

Talking about the men in 'Black'

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

DEBATES and discussions about Rab would not be so intense had its alleged controversial role in the Narayanganj killings not been in the spotlight. Queries about the formation of Rab and its operations need to be clearly answered. Why was Rab needed? How was it formed? What is the size of its officer's corps? What are its role and responsibilities? Has the elite force lived up to expectations? And, of course, whether we need such an elite force at all. Some other relevant questions follow too.

Let's try to respond to the unexplained issues with our counter-queries and comments one by one.

Against the backdrop of an ill-equipped and underperforming police force, Rab was a need of the time to function as an anti-crime and anti-terrorism unit. Consisting of members from Bangladesh Police, Bangladesh Army, Bangladesh Navy, Bangladesh Air Force, Border Guard Bangladesh and Bangladesh Ansar, Rab proved to be instrumental in combating militancy and drug trafficking, recovering illegal firearms and arresting dangerous convicts. It can be argued that if there was a force equally capable as Rab within the police then the need for Rab would not have arisen.

As far as its specific roles and responsibilities are concerned, based on its performance, Rab has fared quite well. The force became controversial due to its 'unwritten terms of reference,' and for being used for 'assigned duties of the government' -- from guarding a T-20 cricket match to almost anything. So, Rab could be used for both detailed and 'non-detailed' operations. About the extrajudicial killings, it may be assumed that the government may have given the elite force some special authority with impunity; but so was the police. So the question arises, why weren't the terms of reference of Rab clearly and completely defined?



There is a technical matter about Rab's battalion structure which has never been discussed. Considering the formation of its 14 battalions there should have been 45 officers of various ranks per battalion. In reality, a Rab battalion is run by 8 to 10 officers. So, even if we take 10 per battalion we get 140 officers against the need of some 630 officers. A battalion consisting of approximately 700 troops is commanded by less than one-fourth of the officers required. The expected outcome in terms of performance is naturally not achieved. But the issues regarding its structure and performance never came under the spotlight.

If there was a shortage of officers then why were as many as 14 battalions formed? With this comes the question of how efficiently and professionally each of the battalions is handled. Does the force perform well or not? On top of it all, who monitors Rab?

Reportedly, some 2,000 members of Rab have been punished for their conduct since its formation in 2004; 700 received major punishment and the rest got minor punishment. Over 4,000 allegations were brought against Rab since its inception while 78 Rab men were sent to jail, and 76 suspended from their jobs. These figures are particularly disquieting for a

force less than 15,000 strong, which is also considered as being 'elite.' The statistical figures of crimes and punishment of the members of police may be even worse. What's needed at the moment is an all-party participatory dialogue for deciding Rab's reform. Its success should be assessed, and alleged 786 extrajudicial killings and other crimes must be properly investigated.

Rab has been praised for meticulously carrying out a number of specified duties (e.g. recovering 3,000 plus arms, seizing huge amounts of narcotics and arresting over 500 wanted criminals). On the one hand, if doing away with Rab is to be considered, then the government must also think of another substitute crime and terrorism fighting unit, as our police needs reforms, expertise and advanced technologies itself. On the other hand, Rab cannot continue the spree of alleged extra-judicial killings and crimes either.

In view of its decade-long successes, failures and controversies, Rab needs independent and objective decision concerning the viability of its function as an elite force. We can introduce reforms within Rab and restructure it for making it a professional force. Corrupt officers of Rab must be handed out exemplary punishment, but at the same time Rab's extent of duties and authority should be specified. It should be held accountable for all its actions.

The success of Rab or any crime fighting wing largely depends on the conditions under which it is deployed, and also on the honesty and sincerity of its members. If the conditions behind the deployment are politically motivated and its members are dishonest then it is likely to get derailed.

It is felt that there is no point in breaking up a force because of crimes allegedly committed by some of its members. Those accusations should be dealt with as per law. Rab's flaws and weaknesses should be identified, and a comprehensive reform put in place.

