

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Real action needed to curb crime

Home adviser must provide a clear plan to address public insecurity

We are quite worried about the deteriorating law and order situation in Dhaka and across the country. The severity of the crisis was evident on Sunday night when multiple serious crimes were reported in different parts of the capital within just a few hours. In recent times, there has been a noticeable increase in criminal activities in the city, prompting public outrage both online and offline. The situation outside Dhaka is equally dire. All this has created an environment of fear where citizens no longer feel safe going out alone.

Sunday night's incidents justified this growing insecurity. For example, a 43-year-old jewellery shop owner was attacked right in front of his house by miscreants who shot him in both legs when he tried to stop them from snatching away his belongings. Elsewhere, muggers robbed two women on a rickshaw just after midnight, the video footage of which went viral.

Naturally, public outrage is mounting, and most of it is directed at the home adviser now. The measures he has taken to improve security seem to have largely failed. Even the much-publicised Operation Devil Hunt—resulting in 8,664 arrests in 16 days—has not made a noticeable difference. Against this backdrop, the home adviser called a sudden press conference at three in the morning on Monday, where he claimed that the law and order situation had “largely improved” since he assumed office, and would continue to do so. He also alleged that cohorts of the ousted Awami League were behind the present security crisis.

However, while his warning about Awami League is one shared by many, his optimistic assessment about law and order does not reflect reality. We are also baffled by his decision to hold a press conference in the middle of the night—an unprecedented move—just to offer routine assurances without providing any concrete plans for tackling crime. This came across as particularly tone-deaf given that, just hours earlier, hundreds of protesters at Dhaka University were demanding his resignation for his failure to ensure public safety. Even on Monday, protesters demanding the same staged a sit-in in front of Shikha Bhaban after police blocked their march towards the home ministry.

Rather than addressing these concerns with transparency and accountability—which the interim government vowed to uphold when it first took over—the adviser instead put all eggs in the basket of faceless conspirators. This does little to inspire public confidence. Perhaps it is time for a performance evaluation of top government officials. If Awami League's cohorts are indeed behind rising crime, this is not just a law and order issue but a political one as well. The government should deal with it accordingly, along with its political stakeholders. But at the same time, it must take more effective steps to curb crime in Dhaka and elsewhere.

Govt inaction spurring sexual predators

Recent incidents of rape and violence call for urgent action

We are alarmed by the frequent incidents of rape and sexual violence reported across the country. On February 21, a fourth grader was raped in Rangpur's Mithapukur upazila when she went to collect flowers to pay tribute to the language martyrs. On February 16, a 22-year-old woman was gang-raped in Munshiganj. And just last week, two women were sexually assaulted on a moving bus on the Dhaka-Tangail highway by a gang of robbers. The list of such horrific incidents continues to grow. Unfortunately, the government's response to such crimes remains largely inadequate. In this regard, the silence of the women and children's affairs adviser—who is a women's rights activist herself—comes as particularly troubling. Such inaction only emboldens the criminals and heightens fear over women's safety.

It should be noted that the interim government has failed to effectively restore law and order even after the passing of more than six months. Besides crimes of sexual nature, mugging, robbery, and violent clashes between different groups have also increased nationwide. This naturally raises the question: what are law enforcement agencies doing to curb these crimes? And why are crimes against women and children not getting the attention they deserve?

Against this backdrop, students from various educational institutions in Dhaka and across the country have recently protested the surge in rape and sexual violence. They have rightly criticised the government's lacklustre efforts, demanding stricter law enforcement, overhauling of special tribunals for rape cases, enhanced protection for victims, a confidential reporting system for survivors reluctant to come forward, government-funded psychological rehabilitation services, etc. The authorities must take these demands seriously and implement effective measures without delay.

Violence against women has been pervasive in our society largely due to the prevailing culture of impunity that emboldens criminals. We have seen how successive governments failed to bring perpetrators to justice, and in many cases, offenders escaped accountability due to their political connections. Now that an interim government is in charge, it must break this cycle of impunity. Along with necessary legal and administrative reforms, it should engage with NGOs and women's and children's rights activists to develop a comprehensive action plan on sexual violence. The immediate priority must be arresting and prosecuting those responsible for the recent incidents of rape and sexual violence. The government must send a clear message that such crimes will not be tolerated in this new Bangladesh.

