

## Welcome to a challenging year ahead

Statesmanship critically needed to make the most of it

AS we bid adieu to 2001 and greet the second year in the new millennium we become conscious of how defining the by-gone year has been, primarily in terms of international relations and global value system. This marked a paradigm shift of sorts in the way we understood the world thus far. And it won't be long before we know how the definitional shift will impact on the hitherto established patterns of inter-regional and inter-state equations. And that's the note basically on which we would like to comprehend the mankind's collective obligations to the new year.

Not since the Second Great War has the global situation been fraught with such a diversity of dangers and conflict of interests as it is today. And that too, ironically, when the opportunities are at their most plentiful to build a new world order based on equality of access to information superhighway.

The quest for a new global order, both political and economic, in the post-cold war era which is almost a decade-old, should have met with success by now. Far from it, the USA's grossly unequal anti-terrorist war against Afghanistan which spilled more blood than did the terrorist attack on twin-tower and Pentagon has rewritten the script for the "might is right" story, raking it up from the ashes of the two great wars. If the process were to end with the war in Afghanistan, the search for a peaceful and equitable global order could still be deemed to be on course. But this prospect seems blighted by the US' off-repeated resolve to take the war against terrorism beyond Afghanistan.

The scenario is one of 'broad-spectrum US domination' in prospect as a self-prescribed anti-dote to global terrorism while the seeds of terrorism are nurtured by the world's most powerful in some flash-points, of which, Palestine is the most glaring instance. The outgoing year therefore ended with an urgency felt for a more democratic decision-making process embedded in the UN system itself, so that the world body can play its due role in international affairs.

On the home front, last year marking the thirtieth birth anniversary of our national independence, there was a stock-taking of where we stood in terms of fulfilling the aspirations of our people. On the minus side has been the failure to maintain national unity which we had forged during the Liberation War in 1971 and resurrected through a popular upheaval against autocracy in 1990. Although investment in social sectors increased in fits and starts, the asymmetrical distribution of wealth continues chiefly because of corruption, rent-seeking and extortion being associated with the implementation of development programmes. Criminalisation of politics feeding on *mastani* (muscleman) and black money prospered as years went by. Public confidence in the police as the custodians of law diminished, something that was illustrated most graphically by lynching of suspected or real muggers in the streets of Dhaka. Oppression of the weak and the vulnerable continued.

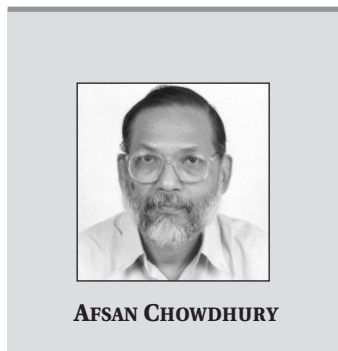
On the positive side, we saw food self-sufficiency, a greater public awareness of environmental concerns by virtue of their forceful articulation by civil society leaders and the resultant save the Osmani Uddyan campaign and save the Buriganga drive by demolishing illegal structures along the banks or into the river. The women's employment issues came to the fore revolving around the demand for their greater representation in parliament. Courts took cognisance of newspaper reports to order the release of illegally detained children and adolescents. Judicial activism was pronounced in the areas of public interest litigation and disposal of writs. These trends need to be furthered during the coming year.

Last year's election yielded a government with an overwhelming mandate to rule the country, by far the most powerful one since 1973. With the very emergence of such an inherently strong government, the law and order situation should have improved automatically. Unfortunately, this has not happened so far; partly because some of the initial signals were wrong but mostly owing to the fact that the oft-repeated resolve at the top to eradicate hooliganism is yet to percolate the lower tiers.

That said, we face the world better in the new year with an ambience of political conciliation replacing that of political confrontation.

Happy and prosperous new year to our readers and patrons!

