

## The brutality of muggers

### Why can't they be caught?

A photo was published in this newspaper's front page yesterday of the son of Helena Begum, who was killed the day before, as muggers pulled her handbag and, when she fell off, drove their vehicle over her. The boy's expression speaks volumes about the shock he was going through.

This is not an isolated incident. *The Daily Star* documented at least three recent incidents in which people have lost their lives when muggers tried to snatch their valuables. It is most likely that had people not been killed, these incidents would have gone unreported. We do not know how many such incidents take place every day. What we do know, however, is that almost all such muggers get away after having been caught by police, because of legal obscurity, procedural complexity and the lack of cooperation and determination of the prosecution and the victims. This makes us wonder, will the family of Helena Begum get justice in the end?

It seems from current cases that muggers have adopted a new strategy to carry out their crime. They now use a vehicle—a car or motorcycle—in their operations so that they can flee quickly from the spot, enhancing the risk of killing or injuring the victims.

Mugging has been one of Dhaka's longstanding problems. What is baffling is that in spite of significant increase in logistics of law enforcement agencies, mugging continues to thrive, endangering public safety and security. Why, despite more resources and technical knowhow, our law enforcers are not being able to nab these muggers and put them behind bars? At present there is no legal definition of mugging and only "robbery" is recognised in the law. This hampers the legal process of mugging cases. The first step is to address this omission. At the same time, the law enforcement agencies must work harder to destroy the network of muggers.

## Police's sonic weapon harmful for health

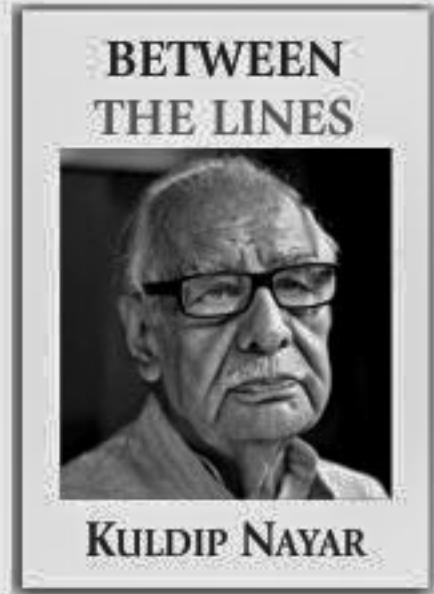
### Danger lies in not following safeguards

THE police have bought 12 Acoustic Healing Devices (AHD) at a cost Tk 50 lakh each for the purpose of driving away protesters. Although it is a non-lethal weapon, the AHDs give out a piercing sound, which, health experts say, can seriously damage hearing of people within a 1km radius. AHDs allow law enforcers the option of scattering crowds without going anywhere near them. The high pitch sonic beams are supposed to be administered following specific guidelines, i.e. operators of these devices are not supposed to emit a sound that crosses the 130 decibel threshold. Health practitioners claim that sound emitted at a level over 85 decibels can cause hearing loss.

While the police are undoubtedly very happy with the performance of these devices since it saves law enforcers from directly engaging with protesters, how sure can we be that the safety measures will be adhered to when using AHDs? Our police have not demonstrated any willingness to follow rules when using conventional crowd-control measures and people have been paying the price for their heavy handedness.

Rights activists are not wrong when they claim that Dhaka is hardly a place where such devices should be used. The device, in fact, was designed for use in conflict zones and has been deployed militarily in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq to drive people out of war zones. So, in the event that an AHD ends up in the hands of a law enforcer untrained in its proper use, how many people are going to end up with impaired hearing is not known. We cannot support the use of such devices, especially where there is ample reason to believe there are grave health risks involved and hope authorities will reconsider their deployment.

# Awards losing their sheen



**BETWEEN THE LINES**  
**KULDIP NAYAR**

I no longer find the enthusiasm which marked the first Republic Day. I recall how we would get up early in the morning to be ready to line up the Rajpath leading to India Gate where different battalions of Army, Navy and the Air Force personnel and armed police displayed their martial prowess. Unlike in the past when the salute was taken by the prime minister, now the president takes the salute. The whole thing is ceremonial.

