

Neila Husain

SMALL ARMS, DRUGS AND BANGLADESH FOREIGN POLICY

Abstract

Foreign policies of most countries, with the core values remaining unchanged, have shifted from military to economic cooperation, from aid to trade diplomacy and from territorial to human security. Small arms and drugs are such 'non-traditional' issues that need to be taken into account when setting Bangladesh's foreign policy agenda. For too long, arms and drugs have been treated as domestic problems that can be controlled internally by law enforcing agencies. The focus of this paper is to look into the issues of small arms and drugs and their relation to the foreign policy of Bangladesh. To what extent is Bangladesh threatened by these two illicit commodities? How do her foreign policy practitioners look at the problem and what measures have they taken to minimize the threats emanating from the effects of small arms and drugs? The paper argues that the problem of small arms and drugs in Bangladesh is not perceived as a major foreign policy issue in spite of the impact they have on domestic and external relations. Very little has been achieved to curb the flow of either arms or drugs in spite of the issues having been addressed in bilateral and multilateral forums.

I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is a dynamic process. Issues and problems considered only a decade ago to be the focus of the sociologist, economist, environmentalist or human rights activist alone are now considered to be critical elements affecting a country's relationships with its neighbours

Neila Husain is Research Fellow at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS). Her e-mail address is: neila@biiss.org

and its position in international community.¹ Foreign policies of most countries, with the core values remaining unchanged, have shifted from military to economic cooperation, from aid to trade diplomacy and from territorial to human security.² The focus of this study is on the issues of small arms and drugs and their relation to the foreign policy of Bangladesh. One may ask why these issues that appear as internal problems of a country should be considered as foreign policy issues? To what extent is Bangladesh threatened by small arms and drugs? How do her foreign policy practitioners look at the problem and what measures have they taken to minimize the threats emerging from the effects of small arms and drugs? In other words, what has been done and what needs to be done?

The paper argues that the problem of small arms and drugs in Bangladesh is not perceived as a major foreign policy issue in spite of the impact they have on the country's domestic and external relations. Very little has been achieved to curb the flow of either arms or drugs in spite of the issues having been brought up in bilateral and multilateral forums, following which even related conventions and agreements were signed. The failure to achieve any tangible results lies either in the "sensitivity" or "low priority status" or both that causes concerned

¹ Post-Cold War literature on foreign policy has gone beyond the traditional state to state relationships. Recent studies link foreign policy with peace research, development, environment, migration, gender, human rights, information technology etc. See for example, Senator Gareth Evans, "Australia's Foreign Policy: Priorities in a Changing World", *Australian Outlook*, Vol. 43, No. 2, August 1990, Kusuma Snitwonge, "Thai Foreign Policy in the Global Age: Principles and Profit?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2001, Singapore, Md. Shamsul Islam, "Bangladesh Foreign Policy in the Information Age", *Journal of International Affairs*, October 2001, Dhaka.

² The dynamics of American foreign policy is a case in point. The forces of the Cold War era shaped US foreign policy to one containing communism. With the end of the Cold War, US foreign policy shifted to economic cooperation and globalization. However, after the September 11 (2001) terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, American diplomats are now gearing international support for their "War on Terrorism". According to former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, while the fundamental purpose of American foreign policy has not changed in more than two centuries, the making of US foreign policy has changed because the world has changed. (Madeline Albright, "The Making of US Foreign Policy", *US Foreign Policy Agenda*, Vol. 5, No. 1 March 2000, p.2.)

governments to shy away from open discussion. The paper has been divided into six sections, including the Introduction. Section Two discusses the problems of small arms and drugs in Bangladesh. Section Three explains why small arms and drugs should be treated as foreign policy issues. Section Four deals with foreign policy initiatives in addressing the problem of SALW (Small Arms and Light Weapons). Section Five provides a set of recommendations, while a few concluding remarks are made in Section Six. There are also three annexes in the end of the paper.

2. SMALL ARMS AND DRUGS: PROBLEMS IN BANGLADESH

From handguns to shoulder-mounted rocket launchers, there are an estimated 600 million small arms worldwide.³ Around 300,000 people are killed every year with small arms and light weapons in armed conflicts. Another 200,000 people die in homicides and suicides through SALW.⁴ A 1995 study showed that of the 58 ongoing armed conflicts around the world, 49 were fought over ethno-political issues, such as wars of secession or regional autonomy, conflicts among ethnic rivals for control of the state, communal or clan warfare. Only one was interstate conflict: a border dispute between Ecuador and Peru.⁵ In most of the conflicts, the tools of violence technically known as ‘small arms’ and ‘light weapons’ are small and light enough to be carried by a small child. In some African war-torn societies, rifle remains ‘the world’s deadliest weapon’ responsible for 90% of casualties in armed conflict.⁶

Scholars are yet to come to a common definition of small arms. The most acceptable definition appears to be the ones given by NATO and the United Nations. NATO defines small arms as all crew portable weapons less than 50mm and includes a secondary capability to defeat

³ David Morton, “Gunning for the World”, *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2006, p. 62.

⁴ Holger Anders, “Combating Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation: Scope for Action by the European Union,” *Briefing Paper No. 28*, International Security Service, available at www.isis.europe.org.

