

Free press but fettered mediemen!

What a contradiction in terms

THE speech of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia at the two-year completion ceremony of the four-party alliance government has not gone down as a forward-looking address one would have expected it to be. The expectancy had to do with the importance of the occasion. To be candid, it had very little about the present, almost nothing about the future, and one could dare say, a bit too much about the past. For the head of government who has been in power for two years out of a five-year mandate to devote almost her entire speech to blaming the opposition can only indicate that she had very little to tell the people. The latter who had so enthusiastically elected her on an agenda for change could hardly be interested in the spewing out of an old tirade against the opposition. The people only wanted to be appraised of what this government has delivered during the last two years vis-à-vis what their perception is of the government's performance.

This opposition-bashing and the refrain of blaming some of the current failures on the 'mess' the erstwhile AL government had left to the BNP-led coalition government two years ago, we have paid audience to for too long. At the initial stages of the government's incumbency, say, for six months or so, people perhaps didn't mind lending their ears to the strident remarks about the AL legacy, but two years down the road very few would be prepared to listen to it. The prime minister's recounting of how former president Shahabuddin and chief adviser to the caretaker government Latifur Rahman had been approached by the then PM Sheikh Hasina for nullifying the results of the 2001's general elections is again going to the past and not speaking of the present which the occasion demanded.

The head of the government has asked her party cadres to resist the AL by forming village committees throughout the country. We regard it as a disturbing call; for, it bodes taking confrontational politics to a new low. The best way for the government to silence critics and put a lid on 'destructive activities' is to perform and deliver.

The PM has said, "It clearly seems that there is freedom of media, but not freedom of journalists", because the latter are not free to write for fear of losing jobs. In other words, journalists are working as puppets of newspaper owners effectively missing out on good work of the government. She has also faulted the journalists for, what she termed, being jealous of the government's success like the opposition. The bracketing of the opposition and the media is unfortunate.

As a matter of fact, there is a palpable contradiction in her statement that the media is free but the journalists are not. How can there be press freedom without free journalists? Just for the attention of the prime minister we may also inform her that there are five dailies with more than one lakh circulation and a few of them sell two lakh copies a day. This would never have happened if the people had not put their trust in newspapers. And a newspaper would never enjoy credibility unless it were free and independent.

Saluting the high achievers

Their brilliance is national asset

IT was a glittering gathering of brilliant, starry-eyed youngsters last Friday at Mirpur Indoor stadium. A total of 456 students were felicitated by this newspaper for their outstanding achievement in 'O' and 'A' levels examinations. We saluted them for the academic feat they accomplished. What we saw was the cream of the crop, not to forget or belittle the crop itself. Those who were not part of the celebration on the day are also substantially meritorious. The high achievers along with those slightly below the top should be tapped well for a better and prosperous Bangladesh.

This year we felicitated more brilliant students than the past year, 137 more to be precise. That itself shows the excellence more youngsters are working for. The icing on the cake is Rezwan Haque's brilliant results. He obtained the highest marks in English language worldwide in 'O' levels. The profound advice by the chief guest of the programme Justice Habibur Rahman to the young achievers, for upholding the standards, values and norms of the nation and not to alienate themselves from tradition and roots, should be motivating and inspiring them to reach newer heights of excellence. We congratulate them -- those who are the future of our nation, those who would be instrumental in building the nation up.

There has been a propensity among brilliant young students towards going abroad in search of knowledge and better life. Sadly very few of them return to their motherland. It is our responsibility to bring them back after they finish their studies abroad. It is our duty to create an environment so as to enable them to use the knowledge and skill they attained overseas in the country. Unless we are able to do that, our country will continue to be devoid of the brilliance of these bright youngsters.

The rumpus over the nukes



M ABDUL HAFIZ

LAST year in September the government of Tony Blair released the first of the two intelligence dossiers outlining the threats posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The dossier included, among other things, now infamous claim that those weapons could be deployed within 45 minutes of an order to do so. It became a political scandal when Robin Cook, the former British Foreign Secretary testified recently that Tony Blair knew before going to war that Iraq had no WMD. In the US, the CIA-conducted survey could not find, to the embarrassment of Bush Administration, any trace of WMD in Iraq, now under their occupation, where nothing could be concealed, neither could any trick be resorted to. It is naive to believe that the Bush Administration wasn't aware of it earlier. It was an open secret that Iraq failed to restart its nuclear plant after being bombed out in 1981 by the Israelis and there could not have been any facility left to produce any kind of WMD after a decade-long stringent sanction and weapon inspection.

