

Banditry on the highway

Exacting a heavy price

WHEN the government vociferously claims that the law and order situation is better than ever before, we find the realities on the ground presenting an entirely different picture. Criminalities are engulfing ever newer pastures with an increasing vengeance, the latest case in point being the Dhaka-Chittagong highway, thanks to an investigative staff item.

This principal highway between the capital and the port city, with all its business and trade connectivity ramifications is being preyed on by hijackers, robbers and extortionists. They are making a killing.

The stark impunity stems from an acute lack or laxity of highway patrol. Where there is highway patrol or local arrangements for police surveillance these would get compromised, going by allegations of truckers and their associations.

The toll taken by robbery of construction materials includes dampening productivity of the steel mills outside Chittagong. It is not a single item-centred piracy, though; in fact, a whole range of export and import commodities are targeted by the robbers. Add to the plunder, harassment and extortion taking place at certain points of the highway. Since the vulnerable segments of the highways are all known, why these can't be secured for the passage of the trucks with effective police intervention?

The serious implications of such disruptions on the highway do not apparently dawn on the government. The foremost consequence of such banditry is increase in the cost of business which leads to depressing investments. Secondly, the prices shoot up due to obstructions along the supply lines with the consumers suffering the most. Moreover, image of the country takes a severe blow at a time when investment climate for the neighbouring or nearby countries is brightening. We are losing out on business competitiveness, a fact, government must be seized with to stop all kinds of lawlessness on the highway. It is an easily manageable length of highway we are talking about and all that is needed is bringing the issue to the fore of our government's consciousness level and acting to match the concerns.

The various associations have threatened to go on strike foreshadowing a business standstill, the government must do everything in its power to avert. Their grievance that no measures have been put in place despite constant reminders, need now to be heeded.

Another death, another spate of violence

The culture of violent reaction must end

IN the endless repetition of road tragedies, yet another young life was extinguished in the Mirpur area on Sunday as a bus ran over a college student while he was getting off the vehicle he was travelling by. Reportedly, what caused the anger in particular was the fact that the victim was made to get off the bus hurriedly by the helper. What followed was complete anarchy on the street which lasted several hours.

Such deaths cannot be tolerated, and while one cannot question the resentment in the fellow students caused by the grief, we feel that what we saw happen following the unfortunate death was a senseless show of anger. And the unsuspected road users, who had nothing to do with the death or had any idea of what was going on, had to suffer indescribable misery.

The fellow students of the victim from Dhaka Commerce College, in order to avenge the death of their colleague, not only torched two buses including the killer bus, they also vandalised some 40 other vehicles and blocked the road that created a tailback of several kilometres and traffic snarl that lasted for several hours.

While the students had every right to protest, and they should have done so peacefully, one wonders whether their way of protesting has done any good to their cause or evinced the sympathy of the public. On the contrary their action has received the deepest contempt from the passers by. And if anything, their action has insulted the memory of the deceased. And this is what they students must understand.

We feel that a thorough enquiry should be carried out and the errant persons, in this case the helper and the driver, who had managed to escape from the scene of occurrence, must be brought to book. And while nothing can recompense the loss of a son, the victim's family

Looking forward to higher cost of living



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

ALL indications point to another spiral in the cost of living.

Such pessimism comes from the fact that one of our largest benefactors, the World Bank has suggested the introduction of royalty on natural gas. From what has recently been published in

the press of late is that the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) along with Petrobangla need to come up with a retail-based pricing mechanism that is built on the basis of costs -- production, transmission and distribution. If we are to go by the report submitted by the International Development Agency which states "it is proposed that during the following years, the average gas price will be increased every year, by a fixed amount of \$0.86 per GJ. By 2016, the average price of gas will reach \$6.00 GJ." All these indicators point to a steady raising of primary fuel prices in both bulk and retail categories over the course of the next few years. Needless to say, such price adjustment is unavoidable given ground realities and government energy bodies are busy working out the new pricing regime.

The rationale that is being used for the latest hike package will naturally revolve around unsustainable subsidies the state coughs out each year. Yet, each hike in energy price is accompanied by a jump in retail prices of goods that are many times more than the readjusted energy price hike. This happened the last time prices were raised last quarter. The question is not so much on whether energy prices need to be adjusted but precisely whether the government has any contingencies to stop the business community and service providers from transferring input costs (energy in this case) plus added profits directly onto to consumers without batting an eyelid. To put all this into perspective,

the 5% increase of diesel price usually invites a jump in transportation cost that is many more times and such enhancement of tariff knows neither any bounds, follows no conformity and basically defies logic. In a similar vein, businessmen claim that their trucking cost for carrying commodities from wholesale to retail markets have jumped due to fuel price hike. One may easily ask by how much? And how many times can they charge the hapless consumer at retail level?

