

Disavowal is not the correct response

Enforced disappearances

FIVE hundred and forty-four is a horrendous number of people to have gone missing, reportedly, in the last eight years since 2008. Only a few of them have returned; unfortunately 300 of them remain unaccounted for. It is a very sorry state where relatives of victims of such patently criminal acts should find themselves between the devil and the deep sea. They don't know who they should turn to when their sons or husbands or fathers are picked up in very clandestine manner by people claiming to be members of the law enforcing agencies. And when the families approach these agencies for redress, they are met with a flat denial. Those few that have returned alive are seized with such mortal fear that they are unwilling to recount their experience. Regrettably, the fingers of accusation in almost all cases are pointed towards these agencies.

We would like to stress that the security agencies cannot wash their hands off the matter by merely saying that they have nothing to do with disappearances. We suggest that they have everything to do with a matter that not only undermines the rule of law, but also severely smirches their credibility, more so of Rab and the special branch, given the method of operations of the abductors. And when there are public misgivings about the role of these agencies, it devolves on them to trace out the perpetrators, and curb them permanently, if nothing else than for their image only.

It needs no repeating that law enforcement must not in any way result in breach of law that these agencies are entrusted to prevent.

Women workers' safety in RMG factories

Harassment prevention committee mandatory

THE finding of a survey that 83 percent female garment workers have faced some form of sexual harassment in their workplace is shocking. The survey also found that many of the garment factories do not have any committee for lodging complaints of sexual harassment which is mandatory as per the direction of the High Court. Female garment workers have to face harassment on a regular basis. But in absence of such a committee, the victims cannot file complaints or seek any help from the authorities. Even in those factories with a complain committee, 67 percent of the victims did not seek any kind of assistance from these bodies because they did not have faith in them. And 43 percent of them said that although they had filed complaints, they did not get any help.

The findings of this survey have reminded us again how little has been done to ensure a safe workplace for our female garment workers. Another reason for such a situation is that there is absence of women at the mid-level and managerial positions at the factories but their representation at these levels is an absolute necessity to stop violence against women at the workplace. Also, it must be ensured that all the factories have a committee, as per the supreme court directive, where the victims of violence can lodge their complaints. In addition, the existing laws and policies to protect female garment workers from physical and sexual harassment should be enforced for which the employers themselves must play the key role.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rescind the uniform minimum call rate

The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) is an autonomous government body and its main responsibility is to look after the interest of the subscribers. Yet, its recent move to introduce a uniform minimum call rate for all mobile operators is really disappointing and goes against the interest of users.

The BTRC took its decision without any prior notice and without holding any public hearing. Many mobile phone users were on the initial or mid stages of the various packages that are offered by operators. All these packages had to abruptly end as a result, meaning that a number of users have now lost a good amount of money in exchange for nothing.

Whereas subscribers expect call rates to go down in a competitive market, the higher call rate set by the BTRC does not make any sense. And what is worse is that subscribers have been left with no say in this. The authorities should rescind this poorly thought out decision.

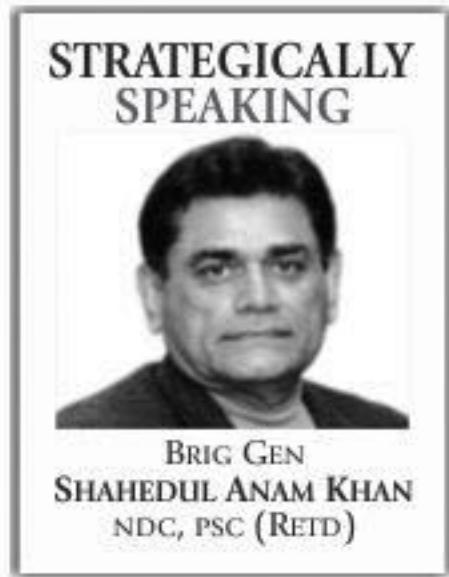
Md Zillur Rahaman, Bhola



PHOTO: STAR

DENIAL IS NOT THE END OF RESPONSIBILITY

Between policing and serving



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING
BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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THE law enforcing agencies have a lot to answer for the incidences of abduction and disappearances, a phenomenon that has assumed alarming regularity. Reportedly, there are over 300 victims of enforced disappearances who remain traceless. Predictably, the families point fingers at the law enforcing agencies—the manner in which they were picked up, as described by the families, leaves very little to the imagination as to the likely identity of the abductors.

