

SUNDAY POUCH

Why are criminals being released?

This gives rise to serious misgivings

THE recent release of infamous criminal Bikash from Kashimpur Jail has raised serious public concerns. The manner of his setting free, reportedly, under special protection in presence of some senior police officials, further adds to the deep misgivings.

It is worthwhile to note that all the procedures of releasing the criminal from the jail, who had some 15 cases against him, were completed within a matter of only 45 minutes. And that too on a weekend day when the court remains closed -- a feat that was "not possible for jail authorities", a Supreme Court lawyer pointed out, unless some powerful hands lent active help.

It is baffling to note how this notorious criminal could get the bails in all those 15 cases against him lying with the police stations? So, would we be wrong or unfair to raise the question whether or not the administration had a role in getting him released?

And now that both the home secretary and the home minister have tried to unconvincingly assure us that due process of law has been followed in freeing Bikash from jail, what still eludes common sense is why on earth a criminal facing charges of murder and extortion should receive this enthusiastic attention from the administration?

One wonders why the process of law has not been equally expeditious in bringing Biswajit's killers to justice.

What is further upsetting is that criminals have been freed from other jails as in last November some 11 terrorists were released from Chittagong jail.

It may be recalled that home minister on November 14 told the Jatiya Sangsad that the President granted clemency to 21 convicted offenders among whom 20 were on death row during the last three years. Among them was Biplob, the killer of Advocate Nurul Islam, whom the president had pardoned in July 2011 while in late 2010 he granted clemency to 20 convicted in the murder of opposition Jubo Dal leader Sabbir Ahmed Gama.

With all our respect for the president's prerogatives, we cannot but share public anxiety over the president's showing mercy to so many killers with supposed political link.

We are deeply concerned about this phenomenon of releasing these criminal elements from jail. Could there be a link with the prospect of steep rise in political violence? Is there an attempt to use well-known criminals to do the dirty work while the government is now facing rising public criticism for doing it through its cadres?

For the sake of democracy we sincerely hope not.

Bangladesh Railway must remain on track

It should be rapidly modernised

BANGLADESH Railway has been trudging along for a good number of years without any purposeful measures being taken to make it go faster. And now that it has run into problems over its move to purchase 70 metre gauge diesel-electric locomotives, owing specifically to arguments by various firms that the locomotives are outdated and also that the tender for the purchase of the locomotives favours a single company, in this instance a Korean firm, there are fresh causes for worry.

Compared to other transport systems in Bangladesh, BR offers a cheap way of travel for people throughout the country. Besides, trains remain by and large a safe means of travel, which is one other good reason why BR is favoured by travellers. And despite all these positive aspects of railway travel, there is something of an irony in that over the years the number of locomotives at BR has gone down from a high of 486 to 295. And most of the remaining locomotives date back fifty years or so. How such a situation has come to pass has never quite been explained. And now BR faces the prospect of purchasing locomotives that do not have revolution capacity per minute (RPM) of more than 900-1100. The firms arguing that they be permitted to pitch in with their products point out that in an age where railways in other parts of the world have locomotives operating on 1,900 RPM, it is only proper that BR come level with current trends.

The onus now is on the authorities to break out of the logjam. BR needs to cut through red tape and move toward a purchase of locomotives that will fulfill public needs to the maximum. What must be borne in mind is that Bangladesh Railway must remain on track, for an incredibly large number of our population depend on it for movement.

Basically, the government needs to get its priorities right in terms of where most of the emphasis for a multimodal

Bangladesh 2012: A snap scorecard



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

AS 2012 winds down, it may be appropriate to assess how the country performed over the year. Detailed assessment

later will be backed by reliable statistics. But it may be interesting to present a broad brush for experts to later follow up. At the end of the year one can say that Bangladesh is at a political crossroad. On the one hand, the hope of any political reforms is temporarily crushed. The present government has been marked by poor governance indicators: corruption, partisan political institutions, worsening human rights violation and deteriorating law and order. By restricting democratic space it has prevented constitutional changes. State organs are still in the hands of party sympathisers.

Mainstream opposition, therefore, remains frustrated. It has resorted to widespread non-cooperation. It has also used its surging strength to intimidate in order to disrupt normal life whenever there is an excuse. Its object is to bring an elected government to its knees. The law-abiding, tax-paying citizens who are in the middle of all this are in a terrible fix. They feel that they are merely pawns in the chess game of politics. Powerless and often brutalised they have become pessimistic about the future of the country.

