

Unnecessary force on protesters

Contradicts democratic values

WE protest the highhanded government action on anti-Rampal power plant activists on January 26 that left scores of people injured. What was supposed to be a peaceful protest turned unnecessarily violent when protesters were barred from entering Shahbagh as they approached the DU Fine Arts faculty. The protesters, many of them students, were met with tear gas, water cannon and baton charges by the law enforcers. There were only several hundred protesters and no reason to believe that they were a threat to public safety, hence the disproportionate use of force was unwarranted. The brutal way a photojournalist was beaten up by law enforcers for trying to take footage of a policeman beating up a protester gives a glimpse of the unnecessary force used. In fact other journalists were assaulted for doing their job. Does this mean no one can hold demonstrations or express opinions contrary to the government's which is what the protesters were doing? The claim by a deputy commissioner that these measures were taken to keep the Shahbagh intersection clear because there were two hospitals there, is hardly convincing. Such diligence to keep major thoroughfares clear is not seen when ruling party members hold rallies or marches to celebrate various occasions that create huge gridlocks in the city. The government's action belies the much vaunted claim that democracy and freedom of expression exist in the country. Such display of intolerance for peaceful protest does not help to enhance the country's image, much less the government's claim to democratic credentials.

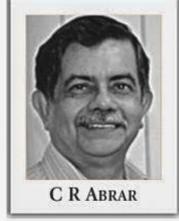
Improvised vehicles on the highways

Enforce the ban, offer alternatives

IN a timely move the High Court has slapped a ban on driving improvised three-wheelers on highways in order to reduce the number of road crashes. That the highest court of the land had to intervene in this matter is evidence of how badly these ramshackle, odd-looking contraptions unfit for roads, are endangering road safety. Now, the obvious question is who will enforce the proscription? Such bans are not new. In 2014, the court ordered the government to withdraw these jalopies from highways in 10 districts across the country. And the following year, the relevant ministry also issued an order, banning three-wheelers and other slow-moving and unfit vehicles on highways. How is it that these dangerous improvisations continue to ply on our roads and highways? What are the authorities doing, if anything at all, to check the number of illegally operated three wheelers? The owners and operators of these unsafe vehicles apparently exploit a local demand for transportation but can that be an excuse for allowing such accident-prone contraptions to ply on roads and highways unregulated? The hard reality is that unless the supply side goes through a complete overhaul, efforts, even if most sincere, are unlikely to solve the problem. Affordable and good quality public transport will have to be introduced to meet the growing demand. Both the government and the private sector have equal responsibilities in this regard. Precious lives are lost everyday in crashes caused by improvised three wheelers. The ban should be strictly enforced while coming up with safer and affordable means of public transportation.

NARAYANGANJ SEVEN MURDERS

Perpetrators, protectors and the patrons



THE 17 January verdict of the trial court on the Narayanganj seven murder case has been applauded by all quarters. Included among them is the chief justice,

jurists, influential ministers, leaders of political parties, and family members and colleagues of the victims. Those close to the government lost no time in claiming that this was a vindication of the independence of judiciary and the rule of law. Others were a bit circumspect. They viewed the judgment as an exception (admittedly, refreshing) to an otherwise gloomy environment that pervades the criminal justice system of the country.

Understandably, the public is outraged at the involvement of a good number of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) members in this contract killing. The leadership of RAB subsequently acknowledged that misdeeds of a section of its functionaries "has tarnished the image" of the agency. Its director general vowed that "If anyone in the force commits any offence going beyond his mandate, he will not be spared" and those members would face trial under the law. Such soul searching is necessary and reassuring for the masses, who are generally in the receiving end of the transgressions of what has been officially termed as 'the wayward members' of the security force.

