

2012 disappointing for human rights

State agencies must be held to account

IN the last year of its tenure, one of the key issues the government must be attentive to is the deteriorating law and order situation in the country.

According to rights organisation Odhikar's Human Rights Report 2012, the picture is far from positive. Rates of violation of women and children and the number of people killed following rape was high, as was the number of dowry-related incidents. A record number of attacks on minority and indigenous communities, women and journalists were reported; 132 people were killed in mob beatings and 38 by Indian Border Security Force. Also, 169 people, according to Odhikar, and 84 people, according to another rights organisation, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), were killed in political confrontations last year.

Perhaps the most alarming trend, however, was in the rise of crimes allegedly committed by the state's law enforcing agencies themselves -- enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings -- followed by an apparent lack of accountability. While Odhikar has put the number of enforced disappearances linked to the state at 24 -- up from three in 2009, 18 in 2010 and slightly down from 30 in 2011 -- ASK has found 56 cases overall of unexplained disappearances. Odhikar put the number of extrajudicial killings at 70 while ASK put the figure at 91. The fact that these trends have not only continued but even increased over the years demonstrates a culture of impunity for those in positions of power, reinforced by an unfortunate denial mode of a government which has failed to recognise and address the issue.

We strongly urge the government to take up the law and order situation -- particularly where its own agents may be the culprits -- without further delay, carry out thorough and impartial investigations and provide credible results whereby those responsible are appropriately punished. If the government is to gain the confidence of its people, providing them with a sense of security is crucial.

Some important watch bodies and we as media have been laying emphasis on the acute need for improving upon human rights situation in the country but, sadly, the government appears to be unmoved. In the final year of its tenure it will hopefully move up things on this front.

Lopsided manning

Doctors' posts in rural vis-à-vis urban areas

IT seems that the government has been totally unable to keep the doctors in the rural areas. The predilections of the doctors for jobs in the bigger public hospitals in the major towns and cities is quite understandable, but the state of manning of the posts of doctors outside the capital, in the outlying areas in particular, belittles the Hippocratic Oath which the doctors morally accede to even if they may not formally swear to it these days.

The figure of this uneven state, as exposed in a report of a leading Bangla daily recently, points to a very ludicrous as well as grim situation. Where as, for example in BBSMUH, there is 300 percent more the number of doctors compared to the number of seats in the gynecology department of a certain government hospital in the capital, some hospitals in the rural areas are having to do with only 30 percent of what they are entitled to.

The general shortfall in the upazilla is in the region of 25 percent and taken on the basis of division it is between 17 percent in Dhaka and 36 percent in Barisal. It is regrettable that despite the induction of more than four thousand doctors on ad hoc basis the situation persists. What is surprising is that the DG Health office does not know how many of them are in the villages. Most of the doctors, particularly the newly employed ones find all sorts of pretexts to come to the capital.

Needless to say, politics and partisanship has much to do for the prevailing state of affairs. Reportedly, most of the beneficiaries of attachment, secondment, post graduate training etc, belong to the ruling party.

It is regrettable that despite the PM's repeated exhortations to doctors to go to the rural areas there has been an abject lack of commitment of our doctors to the rural populace. The health minister has publicly expressed his helplessness in addressing the situation, but can we

Research and education go together



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

MUCH has been written and continues to be written in the national media about the deplorable state of research in our higher education system. Yet, in the midst of all this gloom there is sometimes a beacon of light that provides a glimmer of

hope that all is perhaps not lost. In an effort to address diversified needs of academics, teachers, students and researchers who must collaborate and share information, the University Grants Commission (UGC) is implementing the Bangladesh Research and Education Network (BdREN) under the Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) with funding support from the World Bank. It is hoped that by the end of this year, all public universities will be under the network.

The project is a high speed data communication network that will bridge education and research institutions in both public and private sectors. Guaranteed and dedicated high speed internet connectivity that aims to connect all institutions involved in research including universities, research organisations, laboratories, healthcare and agricultural institutions. Having such a platform in place will help both academics and students alike to take advantage of real-time computing and sharing of information across the country. Since, the hardware part of the system will be based on optical fibre; we are effectively looking at a countrywide network.

