

SUNDAY POUCH

Rape trend gets vicious

Deterrent punishment to perpetrators is the answer

ON the heels of gang rape of teenage girls in Tangail and Savar, we are now flabbergasted at the horrendous incident of rape on a moving bus in Manikganj on Thursday. The victim, an 18-year old female garment worker, was violated on the rear seat of the bus as the driver and his helper raped her.

It almost appears that the rapists may have had the hang of the dastardly gang rape of a physiotherapist student on a moving bus recently in New Delhi. She succumbed to her fatal injuries, the shockwaves rocking the whole world. Rather than taking any message from the stupendous public outrage over that incident and the prompt reaching of the law's arm to the perpetrators, the Bangladeshi driver and helper straight facedly committed the abominable crime.

Thankfully though, like in the cases of Tangail and Savar rapes, in Manikganj too, police have promptly arrested the rapists.

What is now awaited is speedy trial and handing the convictions to the perpetrators at the earliest. Any dilly-dally in handling such perversities can only give them a leeway for complicating the cases to a point where they may slip through the fingers of law. It is crucially important that they are made examples of how severe a punishment they have been meted out. Absence of conviction has been one major reason why incidence of sexual harassment and rape is on the rise.

It is disconcerting to note that rapes which are the worst manifestation of cruelty and brutalisation against women have not yet aroused the level of public contempt this should have. The national outrage in India burst into a crescendo as the media, civil society, all manner of political and social leaderships condemned the Delhi incident.

We believe it is high time that the civil society, social think-tanks and rights activist groups and the media, particularly the electronic media in Bangladesh made a common cause of upholding dignity and security of women.

This should lead to galvanising the whole communities behind the cause and build effective resistance against the heinous crime.

Two sets of elected representatives in conflict

Local governance suffers paralysis

A number of Union Parishad (UP) chairmen have come out stating that members of parliament (MPs) are hampering their work in the developmental arena at the union level. This is where various development projects are undertaken with participation at the grassroots.

Previously, we had commented on the impediments to proper functioning of upazila parishads due to differences of opinion between MPs and upazila parishad chairmen; leading to a sort of crisis in governance. The passage of the Upazila Bill in November, 2011 had effectively reduced the body's powers while enhancing those of MPs. The current impasse that has developed between UP chairmen and MPs appears to be an extension of the same process. One cannot but be disheartened when one learns of the dual messages coming out of the ruling party. On the one hand, there is much talk about strengthening the seat of governance at sub-district level, on the other the continued erosion of powers of UP chairmen speaks volumes of precisely what government's intentions are when it comes to decentralised decision-making.

What has come to light is that during the past four years, little effort has been made to strengthen local government bodies. Rather, as pointed out by ruling party lawmaker AKM Mozammel Huq recently, "there is no country in the world except Bangladesh where lawmakers' main interest is in test-relief, food-for-work programmes, appointments in local educational institutions, and other money-related activities at local level." That is not why the electorate go to the polls every general election. They take that effort in the hope that public representatives elected to office will be able to work in harmony for greater public good.

The current deadlock that has developed between UP chairmen and lawmakers bodes ill for governance. Mere talk about making local bodies effective while working to transform them into rubber-stamps will have long term adverse effects for development. Indeed the government has backtracked from its earlier position where it was decided that local-level activities of seven ministries would be run at upazila parishad level. At the end of the day, we are facing a situation where two sets of elected representatives are at odds with one another, which cannot be a good thing



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

IN 1985, when Rajiv Gandhi, the scion of the Nehru dynasty of India and the then prime minister, came to Dhaka to attend the launching of

Saar, he was greeted like a rock star. Thousands of people lined up the routes where he went. Here was one handsome head of government, immaculately dressed and distinguished for his impeccable manners, in town. The people were also keen to have a glimpse of his beautiful Italian born wife. Unfortunately Sonia Gandhi did not come. But Dhaka society ladies came out in large numbers, along with others, to see this distinguished guest.

Rajiv was literally mobbed. Rajiv seemed to represent a hope for the people of South Asia.

We who chaperoned him around Dhaka had a delightful time conversing with him. Coming out of the Saar inaugural function, he seemed impressed by the remarks made by the then Sri Lankan President Mr. Jayawardene. The wise man of South Asia in his speech had said: "Today six small boats have tied up with a big boat (India). Let us see whether we sink or float."

Visibly impressed, Rajiv asked us whether we shared President Jayawardene's perceptions. We told him that the role India would play would be critical to the success of this nascent organisation.

Rajiv appreciated the point and then said, "Do you know that all the member states of Saar are destined by God to cooperate. Look how the mighty rivers like the Indus cascades down the Himalayas and instead of flowing straight south into India, it veers west into Pakistan and then empties itself in the Arabian Sea. The same is the case with the Ganges. It does not flow from the Himalayas only through Nepal, it meanders through to India and then flow east to Bangladesh before it ends in the Bay of Bengal."