Yet an Anglo-American leadership with a warped worldview embarked on what the powerful always did in the past -- twisting the arms of the weak with an ulterior motive while ensuring minimum cost and no risk, if possible. They found a soft target in Iraq where a WMD was only a figment of imagination while skipping over countries with proven record of possessing WMD -- like Israel. Although it never officially declared itself a nuclear power, Israel is by some distance the mightiest nuclear power outside the Big Five. Israel is estimated to have a stockpile of more than half tonne of plutonium and an unknown quantity of weapon-grade highly enriched uranium. It's plutonium stockpile is more than the combined stockpile held by other non-Big Five nuclear-capable countries. Experts estimate that Israel has around 200 nuclear devices.

"Our antennae are up" so said a senior UN official watching worldwide nuclear proliferation efforts. "The international community can rest assured we do keep track of the events, if they go beyond talk". But a defaulting Israel could always skip those antennae while the stragglers like North Korea and Iran are invariably caught. But the 'preemption' lords are circumspect enough not to dabble with them lest they are provoked to field their nukes which are a bit more real than those of Iraq.

The jury is still, of course, out on whether North Korea has the bomb. During the eighties the country stockpiled enough plutonium for a couple of bombs. But a 1994 agreement with the Clinton Administration froze the programme. However that

agreement broke down last year amid fresh row over North Korea's nuclear ambition. Washington believes that the country may have at least two devices in its hand. As regards Iran's bomb there is as yet no wherewithal. However, the recent discoveries and question marks point to the tracing of two different types of weapon-grade uranium at an underground uranium enrichment centre under construction in central Iran. North Korea's estimated two bombs and some vital disclosure about Iran's nuclear programme have ostensibly been enough to unnerve Washington's

umbrella including protection from nuclear onslaught from any quarter. But the relations between the US and Saudi Arabia steadily declined in the wake of nine-eleven terrorists' attacks in America: 15 of the 19 attackers were Saudi. As a result Saudi Arabia is no more covered by the US' security guarantee; neither does it have its own deterrence arrangement to Parry a nuclear conventional assault. Apparently there exists a security vacuum for her at this juncture.

As regard an option for nuclear-free Middle East the prospect are

PERSPECTIVES

The Saudi quest for a nuclear deterrence is not new. In 1988 Saudis bought from China intermediate-range missiles capable of reaching any part of Middle East with a nuclear warhead. Four years ago Saudi Arabia sent a defence team to Pakistan to tour its secret nuclear facilities and to be briefed by Abdul Qadir Khan, the father of Pakistan's bomb.

neo-conservatives who seem to be opting for caution in handling these two defiant nuclear aspirants.

The response-pattern has however sent a signal that nukes are perhaps the only safeguard against the pre-emption attacks rendered by Bush doctrine. Small wonder that there is a new spate of nuclear proliferation as the new aspirants queue up for acquiring nuclear device as deterrent.

Saudi Arabia, in response to current upheaval in the Middle East, has embarked on a strategic review that includes the question of acquiring nuclear weapon for the Kingdom. A strategy paper being considered at the highest level in Riyadh sets out three options.

* To acquire nuclear capability as deterrent.

* To maintain or enter into alliance with an existing nuclear power that would offer protection.

* To try to reach regional agreement on having a nuclear-free Middle East.

It is for some time that the Saudis are wary of US military presence in their country and would like them packing up. Their experience of each other have not always been savoury. The relationship may one day come to a head when, to take over the control of Saudi oil fields, the US may as well subject the troubled ally to the doctrine of pre-emptive attack. America did not have much compunction in dumping once-friendly Iraq, having the world's second largest oil reserve, when the crunch was felt. What is the guarantee that the US will not repeat it for a country having the world's largest oil reserve, the Saudis genuinely worry.