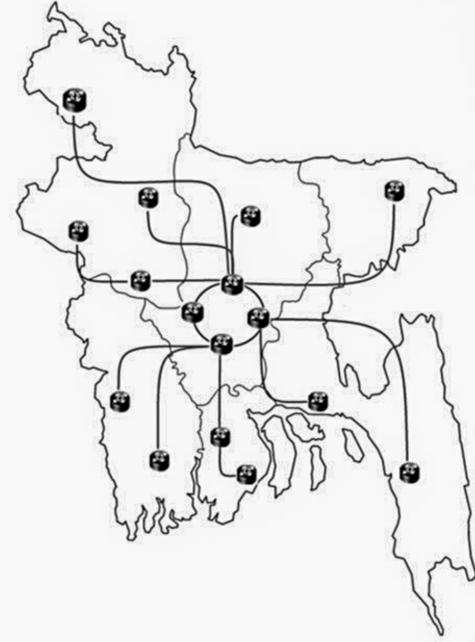
The application of Research and Education (R&E) is diversified and could revolutionise the way we share information. We are potentially looking at true "online" collaboration on research where scientists, researchers or students located in different parts of the country share valuable information on the net (see map). With databases and research work made available online, an agriculture extension officer in Rangpur can share his field data with the head office in Dhaka as and when a situation is developing; a faculty member in Chittagong University can share his research findings with his

colleagues in Dhaka over video conference.

Looking beyond collaboration on research or accessing thousands of journals, books or other material in a "virtual library," R&E could provide vital information on critical data needed for essential decision making on any sphere from industrial productivity to weather monitoring or in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster like flood or earthquake.

Like BdREN, GÉANT is a network that proved its worth in 2008 in China. In the past, it took weeks and months to discover the true impact of a natural disaster on isolated communities. Yet with the aid

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of GÉANT and its link to China, provided high-resolution satellite imagery of the Sichuan earthquake for immediate analysis to help plan, rescue, relieve and recovery of entire communities. Similar to GÉANT, BdREN is a vast pool of information that is available through a fast internet network that is connected to thousands of computers on a nationwide scale, putting it to use to produce projections for scientific study or coming up with a situational analysis will be possible in a matter of hours instead of hours, days and months.

The network can open up a whole new chapter in public health in terms of telemedicine. Doctors

can consult foreign experts located globally to diagnose patients, who in turn may be physically located far away from doctors, but can be treated nonetheless with the aid of "video conferencing." Surgeons in the middle of a complex operation of a patient who is say epileptic can literally "connect" to a group of surgeons in a foreign country to get a solution on the spot.

Ultimately, what it boils down to is that BdREN, if implemented and utilised properly, can open up new frontiers for education and research in the country. We are actually looking at a whole new way of how we connect and interact with a global community for the purposes of gaining knowledge and sharing expertise. It rids countries like Bangladesh which suffers from multifarious problems including infrastructure, lack of requisite human and financial resources to tap into a vast and proven pool of expertise located anywhere in the world. It also helps to get services to those who need it at a fraction of the cost when one calculates the savings in not constructing physical infrastructure such as schools and colleges replete with teachers and administrative staff.

As stated by Prof. Dr. M.M.A. Hashem, BdREN TST Consultant, HEQEP, UGC, "users coming from every part of the global education and research community, R&E networking is not just about helping 'big science.' At a local level, students in physically remote parts of North Africa and Asia gain access to a better quality education experience over their new connections. By overcoming the barriers to education, e-learning can provide new and life-changing opportunities for

students. For example, thanks to stable video conferencing, students in Palestinian universities can now enrol on courses and participate remotely and interactively in lectures held anywhere in the world. R&E networking gives them access to the best educational opportunities where travel difficulties would make it impossible for them to attend in person. Distance learning also helps build a stronger base of skills and knowledge within the community."

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All in the timing

MOEED YUSUF

RECENT months have seen a fresh momentum around efforts to get a political reconciliation process in Afghanistan going.

Since the Afghan Taliban pulled out of the US-led Qatar talks in March 2012, there had been little progress on this front. In recent months, however, we have heard that the US-Pakistan "contact" group on ensuring safe passage for amenable Taliban is moving forward, there is more chatter about the US-Pakistan-Afghanistan core group, and last month a US newspaper leaked the "Peace Process Roadmap to 2015," allegedly a plan that seeks to fast-track reconciliation and gives Pakistan a central role in facilitating talks with the Taliban. We have also seen the UN relax restrictions for travel on blacklisted Taliban and Pakistan has released 18 mid-level Taliban leaders within a month's time.

