

Unabated violence

The madness must stop immediately

SO far BNP's political programme has cost 113 lives. Sixty of them were victims of arson attacks on buses and public transport. More than 1,200 vehicles have been destroyed by fire or damaged by miscreants. One hundred thirty people are writhing in agony in the burn units. And on Sunday only, 43 vehicles were damaged or put on fire. To compound matters, political clashes and traffic accidents, including bullet riddled bodies, number 17. The crossfire deaths and public beatings, a euphemism for crossfire, have gone up to 36 since January 5. We state the horrendous figures only to put the issue in true perspective.

The businessmen, having lost in billions, and having found no other alternative, have taken recourse of the judiciary about hartal and oborodh. Most of all, the SSC students have been traumatised because of dislocation they have suffered due to continual rescheduling of their exams.

It is unthinkable, and we have said this umpteen times in the last two months, that the country should be sacrificed at the altar of ego, whims and arrogance of irrational and insensitive politics.

It is time both the AL and BNP realised that continued obduracy will cause more injury to the country. The AL and BNP must heed the call of the people who are getting disenchanted with the degeneration of politics, and want only the safety and security of their lives.

We urge the BNP to shun the path of violence and the government to commit to address the political issue which is indeed at the heart of the problem. To reconcile between political opponents is not a sign of weakness but of wisdom.

Investigating Avijit murder

Punish culprits and deter recurrence

WITHIN less than a week of Avijit Roy's murder, we reiterate our call for a focused investigation such that Avijit's killers and purported masterminds of the extremist outfit Ansar Bangla 7, which claimed responsibility for the attack, can be brought to justice without delay. If we cannot ensure justice against the dark forces, our values of freedom, tolerance and secularism will suffer a major blow.

The Rab arrest of Farabi Shafiqur Rahman, who had instigated death threats against Avijit, is undoubtedly an important preliminary step in the investigation. However, a lot more needs to be done if we are to regain our confidence in our law enforcement agencies in safeguarding the people from acts of terror.

The attack took place right in front of the Ekushey Book Fair, which supposedly had beefed-up security. Even if we were to assume that it was an organised attack, it bewilders us that the highly trained members could not prevent the killing or stop the killers from escaping the grounds. The fact that the writer had been threatened multiple times on various social media platforms also makes us wonder why no pre-emptive action was taken to monitor such menacing content on cyber space and protect him. Given that Avijit's father and esteemed intellectual, Dr. Ajoy Roy had himself informed all including the DIG and IG about the death threats to Avijit further highlights the inaction and apathy of our law enforcement agencies.

The government has to take a coordinated stance against extremist forces operating both on the ground and on cyberspace that are consistently threatening our cherished values of secularism and freedom of thought.

Ukraine's many dilemmas


 SYED MANSUR
HASHIM

WHILE the proxy war rages between Russia and "little Russia," the bigger question for Ukraine is to avoid economic collapse. Without a stable economy, it cannot defend itself against external circumstances. And for that to happen, Kiev will have to start taking some hard decisions on its economy. The recent ceasefire has brought Ukraine some time on the war effort. What is of greater import is the financial bailout announced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). For meaningful transformation of Ukraine's "crony capitalism" into one that actually functions, much needed reforms will have to be put into effect. A financial meltdown of that country's economy will certainly spell doom for national security in the long run.

Given Ukrainian estimates that the war is bleeding the economy to the estimate of \$8 million per day and severe downturn in the country's industrial output to the tune of about 17% in the last fiscal, Ukraine is in danger of "running out of money." While the left may decry IMF's meddling in the internal affairs of Ukraine, the 2014 \$40 billion package comes with strings attached and Kiev has no choice but to reform. The "package" consists of loans from the West, i.e. the United States (US) and European Union (EU) are major contributors. Tackling Ukraine's debt will be the first major challenge. With the West taking a softer stand on "stringent" IMF conditionalities, given the situation on the ground, Kiev may be able to negotiate better deals with foreign financial institutions on loans. But the Russia-Ukraine \$15 billion loan

promised to former President Victor Yanukovich is no longer on the cards, and with Ukraine still owing Russia \$3 billion in sovereign debt, it will be interesting how the restructuring debt programme plays out for Kiev.