16TH ANNIVERSARY OF BDR CARNAGE

Children of three slain army officials speak to **The Daily Star** about their experience during the BDR carnage on February 25-26, 2009, the false narratives surrounding the incident, and their hope for a fair investigation.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

The horrors of BDR carnage still haunt me



Dr Fabliha Bushra is the daughter of slain Lt Col Lutfur Rahman Khan.

FABLIHA BUSHRA

As I write this, 16 years after February 25, 2009, I am filled with a complex mix of emotions, something akin to relief and even astonishment at being alive and a profound grief of losing my beloved father to mindless violence. I, along with my family, was held hostage while my father was slain, along with many others not too far away from us. The day still feels like a vivid nightmare that I don't have the luxury to wake up from. For 16 years, I have been in the survival mode. That incident has robbed me and many others like me of a childhood, a chance at normal life.

Before we could even make sense of what was happening amid the sound of blaring gunfire and cars burning in front of our house, intruders barged into our home and dragged us out at gunpoint that morning. To our utter horror, they were men in uniform—BDR jawans, whom we looked at for protection and entrusted with our security. I, a 14-year-old then, and my six-year-old

brother held on to my mother tightly, as we ran for our lives as bullets were being fired at us too. When our phones were taken away, my mother pleaded with the jawans to let her speak to my father at least once. She thought we were being taken to safety and it was important to inform my father or he would worry about us. Not once did we think that these men intended to harm us or that my father would meet a fate much worse than us. In my mother's last conversation with my father, he asked her to take care of herself and keep us safe.

Instead of taking us to a safe place, they took us to a place called “Quarter Guard,” where we were held hostage with at least a hundred other families for 36 hours. We were thrown into a small cell that was already filled with injured, bleeding people. While they shoved us in, some of us were kicked in the back, and I was hit in the back of my head with a rifle butt. Many hostages including women and

children were beaten brutally. They had also captured several officers who were beaten to a pulp right in front of us. We were all screaming and praying for the Almighty's mercy as they threatened to torture and kill us.

Most of the time, we were ducking to avoid being shot. We begged for forgiveness and consoled the hostages right next to us who were our neighbours, friends, and playmates. As a teenage girl, my fear of death was layered with a very real possibility of being raped. My mother covered me with a large *orna* as that was the most she could do, in hopes of protecting me from those barbarians.

All the time we were in captivity, I foolishly thought that my father, being a doctor, would be spared from the atrocities. I was proven wrong in the worst way possible when my father's body was found in a mass grave with 32 others. The feeling of getting a new chance at life, after being released from that hell, disappeared when I learnt of my father's killing.

There have been, and there will be, many political autopsies of BDR carnage, and the deaths will probably become just another statistic. Meanwhile, I am forced to make peace with the fact that I will never get closure and will probably have to spend the rest of my life trying to heal from something I had no part to play in. None of us did.

Reject the flawed narrative on BDR carnage



Advocate Saquib Rahman is senior lecturer of law at North South University. He is the son of slain Col Quadrat Elahi Rahman Shafique.

SAQUIB RAHMAN

It was hurtful for the victims' families to see how some media outlets sympathetically portrayed the agonies of dismissed BDR rank and file who recently took to the streets. These riflemen and their families staged protests on January 8-9, claiming that the carnage was the result of Sheikh Hasina's conspiracy and that the riflemen were systematically framed and subjected to farcical trials as part of the plot. Undoubtedly, they were playing the victim card.

Since the recent court hearings on explosive cases, some media outlets began to highlight the miseries of the accused riflemen who received bail. They portrayed the struggle of the riflemen's families to make ends meet. While any prudent human being would have sympathy for the families, it must be noted that the trial of the BDR jawans is still in progress and their chances of conviction remain.

