

Rab crisis betrays lack of inter-ministerial contact

Why the lack of coordination on an issue of national interest?

The US sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) have brought out a rather familiar scene to the fore: frictions among different ministries and stakeholders. We're used to seeing public offices trading metaphorical blows in attempts to ward off blame for any domestic crisis or failure. But the US sanctions have internationalised Rab's image crisis, and thus needed to be handled with care, which did not happen. A report on how the home and foreign ministries were lambasted at a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on foreign affairs for their failure to tackle the debacle was quite illuminating. At the meeting, the foreign ministry's top brass blamed the home office for their failure to help them respond to accusations of extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances, leading to the sanctions. The parliamentary watchdog, on the other hand, blasted the former for "being oblivious to the impending US sanctions on Rab." What's obvious from these narratives is that lack of coordination and inter-ministerial wrangling were partly responsible for creating and prolonging this crisis. This is totally unfortunate. Why was there so much bureaucratic foot dragging on the part of our ministries when our national interest was at stake?

In our view, the home ministry does share the blame for failing to undertake post-sanction reforms in how Rab operates, as does the foreign ministry for appearing clueless even to this day. Unfortunately, from the very start of this crisis, the government's policy has been reactive rather than constructive, underpinned by a desire to come out of the crisis looking good. It has adopted a PR approach to it and lobbied, unsuccessfully, to lift the sanctions. The foreign minister's admission on Tuesday that he sought India's assistance in lifting the sanctions and even engaged representatives of the Indian diaspora in the US is demeaning to our country, not to mention a diplomatic overreach inconsistent with our national interests. It makes us look weak and leaves room for unwarranted meddling.

The US ambassador in Dhaka has already made it clear that without concrete actions and accountability on Bangladesh's part, the US will not lift its sanctions on Rab. Any illusion that the government may have had about whitewashing its elite force should be gone after that. The government should realise that, instead of seeking a backdoor exit out of the crisis or challenging the allegations against Rab, it should focus on establishing durable mechanisms of accountability within our law enforcement agencies. It should also ensure greater coordination and collaboration among different departments and ministries so that any such disaster can be pre-empted. In the end, however, the only outcome that the public really cares about is how respectful our law enforcers are of our laws and individual rights and dignity.

Why is there no progress with the vaccine plant?

It should be built on a priority basis considering future needs

It is unfortunate that the government has not been able to make any progress in building a vaccine plant and research institute in Bangladesh to start producing its own Covid-19 vaccines. While the government announced that it would set up the plant in July last year, according to a report by this daily, the six-acre land in Gopalganj designated for the project has not been acquired yet. And while the development project proposal (DPP) is yet to be finalised, no headway has been made to get a foreign biotechnology firm to sign for the technology transfer and production of vaccines.

While the government's Covid vaccination programme has been a success—as of April 6, 2022, it has administered one dose of the vaccine to 75.25 percent and two doses to 67.37 percent of the population—it should not create any room for complacency, leading to delays in implementing this project. Immediately after the decision was made to build the plant, a technical committee on vaccine production was formed, which gave some initial recommendations. But the committee has reportedly not held any meetings since then, and the members hardly have any idea about the latest development in the project. What's the point of even having such committees if they sit idle for eight long months? And we can't agree with the coordinator of the project, who said that the authorities were working to build a state-of-the-art vaccine production and research facility, which is a massive task and so the delay is normal. Given the importance of the project, we believe it should be expedited.

Just because the intensity of the pandemic is waning does not mean that we should lose our focus on building the plant. Since the world has already suffered three waves of the pandemic and is bracing for a fourth one, we should be prepared in every possible way. Since vaccination is one of the most effective ways to fight the virus, producing our own vaccines will safeguard us in the future without being dependent on the outside world.

Additionally, the vaccination plant will not only produce Covid vaccines, but can also be used for making other vaccines that we regularly import. Therefore, we urge the government to not waste any more time and start implementing the plan to set up this plant without further delay.

If justice had a face now, it'd be of helpless victims



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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THE idea of a justice system hinges on people's faith in its ability to offer fair solutions. So justice, as the saying goes, should not only be done, but be seen to be done as well, so that people's faith in it is kept intact. But what happens when the system is broken and people can no longer trust it to guide them to a just solution? Can they still be expected to show unquestioning allegiance?

