

Save the Sundarbans

The Sundarbans are sick. This should not be news to the intelligentsia of this land. In fact, the 6,000 square-mile forest has been dying for long. The crucial question is: has it reached the point of no return? Or the process can be reversed and the forest started on the way to recovery — even now.

These questions, however, may shrink into merely academics having little impact on the bigger questions of Bangladesh's physical survival. The root of the looming big tragedy lies in the fact that the literate people in general and even the informed ones here do not care much about the fate of the Sundarbans. The forest has been going waste for so long and yet the danger it poses for this country hasn't been perceived even by the government.

It seems there is lately a flicker of light in the dismal picture. British scientists and British funding have made it possible to undertake a three-year project to understand the top-dying disease of the Sundarbans mangroves which has already affected 40 per cent of all trees in the forest. The project is targeted mainly to test the hypothesis that the top of the Sundarbans trees is dying as a consequence of global warming adding to the level of the world ocean through the melting of the polar ice deposit.

The project, however, would also try to understand how Bangladesh can face a possible defoliation of its southern shores and fight falling off into the sea, literally. And, as a part of the project, manpower is being initiated into the specifics of the special kind of forest management this would warrant. A very encouraging act in a very hopeless situation.

The mangroves in the Sundarbans, the highest concentration of such in the world, are holding Bangladesh from being eaten up by sea water. Long before the mangroves give in fully to the rising saline sea water, man has been destroying the forest, driven by land hunger and sheer greed. The crime of denuding large tracts of it for timber has lately been joined by the equally, if not more criminal digging of shrimp ponds. The government has sat smug while the Sundarbans were being strangled.

This must stop and the society must start caring about the Sundarbans. To save the forest many more of such projects would be needed and permanent set-ups created for constant conservation work. Nature in Bangladesh is a prey to man's ignorance, petty selfishness and shameless greed. For Bangladesh to live, this must change.

Policy for Privatisation

The present Awami League government, contrary to notions that are yet to go into full obsolescence, is in a more advantageous position than its predecessor BNP in matters of taking forward the stalled privatisation programme.

First of all, from a left-of-centre belief in a strong nationalised sector, the party is a convinced convert to privatisation of State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) after giving them a last chance to be viable. The fact that a grace period is being given to some of the public sector units does not detract from the Awami League government's express recommitment to disinvestment since its induction into power. Second, with the party's experience in labour unionism it should be able to relate to the various CBAs better. Third, the Awami League government's return to power after 21 years has had a healthy, balancing effect on the somewhat unidirectional thinking pattern in the bureaucracy. Governmental deregulation and services reorganisation may be easier.

Since there are as many as 150 SOEs and utility service units it would have been far from realistic to have aimed for wholesale privatisation — and over-night. But again phase-wise disinvestment of state-owned industries or utilities need not be confused with any slow-down in the process which, in any case, has only stagnated thus far. The approach ought to be geared for the doing the job well and doing it firmly with a multiplying effect.

The process has basically foundered on the rock of attempted disinvestment of only loss-incurring units, bloated valuation of their assets and rigid terms and conditions for any take-over bid. Such dampers should be on the exit course as the government makes a fresh list of disinvestable and retainable units and do the needful on them. The Awami League government's public position regarding privatisation, on which it also seeks the cooperation of the opposition in the parliament, is fairly well-known. All that is needed now is to draw up a privatisation policy and declare it for the investors' guidance.

Special Courts

Within some weeks of the government's constituting ten special courts to take up cases of repression of women and children we get the news that these have started functioning since last week. The sheer speed of the happenings speaks volumes of the dire strait in which the recorded cases of atrocities upon women and children have been without a verdict returned on them for years or justice done even to the memory of a victim like in the Yasmin episode.

Laws with new teeth, repeated media pointers to delays in handling the cases of abuse, eagle-eyed vigil of the women's and children's rights groups have been of little avail before the coiled intricacies of the criminal procedure code. Then again, this is applied by overburdened courts all the time creaking under pressure.

