

## Extortionists' heyday before Eid

*Strengthen police presence and highway patrol*

PROFESSIONAL rent-seekers and criminals have seemingly established a hold in different parts of the city as well as on the inter-district highways. According to police, more than three hundred notorious criminals have reportedly become active within the city alone. They have been threatening citizens they have targeted for extortion of dire consequences over phone or with letters, in case they fail to meet their demands.

As there are instances of police inaction after complaints, or extortionists getting bail even after their arrest, many victims found it safer to accept the criminals' demands without complaining to the police.

Outside the capital city, the travellers are at the mercy of highwaymen as well as rent-seekers of various hues. This rise in extortionist activities is an annual feature, so is the claims by the authorities over beefing up security for the Eid shoppers, travellers and traders in the city and on the highways. There is a disconnect between claims and the ground realities.

On the pretext of stopping illegal toll collection at the ferry terminals, the shipping minister's suggestion that toll collection by transport owners' and workers' associations would be legitimised has raised further concern. This could only fuel extortions in general.

The idea of maintaining discipline at the ferry terminals by transport owners' and workers' associations is a novelty, but it would need to be supervised by the law-enforcement agencies. They should not be adversarial but cooperative towards each other.

Overall, the local administrations should not only discourage extortion, but also energetically pursue all agencies concerned to maintain discipline and enhance safety of life and property. Let the government at the appropriate levels intervene where necessary to make the transition to Eid tension-free.

In particular, measures would need to be put in place to curb overloading and speeding of transports to avert accidents. Their number is usually very high during pre- and post-Eid travelling.

The tragedies should be avoided.

## Desperation in Syria

*Assad regime will have to go*

THE defection of Syria's Prime Minister Riad Hijab to the opposition has, in a pretty medieval way, outraged the embattled Bashar al Assad. He appears to think that he now needs to hit the rebels harder than before, a strategy which in recent times has often proved to be the undoing of many. By now the Syrian president should have gone for a major rethink about the options before him. The recent deaths of his interior and defence ministers in an explosion were proof, if proof were needed, of the grave danger his regime has fallen into. It is a reality much of the rest of the world recognizes. Only Assad and his loyalists go on believing that in the end they will triumph.

The unfortunate part of the sordid story is that some of Assad's friends abroad seem to think he deserves to be sustained in power. The Russians are unwilling to abandon him. And only the other day Iran made it known that it will continue to support the Syrian leader against what it called regional and global enemies of the axis of resistance. That must have cheered Assad to no end. He keeps pounding away at Aleppo, where rebels have been fighting a desperate battle against the army. Indeed, desperation is what has characterized Syria over the past sixteen months. With the regime deploying the army and the air force against citizens and with the rebels caught in a no-win no-defeat condition, it has been the country's civilian population that has been bearing the brunt of the conflict.

It should be obvious by now that the Assad regime has little chance of getting Syria back in its grip. With rebels engaging government soldiers in some pockets of the capital Damascus, it is hard to think that the regime will be able to wriggle out of the difficult situation it is trapped in. And that is where the international community must come in, with the clear message for Assad that he has to go. The crisis concerns a need for change. And change will not happen if Assad and his team hang on to power. They have ruined much of the country. And, arrogant as they are, they will go on wreaking havoc until they are run

## Fasting promotes healthy lifestyle



*Islam makes a strong connection between food and worship and teaches that all forms of worship have a deeper purpose and impact and contributing some way to individual and social well-being. In chapter 7, verse 31 the Qur'an is categorical: "Eat and drink freely: but waste not by excess, for He does not like the wasters."*

only been sent for the perfection of character."

Fasting is complete abstinence from food and drink between dawn and dusk. All those who are ill or frail, pregnant or menstruating women, breastfeeding mothers and travellers are exempted. They are required to make up the number of days missed at a later date. Health is the key to happiness, and what we consume directly affects our health. Islam encourages Muslims to ensure that they are mindful of their health. The blessed Prophet said: "Take advantage of the good health before illnesses afflict you." He also encouraged Muslims to try their best to take up a healthy living lifestyle that includes a balanced diet, regular mental and physical exercise and a balance between material and spiritual needs. The month of Ramadan is a great opportunity to focus on bringing back a balanced and healthy lifestyle in

your life.

