

## Nation Deserves no Less

It was really heartening to see President Shahabuddin Ahmed address a full house of the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday. In the tortuous history of our democracy, yesterday's was yet another triumph of the spirit that has time and again given substance to our national life. The democratic spirit as displayed by our politicians — both from the ruling party and the opposition — has made us highly optimistic about the future of our nation. President Shahabuddin Ahmed, who commands unreserved respect from all, appropriately recorded the sentiment when he thanked the leaders of the treasury bench and the opposition for making an understanding between the two sides possible by enabling the BNP's return to parliament. They displayed a kind of political maturity expected of them.

The basis of a reconciliation between the ruling Awami League and the opposition BNP is a four-point agreement. Pleasantly it gives the hope that the democratic process can indeed gain in strength if only our politicians extend the spirit of co-operation, shown in this instance, into other areas of national life. Let the political bickering and rows over petty issues be left behind and a new dynamism infused into our politics.

We feel encouraged that the accord not only provides for addressing the immediate problems but also for reaching an understanding on contentious issues on a long-term basis through a continuous process of dialogue. Chief Whips and whips of both the treasury bench and the opposition have been given the responsibility to maintain constant contacts between them and, when necessary, to be in touch with the Speaker. Any scope for misunderstanding has thereby been largely eliminated. So we can reasonably hope for an effective and efficient functioning of the JS. The Speaker who brokered the deal seems to have convinced the opposition on the question of his neutrality. Now in a new environment of trust and confidence, he has to reinforce the point of his neutrality.

Finally, we would like to see full attention paid to the debates on the historic Ganges water treaty, the outcome of visits made by prime ministers of two friendly countries to Bangladesh and the four important bills stated to be tabled before the House. Threadbare and enlightened discussion, with a new sense of direction and dynamism, will help consolidate the democratic process. We expect, demand and deserve no less.

## Tough Test for Govt

The nation sighed with relief on Tuesday night. In an unprecedented meeting the ruling party and opposition joined hands to work for a lively and meaningful Jatiya Sangsad. And the next morning, with the arrival of morning newspapers on the tea tables of the nation, we learnt of the looming armed confrontation between BCL and JCD cadres at DU being defused after both had amicably settled to an agreed sharing of the Taka 4.42 lakh booty to be received from the contractor who will be allowed to drop the only tender in connection with a 2.21 crore Taka AF Rahman Hall development work.

The booty in question has been termed plainly as extortion money by The Daily Star story on the settlement. Home Minister Rafiqul Islam is looking for terrorists in every nook and cranny of this land. We believe in his sincerity as well as unremitting application. And his Tangail action has earned admiration from all excepting the egotistical Siddiki family and that has made the expedition the more admirable. Doesn't this morning report come as an unmixed slap on the government's anti-terrorist protestations?

Will it be too difficult to get the names of those that receive the toll money from the successful bidder for the job or from other sources, including police's own? And why would the bidder be allowed to pay the toll money? He must both be prevented and protected. Or it will be hard to prove there is a government in the country.

This is a test not for the Home Minister but for the AL government as a whole. Catch them all or you stop talking loud on terrorism. Beat them or you will be beaten very badly indeed.

## Stir in our sport world

There is a palpable stir in the stadium-para or the sporting world of Bangladesh. Things have very visibly started moving there. It is too early to be certain about whether the flurry will be sustained till this nation finds a footing on the international sport scene.

Within the span of a single month, three things happened the like of each of which does not occur in years. This should have an electrifying effect on our otherwise lackadaisical sporting scene. The hurriedly materialised Bangabandhu Cup soccer was eminently helpful in getting our bearings in football. It provided practice and a kind of foreign exposure and our boys did come out not at all badly. It underscored the need for properly organised international football tournaments in Dhaka. This can contribute to ending our stagnation in this sport which again would prove good to all other sport.

Then came the Ali Bacher-Majid Khan trip, carrying on a platter the happy promise of international recognition of our cricket. Things couldn't be better. Now Dhaka is in the grip of invitational hockey with three foreign teams participating. This is not a big show, by any standard. But just think of the small groups of hockey aficionados who have been giving their life in the cause of their dear sport — and for nothing in return. How thrilled and passionately involved and rewarded they are feeling now. This is only a start and next year let us hope at least seven teams from abroad — at least one of them from Australia or Holland or Spain or Germany — will be here.