Reducing risks of summer disasters

FARID HASAN AHMED

BANGLADESH, with a population of 160 million, is one of the most disaster prone countries in the world. In summer, it faces tornadoes, flash floods and cyclones. Lives, livelihoods and properties are lost in these disasters.

Tornadoes: Tornadoes mainly occur in the pre-monsoon (March-May), and post-monsoon (October- November) periods. They are formed suddenly and for a brief duration, and are extremely localised in nature. It is the pre-monsoon period when most of the abnormal rainfall or drought conditions frequently occur in different parts of Bangladesh.

The deadliest tornado in Bangladesh's history occurred in Sauria in Manikganj District on April 26, 1989. It killed around 1,300 people.

There are also severe local seasonal storms, popularly known as kalbaishakhi (nor'westers). Severe nor'wester is generally associated with tornadoes. Wind-speeds in nor'westers usually range between 113-130 km/hr (70-80 miles/hr), though often their speed exceeds 162 km/hr (100 miles/hr).

Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh has experienced several major tornadoes, killing on average more than 100 people in each event and causing severe damage in their narrow paths.

Cyclones and storm surges: Tropical cyclones from the Bay of Bengal accompanied by storm surges are one of the major disasters in Bangladesh. They occur mainly in April/May and October/November. The country is one of the worst sufferers from cyclonic storms in the world.

Cyclones and storm surges are a continuous threat for the coastal population. The average annual frequency of tropical disturbances in the Bay of Bengal ranges between 12 and 13, of which 5 attain cyclonic strength. Most of these cyclones strike land on the Bangladesh coast or the coasts of Myanmar and

India. On April, 29, 1991, a powerful cyclone struck the coastal area of Bangladesh with winds of around 250 km/h. It killed at least 138,000 people, and left as many as 10 million homeless. The cyclonic storm "Aila" hit the south western part (Khulna Division) on May 25, 2009, killing approximately 190 in Bangladesh. Several hundred thousand homes were washed away when wind-driven tidal surges up to 3 meters destroyed the coastal belt of Khulna region.

Flash floods: Haor areas of the north-eastern part of the country mainly face flash floods caused by sudden and rapid downstream flow of water from upstream during the period late March to May. These floods cause damage to crops and property and are followed by relatively rapid recession. Haors are important areas for boro rice cultivation (a rice variety cultivated from December to May). But early flash floods often wash away standing crops and people lose their harvest. The country had experienced increased occurrence of flash floods in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2010 in the haor areas that damaged the main paddy crops of the region.

Taking into account the risk and vulnerability of Bangladesh to the summer disasters, the following recommendations are placed to relevant organisations/actors/authorities for appropriate strategies and actions in improving the emergency and disaster risk reduction performances.

Emergency management: The key tasks are mentioned below for effective emergency management.

Readiness for a rapid response: This encompasses those measures taken before a disaster event which are aimed at minimising loss of life, making critical services available, and preventing damage when the disaster occurs. It includes the formulation of workable hazard-specific emergency plan, development of warning systems, maintenance of inventories and training of workforce. It may also include search and rescue measures as well as evacuation plans for communities at risk.

Prior to any emergency situation, the contingency plan

provides the basis for identifying and further developing response capacity. The contingency plan is the basis of readiness and covers; (i) analysis of the context, risk mapping and identification of likely emergency scenarios, (ii) mapping of capacity, vulnerabilities, constraint and resources, tangible/intangible assets, and (iii) identification of other external organisations' capacity, constraint and resources in the department/ministry/area/country/region.