## Simi's new year gift



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

SIMI killed herself last week. She killed herself when amongst other things, as many Muslims of Bangladesh or those who are camped outside in more comfortable residences in the western world are going great guns as to whether we are all Islamic enough or not. Whether the Khatib of Baitul Muqarram represents the majority voice of Bangladeshi Muslims or not. Whether wearing Hijab is a matter of choice or not? Simi had no chance to contemplate all these issues that concern the comfortable. She was too busy making a living. Ultimately all she could worry was about her death. On a certain day or night when life became too intolerable to behold and too difficult to breathe through, she ended it. She said she was taking her life. Some may say that we all had a hand in her murder. Some will say she was punished by the hand of God for breaking His rules. Wasn't she guilty of making a living? By not playing by the rules which society approves, she had to be killed. Conveniently, she agreed to be her own executioner.

WHAT about the young men who harassed her?

Death of women who step out of tune with society's band is accepted, even approved by us. For

us, especially the males, a woman is always the greatest threat to sexuality. Fragile male egos can't tolerate the idea of independent women. Sexuality can only be preserved through terms of domination alone, psychologists say. We feel sufficiently male only when we aren't threatened by women who dare question us and the ways we set out for them. Simi had broken some very basic rules and she paid a deadly price for that. She has been taught a lesson. We have won the fight against Simi. We have the right to celebrate.

"I have sinned, I have sinned. I am too poor to deserve the mercy of God. I had to look after a family, raise my children. Forgive me."

I realize that in her infinite world of icons, demons and saints and devils, I am probably no less than an archangel. My words are capable of terrifying her even if they had been told in half-jest. She doesn't even know that she could have asked me what I had done for her. But she doesn't even know that she can protest. I know I can get away with it all. I leave her weeping on the earth which will accept her only when she dies.

dance. They don't drink or do such other things at all but their behaviour would certainly not meet the approval of the Khatib who through the kind courtesy of the government has become a major approver of public morals. And many of our readers have written that the Khatib represents the views of the majority of the Bangladeshi Muslims. The Khatib should issue a fatwa on the issue now. Should we mourn Simi's death or should we approve it? Should we consider her actions as an act of repentance for not being properly 'religious' or were they

1971 war, a freedom fighter's girl friend was violated by the Pakistan army for having gone out with a Bengali officer. When the war was over and the city liberated, the FF returned back and killed his girl friend, accusing her of ethnic collaboration. She had stayed back as her family left for Pakistan. She was a non-Bengali woman who paid for her relationship with a Bengali. But she had been violated for that and ultimately killed because she had done the unacceptable. She had become a fallen woman.

parents had remonstrated, admonished her. Had she brought shame upon them? In all probability they were right. Her acts had forced her parents to receive a delegation of righteous neighbours and law enforcers who had demanded that she behave according to the accepted code, according to the mindset of the Khatibs who has spoken about shamelessness in society. The Khatib should win if we go by the response in society. As many write with confidence and almost a sense of relief that there is no scope of negotiation, debate or anything else for women on these matters. Large chunks of the holy book are quoted and they say the same. And behind those words, there are the supporters and enforcers. Perhaps, they will not be enforced in 'liberal' homes but encouragement no doubt comes from these homes who demand compliance. And there is no scope for disagreeing. Simi found that in the end.

I think I see Simi after death in the domain of the divine. She has done so many things wrong, both temporal and spiritual. She tried to be independent and that isn't socially sanctioned. She led a purdah free life -- as far as we can see from evidence from the media -- and she did work which we are not sure is sanctioned by religion. She had no option except to do what she did. It was a deserving death if we go by the logic of those who are now called abettors of her death.

IN her death, let's be charitable towards Simi. After all she gave us all a new year's gift. She left us a packet which contained her life. She gave it to us with her own hands.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

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I walked down the muddy lanes of a Bangladeshi village where women who worked for a living lived. We meet Lagejan Bewa who has worked without end for the last thirty years. She isn't the socially acceptable housewife who works as hard as life at home. She is a day labourer. She has no time even to remember if purdah has been observed or not. I ask her that. She looks at me with surprise.

