

# Serious breach of port and national security

Investigate and nab the gang members

THE fact that a gang comprising clearing and forwarding (C&F) agents and importers have been able to clear some 4,000 consignments using forged documents over a two-year period is a shocking exposure of the systemic flaw of the Chittagong port's Customs House. A report in this daily published on January 17 tells us that Customs Intelligence and Investigation Directorate (CIID) officials recently unearthed the racket and have identified a number of gang members, including a C&F agent. This incidence needs to be thoroughly investigated for a number of reasons. First, the ID card of a customs official who retired in 2015 was used to unlock a consignment from the CIID computer server. How is this even possible? That ID should have been deactivated the moment the individual left the service.

Second, that so many thousands of shipments got through the Chittagong port illegally could pose a threat to national security. No one can vouch that contraband and dangerous items did not get through the port in the process. What would be the security ramifications of such a breach? These are pertinent questions, not just for CIID but law enforcement agencies as well. Third, we are informed that the CIID has formed a committee to thoroughly investigate the matter. Our opinion is that this gang could not have operated under the radar for so long without help from the inside. Given the gravity of the situation, the authorities should leave no stone unturned to find out precisely who the members of this criminal syndicate are, which parties have benefited from this very illegal activity, and precisely how much revenue the national exchequer has been deprived of.

# Now, Rohingyas from India

Do we have a plan to tackle the overall issue?

SINCE the beginning of the year, no less than 1,300 Rohingya Muslims crossed the border into Bangladesh from India, where many of them had been living for years. The exodus was triggered due to fears that India would forcibly turn them over to Myanmar, as it did other members of the persecuted minority, having succumbed to the demands of Hindu extremists. We find the development very troubling and disappointing.

Bangladesh is already faced with more than a million Rohingya refugees, who had to flee Myanmar to avoid the army's brutal genocidal campaign. With thousands more coming from India, the situation will undoubtedly become more daunting.

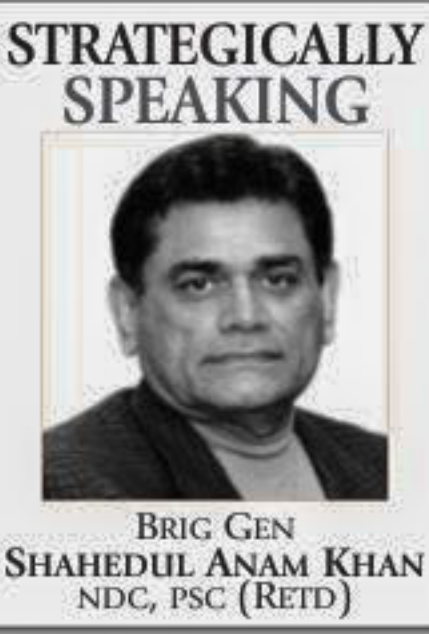
India is a close neighbour with which we share a deep friendship. The government of India is well aware of the developments in Myanmar, where Rohingyas have faced pogroms and persecution. The flow of Rohingyas from India, instead of easing the crisis, is contributing to its exacerbation. Before this, Saudi Arabia reportedly deported undocumented Rohingya migrants who had gone there with illegally obtained Bangladeshi passports.

Just because Bangladesh responded to a humanitarian crisis positively, it seems to have become the transfer station for unwanted Rohingyas. Meanwhile, Myanmar—the ancestral home of the Rohingya people—has all but closed the path of repatriation.

We wonder whether the government is in sync with reality and whether it has any plan or strategy to deal with the crisis. Bangladesh should resolutely make its case in the world stage. It cannot let the world think that the issue is only ours to solve. It should warn the world that a prolonged crisis may have ramifications for both regional and global stability.

# Education doesn't make girls 'disobedient'

"If you educate a girl, you educate the future"



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

THERE are many reasons that have been offered from time to time and over the ages by a section of the Muslim clergy to keep women ensconced

within the four walls of the house, but never has one heard such a comment that girls should not go to school because doing so would make them "disobedient". This comment was uttered by the head of Hefazat-e-Islam (HI), a person who is known to be well-versed in various aspects of Islam. And that is what makes the statement all the more surprising.

I do not possess the required level of knowledge on Islam to indulge in any kind of rebuttal of the comment. That should have come from other Islamic scholars who know better. But except for one, I'm yet to hear or read anything by way of a counterargument from any other Islamic scholars of the country.

Are we to believe that the deafening silence indicates endorsement of what has been uttered by the chief of HI? Either that the rest of our religious scholars agree with a comment that patently contradicts the normative teachings of Islam and what the texts say about education of women and the rights of women in general in our society, or that they consider the statement not worthy of a reaction.

