

We Mourn

The nation today mourns the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who, just 17 years ago, fell victim to a heinous crime, together with his wife and several members of his family. The Sheikh was not the first nor perhaps the last national leader to die from an assassin's bullet. But he was perhaps the first founder of a state and the elected head of a government to die at the hands of a few of his own countrymen who, ironically enough, enjoy the same freedom as millions of others in an independent state that Bangabandhu helped to bring into being, turning a dream into a reality.

In condemning the crime that robbed Bangladesh of its founder, we pay our tribute to the memory of a man whose indomitable courage, the vision of a state that his people could call their own and his uncompromising fight for the rights of the common people created Bangladesh, with a soul of its own. Again and again, the soul has been bruised and brutalised, the spirit of the nation dimmed and many a hope for the country's future dashed. Within six years, the country lost another national leader, Shahid President Ziaur Rahman, the victim of another heinous crime, the man who was destined to complete the unfinished job of the Sheikh, by taking the country along the long road to stability, and giving this impoverished nation a place in the sun.

This long journey of Bangladesh has been interrupted again and again by assassinations, coups, military take-overs and natural calamities. There must be something indestructible about Bangladesh that it has survived these challenges. We can be even proud of the fact that, after nine years of authoritarian rule, we have put the country back under democracy, governed by an elected administration. Our economic agenda has taken shape, winning support and approval from within the country and outside.

Yet, somewhere along the way, we come face to face with national frustration, with a mood of despair. Is it because our repeated failures during the past decades have started taking their toll, eating in to the vitals of the nation? Perhaps.

Shall we blame the system, the leadership of our political parties or our national character? Again, perhaps. What we cannot dispute is that while we have won a new opportunity of resuming the journey towards progress and prosperity, we stand divided, even when it comes to paying our respects to our two great national leaders, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Shahid Ziaur Rahman. As we stand divided on fundamental issues facing the nation, we are also unable to take a common stand against lawlessness, campus violence, corruption and indiscipline among the industrial labour. We have answers to many of these problems, perhaps even to all of them. What we do not apparently have is the ability to apply these answers within a national framework.

We can pay no greater tribute to the memory of the Bangabandhu than to undertake a self-evaluation and, in the process, to judge for ourselves if we are still capable of living by the ideals that provided the foundation of Bangladesh. The self-evaluation, honest and solemn, is more important than the observance of a hartal today, placing garlands at the portraits of the Sheikh or in singing patriotic songs. Let it be a day for work and dedication, rather than of slogans and factional in-fighting. That's the way to mourn the loss of a great leader of the nation.

No Ready Answer

Drug administration personnel on Sunday raided a pharmacy at Mitford and recovered a quantity of "spurious medicine namely Gacajal powder in 1068 files and 1.15 lakh Sodamint tablets". The report published in The Daily Star of Thursday has more than one implication. It naturally makes us once more aware of the danger of what passes for medicine but in fact is otherwise. The problem continues with us and it grows in size and power of harm all the time. The drug administration's successful raid encourages one to feel reassured. Something is being done—other than enacting laws and regulations—to discourage the manufacture and trading of spurious drugs.

One, however, is always at a loss to understand if such raids—few and far between as they are—can meet the challenge in any meaningful manner. The nation's demand for medicine of whatever kind and quality is far greater than the qualified doctors can write their prescriptions for. As a result there opens up a yawning chasm between the amount of "medicine" bought and consumed on the one hand and the part of it that conforms to the standards set by the drug administration on the other. For numerous brands of medicine it is not even a question of quality and standard but one of making completely baseless claims of miraculous efficacy and flooding the market. It is tolerable when the claims somehow relate to cosmetic and ego considerations as it happens with problems of the falling hair. But it is absolutely unacceptable when brands of medicine having no relation to the control exerted by the drug administration are gorged down the gullets of the afflicted.

There is not much that the administration can do to stop this. This is not to say that pharmaceuticals should have an open field to cripple and kill the nation. A foolproof control over these very potent drugs first of all calls for the strict enforcement that no drug shall be sold without a prescription and that there be enough qualified doctors to write out the million recipe and, most important of all, all our people have access to these physicians and are able to buy their service. This is somewhat tall as an order and government performance for a while cannot go beyond ensuring that "spurious" drugs are not manufactured and traded and sold. And we shall rejoice if this small part is well done.

Success in ensuring quality drugs would however mean nothing to the afflicted multitude in need of treatment and care and appropriate medication, who cannot afford to go to a doctor with genuine degree. Ayurvedic or traditional Subcontinental medicine and homeopathy—we are thankful—fill up this vast void. They aren't harmful in the first place and, in the bargain, are decidedly more effective than placebos. The question that remains unanswered is how to ensure the quality of these drugs.

