

Why Hindus always under assault?

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after Bangladesh's Hindus, an outrage that was to go on for nine long months. In the process, the soldiers not only killed such revered Hindu figures as Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Govinda Chandra Dev, Dhirendranath Dutta and others but also mowed down hundreds of Hindu students who resided at Jagannath Hall of Dhaka University.

Things ought to have been different in independent Bangladesh. And yet, in post-1975 circumstances, the country's Hindu community once again became a target of assault, in many instances through the subtle and not-so-subtle encouragement of the ruling classes. Over these past four decades, many more Hindus have left Bangladesh, with most trekking off to India. The more fortunate ones, in terms of academic excellence or economic strength, have made their homes in the developed world.

Today, the country's Hindu population, which in 1971 numbered as high as 25 per cent of the total population, has declined appallingly to below 10 per cent. Hindu homes have been vandalised for close to four decades; Hindu temples have been destroyed; Hindu-owned property has been looted systematically; Hindus have been looked upon as Indian agents.

Today, it is with a huge degree of shame that one must recount the havoc wreaked on Hindus following the electoral triumph of the BNP-Jamaat alliance in October 2001. Supporters of the alliance went on a rampage, beating and raping and killing Hindus in no fewer than 2,500 villages in the country. No action was taken against the marauders.

Our grievance is that even today, with the conclusion of the general election of January 5, Hindus all over the country cower in fear of

elements which have been threatening them since before the voting. As our news reports over the past few days have made it clear, there were patent threats held out against the community in various regions of the country.

Why were these threats not taken seriously by the administration? Where were the measures that should have ensured their security as citizens of Bangladesh? In the aftermath of the elections, once they came under attack from the BNP-Jamaat-Shibir cadres, frantic appeals went out to the police for help.

No response came. Neither was there any move on the part of the Awami League or its alliance partners to go to the rescue of the endangered Hindus.

We bow our heads in deep shame at what has systematically been done to our fellow citizens only because they pursue a faith different from that of the majority religious denomination. Our sense of shame sinks deeper in the knowledge that hardly any individual of repute or any organisation professing its belief in secular democracy, has come forward to condemn this brutalisation of the Hindu community and to resist the menace of communalism in the country.

It is now for the state of Bangladesh to reassure its Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and its indigenous people that this country is a secular geographical entity, that it is home to all its people, that an attack on one community is an attack on every community, that those who from now on attempt to humiliate any community will be dealt with summarily and with an iron hand.

The state must not fail again. If it does, this country will stand guilty of indulging in ethnic cleansing.

No steps yet

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filed against Human Rights Watch. The testimony and hearing in the war crimes case and the contempt petition were deferred to January 16 and February 27, respectively at the judge's chamber.

TRIBUNAL-2
The International Crimes Tribunal-2 has asked two Bagerhat lawyers to appear before the court on Sunday "without failure" as they didn't show up yesterday citing "unavoidable situation".

Earlier on November 17, the tribunal summoned Sheikh Abdul Wadud, lawyer of Bagerhat District Judge's Court, and Shamima Aktar, a lawyer and notary public from the same district, to appear before it to clarify an affidavit allegedly sworn by Achhia Khatun, a prosecution witness in the case against Jamaat leader AKM Yusuf.

Wadud appeared before the tribunal on December 15, but Shamima did not come and the tribunal ordered the superintendent of police in Bagerhat to produce her before the court on December 19.

On December 19, the tribunal fixed yesterday to pass an order regarding the

matter after Shamima appeared before the court. It had also asked both the lawyers to appear yesterday.

But none of them appeared before the court yesterday and Gazi MH Tamim, a member of Yusuf's defence, said there was an "unavoidable situation" and sought a brief adjournment.

During Achhia's cross-examination on November 17, defence counsel Syed Mizanur Rahman showed her a document asking if she recognised the photo attached to it.

Achhia said it was her photo but expressed her surprise at how it had got there. Mizanur also showed her a signature on the document and asked her if she had signed it.

The witness said it was not her signature. The tribunal chairman said Achhia's affidavit should not be in others' possession unless it was made by others.

Since the witness denied signing the affidavit, the tribunal summoned the lawyers concerned to verify it.

The contents of the affidavit could not be known.



Selima Rahman

Khandaker Mahub

Fazlul Haq Milon

Govt takes hardline

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Shirin Sultana. As of last night, police were yet to press any charges against the three detainees, but State Minister for Home Shamsul Haque Tuku told the BBC Bangla Service that they were arrested on specific charges of instigating recent violence.

Contacted, Deputy Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police Masudur Rahman said they picked up Mahub for his recent "provocative" remarks about the government.

He would not comment about the charges against the three others, but said they would be produced before a Dhaka court today.

The latest crackdown came a day after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said the government would take stern action against troublemakers to protect people's lives and properties.

