

The long road to 'identification'

Bring the culprits in Lama rape case to justice

THE delaying tactics apparently adopted by police officers investigating the case of two Tripura girls allegedly raped by two members of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) in Lama Upazila of Bandarban on August 22 are frustrating. Rights organisations on Tuesday brought this to our attention after an inspection visit to Lama which revealed that police are taking time to “identify” and arrest the main accused in the case, although one woman was arrested in this connection. It's surprising that so much of time is being spent in the initial phase of an investigation of a case that is open-and-shut because of specific allegations raised by the victims. We cannot help but wonder if it is symptomatic of unwillingness on the part of the police to expedite investigation because of the involvement of the members of a government agency.

The larger picture is far more critical, however. As we have said in this column before, sexual crimes are on the rise in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) which shows how vulnerable young girls and women, particularly those from indigenous communities, are — with few safeguards, legal or otherwise, against violence, torture and harassment. Most of the time, rape cases go unreported, and even when they are reported, they are not followed with proper investigation. These incidents cannot be seen in isolation and, if allowed to go unchecked, they might encourage further violence.

We urge the government to ensure a quick and thorough investigation into this latest case of sexual violence and bring the culprits to justice.

Unlicensed hospitals a menace to public health

How are they able to function at all?

IN response to a public litigation, the High Court (HC) ruled on September 11 that authorities must close down 14 private hospitals and clinics in the city's Mohammadpur residential area. These hospitals and clinics have been operating with neither valid documents nor requisite facilities or medical personnel. Indeed, from what has been reported in the press, we understand that these establishments were frequently visited by doctors on government payroll and the clientele were procured by middlemen.

That such medical establishments were allowed to operate in the heart of the capital city is alarming, to say the least. We are looking at all sorts of clinics and hospitals here, offering services from general medicine to diagnostic services; mental health to trauma care. We would like to know why the Directorate of Health Services has to be directed by the HC to take action against the operation of these illegal medial establishments, many of which are run by public servants.

We would probably never have known of these illegal establishments had it not been reported in media. But now that the report has been followed up by a HC order, we expect authorities to come back with concrete actions within four weeks as to what steps they have taken to stop these clinics and diagnostic centres from operating. The quality of public health in our country is already highly suspect and the last thing we need is for illegal medical centres to crop up and operate with impunity in our urban centres where the chances of medical malpractice are much higher, putting public health in jeopardy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Upward trend of divorce rates

Of late, the rate of divorces in the country's big cities has reportedly increased. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, citing BSS data, people—mainly women—file divorce applications citing issues like physical abuse, extramarital affairs, personality clash, early marriage, among others.

While it may be considered a worrying sign that signals deteriorating family bonds and values in society, it may also indicate that women in our society feel more empowered and emboldened as more and more women are speaking up against marital abuse. Women are nowadays more conscious about their rights. It is time men realised that women are not to be taken for granted.

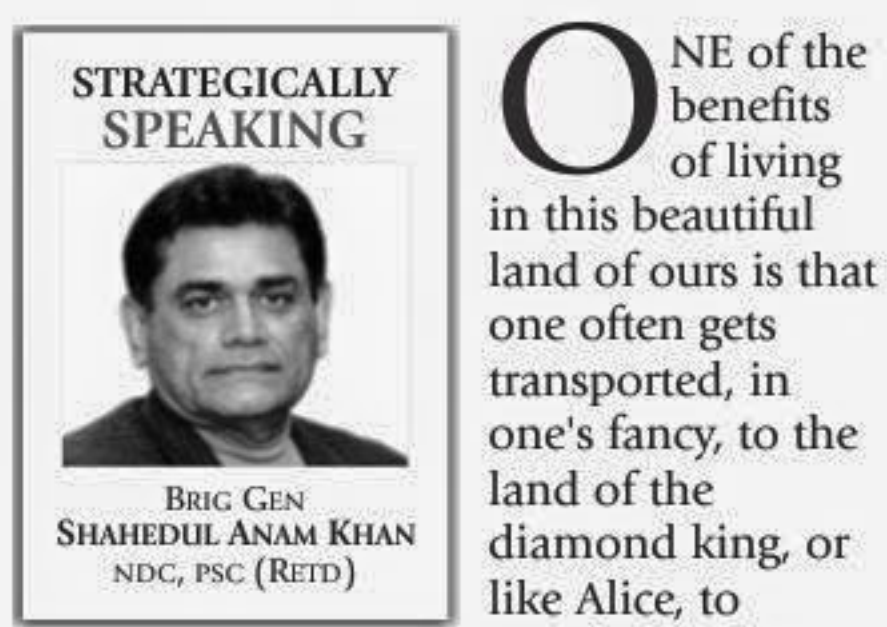
Md. Zillur Rahaman, *By e-mail*

Worsening ride-sharing services

There's no denying that ride-sharing services have made our lives a bit comfortable as we can now call a ride whenever we want using a mobile app. In an overcrowded and overstretched city like Dhaka, these services have reduced our hassle and dependency on CNG-run auto-rickshaws.

