

Violence against women

Have we failed to stand up to it?

WOMEN have become an endangered species in Bangladesh. Hardly a day passes without news of violence against women; of girls, daughters, wives subjected to brutality and torture. Last Friday's issue of The Daily Star carried not one but three stories of violence perpetrated on women.

In one instance a jilted suitor in Barisal reacted by attacking his inamorata, causing her grievous injuries and subsequently her death.

In another instance a young girl of fifteen could not bear the humiliation of being stalked, and not finding solace even in her parents, who rebuked her on hearing of the incident instead of giving her the much needed consolation and support, hanged herself. The third woman succumbed to her injuries after an acid attack in her home.

These are but only a few instances of the widespread violence against women in the country. Needless to say, most of the violence is perpetrated by persons known to the victims or by those that live in the same vicinity, and also, regrettably, by members of her family.

We feel that the state should devise more robust ways to prevent these crimes, and more punitive measures, apart from the existing laws, should be conceived that would act as severe deterrence. For example, the said stalker was arrested and sentenced immediately to one year prison term by a mobile court, but it was too late for the unfortunate girl, and, for an act that has eventually caused the life of the young girl, too little.

Relocating tanneries

Brooks no further delay

CITY'S tannery owners are reportedly poised to sign a deal with the government to relocate their units to Savar. Tannery plant owners have been asked to submit layouts of their factories to BSCIC, an industry ministry body, within two months.

We would like to be reassured with the report on tannery relocation, because the project's progress has been stymied since its approval by ECNEC in 2003, over who would share what part of the project cost including installation of the Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP).

It appears that the government's readiness to bear 80 per cent of the cost, which has multiplied many times over the past decade, has helped settle matters.

So far so good. We want to believe that this is the last deal agreed between the government and the tannery businesses. That is so because the city dwellers can no more stand the hazard of being eternally exposed to 88 million tons of solid and 7.7 million litres of toxic liquid effluents disgorged everyday by some 200 tannery plants. Add to that the prospect of losing around one billion dollar worth of leather and leather product exports to the EU, unless the CETP is established.

The shifting of the tannery units, therefore, brooks no delay. The government must see to it that the latest deal with tannery owners works.

LEST WE FORGET

Prof Noman: A treasured teacher

KHONDOKAR IBRAHIM KHALED

PROF. Noman was an English teacher in Dhaka College when I joined in 1957. He was solemn and tranquil, and had a dignified bearing. He used to enter the classroom silently, and his presence turned the noisy classroom into a haven of tranquility. Without looking at us he would start reading in a measured voice. Then he turned to analysing the piece at hand, opening for us the door to the vast treasures of his outstanding knowledge. His pronunciation was perfect, and his presentation was made with natural flow, which had a spell-binding effect on us.

In our discussions following these classes, we often wondered how it was possible for him to take us under his spell! And unanimously we agreed that he had a knack of making presentations that touched our heart. That was his outstanding quality.

Sometimes, some boys founded the classes of some senior teachers, but they never skipped Prof. Noman's classes; rather they enthusiastically attended and enjoyed them. That was a manifestation of Prof. Noman's magical influence on his students.

Possibly it was the transparency of Prof. Noman's character that made him dear to his students. As a human being, a teacher's character can be an admixture of pluses and minuses. But when one acquires the virtue of moving above all the minuses through committed endeavours of self-perfection, one elevates oneself to the level of an ideal teacher, an ideal human. The strength of character of such a person crates a spell-binding environ, which takes that person from the position of an ideal to that of an idol. Prof. Noman was one such idol.

I didn't have many an occasion to meet Noman Sir during the post-1959 days. The last time we met was at a milad mahfil at his residence when he was the principal of Dhaka College. He received me with such warmth that I can never, ever, forget it. It was evident that the bond of affection of a teacher towards his students attained fullness in the particular case of Prof. Noman.

Prof. Noman is no more amongst us; yet, he remains a glowing light in our hearts. He had helped us become good citizens with his affection, his teachings; a torch-bearer he was for us. We do pray for him to almighty Allah. May his soul rest in peace. In Heaven.

