

## His Memory is National Property

NATION today pays well-deserved tributes to the memory of the man who vanguarded the assertion of our cultural identity and economic rights, brought political freedom to our people and gave us a niche of pride to hold our heads high as a new entity on the world map. The remembrance of his signal contributions to the galvanisation of our people leading up to the establishment of Bangladesh as a free country against stunning odds is rendered poignant with an emotional content derived from the heinous physical annihilation of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman alongside the members of his family. It was the most diabolic serial killing ever masterminded in the annals of nations with a political motive and vendetta harboured by a single group of disgruntled, scheming and misadventurist elements thrusting a *fait accompli* on the entire nation.

It was a great wrong done, something of a cardinal sin committed which were to bear the seeds of the whirlwinds that we would reap subsequently. Taking law into one's own hand, both in the broader and narrower senses of the expression became a pastime since that time on. Satisfaction of political vendetta through assassination, attempted and real coups and counter-coups became the order of the day as ambitious people itched to try short-cuts to ascension to power. With each seizure of power self-protective laws were forced upon the legal system, the worst specimen of which being the one indemnifying the killers of Bangabandhu until it was struck out of the statutes book some time ago.

It is the constitutional changes brought about to demonise the values of the Liberation War together with attempts made to permanently consign the architect of our freedom struggle to oblivion that today pass before the mind's eye. And that's where lies the true significance of the National Mourning Day which must therefore be observed with a vow to live by the national ethos born of the freedom struggle.

Spurred on by the essence of our glorious legacy let's now elevate Bangabandhu to a purely non-partisan status, meaning that he should be put above all questions and controversies regarding his place in history. He needs to be seen as the unquestioned leader of our nationalist struggle, a symbol of national history emblazoned right across the political divide. His memory is a national property not a party property as it is made out to be. Yes, there was a time when he was deliberately denigrated by vested quarters but if the ascension of the AL to power is any measure of tribute to his memory why then should the state machinery be used so much by the ruling party to monopolise his memory? Let it be left to the whole nation to remember him and for history to judge his works in their totality with complete dispassion and objectivity.

## We are Surprised

THE morning papers brought hope to millions of readers expecting a statement from the Prime Minister, according to the Supreme Court Bar Association President Barrister Moinul Hossain, after their meeting with Sheikh Hasina on Sunday night. But the hopes were dashed in the evening by an announcement from a government spokesman saying "Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would not make any statement regarding her comment on judiciary as was published by a section of the press today quoting Supreme Court Bar Association President Barrister Moinul Hossain." About Sunday night's meeting between the Prime Minister and senior lawyers including Supreme Court Bar executives the spokesman said that the Prime Minister made it categorically clear that the three organs of the state — Executive, Legislative and judiciary — should function as per constitution of the country. "These three vital institutions of the state should have accountability for properly serving the cause of the people." We were very hopeful about a solution to the controversy being kicked up by the comments of the Prime Minister about judiciary and the lawyers' community but now we are surprised what has actually happened. This statement has raised the credibility issue of who is right. We thought the whole issue will be behind us after Sunday's meeting. But this is not to be. The Prime Minister, it seems, has not changed which has surprised and saddened us. We have recently written two editorials on the independence of judiciary and suggested keeping this vital organ of the state above all controversy. But PM's public remarks have raised controversy about this vital organ of the state. It is only natural that the three organs of the state should function according to constitution. If the PM wants to reform the judiciary she should discuss the matter with the Chief Justice, judges and associations of lawyers. Conflict between the executive and the judiciary is not good for the country.

## Strike Must End

THE education ministry's attitude towards the teachers' strike at the non-government schools, colleges and madrasahs has been one of deliberate indifference. If non-acceptance of reality would make it go away. The fact of the matter — which the government does not seem willing to accept — is that the problem has snowballed into a crisis. The divisiveness among the teaching community was made much about at the initial stages but with the teachers of such prestigious schools and colleges as Ideal Model and Vigharunissa Noon joining the agitation programme the movement now looks perched on solid footing. And the indefinite strike seems set to continue longer than anxious students and their parents apprehended.

Now, according to Education Minister AHSK Sadeq, the government is ready to resolve the crisis through negotiations. But what we fail to understand is why has it allowed the situation to reach such a pass where striking teachers will not budge from the position until and unless their demands are met in entirety.

What we are looking for is a speedy end to the deadlock. We are talking about the future of numerous students belonging to 22,000 non-government schools and colleges. While we urge the government to determinedly break the ice, our plea goes to the teachers in no small measure to be considerate to the students at this stage of the academic year. However genuine their grievances these should not get in the way of their students' academic progress.

