

Police, also, are not above the law and accountability



SULTANA KAMAL

MEMBERS of law enforcing agencies should certainly abide by discipline, law and professional ethics when they are on duty. Ethics and discipline of

the law enforcing agencies are more important than their personal conduct. Unfortunately, it is true that we have found no sign of accountability and discipline in the government force in some recent events. Their behaviour lacks minimum respect towards citizens.

It is important to mention here that we not only give the law enforcing agencies the duty of maintaining law and order but also arms for carrying out the duty properly. Nothing is more tragic than the use of those arms against innocent people, which should have been rather used to protect their lives and resources.

As a human rights activist and concerned member of the society, I am very distressed and worried observing the recent activities of the law enforcing agencies. Constitutionally, the people are the proprietors of the republic, and we have handed the execution authority over to the government, its subordinate forces and agencies. People expect that they will carry out their duty according to the law. It is the responsibility of the government to monitor whether they are doing their duties accordingly. So the government cannot deny its responsibility if members of the government forces breach discipline and violate rights of common citizens.

The incidents which occurred last Tuesday on the court premise, in the Police Club at Bangsal Road and in Kotwali Police Station are against discipline of the police force as well as violation of human rights. The duty of the police force is to protect

the honour and rights of citizens. If citizens' rights are violated by them and women are harassed, there will be no place of refuge for the people.

In the incident last Tuesday, the girl went to the court for filing a case and was harassed by the police. While she was returning from the court some people shouted "robber," "robber" and police started beating her father and seized his motor cycle. Naturally, the girl went to rescue her father. The police took her along with her parents to the Police Club and brutally tortured her father. A police officer named Zaman along with another policeman took the girl to a room, harassed her sexually and snatched her necklace. It is frightening that members of a law enforcing force could commit such atrocities. The girl got Zaman's name from his badge. Though she failed to identify the other perpetrator she described him in detail. The girl could not have accused them with a specific charge if they had not committed that crime.

When the incident occurred I was attending a programme in the Press Club. I learned from my office that a girl had been snatched by the police in Old Dhaka. As we are a human rights organisation people often call us to seek help. We try our best to respond to their needs. The incident took place in the courthouse. The lawyers present there had the number of Ain O Shalish Kendra. They called the office about the incident and I

was notified by my office.

Similar tragic events had occurred in the past. We know the story of Yasmin from Dinajpur. The police created stories of her being a sex worker after having raped and murdered her. Another girl, Sheema from Chittagong, met her end too. Having heard these stories, as soon as I got to know about this particular incident, I decided that I had to save the girl first. In the meantime, the police had taken the girl and her

In the police station, I asked the OC in-charge what the accusations were against the arrested. He informed me that the girl's father was arrested on suspicion. I asked him if there were any written charges. He could not answer. I then told him if there were no written charges against the girl's father they should be released, and that I would not leave until they were. Seeing my resolute stance, the on-duty personnel agreed to free them.

This was at 10 o'clock at night. I took the girl's father to the hospital as he was beaten mercilessly by the police. There were injury marks on his eyes, shoulders and limbs. The girl said that the police had tried to gouge out her father's eyes. I then asked the police to release the lawmakers and journalists. The officers in charge told me that workers from the lawyer's association would come and the lawyers would be released after the police had talked with them.

Speaking from the view of human rights, the behaviour of the police was blatantly immoral, and a punishable crime. As members of law enforcing agencies, they are bound to abide by the law and professional code of conduct. Baton-charging or strangling people, attempting to gouge out their eyes or sexually harassing women can never be the work of the police. It will be a crime if an ordinary citizen behaves similarly.

When members of the law enforcement forces infringe on others' rights, the crime, I believe, is deemed more serious. Our



SHAFIQ ISLAM/DRIK NEWS

Baton-charging or strangling people, attempting to gouge out their eyes or sexually harassing women can never be the work of the police. It will be a crime if an ordinary citizen behaves similarly.

parents to Kotwali Police Station. Some lawyers and journalists were also taken there. They had protested against the harassment of the girl and the police assault on the parents.

reasons for concern regarding this matter stand on valid grounds. In a short period of time, quite a few incidents have taken place. When I talk to the police officials, they refuse to take responsibility. They say some third force is creating such unstable situations, yet, the television and newspapers tell a different story.