Ukraine has more pressing problems in certain key areas of its economy. One is the "energy" sector. It is home to rampant corruption. Beyond endemic graft that rules the sector, Kiev's policies on energy till date meant low prices. Like Bangladeshis, Ukrainians have come to expect low retail prices for the precious

commodity. Like us, Ukrainians have taken for granted that they will never have to pay the full cost of the energy they consume. The massive subsidies that have gone to keep this utopia alive have proved a major drain on the national exchequer. Moreover, policymakers have never had the political will to go after the oligarchs who rule this precious sector profiting immensely from buying cheap domestic Ukrainian

really got around to shaking off the bad practices of the now defunct Soviet Union. The terrible state of both health and education is a major point of contention for the vast majority of its citizens. Apparently, good "treatment" is only available to those willing to cough up "speed money." Without better health and education, the Ukrainian labour force will remain less productive. Reforms are needed for a healthier

workforce for the economy as a whole. The government's reputation on business regulation is no better. The country secured 96th position on World Bank's doing business survey recently. As stated before, Ukraine's crony capitalism is a serious impediment to growth. Fighting corruption is easier said than done. The culture of bribes is so deep rooted that some fear that attempted reforms will get stuck in the mud as it would affect too many interest groups. The big question is whether policymakers in Kiev will let the anti-corruption watchdog body function freely. The same goes for the courts going after the high-and-mighty and whether policymakers have the stomach to take criticism from a free press on questions of corruption.

Needless to say, any anti-corruption drive will bring the State into direct conflict with the "oligarchs" -- a hangover from post Soviet times, a permanent facet of the Yeltsin era; powerful entities who literally carved out huge chunks of Russia's economy to their own benefit. A similar scenario exists in Ukraine. These dark barons control every aspect of the economy. They control politics and the media; remain at the helm of things with massive financial clout and international connections and backing. Tackling them will be no easy task, for they bankroll the political process to a great extent. For any meaningful reform to bring about a change in the economy will mean taking on these powerful interests. Whether that political exists in the current circumstances is open to debate. But can Kiev choose to ignore making changes? Can it afford to sit idle on years of economic mismanagement that bleeds the economy dry? With the hounds of war on its doorstep baying for blood, tough decisions have to be made by Ukraine, and they have to be taken today, not tomorrow.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.



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The idea of hope in times of despair

AMER WAHAB

FARIA was only sixteen and like any other teenager, had dreams, innocent aspirations and hopes. On Facebook, she shared her moments of happiness, optimism and confusion, but rarely her despair. Her father's world revolved around her happiness and he had a promise to keep -- a trip to Cox's Bazaar after Faria turns sixteen. Seemingly oblivious of any hazard, he decided to take the long journey with his wife and daughter from Jessore to the sea resort by bus, the only means of transport he could afford.

The holiday was brief. Faria carried back fond memories of nature's unreserved embrace. Cuddled between her parents with her head on her father's shoulder, the child was at peace. Even the frequent bumps on the road and the hissing of the wind through the cracks of the plastic shutters of the bus window did not disturb her sleep. The bus cruised along amid the darkness and the chill of the season.

Several hours into the journey, a ball of flame engulfed the vehicle and mayhem ensued. The bus tried to speed away from the inferno but the wind fanned the flames and consumed all humans trapped within it in no time. The mother survived with severe burn injuries. Faria and her father were charred beyond recognition as the air carried the smell of burnt flesh to distant places. This was a single incident among many in recent days when demons in the guise of humans suddenly descend on the highway setting vehicles on fire. On this occasion, seven individuals were deliberately burnt to death.

Since January 5, 2015, many lives have been sacrificed in the face of violence sponsored by politicians tainted by severe mendacity, decrepit morals and a total disregard for human suffering. This is not just another narrative of political violence but one on the

crisis of reasoning and moral deficiency of our leaders that has dimmed our hopes for the future. It seems we have abandoned the memory of the past, that of 1971 when violence in its crudest form was unleashed on the entire nation by the demons of Pakistan and their local collaborators. Even after 43 years, we continue to engage in the ritual of political violence. We failed to understand that violence dehumanises and leaves no victors, only victims.

The outrage born out of the indifference between the political parties, I suppose, is the result of our lack of interest in our nation's history; it has eroded the memory of the past. It is a shame that we have rehabilitated the criminals of 1971 and their allies, and allowed them to reorganise into a decisive force threatening the core beliefs and foundations of our struggle for independence. It is a shame that some individuals today question the trials of the known perpetrators of genocide in 1971 and consider it to be politically motivated.

