

Revelations by Hafajat leader

His confessions sound confirmatory

THE confessions made to police by Junaid Baburagari, Joint Secretary of Hafajat-e-Islam (HI), largely vindicate what we have been suspecting about the detailed programme on May 5. What is evident is that the HI high command lost control of events on the day early on to hardliners in the party. They were joined by Jamaat-e-Islami activists, particularly its student wing Shuhid, and the presence of strongmen from BNP's student and youth wings has also been noted.

The looting and burning of shops in the Motifheel area, arson committed on vehicles and other public property, both government and commercial, were all seemingly part of a well-orchestrated campaign. The fact that a large section of the HI top leadership was in cahoots with other major groups in the opposition alliance is left in little doubt. Their threat to overthrow on Shapla Chatter that was in consideration to what was promised to the government could very well have been geared to forcing down the government. Thankfully, events did not go that way.

About the claims of heavy loss of life at the hands of law enforcement agencies engaged in late night clearing operations at Shapla Chatter, the HI Joint Secretary admitted his ignorance. It confirms the general belief that numbers dead being treated the opposition have been exaggerated. Having said that, we believe due process has been taken recourse to get those valuable information from Baburagari while in demand and not under duress.

Obama's concern shared

His counsel to Myanmar commendable

NEWS from yesterday has it that US President Obama supported Myanmar President Thein Sein's drive for reforms in Myanmar but emphasised that violence against ethnic Muslim minority must stop. The inclusive and far-sighted approach of President Obama to the problems of Myanmar should be considered favourably by the Myanmar authorities. In this pro-democracy leader and Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi can play a catalytic role.

While Myanmar President Thein Sein is taking initiatives to create a more inclusive national identity, President Obama expressed his support towards this development and mentioned that the US will offer support if Myanmar persists in pursuing the agenda. This stand of President Obama is certainly a commendable one.

As Bangladesh shares border with Myanmar and war situation has been at the receiving end of Rohingya refugees, we do have shared concerns to address. We think that citizenship rights that were forfeited decades ago from the Muslim minority community should be restored to them and the process of inclusiveness should start here and now. The ethnic conflict between Muslims and Buddhist communities could only be brought to an end to the State's robust protection of the minority community.

As more economical and social transformations take place in Myanmar, Bangladesh can play a significant role as a neighbouring country to try and build a mutually respectful and beneficial relationship which will mark some of the issues that have arisen in the past.

Given Myanmar's resource base, Bangladesh can work as a partner in progress through utilisation of complementarities in each others' economy. We are keen on close ties with Myanmar.



You said...
AL shed crocodile tears for democracy

KHONDOKAR Musharraf Hossain, BNP Standing Committee Member, accused the government of violating the constitution by prohibiting political gatherings, and wondered whether this was Awami League's / ruling coalition's example of democracy. He said this at a discussion meeting on 21 May.

We Say...
BNP's commitment to democracy is no better

WHILE we denounce the government's prohibition of political meetings and rallies in Dhaka city, and for not allowing the BNP to organise Dura mehfil inside its office, we wonder what is BNP's pledge to democracy when we learn that it was behind the 5th May violence during the Tefazul rally, which was perpetrated with the aim of ousting an elected government.

Is it BNP's definition of democracy?
We would hope our politicians would ponder a while before speaking.



From sugar-coating to the untruth

AKIBUDDIN NAGAR

BANGLADESH'S human rights record was put under the spotlight this week when it came before the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review in Geneva.

The UPR is an international peer-review process that allows UN member nations to scrutinise one another's compliance with international human rights law and make recommendations for its improvement. This week saw Bangladesh face the music for the second time.

In the lead up to this week's review, the government submitted a report to the Human Rights Council documenting its implementation of the recommendations flowing from the last review in 2009.

Sadly, the 29-page report is dense with empty rhetoric, and is particularly at odds with the endemic human rights abuses taking place across Bangladesh on the part of the police, including extrajudicial killings, custodial deaths and tortures.

As in many exercises of self-assessment and international relations, there is a good deal of sugar-coating the truth. So much is to be expected, but there are some glaring misrepresentations that need to be pointed out.

Take the following paragraph:

"The GoB continues to maintain its 'zero tolerance' policy towards violation of human rights by LEAs [law enforcement agencies]. A Police Reform Act with stringent code of conduct is in place, while pro-people policing has been introduced through establishment of model police stations and victim support centres in key police stations. According to existing laws, there is no scope for impunity for human rights violations by armed forces and LEAs."

Aside from the point about pro-people policing, the government's claims of a zero tolerance policy, Police Reform Act and lack of impunity under existing laws go beyond such sugar-coats and risks being untruths.

Zero-tolerance policy?

If the government has a zero-tolerance policy towards human rights abuses by the police, then it has done very little to get this policy into practice.

