

Encroachment of rivers

Stop agencies' connivance

NOT only encroachment of rivers but it appears also that the exercise to clear the rivers of encroachers is becoming increasingly lucrative. Encroachment of public property by unscrupulous people is not a new phenomenon, but what is deplorable is that even rivers, canals and waterways, that happen to be the lifeline of a town or a city, are being literally killed by being filled up, out of sheer commercial motive. And this, unfortunately, happens with the connivance and acquiescence of government agencies.

We are thus not surprised that the eviction efforts in the last three years to clear a part of the Shitalakkhya near Shimrail of the illegal encroachers have been unsuccessful. In fact it has become an expensive farce that has cost the state taka 18 lakh. No sooner does an eviction drive end than the sand traders are back in full force under the very nose of those agencies that are supposed to not only prevent illegal occupation of government property but also to prosecute those that do so, according to reports carried in this paper yesterday.

The very fact that such a vast tract of the Shitalakkhya has been filled up, and it is not an isolated case, it being a common phenomenon with many other rivers in our country, speaks lot about dereliction of the BRTA primarily. This should not have been allowed to happen. And the government must act against those whose job it was to see that our rivers were kept free of illegal occupation.

In death, she champions a cause
Child labour, a blot on social conscience

LAST Tuesday we were touched by the news photo of an inert, largely bandaged, body of 10 year old domestic help, Tamanna. She died following a severe burn from stove fire in her employer's house. We suddenly woke up to a violation of law cutting short a life through a disdainful trampling of human rights.

The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 prohibits employment of children under 14 years of age. It remains a law on paper; seldom, if ever applied because poverty-driven parents are impelled to put their underage children to work for sheer survival. And there is no law regulating working conditions of domestic help either. If anything, Tamanna's death highlights the cause of domestic workers. She has died from stove fire accident but there have been hundreds of others who were brutally tortured by their cruel employers. They would suffer quietly until some day the matters came to a head through some sympathetic neighbours' intervention calling for police attention.

Eighty lakh under 15 children are currently working in different sectors, of whom 13 lakh in risky jobs. Somehow household work is not being listed as risky. The utter helplessness of the children makes them prone to risk. So risk perception about them should to be highly sensitive to their need for protection and caring.

Climate change reality check

EDITORIAL

THE call by the presidents of the United States and France on Monday for a global pact to fight climate change has come at a critical time when millions around the world are regularly being battered and brutalised by unusually severe inclement weather.

These include the recent ruinous and deadly passage of Super Typhoon Haiyan across the Visayas in the Philippines; the more recent continuous downpour that led to floods in all low-lying areas in Brunei, the most severe since February 2008; as well as the severe winter snowstorms that have hit the northern hemisphere, especially the US and Japan, that have caused many fatalities and the cancellation of hundreds of flights.

Summers in the southern hemisphere too have become drier and hotter with yearly fires razing homes and causing fatalities, especially in Australia's Victoria State. In fact there is growing recognition that global weather patterns have gone haywire and that humans with their increasingly larger carbon footprint have been contributing to it.

As the adage goes, the first step to addressing a problem is to recognise that it exists. US administrations under the Democrats seem more amenable to recognising the climate change problem. In the face of Republican denial, Superstorm Sandy that hit New York State in late October 2012 may have helped to ensure re-election for President Barack Obama.

However, the US, which has never ratified the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to tackle climate change, has now been overtaken by the China, the world's second largest economy, as the biggest polluter. It is good that the Chinese government under President Xi Jinping is taking steps to beef up enforcement against polluters by raising the profile of the regulating agency and giving it more bite.

We hope this new joint initiative will lead to a breakthrough at the Paris conference next year.

Obligation of intelligence agencies to the state

STRAIGHT LINE

MUHAMMAD
NURUL HUDA

THE role and obligation of an intelligence agency have acquired an important dimension and concern in the wake of the trial and conviction of the top bosses of the country's apex intelligence agencies in the arms haul case. A defense strategist has reminded us of such agency's obligation to the state and impressed upon the imperative of accurate and objective analysis of various national issues. The matter demands attention for charting out remedial measures.