Hours before the detention, Communications Minister Obaidul Quader said the government would be forced to take a hardline to contain post-polls violence if the BNP-Jamaat did not stop it.

Selima Rahman, sister of Rashed Khan Menon, a top leader in the ruling alliance, was picked up soon after she announced a 12-hour extension of the opposition hartal at a press briefing at her Gulshan house.

Sensing police presence around her house, Selima went to her brother's house (not Menon) on the third floor of the same building. Detectives took her to the DB office from there.

Earlier on December 30, police detained her while she was trying to enter Khaleda's Gulshan residence. But she was later released upon undertakings.

Khandaker Mahub, also former president of the Supreme Bar Association (SCBA), was held minutes after he told a programme at the Jatiya Press Club that the January 5 election was a farce.

The SCBA demanded his immediate release.

In December, detectives arrested BNP Vice-

chairman Maj (ret'd) Hafiz Uddin Ahmed soon after he called upon the opposition men to join the December 29 Dhaka march programme.

Since his arrest, the BNP is having difficulties finding leaders to hold press conferences to announce its programmes.

"These days, we have to request the top leaders for holding press conferences," a BNP leader told The Daily Star recently.

A large-scale crackdown on the BNP first came on March 11 last year -- the day several hundred policemen raided the party's Nayapaltan office and arrested 153 opposition men, including acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir.

Fakhrul and some other leaders were later released on bail.

Then on November 8, detectives arrested BNP standing committee members Moudud Ahmed, MK Anwar and Rafiqul Islam Mia.

Khaleda Zia's Adviser Abdul Awal Mintoo and her Special Assistant Shimul Biswas were also picked up on the same day.

Four days later, plainclothes detectives allegedly assaulted BNP Joint Secretary General Rizvi Ahmed and arrested him in an outlandish pre-dawn raid on the party's central office.

Before his arrest, Rizvi had been acting as the party spokesperson, after most of the senior leaders went into hiding to avoid arrest.

Yesterday, Zainul Abidin, Nizan, Harunur Rashid, Shirin, Nazimuddin and Milon were holding a meeting at the opposition chief whip's business office in Baridhara, said the building's caretaker.

Police first detained all of them, but later arrested Nazimuddin and Milon.

Meanwhile, the BNP units in Barguna, Gazipur and Laxmipur -- from where Mahub, Milon and Nazimuddin hail -- have called a daylong hartal in those districts for today to protest their detention.

In Selima's home district Barisal, the local BNP has called a 48-hour shutdown from this morning in two upazilas -- Babuganj and



A wrecked room at a Hindu family's house in Kornai village of Dinajpur. Jamaat-Shibir men attacked the village shortly after voting ended on Sunday.

PHOTO: STAR

Living in fear of attacks

Hindus in Dinajpur still reel from Sunday's horror

KONGKON KARMAKAR, Dinajpur

As many as 1,450 Hindu families in Chehelgazi in the district have been living in fear of attacks by Jamaat-Shibir goons since the government started trying the war criminals.

Community leaders had earlier expressed their concerns to the local administration and ruling Awami League leaders. Even in the early hours of the 10th parliamentary election they informed the administration of a possible attack. But no-one allegedly paid any heed to their safety in time.

Soon after the election on Sunday, around 2,000 Jamaat-Shibir and BNP men attacked the Hindu majority localities about 12 kilometres off the district headquarters.

Local AL and community leaders have expressed their dismay at the failure of the authorities to realise how vulnerable the Hindus were during the polls.

"They have totally ignored the point of most vulnerability and taken no steps to safeguard these people from such attacks. As a result, many of these poor people have lost everything they had," said Parimal Chakrabarty Tapan, secretary of Dinajpur unit Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Oikya Parishad.

"The attacks could have been prevented if a single military vehicle was stationed in the area," he added.

Witnesses said first a few perpetrators armed with sticks, iron rods, machetes and Molotov cocktails had attacked the Hindu localities around 2:30pm. Ganesh Chandra Roy, 69, a poor farmer, described how he and his three brothers, who live in a cluster of houses at Schoolpara, resisted them.

"First we chased them away. But we saw a huge number of armed men approaching our village as soon as law enforcers posted at nearby polling stations left around 5:00pm," Ganesh said in anguish.

"We immediately fled with our families and ran towards the house of an Awami League leader half a kilometre away," Ganesh said the families returned home yesterday under police escort to recover anything, if survived the fire, from the ashes of their houses.

"It reminds me of the brutalities of 1971," he added showing his modest house in ruins.

Around 2,000-strong Jamaat-Shibir and BNP men took nearly one and a half hours to rake through the Hindu localities, burning, smashing and looting 350 houses and 50 shops.

AL-backed Vice-Chairman Jasmine Ara Jyotsna, who lives in the vicinity, told The Daily Star as soon as she had learned about the attacks, she called the DC, the SP, the UNO and her party colleagues for help.