On January 29, at a press conference, we, the victims' families, strongly condemned the media's role in twisting stories and changing the narrative on the mastermind behind the killings and atrocities inside Palkhona. Though we filed a complaint against Hasina and others in the International Crimes Tribunal, acknowledging that there was a conspiracy, that does not mean the first line of perpetrators, the riflemen, charged with murder, can be freed!

Meanwhile, the protesting riflemen and their families later changed their demands and no longer asked for the unconditional release of those convicted of assassinations.

On February 6, we, the victims' families, through the official Facebook page of our organisation, Shaheed Shena Association, put out a statement that we believe is reasonable.

We clarified that the protesting riflemen who were punished as per the erstwhile BDR service law for upto seven years, are within their rights to place their demand before the government for reinstatement (and compensation) in the force. We have no opinion regarding that. The government might review their applications and do as they deem fit.

Moreover, in the explosive cases where the riflemen are receiving bail, we, the victims' families, cannot certainly comment on the decisions made by the judiciary.

Lastly, we, the victims' families, acknowledge that the murder cases are with the Supreme Court's Appellate Division at the moment. Reinvestigation is not allowed once a court has taken cognisance of a matter. If the new BDR Investigation Commission reinvestigates the murder cases, it would be an interference in the criminal trial. However, we stated that provided there is any scope within the law to reinvestigate the murders, such a step may be taken.

I am cautiously optimistic of the new investigation



Muhtasim Ittisaf is lecturer at the Department of Chemical Engineering at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology. He is the son of slain officer Lt Col Mohammad Sazzadur Rahman.

MUHTASIM ITTISAF

I was in my room when the BDR Jawans came and took us hostage on the fateful day of February 25, 2009. They took my entire family—my mother, my brother—and held us captive inside the Quarter Guard jail for two days, crammed into a small cell. They were firing their guns right in front of us and I was frightened for my family's safety.

We thought we were going to be freed when Sahara Khatun (the then home minister) arrived. Some weapons were surrendered to her, which was clearly just for show as we saw people picking the weapons back up once she left. It was a complete mockery.

We heard that the army tried to send a RAB unit inside, but the top brass allegedly did not allow it.

After our release, we were taken to Mirpur Cantonment. Then to my uncle's house in Dhanmondi. That was when we started getting the list of those who had been killed. I found out my father, Lieutenant Colonel Sazzadur Rahman, was among the martyrs.

It was deeply traumatic. I did not go to school for four months. Later, I got admitted to Adamjee and finished my studies there.

After the incident, we were terrified as everyone warned us not to speak of the then government's alleged involvement. They said “You have already lost so much. Do not risk your life further.”

But growing up in a military family, I heard things that made the government's involvement in the incident quite obvious. It was not possible for such a massive event to occur with just low-level political figures involved. There had to be higher-ups.

What confuses me even more is the appointment of the current home adviser. He headed the 20-member army probe committee on the BDR carnage mutiny in 2009 and allegedly amended the report three times before presenting it to the media. And I believe political involvement in the carnage was covered up.

Some people claim that political and possibly foreign influence was

involved. Yet, no one points fingers directly because a certain quarter does not allow it.

For 15 years, nothing happened. The Awami League was in power, and many believe that there was clear involvement from people within their ranks. Some people even mention the names of Jahangir Kabir Nanak and Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh. There was a systematic effort to delay and bury the investigation.

While the families of the slain officers were subtly told not to point fingers at the Awami League, they tried to pacify us with offers of plots of land, one-time payments—things we did not ask for.

Thankfully, a new committee has been formed under Lieutenant General Fazlur Karim Chowdhury to probe the incident and Saquib Rahman, of slain officer Col Quadrat Elahi Rahman Shafique, is involved in it, representing the families of the martyrs.

I am cautiously optimistic that as long as this government stays in power, we might finally see real progress. That is why I hope the committee can release a preliminary report before the next election, clearly stating the involvement of not just BDR soldiers or army personnel, but of higher-ups, political figures, and possible foreign influences.

All we want is for the truth to come out, no matter who was involved. That is all.