

Fighting the fear factor



STRAIGHT LINE
MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

MOST observers would perhaps agree that a negative fallout of the recent grisly terrorist attack at a Gulshan restaurant has been the steady spread of fear affecting the lives of citizens. Residents of Gulshan area will tell you that the number of customers at various restaurants and food-joints in their neighborhood has decreased sharply since the July 1 incident. The situation has been further aggravated by the closure of some eateries that were reportedly in business without valid papers.

Elsewhere in the city other establishments including higher educational institutions like universities that were allegedly operating violating the mandated requirements have been asked to close down. In particular, the private universities that were operating out-campuses without authorisation have to close down forthwith. This would, in practical terms, mean the termination of academic pursuits of hundreds of students with attendant inconveniences.

The terrorist incident in question may not have directly caused the closure of eateries or educational institutions but as the closure has come on the heels of the gruesome incident, a sense of fear has gripped the minds of apprehensive residents. Nobody knows for sure as to how hundreds of potential displaced students of out-campuses of private universities would be provided with adequate relief.

In addition to the above, the law enforcement machinery has stepped-up in frequency of search operations in the non-family messes in different parts of the city and outlying districts, as part of the anti-terror drive. This has also resulted in considerable unease and apprehension.

While the imperative of such search cannot be questioned, one may have to admit that single accommodation for working men and women falls far short of the actual

