

The Daily Star

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A landmark verdict on 'shootout'

But the fight for justice is far from over

In a landmark verdict on January 31, 2022, a Cox's Bazar court handed down death sentence to suspended police officers Pradeep Kumar Das and Liaqat Ali in connection with the "pure and simple murder" of Sinha Rashed Khan. After over a year of speculation over the fate of the case, the verdict not just confirms what happened to the ill-fated retired major, but also marks the first time that law enforcement officers in the country have been brought to book for staging a "shootout." The court also sentenced six others, including three cops, to life while acquitting seven other police personnel. This is truly a momentous occasion for the victim's family as well as the defenders of human rights.

While we await the release of the full verdict, our reading of the judgment leaves no room for doubt about the July 31, 2020 incident: that it was not a shootout, as the police had claimed, but a premeditated murder planned in cold blood. We get a rare minute-by-minute glimpse into—and indeed a judicial acknowledgment of—how a shootout/crossfire story is cooked up. We have heard several variations of this story in the past. But what all of them have in common is how the law enforcers encounter a "threat" from a "criminal" or his associates, and how they are "forced" to respond (read: fatally shoot) in self defence. Now that the court has laid bare the truth behind the Sinha shootout drama, is it possible that some of the many such incidents reported over the past years were staged too? Should those accused law enforcers be put on trial to check if there were vested interests at play?

Unfortunately, when it comes to a shootout or crossfire incident, a case is hardly ever filed by the victim's family. Police don't want to record such cases. Even when they do, they hastily file the final report with the court, saying they had found nothing. Meanwhile, bodies of the victims keep piling up. In 2020, the year Sinha died, 195 people were killed in "shootouts" across the country, according to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK).

Interestingly, during Pradeep Kumar Das' two-year tenure as OC of Teknaf police station, over 80 people were killed in 48 "gunfights" (another code for extrajudicial killing) involving Teknaf police alone. After Pradeep's conviction, it is only logical that those incidents are investigated to check if there was also any foul play. We urge the appropriate authorities to take steps in this regard.

The Sinha verdict has opened the gate to a world that was shrouded in official secrecy until now. There is no turning back now. It is more urgent than ever to unearth the underlying truths, and we urge the government—particularly the home ministry—to launch internal investigations into all such cases of extrajudicial killings committed either by police or other security forces. The judiciary may also follow suit with its own investigations. The victims' families should also be empowered and assisted to pursue justice.

What's the purpose of a 'rights cell'?

Govt must improve its actions regarding human rights first

WHILE we welcome the government's stated willingness to improve the state of human rights in Bangladesh, we are not sure whether setting up a "human rights cell" under the supervision of the foreign ministry director general (UN) would be the best initiative to this end. As per Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, the purpose of this cell would be to better analyse the country's human rights situation and "rightly" present it before the international community, "especially those who work on human rights in Geneva and New York." So, is it for PR purposes, or is it to help improve our human rights situation?

We cannot miss the link between this sudden initiative and the US-imposed sanctions on some high-ranking officials of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) in December last year. For years, the media, civil society and rights bodies have cried out about the country's human rights violations, but nothing happened. Are we to believe that the government is now prioritising it of its own volition?

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has been requesting the Bangladesh government since 2013 to invite it for a visit for an impartial investigation into such cases, but to no avail, as per the group's 2021 report. And while it has transmitted cases of enforced disappearance to the government since 1996—and is currently waiting for information about 76 such cases—the working group has only ever received clarification regarding one case in the last 25 years. Violations of human rights in the forms of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings are not uncommon in Bangladesh, and certainly must be investigated thoroughly in order to be eradicated completely.

To reduce the number of extrajudicial killings at the hands of security agencies, there must be a system of internal accountability preventing the members of police, Rab, CID, etc from committing such deeds. If the January 31 verdict on the Sinha murder case is anything to go by, the government must also investigate how many of the tens, or even hundreds, of annual "crossfire" incidents truly result from law enforcers being "provoked to retaliate." Most importantly, our own Human Rights Commission must be strengthened before we attempt to present a positive picture of our human rights scenario to the international community. We hope the government will commit itself in earnest to ending all human rights violations.