But is this the real picture of Bangladesh today? If it is so then why are the economic indicators telling a different story?

Last week, Moody's, the prestigious global country rating agency, reported that "Bangladesh's credit stability has been shored up by the momentum in reforms agenda." It gave the country a respectable score of Ba3 putting it on par with the Philippines and Egypt among the 130 countries rated. This score is ahead of Pakistan (B3), Sri Lanka (B1) and Vietnam (B1). It is just behind Indonesia (Ba1) and India (Baa3/Ba1) the two major economies of Asia. Moody's states that "the recent passing of a new value added tax law and reforms connected to fuel prices and the financial sector are the reasons" behind continuing to grade Bangladesh high. The credit

rating agency thinks that in spite of the contentious political landscape, which has in fact dented investors' confidence, event risks in Bangladesh are remote. Translated, it means that future political developments would not result in any sudden shifts in the policy framework.

Moody's further reports that there has been improvement in the country's macro-economic stability during 2012. It is increasingly getting proficient in handling current and future challenges. In specific terms this could mean a spurt in Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves, which in the last fiscal was just \$10.3 billion. By the end of the next fiscal it could shoot up to \$13 billion.

A quick check of the economy is

Bangladesh scores high marks for its better than average performance of the economy and in matters pertaining to foreign relations. The scores become less than average when the performance of the leaders and their politics are assessed. The question now is whether 2013 will bring seminal changes in its politics.

therefore in order. In 2012, analysts noted that domestic demand for consumption goods had grown significantly. The main drivers behind this surge in demand were growth in agriculture sector, huge exports of readymade garments and increase in foreign remittances. Agricultural growth has fundamentally changed the character of the economy. With more than 30 million + tons of rice production, food imports have dwindled. This has allowed the government to divert some of this money for providing a social net and giving protection to the economically vulnerable. With surplus accrued from agriculture there is now more money in the hand of the farmers. They have mutated to be a major consumer group in the country.

Secondly, the readymade garment sector has continued to employ more women and semi-skilled workers. More and more international buyers are sourcing their readymade garments from Bangladesh. This is in spite of complications with regard to meeting international compliance standards on wages, safety and right to strike by garment workers. Total export earnings from this sector now is over \$18 billion and the net earnings after deducting costs of imports to fabricate ready made products would now be touching \$9 billion.

This has provided money in the pocket of millions of garment workers with which they are buying consumer products. McKinsey forecasts a 9% a year of such growth for another decade.

Thirdly, remittances sent by Bangladeshis abroad continue to climb. Besides accessing new labour markets some large market like Malaysia, which had been closed for Bangladeshi workers, have reopened in 2012. This has added large numbers to the existing cohort of remitters. Remittances may therefore climb to an all time high. This huge inward remittance of over \$12 billion has further fuelled demand for consumer goods. But it may also have put pressure on prices of commodi-

ties in the market.

New areas of growth have also become evident this year. These are shipbuilding, production of electronics (white goods) and high-end pharmaceuticals, as well as information technology (IT) products and services. During 2012, Bangladesh was able to produce an additional 3,000 MW of electricity. When added to the previous generation it totals 6,350 MW. Further steps are underway to continue to generate even more electricity. This will help meet the accelerated demand for energy.

At the same time, the government has introduced policy measures that encourage the setting up of solar units in homes and in markets around the country. Grameen Sakti is just one of the many companies supplying solar power to homes. Single-handedly it has completed the setting up of one million solar units this year, while another million home-steads are in the process of being connected by this company. Bangladesh is literally being lit up now at night. Businesses and educational institutions are benefiting from this development. Micro-credit agencies, the banks as well as the World Bank are supporting this massive change. Empowerment of the individual is also being increasingly aided by use of mobile phones (total

subscriber base is now 100 million people). Internet penetration is also increasing rapidly.

In spite of all these developments, there are three main areas where Bangladesh did not concentrate this year. First is, of course, narrowing income inequality between persons and within regions.

The next is establishing better connectivity within the country by roads, rail and waterways. The government has not been able to take up any major infrastructure project in 2012. It has been unnecessarily bogged down with the proposed Padma Bridge, and also the project to develop a deep-sea port in Chittagong. Not much headway has been made there either. The widening of the Dhaka Chittagong highway is another project that must move fast, so that the country can take greater advantage of international trade. Improvement in cyber connectivity between countries can also bring in big revenues as well as employment opportunities.

