

## BGB-BSF Summit

## Killing, harbouring, kayaking and dog training



C R ABRAR

THE Bangladesh-India border has been labelled as one of the most securitised borders of Asia, if not of the world. During 2010 to 2016, on average, the Border Security Force of India (BSF) personnel killed 40 Bangladeshi nationals every year. Despite being a highly emotive issue in the Bangladeshi national psyche and repeated promise of “zero tolerance” by the Indian political leadership under successive regimes, border killing remains a grim reality. The unsettled high profile case of Felani has only exacerbated public perception of ‘the big neighbour’s highhandedness’ in dealing with unarmed civilians along the border.

Quite understandably the issue of border killing finds a place in the agenda of periodic meetings of the Director Generals (DGs) of the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) and the BSF. At least 28 Bangladeshis were killed by the BSF since the 42nd meeting held in May 2016. The five-day long 44th meeting was concluded last week in Dhaka.

The joint press statement issued after the meeting noted Bangladesh’s expression of “grave concern on incidents of firing and killing of Bangladeshi nationals.” In response to Bangladesh’s position the DG of BSF claimed that use of non-lethal strategy has proved “extremely successful in reducing deaths in the border”, but it resulted in “an alarming increase in incidents of attacks by the criminals on BSF personnel”. Indirectly the DG of BSF

acknowledged and justified the use of lethal weapons on grounds that his force acts in self-defence. The press statement did not indicate if any evidence was furnished by the BSF delegation in support of their claim if indeed there has been an “alarming increase” of the “attacks by the criminals”, nor is it clear if the members of the Bangladesh delegation demanded such evidence.

The justification for firing on self-defence of the BSF chief appears to be in sync with the BGB chief. About a month back while visiting Chuadanga border the latter observed, as reported in a Bengali daily, “the BSF forces only act on self defence” and went on to argue

“everyone has the right to defend himself”. He further noted, “the smugglers in both countries are dangerous.”

It may not be farfetched to argue that the DG of BSF’s reasoning did little to placate those concerned with border killings. The standard BSF narrative endorsed by the BGB chief stands out in sharp contrast to what the residents of border areas of Bangladesh have been reporting to the investigative media and the rights defenders. The killing of the schoolboy Shehab Uddin in Chuadanga on May 14, 2016 at point blank range by BSF personnel defies the veracity of the BSF chief’s assertion.

In the last meeting the DGs decided to jettison the plan for “joint investigation into border killing”, a decision taken at the 42nd meeting in the wake of Shehab Uddin’s killing. Instead, the parties decided on “joint spot verification and appraisal on major incidents/killings in border areas”. In response to the media’s query a BGB member stated that the Bangladesh side agreed with the BSF that the joint investigation process decided earlier “was not easy to start” and that such investigation was a police matter. This may very well be the case. However, such revision of a decision brings to the fore the larger questions of the quality of preparatory work done for important

bilateral meetings, degree of coordination among various agencies and the competence of those involved in decision making.

The DG level meeting was marked by another disconcerting development. The BSF chief sought cooperation of his Bangladeshi counterpart “for destruction of reported hideouts of Indian insurgent groups”, indicating such hideouts are in existence in this country. Bangladesh summarily dismissed the audacious allegation. The claim has surprised many as it was made at a time when the relationship between the two countries has been officially acknowledged to be in great shape. A series of agreements, including those on trans-shipment by land and riverine routes on concessional terms, use of Bangladeshi ports and those related to security issues such as that of handing over of the most wanted Anup Chetia, have been signed and implemented with much enthusiasm that Bangladesh’s big neighbour has been craving for years. No less important indicator of such good relations is the statement of a key figure in the Bangladesh administration who felt it was in “bad taste” to claim fees and charges for the services that India was availing and the feeling of “disappointment” by a senior Bangladesh minister at the anti-dumping measure adopted by the “brotherly neighbour”.

At the BGB-BSF meeting the Bangladesh team “expressed its gratitude to the Government of India and BSF for approving plans” to use its roads to build border outposts. At this time and age if at all such acknowledgement were to be recorded it would have been befitting for a sovereign country to

express ‘appreciation’ for the support than ‘gratitude’.

Instead of providing satisfactory explanation to Bangladesh’s claim of border killing and framing effective mitigating measures to reach the avowed “zero tolerance” target the BSF has engaged in a diversionary tactic of lodging spurious claims about the Indian insurgent hideouts. Ostensibly to curb the “menace of cross-border crimes” a series of confidence building measures (CBMs) have been agreed upon by the two parties. Included among them are joint training and exercise, “adventure training like kayaking, rafting, cycling, rowing, mountain climbing etc. joint band display with cultural programmes and exchange visits”. While “BSF will sponsor scholarships for selected brilliant children of BGB members in Indian medical and engineering colleges”, they will also “facilitate in setting up of a Dog Training School or required facilities for BGB”.

Joint social and cultural activities of the two paramilitary forces are a welcome development. However, in the backdrop of unrelenting use of lethal force and killing of unarmed Bangladeshi civilians along the border, the refusal to acknowledge the reality and institute proper investigation, let alone take action against the perpetrators and the failure to pay compensation to Felani’s family by the BSF, as per the directive of the National Human Rights Commission, India, such “adventure trainings” gives the impression of trivialising and dishonouring the memory of fallen Bangladeshis.

