

Extrajudicial killings

Scant regard for the rule of law

A report in this newspaper yesterday has revealed that in the last 13 years, 1900 people have been victims of extrajudicial killings, of whom 800 died in police custody. These numbers are chilling to say the least, and a damning narrative of the state of rule of law in this country. Law enforcement agencies have become so emboldened by the impunity they enjoy, that the ongoing human rights violations in the name of "crossfire" or "encounter" has become something of a norm in the country. The circumstance of the deaths described by the agencies would be hard even for the most credulous to accept.

The record of shootouts dates as far back as 2004—when RAB was formed. The police, RAB and joint forces have since been involved in many extrajudicial killings. Some of these cases attracted media attention while some have gone completely unnoticed. In both cases, however, victims' families have rarely, if ever, gotten justice.

We cannot talk about extrajudicial deaths without mentioning enforced disappearances because the two are intrinsically linked. According to various reports between 2010 and July this year as many as 519 people have become victims of enforced disappearances—329 of whom are still missing. It is for the law enforcing agencies to trace these people.

Without major reforms of the criminal justice system, the abuse of power by law enforcement authorities will continue unabated. The lack of regard for due process is rooted not only in a culture of unaccountability but also indicate the likely acquiesce of higher authorities, and this must change. An oversight mechanism must be employed so that law enforcement officials involved in extrajudicial killings do not go unpunished.

Teenager tortured to death

Reflective of a social malaise

In April this year the High Court had upheld a verdict of death sentence for four perpetrators involved in the brutal torture and killing of 13-year old Samiul Islam Rajon in 2015. We had hoped that the verdict would act as a deterrent to such animalistic behaviour towards children. Regrettably, similar treatment was meted out to Sagor, an 18-year old scrap collector. He was brutally killed on suspicion of being a thief. The similarities between the two cases are uncanny. The boy was tied up to a pole and repeatedly battered and a video of his torture was captured on a cell phone by a perpetrator and uploaded on to social media. His body was dumped nearby and the police are now on the trail of the killers.

What these murders have highlighted is our apathy towards children who may be tortured at will and are considered to belong to that segment of society which is powerless to defend themselves. We have seen the surge in crimes against children with some 145 children raped in the first quarter of 2016 and some 50 children killed. Rajon's murder in 2015 highlighted the need for the formation of special tribunals that would deal with murder of minors which are becoming increasingly common in our society. Swift trials and verdicts are needed so that such predatory behaviour is discouraged and the common belief that children are easy prey dispelled. We hope that authorities will take into cognisance that this incident is not a random act of killing but an emerging societal law and order problem which needs to be tackled swiftly and decisively before it proliferates into a serious situation.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Night at a refugee camp

Recently, I read a report titled "Night at a refugee camp" (*The Daily Star*) and was very touched by it. The way Pinaki Roy and Mohammad Ali Jinnat described their experience of spending a night at a refugee camp was very impressive and left a profound impact on my mind.

Every day we read about Myanmar refugees entering Bangladesh and the amount of relief fund provided by different countries and aid agencies, but the numbers cease to have meaning as we try to understand the pain that those poor souls must have gone through.

People sleeping under tarpaulins, waiting their turn to freshen up in the middle of the night, listening to sermons on radio even during such an unstable period of their lives, all portrayed the triumph of life over the rampant violation of human rights and oppression. We look forward to reading more such heart-warming reports in the future.

Israt, Sylhet



Rohingya settlement on hillocks of Balukhali area of Ukhia light up on Friday night. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Corruption eating away relief for the public

THE OVERTON WINDOW



A report titled "World Food Security and Nutrition Situation-2017", brought out jointly by a number of UN organisations, estimates that some 25 million Bangladeshis,

mostly women and children, suffer from malnutrition. This is not to say that the overall food and nutrition situation here has not improved over the years. In fact, it is quite the contrary, as evident from the fact that Bangladesh has witnessed stunted growth among children (aged under 5) go down from 45 percent to 36.1 percent between 2005 and 2016.

Despite the progress, natural calamities like floods and landslides are having a disastrous effect on the nutrition situation, which is likely to be more severe this time around, considering the extent of damage caused by floods this year. According to the state-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), coarse varieties of rice were on sale for Tk 50-54 per kg in the capital's retail markets last week—Tk 10 higher than the price only a month ago.

With rice prices soaring across the country in recent months, following widespread fears of rice shortages fuelled largely by the fact that massive amounts of agricultural losses were endured, the government has rightly started to intervene in the market recently by selling the staple at a subsidised price under a nationwide Open Market Sale (OMS) programme. Although, only after wrongly delaying from intervening.