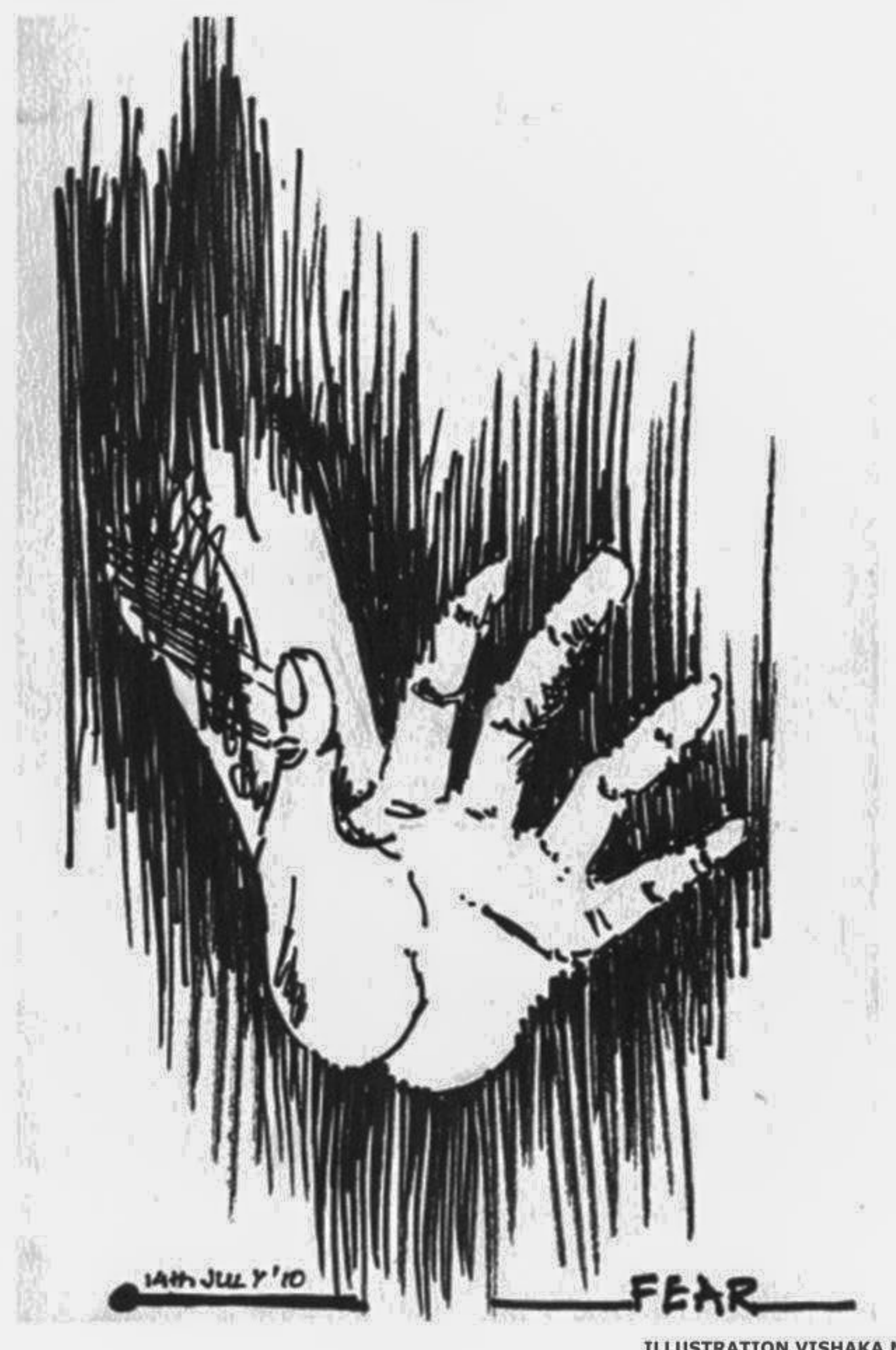


ILLUSTRATION VISHAKA MANTRI

requirements. The pertinent question is, shall we resign to destiny and remain frozen with the fear of the terrorist attack? In other words, shall residents of Dhaka and elsewhere suspend a good part of their normal activities? The desirable answer shall be no because suspension or curtailment of the usual functions would ensure the victory of terrorists who want us to stay indoors and

thus not venture out to protest their patently irreligious acts. Like residents of many terrorist incident-affected places of the western world we must venture out of our homes and conspicuously defy the threat and intimidation of the terrorists.

While investigation into the terror incidents shall go with full swing with a view to bringing the perpetrators and the masterminds to open trial, all other businesses shall be conducted as usual. This would mean that restaurants and food joints shall be frequented in large numbers and places of entertainment like the theaters and the cinema halls should continue to attract

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the usual audiences. The attraction of the variety of food at Dhaka eateries must hold. We have to prove to the outside world and also to ourselves that despite the ravages caused by a few deviants Dhaka retains its friendly charm.

Let us remind ourselves that clamping down restrictive orders and issuance of prohibitory directives in increasing numbers would betray a reactive state of mind that is not looking into the fuller dimension of the terror phenomenon. Since the community has to be involved in the rooting out strategy, residents have to know about the doable on their part. Therefore, the visibility of men, women, and children in their usual course of activities, especially the

recreational ones would be a definite indicator of normalcy. Once Bangladeshis are out in numbers our friends from abroad would shake off their unease and ambivalence.

Can we think of not closing down the establishments and institutions at least for some time? Surely heaven will not fall if the long-existing irregular establishments continue to remain in business till say 31st December 2016. In the meantime all concerned can get their act together to create a legally bearable and congenial environment. We need to understand the tactical disadvantages resulting from a sudden heavy-handed approach.

While the community ventures to return to a state of normalcy, the enforcement authorities must make adequate complementary arrangements that aid in infusing the sense of security. Securing the probable target areas and objects without being offensively restrictive should not be a difficult proposition. The reach and capability of the terrorists are not that extensive as has been given to understand. The members of public carrying out their daily life activities also need to know the capability of their protectors.

The Gulshan attack may have taken us by surprise and the brutalities committed shocked residents beyond imagination but the subsequent Kalyanpur raid should instill sufficient confidence about the preparedness of the law enforcement agencies. Armed with public support and intelligence it is time to take the fight to the very dens of the terrorists and strike fear in the hearts of real and potential bigoted criminals.

Resumption of normal socio-economic activities with the support of adequate protective measures would be an effective antidote to potential terrorist attacks. The emphasis should be on prevention and the entire exercise shall not be a temporary regime-centric effort. Relentless pursuit of the bigoted terrorist shall be an overarching priority because there is a real threat to the constitutionally mandated way of our life.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

A History of Violence

TAHSIN FARID

Athirteen-year-old was tied up and beaten to death, while onlookers stood and watched. A young man mercilessly beat his supposed friend and brazenly recorded it on video. A headmaster was humiliated and beaten in public by his own townspeople and students. A few young men killed 22 people at a restaurant in broad daylight. On the surface, these are three unrelated incidents that occurred in Bangladesh over the span of the last few months. They can easily be brushed off as sporadic instances of unwarranted violence. However, there seemed to be a vague familiarity about them. As if they were different iterations of a plot that was tied together by an underlying theme. After some deliberation, it came to me that these were all symptoms of a more terrifying and disheartening disease – these were reflections of the violence that has become deeply embedded in our society.

