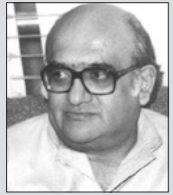


Recapturing the spirit of the Liberation War



REHMAN SOBHAN

[This is Part III of a 3-part series that contains the full text of a speech given by Prof. Sobhan at the Liberation War Museum on March 22.]

ARE we in a position to recapture the vanishing spirit of the Liberation War? Can we build a democratic order which responds to the needs of the people rather than the greed of the powerful? Can we recapture autonomy over our policymaking process? Can we build a tolerant, plural society where all faiths are respected? Is there any escape from this growth and perpetuation of

In conclusion, it must be stated that the emergence of two societies remains in violation of the social contract which has underwritten Bangladesh's struggle for liberation. When the common people of Bangladesh were mobilized behind the liberation struggle they did not expect that their rulers would preside over the emergence of an unjust social order as well as a malfunctioning system of governance. The sense of anger and frustration which permeates our society originates in this sense of disappointed expectations that we have failed to honour the hopes and spirit of the Liberation War.

injustice? The search for answers lies in our ability to build a democratic order where each citizen assumes responsibility, individually and collectively to question those in authority above them and to eventually demand accountability from their political leaders and elected representatives. If we wait upon our leaders to voluntarily make themselves more accountable we may wait for ever. Thus the building of a democratically accountable society becomes our personal responsibility and more so for those with some education and political consciousness. Many more citizen's

must seek this accountability more directly by joining political parties and participating in the struggle to democratize our political parties. This, assertion of individual responsibility must translate into collective action by a civil society which need to remain committed for 365 days in the year to recapturing the spirit of the liberation war rather than just limit themselves to ritual observances on February 21, March 26 and December 16. Civil society should not be seen as a part-time task left to NGOs. In the vacuum left by a non-performing parliament and a casualized civil society full time terrorists and

commercialized *mastaans* will continue to undermine the sustainability of the democratic process. A more accountable system may minimize the injustices of the existing system. But it will do little to moderate the injustices created by the policies and institutions which create and perpetuate such injustice. We thus need to rethink both our policy agendas and to restructure the institutions which perpetuate such injustice. Policy and allocative regimes have to be put in place which prioritizes the ending of poverty by emphasizing justice and inclusion so as to give a

stake to the less privileged in Bangladesh's development process. Such an agenda would need to prioritize more equitable access to educational opportunities and health care so that the children of the deprived face the same opportunities in life as those of the elite. We need to provide resources to the deprived to acquire productive assets in the way of land, water, and technology so as to enable them to compete more equitably in the market place. This would include opportunities to own corporate assets through access to credit from the banking system and the building of institutions which can help them to acquire and manage such assets.

I would hope I live long enough to see a Bangladesh where the deprived majority own a major part of such corporate giants as Grameen Telecom, Lafarge Cement and the Tata enterprises, whilst the women whose labour sustains 75% of our exports eventually own at least a third of the shares in the enterprises where they work. I would like to see *bustee* dwellers own apartments in multistoried buildings built for them in Dhaka and

Chittagong and the landless own homesteads throughout Bangladesh. I would like tobacco, jute and sugarcane growers to own shares in the factories which process their produce, tea garden workers to own shares in the tea companies where they work, whilst fruit and vegetable growers should own shares in agro-processing and cold storage enterprises which buy their produce.

We will need to develop a system which rewards work, skills and production rather than rent seeking intermediation. We will need to build a system which puts employment generation at the centre of our policy agendas rather than as an afterthought of our development plans. We will need to invest in upgrading the skills and productivity of our farmers, artisans, our rural industries, our garment workers. We will need to give the deprived majority an investment stake and price regime which enables them to capture more of the gains from their labours and improved productivity. We need to develop a system which directs resources and rewards to those who use this competitively whilst sanctioning

those who misuse these resource and default on their fiscal and financial obligations.

Above all, we need to rediscover a sense of community where we not only make ourselves more accountable but we fulfill our *social contract* with the less privileged segments of society, whose labour and sacrifice have underwritten our elite status. We will accordingly have to restructure our political and development institutions to accommodate this more inclusive policy agenda where the stake of the deprived classes is institutionalized by law rather than at the whims of our policymakers.

