

## Child brutality on the rise

### Root causes need addressing

WE have been witnessing an alarming rise in incidents of brutalising children and killing them just for realising ransom money or as a reprisal against somebody.

What concerns us most are the methods the killers use in pursuit their bestial instincts.

The recent incident of strangling of a 13-year old schoolboy, Naim, at Kahalu in Bogra and then burning of his corpse in the furnace of a brick kiln just for ransom has jolted the conscience of society. In this case, main culprit Zakaria could not be nabbed until Thursday.

Unfortunately, this is not the first instance of such monstrosity. Not long ago, another victim of ransom, seven-year-old Tanmoy, was killed by his abductors in the Darussalam area of the city.

These reports from the capital city alone are but the tip of the iceberg. No end of such blood-curdling instances of brutality is in sight, few of which are being reported in the media.

Undoubtedly, these appalling cases of brutalities involving children indicate worsening law and order situation in the country. And in most cases, the police, if they are able to sniff it at all, cannot stop the monstrosities happening. Worse still, they often fail to arrest the perpetrators in time, far less bring them to court.

Considering the nature of the dastardly murders, one feels impelled to look for deeper causes rooted in society than in apparent motivation of the persons committing such outrage.

It is time for experts on social psychology to look into the abnormality in the mental make-up of the perpetrators of the crimes. They may also come up with explanations as well as provide suggestions to address these types of mental aberrations among some members of society.

The government and the community should take up the issue seriously to think out some ways to rid society of these kinds of social evils.

## How prepared are we for a dual-shock?

### If earthquake and tsunami hit Bangladesh

THE two quakes that occurred off the coast of Sumatra on April 11 sent mental shockwaves for millions of people in Bangladesh. What is commendable is the manner in which the Indonesian early warning system alerted people of the need to initiate orderly withdrawal to safer grounds as the danger approached. Thanks to proper dissemination of information and public awareness, Indonesian authorities were in effect able to avoid mass hysteria, which if it had occurred would inevitably have complicated matters for an orderly evacuation.

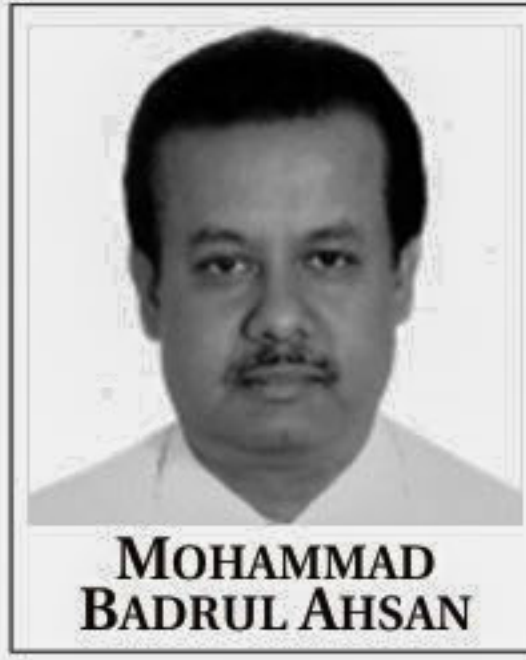
Despite the fact that the tsunami alerts have been lifted across ASEAN and South Asia, questions have come to the forefront about precisely where Bangladesh stands in terms of preparedness should a tsunami or an earthquake followed by tsunami occur off our coasts. Thousands of people were found to be spilling on to the streets as a means of getting out of concrete structures in the hope of finding safety. Though the government is apparently training a core force of thousands of volunteers to help out in post-disaster relief operations, essential equipment like cranes and equipment to locate people trapped under rubble are still on the drawing board.

The building authority RAJUK remains oblivious to the fact that buildings, both new and old, need to be made earthquake proof. And while awareness building is undoubtedly a prerequisite to getting people to safety in the initial phase of such a calamity, what comes afterwards will require massive coordination efforts amongst different government agencies. For all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to fall into place at the time of a quake or a tsunami or both require long-term planning coupled with massive drills to occur at regular intervals. That is a very tall order, but it can be done if the political will to

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- April 13
- 1204  
Constantinople falls to the Crusaders of the Fourth Crusade, temporarily ending the Byzantine Empire.
- 1868  
The Abyssinian War ends as British and Indian troops capture Magdala.
- 1909  
The Turkish military reverses the Ottoman counter-coup of 1909 to force the deposal of Sultan Abdul Hamid II.
- 1919  
Jallianwala Bagh massacre: British troops massacre at least 379 unarmed demonstrators in Amritsar, India. At least 1200 wounded.
- 1984  
India moves into Siachen Glacier thus annexing more territory from the Line of Control.
- 1987  
Portugal and the People's Republic of China sign an agreement in which Macau would be returned to China in 1999.