The writer is a senior banker.

The new terror outfit

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD
NURUL HUDA

THE all-pervasive fear and uncertainty emanating from the raging controversy over the restoration of caretaker government to oversee general election have perhaps deflected our attention from the mischievous activities of yet another terrorist organisation that has taken root in Bangladesh. The reference is to an organisation styled as "Ansarullah Bangladesh" whose activists and at least one leading figure have been arrested by security personnel

The advent of a hitherto unknown extremist outfit lends credence to the apprehension that we have not yet been able to adequately appreciate the threats that exist and have a bearing on our democratic existence. One may ponder if we are late in awakening to the reality that we are fighting against a state of mind that does not share the pluralist values of an open society. One has to bear in mind that religious extremists, despite being a minuscule proportion of the population, carry the potential of destabilising the polity. The question is, do we see a process that creates preconditions to generate terrorist acts on account of ideological motivations?

Don't we realise that the grievances, perceived or real, of Islamic extremists are both local and international in nature? There is no doubt that such grievances acquire significance in a conducive environment for radical actions. It is thus not surprising that there has been a noticeable expansion of the so-called Islamic extremists and their transnational activities.

As against the above apprehensions and well-grounded fears, is there a lack of political consensus and less than adequate institutional capacity, particularly of the regulatory outfits, in combating the extremist threats? It is not uncommon now for extremist groups in one country to train and coordinate activities and assist groups in another country.

Overt intelligence sources indicate that religiously motivated extremist groups are increasingly relying on each other in different countries for assistance, financing and training. In fact, domestic groups with local grievances are now forming international alliances in pursuit of their extremist goals and also the furtherance of those objectives. The worry is, are we providing space to dreaded extremist groups whose hitherto secure bases elsewhere have been weakened?

The reasonable fear in our situation, as elsewhere, is whether religion has not only been utilised as an ideology but also as an insurrectionary strategy that can draw people of varying political convictions.

The so-called Islamist terrorist groups have been found to organise themselves around the rhetoric of a radical interpretation of Islam and seek to impose religion in the politics of Bangladesh. Such terrorism, in terms of growth, benefits from the unhealthy competition to retain or gain power at any cost.

Though unfortunate, the reality is that in garnering

political support some political parties have been perilously oblivious of the cost and repercussions of encouraging extremist ideas and actions. The fact of the matter is that religiously motivated extremists have from time to time attacked government officials and institutions to further their religious and political objectives.

The militant's focus is on the use of power in pursuit of policy. Some sections of the public have been converted to this approach. Incidentally, the liberal current of opinion was significantly de-legitimised. The goal, therefore, should be denial of space for radicalised Islam and the militant tendency at its core. The extremists must not be allowed to develop vital stakes in the political system for starting a radical movement in the long run.

While eradicating or controlling militancy it should occur to us that in Bangladesh the advocates of extreme path are more determined than liberals. Liberal forces hardly work with intense dedication, much less with a sense of mission. One has to remember that in Bangladesh secularism as state ideology finds it difficult to compete with a language of belonging saturated with religion.

One has to recognise the socio-economic reality of Bangladesh where gross poverty co-exists with democracy, a liberal constitution and disorder with functioning polity; the religious and traditional beliefs are far more tenacious than the liberals imagine. The state has, at times, been involved in the business of defining religion. Significantly, the compulsions of the traditional obligations of the ruler to protect state religion have to be kept in view.

The militants' strategy consists of efforts to win the trust and confidence of the majority population based on the role of extremists serving as arbitrators of individual and community disputes and financiers of education and livelihoods. Therefore, specific economic issues should be addressed on an urgent basis.

There is a need to reassess the innate pluralism of our politics, which has not favoured strong ideological parties. This is significant because the liberal front faces an uphill task in recapturing the political as well as the psychological ground already lost to the so-called extremist quarter. The liberals must be ready to face preparations of extremists for further round of aggressive social mobilisation with plans to embark upon politics of confrontation with a view to deriving political capital.