"What is hijab?" I mention that she doesn't wear a blouse and her thin sari barely covers her body properly. That she moves in the world of men. I go on trying to locate her guilt for having violated our code. She appears overwhelmed by all the words. She takes time to sit down next to mud and dung heaps. Then she breaks down.

SIMI was an artist. She was a painter, she would design homes for the joy of celebrations and weddings. Somewhere along the way, she did something wrong. Her neighbours, her local policemen, the society which by extension exists in her environment as well, all turned against her. Simi had in fact committed many wrongs. Perhaps, she was guilty not just of social crimes but religious crimes as well. The people who demand that women should be in purdah should genuinely be happy that she decided to kill herself because Simi never covered herself from top to bottom in hijab or some other traditional Arab custom which many of us would like to adopt.

She designed alpana for weddings. In such weddings, people sing and young people sometimes

just the wanton act of an inconsiderate woman who didn't bother about her peers, her neighbours, not even her neighbourhood policemen.

We still don't know all the facts but it's possible that she was criticized for breaking various religious codes. She also did the terrible unthinkable. To finish her work, she stayed out late. She returned home after socially unsanctioned hours. If she was breaking so many rules and laws and customs, it's a wonder that she was allowed to take her life. Perhaps we would have served society more if instead of her, we had done the act ourselves.

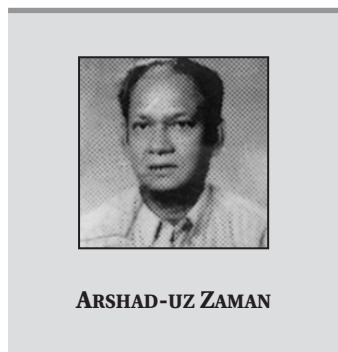
THE man in Bangladesh is a very interesting one. He is a strict believer in morality. During the

WHAT kind of discussions had taken place in that area when they talked of Simi? Did they see her as a human being, a hard working human being or someone who tried to make a living without accepting the conventional standards set by society? What kind of men were the men who teased her? Was her slap the final straw on their male back? Was her act too defiant for the bastions which hold society together?

We probably will never know but all we will know that the next time someone tries to be like Simi another hand, another fist will be raised and Simis will be cut down.

I have seen her suicide note. There is a particular part where she can't decide the tense of the word. I am "going" or "I have gone". Her

## Year-end thoughts



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

HAD it not been for the fact that we are in the beginning of a new century, I would not have any hesitation in naming Osama Bin Laden as the Man of the Century.

The event is too fresh in our memory to need detailed recapitulation. On 11 September 2001, four passenger jet planes flew from different airports of the United States of America. At 8.45 am two of those hijacked planes crashed in rapid succession against the Twin Towers of New York causing immediate explosion and massive fire. Within a very short time another hijacked plane crashed against a part of the sprawling Pentagon in Washington D.C. flattening a large part of the building. A fourth hijacked plane moving presumably towards the White House crashed in Pennsylvania, due to the fact that passengers and the crew had probably a fight with the hijackers.

All this happened in broad daylight and the US administration stood awe struck and paralyzed. Indeed President George W Bush had to move to a safe place so great was the confusion. For the first

time in her nearly three-century history US appeared vulnerable as never before. Her territory, her skies were no longer safe.

The US had to find a rapid response in order to reestablish her credibility, more so because she is the sole superpower trotting the planet. The response had to be swift and highly visible. The destruction of the Twin Towers had been witnessed throughout the world in broad daylight as the 110-

synchronies as they were put behind walls wearing veils head to toe.

