

ILLEGAL FIRE ARMS IN BANGLADESH: KEY ACTORS

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Abstract

With the gradual rise of intra-state conflicts in the post-Cold War world, there has been a significant rise in trade, acquisition and use of illegal firearms by non-state armed groups. These illicit weapons have been the ultimate weapon of choice for criminals and thereby cause a large scale human tragedy each year. Of the countries where illegal small arms have become a big problem, Bangladesh is a significant case. Being the home of one of the biggest populations in the world, Bangladesh has been flooded with a whole range of illegal firearms in recent years. This article seeks to identify and analyze the key actors of illegal weapons in Bangladesh. Further, it also investigated how these users pose threats to security of society through the use of these illegal weapons. Accordingly, the article highlights three major users of illegal small arms in Bangladesh namely political cadres, Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) insurgents and extremists. The article concludes that large-scale use of illegal small arms by these groups cause significant human casualties each year which has created fear and insecurity throughout the society. Data used in this article was obtained using a qualitative approach and the findings have significant policy implications particularly in formulating and implementing counterterrorism mechanism in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Illegal arms, Bangladesh, key actors, politics, insurgents, extremists, insecurity.

Introduction

“The death toll from small arms dwarfs that of all other weapons systems – and in most years greatly exceeds the toll of atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In terms of carnage they cause, small arms, indeed, could well be described as ‘weapons of mass destruction’” (Annan, 2000: 52). Rightly put by Kofi Annan, since an average 500,000 people are killed with small arms every year – one person every minute (Oxfam, 2017: 6). This largescale human tragedy has been caused by the huge number of legal and illegal firearms around the world. The current stock of small arms is more than 875 million, and 75% of them are in the hands of civilians (Alpers & Marcus, 2013). Small arms in the hands of non-state actors are always dangerous. In South Asia alone, around 6.4 million small arms are believed to be in the possession of militants, insurgents, terrorist groups and other non-state actors (Kanwal & Chansoria, 2010: 1). Since the end of the cold war, with the gradual rise of intra-state conflicts, there has been a significant proliferation in trade, acquisition and use of illegal firearms which have been the primary weapons for terrorists, insurgents and militants. In addition, since terror attacks took place on September 11, 2001, arms producers and suppliers have relaxed their control in order to arm the new-found allies against terrorism. Moreover, with the blessings of globalization, not only is communication to the remote parts of the world made easy but also transnational terror and trafficking networks are on the rise. The flow of illegal small arms across

borders has significantly increased around the world too. In the process, there has been a significant rise of illegal small arms in the hands of non-state actors, making them as the ultimate 'weapon of terror'.

Of the countries where illegal small arms have become a big problem, Bangladesh is a significant case. Being the home of one of the biggest populations in the world, Bangladesh has been flooded with a whole range of illegal firearms in recent years. The current stock of illegal small arms in the country compared to the legal firearms is alarming. While the Bangladesh defense forces are reported to have 252700 firearms, the number of illegal small arms flowing throughout the country totals 400000 (Gun Policy, 2018). Although Bangladesh Police possesses 389516 firearms, the huge number of illicit weapons in the hands of non-state actors is responsible for increasing crime and criminal activities in recent years. Though it is widely believed that these armaments are meant to be transferred to the insurgents in Northeast India; the volume, pattern and quality of the illicit firearms and their frequent use in Bangladesh suggest that the country is not only used as a transit route for illegal small arms but also considered as the end destination too. The newly formed local illegal arms factories have added a new dimension to the existing problem. The unlawful weapons produced in these cottage-based factories are not of high quality like the ones produced in India but are good enough to serve the criminals' purposes. The users of these illegal weapons range from terrorists, CHT insurgents, political cadres, smugglers, gangsters, mafias, local goons and others.

In this backdrop, this article explores the major actors of illegal small arms in Bangladesh. It also shows how these actors have been creating fear and insecurity in the Bangladeshi society. Based on the available information, three key actors of illegal arms were identified in Bangladesh namely political cadres, CHT insurgents and extremists. These three groups have been considered based on their frequent armed and criminal activities (Saferworld, 2006; IWGIA, 2014; Moniruzzaman, 2009; Bashar, 2012; Khan, 2016). While existing studies provide useful insights into various sources, routes and impacts of the illegal small arms (SAS, 2001; Ahmed, 2005; Shewly, 2008; Khan, 2017), there is a dearth of research on the key actors of illicit small arms in the country. Essentially, a proper analysis on the key actors helps to explore links among different factors and provides useful information to curb the proliferation of armed activities in the country. Therefore, this article contributes to the existing literature to fill the research gap by analyzing the major users of illegal small arms in Bangladesh. Besides that the findings show that the frequent armed activities by these users have created a sense of fear and insecurity in the society. Data was collected using a qualitative research approach and information was also collected from various secondary sources including books, journal articles, and newspaper articles. Statistical information has been collected from organizational reports and online sources and used to prove the frequent armed activities of the users and how they created insecurity in the society.

