

Nation Mourns

This newspaper takes special satisfaction in seeing this day being observed as national mourning day, because we have been editorially demanding it for the last four years.

As we see it, the best way to honour the man who gave up his life in service of his country, is to ensure the growth and development of that very country he laid down his life for.

For the first time in 21 years, Bangabandhu's murder is being mourned at the state level. In fact for the last two decades a concerted effort was on to obliterate his memory from the mind of the people.

And yet, in spite of the happenings of the last 21 years, today millions are mourning his brutal killing as if he had never taken leave from our hearts.

It is the last lesson that we would like to underscore on this sacred occasion. Leave Bangabandhu in the heart of our masses. Do not spoil it by involving his memory in too many official and state events.

Let it be Annulled

The arrest on Tuesday morning of Farooqur Rahman, Shahrar Rashid — the two self-professed killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the incumbent Prime Minister in 1975, and very nearly his whole family — and Khairuzaman marks a definite departure from the way things had been for over two decades.

The irony of the situation is that the three could not be held or be charged for their part in the August 15 slaughter. As long as that unsurpassed national shame of the Indemnity Act is not removed from the Constitution, Bangladesh cannot be healed of that impossible malaise of constantly losing its moral authority to state power.

To our mind, AL must immediately initiate a national dialogue with all parties in the Sangsad about repealing the Indemnity Act. BNP will be helping itself eminently by agreeing to see the indemnity go. The party is now in no position to afford being singled out as one which would not let the constitution and as such the state and society of Bangladesh be rid of the virus eating into the vitals of all these.

The Bhaluka Tragedy

Eleven people were killed in the head-on collision between a private microbus and a chartered bus near Bhaluka on Monday night. In the microbus were Awami League leaders and workers who were returning to Sherpur from a Dhaka engagement.

There is, however, a great chance of this tragedy being caused by a most common practice of drivers of vehicles — not properly dipping their lights when approaching each other.

We are to ensure that whosoever drives a vehicle must be competent and fit enough to do so. Passing the driving test must be made far more stringent and corruption-free.

Salute to Bangabandhu

Appeal to Khaleda Zia

Help Repeal Indemnity Bill

by Mahfuz Anam

The Bill as it exists not only prevents the murderers of Sheikh Mujib from being punished, but far more importantly, it prevents us, as a nation, from becoming a people who can claim to believe in the principles of justice and law.

LAW is blind, it is equal for all, it is fair, it is impartial. Law reflects the vision of a society to be just, Law is enthronement of certain principles, and the commitment to uphold them under all circumstances.

The Indemnity Bill as introduced as an ordinance by President Mushatq (October 75), and later incorporated into our Constitution by President Zia, violates all the basic assumptions of law. It is contrary to everything that Constitutions and Laws are meant to represent, protect and promote.

This newspaper has been arguing for the last four years (much before it became fashionable, with the change of political leadership) that the issue of repealing the Indemnity Bill is not an issue of political convenience, but one of upholding the moral principles of a society.

The moral question surrounding Bangabandhu's murder is far larger than it may appear at first. One can say that statesmen and Presidents have been murdered in the past, many of them while in power, and that history has treated all such actions as political acts.

If Sheikh Mujib's death is political assassination, then what about the murder of Mrs Mujib, of Kamal and Jamal, of their new brides, of young Russell? If it is said that all the above got caught in crossfire, but were not actually the tar-

gets, then what about the murder of Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni and his pregnant wife and his family members, and the murder of Mr Shariat and his family members, both of whom lived in separate houses far away from Bangabandhu's house?

No, the case is clear. The plot was of murder, carefully planned, cold blooded, and pre-meditated. There is nothing to prove anything other than what it is — a brutal plot to kill the Founder of Bangladesh and obliterate his whole family.

So we raise the MORAL QUESTION over and over again. What can, if anything, justify the killing of so many men, women and children, including one expecting mother and a mere child of 10 years? NOTHING. ABSOLUTELY NOTHING.

The question bounces back upon us, the people. What have we done about this moral outrage, and what are we going to do about it in the future?

As to how we, the people, have reacted to the murder of Bangabandhu, the record unfortunately is very dismal. For the last 21 years we have more or less remained silent, pretending as if it never happened. Ignoring the most shameful act in the history of our tragic nation we, by our silence, stand guilty of participating in the attempt to legitimise something which is fundamentally criminal.

