

## LETTER FROM AMERICA

## Why is it So Difficult to Plead Ignorance, or to be Honest?

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

**The opposition party in Bangladesh was absolutely correct in demanding that issues of paramount national importance, such as transshipment of Indian goods through Bangladeshi territory, should be debated in the parliament. However, it is hypocritical of the opposition to boycott the parliamentary session where the issue was slated for discussion. The opposition cannot have it both ways - they cannot blame the government for not discussing the issue in the parliament, and then boycott the session where it was supposed to be discussed!**

same traits? A look at the behaviour of some of our grown-up vis-a-vis recent events mirrors some of these deficiencies. We have tremendous respect for our own selves, but are reluctant to extend an iota of courtesy to others. We are so garrulous in criticism of others, yet it breaks our jaw to praise an individual. Denigration of a fellow writer with unproven blanket statements for the sole purpose of one-upmanship, is not necessarily a virtue! Oh, the perils of limited knowledge! In reading Rabindranath or Shakespeare are we not better off being dazzled by their brilliance, rather than nit-picking for blemish in the gem?

We are naturally proud of what we do, and believe we do a pretty good job at it. We should rightly feel offended if someone tells us what to do. The flip side of that is we too should desist from telling others what THEY should do. Unless someone is in the same profession as the writer, it is a fairly good bet that he or she is to tell the writer what the writer should do in his field of expertise, he or she would look silly. It is perfectly legitimate for a nation to tell its armed forces how much money the nation can afford to spend on defence. Unless someone is an expert on defence, we would be overstepping our bounds and looking really silly if we were to tell the forces what hardware they should buy, and what they should not. Why pretend to be knowledgeable, when there is no harm in being ignorant?

We may agree or disagree with one or more of our Prime Minister's decisions, or be disappointed with her choice of words; but it is none of our business to TELL her what she should do. Were we to be that haughty, we would not only be exceedingly rude to madam Prime Minister, we would also be insulting fellow Bangladeshis who elected her the head of the government.

The opposition party in Bangladesh was absolutely correct in demanding that issues of paramount national importance, such as transshipment of Indian goods through Bangladeshi territory, should be debated in the parliament. However, it is hypocritical of the opposition to boycott the parliamentary session where the issue was slated for discussion. The opposition cannot have it both ways - they cannot blame the government for not discussing the issue in the parliament, and then boycott the session where it was supposed to be discussed! If they were honest, they would have recorded their dissent in the parliament.

Collective punishment is contrary to every tenet of civilized behaviour. The government has the right to go after criminal elements in the Bustees, or to question the legality of the Bustees in the first place. However, no one in government has the right to demolish entire Bustees because of a few resident criminals, intimidate the writ petitioner who challenged the

government's forced eviction of the slum dwellers, or the High Court that initially passed the order of stay till the disposal of the writ petition. There are reports that makeshift slums were built around the Supreme Court and the petitioner's house by the terrorists at the government's instigation! Such behaviour is unbecoming of a civilized government. If we do not have an independent judiciary, we have the law of the jungle!

Honesty, integrity, respect for the law and other fellow Bangladeshis, and above all unadulterated education are what we need to sweep away society's malaise. A little humility helps an individual and the nation enormously, as does appreciation of one's own limitations. Was it not Sir Isaac Newton, one of the most learned persons of all time, who had lamented that he knew so little? Clearly, it takes quite a bit of knowledge to plead ignorance!

**Stop the Brutality in East Timor Indonesia!** EVER since Indonesia invaded East Timor, nine days after the East Timorese declared independence from Portugal in 1975, there has been nothing but trouble for both Indonesia and the East Timorese.

Indonesia does not have a legitimate claim on the half-island. The Portuguese settled the island in 1520, converting the local population to Catholi-

cism; the Dutch never colonized the eastern half of the island, although the western Timor was a part of the Dutch East Indies. When the Dutch were forced to grant independence to Indonesia after World War II, East Timor remained Portuguese, as West Timor.