This rediscovery of a sense of community will hopefully move Bangladesh towards a search for more indigenous solutions, where externally driven policy agendas will be superseded by policies which originate from our domestic felt needs, expressed through a more democratic consultation process articulated by our indigenous expertise and underwritten by a democratic political consensus.

In conclusion, it must be stated that the emergence of two societies remains in violation of the *social*

contract which has underwritten Bangladesh's struggle for liberation. When the common people of Bangladesh were mobilized behind the liberation struggle they did not expect that their rulers would preside over the emergence of an unjust social order as well as a malfunctioning system of governance. The sense of anger and frustration which permeates our society originates in this sense of disappointed expectations that we have failed to honour the hopes and spirit of the Liberation War. Bangladesh, thus, owes a blood debt to those who fought for our liberation to build a more just, inclusive and genuinely democratic society which enables us to live with dignity, as a sovereign nation, in the global community.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman of Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Bangladeshi peacekeepers do nation proud

I would like to point out the case of one young and ever-smiling officer. He is Captain Eja, but known to the locals as "Captain Eja." We met ex-combatants and other local officials at his camp in Buchanan county where they were pained to know their very "trusted" and "loving" Captain Eja was returning home after completing his mission. An elderly lady security officer broke down. She said: "We don't know how the next an will be but we will never for get Captain Eja. He has responded to our call for help any time of the day or night."

NADEEM QADIR

AT a time when we are desperately look for something to be proud about, I was surprised to find one far away from home, in the western African republic of Liberia.

Ravaged by 14 years of civil war, Liberia stands on the threshold of a new beginning. More than 3,000 members of the Bangladesh army, who top the list of contributing countries across the world, are deployed in one part of this African country under the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to maintain peace that they have secured with lot of efforts, including providing security during crucial elections that brought the continent's first woman president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, to power.

"Banglades (h) Goo(d) Frien(d)," is a statement that echoes in typical Liberian English wherever our troops have put their footprints. It is no easy job to make friends in an alien country with a very high illiteracy rate -- nearly 80 percent of the best and brightest fleeing to other countries due to the war. But our boys have achieved that by their honesty, niceties, gestures and hard work.

President Sirleaf recently told a

Bangladeshi media team that her government was grateful to Bangladesh for the work their soldiers have been doing in Liberia. She said: "The Bangladeshi troops have played a commendable role not only in peacekeeping but also in activities for the welfare of the common people."

"Your soldiers have never violated human rights, they are not linked to any incident of exploitation," Lieutenant General Isaac Obiakor, the force commander in Liberia, told the group of visiting Bangladeshi journalists. The Nigerian general was "impressed" by the performance of Bangladeshi troops, and said: "Your men are doing very well in different sector including rehabilitating ex-combatants and the unemployed."

"They have kept the Bangladeshi flag flying high," said Obiakor. James K Sumo, a student of the University of Liberia, said, "Bangladeshi soldiers never misbehave with our women. We are very grateful to them."

Representative Buckhannon Grabli Smith said: "We are highly pleased with the performance of the Bangladeshi army. They are so nice that our people treat them as brothers. They are a part of our people."

The Bangladeshi troops have

earned the name of upholders of human rights and dignity. Not one woman complained, but only had words of praise for the character of our forces.

Indeed as we visited different parts of the war-ravaged country where Nigerian and Pakistani forces are also deployed, from senior government leaders to the man on the street echoed the general.

The Army Engineers, Signals and the Medical Corps have done their bit to get acclamation from all. I would like to point out the case of one young and ever-smiling officer. He is Captain Eja, but known to the locals as "Captain Eja."

We met ex-combatants and other local officials at his camp in Buchanan county where they were pained to know their very "trusted" and "loving" Captain Eja was returning home after completing his mission.

An elderly lady security officer broke down. She said: "We don't know how the next an will be but we will never for get Captain Eja. He has responded to our call for help any time of the day or night."

