

Mahima's death becoming a political issue

It will hurt the cause of justice

MAHIMA may not have made it in life but death is focusing attention on her. Not enough people stood up to protect her or paid heed to the safety of women in general but things are sadly changing. Not only is the parliament set to discuss the issue but also the Leader of the Opposition has visited her family and called for the trial of the rapists and those who pushed Mahima to suicide. Mahima has reached the brink of her second death as her physical demise threatens to become a political issue.

Any death that adds political mileage and succeeds in embarrassing the other side always gets publicity in the cynical turf of Bangladesh. During the Awami League regime there were many deaths but no action was taken. If one looks at the way AL reacted to the Seema murder and made an issue of that, one reads politics rather than condemnation of a horrible crime.

On the other hand, the BNP has a track record of brushing everything under the carpet which is politically uncomfortable. It did so during its last innings in power and is doing so now. It hasn't even done a post-mortem of the violence in the post-polls period. What can happen at the parliament that couldn't happen in the police station if the authority's will is there?

What we are seeing is the politicisation of the event as both parties try to score political points. That the main culprit is a BNP activist has been reported in the media. The enthusiasm on both the sides seems to derail the main objective which is to arrest, try and punish the guilty.

It used to be once that the people felt they would be safe if they kept out of the way of partisan politics. However, as events are showing, the pursuit of justice becomes difficult if politics gets entangled in this, which dilutes the process of justice itself. Absurd as it may sound, when crime is clouded by politics and vice versa, both tend to become the same.

We insist that this be treated as a murder case with greater diligence because allegedly a party activist is involved and that it shouldn't be the subject for partisan slogans on the street. Mahima in death deserves better.

Another journalist gunned down

List lengthens of professional freedom killers

HARUN-UR-RASHID Khokon, a senior staff reporter of the prominent Khulna daily Purbanchal, has been murdered by gun-shot at point blank range. How many scribes will have to lay down their lives before their physical safety can be guaranteed by the state? The onus is on the state for the simple reason that the journalist-related murder cases have scarcely led to conviction being handed to the killers.

That a journalist can be assaulted, crippled or killed at will due to grudges held against his professional work that divulged truths about any individual or group activity means two things. First and foremost, the people's right to know, which a journalist worth his or her salt would cater for, has been impinged upon. To our mind, the people's right to know is another phraseology for freedom of speech and freedom of expression as embodied in the Constitution of Bangladesh. The second casualty has been Harun-ur-Rashid's right to a living through his choice of avocation.

He died because he was 'courageously reporting' the activities of an outlawed extremist and terrorist group in the southwestern parts of the country. Since he had received telephonic threats on his life, there was an alarm-clock ticking for him anyway. That he did not yield to the pressure speaks highly of his professional commitment; but if he shared the threats with his colleagues and the police, which he probably did, then one would like to know what precautions were taken to avert his death.

This is a murder case that should be easier to solve, because it most probably involved outlawed elements or their hirelings instead of terrorists with links to the ruling party or the principal opposition party. What we are basically stressing here is that the government ought to have the will to punish the murderers. Remember, the Jessore-based journalist Shamsur Rahman's murder? He was gunned down at his office on July 16, 2000. Fifteen out of the 25 accused were even arrested subsequently; but no punishment has since been meted out to the smuggler-hundi syndicates apparently responsible for his dastardly death.

We don't want to see a repeat of this in the case of Harun-ur-Rashid Khokon. The murdered Khulna scribe in the prime of his life at 44 and a father of two nice girls and a boy, has left his family in a sea of helplessness. Our heart goes out in sympathy for them. The culprits shouldn't escape justice.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

