

Do police really need to use more powerful weapons?



RECENT incidents of violence, including attacks on public establishments, seem to have unnerved our police. As a result, the Inspector General of Police has instructed senior law enforcement officials to firmly address such incidence, even with the use of "more powerful weapons"—should firing rubber bullets prove ineffective in bringing the situation under control, according to the *Prothom Alo*. The report, quoting officials, said that the IGP expressed his dissatisfaction, as the "Hefazat-led violence" could not be brought under control by firing rubber bullets. The virtual meeting held on April 7 was attended by senior officials at the police headquarters. Within 24 hours, the media published pictures of light machine guns being put up at police stations in Sylhet, one of the districts that had witnessed some degree of mob violence in recent weeks.

These developments came after violence in Dhaka, Chittagong and Bhraminbaria left at least 17 people dead, during protests against the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Moreover, on April 5, Saltha upazila of Faridpur district witnessed mob attacks on some public establishments, during protests against the government-run anti-Covid-19 drives. The scale of violence and damage caused by activists of Hefazate-Islam and other groups, whether provoked or planned, are unacceptable and should be condemned. But, simultaneously, we need to have an in-depth review of police practices, instead of opting for more lethal tactics. Fortification of key public installations, particularly police stations, is understandable

and perhaps justifiable, especially amidst increased levels of hostility from certain sections of society against the administration and law enforcing agencies—though some critics suspect politics is behind this. These critics argue that putting up heavy arms at police stations will unnecessarily scare off common people. They find it a convenient ploy to gain support from western countries to counter their complaints about the government's high-handed approach against dissent. But, more disturbing is the instruction given to law enforcing units to use "more powerful weapons". Using deadly force in policing has never been a good idea. In fact, it is counterproductive and fuels further discontent and anger among the wider society which makes policing even harder.

The latest instruction is even more problematic since Bangladesh police, in recent years, has increasingly been criticised by human rights groups and observers for brutality and lack of accountability. Even the United Nations' Committee on Torture in its observation in 2019 said that, "The Committee is deeply concerned at persistent allegations of excessive use of force by members of the security forces, intelligence services and the police, including the practice of shooting persons at short range in the knee, leg or elbow called 'kneecapping', which often results in permanent disability, including amputation."

Principles laid out in various international conventions and legal instruments clearly make it obligatory for police in every country to "never knowingly use more force than is reasonable", nor "abuse their authority". They are also required to obey all lawful orders and abide by the regulations of their organisation.

Though it is quite astonishing that our police force is still regulated by the Police



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Regulations of Bengal 1943, it too imposes certain restrictions over using firearms in controlling unruly mobs or public gatherings. Under which circumstances police can use firearms to disperse an unlawful assembly are described by Acts 153 and 155. Act 153(c)(i) stipulates: "An order to fire upon a crowd should be regarded as an extreme measure to which recourse should be had only in the last resort when it is absolutely necessary for the defence of life or property or when a Magistrate, an officer-in-charge of a police-station or police officer superior in

rank to such officer considers it impossible to disperse a mob by any other means. Subsequent provision makes it mandatory to give 'full and sufficient warning' to the rioters for immediate dispersal before any firing. The Regulation requires that the magistrate or the officer in command shall direct the firing in such a way as to secure immediate effect with a minimum of injury."

The Code of Criminal Procedure too has similar provisions like the Police Regulations of Bengal, for dealing with unlawful assembly and mob violence. It emphasises using "as

little force" and causing "as little injury to person and property" in dispersing the assembly and arresting and detaining those in violation of lawful orders. Using firearms to disperse any mob can only be justified, as prescribed by the Penal Code, where it says, "in the exercise of the right of private defence against an assault which reasonably causes the apprehension of death."

It is unclear what those more powerful weapons will do, other than causing higher deaths and serious injuries. Will it not be worse when policing in the world has dramatically changed, putting human rights at the core of enforcing law? The latest spiral in violence that swept through the country started on March 26 at the premises of Baitul Mukarram Mosque, when police tried to stop protests against the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. One of the cases filed with the Paltan Police Station by police noted that they had used more than 1,100 rounds of bullets and about 90 shells of tear gas within two hours to tackle the crowd. Doesn't this record suggest an inclination to use more firepower than non-lethal means for controlling a rioting mob?

Opting for more powerful weapons in policing is also worrying since we do not have an independent oversight mechanism. In 2019, the UNCAT recommended for establishing "an effective complaints mechanism for victims of excessive use of force and ensure prompt, impartial, effective investigations are carried out into all such complaints." Instead of encouraging use of more powerful weapons, it would be wiser for the authorities to initiate such reforms which will restore peoples' confidence in the police.

Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist based in London.

What affect will lockdown have on the apparel industry?



THE Bangladesh government is set to enforce a week-long hard lockdown across the country, beginning April 14. Many murmurs it may go beyond that as well. While I understand "why" the government

feels compelled to act that way, I believe we need to rethink the strategy and find some creative ways taking into account the economy of the country, especially its apparel industry, which is intricately linked to global chains, and is already at a fragile state and passing through a critical moment in its recovery.

A better way ought to be pondered which would protect our people as well as their livelihoods. I believe "Lockdown Lite"—which has been practised in many other countries—could be more apt for Bangladesh and its needs and circumstances. I am not an expert in pandemics or public health, nor do I claim to know more than our esteemed health professionals. Yet, I may submit that the policymakers behind the decision for a heavy lockdown need to consider several other factors.

