

Rising crime, institutional failure, and the bystander effect



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Social psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the "bystander effect." In a moment of crisis, a victim is likely to get less support in the presence of a group of individuals or witnesses. The bystanders simply assume that someone else in the crowd will intervene. This diffusion of responsibility reinforces mutual denial, allowing the perpetrator to thrive.

I was trying to make sense of the endless pixelated images on social media where young men are seen carrying machetes in the open, snatching mobiles or personal goods from cars or rickshaws. They prowl like hyenas in the city jungle. Yet, there is no visible intervention from the bystanders, and little follow-up by police. Our urban experiences have taught us that interventions may prove to be costly and are unlikely to change anything. This reflects in our defence mechanism: while I can risk my life to apprehend one of the perpetrators, they will likely return to the streets due to legal loopholes. Therefore, it's safer to share my dashcam footage, video recorded on mobile phones, or CCTV clips than to act.

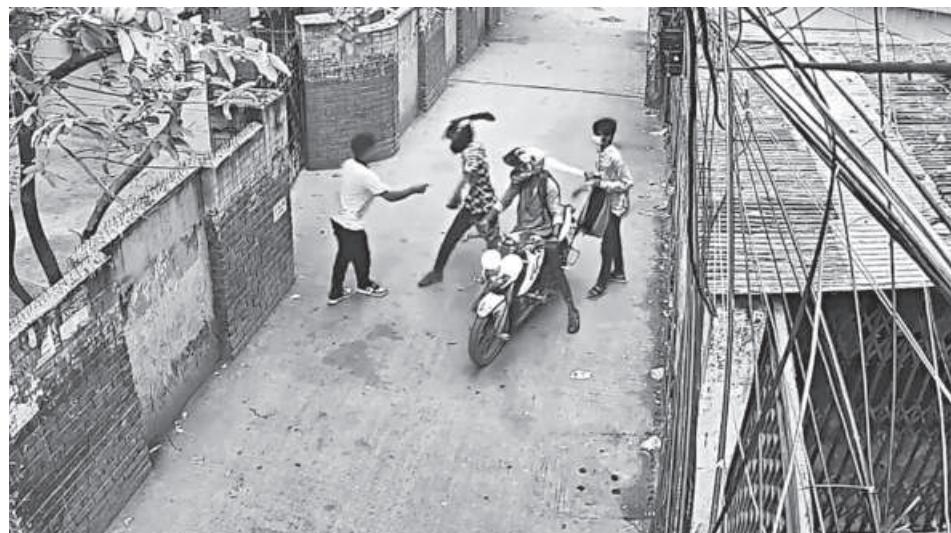
The collective numbness contradicts the spirit with which the masses stormed the streets in July last year. Now, we pray: dear God, let me not be the next victim, the one to bleed or die in public or lose my gadgets that store my privacy. Our silent prayers take the form of a hapless sigh or an emotional social media post or comment. We scroll, hoping our digital virality will conjure some police action.

Our moral muscle has atrophied. We are back to a Darwinian maxim: survival of

the fittest. The foundation of civility, the social contract of solidarity, is in danger of disappearing. With survival as the dominant civic impulse, democracy and its paraphernalia are at risk. Law and Order is a press conference that premiered at 3 am at the home minister's theatre. The number of crimes is on the rise. Even official figures by the police depict a dismal scenario. The dull stats and numbers get some human faces when video footage becomes available.

Our urban experiences have taught us that interventions may prove to be costly and are unlikely to change anything. This reflects in our defence mechanism: while I can risk my life to apprehend one of the perpetrators, they will likely return to the streets due to legal loopholes. Therefore, it's safer to share my dashcam footage, video recorded on mobile phones, or CCTV clips than to act.

Nothing in the country moves without public outrage. Law enforcement agencies don't react unless a protest is significant enough to capture the government's attention. The actors who have entered the political stage after the fall of the Awami League regime are



Failure to check rising crime is eroding public trust and emboldening criminals.

reading from the old script. The government occasionally apprehends a few low-level criminals, neglecting the underlying causes of chaos. Even the much-hyped Operation Devil Hunt brought little relief to public fear.

Some blame the rise in crimes on the 700 prisoners out of the 2,200 who escaped on and after August 5. Officials also accuse the fallen regime of conspiring to harm the reputation of the interim government. But when organised crimes occur in broad daylight, we need to question the impunity with which these criminals operate. Claiming that organised crime networks are taking advantage of temporary fragility in governance is an argument without substance. The government has had enough time to address the political vacuum that reportedly weakened institutional checks. It is the job of the authority to uplift the morale of its forces and give them a clear directive on deliverables.

We have already seen how some high-density urban corridors in Mohammadpur,

Mirpur, Jatrabari, Farmgate, Gulshan, and Khilgaon have become crime hotspots. Attacks frequently target the blind spots under the Hanif Flyover, metro stations, and the elevated expressway. The pattern of attack in locations that act as choke points in the city's mobility grid signals the operational control of the criminals. They are deliberately targeting places with lower police visibility, crowd fluidity, or symbolic value.

Most of these muggers and attackers are in their teens and early 20s. Many of them were probably protected earlier by some Awami League bosses. In the absence of patrons, these muggers and attackers have now opportunistically switched their allegiance. Their motivations are more economic than ideological.

The use of narcotic substances is another issue. The porous border allows drugs to become easily accessible. With law enforcement agencies focused on mitigating bigger political problems, drug culture among the youth gangs is on the rise. Reports

suggest that these gangs are even using police as their agents. Several reported incidents have implicated law enforcement agencies or former uniformed men in robberies, muggings, and kidnappings. Corrupt police officials have become a part of the problem.

