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Border between friends shouldn't be this deadly

Why so many cases of torture and death?

At a director general-level border conference, the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) director general termed the killings along the Bangladesh-India border as unfortunate deaths. While they were indeed unfortunate, particularly for the families of the victims, what is most unfortunate is that these deaths were totally avoidable—and, in some cases, brutal beyond measure.

Take for instance the death reportedly from torture of Kabirul Hossain Molla at the hands of BSF men. After being caught for trespassing into Indian territory on May 10, Kabirul had petrol poured into his mouth and rectum by members of the BSF, who then left him on the no-man's land. Hours later, Kabirul succumbed to his injuries at Satkhira Sadar Hospital. Another Bangladeshi who was similarly tortured—although he survived—by BSF men was Md Azim Uddin. In April this year, Azim had all 10 of his fingernails pulled out with pliers by members of the Indian security force. Such treatment, by any security force, is completely unacceptable under all circumstances. The BSF men could have simply imprisoned these individuals as per Indian law, instead of unlawfully torturing them.

Moreover, in the last five and a half months alone, 15 Bangladeshis have reportedly been killed by members of the BSF. And since the year 2000, more than 1,000 Bangladeshis have died at their hands. Despite the massive death toll, no BSF men have been held accountable, which is especially unfortunate given the cordial relationship between our two countries.

It's time for the government of Bangladesh to ask its Indian counterpart to take meaningful steps to end such killings. And we hope the Indian government, considering our close relationship, will take appropriate action to stop anymore border deaths.

Canals continue to be destroyed

Why are government departments involved?

It is the same story over and over again. Canals—that were once used for water transport and irrigation of farmland—are being encroached upon rendering them useless and causing unnecessary suffering to the local people. This time it is the people of Mathbaria upazila (Pirojpur) who are the sufferers of indiscriminate cutting up of at least four canals where numerous dams and roads have been built.

A former chairman built a road across one of the major canals around 15 years ago putting an end to water transport. If that was not enough, the LGED put the nail in the coffin by carpeting the road and making it permanent. Then dams were added one by one on the canals while the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) built a permanent road on one of the dams.

The result of these incursions is that thousands of acres of land have become uncultivable because they remain under water most of the year. Transport of bulk goods and commodities has also become costlier as the former network of canals has been destroyed so water transport can no longer be used.

What is most astonishing is that none of these constructions have been approved by the Water Development Board (WDB)—the main body to give authorisation. In fact the WDB has asked both LGED and RHD to remove the roads and replace them with bridges and even the locals to remove the illegal dams. But obviously such requests have fallen on deaf ears.

We are quite used to seeing influential individuals encroaching upon water bodies. But it is unfathomable how government departments can flout the rules laid down by the government itself by constructing illegal structures, that too on water bodies that are lifelines of the upazila.

How many more deaths of canals and other water bodies must we witness before something is done to stop this indiscriminate onslaught which government departments are a part of? The WDB must be a lot more proactive in taking quick, effective action against such encroachment to protect these precious water bodies.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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No improvement in our diets

No one can deny the fact that, as a nation, we are not health conscious. Our eating habits should seriously be reconsidered by including healthy food items in our diet.

It appears that in the majority of the households in Bangladesh, sources of carbohydrate—rice and potatoes—usually dominate our diet. Our excessive intake of spicy food is also deleterious to health. Vegetables, a source of different nutrients such as potassium, fibre and multiple vitamins, should be consumed more often. Women, especially, need to increase their consumption of iron and calcium as they go through different stages of growth. Menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding and menopause are stages when their nutritional demands should be given utmost priority. Mass awareness campaigns about proper diets should be conducted in the rural areas of Bangladesh where many women suffer from anaemia and iron deficiency.

Despite Bangladesh being a subtropical country and ranking high globally in terms of food production, our low intake of fruits poses great health risks. Our failure to include sufficient whole grain, fruits, nuts and other sources of rich nutrients is the leading cause of diseases.

Sami Un Naby, Bangladesh Agricultural University

The proposed budget and its impact on vulnerable groups

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

In the proposed budget for fiscal year 2019-20, the government plans to spend Tk 74,367 crore, or 14.21 percent of the total expenditure, for social safety net programmes (SSNPs). This signifies a 15 percent jump from the FY2018-19 allocation of Tk 64,656 crore and a 13.92 percent share of total expenditure.

However, if we consider the revised FY2018-19 budget, SSNPs' share was 14.55 percent of the actual expenditure. If we take it at its face value, the new budget's SSNP target looks good, albeit there are three considerations that give us reason to pause and think.

First of all, in its 2018 election manifesto, the ruling party pledged to the electorate that it would ensure the following: (i) women's empowerment, gender parity and child welfare; (ii) nutritious and safe food; (iii) poverty elimination; (iv) quality healthcare for all; (v) welfare of the elderly, disabled and autistic people; and (vi) sustainable and inclusive development.

