

17 years of fighting a case of 'mistaken identity'

How many more such victims are there?

IT is disturbing to know about Bablu Shiekh, a man who has had to fight a legal battle for 17 long years before he was finally cleared of charges for a crime he did not commit. According to reports in this daily, it was a case of mistaken identity with Bablu Shiekh being taken for Sree Babu, an accused in a case. It resulted in Bablu Shiekh being in jail for two months after which he managed to secure bail but had to fight the case falsely filed against him for 17 years. This gross injustice reminds us of the sensational Jaha Alam case in which an innocent man had to languish in jail for three years after being falsely accused in 26 corruption cases because of negligence of ACC officials in carrying out a proper investigation. Bablu Shiekh's predicament was the result of major gaps in the process through which he was arrested, the case was filed and investigated.

According to the observations of the Natore District and Session Judge, several individuals must bear responsibility for such a travesty of justice. It includes the police official who mistakenly arrested Bablu Shiekh instead of the actual accused Sree Babu without ascertaining his identity, the officer-in-charge of the police station for signing in the challan book without ensuring that the right person had been arrested and the investigation officers who did not bother to verify facts and other details of the victim and accused when they submitted the charge sheet. The defence lawyer also did not submit any facts or documents before the court when he sought bail for Bablu Shiekh in the wrong name.

All this points out to the possibility of many such innocent victims being arrested and having to fight long drawn out, expensive battles before they can be absolved of the crimes (if at all) they have been falsely accused of. People like Jaha Alam and Bablu Shiekh, both from marginalised sections of the society, have had to endure unimaginable suffering and hardship for the "mistakes" of irresponsible officers. It is therefore incumbent on the government to conduct an investigation into such cases where individuals have been falsely accused, arrested and maybe even languishing in jail because of negligence or knavery of those police officers responsible for carrying out the initial investigation and submitting the charge sheet. Those responsible for such uncalled for suffering of innocent individuals must be held accountable.

Bangladesh's slow progress in reducing hunger

Address the core issues holding us back

IT is unfortunate that Bangladesh has gone two notches down in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) this year, ranking 88th among the 117 countries, whereas last year, the country ranked 86th out of the 119 countries. We should identify the reasons and address them with urgency. Although Bangladesh has done better than India and Pakistan in fighting hunger, there is no place for complacency. A slide in the GHI is in stark contrast to the rate of our GDP growth.

Globally, the level of hunger and undernourishment in a country is calculated based on four indicators—undernourishment, child stunting, child wasting and child mortality. Although we have made good progress in reducing the rate of child stunting associated with undernourishment, we still have a long way to go when it comes to reducing the child mortality rate. A 2015 study found that the rate of child stunting has reduced in the country from 58.5 percent in 1997 to 40.2 percent in 2011 because of the rising household wealth associated with pro-poor economic growth and gains in parental education, as well as health, sanitation, and demographic factors reflecting decreased fertility rates. However, the percentage of children under five with stunted growth is still quite high.

According to World Food Programme, 40 million people in Bangladesh remain food insecure, while 11 million suffer from acute hunger. Since poverty and hunger are closely related, Bangladesh needs to put all-out efforts to alleviate poverty. For that, the government should undertake specific programmes under the social safety net schemes. Although over the last few decades, our food production has increased keeping pace with our increased population, our goal should be to become self-sufficient in food production and achieve the global goal of zero hunger by 2030. Along with increasing food production, ensuring access to nutritious food especially by the most vulnerable groups, should be a major priority for the government.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Public transportation system needs urgent attention

Reckless driving by bus drivers in Dhaka claims a lot of innocent lives on the roads of our capital. Many of the public transport vehicles are unfit, often without proper paper work. And when the traffic police do stop them, either the meagre fines fail to have any impact on the transport owners or a simple bribe allows the drivers to continue with the day as usual.

The fume from the exhaust pipes of the buses create a lot of pollution as well. If the vehicles were fit it would make the air we breathe significantly better. Anybody who commutes in Dhaka will easily be able to relate with the issues discussed above, yet it seems the authorities have left the situation unattended.

It is high time, the concerned authorities focused on ensuring strict laws on the public transport system. I hope the concerned authorities take the necessary measures immediately so that the residents of the capital can commute with ease.

Monorom Polok, Jagannath University

The tentacles of institutionalised violence reach everywhere



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

WHEN we read how individuals accused of a crime—drug peddling, terrorism or murder—get shot during a gun fight between their cohorts and the law enforcers we shrug it off without a bat of an eyelid. We know that these "gunfights", "shootouts" or "encounters" are euphemisms for extrajudicial killing. It barely warrants more than a few seconds of acknowledgement before we get on to more "juicy" news. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) has recorded 204 victims of extrajudicial killings in the first six months of this year. Last year ASK reported 466 deaths in crossfire and in police custody.

So why this gross apathy for the death of so many fellow citizens who may or may not have committed the crime they have been accused of? Why are we not concerned that these individuals did not go through the due process of law? Why the lack of outrage regarding the identical official accounts of how they ended up dead? One of the reasons for this apparent absence of empathy is that violence has become normalised in our society, in particular violence perpetrated by those in charge of our security. Extrajudicial killings give the message that law enforcers are showing no confidence in the judiciary thus eroding people's faith in the judiciary and by implication, on law.

Take the number of enforced disappearances—344 between 2014 and July, 2019. Forty of the victims were later found dead, 66 shown arrested in different cases, 35 returned while 203 are still missing, according to rights body Ain o Salish Kendra. There was no disclosure regarding why these people were abducted although, given the description of the incidents by family members it is widely suspected that law enforcers were involved. When individuals with no criminal record are picked up and many of them "disappeared" forever, why should the suspiciously identical deaths in crossfire of alleged criminals arouse any sympathy?

The normalisation of violence as a means of disciplining is related to the politicisation of institutions created to ensure public safety. Since colonial times, governments have used law enforcement agencies for political gains. Both undemocratic and democratic governments have been unable to let go of their fondness for this convenient tool to clamp down on dissent and political rivals or allow favourites to settle scores with perceived enemies. All throughout the 90s, after the restoration of democracy, BNP and AL governments, while taking turns in being in the driver's

seat, thought it best to consolidate their power by having law enforcement and other agencies at their beck and call. And that's how the annoyingly repetitive term "the culture of impunity" was inserted into our daily jargon. Because as long as members of a law enforcement agency remained loyal and obedient to the government in power "a little bit of violence" would not be an issue.

Thus the terror invoked by the word "remand", which is automatically associated with torture and sometimes confessions under duress. In fact this very terror has helped to keep opposition and dissenting voices practically silent. The scenes of unnecessarily brutal clampdowns on opposition party rallies (of both BNP and AL when they were in the opposition) are hard to

forget—with even women activists being physically assaulted by law enforcers and pushed into vans and journalists left bleeding from indiscriminate beatings. But violence, once unleashed and unchallenged by higher powers, cannot be contained and will seep into everything. And for the really corrupt members of such agencies, fear tactics have been used to extort huge sums of money in exchange for not filing cases against rapists or murderers or to make sure an arrestee is not beaten too brutally.

When violence becomes the main modus operandi of law enforcement it is emulated by other groups that enjoy the indulgence of the powers that be. Which makes it less surprising that members of student wings of dominant political parties have carried out systematic torture that have led to death of their victims using tactics similar to those of law enforcers. So it is hardly surprising that Abrar was subjected to such brutality at

the hands of members of Buet's Chhatra League who had a history of cruel bullying of fellow students. In addition, these members enjoyed an implicit immunity from any kind of accountability either from their parent parties, the university administration or from the law enforcement authorities. In fact, on many occasions the law enforcers and Chhatra League members have worked together as a team to clamp down on protestors perceived to be defying the government. Violence when it becomes institutionalised in this way with no checks from anywhere, will inevitably seep into other areas as has been the case with Chhatra League and other student wings in the past. And we cannot isolate the growing violence among teenage gangs who draw inspiration from these



enforcement agencies? The essence of a functioning democracy is accountability of all public institutions, especially those responsible for maintaining law and order. Sadly, politicisation has weakened most of these institutions removing accountability and autonomy, making them mere tools of suppressing real or imagined opponents while looking the other way when ruling party associates abuse their authority. This may seemingly give extra power to ruling governments in the short run but ultimately, they become thorns in the flesh when crimes committed by so-called loyalists go out of control (as in the case of Abrar's murder) and lawlessness threatens overall security creating disillusionment and resentment among the public. And that is not a healthy formula for any government.

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Senior Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, The Daily Star.

The US presidential battle in 2020

Democrats, get your act together. Fast



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

IT is, when you think about it, a bit of a Faustian bargain for the Democrats. A few whiny Republican attempts notwithstanding, the Republican candidacy for the 2020 presidential elections is cast in stone, as it pretty much always is in the US when an incumbent is running for president.

It's going to be ... (drumroll here, please)... you guessed it... the one-and-only man with "unmatched wisdom," who considers himself a "seriously stable genius," a.k.a. Donald J. Trump. There's virtually no competition there, so not much news interest. (Trump, being Trump, is up to his usual antics to pick up the slack.)

As the Democratic presidential debate on October 16 made all too clear, there's plenty of drama on the Democratic side, with the whole thing taking on the look of a maudlin daytime soap. There are few signs of winnowing of the huge stable of candidates.

The competition, the diversity of candidates, all make the Democratic nomination battle very newsworthy, and so the 2020 election focus is mostly on the slugfest between Democratic candidates.

This is where the Faustian bargain comes in. The trouble is, all that media attention is not getting Democrats anywhere as far as the general election is concerned. To take on Trump, what the Democrats desperately need is what the Democrats ain't getting: a single, focused candidate with the entire party solidly behind her/him, ready to take on the sitting US president in what promises to be one of the most bitter, toxic and closely fought presidential campaigns in modern American history.

Instead, the Democrats continue to be saddled with a colorful menagerie of candidates. The recent debate had a

slate of dozen candidates. Now, what kind of a cockamamie debate can you have with that? Although painfully, the answer was made abundantly clear to the long-suffering civic-minded (mostly Democrats) people of America who decided to sit through that ghastly ordeal. The bottom line is this: with that many candidates you can't really have a proper, thorough comparison of candidates. Everybody is out to find some way of standing out, attention flits too often back and forth between the dozen contestants, and pretty soon

fundraising situation especially dire. Sanders recovered very well from a recent heart attack, but his support, while solid, appears to have a definite limit.

The fly in the ointment are the other candidates—who are waiting for a miracle to happen. They are all quite distinguished, talented politicians, but nobody's hitting double digits in the polls, and with the exception of Sen Kamala Harris, and South Bend, Ind Mayor Pete Buttigieg, they are rarely if ever getting even five percent in the polls.

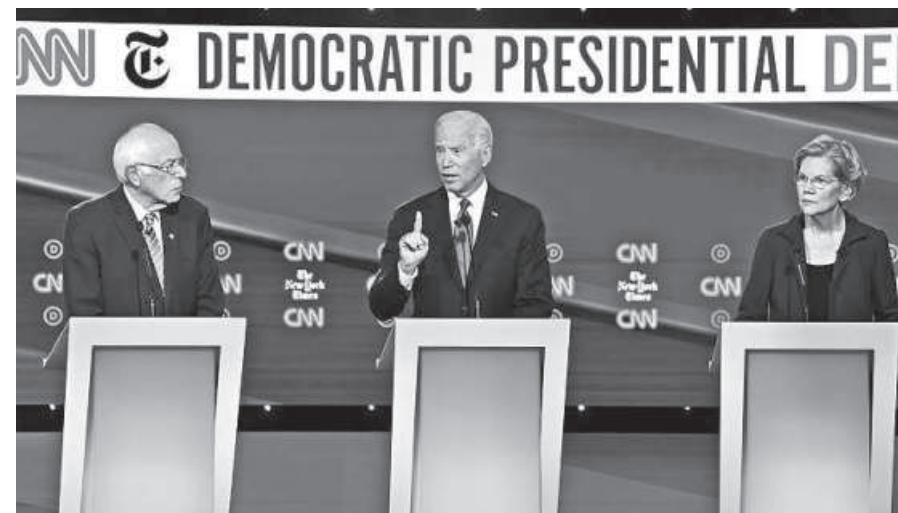


PHOTO: SAUL LOEB/AFP

Sanders, Biden and Warren speak during the fourth Democratic debate.

you wonder whether this is US politics' answer to a beauty contest.

Polls are beginning to indicate quite clearly that there are three heavyweights: Former Vice President Joe Biden, a political moderate, and two more left-leaning candidates, Sen Bernie Sanders and Sen Elizabeth Warren. Warren is on the ascendant, while Sanders and Biden are trailing. It's the overall trajectory that must be exhilarating to Warren supporters. In fundraising and polls, Warren is showing consistent and steady progress. Biden's initial fundraising prowess as well as poll numbers now appear to be petering out, with the

Yet they refuse to give up. One of the peculiar manifestations in the American election season is an odd, tenacious narcissism that is utterly immune to logic. One of the more florid examples this time around was New York Mayor Bill de Blasio who fancied his chances in the Democratic race. Few shared his opinion, even in his own city, and that piety campaign died a merciful death.

In addition to Warren, Sanders and Biden, Harris and Buttigieg look like the only two candidates who have the ability to survive. Without taking anything away from them, that's two too many. For the life of me I cannot understand

why the main US parties cannot come up with a less unwieldy system of nominating a candidate. A similar parade of too many candidates plagued the previous Republican presidential campaign in 2016 until Trump came and slaughtered them all.

Make no mistake. This is a critical, fraught time for America. Dark rumblings of a possible recession is a major cause for worry (Trump's quixotic trade war with China isn't helping). A riveting, scary drama is unfolding at the impeachment hearings at the House of Representatives as each day a new bombshell revelation comes out. Sleazy foreign-born thugs, allies of Trump's personal attorney Rudi Giuliani, are arrested on campaign finance violation charges right before taking off for Vienna on one-way tickets. A slew of foreign service professionals is defying a White House clampdown and testifying in Congress about how Trump's aides ran a parallel policy in Ukraine for Trump's personal political benefit.

As if all of that's not bad enough, Trump decided to take away US troops from Kurdish-ruled area of Syria, a disastrous foreign policy blunder that stunned experts. Now Turkey is launching an attack on the Kurds, throwing that entire region into chaos. Trump's decision has drawn the most unanimous US condemnation in these partisan times.

The Democrats will need all the savvy they can muster to take on a Republican president who follows no rules, defies established norms with total abandon, and, as his terrible rallies indicate, has no compunction in using incendiary hate-mongering and race-baiting to weaponise the 2020 presidential campaign.

There isn't a moment to lose. What the Democrats need to do is cut to the chase and settle down on a candidate as soon as possible if they are to have a fighting chance.

Alas, this is easier said than done. Ashfaque Swapan is a contributing editor for Sill-coneer, a digital daily for South Asians in the United States.