BANGLADESH, whether we like it or not, is the largest Least Developed Country (LDC) in the world in terms of population. The set criteria for inclusion in the LDC group, constituted in 1971, include per capita GNP levels, literacy standards and manufacturing capabilities. Currently 49 countries are members of the Group. As the Coordinator for the LDCs for more than two decades, Bangladesh has been actively articulating and espousing the cause of those countries at the UN and all other international fora. The LDCs, through their combined efforts, have achieved some success in getting special benefits and facilities such as General System of Preference (GSP) concessions, soft-term loans from World Bank and other financial bodies, partial debt relief, grant of more foreign aid. The three UN Conferences on LDCs, held in 1981, 1990 and 2001, have achieved some concrete, if not spectacular, results. However, pledges of donors do not still match their deeds and the Substantial New Programme of Action (SNPA), adopted more than a decade ago, remain largely unimplemented. But then, like all other international negotiations, the LDCs have to maintain pressure on the developed countries.

As a proud and self respecting nation, we obviously do not enjoy being a member of this underprivileged Group and it has always been our national endeavour to graduate out of this Group. However, the time is not yet right. The majority of our population still lives below the poverty line, our GNP income per capita is still abysmally low, our manufacturing capabilities are limited and our overall economic development process has been painfully slow. So before taking a decision to leave the LDC Group we should carefully examine the various pros and cons. The sole consideration should be whether it would serve our national interest to stay in or leave the Group. There is no room for vanity or arrogance, and we cannot pretend to be what we are not.

In the wake of 11 September's terrorist attacks in the US there are clear signs of global economic

slowdown and recessions. These ominous global developments have seriously affected all countries, but the LDCs have suffered the most. Bangladesh's economy is facing a grave crisis and it is absolutely essential to take remedial steps to come out of this crisis. Our export base is very limited and our export figures are falling. The figures released by our Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) last week indicate that our export earnings for the period July to December 2001 fell short of our export target by 16.45 per cent. For the same period last year, the shortfall was 11.47 per cent. No single export item could attain the target set for the period. Worst hit have been the readymade

garments (RMG) and knitwear industries, two of our principal export items, and thousands of garment factories have been closed and workers laid off. It is true that value-addition in our garments sector has still remained low, but we cannot ignore or downplay the social spin-offs of the garment industry, as vast majority of the workers are women who contribute immensely in poverty alleviation. Unemployment truly is the mother of vice, and women are the mothers of our future; their livelihood and employment must be secured.

Our exporters have very limited capital and need support and concessions from the Government to compete in the global market. It would be unwise on our part to throw away GSP and other concessions that our exporters are getting through Bangladesh's membership in the LDC Group. France, where I was posted as Bangladesh's Ambassador not too long ago, is one of the largest importers of our garments. The French importers have emphasized to us that the GSP facilities make our products competitive in their market and encourage them to buy from Bangladesh. It has been our persistent effort to enlarge this base of tariff concessions for our exports, and that's why we have been working for duty-free and quota-free access of our exports, particularly in the US and EU, two of our principal export zones. Unless we obtain special tariff facilities, our exports will face serious challenges from our competitors when the WTO regulations take full effect in a couple of years. As a coordinator of the LDCs, Bangladesh has been urging the leaders of US and EU countries to consider our request for duty-free and quota-free access of our exports to their countries. The immediate past Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited US and

duty-free and quota-free access to LDC products. We have also requested China, India and other major developing countries to grant duty-free access to our goods.

As regards exports to the US, the LDCs have so far made partial progress and Washington has granted duty-free and quota-free access to a limited number of countries, mostly from Africa and Caribbean region under the US Trade and Development Assistance (TDA) programme. Bangladesh has not been included in this group and we have been urging Washington to grant us this special privilege. US still remains Bangladesh's largest export base, but the share of our exports in America's overall import is

minimal. The US apparel and textile lobby, which opposes our request for the special privilege, would be greatly relieved if Bangladesh were to leave the LDC Group now. Similarly, some of our competitors among the developing countries would be quite pleased if we were to leave the LDC Group and be forced to compete with them without LDC benefits. It suits their purpose, but does it suit ours? We cannot take such a step at a time when the question of granting zero tariffs to LDC exports is on the high agenda of WTO -- the success of which would ensure greater benefits to Bangladesh than any other LDC.