The Bangladesh forces besides their regular work gave free treatment and medicines to some 80,000 Liberians suffering mainly from enteric fever or diarrhoea.

While all of them would gift their own food to the locals who have hardly anything to eat other than what is called "cassava" -- a plant root. "Chow" and "chop" are the two words that all ages of poverty-hit Liberians shout whenever they see a Bangladeshi blue beret. It simply means "food."

"Healthy Nation, Healthy People," one huge billboard in capital Monrovia shows Bangladeshi medical team helping the locals. It is the only billboard of its kind that made us so proud. In fact no Bangladeshi blue beret has been infected by HIV/AIDS and it speaks of their respect for strict rules as well as morality.

In such a free society where women dress casually and are often seen topless, one can only wonder how our troops have maintained such a record since landing there in 2003.

Our soldiers live with death every moment of the day. The most severe kind of Malaria is rampant while "Lhasa fever," a fatal disease spread by rats, is another alarming health concern. Their barracks are protected by medicine and every door has a high wood blockade to stop the rats from entering. Every minute they have to be careful what they are eating as rats might have paid an unwelcome visit. For me, the two weeks were a constant fear of disease. Our soldiers also face security risk as they maintain peace.

UN officials said a key component of UN Security Council resolution 1509 (2003) establishing UNMIL was "Support for Implementation of the Ceasefire Agreement" between the warring factions.

Achieving total peace in Liberia depended on what is called DDRR, a program of comprehensive disar-

mament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration. The program was launched just two months after the ceasefire became effective in September 2003.

"Bangladeshi peacekeepers along with those from other countries have completed the DD part and are now working on the RR part," the official said.

They have touched the hearts of orphans and the disabled by providing whatever help they could. Our boys did not make any religious segregation in extending their love and friendship which too as been acclaimed.

At the Mission For Orphans, Disabled and Uncared Children, a special cultural program was organised to mark the visit of the media team. The children, dressed in their typical African colourful headgears and drums, made our bodies shake a little too.

Their song rounded it off: "O Bangladesh, great Bangladesh, God bless your country.

From war and destruction, to peace and reconstruction. We thank you Bangladesh. You helped give us hope for a better tomorrow.

Thank you Bangladesh, long live Bangladesh."

I say thank you to our peacekeepers. You have all given me a reason to be proud of after many a years.

Nadeem Qadir is a freelance journalist and TV anchor. He was with the peace-keepers in Liberia to shoot a TV serial on the armed forces.

Death for apostasy and Shariah

Both the progressive Muslims and upholders of human rights everywhere should come forward and declare unanimously: "Enough is enough, no more Shariah law anywhere in the East and West." Let us bury the past inadequacies, vacillations and double standards of liberal Muslims and non-Muslims (mainly due to the exigencies of the Cold War) towards the violation of human rights in the name of Shariah -- from Saudi Arabia to Iran and Sudan to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

TAJ HASHMI

THE latest spine chiller from Afghanistan is the revolting news about the sentencing of one Abdul Rahman to death for converting to Christianity, a capital crime as per the obscurantist Shariah law. One might be surprised at the recrudescence of barbarism in the name of Islam in presence of UN peace keepers and almost five years after the overthrow of the demonic Taliban regime. However, those who know about the Shariah code have nothing to be surprised about dispensing death penalty to apostates from Islam.

