

Border Killing and Cattle Trade

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It is reported by Bangladesh Legal Aid & Human Rights Organisation Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) that during 2012, Border Security Forces (BSF) of India killed 48 civilian-Bangladeshis along the Bangladesh-India border.

In December 2010, New York based Human Rights Watch in a report described the Indian border guards as "Trigger Happy" force and documented hundreds of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture, and ill-treatment by the BSF.

During the visit of India's Home Minister to Dhaka on January 28-29th January, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh raised with him the issue of killing of Bangladeshis along the border and the Home Minister reaffirmed to bring down the killing to zero level. The assurance of the Minister hopefully reaches the BSF..

Bilateral relations do not depend only on government-to-government relations and are the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private manage relations between Bangladesh and India in which people of both countries are involved.

The people of Bangladesh are surprised at the insensitivity of the Indian government to the killings of Bangladesh nationals and as a result, the perception of people tends to be negative toward India and New Delhi government may realise the Bangladesh government is put into great difficulty in its efforts in strengthening partnership with India.

Many researchers from Bangladesh and India have found that there is a simple way to end the killings at the border because such killings are mostly related to illegal cattle trade from India to Bangladesh.

During Track II dialogue between India and Bangladesh, Bangladesh side had repeatedly suggested to the Indian side to legalise the export of cows from West Bengal, a state in which cows are allowed to be slaughtered,. to end the border killings.

In recent times, the former head of the BSF, U.K. Bansal reportedly said:" The menace of smuggling might be controlled if the trade across the border is made legal. The legalization of export of cows could also help curb tension on the volatile border".

It is reported that Bangladesh Commerce Minister supports the export of cattle from India to Bangladesh and said: "If India begins exporting cows to Bangladesh such untoward incidents will stop."

The fact which breeds and flourishes the illegal trade of cattle is the high demand of beef in Bangladesh, the supply for which is not met by the local market.

It is reported that about three million cattle (cows) per year are needed in Bangladesh where a large majority of Muslim population enjoy eating beef (Muslims constitute 88% of 160 million in the country.) But the local market reportedly can supply only about one million cattle, leaving a gap of two million cattle.

The shortfall of two million cattle per year is met by illegal trade primarily at the West-Bengal and Bangladesh border through about 17 reportedly cattle routes.

Elaborating on the modus operandi of the network involved in the trade, one BSF official reportedly informed that a group of people from the Bangladesh side first sends out a boy close to the border. When the boy waves his hand giving green signal, within seconds, a group of people from each side rush towards the fence. From the Indian side the group comes with about a dozen heads of cattle. One by one, the animals are hung to the improvised bamboo crane and sent across to the Bangladesh side within a few minutes

The cattle smuggled are brought from far flung Indian states like Haryana, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. By the time, it reaches the bordering area, the cost of the cattle touches Rs 5,000. It increases to Rs 15,000 when it crosses the Indian border. Finally it fetches Rs. 40,000 in Bangladeshi markets.

It is reported by cattle smugglers that police, customs and border security guards and even local politicians are routinely involved because the big bucks they earn in the illegal trade, which some researchers found worth of nearly about \$1 billion every year. Bangladesh nationals are killed when they reportedly fail to “grease the palms” of the border officials including security guards.

.The vast illegal trade thrives since cows are considered holy in the Hindu-majority country- India and New Delhi is unable to legalise in exporting them.

When asked for opposition party's reaction on the issue, a Bhartiya Janata Party spokesperson said, “It is a serious issue because scores of cattle are being smuggled every year. It is a tremendous loss of bovine resource and revenue. And it should not be legalised, as it goes against the ethos of the country.”

Radhakanta Saha, a leader of World Hindu Organisation and heads a volunteer group that aims to prevent cow smuggling reportedly said that : “ The cow is our mother. We shall begin a country-wide agitation if India decides to export cows to a country where they are likely to be slaughtered for meat.”

Given the above facts, cow-export is a highly emotive and sensitive matter for New Delhi. While India will never be able to allow in exporting cows to Bangladesh, the sheer of profit will drive illegal cattle trade.

Since Bangladeshi-civilians are involved in the illegal trade in active cooperation with nationals of India across the border, BSF should use non-lethal weapons to prevent the

illegal cattle trade without the loss of lives of Bangladeshis as agreed at the highest political level (paragraph 18 of the Joint Communique of January 13 2010)

The fact that a country which reveres the cow is among the world's largest illegal exporters of cows might seem contradictory. But it is happening under the alleged nose of Indian border officials.

The reiteration of India's Home Minister to bring border killing to zero may hopefully act as catalyst in preventing the loss of lives of Bangladesh- civilians at the border. Let the Indo-Bangladesh relations move on a mature partnership on economic, social and political level.