Questions such as these are getting louder in Bangladesh as people increasingly lose their faith in the justice system. You see its manifestations in frequent denunciations of how the system is failing to protect the helpless, growing support for extrajudicial executions of rapists and thugs, growing acceptance of mob justice, victims' preference for out-of-court settlements, or their unwillingness to report crimes or file cases—all signs of discontent with a crumbling justice system. But when the families of victims surrender to their fate and say, "We don't want justice," it means the system has really hit rock bottom.

We've heard variations of this expression by frustrated citizens on a number of occasions, most recently after last week's clashes between shopkeepers and Dhaka College students in the New Market area. The clashes, which we're still struggling to make sense of, took the lives of two ordinary individuals. One of them was Nahid Mia, a 19-year-old who was involved with neither of the feuding parties. Yet, armed political thugs masquerading as students mercilessly hacked him to death. The other victim was Mohammad Morsalin, a 24-year-old shop staffer, who was hit by a brick during the clashes and died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH). In comments later carried by the media, both their families refused to seek justice, because "what's the point of seeking justice? Whom shall we seek it from?"

This is not the first time that we've had families of victims saying they don't want justice. Last month, when Samia Afran Prity, a college student, was fatally injured by misdirected shots fired during an attack on a political leader in Shahjahanpur, Dhaka, her father, too, had the same thing to say. "Where would I seek justice? There is no justice here, nor do I have the ability to pursue it," he said, as he waited for his daughter's body in front of the DMC morgue.

Victims or their families refusing to pursue their cases in a court of law, out of a sheer sense of helplessness, is perhaps the brightest of all red lines for any justice system. We've had the warning signs for quite some time, though. Remember



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

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the reaction of the professor-writer Abul Quasem Fazlul Huq, whose son, secular publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan, was hacked to death by Islamic extremists in October 2015? He famously said that he didn't want justice, because "even if I want it, there will be none," pointing to the futility of long drawn-out legal battles. Even though eight extremists were sentenced

numbers, one can safely assume, will have swollen after the Covid-induced closures and disruptions.

We hear boastful claims of giving no quarter to criminals. We hear talks of appointing more judges and other court officials to dispose of pending cases, as if not having enough of them is the only problem. Rarely, however, are there talks

to death in this connection in 2021, Fazlul Huq, in a recent interview with *The Daily Star*, repeated his belief that long delays defeat the purpose of a justice system.

In case it's not still clear, when people say they don't want justice, what they actually mean is that they don't want to go through the motions of seeking it through a process that not only does not guarantee success, but may very well leave them exposed to further trouble. A combination of factors is responsible for this disinterest, including long delays in trials (of which there are too many instances to recount), inadequate and often costly legal services, risks of harassment for giving testimonies, lack of security for victims and witnesses, etc. Even those fortunate enough to see a verdict, and its execution, must go through a series of obstacles, starting from the filing of a case and its investigation until the very end of the road.

Ultimately, the question that looms large is not if you're on the right side of the law, but if you're on the right side of power. For only the powerful, or the able, or the lucky can survive this process. The staggering number of cases pending with different courts will attest to that. Imagine: as of December 31, 2020, over 3.9 million cases were pending with courts across Bangladesh. Between January 1 and December 31 in 2020, only 739,000 cases could be disposed of. At the High Court, around 450,000 cases were pending as of December 31, 2020. About 200,000 cases are being added to the national backlog each year. These

of reforming the system by modernising it and removing the roadblocks—systemic, political and social—to swift, unobstructed legal pursuits.

For the ordinary justice-seekers, two of these barriers have a particularly deterring effect: lack of protection for witnesses and complainants, and lack of financial means to ride out lengthy legal procedures. Protection can be extended through legislation and as part of regular police activities. Neither is guaranteed in Bangladesh, as there is currently no witness/victim protection act, nor are police in the habit of proactively defending ordinary victims and witnesses, making the latter vulnerable to threats, intimidation and duress. And despite there being a National Legal Aid Services Organisation, and the Legal Aid Services Act, 2000, governmental legal aid continues to be elusive to most people.