Public scrutiny is essential for the improvement of the performance and ensuring discipline of the security agencies and those should be taken in due stride. Likewise, it is incumbent on the discerning observers not to restrict their focus only on acts of those forces. After all, the errant members were only the facilitators of Nur Hossain's final act of liquidating his political rival, Nazrul Islam. Hence, there is a strong case to dig deep to identify the roots of power that the chief perpetrator, Nur Hossain,

commanded. Nur Hossain is not a phenomenon who mustered influence and power by wielding a Satan gifted magic wand. He is a person of humble background. He masterfully fulfilled his unceasing ambitions by building up rapport with the powerful and the mighty of the society and by establishing effective contact with leading political parties. The latter showered him with protection and patronage and looked the other way when Nur engaged in a plethora of unlawful activities.

Local residents of Narayanganj and other sources inform that Nur began his career as an assistant to a lorry driver. It is alleged that he was connected with General Ershad's Jatiya party before

association. With this new patron's blessings he continued to engage in a series of criminal acts. Included among them were sand extraction from an illegally occupied section of the Shitalakkhya river bank, trading in illegal intoxicants, and engaging in extortion in public transport sector.

Defeat of the Awami League in the general elections in October, 2001 led to the weakening of Nur's authority over his area. As a listed criminal he could not live in his own locality between the years 2001 to 2008. The illegal business of lifting sand from Shitalakkhya river was brought to a halt during 2008 eviction drive. It was at that time the Interpol issued a red alert for his arrest. Nur only returned to his locality after the

registered complaints with police and RAB against Nur and his associates and the owners and pullers of the battery operated rickshaws organised rallies in the Shahid Minar of Chashhara.

Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) sources inform that Nur was able to reestablish his business in illegal sand lifting in the banks of Shitalakkhya river after 2014. The BIWTA source further informs that the unlawful business was resumed despite filing a case against Nur Hossain as the principal accused by Narayanganj Port Authority for violating a High Court order against land grabbing. The port authority lodged charges of impeding government action, issuing threats against state functionaries and for illegally taking in possession 0.8 acre of land against the accused. It has also been contended that in collusion with a section of local administration during the past year Nur Hossain controlled Narayanganj truck terminal is being used as a place for gambling, drinking, indecent stage shows and other anti social activities fetching tens of thousands of taka each day. They continued their operation ignoring instructions of the chief executive of the Narayanganj City Corporation.

Nur's aspiration to become the panel mayor was thwarted by his political rival, Nazrul Islam. In the game of thrones, driven by vengeance, Nur decided to eliminate him. Consequently, the long arm of the law caught up with the defiant delinquent Nur.

While the families of the victims await the final outcome of the appeals of Nur Hossain and his associates, while people strive to regain their trust on the lower judicial system, while RAB leadership engages in introspection, time has also come for the political leadership to reflect on their role in nurturing, protecting and patronising the convicted criminal. This they owe it to the people who want rule of law prevail in the land.

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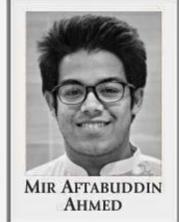
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joining the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in 1992 at the prodding of his then mentor Giasuddin who subsequently became a member of the parliament. Shrewd Nur soon got elevated to the position of Chairperson of the Shiddhirganj Union Council. That was the beginning of his meteoric rise. He quickly learnt that political power comes in handy to enhance fortune. His stint with the BNP ended when Awami League came into power in 1996. Under the new dispensation Nur successfully secured the patronage of a locally influential politician. Buoyed by the relationship with his enigmatic new protector he began consolidating his authority over Siddhirganj area. Nur was elected as president of the Bangladesh truck drivers'

December 2008 general elections. Again under his mentor's protection and using his name Nur resumed his shady activities and was reported to have occupied pavements in Narayanganj city and in Simrail in 2013 and illegally built ticket counters and passenger sheds.

Subsequently Nur got elected as counselor of Ward 4 Narayanganj City Corporation. This position provided him with unbridled opportunity to enhance his fortune and he made best use of it. People of his locality alleged that Nur Hossain and his associates controlled extortion rackets that exists in the transport sector between Kanchpur bridge and Shimrail intersection. Deeply aggrieved by such activities the Secretary of Dhaka Transport Association

Trump's threat to Obama's environmental legacy



BARACK Obama has been a very interesting international figure in the last decade or so. His administration has been dubbed by the global media as the presidency of powerful values but incomplete action. The political right condemns him for being too liberal, while the left attacks his conservative military policy. Yet he left office on January 20, with

a higher approval rating than both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Even though Obama could be best described as a centrist with liberal values, the progressives of the modern world will praise him for his efforts in addressing global climate change.