# SALUTE TO BANGABANDHU

## Anatomy of a Coup: A Journey of a Quarter Century

IN the autumn of 1975, a few months after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a young Bengali stood in front of a hotel in Sacramento, California. His name was Robi Chakravorti. He was the only Bengali in a small crowd that had gathered to hear the last speech of Jimmy Carter's campaign for President of the United States. Carter had stopped over in Sacramento, capital of California, the night before the election. "It was a routine campaign speech," wrote Chakravorti four years later in the Calcutta weekly, *Frontier*. "But a part of it sticks in my memory. He [Carter] said that he would stop over to see the operations of the type for which the CIA had been criticized 'whether in Chile or Bangladesh'." I vividly remember the juxtaposition of those two countries. Reports of CIA involvement in one was well known but in the other it was a matter of gossip and speculation among Indian and Bangladeshi journalists.

Standing only a few feet from Carter, Chakravorti is quite certain that he heard Carter correctly. Carter's "reference to Bangladesh ... puzzled me to no end," recalled Chakravorti. "The association of Chile with Bangladesh surprised me. I thought it could be a slip of the tongue or a matter of rhetoric. In either case, I wondered, why a tongue-twisting name like Bangladesh over names which are easier to pronounce?" Another interpretation ... was that as a Presidential candidate, Carter was briefed regularly by the Ford Administration, that he learnt about CIA operations in Bangladesh and deliberately included it in his speech for effect.

In fact, during a presidential campaign in the United States, the two leading candidates are regularly provided intelligence briefings by the CIA, even when the candidates are neither a sitting President nor a Vice-President. The 1975 campaign

The coup happened on one of those hot sweltering monsoon nights that blow up each summer from the Bay of Bengal. It was a quiet evening and the political talk in the tea shops of Dhaka that day was about Mujib's speech planned for the next morning at the university. Life had become difficult in Bangladesh and people wondered if one of the left wing underground parties might try to make trouble during the university ceremony. But, otherwise, the night did not seem very different from many others that summer.

was no exception. During the summer and autumn of that year, Jimmy Carter, the candidate, received regular intelligence briefings from the CIA.

Two years after Chakravorti stood listening to Carter under a California sun, this writer sat down at the US State Department in Washington

with an American diplomat who had served in a senior position at the American Embassy in Dhaka in August 1975. We had met previously when I was South Asia Correspondent of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Hong Kong). We were joined by my colleague, the American writer and journalist, Kai Bird,

who was then an editor at *The Nation* magazine in New York. Our diplomatic source was a serious and troubled man. He was distressed about the way Mujib and much of his family had died. Moreover, he was disturbed by what he knew about prior contacts and relationships between US Embassy personnel and the

group that had planned the coup d'état.

We had encountered a rare item. An American government official with a conscience. As we talked, he set out before us the pieces of a puzzle. The challenge was for us to pick them up and to begin piecing them together. Clearly, the man before us knew selected parts of a greater puzzle. But, what he knew was crucial. The story, as we knew it, of the coup d'état which killed Mujibur Rahman was unravelling and taking a new shape.

Stories get told and stories get reported. Frequently, a foreign correspondent, trying to penetrate the surface appearance of a complex set of events filled with their own macabre web of killings and betrayals, fails at first to get the reports right. A coup d'état or a midnight murder occurring in distant spots at moments of unexpected crisis, are often reported with little real accuracy at the time. Few writers go back to those reports, once put on page one to discover later that the real story was a very different one.

Just such a case occurred a quarter century ago on the night of 14 August 1975. Martin Woollacott and I filed one of the most detailed reports of what happened for *The Guardian* (London). It ran as the lead story on page one for August 23, 1975. I also filed a report for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Looking back, we certainly missed a great deal. As with all such events when they

happened, no one except the actual participants knew what had really gone on. Curious and skeptical I began to retrace my steps to look again at the story of Sheikh Mujib's death.

The coup happened on one of those hot sweltering monsoon nights that blow up each summer from the Bay of Bengal. It was a quiet evening and the political talk in the tea shops of Dhaka that day was about Mujib's speech planned for the next morning at the university. Life had become difficult in Bangladesh and people wondered if one of the left wing underground parties might try to make trouble during the university ceremony. But, otherwise, the night did not seem very different from many others that summer.

Yet, life in Dhaka did take a sudden turn that August evening. For many who only four years earlier had celebrated Bangladesh's independence their lives would never again be quite the same. Just after midnight the Bengal Lancers and the Bangladesh Armoured Corps slowly trundled out of the capital's main cantonment toward the runways of the abandoned half-built second airport on the capital's edge. As they lined up in formation on the main runway, the commanding officer of the column, Major Farooq, stood on a tank and told his men that on this very evening they would overthrow Mujib's government. It was a fire-eating speech and by the time Farooq had finished they were ready to go. They move out and split into three columns. Within three hours Mujib and many of his family would be dead.

The author is presently working as a Research Associate at the Yale Centre for International and Area Studies. He was recently named a Fulbright Scholar for South Asia.