The fasts of Ramadan can improve a person's health. The deciding factor is what you consume in the non-fasting hours. Food has a great significance in Islam. It is associated with one's relationship with God. Chapter 20, verse 81 of the Qur'an states: "Eat of the good and wholesome things that we have provided for your sustenance, but indulge in no excess therein."

The physical body is a gift from God; it is given to humans as an *amanah* (in trust) to take care of for a fixed period. How much food is consumed and the choice of food has a direct impact on the physical and spiritual well-being of the person. The food that you consume affects your behaviour and personality. Wholesome, natural and healthy food assists the development of a good personality. Overeating has long been frowned upon in Islam as it is thought

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FASTING in the month of Ramadan is an opportunity to make significant changes in lifestyle and develop the resolve to make healthy living choices. Fasting is a physical and spiritual experience requiring a great deal of preparation. What and how much you eat affects your health directly, and refraining from food can help improve self-discipline and restraint if done appropriately. It is an opportunity to make healthy lifestyle choices and give up some bad habits like smoking, eating *pan*, telling lies, speaking ill of others, back biting, losing temper and vain talk. Being mindful of how you fast and how you break your fast can help to improve your overall health -- both physical and mental. Fasting is not only a physical but also a spiritual exercise that has many lasting benefits like a sense of heightened consciousness of God. It also helps you to become less preoccupied with bodily appetites, and gives the heart and mind the freedom to reflect upon deeper spiritual matters, such as the relationship with God and with fellow human beings. It enables a person to develop sustained consciousness of God.

A fasting person learns restraint, and only responds to hunger and thirst in the heightened level of consciousness and discipline. In the Quran "healthy and wholesome food" is described as the best of provisions. Islam creates a sense of responsibility in people to take a healthy living lifestyle as normal. Fasting in the month of Ramadan teaches us to manage and practice spirituality and not to eat excessively. The essential part of spirituality in food is that we are grateful and thankful for the food we get. The blessed Prophet once said: "God has a right over you; your body has a right over you." To strike a balance between the needs of the physical body and your spiritual needs, you must on the one hand consume the right type and amount of food and on the other hand develop excellent interpersonal skills. The blessed Prophet Muhammad said: "I have

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NOT only Bangladesh but also many other countries like India, United Kingdom and Russia are facing floods.

Only at Kurigram, almost 66,000 families have been displaced from their homes. According to newspaper reports, floods have destroyed 37,665 homes and 15,427 hectares of cropland in around 500 villages of nine upazilas in the district. At least 74 educational institutions and 765 kilometres of roads went under water. The observation of the common people is that now they do not get silt after flood, rather their lands get covered with sand and lose productivity in the northern part of Bangladesh. It takes almost three years for the land to come to normal productivity while a massive flood occurs after four or five years. So, people can cultivate the land for one or two years in every five years. Thus, in no way is flood beneficial for the poor people of our country.

The country needs to have disaster preparedness instead of response and relief, and it should be a major component in disaster management strategy. This makes strengthening of Early Warning System (EWS) mandatory. We have done very well in regard to cyclone EW message dissemination and it is well recognised in Asia.

The government has taken up an initiative to strengthen flood EWS, and with the lessons learnt from the piloting of this initiatives of some international NGOs the government is implementing it in 14 districts with the technical collaboration of NARRI. As a part of this, local level authorities of Gaibandha have been equipped with the EWS by the government. The initiative ensures that the early warning messages will reach the grassroots

level within a short time to allow some time to the community for preparation.

There are three stages in the early warning dissemination system:

- Disseminating early warning messages from the source agencies (FFWC/DMB/DMIC) to the local DMCs (district, upazila and union);
- Disseminating early warning messages among the members of local disaster management committees, NGOs, representatives of the volunteers and community-based organizations by local DMCs;
- Disseminating early warning

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messages at the household and community levels by the GO-NGO departments and organisations and volunteers.

So, the dissemination of the early warning messages is a set of consecutive approaches and maintains a chain. Any disturbance or anomaly in this chain will destroy the entire process.