In the past, Bangladesh and other LDCs received substantial benefits in the areas of obtaining soft-term loans from World Bank and other International financial institutions, and in the area of debt relief. Here the EU member countries, particularly the Nordic countries, have been most generous. We can expect similar benefits in the coming years. It is true that with the passage of time the share of foreign aid in our overall development budget has steadily declined. The Consortium

meetings, now called the Development Forum Meetings, have lost much of their importance. But we still need economic and technical support from our development partners to hasten the process of our economic development. I attended the last two Development Forum meetings in Paris and remain cautiously optimistic about the outcome of the next meeting to be held in Paris in April.

As the spokesperson of the Group, Bangladesh played a crucial role at the Third UN LDC conference held in Brussels last May. The Meeting adopted an ambitious plan of action calling for preferential market facilities, greater economic assistance, more foreign direct investment, and special emphasis on poverty alleviation programmes in LDCs. It is time for us to work for their full and early implementation to reap maximum benefit.

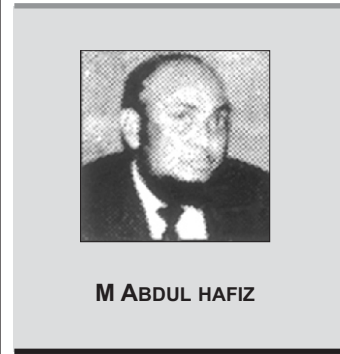
We also have to look at the Group's interests. Bangladesh's abandoning the LDC Group at this stage will hurt not only our own interest but also the Group's interests, particularly Asia's. The LDC Group currently includes 34 African, 9 Asian, 5 Pacific and 1 Caribbean state. The African members, because of their numerical advantage, are already getting separate and preferential treatment from the donors. For example, at the last G-8 Summit in Genoa, the developed countries had invited several leaders from Africa, but only Bangladesh from Asia and El Salvador from Central America. It is true that in terms of number, Africa has more LDCs than any other region, but in terms of population living below the poverty line, Asia outweighs the combined figures of all other continents. While the Africans are united, the Asians remain divided. If we now leave the LDC group, then Asia's group interest will suffer and the entire global assistance for

LDCs will be channeled towards Africa. Some African countries have been trying for years to dislodge Bangladesh from the LDC leadership. We must reassure the Africans that Bangladesh's leaving the Group would seriously jeopardize the collective bargaining position of the LDCs vis-à-vis developed and other developing countries. We should dispel any misgivings that the African LDCs may have against us.

Given this complex scenario, it would be unwise on our part to leave the LDC group at this crucial juncture when our domestic economic situation is passing through a severe crisis and, more importantly, when after years of persuasion, the donors are coming forward to help us. How can we now throw away all the benefits of membership in the LDC Group? Before taking a decision on an issue of such magnitude and national importance, there should be a thorough discussion among the policy makers in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Commerce, and Finance with our leading exporters and Chamber officials.

It is our exporters and entrepreneurs -- and the poor men and women who labour in those industries -- who would suffer most if we leave the LDC now. Eventually when we graduate out of the Group, as Botswana did not too long ago, it would be a triumph for the entire nation. But we still have miles to cover. Bangladesh, as the captain of the LDC ship, cannot abandon it when the shore is in sight. Nor can we throw away all the benefits derived from LDC membership when the country is passing through a grave economic crisis.