The special courts functioning with the exclusive jurisdiction of trying cases of repression will be able to deliver justice at the quickest and thereby serve as a deterrent against their proliferation. Such courts' very presence can help ward off human rights violations and miscarriages of justice through *fatwabazi*.

While we greet the government on the good beginning made by it in the redressal of injustice our womenfolk and children have been prey to, we like to urge them to set up one such court in each district taking the total to 64.

Diplomatic Pirouette on Northern Iraq

Of all the countries holding Kurdish population Turkey figures on top with nearly 15 million. It is therefore natural that Turkey should have an effective voice in the negotiations determining the fate of the Kurds.

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

to Turkey concerning the activities of the PKK guerrillas.

Along with Barzani and Talabani a new player Isin Celebi, the leader of the Turkmen, has entered the field. It is Turkish insistence that has brought this about. Turkish help in evacuating CIA sponsored Kurdish spies, numbering more than 2,000 from Northern Iraq, has played a significant part in enhancing the Turkish role in the current diplomatic manoeuvres surrounding the question of Kurds

of Northern Iraq. As late as 22nd October a fresh batch of 608 Peshmerga CIA agents flew from the southern Turkish town of Adana for Guam.

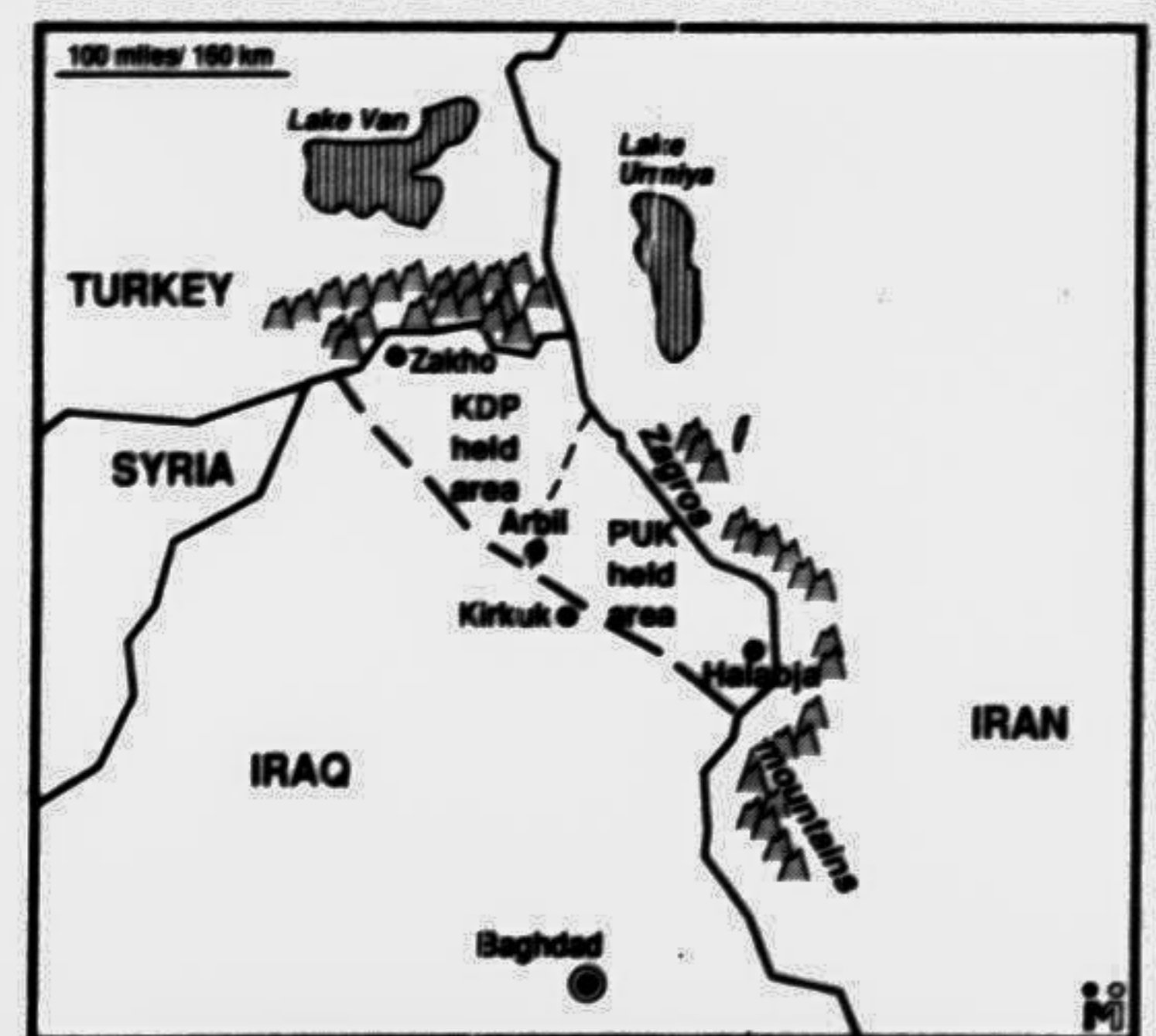
Regarding Turkish role in the intricate negotiations, Ankara daily 'Daily News' commented editorially, "Conditions are ripe for winning back both Barzani and Talabani. Turkey can end the senseless fighting between the Iraqi Kurds and rescue both leaders from the clutches of Baghdad and Tehran." The editorial concluded, "Now we have a chance to bury the past and open a new chapter with the Iraqi Kurdish leaders. The benefits will be mutual." Foreign Editor Sami Kohen writing under the caption 'Ebb and Flow in Northern Iraq' in the large circulation Milyet pointed out that Washington had managed to persuade Barzani and Talabani to hold talks under US auspices and warned them to 'stay away from Iraq and Iran'. He pointed out that the aim of the talks was 'to set up a provisional administration'. Kohen pointed out that the latest developments 'have pushed Turkey in the foreground and the talks are being held on Turkish soil' and concluded, 'these days Turkey's views and interests are in line

