

Violence in the Hills

Address the moot problem

THE spate of violence in the hill tracts is distressing. The killing of an Upazila Chairman on May 3 was followed by the gruesome shooting that killed five and injured seven other indigenous people in Naniarchar of Rangamati. In the last six months 17 people were killed and many more injured in the CHT. It beggars rationale that nearly 600 members of various factions were killed in factional rivalries since the Peace Accord was signed in December 1997.

Reportedly, the violence appears to be the result of factional and even intra-faction rivalry. But we feel that the apparent may not quite reveal the real reasons for these clashes and deaths. The political angle notwithstanding, we believe that there is also a criminal angle stemming from economic compulsions.

Most of the violence and resultant deaths involve members of the erstwhile Shanti Bahini and the many factions that had emerged during the nearly two decades of the turmoil in the region. And the peace agreement we feel has not been able to provide gainful employment to many of the cadres who spent their prime virtually in the wilderness, in spite of the huge investment in the region, due to the lack of real economic activity. Rent-seeking and extortion are the only means of sustenance for them, and what we see today are the consequences of turf war for control of the area.

We would call upon the government to address this aspect seriously. Unless the economy of the region is geared up to provide jobs for the indigenous people, a good part of the peace agreement, we fear, would remain unfulfilled.

Brickfields near schools pose health risks

How were they allowed to be set up in the first place?

THIS newspaper yesterday published an alarming report that nearly half a dozen brickfields in Kamalganj upazila of Moulvibazar are situated adjacent to schools. The students are, therefore, exposed to the black clouds of toxic smoke that these kilns spew out. Experts say this fume is heavy with toxins that could lead to various health problems such as pneumonia, allergies and other respiratory diseases. Unfortunately, this scenario is more or less the same all across the country, especially in rural areas.

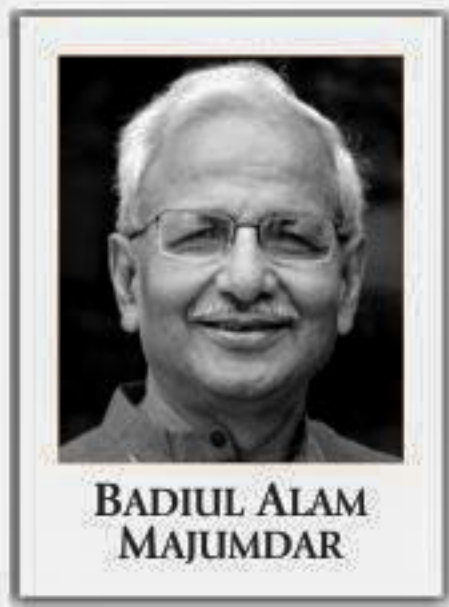
In this particular case of Kamalganj, it is reassuring that the local administration has set up a committee following complaints and protests by locals.

The fact, however, remains that these kilns were allowed to be set up in breach of the Brick Manufacturing and Brick Kilns Establishment (Control) Act. The Act restricts setting up of a brick kiln within one kilometre of educational institutions, among other things. While issuing the license, the local administration should have been careful in examining whether the proposed brick kilns would comply with the law.

Brick kiln owners in rural areas tend to be well connected politically. That is why so many illegal brick kilns still operate under the authorities' nose. As evident in Moulvibazar's case, these illegal brickfields pose a serious threat to public health and contribute to environmental degradation.

The local authorities must evaluate environmental and health risks before permitting new brick kilns to be set up. In addition, the government should encourage environment-friendly brick manufacturers and set a deadline within which existing manufacturers must ensure full compliance or face eviction.

As Gazipur and Khulna polls near, some concerns remain



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BA NGLADESH is now on the election highway. Aside from the national election, seven city corporation elections are to be held this year. However, because of the ineptness of the Election Commission (EC), the elections of Dhaka North and South have already been postponed, in violation of the Constitution and taking away our voting rights. In the meantime, the schedules of Gazipur and Khulna city corporation elections have been declared, and they will be held on May 15. The results of these two elections would have a far-reaching significance not only for the two major parties—Awami League and BNP—but for the nation as well. The experiences of Gazipur and Khulna will also have important implications for the upcoming general election.

In the last few weeks, I have had the opportunity to interact with over 1,500 non-partisan individuals in several meetings throughout Bangladesh. I asked a common question in these meetings: if the national election is held under the present circumstances, do they expect it to be free, fair and credible? Their response, with the exception of one or two, was that they did not see, under the present circumstances, any possibility of a credible election. In addition, in two other meetings with about 40 Upazila-level political and civil society leaders, I asked the same question. Surprisingly, the participants of these meetings, including leaders belonging to the ruling party, also expressed the same view.

