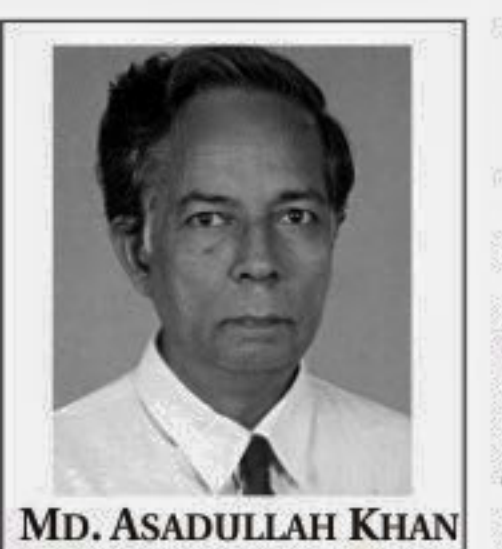


BITTER TRUTH

Youngsters slip into crime cauldron



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

IN an ideal world, there are some stories we'd love to avoid -- those with an excess of blood and gore. Some of us may find watching films based on such themes entertaining and then go away from the TV screen with the reassurance that it was all fiction. However, what is on the silver screen is

coming far closer to our neighbourhood than we would have thought. There is a general sense of alarm across the country, aroused by a recent spurt in crime involving the young and including everything from extortion to robbery to arson to murder.

Ghastly incidents like Tumpa and her brother Babla's murder in the city, Russel's murder and killing of two SUST students in the recent past illustrate how young men in the age group 16-25 are slipping into the crime wave. These crimes are a reminder of the barbaric underworld activities now spreading among kids who are supposed to be the innocent.

The cult of warlordism that began in early 1980s has now spread all across the country. Most of the vicious crimes like murder and arson relate to either drug sale or drug money sharing. This country is no stranger to violence and atrocities, but it is impossible to explain the abominable ferocity in the killing of a minor boy for ransom at Keraniganj in the outskirt of the city.

The majority of the heinous crimes are being committed today by the young. Sure, the young have never been angels and adolescence is often a time for rebellion and rage. But these young criminals, operating individually or in gangs, seem to come from the affluent and middle class families.

Recent incidents of such horrendous killing, burglary, abduction, rape and extortion by youngsters chill the bone. A report published in Prothom Alo on February 21 said that police arrested 6 school students in Chittagong because they were allegedly involved in a burglary in the house of a physician. Much to everybody's shock and consternation, all these boys were school students and were within the age range 15 to 20.

Yet another report in Prothom Alo on January 24 was profoundly shocking. It said that, hard pressed by poverty, a newlywed couple came to Dhaka in the early week of January from the northern part of the country and started living in Bhasantek Balurmah after the wife got a job in a garments factory. The

woman aged 22 was gang raped by four hoodlums of the locality. What was most chilling was that the hoodlums entered her house when her husband was away at work. They forced the woman to prepare food for them. They ate the food and gang raped her in turn.

Criminologists say that the crime rate among the youth has gone up by about 60%, mentioning that there has been a noticeable increase in the number of heinous crimes committed by young people from middle



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class and upper middle class families. A survey by a crime research group indicates that 90% of all serious crimes committed in recent years have been committed by young men trying their hand at crime for the first time. Law enforcers also admit that the situation is getting really serious.

Every day in the cities businessmen get robbed, commuters get mugged, and sometimes stabbed and killed even in trains, buses and on most highways. Women get raped not only on their way back from work places but also within the safe boundary of their

houses, and jilted boyfriends throw acid on school and college going girls. Most shockingly, women in the age group 16-30 are living under constant threat to their lives and in several cases, wary of the humiliation, they committed suicide.

More importantly, for well-known criminal gang leaders, a generation of cheap labour is now available. Hired goons in the age group 16-25 are now committing the most atrocious crimes, ripping apart the age-old societal norms and value systems. This has serious

repercussions since it renders criminal investigations obsolete. Crime dossiers, finger print banks, village crime books, list of bad characters -- the foundations of detection -- are of no use since a vast majority of criminals are now young novices. Quick money seems to be the new mantra. With family values already under stress and job market squeezing up, crime suddenly seems to be the most alluring option. For them, crime pays!

