

A devastating heist

Act fast to catch them

THE daring and bloody bank robbery that was perpetrated in broad day light on April 21 at the Kathgora branch of Bangladesh Commerce Bank Limited in Aushulia has left the nation in a state of shock. A group of eight to ten men, heavily armed with guns, bombs and sharp weapons stormed the bank just after lunch break and took hostage of the bank officials and clients killing seven people including the bank manager. Locals chased three robbers and beat one of them to death.

The way the robbery was carried out speaks volumes about how desperate criminals are becoming these days. Lately, bank heists and attacks on bKash agents and ATM guards have been rampant across the country. This calls for full-proof preventive measures.

Crimes like this, perhaps, take place in conditions where criminals think they can get away with it. And in many cases they have. That raises a lot of questions. Why it took the Police and the RAB one hour to arrive at the scene is baffling. The BCB in Aushulia was reportedly equipped with eight CCTV cameras. It should not be hard for law enforcing agencies to examine the footage and launch a massive manhunt to nab the robbers who escaped despite some heroic efforts by the locals.

And once they are caught, justice must be meted out to these ruthless criminals through a speedy trial, shaking off the inexplicable inertia that has often been associated with responding to similar heinous acts of crimes.

Why only Tk 19 crore disbursed for Rana Plaza victims?

Plaza victims?

TIB has a point

ACCORDING to the anti-graft watchdog, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), Tk 108 crore of the Tk 127 crore deposited into the Prime Minister's Relief and Welfare Fund following the Rana Plaza building collapse is yet to be disbursed two years after the world's worst workplace disaster. This fund came from local sources, mainly commercial banks, in light of the disaster specifically for the victims and their families. That Tk. 127 crore had been donated to the Prime Minister's Relief and Welfare Fund was disclosed in parliament on July 13, 2013.

However, over the last two years, the government only allocated Tk. 19 crore to the victims and their families, giving rise to questions about when the remaining money would be disbursed among the affected. It is unfortunate and unacceptable that compensation remains elusive to many victims of Rana Plaza who are still living in utter privation, with no succor coming to them from the government.

What is even more perplexing is that, following the TIB report, the PMO has declared that it did not set apart a fund for Rana Plaza victims, and as such that the TIB statement is "misleading". However, given that the government had publicly pledged to use the donations made by various quarters to assist Rana Plaza victims, we believe that it should ensure that this fund is allocated towards rehabilitating and assisting those affected by the building collapse.

We urge the government to clear the confusion regarding the fund and make sure that the money deposited in the name of Rana Plaza victims is disbursed in a prompt and purposeful manner.

Don't mar the mayoral elections

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

ONE'S first reaction to the announcement of the three mayoral elections was to ascribe all sorts of motives on the part of the government, and motives there may still be on its part. And in spite

of the demand of the opposition supported candidates for a level playing field, the department and conduct of the candidates gave on the hope that we may perhaps be looking at the beginning of a new, refined and better character of the country's politics.

Arguably, a mayoral election is not the national election, but I would like to believe that the capital and other metropolitan cities are but the index of the mind of the rest of the country. And no matter who won, both the major parties could consider the dénouement a win-win outcome for all in several ways.

However, the contemptible attacks on the campaign motorcade of the BNP chairperson have put cold water on our hopes of a good electioneering and a peaceful April 28.

The mayoral elections, particularly the two Dhaka City Corporations' (DCC) come after nearly a decade and a half of the Corporation going without elected head/representatives. But better late than never. And in spite of that, the election is a very welcome thing that has been thirteen years too late in coming. That notwithstanding, many ascribe motives to the decision of the government to hold the elections now as they do to its decision to bifurcate the DCC in the first place. Many see the government as being too clever by half and may well rue the

decision. But all of us are rooting for a good election, ceteris paribus, all things being equal.

As for me, I feel that the AL has taken a politically strategic move that nonetheless entails risks, and one would think the party has factored that in. The timing was favourable too. It was meant to take the winds out of the BNP's sail and run it to the ground even more, having floundered with its so-called agitation to force the government to go for a general elec-

tion. But all of us are rooting for a good election, ceteris paribus, all things being equal.

that some see as a lifeline for the BNP. The BNP has very judiciously taken the opportunity offered by the AL, perhaps unwittingly, to seek exit from a faulty political strategy that has not given it any political mileage.

As for the election, the announcement had brought a great sense of relief and provided respite from the destructive BNP politics, that was matched by the state's misuse of its forces demonstrated in the number of killed in crossfire and

to take lessons from and apply in their own conduct.