The area of action to counter militancy is a battle of ideas, challenging the ideological motivations that extremists believe justify the use of violence. Successful prosecution in the courts, based on gathering of necessary evidence and apprehending those involved in planning acts of terrorism before committing of mischief should be one of the principal approaches of countering militant activity.

Last but not least, we must avoid stereotyping all religious leaders and institutions as militant fundamentalists. Of prime importance is an inclusive policy agenda where the stake of the deprived classes is institutionalised and thus does not wait for the whims of policy makers. The risks of militancy will reduce in large measure when restoration of rule of law and distributive justice will be effectively manifest.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Syria: The chemical whodunnit conundrum

PORNIMOL KANCHANALAK

SCANDAL! "Caught playing iPhone game at 3+ hour Senate hearing -- worst of all I lost!"

That was a tweet from Senator John McCain, a Vietnam War veteran and former presidential candidate, after he was caught playing a game on his smartphone while his colleagues were seriously debating whether the US should attack Syria.

The US and some Western nations have turned up the rhetoric and want to up the ante in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Leaders of the US, the UK and France responded in the sternest manner possible to reports of a massacre of innocent citizens by chemical weapons near Damascus, only to pass the buck to their respective legislative bodies. The United Nations Security Council is also coming under pressure, but that body has been in a checkmate situation for quite some time.

The person with the worst job is US Secretary of State John Kerry who has been making the case for a US military reprisal in Syria. But he stumbled when asked by a member of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee if the US response could lead to "boots-on-the-ground" in Syria. First he waffled, then meandered. He, perhaps more than anybody else in the US, knows that after two and a half years of civil war in Syria, the time for effective military intervention by the West has long passed.

There is no way to tell who the culprits were in the use of chemical weapons. The conventional wisdom postulates that it must have been President Assad. The underlying assumption of this "conclusion" is that Assad is the only one who has possession and is capable of using such weapons. The other assumption is that if the world can get rid of Assad, Syria will see the dawn of peace and the world could, with a clear conscience, turn a watchful eye to something else.

The on-the-ground reality of the Syrian civil war, however, is much more complicated than good-versus-evil, and the good-will-prevail-in-the-end scenario of Hollywood movies. After more than two years of brutal fighting, the war-torn country has seen an influx of transplanted fighters who are Islamic extremists from groups such as al-Qaeda. They are actually the ones doing the fighting in the name of opposition to the Assad regime.

It is almost too simplistic to assume that if the chemical weapons were used in areas outside of the government's control, it must have been the government who deployed them.

It could be viewed as an argument from a deviant mind to say that there is an equal possibility the chemical weapons were used by the opposition. And here are the arguments in support of that view:

First, while it is true that the chemical attack took place in an area outside of government control, it can be argued that precisely because the opposition could not reach terrain under the control of Assad's forces, they used it in areas outside of it.

Second, the most effective and fiercest fighters in Syria now are the al-Qaeda and Wahabi extremists. They are people who have no problem whatsoever with killing innocents or even themselves. Countless times before, their cohorts have wrapped themselves in explosives and blown up everything and anything in front of them. So why not this time, at least to stir things up a bit, and for a

"good" cause. For them?

Third, the West has unwisely drawn and declared a "red line" for military intervention -- the use of chemicals or weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This is the West's Achilles' heel as far as the Islamic extremists are concerned. Now the West is forced to take its own medicine.

We have heard

tough macho talk from David Cameron, Barack Obama and Francois Hollande -- who in the end showed signs of wavering. But have we heard anything of the same sort from Israel?

Assad's Syria has not been such a terrible buffer zone between Israel and Iran. Suppose the West could topple Assad. Who will take his place? How can anyone be assured that his replacement would not be like Egypt's Mohamed Morsi who, while in office, did nothing to further democracy in his country, but everything to consolidate his grip on power?

Militarily, can the West's "limited" action in Syria accomplish anything worthwhile? How can the West be sure that such intervention would not help spread the civil war into conflict across the region?

