

Rangpur can show the way

Peaceful elections can be the norm

WE congratulate Jatiya Party's Mostafizur Rahman Mostafa in winning the race in the mayoral elections in Rangpur, that too by a wide margin against the two other contestants from Awami League and BNP. Unofficial results from all 93 polling centres show that Rahman has received 1,60,489 votes against his nearest rival from AL who received 62,400 votes and BNP rival who got 35,136 votes. The win was not so surprising, considering that Rangpur is a stronghold of JP with its chairperson HM Ershad being its representative in parliament. But the victory is also indicative of Rahman's popularity in his district although he had been defeated in the last mayoral elections by the AL candidate five years ago which was held on a nonpartisan basis.

The Rangpur elections with a turnout of about 74.3 percent, according to a report, is considered a significant success for the Election Commission for being able to ensure a peaceful election with no major report of foul play. Besides BNP's allegations of intimidation in some poll centres, which the EC should investigate, the people of Rangpur seem to be pleased with the way the polls have been conducted.

The Rangpur mayoral polls have given us a glimmer of hope that this may be the trend in all the upcoming polls. A strong presence of law enforcement members seemed to have ensured a fairly peaceful election. The biggest test for the EC will be during the parliamentary elections by the end of 2018 to see whether such a congenial manner can be maintained. Will the major opposition parties be able to contest the general elections without any intimidation or obstacles to their right to assemble or campaign? We certainly hope so. Let the Rangpur elections be an example that will be emulated in the general elections.

When protectors commit crime

The law must apply equally to them

IT did not surprise us when, after the police headquarters (HQ) launched an online complaint cell for people to report about police misconduct and offences, it started to receive a barrage of allegations from day one.

We appreciate the fact that the police HQ tried to pave the way—no matter how narrow that is—to curb police misconduct. However, it is a matter of regret that barely any concrete steps have been taken against the personnel who have committed serious crimes.

A high-ranking police officer claimed that the police HQ took "stern" departmental actions against any policemen, if found guilty. His definition of "stern actions," however, is limited to withdrawals or transfers. Precedents of suspension, demotion and termination are very rare. Even if one gets fired, he could be reinstated very easily. How can the police HQ expect to deter police offences when the offenders know that they will ultimately get away with them even if they get caught?

Extortion, abduction and torture are outright criminal acts. If a private citizen commits such crimes, he would be jailed. If police personnel, who are responsible for public safety, commit the crimes that they are supposed to prevent, then the punishment should be stricter.

High-ranking officers cannot escape their part of the blame, either. Many low-tier police personnel have claimed that one of the reasons they get involved in criminal activities is to "appease" their superior officers, and had paid a huge amount of money to get their job.

If the police headquarters genuinely want to prevent police offences, it must take action against offenders—both high and low ranking personnel—so strictly that it sends a message to others. Otherwise, public trust in the police will continue to erode.

MY SPACE

Reclaiming public spaces for women



SHAGUFTA HOSSAIN

THE front page of *The Daily Star* published a photo that could be a poster for any women's empowerment campaign. In the picture, 15-year-old Ontora, calls passengers to board a Mirpur-bound BRTC bus, her face a perfect picture of strength and resilience. The caption of the photo draws attention to how rare the picture is, stating that many passengers stare at her in disbelief, because she has the courage to do "a man's job."

I wanted to see exactly how rare this scenario is so I googled "female bus helpers in Bangladesh." The first page displays results almost entirely constituting of titles like "Women harassment in public transport", "DU female student harassed by bus helper" and "Woes of women commuters". Ontora will probably never read this or any other article I write in English. So I assume it is difficult for her to even imagine the extent of her courage to have taken up employment in a public transport service in a country where I am afraid to ride buses. I also assume that it's not her concern. She is not trying to inspire anyone. She is just getting by, trying to earn a living in a country where 26 lakh people are jobless.

I am not the only one in the country who doesn't get on a public bus unless it's an emergency. Statistics say that 13 percent women avoid using public transport due to sexual harassment; 48 percent women experience harassment from drivers and helpers. A report by ActionAid Bangladesh stated that the atmosphere in public service-oriented places is far from conducive. Majority of the respondents interviewed for the study acknowledged that buses and bus stands are unsafe for women. Women are sexually harassed and inappropriately touched at bus stands by service providers and the general public. In addition, both men and women face rude behaviour. The report was quoted by a daily newspaper: "City buses are considered so unsafe that even slum women won't use them unless absolutely necessary (in cases where shared CNG or others are unavailable)."

