

## A narrow escape from Roanu

*But help is still needed*

It is sheer providence that for the last few years we have been saved from the catastrophic consequences of nature's wrath such as in the form of Saturday's Cyclone Roanu, because of a sudden change in direction of the storm, or it weakening, before hitting our coastline. Although at least 24 precious lives were lost, the casualties might have been higher, if not for a well-prepared disaster management plan of the government. This included a massive evacuation campaign, mobilisation of medical aid and the readiness of a large number of volunteers as well as cancellation of weekly holidays of government officials in 18 coastal districts. Apart from prompt alerts to the people, including fishermen and trawler operators regarding the advancing cyclone, operations of water vessels were suspended and the airport in Chittagong was closed, for safety reasons.

But the storm has left several thousand people homeless, hungry and utterly devastated, apart from doing damage to the infrastructure. A report in this daily has given a description of the misery of thousands of people in Bhola who are stranded and practically starving because no relief has reached them. Children are going without food and there is no access to sanitation. School students, many of whom are appearing in the ongoing HSC exams, have lost their textbooks in the floods. People have lost the only home they know along with all their belongings.

Immediate relief such as food and clothes must be distributed to those stranded in various areas. The storm affected people will now have to be helped in every possible way so that they can rebuild their homes and their lives.

## UN Park in Chittagong

*Don't lease it out to commercial ventures*

THE Chittagong City Corporation's (CCC) move to lease out the Jatisangha Park or UN Park to a private company is a rank bad idea. The open space for the general people at the heart of the port city has already been shrunk as a gymnasium and a swimming pool have been built inside the park. What used to be a lush, green space with a water body, walkways and benches is now a skeleton of its previous self, all due to years of neglect and disuse by the CCC.

As it is, there is a dearth of breathing space in Chittagong, where for its six million inhabitants there are only six parks, of which only three are open to all. To make it worse, some of them have become a melting pot for unsocial elements. Women, children and the elderly, who need such facilities the most, steer clear of the parks as they are frequented by disreputable characters.

It is shocking that instead of building new recreational facilities for the citizens of the burgeoning metropolis, the CCC, the custodian of the city's civic amenities, wishes to stifle the few breathing spaces that the city is left with. The presence of green space is crucial for the environmental balance in a city. More important perhaps is its role in the upbringing of children, whose physical, cognitive and emotional strengths are proportional to the establishment of a creative, social environment. We urge the CCC to give up the idea of leasing out the Jatisangha Park, refurbish it and return the facility to whom it belongs - the ordinary people of Chittagong.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Justice delayed, justice denied

It is extremely disappointing that more than two months have passed since Sohagi Jahan Tonu's murder but law enforcement agencies are yet to nab a single person involved in that killing. Investigations and autopsies have been going on and on, but to no avail. It seems that no one cares about people's demand for justice. We wonder how long it takes to complete the investigation and bring the culprits to book. The inability to catch the criminals will encourage more crimes like this.

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### The harassment of a teacher

The humiliation of the headmaster by a lawmaker in Narayanjanj is a condemnable incident. This is an insult to the entire teaching community. How could he behave in such a disgraceful manner? To make matters worse, the headmaster was also suspended by the school's governing committee. However, he was reinstated and the school body was scrapped when allegations against him were found untrue. The whole event highlights the helplessness of teachers in the face of such barbaric forces.

We demand justice for the abused headmaster.

Zabed Wali  
Chittagong

# Debate over Bangladeshi militants' external connections

ALI RIAZ

A S targeted killings of individuals with unorthodox views and members of minority communities continue unabated in Bangladesh, so does the debate on whether international terrorists have made inroads to the country. The question has been whether the claims of the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) of their presence in Bangladesh should be taken at face value. In the past months, both these organisations have been claiming responsibility for a series of killings. Until recently, these claims have not been accompanied by justifications, but that pattern seems to be changing. The AQIS affiliate Ansar-ul Islam, issued a long statement after the murder of Xulhaz Mannan, an LGBT activist and USAID staff member. The government, on the other hand, has continued to deny the existence of these organisations and insists that these are the acts of 'homegrown' militants. In April, the English magazine of the IS, Dabiq, published an interview with the so-called Amir of the Bangladeshi chapter of the IS to bolster its presence. Ansar-ul Islam claims to represent the AQIS in Bangladesh. This is a mutated version of the organisation Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), which came into being in 2007.

