

'Crossfire' deaths and enforced disappearances continue

We deserve an explanation

THE latest report of the human rights watchdog Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) is worrying. Apart from 68 people killed in “shootouts” and “crossfire” encounters with the police and other law enforcing agencies in the first six months of 2017, 44 persons were picked up, allegedly by people identifying themselves as members of the law enforcing agencies, according to ASK, during this period.

The encounter deaths, most of them either in “shootouts” or “crossfire”, are actually a euphemism for extrajudicial killings that betray the state agencies' disregard for the rule of law. The frightful aspect of these phenomena is that deaths and disappearances have continued to occur, as evident from the ASK report. For example, between January and November 2016 there were 173 deaths in similar circumstances while 88 people were abducted during that period, according to family members, colleagues and eyewitnesses of the victims.

While no one can contest the right of the law enforcing agencies to defend themselves, and that encounters with criminals are not beyond the pale, the circumstances of some of these encounters and the ensuing deaths of the alleged criminals stretch the credulity even of the most credulous.

As for the disappearances, it is not enough for the law enforcement agencies to contest the statement of the witnesses. Forty-four people have disappeared and it should be for the police and the intelligence agencies to determine their whereabouts. It should be a matter of serious concern for them if there are groups posing as plainclothes policemen going around abducting with impunity. Bullet-riddled bodies of a few of the abducted were later found.

These are serious matters and we deserve to know what the reaction of the state has been in this regard in terms of palpable action against the breach of rule of law. Everyone deserves the protection of the state, even alleged criminals.

Why so many children out of school?

Education for all should be the aim

IT is disheartening to note that there are about 10 million out-of-school children, adolescents and youths in Bangladesh, as revealed by a new Unesco policy paper. Some of the reasons mentioned in the paper as to why that is the case were related to their living conditions, financial constraints and social adversities.

Data from the study shows that approximately 7.1 million youths and 2 million adolescents in the country are not attending school. Despite the progress that has been made in the education sector over the years, the statistics clearly show that there is still room for much improvement, as Bangladesh right now has the fifth highest number of out-of-school adolescents and the third largest number of out-of-school youths in the world, only ahead of India and Pakistan.

Other studies have shown, meanwhile, that education has both direct and indirect impacts on economic growth and poverty reduction. One of Unesco's own report suggests that with only minor improvements in the education sector, the world poverty rate could be reduced quite drastically. Thus, education is obviously a worthwhile investment. So what are the steps that the government is taking to address this shortfall? What programmes does it plan on introducing to plug the lacuna?

These are questions that the authorities should seriously consider. Moreover, the authorities should also come up with concrete plans to address the shortfalls in the sector and try to bring all youths and adolescents under the umbrella of having a decent education.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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How landslides can be prevented

The recent landslides and flash floods in eastern Bangladesh should remind the government about the danger of landslides to private and public assets as well as local infrastructure. The causes are the massive investments made in various South Asian countries by so-called real estate agencies and the push for infrastructural developments that don't take into account the environmental sensitivity and ecological vulnerability of the region. This includes illegal mining of sands in the river beds by land mafias, encroachment of abandoned mines without any precautionary measures to secure them after mining extraction, rapid loss of vegetation and natural landscapes, and corrupt political and administrative systems at work.

The afforestation and social forestry programmes across South Asia which used to plant indigenous trees and shrubs have been slowing down for decades. In their absence, top soil is being eroded by wind and water and getting loose over time. Heavy rains, floods, and landslides are harming poor rural communities in hilly and riverine areas.

To solve these issues, more local soil-binding plants and bamboo forests should be planted. This requires funding and efficient monitoring. Meanwhile illegal mining activities need to be strictly monitored. Sincere Environmental Impact Assessments should be undertaken before any large real estate or infrastructural projects are sanctioned. Otherwise, dark and gloomy days with more deaths and destruction can be expected in the not-so-distant future.