Things are indeed moving and this is one good direction to take. When will the nation strike up the best direction, that of radically improving our athletic standards which is basic to all sport development?

# Bangabandhu's Historic Landing in Freedom — 26 Hours in London

He was standing, looking somewhat fatigued with journey, with his favourite pipe in hand. Smilingly, he stretched out his arms in which I found myself locked, sobbing. He was well, healthy, rather thin, but in full command of his faculties.

REZAI Karim, this is Sheikh Mujib," resounded the deep, familiar and forlorn voice from the other end of the telephone. The time was about 5 o'clock in the morning, the date was the 8th January 1972 and the place was London.

I was dumbfounded, almost electrified. I hardly could believe my ears. I was speechless with emotion for some time. The long-lost leader of the Bangladeshi people who had spent a never-ending nine months in Pakistani jail awaiting death and for whose release we had waged a relentless worldwide campaign, was finally, set free and had landed in freedom, awaiting return to his beloved people at home.

"How are you, how is your health?" was my immediate, spontaneous reaction. The stories and speculation of his torture in solitary confinement which had spread far and wide and was deeply-rooted in the minds of those who loved him and worked for him. "I am so so. How are you all?" came the reply from a tired voice, marked faintly by a sense of relief.

The British Foreign and Commonwealth office had provided my residence telephone number and Dr Kamal Hossain, who arrived with Bangabandhu by the same aircraft, connected me to him on the phone. In the absence of the late Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, Special Overseas Representative of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and head of the Unofficial Bangladesh Mission in London, I was then acting as Head of Mission. That night, I fell asleep on the sofa after receiving calls and awaiting further calls from colleagues in the Mujibnagar government who loved to telephone dead at night. London time. I woke my bewildered wife up and told her to phone up my colleagues to proceed immediately to the now-defunct Alcock and Brown suite of the VIP enclave at Heathrow.

On my way to the airport, I pressed the accelerator as hard as I could in order to reach in record time. The car radio blared the news — Sheikh Mujib, as he was then known all over the world, has been released and left Pakistan by plane for an unknown destination. During this half-hour drive many thoughts flashed through my mind: in what state of physical and mental condition he was, how much of the struggle for liberation and situation back home he knew, what policy activities he would give to the new nation? etc. etc.

As I entered the ante room of the VIP lounge, three or four high-ranking Pakistani officers who were waiting there got up, saluted and hurriedly left. They included Air Vice Marshal Zafar Chowdhury, chief of the PIA, waiting for handing over to someone responsible to very precious person they had transported from Pakistan by a special plane. None representing the British government had arrived yet. I whisked into the main room, abruptly stopped at the sight of Bangabandhu and proceeded slowly towards him. He was standing, looking somewhat fatigued with journey, with his favourite pipe in hand. Smilingly, he stretched out his arms in which I found myself locked, sobbing. He was well, healthy, rather thin, but in full command of his faculties. I tried to whisper the words in Bengali — Heartiest welcome to you, President of sovereign independent Bangladesh. I had rehearsed the phrase well but cannot vouch how much I could deliver. Tears of joy rolled down our cheeks. Dr Kamal Hossain and his family were sitting behind, watching the event in sombre attention. "Really we became independent?" came the words in exclamation. The voice was a mixture of gratification and incredulity. "Yes, yes," I reassured him emphatically. He sat down, gave a puff of satisfaction to his pipe, happy, but for a moment, pensive.

We were talking... we talked about his family, colleagues,

people and situation in the country, though briefly. Soon, Ian Sutherland, Head of the South Asian Department at the Foreign and Commonwealth office, representing the British government, arrived. He extended formal welcome to Bangabandhu on behalf of the British government and pledged all cooperation for making his stay at the British metropolis comfortable.

As Britain had not yet recognised Bangladesh as an independent nation, befitting protocol could not be accorded to the unscheduled and unheralded visit of the leader of a new nation at a short notice. I had known Ian well, through my diplomatic and political work with the British government during that period. Much later, as Sir Ian, he served as his

days. Bangabandhu understood the predicaments of his unrecognised diplomat and decided to travel in my car, with Dr Kamal Hossain and others to follow in the big government limousine. I failed to dissuade him.

