

On emergency (?) duty



CHINTITO SINCE 1995
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THEY say in Italy you can get away with murder, not literally though, if you could bring out a bambino from somewhere. For one, I have not seen any country,

not that I have visited all the plus two hundred, where children are as adored as in the land of godfathers. They simply go gaga at the sight of a child. In England too you could perhaps get away unscathed for speeding if you could show your wife writhing in labour. Well, a child is obviously involved.

A baby, an incoming one, would do just as well in Bangladesh, but apparently there are other ways to woo the police into having your way or to keep them at bay. Some of the more common gate passes on the road include: My child has exams, I am late for a funeral, and *omuk* minister is waiting for me (he means he has a meeting with a minister, but a guy can be forgiven for faltering when confronted by our police).

On the side of nepotism there are statements (read threats) that the police have to succumb to with utmost caution and patience on a regular basis: my cousin is a ward commissioner, my uncle was a MP, my dad's friend is a minister, my dad may become a minister, etc.

Almost everyone in this country it seems is moving about with someone else's identity, fake or fact. That is because it probably works on most occasions. The number-one catchphrase at election rallies and in anniversary messages -- the people -- do not matter; they are usually harassed at every



A sport utility vehicle of a high official dangerously driving on the fast lane of the wrong side of the road in front of Ruposhi Bangla Hotel.

PHOTO: STAR

opportunity and delayed by successive inaction. That would not have been a grieving issue had not some other 'connected people' gotten away with crime or been granted an undue advantage or allowed to unduly jump the queue!

An ambulance should be allowed to pass through at all costs, but time and again we pity them while stuck at traffic jams or when trailing behind a slower vehicle despite the wailing of the siren. That is not without reason. We have systematically destroyed that compassionate convention too. During hartals, ambulances have been misused to ferry healthy persons in the guise of the almost dead. On

normal days, they carry relatives, students, businesspeople and what not. No wonder then that the crucial tone of distress that ambulances blare have become, to the dread of a genuine case, a matter to be ignored and scoffed at.

In order to get some benefit on the road, some connected persons flash their *porichoy* on their vehicle. The trend goes back to hartal culture when some vehicles were exempted. And so we were introduced to "on emergency export duty", followed by "on emergency medicine supply duty", "water supply", "gas supply", "press" or "newspaper", "ministry", etc. that allowed anyone from a party reveller

returning from a social club to someone travelling to meet his *amoureux* passage through pickets and worrisome neighbourhoods.

There is no hartal nowadays, but there are police check-posts and rounds on no-parking streets, as well as the occasional unforeseen localised *hungama*. Therefore, signs saying "lawyer" on the front of a car, or "sangbadik", or "doctor" are actually ways of getting by in case of any unprecedented situation, even if a paid driver is at the wheels. He is not the professional, so why the tag?

It is important to remember that every person's job is important to that person and to that person's near and

dear ones. No one sweats to sell peanuts on the pavement for entertainment. No one is pulling a rickshaw with two guys on the backseat to build a six pack. A kid is treading to school through the busy city streets because the father cannot afford a rickshaw fare or the school a bus.

The vendor is in no less an emergency than the office-going executive. The student's future depends on his school results. He may have to pull a rickshaw after Class V and a few years more. An old mother will wait all day for Khoka, the rickshaw-puller, to return his rickshaw to the garage and bring her a cough syrup; by then the pharmacy may have shut. With every pedalling he thought of his ailing mother. You think you have an emergency?

You will have noticed that the flag-stand of a car is without a flag when the honourable member of the cabinet or others so privileged is not travelling on it. There is a very good reason for that law. Likewise, the doctor, the lawyer and the journalist should only display such identification when the incumbent is in the vehicle. That makes sense.

Only vehicles belonging to police, fire service and ambulances should have the right of way when on duty. The siren should not be howling when the service people are returning to base or going home. If every situation is treated as an emergency by service personnel who are on emergency employment and by those who are not, then a real crisis risks being not treated as an emergency; not that we have not already reached that alarming situation.

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Holding the police accountable



STRAIGHT LINE
MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

DISCONCERTING police excesses in quick succession have once again brought to the fore the much-discussed issue of police accountability. A



Members of the police force indulging in unnecessary violence or excessive force has become a disturbingly common phenomenon.

