

Sex crimes against women rampant

When will it stop?

NEWS reports of rape have, unfortunately, become an everyday occurrence in our country. As the high profile Banani rape case continues to unfold, the sickening news of the rape of girls as old as five and fourteen hogged the headlines in this daily yesterday.

A fourteen-year-old girl was walking to a local store, in Lama upazila of Bandarban, on Monday evening when a group of men allegedly forcibly took her to a remote area and gang-raped her. A day later, a five-year-old girl in Jessore Sadar upazila was reportedly raped by a neighbour in his house. The child's family members found her in the culprit's house after frantically searching for her and said that the girl was bleeding.

A glance at the recent statistics—which are actually an underevaluation of the real numbers—of sexual harassment and violence in Bangladesh paints a horrifying picture. In Gaibandha district alone, from January to May 23 this year sixty-six women and children were victims of rape and sexual harassment. This includes the attempted rape of a three-and-a-half-year-old girl in Gopalpur village of the district.

This is the cruel reality of women and children in this country. For the less privileged, the situation is infinitely worse. Sexual violence against women is one of the most perverted manifestations of misogyny. We cannot cure people's mindsets overnight but what we can do is try to ensure quick, proper dispensation of justice in each and every case of sex crime.

It is high time for the government to prioritise the issue of violence against women. Law enforcement agencies need to be on high alert so that they can respond swiftly and efficiently in such cases. Why must we "demand" justice every time a girl child or woman is raped or sexually assaulted? We simply cannot sit back and watch perpetrators of sexual violence go scot-free any longer. Enough is enough.

Ultra-poor programme in trouble

Ghost beneficiaries eating away funds

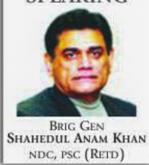
A visit to Gunarigram and Lalmonipur project sites under Harishpur union of Natore Sadar upazila has unearthed some disturbing facts about the government's 40-day employment generation programme for the ultra-poor people. According to the project implementation officer there, "Only 27 labourers out of a total 52 at Gunarigram project and 19 out of the 50 labourers at Lalmonipur project are present. It has been found that the other workers never come to the job." Despite this, the wage of Tk 200 per worker, including the absentees, is being drawn from the banks. So, who is drawing the money against these ghost workers? We understand that these projects are running basically without proper monitoring which has allowed for such irregularities to take place.

The story does not end there. Investigation by this paper has found that certain members of local administration are allegedly arranging for the transfer of funds to the absentee labourers in exchange of "speed" money. The programme in question is worth Tk 8.85 crore with the aim of providing jobs for 11,064 ultra poor in 52 unions in seven upazilas of Natore district.

This is public money that is going down the drain and the real ultra-poor are being deprived of a perfectly good government project that is being run badly. Now the question is if this is the situation of graft in just two unions, what is happening elsewhere? There is of course no excuse for such lax monitoring of programmes that are cash-based and we hope the concerned ministry will take this "eye-opener" as a wakeup call and not rubbish the report, because at the end of the day this is public money that is being squandered.

The Sunday classic in Riyadh

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

US presidents seem to have a predilection for dispensing homilies directed at the Muslim countries just before the month of Ramadan – pre-Ramadan speech if you like.

Barack Obama made his in 2009 in Cairo at a gathering of Muslim heads of states and governments and so did Donald Trump last Sunday at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit. And while Obama's was put through the sieve by the critics for every word that was uttered, Trump is still going through the scrutiny.

While President Trump started by saying that it was not for America to tell others what to do, he did exactly that – tell the Muslim leaders what to do. And if Trump's intention was to bring together the "Muslim world" to work out a common and coherent strategy to defeat religious extremism his approach was misplaced. In fact he only managed to exacerbate the divide that characterises the Muslim world today. Regrettably, the so-called Muslim world stands divided, the hiatus initiated in the early 20th century, as a consequence of the efforts to assert the predominance, on the one hand, of Pan Islamism, and the on the other, of Pan Arabism. That clash, unfortunately, hastransformed the Shia-Sunni divide, the two camps now led respectively by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Regrettably, that divide was formalised by the US President at the very end of his speech when he singled out Iran as the sole sponsor and financier of terrorism. One wonders if all 55 participating heads of government and state endorsed his views or his policies.

Trump's position on Iran, a shift from that of his predecessor's, is meant to serve two purposes; while it will further deepen the schism in the so called Muslim world, much in conformity to the Zionist strategy to drive a wedge

between the two camps, it is meant to also isolate Iran from the rest of the Islamic world by casting it as a patron of extremism and terrorism. First it was Iraq, and then Libya, and now the only Muslim country that has the gumption to stand up to the US, risks being neutered by the US.