"Only the UNO answered my phone and told me that the entire law-enforcement agencies were busy ensuring security for the polls," she added.

She further said when she could finally reach the deputy commissioner over phone, he immediately took initiative and asked the on-duty armed forces to intervene.

"The army reached the villages around 6:30pm when it was already too late for the innocent villagers, whose only fault was to cast votes," said Jasmine.

Abdur Rahman, UNO of Dinajpur Sadar, said as soon as he had received the phone call, he informed the joint forces about the attacks. "I did what I had to do in this case," he added.

Dinajpur Sadar police yesterday arrested five people in connection with the attacks. The arrestees include Abdus Samad, 66, Mobarak Hossain, 18, and Mirza Al Masud, 16.

The government has formed a three-member probe committee headed by Abu Raihan, additional district magistrate. Police have stepped up patrol in the area.

Indian media

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compact can be forged".

In an editorial, The Times of India said: "The fact that 153 of the total of 300 seats up for grabs saw the winning candidates win without any contest dilutes the quality of the results."

"That said, the legitimacy of the polls can hardly be questioned...the election was conducted as per provisions of the Bangladeshi constitution. Neither does the opposition demand for a caretaker regime administered polls -- the main reason for its boycott -- cut ice."

"... had the BNP-led opposition lent greater weight to the polls through its participation, it may have emerged victorious."

"Economic and social development demands that constitutionalism triumphs over political enmity. For this, both Awami League and BNP must talk to each other", the newspaper commented.

Referring to Hasina's offer to hold another election by dissolving the 10th parliament should the BNP abjure violence and choose to participate, the daily said: "India, with its considerable stakes in Bangladesh, can serve as an honest broker between the two parties and reach out to BNP to persuade it to take the offer."

The Hindustan Times editorial said that with just 22 per cent polling, "there are concerns about the validity of the (electoral) process".

"For the time being, Sheikh Hasina and her party have emerged victorious and this is good news for India -- under her rule Dhaka-New Delhi ties have strengthened, especially in boosting trade and tackling terrorism."

An editorial of The Indian Express on Monday said the general election in Bangladesh "cannot be isolated from the bigger battle that has raged in the streets ever since the Sheikh Hasina government initiated the war crimes trial process".

The editorial also said Khaleda Zia "needs to rethink her alliance with the Jamaat, the continuance of which can only further damage Bangladesh".

The Asian Age newspaper in an editorial on Monday said more than half the seats in parliament went to the ruling Awami League uncontested, which had straightaway made the election result unrepresentative.

"In order to head off any plans Jamaat-Islami may have had to disrupt the election, it may have been useful if Prime Minister Hasina had acceded to Begum Zia's demand to have a caretaker government to conduct the election...If Jamaat and BNP had still sought to impede fair elections, the answerability would

lie with Begum Zia -- both in the eyes of the country and the world," it said.

EVERYONE LOST IN BANGLADESH POLLS: BLOOMBERG

The vote was marred by bloodshed, boycotted by the opposition, and notable mostly for a dearth of actual voters. The results reveal only that the country's bitterly divided political parties need to try again.

Running largely unopposed, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed's Awami League had won a majority of seats even before polls opened. Yet no government that forms out of these elections -- which Hasina's own son admitted were "half-baked" -- will ever command solid domestic or international support.

At the same time, the opposition Bangladesh National Party, led by Hasina's arch-rival Khaleda Zia, has undermined its own legitimacy in recent months with a campaign of disruptive strikes and business shutdowns. Its Islamist allies have staged deeply unpopular attacks on civilians as well as political workers; hundreds have died in political violence in the last year.

Since the 1990s, Hasina and Zia have traded power relatively peacefully, despite their vicious differences, and during that time, Bangladesh has reduced poverty and improved health and education. Life expectancy now stands at 69.2 years -- almost 3 1/2 years more than India, where per capita GDP is almost double that of Bangladesh. Infant mortality levels have dropped in Bangladesh, too, while women's participation in the workforce -- particularly in the critical garment industry -- has risen drastically.

Political chaos threatens all these gains.

That prospect should focus minds in Dhaka and outside. New elections are needed, as even members of the ruling party acknowledge privately. The opposition refuses to take part unless a neutral caretaker government oversees the country during the run-up to the polls, as was required by the constitution before the Awami League amended it in 2011.

The details matter less than getting the two sides to sit down together soon, before the violence that claimed at least 22 lives on Sunday spirals further out of control.

India, which has sided with the ruling party in its battle against Islamists, has sway with Hasina, while leaders of the powerful garment industry should be able to make clear to Zia the cost of continued unrest. Their message to the party leaders should be stark: Find a more civil way to carry on their competition. Bangladesh has lost enough.