## CROSS TALK



play dice with the universe," said Albert Einstein when certain aspects of quantum theory ran counter to his belief in determinism. But he will turn over in his grave and give his hypothesis a second thought if he knows what happened in Korail slum last week, where god-like men played dice with 120,000 lives. They woke up on the wrong side of bed one morning, and decided to wreck some shanties for fun.

It was fun for them because they showed no consideration for the slum dwellers. There was no consideration for women and children. There was no consideration for inclement weather. Thirty-five years later enough was enough. Bulldozers rolled in and knocked down homes. Within hours the last refuge of dreams for thousands of people turned into a crumpled heap of nightmares.

True, the housing and public works department of the government had issued a notice on the residents on November 16 last year, asking them to evacuate immediately. There was also a writ petition filed against that eviction notice. The slum dwellers in their audacity of hope couldn't believe that after all the years anybody was really going to evict them from their

homes.

The immediate past caretaker government had earlier conducted eviction drives, only to give up as quickly. The slum dwellers learned to accept it as a fact of life. From time to time governments undertake such drives for the same reason people burp or pass wind when gas gets trapped inside them. When governments cannot get tough on smugglers, syndicates, market manipulators and corrupt officials, they take it out on soft targets: men, women and children who exist like

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cell phone batteries hanging on to their last bar.

In Mark Twain's *Prince and the Pauper*, Edward Tudor, son of Henry VIII, and Tom Canty, the unlabeled son of a beggar and thief, switch clothes to trade their places in life. Earl of Hertford asks Tom, now dressed as the prince, to sign a document authorising increased taxes on windows. A puzzled Tom wonders what will happen to poor people because when they are sick, windows are the only outside they have. "Why they wouldn't have anything nice to look at if it weren't for windows. And, besides... that is taxing sunshine and light, which don't belong to us at all, but to God," he said.

That tells us about the irreducible bifurcation of this world into the haves and the have-nots. In the ultimate analysis, everything belongs to God for those who are believers amongst us. For others everything belongs to Nature, the mysterious force that through its many vagaries perpetuates its course.

It was, again, Mark Twain who claimed that there was no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven and no hell. He called everything a dream, a gro-

tesque and foolish dream. "Nothing exists but you. And you are but a thought -- a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!" he wrote.

Perhaps God's will or Nature's design, whatever we call it, has it that "useless thoughts" should incessantly collide to produce the acceleration that moves this universe. The conflict and chaos are perhaps the wheels of some cosmic vehicle propelled by the winds of empty eternities rising from the repetitive cycles of birth and death.

It was definitely the work of some "useless thoughts" to raze down hundreds of homes to reclaim a few

hundred decimals of government land. After all, the political bosses under various regimes allowed those slum dwellers to settle and live on that land, and they collected rents from these people year after year. Korail slum like other slums in Dhaka City has been the den of many criminal activities, including political muscling and extortion.

In the end, it's obvious, the slum is going nowhere. What happened last week, the dislocations, barricades, traffic nightmares, public sufferings, newspaper and television coverage, wails of men, women and children huddled on roadsides, fuel burned by bulldozers, time spent by busybody government officials, and ink and paper wasted on paperwork were all part of our collective disorientation that has wasted the energy of this nation time and again.

But it was also a deplorable display of our national delirium. We are still a nation living in its role-playing colonial past, the foreign masters amongst us subjugating and exploiting the natives amongst us. How else could we be so indifferent and insensitive to our own countrymen and throw the sick and the disabled, pregnant women and suckling babies out on the street?