How can these youngsters kill so dispassionately? Experts say that each young criminal has his own

genes, his own family background, and his own response to many forces in the society that encourage violence. But a generation is forged through common experience. And the present generation is going through one of those plastic moments in history -- where old value systems have crumbled and new ones have not firmed up.

Unfortunately, the pleasures, comfort and luxuries of modern life dazzlingly displayed on TV screens have permeated into our lifestyle, and the idealism that once inspired educated or even rustic rural people has taken severe knocks. The youngsters born in the late '80s grew up in a world full of scams and corruption. They want ready success, ready money, unbridled life with all the comforts and luxuries, and believe they can use any means to get them. They find that crime and brute force pay a premium.

Loosening family ties, the growing influence of money and the burden of increasing competition are some of the factors that are pushing these youngsters into the "fast lane" of life. Lack of communication, absence of guidance on moral values and diminution of proper rearing are compounding the derailment. Most parents think substituting time and loving care with money is adequate compensation for their kids' needs. Alas! That perception has proved to be so wrong.

Almost awash in guns and plagued by addicts and extortionists, Dhaka and big cities in the country are struggling to cope with the wave of violence. Newspaper reports supported by National Bureau of Crime records assert that incidents of kidnapping, assault and brutal killing of businessmen, political activists and even innocent children held for ransom are done by hired killers.

After a thorough analysis of such violence by the youth who earn money in exchange of contract killing without having any direct link or animosity with the victim, one is led to believe that the damage starts from the home and the environment in consequence of the lack of parental care, and loosened family ties, and sometimes under peer pressure.

Since extortion and murders are mostly drug-fueled, the government should step up the fight against drugs, poverty, corruption and social inequity. But, unhappily, when the "crusaders" themselves are reportedly getting involved in drug trade, there is very little hope that this scourge can be eliminated.

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Putin's Russia

EDITORIAL DESK: The Korea Herald

IN pursuit of a stronger and more assertive position in the global community, Russians gave Vladimir Putin virtually his fourth straight mandate -- including four years of regency -- in the recent presidential election. Putin can extend his rule till 2024, but all will depend on how fast the opposition will be nourished by public desire for reform and democracy.

Opposition rallies' denouncing what they claimed was election rigging across the country -- one example: nearly 100% Putin votes with almost 100% turnout in the Chechnya region -- will continue for weeks in Moscow. Yet, the 63% support, chiefly from the working class, will provide stability as the new Putin presidency takes off in May.

The Putin-Medvedev monopoly of power is extraordinary, hardly imaginable in any other polity, and the Russians deserve special tribute or commiseration for allowing it in the 21st century. Whatever assessment political scientists may have about it, the perpetuation of leadership offers one significant advantage for its neighbours, including Korea -- diplomatic predictability.

Korea normalised relations with the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990, a year before the birth of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Under the new world order that followed the end of the Cold War, Seoul initiated what was dubbed the "four-power diplomacy" concentrating on the United States, China, Japan and Russia in a sort of containment policy against North Korea, as Pyongyang accelerated its nuclear armament.

In June 2000, shortly after Putin started his first presidential term, Moscow manifested the desire for equal participation in the process of resolving the problem of the Korean Peninsula together with an equidistance policy toward Seoul and Pyongyang. In August that year, Russia and North Korea signed the "New Treaty" to replace the 1961 Mutual Aid, Cooperation and Friendship Treaty, deleting the clause on military cooperation in the old pact.

Through the Putin and Medvedev administrations, Moscow showed growing interest in cooperating with South Korea for the development of Siberia and Far

East Russia, particularly with the long-conceived projects of connecting the trans-Siberian railway with a trans-Korean railway and laying a gas pipeline across the Korean Peninsula through North Korea. In the year before his death, Kim Jong-il gave his consent to Moscow on the cross-peninsular pipeline project and Russia began railway repair work between the border cities of Hasan and Rajin.