Denials by the police do very little to mitigate the fear and suspicion that people by and large have developed in their mind that most of the cases of people being picked up by plainclothes men and vanishing altogether, have to do with the state agencies. Unfortunately, we are served from time to time with very bizarre explanations by people in position of responsibility which expose their scant regard for the intellect of the

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common man. Such comments would evoke laughter were it not for the fact that the matter has to do with life and death (more often the latter) of human beings.

Those who have been fortunate enough to return, very few in number though, have been afflicted, it seems, by



sudden attacks of amnesia since none of them can (will not to be exact) recount their experience at the time of their kidnapping and the period they were in captivity. Some of them end up in the most unlikely of places. It defies all rationale that a BNP politician, apparently trying to “escape” the police would not only choose to leave Dhaka but the country as well, only to end up near a Guwahati police station in Assam. Certainly, criminals find safe sanctuary across the border no doubt, but one has never heard of a “fugitive” ending up at the lion's den while trying to escape from the wolves, deliberately.

But let us give the benefit of doubt to the agencies that they have nothing to do with these disappearance or abductions. If that were true then we are all living in a dangerous environment where a group or groups masquerading as law enforcing agencies are virulently active. They identify themselves as members of various agencies and move with impunity kidnapping people, sometimes in broad daylight. Their modus operandi betrays the action of a well-trained outfit quite adept in such furtive operations—from deactivating the CCTV to using of chloroform on the victims. Their getaway is equally efficiently managed.

Given these circumstances, and

accepting the common refrain of denial by the authorities, should it not be enough to raise the hackles of the intelligence and other law enforcing agencies to compel them to track these elements out and snub them for good. There are enough evidences, captured by CCTV as well as material witnesses that should provide enough leads to identify the perpetrators and the vehicles, yet they have remained untraced.

And who are the victims? They are mostly individuals belonging to the opposition political camps. Some of them are businessmen too, and professionals. Yes there have been a few victims belonging to the ruling party, but they were the ones that have had the gall to cross swords with the stronger faction of the group they belonged to. And what is the purpose of the kidnappings? Is it for ransom? Statistics show very little correlation between the abductions and demand for ransom.

This is a serious law and order issue that cannot be dismissed by outlandish comments. Despite denials, the common perception is that these unfortunate people are victims of the state machineries. And it is up to the state agencies to disprove the allegations and clear the so-called misperception. They must placate the minds of the victims' families by arresting the kidnappers

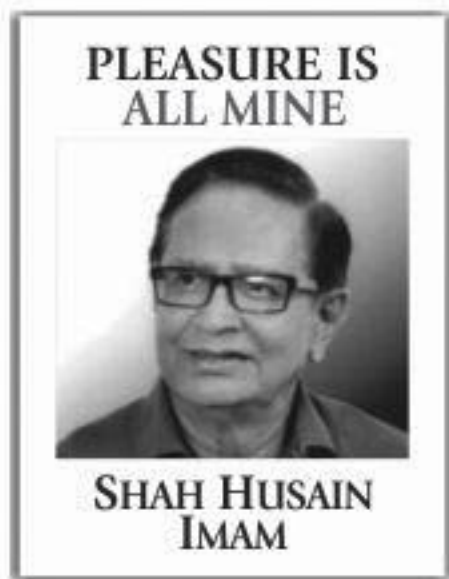
passing off as members of the state agencies.

While some of the abductions were for ransom, and one cannot put it past the realm of possibility that some of the perpetrators are members of one or the other law enforcing agencies exploiting their uniform for a quick buck, many if not all, kidnapping had political motives. For a start, shouldn't every arrest be supported by a valid warrant? And shouldn't the plainclothes men be obliged to produce a valid identity to the intended arrestee. Why should a genuine accused have to be picked up in a clandestine manner, unless it was to shortcut the law?