Food Ministry sources, meanwhile, said that the intervention was not possible earlier because of the shortage of rice in public granaries, while also blaming a section of rice millers for deliberately hoarding rice and hiking prices. The Anti-Corruption Commission too has "received the allegation" that traders were hoarding rice in cahoots with "some government officials", which it has said it will "inquire into".

Consequently, their attempts to defraud the public also allegedly included dissemination of a confusing letter that said that India had stopped exporting rice to Bangladesh, which was later cleared to have been fake by the government. When seen from a broader perspective, this allegation is much more serious than it initially seems. At a time when the nation had barely recovered from one massive disaster (floods) and was struggling to deal with another crisis (the Rohingya influx), that special-interest groups will attempt to

destabilise the rice market—endangering the national interest—for a quick buck should not be taken lightly.

Thus, the government should carefully investigate the matter and transparently deal with its findings. However, what none of this can excuse is the government's own failure to pre-empt a situation in which it would significantly have to intervene in the market in order to stabilise the price of a commodity as essential as rice.

One further indicator of this is the shelving of the government's rice distribution programme to the ultra-poor which it had drummed up for quite some time. The government suddenly postponed the plan as it would require 4.5 lakh tonnes of food-grains, while to operate the OMS programme beyond the district-level for a

One leading private rice importer said that had the government reduced duty on rice imports "right after the flash flood-induced crop loss, a situation like this would not have arisen in the first place." And so, this is the crux of the current crisis. While it is understandable that the government has had to deal with a number of crises all at the same time, what is inexcusable is the food ministry's failure to perform its primary and specific duty. This too demands a proper investigation as much as the circulation of the fake letter does.

And, finally, there is the matter of what has been happening since then which, bar none, deserves the greatest and most urgent attention; particularly given that it is still rectifiable. And, that is, corruption in the OMS programme,



Coarse varieties of rice were on sale for Tk 50-54 per kg in the capital's retail markets last week—Tk 10 higher than the price only a month ago.

month, it would also need 50,000 to 100,000 tonnes of rice; whereas, the public food stock had 3.45 lakh tonnes of rice only and 1.21 lakh tonnes were still in the import pipeline, information from food ministry officials revealed.

This and other similar failures have prompted even rice traders to allege that "the food ministry didn't pay any attention to a fast depleting government food stock, and [had] responded late to the urgency of replenishing the rice reserve after the Haor deluge." And to blame the government for "the delay in reducing the high import duty on rice" and for refusing "to give better price for homegrown rice", only to procure the staple later "from abroad at much higher prices" (Govt wasn't alert to depleting stock, September 20, *The Daily Star*).

including in its sale and distribution.

One incident of this was recorded in Rajshahi's Durgapur upazila on September 20, where three dealers were alleged to have falsely shown on paper the sale of rice at the subsidised OMS rate. "Taking advantage of lax monitoring by food officials," the dealers were alleged to have sold three tonnes of rice—the total allocation of OMS for the day—on the black market (one can only assume at a higher price for personal profit) in complete disregard for the plight of ordinary citizens and the intent of the initiative (Dealers go rogue with OMS rice, September 22, *The Daily Star*).

One of the monitoring officials had even admitted signing the document confirming the sale, under pressure

from someone named Rustom, who also happens to have the "blessings of local leaders of the ruling party". No doubt, there are many more cases of similar corrupt practices happening regularly that are going completely unreported.

Given the settings, while it is perhaps illogical to ask the government to address each and every case of such corruption individually, what it can do is take exemplary measures against the corrupt in cases that are brought to its notice—particularly when its own party men are involved—to show that no one should feel emboldened enough to chance their luck. Also, assigning responsible and non-partisan monitoring officials at the points of sale is as paramount as properly informing the

public about where and how they can easily obtain OMS rice—that has been mainly lacking so far.

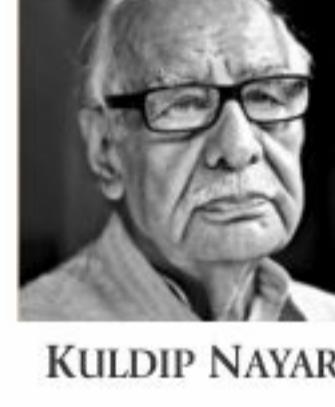
It has been a difficult year for the government with so much going on, but an even tougher one for those who have lost everything and now have nothing going for them. In some of the cases, the government did well and meant well, but in others, it made a hash of things. In some of the instances it was a handful of individuals at fault, but in others, the government's lack of action that allowed it.