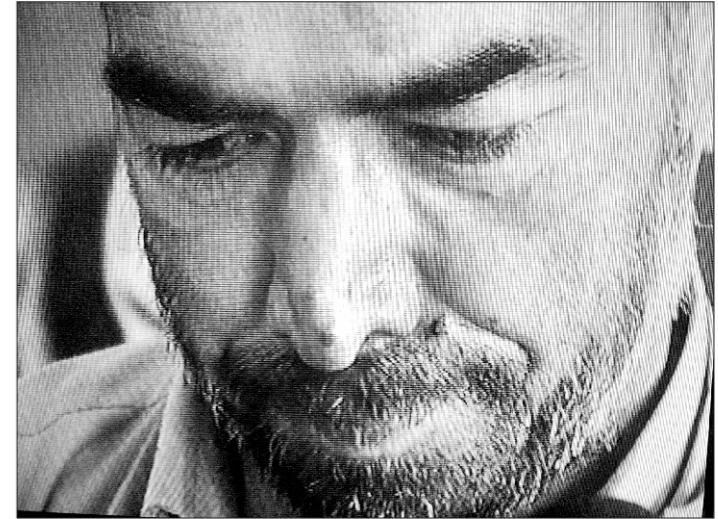
In view of the judgment, one may even assume that since the UN has recognized the post-Taliban regime, Hamid Karzai being an important US ally in its "war against terrorism," the Afghan government, including its judiciary, is a legitimate part of a sovereign country. Consequently one may surmise that condemning someone to death for apostasy or blasphemy in accordance with the Shariah, as it has been going on in countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan, is but "an interference into the internal affairs" of a sovereign country.

On the one hand, some American observers are raising the question if the Afghan regime wants to revert to the Taliban way of doing things, then it should do so without American help; and on the other, both the US President and Canadian Prime Minister have asked the Afghan President to restore the freedom of religion in the country in accordance with the UN Declaration of Human Rights. We believe, despite the sabre-rattling by mullahs and judges, finally the Afghan government will prevail by unhooking Abdul Rahman from the claws of the Shariah. As we understand, unfortunately this will happen not by scrapping the barbaric Shariah code but through a deceptive compromise, by declaring the victim not an apostate, but insane. (In fact, the original judgement has since been overturned but only due to "lack of evidence.")

Both the progressive Muslims and upholders of human rights everywhere should come forward and declare unanimously: "Enough is enough, no more Shariah law anywhere in the East and West." Let us bury the past inadequacies, vacillations and double standards of liberal Muslims and non-Muslims (mainly due to the exigencies of the Cold War) towards the violation of human rights in the name of Shariah -- from Saudi Arabia to Iran and Sudan to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Both the liberal democrats and secular humanists in the West and East, including the Muslim World, should fulfill their moral obligations towards humanity. Nothing would be more counter-productive than portraying the West as the enemy of Islam and the Muslims as obscurantist Shariah-loving terrorists. A bridge is essential and a "dialogue of civilizations," to paraphrase former Iranian President Khatami, between Islam and the West is the only viable alternative to the Shariah obscurantism and provocative Islamophobia nourished in the West.

Exerting pressure on Karzai to save Abdul Rahman's life is fine, but not enough. Exposing the un-Islamic nature of the Shariah code, together by liberal, progressive Muslims and non-Muslim upholders of human rights and dignity with a view to abolishing the so-called Islamic code everywhere is the only solution to the violation of human rights in the name of Islam, once



Abdul Rahman

and for all.

Those who consider attacking Shariah as an affront on Islam and as a violation of the UN Charter should know that there is nothing "divine" about the code. Shariah is the combination of legal opinions of Muslim jurists sought and enforced by medieval Muslim rulers. Although claimed to be emanating from the Quran, Shariah code is mainly based on problematic "sayings" of Prophet Muhammad, individual and collective opinions of medieval jurists, local customs and common sense.

Interestingly, the Islamic scripture or the Quran spells out: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" [2:256] and does not prescribe any death penalty for apostasy either: "Surely (as for) those who believe then disbelieve, again believe and again disbelieve, then increase in disbelief, Allah will not forgive them nor guide them in the (right) path" [4:137].

The Quran sanctions death penalty for murder and other horrendous crimes, not apostasy: "You shall not kill any person -- for God has made life sacred -- except in the course of justice. If one is killed unjustly, then we give his heir authority to enforce justice" [17:33]. One also finds the following in the Quranic text: "For this reason did We prescribe to the children of Israel that whoever slays a soul, unless it be for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he slew all men; and whoever keeps it alive, it is as though he kept alive all men" [5:32].

However, the Shariah law condemns the apostate to death. One finds striking similarity between this barbaric provision with the Biblical prescription: "And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the Lord, shall be put to death" [Bible, King James Version, Leviticus 24:16].