I feel that whatever may be the outcome of the elections it will have many positives for both the AL and the BNP provided all things are equal, and the opposition is not physically and otherwise prevented from conducting its campaign.

For the AL a win of all the three mayoral seats and majority of the commissioners will further strengthen its position. If there is a reversal it can always say that the results demonstrate that free and fair elections can be held under an incumbent government. As for the BNP, given its three months of fruitless agitation, it will be happy to get out of the rut through the election, whatever the results may be. But any attempt by the AL to influence the election directly through use of the state apparatus will be the germination of another BNP agitation programme.

The question is: will all things be equal? Not if the majority of the BNP councilor candidates are on the run to evade arrest. Not if the opposition electioneering is prevented by force as was done recently (in this regard to say that it was stage managed by the BNP is just like the BNP saying that the 21 August attack was organised by the AL). Not if the EC chooses discretion as the better part of valour, or chooses to warn Khaleda Zia not to hold meetings in areas that block traffic while ignoring the others who have been doing exactly that. Not if the police is employed to evaluate the prospect of success of the AL candidates vying for commissioners' posts in the corporations... the list is long.

The announcement of the mayoral election brought respite to the nation. Nothing should be done that reverts to the situation ante.

The writer is Editor, Op-ed and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

tion. The mayoral elections have steered the BNP's attention away from its immediate demand for a national election, exactly as the AL had hoped it would. But what the AL was further hoping, and which did not eventuate, was that BNP would reject the mayoral election and stick to its demand for a national election and thereby be proven, as a party, not committed to electoral politics. But that was perhaps a calculated risk which the AL thought was worth taking. And

enforced disappearances, till the attacks on Khaleda Zia's election motorcade on Monday and Tuesday.

The acts of vandalism, explained away in the most ludicrous manner by some AL leaders, cause us concern lest the elections are marred by violence. One felt that the deportment of all the candidates, their civilised tone when referring to their rivals, and a generally unbelievable camaraderie, is new in our politics and which our political leaders will do well

DHAKA

A woman-unfriendly city

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN
AMIN

DAY before yesterday while passing through the back alleys of Karwan Bazar, a short cut my ingenious driver likes to take, I saw a lone young woman in a shalwar kameez, her hair covered with her orna, walking determinedly through

the potholed road. She seemed oblivious to the leering stares of men - young, middle-aged, old - while they sipped on cha or had a smoke or were sitting at their shops, taking a break, by ogling at this 'pretty sight'. I am always disgusted when I see this from the comfort and safety of the car. It's because I know how it feels when you are a woman walking on the streets - it could be the footbridge, the main road or the alley in front of your house. You know they are there - those hundreds of eyes, staring without any restraint, looking all over you. You pretend not to see them or hear their lewd comments or even ignore the subtle brush of a hand on your body before it disappears into the crowd. It doesn't matter if you are a child, a teenager, a young woman or middle-aged. You are a female and bait for any male on the street to ogle and touch - because he knows he can get away with it.

The day before yesterday I was feeling particularly angry, humiliated and helpless. It was only a few days after the grotesque sexual assault on women and a child at the Pahela Baishakh celebrations. I glared at the men on the streets who were too busy looking at that young woman to notice my contemptuous gaze. To me they all looked like potential sexual offenders. I know it was a prejudiced point of view but that's how I felt. That's how many of us feel at the moment.

This is not a woman-friendly city, dear

mayoral aspirants. That is perhaps the most glaring parameter of failure of our consecutive governments. When you find a city where it is safe for women to go out at night, alone, unchaperoned or into crowds without getting molested or harassed, regardless of their attire, that's a pretty good indication of a country's progress. It means that despite whatever ugly thoughts pervers may have in their heads, they will not go and act on them in the streets in full view of the public. Because they have a fear, the fear of getting caught. The fear of being incarcerated.

Of course there is sexual harassment in every part of the world - even in the most advanced of countries. But in most of these countries the laws against sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape are enforced. Sexual offenders are not let off by the police or protected by political parties. Most of all the society does not look the other way when a sexual assault has taken place and blame the victim, the girl or woman, 'for asking for it'.

According to a survey by Action Aid last year, 47.5 percent women in urban areas in Bangladesh felt unsafe in public places like markets, streets and public transport while 88 percent have reported harassment by pedestrians, passengers of public transport and buyers in market places. What was worse, about 81 percent women, preferred not to seek help from law enforcement agencies fearing further harassment.