The biggest problems now besetting the health of the nation are the quacks and self-medication. Spurious drugs thrive on these. And we have no ready answer to these.

THERE are two very distinct sides to our relationship with Pakistan. There is one that springs from our experiences of being part of the same country for twenty-four years with the history of a limited growth on one side and economic exploitation, cultural domination, disparity and political disenfranchisement in terms of genuine power sharing, on the other. Crowning it all is the nightmarish memory of the genocide and the brutalities of Pakistan during our liberation war.

The other side springs from our need to make friends in the international arena, development partner in the regional context, especially in that of SAARC, and an ally in the bilateral sense, who will support our specific national causes as and when such occasions should arise. Here emotions take to the sidelines and the pragmatic world of self-interest and mutual benefit takes precedence over everything else.

It is this 'pull and push' aspects of our relationship with Pakistan—'pull' of the experiences of the past, and the 'push' of the need for our future—that Prime Minister Khaleda had to balance very carefully during her just concluded three-day visit to Pakistan. The challenge was to push ahead our bilateral relations with Pakistan without appearing to be sacrificing what we hold to be our just and legitimate demands. Given the sensitivities on all sides, it was not an easy task. It is my personal impression that she performed it with suavity and dignity. She was able to convey her earnestness about wanting an extremely cordial relationship with Pakistan while at the same time keeping in view that there were genuine ob-

PM's Pakistan Visit

Pragmatism is the Key

by Mahfuz Anam

stacles in our relationship and they needed to be solved before further progress could be expected. There was a refreshingly new pragmatism in the air, that seemed to dominate the attitude of the two sides. This pragmatism was the key to the success of the visit.

Visits at the level of heads of government are not about ceremonies, receptions or signing accords. In the now defunct communist countries the first two bore immense significance. But for democracies they are part of well established protocol. The third is the result of rigorous work at the official level. The real purpose of such visits between chief executives is to establish understanding and cooperation at the highest political

level that enables countries to overcome knotty and complex problems that cannot be handled at any other level. Such visits permit leaders to form personal opinions about each other and establish rapport that cuts across bureaucratic and official barriers. The best thing that can happen during such a visit is that the leaders become friends. If not, at least trusting collaborators, sympathetic to each other's needs. The exposure makes them sensitive to the domestic pressures that each has to take account of and the political games they need to play for the gallery.

On the question of establishing personal rapport the trip can be said to have been

extremely successful. The visit, which at the start was protocol-wise correct, ended up as most warm and friendly, with the Pakistani Prime Minister Mr Nawaz Sharif originally decided to let Begum Zia visit his home town and political stronghold—Lahore—all by herself remains an unanswered question. But much to the delight of all those who wanted the visit to make an indelible impression on Begum Zia's mind, the Pakistani leader dropped all his previous plans and decided to personally accompany the Bangladesh leader throughout the whole day programme in Lahore. There were other gestures, like the impromptu lunch at Murree, that signified that Begum Zia and Mr Nawaz Sharif had hit it off well. It was this personal understanding between the two leaders that ultimately obliged the Pakistani side to put a date to the starting of the repatriation process. Nawaz Sharif realised that Begum Zia could not return home without a specific date and Begum Zia, on her part, knew that pushing the Pakistani leader further on this question would make it a political liability for him, given the volatile situation in Sindh and the political cloud under which the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) presently was.

On the question of assets and liabilities it was neither possible nor wise for Begum

Zia to push it any harder than she did. If Bangladesh is to get its due share it will have to be on the basis of goodwill and understanding, which Begum Zia was able to establish. The agreement by Pakistan to reactivate the mechanism to look into the question is itself a step forward compared to the fact that it was in the back burner for so many years. Realism dictates that it is not an issue that can be solved in a short time.

The main focus of Begum Zia's visit was to forge economic links with Pakistan, and the result is a mixed bag. The issue is far more delicate than it may first appear. We want, and need foreign, including Pakistani investment here. But a sudden influx of Pakistani investment or businessmen in Bangladesh, however desirable in economic terms, is bound to create political and psychological ripples which both countries would be better off avoiding for the moment. It will be wiser and definitely longer lasting to take a 'slow and steady' approach in this regard.

Obviously her first official visit to Pakistan was watched very carefully by India, just as her visit to India was observed with immense interest by Pakistan. Begum Zia appeared to be well aware of it. She made it abundantly clear, and correctly so, to her hosts that Bangladesh's bilateral relations with Pakistan cannot be made to jeopardise our relations with India. Here again, due to

the deep understanding between the two leaders, the Pakistani side relented the pressure and accepted the Bangladeshi position.

