

Surrender of yaba dealers

Bouquets for some and bullets for others!

THE government has been taking various measures to tackle the scourge of yaba in the country, some of which exceeded the bounds of legality. In its latest and innovative bid, the administration organised a surrender ceremony on February 16 in which more than 100 yaba dealers surrendered to the police. Interestingly, all of them had been in custody and are facing charges on numerous counts. We welcome the government's action.

While it is good to hear that the surrender doesn't exculpate them from the charges, our query is, what is the meaning of the surrender? What purpose will be served by staging this ceremony? Is it merely a media event for public consumption, or a part of the overall government strategy to curb the use of the deadly drug? We ask why this policy couldn't be adopted *ab initio* when the anti-drug campaign was launched last year. Why were 300 people allegedly killed in the campaign to curb the spread of yaba?

We are not privy to the strategy the administration has adopted in this regard, but so far, its anti-narcotics drive, launched in May last year, has not borne much fruit. In spite of the fact that so many alleged yaba dealers were killed and more than a thousand put in custody, including those that have surrendered, the supply of yaba has not decreased. In fact, the trade is still thriving. Only two days ago, more than half a million of yaba tablets were seized in Bandarban. Newer and newer dealers, many of them acolytes of those killed or in jail, are getting involved in the trade. Thus, unless the surrender delivers meaningful results, the whole show would appear to have been laid out as an eyewash only.

Regrettably, yaba trade has become one of the most lucrative businesses in the country involving such a huge sum that even the researchers cannot venture a ballpark figure. It has made deep penetration in the society and, dangerously, affected some elements of the state machinery too. And some listed sponsors of the trade are moving about freely. The government must move beyond symbolism to the substantive, and also investigate how its own personnel may be involved, otherwise these moves would be nothing more than a sham.

No gas supply, no prior warnings

A display of extreme callousness!

IT is reprehensible that some 6-7 lakh people in Dhaka had to suffer from complete or partial lack of gas supply without any warning whatsoever from the authorities. As we now know, gas supply to many areas was shut down for about 26 hours not because of any major accident, but so that emergency maintenance work could be carried out. What we'd like to know is, after the Gas Transmission Company Ltd informed Titas Gas that maintenance work was required in a transmission line on Friday night at around 10:30pm, why did the authorities not bother to inform the public? It is simply because of their abject callousness.

According to the director of operations at Titas Gas, they could not let consumers know about the shutdown as it was after midnight that they managed to make preparations for the repair work. However, the issue is not when they had prepared, but when they had known about it. And as an official of Titas Gas told this newspaper, the authorities were supposed to issue an alert message on Friday night, but they had somehow forgotten about it.

Meanwhile, households had to unnecessarily suffer and businesses had to unexpectedly shut down and incur losses. Will the authorities cover for their sufferings and their damage? Or do they expect everyone to simply forget about it all?

We demand that those responsible for this mess be held accountable and made an example of. It is simply unacceptable to ignore such a big blunder, and we expect to see some heads roll in the coming days as a way to ensure that this never happens again.

Police must follow the law before enforcing it



STRAIGHT LINE

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE disgraceful spectacle of four law enforcement officials being apprehended for committing crimes like abduction, demanding ransom and rape have shaken public confidence to its core. Coming on the heels of Police Week 2019, when citizens were informed of the gallant and meritorious services of many lawmen who received medals, the above aberrations amounting to serious crimes come as a rude shock. The question is, how can the police insist on appropriate conduct from the citizens if their own conduct is not above board? The requirement of law observance can be achieved best if the police themselves, as the country's principal law enforcing agency, follow the law before enforcing it in the public sphere. In fact, "law observance by the police is the best form of law enforcement that one can conceive of in a country under the rule of law."

In order to ensure the continuance of public confidence in police, the police authorities must take swift action against the four police personnel who disgraced their department. Criminal cases lodged against them must be expeditiously investigated so that trial can commence within two months. To deal with such bad eggs within the agency, the authorities may also consider taking action under the stringent Police Officers Special Provisions Ordinance 1976 (as amended) in which there are arrangements to get rid of them within a time limit of 45 days.

However, sometimes we see efforts to explain away serious crimes by law enforcement officials by characterising the offenders as "a few bad apples". This is too simplistic. A reasoned view is that the officer's personality features represent one element of the problem. Organisational culture and practices are also often responsible for police misconduct. One could say that police deviance is symptomatic of a system-wide problem.

The lawmen, being members of a coercive organisation, are legally empowered to curtail liberty only in appropriate cases. But when a lawman curtails liberty with an ulterior motive of obtaining illicit financial gains, his actions are frowned upon by all sections of the society. In the eyes of the public, he is then no different from a petty criminal. The scenario becomes darker when law enforcers stand accused of committing the most degrading offence of rape.

