

Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman 20TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY

Special Supplement 30 May 2001



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

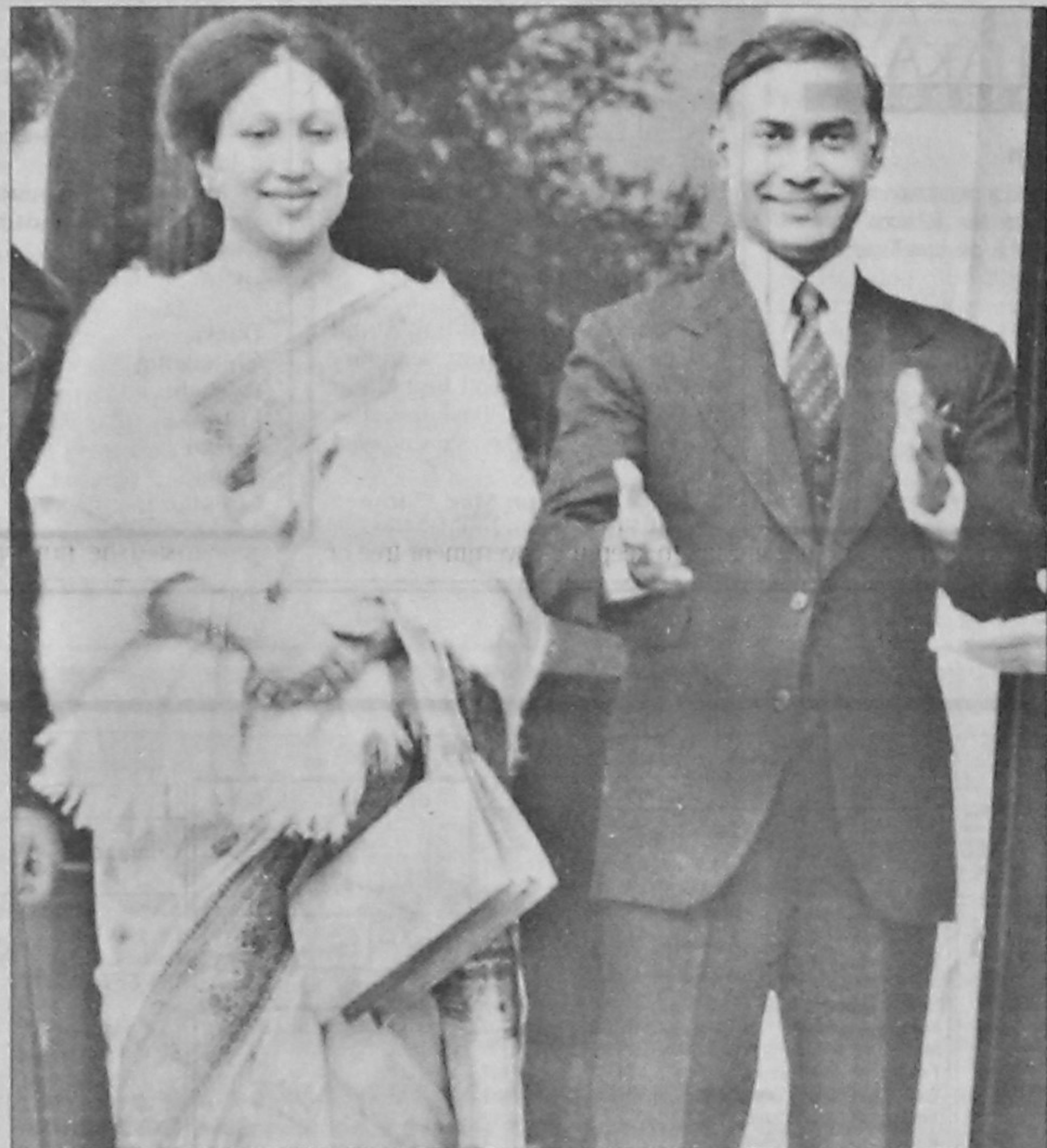
Zia and the Destiny of Bangladesh

Dr. Abul Kalam

patriotic fervor
with the people
in motivating

gation, water, ecology and
environment. The nation
is still reminded of the
youthful images of Zia's travels across the
country with a T-shirt and cap on to work in

them in tasks such as canal digging and irri-
gation, building roads and rural infrastruc-



President Zia with Begum Zia

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
entrepreneurships. All this afforded the peo-
ple 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 coun-
try 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 harmo-
nize state-to-state relationships at the
regional level. That made him a prophet of
South Asian regionalism. The 5-year inter-
im Ganges water accord with India in 1977
was also successfully negotiated while the
current Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari
Vajpayee 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 leader-
ship 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 wis-
dom of a very high order can well be
appreciated in the context of utter help-
lessness 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
jaws were right in retaking Padua after thirty years
and repelling the invading BSF from Bangladesh terri-
tory. Why? Its answer lies both in the strategic per-
ception of Indian leadership, which has, for its own
interests, fabricated a framework of dominance and
dependence for its neighbors, and increasingly grow-
ing yielding nature of Bangladesh Government of the
moment reveling in living with it in peace without a
ripple of demer.

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 arro-
gant, unscrupulous and
scheming big brother.
Under Zia's leadership,
Bangladesh however
wanted to maintain its
relation with India on the
basis of sovereign equali-
ty. 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 cer-
tain objective conditions,
which help develop the
solid base of good neigh-
bourly relation, are ful-
filled. Peace does not
dawn on the horizon auto-
matically. It has to be
bought. This is how

President Zia reflected on the issue and undertook cer-
tain 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 per-
spectives. The long cherished dream of "Akhanda
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, histori-
cal 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 heart-
land 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 fora
and centers. Having all these in view, the policy plan-
ners 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 neces-



People across the
world remember their
national heroes and
pay their respect to
those who served the
nation with dedication.
They follow their
ideals and implement those for
building the nation. The people who
became the national heroes served
the nation and the people selflessly.

