

Fundamental reforms of law enforcement needed

US sanctions on Rab are damaging our country’s image

THE US ambassador to Bangladesh has made it clear that without concrete actions and accountability on Bangladesh’s part, the US will not lift its sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab). Since the sanctions were imposed on December 10, 2021, top officials of our government have been saying that they are working to have them lifted. On what basis was the government negotiating with the US? From news reports, it appears that so far, we have taken a PR approach to this problem, rather than a substantive one.

Following the statements made by US government officials after the sanctions—and even before the sanctions were imposed—we have been highlighting the need to reform Rab. While the media has commended Rab for its performance in fighting terrorism, questions of human rights violations have also been raised repeatedly. And we have mentioned many times the importance of looking into these questions and answering them, rather than brushing them aside. Unfortunately, the government did not give enough importance to such recommendations.

The message from the US is clear. Instead of dilly-dallying with reforms and making requests here and there, the government should get into the serious business of reforming Rab, as well as all law enforcement agencies against whom allegations of violating the constitutional rights of the people have been raised. The time is more than right for there to be a fundamental reform of our law enforcement agencies and their operational methods. We have to reform the culture of taking people for remand and basically exposing them to physical and mental torture. We have to reform how political interests meddle in the way these vital institutions are run.

The law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh need to modernise their investigating methods. Instead of relying too much on remand, they should be trained to collect forensic evidence and follow other modern investigation procedures. Fair and independent investigations into allegations of various irregularities by the law enforcers are must-haves. Recently, we have seen incidents of custodial deaths resurface again. Last week, we saw how the prime accused in a journalist murder case was killed in a “gunfight” with Rab in Cumilla. We have to have a mechanism through which such extrajudicial incidents are properly looked into and prevented for good. Ensuring accountability at every step of the way is thus vital.

Asking for public open space is no crime

Arrest of Kalabagan mother, son is wrong on many levels

WHILE it’s not uncommon for open spaces to be encroached by influential people, the recent incident involving a playground in Dhaka’s Kalabagan area was indeed shocking. On Monday, Syeda Ratna, a local resident fighting for the preservation of the playground known as Tetultala, and her 17-year-old son were detained by police when they went live on Facebook capturing Kalabagan police building a wall on the playground. Police claimed the mother and son duo were arrested for “obstructing government work.” Although they were released about 12 hours later, Ratna had to sign a bond agreeing to “never do so again.”

Protests to save the playground, which has served local residents for 50 years, have been going on since January 31, when the Dhaka deputy commissioner’s office handed over the land to Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) to set up an establishment for Kalabagan police station. After the latest development, experts have rightfully questioned the legality of a minor boy being put in lock-up meant for adult men, especially when he had not even committed a juvenile offence. The outlandishness of the arrest aside, it’s also concerning that the authorities are so determined to deprive local children of the one playground they have in their area.

Reports say that it is officially “abandoned” land, and not listed with the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) as a playground. But while it makes sense for the DMP to decide to build a police station on abandoned land, why must it be one which is of so much use to locals, and has been for decades? The months of protest alone show how significant this land is for the community, especially given how public open spaces for children to play in are becoming rarer by the year. For instance, it has been over a decade since a five-acre plot along Mirpur Road was declared by the prime minister as a site for children with special needs to play, but we’re yet to hear of any progress on that front. Only a sign exists there, while the land is riddled with overgrown vegetation.

While the case of the Tetultala playground has been sparingly reported in the media over the last few months, the one positive outcome of the undue arrest of Ratna and her teenage son is that the issue has finally received the attention it deserves. We hope that the DSCC will heed the home minister’s instruction to find another location for Kalabagan police station, and that none of the demonstrators will be made to suffer for wanting to conserve a rare open space in this concrete jungle of ours.

We need a robust national emergency service



Naznin Titih is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

NAZNIN TITHI

AT a time when everyone is talking about making the national emergency helpline service more efficient—so that more people can get emergency help within the shortest possible time—we came across the news of a family in Dhaka’s Jatrabari area being tortured by police after seeking help by calling 999 (The Daily Star, April 17, 2022). The incident will, no doubt, discourage people from calling the helpline in case of an emergency. Although the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) suspended three police officials following the incident and recommended departmental action against the Ansar member involved, the episode has definitely put this emergency service’s efficacy under question.