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# Hold your tongues please, dear leaders

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INDECENT remarks of the politicians have become a subject of conversations in social gatherings these days, aside from the wide coverage in both print and electronic media. Referring to the recent indecent remarks of some opposition MPs in the Parliament, the prime minister said that she felt ashamed of the utterances of some women opposition parliamentarians. She said: "A gentle lady can't utter such words... I can't imagine that." No one will disagree with the PM on her assertions; but the question is, who should be role model for the politicians to follow in conducting their tongues in what to say and what not to say, be it within the House or outside.

Have the people seen any kind of endeavour on the part of the two antagonistic political camps of the country, both of which incidentally are headed by ladies, to be role models for their followers, let alone for the whole nation? The answer, to our sheer disappointment, is an emphatic no. This is more so for the fact that in our age-old culture women are supposed to represent the gentler and softer spectrum of the gender-band. In the most recent mud-slinging in the parliament, when two opposition women MPs were delivering the unprintable, the leader of the opposition's nodding and smiling face was visible through the courtesy of television cameras.

In many instances, our people have an incomplete perception of the freedom of expression. A member of parliament is immune from prosecution in the court of law for her/his words inside the parliament, but the right to freedom of speech is not absolute; there are restrictions, derived from practice, convention, and the rules agreed to by the House.

In most Westminster democracies,

if a member refuses to heed the speaker's request to bring his or her behaviour into line with the rules and practices of the House, the speaker has the authority to order him or her withdrawal from the Chamber for the remainder of the sitting day. In case of persistent disobedience by a member, the speaker can suspend him/her, including the leader of the House and the leader of the opposition, from the House for a day or invite the House to approve expulsion for a longer period. Rather than

whip used unprintable words against the speaker because the speaker criticised the leader of the opposition for not using her speech to address the burning issues of the day, which, by the way, is within the jurisdiction of the speaker as the presiding officer of the House. Yet, the chief whip went as far as asking the speaker to expunge his own remarks from the proceedings, an unheard of demand in the history of Westminster democracy.

Bangladesh has a well-defined

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expunging the indecent remark, as is customary in Bangladesh parliament, the rules of business of the House could be modified where the speaker may direct the concerned member to withdraw the remark concerned.

This would be a good deterrent if it could be equally applied to members from both sides of the aisle, not excepting even the PM and the leader of the opposition. A few years ago, the speaker of the Ontario Assembly ordered the premier to withdraw his indecent personal remark on the leader of the opposition, failing which he would be compelled to evict the premier from the House. Needless to say, the premier had to comply with the speaker's order to avoid being evicted from the House.

The other day, the opposition chief

defamation law, but there has not been a single instance where an individual has been prosecuted for loosening his/her tongue. A few years ago, the leader of the opposition in the Canadian House of Commons made a false allegation against the PM on the floor. Attributing the allegation as baseless, the PM dared the leader of the opposition to utter the same outside the floor of the House and face a legal suit. When the leader of the opposition came out of the parliament the waiting newsmen reminded him of the challenge of the PM and asked if he would utter the same outside the House. He immediately responded: "If it would be so, I guess I would not do that."

Only a few days ago an octogenarian opposition MP termed the current proceedings of war-crimes trials

that enjoy massive support of our people as "rules of the jungles." In a Western democracy, this type of contemptible attribution about the judicial proceedings outside the House would surely give rise to a suo motu charge against the person making it.

The most disappointing aspect is that our two supreme leaders who, through their charisma, could have been role models for their massive following. The current leader of the opposition speaks less as compared to her counterpart, but there is hardly any truth in her speeches.

The most disparaging performance is coming from none other than the PM whose loose utterances and personal attacks, especially in recent months, are creating a huge burden even for her avowed followers to defend. Her utterances are simply unbecoming of a PM, let alone unbefitting of the daughter of Bangabandhu. What political point does she score by questioning the location of the graveyard of the grandparents of her opponent? What difference does it make if someone was born either in a tea garden or in a mango grove? How one can cast aspersions on the patriotism of a Bengali if the person was born or educated in one part of the subcontinent or the other? What political leverage did she gain by taking a swipe at the last CTG, terming them as "civil society *babu*," forgetting the fact that it was the last CTG that gave the nation the most free and fair election of its forty-year history, which, consequently gave her the historic mandate to lead the nation? Is it not the time to ask our dear leaders to hold their tongues for the sake of bringing at least a trace of civility to the political domain of the nation?

The writer is Convener of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.