

# Why the army's prolonged role in law enforcement is not a good idea



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SYED MUNIR KHASRU

On Monday, Chief of Army Staff Gen Waker-Uz-Zaman said the army must continue working to maintain law and order until Bangladesh gets an elected government. Although he also stated that "it is imperative that we perform our duties without engaging in any unruly behaviour," only a week before that, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) issued a statement on February 17 at a press conference on recent involvement of active and former military personnel in two high-profile robberies in Mohammadpur and Banani and on military's efforts to curb crime. As per the statement, when comparing data of December 2024 to February 2025, the military-assisted operations have significantly reduced extortion cases from 250 to 110, theft from 850 to 600, and murder from 350 to 120. Also, 334 drug dealers have been arrested, with large amounts of illicit drugs seized along with 172 illegal weapons and 527 bullets. Despite the apparent success, fact remains that some crimes remain high. Approximately 1,400 weapons and 250,000 rounds of ammunition stolen following the July uprising are still unaccounted for.

What was supposed to be a two-month emergency measure has quietly stretched into a military-supported status quo. Back in September 2024, the interim government handed magistracy powers to the army, justifying it as a necessary step to restore law and order. However, compared to December 2024, murder cases increased from 204 to 294 in January 2025 while theft increased slightly to 797 compared to 729 in December 2024. Moreover, the recent abduction of 25 rubber plantation workers in Bandarban indicates ongoing lawlessness in remote regions, where insurgent groups and organised crime networks continue to operate. Violence against women and children also remains high, with 1,043 cases reported in January 2025, a marginal decline from 1,205 in December 2024, suggesting that deep-rooted societal and institutional issues are not being effectively addressed.

As March 2025 unfolds and the month of fasting begins, the law-and-order situation seems to be sliding in spite of the army's supportive role. While the army's presence may have helped reduce unrest, soldiers are not trained to deal with criminal activities in civilian life like rape, dacoity, mugging,

looting, arson, toll collection, etc. Unless the root causes—i.e. corruption, economic inequality, and festering political divisions—are addressed, mere presence of the army on the streets will not help resolve the ongoing law and order crisis. It resonates with the army chief's observation, "The disorders that have happened here are of our own making... We have created these ourselves. We have to keep in mind that if we continue the contrary actions, peace and order will never be restored."

**Operation Devil Hunt: A temporary fix?** The government's Operation Devil Hunt, launched on February 8, 2025, is a recent major effort to tackle unrest and crime. It has led to 10,570 arrests till February 26, including 1,141 people already wanted for various crimes. Authorities have seized weapons and ammunition. While these arrests show the state's ability to crack down on disorder, they do not address the deeper causes of instability. It may bring temporary order and relief, but without real change, it is unlikely to create lasting peace.

History shows that prolonged military involvement in law enforcement risks power being misused, as it came out in the ISPR press briefing. If long-term stability is the goal, then focus should shift towards institutional reforms, which includes professional policing and building an effective judicial system. The army's presence may have the symbolic value of show of strength and generating confidence among the citizens, but it is not a panacea to deep-rooted socioeconomic chasm, intolerant political culture, and extreme swings on the political and ideological landscape of Bangladesh.

#### Ongoing civil unrest

In the recent past, the army's support was required to respond to law and order crises, including 30 road blockades in key industrial areas like Gazipur, Ashulia, and Savar. They also managed 42 chaotic situations, including 14 at educational institutions, nine tied to political conflicts, and 16 involving public disorder. However, despite army's presence, unrest remains widespread.

On February 5, an angry mob demolished the residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Dhanmondi 32, the army personnel present

in the scene remained passive. Hence, the chief adviser's statement that the incident was undesired did not have much buy-in from the critics as live telecast showed troops at the site largely remaining inactive. More recently, on February 16, drivers of CNG-run autorickshaws blocked the roads in Mirpur-1, Mirpur-14, and Rampura, among other places, protesting fines for overcharging passengers. They stopped moving autorickshaws with

demands are met, classes and exams remain suspended.

All of the above exemplifies that one cannot expect the army to effectively control all forms of civil unrest. These issues are traditionally handled by the civil administration and police force working in tandem. Hence, it is the government's responsibility to reform and empower the police to maintain law and order and ensure stability, especially before

and industries suffered from the absence of a proper civilian legal framework. Similar risks loom if the army remains engaged in supporting law enforcement beyond the necessary timeframe.

