

Closed Pages Unfurled, Muted Sorrows Voiced

End of the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union is no more. The end finally came when 11 republics on Saturday joined the new commonwealth of independent states, thus marking the collapse of President Gorbachev's year long battle to forge a new confederal union to replace the old, ailing USSR.

The end which was hardly in doubt in recent weeks was, by no means, a smooth one. With the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin stripping Mr Gorbachev of his powers, without much grace and decorum, and several republics openly debating on their choice between total independence and the membership of the commonwealth, this was hardly the birth of a new state, even in a loose sense of the term. It was probably no more than a slow emergence of a new framework for co-existence, which is yet to acquire a well-defined legal, political and economic entity. So much, therefore, remains in doubt, not only about the process through which the commonwealth has emerged but also about republics which have so far declined to join the new arrangement. Above all, there are doubts—and, indeed, fears—in the outside world as to how many 'fingers will be on the Soviet nuclear button', as a western analyst puts it.

But it could have been worse. The danger of different republics being caught in a civil war situation, like in Yugoslavia, was always there. So was there a grim prospect of hardliners staging another abortive coup, like the one in August, with parts of the former Soviet Union plunged into chaos and anarchy. In this sense, the unfinished transition may not have been smooth, but it has been at least relatively bloodless—so far. For this credit goes to Mr Yeltsin who, despite the distrust he arouses in many minds, inside his country and outside, has provided his people with the authority they need in these difficult days. Beside the strong-willed Russian leader, Mr Gorbachev may appear as a sad pathetic figure. However, he has behaved not as a power-hungry dictator, but as a patriot, vainly trying to save a disintegrating 'empire'.

Anything but a detached observer of the process, the West will be now looking at all the options for coming to the help of the new commonwealth. In the first place, the help must come in the form of economic assistance. Otherwise, the autumn of discontent could well turn into a winter of despair.

It is a pity that countries in the Third World, including Bangladesh, many of whom had once looked upon the former Soviet Union as an ally can do little to help the new commonwealth. But they will recall, with gratitude, the contribution Moscow had made to several Third World causes, to the Arab-Israeli conflict, to the battle against apartheid in South Africa and, last but not the least, to the liberation of Bangladesh, to name only a few. Notwithstanding the element of deviousness in superpower politics in Moscow and Washington, the former Soviet Union provided a balance against what might have been a near-total domination of the world by the other superpower. Who can say now what will be the international scene like without this balance? We can only hope that as a new scenario unfolds, the United States, western nations, Japan, China and other regional powers will assume their changed roles with a sense of responsibility and respect for others and that, in this scenario, the new commonwealth of the former Soviet Union too will emerge as a power in its own right, on the side of progress and stability in our challenging world.

Three Cheers for Quick Results

On Saturday results of both the Dhaka Secondary Education Board and Comilla Secondary Education Board HSC Examinations were published simultaneously. Hats off to the Comilla Board for having done the job in exactly 71 days, beating the other boards, even Dhaka, by miles. This is quite in keeping with their performance in the SSC examination results which they published in 90 days, which was till then quite a record. In this land of every one being somewhat suspect—the Comilla Board must have, one tends to fear, pulled off the magic by buying haste at the expense of quality evaluation. But the fear stands more than dispelled by a look at the book they brought out containing the results. The meticulous production meant that the results were already in weeks back and that, moderated and tabulated, they were ready for print many days ago. And unlike other recent years, not one result seemed to have leaked—not even the date of the publication. Three cheers for the two Boards. Specially Comilla for having come out with flying colours from the unjust stigma that stuck to them because of paper leakage in the SSC examinations.

We very ardently hope that the Universities will take a cue from Comilla—Dhaka trailed them by 20 days—and be efficient in clearing all their backlog and come out with results in less than three months of the exams in all cases. We also record our appreciation of changing the nonsensical categories of Science and Social Science into, as suggested by us, the traditional and by far the better categories of the Sciences and the Humanities.