In the era of globalization, the role of non-state actors has increased and often they represent a growing threat to both national and human security. Non-state armed groups refers to groups who retain the potential to deploy arms for political, economic and ideological objectives, which in practice are often translated into an open challenge to the authority of the state (UN, 2006: 1). They have their own economic, social and political agendas. These non-state actors frequently possess illegal weapons and use them when they feel necessary. To meet their own purposes, they often threaten the security of the state and individuals through the use of arms to conduct illegal and violent activities. Accordingly, the use of illegal arms has been increasing among the non-state actors by the enhancement of globalization all over the world. Hence, this article discusses three major non-state users of illegal arms in Bangladesh namely political cadres, insurgents and extremists among others who often threaten the life of individuals, the stability of society and also the existence of the government through their violent criminal activities.

Literature Review

A review of existing literature on illegal small arms in Bangladesh suggests that most literature emphasizes on sources, routes, impact of illegal weapons in Bangladesh and the legal steps of Bangladesh governments to curb the illegal arms trafficking activities. Accordingly, this section provides a thematic discussion of the existing literature on illegal arms in Bangladesh.

Kafi (2005), Islam, Hussain & Bhuiyan (2009), Khan (2013) and Islam (2017) identified both internal and external sources of illegal small arms in Bangladesh. The internal sources consist of six elements which help in the distribution of these illegal arms to the end users. Firstly, black market is big source of arms procurement. These black markets can be found in Mirpur, Pallabi and Gulshan in Dhaka city where one can easily purchase arms directly or from an agent (Interviewee 1, 2012; Interviewee 2, 2012). Secondly, arms are sometimes stolen from police stations and government stocks (The Daily Star, 2010). An estimated 40 weapons and 20,000 rounds of bullets were

lost from government warehouses from 2001 to 2004 (Kafi, 2005: 89). Thirdly, arms users easily manage to acquire arms on a rented basis from the local arms dealers. Some corrupt police officers rent out their weapons to the local terrorists in an ad hoc basis (Interviewee 3, 2012; Interviewee 4, 2012). Fourthly, there are cases that licensed guns are looted from their owners by criminal groups (The Daily Star, 2010; The Daily Star, 2011). Also, there are dishonest and criminal licensees who rent out their licensed guns to the terrorists and extortionists (Kafi, 2005: 92). Fifthly, domestic arms smugglers sell arms in the local market in exchange for cash or other essentials (Kafi, 2005: 89). It has also been alleged that some leftwing insurgent groups like Purbo Bangla Communist Party (PBCP) are engaged in procuring as well as disposing of illegal weapons.

In contrast, external sources can be divided into three categories: international arms traffickers; foreign governments; and cross border insurgents. International arms traffickers consist of the illegal arms smugglers from Europe, Libya, Pakistan, India, Burma, China, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Gulf states. Mainly, the Indian and Burmese traffickers use land borders to supply illegal arms in the country. The rest of the international smugglers use merchant ships for carrying arms into Bangladeshi waters and ports (Kafi, 2005). Secondly, foreign governments supply illicit small arms to Bangladesh. India used to provide arms to the CHT rebels, especially to the Shanti Bahini and United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) (Hazarika, 1989; Chowdhury, 2006: 43). Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Gulf states are reportedly providing arms to the religious terrorist groups and the Rohingya rebels in Bangladesh (Kafi, 2005: 88). Thirdly, cross border insurgents supply illegal arms directly to insurgents whom they sympathize with. It is known that the Taliban of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka, the Kashmiri Mujahideens, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur, All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) of Tripura of India, and Rohingya National Organization (RNO), Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and the Shun rebels of Burma were involved in cross-border arms transfer (Kafi, 2005; IWGIA, 2014).

However, the geographical location, porous border and poor border management have made Bangladesh an attractive route of arms trafficking. Traffickers use various routes which can be categorized into three routes - land routes, sea routes, and air routes. BIPSS (2010) suggests that the land routes comprise the bordering areas particularly the Chittagong, Khagrachari, Bandarban, Sandwip, Haluaghat and Char islands are widely used as arms trafficking routes. Sea routes broadly include the sea, ports and districts adjacent to the sea for illegal arms trafficking. Traffickers from Southeast Asian countries especially Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Cambodia use the Bay of Bengal, as the main route, to smuggle in illegal arms into the country. The famous traditional sea route in this regard is "Cambodia-Thailand-Andaman Sea-Cox's Bazar circuit" (Kumar, 2003). Smuggled arms from the sea routes primarily stay in the districts adjacent to the seas and then brought into every corner of the country. These sea-adjacent districts constitute the Cox's Bazar, Chittagong, Noakhali, Laxmipur, Chadpur, Bhola, Potuakhali, Borguna, Pirojpur, Bagerhat, Khulna and Satkhira (Kafi, 2005: 95). Air routes have also been used to bring illegal small arms and ammunitions into the country. Most of these arms are smuggled in from Dubai, Karachi and Bangkok airports with other contraband items. Corrupt custom officers collaborating with international smuggling rings help to bring in these illicit weapons into the country (Kafi, 2005; Interviewee 5, 2012).