Palestinians' fortune: Plummet to a nadir



M ABDUL HAFIZ

IN reality, Israel seldom reconciled to a Palestinian state in its Biblical laws of 'Judea' and 'Samaria' but it was the United States that often intervened to save the idea from total collapse -- whether it was before and during the now-suspended Middle East peace process. Whereas it would be heartening for the Israelis to wish away the Palestinians from their midst, the Americans from their global perception of things had to maintain a balance of sorts in West Asia's Arab-Israeli equation. That crucial balance is now under threat with the US' clear messages in the recent weeks that its Middle East policy has moved inexorably against the Palestinians and particularly Yasser Arafat whom it itself pitchforked in 1993 from Tunis first to procure the PLO's crucial recognition to Israel and then to be the latter's negotiating partner in ensuing peace process. In a crude about-face Washington has now given its blessings to the Israeli humiliation of Arafat and Israeli attempts to do all but liquidate the Palestinian leader. There is nothing fundamentally new in US action. It has been protecting Israel even in the past in the worst of its actions

from international condemnation through the exercise of its veto power in the UNSC. But seldom had its cover-up been so blatant and naked, its language used against Arafat so harsh or its pro-Israeli bias so pronounced. Now there is not even a pretension of her evenhandedness in Arab-Israeli affair.

For the Palestinian people the last few months have been among the most harrowing in their recent history as Israel has been methodically going about dismantling the visible and symbolic edifices of the Palestinian state. For all practical purposes the Palestinian authority headed by Arafat is no longer considered by Tel Aviv as a negotiating partner. The Palestinian Authority has been reduced to a mockery, as the Israeli army attacks and occupies with impunity the areas supposed to be under the Palestinians. Israeli armoured vehicles pushed their way to within 30 metres of Arafat's own compound in Ramallah in the third week to January. More than half of the town is under Israeli occupation and Arafat himself is imprisoned in his compound by Israeli tanks and soldiers. (Recently

the area of his movement has been extended to include the city). Ironically, the Israeli authority took the measures just when Arafat prevailed upon the Hamas and Islamic Jihad to announce that they were discontinuing their suicide missions. It was time when in more than a year the scale of violence in occupied territory reached its lowest.

In an attempt to fulfil Sharon's long term aim to delegitimise Arafat's authority more atrocities of bewildering variety are carried out.

room for manoeuvre, but the onus is still on him to bring violence to an end.

The latest outburst of the US against Yasser Arafat follows the seizure of freighter allegedly smuggling an arms shipment from Iran for the Palestinians. Arafat not only denied the allegation that he had ordered the arms consignment, he also demanded an impartial international enquiry. The cache was learnt to have consisted of 50 tons of arms and ammunition. When compared

with the sophisticated deliveries of every kind of US armaments worth billions of dollars to Israel -- the aid that has turned Israel into a military monster, 'the arms shipment' for the Palestinians even if found true is utterly meaningless. Some months ago Secretary of State Colin Powell made a significant speech, in which he appeared to be taking into account the feedback from the Arab countries, that much of the anti-American terrorism was driven by America's backing of Israeli actions. He had rightly said that the Israeli occupation was a fundamental factor in Arab-Israeli bitterness. His speech sparked hope but there is no trace of those sentiments in the

events of past few weeks. Have all that changed due to just one incident -- the alleged arms smuggling? What else can be the explanation for the US' new policy of insulting Arafat and baring its fangs?

As for the Arabs' response to the plight of the Palestinians it is increasingly perfunctory. They are evasive and lacking also in traditional Arab empathy. Their evasiveness and inaction have now exceeded in disgrace and shamefulness the already abysmally low

Bush's 'gut instinct', that the EU as a whole is rendered useless for any independent policy persuasion in the region. The recent European declaration in support of the PA contains no measures of implementation in it.

But as the screw of Israeli repression turns, it does not only bring sufferings. According to Edward W Said, the American scholar of Palestinian descent, it also dialectically reveals new opportunities for Palestinian ingenuity. In other words, every turning of the screw of cruel collective punishment creates space for new kind of resistance of which suicide bombing is simply not a part any more. In the face of prevailing cruelty, the brute force and humiliation, the passivity, helpless anger and bitter fatalism are no answers. Strangely, the apparently overpowered Palestinians have already managed to unsettle the schemes of both the US and Israel not through the use of modern arms, particularly the aircraft and tanks, but by suicide bombing precisely because they have no weapons to fight the Israelis.