However, considering some recent incidents, these services may also begin to act like CNG-run auto-rickshaws and rickshaws in the near future. In recent times, their apps show a higher price during peak hours. They explain that “prices are high due to demand.” While the government has published guidelines to regulate these services, it should make sure that they adhere to them.

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STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

ONE of the benefits of living in this beautiful land of ours is that one often gets transported, in one's fancy, to the land of the diamond king, or like Alice, to Wonderland. But unlike Alice who was confronted with curious but somewhat memorable things, one's experiences in the land of ours are not very pleasurable. And what thrusts one to that mythical land and into a psychedelic state are the weird and often highhanded acts of the government and certain people in it and of professional groups who wield power, by virtue of the nature of their calling, over their fellow countrymen and women. It would not be an overstatement to say that we are experiencing a state of absolutism, a relapse to a Hobbesian state.

In which other land under the sun has one heard of victims, not the perpetrators of violence, sued by the police? And the attackers are allowed to go scot free, either because, according to the police, the attack did not happen at all or they couldn't be identified; that in spite of photographs depicting the violent actions against young students both male and female. And the only ticket for their immunity is their tab of ruling party apparatchiks.

It is difficult to find another example where the police openly calls upon the help of the students' wing of the ruling party and employ them as an auxiliary to quash a campaign that flowered from genuine grievances, as was done against the students demanding safe roads. And yet the police terms these attackers as

If we are to believe the police, we must have to believe in reincarnation, otherwise how come the police spot a man who died in 2016, lobbing grenades? And cases have been registered on incidents that have not occurred at all.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

India should accept disaster assistance



AWAKENING INDIA

INDIA'S southern state of Kerala has been hit by the worst floods in nearly a century. Now that the floodwaters are receding, a peculiar debate has emerged over whether India should accept foreign aid to support reconstruction.

At the peak of the floods, the Indian government allocated money from the National Disaster Response Fund for immediate relief. But it was the public that really stepped up, with an outpouring of contributions to the Kerala government's disaster relief fund that amounted to more than twice the funds so far provided by the national authorities.

In fact, the total additional assistance the government has provided—USD 90 million (with promises of an unspecified additional amount)—amounts to less than half of what the state government was requesting for immediate relief. It does not even begin to cover long-term reconstruction costs, estimated at over 50 times that figure.

The floods, which displaced a million people, left Kerala with 39 collapsed bridges, some 6,000 miles of ruined roads, significant agricultural losses, and more than 50,000 homes either damaged or destroyed. Rebuilding all that infrastructure, which took decades to construct the first time around, will be a herculean task.

Despite all of this, India's government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have refused to accept outside help. That stance first became apparent as the crisis was unfolding, when the United Arab Emirates—which is home to some two million Keralites—reportedly offered assistance totalling USD 100 million.

Modi thanked the UAE's leader, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, on Twitter. Then his government—via BJP spokesmen, rather than government officials—let the media know that it would not be taking the UAE grant.

On August 21, Thailand's ambassador

“unidentified persons”. If they were “unidentified” and not what they are alleged to be (others have little doubt about it), should the police not have apprehended them? It is they and not the students who had resorted to violence and disturbed public order. But this was not the only instance that this had happened. In several occasions in recent times, these people were seen assisting the police in beating up the campaigners who were ventilating genuine demands.

But that is not the end of the matter. Some of the student leaders calling for reforms in the road safety law are still



Some of the 12 students, picked up by detectives allegedly on September 5, handcuffed while being taken to court on September 10. Police accused them of attacking law enforcers and spreading rumours during last month's student movement for road safety.

bearing the brunt of the state's wrath for demanding assurance of safety to walk on the roads, for calling for guarantee of their right to life and for the severest of punishments for those who callously abridge that God ordained right, and get away with it. This is the feeling of most people, but only a few, like the students, have dared to call.

