

Lethal Narsingdi shootout

Leaves many unanswered questions

THE special anti-crime force Rapid Action Battalion (Rab)'s statement that six muggers were killed in a shootout in Narsingdi on Monday has raised some serious questions.

Challenging Rab's version, the victims' relatives maintained that none of the victims were muggers.

Whatever the truth, the very method of Rab's dealing with the alleged muggers is simply unacceptable, because it goes against the norms of civilised law and harks back to the days when the law of the jungle prevailed. Even allowing for the fact that the victims were all muggers, why were they killed at all? Under what legal authority persons suspected of mugging on a tip-off from an unidentified businessman such murderous assault could be perpetrated in broad daylight by people claiming to be law-enforcers?

Law provides that no one can be termed a criminal, let alone shot at and killed, until and unless their guilt is proven in the court of law.

Most of all, there is a standard drill for dealing with such an eventuality. Whatever could be gathered from the Rab's version indicates that the muggers were fleeing in a microbus with the snatched money when the Rab men gave them the chase.

In the first place, did the Rab give them a warning to stop and surrender? Failing which, Rab should have immobilised their transport by shooting to puncture the tyres. None of these steps were taken. Instead, the Rab personnel opened fire claiming that they did so in self-defence. Seeing the recovered cache of arms, it appears that the alleged muggers' fire power couldn't have matched that of the Rab. Actually, such issues would not have arisen at all, had the Rab handled the incident according to standard practice.

What has happened is, therefore, repugnant to all legal norms and human rights sensibilities.

We demand of the government to constitute a probe committee that must include ballistic and forensic experts to carry out a scooping investigation into the entire gamut of the incident to get to the truth and inform the public accordingly.

Dhaka's deepening water crisis

Something must be done and fast

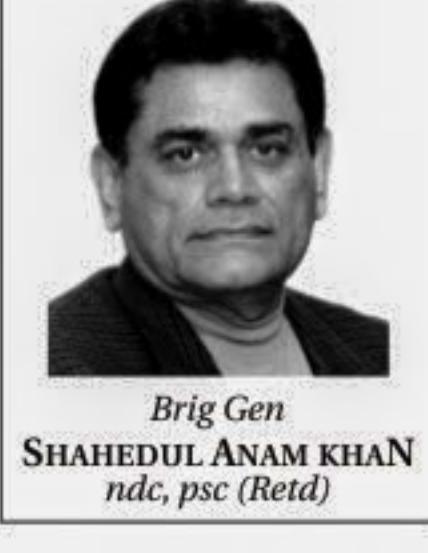
LONG with electricity, now the capital's residents are also facing acute water crisis, that too, even before summer is here in full swing. In fact, some residents of the capital, such as those living in posh areas of the city even, have been going virtually without water for over a month. They are having to buy water for drinking, cooking and washing, resulting in a hike in their regular expenses. Their sufferings are endless, living in an unhygienic environment with unclean toilets, etc.

Wasa, however, is claiming that the water crisis this year is less severe compared to previous years and that advance measures have been taken to improve the water supply and that the results will be felt in the summer. Our question, however, is that if the situation is already this bad, how will it get any better in the summer? Moreover, why has something more constructive not been done over the last two months as soon as the crisis began? Finally, why do we always wait for crisis to strike before taking action? If Wasa has in fact taken any pre-emptive measures to tackle the situation, why is it not being able to do so now?

Most importantly, we put a question to the government and relevant authorities why are we not being able to provide our citizens with the most basic of needs for survival? While we get carried away in high-sounding political debates, our citizens are deprived of their most basic rights, helpless in the hands of a dysfunctional or at the least inefficient system. It is truly time that the authorities pull up their socks and take into consideration the needs and indeed, basic rights, of the people and do their utmost

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

What is the value of an Afghan life?



Brig Gen
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UMAN beings, at least the good ones, are brought up to believe that human life is invaluable, and to put a price tag on it would

be a callous disregard for an intrinsically priceless gift of God. However, to quote a Time magazine report on health, insurance companies in the US calculate that to make a treatment worth its cost, it must guarantee one year of "quality life" for \$50,000 or less. And one wonders whether it is not this calculation that has determined the valuation of the life of civilians killed in Afghanistan in military operations.

