

We must turn back from further violence

Country heading towards a dangerous path

The continuation and, indeed, re-escalation of violence, which led to around 70 people getting killed yesterday, is pushing the country towards greater danger. Violence first broke out in mid July when the student wing of the ruling party attacked student protesters of the quota reform movement. Then we saw law enforcers being used to suppress the protests. Even though such incidents declined after a few days, and the government indicated its willingness to pursue a path of dialogue, yesterday's events suggest that it has decided to return to the path of force. In addition to the killing of ordinary people, the killing of police personnel and attacks on ruling party members' houses indicate that the violence is taking on a different colour. This may escalate into a civic conflict with very ominous consequences.

We believe the prime minister's invitation for dialogue, even though it was initially declined, was the wiser path to try and resolve the crisis. But yesterday's events indicate a complete U-turn from that and towards the use of force on both sides. We strongly believe this is the wrong approach. This violent reaction will only lead to more resentment, destruction, injuries and deaths. Therefore, the ruling party's decision to resort back to the use of brute force, particularly using its student wings, is not only illegal, but also a mistake.

On August 3, we saw the most massive number of people protesting. In the biggest rallies that took place in Dhaka, protesters were fully peaceful. The very next day, we saw ruling party affiliated men taking to the streets with sticks, rods, machetes and, in some cases, firearms. And it seemed they were intentionally placed to face off against the protesters.

The ruling party has full right to peacefully demonstrate its strength. But under no circumstances should that show of strength be done with the use of violence. If it truly wants to reduce tensions, why create a situation where there is a face-off between its supporters armed with deadly weapons and the protesters? And why would they fire live ammunition? Its supporters could have easily gathered somewhere else, instead of taking position where the protesters were and attacking them. Such tactics raise questions regarding the government's declaration that it does not want conflict but would rather have a peaceful resolution. From what we witnessed yesterday, it is the presence of ruling party members that created this confrontation, leading to conflicts.

The events of yesterday show that the country is becoming a battleground between ruling party men and the protesters. This will create much deeper divisions that could prove impossible to mend. Right now, the entire country is heading towards an extremely dangerous path. At this point, the use of force would be most detrimental for the whole nation. We strongly call on the ruling party to withdraw its members, and for both sides to avoid a head-on collision that serves no one and, instead, come to the negotiating table for a peaceful settlement. That is the only way to prevent further deaths and injuries.

How long must we wait for justice?

As bodies pile up, govt yet to show sincerity about fair investigations

The bloodstains from July's unprecedented violence haven't faded yet, with the wounds of survivors far from healed. But already new blood is being spilled. Sunday marked the start of the second wave of violence in under two weeks, claiming about 60 lives across the country. As we brace for more uncertainties and possibly further bloodshed in the coming days, harrowing details are still emerging about the first wave, which serve as a grim reminder of the severe repercussions when state power is wielded without accountability.

After analysing the injuries sustained by the deceased during the first wave of violence, *The Daily Star* has found that 195 victims—or 95 percent—were killed by bullets, including live rounds, rubber bullets, and shotgun pellets. Of them, 113 were shot by live rounds that mostly hit in the head, chest, abdomen, etc. Even a single gunshot to these vital body parts can kill in minutes. As a security expert told this daily, under the rules of engagement for civilian protests, security forces are supposed to crouch in a lying position and shoot below the hip to incapacitate the opponent. If they are standing or aiming upwards—as they did during the first wave—then it indicates an intent to kill rather than disperse. Moreover, fatal shots were also fired from close range in many cases. For example, more than two dozen people died from rubber bullets, meaning that they were likely shot at point-blank range. These targeted and lethal shootings show how far the government was—and still is—willing to go to suppress the demands for justice.

But such heavy-handed tactics do not work, as it should have been abundantly clear by now. If the Awami League government is unsure about how to handle the present crisis, it is partly because it has never faced anything like it in its 15-plus years of uninterrupted rule, and partly because of its unwillingness to adapt and learn and engage with citizens in a democratic way. But this is not a war that the deaths of civilians caught in the middle of clashes can be accepted as collateral damage. There are no winners in this. We have all lost as a nation when at least 204 people—including 43 students and 32 children—died during the first wave. If the protesters now feel that fair justice is not possible under the present government, it is precisely because the latter has given no hint yet of its sincerity in that regard.

We, therefore, urge the government to change its uncompromising stance, stop continued crackdown on protesters, and immediately make way for a fully-fledged investigation by the UN. The government must be able to convince the protesters that it will not try to protect members of security forces and its own party cadres responsible for the killings. This may be the only way left for it to come out of this unprecedented crisis.

