

Extra-judicial killings

Half-yearly account reads horrific

THE number of extra-judicial killings in the first half of the year, according to a report of Ain Shalish Kendro, a dynamic human rights organisation, stands at 63. Neither numerically, or breakup-wise in terms of the agencies killing them off the situation is any better than in the corresponding period of last year.

Actually, the pattern seems to be consistently extensive: Thirty were killed in 'gunfights' with Rab, nine with police, one with a joint team of Rab and Bangladesh Coastguard. Add to these, police torturing eight persons to death and shooting one to death. Also, seventeen inmates and thirty detainees died in police custody.

The statistics speak louder than comments and explode the myth of improving human rights situation. There are two broad implications of such brazen acts of abuse of power and the custodians of law taking law into their own hands aside from other ramifications. The first is that of higher incidence of crime and the second relates to sliding human rights scenario. In between there is a lurking suspicion whether the real criminals are being caught. This stems from the fact most grisly murder incidents are going unsolved with criminals roaming around in a state complete impunity or being shielded away. An impression has grown that law is not for weak and vulnerable and that the general sense of insecurity of the citizens is on the rise.

The ASK report on human right violations draws on newspaper stories. Ironically but not surprisingly perhaps, the journalists themselves are falling prey to killers' hands. At least three journalists were killed in the period under review and forty-three have faced intimidation and death threats allegedly from ruling party men, government officials and criminals. Equally concerning is the fact that a couple of hundred journalists were tortured and one went missing while returning home from work.

Given the vulnerability of journalists it won't be long before they would need special security arrangements to carry out their duties in sensitive beats. A sense of denial of information is collateral to lack of security.

Relocating tanneries

No excuse for inordinate delay

THE continuing delay in relocating Hazaribagh tanneries to Savar is inexcusable. One of the reasons for Buriganga's extremely bad state is the effluents that run off into this river which is the lifeline of the capital. All the leather factories should have been moved to the new location with an ETP set up in the new leather estate by February 2010, according to a Supreme Court order.

However, last year the government had sought two years as grace period from the court, which will also be over next year.

It is unimaginable that there is no palpable action on the nearly Tk.500 crore ETP project even after three months that the contract was signed with a foreign firm in February this year. It is a pity that the government is yet to start construction of the buildings to house the ETP.

Clearing Hazaribagh is contingent upon the construction of the ETP, without which relocation of the tanneries and leather factories will make no sense at all.

The government can ill afford to drag its feet on relocating the Hazaribagh tanneries to the designated spot in Savar for more than one reason. For apart from putting a stop to disgorging tannery effluents into the Buriganga river and settling damages claimed by tannery owners and looking into other related issues, it will also be a race against time. The project must be completed ahead of 2014 keeping an eye on EU's compliance requirements.

Given its urgency, it is hoped that the government will consider the matter with highest priority and complete

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 2

1555

The Ottoman Admiral Turgut Reis sacks the Italian city of Paola.

1776

The Continental Congress adopts a resolution severing ties with the Kingdom of Great Britain although the wording of the formal Declaration of Independence is not approved until July 4.

1853

The Russian Army crossed the Pruth river into the Danubian Principalities, Moldavia and Wallachiaproviding the spark that set off the Crimean War.

1871

Victor Emmanuel II of Italy enters Rome after having conquered it from the Papal States.

1881

Charles J. Guiteau shoots and fatally wounds U.S. President James Garfield, who eventually dies from an infection on September 19.

1853

The Russian Army crossed the Pruth river into the Danubian Principalities, Moldavia and Wallachiaproviding the spark that set off the Crimean War.

1940

Indian independence leader Subhas Chandra Bose is arrested and detained in Calcutta.

1976

Fall of the Republic of Vietnam; Communist North Vietnam declares their union to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

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EDITORIAL

Padma Bridge: From challenge to opportunity?

IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

IN the wake of the World Bank's (WB) cancellation of its contract with the Government of Bangladesh for \$1.2 billion credit for the Padma Bridge, the government faces an acid-test which like any challenge in life can be converted into opportunity. This can, however, happen only if the government shuns the apparent denial syndrome and generates the courage and commitment to ensure a fully independent, credible investigation into the allegations of corruption and deliver exemplary punishment, if found guilty.

The WB loan is a part of the \$2.9 billion Padma Bridge project which has been well recognised as extremely important for Bangladesh for many reasons, not least as a key route to the present government's electoral pledge embodied in a vision of Bangladesh to achieve the status of a middle-income country.

One of the five top strategic components of the government's election manifesto was a very uncompromising stance against corruption backed by over a dozen specific pledges to build capacity to control this menace. For obvious reasons, like any other aspect of government's delivery against pledges, and perhaps even more, the Padma Bridge project implementation was expected to be free from corruption.

In this context, the challenge that the government faces today is deeply regrettable, embarrassing and disappointing. But it is in the hands of the government itself to face it with dignity. The government should proceed fast to set up a fully independent special judicial committee of highest possible credibility to investigate into the allegations of corruption.

