

No more concessions for India on border killing or fencing

OF MAGIC AND MADNESS

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BADIUZZAMAN BAY

There couldn't be a more harrowing indictment of India's ruthless border policy than the recent killings of two Bangladeshis around the 14th anniversary of the gruesome murder of Felani Khatun. The first of these killings involved Zahur Ali, 55, who was allegedly beaten to death by members of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and local Indian citizens at the Boro Keora border area of Chunarughat, Habiganj. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, Zahur, a security guard from Dhaka with a history of mental instability, had recently returned home on a five-day leave. On January 6, he went out apparently to sell some merchandise at the village market and was not heard from again. The next day, his body was discovered inside Indian territory.

The second incident involved Saidul Islam, 23, who was allegedly killed by BSF on January 8 near the Mashimpur border in Bishwambharpur, Sunamganj. According to a report by *Dhaka Tribune*, Saidul was apparently smuggling betel nuts into India when he was shot, sustaining wounds to his chest and abdomen. He later died at the Sunamganj Sadar Hospital. And just three days after that, another victim, Md Shahidul Islam, 22, was critically injured near the border in Shibganj, Chapainawabganj. *Prothom Alo* reports that Shahidul was apparently returning from India with smuggled Phensedyl when BSF shot him. He is now under treatment at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

If this was India's way of commemorating the incident from 14 years ago that gave rise to that iconic image of the upside-down body of a 14-year-old girl hanging from a barbed-wire fence for hours—before she was shot and left to die a slow, painful death—it indeed made its point. However, the recent string of tragic shootings has nothing to do with Felani, who was just another entrant in the absurdly long list of BSF victims. But that haunting image today stands as a symbol of BSF's trigger-happy

exploits that continue unchecked. The ordeal that Felani's family had to go through, both before and after the January 7, 2011, shooting, represents everything wrong with India's border policy. It starts with allowing lethal force to prevent unlawful movements regardless of their causes or its own "zero-death" pledge—with 25 shot dead in 2024, according to Ain o

of his reckless actions. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court of India, which was supposed to hear final arguments in this case on January 8, reportedly postponed the hearing without explanation. Furthermore, despite India's National Human Rights Commission directing the Indian home ministry in 2013 to provide Rs 5 lakh as compensation to Felani's

Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Verma stuck to the same guns. The BSF also routinely uses the excuse of firing in "self-defence" under "compulsion." In July 2022, its then director-general even went as far as to call Bangladeshi nationals killed at the border "criminals." Rights activists have consistently laid bare the hollowness of such arguments about the means or excuses used to stop so-called border crimes, yet Indian authorities refuse to mend their ways or ensure accountability for what is clearly a violation of both internationally accepted border control protocols and bilateral instruments.

This authoritarian tendency was further evident in BSF's recent attempts to construct barbed-wire fences along five border areas, including Chapainawabganj, Naogaon, Lalmonirhat, and the Tin Bigha Corridor. India has already fenced 3,271 km of its 4,156-km border with Bangladesh, leaving approximately 885 km unfenced. While it has temporarily halted its border incursions thanks to strong resistance from Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) personnel and local villagers, its increasingly adversarial approach since the ouster of New Delhi's once-favoured leader Sheikh Hasina stands in stark contrast to its rhetoric of friendly relations. The question is, who surrounds their neighbours with barbed wire, frequently violates bilateral agreements on border management, resorts to excessive force at the slightest hint of unauthorised presence or activity, and continuously refuses to engage in accountability measures?

Interestingly, Pranay Verma, while talking to journalists after the Sunday meeting, said: "We have an understanding with regard to fencing the border for security... We expect that the understanding will be implemented." He was likely referring

to what Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (retired) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury termed as "unequal agreements" or MoUs on barbed-wire fencing signed during Awami League's tenure, leading to the present disputes. Revisiting all such controversial MoUs has become essential in post-uprising Bangladesh, even though India still seems to be tethered to a time when it could get Bangladesh to concede to any unfair demand using its political leverage. But that belongs to the past now. India can no longer expect undue concessions or unequal opportunities when it comes to border management. It must acknowledge that true friendship between two neighbours demands respect, accountability, and adherence to established protocols and agreements, not coercion or exploitation.