Sitting beside me in my Ford Cortina, he asked me to narrate the accounts of the War of Liberation and various episodes since he was made captive nine months ago. This was obviously his first briefing. While doing so, simultaneously composing my thoughts, for the entire duration of the route which now became noisy and congested with traffic, a horrible thought came to my mind. For a moment, it occurred to me... a bundle of nerves that I was while driving, what would happen in the event we met with an

Bengali service of the BBC and David Frost were among those who were most unhappy. They finally got permission only to show respect to the great man. In the process, Frost got an invitation from Bangabandhu to visit Bangladesh for interview.

Hurriedly, I prepared the draft of the first speech of the founder Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Dr Kamal Hossain embellished and gave the final touch on it. I also read out to Bangabandhu a list of probable questions the media representatives could ask at the press conference. He smiled and pre-empted me, saying that he knew the answers already. The grand ballroom of the Claridges was cramped like sardines with media personnel overflowing to the adjoining rooms. I had to make the formality of a brief introduction to the VVIP, who needed no introduction and to see him alive and well the whole world was awaiting. Bangabandhu's first address as the Head of a new-born nation reverberated all over the globe.

There were many episodes during the 26-hour sojourn in London of Bangabandhu which is difficult to recount briefly. I was practically his shadow during this period. This is a short but incomplete account of the physical aspects of his visit. Substantive matters have not been covered in it. The British government provided an aircraft in which Bangabandhu decided to fly back home via Cyprus for refuelling and with a stop-over in New Delhi. Bangabandhu wanted me to travel home with him, but later decided that I should better stay back to placate thousands of disappointed Bangladeshis who would throng at our Mission the next day.

The date and time of his departure were not made public in advance for security reasons. Even my colleagues did not know, so was the advice of the British Intelligence service. At about 5 o'clock on the 9th morning I had to whisk our leader and his companions, sloured in foggy darkness of the city, through the backdoor of the hotel, again for compulsion of strict security. The British Comet aircraft left Heathrow about 0700 hours in the morning, carrying the long-lost leader of a nation back to his people, with Sir Denis Greenhill, Head of the British Foreign Office, and I waving good-bye on the tarmac.

I never sought to correct the mistake of Bangabandhu, who always called me Rezaul Karim, out of affection. In retrospect, one wonders if the great man made any other mistakes, which are not uncommon for a human being, others most probably would not also point it out to him. This time, it would not necessarily be out of affection; motivations might be different.



## Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

country's Ambassador in Moscow, as I did the same for my country there about the same time.

The first issue to be decided was where to take him for his stay. To my query if he had preference for any place, Bangabandhu replied that the hotel he had stayed in during his previous visit to London two years ago would be suitable. I remembered it was President Hotel in Russell Square which is patronised normally by students. I told him that was not suitable and, in consultation with Sutherland, suggested the posh Claridges Hotel. He got startled. "That would cost a lot! Where will you get the money?" Bangabandhu shouted. I had the great audacity to defy the Head of State, for the first and last time, saying he did not have to think about that. Raising my forefinger, affectionately swaying it sideways, I told him that he was the Head of a sovereign, independent nation and would stay in the same hotel and preferably in the same suite of the Claridges where General Yahya Khan and Srimati Gandhi used to stay. He gave a benign smile, condoning a severe act of insubordination. Sutherland arranged the booking.

There came the question of transport. The British government lined up a big limousine. Bangabandhu was about to enter, gesturing me to sit with him. I hesitated. Having left Pakistan High Commission's job I had forfeited diplomatic privileges and the authorities would soon tow my car away, if I did not remove it from the VIP enclave, not to be traced for

accident. People would say what Yahya Khan and Bhutto could not do in the teeth of world opposition, this writer did it with ease and without reproach.

After we reached the Claridges, streams of visitors, media representatives and thousands of Bangladeshis poured in to meet the Sheikh. With my hard-working and dedicated colleagues at the Mission, about 16 in number then, we had to make all necessary arrangements. I got him connected on phone to Begum Mujib, his family and friends as well as to Mrs Gandhi. We set out in groups of five Bangladeshis at a time to visit the leader. His security, comfort and rest were the most important thoughts in our mind. The VIPs who came to hotel included former Prime Minister Harold Wilson, Commonwealth Secretary-General Arnold Smith, former Minister Peter Shore and a host of other British MPs and dignitaries. The British Prime Minister Edward Heath cancelled his weekend sojourn at Chequers and received him at 10 Downing Street, as an extraordinary gesture of goodwill.