with the US offensive.' With the holding of the talks between the two Kurdish leaders Barzani and Talabani on the one side and the US and Turkey on the other side, the first big step towards a Cease Fire has been taken. The diplomatic initiative taken by the US has matched with the ebbing of the fratricidal war. Of all the countries holding Kurdish population Turkey figures on top with nearly 15 million. It is there-

fore natural that Turkey should have an effective voice in the negotiations determining the fate of the Kurds. Turkey has effectively brought to the forefront the presence of a large Turkmen population within the borders of Northern Iraq and specially in the oil rich region. By insisting on the presence of the Turkmen in the future administration of Northern Iraq, Turkey is retaining the initiative.

The latest round of talks definitely indicates, that a page has been turned and fighting is to be replaced by hard bargaining at the diplomatic table.

Kurds' rival enclaves



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.

Miss World contest

Sir, Interestingly, it is being observed from a news item that numerous feminist organisations including the Hindu nationalist and revivalist groups have been consistently protesting the holding of Miss World contest scheduled in the Indian city of Bangalore, on the ground that staging of such programme which also followed by a colourful parade programme of the semi-nude beautiful young girls is a serious threat to their values and culture, although beauty contests in India is a very regular event that is being held in their different cities. One women group has already vowed to carry out a suicide programme to stop the alleged 'unhealthy' show of blind imitation of western culture. My heartfelt congrats to those feminist and revivalist groups for their laudable and bold role they are playing so far. At the same time, my humble question to them, what would be their expression and profession as regards to the daily semineude dances and shows that performed and displayed by their Bollywood super-duper film stars like Shridevi, Madhuri Dixit, Karishma Kapoor, Mamta Kulkarni and others, who are also famous all over the world for their 'exciting' dances. Is it not nudity? Is it not the blind imitation of what their leaders called as western culture? It seems that their alleged leaders do not watch or aren't aware about the nudity of the Bombay film industry. Much bewildering is the recent partisan remarks of Mr Bal Thackeray, who is famous for advocating Hindu theocracy and a good friend of the promoter of the said show, and recently whose party has blasted a leading Indian Muslim Artist named Maqbool Fida Hussain for the painting of a Hindu goddess. Is it not double standard? However, it is to mention here that the India's super-model girls now converted to Hindi film stars. But in occasions — when Sumritia and Aishwarya won beauty contests — we did not hear about any objection raised by the feminist or revivalist groups.