The US demanded from the Afghan rulers that they hand over Bin Laden. Without waiting for a response the US called for a world wide coalition and went to fight Osama Bin Laden and his Taliban protectors. In this turn of events, Pakistan, which virtually guards the doors of Afghanistan, had to fully cooperate in the bombing out by the US of the Taliban, which

headed by Hamid Karzai. He is a Pushtoon, which is the largest ethnic tribe in the mosaic that is Afghanistan. So far the administration enjoys support from the leaders of various ethnic tribes and specially the support and assistance from the international community. Karzai has six months time to call the Loya Jirga, where the tribal elders will form a broadbased government. It goes without saying there are many pitfalls ahead of

retrograde and give a terrible name to Islam, the religion of peace.

India and Pakistan have been at loggerheads for the entire half century of their independent existence. The bone of contention is Kashmir, the state, which remains divided between the two successor states following their war in 1947-48. For a decade now India has been bled white by cross border terrorism from across Pakistan in Kashmir and India has carried

impoverished human beings. War clouds hovered over the subcontinent at the fag end of the year.

The half a century old conflict between the Arabs and the Jews do not appear any nearer the solution at the end of the year. We have to remember that Ariel Sharon of Israel was elected to guarantee safety of life of its citizens. The Israeli public tired of continued killings by the Palestinians and without any security of life, turned to hardliner Sharon, so that they could have the minimum safety. They turned away from former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who came tantalizingly close to a deal with his counterpart Palestinian President Yasser Arafat. Former US President Bill Clinton, who had devoted the entire eight years of presidency in finding a solution to the Palestine-Israel dispute, had to return empty handed because the two adversaries would not take the final step. Indeed during the two Democrat Presidents, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, there has been movement forward in the Arab-Israel conflict. The two Presidents had succeeded in establishing their even handed credentials. Judged by the performance of his past Republican Presidents, there is no room for optimism in the case of George W Bush.

Osama Bin Laden, the Man of the Century, singlehandedly, has succeeded what mighty states like the former Soviet Union failed to do. Bin Laden has for the first time thrown open the US skies. Fortress America is gone forever.

Arshad-Uz Zaman is a former Ambassador.

## THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

One happy fallout of the US campaign has been the destruction of the obnoxious regime called Taliban in Afghanistan. If anything the word came to signify all that is retrograde and give a terrible name to Islam, the religion of peace. India and Pakistan have been at loggerheads for the entire half century of their independent existence. The bone of contention is Kashmir, the state, which remains divided between the two successors following their war in 1947-48. The situation has heated up following terrorist attacks on Indian Parliament in New Delhi. Shriill voices are rising for military action against Pakistan.

story structures literally melted.

In her search for a target the US did not have to go very far. The honour fell on Osama Bin Laden, born in Saudi Arabia, who had established his credentials as a terrorist by masterminding the bombing of US Embassy in Kenya. He was a millionaire and changed addresses frequently finally finding a safe haven in Afghanistan. The Inter Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) of Pakistan had established the ultra fundamentalist regime called Taliban (meaning student) and Mullah Omar, the leader, gave free play to his "Islamising" fantasies. The women were the worst victims of his idio-

Pakistan, with the connivance of the US had created a decade ago. The British Government under the energetic leadership of Tony Blair extended its hand of help to the US effort in the shape of tanks, warplanes and soldiers. The other NATO allies did not stay far behind. Within weeks Afghanistan was bombed into pulp and the Taliban fighters meekly surrendered. There was carnage in Mazar-i-Sharif in the north of Afghanistan where Taliban fighters, mostly foreigners, were butchered without mercy.

Along with the war effort started the UN sponsored talks in Bonn, Germany and the result was the setting up of a new administration

Afghanistan.

To the attack on the US, the American response has been a declaration of war on terrorism. President Bush has repeatedly stated that the war on terrorism is going to be a long one. Inevitably the focus is on Iraq of Saddam Hussein, the handy whipping boy of the US since the Gulf War successfully managed by the father of the present US President, Bush senior.