⁵ Abdel-Fatau Musah & Niobe Thompson (eds.), *Over a Barrel: Light Weapons & Human Rights in the Commonwealth*, London and Delhi: The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 1999, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.1.

light armour and helicopters. The UN in its definition includes revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. Even if one comes to a common definition, there may be differences in opinion as to which type of small arms are problems and which are not. One can take the case of South Asia. In India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, more sophisticated armaments are used in ethnic conflicts. As such, researchers and security experts talk more about AK-47 than they do on crude indigenous made hand guns. Yet, in countries like Bangladesh and Nepal, a few thousand illegal pistols and hand-made pipe guns are enough to create social, political and economic havoc. Keeping the reality in view from a Bangladesh perspective, this paper takes into account the indigenous and smuggled crude weapons such as sawed rifles, pipe guns, pistols along with the sophisticated arms that are entering into Bangladesh in recent years. An overview of the major challenges of small arms and drugs in Bangladesh will help the reader to understand the complexities of the problems.

Problem i: Emerging Market for Small Arms and Drugs

The actual number of illegal small arms in Bangladesh is not known. In 2001, it was estimated that there were approximately 250,000 illegal small arms in the country.⁷ There is no update of that data but independent studies have shown the number of illegal arms to be approximately 400,000.⁸ However, the source of data is not known. Frequently seized weapons by law enforcing agencies are pistols, rifles, revolvers, light machine guns, and home made explosives. (See Annex 2) The origin of small arms in Bangladesh is usually traced to the remnants of the War of Liberation in 1971, and later to the insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region where, in the name of sub-national aspirations and autonomy, a section of the indigenous people was waging an insurgency movement against the government of Bangladesh. However, small arms continue to be funneled in even after the signing of the peace accord in 1996 between the Government of Bangladesh and the

⁷ This figure was given by Chief Advisor, Justice Latifur Rahman, Caretaker Government, 2001, in an interview with *The Daily Star*, 26 July 2001.

⁸ For example, the Bangladesh Development Partnership Centre (BDPC) conducted a study that stated that the number of illegal small arms was 400,000; See for details, Sharif A. Kafi, *Illegal Small Arms and Human Insecurity in Bangladesh*, BDPC, Dhaka, 2005, p.14.

Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samitee (PCJSS).⁹ Studies show that pilferage from government *malkhana*, retained weapons by the *Shantibahini* (the armed wing of PCJSS), illicit trafficking, smuggling and locally manufacturing of weapons are among the major sources of small arms acquisition.¹⁰

Parallel to the proliferation of small arms, illicit drugs trafficking is also taking place through Bangladesh where international drug cartels find its geographic and socio-economic conditions suitable for using it as a transit country. Bangladesh's proximity to the high sea provides transit facilities for ships carrying contraband items. In fact, Bangladesh has direct air, sea and road communications with almost all the major heroine producing countries in the region.¹¹ Poor manning system, porous borders, and corrupt law enforcing agencies make it easy for transshipment from one place to another. Furthermore, Bangladesh, with a population of more than 140 million burdened with socio-economic difficulties, provides a potential market for the end use of their products. It is only due to the enormity of social, economic and political problems that the problem of drugs has received very little attention, except for the concerns raised by donor agencies and some of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

⁹ Incidences of arms, explosives, and explosive substances being recovered from the CHT region is often reported in the local newspapers. Occasionally, ex-shantibahini members are caught red handed in trafficking, distributing and even using arms in criminal activities. Insurgents from neighbouring countries also find the CHT terrain convenient to traffick arms and ammunitions.

¹⁰ Neila Husain, "Proliferation of Small Arms and Politics in South Asia: The Case of Bangladesh," *RCSS Policy Studies 7*, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo, 1999, pp. 6-20.

¹¹ For a detailed account of the drug trade in Bangladesh, see M. Emdad-ul Haq, *Drugs in South Asia: From the Opium Trade to the Present Day*, Macmillan Press Ltd., UK, 2000. Prof. Haq has defined drugs as "any substance that creates physical dependency, increases tolerance and eventually makes the user slave to its habit." These drugs are 'non-medicinal, generally harmful for the human body, socially disapproved of and prohibited by major religions or international regulations or both'.

Problem ii: Increasing Societal Violence

Drug abuse and proliferation of illegal firearms and explosives have now become widespread and easily available in the society. The end-use of small arms is no longer confined to a specific cause or against a particular race, ethnic group or community. It affects people of all walk of lives. Robbery, murder, burglary, theft, abduction, persecution of women, oppression of children, kidnapping, assault on police, extortion, rent seeking, fight over tender rights are types of arms-related violence that are norms and not exceptions.¹² In 2005, the total number of arms-related crime was 437, and drugs-related crime was 3468.¹³

The problem of drug abuse is a rising concern in Bangladesh as well. Although it is difficult to show the link between drugs-addicted youth and crime, a survey conducted by a local NGO revealed that drug abusers were mostly unemployed, educated youths, students, transport workers, rising young businessmen and children from affluent families. It is a common practice to get young people addicted to drugs by giving them free handouts initially. Once addicted, these youths have no option but to resort to stealing, pilfering, mugging, smuggling, extortion and other anti-social activities to pay off drug peddlers.¹⁴ A rough estimate shows that there are about 1.2 to 1.5 million drug addicts in the country, including alcoholics. Seventy to eighty percent of the drug abusers are between 18-32 years of age. Phensidyle (codeine phosphate), heroine, cannabis, and other poly drugs are among the highly abused drugs.¹⁵

Problem iii: Ethnic Minorities and Small Arms

The peace accord signed in 1996 ending the 23-year ethnic conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) was followed by ceremonial arms surrender by the *Shantibahini*. Although this marks a major success in

¹² For more details, see, Neila Husain, "Proliferation of Small Arms and Violence in Bangladesh: Societal Insecurity?" Mohammad Humayun Kabir (ed.) *National Security of Bangladesh in the Twenty-first Century*, Academic Press, Dhaka, June 2000.

