

Caught between 'crossfire' and 'self-defence'

Bank scams happen when regulator sleeps ACC chief's remarks on the mark

THE chief of Anti-Corruption Commission has come down hard on the role the central bank has played over the last several years when it comes to tackling graft in banks. The financial sector is undergoing serious stress because repeated scams have been allowed to take place in the banks, and Bangladesh Bank (BB) cannot absolve itself of the responsibility of not playing its due role as the regulator. Its primary function is to monitor any mismanagement taking place in the banks and to take steps to halt the damage.

The ACC is now taking legal steps against senior management personnel accused of graft involving Tk 6,000-7,000 crore, which could have been prevented had there been proper monitoring. The fact that only recently BB failed to check alleged corruption in a bank that was giving undue privileges to a borrower by utilising its Letters of Credit facility to pile up more than Tk 1,200 crore as bad loans, speaks volumes of its failure to act timely and decisively. Hence it is hardly surprising that we are experiencing a rise of more than 20 percent per annum in non-performing loans in the banking sector as a whole.

The ACC can only do so much. There is simply no way BB can avoid the blame for its failure to uphold the interests of the banking sector and the public money deposited there—siphoned off with help from unscrupulous bank management personnel. Questions should also be asked as to why the ministry of finance did not take appropriate steps to bolster the central bank's role as guardian and enforcer of banking rules.

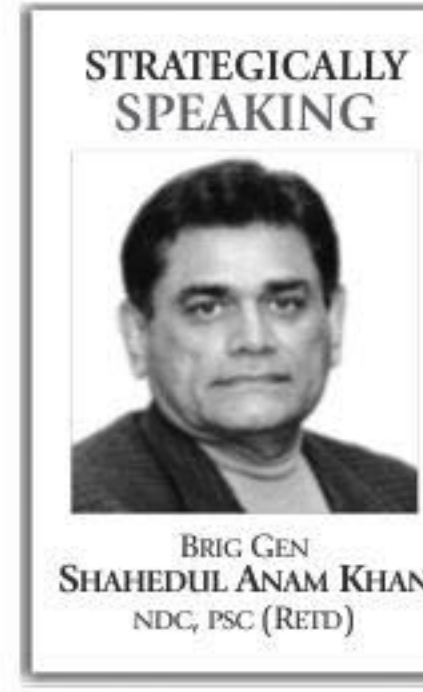
Forests are no one's property to destroy at will

Save Manpura Island from mindless deforestation

WORRYING developments have been reported in the remote forests of Bhola's Manpura Island where trees are being cut down indiscriminately to fuel brick kilns or for other purposes. A report by *The Daily Star* on March 13 carried a picture that showed stumps of freshly cut trees surrounded by sawdust in one of the forests in the island. The practice of felling trees illegally has been reportedly going on for about eight years now, through collusion between local influentials and forest officials who profit from cutting trees, which has serious repercussions for the environment.

The importance of a forest or tree cover, which acts as a shield against natural disasters, cannot be stressed enough. Felling trees in such a manner is not only damaging to the biodiversity of a forest—it can also enhance the effects of floods and storms and lead to reduced rainfall, potentially affecting the communities that live nearby.

Only days ago, the High Court reiterated this point as it issued an injunction restraining the government from felling trees for implementing its development projects in forests and forestlands for six months. Experts say that if trees are to be cut down for some reason, a new tree cover must soon be established in the affected region. This is especially important for Bangladesh where the total area of forestland has come down to a paltry 7-9 percent, whereas it is expected that a country should have at least 25 percent forest coverage. Like the forests in Manpura Island, many forests in Bangladesh are at risk of being robbed of trees and other elements essential to their existence—and that of us, by extension. The government must not allow this to continue. It must come down heavily on those indulging in the dangerous practice of felling trees for everyone's sake.



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

THE greatest gift that a government can earn for itself is the trust of the general public. And the best way to do so is to be transparent on matters of grave public concern and come clean on any policy failures. Pulling the wool over their eyes does nothing to win public confidence; on the contrary, it results in loss of government credibility.

Regrettably, one finds that to be disturbingly true in the case of our administration. In trying to explain away acts of commission or omission of a state agency which fails to pass legal muster or does not measure up to the moral standards, the narratives, unfortunately, fail to wash with the public because of their opacity. One has to stretch one's credulity to the extreme to make sense of the fables that are dispensed.