It was evident that he was passionate about regional cooperation.

Referring to the biggest obstacle to regional cooperation, he put the blame

squarely on the entrenched bureaucracy in all the member countries. He recounted his own experience with the Indian bureaucracy with whom he had to struggle so that India could stretch its hand of friendship to the other leaders in South Asia.

He recalled the horrific disaster wrought by cyclone in Urir Char, an off shore island in Bangladesh in 1988. Over breakfast with Sonia, his wife, on the day after the disaster, they agreed that they would make a quick dash to Bangladesh and show solidarity with the suffering people.

During the course of the day he totally forgot about the programme, as he was immersed in other duties. Next morning, when Sonia asked Rajiv the time for their departure to Dhaka, he immediately picked up the phone and asked for the information from his principal secretary. He was



told that he could not go to Dhaka as there were "no adequate security arrangements there for the prime minister of India."

They were both thunderstruck -- here was the prime minister giving a direct order and it was disregarded by a paid employee without even any communication.

The matter did not end there. The same day news came that the Pakistani President Ziaul Huq had flown to Dhaka and not only visited the disaster area but had also given aid. India therefore missed out on being first to extend sympathy to Bangladesh. It also allowed Pakistan to take lead even though it was the Indian leader who had first wanted to do all this.

Rajiv however made the visit later, accompanying the Sri Lankan president. Rajiv's political career was not stel-

lar. But he prepared the country for the 21st century. He sought increase in Indian investments in modern technology. He began dismantling the "license raj" -- government quotas, tariffs and permit regulations on economic activity.

He modernised the telecommunication industry as well as the education system. He also took the initiative to expand science and technology in all walks of life. One of his important steps was improving India's relations with the US.

However Rajiv was counseled by his close friends and "cronies." One of his grave misjudgments was sending the Indian Peace Keeping Force to bring peace to strife ridden Sri Lanka. This led to open conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE).

In mid 1987, the Bofors scandal broke his honest, corruption-free



image. This resulted in his defeat and a major defeat for Congress in 1989 elections. However, he continued as congress president until the elections in 1991. But while campaigning, he was assassinated by the LTTE.

Last week, Rajiv's son Rahul, in a game changing move, was anointed to the second highest rank in the Congress party, just below the rank of his mother -- current president of Congress. As vice president it is generally expected that Rahul would be finally nominated to fight elections for the prime ministerial post.

So what kind of a person is Rahul and what are the policies he is likely to pursue?

Rahul Gandhi, 43, is a bachelor. A handsome man in his own way, he seems to be dedicated to India and her people. Yet Rahul has several difficulties. First, like Obama he is born with an

identity crisis. His mother is Italian and his father Indian. The opposition therefore call him an Italian prince. This gives him less legitimacy before his critics.

Second, an uncertain fate shadows him everywhere. He played badminton as a young boy with two security guards who later went on to kill his grandmother; Indira Gandhi, the late lamented prime minister of India. His father was assassinated when he was relatively young. So he lives under the shadow of terrorism and death.

Third, Rahul has to carry on the political legacy of the Nehru family which is very demanding.

Finally, he has to disprove the accusation of corruption made against his father, Rajiv Gandhi. Rahul is always reminded by political pundits that he owes his position due to his lineage and not because of his merit. So he behaves always as a "reluctant" leader.

At Jaipur, where the Congress High command met to anoint him, he gave an acceptance speech. In an emotional tone, he revealed some of the political agenda he normally keeps close to his chest. He focused on the divisions within the Congress party. He also focused on what needs to be done to overhaul the system so that the Congress becomes more effective, transparent and accountable.

He spoke out on behalf of the alienated, the marginalised and the voiceless. This inclusive approach he combined with an emphasis on democratic conduct. He made a call to nurture 50 leaders across India who can aspire for the top job.

The question is: Can Rahul translate all these into policies and action on the ground?

It is a tall order. Besides, Rahul is not a good communicator. He hardly speaks inside the parliament nor does he participate in debate in the public media. His Twitter account is used very seldom. The youth in India is restless and is rearing to be led by someone who understands their aspirations and is responsive.

The "reluctant" leader must also gear up to contend the likes of Mamta from Bengal, Modi from Gujrat and Yadav from Uttar Pradesh.

Can Rahul succeed? An effort to understand his persona in the coming days could therefore be rewarding.

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No change on the horizon

S.M. NASEEM

AFTER keeping the country on tenterhooks for almost a month, one of the most farcical melodramas of Pakistani politics ended a week ago in Islamabad -- having been taken to the brink of a human tragedy.