Russia is to host the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Vladivostok in September and Moscow is expected to use the occasion as a great opportunity to raise regional interests and attract investment in its development projects in the eastern region. In his third presidency, Putin will be compelled to step up efforts for the stability of Northeast Asia, which is vital for his economic plans.

The six-party talks for the denuclearisation of North Korea, now entering their 10th year, will be yet another arena where Moscow will seek to play a more positive role. Russia, being among the parties to install a new leadership (second after North Korea), is hoped to join the United States and other participants in taking practical steps to bring about substantial progress, preferably with economic incentives to the North to gain greater leverage.

The Nuclear Security Summit to be held in Seoul later this month could be the first major international event where Premier-cum-President-elect Vladimir Putin will represent Russia. Through top-level diplomacy on the multilateral and bilateral levels, Seoul needs to convince the Russians of the importance of expanding security and economic cooperation between their reemerging country and one of the most dynamic economies in Northeast Asia.

The two countries share vast and boundless areas of cooperation, including commerce, science and technology -- particularly in aerospace and arms development, culture and the arts. Putin will soon understand how absurd it is for Moscow to try to keep the southern and northern halves of the Korean Peninsula at equal distance.

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US Forces in Bangladesh: Some questions

M. HAFIZUDDIN KHAN

BASED on a BBC report The Daily Star, in its March 5 issue reported that US Pacific Commander Admiral Robert Willard at a Congressional hearing stated: "We have currently special forces assist teams -- Pacific assist teams is the term -- laid down in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives as well as India." The immediate denial/clarification given by the newly arrived but flamboyant US Ambassador Mr. Dan Mozena said that "there is no question of US bases in Bangladesh. US special forces come here often for various purposes and leave. We have cooperation with Bangladesh and it is all about partnership. It is a small team coming and going."

The ambassador further claimed that Bangladesh is "a land of hope" and some people did not share the vision of a Golden Bangladesh and sought to destroy the Bangladesh of peace, tolerance, harmony and democracy. "These people seek to impose their own values of hatred and intolerance on Bangladesh. We call these people terrorists. These terrorists are the enemy of Bangladesh, of America and of every democracy in the world."

The above statement of the ambassador raises many questions in our mind. First of all, we are taken by surprise that the "coming and going" of US forces has never been disclosed by our government. The country came to know about it when the Congressional hearing of the Commander of the US Pacific Forces disclosed this. Is it possible to contain "terrorists" and "enemies" in the country without taking the people into confidence or can the government fight terrorism without carrying the people with them so that people's participation, which is a sine qua non for eliminating enemies of the country, is ensured?

Secondly, it seems that the US government is more concerned about the existence of terrorist groups in Bangladesh than the Bangladesh government itself and its people. The ambassador has been very candid and explicit but our government is not. Why?

Thirdly, are there any existence of such powerful terrorist groups in the country which are threats to America and all democracies in the world as apprehended by the ambassador? If so, why didn't the government share this very important and angerous information with the people? Why have these groups not been identified clearly and taken to task. What action has the government taken so far to destroy them? The people have the right to know.

Fourthly, are there any agreements between the two governments on working together to fight the terrorists and enemies of the country? If so, has it been placed in the parliament as required by article 145A of the constitution?

Fifthly, is it a fact that the enemies of the country are very powerful for which the government was compelled to seek the assistance from America? Who are our enemies? The people should be told and warned about them in

clear terms.

Sixthly, the elimination of terrorists and enemies of the country is primarily the responsibility of the Police. Why do the members of American forces come and go and not the FBI or other such organisations including the intelligence agencies. Why combat forces? Who are being trained here -- the armed forces or the police?

Finally, the Ambassador has said that the American special forces come to Bangladesh for various purposes. What are those "various purposes"?

To dispel all doubts, the government should issue "A Press Note" clarifying the position. We should bear in mind that raising a false alarm is dangerous.

The writer is a former advisor to the caretaker government.