Howevrermuch we laud the improvements in the examination system as exemplified by the two results—this is all admittedly very peripheral to the real stuff—education—and in no way anywhere being central. While we cannot but express our anguished concern over the 40-plus per cent student who flunked and roundly condemn the educational system which is responsible for this—and will be doing so until things improve without the help of manipulations such as 'grace' mark, we must also take particular note of one new, and a very dangerous, development. Many of those who topped this year's merit list of the two Boards have very candidly said that they have been greatly helped in their achievements by private coaching 'in batches'—and schools have done little to improve their performances. This statement—one call it an accusation as well—is a double-edged scimitar, cutting at once at the very degraded fall of the schools into useless set-ups for exploitation and the hopeless inanity of the examination which is designed to measure only 'performance' and not education. And the 'coaching centres' manned by school teachers and even students themselves, seem to know better the tricks of how to put up a performance that can well pretend to be coming from someone educated.

This must be stopped before the 'educational island' engulfed by a sea of illiteracy gets eaten up by all-round charlatany.

In a sense there is no particular season of remembering the dead. Yet, with the approach of December, Bangladesh's season of remembrance announces itself. Though there is not a single day in our calendar without a death—a violent, a tragic death to commemorate, never so many deaths occurred in such a short span of time as in the first half of December, in that fateful year, 1971. This has made this time of the year, this early half of December, climaxed by the fourteenth, our season of mourning, of remembrance.

That expression was far from adequate: so many deaths occurred. That was an euphemism, and not a conscious one either. The truth is much harsher. These deaths were perpetrated. These killings were planned and executed in cold blood. And there is not a iota of doubt that the blue print of these killings had been prepared much earlier, that the list of the intended victims was longer, and the aim was nothing short of crippling the nation for generations to come. Also, without doubt the list was prepared by fellow Bengalis, may be in some room of the university campus, by men who were fellow professionals, for never so much malice could be harboured, not vaguely and generally but with accent on individuals, by aliens and marauders. Such enmity is possible, and such mindless ferocity, only within the clan.

This year, during most of the tragic fortnight, I was away from home. I was in India, in India's many-templed south. India's south has many things other than her temples. Yet my visit was planned in a manner that I could see some of the famous temples of India most of which are in the south. The instinct was not religious, far from it. In fact I have a positive dread of holy places and I have never looked upon myself as a pilgrim. Years ago, I had visited the famous Nataraj temple at Chidambaram and I was highly impressed. I wanted to see more of these temples and the opportunity came and I seized it. It so happened that the time coincided with the period when our people undergo annually this pain and mortification ending in some kind of national catharsis. By the time I returned, the three climactic days were still left, so that my return home was a straight plunge into the full flood of sorrow. I did not join the mourners, I did not visit places, I steered clear of a direct participation in ceremonies. But I could not help reading some of the pieces specially written for the occasion—the martyred intelligentsia day—and that was enough. I was left convinced that the nation had neither forgotten nor has it forgiven.

New Fervency

I could lay my hands on half a dozen papers, all dailies, and I could read only selectively, some of the pieces dealing with the killed and the killing

in those supplements on the 14th of December. This year it was the twentieth anniversary of the killings, so there was a note of speciality, both in the observances and in the writings. I think many of us have noticed this. If I am not mistaken, I have noticed a new fervency in both. Is it due to the fact of this year being the twentieth anniversary year of our Liberation, or to the fact of our new-found democracy, or both, I cannot tell for certain. But the fact itself, this new fervency, I cannot dismiss as an illusion. And the fervency touched me, a distant viewer, and brought tears into my eyes.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

When I think of this year's writings, it strikes me that with the passage of time, memories are surging back. People are reminiscing more and more. Memories, far from being dimmed, are washed clean and sharp. Closed pages are being unfurled, and muted sorrows are being voiced. In the past we, in our language, created a *Marsia* literature, exploiting the theme of Husain's martyrdom with his family and followers in Karbala. There are signs, may clear evidences, that an entirely new *Marsia* literature, based on the heroism and the tragedies of 1971, is being created four our times and for the future.

There is a complaint that our Mukti Juddha, the War of

Liberation, has been curiously and callously neglected in the school textbooks. There is much truth in the complaint. Successive post-Mujib governments have either played down the people's war and the leadership of Mujib or have suppressed facts or both. This has given rise to much resentment. History has been sacrificed on the altar of politics, and no body with a clear conscience can deny this. Our electronic media, under the full control of the government, in their programmes have acted according to the dictates of the political masters. It is not for nothing that last year,

as the political movement for the ouster of Ershad and for a return to democracy was gaining momentum, the media became a natural target of the movement, and high on the list of priorities for the new government, of whatever party it may happen to be, was the task of bringing the media under democratic management.