Even when victims go to report muggings or thefts, police seem more worried about the spike in their reported statistics. Social media posts become substitutes for formal complaints. It is a shame that the police only act when a footage goes viral or when the media speaks out. Those running the country should realise that their inaction undermines the state's moral legitimacy.

Is it, then, appropriate to hold the general public accountable for their bystander effect? Our expectation of someone else acting in the face of an ongoing crime symbolises both our delusion about the legal system and our own defence mechanism. Often, the criminals nabbed by police get bail and return to the streets. Such judicial leniency or loopholes can frustrate and discourage the police, who often risk their lives to nab criminals. Without fast-track trials or stronger prosecutorial arms, deterrence is practically null. And for juvenile offenders, correction centres often serve as incubators for future crimes rather than being places where they are reformed.

Let us also not lose sight of the sociological drivers. The economy is still in a state of disrepair. Unemployment is at a record high. Soaring commodity prices push the youth to survival crime. The disillusionment following the uprising has left many of them feeling rudderless. They observe how one group of their peers with political connections receives preferential treatment over the other. With the disappearance of the former regime, old patronage networks are dissolved. Many of the foot soldiers are now on their own. In summary, we have entered a period where survival takes precedence over civics. We want to be bystanders with a prayer on our lips: dear God, let not the next victim be me!

Don't let Israel forcefully deport Palestinians

Yousef Sy Ramadan
is the ambassador of Palestine to Bangladesh.

YOUSEF SY RAMADAN



Palestinians, displaced by the Israeli military offensive, shelter in a UNRWA school in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, on May 28, 2025.

PHOTO: REUTERS

for you—including going to other places in the world for those who wish. The alternative is complete destruction and devastation."

Two bordering nations, Egypt and

Jordan, supporting Palestinian statehood, have rejected the proposition of "taking in" Palestinian refugees in order to support the establishment of Palestinian statehood. Following that, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), the wing in Israel's defence ministry that is responsible for overseeing "civilian matters in Gaza," is now executing the heinous scheme to push out Palestinian

Since the development of this 'voluntary exit plan,' the Palestinian citizens in Gaza—young, old, injured, and starving—have received messages from Israeli numbers, including law firms based in Tel Aviv, offering them paperwork to 'safely' travel out of Gaza. News reports have revealed that Israeli agencies are persuading Gazans to give them 'extensive assistance,' to travel to Ramon Airport in Israel from where they are. In reality, they are being deported.

It has come to our knowledge that some entities—including in parts of the world that have demonstrated solidarity to Palestinians—are knowingly or unknowingly helping Israel expel Palestinians from Gaza under initiatives that appear humane on the surface. We must not fall into this trap after seeing with our own eyes what Israel has done to the Palestinians in Gaza over more than 600 days.

Since the development of this "voluntary exit plan," the Palestinian citizens in Gaza—young, old, injured, and starving—have received messages from Israeli numbers, including law firms based in Tel Aviv, offering them paperwork to "safely" travel out of Gaza. News reports have revealed that Israeli agencies are persuading Gazans to give them "extensive assistance," to travel to Ramon Airport in Israel from where they are. In reality, they are being deported. Israel's Interior Minister Moshe Arbel said on April 7 that Palestinians had been deported to various destinations in at least 16 flights by then. The term "deportation" implies they will not be allowed to return, further cementing that the goal of this policy is to simply empty the Gaza Strip of Palestinians.

Israel's rationale for "voluntary exit" under the premise of "humanitarian assistance" also collapses under international law. As upheld by international tribunals, particularly the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, "It is impermissible to use forced displacement as a response to a disaster that one has created."

It has come to our knowledge that some entities—including in parts of the world that have demonstrated solidarity to Palestinians—are knowingly or unknowingly helping Israel expel Palestinians from Gaza under initiatives that appear humane on the surface. We must not fall into this trap after seeing with our own eyes what Israel has done to the Palestinians in Gaza over more than 600 days.

We must understand that "helping" Palestinians by hosting them as refugees forced out through the border of Israel undermines the Palestinian cause. I appeal to the people of conscience in Bangladesh as well as the decision-makers to not allow such heinous acts to take place under the pretext of protecting Palestinian lives in the Gaza Strip. Bangladesh should not be an alternative refuge for pushed-out, exploited citizens in Gaza under any circumstances. Israel's deceitful plan has also been criticised by UN officials who emphasise the Palestinians' right to live in their own land, and warn that forced migration is directly fostering Israel's vision to annihilate Gaza. It is imperative that the world realises that, especially the people of Bangladesh, who have set standards of humanity by unwaveringly standing beside Palestine throughout its history and shown historic solidarity for the Palestinians during Israel's genocide in Gaza.

ACROSS
1 Sharif of "Dr. Zhivago"
5 San Antonio landmark
10 Lose color
11 New Orleans school
13 Neeson of "Taken"
14 Writer Alice
15 Poet Maya
17 Greek vowel
18 Hoe users
19 Bro's sibling
20 Pen fill
21 Silent performer
22 Church parts
25 Mentioned
26 Swedish singer Jenny
27 Knee protector
28 Yale rooter
29 Bean-filled food
33 Coat rack part
34 Writer Ralph
35 Poet Langston
37 Stadium rooters
38 Do some film editing
39 Destiny

40 Meyers and Rogen
41 Glasgow native
DOWN
1 Court — (legal venue)
2 Bangor's state
3 Wise saying
4 Corrected
5 Busy
6 Island feasts
7 Maximum amount
8 Succeeds
9 Former
12 Made blank
16 Eye part
21 Torso parts
22 First Hebrew letters
23 Major collisions
24 Fish for eels
25 Poet Sandburg
27 Throbs
29 Hardwood tree
30 Writer Asimov
31 Scout's rider
32 Start
36 Wallop



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR
OPINION PIECES TO
dsopinion@gmail.com.