It ended through an agreement between the ruling coalition and Tehrik-i-Minhajul Quran Chief Dr. Tahirul Qadri, with the former conceding to some demands for electoral reform. The latter had just a few days earlier celebrated the news of the possible arrest of the prime minister.

Pakistani politicians may be faulted for myriad sins, but their sense of pragmatism in saving the country from human tragedy deserves credit, even as their tardiness in the cognisance of a looming danger and their lack of a principled approach in dealing with it were responsible for the crisis in the first place.

It is doubtful, though, whether the deal will save the country from further chaos and continued misgovernance and put it on the path of political advancement, economic salvation and social harmony.

The sudden re-emergence on Pakistan's political horizon of Dr. Qadri, a religious scholar of renown, even if self-promoting and deficient in humility, who heads the charity Minhajul Quran, took Pakistani political groups by surprise and set off alarm bells -- similar to the ones heard during Imran Khan's electoral

launch more than a year ago -- for being a proxy of the establishment.

Dr. Qadri's putative nexus with the military was even more credible in view of his background and the patronage offered by Gen (ret'd) Pervez Musharraf, whose coup he supported in 1999 and with whom he remained closely allied until 2004.

Since then, he has reportedly been living in political asylum in Canada because of alleged threats to his life by extremist groups in Pakistan. One of his earlier demands for electoral reform had been to make the military and higher judiciary major stakeholders in the nomination of the interim government before the elections, raising concerns that this was an attempt to smuggle in the dreaded Bangladesh model to derail democracy.

No one has yet found any evidence about who, if anyone, was behind Dr. Qadri, although if a conspiracy did exist it was unlikely to be transparent in any case.

More likely is the hypothesis that this was a solo flight in pursuit of his personal ambition to become Pakistan's saviour. He did not let either Khan or the chief of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, Altaf Hussain, become a co-pilot. He welcomed them aboard only under his stewardship, which they shrewdly declined.

As a result, his flight ran out of fuel and his SOS about an imminent crash-landing was responded to, allowing him safe landing in view of

the valuable human cargo it was carrying.

Although there may be some collateral benefits to others, the main beneficiary of this rather bizarre piece of political brinkmanship is likely to be Dr. Qadri himself. He has succeeded in inserting himself into the equation of high politics in Pakistan, almost at the eleventh hour. He has also succeeded in leveraging the media, the military and the middle class in favour of his agenda.

While many of his proposals regarding the forthcoming elections have received wide acclaim, the manner in which Dr. Qadri has sought to achieve his goals is highly questionable. First, he spent an enormous amount of money before even coming to Pakistan in a massive publicity campaign.

Second, he used strong religious rhetoric and Islamic symbolism, comparing his march with the most sacred incident of Imam Hussain's martyrdom in Karbala.

Finally -- and most importantly -- he used the common people, especially women, young children and the elderly, virtually as human shields to protect himself from a possible attempt by the government to evict the participants from an ordinarily busy thoroughfare. He exposed vulnerable groups to health and safety hazards as Islamabad's night-time temperatures fell close to freezing point, aggravated by winter rains and cold winds.

In one rhetorical flourish during his

five-day jamboree, Dr. Qadri delivered his message to his audience: "99 percent of the people have been kicked out of democracy."

This democracy is only for the one per cent elite."

However, the agreement that he signed with the ruling coalition did nothing to ensure that this situation will be reversed anytime soon. Even if it is adhered to strictly, the resulting changes will at best be cosmetic and may reduce the proportion of the elite in the legislatures by a fraction of a per cent. There is nothing to ensure that the poor and the presently disenfranchised will be fairly represented.

Even if some kind of affirmative action is envisaged in favour of the poor and deprived sections of the population -- as has been done, for example, in the case of women and minorities -- that will remain inoperative and unimplemented because of the configuration of power structures and economic and social disparities. Removing these will require much more radical structural reform.

In the current discourse, no one seems to be paying any attention to these basic problems and the need to mobilise political forces to bring them about. Dr. Qadri's long marches and tall promises are unlikely to achieve much except acting as a catalyst for raising political consciousness amongst the population at large.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 27

- 661** The Rashidun Caliphate ends with death of Ali.
- 1695** Mustafa II becomes the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul on the death of Ahmed II. Mustafa rules until his abdication in 1703.
- 1927** Ibn Saud takes the title of King of Nejd.
- 1944** World War II: The 900-day Siege of Leningrad is lifted.
- 1967** The United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union sign the Outer Space Treaty in Washington DC, banning deployment of nuclear weapons in space, and limiting use of the Moon and other celestial bodies to peaceful purposes.
- 1973** The Paris Peace Accords officially end the Vietnam War. Colonel William Nolde is killed in action becoming the conflict's last recorded American combat casualty.