The latest example is the statement of the home minister justifying the deaths of nearly 300 alleged drug dealers in crossfire during the anti-yaba operation that commenced in May 2018. And the time period of that figure is only up to January of this year. The home minister wants us to believe that all these deaths are a consequence of fire, resorted to by the various security forces in self-defence.

This is not the first time that he has tried to defend an alleged act that has drawn criticism at home and abroad. And he is not the first minister to do so. Before him, BNP ministers spoke in the same eloquent vein justifying similar acts that are incapable of being legally or morally defended.

The most unfortunate aspect of governance in Bangladesh is that although there have been changes in government from time to time, alternating between the AL and BNP, the bad policies have been steadfastly continued with, that too in a more vigorous manner. Operation Clean Heart was a well-intentioned undertaking—to

arrest the rising incidence of crime and lawlessness and recover illegal weapons. It was not surprising that the step was welcomed both at home and abroad, but at the end of it, at least 58 people were dead, allegedly killed by the security forces, and about 10,000 arrested. The High Court had not only declared illegal the actions taken by the army-led joint forces during Operation Clean Heart, it also held the Indemnity Act 2003 illegal and allowed the victims to "file both civil and criminal cases seeking justice against the concerned members of 'the joint forces or law-enforcing agencies' who committed the crimes."

Although the present anti-drug drive does not have a code name, its purpose

is a sad reflection of a systemic failure that those who represent the people, the parliamentarians being members of a co-equal branch of the government, have seldom addressed matters of public concern, or held the executive answerable for its actions. Unfortunately, the separation between these two has been abridged to such an extent that the former appears to have come to be subsumed under the latter.

If ever one hears critical and discordant notes, it is only when a ruling party cadre has the misfortune of falling victim, as we heard in the case of Arzu Mian, a Chhatra League leader, who was killed allegedly in a "gunfight" with Rab in August 2015. And it came from an AL



On March 9, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal defended "crossfire" deaths, saying law enforcement agencies only fire in self-defence during anti-drug drives.

is very good too—"war on drugs" with the avowed goal of "not sparing anybody" who has trafficked in drugs. Predictably, the drive came under criticism by the opposition party as vehemently as the war on drugs is now being criticised by the main opposition and human rights groups. And the move is being defended as vehemently as was the Clean Heart operation by the then administration—that the drive is the only way to tackle a fast deteriorating state of law and order. And vehemently defended also were the deaths at the hand of the security forces.

MP who had reportedly claimed, "Arzu was murdered," and said, "the government could not function depending on RAB which was formed during the BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami coalition government."

As for the home minister's recent comments, we have certain reservations. The description of "crossfire" or even "gunfight" depicting most of these incidents is untenable. Crossfire means the termination of fire in one particular point from two or more directions. There is always a third party involved. For example, journalists are caught between

crossfire in war. But here we have only the victim and the security agency! And if it is a gunfight or encounter, there must be evidence of that once the other side has been tackled. Furthermore, in many instances, the victims were picked up from home or on their way home, and some of them were in police custody, according to the statement of a victim's family, till one fine morning their bullet-riddled body was found in a paddy field.

Over the last many years, families of victims have come out publicly and described the circumstances of the death or disappearance of their relatives, which contradict the story of the police or the ministry. Surprisingly, there is total reluctance on the part of the administration to give due importance to the versions of the families. Do their entreaties not ring a sympathetic chord in our leaders? As citizens, do they not deserve to be heard? Is everything that the police say a sacrosanct gospel truth that cannot be put through independent scrutiny to determine its veracity? Should the politicians be obligated to the police, who are under their orders, or the people, under whose orders the politicians are where they are?

Disorder must be tackled. Many of the drug dealers are armed too and the security forces are well within their rights to deal with such situations as deemed necessary and to ensure their own protection. Miscreants and criminals survive by breaking the law, resorting to violence and killing people without compunction. But the state agencies cannot deal with these elements replicating the tactics of the criminals without running the risk of reducing themselves to the level of these elements. The law enforcers are supposed to uphold the rule of law and serve justice. Those defending the indefensible acts with verbal subterfuge need to be reminded of what Camus said about distorting facts: "Whoever does violence to truth or its expression eventually mutilates justice, even though he thinks he is serving it."

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Ducsu dreams dashed: Another symptom of the disease



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

WHAT do you call those who just refuse to see the writing on the wall? Delusional fools or compulsive optimists? Perhaps we are a bit of both. Thus, despite all the unsavoury antecedents of the Ducsu election—allegations of students being threatened if they didn't vote for Chhatra League, telltale preconditions of voting, and the obvious dominance of the ruling party's student wing in the halls—there was still a glimmer of hope.