The sun finally set on the Portuguese colonial empire in 1975 when Mozambique and Angola became independent in Africa. Sensing an opportunity, the East Timorese too declared independence, inviting an invasion from its bigger neighbour, who made East Timor Indonesia's 27th province. Indonesia's annexation of East Timor had the tacit approval of the United States and Australia.

Indonesia's role in East Timor has been less than honourable from the beginning. They found it extremely difficult, therefore resorted to brutal means, to subdue a small, but persistently hostile Catholic population. East Timor proved to be an international headache for former Indonesian President Suharto. His successor, B. J. Habibie, offered East Timor a plan for autonomy inside Indonesia. If they rejected it, Indonesia would pull out and East Timor would become independent, he promised. Last week 78.5 per cent of East Timorese voted for independence.

In the aftermath of the vote, irregular militias backed by the Indonesian military are carrying out an organized campaign of terror that involves widespread killing, arson and the forced evacuation of tens of thousands of people inhabiting an area one-tenth the size of Bangladesh. It is unclear whether the current violence is an attempt to somehow turn back history, to seek some sort of bargaining power in new East Timor, to send a warning to other separatist movements or simply to wreck vengeance.

The people of East Timor have spoken. Indonesia should respect their wishes and get out of East Timor before its international image is tarnished further. You cannot go back on your word, President Habibie!

## Recalling a Legend of the Liberation War

by Mustafa Hossain

M Noorul Quader, a great freedom fighter, a direct witness to many yet unknown chapters of our liberation war died of massive cardiac arrest at a seaside restaurant in Brighton, UK on September 13, 1998.

I was working on his book on the War of Independence and consequently got a first hand account of the historic he played in '71. Even the day before he left for London for the last time we had a long conversation. He told me that a lot of the historical evidences that would be in his writings were perhaps too sensitive to be published in his own lifetime. He told me of some unpleasant truths, few of which were published, but most of it remained unaid and will probably remain so forever, as the teller himself is now beyond our reach.

For more than two decades, Noorul Quader remained completely low profile and media shy, working in as much privacy possible for a man like him. While working with him I once asked him why he was so low profile regarding matters relating to the War. The answer was quick and to the point. "I did not fight for cheap popularity, name or fame."

Although M Noorul Quader remained behind the scene, it was only a matter of time before public attention would seek him out when the national pulse required so. And when it came to the observance of the Silver Jubilee of the War of Independence he could not be missed out. Suddenly wartime video clippings of him were seen on television programmes. It was the 36-year-old handsome, brilliant and revolutionary Noorul Quader in '71, proudly wearing a beard like Fidel Castro and a green revolutionary cap on his head. It was a wartime interview by a French television channel. In front of the world Noorul Quader the gentleman, officer and soldier, glorified the image of the struggle for independence. Watching that interview on BTV, it seemed only possible for a spirited man like him to take up arms against the Pakistani Government. Being a civil servant, it was possible only for a spirited and vigorous man like him to hoist the flag of Bangladesh as early as 31st March, after killing more than three hundred Pakistani soldiers in direct encounter at Pabna. Noorul Quader had virtually established the Government of Bangladesh in a district town of former Pakistan.

In 1971, Noorul Quader Khan was the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of greater Pabna district. Even though he was a CSP officer he was very much vibrant with Bangladeshi patriotism. His sharp presence of mind, clear and decisive outlook, tremendous courage and strong will to act was fuelled by his immense patriotism and made him rise to the challenge and commit himself to organizing armed resistance against the advancing Pak Army. With an automatic rifle seized from the first fallen enemy soldier he directly participated in and gave leadership to as many as 17 bloody combats in which

the entire Pak Army contingent stationed in his area was wiped out. As a result Pabna became the first liberated area in Bangladesh.