Lawrence Lifschultz



January 8, 1972 ... Bangabandhu's press conference in London prior to leaving for independent Bangladesh.

## A tribute to Bangabandhu

by M Aftabuddin Shah

He does not need any mundane monument. The humblest sod of the independent Bangladesh with nothing but dewdrops in the morning to gild it is a prouder mausoleum than kings and conquerors can boast. The country is his monument. Its independence is his epitaph. Bangabandhu belongs today to no particular period of time and to no particular state but to ages and to the world.

Today is the 15th of August, a date that stands out as the blackest day in the nation's history. This day, back in 1975, a terrible tragedy befell the nation. The carnage, which the authors of the tragedy perpetrated, has perhaps no parallel in the world's history in its brutality, barbarism and gruesomeness. A group of wayward self-seeking betrayers brutally killed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of independent Bangladesh together with about two dozens of his family members and blood relatives.

The 15th of August is thus, to all patriotic Bangladeshis, a mournful anniversary, a day of national bereavement and of chastened and tender recollections of a day of poignant pathos and sombre sensibilities, a day of anguish as well as ignominy.

Today all over Bangladesh people will gather in cities in towns and in villages to observe the anniversary of Mujib's martyrdom. Today speakers will speak of his heroic deeds, his gallant and uncompromising confrontation with the Pakistanis, his flirtations with death for the sake of Bangladesh. Today songs will be sung and prayers will be offered in his memory that will move the heart and soul of the people. The day will inspire us, the Bangladeshis, to revive and renew our devotion and loyalty to Bangladesh.

Today we will endeavour to praise him in well-chosen words and dwell upon his greatness. But how can we adequately praise Bangabandhu and measure his greatness because he was not made of the ordinary clay that we are all made of. The truth is any eulogy today is superfluous for he has had greater praise in his lifetime than we can confer today. He came and lived a life laden with works, laden with glories and became a legend. He attained absolute and complete immortality in his life time and there is nothing we can add to it or deduct from it.

A man of imposing physical constitution who gave nothing to pleasure in youth nothing to repose in age but all to this country and its people was tragically done to death by those who once hovered around him for his favour and for an opportunity to lick the dust of his feet. A man of sterling personal character and incorruptible political integrity he trusted too much to his colleagues and party members suspecting that one day some of them may hatch conspiracies for his undoing. He just passed

the midway point of his prodigious career but was still fully enchanted with the life and interest of the people. Within a year of independence he presented the nation with a superb constitution that even his bitterest critics were full of praise for. In an effort to heal the wounds of the liberation war he proclaimed a general amnesty and pardoned all those who sided with the enemy out of pure political belief. He however, did not pardon those against whom there were specific charges of arson, murder and rape of our womenfolk. Living a simple and ordinary life he exhorted all to give the best to the country and the clock. But the betrayal did not give him the much needed time to put in full order the machinery of the state badly shattered during the savage liberation war.

Great in life he was surpassingly great in death. Though perhaps dazed and stunned, at the treachery of those for whom he suffered all his life, he did not shake before the visible presence of death. The brave and tender man who was oak and rock in every storm of life but vine and flower in the sunshine did not quail before the assassins' guns. Although ridden with bullets there was no contortion of his face. He looked as if above the demonic clatter of the assassins' bullets he heard the voice of God and he faced death with unflinching front. It looked as if he has gone into a short sleep after a long and wearisome journey along the life's highway. The serene and sublime looks of his lifeless face were, as it were, a scornful retort to the murderers, an overt disdain for their indescribable crime. Though lifeless he was looking amazingly himself, undefeated by death. That was Sheikh Mujib, a super human being.

Having thrust him from life, the conspirators set about distorting his image and belittling his achievement. His pictures were removed from all public places and any reference to him became a taboo in state activities. The conspirators who usurped state power began thriving at public expense. The self-confessed killers were rewarded by their political siblings with high public positions. The killers and their beneficiaries did not confine themselves to merely trying to destroy the name and fame of Mujib. They went to the bizarre length of concocting their own parvenu and juxtaposing him alongside Mujib in a zerosum and invidious comparison.

But the patriotic sons of the soil who cherish Bangladesh and its independence scornfully turned away from all malicious propaganda and more the detractors tried to erase Mujib's name the more firmly he became entrenched in their heart.