However, neither history nor current developments in the Middle East and other parts of the world infested with religious extremism bears out the

including Bangladesh, are having to endure.

The idea of isolating Iran cannot appeal to the right thinking person. Iran has to be engaged if extremism is to be effectively snuffed out. Given that the people of Iran has rejected a hardliner and chosen a reformist in the recently held presidential elections through the exercise of open franchise, an option not available to the people of the Middle Eastern countries allied to the US,

the US were he to be elected, that view was only but natural. But to the more perspicuous observer of Trumpian behaviour, choosing the Kingdom as a first stopover demonstrates Trump's businessman-like disposition for jobs, jobs, and more jobs for Americans. And given the huge contribution to the US economy of the US military-industrial complex, Saudi investment of more than a hundred billion dollars for weapon purchase and investment of 200 billion in other sectors guarantee more jobs for Americans. The deal will benefit US by having billions of Saudi dollars pumped into it. And violence and conflict will be the natural corollary of proliferation of weapons, as the billions of dollars of arms purchase will cause, in the Middle East.

As for his address to the leaders of the Muslim majority countries, it was an acknowledgement by the world's mightiest country that it has run out of ideas as to how to tackle the extremist phenomenon, and has sought the participation of these countries by asking them to take the leading role in this regard. It is acknowledgement too that the phenomenon cannot be combatted by force alone.

But when Trump talks about rooting out extremism he conveniently forgets to talk about the drivers of terrorism and extremism. And why should he not? The phenomenon that has engulfed many of the Muslim countries, the concept of Jihad recuperated by the US to galvanise the Islamic world against the Soviets in Afghanistan, has been the single most important causative factor that helped spawn terrorism and extremism. The forerunners of al-Qaeda, Taliban and the IS were once coppers as the "moral equivalents of our Founding Fathers" by President Reagan.

It is pointless to speak of combatting extremism without addressing the causative factors. And that would require readjusting much of US policies, in the Middle East in particular. Is the US prepared to do that?

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.



PHOTO: AFP

accusation that Iran is the only country responsible for what we are enduring today in the form of IS, Taliban or al-Qaeda. In fact the main accuser, the US, and its allies in the Arab world, must share the responsibility for the state of religious extremism, and terrorism fuelled by it, and the nearly irretrievable situation that the world has been thrust into as a result of the US policy over the last seventy years. And the consequence of which most of the Muslim countries,

isolation will alienate the Iranian people who vie for change and root for peace in the world.

That Trump would choose a Muslim country as the first country of his maiden foreign trip may have surprised many. They feel that Trump is perhaps the most unqualified person to talk to Muslim leaders about Islam. Given the unkind words that he uttered about Islam, and the fact that as a candidate he had promised to ban Muslim entry into

REMEMBERING THE RIOTS OF 1984 & 1987

We have learnt nothing from these tragedies

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDEEP NAYAR

THE Hashimpura massacre that took place on May 22, 1987, was as deep a tragedy as the anti-Sikh riots in 1984. Both minorities have not allowed the wounds, which remind them of the atrocities committed against them, to heal. The perpetrators of the Hashimpura massacre, the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) from the UP Police, are

hoping that the dust would settle down sooner or later, and the nation would consider the tragedy as an ugly part of history, and move on.

I remember the whole thing vividly. After hearing of the killings, I visited Meerut. At the outskirts of the city, on my return, some people stopped me and pointed towards the Hashimpura mohalla, which they said was the scene of the deliberate, blatant killing of 42 Muslims by the PAC. To my horror, I found some bodies floating in canals, and some even floated in the River Hindon. This, I was told, was a premeditated murder.

The story goes that a group of men were rounded up by the Army and the police from the largely Muslim Hashimpura mohalla in Meerut and handed over to the PAC. One such truck of men was taken to the banks of a canal, and shot at close range. Forty-two died, in perhaps the single largest custodial killing in the history of independent India. But a closer look at the events leading to that tense afternoon in Meerut 30 years ago, offers a glimpse into a largely unreported dimension of the motives behind the massacre.

My experience dictates that any national tragedy of such scale is usually remembered by the public for some time before receding into the background of history. The past is revived when another tragedy takes place. There doesn't seem to be any permanent solution. Incidents like the one that took place in Hashimpura can only be stopped when the two communities come to realise that their animosity led to the partition of the country.

The most commonly accepted motive, mentioned in the charge-sheet filed by the CID of the UP police, is the alleged assault on the PAC the same day and loot of two rifles belonging to the force. "Upon that, on 22.05.1987, a search for illegal arms in Mohalla Hashim Pura, Meerut was launched," the charge-sheet claimed. But a less explored dimension, also mentioned in the charge-sheet, was the death of a young man named Prabhat Kaushik, who was killed by a stray bullet as he stood on the terrace of a building abutting Hashimpura.