Illegal small arms and explosives as well as their widespread use affect the peace and security of Bangladesh. These effects are on state security and human security. The weaponization of CHT insurgent groups leads to sustain fighting with the law enforcement agencies and this threatens directly the state security (Islam, 2008: 109). The militarization of terrorists with modern armaments and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) is on the rise. The arming of these terrorists creates violence and instability inside the country. The possession of arms and explosives fuels the rising extremists' groups and terrorists to carry out criminal activities together. The empowerment of these terrorists and extremists' groups with modern armaments has impinged on the security of the state (Islam & Islam, 2008: 109). Also, arms trafficking along the border can produce bilateral tensions between neighboring countries. Such has been the case of Indo-Bangladesh relations as well as Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar (Husain, 2006). On the other hand, the proliferation of illegal arms and explosives is posing a grave threat to the security of people's life, property and liberty. By the use of illegal small arms and explosives in political violence, the general citizens see unconditional murder, injury and destruction of private property which creates a sense of political insecurity among the people (Islam, 2008: 108). The availability of illegal arms coupled with domestic economic factors like poverty, unemployment and discrimination is compelling the youths into the world of terrorism and smuggling which is related to their socio-economic insecurity (Islam, Husain & Bhuiyan, 2009: 221).

Seeing the rise in the use of illegal arms, the government of Bangladesh in 2002 launched the *Operation Clean Heart* initiative. Following the operation, the government launched another operation Spider Web in 2003 targeting the left-wing extremist terrorists in the South-western regions (Malik and Joseph, 2005). Later on, a *Combing*

Operation was performed by the then Caretaker Government in 2007 in some specific ‘crime zones’ in the country (Shamsi, 2011). Bangladesh has also adopted UN Resolution 62/47 in 2008. The article “The Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects: UN Resolution 62/47 and Bangladesh” argues that this resolution calls for the implementation of the UN Program of Action (UNPOA) and instrument for making and tracing small arms. The introduction of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in 2004 broke off these criminals and their bases. At present, arms recovery programs, on a regular basis, are being addressed particularly by RAB, and sometimes in cooperation with the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and National Security Intelligence (NSI).

Thus, the existing literature mostly explains the production, availability and the impact of small arms in Bangladesh. Accordingly, the key actors in illegal arms trafficking have not been addressed properly by the existing literature. It also fails to show how the users of illegal weapons are creating fear and are threatening the state and society in Bangladesh through the use of illegal weapons in their criminal activities. Therefore, this article examines the major users of illegal weapons in Bangladesh and their role in creating insecurity in the society. Although there are numerous groups who use illegal weapons in Bangladesh for criminal and terror activities, this article describes three major users of illegal small arms based on their frequent use of illegal arms in criminal activities.

The following section of this article elaborates on who these non-state illegal weapons users are and how they threaten the security of the state and individuals through their illegal activities throughout the country.

Key Actors and Users of Illegal Small Arms in Bangladesh

Political Cadres

Political instability, violent nature of political movements, political murder and electoral violence are regular affairs in Bangladesh. From 2002 to 2013, an estimated 14187 violent political events occurred in which the major political parties are involved (Suykens & Islam,, 2015:5). Use of illegal weapons to dominate the political opponent is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh. This culture of armed violence in politics has its roots in the early period of the formation of the country. The following discussion shows how the political cadres used illegal weapons in different periods of time.

Use of Illicit Arms in Different Political Regimes

After the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, a large bulk of arms was not decommissioned and landed in the hands of the political cadres who later started using these in political conflicts. In addition, the decision of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s regime (1972-1975) to provide every parliament member with a light machine gun (LMG) for personal safety made arms a part of political culture. During this time, student politicians began using illicit weapons in the university campuses. One notorious incident of that time caught media attention. On 4 April 1974, the General Secretary and his associates of Bangladesh Student League, the student wing of the ruling party Awami League in the University of Dhaka, killed seven students in brush fire (Kamol, 2010). Following that, General Ershad’s government (1981-1989) institutionalized arms culture in university politics by distributing arms among student wings to control political rivalries. Since then, illicit weapons have been an inseparable part of university campus politics and led large-scale violent clashes in campuses. In 1993, The New York Times identified the University of Dhaka as the ‘most violent campus’ in the world (Banglapaedia, 2016). According to another estimate in 2014, the university experienced an average of two students murdered every year since independence (Zaman, 2014).