One would like to dwell upon the role and function of our intelligence agencies that without doubt are very sensitive organizations, and on account of their very secret nature few would like a free and frank discourse on their modus operandi. Present day security experts are, however, of the view that open discussion by competent and concerned persons may in fact rationalise the operations of such organisations to the benefit of a democratic polity.

One has to remember that intelligence bosses enjoy privileged access to the top political executive, the prime minister and the home minister. The agencies provide direction to police organisations in addition to providing political-analytical inputs to the ruling regimes. The agencies have undertaken strategic exercises during elections, and conduct election forecasts and analyses to oblige the party in power.

It has been our unfortunate experience to witness that far from being confined to the proper intelligence role, overzealous bosses became almost confidantes of the chief executive, adept at every task entrusted to them. There are events to believe the truly political role of the crucial intelligence organ of our State. The important lesson to be learnt is that politicisation or lack of impartiality and objectivity in intelligence reporting can distort the policy process and thus damage the credibility and political legitimacy of the State. Is it not time that we know if our intelligence organs enjoy the benefit of a legal framework and a well-honed charter of duties? The political leadership have to perhaps decide whether they and the country stand to benefit if intelligence agencies are made to function in a political manner.

Facts, admittedly, are disconcerting. Intelligence apparently faltered when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his immediate family members and other near relations were murdered in the most gruesome manner. Similarly, intelligence could not prevent the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman.

We had the unfortunate experience of witnessing a very sensitive intelligence organisation working principally for the whims and caprices of a virtual dictator and using public funds for creating and destabilising political parties, political horse-trading and shadowing people on personal and flimsy grounds in mid to late eighties. No wonder, in such a scenario, professional efficiency was sacrificed and public servants turned into personal servants with the attendant ignominy.

The unpleasant truth is that intelligence agencies maintain files and shadow the leaders and workers of pronouncedly constitutional politics-oriented parties belonging to the opposition who are recognised partners in the business of politics. At some point of time, when such oppo-

sition party comes to power, there is an uneasy relationship between the political masters and the agencies. In such a scenario, professionalism becomes the worst casualty, sense of direction is lost and the organisation dips into a lackadaisical environment and interests of the state take a back seat, giving greater space to partisan considerations. It needs to be kept in mind that the values of a democratic polity are universal and as such demand unconditional adherence to them.

The national agency is expected to be able to effectively serve national interests if directed appropriately by the political authority. If they (agency) have to remain preoccupied with largely inconsequential partisan matters to the detriment of national interest, then we will not be able to manage a crisis situation, not to speak of forestalling the tragedies of recent times. We have been criticising the agencies very loudly without, however, appreciating the impediments to the growth of an apolitical professional organisation. Time has come when we must have the honesty to call a spade a spade and realise that governments will change hands but not the state.

An intelligence agency should not be the judge of its own operations with regard to the necessity and propriety thereof, nor should it be allowed to operate as the agency or instrument of politicians, or degenerate into an institution for controlling opponents of the party in power, or elements within the party in power with which the high command of the party does not see eye to eye. There must be inbuilt constraints.

At the heart of the matter, there should be a prescription for a charter of duties for the intelligence organ, putting responsibilities beyond doubt, and to indicate what is permitted and what is prohibited.

The legitimate purpose of intelligence should be to anticipate developments that may imperil national interests so as to enable appropriate action with the imperative that any effort to equate national interest with party interest should be guarded against. Once the purpose is known, the chances of non-observance of fairness and objectivity in intelligence collection will be reduced. Constant vigilance against misuse will be needed as intelligence activities are carried on in secrecy.

The catch-all definition of 'national security' should not be used as a cover to hide a multitude of abuses. It should exclude activities that in effect mean denial of human rights and basic freedoms. The vague and antiquated formulations of colonial days relating to intelligence function should be replaced by: (i) clear and firm guidelines on the limits to the organisation's authority; (ii) the area of its coverage; (iii) the manner of functioning; (iv) the permissible methods; (v) laying standards for the evaluation of the credibility of its sources of information; (vi) measures for enforcing accountability to the executive and legislature; (vii) means of controlling and overseeing the operations.

A detailed and precisely honed charter for the intelligence organs in consonance with the spirit of the constitution needs to be worked out.