The assassination of Mujib plunged the country into great turmoil and uncertainty. A weak and shaky government operating from Banga Bhaban on impromptu basis never found its feet. Within three months of his assassination four national leaders and close associates of Mujib were killed in jail while in protective custody. Great internecine killing took place within the armed forces with a group of them declaring themselves against the existing hierarchy system in the army and set about killing all officers above the rank of Havildar. The prevalent lawlessness and anarchy forced the fall of the government of the day paving the way for a new military ruler on the scene who ruled Bangladesh for five and a half years. During this period the country witnessed a phantasmagoria of coups, counter coups, kangaroo courts, military courts, special courts, mock trials, camera trails, summary trials and a plethora of bloody and gory events involving killings and dismissals of hundreds of army personnel. Moreover, a number of basic and fundamental articles of the constitution were changed by decrees to suit individual requirements without recourse to due constitutional processes. A presidential decree of the earlier regime exempting the killers of Mujib from legal prosecution was absorbed into the constitution. The military ruler also formed a political party and got himself elected as president while still in service, in blatant violation of the country's army rules. The general turned president however, managed to survive all the challenges and onslaughts to his regime until May 1991 when he was killed by a group of rebellious army officers. With the death of the president his vice-president took over the charge of the government but not for long. The post-Mujib history of Bangladesh once again repeated itself and a military coup was staged in March 1982. In less than seven years the nation experienced three military take-overs dealing severe blows to the country's democratic and constitutional processes. On this occasion the army chief however claimed to have seized power at the invitation of the

Continued on page 5

## Blot on history

by Arshad-uz Zaman

THE assassination of Bangabandhu and his family was the result of an extensive conspiracy where those pulling the triggers were probably pawns in the game whose roots lay far beyond the borders of Bangladesh. The apparent motive behind the conspiracy masterminded by a few disgruntled officers sprang from the launching of BKSAL and the discontent due to near famine conditions within the country. What is surprising in this tragic and sordid episode was the inactivity of the main body of the military establishment, nay their meek submission to the renegades. To this day this remains the grey area.

There can be no doubt that the vast conspiracy straddling several houses in Dhaka city was well laid out. The killing spree caught in its net the nephew of Bangabandhu and his pregnant wife, the cousin of Bangabandhu, his brother and many more. What was aimed to be achieved through this orgy of blood letting? First and foremost it was to sow terror in the hearts and minds of the entire population of Bangladesh. This objective was fully realized. For there was no murmur of dissent or disapproval.

The chiefs of the armed forces were taken to the radio station from where they made broadcasts of allegiance to the new regime. The new head of the Government would be Khandkar Moshitque, the colleague of Bangabandhu in Government but a member of the plotters. Virtually the entire cabinet of Bangabandhu was sworn intact some with the bayonet at their chests as was

the case of Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, a trusted colleague of Bangabandhu. The plotters planted themselves on the lawns of Bangabhaban (the President's House) and power flowed through the barrel of their guns.

This situation continued for a good three months when a counter coup led by Gen. Khaled Mosharraf toppled the assassins. The assassins fled abroad but before departing made sure that the top leadership of the Awami League remained crippled. They forcibly entered the jail and killed four top leaders of the Awami League — the charismatic Tajuddin Ahmed (Prime Minister in the Provisional Government of Bangladesh in 1971), Syed Nazrul Islam (Acting President of the Provisional Government), Monsur Ali (Prime Minister in the Government of Bangabandhu) and Kamruzzaman (Minister in the Government of Bangabandhu).

The plotters were thus destabilising the newly independent state of Bangladesh. The War of Liberation was led by the Awami League and it was joined by the entire population of Bangladesh. The country had been united in 1970-71 in a manner never seen in the history of the Bangalee people.

Two states, close to Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia accorded recognition to Bangladesh following the assassination. Both the states had opposed the Liberation War strenuously in 1971. They fell for the facile propaganda of Pakistan that Bangladesh was the creation of India. It did not enter their thinking that a genuine nationalist uprising was

sweeping throughout Bangladesh and the events of 1971 were the product of 25 years of national revolt of the Bangalee people against their masters from West Pakistan.

A quarter century has elapsed since the assassination and much water has flown down the Buriganga river. The events of 1975 saw the rise of Gen Ziaur Rahman to power. His five-year rule ended in his assassination in Chittagong. Although several military officers were hanged, the controversy over the motives of assassination refuses to go away. His rule was followed by the military coup of Gen HM Ershad, Chief of Army Staff, who ruled for nine years. His rule was ultimately overthrown by popular uprising compounded by the army pulling the rug from under his feet. Gen Ershad's rule was followed by elections which brought the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Begum Khaleda Zia to power. Thus democracy was returning to Bangladesh after 15 years. Her 5-year rule was followed by elections and this time it was the Awami League (AL) of Sheikh Hasina who triumphed at the polls.

The victory of the Awami League means much more than the simple victory of a political party. It means the return of the pendulum to its position of 1975. It means the nullification of all that was involved with the assassination of the founder of Bangladesh. Bangladesh was once again returning to stability. Bangladesh was founded on principles of secularism. The successive military regimes grossly tampered

Continued on page 5



January 29, 1974 ... Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman receives Yugoslav President Joseph Broz Tito at the Dhaka airport.