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Implications of recent incidents

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A number of recent incidents have raised important questions on national security. National security implies providing citizens an environment where they are free from fear of aggression, violence and subversion from enemies -- within and without. While the defence forces are primarily responsible for providing security from external aggression, internal security, safety of life and property, is provided by the police and other law enforcement organisations. While these agencies provide physical security, national security encompasses broader issues such as food, water and energy security, health and disease control, climate change and adaptation strategy etc.

The on-going investigation of seven murders in Narayanganj involving a few members of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) has raised a number of issues. Rab was raised as an elite force in March 2004 to curb Islamist terrorist forces then active across the country. It was manned by selected members of the police and the three services: Army, Navy and Air Force. As Rab expanded, it also inducted members from the Border Guards Bangladesh and Ansars, a village-based volunteer force. All members of the force are on deputation, serving for a limited period.

Rab dealt swift and decisive blow to the militants. It had been successful in checking drugs and arms smuggling, breaking up criminal gangs, and militant leftist extremists. The force won support and respect from the law-abiding citizens. However, Rab was increasingly used in activities that were ordinarily police jobs. From child-lifting to gold smuggling, from ransom seeking to drug peddling, Rab was used in mundane operations that demoralised the regular police force. More ominously, Rab increasingly resorted to killing suspected criminals in what they euphemistically called 'crossfire.'

The people, having lost faith in the police, saw extrajudicial killing as a short-cut to peace and security. However, it soon became apparent that in many cases the victims were innocent, caught up on the wrong side of the power game. Extra-judicial killings lowered the image of the country abroad and drew serious criticism from human rights organisations.

The investigation into the Narayanganj incident has so far revealed that some Rab officials turned themselves into hired killers. The façade of high ethical standard, so meticulously weaved, peeled off in one stroke. The image of Rab has been so badly tarnished that there are calls ranging from its total disbandment to major reform. In my view, the force should be reorganised as a small strike force located at administrative division level. It should be composed of full-time police personnel, not a cocktail of deputed personnel from half a dozen organisations. Officers and personnel who are now in Rab should be given an option -- either to remain in Rab or return to their respective services. A small, highly mobile, anti-terrorist force, much in line with the Indian "Black Cat," is what I contemplate.

The second incident involved Myanmar. On May 28, a small party of Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB), while on a routine patrol, was suddenly attacked by the Myanmar border police from across the border, resulting in the death of one of our border guards. The Myanmar border guards are reported to have crossed the border and taken away the body of the fallen soldier. Bangladesh lodged a strong protest with the Myanmar authority and demanded an explanation. After initial denial, Myanmar authority called it a case of mistaken identity. They said that Myanmar guards thought the BGB group to be from Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), an insurgent group active along Myanmar-Bangladesh border. The body was returned on April 31. Commanders from both sides met on May 3, when the Myanmar authority regretted the episode. The incident brought into focus the RSO's activities along the border and serious communication gap between border guards of the two countries. Our media reported that Rohingya youth, having been pushed out of their homes, have now found a new sense of direction in the RSO guerilla camps. Due to repeated drives by Bangladesh security forces, the RSO members melted within the local populace, yet retain the ability to occasionally hit the Myanmar forces. Myanmar believes that Bangladesh provides shelter and support to the RSO and thus any movement along the border is viewed with suspicion.

At a time when Bangladesh is engaged with Myanmar on connectivity, trade and commerce and energy supplies, the border incidents, although unwarranted, should not derail the ongoing engagement. While we continue to urge the Myanmar government to take back the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh, we need to ensure that the Rohingyas do not use our territory as a springboard for offensive against Myanmar.

The third incident involved discovery of a huge arms cache in Shatchori Reserve Forest in Habigonj by Rab on June 3. The site is only 3 km from the Indian state of Tripura and was probably used by now weakened All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) in the 1990s. From what was revealed to the media, it was apparent that the concrete bunkers that housed the weapons and explosive could not have been built without the knowledge of the Bangladesh authority, and if it was, then it would be a serious shortfall in our border management. The weapons recovered were in a poor state of preservation; it was clear that the site had been abandoned for at least a decade. However, this and other sites were probably used at some stage to store and transfer sophisticated arms and explosives to different insurgents group in Northeastern India.

We may recall that on June 27, 2003, a truck load of ammunition and explosives were recovered, almost accidentally, in Bogra. The arrested truck driver revealed that he started his journey from Chunarughat, exactly where the present arms cache was discovered. The matter soon died down and we still do not know about the disposal of the case. The 10-truck arms haul in Chittagong on April 1, 2004, involved elements of Bangladeshi intelligence agencies acting on behalf of the NE insurgents in India. One common aim of all the NE insurgents is to drive out the Bengali community from greater Assam; their special targets are the Bengali Muslims living there. It was an irony that for quite some time, we had been helping insurgent groups in Assam (ULFA and BNLF) and Tripura (ATTF), who had been targeting Bengali Muslims there. Our actions were ethically wrong and strategically unsound.

What do we need to do now? We need to address the security issues in a holistic manner.

In the short term, Rab needs to be made a professional, anti-terrorist force with strict rules of engagement. In the area of external security, we need to make our borders more secure by enhancing the operational capability of the border forces, providing them with better communication network within and with the forces across the border. Most importantly, we have to deny any attempt by insurgents to use our territory as a sanctuary or for arms transshipment. The shortfalls brought out in the three incidents need serious attention from the policy planners.

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