

Report

Proliferation of Small Arms in Bangladesh

A day-long on “Small Arms and South Asia: Challenges for Bangladesh” was organized by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) and South Asia Partnership (SAP) Bangladesh, and sponsored by the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade on February 12, 2001. The Canadian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, David Preston, was the chief guest.

Responding to the Seminar leading Bangladesh daily The Daily Star News wrote editorially on February 14: The heavy influx of small and light weapons into the country virtually leaves no place for anyone to hide... Grave dangers are posed to our civic and political lives by the existing caches of arms and ammunition within the country, not to speak of those in the pipeline, given the continual trafficking of illegal weapons through the porous borders of Bangladesh with India and Myanmar... If previously weapons had found their way into the country surreptitiously there are reasons to believe that it is now an open secret, the level of demand inside the country practically determining the rate of supply. With all kinds of differences at the personal, business-related and political levels sought to be settled at the gun-point weapons are in heavy demand all round. The fact that as many as 80 terrorist syndicates are operating in the country, including 28 in Dhaka city alone explains why there is such a huge appetite for acquisition of weapons.

The Speakers at the Seminar were of the view that Bangladesh was gradually becoming increasingly weaponised and politically criminalized, with indiscriminate inflow and use of small arms and they called for immediate steps to check influx of small and light arms into the country and stricter enforcement measures to stop indiscriminate use of arms by political and criminal gangs.

Several speakers pointed out that the country is fast becoming a conduit for small arms, particularly due to insurgency in India’s northeastern states. Demand for small and light weapons by individuals and groups, eager to settle political, business and personal scores, is on an alarming rise, they added. Availability of AK47s, German revolvers, Five Star, M16 nine-shooter, shotgun, etc in the black market at very high prices speak for that, they maintained.

Two papers presented at the dialogue specifically dealt with arms proliferation in Bangladesh and in the South Asian region. Brigadier General (ret'd) Shahedul Anam Khan, the former DG of BISS, presented a paper on “Challenges of Small Arms: the Bangladesh Perspective” and Ms. Neila Hussian, a research fellow of the institute, on “Small Arms: Challenges for South Asia.” Anam expressed fear that the current socio economic condition and the possible spillover effect from across the border may find resonance in the country’s current political condition, leading to dreadful consequences. “Bangladesh, sandwiched between the ‘Golden Crescent’ and the ‘Golden Triangle’, one the largest producer of drugs and the other the largest depository of small arms and light weapons, finds itself at the receiving end of both these phenomenon, without being the primary supplier or user of either. Small arms are being increasingly used as the final

arbiter of unresolved issues between individuals, groups and political parties in Bangladesh today”, he said.

According to one estimate about one hundred small arms are brought in from border areas every day, he said, while another says between six and seven hundred pieces of illegal weapons are smuggled in from India and Myanmar daily. There are 70 to 80 weapons held by various armed groups, which rent out these weapons to those who want it for anything from Tk 35 upwards per hour, depending on the type of weapon, he said.

He said student politics in the country is being controlled by a handful of armed miscreants. These students have a mutual understanding of accommodation with the mainstream politics of the country. Mentioning another report, the retired Brigadier General said that a good number of weapons that flow into the northeastern part of India come in from Kashmir, not through terrorists and sub-national groups but through members of law enforcing agencies. “These are confiscated weapons that the law enforcing agencies bring out with them on being posted out and sell those in the black market. No doubt some of these find their way into Bangladesh eventually.”

“Two decades of insurgency in the CHT has had its share in the influx in the influx of Small arms and Light Weapons into Bangladesh. While some of these weapons were handed over to the government after the Peace Accord of 1997, a large number of these have been kept aside in secret caches, which have been looted from time to time since then”, he said. Mujibul Huq, former cabinet secretary and moderator of the session said, “Small arms are being used for personal aggrandizement in politics and business.”

Neila Hussain in her paper said trade in small arms which has already proliferated in many neighbouring countries have now found a growing market in Bangladesh and Nepal. “Although the Sahntibahini was one of the major source of illegal weapons, the recent flow of small arms proliferation has its own dynamics that are strongly influenced by socio-economic compulsions. This is a significant shift from 1971. The focus has shifted to power and money. Today, more than ever, it is difficult to distinguish between a political and a criminal motive” she said and opined that a common source of arms proliferation has its own dynamics that are strongly influenced by socio-economic compulsions. This is a significant shift from 1971. The focus has shifted to power and money. Today, more than ever, it is difficult to distinguish between a political and a criminal motive” she said and opined that a common source of arms proliferation in South Asia has been through pilferage from government warehouses.

She went on to add: “Unlike its neighbours, Bangladesh is experiencing one of the worst impacts of illegal use of small arms that is not confined to any ethnic unrest. Armed violence in the society has sharply raised the demand for illegal arms. Nature of violence in Bangladesh also reveals that level of tolerance in the society is so low that any kind of disagreement may end up in using small arms. The availability of AK-47s, German-made revolvers, Five Star, M16 nine-shooter, shotgun, etc in the black market at very high prices bear it out. The criminalisation of South Asian societies, including Bangladesh is perhaps one of the worst effects of arms proliferation.”

What is alarming is that figures reveal that in 1995-96 there were 252 deaths for political reasons from small arms while 941 deaths occurred for apparently non-political reasons. The figures since then have increased and on an average there are 21 political killings and 57 non-political killings in a month, she said. She expressed her concern about the fact that women and youths are increasingly becoming carriers of small arms and explosives.

Major General Ibrahim, Executive Director of Centre for Strategic and Peace Studies who moderated the session, said it is not unnatural to have some flow of arms but what was important is to create an atmosphere of deterrence and security. He said only strengthening of laws and more effective enforcement by law enforcement agencies and institutional efforts could check use and abuse of small arms.

Canadian High Commissioner David Preston said it was his country's position to ensure greater human security by containing the proliferation of small arms. He hoped that efforts would be made through the upcoming UN Conference and by individual government including Bangladesh to ensure that efforts are made to reduce the human misery that results from the easy availability of small arms. Don Hubert, Security Consultant of the Canadian High Commission, said his country's human security agenda aimed at developing new concepts, adapting diplomatic practice and updating the institutions on which the international system is based, with a view to enhancing the security of all people. Major General Jamil D. Ahsan, Director General of BISS presided over the seminar and divided into four sessions.

The Bangladesh daily recommended the following steps to improve the situation in Bangladesh first, the ruling party must demonstrably discourage musclemen or terrorists who lay claim to their patronization, secondly, this should be reciprocated by the opposition political parties; thirdly, with the national elections approaching, it will be in the common interest of political parties to cooperate with the next caretaker government in a massive arms recovery drive the latter should carry out before the polls; and fourthly, a greater vigil needs to be mounted along the borders in concert with the authorities in our neighbourhood and appropriate international surveillance groups to combat arms smuggling. Simultaneously, the law enforcement agencies will have to be better trained and materially much more equipped to cope with the situation, albeit aided by realistic and effective gun laws. The bottom-line, however, is: either there must be bipartisan political will to de-criminalise politics or choose to perish.

[This report is based on the News reports on the seminar that appeared in The Daily Star News (Dhaka) on February 13-14, 2001]