

Police running riot in refugee camps?

Govt must investigate the grave allegations of power abuse raised in HRW report

When the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) took over the responsibility of security at the Rohingya refugee camps from Cox's Bazar district police more than two years ago, it was with the aim of properly maintaining law and order and ensuring the safety of refugees who were vulnerable to violence from criminal gangs and armed groups. How disappointing to find now – as laid out in a recent report from Human Rights Watch (HRW) – that the forces in charge of security are not only failing to ensure it, but are allegedly complicit in making it worse.

According to the HRW report, members of the APBn are getting involved with extortion, arbitrary arrests, and custodial torture of Rohingya refugees. On top of that, its lack of oversight over the real issues in the camps has led to a sharp deterioration in the security situation. Some refugees even spoke of collusion between APBn officers and criminal/armed gangs operating in the camps.

These are all grave allegations that must be taken seriously. While some of the testimonies regarding torture in custody are horrific, the revelation cannot exactly be called surprising. We have, in this very column, expressed our concerns in the past over the use of torture and harassment as methods of interrogation by police forces, which continues unabated, despite the formulation of the Torture and Custodial Prevention Act in 2013 and despite widespread condemnation of lack of efforts to prevent them.

The situation is the same when it comes to bribery. According to refugees' testimonies in the report, they have been made to pay bribes to avoid arrest, release a detained family member, and even to access relief items like rice and tarpaulins. There are also accusations of false cases filed against refugees for the purpose of extorting money from them.

What is truly concerning is that these allegations are being reported in a space where police forces have even more free rein than usual to act with impunity. As one of the most vulnerable communities in the country, the refugees have access to almost no other avenue for justice for any wrong committed against them.

So far, the only response from the APBn has been one of blanket denial. However, there is no denying that security is still a big issue in the refugee camps. Reportedly, criminal gangs involved in drug trade and other crimes continue to operate there. Why has the APBn, in all this time, failed to make a dent in dealing with these security issues? We do not feel this question is unjustified in the present context.

It is now imperative that the government investigates these allegations, and holds responsible police officers to account. The HRW recommendation of training non-APBn personnel in each camp to receive complaints from refugees against police officers should also be taken into consideration. At the same time, donors must step up and do their part in providing funds and supporting projects that promote the safety of refugees in camps. If urgent steps are not taken, the situation in the camps will only continue to worsen.

CP patients deserve better care

Children with disabilities, esp those from poorer backgrounds, are suffering greatly

It is disheartening to know that children with cerebral palsy (CP) in the Korail slum are living in inhumane conditions. According to a report by this daily, they are confined to substandard housing – living in small, dark rooms – and denied proper care, as well as the simple pleasures of life, like looking at the open sky.

Currently, some 24 children suffering from this development disability live in the slum.

CP is a group of disorders that appear in early childhood affecting one's movement, posture, and coordination. It is not curable yet, but the quality of life of those affected can be improved with medical care and a supportive environment. But families living in Korail slum are too poor to afford proper care. They barely have enough to spend on anything other than food and housing. More worryingly, they are often unaware of such disabilities, and do not know what to do when a child with an abnormal brain development is born into the family. That also means that these children suffer disproportionately. Even taking showers can be a harrowing experience as they do not have proper facilities or privacy. For girl children, menstrual hygiene can be an added challenge, as they cannot take care of such needs by themselves and must be assisted.

Another issue with caring for patients with CP is the disproportionate burden of caring imposed on female caregivers compared to their male counterparts. According to a yet-unpublished study, more than 97 percent of carers for children with CP in Korail are women. Family members other than mothers and grandmothers hardly ever offer assistance, creating a huge burden on the former. It shows the pitfalls of our patriarchal social system where women are given all the responsibilities of caregiving and even earning, especially in poor households, while men are given a free rein. Male family members must take equal responsibility when it comes to looking after children with disabilities.

On a broader level, both society and the state need to step up to address this situation. Proper care and rehabilitation of vulnerable CP patients is of paramount importance. CP patients need to be given need-based schooling, medication, therapy, and nutritious meals. The state needs to create a supportive environment for those with CP to grow and thrive. NGOs can also play a huge role in this regard. We must ensure that CP patients, especially in slums, are not stuck in a cycle of vulnerability, with their socioeconomic background forcing them to go through lifelong suffering. We urge the government to formulate a national policy to ensure better care of people with CP and other disabilities. Proper infrastructure, proper financial assistance for affected poor households, and a proper social outlook can go a long way in ensuring a better environment for them.