These lapses on the part of those in the Text Book Board and their masters, and those managing the electronic media and their masters, have partly been compensated by the literature of the War of Liberation. We have not yet got, what may with confidence be called the masterpiece of this most promising genre. This will come at the appropriate

time, most likely in the form of a novel, for the novel, and not the epic, is the true literary form of our times. Meanwhile we have had a couple of minor successes—masterpieces would not be the right word—and both of these are the work of women. Begum Jahanara Imam and Begum Mushtari Shaif have both of them achieved something, an authentic and moving account at a personal level of what, in 1971, hundreds of our wives and mothers had seen, suffered and experienced in Bangladesh under enemy occupation. The forms that both the writers have adopted—journal and memoirs—were, under the circumstances, the only ones they could handle properly. We should be thankful to them for the very modesty and honesty of their efforts and the results have been worthy of the effort. What the imaginative writings, some of them coming from acclaimed writers, have failed to achieve, these journals and memoirs have achieved, by merely remaining true to their experience. Their style too is the style of truthfulness.

Determined by Culture

People mourn and remember in a manner determined by its culture. We, the Bengalis, lack the sense of ordered ceremony one finds in some Asian countries with Buddhism or Catholicism as the dominant religion. I was greatly impressed by the televised scene of the first anniversary of Ninoy Aquino's death as

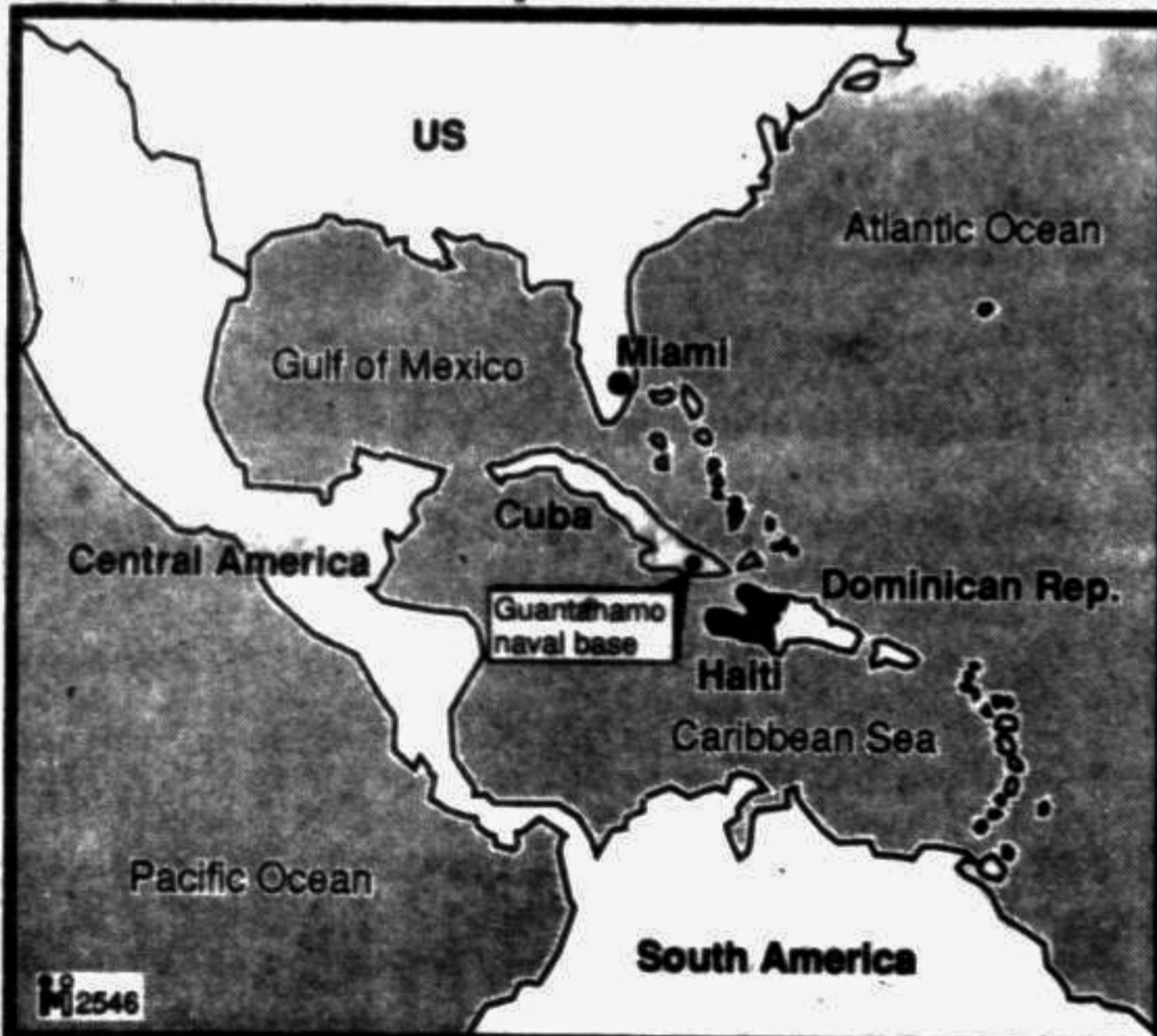
observed in his native country, the Philippines. The dignity, the decorum and the discipline struck me, mainly because these are conspicuous by their absence in our society on similar occasions, and I at once attributed this to a culture in which the church has taught a few things. We, in predominantly Muslim countries, often glory in our faith which excludes a church and a class of clergymen. Perhaps this will not be true of a Shiite country like Iran but this is generally true of Sunni countries. Perhaps,—and here I am indulging in a speculation fraught with difficulties—in denying the church and the priest a recognised role, our gains, if anything, have been matched by our losses. This will be a theme for our sociologists to explore in depth. As in our rejoicing so in our mourning, of element of decorum, of ceremony would immensely add to the beauty of the thing.