The president comes down in a buggy, drawn by horses from Rashtrapati Bhavan to the saluting dais. The prime minister receives him. He takes the salute. There is

sacrificed their lives defending India. These are deserving people

But over the years, the other awards have come to be given to the workers of the ruling party, at present, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This is, however, contrary to the thinking of the framers of the constitution. They banned awards. That is the reason why when the Janata Party came to power in the wake of the popular movement, led by Gandhian Jayaprakash Narayan, they had stopped that practice. The person who initiated the awards was India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. He wanted to give recognition to people who had excelled themselves in the fields of literature, economics or science. No money is given because the award was too valuable to be weighed on the scale of monetary benefit.

information officer, went on stacking in a file. Almost a month before the Republic Day I had to shortlist the names. I must admit I followed no rules while preparing the list which went to the deputy secretary in charge, then to the home secretary and finally to the home minister. I found very few changes in the list I sent.

But the toughest job was preparing the citations. I would have the dictionary and Roget's Thesaurus before me. In some cases, I had the bio-data to guide myself. Mostly they contained a mere cryptic description of the person whether he was a scientist, an academician or economist. That helped me somewhat but preparing the citation on that basis was challenging.

The entire process was so haphazard that the Supreme Court had to intervene to ask the government to constitute a selection committee, including the

In the past, when the Congress was in power it conferred the Padma Bhushan award to the US hotelier Sant Singh Chatwal despite some criminal cases pending against him. There was a furore in the country but the home ministry justified his selection on the plea that he was a known Indian who had served the cause of the country abroad. But there are several cases of eminent people refusing to accept the award on the ground that the panel of selectors was not capable enough to judge their work.

The lesson to be learnt is whether there should be any award at all. The experience is that the ruling party tends to give "recognition" to the people who are either members of the party or are connected with it. The real purpose is lost because the recognition is extended to those who are close to the party.



Floats on display during the Republic Day parade in New Delhi, India.

PHOTO: REUTERS

transparency in what is being done. Normally, India invites one Guest of Honour from a foreign nation and he or she is hosted with all pomp and ceremony.

But this year, Republic Day had several guests of honour, mostly from the Asean countries. To accommodate all the guests the dais, which used to be about 35 feet, was stretched to 90 feet. A huge departure, one should say. The invitations to all Asean heads were to celebrate our long-standing friendship and the government of India made elaborate arrangements to strengthen the bonding with these countries.

Republic Day is also the day when awards are given to the people who have excelled themselves in various fields, especially to the services personnel who have shown gallantry in times of troubles on the border and those who had

Nehru also did not want the award to be linked with politics. He did not envisage that one day the entire exercise of selection would get politicised. The government would pick up its chamchas (sycophants) to reward his or her services to the ruling party.

I recall that initially the Republic Day awards, started some 50 years ago, were under the Ministry of External Affairs which Nehru headed. Subsequently, the job was entrusted to the Home Ministry which gave the responsibility to one deputy secretary. He had too many things on his plate. He passed on the task to the information officer attached to the ministry. That is how I came to handle the job because I was then the Home Ministry's Information Officer.

The mode of selection was arbitrary. The prime minister and other ministers would suggest one or more names which I, as

opposition leader as its member. However, some order came to prevail once the committee was in position. Yet, preparing the citation was my task.

The draft gazette notification of names was issued by the Rashtrapati Bhavan. I recall that once the name of Ms Lazarus was suggested by the president. Accordingly, the gazette notification was made public.

But when President Rajendra Prasad saw the notification, he said the name he had suggested was that of a nurse. She had attended to him while he got a bout of asthma when he was travelling to Hyderabad from Karnool in Andhra Pradesh. We were all embarrassed that the honour had been bestowed on the wrong person. But we could do nothing because the name was already in the public domain. That year two Lazarus' were given the awards.

This only emphasises the argument that the awards are not given according to merit. This charge will remain because the selection is done by people who are nominated by the government. Government should have included the opposition leader in the selection panel but he or she would be in the minority. There should be a debate in the country on the importance of awards. They have outlived their utility which was not there even when they were introduced.

When the constitution has banned awards why should they be there. They violate the spirit of the constitution and the general understanding. Even their introduction was wrong. Prime Minister Narendra Modi should initiate the debate in the country to know whether the awards should continue or not.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

# Govts should act now to narrow wealth inequality

OP RANA

EIGHT men own as much wealth as the poorest 3.6 billion people, or half of the world's total population, says Oxfam in its latest report. The report titled "An economy for the 99 percent", released just before the January 23-26 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, reflects the horrific global wealth disparity that is being further widened as big businesses and the super-rich continue to dodge taxes, lower wages and use their powers to influence political regimes.