UN chief

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believe Bangladesh still has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to democracy by organising free and fair elections that are credible in the eyes of the Bangladeshi people," State Department Deputy Spokesperson Marie Harf said.

"We did note that we were disappointed by the recent parliamentary elections, especially because so many of the seats were uncontested or only had token opposition. Obviously, we believe going forward things should be done very differently," she told reporters yesterday during the regular press briefing in Washington DC.

The response came when she was asked whether the new government was legitimate and if the US was planning to work with it.

Bangladesh still had a chance to have a different future, she said, adding that the US condemned in the strongest terms the violence coming from all quarters.

"We believe that violence has no place in a democratic process, and encourage Bangladesh going forward, the parties -- all parties and all sides -- to come together and move away from that kind of violence," said Marie.

The US official asserted violence was not an acceptable element of the political process.

Asked whether the US was planning to invoke its provisions of halting aids to Bangladesh, she said, "Well, this was parliamentary elections ... I'm happy to check and see what the future holds in terms of our relationship and what that might look like."

In response to another question that how she knew it was a bad election since there had been no US observer, Marie said, "I think when we say observers, that's people like at polling stations. What I base the statement on was that more than half of the seats were uncontested and most of the remainder offered only token opposition. Obviously, you don't need to have an observer at a polling place to see that."

Harf said there had also been quite a bit of violence, which obviously did not need observers at a polling station to see.

Asked whether Bangladesh had sought any kind of help or the US offered any, she said, "Not to my knowledge. I am happy to check with our folks."

JAPAN
Japan yesterday called for initiating serious efforts by the political leadership in Bangladesh to provide the people with a voting opportunity that responds to their aspiration.

In a press release, Japanese Ambassador Shiro Sadoshima said, "Japan is aware that the people of Bangladesh have strong aspiration for making political choice based on their own free will without the fear of violence."

"Therefore, we are deeply disappointed by the fact that no agreement was achieved among major political parties on political framework prior to the implementation of the 10th parliamentary election."

Referring to the ongoing violence, the envoy said Japan was deeply concerned about the political violence, which resulted in death and injury of so many people over the last several months.

"We strongly condemn all sorts of violence and intimidation toward people of Bangladesh, including attack against peaceful political activities, assault on minority communities, arbitrary arrest and obstruction of electioneering," added the Japanese ambassador.

AUSTRALIA

Australia has called for holding a new, fully contested and transparent election as soon as possible.

"While the elections were constitutionally valid, less than half the parliamentary seats were contested and voter turnout was low. The Australian Government condemns the attacks against minorities, and calls on all sides to end the political violence," said Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop.

In a statement issued yesterday, she expressed deep concern at the ongoing violence and political discord which marred the election.

The Australian foreign minister said it had been reported that both the Awami League government and the opposition coalition led by the BNP contributed to the unstable political conditions.

18-party hartal

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January 5 "farical election."

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia has asked the party and alliance activists to guard the religious minorities to ensure their security, she mentioned.

The opposition combine will hold prayers in all religious institutions on Friday for the dead opposition men, who died on January 5.

On Saturday, the alliance will stage protests at thanas and upazilas demanding cancellation of polls results.

CANADIAN ENVOY MEETS KHALEDA

Canadian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Heather Cruden last night called on BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia at her Gulshan residence.

They discussed issues of mutual interest between the two countries, said party sources.

BLOCKADE, HARTAL CONTINUE

Stray incidents of violence marked the second day of the opposition's 48-hour countrywide hartal and the seventh day of its indefinite blockade yesterday.

In the capital, public life was largely peaceful. Pro-hartal pickets were not seen on the streets.

A large number of vehicles, including buses, plied the streets of the capital.

Train and launch services were almost normal. However, intercity buses stayed off the streets. Most of the shops and offices remained open.

In Joypurhat, pro-hartal pickets hurled brickbats and three petrol bombs at the Rajshahi-bound Uttara Express at Pachibibi upazila around 12:30pm, reports our Dinajpur correspondent, quoting railway sources.

Three coaches were damaged in the attack, but nobody was injured.

In Chittagong, Islami Chhatra Shibir activist Saiful Islam sustained bullet wounds when police opened fire at Jamaat-Shibir men at Ashkar Dighir Par around 1:30pm in retaliation against an attack.

Supporters of the opposition alliance set fire to a vehicle at Sitakunda Sadar upazila around 12:30pm.

On Monday, human hauler driver Md Mitul sustained burn injuries as a petrol bomb was hurled at his vehicle in Polytechnic College area.

Mitul was admitted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital with 80 percent burns.

531 schools

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students for year after year. Nahid said adding that destroying them to foil election showed the level of cruelty that befitted the 1971's collaborators of the Pakistani army.

He said most of the institutions came under attack on the night of January 3, two days before the election day.