Though 2012 has seen a deep crisis in leadership in the country, the general people do not seem to have lost heart. The civil society and the media continue to prop up their hopes through affirmative actions. Internationally, in 2012 Bangladesh has been able to effectively change strategic perspectives about itself. The visit of the US secretary of state to Dhaka to sign the Joint Declaration for institutionalising security talks annually at a ministerial level, and receiving a favourable verdict from the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea in the maritime boundary dispute with Myanmar were significant. The country now has to work assiduously to get road and rail connectivity with China.

Bangladesh scores high marks for its better than average performance of the economy and in matters pertaining to foreign relations. The scores become less than average when the performance of the leaders and their politics are assessed. The country can therefore rightly claim average scores for its general performance this year. The question now is whether 2013 will bring seminal changes in its politics. We will have to wait and see. The general elections are due then.

The writer is a former Ambassador and a regular commentator on contemporary matters. E-mail: ashfaq303@gmail.com

Farewell to arms no easy task

CHEN WEIHUA

JUST a few hours after the tragic shooting last Friday in Newtown, Connecticut, which killed 20 children and six adults, my colleague suggested that we should discuss gun control in our weekly Across America Talk video programme.

But the question we immediately asked ourselves was what we could discuss about gun control. We had extensively discussed the subject in July right after the theatre shooting in Aurora, Colorado, which took 12 lives.

In between, there was a shooting in August at the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, in which seven people died, and then the shooting just days before the Newtown rampage in a shopping mall in Oregon, which killed three.

The US cable networks have been covering the Newtown massacre 24/7 over the past week. The conflict in Syria, the satellite launch by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the protests in Egypt which had dominated the news before the shooting suddenly no longer made the headlines.

Even the so-called "Fiscal Cliff" has been given little coverage despite the fact that US President Barack Obama and House Speaker John

Boehner have not struck a deal so far to save Americans and the world from a possible panic only 11 days away.

When the Aurora theatre shooting took place, Obama was reluctant to talk about gun control for fear of offending pro-gun voters in a close presidential election. This time, after securing his re-election, he has made

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many pledges and vowed tough action to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. On Wednesday, he said Vice-President Joseph Biden would lead the effort.

But if Obama is truly to use all the power he has, he probably should lead the mission himself to accomplish a mission impossible.

I would like to be wrong, but I think that after two more weeks, no one in the US is going to talk about the Newtown shooting or gun con-

rol, except for the families who lost their loved ones.

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will be met with strong resistance from those defending the Second Amendment, which gives US citizens the right to bear arms.

In the name of defending the constitution, few have seriously considered whether such an outdated amendment is still fit for the 21st century.

Reports show that gun sales have increased in Connecticut since the Newtown shooting. The FBI has also reported more background checks

for firearms purchases this year than ever before.

A Pew Centre survey, which was conducted right after the Aurora theatre shooting, found that 47% said it was more important to control gun ownership, while 46% said it was more important to protect the right of US citizens to own guns. The attitude was largely unchanged despite the shooting.

I am not trying to sound cynical, but Obama and Americans simply need to take drastic action to "un-arm" US civilians before another mass shooting occurs.

People in the US marvel at the low gun-related homicide rate in Japan, less than 10 in 2008, but they do not realise that it is almost impossible for Japanese people to buy guns, let alone high-capacity magazines and semi-automatic rifles, which were used in all of the recent shooting rampages.

On the same day the Newtown tragedy took place, a crazy man in Central China's Henan province entered a rural primary school and injured 23 children. But if buying a gun in China was as easy as in the US, that tragedy could have been worse than Newtown.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 23

1921

Visva-Bharati University is inaugurated.

1948

Seven Japanese convicted of war crimes by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East are executed at Sugamo Prison in Tokyo.

1979

Soviet war in Afghanistan: Soviet forces occupy Kabul, the Afghan capital.

1990

History of Slovenia: In a referendum, 88.5% of Slovenia's overall electorate vote for independence from Yugoslavia.

2007

An agreement is made for the monarchy of Nepal to be abolished and the country to become a federal republic with the Prime Minister becoming head of state.