¹³ The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) has an official website that keeps an update of crime and terrorism in Bangladesh, available at www.rabbd.com accessed on 20 December 2006.

¹⁴ *The Independent* (Bangladesh), 19 September 2000.

¹⁵ "Drug Situation in Bangladesh", *In Touch*, VHSS Health Newsletter, Dhaka, Vol. 15, No. 167 July 1997, p. 1.

South Asia in terms of controlling insurgencies, there are allegations that not all arms were surrendered. There are frequent reports of armed violence, extortion and even a major kidnapping in 2001 involving foreign development workers by armed members of different factions in the CHT.

Problem iv: Abuse of Political Power

Small arms tend to serve the interests of small yet influential section of the 'political elite' in Bangladesh, who have their own concept of 'politics'. To most of them, the use of arms is regarded as a short-cut process to meet their political ambition. Mainstream political parties allegedly maintain armed cadres to attain their respective goals. Frequent occurrences of violence by politically-backed armed cadres in almost all cities and towns of Bangladesh point out a nexus between a thriving underworld and mainstream politicians. It is argued that in the present context, a major political party without any link to armed cadres is almost inconceivable! There is at least one killing every month in which small arms were used by an activist who has political support.¹⁶

Problem v: Weaponization of Educational Institutions

Small arms have long infiltrated into educational institutions to the extent that student dormitories are considered storage dens for arms and ammunition. Campus violence, extortion, inter- and intra-party hostility over tender rights, hall occupation, killings, rape, etc. take place in the name of student politics. At times, it is difficult to distinguish between a student, an activist and a criminal. According to a research finding, in 1995 there were as many as 14 armed cadre groups in the Dhaka University alone.¹⁷

Problem vi: Negative Impact on Economic Growth

The direct and indirect fallout of arms on the development sector in Bangladesh is a growing concern. Illegal toll taking, extortion and rent seeking are considered by economists and donor agencies as major obstacles to economic growth of the country. There are allegations that in

¹⁶ See for more detail, Neila Husain, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ For more details on campus terrorism, see Abdullah Al-Hassan Shamim *et al*, *Campus-e Santras: Dhaka University*, Dhaka University, 1995.

most cases armed criminals are provided with police and political protection. Chronic strikes and hartals where gun and muscle powers are common characteristics, economic activities slow down and foreign direct investment suffers. According to noted economist Professor Wahiuddin Mahmud, “we cannot expect the free-market reforms to produce results unless we can literally free our market places from the clutches of illegal toll-collectors”.¹⁸ Illegal toll collection perhaps accounts for a much larger proportion of Bangladesh’s GDP compared to rent-seeking incomes that were previously generated through government controls through permits and licenses.¹⁹ Whether the person is an industrialist or a petty trader, the chances of being extorted by armed miscreants is almost the same. Refusal to bow down to their demands results in physical and material loss.

3. SMALL ARMS AND DRUGS: FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES FOR BANGLADESH?

The historically established fundamental concern of Bangladesh foreign policy has been upholding sovereignty and territorial integrity. (See Annex 1) In the conventional sense, it means safeguarding the country from direct military aggression from an external power and non-interference in internal affairs.²⁰ From the days of its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has tried to achieve its goals by pursuing a foreign policy based on territorial approach rather than a functional approach. While this holds true in principle, and will continue to do so in the future,

¹⁸ In Neila Husain, “Youth, Chandabaji and Small Arms: A Political Nexus!” in Shahedul Anam Khan & Shaheen Afroze (eds.) *Chandabaji versus Entrepreneurship: Youth Force in Bangladesh*, Academic Press, 1999, p. 59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ For a more detailed account of Bangladesh foreign policy, please see: Emajuddin Ahamed (ed.), *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: a Small State’s Imperative*, The University Press Ltd, Dhaka, 1984. M.G. Kabir and Shaukat Hassan (eds.), *Issues and Challenges Facing Bangladesh Foreign Policy*, Bangladesh Society of International Studies, 1989, Muhammad Shamsul Huq, *Bangladesh in International Politics: The Dilemmas of the Weak States*, University Press Limited, 1993, S.R. Chakravarty, *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1994, Kathryn Jacques *Bangladesh, India and Pakistan: International Relations and Regional Tensions in South Asia International Relations and Regional Tensions in South Asia*, St. Martin’s Press, 2000.

a country's security can be at stake without being attacked physically by an enemy state. For some countries, the possibility of direct military aggression may be remote, but that does not rule out the possibility of being threatened by non-traditional sources, such as poverty, environment, energy, and so forth.

Small arms and drugs are such 'non-traditional' issues that need to be taken into account when setting Bangladesh's foreign policy agenda. For too long, arms and drugs have been treated as domestic problems that need to be controlled internally by law enforcing agencies. However, a close look into the nature, source, types and funding of small arms and drugs reveal important aspects and implications of the proliferation from foreign policy perspective.