Oxfam says that, thanks to new, updated data on the global distribution of wealth, especially in developing



CREDIT: FEE.COM

countries such as India, it is clear now that the poorest half of the world population owns less wealth than previously thought.

Economies across the world are "channelling" wealth to the super rich at the cost of the poor, with women being most exploited, the Oxfam report says. The astonishing pace at which the super-rich are accumulating wealth could in only the next 25 years create the world's first trillionaire. To put things in perspective, a person would need to spend USD 1 million every day for 2,738 years to exhaust USD 1 trillion.

That the wealth disparity in India is among the widest in the world should be a grave concern, as the country is considered an emerging economy with a relatively high economic growth rate.

Last year's Oxfam survey showed the richest 1 percent people in India owned 58 percent of the country's total wealth, which was already higher than the global average of about 50 percent. This year's report says the

richest 1 percent Indians pocketed 73 percent of the total wealth generated in the country last year.

It is indeed "obscene" that so much wealth is held by so few, as executive director of Oxfam International Executive Director Winnie Byanyima said, particularly because one in every 10 people in the world is forced to survive on less than USD 2 a day. Income disparity is pushing millions of people into poverty, fracturing economies, dividing societies, making a mockery of democracy, and fuelling anger against the world order created and run by the rich and powerful. No wonder people in many countries seem disillusioned with globalisation, and the majority of voters in the United Kingdom supported Brexit in the 2016 referendum and people in the United States elected Donald Trump as president.

The situation is also cause for concern. In 2016, the income inequality was the lowest in Europe, with the top 10 percent of the population controlling 37 percent of

Europe's total wealth, and the highest in the Middle East (top 10 percent possessing 61 percent of the wealth). Although the corresponding figure for China was 41 percent, the Chinese leadership headed by President Xi Jinping has vowed to eliminate abject poverty by 2020 to realise its goal of establishing a moderately well-off society in an all-round way. In fact, China is the only country to take such a vow and act on it.

Aggravating the global problem is climate change, which is causing more droughts, floods and other natural disasters and thus forcing more people to lose their livelihoods and fall into the poverty trap. And thanks to rising unemployment and loss of hope, more youths are joining terrorist groups. Public anger with the wealth disparity is already creating political shockwaves in many countries. If world leaders do not take immediate action to break this vicious circle of climate change, forced poverty and terrorism, the world could sooner than later be caught in a web of conflicts, which would neutralise the gains of globalisation and free trade, and render even elected governments ineffective.

Governments can and should narrow, if not end, the wealth inequality to alleviate poverty, by increasing taxes on wealth as well as high incomes, using more of their revenue to improve education and healthcare, and create jobs. They should also support enterprises that take care of workers and society, rather than just their shareholders.

And they have to do all of this before it is too late.

OP Rana is a senior editor at China Daily.

Copyright: China Daily/ANN

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Children should not be in jail

In 2020, the High Court ruled that no children should be raised in jail. Despite the ruling, many innocent children are being raised in prisons across the country. Maybe their parents—in particular, mothers—are convicted of crimes, but what crimes have these children committed? Why do they have to live in jails like criminals? Although some of them attend schools, they have to return to prison at the end of the day.

There should be different prisons for convicted female prisoners who have children with them. The children should be allowed to spend a significant amount of time outside prisons. And there should be schools and playgrounds for them.

Md Tarek Aziz Bappi, University of Dhaka

### Engage int'l community in Rohingya repatriation

Bangladesh and Myanmar have signed a deal to repatriate the Rohingya refugees who are currently sheltered in Bangladesh. Myanmar's army and the Buddhist extremists in Rakhine carried out a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya minority community. The stateless Rohingyas are often dubbed as the world's most persecuted minority.

A toxic anti-Rohingya sentiment persists in Myanmar it seems. The international community and humanitarian organisations have noted with concern that the situation in Rakhine has not improved enough for repatriation. In my opinion, the government should steadily go forward with repatriation, but with assistance from the international community.

Md Zillur Rahaman, By e-mail