Use of Illegal Weapons by Different Political Wings and Inter-party Violence

All major political parties maintain two fronts - ‘political wing’ for political activities and ‘armed wing’ for coercive activities. The political parties indulge these cadres to often launch killings, violent strikes, gunfire and bombings against the opposition party leaders and supporters. The student cadres committed scores of murders but in most cases, the perpetrators went unpunished due to patronization and influence of political godfathers (The Bangladesh Chronicle, 2014). The student fronts also supply armed cadres to the big gun politicians who have the power to shield them from the university authority as well as the law (Islam, 2017). The most notorious example of attacking political opponents using armed violence is the grenade attack at the Awami League (AL) rally on 21st August 2004.

This violent trend increases inter-party intolerance and ends in rising rates of political violence. Table 1 shows that over 2000 people were reported killed during violent political movements from 2007 to 2016.

Table 1: Casualties of Political Violence in Bangladesh, 2007-2016

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Killed	90	84	251	220	135	169	506	190	197	215	2057
Injured	1689	2413	15559	13999	11532	17161	24176	9429	8312	9053	1,10,323

Source: Prepared by the authors based on “The Distribution of Political Violence in Bangladesh” and annual reports of Odhikar, a Dhaka-based human rights organization.

The casualties as shown in Table 1 prove that political cadres continue to use illegal small arms, thus creating insecurity. Besides, student cadres keep illegal firearms in university dormitories in which law enforcement agencies have very limited access. Some recent drives by the police forces recovered significant volume of illegal weapons from the dormitories of Bangladesh belonging to the Islami Chatra Shibir, student wing of Bangladesh Jamat Islami (The Daily Star, 2015). There are numerous cases when the student cadres are found to openly use illegal arms in clashes against rival student wings as well as in street violence (The Bangladesh Chronicle, 2016). According to intelligence reports, some expelled student cadres are the top listed buyers of illegal firearms coming into the country (Khan, 2014). Police records say that a significant number of student cadres of Dhaka University have recently been arrested for robbing people at gunpoint (Kamol, 2010).

Use of Illegal Weapons by the Political Cadres during Election Time

The use of illegal small arms becomes rampant during the election campaign period. Illicit weapons have affected all the elections over the past years in a way that every citizen feels unsafe when the election is imminent. The use of these arms, continuing till the Election Day even afterwards, causes a serious threat to a free and fair election. In addition, armed cadres use these weapons to silence the opponents and murder the competing candidates as well as newly elected candidates (Husain, 2002). Therefore, all political leaders need to maintain the armed cadres for their personal safety. Moreover, the political parties use the armed thugs for extortion and abduction. Sometimes these armed cadres engage in clashes with the law enforcement agencies and terrorize the society (Dhaka Tribune, 2014; The New Nation, 2016). Table 2 presents the number of people killed in gunfights with the law enforcement agencies between 2007 and 2016.

Table 2: Gunfights between Armed Criminals and Law Enforcement Agencies, 2007-2016

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Killed in Gunfights	130	136	129	101	65	53	65	119	148	151	946

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the annual reports of Odhikar, a Dhaka-based human rights organization.

Thus, though 'non-state armed groups and political parties are perceived as two opposite models or approach to democratic political processes' (UN, 2006), the characteristics of political cadres in Bangladesh does not point to such a democratic process for the political parties tend to use the non-state actors for their political willing and dealing and also for their protection too. Rather, the above discussion shows that, the political parties can be considered as one of the major users of illegal weapons in Bangladesh.

CHT Insurgents

Another major user of illegal small arms are the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) insurgents. Though the existing literature talks about the use of illegal weapons by the CHT insurgents (Kafi, 2005; IWGIA, 2014), the pattern of use of illegal arms by the CHT insurgents has not been widely discussed. The activities of the CHT insurgents as a key user of illegal weapons are discussed below.

The roots of the insurgency movement in CHT area can be traced back to the India partition in 1947. During the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, Ferozpur of Punjab was given to Pakistan at first but it was handed over to India at the end due to the city's large Shikh community (Mey, 1984) who were religiously more attached to India. This was considered a loss to Pakistan and they were compensated by awarding CHT which had greater connections with Burma and the Indian state of Tripura and Mizoram than East Pakistan. This led the CHT people to organize political opposition since they never wanted to be a part of Pakistan (Huq, 2000). The political opposition turned into vindication when some CHT leaders collaborated with the Pakistani occupying force during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 (Mohsin, 1997: 59) but they failed to secure their demands to establish an independent *Jummaland*. As a result of this failure CHT leaders started an insurgency movement under the umbrella of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (translated: The Chittagong Hill Tracts People's Solidarity Organization) (PCJSS) and continued armed fights against police and Bangladesh army since 1976. Although a 'Peace Accord' between Bangladesh government and the Hill people's representatives was signed on 2 December 1997, it has not ended the insurgency completely.

