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**Editorial**

Ground Realities

## **Police, rule of law and going beyond clichés**

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NUR Mohammad could not have been more frank. As inspector general of the nation's police, he more than anyone else should be knowing of the malaise his force has long been afflicted with. In Kishoreganj last week, he informed us, perhaps without batting an eyelid and with absolute awareness of the ramifications of his remarks, that most criminals in the country commit offences that are well within the knowledge of the police. Now, that, for many of us, may not be a revelation.

Anyone who has had the bad experience of being subjected to criminality, or hearing of it, knows only too well how many times the kind of help expected of the police in handling the sinister elements in our society simply did not happen to be there. That is the truth, an unalloyed one. But when it is the inspector general of the police himself enlightening us on his perception of the force he commands, there is something of stunned silence in which we receive the information. Amazement then gives way to some very hard thinking.

And then comes the question, obviously from all of us: If that is the way the man at the top of the police administration perceives the working of his organisation, what measures does he plan to undertake in order to reform the system? No, we will not advance the opinion that Nur Mohammad should now transform himself into a reformer and go into a crusade against the many bad apples that have systematically tarnished the image of the police force. And we will not make that suggestion because the job is one that no single individual can handle. It is a malaise that calls for a thorough, across the board reform of the police system, which reform is again associated with the overall need for qualitative change in every area of activity that affects the lives of Bangladesh's citizens.

What the police have been doing, or not been doing at all, is but a mirror image of the realities we in this country have been compelled to observe in the past many years. You can come up with the thought that a goodly part of the trouble with the way the police have functioned has had to do with the repeated bouts of politicisation they have gone through at various stages of the nation's history. We will not dispute your assessment, for we have before us such instances as the police doing next to nothing in the days when fanatics of the Bangla Bhai brand went around widening their network of terror in the northern part of the country. The political classes lording it over the country at the time cheerfully denied that there was at anyone called Bangla Bhai. And the police went along with that, until the state of emergency came in and everyone began falling head over heels in unearthing terrorism and moving on to uproot it lock, stock and barrel. Whether the uprooting process has worked is an entirely different matter altogether.

The question today, in light of the IGP's remarks, is whether or not the department on his watch has undertaken any

meaningful action against the policemen who looked the other way when we asked them to apprehend the terrorists, who indeed joined hands with Bangla Bhai and the likes of him in carrying out the odious job of disposing of people conveniently labelled as extremists. Nur Mohammad, of course, confined his views to the ways in which the police have often known about criminality and yet did little to act against it.

But please allow us to broaden the subject here, for the simple reason that there is a whole big area where the police come in. And everywhere the police step in, there is fear which comes in their wake. That is a point the inspector general has readily acknowledged. Let that be the premise on which any discussion of the police, of its performance in Bangladesh, is based. Fear is supposed to be a deterrent to criminality. But have you noticed that among the criminal classes today there is a distinctive absence of fear, that they operate with impunity and that even the police know of the degree of impunity on which they work?

That, however, is not to suggest that fear is not part of life any more. It is there in the way citizens still relate to the police. When you and I still feel, despite all those calls for friendship between the police and other citizens, that asking the police for help in tracking down the criminals who we think should be facing justice will only result in bigger worries for us, that is when fear stalks us. When policemen in the thanas, or police stations, decline or plainly refuse to accept complaints from citizens, and only reluctantly agree to people's lodging general diaries, you are made aware of the long road that must still be travelled before we have a police force we can truly look upon as our route out of our zones of fear.

To be sure, the police force has been a constant victim of political buffoonery. Ministers whose respect for the rule of law has been conspicuous by its absence, whose inability to provide strong leadership to the force, and whose sheer ineptitude have been the norm in the last two decades, maybe more, have done grievous damage to the police administration. That said, there are still the many questions about the ferocity with which some policemen have acted on duty and of their own volition. Think back on the officer who knocked a photojournalist to the ground in Chittagong a couple of years ago. Think back too on the carefree use of the baton a policeman made on the lawmaker Asaduzzaman Noor at an Awami League-led political rally at the height of the anti-government agitation in the later part of 2006. Think back on the humiliating spectacle of a young man hung from the ceiling of a police station, a blot on our conscience.

The problem, ladies and gentlemen, is not merely in acknowledging the truth of criminals working with the knowledge of the police. It is something more, something deeper. And it stems from the slow erosion in police efficiency and the gradual infiltration of political influence into the police administration over the decades. There is talk of police reforms. By all means, have those reforms gone through, have them put in place. But let a key aspect of the reforms process relate to the psychological training of men and women willing to be part of the police force.

It is wonderful speaking of the need for a change in mindsets. Falling back on clichés may be fine for sometime. But clichés, like all those talk shops we are taken through on a near daily basis, eventually lose all meaning because of the hollowness they come couched in. The real, paramount, need today is for a batch of educated, sophisticated men and women, those attuned to the ways of the world, to make it into the police service, indeed into any area of public activity. Let there arise circumstances where the policemen in your neighbourhood and mine will give us little or no reason to gripe about their performance.

Briefly, let us have policemen around us able to relate to their counterparts across the globe. If one Bengali policeman can make it to Interpol, why shouldn't others?