This is where the real significance of continuance of the Indemnity Bill really lies. The Bill as it exists not only prevents the murderers of Sheikh Mujib from being punished, but far more importantly, it prevents us, as a nation, from becoming a people who can claim to believe in the principles of justice and law.

Here is the challenge before our law makers. If you all are really "law makers" then all of you must act together and pave the way for the repeal of the Indemnity Bill. This notorious Bill was promulgated as an ordinance by the President of the killer government, Khondakar Mushatq. Later General Ziaur Rahman incorporated it in our Constitution through the infamous Fifth Amendment. On the 25th Anniversary of our Liberation War we would like to appeal to all members of the Parliament, from all parties, to join hands and free the country, its people and its legal

system from this ignominious legacy.

For the process to begin Awami League should introduce a bill seeking the repeal of the Indemnity Act. In introducing the repeal bill, the treasury should hold formal, informal and even private consultations with all parties represented in the Parliament, and most sincerely seek their cooperation.

Given the fundamentally moral nature of the issue, and patently illegal nature of the existing Act, all MPs, all of whom are oath bound to uphold the highest principles of law, justice and human rights, should find no problem in coming to an agreement to repeal this despicable piece of law.

In this moral undertaking, we would especially like to appeal to Begum Khaleda Zia to help the nation in unbending its conscience and its Constitution by joining hands with, especially the Awami League and repealing the Indemnity Bill.

Late President Zia has done many things for which he will be honoured and remembered (like restoring multi-party politics, freeing the press from one party shackles, etc.). But for the Fifth Amendment he will have to face the condemnation of posterity for giving constitutional shelter to self-confessed killers and for having made a mockery of the law, the Constitution and of a nation's sense of justice and self-respect.

History may reveal the compelling circumstances that forced Gen. Zia to introduce the 5th amendment. Begum Zia, meanwhile, can do the nation a great deal of good, and the memory of her illustrious husband a great favour by helping to bring about a national consensus on repealing this monstrosity and shame on our nation.

This appeal may sound politically naive to some. But, we believe, to most law abiding citizens it will sound natural and obvious. Begum Zia is a leader of considerable stature. Not only she is a former prime minister, she could very well be a justice one too. The fact that her party won 34 per cent of popular votes, clearly shows that a vast section of our people believe in her leadership. But what is that leadership likely to be, if it is bereft of moral moorings?

Khaleda Zia could have forged a consensus on repealing the Indemnity Bill while in power. She made a mistake by

not doing so. She can, and should, correct that mistake now.

A historic understanding can be made between AL and BNP around this move. Many issues of the Liberation War, which continue to plague relations between our two leading political parties, — which in turn so negatively affect our politics — can be resolved. Not only a consensus on Bangabandhu's place in our history but also that of Ziaur Rahman can be worked out around the same initiative. This will help to close a highly destructive chapter in our contemporary history — the re-opening of which will probably finally kill our chances of rapid growth and gaining a competitive position in the global trade and commerce.

Such a move will also help to consolidate our democracy and the economy. However, if we want the opposition BNP to have the maturity to extend a cooperative hand to the ruling party, then simultaneously, we have to insist that the treasury bench must help to create the environment conducive to such a behaviour by the opposition.

On the occasion of the 21st anniversary of Bangabandhu's murder — first under AL government — much will be said about his glorious life. But much also is likely to be said about other parties and leaders that may deepen wounds, and fortify divisions. Such utterances, however, applause generating at present, are actually enmity generating in the medium and long run. Restraint in this respect will be therefore, our suggestion to the ruling party would be not to use the opportunity it has got, by being in power after 21 years, in further widening existing differences. Instead, every effort should be made to build bridges.

However, we conclude by our most fervent appeal being directed at Khaleda Zia. Given the immorality of the Indemnity Bill, her own belief in the values of justice, and her own sense of what is right or what is wrong, she should not have any difficulty in cooperating to negate this Bill. We request Begum Zia to seriously look into what we ask of her. She will realise that she has a reprehensible legal legacy to lose, and a far greater political world to gain. She will help the nation overcome another division and thereby considerably strengthen her claim as a leader of vision, principle and justice.