More specifically, the armed wing of PCJSS known as Shanti Bahini (Army of Peace), who received training as well as arms and ammunitions from India (Chowdhury, 2006: 43), has been using illegal firearms to launch killing and kidnapping. They control areas under their domination and are involved in toll collection. In addition, the PCJSS has created a reformist group and have started stocking arms as it has become disappointed with the performance of the Peace Accord. According to an inquiry report of Hill Watch Human Rights Forum (HWHRF), a Dhaka based human rights organization of the hill people, an armed group of PCJSS has unleashed a reign of terror in different areas of Rangamati district by killing and torturing innocent villagers, kidnapping local peoples and exacting large amount of money as ransom, forcing every village to pay them tax and carrying out violent raids (UNPO, 2004). From the testimony of the victims interviewed by the Forum, it is clear that the armed groups are the members of Shanti Bahini and inflict violence against rivals, particularly towards the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF).

UPDF was formed in 1998 by some rebels of PCJSS and is widely regarded as the anti-CHT Accord group who is in favor of full autonomy of the CHT areas. They refused to surrender their arms after the CHT Accord and UPDF went underground and formed a large armed group who is alleged to possess a large stock of arms and ammunition hidden in the hill areas. The UPDF armed men use illegal firearms and conduct armed activities against the PCJSS activists as well as innocent villagers. More recently, the Hill Women's Federation (HWF), in line with the UPDF, has started keeping arms with them (The Daily Star, 2010). According to an article of PCJSS, a group of UPDF armed members along with reformist group intensified atrocities including killing and torturing innocent villagers, kidnapping PCJSS members for ransom, and forcing villagers to pay tolls to UPDF and also to work for the group (PCJSS, 2013). It is also alleged that the armed group opened fire on innocent passengers at Moratila area in Khagrachari district on 16 January 2013 leaving two passengers seriously injured. Another source said that the group conducted an armed raid in the Kathaltala area of Rangamati district on 3 June 2013 and beat up two innocent villagers (UNPO, 2013). However, there is also rumor that the group has recently received a shipment of firearms in June 2012 as per the group's plan to increase its stock of arms (Nazim, 2014). It became evident that this group has become bolder since the Bangladesh army has been facing numerous armed clashes with them.

Besides the use of illegal firearms on innocent villagers by both PCJSS and UPDF, PCJSS insurgents are also involved in cross-border arms trafficking. The biggest arms haul in Mizoram so far and one of the biggest in Northeast India in recent years took place on the first week of March 2013. Mizoram police and Assam Rifles (the

oldest paramilitary force of India) seized 31 AK-47 assault rifle along with a Singapore-made Light Machine Gun (LMG), a US Combat Browning Automatic rifle, 809 rounds of ammunition, and 32 magazines from a farmhouse on the outskirts of the state's capital Aizawl and arrested three Bangladeshi nationals who belong to the Chakma community (Sarma, 2013). According to Mizoram police, the arrestees who belong to PCJSS armed wing Shanti Bahini smuggled the armaments from Burma to deliver it to PCJSS insurgents in Bangladesh. The PCJSS and UPDF armed insurgents are smuggling sophisticated weapons like AK-22 automatic rifles, G-3 rifles, MK-11 rifles, AK-47, AK-56, and M-16 rifles through the border of CHT and selling them to the Islamic militant groups operating in the country (Acharjee, 2016).

There are also some other armed groups who are fighting for the autonomy of the CHT. These groups amass illegal firearms and often engage in armed clashes with PCJSS and UPDF fighters. In some areas of the Northeastern part of CHT, a new masked group known as Borkha Party (Veil Party) has been terrorizing the people with illegal weapons and indulging in murder, abduction and extortion (IWGIA, 2014). Although a recent drive by Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) forces recovered large amounts of weapons and ammunitions from the party's hide-out, its armed activities still persist.

Furthermore, the armed group known as 'Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO)' which started its militant activities in 1991 is seeking to establish an independent Muslim state in Myanmar and it is active in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. It is widely believed that RSO has never had any camp in Burma but only across the border of Bangladesh (Linter, 2002). According to a national daily, RSO has started regrouping after the sectarian violence on June 2012 in the Arakan state of Burma (Dhaka Tribune, 2014). However, the group receives illegal weapons along with other support from transnational Islamic terrorist groups seeking to promote Jihad in Myanmar. Moreover, it has built close connections with Islamic militant groups of Bangladesh and local political cadres (Chowdhury & Sengupta, 2011) who provide support to the group. Besides, it acquired substantial number of Chinese-made RPG-2 rocket launchers, light machine-guns, AK-47 assault rifles, claymore mines and explosives from private arms dealers in the Thai town of Aranyaprathet near the border of Cambodia (Linter, 2002). It is believed that RSO has set up armed camps in the deep jungle of the CHT for training its armed wings and run arms smuggling and human and drug trafficking syndicates in the region. In addition, a coordinated operation by RAB and BGB recovered 20 AK-47 rifles and thousands of rounds of ammunition from one of the hide-outs of RSO (Bdnews24, 2005), indicated the group's involvement in armed activities. It is also reported that RSO insurgents murdered 9 Burmese police officers on 9 October 2016 at the police force office in Maungdaw Township located in the Bangladesh-Burma border and looted more than 50 guns and thousands of bullets from the post (BBC, 2016).