3.1. External Supply

The types of arms and drugs available in the black markets or seized by law enforcing agencies suggest that the trade is cross-border. One study identified phensidyl among items that showed changing patterns of smuggling in the 1990s into Bangladesh from India.²¹ To this list, small arms and explosives need to be added. Most alarming is the smuggling of high-powered explosives like RDX, PK and Zealatin along with detonators, cordex and safety wires.²² In the country-side, Indian-made pipe guns are widely used by local criminals because they are easily available and low priced. Similarly, widely used drugs, such as heroine, marijuana, phensidyl are not produced or refined in the country since Bangladesh is not a drug producing country. Most of the drugs are smuggled in from neighbouring countries.²³

3.2. Foreign Funding

In some of the internal problems of Bangladesh, there have been allegations of foreign intervention. In the 1970s and 1980s, during the

²¹ Muinul Islam, "Trade between Bangladesh and the Bordering Indian States: A Choice between legal trade and Smuggling", paper presented in the *Second Dialogue on Interactions with the Indian Bordering States* organized by BISS and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Calcutta, August 16-17, 2000.

²² *The New Nation* (a Bangladeshi English Daily), July 23, 2001.

²³ "Drug Situation in Bangladesh", *In Touch*, *op.cit.* p.1.

ethnic conflict in the CHT, there were allegations about India's involvement in providing training as well as supplying weapons to the insurgents.²⁴ India's active support to the insurgents allowed them to operate from bases well within its borders. In 1992 there were 25 camps in Tripura and 6-10 in Mizoram.²⁵ One also hears of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) activities in Bangladesh. Although the Bangladesh Government has denied such involvement, the very fact that the issue has been raised deserves attention. One must bear in mind that any foreign intervention of that sort involves at one point or the other the transfer of illegal arms.

3.3. Transit Country

In spite of the fact that there is an alarming rise in the use of small arms and drugs in Bangladesh, their demands are not yet big enough to make Bangladesh an end-destination, as such shipments are expensive and risky. There must be one or more country for which the transshipment is meant. This is where the broader picture needs to be taken into consideration. The South Asian region is flanked on both sides by two of the largest drug triangles - the Golden Triangle in the east and the Golden Crescent in the west. In addition, a number of major insurgency movements and ethnic conflicts are taking place within and beyond its periphery. In most cases, both trades are linked. Today, South Asia has emerged as a 'safe haven' for illicit trafficking, producing, and marketing of both small arms and drugs. Bulks of arms enter Bangladesh, allegedly with end-destination to the insurgents in India's Northeast, Myanmar and even Sri Lanka. Similarly, large quantities of drugs are smuggled through Bangladesh to Europe and America. Drugs are smuggled from Myanmar, trafficked to Cox's Bazaar from where they are shipped to the West. The other route is through the Northeastern states of India to either Kathmandu or Delhi, from where they are smuggled to the West.²⁶ During the process of trafficking, a small

²⁴ Mizanur Rahman Shelley (ed.), *The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: The Untold Story*, Centre for Development Research, Bangladesh, 1992, pp.109-110.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

²⁶ D. Suba Chandran, "Drug Trafficking and the Security of the State: a Case Study of Pakistan," *Strategic Analysis*, September 1998, Vol. XXII, No. 6, pp. 903-906.

portion, yet big enough to destabilize Bangladesh society, pilfers into the domestic market.

In September 1999, law-enforcing agencies seized one of the largest consignments of drugs. The incident revealed two things: 1) a picture, though not complete, of the transnational character of the drug trade; and 2) Bangladesh as a transit country for illicit trafficking. In 1999, three Pakistanis were arrested from a local hotel in Dhaka for possession of 24.1 kg of heroine, which the Narcotics Control Department said to be “pure and high quality heroine”. The racketeers of at least five countries were involved in heroine trafficking. The consignment was brought to Bangladesh from Afghanistan through Pakistan and India on land routes. From here it was to be flown to Birmingham, England”. The consignment was packed in ‘Lux’ soaps; each packet contained 200 grams while 500 gram was unpacked.²⁷ The status of being a major transit country is not only a security concern for Bangladesh, but also a diplomatic one as it strains bilateral relations between Bangladesh and other countries.

3.4. Safe haven for Cross-border Insurgents/ Criminals/ Terrorists

Porous borders between Myanmar and Bangladesh have made it convenient for cross-border movements of terrorists, saboteurs, and insurgents and recently criminals to enter into the remote areas of Bangladesh, such as Cox’s Bazaar and Bandarban districts. There have been accusations and counter accusations from both sides of giving sanctuary to criminals, terrorists, and insurgents of neighbouring countries. With the poor patrolling system of Bangladesh’s southeast borders, there is virtually no effective system of government watchdog to keep track of the people coming in. A considerable part of the terrain and certain points with Myanmar are still without any surveillance of Bangladeshi forces.²⁸ Cross-border insurgents take advantage of the situation by trespassing into Bangladesh territory to take hiding in the hilly terrain. Once inside, they sporadically pillage economic targets

²⁷ *The Daily Star*, 22 September 1999.

²⁸ Brig Gen, ATM Zahirul Alam & Lt. Col. Abul Kalam Md. Humayun Kabir, “Security Challenges for Bangladesh in the Twenty First Century”, *Bangladesh Army Journal*, 28th Issue, January 2000, p.7.

inside Bangladesh for their subsistence.²⁹ Interestingly, a close network between the underworld criminals, insurgents, arms traffickers, and drug traders exists on both sides of the border. The matter is an issue for diplomats when an insurgent/terrorist/criminal of one country is arrested by the law enforcing agencies of another. The issue can even strain bilateral relations when it comes to extradition.³⁰

3.5. Small Arms and Refugees

The issue of refugee is another area that links small arms with diplomacy. In 1978 about 200,000 Rohingya refugees crossed the border into Bangladesh to flee persecution from Myanmar's junta. The repatriation of these refugees, following an agreement between the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh³¹, was slow and for long remained an outstanding issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar. In the meantime, what went unnoticed was that arms trafficking was taking place along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. There have also been reports of criminal activities and armed violence within the camps.³²

3.6. Image Problem

On 17 December 1995, an aircraft carrying 2,500 Kalashnikov rifles and 1.5 million rounds of ammunition dropped arms cases over the villages of Purulia, West Bengal. The cases were marked '*Technical Equipment*' and bore the name of the '*Central Ordinance Depot, Rajendrapur Cantonment, Bangladesh*'.³³ Although investigation showed

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ The case of Anup Chetia, allegedly an ULFA insurgent who was arrested in Bangladesh is an example. India repeatedly demanded his extradition from Bangladesh.