Water flow from upstream is one of the major reasons for flood occurrence in Bangladesh. Heavy rainfall in Assam forced India to let the water flow down to Bangladesh. And within 3 to 4 days a huge land area of Bangladesh was inundated suddenly in the early rainy season, which is

quite an unusual time for flooding in Bangladesh.

We adopted the strategy for EW dissemination quickly in Bangladesh but all the efforts turned out to be in vain. The people had to suffer severely and our aim of moving towards disaster preparedness instead of disaster relief and response was frustrated.

I visited the flood affected areas of Gaibandha to see how things were going on. Many of the community people said that they could realise that flood was imminent but they were waiting to receive the messages from television and radio.

At Gaibandha, water crossed the danger level on June 27, causing a

huge devastation. The lives of the poverty struck people of northern Bangladesh came to standstill for few days; searching for a food packet had become the only task of the victims. Hundreds of men and women kept standing in the water for hours after hour for a single packet of food, but many had to return without food for their hungry children.

A detailed investigation revealed that the Upazilla Nirbahi Officers (UNOs) received the message from the central level on June 28, one day after the water crossed the danger level. This is the first communication that the district level officers received from the government and by this

to increase worldly appetites and cause sluggishness, thereby "dulling" the soul, hampering spiritual growth and increasing physical ailments.

The blessed Prophet said: "The children of Adam fill no vessel worse than their stomach. Sufficient for him is a few morsels to keep his back straight. If he must eat more, then a third should be for his food, a third for his drink, and a third left for air." (Sunan al-Tirmidhi).

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The diet should be simple and not differ too much from one's normal everyday diet. It should contain foods from all the major food groups. Complex carbohydrates are found in grains and seeds, like barley, wheat, oats, millets, semolina, beans, lentils, wholemeal flour, *basmati* rice, etc. Fibre-rich foods are also digested slowly and include bran, cereals, whole wheat, grains and seeds, potatoes with the skin, vegetables such as green beans and almost all fruit, including apricots, prunes, figs, etc. Foods to avoid are the heavily-processed, fast-burning foods that contain refined carbohydrates in the form of sugar, white flour, etc., as well as, of course, too much fatty food (eg cakes, biscuits, chocolates and sweets). It may also be worth avoiding the caffeine content in drinks such as tea, coffee and cola.

The most commonly consumed foods by Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, were milk, dates, lamb/mutton and oats. Healthy foods mentioned in the Holy Qur'an are fruit and vegetables, such as olives, onions, cucumber, figs, dates, grapes as well as pulses such as lentils. The encouragement of fish can be seen in the fact that Islamic law spares fish from any specific slaughter requirements, making it easy to incorporate fish in a meal.

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## Flood: Early warning system

time, the entire north-west region has gone under water. Should we call this a flood early warning?

This indicates that we still need to be more proactive, not in theory but in practice. We want the message to be delivered from the central level (DMB/DMIC/FFWC/WDB) to the grassroots within a very short time. So, in the first stage, the message stopped when dissemination to the grassroots from the upazilla was the major challenge.

The second proposition is for strengthening the flood EWS in Bangladesh. We need to develop some strategies that can help us collaborate with India, which is upstream. We can have bilateral agreement with India which will ensure that India will inform Bangladesh at least one day before releasing the water so that we can disseminate the EW messages to the community level. If this is done people, especially those in the north-western part of Bangladesh, would get one and half to two days to make preparations, and the people would suffer less.

It would be better if we could develop another collaborative mechanism with India which can complement our mainstream EWS. Besides this, it could also be predicted that our country may be flooded as there was heavy rain fall in Assam. It is obvious that when India is inundated, it will release the water to flow downstream. If we could predict the flood situation and concerned bodies like DMB or DMIC could work more effectively, at least by giving the early warning messages with proper lead time, our people would not have to suffer so much.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

August 9

1942

Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi is arrested in Bombay by British forces, launching the Quit India Movement.

1945

World War II: Nagasaki is devastated when an atomic bomb, Fat Man, is dropped by the United States B-29 Bockscar. 39,000 people are killed outright.

1974

As a direct result of the Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon becomes the first President of the United States to resign from office. His Vice President, Gerald Ford, becomes president.

1999

Russian President Boris Yeltsin fires his Prime Minister, Sergei Stepashin, and for the fourth time fires his entire cabinet.