As the world grapples with a "no-good options" situation, for a decorated war veteran like Senator McCain to choose to play a poker game on his iPhone during the Syrian debate was telling. He was very sceptical of Obama's war strategy in Syria.

Upping the ante may be a good ploy in poker, but in the case of intervention in Syria, the final outcome of McCain's poker game on the phone may also be telling: he lost.

© The Nation (Thailand). All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Need for informed choice on Bt Brinjal

Scientists have taken initiative to develop genetically modified pest resistant Bt Brinjal and they accomplished the goal by inserting a gene (Cry1Ac) from the soil bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt.) into the genome of various brinjal cultivars. Meanwhile, some internationally acclaimed scientists led by Professor David Schubert of reputed SALK Institute of San Diego, California has urged that Bangladesh government should not release genetically modified Bt Brinjal as it would result in unprecedented health hazard for the people. It may be mentioned that even Indian government told that it needed more time before releasing Bt Brinjal. The Philippines has also postponed introducing Bt Brinjal in their country.

It is true that Bt Brinjal is resistant to certain common insects and it will obviously increase brinjal production. But every scientific innovation has its merits and demerits. So, before introducing Bt Brinjal in public, more biosafety research is needed. **Professor M Zahidul Haque**
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture
SAU, Dhaka

Availing therapists' service

Speech and language therapy in Bangladesh is a new opportunity for many people who have problems in speech, language, communication and swallowing. If a patient take regular follow-up from the therapist, his condition of disorder will improve and he will be able to share his thoughts or ideas with others. Speech and language therapists are the allied health professionals who work with patients, teachers and other health professionals such as occupational therapists, physical therapists and doctors. They work in the hospitals, community health care centres, special schools and other places. They work with both children and adults. A child can have learning difficulties, stammering, voice disorder, autism, cerebral palsy and other conditions. So parents should take such children to speech and language therapy consultants as soon as possible because the sooner they go to the therapists, the better outcome they will receive. Today stroke and head injury is a common problem among adults due to which sometimes patients face difficulties in speech, language and swallowing. They should also take this treatment.

H.M. Abubakar Siddik
Dept. of Speech and Language Therapy
BHPI, CRP, Savar

Cars parked inside Secretariat

A report on the matter was published in a local English daily on 18th August. It was about the practice of overnight parking of many vehicles inside the secretariat which is a potentially dangerous practice. Usually during night time, the secretariat area is totally deserted except for the designated guards posted in guardrooms alongside the doors in the perimeter. The whole area has many buildings, and with papers and files, all potentially inflammable material spread all over the place. Should someone with bad intentions stays back after the offices are closed, he can then deliberately set alight a few vehicles' fuel tanks. This may lead to an uncontrollable fire that can spread all over the area.

It would be better and safer to park all these vehicles covering half of the road on the western side, with the other half and the gate areas left free of parked vehicles, so that vehicles can come in or go out of the secretariat at night if so needed.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Ramu incident shame for all," published on September 4, 2013

Abul Kashem

The most shameful incident for the nation is that our politicians are so vindictive that they cannot sit together and come to a consensus to solve national problems which they themselves create time and again, causing limitless sufferings to the people.

Shahin Huq

Ramu incident is a shame for Sheikh Hasina and her party, as local Awami Leaguers were the masterminds of the temple attack. We the Bangladeshis do not share in this abominable act.

"Curious buying spree" (September 4, 2013)

Touchstone

No big loans are ever sanctioned without the board's cognizance! The Basic Bank's recent financial scam smells as fishy as the fishing trawlers that the Chairman Bachchu is scooping up from the market. I wonder if he will be hauled up by Muhith's riddled net or he will escape through loopholes like Jasmine, the chairman of Hall-Mark.

SM

All arrows lead to a basic answer -- he is one of the players of BASIC corruption.

nnworx

Thank you, TDS, for bringing Bachchu to nation's court.

Iftekhar Hassan

Will finance minister say, "Oh, its no big deal?" Just wondering what his salary was at Basic Bank and why ACC cannot nab him based on his past income tax returns and assets.