Except for the civic reception at Lahore, Begum Zia's visit was far too confined within the officialdom. The poorly organised meeting with the private sector representatives at Islamabad, while business centres are in Karachi and Lahore, did not give our Prime Minister the type of public exposure that helps to establish direct links with the people. I do not know why—and I consider to be a major flaw of the visit—our PM did not address the Pakistani press. There should have been at least one, if not two, press conferences, one at Islamabad and another at Lahore. It could have been possible even within the time constraints. There should have been, as there was in Bahrain, a TV interview, which again would have given our PM an opportunity to reach a huge number of Pakistani homes. Bureaucrats who plan her trips, and those who organise it at the other end, both seem averse to the free press and hence avoid including it in the programmes. The PM's press and political advisors would do well to keep this aspect of foreign visits in mind.

It would be foolish, if not motivated, on our part to try to find either too much or too little in Begum Zia's maiden visit to Pakistan. The results, a breakthrough for camp followers and a total failure to the detractors, are impressive for a first trip. Much will depend on how ably we build on the foundation that has been laid.

The author was a member of Editors' team accompanying the Prime Minister.

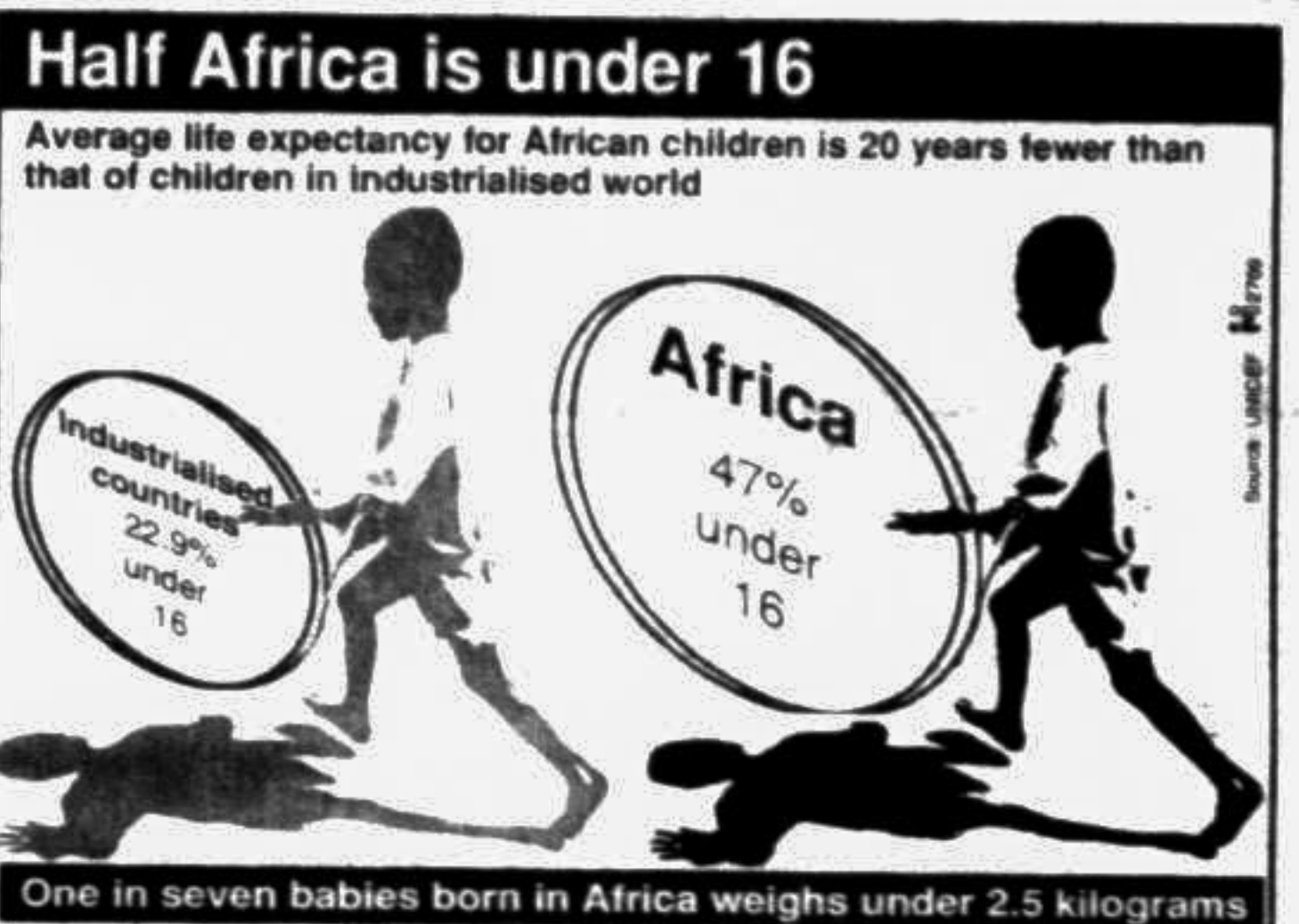


A warm farewell at Lahore

Population Clocks Tick Away as Heads are Counted

Tim Nyahunzvi and John Gambanga write from Harare

The International Population Control Award went to President Robert Mugabe in 1989 for Zimbabwe's vigorous population control policies. The efforts continue, but the country's birthrate is still high. Zimbabwe is holding a census (August 18-27) and a big population rise is expected to be recorded.



with which they are treated was summed up by a middle-aged man in video on Aids awareness shown on national television. He said the idea of using a condom was like "sucking a sweet with the wrapper on."

In remote rural Zimbabwe, says Dr Gibson Mandishona, of the Central Statistical Office, fertility and mortality rates remain high because of early marriages, a high level of illiteracy, the need for security during old age by parents—hence the large number of children—and low standards of health and nutrition, especially among children.

Men generally feel family planning is the women's responsibility, and while most would not mind if their wives were sterilised, few would entertain the idea of being sterilised themselves. Says Fatima Bopoto, of ZNFPC: "It has something to do with our culture and attitudes to this form of birth control."

The ten-day census will cost Z\$ 25 million. About one-

third of this will come from the UN Fund for Population Activities and the Swedish International Development Authority. Training of enumerators, team leaders, and supervisors began in June.

The census comes in the middle of five-year Economic Structural Adjustment Programme, after what turned out to be ten years of a disastrous experiment with socialist policies—albeit in fulfillment of pledges made to the electorate after the independence war.