Earlier this year the Thomson Reuters Foundation carried out a survey that stated that Dhaka ranked as the seventh most dangerous megacity for women. Sexual violence and cultural practices along with two other factors contributed to Dhaka's miserable failure. The Safe Cities index also ranked Dhaka as one of the 10 least safe



Fifteen-year-old Ontora calling passengers to board a Mirpur-bound BRTC bus in the city's Farmgate area.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

cities for women to live in.

And if we moved beyond statistics and reports to lives, on August 25, five men raped and murdered 27-year-old Zakia Sultana Rupa in a running bus while returning to Mymensingh from Bogra which became national news. Rupa, who completed her Masters from Bogra Azizul Haque College, was studying law at Dhaka Ideal Law College. She was working at Unilever Bangladesh Limited at its Sherpur branch. The bloodstained body of the victim was found on the Tangail-Mymensingh Highway at Modhupur's Panchish Mile area.

Following the case, much discussion, at least in my circles, centred on how "Bangladesh is becoming like India" citing the much-discussed Delhi gang-rape to point out Delhi's low standards in ensuring safety on public transports. In addition, a number of informal reports emerged on social media where people reported in either witnessing or being victim to harassment on public transport. However, the fact of the matter is, safety on public transport has not been guaranteed for women in Dhaka for as long as I can remember. Women who board public transportation do so braving many risks. We develop a thicker skin, accept the risks as part of our lives and we move on.

There is also a silence around reporting sexual assault and harassment because it is traumatic to speak about. Having your body violated will leave marks on your psyche that takes forever to heal. There is also a stigma associated with speaking about any kind of assault. Having to prove

that something like this has happened to me is difficult. But when we do speak up the general response to women facing unsafe situation on public transport is asking them not to avail these services. However, by asking women to give up their spaces in public domains, we are essentially telling them, "You don't belong here" and consequently "Public spaces are men's spaces." So what's the solution?

I am wondering if taking some really small steps can significantly help reduce this predicament. In a report titled "Freedom to Move" published by ActionAid under their Safe Cities for Women campaign, the organisation proposed four keys to gender responsive transport. Firstly, they suggest that the state should play a bigger role in regulating, subsidising and even providing public services in order to make it available, accessible and safe for women and girls. Secondly, women must be included in the physical planning and design of cities and public transport systems, ensuring gender-responsive safety designs, ticketing systems or route selection and the implementation of specific gender policies for urban public transport, making them participatory. Thirdly, governments should make public transport providers and their staff live up to agreed standards, and give sanctions resulting from their performance. And lastly the transportation must be effectively managed. The report proposes a multi-sectoral approach to ensure women's right to freedom of movement within the

city, grounded in efforts that prevent violence against women and girls. Steps include challenging patriarchal norms and gender discrimination through the education system; ensuring equal educational and employment opportunities for women and girls; and increasing women's political participation and decision-making power.

I understand. None of it sounds like small steps or simple solutions. While these are great and necessary recommendations, to the average person they may sound complicated. So, I am wondering if we can start with a simple step of encouraging more female staff on buses. Female bus drivers, helpers, conductors and assistants might significantly reduce harassment on public transport, making them more women-friendly. This will solve multiple problems at a time, starting with ensuring a more conducive environment for women commuters, encouraging more women to use public transport. As a spill-over effect, if public transports were more user-friendly, traffic would be reduced on the streets improving the quality of life in the city in general.

It is time to reclaim public spaces for women. It is time to assert that spaces belong as much to women as to anyone else. And in doing so, we honour trailblazers like Ontora, braving many storms in a man's world.

Shagufta Hossain is the founder of Leaping Boundaries and a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The Pandora's box of the digital age



CARL BILDT

IS the world sliding dangerously toward cyber Armageddon? Let us hope not; but let us also apprehend the threat, and focus on what to do about it.

One country after another has begun exploring options for bolstering their offensive capabilities in cyberspace, and many other countries have already done so. This is a dangerous escalation. In fact, few other trends pose a bigger threat to global stability.

Almost all societies have become heavily dependent on the Internet, the world's most important piece of infrastructure—and also the infrastructure upon which all other infrastructure relies. The so-called Internet of Things is a misnomer; soon enough, it will be the "Internet of Everything." And our current era is not a Fourth Industrial Revolution; it is the beginning of the digital age, and the end of the industrial age altogether.

The digital age has introduced new vulnerabilities that hackers, cyber criminals, and other malign actors are already routinely exploiting. But even more alarming is the eagerness of national governments to conduct cyber-warfare operations against one other.

We have already reached the stage at which every conflict has a cyber dimension. The United States and Israel crossed the Rubicon in 2010 by launching the Stuxnet attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Now, there is no telling where ongoing but hidden cyber conflicts begin and end.