Let's now parse the proposed budget as a measure of the government's seriousness to reach these six goals.

To his credit, the finance minister alluded to the manifesto in his budget speech. Referring to SSNPs, he said, "As per our election manifesto of 2018, budget allocation in this sector will be doubled in the next five years." The PM echoed this sentiment in a post-budget press conference on June 14 where she termed the proposed budget "a budget for social welfare and wellbeing for all."

So far so good! However, it would be difficult to meet all these new targets with an allocation of 14.21 percent of expenditure, or only 2.58 percent of GDP in FY2019-20. It is commendable though that the finance minister has promised that the budget allocation in this sector will be doubled in the next five years.

Secondly, the implementation and execution of the government's SSNP projects leave much to be desired. According to the Planning Commission, the government has over 130 SSNP line items, but 33 percent of the funds go towards "pension for retired government employees and their families." An earlier study of the World Bank on the effectiveness of SSNPs states: "Data suggests that a large proportion of poor and vulnerable households do not have any access to these programs." Other sample surveys indicate that the average benefits of SSNPs are low and declining in real terms.

On the bright side, the finance minister mentioned other actions taken by the



One of the shortcomings of the budget can be seen in its meagre allocation to health and education.

PHOTO: JOY CHAKMA

government to buttress the support system for vulnerable groups. "The government has declared to reduce poverty to 12.30 percent and the extreme poverty rate to 4.50 percent by 2023-24," he said. He reiterated the government's desire to sustain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) programme, and to prioritise "SDG targets, such as reducing the rate of poverty below 10 percent and extreme poverty below three percent by 2030." Unfortunately, while SDGs are mentioned in the budget in a few places, it is not clear whether this reference was merely perfunctory or more details would follow later.

Thirdly, many in civil society question the effectiveness, selection process and criteria, and overall impact of SSNP projects, and point to the misuse of funds allocated for the programmes. An earlier study by the World Bank indicates that while the government is distributing more than half of the SSNP resources in the form of cash allowances, public works, and education and health incentives for poor and vulnerable households, which aim to contribute to the fight against poverty and to improve human capital, the effectiveness has been spotty. Some of the reasons are bureaucratic malfeasance, "abuse of power, malpractices, and political bias of locally elected representatives," according to one study. "The selection process could be greatly improved through closer involvement of civil society—particularly the older people themselves—in program implementation. Most of the program's weaknesses, including selection bias, can be overcome if the program is scaled up to a universal one. Estimates suggest that such an upgrading with a reasonably benefit size is possible—given the political will," it

adds.

The finance minister ought to be congratulated for his attention to the plight of 10 percent of our population who have some sort of disability. "Considering this fact, I am proposing a five percent rebate on the total tax of a taxpayer if at least 10 percent of the total workforce employed by the taxpayer are physically challenged people," he said in his speech.

Turning to the reduction of inequality of income and wealth in the country, which has recently seen a significant uptick, the government needs to redouble its efforts to refocus its policy areas that can reduce the disparity between the rich and the poor. The government can address inequality by using the fiscal policy tools at its disposal, viz. progressive taxation and expenditures on health, education, and social protection. The budgeting process could have provided a roadmap for our national priorities but one can't be certain that our elected representatives are in the mood to engage in an open debate and challenge the status quo. As in other open democracies, the budget session needs to be utilised as an opportunity to "review our priorities, refocus our energies and reinforce our strengths."

The shortcomings of the budget can also be seen in its meagre allocation to health and education, as well as its paying lip service to accountability. For the fiscal year 2019-20, the finance minister proposed an allocation of Tk 25,733 crore for health and family welfare. "Increased domestic spending is essential for achieving universal health coverage and the health-related Sustainable Development Goals," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO

Director-General. "But health spending is not a cost, it's an investment in poverty reduction, jobs, productivity, inclusive economic growth, and healthier, safer, fairer societies." According to Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman of PPRC, "Bangladesh ought to allocate six percent of its GDP for education and three percent of its GDP for health. This means that these shares deserve to be doubled." This year's current budget allocation for both is way below the global trajectory in these sectors in low- and middle-income countries.

The overall impact of the budget will be to enhance disparity in the country. Around 20 lakh people are being added to the job market on a regular basis and there should have been directions and plans in the budget to ensure employment generation for them. Default loans in the banking sector stood at Tk 110,874 crore as of March, up from Tk 93,911 crore three months earlier. Ironically, the budget's provision to allow black money to be invested with a minimal tax will aid the defaulters. According to former Finance Minister AMA Muhith, less than a third of government revenue comes from direct taxes, which is less regressive than indirect taxes such as VAT. But it has to be raised to 15 percent, he said, suggesting the government increase the contribution of income tax to the total revenue. Currently, income tax accounts for only 30 to 35 percent of the total revenue earned, and Muhith recommended that "it could easily be raised to 50 percent as there are a lot of wealthy people in Bangladesh."

