

Police arrests four Rab members for abduction, torture

Justice must be seen through

POLICE arrested four Rab members and a civilian woman on Friday in the capital's Hatirjheel on the charges of abducting, torturing, and demanding ransom from one Tamzid Hossain. The arrests took place after the victim's sister informed the police about it. On Thursday afternoon, Hossain was kidnapped, blindfolded, and tortured while his sister was called by his three men (claiming to be from Rab) from one phone number, demanding a ransom of Tk 2 crore in exchange for his safe return. They threatened to accuse Hossain in arms and narcotics cases, but refused to answer when his sister asked which Rab office he had been taken to. The men later settled for a Tk 12 lakh ransom, which police later held two of them with.

While we highly commend the police taking swift action regarding this case, we must also insist that justice be ensured for the victim. Given the profession that most of the accused belong to, it is more than likely that they may slip through unscathed, with only a slap on the wrist. But we believe that this incident needs to be made an example of, so that those belonging to the same and similar professions may not be under the misconception that they can commit these crimes against civilians and face no justice.

There is no doubt in regards to Rab's superb contribution to reducing crime across the country—not the least of which include their deradicalisation programme and launching the country's first On-site Identification and Verification System (OIVS) for criminal profiles—but the unit is also known for being involved in many incidents similar to what took place on Thursday. In November of last year, for instance, one man died while in custody of Rab-7 as he was hit with blunt objects. While Rab claimed after his death that his injuries were results of a mob beating, such a beating was not mentioned in the case that they had filed with the police. As such, we would urge the police, Rab, and other relevant authorities to see this case through to a just end for the victim and the accused. There should also be a thorough investigation of all of Rab's activities, so that no one—regardless of their profession—can feel that they are above the law. It is unacceptable for an organisation such as Rab to have its members be involved in abducting and torturing members of the general public, when it is their duty to protect those same citizens from such situations.

Nationwide lockdown has to be enforced rigorously

Govt can't backtrack from its decision this time

WE welcome the government's latest decision to impose a week-long strict lockdown to curb the rapid transmission of the Covid-19 virus, starting from April 14. With both the daily death and infection rates caused by coronavirus at 63 and 7,462, respectively as of Friday morning, something more than just restrictions on public movements had to be initiated. We sincerely hope that the upcoming nationwide lockdown will turn out to be a timely move in the fight against the deadly virus.

According to a report published by The Daily Star on April 10, 2021, all public and private institutions except emergency services will remain closed during the lockdown. Also, public transport services will be suspended. Although these directives seem very convincing, the government has to ensure that they do not become a farce, as we are witnessing right now. Following the surge in Covid-19 cases since the second week of March, the government issued a 11-point directive and also, a seven-day restriction on public movement on April 4. While public transport and shopping malls were initially to be suspended, the former started to operate on the city streets again within just three days of the imposition of the restrictions, while the later has also reopened two days ago.

Concerned authorities have to be strict and forceful this time to make the lockdown effective. They have to give public health safety their topmost priority and be uncompromising against demands made by various quarters. Also, the aforementioned report mentions a former director (Disease Control) of Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) as saying, "The ongoing restrictions were unplanned and they have failed to contain the transmission of the virus. Goals were not fixed, so nothing was achieved."

The government has to implement the upcoming lockdown in a planned and systematic way this time so that it can create a lasting impact on the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. Also, there has to be strong and clear public communication from the government's side regarding the goals that it wants to achieve through the imposition of the lockdown, so that people feel encouraged and motivated to abide by the official directives.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Law enforcers involved in law breaking

When the Rapid Action Battalion was first formed in 2004, people had high expectations of the elite force. However, their expectation soon turned into disappointment, as members of Rab started to become involved in various law breaking and anti-people activities.

