

## Suicide bomber inside Rab barracks

It is time to combat the radicalisation process

**W**E are shocked that on Friday a suicide bomber had sneaked into the compounds of a Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) barrack and blew himself up. Despite our recent grapples with militancy and the attacks on civilians the last few years, this is the first instance of such an attack inside law enforcement premises. Thankfully, the attack only injured two Rab members, and no one was killed.

The recent pre-emptive drives on militant dens highlight that these groups have been trying to regroup outside the capital. Counterterrorism officials have stated that these militants are now trying to set up their dens in Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and Rangamati districts. Only yesterday, another militant, carrying explosives, was killed when he tried to rush past a Rab check post.

The challenge now is not only one of curbing the existing militants, but also to contain their radicalisation attempts and keep them on the back foot. The recent drives are helping to bust their strongholds. But, on top of this, we must also seriously assess the possibility of their connections with international groups. Within hours of the attack on Friday, the Islamic State (IS) had claimed responsibility, which our Home Minister has trashed.

We feel blanket rejections of these claims are self-defeating. To combat these militants, it is important to know who they are and how they are being radicalised in the first place. No direct presence of IS in the country does not mean that there might not be ideological or informational connections with the group, which has been fuelling the radicalisation process. These are important questions, the answers to which should help the authorities in not only foiling their attempts of regrouping, but also help deter further spread of radicalisation.

## Half kilo per sack missing

Ultra-poor short shifted

**T**HE government has a food aid programme that allows ultra-poor families to buy 30kg sacks at Tk10 per kilo. Allegations of these 30kg sacks being tampered with whereby people buying them end up with 29.5kg sacks have arisen against a dealer at Loharpur centre of Barisal Sadar upazila recently. It is still too early to comment on the fate of an investigation, if any, into the matter, but it simply points to yet another case of attempted graft. It is unfortunate that even the hard core poor for whom the programme serves a vital role have to pay for goods that are not delivered properly.

We are informed by the monitoring officer of the programme that the matter has been duly relayed to the proper authorities higher up the chain of command. That is good news. It is interesting to note that a food inspector at Barisal Sadar upazila has stated that his office has received no such complaint, but if any irregularity is found action will be taken. Two contradictory statements coming from officials of the same programme is confusing to say the least. And dealers claim that there is no tampering at their end. Whatever may be the case, we would like to know where that half kilo per sack rice is ending up and who is involved. If it is being supplied for sale in the regular wholesale or retail markets, then it is imperative that all the culprits involved in the racket be made to pay for this activity. A failure to take corrective action will of course, doom a very much needed programme to failure which would serve no one, least of all the ultra-poor.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Ensuring fair price of agro-products

Farmers in our country often do not get fair price of their produce. They sustain a great loss particularly during bumper production. They fail to realise even the cost of production. This is really a frustrating situation. As a result farmers are losing interest in agriculture which certainly has negative consequences for our agro-based economy and food security. That's why it is imperative to ensure price-protection and easy marketing of agro-products. Some super markets and mega shops in the capital are directly buying vegetables and fruits from enlisted farmers at a genuine price. The government can also introduce such a system to purchase agricultural products directly from the farmers for distribution among the consumers through a reliable marketing channel.

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### Special buses for female commuters

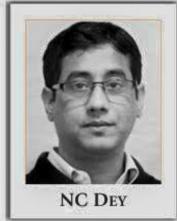
The other day while in a bus I found four or five female office goers standing with difficulty among the rush of male passengers. Although few seats in the front were marked reserved for women, those were occupied by male commuters. Showing disregard and lack of courtesy they did not offer the seats to those standing women.

The concerned authorities should introduce special buses for women commuters for Sunday to Thursday along planned routes during office hours. For the rest of the days, the buses can be open for all. It will not require a lot of money to introduce this special service. It will definitely reduce the hassles faced by women commuters.

**Sirajul Islam, Former Resident Manager, Padma Oil Co. Ltd, 7/2, Paribagh, Dhaka**

## FIRE OUTBREAK AT KORAIL

# Ignorance or negligence?



NC DEY

**A** shocking fire broke out at Korail slum, the largest slum in the city which encroaches upon Gulshan Lake, on March 16, and left thousands of people homeless and wounded. The actual reason of the fire is still unknown but one of the sources being touted for the fire is the burning end of a cigarette. While the fire apparently broke around the slum at around 2:00 am, trained local volunteers and fire fighters reached the place at around 3:15 am, and were able to bring it under control by 7:15 am.

The researchers of Environment Research Unit, and the staff of Field Management Unit of RED, BRAC, including me, visited the affected area to understand the overall situation of the victims. The key concerns of the team were to identify the immediate needs of the affected people, and to identify how we can respond rapidly and more effectively during man-made disasters like this.