Right now, those who have nothing going for them cannot afford to have the government make a hash of things any longer, nor its lack of action to alleviate their sufferings.

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

Are refugees outsiders?

BETWEEN THE LINES



COMMUNIST leader Jyoti Basu ruled West Bengal for two and a half decades. He fought relentlessly against the communal forces. It is surprising how the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has penetrated and practically taken over the state. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress is in power in the state at present but even her adherence makes it clear that they are fighting a losing battle.

The RSS has moved into the interior of the state and its morning shakhas are being held in every park. How and why it has happened is a case study.

Communism and ideology is what the Left pursued. In sharp contrast is the RSS preaching, completely archaic and conservative. The rich Bengali culture is today sandwiched between the RSS and the communists.

Mamata is accused of trying to appease the Muslims when she vainly banned the immersion of Durga idols beyond certain hours. The state government, according to news reports, apprehended that both immersion and Muharram processions would be taken out deliberately to cross each other's path, putting the administration to a stern test. However, the Calcutta High Court intervened to restore the status quo.

Perhaps what prompted Mamata to order the ban was the steady string of communal riots that have been breaking out in the districts. Controversies over the routes of Muharram processions, too, had ignited the spark. In addition, the accusations by belligerent Hindu groups, comprising both Bengalis and non-Bengalis, had sprung up to resist "Bangladeshi infiltrators" and "Islamic terrorists".

All these added to the communal

liberated from West Pakistan, had migrated to India and even today they maintain two houses, one in Bengal and the other in Bangladesh. Their children study in Indian schools and have even acquired identity and become citizens of India in some cases.

However, the rising Islamic radicalism and the steady attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh have led to a fresh exodus over a decade. Unable to find a living, the economically poor are mostly confined to the border districts, eking out a living through odd jobs. Understandably, the Bengalis harbour deep resentment against "the other" Muslims. And these are the



Dhaka has provided shelter to these refugees on humanitarian grounds but beyond a point it cannot help much.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

ones that RSS has targeted cleverly to pull on to its side.

Against this backdrop, the Bangladeshis are going through a peculiar problem of exodus of Rohingyas, a minority Muslim community, from Myanmar. Dhaka has provided shelter to these refugees on humanitarian grounds but beyond a point it cannot help much.

The number of Rohingya refugees who have fled Myanmar into Bangladesh since late August has now topped 480,000,

he said. "This brings the total number of Rohingyas in Bangladesh to more than 700,000." The Rohingyas are denied citizenship under a 1982 Myanmar citizenship law. The Myanmar government recognises them as illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh.

The exodus of Rohingyas has also posed a problem to New Delhi since some of them have infiltrated into India through the northeastern states that share a long border with Myanmar. Even as the government is trying to prove to the court

never give such a statement," said Ahrir. The government recently told the Supreme Court that it will give evidence to the court. According to the government, some Rohingya militants are linked with Pakistan-based terrorist groups. The centre has said it will deport all 40,000 Rohingyas who are illegal immigrants. The move has been challenged in court by two Rohingya petitioners who said that their community is peace-loving and that most of them have no link to any terrorist activity.

New Delhi has to face the refugee problem stoically. There are Kashmiri pundits in Jammu and Bangladeshi Muslims in Kolkata and Guwahati. So is the case with Sri Lankan Tamils who have taken asylum in Tamil Nadu. Small skirmishes are already taking place and pose a serious problem. But the Rohingya exodus has forced the government to revisit the issue of refugees, giving a political colour to a human issue.

What is disconcerting is that the problem is also slowly getting a communal colour—Hindu versus Muslim. West Bengal, which is already sitting on a volcano, has to retrieve the situation which may get out of control. In fact, the secular and democratic forces would have to join hands to fight against the onslaught of Hindutva elements.

Sadly, one has to admit that the country is going towards a philosophy which has been fought by Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Our heritage is pluralism and its essence has to be kept alive. This is not a one-party task. All like-minded forces have to come together to fight against the creeping communal elements.

With the Hindu extremists getting an upper hand in every sphere, it is an uphill task. But there is no option either. If we want communalism to be rolled back to restore the ethos of pluralism, the secular forces have to go to the grassroots. The communists are giving the impression as if they alone are putting up a fight. The Congress is also doing so relentlessly, however irrelevant it looks in the present scenario.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.