According to Human Rights Forum – a coalition of 19 civil society organisations – between January 2009 and April 2012, there were 511 reported instances of extrajudicial killings by law enforcing agencies, including the police and the Rapid Action Battalion. Few investigations have been conducted into these killings and in almost all cases, no action been taken by the State against any of the officers involved.

Besides the few cases that reach the courts, violations have either not been addressed, or they are done so internally. The internal oversight unit is known to be weak, under-resourced and insufficiently independent from the powers that be. Often, the punishment meted out involves transferring police officers to other units. This

process lacks any form of transparency or public accountability.

Had the government been serious about a zero-tolerance policy, it would have put in place an effective system to independently review police misconduct. Although it has established a National Human Rights Commission, the commission's mandate precludes it from actually investigating violations by law enforcement agencies.

With respect to the police, it is limited to requesting reports from the Ministry of Home Affairs, which has not been cooperative in the majority of cases. Both internal and external police accountability are therefore painfully absent.

Police reform act?

The claim that a "Police Reform Act with stringent code of conduct is in place" comes as a surprise. Policing in Bangladesh even today continues to be governed by the Police Act of 1861,



The claim that a "Police Reform Act with stringent code of conduct is in place" comes as a surprise. Policing in Bangladesh even today continues to be governed by the Police Act of 1861, an archaic law whose main objective was to consolidate colonial rule.

An attempt at legislative reform did take the form of a Draft Police Ordinance almost six years ago by a group of senior serving and retired police officers and legal experts.

However, successive governments took no interest in implementing the Draft Ordinance. If a "Police Reform Act" is in place, its contents are unknown and it is nowhere to be found in the public domain. Otherwise, there is no such thing and the government's claim is patently untrue.

No scope for impunity?

The government's claim that there is no scope for impunity under existing laws appears to be another political statement. On the contrary, a culture

of impunity is deeply embedded within the outdated legal framework.

This begins with the Constitution. Article 46 empowers Parliament to enact legislation indemnifying any state officer for any act done to maintain or restore order, and to lift any penalty, sentence or punishment imposed.

Impunity is also specifically provided for under the Code of Criminal Procedure of 1898. Section 197 prohibits prosecutions against public officials – including police officers – without the government's approval if the offence is committed in an official capacity. Reportedly, the necessary approval is seldom granted.

Furthermore, section 132 provides that a police officer acting under good faith or acting in accordance with an order given by a superior is not to be deemed to have committed an offence, while involved in disposing an assembly that is unlawful or likely



to disturb the public peace. This provision is particularly concerning in light of ongoing mass demonstrations and harkens back the numerous reports of law enforcement agencies allegedly using excessive force while controlling crowds.

Ultimately, for the government, the truth appears an unnecessary detail. In light of the human rights concerns in Bangladesh, this is profoundly disappointing. Let us hope that the government takes the international human rights system seriously without treating it as an exercise in public relations and empty self-congratulation.

The author is a Programme Officer, Police Behaviour Programme, Governance and Human Rights Division.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Withdraw the ban
We are surprised by the government decision to ban political meetings and rallies in Dhaka. The recent activities of the government have made us very anxious. This kind of undemocratic decision can backfire on the AL. I request the government to withdraw the ban immediately. I also request the opposition to give up all forms of destructive activities.
M. A. Kasher
Mehenzbadpur, Dhaka

Mass murder in Savar
Rana Plaza collapse is the worst man-made disaster in the history of our country. The death toll stands at 1127, with several hundred workers critically injured, most of whom have been retained for life.
It was reported that Sobel Rana, the owner of the building, raised additional floors illegally on the six-storey structure. No expert opinion is needed to say that such a building with a weak foundation can break down any time. Sobel Rana is mainly, if not solely, responsible for the tragedy. None the authorities concerned must see that the culprits are punished.
Md. Mohsin Ali
Senior Assistant Secretary (Retd)
Nutan Camp, Kishida

Dictator better than democrats!
The ten-year tenure of Ershad is a dark chapter in the history of Bangladesh. But then, the activities of the democratically elected government have far exceeded the bad deeds of the deposed dictator.
The other day a journalist, while expressing his views on the recent political developments in Bangladesh, on TV, mentioned something very important. There were perhaps two known casualties during the tenure of Ershad. On the other hand, the number of casualties have exceeded the triple digit figure during the tenure of the present government.
Saleh Mohammad Ayub
Houston, Texas, USA

Mitigating political crisis
I have read the commerce minister's article on 21st May's Op-ed page in your daily. He has a clear idea about the present crisis of the country but he is unable to find out a path to peaceful solution of the crisis. It is high time the government found out a way to resolve the political disputes.
Shahin Shaptem
Dhaka Gold, Dharmendi
Dhaka

Disposal of drain wastes
We all have been watching the 'yearly' event of cleaning the clogged drains. After the cleaning is done, the extracted wastes are left to the mercy of nature, which causes mess and emits horrible stench. Common sense suggests that the departments concerned coordinate and jointly do the cleaning job. Tegopon to Mohakhali road is a case in point. The road is in a dilapidated condition and needs cleaning.
Syed Imtiaz Ali
Banani, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Aim was to oust govt," published on May 22, 2013
Ash C.
It's very strange that while the 18-party and other rights body are clamouring for a judicial / international probe on the May 5 / 6 mayhem, the government needed more than two weeks of remand of the 60 years-plus old man to produce a beautifully edited 'confession'! How off to the administration!