Our intelligence organisation needs to work under pragmatic political leadership, and if properly and professionally steered it will not threaten our liberties. If we operate by the book, we will be adequately informed of the perils which face us. The last thing we can afford to do now is to put our intelligence in chains. Its protective and informative role is indispensable in times of unique and continuing violence.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

Where have all the Molotov cocktails gone?

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

THE title of this essay could be puzzling. Readers might think I am bothered about the sudden "disappearance" of Molotov cocktails that terrorists hurled at innocent people and killed scores of them -- mostly poor working class people -- in the couple of months before the farcical Parliamentary elections of January 5.

This piece is about the alarmingly growing indifference and unresponsive nature of the average Bangladeshi to selective and indiscriminate killing of innocent people by law-enforcers as well as by law-breakers and terrorists. The people have become so indifferent and unresponsive to violent deaths of innocent people that they do not bother to question the government version of the story, which our experience tells us, has hardly ever been true since our liberation.

People seem to be resigned to their miserable fate to such an extent that they no longer bother to ask who were they who killed innocent people with Molotov cocktails, and why did they suddenly stop using them soon after the elections? The crux of the problem is that the already depoliticised and of late de-enfranchised people have become desensitised to violent deaths. Thus, potentially many of them are not averse to using Molotov cocktails or other deadly weapons.

One wonders if the "Jamaati terrorists" (as Awami League leaders want us believe) were behind the Molotov cocktail attacks, they have no reason to discontinue its use in the wake of the elections. The government's tireless effort in projecting the Jamaat-BNP men as "pro-Pakistani Islamist terrorists" who, it alleges, are hell-bent to stop the trial and execution of the war criminals through indiscriminate killing of people, may be mentioned in this regard.

We believe killing innocent people with Molotov cocktails is either madness or a terrorist act. Since there is no room for the assumption that there was a collective convolution or sudden madness among sections of the people -- allegedly among members of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and among sections of the BNP -- who started firebombing people right and left, weeks before the controversial elections, we need some other explanations. Were these terror attacks the handiwork of some killing squads? And we know, as there are terrorists who are basically non-state actors, so are there terrorists -- members of death-squads -- who are state-sponsored. The stories about the so-called "crossfire" or "gun battle with Rab and police" are the fig leaves for the government, which it knows nobody at home and abroad takes seriously.

It is time that Bangladeshis at home and abroad start calling a spade a spade. We must make the government explain why "crossfire" deaths should not be considered state-sponsored killing by death-squads, and not different from how Hitler, the

Franco, Pinochet and Saddam Hussein (among others) used to eliminate their political adversaries. Interestingly, neither the BNP nor the AL governments produced any credible evidence to justify extrajudicial killing of criminals and innocent people through "cross fire" or "encounters." The present government has failed miserably to nab any Molotov cocktail thrower, while these terrorists killed people in broad daylight in presence of hundreds of people. Does this in any way mean that the terrorists did not belong to the Jamaat or BNP but to some other party having a vested interest in terrorising the people to gain some political leverage?

Whatever may be the truth, the distressing fact is that, of late, Bangladeshis in general have become so insensitive to violence that a dozen or so violent deaths of people a day in a city or across the country -- at the hands of law-enforcers or political activists -- do not perturb them at all. This is what was never normative throughout the history of Bangladesh. People never accepted the killing of innocent men and women by Pakistani marauders during the nine-month-long Liberation War, when the country virtually turned into a killing field. As this writer can tell from his own experience of living through the bloody days and nights of 1971, Bengalis in general did not accept the violent death of an innocent civilian at the hands of Pakistani troops or their collaborators as customary, routine, regular, let alone acceptable.

Throughout history, to the average Bangladeshi, one violent death of an innocent person was too many to mourn, condone and forget about. People still mourn the deaths of Khudi Ram, Surya Sen, Salam, Barkat, Jabbar, Assad, Motiur, and tens of thousands of other martyrs, who died for a cause at the hands of our enemy. Why the same people have become so insensitive to political murders, selective and indiscriminate killing of innocent people is a disturbing question today.