Experts, including some police personnel, described the killings as among India's worst incidents of



SOURCE: GOVERNANCENOW.COM

custodian violence. The trial began only in 1996 and a couple of years ago all accused were cleared of all charges by a trial court in what activists have called a grave miscarriage of justice.

Naturally, the reaction from the survivors or, for that matter, the relatives of those killed was along the expected lines because it had taken 28 years for a judgment, with all the accused being allowed to go scot-free. Many families are not hopeful of a breakthrough and say that the investigation was shoddy.

In fact, the then Meerut Superintendent of Police, Vibhuti Narain Raio, who has written a book on the incident says: "It took me nearly five to six years to realise that my belief that the killers would receive exemplary punishment for such a heinous act would remain just that – a mere belief. As time flew by, it became evident that the Indian state was just not interested in penalising the guilty. All the stakeholders of the state kept playing hide but not seek with their responsibilities and many shielded themselves behind criminal negligence. And it worked for them."

Even today, according to reports, the Hashimpura locals are traumatised by that day's incident and say that the PAC was organised and planned. The locality is almost U-shaped, making it difficult for people to flee, and the constant hum of handloom machines is the daily companion of locals there. Most houses are rundown with flaking paint, as if locals have given up hope of a better life.

This should remind us of the Jalianwala Bagh tragedy where over 1,500 innocents were killed within a walled boundary. (Prince Phillip accompanying his wife, the Queen, to Jalianwala Bagh after the tragedy, remarked that the number was exaggerated!) Subsequently, when I met General O'Dyer and mentioned the killings, he did not show even an iota of remorse.

The description of events by the survivors at Hashimpura is heartrending. According to one account, hundreds of men were sent to prison for weeks where

they were interrogated and beaten up because they were Muslims. Some people were dragged out of their houses and taken to the police station. According to eye-witness accounts, the killings happened in two phases – the first at Gang Canal of Muradnagar and the second at Hindon.

During the anti-Sikh riots in 1984, in the wake of Mrs Indira Gandhi's assassination, Delhi witnessed killings of over 3,000 Sikhs, the officially announced estimate. The number could be more. The perpetrators included top Congress bigwigs. Fingers were pointed even at Rajiv Gandhi, at whose behest allegedly the deployment of the Army was delayed to allow the rioters a free-hand. The cases which were closed are now being reopened. But no one has been punished so far. The connivance of authorities at that time has allowed the evidence to rub off.

Many victims of the 1984 riots are still seeking rehabilitation. There is no difference in the case of Hashimpura either. The survivors are still struggling for normalisation, hoping against hope that the Delhi High Court, where an appeal is pending, would get them justice sooner than later.

My experience dictates that any national tragedy of such scale is usually remembered by the public for some time before receding into the background of history. The past is revived when another tragedy takes place. There doesn't seem to be any permanent solution. I have been a mute witness to innumerable riots where the complicity of police is apparent.

Incidents like the one that took place in Hashimpura can only be stopped when the two communities come to realise that their animosity led to the partition of the country. This cannot be repeated; continued enmity will put in peril the ethos of democracy and secularism in the country. Efforts should be made whereby minority communities in the country feel like equal partners and enjoy all the facilities guaranteed by the Constitution to all citizens of the country.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Safe cities for women

Around 56 percent of women are reluctant to use public transport in the capital due to a lack of proper facilities, revealed a study titled "Gender Responsive City Structure" on March 20, conducted by Action Aid Bangladesh. Covering data from 200 women, the study revealed that 25 percent women find the city roads to be unsafe for them; 22.5 percent claimed to have been harassed on commute and only 5.5 percent can use public toilets with help from men.

Local buses are the most common and affordable mode of transport for struggling women. But most male passengers force bus drivers not to take any female passengers under the excuse that there are no vacant seats in the women's seating area; as if women can travel in buses only if they can sit on their allotted seats. Although the government sanctioned some double-decker BRTC buses to specially cater to women passengers, only a few follow the rule. Reserved seats are particularly rare during peak hours because they are divided between women, children and handicapped persons. Increasing these seats would go a long way in helping female passengers who struggle with their daily commutes.

Meanwhile, we urgently need public toilets that can be used by women. The ones currently in use are completely unhygienic and unsafe.

Women, especially those from low and middle income households, can't participate in the economy if we can't even facilitate their safe and easy movement around the city. We hope the government will take immediate measures to fix this situation.

Zubair Khaled Huq

By email