Saikat Kumar Basu, Canada

Two disasters, two countries, two peoples



STRANGER THAN FICTION

TAJ HASHMI

CONSECUTIVELY on June 13 and 14, major disasters hit Bangladesh and the United Kingdom. On the morning of the 13th, landslides killed more than 150 people, and four army personnel, in Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts districts of Bangladesh. And in the early hours of the 14th, a fire in a 24-storied apartment complex, the Grenfell Tower, killed around 80 people in London. Both the disasters killed poor and marginalised people. In Bangladesh, the victims were “nameless” as well.

While a faulty fire alarm system and inflammable building materials may be attributed to the London fire, massive illegal deforestation and hill-cutting led to the landslides in Bangladesh. Sadly, most Bangladeshis had other “more important” problems to address than doing anything for the landslide victims. However, there's more to the story. While the poor are inert and indifferent to disasters (beyond the immediate vicinity), the rich aren't forthcoming with financial support and empathy with the victims.

As it appeared on British media reports, including BBC, for the first few days, more than 80 percent of the news coverage was about the Grenfell Tower disaster. Even more than two weeks after the disaster, British media, politicians, members of the civil society, intellectuals, and ordinary people were mourning the “avoidable” deaths, empathising with the victims, helping them generously, and condemning the various government departments for negligence, which led to the disaster. The Queen, Prime Minister Theresa May, national leaders, including local MP Jeremy Corbyn, London Mayor Sadiq Khan, and thousands of people visited the disaster zone. Jeremy Corbyn has gone to the extent of asking the government to requisition homes of the rich for fire survivors—like Churchill did to rehabilitate survivors of German bombings during World War II. Fifteen victims of the fire met the prime minister at her residence. There was also a one-minute silence observed at the Buckingham Palace; and on Monday, June 18, the whole nation observed one-minute silence, to show respects to the victims.

Meanwhile Bangladeshis who understand, and enjoy cricket, were busy watching the live telecast of the ICC cricket competition from Britain; and in the same day of the disaster, the prime minister went to her scheduled overseas trip to Sweden. Within 48 hours,

people's attention seemed to have shifted from the disasters that befell the poor. However, had the victims been members of the urban rich, Bangladesh would have mourned their deaths longer. Poor villagers, urban squatters, and slum dwellers in Bangladesh are much more fragmented, isolated, inert, introvert, and as “sack of potatoes”—to paraphrase Marx—don't take “political” decisions (in the broad sense of the term) on their own, and need outsiders, often their own class enemies, to lead them or take decisions on their behalf. Hence this collective neglect of the poor by people who “matter”, and those who don't, across Bangladesh!

The bulk of the poor urban and rural squatters in Bangladesh—many totally landless—come from the typical fragmented and faction-ridden peasant communities, having strong patron-client relationship, where the powerless clients having very low self-esteem, work only for their patrons, not for society or



PHOTO: AFP

the nation at large. To the bulk of these poor, society is made of immediate clan members or uprooted fellow proletarians; the state and nation seem to be too remote and abstract to understand, let alone integrate into. They only know their local patrons, the village elders or *matbars*, “tribal chiefs”, and “mafia bosses” who are well-connected to local MPs, powerbrokers, and ministers, who could be ruthless and benign at the same time.

The ubiquitous *matbar*-MP-minister nexus, not nationalism, determines the politics of Bangladesh. Thus, the environment-unfriendly Rampal power plant, rapes and abductions of poor women, and all disasters beyond their immediate neighbourhood are too distant and irrelevant to the bulk of the population. Why so?

We know, the East India Company added certain new elements to Bengal's administration, land system, and culture. It was the new land system called the

Permanent Settlement aka the *Zamindari* system of 1793, which radically moulded the administrative machinery, and the popular and political culture of what is now Bangladesh. The *Zamindari* system fragmented the rural community and the budding urban society by establishing neo-feudal relationship and patron-client relationship. Surprisingly, Paschim Banga (erstwhile West Bengal) also had a similar land system but elites, middle and working classes there have been very assertive and uncompromising. They empathise with victims of natural and manmade disasters, and don't shy away from questioning and challenging the authorities.