How can breaching citizens' privacy be lawful?



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KAMAL AHMED

When the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, reported that Israeli cybersecurity companies sold spyware systems to Bangladesh – a country that does not recognise Israel – the response from our government was that it had not bought the systems “directly” from Israel. *Haaretz* didn't say it either, but revealed details of the technology and the identities of the owning company and its intermediaries spread in three countries: Cyprus, Switzerland, and Singapore. Just one day after this revelation, on January 12, home minister Asaduzzaman Khan told MPs that the government has taken initiative to introduce an Integrated Lawful Interception System (ILIS) to monitor social media and thwart various anti-state and anti-government activities.

First came a non-denial of the fact that the government agencies have indeed procured highly sophisticated Israeli technology, which many experts describe as a surveillance weapon; then a confirmation of the existence of an integrated interception system, which according to the minister is “lawful.” A closer examination of the minister's response, however, raises serious questions about misinterpreting the law, since he has equated anti-government activities with anti-state acts.

Since when has being anti-government or not supporting the government's actions and policies been a crime? This happens only in a totalitarian state. Is the minister suggesting we are no longer a democracy? Doesn't the job of the opposition require criticising, challenging and opposing the government, and putting forward alternative arguments to hold it to account?

Responding to a parliamentary question, the minister added that law enforcement and intelligence agencies were working relentlessly to foil any conspiracies against the country. He said, “Besides, modern technology like Open Source Intelligence Technology [OSINT] has been included in the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre [NTMC under the home ministry] to prevent anti-state and anti-government activities through monitoring social media.”

Again, his answer appears to be an attempt to obscure facts and confuse us. The legitimacy of using open source intelligence has never been questioned by any rights group. Rather, snooping or breaching citizens' privacy

has been opposed, as it violates their fundamental rights guaranteed by the country's constitution and various international treaties and instruments.

In addition, there are genuine reasons to be concerned over the deployment of such surveillance mechanisms without any judicial oversight, as there are plenty of allegations of abuse of authority against members of our law enforcement agencies. Rights groups have listed a number of cases in which people have been charged for sedition for criticising politicians belonging to the ruling party on social media. Without legal safeguards, putting in



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

place such surveillance systems aimed at suspected anti-state activities carries serious risks of innocent victims being harassed.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has justifiably expressed alarm by arguing that, in the absence of any specific policy related to cyber surveillance, the advanced tools would erode fundamental constitutional rights related to privacy, communication, and freedom of expression.

It is not the first time that we are having a debate on the issue. In July 2021, a *Washington Post* report on Pegasus software being used for spying on politicians, journalists and rights activists in 45 countries, including Bangladesh, stoked a similar debate. The Bangladesh government denied buying

the software. The report was based on research carried out by a Canadian cybersecurity organisation, Citizen Lab, which, however, didn't specify whether the spyware was actually deployed by the government or any other entity. Experts say that Pegasus can harvest data, turn on the microphone and camera of a smartphone without the user's input, track locations, and record keystrokes.

Well before the Pegasus controversy, a number of foreign media outlets reported that Bangladesh had procured a few other Israeli surveillance technology and equipment from Celebrite and Picsix Ltd to acquire the capabilities of hacking phones and obtaining encrypted data. Those, too, were bought from affiliated entities registered in a third country.

As the home minister acknowledges acquiring greater surveillance capability, TIB reminds us of previous examples of private phone chats and conversations of politicians, businessmen, journalists, and

following a petition filed by a number of victims and the Editors Guild. The court-appointed probe committee was headed by former chief justice Raveendran and included top cybersecurity experts. The Indian Supreme Court rejected the government's offer to form its own panel of experts to probe the allegations, saying that indiscriminate spying could not be allowed, and highlighted the “chilling” effect it could have on freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The judges added that they were compelled to “determine the truth and get to the bottom of the issue.”

