

## SUNDAY POUCH

## Spotlight on human rights situation

*Watch bodies' reports should be taken seriously*

**I**N the most customary fashion, the state minister for home affairs has trashed the US government's Human Rights Report 2011 for its less than savoury remarks on the deteriorating human rights situation in Bangladesh. The reaction of the government is not altogether surprising given the fact that the State Department's report has highlighted in no uncertain terms the mounting allegations of 'disappearances' and extrajudicial killings in the country. Amnesty International's recent reports portray more or less a similar picture.

Though it may serve the government to reject the report outright terming it as "baseless and motivated", the fact cannot be denied that according to various media reports and local rights organisations, incidents of extrajudicial killings by elite law enforcement agencies like RAB are on the rise. What is alarming to note is that there have been marked reluctance by authorities to investigate allegations where such agencies have overstepped their authority. Apart from extra judicial killings, custodial deaths or arbitrary arrests, the situation has decidedly taken a turn for the worse with the advent of 'disappearances' leaving families bereft of any knowledge of what happened to their dear ones. When one adds the clueless-ness of law enforcers, this is a sure fire prescription for a deteriorating law and order situation in the country.

The increasing lawlessness highlighted in the latest report basically reflects what the media and civil society have been stressing over the course of the last few years. Bangladesh may be doing better than several other countries when it comes to human rights records, but the dismissive attitude of public representatives can only be unhelpful. While we may disagree with some details in the reports, we fully endorse their thrust.

Denial mode can only serve to perpetuate more of the same by state outfits that are by definition upholders of the law! Unless the government acts now and takes comprehensive measures to investigate cases of killings by select elements of law enforcement agencies, the situation will not be rectified anytime soon and Bangladesh's human rights situation will continue to receive such adverse comments and our image abroad as a country will continue to suffer.

## BSF killing at the border

*Assurances need matching action*

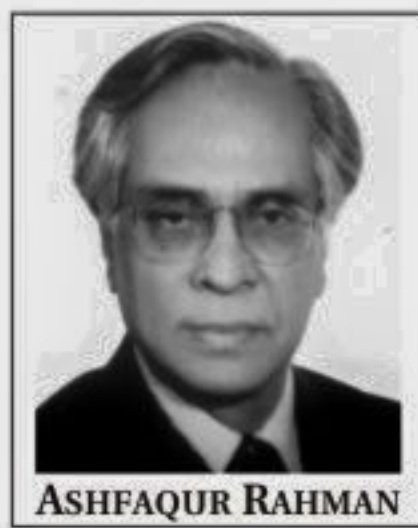
**I**NDIAN Law Minister Salman Khurshid regretted the killing of Bangladeshis by the Indian border security forces (BSF). The Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram during his visit to Dhaka in July last year had expressed his regret too and assured that the BSF 'under no circumstances' would shoot at any Bangladeshi crossing the border. Pranab Mukherjee during his recent visit expressed similar sentiments. While all these regrets and assurances are welcome, it is with deep anguish we note that realities on the ground are far from satisfactory.

We think the Indian side has failed to gauge the negative impact that every single incident of killing or torture by BSF personnel has on people-to-people relations of the two countries. After the grisly picture of Felany's corpse hanging from barbed wires and the video footage of a Bangladeshi youth's brutal torture by BSF men were released, we thought that untoward incidents at the border would come to an end. But alas!

Even when an illegal trader is killed, it leaves a scar on the minds of people since there are legal ways to deal with them. These are issues which relate not only to fundamental human rights but also to trust and goodwill between two neighbouring countries. We fail to understand why such a sensitive issue eroding goodwill defies a solution despite repeated assurances from the Indian government.

One may argue that there is a gulf between the professed intentions of the Indian government and the attitude of the BSF which serves only to undermine the spurt in relations achieved by the two countries bilaterally. But border security being a central government affair, BSF

# Diplomats on our internal matters



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

**T**HE conduct of diplomacy has changed significantly in the last 60 years. Before World War II, diplomacy was a government-to-government relationship. But since the Great War, diplomacy has broadened to include a government-to-foreign people connection. This is known in many countries as "public diplomacy."

Last week, there was a public event here which was called "A Conversation with Dan Mozena," the friendly and charming US envoy to Bangladesh. The invitation said that he would speak on US policy on Bangladesh. It was an invitation like any other, with the prospect of understanding the nuances of US diplomacy in this country and in our region.