Noorul Quader Khan who was never a politician, had done the most political of things. There on 31st March 1971, for the very first time the official functioning of the Government of Bangladesh was started with the hoisting of the Bangladesh Flag by a member of parliament. An order was issued for the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement and starting the functioning of all government departments and banks under his signature using the first rubber stamp "Government of Bangladesh-Pabna" (in Bengali). News of his victory spread like wildfire in the country.

Noorul Quader then took trainloads of provisions to feed the liberation army and commandeered truckloads of money to sustain the war. This is the money with which he first established the Bangladesh Treasury. This money helped pay for the costs of War of Liberation.

From Pabna, Noorul Quader went to Meherpur, fighting the Pak Army along the way. There he took over administrative responsibilities and was responsible for all arrangements of the oath taking ceremony of the Mujibnagar Government. On April 17th 1971, when the Mujibnagar Government took oath, he was there not only as the Noorul Quader Khan, DC Pabna, but as a jubilant freedom fighter armed with weapons of war and back from a battlefield. He was surrounded by his group of victorious freedom fighters also responsible for the security of the oath-taking programme.

On 24 April 1971, Noorul Quader was appointed the first Secretary of the Government of Bangladesh in exile and was assigned by the then Cabinet of Tajuddin Ahmad to set up the administrative machinery. He set up the civil administration of Bangladesh and gave appointment to all other top offices there. He was also the Secretary of the Youth Camp, which was responsible for the recruitment and training of Muktiyoddhas during 1971. Around 106 camps were set up and training of over 120,000 Muktiyoddhas was carried out there. They formed the core of the Muktiyoddhas.

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Upon liberation of the country, Noorul Quader was made responsible for transferring the seat of the Government of Bangladesh from Mujibnagar to Dhaka. On 18th December 1971, Noorul Quader came to Dhaka as the First Establishment Secretary, bringing the Government of Bangladesh with him. Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad selected him not only to take the Government to Dhaka but also to carry with him the spirit of the Liberation War.

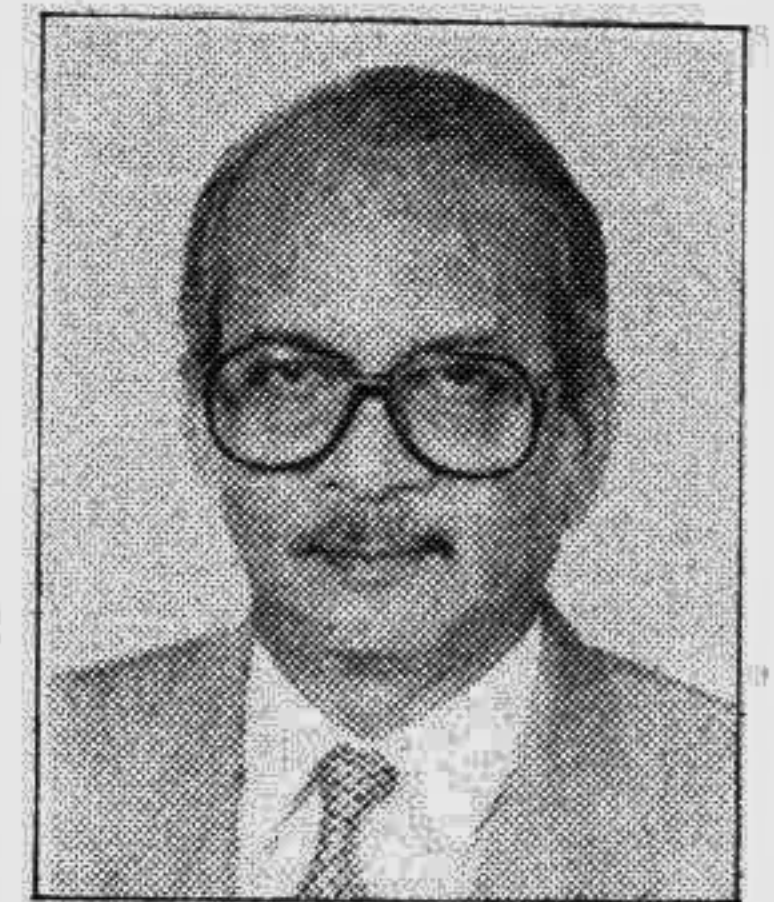
Noorul Quader is one of the greatest freedom fighters our nation has produced to have fought both in the battlefield in direct armed combats as well as with the pen with which he helped kill the Pakistani Administration, by officially starting and steering the functioning of the Mujibnagar Government of Bangladesh.