If I may make a suggestion to our sociologists: We see both genuine emotion and a disorderly expression of the same in most of our celebrations, whether of joy or of sorrow. This hurts, particularly in ceremonies associated with death and tragedy. Has disorder something to do with the absence of authority, authority hallowed by tradition and acceptable to all and sundry? Can we describe our society as one characterised by a singular absence of authority? Not only religious, but secular too?

US Holds Fast and Keeps Out Fleeing Haitians

Mohamed Hamaludin writes from Miami

Since Haiti's democratically elected President Jean Bertrand Aristide was overthrown scores of refugees have been leaving for the US to escape political and economic repression. While refugees from politically-crucial Cuba are allowed entry into the US, the impoverished and persecuted Haitians are treated badly.



In a major show of stubbornness, the Bush Administration has refused to bow to growing clamour to admit Haitian refugees seeking asylum. It has ordered the military to take charge of detaining those found in international waters on the way to Florida.

The Pentagon, faced with a growing tide of "black boat people" after President Jean Bertrand Aristide was overthrown on September 30, set up a detention centre at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

It was initially intended to hold up to 2,500 Haitians, but Pentagon spokesman Pete Wilson did not rule out expanding the camp.

The US move, underlining the Administration's refusal to budge from a 1982 prohibition policy against only Haitians, capped two weeks of startling developments on the refugee issue.

Aristide took office in January as the first democratically elected president of Haiti. Between then and his overthrow and flight to exile, the constant flow of refugees from his impoverished nation slowed to a trickle.

Then the tap opened again. Hundreds arrived packed into unseaworthy boats. The US Coast Guard, which enforces the sea embargo, were picking them up and taking them back to Haiti—as they had been for ten years.

During that period, fewer

than 100 of some 25,000 trying to enter US to claim asylum were allowed in. The Administration consistently deemed them "economic refugees", as distinct from political refugees escaping persecution.

With Aristide's removal and Haitians as the mercy of a military dictatorship, that interpretation of events came under fire. The Haitian Refugee

Centre filed a suit against the government and a federal judge issued a temporary order preventing repatriation of the refugees then in US custody.

By then, the number of refugees seized and about to be taken back had risen to more than 1,000 in just two weeks.

Another judge upheld the initial order, as did an appeals

court.

In addition, the courts for the first time instructed the government to let refugee attorneys board the Coast Guard patrol boats and interview the Haitians to satisfy themselves that immigration officials were being fair in their assessments.

