

# Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman

# 20TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY

Special Supplement 30 May 2001



A nation in crisis years of providence of destiny. The late Ziaur Rahman, or Zia, as the people affectionately call him, appeared and reappeared in the national horizon of

Bangladesh as a man of destiny to provide leadership to a people that had endured consternation and traumatic shock in its deep hour of trials. His first appearance was occasioned by the up-and-coming military landscape in the aftermath of the brutal Pakistani assault on an unarmed civilian people of the then East Pakistan on 25th of March 1971. The leaderships then trusted by the people either went hiding or chose to surrender to the Pakistani junta, and the nation was left to its fate without a sense of direction. Zia's emergence at that critical hour with his 'Declaration of Independence' of Bangladesh is still fresh in the minds of many who lived then and listened to him, a voice that served as an instant source of strength and motivation in the struggle for liberation. As a mere Major in the military he then earned laurels for his gallantry as a Liberation War hero. Despite his charismatic valor Zia did not show any political ambition and quietly he went back to the barracks and unhesitatingly served the nation as a soldier with loyalty and dedication.

However, the legacy of misgovernance and the twists and turns in the affairs of state in the years after liberation had changed the political landscape sooner, and as a patriot Zia couldn't but respond to the call of duty.

The images of hunger and famine of the post-liberation years pulled the country's profile to the very lowest point as a 'bottomless basket'. It was again the destiny of Zia to rescue the nation from such a horrific state of affairs once he emerged at the helm of affairs of the country after the joint uprising of sepoys and the masses on November 7, 1975. The national image that suffered immeasurably had to be salvaged and the country was to be provided with a sense of direction.

Envisioning an integrated national policy and strategy, Zia had laid emphasis on development and production for building a self-reliant nation, aware that only a respectable national self-image could enhance the country's national interest internationally. There were multiple challenges and insecurities including food, im-

## Zia and the Destiny of Bangladesh

Dr. Abul Kalam



President Zia with Begum Zia

## Zia - A Visionary

Reazuddin Ahmed

turned back at his call and defeated the occupation forces. It was Zia who fulfilled a soldier's obligation by liberating the country. Again General Zia stood by the people when the conspirators were trying to undermine country's sovereignty. Those who saw the anarchy in those days in 1975 will definitely agree that General Zia saved the nation from a civil war-like situation. But there are many critics who say that Zia's role has been exaggerated. But it is not true. I am to say that Zia has not been properly evaluated until now. Those who want to undermine the contribution of Zia, should not forget that a soldier's duty is to defend his motherland and Zia did it in 1971 and 1975.

In 1975 General Zia was brought to the centre stage of power through a revolution. The people and soldiers jointly organized that revolution to defend country's sovereignty. Zia was brought to the radio station from captivity. He did not seize power by promulgating martial law. The country was already under martial law on November 7 when Zia was installed to power by the people and the sol-

Ziaur Rahman who allowed political parties to function under multi-party democracy. The 1979 parliament was represented by different political parties. The noted parliamentarians were elected to that house.

President Zia emerged as a politician through formation of a nationalist front. Such a front was then required to organize the nationalist forces. The nationalist forces were then fragmented and scattered all over the country. Zia saw tremendous political potential in that force. So he formed the nationalist front to bring all nationalists under one banner. The front was then converted into Bangladesh nationalist party (BNP).

Formation of BNP was a significant event in our political history. The launching of BNP was a deterrent to those who wanted to rule Bangladesh perpetually with extraneous support. Ziaur Rahman launched BNP to create a balance of power in our politics. As a politician Zia felt the urgency of forming a party that could nurture and protect democracy. A frustrated people saw silverlining in the clouds under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman in mid seventies.

tures in order that the country won't require a begging bowl seeking international assistance so as to feed a starving people. It was a gigantic task; yet Zia worked relentlessly to motivate the people for working towards self-reliance.

His landmark achievements include reintroduction of multiparty democracy, restoration of the freedom of the press, enhances food production and support towards a widened horizon of business entrepreneurship. All this afforded the people of the country a little smile they forgot and brightened the nation's image abroad. Zia's foreign policy was geared to guide Bangladesh in the complex milieu of its Asian neighborhood and in its dealings with other major powers and power blocs beyond. Just as he traveled across the country to motivate the people to work for self-reliance, he also embarked on visiting the key foreign capitals in order to broaden the country's international linkages. In a world that is largely controlled by major powers and blocs, Zia had realized that a small power like Bangladesh must loop around somewhat like smaller fish in the seas not to be swallowed by the bigger fish or swayed away by any particular big power or power bloc. Hence came his diplomatic swing from the Indo-Soviet axis to openings with China, the Islamic World and the west.

As a perceptive leader Zia realized also the geopolitical concerns of Bangladesh in its neighborhood. Certainly Zia was the first to moot the cooperative idea so as to harmonize state-to-state relationships at the regional level. That made him a prophet of South Asian regionalism. The 5-year interim Ganges water accord with India in 1977 was also successfully negotiated while the current Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpeyi served as the Foreign Minister of the then Janata Government.