Things were different in the old world of nuclear weapons, which are complicated and expensive devices based on technology that only a few highly educated specialists have mastered. Cyber weapons, by contrast, are generally inexpensive to develop or acquire, and deceptively easy to use. As a result, even weak and fragile states can become significant cyber powers.

Worse still, cyber-war technologies have been proliferating at an alarming pace.

While there are extensive safeguards in place to control access to sensitive nuclear technologies and materials, there is almost nothing preventing the dissemination of malicious software code.

To understand the scale of the threat we face, look no further than the "WannaCry" virus that, among other things, almost shut down the British National Health Service this past May. The virus exploited a vulnerability in the Microsoft Windows operating system that the US National Security Agency had already discovered, but did not report to Microsoft. After this information was leaked or stolen from the NSA, North Korea quickly put the ransomware to use,

security is regarded as complicated and costly; but cyber offense is seen as inexpensive and sexy.

The problem is that, while deterrence works in the nuclear world, it isn't particularly effective in the cyber world. Rogue actors—and North Korea is hardly the only example—are far less vulnerable than developed countries to cyber counterstrikes. They can attack again and again without risking serious consequences.

Cyber attacks' often-ambiguous origins make it even harder to apply a rational theory of deterrence to the cyber world. Identifying the responsible party, if possible at all, takes time; and the risk of

In a world riven by geopolitical rivalries large and small, such ambiguity and sabre-rattling in the cyber realm could have catastrophic results. Nuclear weapons are generally subject to clear, strict, and elaborate systems of command and control. But who can control the legions of cyber warriors on the dark web?

Given that we are still in the early stages of the digital age, it is anyone's guess what will come next. Governments may start developing autonomous counterstrike systems that, even if they fall short of Dr Strangelove's Doomsday Machine, will usher in a world vulnerable to myriad unintended consequences.

Most obviously, cyber weapons will become a staple in outright wars. The United Nations Charter affirms all member states' right to self-defence—a right that is, admittedly, increasingly open to interpretation in a kinetic, digitised world. The Charter also touches on questions of international law, particularly with respect to non-combatants and civilian infrastructure in conflict zones.

But what about the countless conflicts that do not reach the threshold of all-out war? So far, efforts to establish universal rules and norms governing state behaviour in cyberspace have failed. It is clear that some countries want to preserve their complete freedom of action in this domain.

But that poses an obvious danger. As the NSA leaks have shown, there is no way to restrict access to destructive cyber weapons, and there is no reason to hope that the rules of restraint that governed the nuclear age will work in the cyber age.

Unfortunately, a binding international agreement to restrict the development and use of offensive cyber weapons in non-war situations is probably a long way off. In the meantime, we need to call greater attention to the dangers of cyber-weapon proliferation, and urge governments to develop defensive rather than offensive capabilities. An arms race in cyberspace has no winners.

Carl Bildt is a former prime minister and foreign minister of Sweden.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Newborns being stolen from hospitals

The news that newborn babies are being stolen from hospitals, especially public hospitals, is a matter of grave concern. The Dhaka Medical College Hospital last month formed a three-member probe committee to investigate one such incident on its premises.

In 2015, an *Al-Jazeera* report said that at least 16 such incidents occurred in Bangladesh's public hospitals in 2014.

Needless to say, the extent of pain and trauma the victim's parents and families go through in the case of something like this happening must be enormous. That said, it is unimaginable how someone could be cruel enough to steal a baby away from its parents right after it is born.

I urge the concerned authorities to ensure better security in all public hospitals as such incidents cannot be acceptable in any civilised society.

AHMK Baki Billah, By e-mail



which should come as no surprise. In recent years, North Korea has launched numerous cyber-attacks around the world, most notably against Sony Pictures, but also against many financial institutions.

And, of course, North Korea is hardly an exception. Russia, China, and Israel have also developed cyber weapons, which they are busy trying to implant in systems around the world. This growing threat is precisely why other countries have started talking about acquiring offensive cyber capabilities of their own: they want to have a deterrent to ward off attacks from other cyber powers. Cyber

misattribution is always there. I doubt we will ever see unambiguous proof that Israel is conducting offensive cyber operations; but that certainly doesn't mean that it isn't.

In the darkness of cyberspace, sophisticated actors can hide behind oblivious third parties, who are then exposed to counterstrikes by the party under attack. And in the ongoing conflict among Gulf countries, at least one government may have contracted hackers based in other countries to conduct operations against an adversary. This method of avoiding detection will almost certainly become the norm.