Just recently, four members of Rab were arrested on charges of abduction, torture, etc. We hope that they are punished in accordance with the law, so that others are deterred from doing the same.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

Bangladesh's Covid emergency needs to be recognised as one



A CLOSER LOOK
TASNEEM TAYEB

BANGLADESH has been under lockdown since 6am April 5, 2021. This is the first time the nation is under lockdown to curb the spiralling spike in Covid-19 cases. While last year the nation took a similar—and perhaps more effective measure to flatten the curve—the government called it a general holiday. Although this time around the country is officially under a lockdown, given the mounting statistics, its effectiveness has been limited at best.

Covid cases are increasing by the day, the healthcare system is overloaded with patients seeking medical support, and there are people who are dying due to lack of treatment. There is an acute shortage of medical facility for Covid patients, including ICU facilities and medical care staff. People are practically dying in cars and ambulances as their loved ones take them from one hospital to another in search of treatment. And even for those who are seeking treatment at home, oxygen supply remains scarce. At a glance, this looks like a scenario from last year when the healthcare system almost collapsed under the pressure of the mounting Covid-19 cases.

While why this nightmare has been allowed to bog the nation down once again remains a major question that needs to be answered in the long-run; what is a more pressing question is how effective and practical are the measures that are currently being taken to address this situation.

Earlier in April, the cabinet division of the government issued a circular with a set of 11 directives defining the scope of the ongoing lockdown. The directives unfortunately seemed hastily penned, to say the least. The result: people blatantly ignored these directives and went about their usual business.

Over a period of just three to four days a lot of these directives have been reversed. While as per directive one, all public transport services remained initially suspended, the book fair remained open for public visit. On the third day of the nationwide lockdown, city buses were back on the roads. On the fourth day of the lockdown, the cabinet division allowed operation of shops and shopping malls from 9am to 5pm.

LATE last month, the Biden Administration unveiled a USD 2 trn infrastructure programme that aims to modernise American infrastructure. The American Jobs Plan has four major spending components over the next eight years. First, invest USD 621 billion on clean energy, upgrading and repairing highways, railways, bridges and city transit systems. Second, focus USD 650 billion on improving life in homes, schools with water and broadband systems. Third, spend USD 400 billion on caregivers for elderly and disabled people to create jobs. Finally, invest USD 300 billion in research, development and manufacturing, including USD 50 billion on semiconductor manufacturing. Underlying is a strategy to deliver green lifestyle to combat climate change.

Coming on top of the USD 1.9 trillion stimulus package and USD 0.9 trillion approved under Trump, the US is committing USD 4.8 trillion or 22.9 percent of 2020 GDP, setting the stage for Big State competition with China. To fund this, the corporate tax rate would be raised to 28 percent from the current 21 percent, which Trump slashed from 35 percent in his 2017 tax package. The Biden package would also plug US corporate taxation evasion through capturing offshore income at domestic tax rates.

This attention to infrastructure and jobs is long overdue. Furthermore, the world needs this large fiscal stimulus to help global recovery from the pandemic. The OECD estimates that up to 1.5 percent would be added to global growth from the US stimulus package.

The downside is whether US can implement such investments without inflation and whether the rest of the world will fund this without higher interest rates. On inflation, LSE Professor Charles Goodhart and Manoj Pradhan have already documented that since the 1980s, global benign inflation was due to China becoming the world's new source of cheap goods and services. They think that this will not last. University of Texas Professor James Galbraith warns that "China is missing from the Great Inflation Debate." He, however, thinks that China will not rock the boat by pushing up prices.

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) itself, has requested businesses to submit their VAT returns in their respective VAT offices during the lockdown, albeit while maintaining safety measures. One can only wonder why government offices are themselves not fully adhering to the lockdown measures, or why can the VAT returns not be submitted online. And this is just one case.

Also the first few two days of the lockdown were marked by anti-lockdown protests from various quarters across the country, with protests turning violent in some areas of the country, including



Customers throng Noor Mansion Shopping Centre in the capital's New Market area on the first day of reopening of malls after a brief four-day closure during the ongoing 'lockdown'.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Faridpur.

Moreover, the failure to clearly define the underprivileged and vulnerable communities—whose income would be significantly affected due to the "lockdown"—have forced them to come out of their homes in search of livelihood.