One may impute this to the rise of Western educated upper, and middle classes in and around Kolkata since late 18th century, mainly emerging out of the direct beneficiaries of the *Zamindari* system. Members of these Hindu *Bhadralok* classes have been urbane, capitalist, and some even active leaders of trade unions, socialist and



PHOTO: ANVIL CHAKMA

communist movements. Again, unlike Bangladesh, less dependency on agriculture—due to the urbanisation and industrialisation process that started in late 18th century in and around Kolkata—has weakened peasant and pre-capitalist production relations, and patron-client relationship in Paschim Banga.

Bangladesh, which was a rural and agrarian hinterland of West Bengal up to 1947, still remained culturally rural and peasant. Hence the collective indifference of the people and their government to the suffering of the common people across Bangladesh. One may attribute this “alienation-indifference syndrome” to “post-colonialism”, which renowned British-Pakistani sociologist late Hamza Alavi has used in the pejorative sense of the expression. As Alavi has argued, having an over-developed bureaucracy and military, and an under-developed civil society, ruling classes in post-colonial

Pakistan and Bangladesh lack much sense of belonging to the state, or patriotism which may be translated into “colonial hangover”, “mass alienation from people”, and “absence of empathy/sympathy with the ordinary people”. The culture of unaccountability of the ruling/rich classes—never that synonymous till the rise of Ershad autocracy—has also turned the ordinary people apathetic to others' sufferings, as they have their own grievances to redress.

Now, is it necessary or possible to compare the behaviour of the British government and people with their Bangladeshi counterparts vis-à-vis the recent disasters that befell their countries in mid-June? We simply can't compare countries with accountable governance having well-entrenched democratic, urban, and egalitarian values with a “post-colonial”, “soft state” like Bangladesh, which lacks these values. The ruling elites and ordinary people are segregated vertically, on political and economic lines, and the

ordinary people are separated from each other horizontally, on factional, religious, political, and economic lines in Bangladesh, a fractured post-colonial state—not a well-knit nation state.

Interestingly, many poor countries, including India, manage disasters more efficiently than Bangladesh. It's not lack of resources that impedes disaster management, but it's lack of national solidarity, accountable governance, and mass empathy with people in distress. Surprisingly, “baby boomers” (born between 1946 and 1960)—the generation that took part in the Liberation War—and “millennials” (born between mid-1980s and early 2000s) of Bangladesh (both supposed to be articulated, brave, and liberal), to put it mildly, also seem to be apathetic and opportunistic, even during times of national emergencies.

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The race for Raisina Hill



FROM A BYSTANDER

MAHMOOD HASAN

POLITICAL parties to submit nomination papers by June 28. Election will be held if there is more than one candidate. Several names, both from the BJP and the Congress-led opposition, have been doing the rounds in Delhi since early May.

Pranab Mukherjee, the first Bengalee (a Brahmin) ever to hold the post, was elected on July 2012 with the support of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). But with the centre-right National Democratic Alliance (NDA) sweeping into power in 2014 the stage is probably set for India to get a saffron brigade president who will uphold RSS's Hindutva.

On June 12, BJP chief Amit Shah formed a three-member committee to find a consensus candidate for the presidency after “consultations with all political parties”. Earlier on May 26, led by Congress, 17 parties got together to form a 10-member sub-group to finalise their candidate for the presidency.

On June 19, BJP Parliamentary Board surprised everyone by announcing that Bihar governor Ram Nath Kovind, a Dalit leader, will be NDA's candidate for the presidency. LK Advani and Murlu Manohar Joshi simply did not figure in Amit Shah's list of candidates. Modi-Amit led BJP is no longer the same party that one witnessed during AB Vajpayee's days. Shah said that BJP has informed opposition parties and PM Modi had spoken to Congress president Sonia Gandhi and former PM Manmohan Singh.