Newspaper, radio and television representatives of media from all over the world from Canada to Pakistan fished to the hotel, to get exclusive interviews. I told Bangabandhu we could not accommodate all important ones without the risk of committing discrimination. The best policy would have been to hold a press conference in which everybody would be invited. It was approved. My friend Serajur Rahman of the



Bangabandhu's first press conference in freedom. Dr Kamal Hossain is sitting on his right, and this writer, on his left on January 8, 1972 in London.

## 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.

### Euphoria: Regional, sub-regional and bilateral

Sir, Indian PM Deve Gowda came full of goodwill and left with a baggage overloaded with Bangladesh's nutan gurur sandesh (the East Bengal football club lost the games in Dhaka due to gorging themselves with the Ganga hilsa fish, it is benevolently suspected).

The governments in both the neighbouring countries are new. Some critics say Congress in India might not have found the flowing ink to sign the Ganges agreement. Some critics on this side are of the opinion that this pact came only because AL could come into power last year after two decades. The image counts, friendly or unfriendly. The point to watch is what

happens when both or either of the governments change in the near future. Political solution is not enough for lasting friendship — the people must be friendly at a consensus level. The politicians are simply negotiators or facilitators working on behalf of the people. Politics in our country continues to be highly partisan and therefore, unpredictable.

It is the festive season; after spring comes the long hot summer. All credit to the Awami League for the thawing.

A Zabr Dhaka

### Environmental Pollution

Sir, We are a nation of great "talkers" and "observers", but hardly any doers. We talk and talk in "seminars" and "workshops", and we observe all types

and varieties of "weeks" throughout the year, but we hardly do anything to practise what we talk about and preach.

The principal cause of environmental pollution in Dhaka city is undoubtedly the emission of black smoke by motorised vehicles. It is for everybody to see how the black smoke is being emitted by defective motorised vehicles all the time and all over the city, and no experts or technicians are being engaged to detect this sight.

With determined action, this deadly menace can be eliminated in one single week. For instance, by using its executive authority, the government can issue a notice to the effect that vehicles emitting black smoke would be subject to immediate seizure and would be released only on payment of fines, say on the following rates:

Auto-rickshaws	Tk. 2,500
Coasters and mini-buses	5,000
Private cars	5,000
Buses and trucks	10,000

In order to make the above procedure fully effective, all police personnel above the rank of constables, irrespective of which police department they belong to, should be empowered

to seize defective vehicles and hand the same over to the nearest police station.

The police station would issue an official receipt to the police official seizing a vehicle as well as to the driver/owner of the vehicle.

In order to avoid congestion at a police station and also to simplify the process the police stations may be authorised to receive the fines in cash in exchange of printed official receipts.

A Qayyum 69, Gulshan Avenue Dhaka-1212

### Unruly about Rules

Sir, The news under the heading "Constable beaten up in Khulna" by a number of rickshaw-puller on 13th January is disturbing. The fact that the constable was beaten when he arrested a rickshaw-puller for violation of the traffic rules. If a custodian of law is beaten in his attempt to enforce the law, then we really have to ponder in what sort of society we are living.

A K Khan Suamibagh, Dhaka

## Dhaka Day by Day

# Looking for a book about Bangladesh

by Samia Islam



For voracious readers, Dhaka can be a disappointing city. Not only because it doesn't have enough libraries and book stores to quench their eternal thirst but also because the books are so out of reach both in terms of price and availability. Therefore, the book fairs are a treat for the reading populace. The Ekushey Book Fair pulls huge crowds but the Dhaka Book Fair isn't left far behind. People throng the fair ground in search of international bestsellers as well as local new arrivals.

This year however, the domestic publishers were unable to launch Bangla books in sufficient numbers at the Dhaka Book Fair. Even so, the appeal of the book fair was not tarnished as most of the renowned people of the literary arena had at least one new book to their name. Apart from Bangla books, excellent international titles were available at this year's book fair. Book lovers' paradise indeed. Precisely this realization had made me vow to someone that I would get him a book on Bangladesh from the on-going Dhaka Book Fair. This person was looking for a concise book on our country that would cover its history, archaeology and culture. He was going to use the information from the book in a cultural exposition of South Asian countries that was going to be held in New Zealand, where he wanted to participate representing Bangladesh. I had seen such books about India and other countries at the Book Fair. Naturally, I assumed surely there would be something available on Bangladesh. Perhaps I was being presumptuous but it was a matter of time before I realized to my utter dismay that I had spoken too soon.