The criminal conduct of a section of the police has worried many in the past. What, however, is unfortunate is that we have not adequately ventured to find out the causes of such behavioural aberrations or try to understand the dynamics of a police sub-culture. Most often, we have treated the symptoms only by punishing the individual(s) responsible. At times, that has also failed on account of procedural shortfalls or evidentiary insufficiencies.

There is no denying that the public has serious doubts about the credibility of the recruitment process of lower functionaries in the police department. The level of political interference in the process is said to be shocking. Politicians seem to be under the impression

that their chosen candidates, if recruited in the police force, will prove an asset for them in the future. Such appointees, however, mostly become a liability for the individual politician and the public at large. Whatever the case may be, the unfortunate reality is that often recruitments have been made on considerations other than merit and ability. In this act, some police officers also play a role to satisfy their political masters. The net result is that undesirable elements find their way into important positions of authority. Such recruits who enter the service by greasing the palm of influentials may never understand the burden of trust that society places in its police force.

Following recruitment, there is the training schedule wherein also there are allegations of subjecting the trainees to undue pressures. It is not, therefore, unusual that the appointees turn into bitter individuals. The dehumanising experience at the formative period of their policing career takes its toll on them later. The four

profession in our life.

Recruitment standards must be improved by strictly curbing corrupt practices at the point of origin—that is, recruitment. Officers with a record of honesty and integrity should be entrusted with the responsibility of conducting the recruitment. This is important because the crux of good policing is the presence of a well-qualified, trained and motivated constable. The need is to change training programmes from isolated, closed rigidities to integrated, inter-disciplinary programmes for the preparation of proper law enforcement professionals. "Ethical awareness" training can be introduced to address corruption. The minds of the field functionaries should be constantly guided by holding training courses at the district and police station levels.

There should be a concentrated drive to make it difficult for a dishonest person to remain in a focal position. Superior officers have to set examples by maintaining their private lives above board. Since

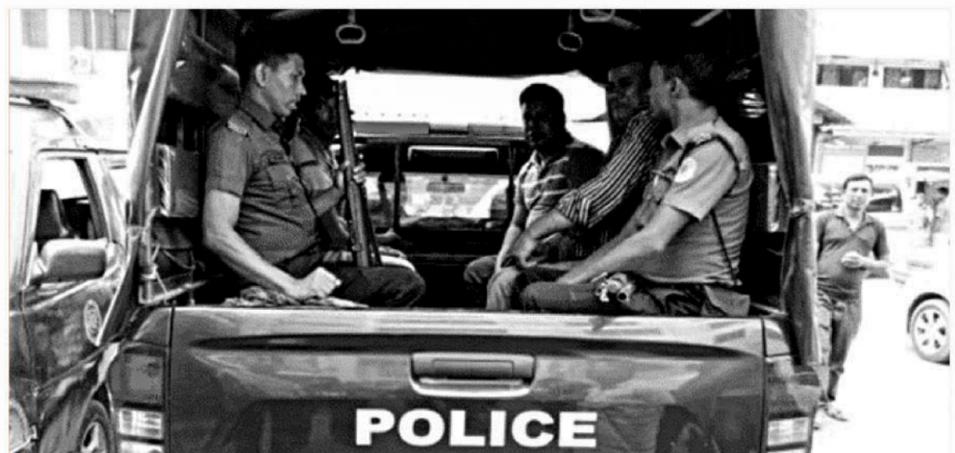


PHOTO: COLLECTED

apprehended officers could be among those bitter individuals. Whether that suspicion is well-founded or not, the unfortunate fact is, with increased criminalisation of politics, it is becoming difficult to control policemen who cultivate a close relationship with the politicians in power. Equally culpable are the lax supervisors.

We have to agree that the standards of recruitment in police have declined over the years, and many undeserving candidates have managed to secure entry through unfair means. Once in uniform, this lot lets the lure of the lucre control them and never hesitate to deviate from the expected norms of the police. The training, especially of the lower ranks, has been sadly neglected and there is a distinct lack of emphasis on desired police behaviour.

We have to acknowledge that the responsibility for failure to improve the standards of police recruitment and training must fall squarely on both the politicians and the police personnel. They have not risen to the occasion but that does not mean that the unhealthy practice should continue to the detriment of such an important

police corruption is often a result of poor service conditions, efforts are needed to improve those. At the same time, corruption should be dealt with an iron hand. All these are tall orders, and therefore, in order to reach the objective of the much-needed attitudinal change within the policemen, a proper environment has to be created so that they can perform with a sense of pride and duty.