Extremists

Extremist groups in Bangladesh are considered as one of the major groups of illegal arms users. They can be categorized into two groups - left wing extremists and right wing or Islamist extremists. Though, ideologically, the right-wing extremists are different from the left-wing extremists, the target groups and the focus of ideological interests of both of these extremists are almost the same. Both the extremist groups gather their members by manipulating people based on their ideological predisposition. On the one hand, the leftists believe that equality in the society can be ensured by looting the assets of the rich and distributing those assets to the poor (Robin Hoodian approach); on the other hand, the religious extremists believe that justice can be ensured by conducting jihad (Khan, 2016). The following discussion explores why, how and since when the extremist groups in Bangladesh are using illegal arms to establish their ideologies in different parts of the country.

Left Wing Extremist

The presence of radical leftist parties in Bangladesh dates back from the 1980s when they conducted numerous attacks from the 1980s to 1990s. The radical left politics of Bangladesh traces back to 1925 when the Communist Party of India (CPI) was formed under the leadership of Manabendra Nath Roy (1887-1945) (Sobhan, 2010). The radical leftist parties divided into many factions who mainly include Purba Banglar Communist Party, Biplobi Communist Party, Purba Banglar Sarbahara Party, Red Flag, Gono Mukti Fouz and Janajuddho (ICG, 2016). The sequence of events of use of illegal weapons by the leftist parties since the independence of Bangladesh is discussed below.

During the Liberation War, leftist Naxalite groups were strongly visible in the south-western districts of Bangladesh (Parvez, 2016). Later, many ultra-left parties grew in Bangladesh after the independence of the country

and they were mainly marked by lightning strikes, bomb attacks, targeted assassinations and seizures of public buildings throughout the country (Sobhan, 2010: 15). The available researches show that the left-wing extremism has been active for a long time in the south-western and northwestern parts of the country such as in Satkhira, Khulna, Jessore, Jhenaidah, Magura, Chuadanga, Meherpur, Kushtia, Pabna, and Rajshahi. Existing available literature show that the leftist groups are mainly involved in murder, robbery, extortion, bomb/grenade attack, circulating party leaflet, secret meeting, land grabbing, and abduction for ransom (SATP, 2003).

The target groups of the leftist extremists mainly include businessmen, farmers, political leaders, teachers, lawyers, journalists, and other professionals (SATP, 2003). Among the violent attacks by the leftist extremists in the country are the death and slaughter of Wasel Hauque, a business man of Meherupur Upazila in January, 2008; the killing of a shrimp farmer in a bomb attack by a local leader of the PBCP-Janajuddha in April, 2008; and several bomb attacks in Jhenaidah from 2007 to 2008 which injured a number of innocent people through such attacks in the country. Moreover, leftist extremists are playing a dominant role in looting and killing in ‘Dhalar Chor’, in the South Western part of Bangladesh and the local police also feels threatened to take any legal actions against them according to a Bangla crime program namely ‘Talash’ telecast in the Independent TV channel in Bangladesh. According to that TV show, the teachers do not go to school to teach and doctors do not go to the hospital due to the fear of being attacked by the leftist extremists in that area. A female group also works in the ‘Dhalar Chor’ area to preserve and supply illegal arms to the leftist activists. Until 2012, around 6500 people were killed by these leftist organizations in that area (Choromponthi, 2017).

However, by 2000s the violent activities of the leftist parties have shifted to low-scale criminal activities, mostly in the south western and parts of the northern areas in Bangladesh (IGG, 2016). Moreover, these radical leftist groups are also not much visible throughout the country more recently. However, as of 2011, there are 13 left wing extremist (LWE) groups believed to be active in western and south-western districts of the country including Purba Banglar Communist Party, PBCP (Janajuddha), PBCP (M-L Red Flag), PBCP (M-L Communist War), Biplabi Communist Party, New Biplabi Communist Party, Gono Bahini, Gono Mukti Fouz, Banglar Communist Party, Socialist Party, Biplabi Anuragi, Chinnamul Communist Party, and Sarbahara People’s March (Parvez 2016).