The 2-hour programme began with the Bangladeshi host asking the ambassador several questions relating to the recent visit of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Dhaka and the discussions that took place. He was also asked about the US perception about the changing strategic scenario in the Indian Ocean region and the role that the US is expected to play. Relations between India and the US were also discussed. All this was within the remit of a foreign ambassador explaining the policy of his country.

The next hour was devoted to questions from the audience. During this segment, some questions were asked about politics in Bangladesh. Views were exchanged about the confrontational nature of our politics, about the internal law and order situation, as well as about political agitations including hartals. While answering the questions the ambassador was drawn into the vortex of our internal politics. At one point, it seemed that the questioners

were comfortable at being lectured on how politics should be run in the country. No one requested the audience to stop asking the ambassador questions that related to our internal politics, because it could be diplomatically embarrassing for him to answer.

After the Second World War, it has become acceptable for a government to try to influence the views of the people of another country. In the beginning, the method used for developing this government-to-people relationship was through "information and cultural" programmes. The purpose was to win the "hearts and minds" of the people of the host country to which an ambassador was accredited. This was done to bring people in that country round to

himself ever so skillfully. He had to sail among shoals without having his diplomatic boat scuttled. The local ministry of foreign affairs in many countries guided him through "gentle reminders" that he should not ruffle any political feathers through unwarranted comments. Speaking in a public forum like the one that the US ambassador did was thought hazardous. But times are indeed changing.

A few foreign ambassadors in Dhaka now feel comfortable commenting about hartals and political agitation, the prospect of a caretaker government, the need for unity among politicians, etc. These are subjects which are internal to Bangladesh and do not in any way come within the traditional ambit of

imperatives that could dictate such high-level consultation. It could be their concern over human rights situation in that country or even the need for a cleaner government to pursue closer economic cooperation.

But the people in general should not be drawn into a public conversation on internal political problems with a foreign ambassador. It could unnecessarily raise their expectations without any tangible results. It would leave them frustrated and aggrieved with the government of the day.

On our part too, we should not be running to foreign diplomats to air our political grievances. Some of our journalists ask diplomats questions that are highly inappropriate. They give the impression that an answer from them will determine the future course of our political discourse. In many ways, the people feel humiliated. The outside world gets an impression that we do not have any political mechanism to address our internal political problems. Do not forget that we have a parliament, a judiciary and, most important, an active civil society.

Every country has complex political issues to grapple with. But one should not forget the fact that the solutions will not come from foreign diplomats. They necessarily have to be homegrown. Foreign embassies are here for a completely different purpose. They have their own agenda and they carry their own national baggage, which is to promote their own national interest. Why should we come out and carry their baggage in our country?

A wise man had once aptly said: "The more you say, the less people remember." So what is the point, dear ambassadors, in making your case?

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the views of the government which the ambassador represented. The intention was to have their support in promoting the vital interest of his country. But speaking out on the internal affairs of a country was never considered.

As public diplomacy expanded in scope and focus, an ambassador's outreach role also expanded. Besides keeping in touch with various organs of the host government, he found it important to have friendly relations with the local media. He also understood that it was critical to be accepted by the political, intellectual and cultural community of the host country. But then, at times this seemed to come in direct conflict with traditional diplomacy.

So an ambassador had to conduct

diplomacy. There are many reports on this in our press. Some ambassadors say that unless there is political stability, investments from their country will not be forthcoming. But many analysts believe that it is a blatant excuse to influence the internal affairs of Bangladesh.

For pragmatic reasons, therefore, all foreign ambassadors should refrain from making any comment or be involved in any way in influencing our internal politics. In any democratic country an ambassador is free to go to the high echelons of the government or meet the leaders of the opposition parties and express his government's specific concern on an internal political issue. There could be several

## | The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

# The crisis of European democracy

AMARTYA SEN

**I**F proof were needed of the maxim that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the economic crisis in Europe provides it. The worthy but narrow intentions of the European Union's policy makers have been inadequate for a sound European economy and have produced instead a world of misery, chaos and confusion.

There are two reasons for this.

First, intentions can be respectable without being clearheaded, and the foundations of the current austerity policy, combined with the rigidities of Europe's monetary union (in the absence of fiscal union), have hardly been a model of cogency and sagacity. Second, an intention that is fine on its own can conflict with a more urgent priority -- in this case, the preservation of a democratic Europe that is concerned about societal well-being. These are values for which Europe has fought, over many decades.

Certainly, some European countries have long needed better economic accountability and more responsible economic management. However, timing is crucial; reform on a well-thought-out timetable must be distinguished from reform done in extreme haste. Greece, for all of its accountability problems, was not in an economic crisis before the global recession in 2008. (In fact, its economy grew by 4.6% in 2006 and 3% in 2007 before beginning its continuing shrinkage.)

The cause of reform, no matter how urgent, is not well served by the unilateral imposition of sudden and savage cuts in public services. Such indiscriminate cutting slashes demand -- a counterproductive strategy, given huge unemployment and idle productive enter-

prises that have been decimated by the lack of market demand. In Greece, one of the countries left behind by productivity increases elsewhere, economic stimulation through monetary policy (currency devaluation) has been precluded by the existence of the European monetary union, while the fiscal package demanded by the Continent's leaders is severely anti-growth. Economic output in the euro zone continued to decline in the fourth quarter of last year, and the outlook has been so grim that a recent report finding zero growth in the first quarter of this year was widely greeted as good news.

There is, in fact, plenty of historical evidence that the most effective way to cut deficits is to combine deficit reduction with rapid economic growth, which generates more revenue. The huge deficits after World War II largely disappeared with fast economic growth, and something similar happened during Bill Clinton's presidency. The much praised reduction of the Swedish budget deficit from 1994 to 1998 occurred alongside fairly rapid growth. In contrast, European countries today are being asked to cut their deficits while remaining trapped in zero or negative economic growth.

There are surely lessons here from

John Maynard Keynes, who understood that the state and the market are interdependent. But Keynes had little to say about social justice, including the political commitments with which Europe emerged after World War II. These led to the birth of the modern welfare state and national health services -- not to support a market economy but to protect human well-being.

Though these social issues did not engage Keynes deeply, there is an old

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tradition in economics of combining efficient markets with the provision of public services that the market may not be able to deliver. As Adam Smith (often seen simplistically as the first guru of free-market economics) wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*, there are "two distinct objects" of an economy: "First, to provide a plentiful revenue or subsistence for the people, or, more properly, to enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence for themselves; and secondly, to supply the state or commonwealth with a revenue sufficient for the public services."

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Europe's current malaise is the replacement of democratic commitments by financial dictates -- from leaders of the European Union and the European Central Bank, and indirectly from

credit-rating agencies, whose judgments have been notoriously unsound.

Participatory public discussion -- the "government by discussion" expounded by democratic theorists like John Stuart Mill and Walter Bagehot -- could have identified appropriate reforms over a reasonable span of time, without threatening the foundations of Europe's system of social justice. In contrast, drastic cuts in public services with very little general discussion of their necessity, efficacy or balance have been revolting to a large section of the European population and have played into the hands of extremists on both ends of the political spectrum.

Europe cannot revive itself without addressing two areas of political legitimacy. First, Europe cannot hand itself over to the unilateral views -- or good intentions -- of experts without public reasoning and informed consent of its citizens. Given the transparent disdain for the public, it is no surprise that in election after election the public has shown its dissatisfaction by voting out incumbents.

Second, both democracy and the chance of creating good policy are undermined when ineffective and blatantly unjust policies are dictated by leaders. The obvious failure of the austerity mandates imposed so far has undermined not only public participation -- a value in itself -- but also the possibility of arriving at a sensible, and sensibly timed, solution.

This is a surely a far cry from the "united democratic Europe" that the pioneers of European unity sought.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 27

- 1703**  
Tsar Peter the Great founds the city of Saint Petersburg.
- 1883**  
Alexander III is crowned Tsar of Russia.
- 1960**  
In Turkey, a military coup removes President Celal Bayar and the rest of the democratic government from office.
- 1965**  
Vietnam War: American warships begin the first bombardment of National Liberation Front targets within South Vietnam.
- 1980**  
The Gwangju Massacre: Airborne and army troops of South Korea retake the city of Gwangju from civil militias, killing at least 207 and possibly many more.
- 1996**  
First Chechnya War: Russian President Boris Yeltsin meets with Chechnyan rebels for the first time and negotiates a cease-fire.
- 1999**  
The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, Netherlands indicts Slobodan Milošević and four others for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Kosovo.