In fact, the United States has paid \$50,000 to each relative of the civilians killed in the March 11 shooting rampage in Kandahar in which at least 17 people died. And each of the wounded in the shootings was paid \$11,000.

The number of civilian deaths due to military actions in Afghanistan is estimated to be between 9,415 and 29,000. And if each of the 29,000 deaths were to be compensated it would amount to around \$1.5 billion. Contrast that with the fact that Americans have spent \$50 billion on their pets last year. I give you the breakdown being fully aware that I would be accused of belabouring a very "unimportant" point. Americans spent \$19.85 billion on pet food, \$13.41 billion on vet care, \$11.77 billion on supplies and over-the-counter

medicines, \$3.79 billion on other services and \$2.14 billion on live animal purchases.

Unfortunately, Afghans alive or dead, victims of collateral damages or planned killings by US Special Forces, all gross violations of human rights, will never value up to American "cats, canaries, puppies" and the like.

But my purpose today is not to compare an Afghan with an American canine, but to highlight once again the duplicity of the US that is fre-

of human rights, at home and abroad, is full of holes.

The latest US effort to be the flag bearer and upholder of human rights in the world was displayed in the sponsoring of the UN Human Rights Resolution against Sri Lanka on March 22. It is travesty that of all countries it was the United States of America that sponsored the resolution. Given its record one wonders whether the US has the moral author-

issue is like telling Sri Lanka how they should govern themselves. It is neither the US nor another country's business to say so.

But if the world body has shown its concern for human rights, and fully justified in doing so, it being the world body's bounden obligation to do so, one wonders whether the UN would ever be provoked enough to call the US to answer the alleged violation of human rights, particularly in the two countries that have been under its occupation for more than a decade, human rights that have been violated collectively by the military, or individually as was in the case of the latest killings in Kandahar.

The March 11 killings have been blamed on Army Staff Sgt. Robert Bales. However, there are reasons to doubt the official version of the incident that the soldier acted alone.

It is difficult to believe that an individual soldier would be able to get out of a heavily fortified military establishment, go to two villages more than a mile apart and quite a distance from his camp, and take down sixteen Afghans all by himself knowing the full consequences, even if he was inebriated at that time. The circumstances indicate that the soldier was not acting alone. And if his lawyers have accused the administration of hiding evidence there is very little ground to disagree.

And it is this opacity on the part of US that calls to question its credibility as a protagonist of human rights.

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While no country can claim a clean slate as far as its own human rights situation is concerned, no other country arrogates to itself the role of human rights judge like the US when in fact its own record of human rights, at home and abroad, is full of holes.

quently revealed in the statements of its diplomats, or by its policy stand on international issues, particularly on matters of human rights.

It has been the US practice for long to annually publish reports on the human rights situation in other countries. It is a report card, if you like, on almost 190 countries, on how each has fared in terms of guaranteeing those rights that have been universally accepted as basic for a person to live as a human being. While no country can claim a clean slate as far as its own human rights situation is concerned, no other country arrogates to itself the role of human rights judge like the US when in fact its own record

ity to intervene in this particular case.

No war is justified unless it is for self-preservation, and nothing can justify killing of civilians, whether it is because of aerial bombings, so cynically called collateral damages, or civilians caught in the crossfire.

If the purpose of this particular resolution was to urge Sri Lanka to "conduct a credible investigation into alleged war crimes committed during its battle against the Tamil Tiger separatists in 2009," the resolution comes at a time when it is busy recovering from the wounds of a 30-year conflict and is in the process of reconciliation. And some commentators think that the emphasis on the "devolution"

| The New York Times | EXCLUSIVE

Will Annan save Assad?

AARON DAVID MILLER

EARLIER this week, the Syrian government accepted a peace plan proposed by Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary general. Annan's six-point initiative to resolve the crisis in Syria calls for a "political process" to address the Syrian people's aspirations, a cessation of fighting and troop movements, quicker release of political prisoners, and allowing humanitarian aid, access for journalists and greater freedom of assembly.

Although it is well intentioned, Annan's plan won't end the crisis; it will make it worse.