Accurate statistics are vital in any type of planning for the future. First results of the census are expected in De-

ember. Zimbabwe's population problems are not unique in Africa. The population of the continent is about 647 million. With a growth rate of three per cent a year it is expected to reach 1.5 billion by the year 2005.

To remind officials of the problem, four population clocks tick away in Zimbabwe. One is in the Central Statistical Office and the others in the Ministries of Information, Posts and Telecommunications and Education and Culture.

One worried, cynical reader wrote to the national newspaper, The Herald: "It seems the rate at which birth certificates are being issued less than a quarter the rate at which people are being born. If that is not the case, why are the district administrator's offices perpetually full of people wanting these documents?"

Perhaps the census will give the reader an answer.

—GEMINI NEWS

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.

Islamic laws
Sir, Law and order situation in the country has assumed an alarming form. Things are going from bad to worse. Mugging, hijacking, killing—not to speak of theft—have become commonplace. There was a lot of uproar in the parliament over the issue. The honourable Home Minister claimed that things were now better than they were in 1972. But that is beside the point. Which political party is in power is also impertinent.

The point is that law and order is not merely bad. It has come to a collapsing stage. Life, person and property of the citizens are practically left at the mercy of the criminals. Situation has come to such a pass that no minor measures can improve it. Drastic and exemplary punishment are called for to arrest and improve the situation.

Perhaps the only answer lies in full implementation of Islamic laws. In Saudi Arabia and some other Middle East countries where Islamic laws are in force, law and order situation is very commendable although literacy rate there is not high. Their law and order situation is even better than that of Europe and America although literacy rate in the West is much higher.

In Bangladesh about 90% people are Muslims and they may welcome introduction of Islamic laws except, of course, a handful of criminals. If need be the government can hold an

opinion poll on the subject to ascertain the views of the rank and file. It may not be out of place to mention here that an ex-chief justice of Pakistan, Mr Cornelius who is a non-Muslim pleaded for introduction of Islamic laws.

May I, therefore, request the present democratic government to be bold enough to introduce Islamic laws in order to give safety and security to the innocent citizens.

Saleh Ahmed Choudhury
Dhaka Cantonment

Not to lie
Sir, There is a common maxim that lie is the mother of all sins.

In all major religions, there have been teachings not to tell lie. But we do very often, showing thumb to those moral ideas, indiscriminately practise lie. And this practice does not spare us from falling in troubles. The other day, one of my acquaintance's marriage got split due to a little lie.

Think of a world where none tells a lie! Had this been a reality, the world could have turned into a mini-heaven with all sorts of crimes, mismanagements and unfair practices certainly minimized.

In spite of all these prospects, people tend to tell lie. As a preventive device, I do emphasize on a micro-level approach. By the term 'micro-level approach' I mean that the individuals should be

taught moral values and norms and extensive practices of these values and norms should be institutionalized.

All these may seem to many as merely pious ideas. But such practices could positively revolutionize the society.

I do very rarely tell a lie. In fact, I have never told a big lie. On several occasions, I was awarded for this good practice. By those awards, I was highly encouraged to practice telling truth exhaustively.

In fine, lie begets lie, creates troubles, and truth begets awards and diffuses tension. Should we not opt for the better?

Md. Abdur Rouf
International Relations
Department, DU

Iraq and US election
Sir, Iraq has agreed to allow an UN team to enter its Agricultural Ministry building to look for documents concerning weapons. The issue is settled, as per announcement. But afterwards there is a news that US navy is increasing its strength in the Middle East.

Has this any connection with the forthcoming presidential election? Does President Bush think that he can turn the tide, now favouring Mr Clinton, with the help of Jewish vote and finance?

Didn't Israel get away with plenty more defiance of UN?

M A Haq
Green Road, Dhaka

Bank loan for industries
Sir, At present loan extending banks hesitate to issue industrial loans to the claimers due to the failure of the latter in refunding the loan money or the interest. The loan receivers who do not establish industries, I think, remain close to the banks for the ease of cheating the banks. As a result, the bankers being afraid of also the genuine parties who are not so close either, are not willing to invest the bank money.

To ensure setting up of genuinely needed industries with bank loan the government or more precisely, the concerned development must find a way out.

M A Moth Majumder
Survey of Bangladesh, Dhaka

BTV programmes
Sir, "Places in the Heart" was shown on 31/7/92 in the 'movie of the week' programme of BTV. It was indeed a good selection. The story of the movie was about a housewife whose husband was sud-

OPINION

VAT and Vendors

The other day I went to post a letter at one of the post offices in the city. While walking out of the building, I noticed a good number of people relishing on a special dish of grams. I felt an inclination to have some. Usually I advise my children to abstain from the delicacies available on the road-sides. But sometimes as it happens to all, one feels like breaking the rules and taste something different. Many vendors were selling their delicacies and it appeared that the people were enjoying the snacks.

I lent myself to the hospitality of one of the vendors. As I joined the other people enjoying the dishes, I began to enjoy their comments and opinions on different issues. On observing the fast sale, one gentleman by-the-by asked the vendor about his income. The vendor hesitatingly but softly said, "Normally I invest Taka two hundred and at the end of the day, I return home with Taka three hundred." On hearing this the questioner screamed out and in a humorous tone said, "This evening I must ring the Finance Minister, Mr Saffur Rahman, and tell him to impose VAT on your business." At this the vendor was quite inquisitive and wished to know what the gentleman meant by VAT.

The gentleman engaged himself to explain about VAT. All that the vendor could grasp about VAT was an extra payment on his part for making the sale of the stuff. Then the vendor instantly and confidently said, "We all the vendors have been paying this so-called VAT since long before Mr Saffur Rahman even came to power." People around were very curious to know what he actually meant by the VAT. He further stated, "We daily pay VAT to persons as government representatives and local mustabhis." He further confirmed that they cannot any way avoid this VAT because violating the demands of those means kicks in the tummy and being driven away from carrying this business. As this is their only source of income, they have no other choice.

In a very disappointing tone and disgusting mood, he expressed, "On the top of all these, if we have to pay further taxes then we will have no alternative but to ask our families to beg or die." I was charmed by his deliberation. This gave out a hard fact which many of us know but don't care to express it for the fear of dire consequences. I guess that if checked with other way-side vendors, it would be the same picture.

This may ignite an anger in the section of villain opportunists who are thriving up on the suffering of the poor vendors. These poor vendors need protection. Aforementioned harassment from any quarter should not be tolerated. The law enforcing personnel should check this by themselves and take measures accordingly. As we are aware of alleged corruption of law enforcing agencies, our journalists should indulge in investigative journalism, thus minimising the corruption on the part of the guardians of law and order. If these vendors have been running this sort of business for a long time without any objection from the authority then they should be allowed to continue as before. They are self-employed and employment is one of our biggest problems. This sort of employment eases unemployment situation and reduce begging.

Our banks may introduce programmes for financing this kind of small investments. This will substantially help the economy and lower strata of the society. It is proven that if people are allowed with small loans to run business in a small way, the poor people can earn their living. This will reduce the practice of begging and anti-social activities. Concerned authorities should look into this seriously and take appropriate action in this context.

Jerome Sarkar
Singlaia, Dhaka