³¹ For more details see, Chowdhury R. Abrar, "Issues and Constraints in the Repatriation/Rehabilitation of the Rohingya and Chakma Refugees and the Biharis," paper presented at the *Conference of Scholars and other Professional Working on Refugees and the Displaced Persons in South Asia*, organised by Colombo based Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Rajendrapur, Dhaka, 9-11 February 1998.

³² *Ibid.* p. 11.

³³ Brian Wood and Johan Peleman, "The Arms Fixers: Controlling the Brokers and Shipping Agents", Basic Research Report 99.3, *PRIO Report 3/99*, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, 1999, pp.19-28.

that Bangladesh was not involved in any way with the arms drop (the arms were fortunately not used), the Purulia case illustrates the complexities of arms trafficking and how a country can easily be a target and a victim of international trafficking.

By keeping silent on the issue of small arms and drugs, Bangladesh has allowed itself to be portrayed negatively in the international community both at home and abroad. On many occasions international bodies, foreign representatives in Dhaka and foreign media have “expressed their concern of increasing human rights violation”,³⁴ and even alleged that Bangladesh was “turning into a terrorist state”³⁵ or that she was “harbouring (India’s) insurgents”, and so forth. These misconceptions and accusations should not be taken lightly as they may even be foreign policy strategies of other countries to tarnish the image of Bangladesh, or in the case of the rise of religious militancy, they may have even been early warning signals, or even both. Dispassionate and timely research can save the country from undesired comments.

From the above trends, it is significant to view small arms and drugs as high priority issues in foreign policy making. Both products have external dimensions that make it imperative for decision-makers to look beyond national boundaries for their solutions. Small arms and drugs have direct and indirect impact on security in all its aspects: state, societal and human. Therefore, it is in Bangladesh’s national interest to curb terrorism, insurgency, smuggling, trafficking, trans-boundary criminal activities and interference of foreign intelligence organizations. Policymakers of concerned countries have to sit with their counterparts across the negotiating table to discuss these problems. A country’s internal stability and external relations are jeopardized not only because of the cross border trafficking of small arms and drugs, but also due to lack of coordinated management and tact. Therefore, small arms and drugs are by default foreign policy issues.

³⁴ Dr. Irene Khan, in her speech on “Human Security and Human Rights in the context of Bangladesh and South Asia”, organized by BIIS, 24 December 2002, Dhaka.

³⁵ Bruce Lintner, “Cocoon of Terror”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 2002, cited in www.bangladeshhighcommission.org.com.

4. FOREIGN POLICY INITIATIVES IN ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM OF SALW: AN ASSESSMENT

4.1. Bilateral & Multilateral Initiatives

There has hardly been any meeting at the government level on the issues of small arms or drugs specifically. However, this is not to suggest that these issues have not been raised at all. The first case followed perhaps soon after the liberation war in 1971. The arms and ammunition surrendered by the Pakistan armed forces and captured by the Indians may be identified as one of the earliest case studies where Bangladesh foreign policy on this particular issue was put to test. Allegedly, many of the arms were transported to India under the Indian army supervision. "From a strictly legal point of view, Bangladesh's demand for a share in the captured arms was just."³⁶ A joint command composed of Indian and Bangladesh forces was set up on 6 December, 1971 and though the arms were mostly captured by or surrendered to the Indian forces, they were technically in the possession of the joint command. Therefore, Bangladesh had legitimate claims to some of the arms".³⁷

Over the years, small arms and drugs were linked to cross border terrorism, organized crime syndicates, smuggling, insurgency, and so forth. It became clear that a significant share of the small arms and drugs was entering into Bangladesh through India and Myanmar. Flag meetings took place from time to time between border security forces of concerned countries to discuss smuggling, trafficking, infiltration, etc. In 1997, Bangladesh and India agreed to act jointly against insurgent groups operating along their common borders. This decision was expected to improve bilateral relations.³⁸ Similarly, according to the 'Brief on Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations' published by the Commerce Ministry, two agreements were signed on the repatriation of the Rohingya

³⁶ Ishtiaq Hossain, "Bangladesh-India Relations: Issues and Problems", in Emajuddin Ahmed (ed.), *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh : A Small State's Imperative, op.cit.*, p.35.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Jane's Defence Weekly, 15th January 1997, cited in *International Security Digest*, Centre For Defence Studies , Vol.4, No.1, King's College, University of London, February 1997.

refugees, and prevention of trafficking of narcotics.³⁹ The other related outstanding issue between Myanmar and Bangladesh is the injuries and deaths caused by landmines planted by the Nasaka forces along the border to stop the outflow of Rohingyas. In eight years, at least 56 people were maimed or killed by mine explosion.⁴⁰ When it comes to human lives, especially those of Bangladeshi nationals, the foreign office cannot ignore it.

