

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

## Left helpless

### Crew of detained cargo ship must be rescued

THE unfortunate state of the 24 crew members of a Bangladeshi-owned cargo ship detained in India for the last five months shows, yet again, what irresponsibility, corruption and lack of accountability can do. The captain and crew have been left without adequate food, water and fuel for the last two weeks which the owner company's agent has stopped supplying due to pending payments, while the ship is being detained due to its lack of safety measures and the owner's unpaid dues to India and Sri Lanka.

The ship had been denied departure clearance as it did not comply with the safety measures owing to which, along with the matter of unpaid dues, there was a case pending with the Admiralty court of Mumbai High Court. The very court had issued the detention order. Neither is this the first time, for the ship's captain has claimed that in late 2010, it had been detained for four months and released on a false declaration.

The crew has not been paid in seven months, has trouble communicating with their family members and is now running out of supplies of basic necessities. Meanwhile, the Department of Shipping has not only denied knowledge of the case but also claimed that it is helpless in terms of rescuing the crew unless appropriate relievers are provided to man the vessel.

It is high time the government steps in to rescue the innocent crew members who are not in the least responsible for their owner's fraudulence. The owner, who is said to be in Singapore, must be held to account and not only in this case but other such cases must be taken up by the relevant authorities so that such gross fraud and corruption by those in positions of power does not cause suffering to others.

## Rural eye patients' plight

### Ophthalmologists' service should be made available

WHILE addressing the 40th annual conference of the Ophthalmological Society of Bangladesh, prime minister Sheikh Hasina drew the attention of ophthalmologists to the plight of eye patients in the rural areas. She urged them to extend their service to them by visiting villages.

As the major public and private hospitals are concentrated mostly in the urban centres, the larger section of the population is unable to access and afford their service. Of the many diseases rural people suffer from, eye-related conditions, especially cataract, is common.

Due to lack of timely diagnosis and treatment, cataract, which is removable through operation, has become a cause of blindness.

Most of the poor rural people either remain unaware of the nature of their eye condition, or cannot simply bear the cost of seeing an eye specialist in hospitals or clinics away from home. As an alternative, they go to quacks or faith-healers for treatment. Needless to say, their condition only gets worse.

The importance of this particular aspect of public health cannot be overemphasised. But this is also not the only occasion that the PM reminded doctors employed in public hospitals, in the upazila health complexes in particular, to be attentive to rural patients. But we have not yet seen any significant improvement in that area. We are yet to know how many doctors have returned to the rural areas in service of suffering humanity.

We hope ophthalmologists she addressed at their annual conference would be driven by their oath and conscience to attend to the eye patients suffering in villages.

Exhortations apart, the government needs to develop the communications and other infrastructural facilities including adequately equipping the rural health complexes for doctors to stay in villages for a reasonable

# BDR mutiny: What is the truth?



Brig Gen  
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IT was absolutely galling to hear a TV talk show host referring recently to the BDR mutiny as "so called

mutiny (*tathakothito bidroho*)." Either the host does not know what a mutiny is or does not know the meaning of "so called." I am willing to put it down to the ignorance of the compere on both counts, because, if it were a deliberate characterisation of the BDR mutiny than it not only defiles the memory of the dead but also dilutes the gravity of the incident. It was a mutiny and very well planned too. However, there may be a few who are active even now to paint it otherwise.

This reinforces the need for journalists to be aware of the need for conflict sensitive journalism, a serious lack of which was exhibited when a TV channel on that day of February 2009 was busy transmitting the comments of the rebels castigating the officers when at that very time they were also busy killing these unfortunate officers.

February 25, 2009, is just not another day for us. On that day 73 people were killed. Of those, 57 were army officers killed in a space of 24 hours. It was 10 more than the number of officers killed in the nine months of the war of liberation. And we are still waiting for the truth to emerge.

Grievances of the BDR *jawans* as a cause for the mutiny are too simplistic an argument to cut ice. I have said it before and say it again that it was not quite a spontaneous outburst of resentment at not being heard by the DG. I have never heard of or encountered a situation in my career where grievances had manifested in the form of violence such as we had witnessed that day.

In this very column on March 5, 2009, we had stressed on the need to

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STAR ARCHIVE

get to the roots of the mutiny. It is important to do so, if only to prevent recurrence of such incidents. The government had instituted a committee to inquire into the mutiny, which has in quick time submitted its report. We do not know what the findings of the committee are or its recommendations. But merely sending the accused en masse to jail, or hanging a few of them, can hardly do justice to the victims. And it is not just the dead but the security of the state that was put at risk in the two days of uncertainty that had gripped the nation.

It would have helped matters if the major findings of the inquiry committee were made public. It would have helped answer some of the questions that are still nagging the minds of many, particularly the families of the victims.

First of all, the mastermind of the mutiny we have not been able to pinpoint. While it may not be possible to exactly identify the person or persons behind the massacre, it would be reassuring to know if there were any masterminds at all, or the reasons for precluding such a possi-

bility.

There are reasons to believe that Towhid and his close associates, who were at the forefront on that day, were actually the front men acting on instructions. And the only way to find that out is to track the conversation that these people had had during the twenty four hours of mayhem.

The question is, did the committee go through the recordings or seek those from the relevant authority? I am given to understand that every word we speak on the mobile is recorded, and given the gravity of that day, one would hope that the recordings are available with one or the other agencies of the government. That should put some awkward questions to rest.

There is talk too about how the mutiny was handled, and one can always be wise after the event. Given the fluidity of the situation, military action was not considered an option. It has been argued that given the large conurbation that subtended the Peelkhana complex, military action might have caused large collateral damage. We do not know if that

would have happened, but we know for certain that lack of military action cost the lives of 57 officers and 17 other people.

