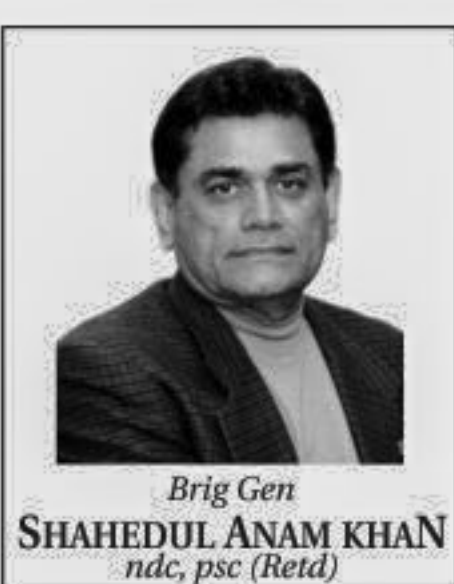


## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

# Border killings: Self defence is poor excuse



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**T**HE matter has once again made the headlines, particularly after the killings at the border by the BSF on the first

few days of the New Year. It is little comfort to Bangladesh that the number of Bangladeshis killed in BSF firing in the border has come down in the last one year. It is staggering when compared to statistics of such incidence along the Indo-Pak border that, given the state of animus that prevails between the two countries, is supposed to be more hostile than what prevails between Bangladesh and India.

India does not see these as killings, they are "deaths," according to the Indian BSF commanders. Semantics cannot screen the reality nor can that bring the dead to life. It only adds to the agony of the victims, almost all of whom belong to the border areas. And whatever explanations, justifications, reasoning, validations etc are offered for these killings, they cannot help prevent a negative mindset developing in the minds of these people. And that is twofold.

Firstly, these people form a deep distrust about our neighbour whose "trigger happy" BSF jawans, an appellation used by HRW in its report of 2010, have gotten away with murder of Bangladeshi nationals. But they have no means to change BSF behaviour. And secondly, and what is more perilous, is the perception they form about the government's ability to protect the lives of its citizens. And no government can afford to have its citizens form an adverse opinion about its capability to provide security to its own people.

The BSF firing on our citizens has come under the scrutiny of the HRW which has been calling upon the Indian government to rein in the Indian border guards. The BSF response is both predictable and inter-

esting. In its response to Bangladesh complaints after the incident of December 2011 the Indian MEA explanation stated: "To prevent loss of lives along the border areas, BSF has exercised the utmost restraint and has resorted to firing in self defence only in rare cases. India has taken various steps, including strict control on firing, introduction of non-lethal weapons, round-the-clock domination and intensive patrolling. It has also imposed night time restrictions on the movement of people in the border areas."

The Indian explanation also cited

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instances where a large number of Bangladeshi nationals entered inside Indian territory and pelted stones on BSF personnel. The Indian government also maintains that persons trying to cross the border illegally are not innocent persons.

Are the Indian arguments valid? Even if we agree that the persons who cross the border illegally are not innocent persons, is it for the BSF to be the judge, jury and the executioner? And should all the so-called guilty deserve the death sentence? What about the assurance by India to use non-lethal ammunition?

As for the 50 or 60 persons who are alleged to have entered into India and pelted the BSF with stones, one finds the statement difficult to accept. How is it that the Bangladeshi citizens could manage to negotiate a double strand barbed wire fence, and then subject the BSF to attack? Why was BSF not able to detect them well before the "infiltrators" had crossed the border and accreted in such numbers, particularly when they have the facilities of night vision devices? The reality is that very few crossing take place without the connivance of the border guards.

fact that it is self defeating. To think that joint inquiries would reveal whether the firings were in self defence or otherwise is puerile.

While the Bangladesh foreign minister has termed the killings as unpardonable we find her comments, advising her countrymen not to cross the border at night, rather intriguing. So, we can cross the border (illegally) in the daytime? She has also suggested that under the circumstances both sides needed to act. We would be very interested to know how she sees the Indian side acting and in what way so that no more Bangladeshi is killed.



The argument of firing in self defence is equally untenable, mainly because so far the BSF has not been able to exhibit the types of weapon that the Bangladeshi "miscreants" had supposedly attacked the BSF with. On the contrary, there are pictures of dead Bangladeshi citizens bearing bayonet wound and marks of physical assault.