The paradox is that despite the fragile foundation of our anemic national institutions and mutilated political culture, we have done well in certain economic and social fronts. Thus we continue to place a disproportionate degree of attention to issues like GDP growth, poverty alleviation, school enrollment, and cross-country comparisons of key social indicators without emphasising the fragility of our social systems and key national institutions. During periods of political calm we remain complacent and fail to see the obstacles and structural weaknesses of our social norms and systems that disrupt the continuity of our national progress.

Over the years we have gradually exiled political tolerance, reduced the idea of democracy to mere elections, while the opposition has repeatedly disrespected the institution of the parliament by refusing to attend sessions even when elections were generally considered to be free and fair.

With every change of government, the political parties, for the first few years, remain occupied in unleashing a vendetta on the opposition, pursuing them for their past misdeeds and the partisan bureaucracy they had installed. The incumbent then repeats the same offence over the remaining years of their tenure. The dismally poor state of our nation today, leaves us conflicted regarding the future and we oscillate between hope and despair in our discussions and debates in public fora.

It may not be wrong to ask "Name one national institution functioning with tolerable efficiency and that is free from crude political influence." Perhaps we will find the answer by looking into the functions of institutions such as the political parties, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and specifically, education -- the most important building block of a nation's moral values.

We have ignored and marginalized the need for a proper education system for too long. As a result, we observe that our values and morals have decayed to the extent that it does not hurt people's conscience to use freedom fighters certificates and solicit benefits and promotion in public establishments - the worst form of disrespect toward the martyrs of our liberation struggle. It goes without saying that politicised and dysfunctional institutions are antithetical to progress and threaten our national well-being with far reaching, adverse consequences.

The last thing that died with Faria in the inferno was hope. The famous words of Dr. Samuel Johnson, the famous English scholar and moralist, come to mind: "It is necessary to hope, though hope should always be deluded; for hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, are yet less dreadful than its extinction."

The writer is marketing and media research practitioner.

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COMMENTS

"We are all Mukto-Mona" (March 1, 2015)

S. M. Iftakhar Ahmed

Islam strictly prohibits the killing of innocent beings.

These extremists deliberately ignore the example of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), who, despite suffering the worst insults and humiliation during the early days of Islam, forgave his tormentors. These extremists have nothing to do with Islam, but are rather, simply looking for an excuse to quench their psychotic thirst for blood.

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Freethinking is a taboo in our country. Not only the extremists, but also the ruling party tries to stanch the freethinkers.

Rrronimoni

Timely piece sir. It's sad that Mukto-Mona has been taken down just after the murder. Is it sabotage?

Yes, we, by nature and culture and religion, are MUKTO MONA. There is no such a thing as murdering people just because they hold different views.

"Cops still clueless" (March 1, 2015)

Dev Saha

Being clueless is no longer an option. The chance of nabbing these criminals is diminishing with each minute passing by without results.

Aasfiswar

The credibility of Bangladesh's police was always questionable but in recent times, it reached all time low. Maybe they will fabricate stories and the actual perpetrators will remain out of reach.

"Don't let Bangladesh become a cocoon of terror"

(February 26, 2015)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Fertiliser from human waste

This informative BSS report from Rajshahi was published by an English daily a few days ago. It pointed to a potentially endless source of organic fertiliser that is more useful and better for the soil than the usual chemical fertilisers now being used. It uses human excreta, which after proper composting can be used as a fertiliser. This was tried out and practiced in four unions under the Bagmara upazila of Rajshahi and Manda upazila of Naogon from December 2009 to March 2012. Aside from being a useful fertiliser, it also provides a hygienic and eco-friendly solution for better rural shallow latrines. The key issue of the process is preparing the compost properly that requires instruction and training of the local farmers.

I would appeal to all our dailies to follow up on this interesting matter in our overall national interest. This rural organic fertiliser needs no plant, equipment or technology.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Epidemic of political insanity

Bangladesh is in the grip of a serious epidemic called political insanity. It has affected most of the politicians irrespective of their party affiliation. The initial symptoms are mild and almost unrecognisable. The symptoms gradually increase in intensity from incoherent speeches to open paranoid acts. They tend to justify their acts through reasons of their own making. They exhibit a false face of emotion which emanates from paranoid delusions. A real catastrophe which affects the non-political people deeply fails to arouse even the slightest reaction in them. They seem to enjoy worst forms of violence on others as long as it does not affect them directly. Only Bangladeshi politicians seem to be susceptible to this condition due probably to some genetic disorder. There is no known cure of the disease as yet.

Shahjahan Hafiz
Gulshan, Dhaka