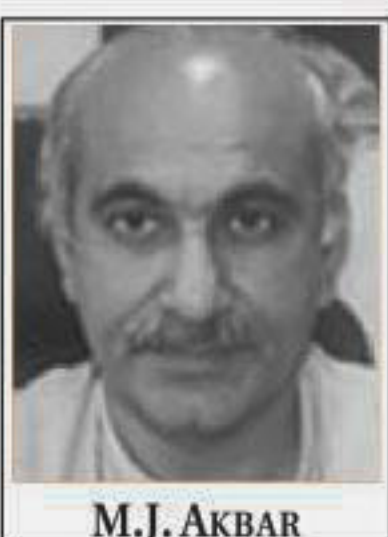
One wonders too whether the committee had looked into the role of the intelligence agencies and if the common refrain, that it was intelligence failure that failed to preempt the mutineers, is justified. It should have been one of the remits of the committee to uncover whether the intelligence agencies failed to get any whiff of the brewing massacre or whether the people at all levels of command failed to comprehend the gravity of the matter. I am not willing to concede that the agencies had no idea of what was coming or that they had not conveyed it to the topmost level.

Truth must be revealed or else, like Duncan's blood on Macbeth's hand, the ocean wouldn't wash our hands clean of the blood of the victims of the BDR carnage and, like his wife, find their blood dyed into our conscience forever.

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## BYLINE

# The other half of murder



M.J. AKBAR

COULD death be a half-truth?

This question is obviously a killer's last hope and best alibi. There is enough truth in that great genre of mystery fiction to suggest that murder can often be an open debate. This does not help the dead, for there can be no murder without a victim; but this remains a serious concern for the living. Whether murder is committed in cold or warm blood, there is no legitimate end without justice.

The pictures depicting the killing of a 12-year-old child, Balachandran, in Sri Lanka, were stark. The chubby innocence of his face was a further torture to the imagination. His only mistake was being son of the wrong parents, as far as his killers were concerned. His father was Prabhakaran, the defeated and slain dictator of the LTTE, who spent his life trying to partition Lanka and create a separate country for its Tamils. No war is pleasant, but this one was especially ruthless. Balachandran became a hostage after LTTE's annihilation in the winter of 2008-09. Channel 4, the British TV station, which has been running a campaign against human rights violations by the Lanka Army, aired footage of this murder and alleged that orders had come from the very top.

The official Lanka Army reaction, through a spokesman, called the story "lies, half-truths and...speculation."

If that is only half the truth, then what is the other half?

The only speculative part is the bit about orders coming from the very top but that is common sense even if the source has not been identified. No officer would risk elimination of such a high-profile prisoner without clear-

ance from the highest in the land. Twenty four hours later, someone more intelligent in the Lanka government added that the visuals had been morphed. The channel explained that it had verified the images.

But there is a simpler answer. If the pictures are a lie, then the child must be alive. If he is alive, he is in Lanka government's hands. All the authorities have to do is produce the child. That would be the ultimate habeas

corpus: produce the body, in this case hopefully alive. That is unlikely to happen. What will follow is silence, tons of it, in the quiet confidence that media stories cannot be repeated forever. This silence is being, and will be, supported by the three major powers with an interest in Sri Lanka: India, China and the United States. No one will seriously question Colombo at a Geneva human rights forum, or



BALACHANDRAN

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tons will clang noisily, awakening all sorts of demons in Geneva and elsewhere.

As in any conventional murder mystery, the killers did overlook an obvious detail, the sort of clue that sets the grey cells of a Hercule Poirot whirring at a frantic pace and opens up the path of discovery. Colombo's wise men missed one of the great new facts of the contemporary age, the rise of the mobile phone.

All the mass manufacturers of such phones are as much camera makers as communication specialists. Everyone is now a walking camera. We are still groping through the full implications of this mobile phone revolution, but one thing is already clear: justice has moved from the time of eye-witness testimony to camera-witness evidence. We are undecided about CCTV surveillance. When there is a terrorist attack we want them everywhere. In calmer times we worry about government snooping into our private lives. Perhaps there is no such thing as privacy anymore already. Telephone conversations are routinely taped by secretive agencies.

Governments have other worries. Any official today can take out his camera phone and copy a file in a second, exposing corruption if he so wishes, or simply waiting for the opportunity to indulge in some supplementary blackmail of his superiors on the side. Almost every event is being recorded, sometimes with a sense of celebration, sometimes out of a sense of grievance. We get antsy at the thought of a barbarian government assaulting our privacy. But the anonymous individual can be a greater danger.

There are two ways the footage of Balachandran's killing could have reached media. Someone could have leaked it from government records. Or it might be a soldier in the death squad who thought he wanted a gruesome but historic memento, and then began to grapple with his conscience. We do not know, yet. But something slipped through that security net, and it was not a lie.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 28

- 870** The Fourth Council of Constantinople closes.
- 1870** The Bulgarian Exarchate is established by decree of Sultan Abdul-Aziz of the Ottoman Empire.
- 1922** The United Kingdom ends its protectorate over Egypt through a Unilateral Declaration of Independence.
- 1972** Sino-American relations: The United States and People's Republic of China sign the Shanghai Communiqué.
- 1985** The Provisional Irish Republican Army carries out a mortar attack on the Royal Ulster Constabulary police station at Newry, killing nine officers in the highest loss of life for the RUC on a single day.
- 1986** Olof Palme, Prime Minister of Sweden, is assassinated in Stockholm.
- 1991** The first Gulf War ends.
- 1998** Kosovo War: Serbian police begin the offensive against the Kosovo Liberation Army in Kosovo.
- 2005** A suicide bombing at a police recruiting centre in Al Hillah, Iraq kills 127.