Using stranded gas could cure the price hike syndrome



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A declining trend of gas production from the local gas fields against an increasing gas demand has led Bangladesh to partially depend on importing high-priced liquefied natural gas (LNG). At present, more than 20 percent of the total gas supply in the country is met through imported LNG. An increase in LNG import means that the economic burden gets bigger and the government seeks to mitigate that by raising gas prices. This is what has happened now. However, the scale of gas price hike proposed this time has been widely criticised by various quarters, who termed it abnormally high and outrageous for an economically overstretched public already suffering the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The gas distribution companies have proposed to raise gas prices by 117 percent on an average, meaning that a household using a single burner stove will pay Tk 2,000 per month instead of the present rate of Tk 925, while converted natural gas (CNG) will cost Tk 76 per unit in place of Tk 35, the industries will pay Tk 23 per unit instead of Tk 10, and so on. The Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) rejected the proposal outright for what they termed an unethical demand, and also on the ground that the gas distribution companies have no room to ask for a gas price hike; it is the parent company, Bangladesh Oil, Gas and Mineral Corporation (Petrobangla), that may ask for a tariff increase. Whatever the mechanism may be, one thing is certain: Bangladesh is facing an economic challenge to come to terms with the LNG import bill.

There are two points of interest on the issue of gas price hike. The first one concerns the proposal of doubling the gas prices in a single stroke. Bangladesh procures LNG through two purchasing modes. One is through long-term contracts with two countries, Qatar and Oman, at a rather fixed price of USD 11 per unit, under which about 17 percent of the country's total gas supply is provided. The second one is the spot market purchase, where LNG price is unstable and volatile, under which only five percent of the total gas supply is provided. The LNG price in the spot market dipped to USD 5 per unit in the early months of 2021, but shot up to as high as USD 40 per unit in December the same year. Bangladesh, at one stage, purchased LNG from the spot

market at a rate of USD 35 late last year and temporarily stopped buying because of the very high price. The suggestion that gas prices be doubled on the grounds that the spot market registers sky-high prices is not justified because of the fact that we buy only five percent of the total gas supply from the spot market. Bangladesh is likely to procure most of its LNG from

supplying gas to local industries. In the early 2000s, Niko Resources, a foreign company, was engaged to drill another well in the field, but the well exploded due to an accident caused by Niko's negligence in 2005. Bangladesh and Niko went to the international court for compensation settlement. Strangely enough, 17 years have passed without the case being fully



▲ Before getting heavily dependent on importing LNG, we must look into the options of utilising the gas that's left stranded in several gas fields across Bangladesh.

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long-term contracts where the price is stable.

The second point of interest is the high dependence on LNG import, which will make the economy vulnerable to negative pressure. The LNG import already costs Bangladesh dearly, and the cost will rise even more as the import volume increases over the years. A decreasing volume of local gas means a higher share of LNG in the supply chain. That will eventually lead to gas price hike. But is it inevitable for a country which is rated highly prospective for natural gas? If not, then why do we have this problem and what is its solution?

A point is often made that to make a new local gas source available, exploration and time are needed. And time is not on our side. The question is, why was there so little exploration over the last 20 years? Why did the large offshore discoveries in Myanmar and India do so little to nudge Bangladesh to explore its own offshore gas sources?

Nevertheless, Bangladesh has significant gas reserves stranded underground for reasons other than technical. The Chhatak gas field in Sunamganj with significant reserves went onstream in 1960, with a single well

settled, leaving the remaining gas in Chhatak field stranded underground. Another gas reserve in Feni, which was also given to Niko Resources, remains stranded as well.

In 2018, Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company (Bapex) discovered a significant gas reserve north of Bhola. This gas cannot be extracted and supplied to the national grid because of the lack of a pipeline! A pipeline of a relatively short distance to cross a channel cannot be built on an emergency basis, while thousands of crores of taka is being spent to pay for LNG imports! For the same reason, gas cannot be extracted from Shahbazpur gas field, also in Bhola, in full capacity. There are other cases of stranded gas, which can be lifted with little effort—the wells in Zakiganj and Salda, for example.

