

CROSS TALK

Hatirjheel project inaugurated

We commend the major connectivity and decoration stride

THE much-anticipated Hatirjheel-Begunbari was inaugurated amidst fanfare on 2nd January at a cost of Tk1,971 cr. This project provides more than a mere road link between Rampura and Tejgaon. Rather, it is a comprehensive project that addresses multifarious shortcomings including drainage of flood waters, recreation facilities in terms of walkways and urban beautification.

Over the last few decades, Dhaka has transformed into a concrete megacity devoid of green and recreational facilities. So, Hatirjheel project comes as a much welcome reprieve for the hemmed in citizens of Dhaka city who will be glad to find that they now have over 9 km of new footpath and a 10 km long lakeside walkway. This is the first major road link expansion undertaking in the country in nearly two decades. It should redress the severe gridlock commuters often face when trying to commute from Rampura to Tejgaon, Bangla Motor or beyond via Moghbazar and Malibagh, and vice-versa. The two-way road directly connecting Moghbazar with Rampura will be particularly helpful in easing traffic at the almost impassable choke points in Moghbazar, Mouchak and Malibagh. And it is not only motorised vehicles that will find the shortcut useful. With care given to people's movement, the walkways will serve to cut short the long walks thousands of people, including women working in garments factories make every day to get to their destinations. However, much remains to be done, particularly the recreational part of the project that envisages a water court, floating walkway, children's play equipment, water taxi terminal, lakeside landing steps, etc.

The issue of compensating those affected by this 302-acre project has been raised by none other than the prime minister herself. This of course will be a step in the right direction. We are hopeful that Rajdhani Unnayan Katripakha is up to the task of handing over apartments that are yet to be built to the displaced families, for the issue of compensating the public is of great importance.

Border killings

We view it with great concern

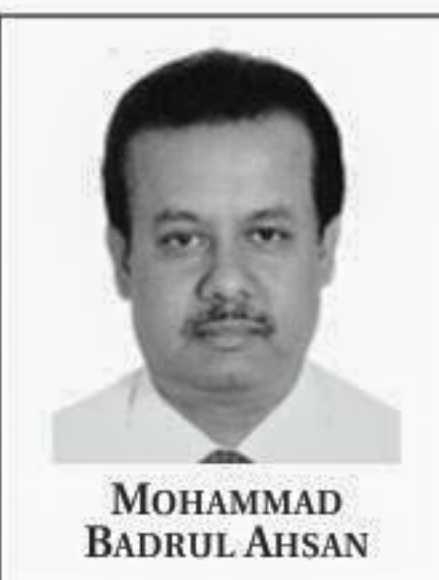
THE frequent killings of Bangladeshi citizens by BSF are a matter of great concern for us. The figure of deaths and abductions in the last two days of the New Year is extremely disquieting. And last year, according to "Ain O Shalishi Kendro" at least 48 Bangladeshis met their death in BSF fire and 319 were tortured by them. Also during that time 106 Bangladeshis sustained injuries while 140 were abducted by the Indian border forces.

Incidences of border firing and abduction are extremely distressing, more so when we see the repetition of these despite the assurances from the highest political level in India that the BSF personnel would be restrained. And further, Bangladesh was given the assurance two years ago that henceforth lethal ammunition would not be used. The regular DG and commander level meetings at all levels have recognised the magnitude of the issue, but going by the records, no substantive action has been taken by India to see that the assurances were honoured.

In this regard we view the comments of the Bangladesh Home Minister, that during his last visit to India both countries had agreed to resort to firing in self-defence, with a bit of reservation. We feel 'self defence' lends itself to very wide and subjective definition. And we fail to understand how cattle traders or trespassers, we are certain that given the nature of the terrain and the border there would be a few of these, pose threat to the heavily armed Indian BSF. We are yet to see the lethal weapons that these so-called 'threats' were carrying on their person when they were shot down by the Indian border guards.

It needs no repetition that deaths and torture of Bangladeshi citizens at the hands of the BSF creates an adverse mind frame, particularly among the border population. And saying mere 'sorry' from time to time by

When some men are monsters



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

TWO women are raped in India every 60 minutes and when a college girl in Delhi was raped inside a moving bus on

the night of December 16, her ordeal lasted for 30 minutes. By the time her assailants were finished with her, another poor victim was getting ready to complete the hour unless she was raped already. In every country of the world, some men turn into monsters with clockwork rigidity.

When the Delhi girl was being violated, men spiked their lust with fury. One of the rapists testified he saw ropelike objects being pulled out of the girl by other assailants, which happened to be her intestines. The girl, who succumbed to her injuries in Singapore's Mount Elizabeth Hospital last Saturday, wouldn't have been able to eat another meal in her life if she had lived.

It's hard to tell what those men looked for in their victim's body. If they looked for pleasure, then why did they have to be so brutal? They wanted to rip up their victim in the manner wayward children smash their toys while playing. It's a bad comparison I know, because a girl's body should never be a plaything. Neither should the gravity of that crime be downplayed as childish. Yet the analogy brings out the

stupidity of the whole thing. May be stupidity isn't the right word for it. I don't know which word can adequately capture the cruelty when six men in their libidinal excitement forgot the girl was also a human being.

No matter how the sociobiologists may want to explain it, rape is conclusive evidence that some men are but a compromise in the evolutionary process. It has nothing to do with their upbringing, economic class, academic background or social standing. Former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn jumped on a hotel maid. Many so-called honourable men have been accused of groping, molestation and outright rape.

It has to do with the wiring of such men, who salivate at the sight of women like Pavlov's dog does at the ring of bell. But while some men have actually committed the crime all men throughout history should bear responsibility. The Code of Hammurabi is one of the first set of written laws that defined ravishing of a virgin as property damage against her father; no consideration for the victim.

In the 19th century, it was believed that rape without the consent of a woman would be physically impossi-

ble. In the 20th century, police frequently asked victims rude questions to determine if they gave tacit approval to their own victimisation. English physician Samuel Farr was pretty certain women couldn't get pregnant without an orgasm, which laid the foundation for US Congressman Todd Atkin's argument in 2012. He claimed that a violated woman couldn't get pregnant unless she was willing.

An eminent 19th century gynecologist Dr. Lawson Tait concluded that a woman couldn't be dishonoured without her agreement. He is the father of this notorious logic that a moving needle can't be threaded. Only last month a California judge stated that rape happens because a victim doesn't fight hard enough. He was later reprimanded

by the Commission on Judicial Performance.

The clear difference between rape and sex is that which exists in a house between intruder and guest. The body is an individual's most private place. That body no longer has to belong to a female, because male victims are also coming to surface. Last January, the FBI in the US for the first time changed its defini-

tion of rape. It now includes sexual assaults on males.

One of the ironies of history is that men have always looked for excuses to excuse themselves. In the 13th century, the Saxon Law laid out the severity of punishment depending on whether a woman raped was a virgin, a wife, a widow, a nun, or a woman of disrepute. Many US states followed that principle well into the 1980s. Until 1998, Mississippi held that rape of an "impure" woman wasn't statutory rape.

Hundreds of years later it still remains a mystery. If courtesy demands one must knock before entering a room, or ask for permission to use a telephone in a stranger's house, what inner compass guides the souls of men who rejoice in taking a woman's body by force in the 21st century?

More civilised countries have higher rates of rape: 78 women per hour in the USA. That doesn't count abuses which go unreported. A 2007 UK government report claimed that between 75 and 95% of rapes are never reported.

In Laurie Halse Anderson's book *Speak*, a victim asks if she was raped in the head because she couldn't stop thinking about it. Living victims suffer more. The ordeal repeats itself inside their moving bodies, killing them many times before their death.

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The real challenge

I.A. REHMAN

THE most critical challenge Pakistan faces in 2013 is the test of the 65-year-old nation's capacity to ensure a credible general election and a normal transfer of authority to the parties/coalitions commanding majorities in the national and provincial legislatures.

That a transfer of power should take place this year is not in doubt; what needs to be guaranteed is that authority will be passed to those who win the polls. This because two possible developments that could thwart or disrupt the electoral process are being openly discussed among political observers and commentators.

