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Curbing political control must for police reform

The Daily Star roundtable told

Staff Correspondent

Speakers at a roundtable yesterday said curtailing political government's control over the police, ensuring facilities to enable the force work lawfully and making it a pro-people organisation should be the main thrusts of the police reforms.

They suggested that the police reforms should include training of policemen for changing traditional mindset with special emphasis on issues like human rights, their salary hike, lessening workload, increasing allocation for maintenance of police stations and gender sensitive policing.

Several speakers came heavily on the political governments for bringing frequent changes in the top post of the police, which they said broke the chain of command in the force and contributed to loss of loyalty of subordinate police officers to the bosses.

The Daily Star organised the roundtable titled 'Police Reforms: Some Immediate and Long Term Goals' at its office.

The speakers stressed the need for bringing all the communities, especially vulnerable ones, for their views before finalising the drafted Police Reform Programme (PRP) to make it successful, sustainable and people-friendly. A committee has prepared the draft for police reforms with the assistance of UNDP, DFID and European Union.

Policing the police and making them prepared to deal with the defects they are facing is required along with listening to their grievances, they said.

They emphasised police's immunity from political control through protecting their interest and judicial oversee so that they can serve people freely and fairly.

"The success of any reform depends on political will. The primary goal of the reform is its insulation from illegitimate interference from wherever it comes," former adviser to a caretaker government and also a former inspector general of police (IGP), ASM Shahjahan, said at the roundtable.

"Police should be pro-active, not be reactive as has been known and experienced in our country over the years. In a democratic country performance of the police should be measured by the satisfaction of



A roundtable on Police Reform: Some Immediate and Long-term Goals in progress at The Daily Star office in the capital yesterday. PHOTO: STAR

the community and not only by some statistical data," he said.

"There is hardly any police station which can be run with the insufficient money given by the government. Their day-to-day need should be met properly, so they do not have to look out for other means of income," he said.

The PRP should have a provision that would make the force serve the people, instead of making it a quasi-force of the government, said the former IGP, who is also UNDP's senior adviser on police reform.

In his key-note speech, ex-IGP Nurul Huda said the Police Act of 1861 should be replaced by a new police act which would not only change the system of superintendence and control over the police but also widen their role to make the body function as an agency to promote the rule of law and render impartial service to the community.

"Another important thrust of reform should be to ensure that the investigative tasks of police are kept beyond any kind of intervention by the executive or non-executive," Huda said.

He also suggested relieving the police from general administration tasks like collection of intelligence of political parties for the government.

"We are living in a time of great irony in Bangladesh when democracy is restricted for the betterment of democracy," he said.

Huda stressed the need for bringing substantial changes in the strategies of policing and a smaller but skilled police force.

He suggested fixing the tenure of the police chief and forming of a commission, through appropriate statute, which would approve any premature expiry of the tenure.

"The onus of ensuring malpractice-free management of the force, including recruitment, promotions, postings and transfers, squarely rests with the police hierarchy," Huda said.

He said efficient human resource management, efficient use of financial resources and adoption of modern technologies are other areas for which the police leadership need to take initiatives.

Officers of impeccable integrity, good repute and proven competence have to be deputed to probe public complaints against the police, he said.

He said ensuring gender-sensitive policing should be a critical element of the ongoing police reform efforts. Programmes and strategies aimed at changing police's attitude towards women should involve proactive induction of substantially large proportions of women into the police force. A gender-sensitive training strategy should be integral to the police reform agenda.

He said the problem of corruption stems from several interrelated factors which include low pay of policemen, wide discretionary powers available to them, outdated performance appraisal systems, poor working conditions, ineffective internal accountability (by seniors) and

abysmally weak external accountability mechanisms.

Expressing grave concern over the politicisation of recruitment in the police department, former IGP M Azizul Haque said political governments' unfettered changes and transfers in the top posts of the force led to the collapse of the chain of command. He cited the incident of changing the IGP six times in five years of the immediate past BNP-led government.

If the police are guided by the law, political influence will reduce to a great extent, former IGP Ismail Hossain said. He suggested privatising police recruitment.

Editor of The Daily Star Mahfuz Anam said the general impression of the people is that police beat up people taking part in processions, do not file any case without instructions from the political party in power and they take bribes from people.

He said the police have been used as a mechanism for oppression whereas a civil society cannot exist without a people-friendly, just and honest police force.

"The draft has to be something that will make people feel comfortable. The reform must have some system through which different interest groups can get benefits," said Khushi Kabir, head of Nijera Kori, an organisation working for protection of the livelihoods of the rural poor.

Prof Asif Nazrul of the Faculty of Law of Dhaka University said people must be sympathetic to the police. They are working for the society round the clock without any overtime payment, he added.

"Police have to disobey illegal or undue orders of ministers. If there is no scope, it needs to be created through reforms," he said.

UNDP Programme Manager Hubert Staberhofer said the drafted PRP is now being translated into Bengali, which will be distributed in the country for widespread discussions. He said the reform proposal has the standard of the countries in Europe.

Executive Director of Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association advocate Salma Ali, Director of Ain-o-Salish Kendra Dr Faustina Pereira, barrister Tanjibul Alam also took part in the roundtable moderated by Brig Gen (retd) Shahedul Anam Khan, editor, defence and strategic affairs of The Daily Star.