Looking at Bangladesh's competitiveness in a global setting, we enjoy a comparative advantage

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over countries such as China, India and many other countries in the apparel industry. This is primarily due to low input costs, i.e. labour is cheap, as is the price of energy, i.e. gas, oil and electricity. Now with the increased tariff that the state proposes to introduce for energy and power, the garments sector exporter will have to cut costs somehow to stay competitive in this annual \$19 billion a year export market from Bangladesh. Those cost cutting measures will come by squeezing the labourers further in terms of finding ways to cut their wages. The very recent labour unrest in Ashulia drove home the

realities of living conditions of factory workers in the RMG sector. Any further squeeze could potentially lead to an explosive situation that could engulf the entire sector.

The realities of "expensive power" have yet to make any impact on industry leaders. Failure to realise that in the very immediate future, industries that include the RMG sector will be facing realistic pricing regimes for gas and electricity (produced mainly by oil-run power plants) is going to end up having catastrophic consequences for industry and country at large. There is still time to improve their competitiveness by bringing about a change in mindset. It calls for changes in lifestyle: forget the yearly holiday on the French Riviera or Tahiti and ditch the BMWs and Jaguars. Invest savings in improving productivity and energy efficiency that will lower energy bills across the board. Sadly, such rethinking is not really on the list of priorities.

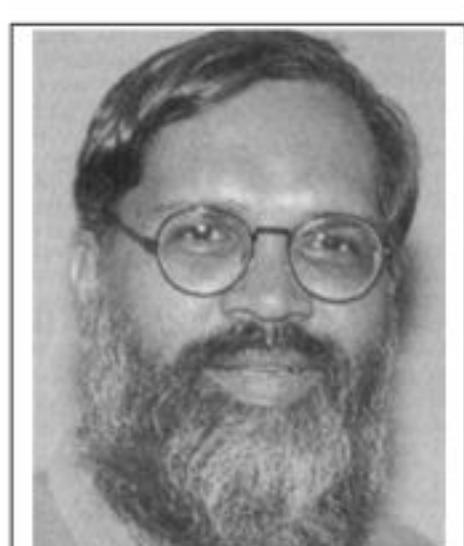
Rather, putting further squeeze on labour so that it may become cheaper still is very much the viable option. While the industrial police may go on wielding their batons and the newly procured hot water cannon trucks give the labour force a much needed hot bath, such measures will only assist in fermenting labour unrest that will lead to political agitation.

At the end of the day, it is up to the government to justify energy and power prices. Doubling the gas price for captive power generation and hiking the present CNG prices by about 40% will have a chain reaction on retail pricing and that too for reasons explained above. While it may make perfect sense to revise pricing upwardly, it is up to the government to set up effective monitoring mechanisms to stop unscrupulous business entities from taking advantage of state inefficiency, as a regulator, and bleed the consumer dry. A failure to do so is asking for trouble; trouble when it comes may be very difficult to contain.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Atrocities will further fuel Naxalism



PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE killing of 20 civilians by the Central Reserve

Police Force in Bijapur in Central India's Chhattisgarh will go down as a black mark in the history of Indian counter - insurgency. All evidence suggests that the CRPF gravely mistook a village meeting to plan a seed festival for a Maoist gathering and indiscriminately fired on it.

Among the victims were two 15-year-old boys, a 12-year-old girl, and a professional drum player -- hardly fit to be confused for armed Naxalites. Although the CRPF troops' bullet injuries remain unexplained, and four of those killed allegedly had police records, nothing suggests that Maoists ambushed the troops, who then fired in self-defence.

Even firing in self-defence cannot be indiscriminate. Besides, there's evidence of sexual assault and mutilation of dead bodies. This suggests collective punishment -- which is categorically unacceptable.

Equally deplorable is the butchery's rationalisation that the CRPF has no "system of segregating" guerrillas from civilians during gunfights, and Chief Minister Raman Singh's argument that Maoists use civilians as human shields, and are responsible for their deaths.

However, the present case appears less an instance of unintended damage than deliberate targeting. The attacking party followed the "fire-first-and-ask-questions-later" approach.

The incident emphasises the growing disconnect between the people and counterinsurgency troops, who have no comprehension of their language, culture and sensitivities, and whom they often consider inferior.