There is no doubt that Obama has been the most proactive President in the history of the United States, when it came to prioritising environmental protection. Suffice it to say, Obama's administration successfully promoted the notion that protecting the environment was as important to the country as other macroeconomic objectives such as controlling inflation and boosting growth. This is not to say that all decisions undertaken by President Obama were pro-environmental. That is hardly the case. But he did create an important platform for this issue to take centre-stage in American society. Climate change policies should, in reality, get precedence over many of the issues America and the world concerns itself with. But to expect this is entirely utopian. The world is still premature when it comes to addressing climate needs. We still argue over whether global warming is real or not. We continue to be ignorant about reducing pollution. This is a sad tale. Yet Barack Obama did his best to put this sad tale, front and centre. Now his most time-critical achievement is at severe risk from his successor.

To name a few of Obama's successes with regards to environmental protection, his administration gave tangible support to the green economy, reduced carbon emissions from new cars by a billion tons and significantly abridged mercury discharges in power plants. Furthermore, amidst a Majority-Republican Congress, his government instituted key pieces of legislation to curtail strip mining, reduce methane emissions from natural gas operations, curb energy costs, regulate coal ash impoundments, ensure stricter air quality standards and protect wetlands. Obama's blocking of the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline, an economic project which symbolises the extravagant use of fossil fuels, was well received by progressive intellectuals in the world. USA's leading efforts to negotiate the 2009 Copenhagen Accord and 2015 Paris Agreement is also seen as a victory of institutional climate change cooperation. This is something the world had never seen, especially in this magnitude, before. Even after all these successes, now ex-President Obama is surely pondering about the existential threat his achievements face from President Donald Trump.

Domestically, President Trump has not even taken a week to initiate what many environmentalists have termed as his war against the environment. Information pertaining to climate change has been erased from the White House website, whilst the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been asked to remove carbon-emission data from its webpage. His appointment of Republican donor Scott Pruitt as administrator of the EPA seems baffling. Least because he is the same man, who for some senseless reason, has

doubts over the very legitimacy of the problems the EPA is expected to tackle. The institution which is expected to protect, promote and preserve the environmental accomplishments of the Obama regime is currently headed by a man who has his doubts over climate change. Furthermore, Trump has announced his plans to cut the EPA budget by USD 1 billion. In a cumulative sense, almost all of Obama's institutional reforms to protect the climate face a threat of survival. Frankly, it is entirely plausible to expect a one-eighty degree turn in EPA activities in the next four years. This turn will be, in no uncertain terms, a turn for the worst.

This is not all. The Keystone XL project is likely to be approved in the coming days, creating an emblematic transition of the US away from renewable energy and back to unsustainable resources. Trump also plans to eliminate the Clean Air Act which currently curbs greenhouse gas emissions. In an irrational move, President Trump also ordered all EPA funded scientific research on climate change to be bypassed through the

domestic and global environmental regulations are out of control. He considers global warming a hoax created by the Chinese. If that is not concerning to the modern world, then nothing should be.

Bangladesh faces severe risks to its environmental future. Even though we are a developing country and even though we have diverse views regarding projects like Rampal, we do not in any way deny the credibility of the threat posed by climate change. Our government has been very clear in its intention to go ahead with the Rampal coal plant project despite vehement opposition from civil society groups and environmental activists. But the Awami League government has, at the same time, taken certain bold steps to ensure a more sustainable green economy. So when our ministers boast about how Donald Trump's presidency is going to be wonderful for Bangladesh, one would urge them to look at the facts. His philosophy of *America First* means greater economic protectionism and reduced leeway when it comes to bilateral and international affairs. His climate policy of