We have been called out by various human rights organisations, both national and international, a call that was renewed yesterday, The Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearance, to stop recurrence of this outrageous phenomenon, and to find the whereabouts of the victims. There is more to the job of the agencies than only policing. Serving the people is one of the many articles that police go by. Law cannot be violated by the agencies in maintaining law. When that happens the distinction between criminals and policemen is blurred.

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Managing traffic: A road to nowhere!



PLEASURE IS ALL MINE
SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

more accident-prone now than we were before the stirring event of early August? It appears we are!

A report in this paper on August 29 states, “More than 300 road deaths have

generation—spectacularly! Pleased as we were at the “heralding of power (of innocence)”, we knew it will run into a distraction but to their great credit they have done their part of the job—pinpointing where remedial actions should be directed.

Our expectations had to be realistic knowing full well that transport business being lucrative would keep transporters fiercely beholden to it. In fact, I have an interesting, if a little dreadful anecdote to share. A compatriot recalled, once in Johannesburg some time ago he had seen a man being killed on the street in a row over a route franchise in the local

own devices!) which is why late Mayor Annisul Huq set about the task of reorganising them in a lesser manageable and governable number—to around 20 along perhaps corporate lines. This found favour with the PMO which reportedly suggested Mayor Khokon pursue the line so that amalgamated entities could be monitored, supervised and koshered to make them competitive, service-oriented and efficient.

The first thing the students banged the stage with was a demand to prohibit the romping of, oftentimes an underage conductor or helper, on to the driver's seat, completely amateurish and



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Two motorised three-wheelers plying the Dhaka-Tangail Highway, defying a ban on the movement of such vehicles on highways.

been added to the total tally in the last one month.” Allowing for the festival-time heavier casualties due to commandeering of vehicles suspect on road-worthiness, aside from the rush driving of overloaded vehicles, the figure is disturbingly high—averaging 10 per day!

When our children gave a jolt to the people who are supposed to be in charge of road safety early this month by a practical demonstration of how it could be done we thought the baton was passing to a new

transport business. South Africans were known to spend 30 percent of their income on transport, indicative of the size of the commute business, and to that extent the interest of a stakeholder in it.

In Bangladesh too the lucre of transport business is substantial owing to subsidies and an increase in the transport bill of citizens. Hence, we see a multiplicity of companies—well over 400 operating on 2,000 routes, by one count. Such a big number of companies was considered unwieldy (so left to their

unauthorised. With the steering wheel in their hands, accidents wait to happen as outright murders.

Add to this the contractual appointments of transport operators practically inducing a mad race to outdo each other in making trips and pocketing as much money as possible. The implications are severe for the commuters; buses making arbitrary and dangerous stoppages in the middle of the roads to pick up passengers. A decision has been taken by the government to introduce fixed salaries for the employees

instead of binding them in a vicious contract that dehumanised what should have been a civic service with a human face. But if it were not to be window-dressing, the decision will be only tested on its implementation.

As for fake licenses, completely unauthorised driving or driving without any documentation, BRTA is working overtime to keep the rushing applicants supplied with necessary papers at an unprecedented speed, some tend to add, with palm greasing at a rate to match the strictness of the demand.

There is a catch in getting driving licences—the requirement of experience for obtaining licences to drive medium and heavy vehicles has been relaxed until December 31. Professional licence and one-year experience will suffice in place of three-years' experience as required earlier. But the licences will be for three years issued and obtained without the rigours of testing. This short circuiting comes with a three-fold cost: First, the risk of regularising the irregularities or legitimising the illegal status of many a unqualified driver. More to the point, status quo in a different garb is being presented with what results we will only get to know after hitting the road! But persistence with status quo is risky because it validates the licence for freedom, and with it impunity against culpability.

We see a contradictory policy relating to the resolve to strictly enforce the ban on slow-moving vehicles on the highways. Where do they go? To suddenly put them out of business could severely hurt the livelihood options of a very large swathe of people. Why not have separate slow lane on the highways for them?

Then how do you legislate against such moronic barbarity of a man having been pushed off a minibus, run over and killed following a spat with the driver's helper in City Gate area on August 27? Last month a North-South university student was thrown on to a roadside canal by the driver, helper and supervisor of a coach service. Deterrent punishment can din the right sense in the rogues.

Composite sensitisation committees at the ward-level may be tried out to foster mutual understanding and respect between segments of society.

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