If the environment for a free and fair election does not prevail, the EC can refrain from holding it. The commission's responsibility is not to hold election using anyone's prescription. It can even cancel the election results, subject to inquiry, if there are suspicions of unfair means during elections.

Clearly, such negative views of a large number of socially conscious opinion-makers about the credibility, or lack thereof, of the coming national election present serious challenges for the EC, the government, political parties, the media and the civil society—important stakeholders of all elections. Clearly, an appropriate role by these stakeholders is essential for a credible election. However, the commission's role is most important in this regard, although its neutrality and effectiveness are necessary, but not sufficient for ensuring a free and fair election. In other words, even the strongest and most neutral EC will not be able to hold credible elections unless the government—that is, the bureaucracy and the law enforcement agencies—behaves neutrally and the ruling party acts responsibly during elections.

It may be recalled that the elections of four city corporations—Khulna, Barisal, Rajshahi and Sylhet—were held on July 15, 2013. In these elections, the incumbent mayors, all of whom belonged to the ruling party and most of whom were successful as mayors, lost by big margins to their BNP rivals. In the subsequent Gazipur city corporation election also, held



Female voters queue up before a polling centre in South Jagua Government Primary School of Kalizira area of Barisal city in 2013 to cast their votes in the city corporation polls.

PHOTO: STAR

on July 6, 2013, the AL candidate lost by more than 100,000 votes, although Gazipur is traditionally considered an AL stronghold.

It should be noted that all the city corporation elections held in 2013 were more or less free and fair. Although the ruling party put all their efforts and energy into winning these elections, they did not try to unduly influence election results. This was because the AL tried to, in the background of enacting the 15th Amendment discarding the Caretaker Government, create an impression that they could be trusted and credible elections could be held under the party government. However, with the AL's consecutive losses in five city corporation elections, the fate of the subsequent national election became pre-determined. As a result, the EC, despite holding credible elections in those five city corporations, could not do so during the parliamentary election of January 5, 2014.

The coming Gazipur and Khulna city corporation elections again represent a challenge for the AL. If these two elections turn out to be fair and credible and the AL loses, it will send a clear message about their popularity. On the other hand, if they win through fraudulent means, it will only stoke popular concerns about the credibility of the coming elections.

The Gazipur and Khulna elections have also created a serious challenge for the EC in that although the commission gained credibility by holding the Rangpur city corporation election in a free, fair and peaceful manner last December, it lost public confidence during subsequent local elections held on December 28, 2017 and March 29, 2018. The recent Union Parishad and Paurashava elections were marred by violence, death, fake voting and ballot box snatching. According to an editorial by Prothom Alo (March 31, 2018), "These elections were just the opposite of what are considered as free and peaceful elections. Now the elections of Bangladesh have become competition between muscle powers."

The upcoming elections pose another challenge: after the one-sided national election of 2014, many observers claimed that if the election is competitive, the media can freely report foul play, and if election observers are present in polling centres, the election is likely to be free, fair and credible. However, the post-2014 electoral experiences, particularly of the last Dhaka and Chittagong city corporation elections, have proven this to be a myth. These elections have clearly

shown that credible elections depend mainly on the will of the government and the ruling party. But the commission, if it wants, can prevent rigged elections. If the environment for a free and fair election does not prevail, the EC can refrain from holding it. The commission's responsibility is not to hold election using anyone's prescription. It can even cancel the election results, subject to inquiry, if there are suspicions of unfair means during elections. According to our Supreme Court judgment, the EC has the inherent power, even to "add to statutory rules", to ensure free and fair elections. Thus, the EC's responsibility is to use this power justly and fairly in order to gain public trust and confidence in the electoral system.

To gain public confidence in the electoral system, the undesirable elements must be kept out of the electoral arena. The affidavit, the declaring of education qualifications, criminal records, profession, income, assets and liabilities of candidates and their dependents, can be an important tool for this purpose. It may be recalled that the legal requirement for declaring the antecedents of candidates through affidavits was established and institutionalised through the incessant efforts of SHUJAN. As per law, if a candidate hides information and declares false information in the affidavit, his/her nomination is liable to be cancelled. If elected with false declaration, his/her election is to be declared void. Some important examples are already set in this regard. (See the author's *Ninth Parliament Election 2008: Information about the Contestants*, Prothoma Prokashoni, 2012.)