Saudi Arabia does not regard Iran, a past adversary with which Riyadh has restored friendly relation, as a direct threat. But it is unnerved by the possibility of living with two nuclear neighbours -- Iran and Israel -- on its two flanks. Riyadh is also worried about a string of apparent leaks in American papers that the US administration is critical of Saudi Arabia. The country has long enjoyed the US security

thin indeed. The Arab countries have been persistently urging International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA), the UN nuclear watchdog, to get tough with Israel to let inspectors assess its nuclear programme in line with similar pressure on Iran. So far, enormous of such urges and appeals went in vain. Israel became only stronger in its nuclear muscles.

The Saudi quest for a nuclear deterrence is not new. In 1988 Saudis bought from China intermediate-range missiles capable of reaching any part of Middle East with a nuclear warhead. Four years ago Saudi Arabia sent a defence team to Pakistan to tour its secret nuclear facilities and to be briefed by Abdul Qadir Khan, the father of Pakistan's bomb. There have also been rumors going back 20 years that the Saudis wanted to pay Pakistan to do the research and development on nuclear weapons. According to Washington-based Institute of Science and International Security there are doubts that the Saudis would try to build a nuclear bomb, preferring instead to buy a nuclear warhead.

Whatever may be the manner in which the Saudis would obtain a nuclear deterrence, there's obviously a lot of restlessness in the Middle East today prompting and pushing the nations like Saudi Arabia to produce a nuclear deterrence. But whenever they are about to have it cannot be without a great deal of furor over the old problem of proliferation which is still as real as ever. Apart from five permanent members of the Security Council which are all nuclear powers, around 25 other countries have sought to obtain nuclear weapons with varying degrees of success. It is yet to be seen how a Saudi initiative in this regard will be dealt with by international community represented by various UN agencies which are already tainted by brazen bias.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

It's a pity Mahathir's true message didn't register

ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE recent speech made by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to the OIC has touched off a firestorm of controversy in Europe and the US. The New York Times ran a thundering editorial entitled "Islamic Anti-Semitism" in which it huffed: "It is hard to know which is more alarming -- a toxic statement of hatred of Jews by the Malaysian prime minister at an Islamic summit meeting this week or the unanimous applause it engendered from the kings, presidents and emirs in the audience." Leaders from the EU and the US were quick to follow suit, "deeply deploring" Mahathir's "totally unacceptable" comments.

On the other hand, the speech was very well-received in the Muslim world which, let us not forget, was its intended audience, and many are genuinely puzzled as to the furor that Mahathir's words have set off. Those who are not puzzled feel that the firestorm underscores Mahathir's point about Jewish domination of the world and believe that he has merely had the courage to articulate what everyone in the Muslim world believes but no-one else dares to say.

Both these views, however, miss the point.

First, in the West no-one appears to have read the entire speech which is why they are reacting to it as though it were nothing more than an 4000-word rant against "the Jews." As it so happens, this was not at all the principal subject of Mahathir's speech. Mahathir's speech was in fact a powerful critique of the flaws and failings of the Muslim world and a clarion call to action for the Muslim world to overcome its weaknesses.

Had the New York Times editorial board taken the time to actually read the speech in its entirety, it might have helped to clear up the paper's apparent mystification over why Egyptian foreign minister Ahmed Maher thought the speech a "very wise assessment" and "even" Hamid Karzai called the speech "very correct."

"Jews rule the world, says Mahathir" read the BBC crawl across the bottom of my computer screen the day after the speech. This is what the BBC thought fit to highlight about Mahathir's 4000-word call to the Muslims to take control of their own destiny.

In focusing on this one relatively insignificant aspect of his speech and ignoring the rest, the Western media went a long way towards making Mahathir's point for him.

But Mahathir's unquestioning defenders have also got hold of the wrong end of the stick. In the first place, it is equally mistaken to applaud Mahathir for issuing a courageous denunciation of Jews and the influence they wield. This was not Mahathir's message and understanding his speech as such would be to ignore its actual meaning every bit as much as commentators in Europe and the US have. In fact, in his speech Mahathir spoke of Jews almost admiringly and referred to them primarily in order to contrast the condition of Jews in the world with that of Muslims and to

exhort Muslims to emulate their success: "They survived 2000 years of pogroms not by hitting back, but by thinking."

