

BOTTOM LINE

Border killing and cattle trade

It is reported by Bangladesh legal aid and human rights organisation Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) that during 2012, Border Security Forces (BSF) of India killed 48 civilian Bangladeshis along the Bangladesh-India border.

In December 2010, New York based Human Rights Watch in a report described the Indian border guards as a "Trigger Happy" force and documented hundreds of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture, and ill-treatment by the BSF.

During the visit of India's home minister to Dhaka on January 28-29, the foreign minister of Bangladesh raised with him the issue of killing of Bangladeshis along the border and the Indian home minister reaffirmed that BSF would bring down the killing to zero level. Hopefully, the assurance of the minister will reach the BSF.

Bilateral relations do not depend only on government-to-government relations but are the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage relations between Bangladesh and India in which people of both countries are involved.

The people of Bangladesh are surprised at the insensitivity of the Indian government towards the killings of Bangladesh nationals and, as a result, the perception of people tends to be negative toward India. The New Delhi government should realise the Bangladesh government is put into great difficulty in its efforts in strengthening partnership with India.

Many researchers from Bangladesh and India have found that there is a simple way to end the killings at the border because such killings are mostly related to illegal cattle trade from India to Bangladesh.

During Track II dialogue between India and Bangladesh, the Bangladesh side had repeatedly suggested to the Indian side to legalise the export of cows from West Bengal, a state in which slaughter of cows is allowed, to end the border killings. Recently, former head of the BSF, U.K. Bansal, reportedly said: "The menace of smuggling might be controlled if the trade across the border is made legal. The legalisation of export of cows could also help curb tension on the volatile border."

It is reported that the Bangladesh commerce minister supports the export of cattle from India to Bangladesh and said: "If India begins exporting cows to Bangladesh such untoward incidents will stop."

What breeds and flourishes the illegal trade of cattle is the high demand for beef in Bangladesh, the supply of which is not met by the local market. It is reported that about three million cows per year are needed in Bangladesh where the people enjoy eating beef, but the local market reportedly can supply only about one million cows, leaving a gap of two million. This shortfall is met by illegal trade primarily at the West-Bengal and Bangladesh border through about 17 cattle routes.

Elaborating on the modus operandi of the network involved in the trade, one BSF official reportedly said that a group of people from the Bangladesh side first sends out a boy close to the border. When the boy gives the green signal people from both sides rush towards the fence. From the Indian side the group comes with about a dozen heads of cattle. One by one, the animals are hung on improvised bamboo cranes and sent across to the Bangladesh side within a few minutes.

The smuggled cattle are brought from far flung Indian states like Haryana, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. By the time a cow reaches the bordering area, its price touches Rs.5,000. It increases to Rs.15,000 when it crosses the Indian border. Finally, it fetches Rs.40,000 in Bangladeshi markets.

It is reported by cattle smugglers that police, customs, border security guards and even local politicians are involved because of the big bucks in the illegal trade, which some researchers estimate to be about \$1 billion every year. Bangladesh nationals are killed when they reportedly fail to "grease the palms" of the border officials including security guards.

The vast illegal trade thrives since cows are considered holy in the Hindu-majority country, and India is unable to legalise their export.

When asked for opposition party's reaction on the issue, a Bhartiya Janata Party spokesperson said: "It is a serious issue because scores of cattle are being smuggled every year. It is a tremendous loss of bovine resource and revenue. And it should not be legalised, as it goes against the ethos of the country."

Radhakanta Saha, a leader of World Hindu Organisation and head of a volunteer group that aims to prevent cow smuggling, reportedly said: "The cow is our mother. We shall begin a country-wide agitation if India decides to export cows to a country where they are likely to be slaughtered for meat."

Given the above facts, export of cows is a highly emotive and sensitive matter for New Delhi. While India will never be able to allow it, the sheer profit will drive illegal cattle trade.

Since Bangladeshis civilians are involved in the illegal trade in active cooperation with Indian nationals, BSF should use non-lethal weapons to prevent the illegal cattle trade without the loss of lives of Bangladeshis, as agreed at the highest political level (Paragraph 18 of the Joint Communique of January 13, 2010).

That a country which reveres the cow is among the world's largest illegal exporters of cows might seem contradictory. But it is happening allegedly under the nose of Indian border officials.

The reiteration of India's home minister to bring border killing to zero may hopefully act as catalyst in preventing the loss of lives of Bangladeshis civilians at the border. Indo-Bangladesh relations should be a mature partnership on economic, social and political level.

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Bashar Al-Assad won't strike back

MUHAMMAD ARIF IQBAL KHAN

THE bombing by Israeli air force on Wednesday of an arms depot on the outskirts of the Syrian capital Damascus was quite characteristic of the regimes' security strategy. Israel will not stop at anything to protect itself from any threat either perceived or real. If that means illegal violation of another country's air space then so be it.