PHOTO: STAR

desirable view is that control of the police should lie with society as a whole, and yet this is, in practical terms, not possible. On the other hand, police independence will itself create social or policing problems. It is right and should be made possible for members of the public to have the opportunity to have their views or concerns heard and taken into account by senior police officers deciding operational policing matters.

Individuals belonging to marginalised groups have an urgent interest in policing which is engendered by the behaviour of police towards them. If police officers treat those individuals discourteously, use violence, demand bribes or fabricate charges with impunity, then every member of society will feel unsafe when dealing with the police. The police under democratic control are under an obligation to behave with civility, honesty, and lack of physical abuse. Therefore, the expectations individuals have of their treatment by the police is crucial to effective policing.

Public confidence relies upon the existence of a mechanism for the individual to have allegations of police transgressions dealt with effectively. Furthermore, that mechanism must be perceived as efficient and effective, which

requires that it be independent. Any system of police accountability may ultimately require legislative force. Police powers and police discipline both require legislative authority. It is relevant to recollect that public confidence is gained by having some form of external investigation or review body to avoid the perception of a cover-up which arises when the police are seen to be investigating themselves.

Society as a whole is concerned with very broad issues in policing,

Among these concerns are standards of behaviour, such as, police integrity, and the manner in which incidents are generally handled, including the amount of force each society finds acceptable and unacceptable in carrying out police duties. There is actually no clear defining point at which police malpractice can no longer be considered as isolated instances. It is also difficult to lend credence to traditional police response to allegations of police corruption as "a few rotten apples in the barrel".

Public confidence increases when the police complaints system provides for an external body to supervise an investigation, or review the evidence and conclusions drawn by the police investigation, especially when this body has both the power and the will to carry out an impartial review and order a re-investigation, if necessary. This is so because there is a very real public fear that complaints against police personnel will not be taken seriously. The need, quite clearly, is to ensure that the system of accountability allows society as a

whole to remain in control of its police.

In Bangladesh, where criminalisation of politics is of concern, it is very difficult to safeguard against the delinquent policemen who have necessarily nurtured a close nexus between themselves and the pliant politicians who are in power. To do away with this undesirable situation, it is essential to devise a suitable measure to keep close watch on the performance of the police and judge their performance and make it public whenever any wrongful performance is observed.

The police are vested with the authority to use legitimate force against the citizens and this mandate to use violence to curb violence raises the key issue that the police themselves should not indulge in unnecessary violence or excessive force.

It is time to think of creating a department of supervision to supervise the police performance also. The task before such an organ should be to ensure that the police use force and authority with restraint and only in unavoidable circumstances. In order to prevent misuse of powers, there is need for accountability. While the ultimate accountability of the police who are vested with considerable coercive powers is to the people, the police must respect the law of the land. They are not licensed to become law-breakers themselves. We must be able to believe that the most visible symbol of the government is a helping instrument for the public instead of a coercive arm of the State.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star and a former IGP, Bangladesh Police.

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QUOTABLE Quote



FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA
 We're all curious about what might hurt us.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- Rewrite for the screen
 - Bring back
 - Pack animal
 - Hawaiian greeting
 - Halley's discovery
 - Humidor item
 - Dispatched
 - Gorilla, for one
 - Split into shares
 - Previously owned
 - Toothbrush target
 - Soars
 - Baggy
 - Cooking herb
 - Egotistic
 - Tobago's partner
 - Concealed
 - Anthropologist Margaret
 - Boise's state
 - Where-withal
 - Tart fruit
 - Finish
 - VCR inserts
 - Unemotional
- DOWN**
- "Modern Family" network
 - Twosome
 - Sleeve filler
 - Comander in chief
 - Lugged
 - Truthful
 - Yale student
 - Forum garb
 - Bloke
 - Fabled race loser
 - Tennis need
 - Backside
 - Cruise stop
 - Blood vessel
 - Judicious
 - Frog's cousin
 - China setting
 - Tear asunder
 - Church speeches
 - Tell tales
 - Identifies
 - Sword part
 - Inklings
 - Moist
 - Garden tool
 - Commotion
 - Convent resident
 - Secret agent.

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

M	I	N	E	D	E	P	O	T
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O	M	E	G	A	E	N	T	E

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