"We know where the slums are, we know where the vulnerable people live; it is possible to geographically identify these areas, there is clear segregation of the rich and the poor by geography in every city and if we could provide them with cash support or food assistance then they will not go out," suggested former World Bank lead economist, Zahid Hussain.

Zahid Hussain suggests that while people are under lockdown (if such a lockdown can actually be enforced), the authorities will need to "study the Covid-19 cases and trace which behaviour triggered the spread so that in the long-run those behaviours can be discouraged

through policy." For instance, if the Covid spike has been due to a lack of sufficient quarantine of people coming from abroad, then measures need to be taken to rectify this. Or if the cases had been a result of people nonchalantly visiting tourist spots, then precautions can be taken to avoid such scenarios in the future. And the list goes on.

The government on Friday announced that the nation is moving towards a week-long hard lockdown from April 14. But one might be pardoned for asking, why this week-long delay in announcing the "hard lockdown"? If the hard lockdown



Customers throng Noor Mansion Shopping Centre in the capital's New Market area on the first day of reopening of malls after a brief four-day closure during the ongoing 'lockdown'.

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had been imposed from April 5, or ideally even earlier, a lot more lives could have been saved.

The authorities had successfully flattened the curve last year, and in doing so, became so complacent that it resulted in a scenario where they perhaps thought they had won the war against the all-pervasive pandemic, and not the battle.

As an outcome, we kept seeing rising cases of infections for some time, but it was not until things started going out of control that the government decided to impose lockdown measures.

While the government needs to strike a balance between lives and livelihoods, making sure no one dies of hunger or Covid, it needs to come up with a concrete, well-planned comprehensive strategy to contain the pandemic while ensuring people have sustenance.

If a hard lockdown is imposed, the government needs to ensure that the

affected people are getting social safety support. For one, the government can utilise the 113 million Euro grant by EU and Germany provided to Bangladesh's "Social Protection Programme for Unemployed and Distressed Workers in the RMG, Leathergoods and Footwear Industries" late last year, to support workers whose income will be impacted by the pandemic.

The initial plan was to bring "laid-off, disabled and insolvent workers of export-oriented garment, leather and footwear manufacturing factories" under a scheme whereby they would be given Tk 3,000 per month for three months as part of financial support. The EU-Germany grant was meant to back this up. 80 million Euro (around Tk 800 crore) had been transferred to Bangladesh in December 2020 to support in strengthening the social security system.

Eligible workers under Social Protection Program for Unemployed and Distressed Workers in the RMG, Leathergoods and Footwear Industries managed by the Department of Labour, Ministry of Labour and Employment, received the first monthly instalment of Tk 3,000 on December 22, 2020.

While how much of this grant has been spent is not clear, whatever of it remains can be used to support workers who will be affected by the hard lockdown. And the government also needs to announce and implement a well-defined social safety package during the hard lockdown to make sure people stay indoors.

And a hard lockdown should be enforced like a hard lockdown, symmetrically applied to all, irrespective of people's political, social or financial muscle. If a rule is applicable for one, it should be applicable for all. Otherwise, the hard lockdown will only be as good as the apparently relaxed lockdown the country is now undergoing.

This is a serious situation, that demands serious, people-friendly and decisive action by the government. The people responsible for running the nation must realise that people's lives and livelihoods are at risk, and this is not the time for stop-gap, kneejerk, half-hearted measures. The government has already been late in its response to contain the second wave. Nothing would be more unfortunate for the nation right now than being led by people living in a world of half measures.

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Adopting state capitalism to compete against China



ANDREW SHENG

LATE last month, the Biden Administration unveiled a USD 2 trn infrastructure programme that aims to modernise American infrastructure. The American Jobs Plan has four major spending components over the next eight years. First, invest USD 621 billion on clean energy, upgrading and repairing highways, railways, bridges and city transit systems. Second, focus USD 650 billion on improving life in homes, schools with water and broadband systems. Third, spend USD 400 billion on caregivers for elderly and disabled people to create jobs. Finally, invest USD 300 billion in research, development and manufacturing, including USD 50 billion on semiconductor manufacturing. Underlying is a strategy to deliver green lifestyle to combat climate change.