Apart from taking bilateral initiatives, Bangladesh has also been active in multilateral arrangements. As a member of SAARC, Bangladesh has signed the SAARC Regional Convention on Terrorism at the third SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in 1987. This Convention is considered as a historic step towards the prevention and elimination of terrorism from the region.⁴¹ Prior to the Kathmandu Summit, the Heads of State or Government agreed in the Bangalore Declaration of 1986 that ‘cooperation among SAARC states was vital if terrorism was to be prevented and eliminated from the region.’⁴² Ironically, although the purpose was to eliminate terrorism, there was no exclusive clause that included the trafficking and production of small arms, weapons and ammunition. Only a brief reference on the use of firearms and explosives has been made when describing terrorism.

A similar SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substance was signed at the Fifth SAARC Summit held in Male in 1990. In the Colombo Summit held in 1991, the member states expressed serious concern over the growing linkages between drug trafficking, international arms trade and terrorist activities.⁴³

At the global level, Bangladesh, as member of the United Nations, subscribes to the UN Resolution 2625 (XXV) that requires each state to

³⁹ Cited in Yunus Ali Sheikh, “Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations: Making Most of Proximity”, *BISS Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1998, p. 472.

⁴⁰ Khondokar Mohitul Islam, “Bangladesh-Myanmar Shimante Bhumi mine Bibbishika”, *Shaptahik Robbar*, 27 May 2001, p. 17.

⁴¹ See for details, paragraph 18 of the Kathmandu Declaration, “Kathmandu Summit: Declaration and Joint Press Release” published by the Secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 4 November 1987, Kathmandu, p.8.

⁴² SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu.

⁴³ Paragraph 40, Colombo Declaration, SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu, 1991.

refrain from organising, instigating, assisting or participating in acts of strife or terrorist acts in another state or acquiescing in organized activities within its territory directed towards the commission of such acts. Bangladesh was the first South Asian country to have signed on to the Ottawa Treaty, *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Landmines and on Their Destruction*. Bangladesh has also participated in the 2001 Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects organized by the United Nations in New York.⁴⁴

4.2. An Assessment

The Bangladesh foreign policymakers have been quite active in trying to curb terrorism and drugs; at least this appears so on paper. In reality, however, the conventions and agreements have yet to show any positive results. Very little has been achieved in absolute terms to stop proliferation of small arms and drug trafficking. Bangladesh continues to be plagued by fresh in-flows of drugs and arms. The question that immediately crosses the mind is, why so? What has gone wrong?

First, Small arms and drugs continue to be treated as domestic problems to be dealt with internally. It is only raised when linked to insurgency. With the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, policymakers perhaps do not consider arms and drugs to be security threats any more.

Second, the issue of small arms is a sensitive topic in bilateral relations. Raising the problem is often perceived as an accusation followed by counter accusation. Bangladesh diplomats have to be careful not to create misunderstanding with their neighbouring countries. Yet, it is relatively easier discussing outstanding issues between similar governments, in comparison to discussing these issues with a military junta. This is the case with Bangladesh and Myanmar over the issues of landmines and small arms, repatriation of Rohingya refugees and cross-border infiltration. According to a former diplomat of Bangladesh, “It is very

⁴⁴ For more detail on the Conference and on Bangladesh’s statement, See www.un.org/Depts/dda/CAB/smallarms

difficult to understand their mindset.”⁴⁵ For many years, Myanmar’s border forces continued to implant landmines in order to stop Rohingyas from crossing over to Bangladesh, in spite of the fact that innocent people were being killed or maimed. To have an opportunity to raise the issue, without agitating the Junta, is a challenge in itself.

Third, it has become increasingly difficult to trace the country of origin or end- destination. With more non-state actors and private groups entering into the clandestine trade, it becomes almost impossible to point fingers. Corruption among the law enforcing agencies, safeguarding evidence (*alamat*), political protection of criminals, make it difficult to come across hard evidence that can be placed at the negotiating table.

Fourth, perhaps the greatest handicap of our foreign policymakers in controlling arms and drugs is the paradox that exists in our political culture. The alleged nexus between mainstream political parties and organized criminal underworld raises the domestic demand for small arms by those quarters that are also supposed to control the flow. Personal or party interest outweighs national interest, paving the way to the discreet in-flow of small arms and ammunition.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, an attempt has been made to describe the problem of small arms and drugs in Bangladesh and its relation to foreign policy issues. It has also highlighted measures that have been taken to address the problems as well as the limitations. Following is a set of policy recommendations that may be considered in future policy formulation.

Identify foreign policy priorities in the light of new security perceptions: Small arms and drugs are foreign policy issues in their own right. Small arms and drugs have so far been discussed in the light of international terrorism and insurgency. This paper has shown how small arms and other forms of cross border smuggling can affect bilateral relations. It is time that Bangladesh’s policymakers treated illicit trafficking of arms and drugs as components of foreign policy formulation.

⁴⁵ Author’s interview with a former Bangladeshi diplomat.

Creation of a separate cell within the Foreign Ministry on small arms and drugs: The task of this cell would be to

- Encourage independent studies & research on small arms and drugs;
- Create a data bank in cooperation with the Ministry of Home and the Department of Narcotics Control;
- Raise awareness in the Foreign Service Academy, Police Academy, and National Defence College by including these issues in their curriculum, and keeping follow-ups; and
- Appoint a Consultant/ Expert for overall coordination.