Reduction of risks: It is expected that responsible authorities will act appropriately for reducing the disaster risks in line with the disaster management vision of the government. The vision is to reduce the risk of people, especially the poor and the disadvantaged, from the effects of natural, environmental and human induced hazards to a manageable and acceptable humanitarian level, and to have in place an efficient emergency response system capable of handling large-scale disasters. The major areas of interventions for reducing summer disaster risk could be:

1) Mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in existing development works and future initiatives of government departments and non-government organisations (NGOs) of the country is very important. The authorities concerned should develop disaster data base, which is very important for carrying out detailed study and planning. The government authorities and NGOs need to redesign their development programmes with the active participation of the most vulnerable communities to ensure that they maximise disaster mitigation potential and incorporate traditional community coping practices which are appropriate technically, environmentally and economically. Some targeted but tested disaster risk reduction activities, both structural (embankments, river protection, cyclone shelters, housing scheme) and non-structural, could be undertaken in consultation with the community in relevant organisations.

2) Appropriate feasibility and cost benefit analysis of independent authorities is very much needed for taking any structural protection initiatives. Public hearing and consultation is important in this regard.

3) The respective authorities at different levels should strengthen capacity building initiatives of local government and communities at risk. A well organised and coordinated effort is needed to further strengthen local level planning, implement decision making process, and allocate resources to local government for disaster proof programme in the vulnerable location. Resources from central government and others should be ensured by authorities and policy makers.

4) Bangladesh is capable of forecasting cyclones and river floods, but there are a lot of gaps and limitations in forecasting flash floods and tornadoes. Improvement of present forecasting system is very much needed. Bangladesh flood and flash flood warning information will not be at desired level without establishment of a regional data sharing and cooperation framework. A tornado forecasting system is needed where Bangladesh Meteorological Department and SPARSO may play a significant role as tornado builds up on land and provides minimum time for early warning and forecasting.

Effective initiatives by the responsible authorities in disaster risk reduction are essential for the safety of a large number of vulnerable people. The key government agencies and relevant organisations need to know the previously adopted "all hazard-all risk-all sector approach" the Disaster Management Act 2012 endorses and promotes. The approach equally focuses on disaster risk reduction and emergency response management, with greater emphasis on equitable and sustainable development. Understanding and enabling policies and acts like Disaster Management Act, Standing Orders on Disasters and National Building Code, through political determination, administrative diligence, appropriate resources, and accurate planning and monitoring mechanism are of utmost priority for the concerned authorities and organisations in this respect.

The writer is Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation Practitioner. A Fellow of EPFL, Switzerland. (The views are the writer's own)

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- 1 Record company
- 6 Writer Kingsley
- 10 Nimble
- 11 Wind strips
- 13 Wild fear
- 14 Assume as a fact
- 15 Salt Lake City player
- 16 Cabinet wood
- 18 Future embryos
- 19 Spider-Man's alter ego
- 22 Attempt
- 23 Swiss river
- 24 Turning tool
- 27 Deep chasm
- 28 Region
- 29 LAPD alert
- 30 Wonder Woman's alter ego
- 35 Miserables
- 36 Earth: Prefix
- 37 .. man-mouse?
- 38 Old anesthetic
- 40 Less colorful
- 42 Purloined
- 43 Many a time
- 44 Church area
- 45 Dance units

DOWN

- 1 Accept eagerly
- 2 Quartz variety
- 3 Physiologist Alfred
- 4 Quarter-back Manning
- 5 "The Russia House" author
- 6 First Greek letter
- 7 Chinese chairman
- 8 "Don't worry"
- 9 Reacts to the cold
- 12 Rude looks
- 17 Secret agent
- 20 Patriot Allen
- 21 Temple leader
- 24 Soup servers
- 25 Light solo
- 26 Place to get a cup
- 27 Fitting
- 29 Clumsy fellow
- 31 Concur
- 32 Nick of "48 HRS"
- 33 Move furiously
- 34 Brings in
- 39 Golfer Emie
- 41 Back, on a boat



Yesterday's answer

STAR CASA
LEON ADULT
AXING SOBER
MILEAGE DRY
ESE TRYOUTS
STRATA WEST
NAVAL
SOFT INSIDE
PULSATE NRA
AWE SYMPTOM
SLEET OLIVE
MACRO NAMES
YEAR EYES

QUOTABLE Quote

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Aldous Huxley



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Eat summer fruits to your heart's content and enjoy the summer vacation.