The tone of the statements coming out of Washington, Islamabad, and Kabul has also been uncharacteristically conciliatory as far as their respective actions on reconciliation are concerned. All sides seem to be suggesting that they are pleased with recent developments and the US seems more comfortable with Afghanistan and Pakistan leading the process than it has been in the past. Officials in Kabul, while continuing to point at Pakistan as a problem, seem reluctant to criticise Islamabad on the peace process any longer.

Not much has been made of these developments in the public domain -- perhaps because very many initiatives have been floated and have come to zilch in the past; or because many have simply given up hope and do not see much point in raising expectations.

Of course, there is no guarantee that any progress from now to D-day will be enough. But that is not reason enough to dismiss these developments.

Notwithstanding the fact that we are still discussing preliminaries here -- "talking about talking" to the Taliban, that is -- there is something different about the latest impetus: the timing.

We are now decidedly approaching the "end of the endgame" in Afghanistan. The US, Pakistan and Afghanistan are agreed on three facts: (i) that the 2014 transition without any political process in place, even a weak one, could push Afghanistan

into much greater instability; (ii) that none of the regional actors want such an outcome for fear of negative spillover or a revival of a proxy confrontation; and (iii) that they have hardly anything to show for past efforts at reconciliation.

And all of them are staring a glaring reality in the face: time has all but run out.

Corollary: Washington, Islamabad, and Kabul are in a state of desperation to get something positive going.

It is this desperation that makes the recent developments more hopeful prospects than the ones that have already come and gone. Indeed, not only are we witnessing a softening of public tone on all sides, we are also finding less reluctance to give Pakistan -- presented as the poster child of regional problems for some time -- space to work its channels to jumpstart the process.

What we can say though is that the incentive to push ahead and compromise is higher on all sides than it has been on previous occasions. Ironically, it stems from the fear of total failure in Afghanistan. The danger is just too clear and present to shy away from any longer.

One would expect to see rigidities in respective positions begin to disappear in such a context. And there may be initial signs that they are: some time ago, one wouldn't have expected a peace plan to explicitly suggest allowing the Taliban to manage a part of the Afghan state without much accountability, as the Roadmap to 2015 does; nor would we have seen willingness from Pakistan to release Taliban prisoners without having a guarantee that its concerns in Afghanistan will be addressed and that it will retain a ringside seat in the process.

On the US side, there is the reality that public opinion is now decidedly against the war and substantial residual military presence in Afghanistan. If the Nato-US coalition wants out without Afghanistan in disarray, if political reconciliation is seen as one of the prerequisites for this, and if past US-led efforts at reconciliation haven't really delivered,

then it holds that any effort with half a chance should be worth a try -- and therefore supported.

Moreover, even though red lines wouldn't disappear, one would expect more flexibility: some non-negotiables would become negotiable -- the extent of acceptable revision to the Afghan constitution, "soft" issues in the social/human rights domain, etc. being examples.

Finally, while most would perhaps argue that the closer you get to the deadline, the less interested the Taliban would be in negotiating (they would much rather wait it out and then stamp their authority once the US military is gone), this conventional wisdom has been challenged by the Taliban's signalling in recent times. It is fairly clear -- more so if one talks to interlocutors who have some insight into the Taliban's thinking -- that they are looking to engage in talks.

They are war-weary, their ranks are not nearly as cohesive as we make them out to be, and most importantly they desire recognition as a legitimate political force rather than being branded as an insurgent cum militant organisation. We don't know if they are sincerely seeking compromise but they have calculated rightly that their mere participation in talks legitimises them as a future political force in Afghanistan.

And thus we see them engaging in Qatar, Tokyo and Paris formally and in a number of other discrete settings informally. They realise that the ongoing terminal phase in the current Afghan campaign is their last chance to achieve this.

Surely, there is always the possibility that the current impetus will fizzle out. Already, some argue that plans like the Roadmap to 2015 are wishful. There is also always the possibility of one of these actors overplaying its hand and forcing the process to a grinding halt.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 15

1949 Chinese Civil War: The Communist Party of China forces take over Tianjin from the Nationalist Government.

1991 The United Nations deadline for the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from occupied Kuwait expires, preparing the way for the start of Operation Desert Storm.

1991 Elizabeth II, in her capacity as Queen of Australia, signs letters patent allowing Australia to become the first Commonwealth Realm to institute its own separate Victoria Cross award in its own honours system.

2007 Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, former Iraqi intelligence chief and half-brother of Saddam Hussein, and Awad Hamed al-Bandar, former chief judge of the Revolutionary Court, are executed by hanging in Iraq.