Israel can strike a state whenever it wants on the pretext of national security. Timing of such strikes is what concerns Israel, not its legality. Last week was the perfect time to bomb Syria for one simple reason, there was very remote possibility of a counter attack from Damascus.

The Baathist regime's inability to fight on two fronts at this time is understandable. Civil war rages in almost all the important cities. Bashar Al Assad's main ruling credibility is due to support from the armed forces, who are trying to protect the regime's authority. Baathists will lose their ability to govern if the army fails to end the civil war in its favour. On top of that some senior generals from the army defected and joined the Free Syrian Army (rebels). Their defection is more than an embarrassment for Bashar. It's a severe blow to Syrian soldiers' morale.

The civil war is raging on to pull down the Baathist regime on one hand. On the other hand soldiers fear divisions and revolts within their ranks due to top level defections. The country and the army is split between pro and anti Assad groups which makes Syria unstable and vulnerable to a collapse in the centre. Bashar Al Assad has rightly chosen to concentrate on tackling the rebellion before anything else. Syria's inability to retaliate may have been correctly calculated but does Israel have the right to attack Syria?

Israel for its part has calculated and timed its move with remarkable foresight, knowing not only Syria but also Hezbollah would not be able to strike back.

Analysts argue that Tel Aviv government is continuing semi-clandestine war to restrict the flow of sophisticated weapons from Syria to anti-Israeli terrorist group Hezbollah, which has large control of Lebanon. Israeli intelligence has been warning of action against Syria if it found any evidence of shipment of chemical weapons to Lebanon.

Hezbollah is the most immediate and serious threat to Israel suggests security analysts. Compared to another anti Israeli group Hamas, Hezbollah is more skilled and better equipped. In the 34-day war in southern Lebanon in 2006, Hezbollah claimed to have fought the Israeli army to a standstill and received much adulation in the Middle East as a result.

Hassan Nasrallah, chief of Hezbollah, is regarded as a modern-day Arab hero championing the cause of freedom and resistance against Israeli occupation. Hezbollah's organising and fighting capabilities surprised the world in 2006 for which Israel wants to take every step to stop its weapons build up.

There are reports that Hezbollah has even acquired Scud D surface-to-surface missiles with a range of 700 kilometres and capable of carrying a one-ton warhead. Two of these missiles originating in North Korea and supplied with the help of Iran and Syria are reported to have been sent to Hezbollah in 2010 and

another eight in 2011. Until the outbreak of the long-running uprising in Syria Hezbollah let Syrian President Bashar Assad store many of the group's most sophisticated weapons. But since the start of the Syrian uprising Hezbollah has been moving its stockpiles of weapons to Lebanon.

Among the weapons reported destroyed in Wednesday's attack on the Damascus weapons depot, which the Syrian government described as a "scientific research facility," were Hezbollah's stockpile of SA-17 anti-aircraft weapons.

These Russian-made mobile weapons are reputed to be among the most sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons. If Hezbollah had taken delivery of the missiles, it would have ended the impunity of Israeli reconnaissance flights over Lebanon.

Since the end of the 2006 war in southern Lebanon, Israel has been constantly on the alert for weapons destined for Hezbollah and swift to act when shipments have been detected. In 2009, Israel carried out two attacks in Sudan, one on a truck convoy and one on a ship in Port Sudan, believed to be carrying weapons from Iran for Hamas and Hezbollah. Also in 2009 three ships suspected of carrying Iranian arms destined for Hezbollah in defiance of the UN embargo were detained at sea.

One, the Russian registered container ship Monchegorsk, was seized by the US navy and found to be carrying a large cargo of artillery shells and other ammunition. The ship was held in Cyprus where it later blew up, killing 12 people. In October last year, the Israeli air force bombed a munitions factory in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, which was allegedly making weapons for Hezbollah and Hamas.

In November 2011, a massive Hezbollah arms cache near Sidqin, close to Lebanon's southern port city of Tyre, exploded. There is speculation it was attacked by an Israeli missile-equipped drone aircraft. In October last year, there were a series of blasts at a Hezbollah weapons storage depot in Lebanon's eastern Bekaa valley. And, in mid-December, a Hezbollah arms store blew up in the southern Lebanese town of Tairharfa close to the border with Israel.

Bashar Al Assad will not be in any position to open another front against Israel. He is too weak to do that now just as he was before the civil war started. No Arab country in the region is capable of fighting Israel for a very simple reason. Arab countries' military might is no match for Israel's supremacy. Billions of dollars spending on weapons were intended to defend and protect dictators from being overthrown by mass peoples' revolution and secondly, to enrich the fortunes of the dictators, their families and the military top brass.

Israel for its part has calculated and timed its move with remarkable foresight. Knowing not only Syria but also Hezbollah would not be able to strike back. Bashar Al Assad currently sits like a shooting target ready to be humiliated by Israel, US and its regional allies.