On August 25, 2023, the Indian Supreme Court said that the committee had found five phones that had some kind of malware, but could not determine whether it was Pegasus. Without revealing the full probe report, the court said that Justice Raveendran had recommended changes in the existing law governing surveillance in the country and that privacy protections must be enhanced along with the cyber security of the nation.

Another historic order made by the Indian Supreme Court, which has suspended the sedition law, should be referred to here. On May 11, 2022, a three-judge panel said that the law has been used to quash dissent and is not in tune with the times.

Many observers believe that the Bangladeshi government's enhanced surveillance capacity is aimed at silencing dissent and weakening opposition parties, and that this would only intensify ahead of the general election, which is due within a year.

India is an example of what an independent judiciary can do in protecting citizens' constitutional rights to free speech, expressing dissent, and protesting.

Can we expect similar judicial protection in Bangladesh?

Quality training crucial for primary school teachers

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SALMA AKHTER

Over the last few decades, remarkable progress has been made in the field of primary education in Bangladesh. Large numbers of teachers have been recruited and the present student-teacher ratio is 54:1, but quality remains an issue, and is one of the main barriers to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.

With the aim of increasing the quality of teaching and learning activities at the elementary level, training programmes of primary school teachers were re-visited, reviewed, and subsequently redesigned. The Certificate in Education was cancelled and the 18 month Diploma in Primary Education (DPED) programme was developed following the ways of international teacher training standards.

The DPED was launched in all Primary Teachers Training Institutes (PTIs) in Bangladesh between 2012-2017. A major goal of the DPED programme was to develop basic theoretical and practical knowledge about the teaching profession so that teachers' attitudes and abilities could reflect professional commitment and

competencies.

I had the opportunity to review and analyse the objectives, goals, frameworks, contents, resource materials, and delivery mechanisms of the DPED programme to evaluate its effectiveness.

Based on the data collected from the field and the opinions of stakeholders, I made recommendations to strengthen and improve the DPED programme. I emphasised on keeping the duration of the DPED unchanged, as opposed to the recent proposal from the Directorate of Primary Education to reduce it to four to six months.

It was clear that all stakeholders supported the 18 month duration to be appropriate as a good initial teacher training timeframe and applauded the DPED programme launched by the government.

But why are we thinking of reducing the training period? Is there a logical reason behind this?

It is not mandatory to have a professional degree to be employed as a teacher in Bangladesh. Candidates can participate in the job recruitment process with certain qualifications/degrees in general education. After passing the exam, they get a job and then can receive professional training, which has a profound influence on their teaching career. New recruits have no idea about the learning process. Because of a lack of pedagogical

knowledge and skills, they are unable to provide quality teaching to students at the pre-primary to primary levels. As a result, the quantitative expansion of primary education in this country does not reflect the quality of classroom learning activities. Student learning outcomes/achievements are not permanent, and this justifies the importance and necessity of the DPED programme.

Teachers teach students from pre-primary to primary levels without having much pedagogical training. But this period is the most important of one's entire education. How can untrained teachers do this job properly?

Teachers teach students from pre-primary to primary levels without having much pedagogical training. But this period is the most important of one's entire education. Teaching needs at this level are therefore highly complex and challenging. How can untrained teachers do this job properly? They need to be introduced

to various theories of learning and teaching techniques. They need intensive training, observation, monitoring, and mentoring to acquire the right teaching skills.

Without reducing the duration of the DPED training programme, we need to instead think about how to make it more effective and fruitful. Where intervention is required, it must be carried out. And discussions must be held with different stakeholders. It is important to understand the essence of their opinions and implement their ideas without being bound by them.

Workshops should be organised at a national level. Formulating a national policy on the training of primary school teachers, with the consultation of all concerned (teachers, students, PTI trainers, trainees, NEP, IER, DU and other educational agencies), is essential.

The DPED programme should be restructured and rearranged in line with the new educational policy, curriculum, and textbook evaluation system. If this measure is not taken, the current mindset about primary teachers' training in Bangladesh will keep disappointing people. Moreover, Bangabandhu's dream of building a Shonar Bangla, the historic declaration of the nationalisation of primary education immediately after independence, and his educational philosophy and directions regarding education will remain elusive.