Mr Thackeray may deserved to be commended for saying that 'their people would be very fortunate to see the most beautiful women of the world, if the show staged in their country'.

Mr Muhibbul Abrar Choudhury
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"Excellent Idea Poor Show"

Sir, This is a short note to place on record my sincere appreciation of your commentary 'Excellent Idea Poor Show' which was published in your esteemed daily on Thursday, 3rd October, 1996. It was no doubt a sensible reaction to BTV's programme 'Sabinayev Gigasha' telecast in the evening of Tuesday, the 1st October, 1996. I am happy to say that you echoed the voice of thousands of silent TV viewers who equally waited to hear from the Prime Minister nothing but the whole truth. They are as much disappointed as you were. Although I will not accuse the Prime Minister for resorting to any lies, yet I will say that it did not matter what she said. What came out prominently is what she did not say. It was undoubtedly an exercise in shocking silence on vital issues.

No doubt you tried to find fault with BTV, Ministry of Information and finally the Prime Minister's secretariat (manned by not her real well-wishers but mainly sycophants). But can the Prime Minister wash off her hands from the blunder she committed in spearheading a programme 'signifying nothing'? She may not be the producer, but she was the protagonist — the star of the show. Indeed, she had an opportunity she missed!

If you want to blame only the bureaucrats, I think you are not fair. If the programme was successful, it is not the organisers who would have got the credit. The Prime Minister would have not only taken it but also used it to gain political mileage. You called the programme

an inept propaganda. I would go to the extent of saying that it went close to a farce. Credibility was certainly lacking because the Prime Minister allowed herself to be dictated by some overenthusiastic novices with little experience of conducting such an important and sensitive programme.

I am glad to notice that Mr. Abed Khan, who also has a sharp pen as yours and who is almost as fearless as you are, produced a virtual carbon copy of your comments in the *Bhorer Kago*. I am old saying 'Great men think alike' is still true. These special commentaries are a reassurance that journalism in our country has not totally lost its sanity and objectivity. At least, a few in the profession can rise up to the occasion and express their views without any fear.

The Prime Minister may have lost a battle. I hope she will win the war when the challenge comes again. But if she has to do it, she will have to engage people who know their job — professionals in their respective areas.

Once again, I want to thank you for being a professional in the true sense of the term. I enjoyed reading your commentaries in the past and I look forward to reading many more in the days to come.

RA Mazumdar
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US-Israel axis

Sir, At this hour of great tragedy, trial and tribulations, we express our empathy, unflinching support and solidarity with our Palestinian brethren who have been relentlessly struggling for their human rights, freedom and democracy from the Israeli atrocities for over last five decades.

We strongly condemn the outrage and violence, short-sighted policy, arrogant transgression of Israeli Prime Minister for blocking Middle East peace accord 'Land for peace', building illegal settlements and opening an underground passage near the Al-Aqsa Mosque sparking fire and fury and shedding the blood of hundreds of Muslims.

We are very much surprised and shocked why the US envoy at the UN Madeleine Albright is always reluctant to denounce Israeli violation of human rights, breach of international law and UN resolution, illegal occupation of Palestine, and Southern Lebanon and Syrian Golan Heights?