The government reaction, in the form of a pithy statement by the deputy minister for education, was not much more than skirting the issue, passing it off as a personal comment. How can that be so when he made everyone present at the gathering, thousands of them, take the vow that they would not allow their daughters to study beyond class IV or V? Most of his audience in the gathering were simple-minded God-fearing credulous Muslims with an extremely impressionable and pliant mind. Thus, a comment that impacts a large section of people, localised they may be, no longer remains within the purview of one's individual comment but involves and ultimately affects the society at large. I can't help repeating a comment which I

came by recently, that anything that remains unanswered is empowered. These words display wisdom as well as express caution.

Resistance to women's development comes from some quarters in the Islamic world, particularly some extremist organisations and not from the teachings of the Holy Quran or the Hadith. Malala Yusufzai's "crime" was that she wanted to seek education and contribute to the society. The name "Boko Haram" means roughly "anti-education". These show how far removed some people are from the normative teachings of Islam. And these minority Muslim views are taken by the rest of the world as reflective and representative of the teachings of Islam.

includes both men and women.

Knowledge is what the entire edifice of the society is constructed upon. And knowledge is something whose acquisition is not contested in Islam. The source of knowledge can be many, but the source of knowledge that helps enhance one's quality as a human being is worth seeking and the pain worth enduring as the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) had said. There are many instances of the revered chief of HI contradicting the teachings of the Holy Quran and the traditions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

History also tells us that women participated in the campaigns during the period of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).



PHOTO: STAR

The Holy Quran neither commands that women be confined and secluded within the house, nor does it prevent them from seeking education.

As for education, the Hadith says that education is not only a right but also a responsibility of all males and females. In fact, it is agreed by all the famous exegetists of the Quran that the first revealed verse starts with the word "Iqra" (read). The Holy Quran says, "Can those who have knowledge and those who do not be alike?" (39:9). The Prophet (PBUH) said, "Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim," and the word "Muslim" is used here in the wider sense which

Kahlua, sister of Zarrar bin Yusuf, participated in the Battle of Bait Lihiya against the Byzantines under Khaled bin Walid in 634 AD. Women's knowledge and wisdom were duly recognised by the Holy Prophet. History informs us that the Prophet (PBUH) "consulted women and weighed their opinions seriously. At least one woman, Umm Waraqah, was appointed imam over her household by him. Women contributed significantly to the canonisation of the Quran. A woman is known to have corrected the authoritative ruling of Caliph Umar on dowry. Women prayed in mosques unsegregated from men, were involved in Hadith transmission, gave sanctuary

to men, engaged in commercial transactions, were encouraged to seek knowledge, and were both instructors and pupils in the early Islamic period. Bibi Aishah was a well-known authority in medicine, history, and rhetoric, and women held political power during the three Caliphates" (Oxford History of Islam).

While the Quran and the Hadith call upon all Muslims to seek education, the Hadith of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) specifically commands fathers regarding the upbringing of daughters. One Hadith says, "The one who brought up three daughters or sisters, taught them good manners and treated them with kindness until they became self-sufficient, Allah will make Paradise obligatory for him. A man asked: what about two, O Messenger of Allah? The Holy Prophet replied: 'The same for two.'" Ibn Abbas, the reporter of the Hadith, says: "Had the people at that time asked in respect of one daughter, the Holy Prophet would have also given the same reply about her."

Therefore, urging parents not to allow their daughters to seek higher knowledge is anti-Constitution and anti-secular because such a human diktat would deprive women of their basic rights, like the right to education and right to equal opportunity guaranteed by the Constitution. Thus, doing the biddings of the HI chief would amount to violating the teachings of Islam, because what he has said is against the teachings of the two documents that Muslims rely heavily on for both spiritual and temporal existence. Because the very second chapter of the Holy Quran, Verse 2:228, states: "And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women."

Without going into the various aspects of gender equality, suffice it to say that our religion mandates upon the father the proper upbringing of daughters, and good education is indispensable to do that. Education does not make a girl "disobedient"; it makes for a better society and a better world. Perhaps we need reminding ourselves the famous saying that if you educate a woman you educate a nation. The contrary notion must be resisted; otherwise it would only lead the nation towards a regressive path.

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## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# Indian farmers in revolt



SHASHI THAROOR

AWAKENING INDIA

WHEN Prime Minister Narendra Modi led his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to a landslide victory in the 2014 general election, he promised to be all things to all voters, eloquently promising "achhe din" (good days) for India. One of his target audiences was farmers; the agriculture sector still accounts for 67 percent of employment, and he grandly promised farmers that his government would double their incomes by 2020. He swept their votes.

Today, as Modi seeks another term in a general election due before May this year, those promises are haunting him. Indian agriculture is in crisis. Farmers are in ferment. During Modi's tenure, the costs of inputs, and therefore of cultivation, have risen alarmingly, while prices for agricultural products, and therefore farm incomes, have stagnated or dropped. And, because government-guaranteed Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) have not been paid, farmers around the country are going broke.