Within another week, the number jumped to 2,600. A frantic Administration then began to seek third countries to admit the Haitians on humanitarian grounds, even if only on a temporary basis.

A handful of Latin American countries, as well as the Caribbean states of Belize, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago agreed to accept around 100, provided the US or the United Nations paid the cost.

Then, one weekend in late November, a wave of refugees rolled out of Haiti, pushing the total beyond 4,000. Seven Coast Guard boats were needed

to hold them. The Haitians could not be taken back until the courts decided whether they should be allowed in to file asylum claims. The matter became most urgent when Cuba announced that one boat with probably 250 refugees had sunk off its waters.

Also, talks between the Organisation of American States and the military and civilian authorities in Haiti to return Aristide to office have not been successful so far, raising the spectre of even more refugees.

As those talks waver, the number soars. By the end of November, 6,112 had been barred this year—4,530 since Aristide's overthrow. Of 3,166 interviewed for asylum, only 120 had been let ashore.

The US government could have honoured the court order and still brought the Haitians ashore, but that would have given them a chance to claim

asylum in a manner more formal than the 15-minute interviews in the ships.

Instead, fearing a wave of tens of thousands of refugees would inundate the shores of South Florida in a repeat of the Cuban Mariel boatlift of 1984, the government opted to set up the camp at Guantanamo Bay.

Cries of double standards have followed the treatment meted out to the Haitians when compared with the case of admission for, say, Cuban refugees. The irony of the situation has not escaped observers.

While Cuban refugees are allowed to come ashore under the Cuban Adjustment Act, Haitian refugees are prohibited and taken to an American base that is on Cuban soil.

A judge was expected to decide whether to make the temporary restraining order permanent or otherwise determine the status of the Haitians. Whatever that outcome, many here say US policy toward the Haitians smacks of racism and has not done the country proud.

— GEMINI NEWS
MOHAMED HAMALUDIN is the editor of Miami Times.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Upazila

Sir, It is true that the government has taken a hasty decision in implementing the long cherished demand of the lawyers for dissolving the 'pyramid' of upazila. The grievance of the political parties appear to be that the law relating to the dissolution of the upazila system should have been passed by the Parliament and not by the President through Ordinance. The repealing Ordinance is also liable to get approval of the Parliament.

The Local Government (Thana Parishad and Thana Administration Reorganisation) Ordinance, 1982 was promulgated by Hussain Mohammad Ershad in pursuance of the Proclamation of 24th March, 1982. It was not even Ordinance in ordinary meaning of the Constitution.

The lawyers have been seriously agitating against this system. On this demand a national consensus was reached among all the political parties long before the movement against autocracy started in the country. Ershad fell, with his system.

It was the national consensus that has been implemented by the President through the Ordinance, a mode prescribed to enact law under the Constitution. The opposition are also the parties to the national consensus. They have

taken this issue soon after they lost the issue on presidential election. On both the occasions these political parties had shown enough of the hypocrisies. They have shown that for their narrow interest they can take blessings from Golan Azam, Sk Hasina's letter (the so-called SOS) to the foreign missions and donor agencies has exposed their political bankruptcy.

The only thing these political parties believe that unless they capture political power of the country, there cannot be any democracy in this country.

Let us rise above the party interest, and we must realize that national interest is above everything. Let us nourish and protect our hard earned democracy. If democracy survives parties interested to form government may get their chance. Will the political parties wait for their turn?

M. Saleem Ullah
Motijheel C/A, Dhaka

Monitoring farm problems

Sir, The national newspapers can contribute effectively to the country's agriculture development by regularly monitoring the field problems of the farmers as well as performance of the government agricultural personnel at the field level. The district and upazila correspondents of various newspapers can make fre-

quent visits to villages for collecting accurate farming news ad views from the farmers and agricultural professionals.

News and views so collected and ventilated through the newspapers will obviously help our executives understand the exact situations and to take action accordingly.

M. Zahidul Haque
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Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka

Foreign exchange

Sir, A large number of people in Bangladesh are being virtually deprived of their status as foreign exchange earners. They are mostly working with foreign organizations based in Bangladesh who bring foreign exchange from their countries for payment to employees but disburse that out of their convertible accounts. In other words such employees earn foreign exchange, but they receive in Bangladesh Taka and thus lose facilities, such as, purchase of Wage Earners' Development Bonds available to Bangladesh nationals remitting foreign exchange from abroad.