There have been four border-related treaties signed since Bangladesh's independence, as the home adviser has said. Of them, the 1975 one specifies that no defence development activities can take place within 150 yards of the zero line, with another MoU adding that any such work will "require prior agreement between the two nations." There have also been repeated commitments from the Indian authorities to pursue a non-lethal strategy in combating border crimes. India must honour these agreements and commitments. Also, the extrajudicial killings of so many Bangladeshis by BSF cannot go unanswered. India faces too many unresolved issues with Bangladesh—including Sheikh Hasina's extradition—to allow these manageable crises to fester unnecessarily. But if it continues its uncooperative stance, the government should consider taking the issue to the international court and actively raising it on global platforms. Protecting the lives of our citizens and our border integrity is non-negotiable.

The power of silence in a bitter political rivalry

THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia boarded a flight to the UK for medical treatment a few hours after her scheduled departure. The delay was caused by the thousands who thronged the highway to bid her farewell. The ensuing traffic jam inconvenienced commuters, no doubt, but it was an outpouring of love and support from her admirers and followers. On the same day, the Bangladesh government revoked 97 passports, including that of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who is now exiled in India, having fled after a massive political upsurge.

Just six months ago, the tables were completely turned. Khaleda was under house arrest, while her party was desperately appealing for her to be allowed to travel for medical care. The request was denied many times. Meanwhile, Sheikh Hasina held an iron grip on power, with no one daring to challenge her.

Since Hasina's government came to power, Khaleda had endured relentless verbal attacks but remained largely silent, maintaining a quiet dignity even as Hasina's words often struck with sharp venom. The two women, both giants of Bangladesh's political landscape, share a bitter rivalry, yet their communication styles couldn't be more different—Hasina is known for her fiery, often harsh tone, while Khaleda is known for remaining calm and calculated, rarely engaging in public verbal sparring.

Khaleda Zia's troubles began in 2009 when her archrival Hasina assumed office. The first blow came when Khaleda was forcibly evicted from her Dhaka cantonment house, which she had called home for decades. In a tearful press conference at her Gulshan office, Khaleda accused the government of dragging her out of her bedroom, breaking down her door, and leaving her with nothing but the clothes she was wearing. Awami League leaders, including Hasina herself, dismissed her emotional plea as nothing more than "crocodile tears."

The political climate grew more hostile. On December 29, 2013, as the BNP declared its "March for Democracy" ahead of the controversial January 5, 2014, elections, Khaleda's path was blocked by five sand-laden trucks ordered by the government to prevent her from attending the rally. The sight of the trucks—now infamous in Bangladesh's political history as "sand-truck democracy"—left Khaleda frustrated and powerless. It was the first time she was out of parliament since she began parliamentary politics in 1990. While she was visibly upset, her fury was directed not at Hasina but at the female police officers who had managed to irritate her. In a brief moment of exasperation, Khaleda lashed out in a rare outburst. The only other time Khaleda appeared ungracious was when Hasina wanted to offer condolences for the death of Arafat, Khaleda's younger son. The

sitting prime minister was turned back from the locked gates of Khaleda's Gulshan house.

Khaleda's journey took an even darker turn when she was imprisoned on corruption charges filed during the army-backed caretaker government. Meanwhile, Hasina, when she came to power, had all charges against her cleared, even as Khaleda languished in Dhaka Central Jail. Hasina, ever vocal, repeatedly mocked Khaleda, calling her a "thief" and

prison, deepening the political animosity between the two women and fuelling a bitter feud that shaped Bangladesh's political landscape. Even after sending her to jail, Hasina did not refrain from making harsh comments. Earlier in 2022, she even remarked that Khaleda Zia should be "thrown" off the Padma Bridge. At a programme in London in October 2023, Hasina further said, "Khaleda Zia is over 80 years old, and there is news every

she blamed the students and ordered the police to crack down hard on the protesters.

Ultimately, Hasina was forced to flee the country. Despite her repeated declarations that she would never leave, she fled Bangladesh in the face of mass public anger, abandoning millions of her party loyalists who were left in disarray.

On the other hand, Khaleda Zia departed the country amid a spontaneous farewell fit for a respected leader after years of hardship. Despite that, Khaleda chose not to lash out against Hasina. Instead, she called for "no destruction, no anger, and no revenge," urging the need for love and peace to rebuild the nation.