Such national heroes fought against
the enemies of the nation to liberate
and defend their motherland and
built the nation with statesmanlike
foresight.

Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman
was one such person who emerged
as a liberation war hero in 1971 and
later became a visionary in building
a modern Bangladesh. Today is the
death anniversary of Ziaur Rahman.
It is the befitting occasion to
remember him, to pay respect to him
and to evaluate his achievements.
But it is not very easy to evaluate
Zia in short because his achieve-
ments are really great. He made
remarkable contributions as a sol-
dier, president, politician and as a
reformer. Zia is often seen by many
either as a soldier or as a president.
This may not be the proper way of
evaluating a national hero. Zia
should be seen in totality for an
objective evaluation of his life and
achievements because his honesty,
dedication, sagacity and foresight
will continue to guide the nation and
inspire the new generation.

Even the critics of Shaheed
President Ziaur Rahman can not
undermine his role in the liberation
war and restoring peace and disci-
pline in the country in the post '75
Bangladesh. When Zia came to the
centre stage of power, the country
was in total anarchy. There was no
government in the first week of
November, 1975. The whole nation
was as helpless as it was on 25
March 1971. In 1971 Major Zia
gave the nation a sense of direction
by declaring independence and call-
ing them to take up arms to liberate
the country. A determined people

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 may
say that Zia's role has been exagger-
ated. But it is not true. I am to say
that Zia has not been properly
evaluated until now. Those who
want to undermine the contribu-
tion of Zia, should not forget that a
soldier's duty is to defend his moth-
erland 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 organi-
zed that revolution to defend coun-
try'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-

diers through a revolution.
Seventh November was the turning
point in our national life. The coun-
try was set on a long march towards
democracy. The so-called democrats
and elected representatives of the
people killed democracy and estab-
lished one party Baksal rule. Is it not
true that multi-party democracy was



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 a
savior of democracy? It is true that
Zia was a soldier. A soldier's image
is that he takes position against
democracy. But there are exceptions.
Zia was such an exception. It was

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 politi-
cian through formation of a nation-
alist 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 tremen-
dous political potential in that
force. So he formed the
nationalist front to bring all
nationalists under one ban-
ner. The front was then con-
verted 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 extra-
neous 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. BNP did it when gener-

al Ershad was trying to perpetuate
autocratic rule in Bangladesh. If a
politician's success lies in seeing
things beyond his nose, then Zia was
definitely a successful politician
because he filled political vacuum by
launching a strong party that is need-
ed for sustenance of democracy.

President Zia will be remembered
for so many reasons. He restored
discipline in the administration and
charted a road map for Bangladesh
to make the country a self-reliant
one. He took over administration at a
time when Bangladesh was a bot-
tomless basket. But Ziaur Rahman,
within shortest possible time, pulled
up Bangladesh from the shambles.

The nation got a dignified position in
the committee of nation as a member
of security council and vice-chair-
man of the organization of Islamic
countries (OIC). Zia undertook ini-
tiative to make the country self-
reliant in food and his action plan
was so successful that Bangladesh
could export rice in early 80's. The
country's industrial policy was liber-
alized and private sector was given
the driving seat in industrial devel-
opment of the country. During his
time denationalization process start-
ed. It is needless to say that
Bangladesh had to suffer most
because of wholesale nationalization
at the dawn of independence. He
streamlined administration through
sweeping measures. The talented
people were attracted to politics and
civil service.

Zia had firm conviction in institu-
tionalizing democracy and the society.
He took certain steps that will be
remembered for long. The newspa-
pers enjoyed freedom during his
time. He took initiative to set up
press institute of Bangladesh and
formed press council. He took all
these steps to strengthen democracy
and institutionalize freedom. Zia
introduced a brand of politics that
enthused younger generation to par-
ticipate in nation building activities.
A frustrated people saw silverlining
in the clouds under the leadership of
Ziaur Rahman in mid seventies.



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 rally-
ing 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 mutuality with
such states as Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and
the Maldives along with India so much so that it ulti-
mately 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

end of the Indo-Soviet Axis and Indian hegemonic cir-
cle. Bangladesh came closer to the Muslim world of
more than fifty states, which began to take fresh look
at Bangladesh and its problems. One of the super pow-
ers of the time became a good friend of Bangladesh.
Bangladesh developed a good working relation with
China, another big neighbour within a paltry distance
of only 65 miles. South-East Asian Countries were
drawn closer. The distant Europe remained no longer
disinterested in the affairs of Bangladesh.
Bangladesh is much stronger today than it was in the
1970s. In terms of population it is the eighth largest
country. In this era of globalization its market of 130
million people is taking more and more and attractive
hue. Its new find, gas reserve, has made it an object of
warm wooing by many. Its strategic location, in the
vicinity of the Indian Ocean, the prospective theatre of
big power showdown in the days to come, is equally
significant. Having all these in view, if the foreign pol-
icy postulation of Bangladesh is redrawn in the line
pursued by President Zia, and if the diplomatic cards
are creatively played, Bangladesh may turn into one of
the key actors in the region both in political and eco-
nomic spheres. At this moment of humiliation the
nation remembers him with deep veneration for his
innovative foreign policy stance.