To understand Mahathir's speech as a denunciation of Jews is to miss the point entirely. The main point of the speech was that it is self-defeating for Muslims to blame others for the conditions in which they find themselves and that the way forward is for Muslims to empower themselves and take control of their own lives and destinies. "I will not enumerate the instances of our humiliation and oppression, nor will I once again condemn our detractors and oppressors. It would be an exercise in futility because they are not going to change their attitudes just because we condemn them. If we are to recover our dignity and that of Islam, our religion, it is we who must decide, it is we who must act."

Mahathir's speech should be neither attacked nor defended as a denunciation of "the Jews."

Mahathir is a highly intelligent, educated and capable man who has provided visionary leadership both to his people and to the people of the developing world for the past two decades. He should have known better than to give his opponents this kind of opening to discredit both him and the Muslim world.

This is not to say that Mahathir's speech was entirely trouble-free. The trouble with his speech is that fine sentiments such as those quoted above were undermined by the simplistic language he used when speaking about "the Jews."

Don't get me wrong. I do not equate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.

One can have sincere philosophical problems with the creation of Israel and its continued existence as an apartheid that treats its non-Jews as second-class citizens without being an anti-Semite.

One can deplore Israel's continued military occupation of the West Bank and the disgraceful conditions under which Palestinians in the occupied territories must suffer without being anti-Semite.

One can comment on the fact that US foreign policy is biased towards Israel largely due to the disproportionate political influence wielded by the pro-Israel lobby or that the media in the US is heavily biased towards Israel in their coverage of the Middle East without being anti-Semite.

These are coherent and eminently defensible points of view that are shared by many Jews.

Indeed, some of the most powerful critiques of Israel and its supporters that I have read have been written by Noam Chomsky, Eric Alterman and Norman Finkelstein -- all of them Jews.

But there is a difference between this kind of critique and statements such as: "But today the Jews rule this world by proxy."

In the first place, it is simplistic and simple-minded to talk about "the Jews" as though Jews are a monolithic block. Like everyone else, Jews are individuals -- they can be liberal and conservative,

bigoted and fair-minded, pro-Israeli and anti-Israeli. One can no more speak of "the Jews" than one can of "the Blacks" or "the Bangladeshis" for that matter. To bundle together an entire nation or people under one convenient heading is nothing more than intellectual laziness.

Perhaps Mahathir meant to say that Israel has succeeded in co-opting US foreign policy. Or even that Jews -- taken together as a people -- have achieved success and wield power and influence far in excess of their numerical strength. But this is quite different from stating that "the Jews rule this world by proxy."

Mahathir even conceded as much in his speech. He allowed that "even among the Jews there are many who do not approve of what the Israelis are doing." But this begs the question, if many Jews do not approve of what Israel is doing, how is it possible to speak of "the Jews" as though they were one indivisible entity? It is simply a

failure of the intellect to think in those terms.

Let's be frank. Statements such as "they invented and successfully promoted socialism, communism, human rights and democracy so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong, so they may enjoy equal rights with others" are just plain embarrassing. These are not words that a man of Mahathir's calibre should want attributed to or even associated with him.

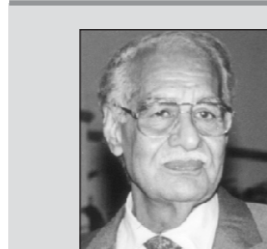
No-one comes out of this looking well. The commentators and leaders who have obsessed on a few sentences ripped out of context out of a thoughtful 4000-word speech have done nothing more than make Mahathir's point for him that the Western media is only too ready to portray Islam in a negative light.

But at the same time Mahathir has himself undermined an otherwise brilliant uplifting address with a few words that make him sound like an ignorant bigot. Mahathir is by no means an ignorant bigot. He is a highly intelligent, educated and capable man who has provided visionary leadership both to his people and to the people of the developing world for the past two decades.

He should have known better than to give his opponents this kind of opening to discredit both him and the Muslim world. He should have known that the furor over a few poorly-conceived words about "the Jews" would eclipse the true meaning and import of his address, and that the public perception of Islam would thus be diminished at a time when it can ill afford it.

Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star

Not by bread alone



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

IT is entirely a different Riyadh -- majestic, modern and mobile. Thirty years ago when I visited it, the Saudi Arabian capital was a mere habitation of small brick houses which had been retrieved from inhospitable desert. The battle to conquer dunes of sand still goes on, relentlessly. In the meanwhile, many Riyadh-like cities -- Jeddah or Dammam -- have come up in the kingdom, with new enterprises. A network of six-lane roads, which are lighted even before it gets dark, links a country of nomads, where even camel tracks were not visible at one time.

True, the earnings from huge reservoirs of oil and the toll on pilgrims for the Haj have made the development affordable to the kingdom. Yet what has made it possible is the labour from the subcontinent. There are nearly 30 lakh people, 16 lakh from India alone. They are engineers, doctors, economists, scientists, educationists or mere labourers. They are still the backbone of the country's economy.

Surprisingly, the key to the progress as they are, they have no

privileges, no security of tenure or no right to residence. They can be thrown out any time without notice. The status of newcomers or those who came 30 or 40 years ago is the same: no legal domicile, no automatic nationality and not even temporary citizenship. All depends on the preference or the permission of the government. It may want people from a particular country at one time and from another at some other.

Once the Pakistanis were allowed in droves. Then the Indians came to be liked. They still "sell" well

Openings are shrinking because the Saudi youth is entering the market and demanding employment. Some of them are brilliant. But the average is indolent and wants the best of life without working for it. Even those Saudis who are below par are pushing out old hands to the background or even out of the country. I know the son-of-the-soil theory has come to prevail

in every country. Yet those who have given their sweat and toil to build Saudi Arabia should have been given a sense of security in the jobs they occupy or ensured a

The Indians in Saudi Arabia or, for that matter, the Gulf countries, proudly cling to their nationality while those living in America, the UK or Canada have jettisoned their nationality. But the latter are considered more important even as non-resident Indians (NRIs).

There was a big jamboree of NRIs last year at New Delhi without any invitee from the Arab countries or the Gulf. New Delhi's criterion for importance is the quantum of money which the community from a particular area contributes to foreign reserves. I have no idea how large is

because of their reputation of minding their own business and working hard. Policemen treat them with consideration. Still when it comes to having any tangible rights, the Indians are no better than the others. New entrants are few and far between as the time goes by.

I can understand if a person is thrown out for having committed an offence or for having violated even the unwritten laws of the country. Any consideration other than that is capricious. But then that is the reality. The sword of Damocles is constantly hanging over the heads of those who are working. But they have learnt to live with it.

salary for the period they would have served if they had not been retired early.

It should not, however, come as a surprise that the Americans, employed at similar jobs, have a fixed tenure and comfortable living. They draw a salary which is three or four times more than that of people from the subcontinent. The anti-American feeling is strong, particularly after what has happened to Iraq. Still they throw their weight around and continue to enjoy a pre-eminent position.

But then New Delhi is no less dazzled by those employed in America or elsewhere in the West.

BETWEEN THE LINES

"Do you have freedom," I asked one of the Indian friends at Riyadh. He said it all depended on what was meant by freedom. "My wife, wearing jewellery, can travel all by herself throughout the country even at night," he said. "Nobody would even imagine that any harm would come to her. Compare this with India which has all the freedom."

the financial input of NRIs from the West. But the Indians from Saudi Arabia alone remit seven billion dollars every year. This is apart from the money which Air India make because its Saudi Arabia route is the most paying.

Ninety per cent of Indians in Saudi Arabia are Muslims. It is amazing how closely they follow the day-to-day developments in their country through TV channels. With no firm future in Saudi Arabia, their main concern is: What will happen to the Indian Muslims? In one way, the question is easy to answer: the country has the constitution which is secular in letter and spirit. The word

their entire stay of 150 years. Still Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani has the temerity to say that the "ideology of the BJP or the RSS has been an unifying factor for the nation." How can those who want to found a state on religion, not the nation, unite the country? But any desperation or retaliation in terms of fanaticism will be counter-productive for the Muslims. They should maintain their faith in the constitution which gives equality before the law. They should remember that wading through blood in the wake of partition and adopting a secular constitution was not easy. But what then Prime Minister