One Friday morning I decided to devote my precious time to book hunting. After all, the prestige of my country was at stake. I had to find the right book. You see, at that point in

time it was a matter of choosing. I was soon to revise my target and change to any book instead of the right one.

All sorts of books were laid out in arrays in front of me — hard cover and paper back. There were lots of books of the kind I wanted too. Only they were about India, Iran, Pakistan, Nepal, United Kingdom, Greece etc. but not a single one on Bangladesh. However, they had hoards of books on the Dhaka stock market (isn't it a bit too late for guidelines now?).

They also had books on the liberation war, water sharing, structural adjustment in Bangladesh, Aid in Bangladesh, Geology of Bangladesh but not a single succinct book that could prove to be a useful reference for a foreigner or someone interested to know about our country but who doesn't have the inclination to get down to the brass tacks. A book that entices people, tourists who would feel interested to make the journey here, explore our land with its bounty of natural wonders. One book that would present a different picture to the outside world, an image far removed from the media-formed one of a land of natural disasters and tropical diseases.

My search went on for three hours, at the end of which time, I was compelled to buy a Shishu Academy publication on 'Bangladesh through the ages' (erroneous title). Although rather amateurish and slipshod, it was the only book at the fair premises that came close to what I was looking for and perhaps what my friend had intended to get. As to information about our famous archaeological sites, national monuments, eminent personalities of the cultural arena, my friend will have to devise some way to make up for the scarcity of information regarding Bangladesh in our own country. I just wish him luck.

## Reign of Terror Worsens as 'the Power' Digs In

Algerians have little to celebrate on the fifth anniversary of military's scrapping of elections to deny Islamists victory. Although new polls are due this year, a Gemini News correspondent Susie Morgan from London, says that attempts to expand democracy have been shelved, while violence escalates.

FIVE years after the Algerian government sparked a civil war by cancelling elections, the outlook for the country's 27 million people looks bleaker than ever.

There is no respite from the sickening spiral of violence and all-pervasive climate of terror — nor from the consequent economic collapse.

About 60,000 people, mostly innocent civilians, have died in the violence that erupted after the scrapping of the second round of general elections in January 1992, which the main Muslim opposition party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), had looked certain to win.

Feeling cheated of power, Islamic militants took up arms against the military regime. Today, the security situation is worsening, particularly in rural areas. Scores of people were killed in a series of terrorist attacks in the last few weeks of 1996.

Meanwhile, the unelected regime is accused of becoming increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic. Some political opponents, including a number of distinguished lawyers, describe a referendum held in November as, effectively, a second coup d'etat to cap the military's blocking of the democratic process in 1992.

Algerians were asked in the plebiscite to endorse a new constitution legitimising sweeping new presidential powers and banning Islamic parties — in effect rolling back for the foreseeable future earlier attempts at greater democracy. The government secured a landslide after the main opposition parties refused to participate in what they considered a charade. They felt the referendum was designed to allow the shadowy men known collectively as le Pouvoir (the Power) to claw back much of the influ-

ence the country's corrupt oligarchy was forced to cede after food riots in 1988.

Those riots against "Marxism-Leninism" (a reference to the country's disastrous centralised economic system) preceded those in eastern Europe and appeared to usher in the most democratic system in the Arab world, with scores of political parties competing for power.

The process was halted by the military, who have really run Algeria since independence from France in 1962.

Opposition parties are particularly angry that the latest referendum included provisions for the alteration of the constitution. The changes, they say, should have waited for legislative elections — due to be held this year — when the issues could have been properly debated.

Opponents of the changes include the Front of Socialist Forces, the Berber-based Assembly for Culture and Democracy and even moderate Islamic parties, such as Ennahda and Hamas, both of which will have to change their religious status if they are to participate in the scheduled elections.

In the climate of gloom, the political changes imposed by the government are considered of virtually no relevance by a politically cynical populace, which feels disenfranchised.

"Democracy? What democracy? All I want is a job, a home," is the usual sort of response from young Algerians asked what they think of the referendum. Few people are safe as the rival sides pick their targets. Amnesty quotes an unnamed Algerian source as saying that some people have been killed "because their names appeared on lists", while others died "because their names did not appear".