The military has shown reluctance to remain in power for extended periods, understanding that prolonged involvement in governance risks tarnishing its reputation. Unlike the Pakistan Army, the Bangladesh Army does not get engaged in the affairs of running the country, either openly or overtly. Hence, the interim government should not extend military magistracy beyond Eid ul-Fitr, and should find ways to install confidence in the police, who are yet to recover from the trauma of the recent past. On that note, a clear transition plan should be put in place without delay so that regular law enforcers are in the driving seat, properly empowered by the government.

#### What lies ahead

The current state of law and order is epitomised by five syndromes: i) an army in a supportive role whereby they are not fully functional, and hence not fully effective either; ii) a shaken and traumatised police force with low morale, high insecurity, and resulting passivity and inefficiency; iii) an indecisive government lacking the courage to lead the nation out of the mess in the aftermath of the ouster of Sheikh Hasina government; iv) an evolving political landscape which is raising concern and eroding optimism that the nation had in the immediate aftermath of August 5, 2024; and v) a country on a slippery slope as uncertainty on elections and reforms dampen the positive spirit and democratic aspirations of the people. Continuance of any or all of the above cannot bode well for the nation, as echoed by the army chief, "I am warning you. If you cannot forget your differences and work together, if you engage in mudslinging and fighting, the independence and sovereignty of this country and nation will be at stake."

The problem is that those who are in a position to do something about it seem to be in slumber or in a state of denial or too scared to do the needful. The army's limited and supportive role in maintaining law and order will not help address any of these three situations prevailing in the mindset of those who were given the responsibility to steer the nation to a new dawn of hope and aspiration, positivity and prosperity. The interim government must find ways to effectively govern the country by being decisive and firm in dealing with the troublemakers, paving the way for the army to return to the barracks sooner than later. Otherwise, it may become increasingly difficult for the army chief to ensure, "While performing duties we must avoid the use of force, it may be applied only when absolutely necessary."



Army personnel check a private car on Manik Mia Avenue in Dhaka in the early hours of February 26, 2025, amid the recent spike of crimes in the city as well as across the country.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

passengers, worsening traffic. A similar protest had already taken place on February 13 along Mirpur Road, causing public distress and intense traffic.

Tensions within educational institutions have intensified. On February 18, a violent confrontation erupted at the Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET) between members of Students Against Discrimination and Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, BNP's student wing, resulting in injuries to at least 50 students, some suffering from sharp weapon wounds. The dispute arose due to restrictions on student political activities that have been in place at KUET since August 2024.

The violence sparked protests at multiple universities. Students Against Discrimination held rallies at Dhaka University, while similar demonstrations erupted at Jahangirnagar University, Chittagong University, Rajshahi University, and Jagannath University. At KUET, students have demanded a total ban on student politics, among others. Until these

and during the elections. As aptly stated by the army chief, "Maintaining law and order is not the responsibility of the army alone. Apart from 200,000 police personnel, there are BGB, Rab, and Ansar-VDP members. Army has only 30,000 troops deployed. How can I fill this void with just 30,000 soldiers?"

#### Past lessons should not be forgotten

Currently, the army is not in the driving seat as it was during the military-backed caretaker government of 2006-2008, and this time its role is focused on maintaining law and order in a more restrained manner. However, the prolonged use of military power, in whatever form or manner, carries an inherent risk even when efforts are made to act in a cooperative and measured way.

During 2006-2008, the army's image was negatively affected by accusations of human rights violations and political suppression. Additionally, the economic downturn during that time was exacerbated by heavy-handed military control. Investors were hesitant

# How can a convicted killer escape?



#### MIND THE GAP

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NOSHIN NAWAL

I would love to tell you that I was surprised. That I gasped in horror when I read the news. That I clutched my imaginary pearls and whispered, "Oh dear, how could this have happened?" But alas, I am a Bangladeshi. I read horrors in ink and paper every day. Here, law and order are just suggestions, and justice is an occasional guest appearance on this tragicomic reality-show we call governance.

Muntasir Al Jemy, one of the men sentenced to death for the brutal murder of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) student Abrar Fahad, escaped from Kashimpur Central Jail on August 6 last year. Yes, you read that correctly. Last year. Not yesterday. Not last week.

And the authorities—those fine, upstanding guardians of justice—decided to keep this little detail to themselves for a neat six months.

