"This however should be subjected to enquiry and necessary investigation."

According to Huda, law enforcement agencies have batons, tear gas and hot water which they usually use (in that order) to control violence at a certain level. Firearms are brought in when all else fails. This of course has its consequences.

"When civilians attack the police in large groups it becomes difficult to control death and injury suffered by the public," says Huda. "We must keep in mind that we are not at war, therefore both sides are not always armed combatants, so when these attacks happen in residential/populated areas, the police cannot be selective when firing, it is almost impossible to distinguish rioters from bystanders in the crowd. There is never a guarantee that there will not be any collateral damage."



The police use various weapons for riot control, firearms being their last resort. PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

Huda asserts that the law enforcers have not violated protocol when they used their firearms during these riots. "In Manikganj recently, 15 police officers were badly injured in a clash and the mob would have lynched them, had they not fired," he explains. "There is no specific procedure that requires a police officer to wait for permission to fire his weapon. If an officer in charge is present, he makes the decision, but since he cannot be there in every situation, any responsible policeman can make that call if he sees there is a bodily threat to himself or any civilian and to government and private property."

There is however, protocol to be followed after each instance where firearms are used. "Every police firing is initially subjected to an executive inquiry," explains Huda, "And thereafter if the authorities find it necessary, there can be a judicial inquiry also. The current situation in the country is not exclusively a law and order affair, if you go to the source you will see it is a political affair and it needs to be resolved at the source. The solution may be discussions between the two leading political parties."

Adilur Rahman Khan agrees, "In a democratic society, the best solution to these conflicts is political dialogue. The police are acting on the government's order. It is up to the government to take steps to curb this situation. The opposition has already asked for a meeting regarding the appointment of a caretaker government to oversee the upcoming elections. The government should take them up on this offer and use the opportunity to come to a compromise regarding the current situation of unrest and tension. The government should also take steps toward having internationally accepted proper trials for war criminals," he opines.

Khan also suggests that the government take measures to compensate the families of civilian bystanders who have lost their lives and pay the medical bills of those injured as a show of good faith. They should also compensate and provide protection to the Hindu families who have lost their homes and take steps to bring the perpetrators to justice. "Until a dialogue is established however, the situation will only get worse and eventually become unmanageable," he predicts. ■