Maybe that's our strongest feature as Bengalis—to hope in the midst of the most formidable odds. Then again, it could also be our weakest point—to delude ourselves that no matter how obviously adverse the conditions, things will miraculously get better. Perhaps it's time to stop believing in miracles and accept reality.

It seemed like a well-rehearsed play being enacted all over again. After the mindboggling national election, the tepid mayoral election, and the almost invisible upazila election, why we would expect anything different from the Ducsu election is also something to ponder about. So what if it was taking place after 28 years? So what if the opposing sides shared tea and *shingara* in the historic Madhur Canteen, the seat of many a glorious student movement? So what if the general students were enthusiastic and their candidates confident that the election would be held in a fair manner?

What happened during and after this Ducsu election is just a reflection of how a university with such a glorious past in terms of political movements and academic excellence has been degraded by petty politicisation (read opportunistic sycophancy), eating away both ideology and intellectual freedom. This has happened over decades as the country transitioned from military dictatorships to democratic rule under one of the two major parties. The practice of "hall control" by student cadres and teachers pledging allegiance to white or blue panels—even the highest administrative positions being political appointments—has deeply become embedded in the university culture. On a campus where non-political students are terrorised and often forced to join student

wings of political parties, just to be able to attend class, and where they are physically assaulted and sexually harassed by political cadres without even a whimper from the university authorities, the pursuit of knowledge becomes a mere ritual to somehow get a certificate without the inconvenience of getting maimed or killed.

Is this what this iconic institution was supposed to have looked like in this century?

Undeniably, historically, the Ducsu election is much more than electing a student body in a public university. By tradition, Ducsu elections have always

independent country, the political ramifications of the Ducsu election do not reflect the nationalistic goals of the '60s; rather it is an exercise for the students to get a taste of a democratic process within the institution. Chhatra League, moreover, seems to have forgotten that all the other Ducsu elections were contested on a level playing field, not through underhanded, juvenile tactics of flexing muscles or fake voting. Thus, in one final stroke, the dreams of thousands of students, many of them freshers, were crushed to the ground.

Chhatra League's apparent rage at

representative body that will make their university experience better, the Ducsu election has only resulted in disappointment and more uncertainty. With an administration that has turned tone deaf to the protests and demands of the general students and the prospect of even more intimidation and bullying in the future with total impunity, there is little scope for even deluded optimism.

The tragedy of crushing the spirit of young people cannot be emphasised enough. Whether it was to punish them for daring to demand reform in an archaic, illogical quota system or for



Instead of giving the students a representative body that will make their university experience better, the Ducsu election has only resulted in disappointment and more uncertainty.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

had a political tint, producing future leaders of the country—Matia Chowdhury, Rashed K Menon, Tofail Ahmed, to name a few. Most major political movements such as the Language Movement, education movement of the early '60s, anti-martial law movement of the late '60s, 1969's mass uprising and the fall of Ershad's military regime originated from Ducsu. It is assumed that the panel that could form a student governing body would also have a significant role to play in the country's politics.

After 28 years and being in an

Nurul Haque Nur being elected VP despite all the "preparations" taken to ensure complete victory was another jarring note in the aftermath of the election. Though they won 23 out of the 25 seats, it just wasn't enough.

While a boycott of classes and exams was announced and then suddenly withdrawn by the VP-elect, the leftist panel with Liton Nandi as the VP candidate has threatened tougher movement if the administration does not announce re-polls, something the DU authorities said would just not be possible.

Instead of giving the students a

roads where buses would not crush them on their way to school, clamping down on their right to protest and their right to elect the student body of their choice does not bode well for this country's growth. A nation will only regress into intellectual and moral bankruptcy if it continues to choke the voices of its young people. And the outcome of the Ducsu election has echoed this harsh, unpalatable truth.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Appreciating the role of care-givers

I read with keen interest Rifat Mursalin's article titled "Appreciating women who don't work (for pay)" published in *The Daily Star* on March 10. I strongly endorse the writer's analysis of how society views and neglects a housewife's contribution to the economy. Growing up in a patriarchal society, we often tend to see a housewife's role as a mere care-giver—one that is of low status and does not generate any monetary value.

But we often don't see how dependent the society and, in fact, all of humankind are on the role of a care-giver. I myself could never have been successful without my mother's support who was a housewife. It is high time we changed our attitude towards the "most committed, selfless, dedicated women" whose relentless contributions to the household we rely upon on a day-to-day basis.

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