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A thankless reading

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I read the Washington Times article written by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition Begum Zia to fathom the recent parliamentary fury. Since the credit line proffers the name of Begum Zia, I shall assume that the author takes full responsibility of writing what appears to be an appeal to the US government to save democracy in Bangladesh.

It was with equal interest I read the trail of comments that followed the online version of the article; they were made by our fellow citizens who are divided in their opinions like a forked tree. I shall focus primarily on the content of the article with the hope that the reader can come to her/his own conclusion about the piece.

The title, "The Thankless Role in Saving Democracy in Bangladesh," is ambiguous as the identity of the "thankless" one is not revealed. The subtitle (Corruption and stealing threaten a once-vibrant nation) makes "national vibrancy" a thing of the past. It appears that the author wants to highlight the fact that she has not been "thanked" enough for saving democracy; however, throughout the piece she wants to portray her political rival Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as the "thankless" one who has not given the US its due for "fostering" democracy. The author seems to hint that both democracy and national vibrancy are lost in the "corruption and stealing" quagmire.

The article begins with a rhetorical

question: "Will 2013 be a watershed in US-Bangladeshi relations?" The OED defines 'watershed' as: (1) an area or ridge of land that separates waters flowing to different rivers, (2) an event or period marking a turning point in a situation. The "watershed" text cleverly employs words to separate meanings flowing to different directions. The convoluted meaning of the word "watershed" becomes clear in the third last paragraph when the author urges the US and its allies "to keep Bangladesh from slipping away from democracy." The repeated use of passive voice helps the author to disperse her meanings.

"My country has been independent ... since 1971, when the United States was one of the first nations to recognise our right to self-determination." It is not clear how Bangladesh earned its independence and what the role of the US was during 1971. Then a warp drive is undertaken to jump to the present time to claim that the US is "sitting idle" while Bangladesh is shifting its "allegiance" to other "growing world powers."

Realising that such an accusation might hurt US ego, the next paragraph tries to do damage control by stating that the US, through its agencies, has stopped the \$2 billion Padma Bridge project "demanding an inquiry into ministerial corruption."

The author seems to identify the corruption probe as a "punitive measure" for the "shifty allegiance." Padma Bridge is described as the "largest single infrastructure project in Bangladesh for 40 years!" again, it is not clear who initiated and tabled the project in the last 40 years!

Then the focus shifts to the humiliation of Nobel laureate Dr. Yunus, allegedly by Sheikh Hasina. Citing the attorney general, the author argues that the humiliation is due to Hasina's covetous claim to the Nobel prize. "Most Bangladeshis would disagree that Ms. Hasina has any claim on

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the prize. Just ask the families of some 300 people who have been registered as missing since 2009 at the hands of Ms. Hasina's Rapid Action Battalion." Interestingly, "most Bangladeshis" who would question Hasina's Nobel ambition are reduced to a sample size of family members of 300 missing men, including one trade union leader Aminul, as well as the "political leaders and their supporters" who are accused of "atrocities" during the war of

independence. The author seems to give her opponent the full credit for Rab action.

The next paragraph mentions how the US ambassador for war crime has "condemned" Bangladesh for "trying only opponents of the regime." According to state.gov web site, the ambassador-at-large Stephen Rapp had regretted that some of his suggestions such as the definition of "crime against humanity" and "camera trial" were not met. However, those suggestions cannot tantamount to what the author describes as "condemned."

The trial of the war criminals is depicted as a personal whim with no reference to those who lost their near and dear ones in 1971. This allegation sets the tone for the next accusation: the country is moving away from democracy to oligarchy. It is the personal will of Sheikh Hasina that is stopping the transition of power through the "caretaker government." Hasina is portrayed as the stumbling block against regional democracy, "fostered" by the US. The people of Bangladesh, the article argues, stand a "chance" of expressing their voice under a caretaker government only. Why does Begum Zia think of "election" as a "chance?" Is she not sure of her own proposal? Of course, she knows all too well that the defeated party following each

election held under the caretaker governments has dubbed the polls as either "subtly" or "grossly" rigged.

To keep democracy intact, Begum Zia thinks that the action of the US and its allies must be "strong": these actions include the withdrawal of "general preferences for trade" and the sanction on "travel" of those "who undermine democracy." The author urges these visible actions to show to "our public" how the US is committed to its "democratisation mission." Finding democracy unsafe under Hasina, she urges US and its allies to "speak" action. The author thus launches her attack on an individual as if to detect the root cause of the country's endangered democracy. Her solution seems to imply Iraq or Libya-like action.

It seems the author has no faith in the people of Bangladesh who have given her the mandate to voice out these concerns in the national parliament or at least in local talk-shows. She relegates the trial of the war criminals to mere personal vendetta. She asks for stern punishment such as the annulment of trade facilities which will affect not only the country but also many of her party colleagues including her sons. The article is a classic example of media spin-doctoring; the only thing that is missing in the words of the head of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is nationalist feeling!

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