Noorul Quader was the first civil servant to dive into the bloody struggle of independence and emerge drenched in the spirit of the Liberation War. Even before the people and officials of the then East Pakistan had been able to embrace the reality of a liberated and fully independent country emerging, Noorul Quader had liberated Pabna, started a government and established to the world the reality of an independent Bangladesh. In the process, Noorul Quader Khan became a legend of the Liberation War.

He not only revolted to the mass killing of the Bengali people, but also against the attack of the Pakistanis on the customs and culture of the Bengali nation. It was deeply related to his soul and self-identity. His hatred of the "Khan bahini", as the Pakistani Army was referred to, made him even give up his own family title "Khan" making him simply Noorul Quader.

Noorul Quader considered the liberation war as the most important chapter of his life. He regarded every single freedom fighter from the depth of his soul. Even though he never tried to promote himself and his contribution to the nation, the spirit of the Liberation War remained deeply rooted in his mind. This being a Muktiyoddha myself, I wanted to dedicate my book on the War of Independence to him. Listening to this he told me that he would be present in the publication programme. Today I can only feel anguish at the thought that, the publication programme would take place, but Mr Quader to whom the book would be dedicated, would not be there. Yet the spirit of the Liberation War which shone like an immortal flame in the heart of Noorul Quader will forever continue to inspire the Bengali nation.

Noorul Quader was laid to eternal rest at the Shaheed Buddhijibi-Muktijoddha Graveyard in Mirpur. It was the very least the nation could do for him. Yet it is a loss to the nation that many important facts about the War and the government during its period of conception - the hands of Noorul Quader have been lost forever with him. Who else is there to tell us about the untold chapters of the Liberation War and help us distinguish between the truths and the half-truths?



M Noorul Quader

## Transshipment Facility to India: Coinciding Views for and Against

By A B M S Zahur

**Transshipment issue must be discussed thoroughly in the parliament. We the common men would like to know the points for opposing the treaty and the ruling party's points for justifying their proposal for the treaty. We need friendship, we also need economic development but not at the cost of conceding our national interest or jeopardising our national security.**

economically viable one, she will have to tackle the great trouble in Kashmir in the northwestern front and increasing insurgency in the NEFA region in the eastern front.

India will only be successful in developing confidence and trust among her neighbours if she is prepared to consider their interests also. Though in allowing transit facility to Bangladesh and Nepal or Bangladesh and Bhutan she may lose financially (we are not aware of the amount), she may nevertheless be able to make up for such loss if she can have the transshipment facility through Bangladesh which had already allowed her transit facility through the river route. Bangladesh's relations with India between 1975 and 1996 may not have been all that close because the Bangladesh governments during this period considered that it would not be easy for them to obtain people's support in case they conceded any benefit to India.

All these governments, however, were aware of the need for a good relationship with India. Awami League is different from other political parties in that this party was not only at the forefront of the freedom movement but it also obtained moral and material support from India during the Bangladesh war of independence and as such it perhaps can handle India much better than any other political

party in Bangladesh. It is true that both BNP and JP desired to solve the problem of Chittagong Hill Tracts and the sharing of Ganges water. As India did not cooperate or as they failed to identify the right approach to solve the problems they could not be successful.