We wonder where to the US-Israel axis leading the Middle East?

OH Kabir
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Who'll make the capital's traffic orderly?

Sir, I feel, to maintain the Capital as a capital, the government has some responsibilities. That's why, it has formed RAJUK, DCC, DMP, WASA, DESA, BTB and the like with more authority and power to keep Dhaka as an standard capital, and also as a model city of the country. But, if an alien lands in this city, then he will find the capital as an orphan. He would also have doubts on the capability of the government to control the city's administration.

On the traffic disorder of Dhaka, conscious editors and elite took initiatives to draw the attention of the authorities concerned. One of such venture is DS's 'Save Dhaka, Clean Dhaka' campaign, organised by Mr Mahfuz Anam, Bangladesh Scouts and BUET. True, the society didn't expect from them (DCC, RAJUK, DMP etc) to turn the 'traffic jungle' into 'traffic heaven' by a magic wand. But what they hoped was at least an application of traffic law strictly on all (to array the 'traffic jungle'). No doubt, it is desirable to have 'Flyovers' and 'Freeways'. But these will need time and money to come into reality. Until then, shouldn't we try all possible

ways (with available means) to root out the causes of *Long Jams* in the city? In fact, if such a trend of disorderly traffic continues, then no matter how many Flyovers/Freeways are built in the city, won't come to any help. A vivid example can be seen near ZIA, where for poor traffic discipline, a magnificent walk bridge and passengers waiting shelters are not used by road users.

So, my questions are: a) Why the traffic laws are not strictly enforced on all road users, to make them disciplined? b) Why then our rickshaws aren't made to follow in a line (if needed be, by providing a 3' high lane-barrier all along, on both side of the roads, to contain rickshaw with in it) in the rickshaw-lane? c) Why aren't rickshaws made to wait in orderly style in designated stands? d) Why maximum accident makers — mini-buses/buses are allowed to stop recklessly on the road, on to pick up hanging passengers? e) Why mini-buses are allowed to carry more passengers than their capacity? f) Why bus-stops are near road crossings (usually a dense traffic spot) to add more bottle-necks to traffic movement? g) As space is available, why a wider traffic circle cannot be made near Hotel Sonargaon and the like places to ease present congestion?

A R Choudhury
Uttara-Dhaka

"Short on Action"

Sir, Thank you very much for your editorial published on 24.10.96 under the caption 'Short on Action'. You have rightly said that 'we also need to step up our vigilance against the use of mastans as hirelings and ensure a much stricter enforcement of the law, so that no one — no matter how rich or powerful he may be — can evade it'.

I also read the letter published in your esteemed daily on 17.10.96 under the caption, 'Muggers at Narayanganj'. In that letter the writer has mentioned about an influential politician who created pressure on police to release the muggers. Though the government has taken certain steps for it, yet nothing has been done against that influential politician. Because of the fact that politician belongs to ruling party. The people of Narayanganj know it very well that this politician rear up terrorists in Narayanganj.

If government, in my opinion, can take any action against this person, it is needless to say, 'terrorist activities' in Narayanganj will be stopped for ever. Will our government take any action against this politician?

Mujibur Rahman
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On purchase of power from India

Sir, There may be reasons to purchase power from India if the feasibility study, as has been undertaken by the government, recommends it. But the issue must be examined very carefully. At the moment the purchase of power from India may seem very lucrative in terms of its potentials for solving our problems of load-sheddings and inadequate power supplies to the industries. But what will happen if India suddenly stops the supply because of unfavourable twists in the political atmosphere in the future or become of our unwillingness to pay higher power rates which India may compel us to do?