Ram Nath Kovind, a lawyer by

profession, is a self-made man and comes from Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. He joined BJP in 1991 and was president of BJP Dalit Morcha (1998-2002). He was elected twice to the Rajya Sabha (1994-2006) from UP. He became governor of Bihar in August 2015. Kovind is respected among political circles for his integrity and his abstemious way of life.

Many within the opposition find it difficult to oppose Kovind, because several parties are Dalit-based organisations, e.g. Samajwadi Party, BSP, Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United). The cracks in the opposition camp became clear when Bihar CM Nitish Kumar (himself a Dalit) broke ranks and

Meira Kumar comes with overwhelming credentials. Daughter of late deputy prime minister Babu Jagjivan Ram, who was Congress's most influential Dalit leader, she joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1973. She was elected member of the Lok Sabha five times before becoming Speaker of the Lok Sabha in 2009. She was cabinet minister in Manmohan Singh's government from 2004-2009. Announcing her candidature, Ghulam Nabi Azad, leader of the opposition in the Rajya Sabha, said she was a “crusader for social justice”.

The president will be indirectly elected by an electoral college composed

politics, where numbers matter. The three political groupings are clear: the aligned parties of NDA and UPA, and the unaligned parties. Though unaligned parties have few votes, they will most likely support Kovind. As it stands now, after the state legislative elections, since 2014 the BJP-led NDA has gained a numerical advantage over the opposition. According to reports Kovind is likely to bag 62 percent votes, i.e. roughly 7 lakh value votes.

A shrewd BJP nominated Kovind as part of its overall political strategy. It has put the opposition in disarray and has ensured that its candidate will win the presidency. By nominating Kovind, BJP will now try to consolidate its Dalit support base and, more importantly, lure Dalit-based regional parties into the NDA fold before the next Lok Sabha elections in 2019. Unfortunately, UPA has not been able to keep its flock together.

The president of India holds largely a ceremonial post. Many think Kovind is a low-profile, uninspiring candidate, who is little known publicly. One wonders whether Kovind will be able to inspire confidence among the people about his capability of protecting the constitution's secular ideals and traditions.

Not to overlook another important upcoming election is that of the Vice President. Incumbent Mohammad Hamid Ansari retires on August 10, 2017. Election for the post will be held on August 5. Here, too, BJP will have the final say given the numbers it commands in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. The million rupee question is, will it be another Dalit, an upper caste Hindu, or a Muslim?

The result of the presidential election is a foregone conclusion. The first Dalit President of India was KR Narayanan (1997-2002). And India is set to get a second Dalit president at the sprawling Rashtrapati Bhavan on Raisina Hill.

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This election is not about who has better credentials, or about religion or caste. Rather it is about vote bank politics, where numbers matter. The three political groupings are clear: the aligned parties of NDA and UPA, and the unaligned parties.

declared support for Kovind. However, putting up a brave face of unity the Congress and the Left declared that this election was an ideological battle against the Sangh Parivar to protect the ideals of the constitution.

The opposition waited for the NDA to make the first move. But they criticised the BJP for unilaterally nominating Kovind. On June 22, Sonia Gandhi, on behalf of the opposition, announced that Meira Kumar will be the opposition candidate for the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Obviously, UPA had no choice but to name a Dalit as its candidate, as a higher caste nominee would have been a non-starter.

of 776 MPs of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, and 4,114 Members of the Legislative Assembly from 31 state legislatures. In total there are 4,990 electors who will cast their secret ballots on July 17. The vote of each member carries a value in proportion to the population they represent. It is a complex calculation. However, the total weighted value adds up to 10,98,903. The candidate winning more than 50 percent of the total value will be declared the winner.

It will be a Dalit-versus-Dalit election. But this election is not about who has better credentials, or about religion or caste. Rather it is about vote bank