One happy fallout of the US campaign has been the destruction of the obnoxious regime called Taliban in Afghanistan. If anything the word came to signify all that is

on a world wide campaign against Pakistan, in order to brand it a terrorist state. Now that the US has put terrorism on the top of her agenda, India finds that she has a perfect opportunity to bring into focus her campaign of Pakistani terrorism. The situation has heated up following terrorist attacks on Indian Parliament in New Delhi. This audacious attack stunned the Indian population and shrill voices are rising for military action against Pakistan. There has been troop movement on both sides and rumblings of cannons and guns. It is to be hoped that saner voices will prevail between these two nuclear neighbours, with millions of

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



### Faezul Huq's protest letter

I am very intrigued by the protest letter and the attendant threat by Mr. Huq to sue another letter writer Mr. Shawkat Hussain for accusing Huq for being a collaborator.

I am not sure if he is a collaborator or not but I seem to remember that the post-liberation government of Sk. Mujib took him in as early as December 1971. Isn't that what he is talking about when he mentions that two British MPs wrote to Mujib in June 1972? Will Mr. Huq please shed some light?

Ashraful Alam  
Lamatia, Dhaka

### Razakar: A true story

We are a Shaheed family from Barisal. My elder brother was a freedom fighter and on 5th December 1971 was caught by Razakars and killed. Razakars raped my three cousin sisters in Lalmonirhat and one of them was killed.

Razakars in Rangpur killed my uncle. We have three members from my father's family still missing (one young girl and two old men).

We are a family faced directly affected by the Liberation War. My

uncle and my father suffered a lot from all that. They were physiologically stigmatised and died after the Liberation War in 1974.

We know Sheikh Mujib and we know Golam Azam. We understand the politics of Bangladesh. And still we want the Razakars to be forgiven and we continuously would show them mercy. This is their punishment. We will suffer but would never stop loving Bangladesh.

Isaac Baroi, on-e-mail

### Nigerian syndrome

We often come across the word "Nigerian syndrome" related to the export of gas.

As a matter of fact this came about due to the political crisis which erupted in Nigeria in the 1970's leading to economic atrophy and political disaster. International reports allege that this was masterminded by a major international player in the Oil industry.

When the Nigerian government refused to respond to the SHELL proposal, a lot of things happened including political unrest. Various books and reports have said that the oil lobby worked overtime in organising a succession of putsch against the civil government.

After succeeding in their motive, SHELL started to extract millions of barrels of oil by palm-greasing those in power. But this wealth wasn't shared and Nigeria grew poorer by the way. The per capita income in the late 1970's was US \$1300, which has come down to US \$240 (approx.). This is a nutshell is the Nigerian Syndrome.

A similar kind of situation prevails in Myanmar in context to operation of a lucrative offshore Yadana gas field. This highly profitable gas field is owned and operated by an American oil company UNOCAL and Total a French oil company.

There are no less than 85,000 citations in the Internet on Shell's operation in Nigeria alone. In fact, Shell, Unocal and Total operate as a medley. The present military junta of Myanmar known as State Law and Order Restoration Committee, (SLORC) is one of the most repressive regimes of the world. Myanmar is totally ostracized by all most all counties, yet the military junta is running the country in full steam with financial support of oil companies while democracy is not in sight.

Interestingly, both these SHELL and UNOCAL companies are involved in the gas business in

Bangladesh, UNOCAL being in the forefront while SHELL is following. Most conservationists say that major oil companies not only put pressure but if government's refuse to do their bidding, force them to do so.

Having said this, whether we export gas or not, I believe the present government should device some sort of safety valve to check the activities of these IOC's. Further it indicates their interference in government policies and decision making. Hence, the government should not get carried away, cajoled, trapped or trade in lieu of something considering that the proactive predictions of the IOC's to be viable which will bring economic revolution benefiting the country.

Therefore, should the government go for export of gas, they should safeguard the stability of the nation. These will also assist the present party in power in any problem that could arise in future.