Both the denial of any external connections of Bangladeshis, and insistence that the IS/AQIS has recently made inroads in the country, seem to disregard the historical background of militancy in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi militants had regional and extra-regional connections since their inception in the mid-1990s. It is worth recalling that the genesis of Islamist militants can be traced back to the Afghan War (1979-1989) in the late 1980s. The fountainhead of the militant groups in Bangladesh, Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HujIB), emerged in public on April 30, 1992 through a press conference at the National Press Club in Dhaka. A group of so-called volunteers, who participated in the Afghan War in the previous years, arranged a press conference in the wake of the fall of Kabul to the Afghan Mujahedeen. Although the rudimentary form of the HujI began in Pakistan in 1980, it was formally established in 1988. It expanded in the following four years, as the HujI leadership wanted to reach out to other parts of South Asia. This led to

the establishment of the HujI in Bangladesh. The initial goal was to use Bangladesh as the launching pad for destabilising neighbouring Myanmar.

The operation of the HujIB expanded further after it established relationships with the local militant organisation Jamaat-ul-Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB). The JMB was founded in 1998 but was named as such three years later. The founding of the JMB was a culmination of a series of meetings between Sayekh Abdur Rahman and a number of Islamist leaders and Ulema in 1996. These meetings brought Mufti Hannan and Abdur Rahman together. On January 19, 1996, law enforcement agencies busted a training camp in a remote part of Cox's Bazar and arrested 41 armed militants. The camp was originally thought to be a training camp of Rohingya rebels based in Bangladesh.

Abdur Rahman of the JMB and the LeT and Hafiz Saeed. Indian intelligence agencies had claimed that Thadiyantave Nazir of the Lashkar-e-Tayeba, allegedly connected to the 2008 bomb blasts in Bangalore, had travelled to Bangladesh.

The presence of regional militants in Bangladesh became publicly known in 2008 and 2009. Abdur Rauf Merchant and Jahed Sheikh, two Indian militants, were arrested in Bangladesh. Between May and September 2009, six members of the so-called Aref Reza Commando Forces (ARCF), including Mufti Obaidullah were arrested. Some of these militants admitted that they were living in Bangladesh for some time; for example, Obaidullah claimed to be in Bangladesh since 1995 and another member of the group Habibullah claimed to be residing since 1993.

of international terrorist groups in a country. There are many ways of indoctrination and recruitment. Ideas of extremism to identification of targets can well be coordinated from distant lands. A number of attacks in various parts of the world have already demonstrated that the internet as a vehicle is quite effective. The phenomenon called 'lone wolf' is pertinent here. As such, the characterisation of ongoing militancy as a combination of global and local - a 'glocal' phenomenon, as Habibul Haque Khondoker writes in a local English daily - is apt.

There is no denying that there are Bangladeshi citizens willing to join the 'Global Jihad' and bring it home. A survey of newspaper reports published between July 2014 and June 2015, shows that law enforcing agencies arrested 112 alleged 'militants'. Of these, 22 individuals were identified as either connected to or aspiring to be connected to ISIS, 12 reportedly tried to travel to Syria. Two rounds of arrests of Bangladeshis in Singapore, in December last year and in March this year, also show that expatriates can become vehicles for radicalisation. There have been instances of British-Bangladeshis joining the Syrian war from the United Kingdom. Indian investigators have claimed that Bangladeshi militants, particularly the JMB, have been known to operate from India, particularly in West Bengal.

As such Bangladeshi militants' external connections should not be viewed as an entirely new phenomenon. This is not to underestimate the significance of connections with the IS or AQIS, instead to underscore that given the history such links would require few efforts. If individual acquaintances of the past metamorphose into an organisational tie, the situation will take a turn for the worse, perhaps slide down to an unmanageable level. The IS/AQIS is capable of providing additional resources and a global stage for these menacing groups. It is a matter of time and opportunity before such a tie can flourish. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge that denial cannot be a strategy, and that it is necessary to act in earnest.

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*In the age of globalisation, exportation of terrorism does not require physical presence of operatives of international terrorist groups in a country. There are many ways of indoctrination and recruitment. Ideas of extremism to identification of targets can well be coordinated from distant lands.*

When these militants were being tried at a local court in Cox's Bazar, Abdur Rahman was sent as the HujIB representative to monitor and help the accused. This turned out to be the beginning of a long relationship between JMB and the HujI-B.

The external connections of the potential militants of Bangladesh began in earnest in 1997-98. The connection established between Indian citizen Syed Abdul Karim Tunda and Abdur Rahman is a watershed moment in the history of militancy in Bangladesh. Tunda, who has been in Indian custody since 2013 on a number of terrorism charges, is alleged to be an operative of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayeba (LeT). Indian intelligence sources insist that Tunda entered Bangladesh in 1994 and operated from there for quite some time. In any case, he was the bridge between

The other source for the connections between the Bangladeshi militants and outside groups was the presence of the Rohingya rebel groups in Chittagong Hill Tracts. HujI's primary goal was to establish contact with these rebel groups. Interestingly, Rohingya rebel groups, Bangladeshi militants and northeast Indian rebel groups, such as the ULFA, had reportedly worked together to procure weapons from black markets in Southeast Asia and used Cox's Bazar's remote shoreline as the drop-off point before being distributed. This shows that cooperation among militant groups across the border does not have to be based on ideological affinity; instead other factors can and do bring these groups together.