The plan is an ill-timed lifeline to a murderous regime that will exploit Annan's diplomacy to buy time, to reload and to divide the opposition and the international community. In the end, everyone except the Assad family will be weaker for having pursued it.

Every element of the Annan plan is a trap. A ceasefire offers President Bashar al-Assad's troops time and space to rest and plan; it will also break the momentum of supplying weapons to the Free Syrian Army, which has risked much and could easily find its morale and spirit shattered. Humanitarian aid and prisoner releases will allow the Assads to show a gentler face to the outside world without giving up anything significant. Indeed, a cycle of catch, release and catch again is almost guaranteed for opponents of the government.

But the greatest danger is the "political process," which offers Assad a get-out-of-jail-free card. It shifts the international community's focus from getting rid of him to seeing what he will give in the way of political reforms.

We've seen this before many times since the Assads came to power. The gap between expectations and delivery is huge. If Assad's government

like his father's, which preceded it -- is prepared to kill thousands of its own citizens to stay in power, it's certainly prepared to be as tough and as uncompromising in any political process.

The Annan plan is the key to an empty room; it will most likely mean an eventual return to conflict on terms that will favor the government, not the rebels. The argument that the opposition will have more leverage once the action shifts from the military arena to the negotiating table is naive.

There ought to be a diplomatic equivalent of the Hippocratic oath: Above all do no harm. And this is one of those occasions, because the Annan initiative can do plenty of damage.

Assad is likely to exploit the United Nations' diplo-

macacy because it is

based on a process that doesn't rule out his government's staying in power and indeed might ensure that it remains. Suddenly Assad, a pariah, whom the international community has called on to step down, has become part of the solution.

That is worth its weight in gold to a regime that is fighting to survive. Indeed, it reduces the chances of an internationally mediated transition in Syria. And that's the way the Assads want it: a Syrian solution to a Syrian problem.

The international community wants a way out of this nightmare without having to take risks, let alone

undertaking military action. Many countries, including the United States, are understandably embarrassed by their own unwillingness to act in the face of a death toll that is now approaching 10,000.

The Annan plan perversely begins to let everyone off the hook. It relieves the Russians and the Chinese of the stigma of backing a brutal regime and gives them a seat at the table; it also relieves pressure on Turkey, which has been considering creating humanitarian zones along its border with Syria and possibly intervening.

It even relieves pressure on Washington to act.

There is no doubt that the Obama administration has a huge stake in seeing Assad fall; it would help constrain Iran, a key Syrian ally. But

Obama is extremely reluctant to use force, as Nato did in Libya. With an election looming, his motto is "not now" on tough issues like Iran, Syria and North Korea. And who could blame him? He's trying to get out of military adventures abroad, not get into them. And he's right to avoid an effort on Syria that isn't multilateral, internationally sanctioned and well thought through. The problem is that there just doesn't seem to be an effective middle ground between military

and Annan's diplomacy.

The Annan plan also carries real

risks for a Syrian opposition that is

already fractured and divided both

inside and outside Syria. It's challenging enough for rebels to fight over the spoils after deposing a dictator; it's quite another matter to remain unified while the government is still in power using every resource it has, including bribes and threats, to play political politics.

The tragedy of Syria is that the options for a peaceful resolution run from bad to worse. The Arab Spring and its aftermath have offered up three models for change: the Egyptian and Tunisian model, where the military stands aside and the people prevail; the Libyan model, where outside actors aid rebels in getting rid of the government; and the Yemeni model, where a combination of diplomacy and a badly wounded autocrat lead to a negotiated solution.

None of these seem to offer much hope for Syria now. Unlike in Egypt, the regime will hang together (knowing they'll hang separately if they don't). Unlike in Libya, the great powers have no stomach for military intervention. And unlike in Yemen, Assad will not be eased out with promises of immunity, certainly not when there's a possibility that the Annan plan will make him kosher.

Whatever Syria's future, it does not lie in a diplomatic process that strengthens the government, weakens the opposition and makes the international community complicit in resurrecting a cruel dictator.

In the end, the Annan plan will fail because Assad will not surrender power, and he has already inflicted too much pain, death and cruelty on the Syrian people to ever convince the opposition that he will.

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