We must step back from the precipice



Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at BRAC University, chair of Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN), and advisor to Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE). Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

MANZOOR AHMED

Awami League leaders including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina plaintively ask, "All job quota demands have been met; why, then, are the students protesting?" If the ruling party leaders don't understand or pretend not to understand why students are not staying back at home (their campuses and dormitories remain shuttered), we are in much deeper trouble than one could imagine. We are already at the precipice.

July 2024 will surely be marked as the blood-drenched July and will find its place in history with other milestones of student movement, such as 1952 (Language Movement), 1969 (Mass Uprising), and 1990 (anti-Ershad movement), which turned the tide of history.

The question frequently raised is how a demand for quota reform in government job recruitment by university students in Dhaka has been allowed to spread nationwide

Corruption and cronyism affected every citizen who came in contact with any government agency; obscene amassing of wealth by those favoured by the regime reached a new height; and the daily struggle of families to make ends meet in the face of inflation and price hikes of daily necessities was aggravated by syndicates of hoarders and extortionists nurtured and tolerated by the authorities.

They did not feel the people's pain and grief caused by more than 200 deaths of students and citizens of all ages, including children, some of whom were killed and injured in the safety of their homes by firing from helicopters roaming over residential neighbourhoods, according to the victim families' accounts.

It is very difficult to understand why student coordinators of the protest were not reached out early, in order to come to an understanding about the outcome and about a process to

down—have continued. The regime's



A protester holding a placard that states, 'Merit behind bars while the killers roam free.'

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

plan does not require that the charges are properly framed and allegations are proven in the court. The hapless people taken into custody under any excuse would suffer harassment, physical abuse, long incarceration, material loss and mental agony, no matter what verdict the slow process of justice eventually hands

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The prime minister should demonstrate her bona fides by offering

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and to turn into a bloodbath. The common answer is that the regime has totally failed to sense the public pulse. Incompetence, arrogance, and mockery of protesters by supposedly responsible people were combined with a belief that it would be controlled by applying force and by unleashing the student arm of the ruling party. They failed to realise the depth of grief and pain of the people when Abu Sayed of Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur was gunned down by police on July 16, at close range and in public view, as he stood alone with a stick in hand. The government failed to realise that it was fast going out of hand. It failed to sit back, take stock and change its game plan.

The regime failed to see that the movement wasn't just about quotas, and the longer it continued, it conflated and merged into all the grievances and pains of the people.

be followed, including handling the judicial process. The public does not understand why and how the police, Rab and border forces called in to the cities became so reckless and vengeful as to aim at the protesters' eyes and heads using not just rubber bullets, but also shotgun ammunitions and lethal bullets. In the fray, they themselves suffered attacks and loss of life. Have the rules of engagement, operational procedures and command and control broken down completely, or has this been part of the plan to subdue protest by terrorising the protesters and citizens?

The usual playbook of large-scale arrests casting a wide net and alleging vague criminal acts, picking up the people at the dead of night, not informing families of the whereabouts of those picked up, not allowing families to visit those in custody—all illegal under our constitution and

down. And none are held answerable for this cruel travesty.

Considering past experiences, it is difficult to have any faith in government enquiries and the possibility of real perpetrators being punished. As the sister of 19-year-old Mahmudur Rahman Shoikot of Nurjahan Road in Mohammadpur, shot in the head as he was looking for his injured friend, asked, "Police killed my brother; should we go to them for justice?"

Students have now called for a non-cooperation movement. It is a deep expression of their frustrations. As of this writing, the prime minister has said the doors of Gono Bhaban are open to students. She has been holding meetings with university heads. These are moves that should have come much earlier.

There is no reason why the prime minister should not declare the acceptance of the nine-point demand of the students for accountability and justice regarding the government's handling of the quota reform movement and the deaths and injuries, restoring academic peace on campuses, and allowing legitimate channels of expressing students' views and complaints through elected student unions.

full cooperation to the Eminent Citizens' Enquiry Commission headed by Justice MA Matin and Sultana Kamal, and vow to give due consideration to its findings and recommendations.

The prime minister should ask the ministers involved in aspects of the quota reform movement to accept their share of the responsibility. Officials of law enforcement agencies need to be placed on suspension pending appropriate investigation. A process should begin to bring those respected for academic feat and personal integrity into university management.