In addition, swearing a false affidavit is a criminal offence. We feel that if the information disclosed in affidavits and tax returns submitted by the candidates are scrutinised, our electoral arena could largely be cleaned up. We have been urging the commission to do so for a long time, with no success. We hope that in view of the serious accusations recently raised about submitting false affidavits by some mayoral candidates of Gazipur and Khulna city corporation elections, the commission would be convinced, in the interest of cleaning up our electoral and political arenas, to seriously scrutinise the affidavits submitted by the candidates.

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IN MEMORIAM

Remembering freedom fighter Lt. Col. Quazi Nooruzzaman, B.U. (declined)

KAISER HAQ

EVERY year around this time, I get a phone call from someone or the other of the loose fraternity of Sector 7 veterans to remind me that May 6 is Lieutenant Colonel Quazi Nooruzzaman's death anniversary; he passed away in 2011. He is warmly remembered for his paternal presence in the Sector that stretched over a number of districts: Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Bogra, Pabna. There isn't a single sub-sector he didn't visit from time to time, nor was there a major operation in the Sector in which he wasn't present.

Colonel Zaman was what one would call a born fighter, and he liked to lead from the front. Quayum Khan in his memoir *Bittersweet Victory* recalls that during an attack, the colonel, who was an artillery officer, persuaded the commander of the supporting Indian battery to let him direct artillery fire.

My fellow company commander, Saifullah, and I were in the colonel's party during the attack on the Khanpur Border Outpost in Dinajpur. After a blistering artillery barrage, the assault party led by my course-mate Major (Retd.) Amin overran the Pakistani bunkers. The colonel's party moved up along with an Indian battalion. Saifullah and I were terribly excited, for what we had witnessed was a classic infantry attack with artillery support, the first in our Sector.

From the front line we tried to spot



Lieutenant Colonel Quazi Nooruzzaman

elements of the retreating enemy contingent and figure out their intentions. Someone spotted a man in black uniform. It could be the uniform of one of the Pakistani militia forces, or it could be a cavalry (Armoured Corps) uniform. The latter possibility would signify an upping of the ante.

Our colonel eagerly asked the Commanding Officer (CO) of the Indian battalion to let him direct the supporting Indian artillery battery but his powers of persuasion failed this time. The Indian (CO) politely brushed aside the request (it would, after all, have been a breach of military protocol) and instead called in a

troop of tanks. Just in case.

One of my fondest memories of the colonel is of him visiting our sub-sector. He would always have a present for me: a carton of Panama cigarettes. He cared for the morale of his boys, and wanted them to be in good form for a big push he had in mind; troops from all the sub-sectors under him would go into action in concert and try to liberate a sizeable chunk of Rajshahi. Adequate Indian artillery support would be necessary.

Unfortunately, the plan could not be translated into action. Events in the larger theatre began to speed up, and we became part of the joint Indo-Bangladesh force that brought the enemy to their knees. Though the colonel left the Army soon after Liberation (he had been a long-retired officer when he joined the struggle)—his war wasn't over. He was one of the founders of the Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee, and today as the ICC nears the end of the task of meting out punishment to the local war criminals, the colonel deserves to be remembered with special gratitude.

Let me end with a note on the title of this brief memoir. Colonel Zaman was awarded the Bir Uttam title but he refused to accept it as he believed gallantry awards were out of place in a people's war, which is how he saw the independence struggle.

Kaiser Haq is a poet, translator, essayist, critic, academic and a freedom fighter. Currently, he is the Dean of Arts & Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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"For the love of books"

Recently, I came across a very impressive piece of news in this newspaper titled "For the love of books." The report was done by Andrew Eagle and Zahangir Shah. It told the story of a public library set up by Rafiqul Islam, a councillor of Manikganj. Although Rafiqul is not a very educated person, his dream is to build a society based on idealism. And he believes that his dream can be achieved through nurturing the habit of reading among readers of all ages. He has fulfilled his long-cherished dream by setting up this library. People like Rafiqul are the real assets of our society.

Md. Zillur Rahaman, Bhola

Make public universities free of session jam

Session jam is a very common problem of our public universities. Being a student of Comilla University, I am also a victim of this. The main reasons for session jam are violence on campus, and teachers' and students' politics. In many public universities, students need seven to eight years to complete a four-year graduation course. Thus valuable time of their life is lost and they cannot apply for many government jobs as the age limit for government jobs is 30 years. We urge the government to take appropriate measures to make our universities session-jam-free.

Amdadul H Sarker, Comilla University