May I, therefore, request the authorities to accord recognition to those people who receive their salaries out of convertible accounts maintained by foreign donor and other organizations, as foreign exchange earners in line with their brethren abroad. The country will no doubt stand to gain as more and more people will invest in this country and mobilise internal savings. I do not see any reason why they should really be deprived of these facilities.

Abdus Sobhan
North Nalapara, Chittagong

OPINION

The Police in Action

I happen to be one of the unfortunate newspaper readers who have got a glimpse of the photograph of a half-naked garment factory worker being manhandled by the policemen. The photograph had appeared in the 22nd November issue of The Daily Star. It was a horrendous sight. A number of policemen had encircled the worker and as the photograph showed, they were beating the man mercilessly and at the same time were engaged to strip him of his clothes. It confirms that high degree of brutality perpetrated by the police as is usually alleged by the public and the press. We perennially hear of the shortage of the police personnel. Interestingly enough, here, we found at least seven policemen punching upon the single garment worker. One can be sure today of what is alleged being proven by the pictorial evidence of such misbehaviour on the part of the police and people will be more inclined to believe the press.

of the police. The police action frustrates us.

Reportedly, the police is busy apprehending small fries when the big monsters of the underworld are at large. Of course, the people are no more fool to consider this bias of the police to the criminals as to be a Platonic Love; some among the victims are very vocal about the secret and undocumented dealings of the police. Some are sharpening their pen as well as their talent to counter the police, the wolf in sheep's coat. They feel very strongly resentful about the misconduct and corruption of the policemen because it is the tax-payers' hard-earned money which is used to maintain the law enforcing agencies.

back-sliding in the police activities. The need of the hour is stringent action meted out to the peace-breaking and the unscrupulous elements. To harass and arrest the poor and hapless and standing against the criminals are two opposing concepts. The policemen should be reminded that they are to eradicate, control and fight crimes.

We often come upon the press reporting the policemen's generosity towards the convicts who are accused of grave crimes like murders, rape, looting, etc. We further hear of the police either extending help or pretending ignorance to the things like mastaans illegally evicting owners of a house. We are now confronting the very obvious and blatant abuse of power by the police. However, it is crystal-clear that the police show a lot of heroism in attacking the poor and the hapless people. They are fearful to handle any situation were courage and competence is called for like the explosive situation on the varsity campus. The allegation regarding the police's role as a silent observer when the mastaans attacked a female worker adds to the diabolic character

Often citizens, as a last measure, go to the high officials of police to get some redress. But to their great disappointment, they find that these officials readily get busy to exaggerate their commitment to eradicate crimes and pontificate about mass participation in curbing crimes than to take any concrete step to bring the policemen back to justice. This kind of mysterious behaviour instead of straight-forwardness in awarding punishment merits the logically raised questions as regards their involvement in crimes.

In one unexpected case the Home Minister while being interviewed by The Daily Star admitted the presence of corruption in the police. This is the first time we find a minister exhibiting a high degree of courage and integrity to admit a truth! Certainly, the Home Minister deserves a sincere panegyric. Beside the honesty of admitting the facts, the government should take concrete steps to contain the

In the meantime, may I request the Home Minister to look into the case of garment workers impartially and initiate a process everybody is curiously waiting for. A public abashment of the monstrous policemen may be a consolation to the garment workers as well as the whole nation and instil confidence as to the government's determination to uphold human rights.

We cannot exempt the Human Rights organisations from the blame of maintaining a low profile, a mentality of keeping a safe distance from the trouble spots. Their sitting duck attitude and disorganised activities do not at all commensurate with the policies or action programmes announced by them.

This will be, no doubt, a big challenge for the Home Minister to drive out the well-seated demon called corruption from the Police Department. However, on the other hand, it also gives him an opportunity to prove his acumen and statesmanship despite the fact that it takes full inner strength or heroism to fulfil the obligations to the mass. At the same time, we cannot overlook the role of the people's representatives to educate the people about the rights and the limits of power of the law enforcing agencies. The lawyers also have got a bigger role to assume.

AM Sayed Khan
Farashgonj, Dhaka