As a gesture of good faith, the prime minister should pledge to negotiate with the UAE authorities about deporting back to Bangladesh the 57 Bangladeshis who have been sentenced to prison for holding a rally in the UAE supporting the students' movement.

The words, actions and gestures must reflect a good faith effort, signal a change of plans and strategies, and a change of heart and mind. And a willingness and openness should be demonstrated to consult and dialogue with all about overcoming the hurdles to build a just and democratic society.

No sane person can believe or declare that it is too late.

Will India learn anything from the Wayanad Tragedy?



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

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

The deadly waves of landslides, triggered by incessant heavy rains in the hills of southern Indian state of Kerala's Wayanad district, has once again brought to sharp focus the debate over development and ecology.

Following the first day of the landslides on July 23, the Indian Environment Ministry issued a fresh draft notification declaring over 56,800 square km of the Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) spanning six states, including the devastated Wayanad villages. This was the sixth such notification by the Environment Ministry in a decade since 2014, but the final notification has never seen the light of the day after running into objections from political parties and governments.

The Western Ghats, among the world's eight most important biodiversity hot spots, runs between India's south to west through Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. What is at stake is the life of more than 50 million people living in the region, most of them dependent on agriculture and plantations.

According to official documents,

the significance of the Western Ghats as a global biodiversity area and a treasure trove of biological diversity has been repeatedly emphasised. It is also the origin of Godavari, Krishna, Cauvery, and a number of other rivers of peninsular India, on which depends much of the economy of the region.

Environmental scientists have attributed the landslides to a combination of loss of forest cover due to unregulated infrastructure development, quarrying, mining in the fragile terrain, and climate change. The increase in the rainfall on Kerala in recent years is seen by environmentalists as the result of warming of the south eastern part of the Arabian Sea, causing heightened precipitation.

In 2011, an expert panel set up by the Indian government, led by ecologist-academic Madhav Gadgil, had submitted a report, recommending a ban on these activities and designating 75 percent of the entire Western Ghats region as an ecologically sensitive zone (ESZ), a graded zonation approach to regulating industrial and agricultural activities and creation of an overarching ecological authority for the region.

The expert report is gathering dust following resistance by political parties, which opposed cutting down the ESZ areas for industries and other development activities. The opposition has largely stemmed from fears that any move to ban certain activities and the demarcation of whole villages as ESAs will deprive the local people of economic growth opportunities.

Another government-appointed committee, headed by leading scientist K Kasturirangan, had suggested in 2013 that the Meppadi Panchayat in Wayanad, one of the most severely affected places by the July 23 landslide, be included in the larger eco-sensitive zone being demarcated in the state. The Kasturirangan panel proposed 37 percent of the Western Ghats be demarcated as ESA because the previously proposed 75 percent figure was considered too high. However, the Kasturirangan committee recommendations also remain unimplemented.

Maharashtra's Congress-NCP coalition government submitted to the federal Environment Ministry in 2012 that the creation of an overarching Western Ghats Ecological Authority would run parallel to existing government agencies and opposed the idea. Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu opposed a proposed ban on new hydropower projects in the region.

In 2022, the BJP government had issued a notification of ESAs in the Western Ghats but the party's government in Karnataka opposed the move. The then Karnataka Home Minister, Aranga Jnanendra, had said, if the draft notification was accepted as

it was, "it will affect the lives of people in rural areas."

The Indian Express quoted Pandurang Hegde, an environmental activist associated with the Save Western Ghats Movement in Karnataka, as saying that irrespective of which political party is in power, they have always projected protection of Western Ghats as an "anti-people issue."

Hegde added, "Those with vested interests desiring to exploit natural resources do not want the demarcation of ESAs and politicians have used local people as a shield to justify the delays."

In an article in *The Indian Express*, Amitbah Kant, India's G20 Sherpa, says a 2022 study on depleting forest cover in Wayanad showed 62 percent of the district's green cover disappeared between 1950 and 2018, while rubber plantation cover rose by around 1,800 percent.

The intensity of the landslide increased because rubber trees are less effective in holding soil compared to the dense forest cover of pre-plantation times. Besides, the sharp rise in eco-tourism in Wayanad, one of the most scenic spots in India, has gone on unchecked in the last so many years with the construction of hotels, resorts, and roads through the hills.

The main challenge is aligning the biodiversity of the Western Ghats region with adequate opportunities for the local people in the broad framework of ESA. It is not merely an issue of development regulation, but is intimately linked to positive promotion of environment-friendly and socially inclusive growth.