Not very long ago, a video of a young man, Xunayed, assaulting his friend, went viral on social media. His solution, to what he perceived as a transgression by his friend, was violence and instead of condemning the violence, the reaction from a large number of people on the social media and otherwise was to threaten more violence as payback for what they thought was offensive. In truth, we did not condemn Xunayed's violence; we only ridiculed the stupidity of his onscreen 'performance' and felt the need to remind him that he isn't as powerful as he thinks he is. We needed to express that we were stronger and could easily squash him.

Incidents like this aren't isolated; in fact, they are so common place that we ignore them until tragedy strikes. Take public floggings for example. Think back to every time we heard of a thief or burglar being caught and beaten (sometimes to death) by the mob. Very rarely are we outraged; on the contrary, most of the time we feel a sense of righteousness, that justice has been served. But in the neglect of legal means, eventually and inevitably, we are faced with heartbreaking brutalities – like the fate of Samiul Alam Rajan last year.

This thirteen-year-old was beaten to death in public by some men on the allegation that he had stolen a rickshaw. Understandably, the whole nation erupted in uproar, but it took the video of a poor child chained to a wall, begging for his life while his assailants laughed mercilessly, for us to realise the brutality of such violence. This incident should prove that taking the law into our hands is not justice; it is in fact frontier justice. By engaging in it, we are only asserting that whoever has physical strength to overpower the opposition will win. That everything can be resolved by violence, and subliminally, we acknowledge that in our society, might is right.

Vigilantism continues to be endemic in our society. We refuse to learn from our mistakes and inevitably tragedy repeats itself. Like when six students were mistaken for burglars by villagers in Aminbazaar and beaten to death. This incident gave us pause; we felt sad for the victims and bemoaned the case of mistaken identity, but we still failed to effectively condemn the violence. We only noted this as a tragic misunderstanding because the victims did not "deserve" the

violence in this case. Yet, ultimately, we dismiss it as some systemic error that we accept because we do not see anything wrong with the "nature" of the act. We failed to identify that the underlying problem was our predilection for and acceptance of violence as a justifiable solution to almost everything.

I believe that it becomes ever more undeniable that our culture harbours and even encourages violence in the form of vigilante justice. This may seem farfetched but one need only recall how often we see skirmishes break out on the roadsides. It's quite common to see individuals squabbling on the roadside over petty issues like who should give way to whom at a traffic junction or if the rickshaw puller is asking for too much money. Invariably, there will be a threat of violence and some might come down to throwing fists while a crowd gathers to watch the spectacle.

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Sadly, this violence has become inherent in our culture and is reinforced by the media. Take for instance, the movies we watch. In almost every local or foreign movie, violence seems to be the main or, at the very least, a major attraction. We break into applause when the protagonist takes matters into his own hands and goes outside the law to brandish his own form of justice. What we do not realise is that subconsciously, or even consciously, there is an instant connection with the hero, as we feel the desire to engage in violence with the same impunity. Many of us will never act on these urges, but, unfortunately, many others will.

One of the most shocking examples of this acceptance of violence and religious intolerance came a couple or so months ago when Shyamal Kanti Bhakta, the headmaster of a local Naryanganj school, was publicly made to hold

his ears and then beaten by some locals. His alleged crime was that he apparently hurt some people's religious sentiments. Regardless of the validity of the allegations, it was deeply worrying that in a culture that is built on respecting elders, these people, which included some students of his school, had the audacity to act out their form of retribution on a headmaster of their very village. Furthermore, the public nature of the act suggests that they believed they would be able to carry such violence with impunity. In other words, they expected their behaviour to be accepted. And they weren't wrong! Probably, the most incredible aspect of this whole farce was that this 'punishment' was apparently encouraged by an elected official who, in this scenario and in the perpetrators' eyes, represented the government and hence, the justice system. This is not only an acknowledgement but also an endorsement of such violent behaviour.

Unfortunately, this glorification of violence in the media and our society in general has resulted in very sinister practices becoming ingrained in our culture. Domestic violence, for instance, is widespread to a staggering extent. It is almost taken for granted that husbands beat their wives, even in the cities where people are supposedly more educated and therefore, assumed to be less violent. Many husbands believe that it is their right to receive dowry from their spouse's families. If they are denied, they feel wronged. Since they have been wronged, they feel the need to exact their idea of justice on their wives. It is frightening to think that we live in a society where we're so convinced that it's okay to be violent that we may even resort to gruesome murder if we feel that it is deserved (as in the case of mob justice).