In Chhattisgarh, Adivasi identities, rooted in an ancient civilisation, remain strong. It is only since the 1980s that they have been exposed to large-scale intrusion by external predatory interests like forest contractors and the mining mafia. The tribals have over the years lost land and access to forests.

The state fails to comprehend this as it pushes destructive mining and industrial projects, thus increasing the Adivasis' alienation. It hasn't even invested a fraction of what it spends on the paramilitary forces in addressing Adivasi grievances or helping its counterinsurgency troops understand the roots of tribal alienation amidst which Maoism thrives.

E.N. Rammohan -- a distinguished former Border Security Force chief with much counterinsurgency experience -- puts his finger on the nub: "Give land to the tiller and forests back to the

tribals. Plus, bring down the vast gap between the rich and the poor... and the Maoists would be on the wane."

In Bijapur, the CRPF was in the first place wrong to open fire. The proper objective of a counterinsurgency operation is not to kill rebels, but to bring them to justice by establishing their culpability for specific crimes, and to isolate them politically from the population.

This civilian butchery has created fear and insecurity among the people. Many are planning to move out of their villages into neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. It will take generations for their scars to heal.

Politically, the incident is a huge victory for the Maoist argument that the Indian state is irredeemably anti-people and brutal. Democracy is a mere façade. It must be overthrown through an armed revolution.

The only way to redeem this situation is to award

The Maoists aren't about to capture power or destroy India's unity. They pose a civil law-and-order problem, which should be tackled by normal police methods -- good intelligence-gathering, crime control, painstaking evidence collection, and prosecution of those instigating or practising violence.

exemplary punishment to those responsible for the killings. India has paid a heavy price for not bringing the culprits of past counterinsurgency excesses to book.

Take the Chittisingpura massacre of 2000, in which 36 Sikhs were killed. Indian military forces killed five innocent locals at Pathribal in Anantnag district, claiming they were the culprits. Their bodies were dressed up in military uniforms and set on fire in an extraordinarily shoddy cover-up attempt. Officers were decorated and monetarily rewarded for this heinous crime. They compounded their offence by substituting the victims' DNA samples with fake ones.

The incident still rankles in Kashmir. Yet, nobody has been put on trial for it -- although the Supreme Court has strongly refuted the army's misguided invocation of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act to reject that demand.

The latest Chhattisgarh killings raise serious

questions about the anti-Maoist campaign underway in nine states. It has come in for scathing criticism from an Expert Group of the Planning Commission.

The Group holds: "The methods chosen by the government to deal with the Maoist phenomenon [have] increased the people's distrust of the police and consequent unrest. Protest against police harassment is itself a major instance of unrest frequently leading to further violence by the police... which in effect triggers a second round of the spiral."

In many parts of India, the state has been captured by the rich or become dysfunctional and predatory upon the people. Notes the Expert Group: "One of the attractions of the Naxalite movement is that it does provide protection to the weak against the powerful. One doesn't have to romanticise the Maoists to recognise this."

Green Hunt only pays lip service to the official "two-pronged" approach of "development" and "law-and-order," or simultaneously redressing popular grievances and using force. In practice, it overwhelmingly relies on brute force without recognising that the insurgency feeds on Adivasi dispossession and brutalisation.

The official premise that Maoism is India's "greatest internal security threat" is profoundly mistaken. The Maoists aren't about to capture power or destroy India's unity. They pose a civil law-and-order problem, which should be tackled by normal police methods -- good intelligence-gathering, crime control, painstaking evidence collection, and prosecution of those instigating or practising violence.

By contrast, social cohesion is gravely threatened by the communal Right, including the Bharatiya Janata Party and its associates, some of whom have embraced terrorism, but against whom the Indian state doesn't act.

The state must heed the counsel of counterinsurgency experts like Robert Thompson. "Hardly, if ever, has a counter-insurgency campaign been won strictly by waging war. Military action has an important role in overcoming guerrillas, but the philosophy espoused by the guerrillas must also be defeated and this requires a well-reasoned combination of political reform, civic action and education of the population."

As Mr. Rammohan puts it, a counterinsurgency operation must be "scrupulously legal." This is a precondition for its popular acceptance, and also for the state's legitimacy. When will India's rulers learn this?

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 10

1806

The Vellore Mutiny is the first instance of a mutiny by Indian sepoys against the British East India Company.

1947

Muhammad Ali Jinnah is recommended as the first Governor-General of Pakistan by British Prime Minister Clement Attlee.

1973

National Assembly of Pakistan passes a resolution on the recognition of Bangladesh.

1992

In Miami, Florida, former Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega is sentenced to 40 years in prison for drug and racketeering violations.