Insertion of additional clause(s) in the SAARC Conventions:

Although the conventions on arms and drugs are major steps in acknowledging the threat, these alone do not suffice. The clauses need to be more specific on trafficking, smuggling and punitive measures. Initiative should be taken in earnest for insertion of required clauses.

Conclusion of Extradition Treaty with Neighbouring Countries:

In view of recent experience, efforts should be taken to conclude an extradition treaty with bordering countries, especially India where Bangladeshi criminals allegedly take shelter.

An Active Foreign Policy to control arms and drugs:

Although Bangladesh is a small state, it can take the initiative to highlight the problem of arms and drugs. Bangladesh's diplomats need to be more skillful in their art of negotiations so that they could address these sensitive issues with sensitive neighbours. India, for example, is pursuing a vigorous foreign policy in this regard. It has been partly successful in building a strong anti-terrorism lobby in the West.

Increase in Cross Border Cooperation:

Since a major share of illegal arms and drugs enter Bangladesh through neighbouring countries, there needs to be more cross border cooperation to control the flow. In the turn of the 21st century - an era marked by globalization and free trade - New Delhi decided to fence its borders to stop illegal infiltration, a move that immediately strained Indo-Bangladesh relations.⁴⁶ To avoid

⁴⁶ Former Foreign Minister, Abdus Samad Azad expressed his dissatisfaction over India's decision at a press conference in Dhaka, saying that the border fencing would affect the relation between the two neighbouring countries,

misunderstanding, both countries should work together to find a mechanism acceptable to both parties to check the movement of arms and drugs as well as wanted criminals and terrorists. As one scholar has noted, “it seems odious that when the criminals and anti-state elements have their effective system of networking across the borders in the perpetration of their crimes, the government of the countries of the region have so far failed to establish their own networking mechanism”.⁴⁷

Cooperation with countries/organizations: Since Bangladesh is a transit-country, it is to the interest of the end user countries that countries like Bangladesh remain outside the grip of the mafia. Dhaka’s relations with organizations such as the Interpol could be expanded. Similarly, training of Bangladesh’s border forces and customs officers should be updated. Unfortunately, the smuggling syndicates are better equipped and financially more powerful than the poorly paid border security forces. Neither are many of them well trained in this regard. According to the Director (operation) of Narcotics Control Department, at present phensidyl is emerging as a greater problem than morphine and cocaine. However, other officials opined that although the use of morphine and cocaine has increased, the reason these drugs are not seized is because the people responsible for controlling narcotics cannot recognize cocaine or morphine. According to them, they did not receive any training in this field”.⁴⁸

More Transparency in the Foreign Office: Foreign policy is considered an exclusive domain for those who are entrusted with its responsibility in pursuing it. In the age of information sharing, efforts should be taken to be more transparent and interactive with the civil society. This serves two purposes. First, interactions help in the overall development and improvement. Secondly, a transparent foreign policy

Bangladesh Foreign Policy Survey, Vol. 6, No. 1 January-March 2000, BISS, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Shahedul Anam Khan, “Preventing Illegal Flows: A Bangladesh Perspective”, in Dipankar Banerjee (ed.), *South Asia at Gun Point: Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation*, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 2000, p.207.

⁴⁸ *Dainik Janakantha* (Bangladesh), 15 July 1999.

removes doubt, discourages wrong assumption making and, above all, reduces dependence on foreign source of information.⁴⁹

6. CONCLUSION

For many decades, international relations, foreign policy and international security were regarded as state-to-state conduct, and the skilled job of the professional diplomat. However, in recent years one notices a decentralization process in which both state and non-state actors pursue bilateral or multilateral issues. Different actors at the negotiating table include government, non-government organizations, international agencies, donor countries, ethnic minorities, and independent scholars or experts. Scholars who urge on more flexibility in diplomacy have even argued that non-state actors - in particular multinational business enterprises and NGOs - have become “more significant on the world stage than governments who are cast into a limbo of growing irrelevance.”⁵⁰ In fact, there is decentralization within the government, where each ministry or department is presenting its own problem, instead of leaving the foreign ministry solely with it. In the age of information sharing, the role of the media and the civil society in the decision-making process cannot be ignored.

In the light of these changes, Bangladesh foreign policy makers need to consider the practice of constructive interactions between different but relevant actors and non-state actors in policy formulation. Implementing foreign policy is indeed a complex and sensitive process that requires managing without sending wrong signals to neighbours, at the same time, maintaining one’s position in the regional and international community. Foreign policy is also about managing Bangladesh’s image in the world, especially in the age of globalization. For this purpose, frequent brainstorming and stocktaking sessions within and outside the foreign office can help identify the strengths and weaknesses of its foreign policy. The fact that Bangladesh is a developing country and that it is surrounded by neighbours like India and Myanmar may appear as

⁴⁹Bangladeshi researchers having very little access to government sources, and therefore, have to depend heavily on western and Indian sources that may not always be objective.

⁵⁰ Andrew F. Cooper and Brian Hocking, “ Governments, Non-Government Organization and the Recalibration of Diplomacy”, *Global Society*, Vol. 14, No. 3, UK, 2000, p. 362.

hurdles to our diplomats in attaining their goal. Skilled diplomacy, updated information, regular follow-up meetings and, more importantly, homework carried out well ahead of time will invariably give an edge over the counterparts at the negotiating table.

