

PHOTO: STAR FILE

CONDITIONAL CONDOLENCES

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It is appalling that our reactions to a blatant murder depend on who the victims are. The recent killing of nine people in Kurmitola Bihari Camp by a gruesome arson attack shows how politicized even our sensibilities are. Nine people that included women and little children were burnt alive by individuals who cold-bloodedly murdered these people by setting fire to their homes. Could anything be more diabolical or grossly against our sense of humanity? But the reaction to this horrible massacre has been lukewarm, the outrage, grudgingly shown.

This is because the victims were Biharis – a community shunned by Bengali Bangladeshis because of their allegiance to Pakistan during the Liberation War. If these victims had been Bengali, the outrage would most likely have been a lot more intense and visible.

It is the same kind of apathy many Bangladeshis feel towards victims of rape, arson attack and land grabbing when they belong to minority communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracks. Or the tacit acceptance of Bangladeshi Muslims of such violations when it is against members of the Hindu or Buddhist communities.

It is as if we have completely forgotten why we fought against an oppressive, fascist regime: to free ourselves from discrimination based on race or religion. The values of the Liberation War are upheld conditionally, applying only to those who are the majority.

It is true that we as a people, are full of double standards. We cry for some and turn our faces away from others in the same situation.

But the greatest tragedy of all is that many of these crimes have been committed by members or cohorts of the existing ruling party in power, often taking advantage of the majority's prejudices. Moreover, these criminals are protected by the state and enjoy full immunity from the law. News reports on the recent murders of Biharis, allege that it was a case of vengeance by a local MP against members of the community who had dared to refuse to comply with an illegal demand. According to members of the community, the lawmaker had visited the area more than a week ago and asked the Biharis to allow an illegal electricity connection to an adjacent slum inhabited by Bengalis. When they refused he allegedly threatened them of dire consequences. In the early hours of Saturday a clash between the Biharis and law enforcers and Bengali locals led to the arson attack. (The Daily Star, 16.06.2014).

Despite announcements by the government, of extra security on Shab e Barat , a night of prayer and piety, nobody came to the rescue of these hapless victims when they were burning to death in the morning. What were the law enforcers doing?

A handful of Bihari men have been arrested and taken on remand. Members of the Bihari community have said these individuals have nothing to do with the murders. Law enforcers were seen with the attackers they allege.

Fear and intimidation are part and parcel of the lives of the poor and marginalized. When it is the state and its machinery that is involved in such intimidation, there is little hope of justice.

In such a desperate situation we can only beseech our leaders to stop protecting criminals who are killing and looting, and bring them to book. As for us ordinary citizens, we must remind ourselves that it is irrelevant whether these victims were Stranded Pakistanis, Biharis, Bangladeshi citizens or members of any other community; they were all fellow human beings. As humans we are morally bound to abhor and protest against such inhumanity. ■