Why, you ask? Oh, the usual reasons—bureaucratic inefficiency, incompetence, and, most likely, a cocktail of corruption and apathy. But let's give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they were too busy doing—oh, I don't know—absolutely nothing to bring Abrar's murderers to real justice. Maybe they were taking an extended nap, rocked gently to sleep by the lullaby of impunity that has become the theme song of our criminal justice system.

It wasn't until Jemy's lawyer failed to show up in court that anyone thought to wonder, "Hey, where is this guy, anyway?" Imagine that—a convicted killer disappears, and the

only reason it comes to light is because his legal team ghosted a hearing. I can't decide whether this is a crime thriller or a bad sitcom.

Let's be clear, Jemy was in a condemned cell. That means maximum security. That means he was supposed to be under constant watch. That means there were protocols in place—except, apparently, in Kashimpur, where the only protocol is "Oops, my bad."

**This isn't just about one escaped convict. This is about the rot at the heart of our justice system. This is about the fact that our prisons are about as secure as a leaky tin roof during monsoon. This is about the fact that our government, our institutions, and the very people who are supposed to uphold justice, seem to be in a committed relationship with impunity.**

The official excuse? A jailbreak involving 209 prisoners. That's right—over two hundred criminals waltzed out of prison like it was an Eid sale at Bashundhara City.

But here's the kicker: it's not even the escape itself that enrages me the most. It's the duplicity. The deliberate silence. The casual, callous disregard for Abrar's family, who had to find out, six months later, that their son's murderer is out there, free as a bird. And for what? To avoid embarrassment?

To sweep yet another failure under the rug? And what does this tell us about the

"efforts" to recapture Jemy? Exactly what Faiyaz, Abrar's younger brother, pointed out—there weren't any. Because if there had been, we would have heard about it. There would have been press conferences, wanted posters, manhunts. Instead, there was silence, because the authorities knew that if they didn't say anything, they wouldn't have to do anything.

This isn't just about one escaped convict. This is about the rot at the heart of our justice system. This is about the fact that our prisons are about as secure as a leaky tin roof during monsoon. This is about the fact that our government, our institutions, and the very people who are supposed to uphold justice, seem to be in a committed relationship with impunity.

And while they get away with it, families like Abrar's are left to suffer. Left to wake up every day knowing that the very system that

promised justice is the same one that lets it slip through the cracks—no, scratch that—march out the front door.

If the authorities have even an ounce of shame left, they need to do two things immediately. First, find Jemy. And second, explain—truthfully, transparently—why they hid this from the public for so long. And if they can't do either, they should at least have the decency to admit that they are unfit for their jobs and resign.

But then again, accountability isn't really a thing here, is it?

## CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

1 Puts in the oven  
6 Exams  
11 River bend  
12 Snow house  
13 Led to opportunities  
15 Morse bit  
16 Calendar box  
17 Court  
18 Disgusted  
20 Kyoto setting  
23 Plumbing conduits  
27 Full range  
28 Battery unit  
29 Yard plus a bit  
31 Snug  
32 Express stop  
34 Cart puller  
37 Taxi

38 Debt note  
41 United in the face of a challenge  
44 Less  
45 Find charming  
46 Borders  
47 Sub sounder

### DOWN

1 Car part  
2 Trade fair  
3 Aid illegally  
4 Shipping weight  
5 Stockholm setting  
6 Neaten the room  
7 Sense of self  
8 Leisurely  
9 Matador's foe  
10 Mediocre  
14 Pop  
17 Court  
18 Disgusted  
20 Kyoto setting  
23 Plumbing conduits  
27 Full range  
28 Battery unit  
29 Yard plus a bit  
31 Snug  
32 Express stop  
34 Cart puller  
37 Taxi

18 Disconcerted  
19 Turning point  
20 Traffic snarl  
21 Had lunch  
22 Cook's need  
24 Small dog, for short  
25 Middle-earth resident  
26 Pig's digs  
30 School break  
31 Hooded snakes  
33 Spot to jot  
34 Peak  
35 Glided  
36 Musical number  
38 Privy to  
39 Gumbo vegetable  
40 Manipulative one  
42 Take to court  
43 Foofaraw



### SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

G	A	B	E	P	A	I	R		
H	O	T	E	L	A	R	M	O	R
A	S	H	E	S	D	E	F	O	E
R	O	O	F	E	R		I	K	E
E	L	M	S		O	P	E	N	D
M	O	E		L		U		V	E
R	E	A	C	T	S				
T	O	U	P	E					
R	O	D							
A	T	O	M	S					
P	E	R	I	L					
R	A	C	Y						

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