It was not until the surprising revelation by the Bangladesh home minister recently, that both parties had agreed on the principle of firing in self defence, that we came to know about our validating the killings, because the phrase "self defence" lends itself to subjective explications, apart from the

The border killings do not reflect the state of bilateral relationship between the two countries, particularly developed in the last four years of the AL-led coalition government. Regrettably, the killings, given the very little progress on various issues between the two countries, except for liberalising imports from Bangladesh by India, have created serious misgivings in the public mind about India's attitude towards the entire gamut of bilateral relations, and about its earnestness in resolving the outstanding issues.

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# Bangladesh election cliff- 2013

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

**T**HE United States just averted by the skin of its teeth what was widely described in the media as the "fiscal cliff" of 2012. To briefly recap, the fiscal cliff was what was apprehended to have happened to the US economy had the two combating political parties in the US Congress not agreed on the fiscal policy of the country -- particularly with regard to revenue and expenses.

Fiscal cliff is a term used to describe a bundle of momentous US federal tax increases and spending cuts that were due to take effect at the end of 2012 and early 2013. Economy and media pundits had predicted a very stark future for US if the two sides -- the government party and the opposition -- had not come to an agreement by December 31 on taxes and government expenditure -- two essential components to stave off the rising public debt of the country.

The abrupt onset of such significant budget austerity in the midst of a still-fragile economic recovery had led most economists to warn of a double-dip recession and rising unemployment in 2013 if Washington failed to intervene in a timely fashion.

The agreement of the two opposing parties to avoid the fiscal cliff did not happen without a lot of bickering, blame games, and later a substantial amount of give and take. It did not happen without giving up on long-held once-rigid position of each party on revenue and expenditure. It did not happen until the whole nation was kept on anxiety pills for days together. But finally the parties came together, if briefly, to agree on the substantive issue of importance to both parties -- the interest of the nation.

The agreement came because, in the ultimate analysis, people and the country come before their parties' interests. There are elements in both parties who personally despised the new agreement, but they had to fall in line behind their respective leaders (at least the great majority among them) in the interest of the country.

At the risk of making a farfetched comparison with the fiscal cliff of the US, which perhaps is a mixed metaphor, I foresee an impending cliff for Bangladesh -- the election cliff of 2013. This I say with a trepid heart, and a sense of foreboding for the upcoming elections of 2013. I call this a cliff given the circumstances now obtaining in the country surrounding

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the elections, and the stands taken by the two major parties on how to hold them. The government party has staked its position by amending the constitutional provision for a caretaker government under which the elections would have been held. The main opposition opposed this and had gone to the streets in protest.

The opposition is currently sworn to its position of not participating in the elections unless they are held under a neutral caretaker government. The response of the ruling party has been not to yield to such demands. Already, several strikes (hartals) by the opposition have been held, and we are told many more are to come. Already, the streets of the capital city and several

other towns have witnessed mayhem of the kind that accompanies such hartals; already many days of productive work have been lost, and we may expect many such losses from political protests in the coming days.

Do we see any signs of compromise between the two parties in days to come? Do we see any prospect that our major parties will realise that by their adopting such intransigent positions nobody gains? Do we find any clue that an agreement will be reached by the two major combatants on how the elections will be held? The simple answer is no. As days advance all we see is that the rigidity of both parties also advances. The rigidity has come to such a level that the country is fearfully

to reduce long-term entitlement spending, and have generally supported greater reductions in the defense budget. Yet, despite these differences in political philosophy and role of government, the parties reached a compromise that avoided the cliff and helped the country avoid a possible second recession.

Contrast this cliff with the political cliff that is looming large in our country. What is obtaining in our country is the cumulative effect of years of intolerance, gross neglect of the people's or country's interest in order to preserve and protect individual or party interests, and complete disregard of people's will.

It is ironic that while both parties execute their programmes, including hartals, that cause suffering to the people each defends them as activities in support of the people. One wonders how a common man benefits from strikes and lockouts, mayhem on the streets, and taking of law into hands by brigands whose activities are overlooked by law enforcing agencies.