The first is the safety of the garment factories. The RMG industry in Bangladesh has gone to extraordinary lengths to create safe working environments since this pandemic erupted last year: workers constantly wash hands, wear masks, follow strict hygiene protocols and stay six feet apart.

Medical assistance and doctors are always available. Staff are constantly educated on how to stay safe. Workers are also encouraged to share the good practices they learn at work as they return to their homes. Temperatures of workers are recorded twice a day in factories. Anybody with symptoms is immediately tested and isolated, when necessary.

These strict protocols have been vital in ensuring that outbreaks of coronavirus in the workplace have been rare in the past year. Numbers over the past 13 months surely vindicate that.

In many ways, the workplace now provides the safest environment for garment workers, not least because many of these

workers live in cramped housing spaces where there are often six or more people in a tiny environment. Are they being tested while they are at home? It's unlikely. Do they stick to strict protocols? Again, we simply cannot know, although we can safely assume that not all will follow the kind of stringent hygiene norms at home as they do while at work.

When they are at home, workers may be carrying the virus but remain asymptomatic. Lulled into a false sense of security, they can spread the virus in their surroundings without knowing.

There is another issue at play here. If we lockdown from April 14, it is likely that many workers will not remain in Dhaka and will instead return to their villages. Speculations could kick in, as did last March-April. Our villages, which up until now have remained relatively Covid-free, now risk becoming infected—thus increasing community spread. Indeed, the nation does not want that. Surely,

the workers are relatively safer to be at work where they can be monitored, tested and isolated, if needed.

I believe that a hard lockdown is likely to have unintended consequences by increasing the spread of the virus, rather than dampening it down. Let me outline "lockdown lite" which, to many, should offer a more considered approach.

Don't get me wrong, I am not pitching "business" ahead of life. Under the present circumstances, it is a fact that if we want a successful, world-class healthcare system, we also do need a flourishing economy.

As it stands this week, many of our key markets are set to re-open fashion stores, the UK being a key one. All analysts suggest there will be a surge in buying as markets reopen and pent-up demand is unleashed.

If we do not fulfil this demand, our competitors will. And, if the orders move away once, it may well do for a good long time. This is something we cannot ignore.

During the last heavy lockdown or "general holiday", as the government called it, many factories were prevented from completing critical orders. This has happened time and again these past 12 months, destroying confidence with customers.

schools and economic activities likely resuming in the western world from this August, buyers will also not be ready to agree to take the orders on a later date. Clearly, the repercussions of wholesale lockdown in the apparel industry will be far too heavy for the factories, in particular, and for our national economy, in general, to absorb.

The timing of the hard lockdown is also critical—it coincides with the celebration of the Bengali New Year holiday as well as the start of Ramadan. There is a risk that many workers will assume the hard lockdown will be extended, when in all likelihood they head to their hometowns, until after Eid. Thus, this could cause a new wave of the virus. And, Eid is another factor to consider: are we then still expected to pay Eid bonuses while factories stay closed?

This is in no way a criticism of our government. Our prime minister is providing stellar, prudent leadership, and the government is discharging a job which is virtually impossible under extremely trying circumstances. Governments everywhere have been learning on the job about handling this pandemic.

Surely, it does not have to be a black-and-white situation in terms of hard lockdown versus normal life. Possibly a third way should merit thinking in which we take advantage of our investments, time and effort that RMG factories have put in to ensure the workplace is as safe a place as any in the current environment. However, the importance of stricter monitoring of the safety measures in each and every factory by the government as well as by Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) cannot be overstated to contain and control the infection rate.

By all means, let us introduce curfews and enforce strictest movement restrictions on the private lives of individuals—these are sacrifices we are all happy to make for the collective, national good.

In the meantime, let's please keep the wheels of our proud RMG industry turning—so that as we emerge out of this pandemic, we are ready to robustly hit the ground running.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).



A garment worker takes hand sanitiser from the gatekeeper in front of a factory in Dhaka's Tejgaon industrial area. PHOTO: STAR

QUOTABLE Quote

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT
Former First Lady of the United States (1884—1962)

Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Locate
- 5 Cuts down
- 9 Wish granter
- 10 Furious
- 12 Second U.S. president
- 13 Oregon's capital
- 14 Kansas' capital
- 16 Rep.'s rival
- 17 Amorous archer
- 18 In a gentle way
- 21 Melancholy
- 22 New York's capital
- 23 Spills the beans
- 24 Montana's capital
- 26 Twisty fish
- 29 Trio doubled
- 30 Forever --- day

DOWN

- 1 Soft hat
- 2 Peas' place
- 3 City of southern France
- 4 Cubicle fixture
- 5 Towel word
- 6 Important time
- 7 Thoreau work
- 8 Unwavering
- 9 Airport areas
- 11 TV award
- 15 Georgia's capital
- 19 "Fernando" group
- 20 Mates for pas
- 22 Out of the wind
- 23 Diner sandwich
- 24 Morphine product
- 25 Thrill
- 26 Require as a result
- 27 Fixed copy
- 28 Bowling spots
- 29 Laments loudly
- 30 Houston player
- 33 Purposes
- 35 Knight's address
- 36 Cease

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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

MATE, LOTSA, ERA, SAMOAN, KING, QUEEN, BUNT, OAR, AKITA, TREND, POSTS, UNCUT, NEATO, ROW, HARE, CRABS, SNEER, BEES, SAMSON, BET, ELATED, SATED, WEDS

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT