

We Empathise

How must it have felt to go in a dark stormy night down a sea of icecold water, stuck up in cabins that gave a sense of false security in a vessel tossing like the rider in a rodeo show! The eight hundred men and women now accepted as lost in Thursday's ferry capsize in the Baltic did not find time to call up heroic sentiments and actions that made the sinking of the Titanic or, earlier still, the HMS Birkenhead supremely memorable. One moment they were all there in a ferry, not unlike a pleasure cruise-ship, half of them headed home, and the next they were no more. It took only minutes, something very unusual for a vessel of that size.

Many were the factors that seemingly conspired to keep the rescue figure pressed to below 150. The Baltic is not an open sea and is enclosed on all sides by some of the most prosperous and best managed states of the world with enviable technological prowess. And the ferry Estonia was on the shortest of trips that are made in that sea — from Tallin to Stockholm. Elements were in their hostile worst not only in sending the vessel down but more so in rendering all rescue attempts little better than futile. The vaunted attainments of the western industrial civilisation manifesting itself in revolutionary progress in movement as well as communication making it possible to stop unnecessary deaths by the bulk anywhere on the globe and at anytime — stood aside as if abandoning the Estonia and its passengers and crew. The vessel and the victims were pushed to the condition so familiar to us in Bangladesh. And this is why we in all of this wide world can appreciate the most the helplessness that reigns over such a disaster. And from that feeling we sympathise — in fact empathise, with those that have lost their near ones in the Baltic tragedy. There is no difference between the thousands on the recent weeklong vigil on the shores of Meghna-Dakatia and those that now will do the same on the Finnish shores, nearest to the spot of tragedy.

If the proud Swedes and the punctilious Finnish and the efficient Estonians can fail in maritime voyaging, their technological achievements notwithstanding, what must we be doing to make our river voyagings safe. One early guess as to what caused the Estonia's undoing suggests heavy loads of motor vehicle cargo shifting to dip the tossing vessel into taking water. Is it not what happened to our Dinar-2 in which more 200 perished similarly in a matter of minutes? The seal making the rump on Estonia watertight was found to be unsatisfactory. The Dinar was similarly reported to have lost engine power — due to a technical defect — when it went down.

The world must wake up from the Baltic tragedy to a new awareness of the necessity of safer water-surface journey. And we hope we have a fair share in that, if only in the interest of sheer physical survival of us. How must it be hard for the bereaved families on the Baltic to bear their loss being so very unused to such unnecessary and avoidable and unscheduled deaths and living in so very predictable a world of stability and opulence, unlike us who have the biggest supply of such deaths in the world stalking our every living moment. It perhaps hurts the same. In one case there is care everywhere to register the hurt, in the other there is a pervasive uncare that obviates the hurt and makes a repetition of disaster a matter of course.

US-Russia Summitry

The Clinton-Yeltsin summit, fifth between them since their Vancouver meet in April 1993, ended in Washington on an upbeat note, specially on the global security issue. Harking back to "bonds forged at the crucible of battle", in an obvious reference to their fighting as allies against Nazism in the Second Great War, they came warming up to accelerate the pace of dismantling their nuclear arsenals. This is reflective of their common desire to live up to the potentially promising environment for peace created against the back-drop of an end to the cold war era. Full three years have passed since *detente* and it was time for tangible progress on the security front.

The Presidents of the United States and Russia have decided that pending ratification of the SALT-II which envisaged disposal of the nuclear warheads in nine years they would advance the process of dismantling as far as practicable. With the implementation of SALT-I and-II, the intermediate and long range ballistic missiles might well be dispensed with sooner than was projected beforehand. Russian President Boris Yeltsin thinks it could be done within seven years. Added to the cut-backs on conventional troops and armouries, the reduction in the mutual possession of nuclear warheads can improve the European security situation dramatically. The structured poises and counter-poises in the shape of WARSAW and NATO have all but vanished. WARSAW is gone; and NATO is grappling with the question of how far eastward its frontier should move in Europe.

The summiters also resolved to exercise tighter control over nuclear material which seems to get to third parties somehow. Putting a cap on this is important because of much less-than ideal coverage of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The other aspect to global insecurity consists in arms trafficking and the free flow of small weapons into the hands of terrorists.

Yeltsin and Clinton who could differ on the question of lifting the UN arms embargo on the embattled government of Bosnia perhaps treated the matter as academic now. The US President was ready to carry out his commitment on the subject if the recalcitrant Bosnian Serbs failed to make peace in accord with the latest formula of the international contact group by October 15. But the Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic himself wants the withdrawal of embargo on the Muslims deferred for six months, until Spring. His go-slow, in an apparent retraction from an earlier stand to get the arms embargo lifted as quickly as possible to bolster Muslim defences against the well-armed Serbs, has been prompted by the possibility that the UN forces might disengage in the event of a wider conflict. France and Britain are not going along with the American perception of providing the Bosnian government with an equal chance to fight the Serbs.

What however is intriguing is that trade and economic sanctions on Serbia and Montenegro have been lifted apparently on dubious satisfaction that they have earned it by stopping their own supplies to the Bosnian Serbs.

I missed the part. But I was there after the great parades for Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao had come to an end in Hyderabad and Bangalore. I was on the trail of Rao, one day later. By then, all the leaders, bureaucrats and others who mattered had marched off to join the shadows. Everything looked haunted.

It is no use to talk about welcome arches, life-size cutouts or the profusion of flags and bunting. Such wasteful expenditure has become a perk of the office of prime minister. None can also possibly object to high profile security apparatus, long stoppages of traffic and suspension of normal work in government secretariats. After all, it is not every day that the emperor from Delhi goes down south to visit his subjects.

But why should Rao, otherwise amiable and simple, throw his weight about when everyone knows that he is only one in the Congress who has any weight? It was understandable in the case of Mrs Indira Gandhi because she had contempt for the party leaders and had eyes fixed on her own dynasty. Rajiv Gandhi inherited a party in which no tall leader had escaped his mother's machinations. Rao had to face some challenge in the beginning but not now. There is no reason why he should cut the party leaders to size, especially when he is past 77 and when he is not grooming his children.

The case in point is his recent visit to Andhra Pradesh. The talk of Hyderabad town, when I reached after PM's de-

On the Trail of Prime Minister

parture, was why did he have to insult chief minister Vijayabaskara Reddy, who is totally loyal to him? Prime minister went to Cuddapah, not far from Hyderabad, despite CM's opposition, apparently to placate Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, a Congress MP, who is Vijayabaskara's inveterate opponent. Still worse was PM's deliberate silence when abuses and chappals were hurled at the CM, meticulously planned earlier. Even privately Rao had no word of regret, much less condemnation. He in fact rationalised the incident by arguing at the Congress workers meeting, held subsequently, that politicians had to face a rough-and-tumble life.

Rao was so overwhelmed by the large gathering, dined and wine in desultory fashion for several days, that he did not bother about CM's sensitivity. So humiliated did Vijayabaskara Reddy feel that he had his intention to resign communicated to Rao there and then. Still he did not react.

Both Rao and Vijayabaskara Reddy have been friends for a long time. Even when Reddy quitted the lower portfolio at the centre to become Andhra Pradesh chief minister, Rao would consult him on ticklish legal and constitutional problems. Vijayabaskara Reddy, on his part, went all out to get Rao elected to the Lok Sabha from Andhra Pradesh, needlessly rigging the polls in certain areas.

The question that still remains unanswered is why Rao

did not recompense the hurt Vijayabaskara? If the PM wanted, he had all the time to do so. It was not an unwitting omission. The only plausible reply is that Rao wanted the message to go to him and the other Congress leaders that he and he alone mattered in the Congress. He has felt small when at recent gatherings Sonia Gandhi has been vociferously applauded even at the expense of neglecting him. One should also check whether Vijayabaskara Reddy has been calling on her as

Gandhi did to ridicule the Andhras, a prime minister from Andhra Pradesh has repeated it.

Vijayabaskara Reddy is considered a decent man, if not an able administrator. The Andhras have not liked the treatment meted out to him. The insult to him or the role of Rajasekhara Reddy has, however, receded into the background. In the fore has come the failure of Rao to make amends. Surprisingly, the Bharatiya Janata Party in the state is exploiting the point

forthcoming state election was the objective. By unveiling the statue of late chief minister Dev Raj Urs, who became an *avatar* of the backward by giving them a pre-eminent position in the state's government, Rao has tried to woo the Urs flock. But they have not forgotten the way Urs was hounded out of the Congress. Rao probably believes that people's memory is short. So far he has not created even a ripple of support among the backward.

In one way, Rao's visit had harmed Moily. True, he got a clean chit for 'good administration'. But Rao has also made it clear that tickets for the assembly election would not be allotted with any particular leader in view. If anything, this has dwarfed Moily, who will be leading the Congress in the December polls.

The mishandling of happenings in Hubli, where five people died of police bullets when the BJP was trying to hoist the national flag at the Idgah on August 15, has adversely affected the ruling Congress. Even the Muslims are not happy because they wanted the government to find an amicable solution, which the party as such did not attempt before the incident.

The Congress is also harassed by former chief minister Bangarappa, who is getting a good response from the backward communities. He looks like spoiling at least 7.5 per cent Congress vote. He himself may secure only 25 to 30 seats, but it may turn out to be a crucial number in an assembly which may be a hung

one. Neither the Hubli incident nor the joining of Jivraj Alva, a local leader, has helped the BJP. Alva's reputation is that of a defector, especially when the polls are only two months away. The news about his switchover from the Janata Dal has not spread even among his supporters. The other day some 100 of them came to a BJP meeting and, as usual, raised slogans against the RSS, not realising that the RSS was the *alma mater* of the BJP. The 29 per cent vote which the party obtained during the Lok Sabha election, appears to have dwindled. Still, it alone poses a real threat to the Congress.

Alva has not, however, been able to make any dent in the Janata Dal support. Already the party is far weaker than before because of splits at the national level. At least in the state, the party has closed its ranks. Both Hegde and Deva Gowda are trying to win back the people on the slogan that their government was better than those of Bangarappa and Moily. Not good examples to cite to retrieve the people's confidence, but both are drawing crowds.

Nagpur was not on the PM's trail. But I went there to savour the Maharashtra politics. The point of discussion was whether Sharad Pawar would continue as chief minister till the Assembly election due in March. I think this debate has been fanned by Rao's query to a local editor how the Congress would fare without Sharad Pawar. After communal riots and the bomb blasts in Bombay, Rao particularly sent him from the defence to become Maharashtra chief minister. Strange, the PM should be posing such questions.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

some state chief ministers and central ministers are doing so religiously?

Whatever the truth, the Cuddapah incident may cost the Congress dearly in the December state election. Already people are recalling the day when Rajiv Gandhi had belittled the then chief minister Anjaiah in a speech at the airport itself. The scorn shown towards Anjaiah proved to be the undoing of the Congress, which was routed in the Assembly polls.

Even otherwise, the Telugu Desam of N T Rama Rao looks a winner because of lacklustre performance of the Congress government and dissensions in the party. Rao has provided the opponents with yet another talking point that what Rajiv

hoping such a stance might help it pick up some of the fall-out. But its voting percentage is not likely to go up because the party exists only in name.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is not making any wave in Andhra Pradesh; it never did. The state introduced reservation for backward classes some years ago and there isn't any troubled water in which the BSP can fish. This is true of all the southern states. They introduced reservation quota for the backward nearly two decades ago. Karnataka has a quota of 86 per cent since R K Hegde's earlier stint of chief minister-ship in 1980.

Rao's stay in Bangalore was only for one day. Again the

National Anti-plague Committee: Let the Professionals Take the Initiative

by A M Alimuzzaman

supposed to fumigate each and every aircraft that leave an airport. Similarly the fruits and vegetables are supposed to be checked to ensure quality before they are allowed to enter. These are normal and routine duties of the duty officers who are to be again impressed to do their job properly. In case these officers have any problems these are to be looked into.

Medical check-up often might be interpreted as a kind of harassment. The passengers might get fed-up and try to escape. Hence care and attention may be given so that the check-up does not seem to be disgusting. It is takes time it has to be politely explained to the passengers that the process is in their interest.

Then, issuance of visa. Visa means restrictions. Moreover, an Indian national infected with plague does not have any reason to come to Bangladesh. Hence the reason for suspension of visa to Indian nationals does not seem a reasonable decision, particularly when all the incoming passengers are being thoroughly checked-up at the entry points.

Assurance and Hope

What is needed is assurance of hope and confidence. Nothing is lost. The deadly disease may be there. But then every disease is deadly if not treated timely and promptly. The Surat authorities failed to give this message to their people and the result was mass desertion. The following measures may, therefore, be taken. A layman's guide may be printed and published in the media. How a layman on duty at the entry point can spot a plague victim by looking at him. Visible symptoms are to be spotted before making the thorough medical check-up by especially trained staff. Moreover, the staff on duty, the police on duty, have also to be reassured that no harm would be caused to them in the course of the checking.

Above all, the passengers in particular and the people in general have to be told that there is no reason to get panicky. The people have also to be informed about the Infectious Diseases Hospital. Where this hospital is located. How to get to the hospital or hospitals. Is it located only in

Dhaka or in other district towns? Is there any fixed hours for the patients to go there?

The people have to be assured and re-assured time and again that the disease can be treated and death prevented if treatment is given at the hospital just after the appearance or feeling of the first symptoms.

There are 800 million people in India. Against this, 100 deaths are not a case of alarm and "red alert". The road accidents, diarrhoea, TB, cancer, and other diseases and incidents are taking their toll every day. What is evident in India? That for the lack of timely action the Surat situation has escalated. What timely action? The timely actions are: How the disease and why the disease had occurred in Surat in the first place? And, then why did the people get panicky? There must have been lapses somewhere.

In Dhaka and also in other places in the sub-continent we have to immediately fill-up the gaps. Mere checking the passengers at the entry points will not do. There are innumerable slums in Dhaka and also in the rural areas. These slums are full of rats and, who knows, fleas too are there. How these slums are to be improved and the carriers eliminated? Even the buses and rickshaws that ply in the cities need to be fumigated periodically. The innumerable grocery stores that cater to the need of innumerable people are also not free from the threat of infested rats and fleas.

Training and Orientation

Moreover, are our doctors, nurses, and other technical staff trained and oriented to receive and treat plague patients? These are the issues which need to be handled by the professionals in a concerted way. There is no reason to panic although there is no reason to be complacent. After all, the disease which played havoc in the 14th century is no more that dangerous in the face of modern science, technology and professionalism. It is the failure of the administrators and professionals of Surat who became complacent for a moment. We are to take lessons from Surat. The Surat

experience is to remind us that there is no room for complacency. The Dhaka Airport Health Authority has got to be reorganised which is long over-due. Similarly the health units of other airports, sea ports, rivers ports have to be strengthened and reorganised giving them adequate logistics and authority. Similarly, the City Corporations' health units

have to be strengthened with more logistics and authority to regularly visit the slums where rats may abound and shops where groceries are stored.

The Mayor or his representative may be inducted in the national committee.

The professionals are, therefore, to take up the initiative immediately. In this regard the approach of WHO is noteworthy. The circular

which WHO had issued on the plague situation in India bear their professionalism. There is thus no need for alarms. But we have every reason to be careful and be prepared for such an eventuality. The National Committee is a right step. But the professionals are to step forward and ask: Why such a disease occurs? Have we taken measures to stop it? Have we prepared our administrators, police, hospital workers, doctors, nurses and staff to face it? Let the professionals take over.

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OPINION

Supplement on Bangabandhu: An Afterpiece

G A Momin

I wholeheartedly congratulate The Daily Star for giving the readers a splendid supplement on 15 August marking the 19th death anniversary of Bangabandhu. The supplement consists of two parts — one produced by The Daily Star and the other sponsored by the Awami League. It contains a number of pieces contributed by Sheikh Hasina, Nilratan Halder, Naimul Huq and two poems: one by Waliur Rahman and the other by me. Besides the supplement, the regular pages present an article by S A M S Kibria, an editorial, and a post-editorial by Mahfuz Anam. All the pieces have been highly analytical, informative and expiscatory.

Sheikh Hasina in her article 'History's Macabre Tragedy' gives a detailed and horrifying picture of the tragedy of 15 August and how the people most trusted by Bangabandhu betrayed him most. She thoughtfully likens the events to the tragedy of Plassey when the last independent ruler of Bengal Nawab Serajuddowla fell a victim to the vicious trap laid by the conspirator Mir Zafar.

S A M S Kibria in his article reminds the government that it is obligatory upon the party in power to remove all obstacles to holding a long-awaited trial of the killers of Bangabandhu. He also flings at the ill-bred moves ever since the killing of Sheikh Mujib to distort history of the country and tarnish the image of Bangabandhu.

Nilratan Halder in his 'The Nation Paying a Price' compares Sheikh Mujib with Mahatma Gandhi, who like Sheikh Mujib guided his country to its ultimate goal. Bangabandhu differed with Gandhi in the sense that while Gandhi drew his inspiration from his struggle from spiritual sources, the driving force with Sheikh Mujib was his earthly passion. Nilratan Halder points out that post-Mujib period has been concomitant with ever worsening plight of the common people; particularly that of the down-trodden class. He also expostulates very truthfully that 'BAKSAL' was formed through force of circumstances. Sheikh Mujib's decision for formation of 'BAKSAL' had an element of compulsion rather than choice. Conspirators from both within and outside the power-axis made it almost impossible for him to run the country.

Naimul Huq quoting a number of persons who witnessed the burial of Bangabandhu gives a vivid and touching description of how Bangabandhu's corpse was flown to Tungipara and how secretly and sacrile-

geously the Father of the Nation was buried in a quiet spot of rural Bangladesh.

The poem 'Apotheosis' by Waliur Rahman is a highly passionate elegy devoted to the memory of the Father of the Nation. Rich in diction and metaphor the poem stirs the deep recess of the readers' heart. The writer's deep-rooted pathos and remorse run all through the poem like the serene flow of the Madhumati fondly nestling ripples and waves in its despondent bosom.

About my poem entitled '15th August' I certainly do not have any comments beyond saying that only the readers can tell if there is any substance in it.

The editorial 'The Black Night' and Mahfuz Anam's post-editorial 'The Murder of a Patriot' have been simply master strokes. In the post-editorial Mahfuz Anam very skillfully puts a plain on behalf of Mujib's small minded critics and then goes on stocading Sheikh Mujib's position by expunging some of the charges and belittling others to press home the demand for trying the loathed killers of Sheikh Mujib. The editorial 'The Black Night' superbly unleashes a crescendo of irrefutable arguments in favour of declaring 15th August a national mourning day. It urges the democratically elected government to accept the demand. The government if it is at all disposed to studying public mind properly, should by now understand that in these demands echoes the voice of the nation. Mahfuz Anam very wisely points out that in our terribly divisive society 'Bangabandhu' can still be a unifying force — a great force for national unity.

As an epilogue to the pieces — perhaps not very completely reviewed by me — I am inclined to put forward some of my observations. It passes my comprehension why the political parties except of course the ultra rightist ones, should shove Bangabandhu to the Awami League camp alone. Bangabandhu's leadership, first in matters of carving out a distinctive identity for the Bengalees and then untiringly organising the nation for an armed struggle, was accepted by almost all the leaders of our country. During the liberation war even in his absence it was Bangabandhu and his recorded speeches that everybody, every freedom fighter, turned to, irrespective of his political affiliation for inspiration and lease of additional moral and physical courage. Sheikh Mujib be-

longed to the nation. His image and appeal should not have been restricted within the confines of Awami League.

My next contention is, when Sheikh Mujib was killed, he was the President of 'BAKSAL' and not of the Awami League. By forming 'BAKSAL' Sheikh Mujib made a departure from traditional Awami League politics. BAKSAL was a conglomerate of leaders from all the political parties and professional groups. Late President Ziaur Rahman, if I am not wrong, also had joined BAKSAL. When cracks and dissensions marked the political scene, Bangabandhu enfolded, all into BAKSAL with the express purpose of preventing any schism in administration in the initial stage of independence. Thus Sheikh Mujib almost throughout his political career was a symbol of unity and cohesion. Then why such a sudden departure from everything about Sheikh Mujib by almost all the political parties except the Awami League and why has Sheikh Mujib remained an unsighted alien with successive establishments ever since August 15 '75? I strongly feel that 'Bangabandhu' has been a highly prized concession naively made by Begum Khaleda Zia to Sheikh Hasina. As a matter of fact Begum Zia could have taken Bangabandhu out of Hasina's ling and have her greatly disarmed. Begum Zia, the first truly elected prime minister since 1975, should have realised her obligation to the nation as a whole and not to a particular section of people and should have, to her advantage, shunned the myopic stand of cold-shouldering Sheikh Mujib and taken step to place Bangabandhu in the right perspective officially. That would have been a great initiative on the part of Begum Zia. But good works in our political amphitheatre are rarely seen. It is a sad commentary on the quality of our leadership.

Before conclusion, I would like to pay my respect to the memory of late S M Ali, the unforgettable founder editor of The Daily Star. He was perhaps the first among the editors of English language dailies to raise the issues of indemnity bill and national mourning day editorially, when most of the English language dailies, for reasons beyond my comprehension, were shying away from Sheikh Mujib and almost everything associated with him.

True to its tradition 'The Daily Star', under editorship of Mahfuz Anam, has been maintaining its individualistic, patriotic and neutral stance to the delight of its readers.

To the Editor...

"Why Not Privatised Radio and TV?"

Sir, The government need not privatise BTV/BB, but allow private radio and television networks to compete.

Autonomy and monopoly are harmful to democratic voters (during the coming general elections).

'We over-know what the party in power is doing. We do not know what the others are doing. Curiosity killed the cat, and obstinacy brought down many regimes.'

Our government is wise: we have been promised alternative channels within the next four months. 'Alternative' outside or inside?

A Husnain
Dhaka

Doctors' strike

Sir, On the one hand, very often, our government doctors

remain absent from their duties unauthorised, make private practice, observe harkals and strikes at their sweet will causing untold sufferings to the people and, on the other hand, they regularly draw their pay and allowances for such period of unauthorised absence from the public exchequer, without any feeling of penitence. We feel this policy of 'double benefit' is disgraceful for them.

We are surprised as to how the highly educated and qualified doctors who are morally and ethically bound to render humanitarian service can fall prey to such whims. We wonder as to why no disciplinary action has been taken as yet by the government against the BMA leaders, who are government servants, for indulging in such activities as violating government service rules and regulations and discipline and

committing gross misconduct. We also wonder why our public leaders, members of the parliament of both government and the opposition parties are found lenient towards the government doctors.

We suggest that the pay and allowances of the government doctors for their period of unauthorised absence from duty may be deducted, and distributed among the ward boys and the nurses who have been rendering undaunted and commendable humanitarian services to the patients, no matter whatever simple and humble these might be. In the absence of highly paid but not so responsible government doctors in the government hospitals, medical colleges, thana health complexes and rural health centres.

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