The election cliff of 2013 is bound to happen if the two major parties do not reach an agreement soon. The impact and effect of this cliff will not be limited to our fiscal future alone. It will affect our political stability and development prospects in the coming years.

Bangladesh today stands at the cusp of growing from a low income to a middle income country in perhaps less than a decade, but only if it can retain the momentum of its growth. With the uncertainty surrounding our political environment the future can be symbolised by a big question mark. Can we avoid this election cliff?

The writer is a former civil servant and a retired World Bank staff member.

## Availing of GSP facility

*We need to act fast*

**E**XPLAINING the government's position on the US considering withdrawing its Generalised System of Preference, or GSP, for our exports, foreign minister Dipu Moni made two points. First, the government was seized of the issue and that it is taking steps for Washington to continue with the policy.

Second, she also pointed out that export under the US policy accounts for only 0.6 per cent of our total export.

Her approach misses the point that at issue is not merely the percentage of products Bangladesh exports to the US under GSP facility. But that it could impact the tone and tenor of the bilateral relationship between two countries, which have been very friendly.

What message are we sending to our trading partners in a country that buys a large chunk of our readymade garment (RMG) products?

In fact, we are giving the impression that we are not really interested in addressing the underlying issues that have a bearing on the GSP policy of the US.

It is not that the US has come out with the issue all of a sudden. Actually, for the past several years GSP has been a talking point between the two countries. The US has been making repeated requests to Bangladesh to address the issues of labour rights, better working conditions for workers, workplace safety, wages and the like, many of which have not yet been met.

It may be noted that, Trade Policy Staff Committee (TPSC) a subcommittee under the GSP, is reportedly considering lifting, suspending or limiting the facility also because the largest federation of trade unions in US, the AFLD-CIO, has put Bangladesh under the microscope. In fact, it has taken exception to Bangladesh's not having conformed to international labour standards.

These developments may send a wrong signal to our other trading partners, particularly, the EU, the largest destination of our RMG products.

Needless to say, the US and the EU share similar views on our human rights situation and workers' rights. Accordingly, our risk perceptions should be formed.

Ideally, we should have addressed these issues of concern on our own before being asked by our trading partner to do so.

We would like to emphasize that 31st January being the deadline to meet the conditions, time is fast slipping away.

So, if we are to avail ourselves of the GSP facility, we would need to act fast and take all necessary measures required.

## The passing of Nirmal Sen

*A life led with values*

**W**ITH the passing of Nirmal Sen, we lose yet another member of the vanishing breed of heroes who sowed the seeds of our nation. Beginning from the anti-British movement back in 1942, he participated in all successive movements for freedom, including the liberation war and the anti-autocratic movement. More recently, he was seen in a wheelchair among the journalists demanding justice for the killing of mediapersons Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Rumi last year.

Through his contributions to left and progressive politics as well as his journalistic work -- with newspapers in erstwhile Pakistan, including Dainik Pakistan which later became Dainik Bangla, especially his renowned column written under the pen name "Aniket", and as an active member of various press organisations post-independence -- Sen was a vocal champion for freedom -- of the press, nation and people, particularly the less fortunate.

Every day of his 82-year-old life was dedicated to the cause of freedom and rights of the people. Even illness and old age could not restrain his spirit, for, while his body may have been paralysed and confined to a wheelchair, his mind still soared and he continued to write about the nation to which he had given his all. And even in death he has not been overcome, for his last wishes to establish a women's college in his village and to donate his body to a medical college for research purposes will surely make him live on. His was a life lived in full as has been his death.

We salute Nirmal Sen. He will remain irreplaceable, but in remembering him, we hold him up as a beacon of hope for the future and look towards our present and coming generations for a reflection of his ideals to take

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 10

**1916** Erzurum Offensive during World War I, Russian victory over Ottoman Empire.

**1920** The Treaty of Versailles takes effect, officially ending World War I.

**1946** The first General Assembly of the United Nations opens in London. Fifty-one nations are represented.

**1972** Sheikh Mujibur Rahman returns to the newly independent Bangladesh as president after spending over nine months in prison in Pakistan.

**1984** The United States and Vatican City establish full diplomatic relations after 117 years.