Their demands have resonated with the administration too. No less a person than the honourable prime minister has acknowledged the justification of the demands, as did many of her ministers. She is on record saying that the students have opened her eyes. If that be so then why are they still being picked up, a month after the agitation that was so ruthlessly snuffed out by the Chhatra League? And some of them had remained

unaccounted for, for six days, till they were produced in court on September 10. Doesn't that suggest that the agencies were dishing out falsehoods when they feigned ignorance regarding the students' whereabouts? Why were these youngsters, so very early in their formative years, subjected to police torture? It seems that the two pressing issues—road safety and quota—have become anathema that does not admit of consideration at all, when in fact the PM herself acknowledged the relevance and validity of both the demands, and in the floor of the parliament too. Even those that express

administration appears helpless.

And in their over-enthusiasm to snub the recent movements and to pre-empt future ones, the path resorted to by the police have all but denuded it of whatever vestige of credibility it had left. If we are to believe the police, we must have to believe in reincarnation, otherwise how come the police spot a man who died in 2016, lobbing grenades? And cases have been registered on incidents that have not occurred at all.

There is no reason to think that the general public does not understand the game being played here and that the

support for these two causes are being subjected to violence by the ruling party cadres. What an irony! Those that helped the authorities open up their eyes have been forced to shut up their mouth!

And the case of Mozammel Haque, a campaigner for road safety, has surpassed all levels of absurdity. It makes the police look very amateurish, not being able to make up their minds as to what charge to bring against him that would stick. Initially Mozammel was charged with extortion and now a case under the Explosives Act have been brought against him. All this because his compilations of reports on the death tolls in road accidents, based on published accounts, have raised the hackles of the powerful syndicate that controls the transport sector and against whom even the

authorities have been successful in pulling the wool over their eyes. Little does it realise that these things cost heavily in terms of government's credibility. Neither are the students nor those rooting for the cause of public safety bear any hostility towards the government. But regrettably, both they and the cause they are struggling for have been criminalised by the authorities, and demanding justice has become a crime. As Bertrand Russell had said, “A government can exist without laws, but laws cannot exist without government.” What he implied is that absence of the rule of law is in fact the abnegation of the existence of an effective government. It is for the government to prove this wrong.

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A flooded area in the north part of Kochi, in the Indian state of Kerala.

PHOTO: AFP

by that 2004 decision was superseded by the National Disaster Management Plan, issued by Modi's own government in 2016. Paragraph 9.2 of the plan states that the government does not issue any appeal for foreign assistance in the wake of a disaster, but can accept such assistance, if another national government offers it voluntarily, “as a goodwill gesture in solidarity with the disaster victims.” This means that it would have been entirely permissible for the government to accept the UAE's help.

So why did the BJP reject the offer? After announcing the decision to reject the UAE's offer, the party's spokesmen lost no time in invoking national pride: India, now a net donor of aid to poor

countries, could take care of its own.

If Modi's government believes that it has adequate funds to meet Kerala's needs, it owes the state's people an explanation to as to why such a small amount has been allocated. But there is little reason to expect any such thing of the cash-strapped Modi government. When Cyclone Ockhi struck coastal areas of Kerala last December, the central government provided just 2 percent of the aid the state government requested.

The rejection of foreign assistance is not even a fundamental BJP policy. After the 2001 Bhuj Earthquake in Gujarat—where Modi himself was Chief Minister—the BJP-led central government accepted international assistance. The total funds raised by United Nations bodies—such as the UN Development

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afflicted, such as after earthquakes in Nepal, Pakistan, and Iran, and floods in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Even the United States accepted foreign aid after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in August 2005, with India providing USD 5 million. Why shouldn't others similarly extend a helping hand to Indians in distress?

India is a proud country that prefers to rely on its own resources. But when our resources are nowhere near sufficient to meet the needs of our people—who are suffering in the wake of a devastating disaster—it is both churlish and irresponsible to reject aid from those who can and want to provide it. No policy of national pride can justify callousness towards our own distressed citizens.

By all means, do not go abroad with a begging bowl. But when your friendly neighbour knocks on your door and offers you the cup of sugar you need to finish a recipe, you don't turn him away. There is no shame in accepting aid from friends whom we would help if the tables were turned. For the sake of the people of Kerala, the BJP government must recognise this and revise its disaster-aid policy.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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