It gets worse. When crops fail, many farmers and agricultural workers laid low by the crushing burden of debt (often incurred at usurious rates from rural moneylenders) commit suicide—as more than 11,400 did in 2016. That is the last year for which official data on farmer suicides is available, but media reports suggest the numbers have grown since then.

The biggest victims of the BJP government's neglect of agriculture have been the country's small and marginal farmers, as well as landless farm labour. These groups were dealt a body blow two years ago by Modi's thoughtless and foolhardy demonetisation scheme, which abruptly withdrew 86 percent of India's currency from circulation overnight. Daily wage workers, traditionally paid in cash, lost their jobs by

policies. Yet the government's failure to honour its MGNREGS bills on time has meant that many rural laborers have not received their benefits for months.

The cumulative impact of the Modi government's failures has been high levels of agrarian distress and unrest, with increasingly desperate farmers staging protests to sway the public and force the authorities to pay attention.

In 2017, frantic farmers from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu protested in the national capital, New Delhi, for more than a hundred days, with some stripping off their clothes in public to show they had nothing left. In March 2018, some 25,000 farmers marched in the BJP-controlled state of Maharashtra to

Pradesh state (then ruled by the BJP), turned violent, and six farmers were shot and killed by the police.

With the Modi government seeming utterly clueless in the face of such protests, India's opposition parties have taken up the farmers' cause, and there is little doubt that it will be a major campaign theme of the anti-BJP coalition that hopes to wrest power from Modi this year. Within days of being sworn in, the Congress Party governments that won power in three states in December each announced the waiver of outstanding loans to farmers in their respective jurisdictions. While the BJP bleats that this is bad economics, the opposition has no doubt that it is good politics.



New Delhi police use water cannons to disperse and stop protesting farmers at the border with Ghazipur during their march to New Delhi.

PHOTO: AFP

demand debt relief, minimum support prices, and land rights. They grabbed headlines but little else; in late November, another 20,000 farmers marched in Maharashtra to demand compensation for the drought that had destroyed their crops.

On the last two days of November 2018, tens of thousands of farmers marched through New Delhi to the gates of parliament in a Kisan Mukti (Farmers' Liberation) March. Brought together by a network of more than 200 organisations from across India, the farmers, mostly peasants of modest means, clamoured for a familiar set of demands: debt relief and payment of MSPs for their produce.

The protesting farmers also demanded an emergency parliamentary session to discuss the agrarian crisis. This demand proved otiose, because Parliament was convened two weeks later anyway. Sadly, farmers' issues received minimal attention in the recent session, and the government failed to submit any proposals to alleviate the agrarian crisis.

But the countryside is seething, and the level of desperation on the part of farmers is mounting. During the summer of 2017, a protest in Mandsaur in Madhya

But loan waivers are only a temporary fix. The root causes of India's agrarian distress must be addressed. These include an arguably excessive number of people dependent on agriculture (two-thirds of the population produces 12 percent of GDP), uneconomically small landholdings (thanks to population growth and land reform), a broken agricultural credit system, government procurement policies that cause market distortions, and the failure to ensure MSPs. Many of the problems, ironically, are the result of earlier fixes gone wrong.

Whoever leads the government after the coming election will have to undertake a comprehensive overhaul of Indian agriculture. The current government's failure to confront the challenge is likely to ensure that it will not be Modi.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

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the millions, because replacement currency had not been printed in adequate quantities. Small and micro enterprises in farm and market towns collapsed.

Modi is contemptuous of the previous government's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which assured every poor rural household of a hundred days' paid employment per year. The scheme increased the purchasing power of the rural poor and reduced distress migration from the countryside, and the Modi government found it was the only lifeline available to support rural India amid the havoc wrought by its

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Brexit chaos

Amidst the chaos surrounding the UK's departure from the European Union—a process dubbed as Brexit—the person I feel most sorry for is Prime Minister Theresa May. Being a "remainer" herself, she is now having to deal with the expectation of negotiating a smooth Brexit deal. She needs a majority consensus from parliamentarians.

She isn't responsible for the chaotic situation her country seems to be in. It was a mess she inherited from the erstwhile Prime Minister David Cameron, who triggered the referendum over whether to remain in, or leave the EU.

Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, the two leading "leave" campaigners, are keeping a low profile, distancing themselves from taking any responsibility for the whole mess that they created. Meanwhile, as the PM's deal was defeated resolutely in parliament, the leader of the opposition Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, had called for a fresh election which was voted down.

It's a textbook example of total political chaos. A smooth Brexit is in the interest of not just the British, but the entire world and its stability. We can only hope that the chaos ends soon and things settle down.

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