Fast actions to add the gas from these fields to the national grid as soon as possible would reduce the dependency on LNG import to a large extent. It needs emergency outlook, nationalistic feeling and courage to overcome the slow bureaucratic processes with fast actions. The present administration apparently lacks these qualities.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Will Russia's Anti-NATO Gambit Succeed?

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RECENT talks in Geneva between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken regarding the crisis over Ukraine achieved little. Russia asked for a written response to its demands, which include a halt to NATO enlargement. For now, Russian President Vladimir Putin might be as relieved at the current standstill as the US and its NATO allies are.

That is because Putin is playing a dangerous game of brinkmanship vis-a-vis Ukraine. True, he has succeeded in calling into question the strength of NATO's commitment to the country, highlighted its internal divisions, and forced the world to pay greater attention to Russian power. And he may yet manage to wring concessions from the US and NATO. But Putin also risks putting himself in the position of having to launch a materially and politically costly invasion of Ukraine.

Stopping NATO expansion has been one of the Kremlin's main foreign policy objectives for a decade, but Putin's approach has yielded few results. Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014 has succeeded only in making NATO membership more appealing in Ukraine and Georgia. Moreover, Russia's actions failed to prevent smaller candidate countries from acceding to the Alliance, with Montenegro and North Macedonia joining in 2017 and 2020, respectively. Worse yet, Putin's bellicose foreign policy

led to NATO membership being seriously considered by mainstream politicians in neutral countries like Sweden and Finland.

The escalation of tensions over Ukraine also carries enormous domestic risks for Putin. The Kremlin's 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region required little sacrifice and massively increased Putin's political support at home. Invading eastern Ukraine now is unlikely to yield a similar political dividend, as opinion polls in Russia have long shown low public support for such a move; just a quarter of Russians currently support the incorporation of Donbas into Russia.

Given the risks, what could Putin hope to gain by seemingly backing himself into a corner?

Despite his repeated claims that NATO poses a threat to Russia, Putin may regard the current standoff as a way to demonstrate to Ukraine and other Eastern European states that the NATO and US commitments to them are actually quite weak. US President Joe Biden arguably reinforced this impression at his press conference on January 19, 2022, when he appeared to suggest that a "minor incursion" by Russia into Ukraine would elicit a milder Western response. (Biden and other administration officials subsequently scrambled to walk back the comment.)

Russia benefits from such gaffes, because the Kremlin obviously wants to sow discord and highlight fissures among NATO members. While the US and several Eastern European countries have supported Ukraine's accession, the Alliance has long been divided over the issue, owing to its members' differing economic, security, and energy relations with Russia.

In the days leading up to the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Ukraine

presented Germany and France with a letter requesting their support for its entry into NATO. But France's then prime minister, Francois Fillon, emphasised his country's opposition to Ukraine (and Georgia) joining the alliance. "We think it is not the right response to the balance of power in Europe and between Europe and Russia, and we want to have a dialogue on this subject with Russia," Fillon said. The then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier expressed a similar view.

But publicly, at least, the US and NATO officials have reaffirmed the Alliance's continuing unity. While Biden suggested at his news conference that America's European allies were not united on how to respond to a small Russian incursion into Ukraine, there have been no bilateral negotiations between other Western powers and Russia regarding Ukraine.

On the surface, Putin seems to have unnecessarily boxed himself in by making unacceptable demands on an issue—Ukraine's NATO accession—that was unlikely to materialise anyway. But Putin has, in fact, made real gains by exposing the West's disarray and the weakness of its commitment to Ukraine.

If the US and European negotiators make even symbolic concessions, Putin can use them to burnish his image. Even if he de-escalates tensions without the written guarantees he wanted, the stationing of Russian troops in Belarus, and the recent deployment of a Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization "peacekeeping" mission in Kazakhstan, demonstrate Russia's continued leadership role among former Soviet states.

But Putin's brinkmanship over Ukraine remains dangerous. One can only hope that when the US and Russian officials return to the negotiating table, they will find a way to prevent a manufactured crisis from turning into a hot war.

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