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This attention to infrastructure and jobs is long overdue. Furthermore, the world needs this large fiscal stimulus to help global recovery from the pandemic. The OECD estimates that up to 1.5 percent would be added to global growth from the US stimulus package.

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On US debt funding, out of US net foreign liability to rest of the world of USD 14.1 trillion at end-2020, just under three quarters are funded by East Asian surplus economies (Japan, China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan), with the balance by Europe (Germany, Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland). As Harvard Professor Kenneth Rogoff put it, "it seems an article of faith among US policymakers and many economists that the world's appetite for dollar debt is virtually insatiable."

What could totally disrupt both assumptions? Worsening US-China relations! By retaining Trump's tariffs on China and hardening rhetoric on China, the Biden Administration thinks it can pump up the US and fight China and Russia at the same time.

Is this unipolar hubris justified? The latest China Academy of Social Science (CASS) 2020 National Balance sheet report showed that by 2019, China amassed national net wealth and GDP at market value at 80 percent and 65 percent of the US respectively. China is a net lender to the world with USD 2.2 trillion or 14.4 percent of GDP, running current account surpluses, whereas the US is a net borrower to the tune of USD 14.1 trillion or 66.9 percent of GDP, running growing twin fiscal and current account deficits and debt.

The real race is which form of state capitalism is more sustainable and effective—a marathon rather than a short-term dash. State capitalism has evolved from managerial and financial capitalism of recent years because financialization and technology created growing income and job disparities that only government intervention can correct. There may be ideological differences, but ideology does not ensure performance outcome.

The Chinese use state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to implement long-term national goals, such as modernisation of Chinese infrastructure, stabilisation of jobs, regional development and provision of social utilities. Although less efficient than the private sector, by keeping sufficient reforms to ensure profitability, SOEs contributed to China's growing net national wealth to USD 88.6 trillion. With the state owning one quarter of such wealth, there is more than ample reserves to address Chinese modernisation without higher taxation on the citizens. A 40-year review of Chinese SOE

performance consider that SOEs are best labelled as "social enterprise", created to achieve social goals through business methods, not wholly-for-profit.

In contrast, the combination of shareholder capitalism and frequent elections induces the US to act for short-term considerations. With contentious domestic politics and complicated Federal State relations, infrastructure projects have hitherto faced formidable obstacles and delays. Money politics have reached the stage where everything depends on monetary creation, but that

competitiveness, as well as creating an economic system that is vastly more inclusive, the United States can only tread water while China continues to march toward the future."

As governments assume larger roles in the US, Europe and China, the issue is how to deliver performance along the whole range of military, economic, social, technological and organisational dimensions, without capture, corruption, concentration and widening social injustices. So far, American free markets have allowed the 1 percent to increase



Chinese and US flags flutter outside the building of an American company in Beijing, China, January 21, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS

in turn relies on growing net foreign debt.

In short, one state capitalism relies on domestic savings and the other relies on foreign savings.

The US has been running down its public infrastructure, because the bulk of net wealth is in private hands. In contrast, China uses SOEs to own and build infrastructure, but allow private sector to innovate and compete across usage rights. Over the last two decades, China has reduced state-ownership of assets and allowed the private sector to push market innovations. Despite criticisms that privatisation was slow, sufficient SOE reforms were made to hold back growing SOE leverage and ensure that they remain profitable and deliver on national objectives.

As CSIS Jude Blanchette argued, "Absent a deep and enduring commitment to rebuilding internal

concentration of wealth and power, including capture in politics. The Achilles' heel of procedural democracy is the enormous difficulty of reforming itself when captured.

In contrast, China seems able to lift the majority out of poverty and deliver modern infrastructure and living standards, at the cost of individual freedom. The competition is, therefore, between different forms of state capitalism that may in practice look like market socialism.

Who wins in this competition is not about wishful thinking that the other side will collapse or falter. It's about who makes the least strategic mistakes.

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