Where it Went Wrong

by Shah Husain Imam

He personified bravery propelled by a dream, a gale force that could not have stopped short of calling at the port of blissful freedom whatever the pain suffered and the price paid on the way.

As we write belated obituaries on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and surpass each other in chastising his assassins and showering tributes to his memory, we should be anguished to be doing all these only with the backing of the political power of the day.

We took 'de-mujibisation' in the stride for all these years — let's be honest with ourselves and admit it. Many might have mourned his assassination and that of the members of his family in the privacy of their homes, perhaps even played the cassette of his stirring 7th March speech but that was a very small consolation for the wholesale failure to remember Mujib in public.

True, the killers of Bangabandhu and the members of his family by their very scale of dastardliness administered a shock therapy in the classical style of diabolical military punches. There were other galling things as instant turn-coats from the Awami League romping into the hardpan of reactionary forces to legitimise their coup d'etat and also surmises about Mujib having gone overboard with his socialism in the one-party system and provoked unfriendly international reaction which emboldened the local schemers to execute their plot.

But isn't a nation's mettle tested under conditions of such stresses and strains? We need doing a soul-searching on that and finding out, if necessary by research, that which plumbs new depths as to where things really went wrong and how.

Pure courage put Bangabandhu on a niche that few in this part of the world can claim to have reached in their political careers. Whilst most of his contemporaries lolled in self-centred and conformist comfort he laboured in hard politics rather mundane to most of his followers but visionary in his case with longings for autonomy, and for national self-determination when pushed to the walls.

He personified bravery propelled by a dream, a gale force that could not have stopped short of calling at the port of blissful freedom whatever the pain suffered and the price paid on the way. That was the Mujib visage which captivated the imagination of the people more and more as the Pakistani rulers committed mistake after mistake in their simplistic black-and-white perception of Bengali sentiments.

In a sense, it is more the blunders of the Pakistanis than any design by the Awami League that precipitated the creation of Bangladesh.

When a deposed Pakistan prime minister Husayn Shaheed Suhrawardy took on a Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto pejorative — implicating him in corruption, etc — with a greatly inflated or levelled with an Ayub Khan in his martial law prime-time at the Dhaka Club flinging a

democratic point of contention at him it was the Mujib's mentor's approach to a test of courage on the firing line itself, a gift to his alter ego — the Bangabandhu to be. He also gleaned the best from Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani and Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq in his love for the peasantry and his adoption of socialism in the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh.

He could not be a Fidel Castro or Che Guevara leading a guerrilla war after Pakistan's genocidal crack-down upon us on March 25, 1971, because of his political upbringing, a fact his critics tend to overlook.

On a televised programme poet Shamsur Rahman has compared Bangabandhu's patriotism with Nelson Mandela's in point of prolonged incarceration both of them suffered for the causes of their peoples they held so dear to their hearts: One fought the diabolical apparatus of apartheid while the other a vicious domination machine. But going back in time, his signal contributions to the carving of a state for our people are also analogous to what George Washington did for America. Why not be big of heart on this starting-point of free Bangladesh's history and stop judging facts to live in a fake-believe world?

Nobody is undermining Ziaur Rahman's contributions to the freedom struggle but to regard these as of the same or higher ranking with those of Bangabandhu himself would be a self-demeaning travesty of history.

In a rather gleeful justification of distortions in the annals of our Liberation War many tend to point out that after all rulers write their own histories, so why feel repugnant about it. Their logic seems to be that when in power the BNP had idolised Ziaur Rahman over Bangabandhu for political reasons and now that the Awami League is back in power it is entitled to do the opposite, that is defy the Bangabandhu. And if and when the BNP is elected to form government in the future they could very well revert to giving a pre-eminent position to Ziaur Rahman. And the cycle of action and reaction thus goes on and on. We just don't buy this prospect for alternating deifications with the underlying implication of sending confusing signals to the outside world.

Once and for all, Bangabandhu's place in history will have to be firmly entrenched by a national consensus among the political parties. It seems a moot point is slowly emerging on this issue across the political spectrum. When the political history of the country is re-written to flush it of the accumulated distortions, perhaps there should be a chapter to it detailing how far the Awami League in its re-incarnated form has kept to or veered away from the Mujibian ethos.