This culture of violence also bears responsibility for the string of blogger killings that took place in the recent past. Between January 2013 and now, there have been no less than ten incidents where so-called atheist bloggers were hacked to death by religious extremists. It should have been cause for concern that in a democracy like ours, people were being brutally hacked to death for stating their views. While we acknowledged that the killings were wrong, we also iterated that the bloggers should not have said anything against religion. So, in our tolerance of violence, we indirectly justified the attackers' violent behaviour.

In our society, since we are so convinced that we are right, we are convinced that they are wrong. With this conviction comes the sense of righteous entitlement that we need to punish what is wrong. For some extremists, this meant viciously murdering bloggers in broad daylight, when in fact stating an opinion should warrant nothing more than a verbal response with one's own opinion. There is no doubt that these killings occurred from a sense of self-righteousness that was at least partially fuelled by our general acceptance of violence. It is especially frightening because it alludes towards a religious intolerance being bred from this violent nature.

On July 1, twenty two people were killed in a restaurant in Gulshan by militants. The country is still reeling from the shock of this barbaric event. There has been an outpouring of grief for the victims and concern that this may be the beginning of a descent into turmoil. We find

ourselves asking how we got here. Unfortunately, we are still unable to realise that subliminally, it is our acceptance of vigilantism and affinity for violence that is at least partly responsible. Our indifference and sometimes tacit acceptance of violence against "dissenters" is culpable. Our silence to the violence that went before gave encouragement to the extremists to continue what they believe are righteous acts.

We must ask ourselves if this is the society we want to be? A society that harbours and encourages violence that at times borders on barbarism? I sincerely hope the answer is an emphatic NO. The picture does appear bleak. Yet, we cannot afford to be disheartened and simply

accept this as the status quo. We must first acknowledge our responsibility and not simply push the issue under the rug. Secondly, we must look at how we have been united as a nation to protests against this violence. Our outcry led to the death sentence of Rajon's killers; we stood steadfast by the side of Shyamal Kanti Bhakta; and we continue to be active in our fight against intolerance and terrorism. All of this proves that we have an indomitable moral compass which, with some introspection, can lead us away from violence and towards a path of peace and tolerance.

The writer is a final year medical student at Weill Cornell Medicine. Email: tahsin08@gmail.com

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
 Directorate General of Food
 Modern Food Storage Facilities Project (MFSP)
 Probashi Kallayan Bhaban (Level-17)
 71-72, Eskaton Garden, Dhaka-1000

Memo No. 13.01.0000.362.14.165.16.42 Date: 27/07/2016

Assignment Title: Consultant Firm for Communication and Public Awareness Service for MFSP

Package No. SD-31 IDA Credit No. 5265 BD

- Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has received an IDA credit toward the cost of the Modern Food Storage Facilities Project (MFSP), being implemented by the Directorate General of Food, Ministry of Food. Main components are to construct grain steel silos at eight locations with a total capacity of 535,000 M Ton, distribution of household silos among 500,000 farmer family and food policy research program.
- The broader objective of the consultancy is to support the project object through strategic communication. Details are available in the Terms of Reference (TOR).
- Duration of consultancy: Project duration (around 48 months), Lump-sum contract.
- Short-listing criteria: EOIs would be reviewed on the basis of the following criteria:
 - Registration details of the applicant (Trade licence etc.)
 - Availability of key professional staff (List with signed CV)
 - Annual turnover of the firm (Supported by NBR certificate or work completion certificate)
 - Communication/campaign related activities in last 10 years (Supported by work completion certificate)
 - Experience in the projects funded by development partners.
- Selection procedures: The consulting firm will be selected through Selection Based on the Consultants' Qualifications (CQS) method of World Bank Guidelines for Selection and Employment of Consultants under IDA Credits & Grants by World Bank Borrowers updated January 2011.
- Last date and time for submission of Expression of Interest (hard copy) is 2:00pm 21 August 2016.
- Interested consultants may obtain further information at the address below during normal office hours or via email or at website www.mfsp.gov.bd.
- The authority reserves the right to accept or reject all EOIs.

Md. Gazi Ur Rahman
 Project Director (Joint Secretary)
 Modern Food Storage Facilities Project (MFSP)

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