Billy I. Ahmed  
Dharmondi, Dhaka

### Islam is not seasonal

The notion that Islam requires certain deeds at certain time of the year is very myopic. I am not very much versed in Quran. But so far I

read in the translations, I do not see anything that requires women to cover their heads or not to wear a "bindi".

But, any way, these are petty trivia. In a society (Muslim Society as per Mr. Zakaria), where lies, violence, and bribery is rampant (even in the month of Ramadan), does it matter, whether the anchorwoman in a TV channel cover her head or not wear a "bindi"?

Please, let's not trivialise Islam with these trivia. And above all Islam is not seasonal.

Mohammad A. Zaman, M.D  
North Carolina, USA

### Purdah in Islam

In view of the raising controversy on the issue of purdah in Islam it is pertinent to reproduce two relevant Ayats from the Holy Quran, Surah Al-Ahzab (The Confederates Tribes) for those who are interested in the subject matter.

"Wives of the Prophet, you are not like other women. If you fear Allah, do not be too complaisant in your speech, lest the lecherous-hearted should lust after you. Show discretion in what you say. Stay in your homes and do not display your finery as women used to do in the days of ignorance (pre-Islamic days). Attend to your prayers, give

aims to the poor, and obey Allah and His Apostle." (Ayat 32).

"Prophet, enjoin your wives, your daughters and the wives of true believers to draw their veils close round them. That is more proper, so that they may be recognised and not molested. Allah is forgiving and merciful." (Ayat 59). Source: The Koran, Translated by N.J. Dawood.

Syed Waliullah  
Dhaka

### Purdah is compulsory

I'm writing in response to what a concerned citizen from Dallas has written who believes that Purdah is a woman's personal choice.

As mentioned by Mr. Sameer Ahmed Khan Mojlish, Purdah is compulsory and Mr. Ziaul Huda has verified this by including Quranic Verses in the letter published on December 26th which were Ayats 31 and 59 of Surah An-Nur and Al-Ahzab respectively. If we are true, pious Muslims, and believe in the Almighty Allah, then we do not have a personal choice regarding Purdah but to follow what has been laid down in the Holy Quran. You mentioned that "It is one's portion to pray, to fast, to give away portions of one's assets,....". No, we must pray five

times a day, fast during Ramadan, and give Zakat and perform Hajj when it becomes obligatory to us.

Almighty Allah has given us a brain to think and to decide what is right and wrong. As we are Muslims we must obey what Almighty Allah has asked us to do. What has been given in the Holy Quran is the right path that we are to follow. Now it is up to us about what we decide but remember we have to answer for everything to Him. We should not forget that what ever we do in this world is to please Almighty Allah and only Him.

I agree completely with Farah Islam's view that "Hijab bolsters a woman's liberty and freedom".

Tasneem  
Grade 11, Dhaka

### Release Shahrar Kabir

The Human Right Congress for Bangladesh (HRCBM-DFW) has been following with great concern the sequence of events following the arrest and detention of the renowned journalist, author and human right activist Mr. Shahrar Kabir. Authorities arrested Mr. Shahrar Kabir on November 22, 2001, when he returned to Bangladesh after visit-

ing West Bengal and witnessing and documenting the plight of the Bangladeshi Hindu minorities who had fled there following the October 1, 2001, election.

His actions and efforts have always been a vital force in creating awareness among the people, which help identify the anti-social and anti-liberation forces. Bangladesh needs courageous citizens and thinkers like Mr. Shahrar Kabir to protect life and liberty and guarantee freedom of expression against social injustice and to create communal harmony.

Peace and freedom loving people all over the world have expressed their grave concern on the well-being and security of Mr. Kabir.

We, on behalf of the HRCBM-DFW, urge the government authorities to immediately drop all charges against Mr. Shahrar Kabir, release him unconditionally and return all his documents, videos and personal properties confiscated at the time of arrest.

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