There are many other incongruities between the Islamic scripture and the Shariah code. As for example, while the Quran prescribes 100 lash as punishment for adultery, the Shariah sanctions stoning to death for both the adulterer and adulteress, in accordance with the Old Testament.

The Shariah with all its variations and contradictions has created problems both for Muslims and non-Muslims in Muslim-dominated as well as other countries in our times. The term "Shariah" evokes bad memories among its victims as well as opponents who want the abolition or drastic reforms of this Draconian code. Our experience tells us that Shariah is inherently prejudicial to women, non-Muslims and freethinkers, and that its language, spirit and above all, execution, go against the

spirit, ideals and teaching of Islam. However, ironically the mullahs, who are supposed to be the upholders of the ideals of Islam, have been the main promoters and defenders of Shariah which stands in contravention of human rights, decency and civilized behaviour.

The collective ignorance of the Muslim community combined with the vested interests of many Muslims is sustaining this incongruous Shariah code. The Muslim community in Afghanistan and beyond can replace this absurd, outdated un-Islamic code of Shariah with a liberal and modern one only through collective efforts of the members of the civil society, human rights groups, intellectuals and liberal politicians. They need to educate both the mullahs and ordinary Muslims with regard to the obscurantist aspects of the Shariah. The core of the problem is political. So, only social reformist agenda by a few cultural groups will not be able to resolve the issue.

However, this arduous task requires global support from the UN agencies to the various human rights organizations, liberal democratic governments and donor-driven development agencies and NGOs. The West must call the shots not by demonizing Islam, Prophet Muhammad and the not-so-monolithic Muslim community or by selective condemnation of the anti-Western "Islamic" countries such as Iran and Sudan. Violation of human rights in any form in "Islamic" countries like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt or Bangladesh, despite their pro-Western foreign policies, should become a global concern. With UN sponsored sanctions, and if required, military interventions as taken against the rogue Serbian regime in the early 1990s, the terror of Shariah may be contained and eliminated eventually.

The Afghan President's assurance to the West that his government is not going to yield to the pressure of the blood-thirsty mullahs who want to kill Abdul Rahman for apostasy is but an isolated act of redemption, not an outright victory against Shariah and barbaric obscurantism in the name of Islam. We have a long way to tread to get human rights and dignity for all the victims of Shariah in Afghanistan and beyond.

Taj Hashmi writes from Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada.

Mitigation of dollar crisis

The quickest means of fattening the Forex reserve is control of imports and use of import-substitutes. It is not possible to increase exports overnight, but it is possible to lessen imports. Continuous dollar crisis adds to import costs which on the other hand increases inflation, reduces purchasing power of the consumers leading to reduction of production and many more economic problems and poverty. It is, therefore, essential that imports of luxurious commodities like costly branded private cars and jeeps (exceeding engine capacity of 2000cc), costly electronic households, ornaments, dresses, etc should be banned temporarily.

ALI IDRIS

IN economics, the theory of demand and supply determines the price of a commodity. The commodity which has more demand than its supply in the market will be costlier. US Dollar, like a commodity, is a foreign currency earned through export of goods, services, receipt of foreign loan, aid, grant, investment, etc. and spent by way of import of goods, services, repayment of foreign loan, repatriation of foreign dividend, capital etc.

The surplus of earning over spending added to previous balance creates the Forex reserve of Bangladesh Bank. The higher the reserve the more is the supply of US Dollars in the market except under unusual circumstances. The balance of trade and the Forex reserve determines the rate of exchange between Taka and other currencies.

During the last one year the exchange rate of Taka with US Dollars has gone up almost by 23% i.e. the Taka has depreciated. This rate is the highest since floating rate of exchange for Taka was fixed. Current optimum Forex reserve of Bangladesh Bank is Tk 300 crore in US Dollars. If this figured drops crisis for dollars crops up. Hence, in order to keep the dollar market steady, it is necessary to increase this reserve by increasing exports

over imports. But it not possible to increase exports overnight. Consequently, the Central Bank takes temporary measures to combat the dollar crisis in the market:

- 1) Increase the provision for keeping more margin when opening Letters of credit for imports.
- 2) Release a portion of the Forex reserve with Central Bank in the open market through commercial banks.
- 3) Ban import of luxurious items temporarily.