In this age of globalisation Bangladesh cannot afford to live in isolation. It is time we changed our attitude. If we are to participate in the global development process (keeping our national interests in view) we shall have to give more attention toward sub-regional and regional development. Awami League deserves credit in improving Bangladesh's relationship with Myanmar. In the past we never gave enough attention toward developing better relationships with our next door neighbours. In fact we only concentrated on developing better relationships with rich Islamic countries and the countries of the developed world. Bangladesh's active participation in the recently concluded conference participated by India, China, Myanmar is an appropriate step toward the development effort.

The issue of extending transshipment facility to India is far from simple. Without an in-depth study of the complex issue no effective decision is possible. First of all we should see whether we are capable of handling movement of 4 million tons of goods on the existing

roads, to what extent would our own transport system be affected, how to ensure road safety, how to ensure that sealed containers do not contain explosives or arms, whether perishable goods will be included among the items to be transported, who should compensate in case of accidents, what would be the payment schedule, who should provide money for infrastructural development and transport vehicles. After the first step we may go for further discussion in regard to its implication in the development of sub-regional trade. From Bangladesh's point of view the question of Bangladesh-Nepal and Bangladesh-Bhutan trade development through obtaining transit facility from India must be raised and should be made a part of the Bangladesh-India transshipment deal. Both Bangladesh and India will have to consider the fact that both Bhutan and Nepal are landlocked and as such deserve special treatment. From granting transit facility to Nepal or Bhutan India may not be the ultimate loser because on the one hand it will relieve Calcutta port from extra pressure and on the other hand, financial loss due to loss of royalty may be completely wiped out from the benefit to be accrued from the transshipment facility that Bangladesh may extend.

In this regard BNP's politics appears to be intriguing and

confusing. During the regimes of Ziaur Rahman and Khaleda Zia BNP never opposed the concept of extending transit facility to India. Its India phobia and fear of loss of sovereignty suddenly prompted it to oppose any friendly gesture by Awami League to India.

Transshipment issue must be discussed thoroughly in the parliament. We the common men would like to know the points for opposing the treaty and the ruling party's points for justifying their proposal for the treaty. We need friendship, we also need economic development but not at the cost of conceding our national interest or jeopardising our national security.

The author is a retired joint secretary Govt. of Bangladesh.

## Mahathir's Malaysia at Crossroads

by A S M Nurunnabi

**Building Putrajaya despite the financial crisis confirms that one man can triumph over global markets, over the so-called free-market experts. Mahathir hopes to rekindle all the Malay-pride projects slowed or stalled by the Asian crisis, including the world's tallest building, the world's longest bridge and Cyberjaya, a Malaysian Silicon Valley, also carved out of the palm plantations. It could all happen, unless, of course, Mahathir is surprised at the polls by the opposition, which wants to cancel megaprojects as too grand.**

THERE are yet no definite indications as to the direction Malaysia's political future will take following the upcoming general elections. Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohammad has been in an upbeat mood with the completion of his grand project of founding Malaysia's new capital at Putrajaya. To many, Putrajaya will be remembered as the crowning achievement of Mahathir's 18-year reign. Mahathir seemed serene in the belief that he has survived his one-man battle against the worst financial crisis to strike Asia since World War II. While collapsing currencies "humiliated rulers and tycoons across the region," Mahathir said he attacked. He denounced the "colonial" Western powers exploiting the crisis to "take control" of Asia. He said he could hold off the money traders with currency controls "indefinitely."

At 74, Mahathir feels he has not completed his lifelong mission to lift the Malay sons of the soil, or bumiputras above their oppressors, whether they be American and European financiers or Chinese businessmen at home. Now comes his crucial test. With all of Southeast Asia recovering, lifting the Malaysian economy with it, Mahathir is widely expected to call elections at a very early date. As reported, he is already out campaigning, delivering a stump speech that echoed his firebrand nationalism from the 1960s, when he hectoring fellow Malays to toss off their colonial reputation as "nature's gentlemen" and seize Malaysia's wealth from the British and Chinese. He urges Malays to be grateful for all that he and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) have done to raise their share of national wealth from two to 30 per cent, and to save them from

foreign powers. Everywhere he invoked the spectre of 1969, when the largely Chinese opposition denied UMNO its customary two-thirds majority in Parliament and Malays vented their rage on celebrating Chinese in a Kuala Lumpur blood-bath.