In the age of globalisation, exportation of terrorism does not require physical presence of operatives

## United in Division



CHINTITO SINCE 1995  
NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

YOU do not necessarily have to be an Awami League aficionado to appreciate that the two mayors of Dhaka City, albeit split along cardinal lines, are working in harmony for the betterment of the capital. This task is not actually akin to running a candy shop, considering that Dhaka is among the most populated cities in the world - eleventh - with over fifteen million people hustling and bustling within a space of 300km<sup>2</sup> or so. That makes it also the eleventh most congested city in the world.

The sceptics who twisted their upper lip, doubting the benefits of splitting the mega city have been silenced for now. Some of them may have actually preferred a war of words extending to garbage-slitting among the two. That has never happened, and the two remain apparently good friends vying each other for wreaths of achievements, but never rejoicing at the fumble or even a tumble of the other. Such concord for a common purpose that could easily have slid into a nasty blame-game remains the strongest armament of both, as they are learning from each other, and sharing their unique experiences.

I am not making my judgement on the basis of any interview with either of the mayors, but base my observation from evidences I gathered from the city while walking, which I do on a daily basis, despite the grievances of many that pavements are uneven, that the streets are mostly dark, dirty and unsafe. The cynics will lament my good fortune, because in spite of reported incidents of mugging and drugging, Yours Worried has remained unscathed, and so have many of you; and Dhaka is not among the worst in the world.

The first we took notice of the incumbent mayors was perhaps when powerful operators, unseen though they may be, were dislodged by the dismantling of illegal parking of trucks and buses, an issue few even considered mentioning in their election pledge, local or national, let alone ponder on implementing.

Encroachment of pedestrian ways is being dealt with every day. Several roadsides have been cleared. Temporary-turned-permanent establishments have been removed, much to the chagrin of the owners, but the city needs to have its arteries cleaned for it to breathe.

You will rarely see coverage of freshly painted foot over-bridges, some adorned with live flowers and foliage, for much of our media generally thrives on the woes of the nation and the ahs of their readers and viewers. More citizens are using overpasses to cross traffic-heavy roads, but many still find it convenient and allowable to traverse at street level, risky though the long-standing practice is.

Some markets that began as ad-hoc kiosks a decade or two ago have been removed, and large chunks of city space have been cleared for appropriate use. Several others will face the same music, not because

the mayors want to install their personal businesses; citizens have embraced such moves in good spirit.

Garbage collection locations (the learned call them STS or Secondary Transfer Station) have been constructed at several parts of the city. At other points, where space has not been made available for such constructions, movable steel barriers on wheels have at least shielded the filth from the passers-by. Such finesse we are not used to.

Almost overnight, we lost some of the small roadside dustbins among thousands installed, that to a great extent were appropriate for this city by size and design. Those who favour the ruling party are trying to use them as rubbish bins for day-to-day use; those who are in the opposition are throwing

leaving.

An educated guess is that all removals and breakages have been affected following magistracy notices and under supervision of bona fide officers. Any departure from that procedure would have prompted a series of litigations that would have kept our mayor duo unproductively active.

The city obviously still has many shortcomings; public toilets, paved pavements, small parks as breathing space, widespread lighting, and covered drainage to name a few. But in a little over a year, the pair have shown resolve to act and not dwell in the past.

Obviously, there are political and non-formal clouts of all shapes, shades and sizes, and they may be scraping the earth with their feet, perturbed as they



Repainted footbridges - one of the first steps to improvement.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

their trash everywhere but inside the bin. It is reported that druggies are stealing them due to their resale value, but some could have been removed just for the heck of disobeying the establishment.

Illegal constructions at Fulbaria near Gulistan and New Market have been demolished, as a result of which it has been possible to widen certain roads, a much needed component to facilitate traffic and ease the perennial congestion.

LED lamps are now brightening some of our streets, if those with 'vision' can observe. But, first they have to roll down the dark glass of their vehicles, or in the least, remove their sunglasses; yes, some of us do fancy them to refrain from having to watch the 'filth' of the city they cannot otherwise contemplate

are, but they do not make as much as a whimper, for they know that in the endeavours of the two mayors there is not an iota of personal gain involved.

The City Corporations do not need money as such, because they are 'capital'-ists (pun intended), but the one component they could do very well do with is greater cooperation of the citizens. For instance, do not throw everything on the street, please.

Mayor Mohammad Sayeed Khokon of Dhaka South City Corporation and Mayor Annisul Huq of Dhaka North, take a bow!

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