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India's cricket diplomacy in the Maldives

India using soft power to help promote strategic security objectives



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

ONE of the most abiding images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first bilateral visit to the Maldives on June 8 was him gifting President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih a cricket bat, containing the autographs of all the members of the Indian national team playing in the ongoing World Cup in England.

It is not often that one sees such a gesture from one head of government to another. It was as high on optics as a powerful statement of India's soft power diplomacy. Modi could not have chosen a better time for this given that the frenzy surrounding the World Cup is at its peak. Cricket diplomacy came in for praise from none other than cricketing legend Sachin Tendulkar, who also expressed the hope that the Maldives would be seen on the cricket map soon.

What helped India unleash cricket diplomacy with the Maldives is the fact that the Indian Ocean island nation's president and vice president are great cricket enthusiasts. India is considering a request from Solih, who watched a match in the popular Indian Premier League competition in Bengaluru this year, to build a cricket stadium and train the national team of the Maldives to bring them up to the requisite international standards. The stadium is expected to be built near Male under the line of credit that India will give and the Indian government is working with the Indian cricket board (BCCI). India has already supplied cricket and training kits to Maldivian cricketers. A team from the BCCI had visited the Maldives in May in connection with the training of Maldivian cricketers and finalising coaching programmes for them. Also, the Maldives would like India to undertake training programmes in that country. It remains to be seen if the BCCI would take on additional responsibilities in this regard. Cricket remains a "good area in which



Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifts a cricket bat signed by the Indian team to cricket fan and Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in Male.

PHOTO: PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU, GOVT OF INDIA

we could build public relations and people-to-people relations and therefore, I think, one of the important discussions that took place was that we would assist the government of Maldives in building a proper cricket stadium, an international level cricket stadium in the Maldives, in the vicinity of Male," Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay K Gokhale told reporters in the run-up to Modi's visit. Given the popularity of cricket in South Asia, "we see this as an important people-to-people relationship-building exercise in the same way that we did for Afghanistan, if you recall, a few years ago," he said.

India helped Afghanistan to qualify for Test-playing status and is still helping the country. The BCCI has provided the Afghan national team a stadium in Greater Noida, near Delhi, for training after shifting from their previous venue in Sharjah in 2015. India had also helped Afghanistan gain access to a stadium in Dehradun where Afghanistan hosted Bangladesh in a series of Twenty20 matches in the week prior to Afghanistan's first-ever Test match against India in Bengaluru in 2018. The full

measure of the diplomatic importance of that Test could be understood from the fact that Prime Minister Modi and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had issued separate statements to mark the landmark occasion which were read out to the spectators at the stadium and the live TV audience.

The BCCI has also promised to assist junior teams from Afghanistan to play in India and provide assistance for the improvement of coaching, umpiring, and other technical support. Also, the Indian government provided one million dollars for the construction of a cricket stadium and related facilities in Kandahar. These are commendable initiatives to improve Afghanistan's domestic capabilities for cricket and to popularise the game in the country.

There is no doubt that India is using cricket diplomacy to help promote strategic security objectives in Afghanistan and the Maldives. Terrorism emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan threatens South Asia as a whole, and India's use of soft power of Bollywood and cricket has led the Afghan people, who are fiercely

independent, to perceive New Delhi as a benign foreign power. India has invested a lot of political and economic resources to rebuild war-torn Afghanistan and has remained stuck to its course despite suffering occasional setbacks from terror attacks in that country.

In the Maldives, Modi's cricket diplomacy was an icing on the cake as India appears to have gotten back its influence following the change of guard after the electoral defeat of President Abdulla Yameen's government whose five-year rule saw the country's relations with India suffer and move closer to China. But with a friendly government in place in the Maldives since December last year, India was quick to offer millions of dollars in soft loans for high-impact social welfare projects in Afghanistan in a range of sectors. India also liberalised visa norms for Maldivians in January this year. New Delhi, it seems, is keen to make up for the lost time during the Yameen years.

Sports has often been used as a diplomatic tool to try and improve ties between traditionally rival countries. Ping-pong (table tennis) diplomacy between the United States and China, once Cold War rivals, in 1970 was considered to be a historic event in international relations. On the other hand, sports has also been used to make a statement of protest through the boycott of sporting events including the Olympics. The same narrative has prevailed in the Indian sub-continent when it comes to cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan. India-Pakistan cricket diplomacy has had a mixed bag of outcomes. At times, it was used to break the ice in bilateral ties but the thaw was short-lived. The wars of 1965 and 1971, and attacks by Pakistan-based terrorists in India have led to a long hiatus in sporting relations between the two countries, which continues today.

Soft-power diplomacy, however, has its limitations and could at best be an add-on component when bilateral relations are robust and sustained in order to generate more goodwill and bonhomie among the people of two countries.

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