In the age of multilateral co-operation, sharing data is essential. If Bangladesh wants to work in a multilateral framework to curb the small arms and drug menace, she should share information on illicit stockpiling, manufacturing, transfer and trade and possession. The United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects – the first of its kind - was held in 2001. Participating states agreed on the *Program of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects*. This marked a watershed in international efforts to control SALW. Bangladesh is a party to the UNPoA. However, as required by the UNPoA, member states are required to submit national reports on SALW. Ninety per cent of states submitted reports that provided information on national laws, regulations and administrative procedures governing small arms control at the national level.⁵¹ No such report has yet been submitted by Bangladesh. (See Annex 3)

Keeping a low profile on the issues of small arms and drugs will not improve the plight of Bangladesh. The policy makers in the foreign office have been neglecting or keeping a low profile on these problems for too long. Bangladesh is in a precarious situation; in fact she may even be called a time bomb. With rising unemployment in the country and increasing demand for sophisticated arms and explosives in neighbouring countries, the realistic path for Bangladesh would be pursuing a two prong diplomatic approach in a structured framework. On the one hand, the foreign office should continue to pursue its economic diplomacy vigorously in order to encourage investment and create employment, and on the other, practice a ‘zero tolerance’⁵² foreign policy to stop

⁵¹ Elli Kytomaki and Valerie Yankey-Wayne, *Implementing the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons: Analysis of the Reports Submitted by States in 2003*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Geneva, 2004, p. 30.

⁵² In a Seminar on “A Strategy for combatting Terrorism in Bangladesh” organized by Bangladesh Enterprise Initiatives (BEI) in Dhaka, 23-24 December 2006, the President of BEI, Ambassador Farooq Sobhan in his concluding

trafficking of arms, drugs and similar contraband items into Bangladesh. If Bangladesh fails to address the problem now, it will not take long before AK-47s and heroine will be in the hands of every criminal and distressed youth. Unless serious preventive and control mechanisms are undertaken to curb the menace, Bangladesh will no longer be a mere transit country for small arms and drugs, but an end-use destination with a considerable big market.

remarks emphasized on the need for 'zero tolerance' on the issues of small arms and explosives in Bangladesh.

Annex 1

Fundamentals of Foreign Policy of Bangladesh

1. The State shall base its international relations on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, peaceful settlements of international disputes, and respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter, and on the basis of those principles shall-

a) Strive for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament;

b) uphold the right of every people freely to determine and build up its own social, economic and political system by ways and means of its own free choice; and

c) Support oppressed peoples throughout the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism or racialism.

2) The State shall endeavor to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity.

Source: www.mofa.gov.bd accessed on 26 December 2006.

Annex 2**Summary of Recovered Arms & Ammunition Till 30 Sep 2006 by RAB**

Ser	Description	RAB-1	RAB-2	RAB-3	RAB-4	RAB-5	RAB-6	RAB-7	RAB-8	RAB-9	RAB-10	RAB-11	RAB-12	Total
1	Revolver	24	63	152	70	34	46	48	18	39	22	08	04	530
2	Pistol	32	49	58	35	37	50	23	04	02	11	08	03	314
3	9 mm SMC/SMG	0	0	01	0	01	03	04	0	01	0	0	0	10
4	AK-47 SMG	01	01	0	02	20	0	13	0	0	0	0	01	38
5	AK-22 Rifle	0	0	01	0	0	0	02	0	0	0	0	0	03
6	M-16 Rifle	0	0	0	0	0	01	02	0	0	0	0	0	03
7	.303 Rifle	0	01	0	02	0	02	18	0	0	0	0	0	23
8	7.62 mm Rifle	0	0	0	0	0	0	03	0	0	0	0	0	03
9	7 mm Rifle	0	0	0	0	0	0	01	0	0	0	0	0	01
10	SLR	0	0	0	0	0	0	01	0	0	0	0	0	01
11	Air Gun/ Katta Air Gun	01	0	0	01	04	06	07	0	0	0	0	0	19
12	Shot Gun	0	01	01	03	02	10	03	0	02	0	0	0	22
13	.22 Bore Rifle	05	05	03	0	03	04	03	0	01	0	0	03	27
14	SBBL	04	05	22	07	18	03	109	01	06	0	0	04	179
15	DBBL	0	02	02	0	02	05	16	0	0	0	0	0	27
16	LG/Pipe gun/Shooter/ Shutter Gun	21	46	93	50	89	222	252	26	21	11	04	21	856
17	sawed Rifle	01	02	01	02	02	03	04	02	0	01	01	0	19
18	Booster/Beta Gun	0	0	0	0	0	01	01	0	0	0	0	0	02
19.	M-79 Grenade Launcher	0	0	0	0	0	0	01	0	0	0	0	0	01
20.	Rocket Launcher T-56	0	0	0	0	0	0	01	0	0	0	0	0	01
Total		89	175	334	172	212								2079

Source: rabbd.com (Official website of Rapid Action Battalion)

Annex 3

National Laws and Regulations of some of the Asian countries on Small Arms and Light Weapons

Country	Manufacture	Export	Import	Transit	Transfer	Civilian possession
Bangladesh						
India	√	√	√			√
Pakistan	√	√	√	√	√	√
Sri Lanka	√		√			√
China	√	√	√			√
Indonesia						√
Malaysia	√	√	√	√		

The information this Table has been sorted from the original Table published in Elli Kytomaki and Valerie Yankey-Wayne, *Implementing the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons: Analysis of the Reports Submitted by States in 2003*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Geneva, 2004. The table gives an overview of the information states, in their commitment to the United Nation Programme of Action (UNPOA), provided in their national reports with regard to the sorts of national legislation covering manufacture, exports, imports, transfers, transits as well as licensed civilian possession.