We would like to believe that this was an isolated incident and does not represent the services provided by police in emergency situations in any way. However, the service is riddled with a host of problems that need to be addressed going forward.

The helpline, 999—a toll-free number which allows citizens in trouble to call and ask for help from police, fire service or ambulance service providers in case of any emergencies—was officially launched on December 12, 2017. Till January 31 this year, the helpline has received over 35.3 million calls. The number is impressive, but were all of these calls actually made seeking help from the service? The answer is no. According to the National Helpline Centre sources, around 67.44 percent of the calls made during this time were either blank calls, prank calls, missed calls, test calls or repeat calls.

Who are these people making these calls, creating unnecessary congestion in the system? According to the helpline operators, in most of the cases, these calls are made by adolescents. According to a female operator of the helpline, sometimes teenagers call and say, for instance, that there is a fire incident somewhere, which later turns out to be a hoax. According to a report in this daily, the helpline received around 164,000 calls made by adolescents in 2020, which rose to 235,000 calls last year. Reportedly, this is one of the biggest barriers in providing support to people in actual distress.

The question that comes next is: Did the remaining 32.56 percent of the callers receive any help from the service? The answer to this question is also a resounding no. Why? Because a majority of the callers did not have any clue about what types of services the



▲ VISUAL: TEENT AND TUNI

The helpline, 999—a toll-free number which allows citizens in trouble to call and ask for help from police, fire service or ambulance service providers in case of any emergencies—was officially launched on December 12, 2017.

helpline actually provided. Reportedly, callers often complain about the price hike of essentials, seek information about Covid-19 vaccines or make random queries to solve problems with their mobile phones.

Moreover, female operators of the helpline often have to face abusive comments and questions from the callers,

to installing an automatic caller identification and location system, which can locate a caller’s exact address instantly and cut down the response time significantly. Why it has not been done yet, despite repeated assurances from the authorities, is anyone’s guess.

The helpline unit currently receives around 30,000 calls a day, which is

as reported by this daily.

The problems mentioned above have arisen mostly from the lack of awareness among people about the nature and sensitivity of the emergency helpline. It seems strange as to why the authorities have not been able to take the measures needed in more than four years of its operation to make people aware of the services available through the helpline. It should not have been difficult for them to educate the ordinary people about the importance of this life-saving service as the news and social media could have been utilised for the purpose.

Beside these problems, there are some other issues that impede upgrading the emergency helpline according to international standards. One of them is slow response time. Reportedly, while the average response time of the 999 unit in Bangladesh is about 20 minutes, it is only seven minutes in countries such as the US, the UK, and Japan. This is because the helpline’s operating system is outdated, and there is also a manpower crisis. Currently, everything—from pinpointing the locations of service-seekers, to communicating with the various service providers to finally assigning a team to help the callers—is done manually, which is not only time-consuming, but also makes the service inefficient.

Thus, to make the helpline more efficient, there is no alternative

difficult to attend with its existing manpower. While the unit needs to have the capacity to take at least 500 calls at a time, it currently has the capacity to take only 100 calls. Therefore, in order for the system to function smoothly, more manpower needs to be recruited for the service.

After the helpline was introduced in 2017, we came across several cases of successful intervention through its use. We came to know how police in Chattogram prevented a child marriage after receiving a call at 999 (The Daily Star, December 14, 2017). In another incident in 2018, a ferry carrying 300 passengers on the Padma River was saved from sinking as one of the passengers called 999 for help. The rescue operation that was carried out last year to save the lives of 13 fishermen who had been stranded at the Bay of Bengal for five days, is another such case.

The emergency helpline can actually make a big difference in a society like ours, as it can not only be used to save lives, but also to combat crimes. Just think about how we can bring the number of child marriages down to zero with only a call from any of us—the ordinary citizens. Therefore, the authorities concerned must give more effort into making the helpline a robust, efficient service that can help the citizens whenever needed.

Fresh Churn for the Muslims of Assam



Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star. He writes from New Delhi, India

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE complex web of religious and linguistic fault lines in the northeastern state of Assam in India is once again set for fresh churn, with implications for the Muslim population there.