If that happens, shall we not again plunge into the darkness and be forced to close down the industries? Recently a situation like this has occurred in Uganda and Kenya. Most of the Kenya's power requirements are met by Uganda. Now Uganda has suddenly increased the power rates. Kenya says it cannot afford that. As a result a crisis has developed in the relationship between these two countries. May be Uganda will have to yield because it is a landlocked country and needs export facilities through Kenya. In my opinion it is best to be really independent in matters like power. Let us generate all our necessary power ourselves using our available gas and coal fields.

Mrs U Khatton
Dhaka

OPINION

Of Trial and Justice

All political parties have their own characteristic rhetorics. Not all rhetorics expounded by the respective parties are digestible. There is one particular aspect of statements and policies made by the Awami League which interests me. The particular statements and policies concerned are the events which occurred in 1975. After such a long gap, the Awami League has come to power and now they are seemingly shouting for the blood of those responsible for the death of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family.

The mass media is used to arouse public sentiment using methods sometimes a bit embarrassing. There was a need for our Prime Minister to be bleary eyed and nearly in tears in public. There is also no need for slightly gruesome pictures of a dead Sheikh Mujib to be published in the newspapers as posters. We have seen such things too many times in the past. Anyway, in a few days, with unusual efficiency displayed by the police, all the major suspects are arrested and taken in remand. What will be the end of all this. We do not know as yet.

Anyway, we can now discuss something that has astonished me concerning all this. Well, the explanation follows: Without the people of the then East Pakistan willing to attain their long-denied freedom and nationhood, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would have been of the same renown as the extreme right-wingers in the United States. To do anything of the magnitude as what accrued before and during the Liberation War, you need full and active cooperation of the people you want to work for. It is true that a good leader is a must for such a great act, but it is also true that the need for such a leader must be there.

The role of the people of the then East Pakistan who opted for a free and autonomous country called Bangladesh was most important during the Liberation War. It was the willpower and resilience of the people of Bangladesh which saw them through the war despite all the attempts to suppress them by the occupying Pakistani forces. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman inspired the people of Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, to dream — and then fight and toil to make the dream come true. But inspiration alone does not win wars or create nations. It was the work of soldiers and civilians, who organized armed resistance and offensive operations that led to the severe attrition of moral and capability of the Pakistani forces and their allies, which won us the war. It is strongly doubted by most that even if the Indian armed forces had not intervened near the end, the Pakistani armed forces could have launched any serious counter-attack.

But price paid for this victory has been very costly indeed. There is absolutely no doubt that more than one million, perhaps even three million, people were massacred during the war. Most victims were innocent civilians who were plundered, raped and killed. The crimes committed during the war by the Pakistani forces and their allied Rajakars and other organisations, which sadly, also consisted of Bengali men, were equivalent to the crimes committed in Bosnia and Rwanda.

However, when Sheikh Mujib was released and the AL formed the post-war government, nothing was done against the people who had committed these crimes. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to utter disbelief of some, actually pardoned the aggressors and traitors. If he

care so much for the people he had helped to liberate, why did he forgive those who had committed heinous crimes against the people? One reason given is that if retribution had been sought, the country would have degenerated into a state of anarchy with armed Bangladeshi men seeking revenge. For one thing, it is a miracle that this did not happen when the declaration of 'general amnesty' was given. For another, there were large numbers of Indian troops in Bangladesh at that time. They could have been used to keep the peace and arrest properly the suspected war criminals. The governments of India and Bangladesh could, with international help, have set up a 'special war crimes court' to try cases of genocide and rape of innocent civilians.

Now, since the Awami League has failed to deliver justice for the killings in 1971 of thousands of Sheikh Russels, Sultana Kamals and Sheikh Jamals, I do not think that the Awami League has any claim for delivering justice to the killers of Sheikh Mujib and his family. It astonishes and angers me to think that the same party which has ignored the crimes against the people they were supposed to serve, should seek revenge for the killing of just one great man and his family.

A father of the nation cannot be father without the nation. Deliver justice on behalf of the nation and then consider yourselves true citizens of the nation of which the man you follow was the father. It is then and only then that Bangladesh will help in finding and punishing the killers of Sheikh Mujib and his family.