Thus Zia had left an indelible mark as a hero of the Liberation War and as a statesman.

He steered the nation out of a morass of doomsday atmosphere and provided leadership with a sense of dedication at that very critical juncture of Bangladesh. Bangladesh under Zia found renewed confidence as a nation-state. The cruel hands of treachery had left some of his job unfinished, and the nation now has to choose the right direction to carry Zia's vision forward.

President Ziaur Rahman's political wisdom of very high order can well be appreciated in the context of utter helplessness of the Bangladesh Government following recent border skirmishes between the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and Indian Border Security Forces (BSF). Bangladesh Premier had to say "sorry" three times during her twenty-five minutes talk with the Prime Minister of India, although BDR jawans were right in retaking Padma after thirty years and repelling the invading BSF from Bangladesh territory. Why? Its answer lies both in the strategic perception of Indian leadership, which has, for its own interests, fabricated a framework of dominance and dependence for its neighbours, and increasingly growing yielding nature of Bangladesh Government of the moment revealed in living with it in peace without a ripple of demur.

Ziaur Rahman like a seasoned statesman realized the need for peaceful borders with India. He loved to see India as a great neighbour, a friendly but honest neighbour, not an arrogant, unscrupulous and scheming big brother. Under Zia's leadership, Bangladesh however wanted to maintain its relation with India on the basis of sovereign equality. He took it to be the spiritual craving of Bangladesh, its undying ethos. But however friendly one wants to be and whatever cooperative attitude one likes to evince, peaceful relation is not possible unless certain objective conditions, which help develop the solid base of good neighbourly relation, are fulfilled. Peace does not dawn on the horizon automatically. It has to be bought. This is how

President Zia reflected on the issue and undertook certain momentous steps for stabilizing peaceful but mutually respectful relation with India.

The emergence of Bangladesh has come down, right from the beginning, as a "strategic irrelevance" to the Indian leaders both from the political and security perspectives. The long cherished dream of "Akhand Bharat" of Patel, Nehru and Gandhi on the basis of One-Nation Theory was frustrated by Jinnah's Two-Nation Theory and India was partitioned in 1947. The

creation of Bangladesh on the basis of linguistic nationalism struck not only at the root of the Two-Nation Theory but mortally ridiculed the very base of One-Nation also. It adumbrated the growth of many nation states in India, especially in the vicinity of Bangladesh, on the basis of such forces as language, culture, ethnicity, geographical configuration, historical past and so on, leading to Balkanization of the Indian Union. From the security perspective also the location of Bangladesh has never been propitious to Indian interest. Located as it is, at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal and standing in between Indian heartland and the disturbed north-east, Bangladesh is not far from the epicenter of growing Chinese presence in the region. What is more, Bangladesh stands on the southern front of the 20-mile long Shiliguri Corridor, a rugged land bridge between Nepal and Bangladesh. If the Shiliguri Corridor goes out of hand by any chance, with the hostile Bangladesh standing by, the entire north-eastern part of India will be detached from the mainland and eventually lost. This has

## Zia's Innovative Foreign Policy Stance

Emajuddin Ahamed

always remained a great concern to Indian strategists and the question has been mooted in hundreds of forums and centers. Having all these in view, the policy planners of India wanted to put Bangladesh within an overarching framework of dominance and dependence.

It was Ziaur Rahman who realized for the first time that such a relation with India is not only agonizingly humiliating but also verily suicidal. He also realized that good neighbourly relation with India was a necessary



Zia in Million hearts

sity. Having these twin objectives in view, he started bringing in changes first at the internal setting through resurgence of nationalistic aspirations of the people and then by stabilizing countervailing forces at the regional and international levels. Some fundamental changes were wrought at the domestic plateau. National unity, which is lifeblood of national strength, was ingeniously fostered among the social forces. The colour of Bangladeshi nationalism became the rallying point. The wasteful and exploitative economic system, the so-called socialism, was done away with. The democratic multi-party framework was revived and electoral politics was put into perspective.

The foreign policy goals were devised anew, and dynamic international relations were set on with a view to preventing Bangladesh from hurtling down to the abyss of dependence. At the regional level, Bangladesh developed a pattern of mutualism with such states as Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives along with India so much so that it ultimately led to the forging of regional cooperation in the region for the first time in history.

At the international level, Bangladesh, a lonely sojourner, picked up friends from both the right, center and left and established a kind of viable comradeship amongst them. Bangladesh was lifted from the dead



President Zia with an African leader killed through establishment of Baksal? Is it also not true that multi-party democracy was restored by Ziaur Rahman? What the critics will call Zia, a killer of democracy or savior of democracy? It is true that Zia was a soldier. A soldier's image in most third of the world countries is that he takes position against democracy. But there are exceptions. Zia was such an exception. It was