The foregoing measures will temporarily subside the crisis, but in order to make the Taka currency more stable against dollars it is necessary to increase exports so as to create a favourable trade balance and a fat Forex reserve.

The major sectors of export earnings of Bangladesh are (i) Readymade garments, (ii) Human resources, (iii) Jute and jute products, (iv) Hides, skins and hides products, (v) Prawns and other farm products, (vi) Tea, and (vii) Foreign aid and investment. Of these, the largest sector is readymade garments. Then comes human resource, the rate at which exports of readymade garments and human resource are increasing in South Asian countries is much lower in our country due to lack of initiatives by the government.

Besides lobbying in the importing countries, more facilities in bank-credits, duty and tax, cash subsidy etc have to be extended to these major export sectors and other smaller sectors as well. Moreover general and technical training have to be infused in the manpower made ready for export. Processing export of human resource is the easiest and cheapest industry requiring no capital and no infrastructure. Hence our country should resort to this export extensively. There is another export sector viz. tourism which has not developed here. This is disappointing.

Even a country like Nepal earns 40% of its foreign exchange through tourism, whereas our country earns less than 1% of total foreign exchange comes from tourism. And like human resource export, tourism industry needs the least capital investment if the infra-structural facilities exist for internal use. We have the minimum infrastructural facilities of tourism, what is needed is a sound policy, political stability and publicity.

The quickest means of fattening the Forex reserve is control of imports and use of import-substitutes. It is not possible to increase exports overnight, but it is possible to lessen imports. Continuous dollar crisis adds to import costs which on the other

hand increases inflation, reduces purchasing power of the consumers leading to reduction of production and many more economic problems and poverty. It is, therefore, essential that imports of luxurious commodities like costly branded private cars and jeeps (exceeding engine capacity of 2000 cc), costly electronic households, ornaments, dresses, etc should be banned temporarily.

The country spends almost Tk 12,000 crore for import of petroleum products. Recently there was a crisis for dollars for import of petrol, diesel etc, even some trains were stopped for want of diesel. This country has the "gaseous gold" of natural gas which can be utilized in every sector as energy.

From now on, no vehicle without CNG system should be allowed for importation. Alternatively no new vehicle should be given registration if it does not have CNG system. The farmers who use diesel for irrigation and ploughing are faced with high cost and have invented alternative fuel of cylinderized gas.

So this gas may help the agricultural as well as industrial production of the country. If gas is used in all sectors, a huge amount of foreign exchange may be saved by substituting the import of petroleum products, which will add to the Forex reserve of the country and mitigate dollar crisis. The government should implement the above suggestions immediately.

Another method of fattening of Forex reserve is increasing the remittances of expatriate manpower abroad which now amounts to almost Tk 30,000 crore yearly. If more incentives and facilities like reduction of bank charge, enhancement of exchange rate, interest rate on saving and investment schemes etc for remittances are allowed and intense application of money laundering act is made, then the flow of

remittance will further go up resulting in increase of the Forex reserve.

The foregoing measures are good for temporary boost-up of Forex reserve, but it is necessary to increase the volume of exports in order to strengthen the economy permanently. With this view, the government has to boost up exports of all non-traditional sectors in addition to the existing major sectors and take the following steps:

- a) Increase exports of software, agricultural products, handicrafts, allopathic and herbal medicines, cement, ceramic and melamine products, cosmetics, etc.
- b) Increase agricultural products and diversify them in order to be self-sufficient and export the surplus.
- c) Utilize gas in transportation and all possible sectors in order to substitute import of petrol and diesel.
- d) Improve and establish modern medical facilities inside the country in order to attract Bangladeshi and foreign patients.
- e) Improve and establish higher education facilities inside the country in order to retain Bangladeshi and attract foreign students.
- f) Develop the tourism facilities and environment in the country in order to attract tourists.
- g) Increase export of human resource.

These measures, I trust, will lead the country to an economically strong position.

The author is an FCA.