Therefore, though the leftist extremist groups are not very visible at this moment, but several armed incidents conducted by the leftist extremist groups in the country cannot be ignored. Table 3 shows the number of armed incidents caused by the leftist terrorists from 2008 to 2017.

Table 3: Armed Incidents by Leftist Terrorists since 2008 to 2017

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
Number of Incidents	47	70	37	17	12	20	16	13	13	11	256
Killed	57	87	30	24	15	25	16	17	18	14	303
Injured	11	6	3		2		4	17	4	6	53

Source: Fatalities- Leftwing Extremism, South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), 2008-2017

These incidents killed 303 people and 53 were seriously injured. Though the terrorists used different types of weapons but they mostly used single barrel guns, shutter guns, light machine guns, foreign pistols, locally made arms, firearms, bombs, revolvers, pipe guns, Pakistan-made rifle, cartridge, machetes, knives, AK-47 rifle, 9mm pistols, revolvers and others were used.

They amass these arms through the southwestern borders of Jessore, Kustia, Satkhira, Meherpur, and Chuadanga. A Chuadanga police source suggests that there are clandestine arms factories in Nasirpara and Kachirpara villages of Jalanghi Thana in Murshidabad district under West Bengal. These places are within three kilometers of Meherpur and Chuadanga borders from where these criminals collect illegal arm. In addition, Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) sources claim that these extremist groups collect consignments of illegal weapons and explosives through two important routes – Mujibnagar and Gangni – from India and use it in the terror activities inside the country.

Right Wing Extremist

The presence of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh mainly originated from the late 1980s when some Bangladeshis went to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet Union. Those who went to Afghanistan returned to Bangladesh having some necessary training to use arms and to make bombs. They were also motivated by the ideology of Jihadism. Consequently, since the 1990s they started to go against all kinds of secular ideas and beliefs and started to move into action in the name of religion. Gradually, they became strong enough when in 1999 they were responsible in the bomb blasts at the Udichi Cultural Function at Jessore (BBC, 1999). Among these Islamic militant groups, some have strong connections with particular political parties while others have no specific political affiliation (Riaz, 2016). However, weak governance along with political violence, ideological clashes between secular and right-wing ideologies have created conditions for the growth of radical Islam in Bangladesh over time (Khan, 2017). These forces reappeared and reactivated under the umbrella of the political parties in power following the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh (Rashid, 2016). Moreover, Islamic ideology was used by the undemocratically elected government where they used religion to establish the justness of their clinging to power and they continued to destroy the secular image of the Bengali nation (Rashid 2016). The main activities of these religious extremist groups include preaching of Jihadi ideas and providing training on militancy. These groups are also engaged in regrouping, networking, training, propaganda and abduction for ransom (Sobhan, 2010).

The Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh mainly include Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B), Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) and Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ansarul Islam, Ansarul Islam Bangla Team (ABT), Hizbut Towhid, Allahr Dal and Hizb-ut-Tahrir and so on (Parvez, 2016). Among them, nowadays, jihadist activities in the country are dominated by JMB having strong linkages with the Islamic State (ISIS) and Ansarul Islam affiliated with al-Qaeda's South Asian branch (ICG, 2018). However, three groups; HuJIB, JMJB and JMB; are inter-connected and interdependent and sometimes their memberships are also overlapping (Mandaville et. al, 2009).

The radical Islamists mainly use grenades, detonators, pistols, commando knives, and AK-22 rifle and locally made sharp weapons. Primarily, Islamists in Bangladesh are confined to a small group and mainly engaged in non-political and peaceful religious activities (Sobhan, 2010). The Southeastern part of the country has been used as a weapons transit point by various rebel groups of India and Myanmar for many years and these weapons are used in the country by the criminals and militant groups (Riaz & Fair, 2011). Nowadays, mainly since 2013, "the targets of these Islamist militant groups include the secular activities, intellectuals and foreigners, as well as religious and sectarian minorities" (ICG, 2018). For example, the killing of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider on February 15, 2013, attack of Bangladeshi-American blogger and writer Avijit Roy on February 27, 2015, attack of Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka's diplomatic zone on July 1, 2016 (The Indian Express, 2016) clearly indicate the anti-secular, anti-foreigner and anti-intellectual targets of the Islamic militant groups in Bangladesh.