While three deaths of Dhaka University students in 1952 and a couple more in 1969 at the hands of law-enforcers led to the independence of Bangladesh, one wonders, why so many brutal deaths after liberation have gone almost unmentioned. While Nurul Amin remained a pariah for his role in the killing of February 21 -- ultimately he had to leave Bangladesh and die in Pakistan -- one wonders why the killer of Nur Hossain and many other innocent people is still around as an important leader!

In sum, Bangladesh is going through a dreadful period, pregnant with ominous developments, which could cost the nation dearly in the near future. While India, with its hegemonic designs, is trying hard to befriend the government by bypassing the people, the disillusioned and angry people can take some drastic measures, which can destabilise the country for decades. Unless the country adopts democratic methods to run its government, desensitised people may be lured into adopting Molotov cocktails and even more deadly weapons as their only means to live with dignity and honour. As India should not take Bangladesh for a ride, the government should not consider the people too stupid to understand its cry wolf jingles, "Islamists are coming" and "After us the deluge." Sooner the government comes to its senses, the better.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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'Bangladesh at a crossroads': Where's the objectivity?

I wonder what prompted Charles Tannock, Foreign Affairs Coordinator for the European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament, to write the article, "Bangladesh at a crossroads" published in this paper on February 9, 2014.

There are quite a number of points which are questionable. At one place he wrote, "Roughly 300 people -- many of them members of religious minorities, who are often scapegoated for supporting the Awami League and the ICT -- died last year as a result of the protests." There are many versions of the killings, so one should be 100% sure before commenting on it. It is questionable as no proper investigation was carried out.

He doggedly went on saying that "the government had no choice but to hold the election as mandated by the constitution." Is it really so? Our constitution was changed many times before; it could be changed one more time to give the people their basic rights. We feel betrayed, for not being able to cast our votes.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Retain Dhaka's beauty even after T-20

I remember during the 2011 World Cup, Dhaka city was cleaned and made presentable before the visiting teams. They were even overwhelmed at how much cleaner Dhaka had become compared to what they saw when they last visited the city. Unfortunately, as the world cup ended and all the teams left, Dhaka city returned to its old filthy state.

Now in 2014, Dhaka is once again preparing to host the T20 World Cup. It is again being beautified and cleaned to make it presentable before all the visiting teams. I hope this time the city will be kept beautiful, clean and liveable long after the tournament ends.

Aminur Rahim
New DOHS
Mohakhali, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Mother still waits, cries for justice," published on February 12, 2014

Jafar Iqbal

Justice will never show its face until AL government is changed. But there is no hope for BNP too, who are just the other side of the coin.

Shahin Huq

Not one mother. According to some reports, over a thousand mothers and wives have lost their dear ones, while many others still cling to a faint hope that their loved ones abducted by the government forces will come back! Who would dare to console them??

Opee Monir

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the then home minister Shahara Kahtun and DMP commissioner Benazir Ahmed are the persons who should be able to provide us some answers.

Barkat

The security agencies are busy with framing false charges against the opposition political parties. They are working full time to protect the AL and its affiliates. So who cares if two journalists' murder mystery remains unresolved? Inu's comments are too little and too late.

"BSF apologises, compensates" (February 12, 2014)

Shahin Huq

How kind! But the question is: if Bangladesh border security personnel kill and torture Indian citizens, will the Indian government spare us if we give them 50,000 taka?

Titu Sultan

Now the question is, are they a friend or foe of Bangladesh? The value of a Bangladeshi life is 50,000/-rupees only.

Shahid Rahman

Humanity at its worst! There is no place for the poor and hapless in the world we live in. But don't you worry my brother, the ultimate justice is yet to come.

Opee Monir

"Goru mere juta dan." We should say no to Rs. 50,000. We need to bring back our dignity. We want Indian High Commissioner to say sorry.

"Verdict uncertain as new judge in" (February 08, 2014)

Mofiz

Remember Ershad wrote a letter to PM a few days ago? He indicated submissively to remain in PM's pocket, and is willing to be used whenever the government needs him. Right from then, things started to turn around, and finally here is the outcome. I am surprised to see the silence of the High Court in this regard.

Pro-Voce

Ershad is in a cage now with an identifying tag on his tail and thus, the case can wait until he gets wild again.