In a world where silence hardly prevails, Khaleda Zia's restraint became her strength. When the autocratic regime sought to break her, it was the people who showered her with love. This quiet yet powerful defiance set her apart from others.

Where others saw defeat, Khaleda saw an opportunity. As Hasina fled in the face of overwhelming public dissent, Khaleda was met with the kind of love and support that transcended years of political conflict. In choosing peace over revenge and dialogue over destruction, she set an example that speaks louder than words.

Of all the five major political figures in Bangladesh's history—Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman, HM Ershad, Khaleda Zia, and Sheikh Hasina—it is only Khaleda Zia who has managed to avoid the label of an autocrat. This distinction is a significant defining aspect of her political legacy.

At a time when politics often rewards the loudest voice, Khaleda Zia's legacy serves as a reminder that silence, too, can be golden. It is this quiet strength that will echo through Bangladesh's history, ensuring that she is not just remembered but also revered.



VISUAL: MONOROM POLOK

claiming she deserved the punishment she received. Hasina would often declare, while mocking the BNP's political efforts: "Now they're marching for a thief."

Ironically, however, the international media has reported massive corruption allegations against Hasina's cabinet and even her niece, who is a British MP.

Hasina even issued threats that any attempt by the BNP to step up its movement would result in Khaleda being thrown back into

day that she is on the verge of dying." She then questioned the point of crying over her health.

Hasina's ungracious comments weren't limited to Khaleda. She also targeted other prominent figures, including Muhammad Yunus, who is currently the chief adviser to the interim government. She infamously labelled Yunus a "bloodsucker of the poor." Moreover, during the student protests in late July, Hasina's reaction was far from empathetic. Instead of listening to the youth's grievances,

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

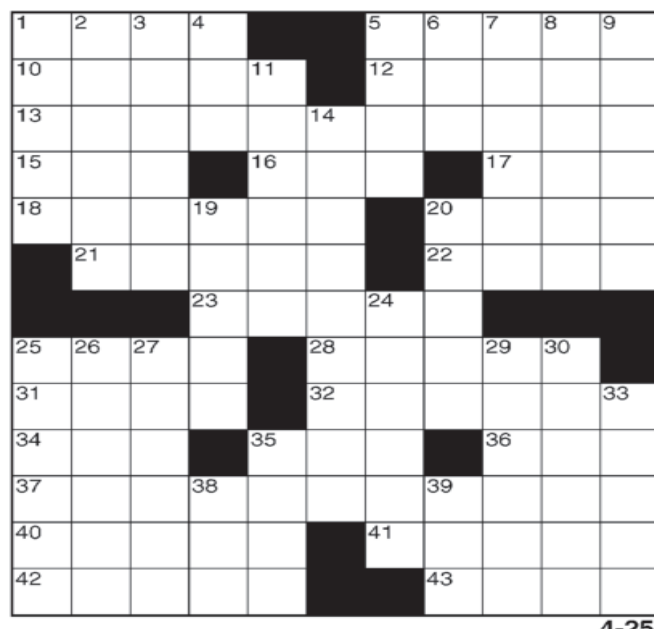
- 1 One of the Deadly Sins
- 5 Church fixture
- 10 Pays to play
- 12 "Cheers" barmaid
- 13 South America's north coast
- 15 Bar bill
- 16 Quaker's pronoun
- 17 Not pos.
- 18 Sand substance
- 20 Skin woe
- 21 Home design
- 22 Reduced amount
- 23 More than sufficient

DOWN

- 1 Survives
- 2 Like some debts
- 3 Horse house
- 4 Wallet bill
- 5 Needing aspirin
- 6 Hurried flight
- 7 Somnolent state

8 Sci-fi threat

- 9 Mountain chains
- 11 Half-hour show, often
- 14 Twinge
- 19 Start of a Caesar quote
- 20 Watchful
- 24 "Get a move on!"
- 25 Contribute
- 26 Made over
- 27 Incite
- 29 La Scala city
- 30 Water channel
- 33 Dance's de Mille
- 35 Top Ten songs
- 38 Cardinal color
- 39 Tire track



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