The main cause of the fire is still unknown. However, many slum dwellers believe that this could be a case of sabotage. The fire broke out before the break of dawn when most slum dwellers were sleeping. The fire spread rapidly, burning several houses in its way. Residents were made aware of the fire only after announcements were made from the local mosque about the fire. The residents acted swiftly, trying to control the flames by smashing down adjacent structure so that the fire couldn't spread further. Eighteen units of fire fighters were dispatched at the scene, but they could not go near the fire, as the roads were very narrow, restricting entry to the water trucks. They had to thus leave the truck almost half a mile away, and carry the water pipe to the location. Like in the case of the Gulshan DCC incident, it took hours for the fire fighters to bring the fire under control.

The fire broke in the middle of the slum, where the dwellers are relatively well-off when compared to the other areas of the slum. Most houses here were two storied, semi-pucca structures. The losses incurred due to this fire outbreak would thus be greater than previous fire accidents in Korail, since this part of the slum also housed several businesses and shops that lost a large portion of their possessions and assets. When speaking to the slum dwellers, many reported that as power was cut off immediately, they were unable to gather their valuable possessions and were injured while trying to flee their burning homes.

Local development organisations tried to collect donations for the residents, and did their best to distribute the aid amongst them. However, many slum dwellers have alleged that they did not receive any assistance (cash or kind). Despite genuine intentions, this misallocation of resources could most possibly be due to lack of coordination and communication. In this case, the government could have taken the lead to organise the fund raising drive to ensure that the slum dwellers received the amount donated for their rehabilitation.

Another immediate action that could have been taken was offering psychological first aid to the slum dwellers, who were obviously in a vulnerable state, to help them come to terms with this sudden disaster.

This was the third fire to have broken out in Korail slum in the span of a year. Last year, fire broke out in the slum in March and December. While apparently the fire service conducts regular training on primary firefighting techniques with around 200 volunteers in the neighbourhood, it is surprising to note that there are no fire extinguishing equipment in the slum area. What is the use for such training and techniques if the basic equipment to extinguish a sudden fire are not in place?

Necessary long term steps need to be taken to ensure

introduced for quick response by the trained work-force from the community.

Regular trainings on fire outbreaks and other disasters, along with bi-annual fire drills, should be conducted so that residents are aware of what to do in case of an emergency. However, despite all the training, residents would need some additional resources, such as floodlights set near the slum, so that injuries are reduced, and lives and assets can be saved. Moreover, to assist slum dwellers with first aid, an emergency response unit should be established to address such disasters. The government also needs to ensure that in case of such accidents, slum dwellers are rehabilitated as soon as possible, preferably within two days. If that is not possible, their supply of water and sanitation facilities



A boy sits atop a suitcase — all that his family was able to save, after a fire broke out at the capital's Korail slum early Thursday. The fire gutted at least 500 houses and rendered several hundred families homeless.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

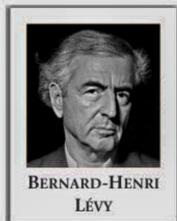
that such accidents don't repeat in the future. First and foremost, it is of utmost importance to install fire extinguishers in several areas of the slum so that residents themselves can take the lead to eliminate a fire when it breaks out. Necessary training needs to be provided to slum dwellers on this front. Moreover, new fire controlling systems should be introduced for narrow alleys and congested areas within the slum. There should also be a permanent source from where water can be pumped easily in case of a fire emergency, especially considering that fire trucks often cannot enter the narrow alleyways. In this regard, as surface water is available near the slum area, water lifting devices, such as power pumps with long hosepipes, can be

should be ensured within a couple of days at the most. After the Nimtali tragedy in Dhaka in 2010, there was a lot of talk about developing the fire preparedness system of the country. Recent incidents, however, prove that far more improvement is needed on this front. While the slum dwellers and authorities are concerned about the risk of a fire outbreak, the existing systems for protecting the marginalised and vulnerable people of Korail have not been working effectively for a long time now. This, like many other fire incidents of the country, could thus be called a case of ignorance as well as negligence.

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## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Another strange French disaster



BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

Party. Hollande's prime minister, Manuel Valls, became the second course at the cannibals' banquet.

By then, the corpse of one of France's two major parties, no longer merely supine, had reached an advanced state of decomposition. Now, at the very moment when one might expect a presidential candidate

**T**HE "hunger games" aspect of this French election cycle began on the left. President François Hollande was brought down by his own Socialist

those who had adored him. And, in the wake of the scandal surrounding François Fillon, the Republican nominee and the man who defeated him, Juppé lost his nerve and on March 6 definitively quit the race.