In determining the mandate of this investigation, the government must distance itself from the policy of denying that corruption couldn't have taken place because no funds have yet been released. Corruption is more than exchange bribery or kickback. It consists of abuse of power in influencing policies and

decisions, particularly involving conflict of interest. It will be particularly important in this case to assess if such abuse has taken place in this case.

The proposed committee should be bestowed with full powers, independence and technical support to investigate into the matter and recommend action in accord with the relevant laws within a specific deadline. The report of the Committee must be published for public infor-



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mation at the same time as it is submitted.

The WB for its part allowed itself to take a controversial decision and miss the opportunity to continue to engage with the government to assist the investigation process, and keep the credit open parallel with the investigation process.

The World Bank's decision was in some ways expected. It is common knowledge that a significant part of the funds of WB financed projects in

the developing countries have been lost to corruption and misuse over the years, for which the main burden lies in the hands of the governments of those countries.

However, it is also well known that part of the onus also lies on the Bank itself. A 2009 report by the Bank's own Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) that was released only after a protracted battle with the Bank's management which fought hard to avoid disclosure concluded

that the Bank doesn't protect its funds adequately. Lack of safeguards in the Bank was found to be in the category of "material weakness." the most serious of financial accounting failings. (http://fpif.org/reports/world_bank_corruption) The report also commented that after over a decade of high-level speeches and rhetoric against corruption the Bank has progressed very little to protect its projects and financial management

from risk of fraud.

Against this backdrop, as a newcomer to the world of openness and accountability, faced with the challenge of addressing the allegations of corruption in the Padma Bridge project, the Bank seems to have adopted the easiest approach of chopping off the head because of a headache.

Instead of depriving the people of the benefits of funds that the Bank draws from global public sources, it could have been, and should now be, more strategic and continue to engage with the government. While investigations on alleged corruption continues in Bangladesh and Canada, to which WB should provide full support, it should review the decision and find ways to provide the credit by sharing the responsibility as a key fiduciary agent of the project to ensure integrity, transparency and accountability in the implementation process.

Neither the WB, nor the government can deprive the people of the country of the development opportunity for alleged corruption of a handful of people.

The government's initiative to secure funds for the Padma Bridge from alternative sources may be perceived as a way to divert attention from the allegation of corruption rather than actually moving ahead with the project, but even if it so succeeds, it would not help the credibility crisis that the government faces.

There is no alternative for the government other than taking the challenge head-on. By taking the Padma Bridge project as a test case the government must demonstrate that it has the capacity and courage to send a strong signal that corruption is indeed a punishable offence in Bangladesh without fear or favour to anybody. This will not only persuade the people of the country a year and a half before the next general elections, but also help overcome the reputational crisis of the government in the eyes of the international community.

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A bridge too far

tion conspiracy" between three groups that involved Bangladesh government officials, civilians and a Canadian firm, two of whose top executives are under trial in Canada

The reason the WB has chosen to de-link from the project is because of the government's lack of palpable action to address its concerns. It felt that the matter did not receive the due importance of the government. The finance minister binning the recent statement of the World Bank as being the statement of its outgoing president validates the WB's statement.

One wonders whether such an irreconcilable situation should have come about at all. Was it not possible to work out a modus vivendi to address the concerns of the WB?

Were the three stipulations of the Bank, namely sending the alleged persons on leave till completion of the enquiry, appointing a special team within the ACC to investigate and making all investigative information to a World Bank panel, so difficult to concede? In fact the best would have been to run a conspicuous inquiry and the project work simultaneously.

One is therefore not sure if the government, in its attempt to protect a few people, has put not only its own credibility at stake but has also jeopardised our national interest. Or is it that the government is so beholden to some of them that it is unable to take action against them.

It is more than merely the WB's \$1.5 billion that is at stake. It will certainly influence the other donors also. And when ministers talk callously about alternative source of finance they seem to only betray their ignorance of the complexity of the project and the cost of financing from other sources. And no other source can meet the easy terms of the World Bank loan. Our planners forget that constructing a bridge, particularly like the

proposed one, is not like purchasing a commodity in the open market

The action of the government so far has been less than transparent, made even more so with the most ill-advised action of the ACC to bar the media from its office, having felt uneasy with the presence of the RCMP in town. Why such a caveat on the media if there is nothing for

the ACC to hide?

The main tussle between the government and the WB stems from the definition of the term "corruption." There is a universal meaning of the term "corruption" and clearly the statement of the Bank says that there was a conspiracy of indulging in corruption. The government's insistence on the fact that no money has passed hands since the project had not even gotten off the ground appears to be a puerile argument. Making preparation for robbery is as much culpable an act as the robbery itself. Why is it a merely a fact versus intention issue?

The WB has made its case by providing what it calls credible evidence to the government of Bangladesh. But there has been nothing substantive from the government the public has been told. And we are not sufficiently persuaded that the obtaining situation is the fault of the WB. If so then the government should have been more proactive and averted the situation.

The country stands besmirched with the allegation of corruption. It is for the government to prove the WB wrong. And it must act fast and substantively instead of hiding behind facile arguments.

We want the government to take all steps to clear our name as a country which does not take corruption seriously. We demand the government make public not only the letters it wrote to the Bank, but also publish a full account of what steps it took to satisfy it.

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