The deviation of policemen is always deplorable as they shake the foundation of the society by eroding public faith and trust in the rule of law. This most visible symbol of authority can never escape criticism for any wrongdoing or malfunctioning. They cannot ignore public opinion. This needs to be constantly impressed upon the rank and file of the police department. It is also time to ensure that police modernisation schemes to ensure internationally recognised best practices remain a high priority.

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Women's safety in public transport: A case for the would-be city father

ZAM KHAIRUZZAMAN

IN Dhaka, a woman travelling—whether walking on the street or using public transportation—faces a near-constant threat of sexual harassment. For the most marginalised women, this threat is even more acute and influences their daily movements: how they choose to travel, at what time of day, and with whom. A woman's ability to move freely and safely in her city has important implications for gender equity as a whole.

In cities all over the country, many girls and women feel unsafe being alone in the street. At some point in their life, many have had to, or will have to, face sexual harassment, abuse and violence, solely because they are women. Violence against women and girls cuts across lines of income, class, race, ethnic group, and residence.



PHOTO: STAR

Physical, sexual and psychological violence can be a daily feature of women's interactions in their neighbourhoods, on public transport, in workplaces, schools, sports clubs, colleges, hospitals, and in social institutions. Unsafe spaces abound in cities and surrounding areas—deserted streets, dark lanes, isolated bus stops, or public toilets.

Urban environments offer greater anonymity to the perpetrators of violence against women and girls. Although not all women have been attacked or raped, all have most likely felt a sense of unease at some point.

In Dhaka, many women may have to restrict their movements or activities because they feel unsafe. The fear or threat of violence is an effective way of controlling women's activities. Fear and feeling

unsafe are major obstacles to the empowerment of women.

Public transport networks must minimise the chances of women being threatened and attacked. Adequate lighting in housing areas and inner cities is also essential.

Recently, according to press reports, the ruling Awami League-nominated candidate for Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) mayoral by-polls, Atiqul Islam, has unveiled his election manifesto. He has promised to work to ensure a modern and active city if the people elect him in the upcoming DNCC by-polls scheduled to be held on February 28.

One of the promises of the ruling party-nominated candidate is that he would introduce franchise-based transport system on all DNCC roads. Any discussion on

low- and lower-middle-income backgrounds in urban, peri-urban and rural areas, who commute by public transport and on foot to go to workplace and other destinations. The geographic areas covered in the research are Gazipur, Dhaka and Birulia of Savar Upazila in Dhaka district.

According to the research, 35 percent of respondents using public transport said they faced sexual harassment from males belonging to the age group of 19-35 years. Around 59 percent faced such harassment from the males who are 26-40 years old. The forms of sexual harassment experienced by the respondents included deliberate touching of the victim's chest and other parts of the body, pinching, standing too close to the victim and pushing, touching of hair of the victim, putting hand on their shoulder, touching their private parts, etc.

People who sexually harass women come from various tiers of society, age groups, and geographical areas, unveiling the pervasiveness and epidemic nature of this problem. Many women are forced to use public transportation due to the lack of options, leaving them susceptible to harassment.

So, the transport system must change. Cities can and should take on the responsibility of making their public transportation system safer for women. BNP has boycotted the DNCC by-polls, but others who remain in the mayoral race must pledge to work on the transport system once and if elected.

Awami League's Atiqul Islam, being a candidate of the ruling party, should especially come forward in this regard and incorporate women's safety in his election manifesto. There needs to be political will to drive real change in the transport sector. A safe city is a just city. This has particular relevance for women. Buses remain especially crucial to women belonging to lower middle class and poor women. Women have a much more varied pattern of movement like taking their kids to the doctor some mornings, then bring them to school before they go to work. Women use public transport more often. So unsafe transport not only causes them to change their modes of movement, it also reduces how many trips they make. This insecurity reduces household income, as inadequate transportation bars women from accessing their full educational and employment opportunities.

Women split their time between work and family commitments like taking care of children and elderly parents. The would-be city father should recognise this and take a plan to improve women's access to public transport. Women's safety and ease of movement should be the priority. Gender mainstreaming should become a force to reshape Dhaka city.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Let the media function freely

It is disheartening to see a supposedly democratic parliament enacting draconian laws such as the Digital Security Bill despite widespread protest from the citizens and civil society members. And it is frightening because of the huge impact that such laws generally have on our life and society. "A critical, independent and investigative-minded press is the lifeblood of any democracy. It is only a free press that can temper the appetite of any government to amass power at the expense of the citizen," Nelson Mandela, in 1994, told an audience at the International Press Institute Congress.

We need to understand that laws like that are not only harmful for the journalists but also injurious to the interests of the general public. It's high time the government revised those laws to make them more people-friendly and attuned to the principles of the Constitution and allow the media to function independently.

Tabibul Islam, Dhanmandi