Should they cede their right to justice, then? Should they suffer silently, while their rights and dignity are being trampled on with carefree abandon? Unfortunately, as more people grow disillusioned with the justice system, the risks of crimes, chaos and divisions in society will grow as well. If people continue to be deprived of timely and adequate legal services, they will look for extrajudicial solutions and even take the law into their own hands.

This cannot be a desirable outcome for anyone. The authorities must treat people's rejection of the justice system as the ticking time bomb that it is. They must do everything to restore their faith.

Let's not pay lip service to climate change



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IN the last couple of months, we have been listening to discussions on how to build on the outcomes of the COP26—the 26th Conference of the Parties for climate change held in Glasgow, UK last year. These discussions are often accompanied by another flow of conversations: how to get prepared for COP27, scheduled to be held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt this November.

These conversations put me in a dilemma. As a conservationist, I am quite excited to see repeated mentions of nature and biodiversity conservation as a means of climate change adaptation and mitigation in the Glasgow Climate Pact, the core document out of COP26. But, as a person who has seen repeated failures of the COPs in making major, meaningful decisions, or the failure of major actors to comply with major decisions between the COPs, I feel frustrated.

As a Bangladeshi, I am proud of seeing Bangladesh creating examples of climate actions over the last 12 years—be it formulating the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) or funding it with the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF), or leading the least developed countries (LDC) bloc at the COPs. In recent years, our proud moments included preparing climate budgets, formulating Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, our second-term presidency of the Climate Vulnerable

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Forum (CVF) representing 1.2 billion people, and drafting the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan, for example. But being proud doesn't mean anything when our fellow country people have to spend USD 2 billion every year to adapt to the dire impacts of climate change.

I see the forthcoming COP27 as the opportunity for Bangladesh to prioritise climate action in three interconnected areas. First, we need to harness our leadership beyond the current CVF presidency, which formally ends in June this year. At COP26, we showed the world a new development philosophy—moving from "resilience" to "prosperity"—through the Mujib Plan. Can't we now collaborate with the CVF countries, and provide them with technical, intellectual, and philosophical support to move towards prosperity as well? Can't we now show how we can speed up funding for the Mujib Plan's implementation and create yet another outstanding example, as we did back in 2010 by implementing the BCCSAP with BCCTF?

Second, as we are now preparing our national budget for FY2022–23, I urge the government to establish a Biodiversity Conservation Fund. The provision for this fund already exists in Article 36 of Bangladesh Biodiversity Act, 2017. This new national funding mechanism will be yet another milestone of Bangladesh's leadership in implementing the COP26 decision. Why? Because, at COP26, nature-based solutions (NbS) have been appreciated as one of the effective ways to take ambitious, long-term actions against climate change. The Biodiversity Conservation Fund, therefore, can help us tackle two crises simultaneously: climate crisis and biodiversity loss. The parliament also acknowledged this by unanimously adopting a motion in November 2019, just before the Covid-19 pandemic hit the

world. Third, while thinking of climate change, I am not forgetting our post-pandemic challenges. Our poverty level doubled within the first nine months of the pandemic. We are now expecting to push our poverty level down to the pre-Covid level by June 2022. NbS can help our economic recovery after a crisis or a disaster—we saw that after many natural calamities, or getting prepared for the next one. The mangrove plantations established since 2014, for example, to protect Gabura, Satkhira tell us that story. Globally, IUCN, ILO, the University of Oxford, and others are also advocating for nature-based solutions' economic recovery aspects. I would urge the government to incorporate "economic recovery potentials" of NbS in their post-disaster rebuilding initiatives, as well as post-pandemic recovery efforts.

Covid has delayed our graduation out of the LDC status by a couple of years. We should use this additional time to change our mindset as well as our climate action culture. It is indeed fascinating to see that Bangladesh is spending 4.16 percent of its annual budget or 0.73 percent of its GDP in 2021–2022 to tackle climate change, despite passing through a pandemic. But how long should we be receiving external funds just to prepare a National Adaptation Plan (NAP) or update the old BCCSAP? We can't have the luxury anymore of preparing a plan in a celebratory manner and then just leave it unfunded.

We need to move forward from being called the "adaptation capital," "adaptation teacher" or "adaptation leader" of the world. We must be more vocal globally and unprecedentedly aggressive to fund our prosperity and other development plans. What is stopping us from starting it before COP27?