Hence, a number of bomb blasts and grenade attacks from 1999 to 2015 have proved that the presence of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh is an alarming issue that needs serious attention. One mentionable incident of an attack by Islamist militants includes, almost 500 serial bomb blasts in all but 64 districts of the country on 17 August, 2005 (Sobhan, 2010). Other armed incidents by the Islamic militant groups include; among others; grenade attack against the anti-terrorism rally organised by Awami League on Bangabandhu Avenue on 21 August 2004, hacking of a Hindu priest to death and decapitating him at a temple in northern Bangladesh on February 21, 2016, killing of blogger Washiqur Rahman Babu on March 30, 2015 and so on (The Indian Express, 2016). As a result, a number of militant groups were banned and a number of other suspected organizations have been blacklisted by the government of Bangladesh as the actions of these groups are threatening peace and stability of the country by preaching extremist views and violent activities. The banned Islamic militant groups include Ansar al-Islam, JMB, JMJB, HUJI-B, ABT and so on (Bdnews24, 2017). However, some of them are still active in the country using different names and forms and are trying to fulfill their agenda by using unfair means.

However, since the 1990s, the violent activities started to be committed by the Islamist militants and gradually increased in the first half of the 2000s. Table 4 below shows that since 2008 to 2017 the number of the armed incidents conducted by the Islamic terrorists in Bangladesh is 50. Through these incidents, 244 people were killed and 880 people were seriously injured. The targets of their attacks were mostly against government establishments, non-governmental organizations and private citizens.

Table 4: Armed Incidents by Islamic Terrorists 2008-2017

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
Number of Incidents	1	3	2	0	0	28	2	0	6	8	50
Killed	1	7	3	0	0	139	6	0	54	34	244
Injured	0	0	0	0	0	664	55	0	116	45	880

Source: Fatalities- Islamist Terrorism, South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2008-2017

However, researches argue that the war crimes trials and the Shahbagh movement provided the backdrop for a new era of Islamist and jihadist activism (ICG, 2018) in the country. Moreover, since the 2016 Dhaka attack, law enforcement officials began using the term “neo-Jamaat-ul Mujahideen” to obscure ISIS’s role in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the pattern of membership recruitment in the Islamic militant group is also changing rapidly in this new era of Islamist activism. Nowadays, it is no longer only youngsters from ‘madrasas’ as the source for Jihadi recruitments but rather a large number of students from different academic backgrounds, particularly science and technology, are also joining extremist groups. Based on the data published in the media, around 61 percent of the militants arrested from 2014 to 2015 had come from middle-class or the upper middle-class strata of the society, with a large number of them being either engineers or have studied science (Riaz, 2016).

Thus, the above-mentioned extremist groups - both leftist and right-wing Islamists - are the big users of the illegal arms in Bangladesh. Through the use of grenades, detonators, pistols, commando knives, AK-22 Rifle, locally made sharp weapons and others they try to achieve their own ideological interests through whatever means possible. As long as, both the extremist groups were not in favor of the independence of Bangladesh as a secular country, always they try to remain busy to prove the government of Bangladesh as failed and inactive in maintaining law and order in the country. In doing so, most of the time they are involved in murder, bombing, extortion and so on. Thereby, both the leftist and rightist extremist groups want to establish their ideologies by using illegal arms to inflict violence in the society and the country. Consequently, the pattern of attacks and the nature of arms used by both the groups seem almost similar.

Nonetheless, the government of Bangladesh has been taking many initiatives so far, for example, arresting and killing the criminals through the operation clean heart project; crossfire and encounter initiatives; zero tolerance initiatives against criminal activities and so on to stop these violent activities undertaken by the extremist groups. Besides, Parliament passed the Anti-Terrorism Act in 2009 and the Anti-Money Laundering Act in 2012 to prevent terrorism financing (ICG, 2016). “According to police statistics, more than 2,400 militants were arrested between 2005 and 2013; at least 154 Islamist extremists are currently on death row” (ICG, 2016). However, the accessibility to illegal arms by these groups has not been successfully curtailed yet.

Conclusion

The article concludes that political cadres, CHT insurgents and extremists are the key users of illegal arms in Bangladesh due to their prominence, involvement and frequent use of illegal weapons in conducting criminal activities. The article also shows that the use of such illegal fire arms have induced a reign of fear and anxiety throughout the country. The initiatives taken by the government have not been able to decelerate the arms traffickers and the activities of the users. Bangladesh government must be pro-active in order to prevent the proliferation of the use of illegal fire arms and disrupt the supply and distribution of illegal small arms. In order for that to happen, the government has to emphasize on three tasks simultaneously - reducing demand, controlling supply and recovering stocks. Moreover, if the political parties of Bangladesh continue to use these illegal arms users as their political protectors to discourage their political oppositions, then the problem will never come to an

end. Rather, the arms users will be encouraged to continue their terrorist activities with the protection of the powerful political parties. Therefore, the political parties of Bangladesh should stop using these illegal arms users to ensure the security of the country both at the national and international level is safeguarded. Besides, in order to project the image of the country as a peace-loving nation, the government of Bangladesh should take proper initiatives to give suitable training to the law enforcement body of the country to take necessary legal actions against the users of illegal arms. Failure to do so will make the illegal arms users much stronger and this threatens the law and order situation of the country.

Endnotes

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