The first scenario runs like this: the law and order situation continues to worsen and the people become more restless because of electricity/gas/water shortages and other economic difficulties and the caretaker prime minister petitions the Supreme Court to order the postponement of elections and sanction the creation of a Bangladesh-style interim regime, and the court obliges him. Result: no election in 2013.

This theory has no legs to stand on. It is not impossible that the caretaker prime minister may come under pressure from powerful, anti-democratic forces, whose advice in favour of deferment of elections may not be based on a fair assessment of the situation on the ground. In fact, they may not bother the interim head of government. There are quite a few glorified touts that have made public interest litigation a farce. One of them or any citizen could be persuaded to seek the judiciary's intervention.

But the plot runs aground there. Regardless of what the critics of the direction judicial activism has taken may say the judiciary is unlikely to fall into the anti-democratic forces' trap. The superior courts may have now and then transcended their jurisdiction to take the institutions of state to task but they cannot deprive the people of their most fundamental right to choose their rulers. Whether they choose good rulers or bad ones is nobody's

business so long as elections are held in accordance with the law.

It is wrong to seek the judiciary's intervention in a political matter that patently lies outside its jurisdiction. Besides, no court will be able in the foreseeable future to renege on the judiciary's commitment to resist any extra-democratic dispensation, be it a military rule of Pakistani brand or the Bangladeshi model, both total failures.

The other scenario is that the militant organisations that have finally proclaimed their resolve to destroy Pakistan's democratic experiment, and decimate all political elements committed to its continuance, will create a law and order crisis of so great a magnitude that elections will not be possible at all.

This threat cannot be taken lightly. An increase in violent attacks on state institutions, security personnel

time will be a much bigger disaster than was the case earlier on because today a more conscious citizenry, a largely free media and an assertive judiciary promise democratic governance a much better environment for its sustenance and defence than it ever had.

Today it is possible to say that whichever party/coalition comes on top after the polls, it will not be able to do what it may like however corrupt it may be. If the system is undermined at this stage the state will be thrown back many decades and the process of democratisation will have to be started from scratch.

The weaknesses of democracy are known, not only in Pakistan or South Asia and the Muslim world, but also in countries where this system has taken root. But the alternative to even an imperfect democracy will be worse because neither military des-

potism nor a theocracy can meet the demands of the multi-national federation that Pakistan is and it can only survive as such.

formally responsible for holding free and fair elections this task is also the responsibility of political parties and the people at large. Massive public participation in polling alone can deter the extremists from carrying out their nefarious designs.

The ECP also will do well to repose more trust in the people than in any state institution. One was not surprised by the army chief's assurance of help in the election process; what did surprise many was the request the chief election commissioner made to him.

The army, like any other state institution, is not required to guarantee fair elections; it is only expected to avoid interfering in the electoral process. The army's help can be sought for maintaining order, and that too from a distance. The presence of any troops/Rangers inside polling stations cannot be permitted as it will vitiate freedom of voting. As for security needs, the armed forces are always available to the civil authorities, including the ECP.

It is also necessary perhaps to moderate official and public expectations from the coming elections. The objective of a fair poll should be pursued with realistic assumptions. The days of an ideal election are still far away and one should aim no higher than a reasonably fair electoral contest because it is not possible to guarantee a level playing ground to candidates with modest resources. Likewise, those elected this time again are unlikely to match public expectations of competence and integrity, because the condition for that, namely a social revolution, is yet to be met.

Tailpiece: Seen in Karachi last week on a white-washed wall near the stadium was a several yards long declaration: "Hamein manzil nahin rahnuma chahiye (sif) Altaf." It could be read in two ways: (i) We don't care where we are going, we only need a pathfinder, says Altaf; (ii) We do not need a destination/goal, we need a leader, only Altaf. So much for democracy!

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 4

1717
The Netherlands, Great Britain, and France sign the Triple Alliance.

1762
Great Britain declares war on Spain and Naples.

1878
Sofia is emancipated from Ottoman rule.

1948
Burma gains its independence from the United Kingdom.

1951
Korean War: Chinese and North Korean forces capture Seoul.

1989
Second Gulf of Sidra incident: a pair of Libyan MiG-23 "Floggers" are shot down by a pair of US Navy F-14 Tomcats during an air-to-air confrontation.

2010
Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, is officially opened.