M Ahsanur Rahman

OUR society is, as it were, out to yield a series of disgraceful in cidences, liability of which lie not only on the infamous offenders, but on the society itself, and more accurately, on the whole mankind. As Dostoevski said: "Most of the barbarous acts were done by the most civilised persons."

In our country, too, a group of greedy persons encumbered the nation with the blood of the Father. They were, in reality, very close to power, very trustworthy indeed to the persons who matter. They killed the leader destined historically for the nation, all in deep darkness of the night, proved themselves to be the most vile coward. They stripped themselves off the clothes of human bondage, killed humanity and in the end, covered the insulted, tarnished dead things with confusing politics. They could not, however, get rid of the smell of human blood in their hands. But is it not very unusual that this huge human society comprising of at least 2 per cent of global population would remain hostage in the cursed hands of the aggressors and traitors who chose filthy terrorism to fulfill their blood thirst?

The nation, however, woke up after all these years with reinforced feeling of humanity. Now is about time she could shake off the encumbrance — rather savage and brute — from her shoulder. Now is about time the nation could take exact measure — not as revenge, but as a just and corrective action against the misdeed done on 15 August, 1975.

Every sensible person may agree to the fact that the whole nation was stigmatised on that fearful night, with its judiciary disgraced and rule of law jeopardised, which was further humiliated by an unlawful ordinance. The infamous Indemnity Ordinance was in reality

the order of the killing of the Constitution, successfully professed for with the help of a group of hired intellectuals. A huge lot of sheer lie and bluff was used to ratify the stand resulting in the blackest chapter in the history of rule of law.

Why, is not the immorality and illegality of the said ordinance evident in the very nomination? According to any dictionary in the civilised society indemnity has a crystal-clear definition which reads 'Security from punishment.' Here we are: we have found out the entire black chunk of the crime. The state deliberately and purposefully passed the ordinance only to save the killers who had committed an unforgivable offence against human beings, against the state and finally, against the universal mankind. So, evidently here lies the backstair of the edifice erected by the nation's number-one enemy. The so-called ordinance is just self explanatory in the other way round ensuring the necessity to punish the filthy felons who fell on the Father of the nation and his family members including an innocent child of six.

There were two errors of the deadly monsters of 15 August as is always left behind by criminals. First, they claimed 'responsibility of the killing, attempted to glorify the mass homicide in their own, concocted explanation and secondly, that their godfathers and patrons home and abroad formed a vicious pact to give the partisans who liberated the nation a good lesson.

But why should the nation carry on this burden? People formed the state and developed the society only to live and let live. Our Constitution will hardly allow somebody to commit crime and evade punishment. And this is simply against international human rights. And it is stated in clear term that there should be no law which may deem contrary to any of the fundamental principles of the Constitution. Our country has further obligation since she signed the International Human Rights Charter that declares in its third Article that every person has a right to live, independence and personal security; in seventh Article, that every person is equal in the eyes of law and without discrimination every person is entitled to be protected by the law of the land, while its eighth Article declares that every person is entitled to have justice against any act which may be violation to the constitution or of any of the basic human rights.

Besides all political importance how it that Sh eikh Mujib as a person and his innocent family members would die in this enlightened bring of 20th century and law would not take any course of action? All 130 million people may ask why Sheikh Hasina, he sides her premiership as a citizen of this country should be deprived of common justice of the brutal killing of her parents and almost all family members which she is very much entitled to?

Have not we seen all that human tear over flowing her eyes? Have not we ever heard all that moans over flowing her throats?

Indemnity Ordinance should immediately be annulled and the self-declared killers must be tried in no time. Those persons, too, should be put to task who formulated this 'black Ordinance' only to disgrace and humiliate our Constitution and insulted the whole mankind. We all should get rid of this catastrophe of our history without further delay.

Khandker Masharuf
Karim