Fillon, once the clear frontrunner, the choice of four million primary voters, has now brought forth the spectacle of a party of mutineers trying to nudge him out of the race. Schemes, evasions, calculations, and bargains multiply, all based on polls interpreted by the modern equivalents of Roman haruspices. Another corpse.

Enter the investigating magistrates, who obviously are playing their rightful role in hearing evidence about a fake jobs scandal involving Fillon's wife and children. Their integrity,

part of this entire picture. Our new and strange relationship to politics, as evidenced by the current circumstances, can be summed up in three terms.

*Cancon.* Or, more accurately, can't-can't: the griping we do upon the Wednesday appearance of the new *Le Canard Enchaîné*, the satirical weekly whose insurrectionary humor, once fodder for the loose cannons of the left and right, is becoming the everyday language of politics. There was a time when reading the newspaper was, according to Hegel, the philosopher's morning prayer. Now reading that particular newspaper feeds the electorate's insatiable appetite for ridicule.

With what sardonic anticipation French readers await the latest on the base doings of our elected officials and their rivals! With what greedy delectation do we devour our weekly dose of corruption, rot, and scandal! And what bleak disappointment we feel, what sudden loss of interest in life, when, by chance, there is nothing new to report. Ought we not bear in mind, with the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, that when we amuse ourselves thus and become so inebriated with scandal, we "yawn gloomily toward a dark demise."

*Spectacle.* In lieu of judgment, we get ceaseless and frivolous commentary on the thousand and one twists and turns of the electoral contest. Once, the news media covered sports as if it were politics. Now political commentary resembles sports coverage.

"Game analysis" has become the paradigm of political narrative. And, in the venerable country said by Marx to be the political nation *par excellence*, politics is becoming a subspecies of soccer, with its teams, fans, referees, and high scorers. Is it any surprise that at the height of the Fillon affair, the right-wing bosses and their phantom coaches turned (doctrinal and stylistic differences be damned!) to their benchwarmers, who were supposed to be waiting to enter the game? Likewise, one wonders whether Fillon's loyalists see in him anything more than his stamina, his ability to take a beating, or the figure he cut when, after being knocked flat on his back, he got up as if returning to an unfinished fight.

*Equality.* Eagerness for it was, once,



PHOTO: AFP

François Fillon, once the choice of four million primary voters, has now brought forth the spectacle of a party of mutineers trying to nudge him out of the race.

to tell the nation what he thinks of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Islamic radicals, the Socialist candidate, the wan Benoit Hamon, finds nothing better to talk about than legal marijuana, red sludge, and endocrine disruptors.

On the right, the disaster is just now cresting. Early on, former president Nicolas Sarkozy was eliminated. Former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, after being crowned virtual president for much of last year, was toppled by

however, will not be impugned by a gentle reminder that they, too, are human beings, susceptible to human passions and resentments; that the considerable power they wield tends, as all power does, to reach as far as it can; and that, as a consequence, they have become fully enmeshed in a campaign from which, invoking Montesquieu, they should strive scrupulously to hold themselves at a distance.

But we, citizens and voters — each and every one of us — are the worst

the noblest of passions; there was, in that passion, the dream of cultivating the body politic and, in so doing, dignifying politics. And I agree with the philosopher Jean-Claude Milner who, in his recent book, *Relire la Révolution*, takes on the Anatole France of *The Gods Are Thirsty*. Far from simply offering the people their daily ration of blood, Robespierre also tried, in his way, to check the descent of the masses into a vengeful mob and to save what could be saved of the balances inherent in republican hierarchy.

There is none of that in today's brand of egalitarianism — nothing but a mob inching ever closer to its moment of ultimate power while promoting an equality not of common interest but of complaints, indignities, grudges, and corruption. And, among the fragmented, distraught children of the Enlightenment, among the zombie heirs of Rousseau fibrillating between aggressiveness, blindness, and despair, equality is no longer a task but a taint, a sort of dark shroud, a halo of resentment and hatred to which our common tongue is tied as to a buoy in a tide.

Another disaster. Another delusion. From redemptive egalitarianism to equal-opportunity grousing and score-settling, we have hiked the path that leads a society from life to death.

Frightening as it sounds, that is where France finds itself: not in a mere crisis, but in the last stages of what the great anti-Nazi historian Marc Bloch called, in 1940, his nation's "strange defeat." We confront not a lone tree of iniquity, but rather a vast forest of murky words, dangerous and lunatic in their debasement.

And, lying in wait, guided by the Eumenides (the Greek deities of vengeance whose name is synonymous with fury as well as justice), a figure is taking shape as if, in classical terms, in fulfillment of a dreadful fate: Marine Le Pen.

The writer is one of the founders of the "Nouveaux Philosophes" (New Philosophers) movement. His books include *Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism*, *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*, and most recently, *The Genius of Judaism*.

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