On April 22, 2022, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that the state government had accepted the definition of “native Muslims of Assam”—a long-pending demand of indigenous Muslims—as recommended by cabinet sub-committees. In July last year, the state government had set up seven sub-committees to suggest measures and recommendations for the overall development of indigenous Muslims, whose mother tongue is Assamese and who are numerically much smaller than the “immigrant” Bangla-speaking Muslim population in the state. One of the sub-committees suggested recognition of “Assamese Muslims” as a distinct group. Among other suggestions by the committee was issuing identity cards as well as conducting a census to “identify and document” the Assamese Muslim community.

As per the last census in 2011, Muslims comprise 34.22 percent of Assam’s 31.2 million population. In real terms, there are an estimated 11.8 million Muslims in the state, of whom only about 4.2 million are “natives”—who are broadly known as Morias, Ujanis, Deshis, Julas and Poimalis—who either converted to Islam or were war prisoners during the Mughal conquest of Assam. While Deshis are

Is the cabinet sub-committee’s suggestion on “indigenous Muslims” practical? And will it solve the religious and linguistic issues confronting Assam?

13th-century converts from indigenous communities such as Koch Rajbongshi and Meche, Moriyas trace their origin to converts as well as soldiers and artisans who came to the region during the Ahom rule. Smaller groups like Julha Muslims also fall under this category. All these groups have always seen themselves as distinct from the Bangla-speaking Muslims who migrated from East Bengal and then Bangladesh.

Two crucial questions that arise are: Is the recommendation of the cabinet sub-committee on “indigenous Muslims” practical? And will it solve the religious and linguistic issues confronting Assam? The BJP-led government in Assam, led by Himanta Biswa Sarma, has its own political calculations.

Sarma said all the recommendations of the sub-committees were “implementable,” but in a calibrated manner within short, medium and long time frames. Then, as he pointed out, there would be “legislative mechanisms, administrative decisions and financial support” to indigenous Assamese Muslim groups, and increasing their representation in parliament and Assam legislative assembly. The committee also suggests the creation of legislative council (other than the existing legislative assembly) as per Article 169 of the Indian Constitution and reservation of a certain number of seats in it for the Assamese Muslim community.

Politics seems to have crept in when Sarma reportedly rooted for the definition of religious minorities on the basis of district-level demography. Citing the example of South Salmara Mankachar in western Assam, where Muslims account for nearly 95 percent of the population, he said, “Hindus can also be a minority in a particular state depending on the geographical situation, population pattern and threat perception.” It was not the first time Sarma talked about the “threat to Hindus in Assam.”

Analysts say that Assam’s Muslim-majority districts—Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Morigaon and Bongaigaon, Nagaon and Darrang, Hailakandi and Karimganj—have been a weak point for the BJP electorally. In the 2021 assembly elections, which saw the saffron party returning to power in Assam, out of the 49 assembly seats in the Muslim-majority districts, 29 were bagged by the Congress-All India Union Democratic Front alliance, and 12 by BJP. That must be a cause for worry for BJP, for whom making a deeper dent in these areas may not be easy.

The formal recognition of “indigenous Assamese Muslims” may not guarantee the kind of political dividend the BJP would like to look at, if the 2021 assembly poll results are anything to go by. It is possible that a majority of Muslims in Assam, irrespective of linguistic barriers (which are not as glaring as they seem), may remain a homogenous bloc when it comes to voting.

This is where Sarma’s idea of district-wise definition of religious minority comes into play, because it would give them access to the government’s social welfare schemes and financial assistance. BJP’s argument is that if a community is a majority in a state but not in a district, they miss out on government benefits. This is clearly directed at benefiting Hindus in a Muslim-dominated district. Hafiz Ahmed, who heads the Char Chapori Sahitya Parishad, the largest literary body representing the Bangla-speaking Muslims of Assam, recently said that one needed to assess the socio-economic status of minority groups, particularly in char (riverine) areas, where many Muslims of Bangla-speaking origin live and which have for long been backward. Any solution to the plight of Assamese Muslims, indigenous or of immigrant origin, needs a viable comprehensive socio-economic approach that transcends polarising politics.