Two days before this incident, police inhumanly tortured three journalists of Pothom Alo. The journalists were taking pictures of a peaceful demonstrations brought out by girls from Polytechnic Institute. The police force was carrying out its professional duties, and the journalists theirs, when all of a sudden, the policemen cracked down on the innocent journalists. Everyone has the right to do his duty under the protection of law. There is no logic behind the assault by the police or their obstruction of journalists in doing their duty.

If the policemen had minimum accountability then they could not have done this heinous act. We have many friends in the police, and many patriotic members also. If they fail to create a culture of respect for the law then their benevolence will be meaningless.

At the end, I want to draw your attention to another matter. Many people complain that using the police for securing political, personal and group interest makes them so reckless and unruly. This is happening not only during this government; there are many examples of the use of police for political interest in the past also. If those in power want to use police for political interest then the police will try to seek more opportunity. This is dangerous for democracy, and not less fearful for rule of law.

The writer is Executive Director, Ain o Salish Kendra and a former adviser to a caretaker government.

(This article was first published in Prothom Alo on May 31, 2012. Translation by The Daily Star.)

BITTER TRUTH

The looming water crisis



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WATER is the most precious fluid in our lives. It is the substance from which all life on earth has sprung and continues to depend on. If we run short of oil or other fossil fuels we can

use alternative energy sources, but if we run short of pure drinking water we are doomed. With regional disputes over water resources increasing, people and ecosystems alike are facing urgent and immense challenges.

There were startling reminders from the UN-sponsored World Water Forum that despite more than \$3 trillion in development efforts over the past few decades, nearly a billion people in 50 countries lack access to safe water, more than 5 million people die each year from water related diseases and some 2.4 billion lack adequate sanitation. More disquieting, the United Nations predict that two out of three people will be living with water shortages by 2025.

The glaring lack of attention to water issues may be termed as the most critical failure of the 20th century and a major challenge to the 21st, contends Peter Gleick, former president of Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment and Security. He adds: "There are many tools for doing so, and the economic costs are not high compared to the costs of failing to meet those needs."

Scientists, water professionals and environmentalists have been raising warning signals for decades that a water crisis was looming, but their call fell on deaf ears. The crisis is partly due to natural cycles of extreme weather and the expansion and contraction of arid regions, but human beings are more responsible for creating water scarcity and "water stress." In a planet that is 71% water, less than 3% of is fresh. And less than 1% of that water -- 0.01% of all the earth's water is fit for human needs.

The planet is not actually running out of water. But its people are having an increas-

ingly difficult time managing, allocating and protecting the water that exists. The situation in Bangladesh, especially in the cities, with respect to water hazard and contamination is appalling. Factories and residents discharge harmful chemicals and toxic wastes into the rivers. The growing need for food induces the farmers to use agro-chemicals, insecticides, and pesticides that not only pollute the river water but also wreak havoc on the eco-system.

Ground water is the main source of water for cities and irrigation. But the yearly recharge of the aquifers is less than before. Growing dependence on ground water is lowering the water table, making arsenic contamination a pervasive health hazard.

Rivers in the poorest countries have shown marked falls in the levels of dissolved oxygen a key indicator of increased pollution by sewage. An estimated 90% of the sewage in developing countries is discharged into rivers, lakes and seas without any treatment. To make things worse, sources of fresh water that could dilute the sewage are dwindling in many areas because of drought, deforestation, and loss of topsoil that conserves water in the ground.

There have been salient improvements in recent years in the developed and some developing countries in the access to safe water and better sanitation. Since 1980, some 2 billion people in the developing countries have gained access to better water supplies and another 400 million have got better sanitation. Even the poorest people are willing to pay for clean water and the provision of basic sewerage, but a big chunk of their hard earned income is lost in such avoidable expenses.

When the governments fail to meet the basic needs of people, alternatives must be chosen. Privatisation can help, as in Brazil,

Argentina, the Philippines and Turkey. The involvement of private companies might augur well for the country, especially for Dhaka, Narayanganj and Chittagong, as it is likely to bring about dramatic improvements in efficiency and services. It can provide the capital needed to connect millions of new customers. In 1992, a consortium won a 30-year contract to run water and sewerage services in Buenos Aires, and by 1995 had it cut the labour force from 7,500 to 4,000 and renovated



WAHID ADNAN/DRIK NEWS

The government needs to introduce measures like drip and micro-irrigation systems in agriculture, ensure roof water-harvesting, arrest leakage from pipeline networks and manage demand to match availability of water.

thousands of kilometers of pipes.

But projects implemented with private investment can only bear fruit if an investment-friendly climate prevails and the people agree to bear increasing water charges. The situation does not improve and people's sufferings go on increasing in Bangladesh because Wasa and DCC are prone to thinking that it is less risky to go for managing existing systems than to go for new investments.

"Water and sewerage is a low return, high risk business," says John Briscoe, a water expert at the World Bank. So the opportunities in water business by foreign investors are very limited. The adage "everyone lives downstream" is no doubt a catchy slogan but disappointingly few do much about the state of the stream itself in poor countries.

The reason for the water crisis especially big cities like Dhaka and Chittagong, are the increase population and the myopic planning, misguided policies and muddled perceptions. As the pressure of population mounted, no thought was given to the emerging mismatch between demand and supply. Because of this, Dhaka, situated on the Buriganga, has to think of piping water from the river Jamuna.

To meet the crisis, ground water was pushed as a solution, while storage and distribution projects were neglected. Industrialisation saw no checks on pollution of water resources. As Bangladesh became urbanised, traditional systems of managing water resources did not work. Today, the very development, growth, and security it sought to build while neglecting the ecological side are under threat. Most

shockingly, no projects for utilisation of water from river basins have been undertaken till now. Incidentally, it is worth mentioning that 95% of Buenos Aires' water supply (about 4,442,065 cubic metre per day) comes from La Plata river that separates Uruguay and Argentina, while the rest 2,31,416 cubic metre is extracted from underground aquifers.

No effort, either by the government or by private entrepreneurs, has been made to

conserve the surface water. Uttara lake in Dhaka could have been a pure surface water source along with Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara lake. High-ups in the administration have been offering lip service for conserving surface water sources in different seminars and symposia during the last few years as they foresee serious depletion of underground water sources due to heavy extraction. But appallingly, people have not seen any visible effort in that direction till now. The enormity of the crisis dictates urgency in thought and action.

The water crisis is the single biggest crisis facing Bangladesh today, and the stress is showing. It is most disquieting to see that some areas of Dhaka city are going without water supply for days. Dhaka's ground water aquifers were emptied so drastically that harmful deposits and toxic substances rushed in. These aquifers take decades to recharge, while population growth is exponential. With pipes drying up, the search for water is frenzied. Dhaka Wasa has the capacity of supplying 210 crore litres per day against the demand of 225 crore litres, as revealed by Wasa. It is most unlikely and unbelievable that with just a shortfall of 15 crore litres there could be such a crisis and almost a war-like situation in vast areas of the city for water.

The situation is no better in rural areas. Despite the spread of bore wells, the number of "no source" villages has burgeoned because of contamination, drying up of sources, and system breakdowns. Water van is the most visible evidence of the country's thirst even in villages. Rural Bangladesh, yet to be acquainted with water-taps, is worse off as ground water tables have plunged in almost all districts.

In view of the lingering crisis that seems to be increasing by the day, the government needs to introduce measures like drip and micro-irrigation systems in agriculture, ensure roof water-harvesting, arrest leakage from pipeline networks and manage demand to match availability of water. This means that policies should be tailored to curtail demand in agriculture and domestic sectors.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com