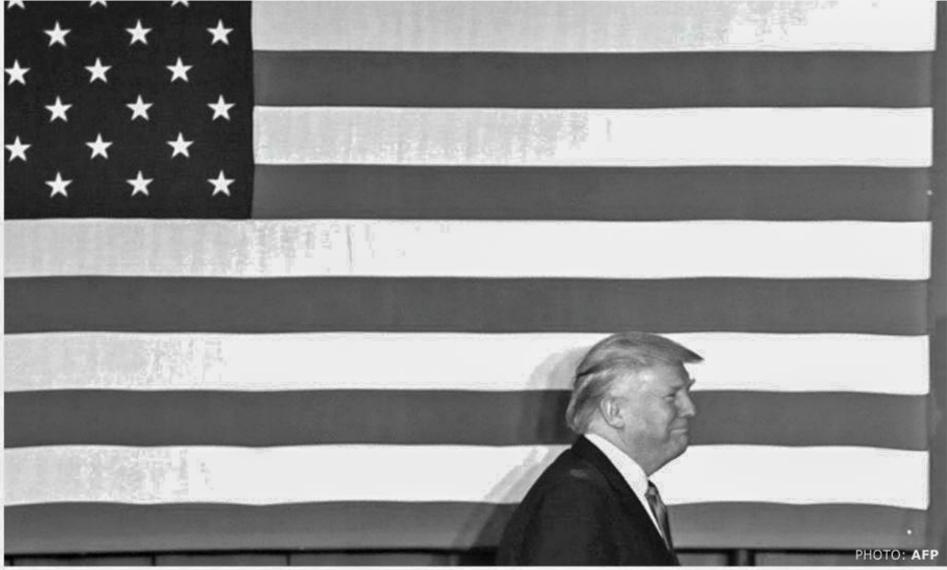


PHOTO: AFP

White House before publication. This effectively guarantees the Federal Government's right to release whatever information they feel is appropriate and disapprove anything which makes the Trump administration look bad. How can the most important country in the world ignore the needs of a global phenomenon and simultaneously prevent intellectuals from making citizens aware of the threats of climate change? It is a question to which many Americans, let alone the world, have no answer. This is what the Trump Presidency is sadly looking like.

From an international angle, the repercussions are devastating. Dissemination of the historic Paris Agreement was a central message in Trump's campaign. Although a direct withdrawal from this agreement seems unlikely, recent reports suggest that he may significantly reduce UN-based climate change funding. It is expected that his administration will not play a significant part in addressing global climate change concerns. Henceforth, without the blessing and support of the most powerful country in the world, the hard-earned Obama-led environmental cooperation scheme is now under serious threat. Donald Trump continues to suggest that both

lower international funding is surely going to hurt our path to a sustainable future, and there should be absolutely no doubt about that. Barack Obama did do his best to emphasise the threat which countries such as Bangladesh face from climate change.

Barack Obama and Donald Trump are two polarising figures for very different reasons. And the current President is on his way to tarnish the legacy of the former. This is a fact. To those who doubt Donald Trump's ability to pull-off his rhetorical election promises, think again. He has initiated the process to build his big and beautiful wall. He has announced his plans to reduce Muslim immigration. And most significantly, he has surely initiated the downfall of Obama's very real environmental achievements. Thus it would not be strange for global citizens to panic in regards to the Trump-led government, whose policies seem to be getting more discriminatory, intolerant, and yes, anti-environmental by the day.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Disappointed at the BCIC

The agriculture industry, which accounted for a fifth of the country's GDP last year, is the reason Bangladesh doesn't have to import food items to meet the domestic demand. However, the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Cooperation (BCIC), and a few of its syndicates and high officers in particular, have done a very poor job with the management of fertiliser distribution. Such negligence and misconduct is inexcusable.

The farmers of the country will continue to be exploited if the persons responsible are not given their due punishment.
 Mobarak Hossain
 Chapainawabgonj

Using elephants as snatchers!

We have been witnessing the strange malpractice of snatchers and even gangs astride elephants looting shops and other street businesses. The elephants are trained to snatch money and valuable belongings from victims who have no choice but to relent in fear of being attacked by the large animals. It has become particularly common in Chittagong.

The law enforcement authorities must come up with an immediate solution to this problem.
 Robin Paul
 On email