island holds the ultimate autocratic power. How will they implement democracy in the nation which they do not practise in their own party? Both the parties exploit innocent people uttering false promise with ultimate intention of going to power. They forget their promise once they are in power. Neither of the parties have any intention to work together to formulate joint policies on matter of national interest such as terror-

ism, security, transparency' etc." But instead, to achieve their parties' political goal they sacrifice the national interest in the process. I should say they damage the national interest to undermine each other. In this process politics has been criminalised, criminal culture has flourished under the protection of politicians and the fabric of morality of the society has been destroyed. Our generation will some how live their life but we are condemning our new generation to a future of complete doom and jopardy. There is still time for the

My friend was right in one sense. The security of life and property was important. Still the freedom of expression is something basic to human beings. It is heartening to see that Saudi Arabia is holding elections for setting up its first municipal council. With all the luxuries, the say of the people is necessary. Man does not live by bread alone.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Jawaharlal Nehru said at that time was as much true as it is today: "The government of a country like India with many religions that have secured great and devoted following for generations can never function satisfactorily in the modern age except on secular basis."

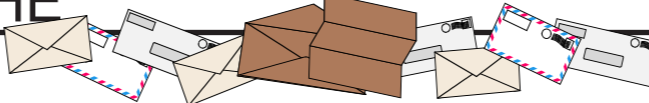
This is what the then King of Saudi Arabia admired about India when I interviewed him many years before. Today's government at Riyadh is no different. What is not understandable is why the government prefers a Muslim to head the Indian embassy in Saudi Arabia. Ours is a secular country and our diversity is the country's strength. Singling out any religious community for representation gives a handle to communal elements.

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Attention, communication minister

I must thank Mr. Nazmul Huda for his brave decision on eliminating the two stroke baby-taxis from city roads. We can now easily differentiate that the air we breathe everyday has become fresher than it used to be. And, certainly, much fresher from those places where the baby taxis are still plying. We are very lucky to get such a courageous minister in the communication sector.

Another decision of the minister to remove rickshaws from the main roads of the city was audacious. There is no doubt that the rickshaws are main obstacles to traffic movement. I must admire this daunting decision too.

Having said that, I want the authority to think about middle class families who are really dependent on the rickshaws. The bus service is still not up to the mark and the number of buses does not meet the demand of the city commuters. The condition of most of the local buses is

extremely poor and hazardous.

As a result, the middle class travellers are at the mercy of the CNGs and the taxi cabs.

Most of the time CNG drivers do not want to go where they are asked to, and if they decide to go, then they demand 10-15 Taka more than the actual fare shown in the metre. Sometimes they also play the trick by saying that the meter does not work. This leaves passengers to haggle over exact fares.

More CNGs and better local bus services

are required to improve this unfortunate condition of middle class people. We all hope that the communication minister will consider the present miserable condition of middle-class families. The unpleasant consequences of removing rickshaws must impel the authority to bring sufficient alternative vehicles on the road before the further decision is taken about any of the city transports.

Md. Ashiqul Haque
West Hajipara Road, Dhaka

Dream turned nightmare

I am a returnee probhahsi after spending decades in England. I came back to my homeland with high hopes to spend the remaining days of my life here. But soon my hope turned into a nightmare after witnessing the decadence of moral, social and political values of the nation. It felt like I have come back to an alien land. For this I blame both the political parties-BNP and AL. Hypocrisy is ripe in the leadership of both

the parties. First of all there exists no democracy in either of the two parties for selecting party leaders. The head of the party holds the ultimate autocratic power. How will they implement democracy in the nation which they do not practise in their own party? Both the parties exploit innocent people uttering false promise with ultimate intention of going to power. They forget their promise once they are in power. Neither of the parties have any intention to work together to formulate joint policies on matter of national interest such as terror-

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leaders of both the parties to save our future generation and the nation as a whole. Please wake up while there is still time. Close your rank and work on the basis of national interest, or history will never forgive you for destroying a nation which achieved independence against tremendous sacrifice under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Mohammed Iqbal Hussain
Dhaka.