Stopping by Humanity's Graveyard

by Chandra Shekhar Das

FOR many in the subcontinent August is the cruellest month. For all the stretching of the tressitura in favour of new geographical and political emergence and azaadi, no month brings so many poignant memories. No other point of time in every year brings the inherent cowardice and cruelty of us as a people of a particular geographical identity under the spotlight.

If the tide of tragedy that swept the subcontinent at the wake of the Partition in the August of 1947 can be masked as the unavoidable birth pangs of two nations, the one that befell Bangladesh on the same date, in the same month, 28 years later, following the attempt to remove the patriarchal presence of the pivotal person in Bangladesh's emergence, has nothing to hide its face of unimaginable cruelty.

What crime, the killers could have accused Sheikh Russell of? The youngest son of Mujib and a boy of 10 vainly tried to hide behind the gadget from the fuming guns that had only a little while ago silenced his father, the incomparable orator and the epitome of the dream of freedom for those who knew him as Bangabandhu.

Which court of law can mete justice against the crime of annihilating the dream of blossoming youth? With the intricate pattern of mehendi — an artistic tattooing ritual in

celebration of nuptial spirit — still red and fresh in their hands Sultana and Parveen, the brides of Kamal and Jamal, had to be riddled by the bullets of the killers. Their only crime was their identity as the daughters-in-law of Sheikh Mujib. So darkness at noon for Sultana at 23 and Parveen at 22. An athlete of repute at the university, Sultana must have realised to her horror that no speed is of use when death is the destiny.

In the quiet grim surrounding of the Banani Graveyard there are others, asleep eternally whom nature did not deprive of the right to life but the wrath and frenzy of the perpetrators of a cowardly act in the name of revolution. Lying in the cheerlessly trodden tract is Mrs Mujib, 45-year-old Fazlunissa Begum, a lady never quite evaluated for her contribution in the emergence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the Bangabandhu, as the symbol of unification of a huge population irrespective of religious differences.

Close to their mother, lie buried the two older sons of Sheikh Mujib — Sheikh Kamal and Sheikh Jamal, mercilessly killed on that fateful night.

Banani Graveyard is not the source of remembrance of a family tragedy but the tragedy of a clan also. Besides, Sheikh Naser, the 47-year-old younger brother of Mujib who hap-

pened to be in the Dhanmondi residence on that dark night and whose desperate attempt to dodge death by hiding in the bathroom met with no success, there are graves of Sheikh Moni and his wife. The 27-year-old Arzu Moni, wife of Moni, Mujib's nephew, was reportedly pregnant but had to accept a violent and untimely death along with the possibility of life within her.

For sheer number of the gory dead bodies that came out of a house to unceremoniously motored off to the Banani Graveyard on the morning of the 15th August, Abdur Rab Serniabat's family is second only to that of his brother-in-law, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The former minister in the regime of Sheikh Mujib's Awami League is frozen in the ageless frame of memory along with his two daughters. Although his son, a prime target of the killers, survived by an incredible stroke of good luck, his 5-year-old son was brutally killed as was the 55-year-old housemaid and the 14-year-old servant. Hasnat escaped death because he had just arrived from Barisal in connection with a marriage resembled him so much that the predators in black uniform took him for Serniabat's son sealed his fate of mass burial at Banani.

The trail of graves has

room for a remarkable character, pushed in the background for the impact of a huge family tragedy, but no less significant from the moral point of view. With the members of Sheikh Mujib's family and relations lies Colonel Jamil in eternal rest. In the long list of detractors and cowards who were either delighted or ran for cover, Jamil whom Sheikh Mujib put in the Military Intelligence only 15 days before the catastrophe shines as an epitome of courage, conviction and commitment. When Mujib rang him up for help, Jamil drove towards Road No 32 with only a dressing gown on his pyjama. Jamil never got out of his Volkswagen alive to be of any help to his leader and along with others have become a part of the history as the direct outcome of the abortive attempt to efface Sheikh Mujib from the history of Bangladesh.

The painful memories of these untimely deaths call for trial and punishment of those who committed unspeakable and unpardonable crime and tried to pass them as the conscience of the nation. To win back the respect of the international community as a people with conscience and a semblance of morality, and most importantly, to heal our conscience, we need to pave the way for a judicial evaluation of the atrocities done on August 15, 1975.