Mohammad Sarwaruddin
Confessional statements are perfectly aligned with government expectations.
Mahbubur Rahman Sharif
In our country all matters are contaminated by political colour and that is why it is tough for us to grasp which one is real and which one is false. The government should take correct initiative without having the mentality of abolishing the opposition.

Iftekhar Hassan
Even this Hafajat man selling the truth! Everybody is thinking all these are under duress.

Peaceful citizen
We, as peaceful citizens, never doubted their role in these heinous activities. They portrayed themselves as the feet of 18-party, Jamaat-Shuhid and HM Ershad but forgot that these parties themselves could not muster enough support to start a movement and they were being used as pawns in the game for power-grabbing politics.

"Cold-blooded murder" (May 21, 2013)
Yamuna Jamil
Very true. An unfortunate Zia!

Raf Chow
Since Bangladesh's inception, we had time backward step after another due to inept political vision and corrupt administration. We believed in Bangladesh but he had his failings which did not help. We took the wrong track of dictatorship under him and then came all the military shenanigans. Since '11, we have so called democracy but nothing has changed as the two supreme leaders think they have bought the country via their family lineage.

Dev Saha
Please make sure that this kind of judicial murder never happens again.

INTERNATIONAL DAY TO END FISTULA Woman's tragedy

ARTHUR EKKEN

LET me start with a story, the story of Kalsuma Begum. She is from Chaudpur, born in a poor family. Her father was a shopkeeper. She was the seventh among six brothers and three sisters. She was lucky to get the opportunity to be educated and successfully passed grade eight from a local school. She got married at the age of fifteen. Her husband and in-laws were not supportive to her. She got pregnant in the very first year of her marriage and gave birth to an underweight baby with the help of a local traditional birth attendant. In the second year of marriage, she got pregnant again and was consulted with a doctor. The doctor advised her to go to Dhaka for better treatment. But she could not, because her father was paralysed, her brothers were away, and her husband was not cooperative.

She had prolonged labour pain for a couple of days and then taken to Chaudpur community clinic, where she gave birth to a stillborn baby. But she developed an obstetric fistula after the delivery. Her husband left her. After suffering from this painful fistula for 11 months, Kalsuma came to the Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) with her brother.

In DMCH, she underwent an operation and is completely cured now. Subsequently she was sent to the fistula patients training and rehabilitation center run by Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition (BWHC), supported by

UNFPA, to receive training on sewing and basic education from the rehabilitation center. After completing her training she was given some rehabilitation materials for her livelihood such as sewing machine, basic education materials, vegetable seeds and seed money of Tk 1000 only.

In this centre the counselor helped her to recover from mental depression and made her realise that this is just a condition and she can lead her life just like a normal woman after treatment. After training and rehabilitation Kalsuma has become more confident and now earns her own livelihood. She collects orders from the local market and from her neighbors. Kalsuma also arranges meetings in her community to create awareness about fistula and various maternal health related issues regularly. She has referred eleven pregnant women to the local health complex.

Kalsuma is now both mentally and physically cured. She is economically independent and much admired by her local community.

There are thousands of Kalsumas in Bangladesh. As a result of prolonged, obstructed labour, in most cases the baby is stillborn or dies within the first week of life, and the woman suffers a devastating injury – a fistula – that leaves her incapacitated. The consequences of this injury more often leave her ashamed, ostracised and excluded. Many women and girls who suffer from

fistula are excluded from daily community life and abandoned by their husbands and families, isolating them socially and emotionally, making it also difficult to maintain a source of income or support, thus deepening their poverty and magnifying their suffering.

Obstetric fistula has been virtually eliminated in industrialised nations, but in the developing world it is estimated that 2 to 3 million women and girls are still living with the condition and more than 50,000 new cases develop each year. However, obstetric fistula is preventable and, in most cases, can be surgically repaired.

As part of the global community, we have an obligation to end this health and human rights tragedy. Globally, UNFPA leads and coordinates the Campaign to End Fistula, working with its partners for the past decade to make fistula as rare in developing countries including Bangladesh as it is in the industrialised world.

Through its three key strategies of prevention, treatment and social reintegration, the collaborative efforts of the Campaign have helped women and girls of Bangladesh overcome a debilitating condition that has left – and continues to leave – significant numbers suffering in solitude and shame.

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