The research reasserted the reasons for sexual harassment on the streets - poor enforcement of existing laws, inadequate laws, not prosecuting the offender, the lengthy legal process that deal with such cases and the lack of gender sensitivity of police and hospital staff.

When the research study was officially launched, the Information Minister mentioned 'special training' was necessary for the police to learn how to behave with a woman. He said he would tell the DMP commissioner to include women police

along their male colleagues while patrolling the cities and urged women and girls to strongly protest if they were harassed or attacked.

We don't know whether the Information Minister followed up on his promise. What we do know is that during the hour long assault on Pahela Baishakh, the police refused to come to the aid of a few brave young men who were trying to save the victims. Later the police let go of some of the attackers who had been caught and handed over to them. The denial of the police and home minister that sexual assaults did take place is bizarre. Footage of the incident and pictures clearly showing the attacks have gone viral on social media and been published in papers. This only reinforces our suspicion that these sex offenders somehow have immunity and therefore impunity.

We expected our Prime Minister, the leader of this country and a woman, to condemn this horrible, shameful, ugly crime. We had hoped she would reassure us that this incident would be investigated promptly and that the culprits would be caught and punished no matter who they were. We were disappointed.

It had to take an attack as blatant, horrific and as public for us to acknowledge just how unsafe this city is for women. We do not know how many of those attackers were university students, outsiders or religious fanatics (as suggested by the Information Minister). What we do know is that these men worked in unison as mobs do and they felt the need to teach these women and girls a lesson. For daring to come out to celebrate the most joyful day of the year. They did this because this is what boosts their machismo - crushing a woman's spirit through sexual violence. They did this because they knew they would get away with it.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Op-Ed and Editorial, The Daily Star.

This is not a woman-friendly city, dear mayoral aspirants. That is perhaps the most glaring parameter of failure of our consecutive governments.

COMMENTS

"Appalled to learn about 20 women assaulted during #PahelaBaishakh celebration at #Dhaka University. Let's act to stop #ViolenceAgainstWomen."

--US ambassador in Dhaka

Marcia Bernicat

Dev Saha

There is no way to know how many are being harassed within the four walls of homes. The culture of misogyny needs to be addressed, forcefully and completely.

"Teesta water sharing: Experts for UN intervention" (April 18, 2015)

Estiack Ahmed Miraj

There is no alternative for this.

Lal Shobuz Potaka

Government should take the matter seriously.

"BSF kills 2 Bangladeshis" (April 17, 2015)

Kumar

There must be an end to this madness. I am just hoping for a border agreement as soon as possible.

"Portrait of a patriot" (April 17, 2015)

Nasrat Ahmed Khan

The title should have been "Portrait of an unsung patriot"! Successive governments have given Shawdhinota/Ekusha Padaks and gun salutes to so many people, but no one realised what kind of courage is needed to be the first to defect and plunge into uncertainty with the entire family. This is very unfortunate.

A freedom fighter

I could not but agree with you more. He should have been given the highest honour of the land. Yes, a real unsung hero.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Why is BCL barring students from protest?

It is disappointing to learn that female members of Dhaka University's BCL were told by their own (male) leadership that they could not participate in the rally they organised for this Friday so general female students could protest the sexual assaults that occurred at Pahela Baishakh and the poor response by law enforcement and university authorities. BCL leadership went so far as to claim no protest was ever planned and that their organisation's focus was on the city corporation elections. The female members had no option but to follow their leaders' commands. Fortunately they do have an option. I hope they change their minds and participate in the rally, defying the leadership that clearly does not prioritise their safety and security as citizens of Bangladesh. These young women have voices that need to be heard.

Neil Taylor
On e-mail

Muslim glory

It is heartening to learn that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is going to launch its first mission to Mars jointly by the Arab and Muslim world. Vice President, Prime Minister of the UAE and ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum said "We, thanks to Allah, have begun arrangements for launching the first Arab-Islamic probe to explore planet Mars and it will be the outset for Arabs entering the space era." While heartily congratulating the UAE, I pray to Allah for the success of the mission. This is a matter of pride for the entire Muslim world. Many people may forget but the truth is that once Muslims ruled the world with utmost glory and the entire world should be grateful for their contribution in medicine, science, astronomy, philosophy etc. which is now going to be erased from our memory by the Western propaganda of portraying Muslims as 'terrorists'.

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