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DGs of BGB and BSF holding a five-day long meeting between the two border security forces, February 2017.

## How media can survive the Trump assault

SHAFIQ RAHMAN

RELATIONS between President Donald Trump and the US press is rocky, to say the least. It began during election campaign. Many thought it would get better once Trump would be elected, but on the contrary, it has been worsening since he became President. Trump’s assault on press seems relentless. He tweets about it and he attacks media whenever he opens his mouth. He vehemently attacked media when he spoke at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).

The bitter relations between the White House and the press are neither uncommon nor unprecedented. We still remember, it was the press that brought down the presidency of Richard Nixon. But it seems Trump is taking his fight with American media to a different level. It became a routine for Trump to point fingers to the press gallery in his campaign rallies and call the journalists “the most dishonest people” in the world. He continued his tirade and in his latest tweet he called media the “enemy” of the people.

As Trump heated the anti-media rhetoric, journalists were slow to respond, but it appears gloves are off now. Many reporters and commentators are calling Trump a “liar” on national television, which is unprecedented. Historically, press,

albeit critical to the White House and the Administration, showed deference to the office of the Presidency and rarely used the “L” word when talking about the President.

By now, not only Americans but also people in the world who follow news understand that Trump has a thin skin and he does not like criticism. This explains Trump’s constant rant about media, but he does it for another apparent reason: his political base loves to see media confronted by Trump, who they consider a champion of their cause.

If you follow US media, you will notice that journalists are becoming nervous and taking Trump’s threats more seriously. They have good reasons to be nervous. Two law professors recently wrote in an opinion piece in *New York Times* ([https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/opinion/dont-expect-the-first-amendment-to-protect-the-media.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/opinion/dont-expect-the-first-amendment-to-protect-the-media.html?_r=0)) that “The truth is, legal protections for press freedom are far feeble than you may think. Even more worrisome, they have been weakening in recent years.” Law professors Ron Nell Andersen Jones and Sonja R. West wrote in their piece that it’s not the law but the “customs and traditions” which primarily protect journalists. And this tradition can significantly be eroded on the face of constant onslaught from President Trump.

The question is: how media can

confront this attack. Back and forth on every Trump tweet will not be enough. In fact, Trump enjoys constant bickering with the press, because it gives him the focus he so desperately desires. Media can fight Trump attack by going back to basics - pursuing traditional journalism with a zeal of reporting facts. Not just superficial facts, such as the crowd size in Trump’s inauguration, but more consequential information such as Trump campaign team’s communication with Russian election and the consequences of Trump’s policies. Real investigative reporting is the way to fight Trump attacks. But do media have the tools and resources?

Even though US media have always been business entities and maximising profits drove media operations, there was a time when media embarked on journalism that focused on vigorous investigation and acted as real watchdogs. They had the resources to do their jobs. However, as corporate control crept into media industries, the model of newsroom operation changed significantly. The size of newsroom staff dwindled and foreign bureaus of news organisations slashed. An American Society of News Editors found that newsrooms have been losing jobs since the economic recession of 2007-2008. The industry reported a job loss of 3,800 in 2014 alone (<https://www.poynter.org/2015/news>

paper-industry-lost-3800-full-time-editorial-professionals-in-2014/360633). News media experienced deep cuts in their news budget and news media laid off thousands of editorial staffs. That compromised news media’s ability to invest in issue-based and investigative reporting.

Competition from digital web-based media further deteriorated traditional news media’s financial health. In the advent of digital news media, it was obvious that advertising dollars will be diverted to those media, but increasingly non-news websites are receiving a lion’s share of advertising dollars. An estimate shows that in 2015, USD 59.6 billion was spent in all digital media sites including search engines but a whopping USD 38.5 billion went to non-news sites like Facebook, Google, Verizon, Twitter and Yahoo (<http://www.journalism.org/2016/06/15/digital-news-revenue-fact-sheet/>) Traditional news media explored

a variety of models to attract audiences and advertising revenues. But it appears corporate owners did not want to invest in news rooms, which forced news executives and editors to cut staff and close foreign bureaus. News media, especially cable and network televisions, pursued a style of newsroom practice, which media scholars referred to as “infotainment”.

Providing information and entertainment is considered the classical functions of mass media in a democratic and capitalist society. Traditionally, media have been keeping those functions separate. But, recently scholars and media critics are observing that media, especially electronic media, are mixing the two. It is a growing trend that electronic media present information wrapped in entertainment. The practice of infotainment appears to be an attractive option to the media executives because potentially it may attract more viewers and added

revenues. However, this practice erodes informational function of media. Traditional news media’s job is to provide citizens with critical information and analysis. Citizens need unadulterated information so that they can make informed decisions about public affairs. Therefore, democratic systems largely depend on media’s ability and willingness to provide information to citizens. Media as capitalist enterprises partly lost their social responsibility over the decades, and no wonder they also lost credibility as a social and political institution. Trump’s attacks on media should be viewed in this financial and cultural context.

So, how can new media survive Trump’s attacks? As many commentators caution, journalists should not frame it as a fight between media and Trump. They just should do their job. Better.

The writer teaches media and communication at a US college.

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