Previously no one could think that Mahathir could lose. No one had the power to stand up to Mahathir until he sacked his designated successor, Anwar Ibrahim, at the height of the economic crisis last September, then threw him in jail on charges of covering up an illicit relationship with his chauffeur. Anwar was convicted of the cover-up in Asia's "trial of the century."

According to observers, the on-going campaign is shaping up as a referendum on Mahathir. Even those who see Anwar as a younger, slicker version of his mentor are reportedly flocking to opposition parties. Led by the Justice Party of Anwar's wife, Azizah, the fractured opposition is calling for abolition of colonial-era security laws and the secret police. They want reform of cronyism, of the judiciary and of an electoral system that, they say, allows UMNO to marshal soldiers and their wives, even phantoms and the dead, to cast votes for the ruling party. In the countryside, UMNO is labelled as a "one-stop shop" offering everything from student loans to funeral arrangements, and civil servants are said to "educate" villagers about the ruling party's good deeds. Against those odds, the surging opposition probably can't win. But they might deny Mahathir the two-thirds majority he used in the past to pass constitutional amendments sidelining Malay sultans and other challengers. Mahathir's high-profile trip

to Beijing on August 18-20 was much more than a diplomatic mission abroad. It was a political mission aimed at a domestic constituency. The staunch nationalist that Mahathir is, he hopes his hobnobbing with China's leaders will snare the hearts and minds of ethnic Chinese voters back home in the run-up to what could be the toughest general election of Mahathir's 18-year rule.

Accompanying Mahathir on his China visit was a 205-strong delegation of business people, of whom 193 were Malaysian-Chinese reflecting their disproportionate role in the economy. The Chinese, who make up only 26 per cent of Malaysia's population, could also have a disproportionate impact on the election due before June next.

Because the firing and imprisonment of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has divided the dominant Malays, who largely supported the ruling coalition in the past, the Chinese could tilt the balance in many constituencies. Many analysts believe that in the coming elections, the majority of Chinese will choose to return the ruling coalition — this time to ensure political stability. They say that older and wealthier Chinese fear that a strong opposition showing could derail the nation's recovery from its worst recession since independence. Others are said to be worried that votes for the opposition could prompt riots similar to those in Indonesia last year that resulted in the killing of ethnic Chinese and the looting of their shops. Still others are believed to be concerned that a strong showing by Islamist elements in Malaysia's opposition could allow the opposition party to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state that would ban

Islamic state that would ban many Islamic practices. But because Malaysia has no tradition of holding opinion polls, nobody knows for sure how the Chinese will vote. Interviews with a cross-section of Malaysian-Chinese reportedly confirm that the community is far from united behind the ruling coalition, which controls 84 per cent of the parliamentary seats. Many Chinese would like to reduce that giant majority and vote in a stronger opposition to keep a check on the government. It is, however, the general feeling that young voters tend to be more anti-establishment because of the Anwar incident. Now younger Chinese may identify with younger Malays. It's perceived by pro-Mahathir elements as an area of concern.

At his inner sanctum in the new city of Putrajaya, Mahathir is believed to have regained control of the economy from the later-day Western "colonialists" and is confident he can micro-manage Malaysia's over-all economic policies. Everyday he meets with his National Economic Action Council and reviews every aspect of the national economy.

Building Putrajaya despite the financial crisis confirms that one man can triumph over global markets, over the so-called free-market experts. Mahathir hopes to rekindle all the Malay-pride projects slowed or stalled by the Asian crisis, including the world's tallest building, the world's longest bridge and Cyberjaya, a Malaysian Silicon Valley, also carved out of the palm plantations. It could all happen, unless, of course, Mahathir is surprised at the polls by the opposition, which wants to cancel megaprojects as too grand.