The mere fact that the people have come from outside to occupy their land and then try to destroy the by "disclose a frightened, closed off and horrifyingly insecure populace" badly in need of reassurance. At the same time no less ineffective are Israel's collective measures as one of their generals put it, "Stopping the resistance by besieging Palestinians is like trying to drink the sea with a spoon. It just doesn't work."

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PERSPECTIVES

The mere fact that the people have come from outside to occupy their land and then try to destroy them should be enough of a motivation to drive any one to take the extreme measure. That these measures are not without their dreadful effect is clear as fissures in Israeli society "disclose a frightened, closed off and horrifyingly insecure populace" badly in need of reassurance. At the same time no less ineffective are Israel's collective measures as one of their generals put it, "Stopping the resistance by besieging Palestinians is like trying to drink the sea with a spoon. It just doesn't work."

OPINION

Changing Hajee Md. Danesh Science & Technology University into an agricultural university

DR. MD. ABDUS SIDDIQUE

THE 7th Parliament in its concluding session held on 2/3 July 2001 passed an Act for establishing the Hajee Md. Danesh Science & Technology University in Dinajpur abolishing the Hajee Md. Danesh Agricultural College. The Agricultural College was established in 1988 utilizing the land and all other facilities of the Agricultural Training Institute located at Basher Hat area of Dinajpur.

Since the liberation of Bangladesh, governments formed by different political parties felt the need of boosting agricultural production for food self-sufficiency and economic development of the country. In order to achieve the goal, establishment of modern agricultural education and research systems in the country was felt necessary. In the pre-independence period (before 1971), there was one Agricultural University in Mymensingh and one Agricultural College in Dhaka. From time to time, different Commissions, like the Kudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission (1974), the National Education Commission (1997) and the National Agricultural

Commission (1999) recommended establishment of new Agricultural Universities in different regions of the country. In the mean time, two more Agricultural Colleges, one each in Dinajpur and Patuakhali, were established under the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) with academic affiliation of the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU). The National Education Commission (1997) strongly recommended that the Agricultural Colleges of Dhaka, Dinajpur and Patuakhali be converted into full-fledged Agricultural Universities.

During the tenure of the immediate past Government, ECNEC approved a joint project in 1998 for the establishment of six Science & Technology Universities in different parts of the country. However, there was no provision in the approved project for establishing any Science & Technology University abolishing any of the existing Agricultural Colleges. But, unfortunately, acts for establishing the "Hajee Md. Danesh Science & Technology University" and "Patuakhali Science & Technology University" abolishing the two Agricultural Colleges were passed by the Parliament. Whereas, the

same session of the parliament passed an act for establishing the "Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University" in the campus of the Bangladesh Agriculture College in Dhaka; which ultimately resulted in three Agricultural Universities in the country, all under the Dhaka Division.

Side-by-side, acts for the establishment of 10 other Science & Technology Universities in the country were passed in the same session of the parliament; but none of the medical, engineering or general college campuses was earmarked for any of these Universities. Whereas, the existing facilities, manpower and equipment of the BITs were much more suitable for establishing the Science & Technology Universities.

Obviously, this is not in line with the need of the country and recommendations of different National Education and Agricultural Policies of the country, and gives a clear indication of squeezing the development and extension of agricultural education in the country.

Bangladesh is predominantly an agricultural country, where most of the people live in the rural areas with 66 per cent of the total families being farm based. Most of the rural people are absolutely involved in farming for their livelihood. Nearly 87 per cent of the cultivable land of the country is being used for the production of crops. The contributions of agriculture, fisheries and livestock in the national GDP are, 19.4, 5.5 and 4.0 per cent, respectively, totaling about 29 per cent. For real development of this agriculture based country it is necessary to generate and utilize more and more improved, scientific and appropriate farming technologies. And for the purpose, it is essential to build up well trained manpower in the field of agricultural research, extension and education.

In the past, jute, tea and leather were the main export products of this country. But, these sectors could not develop further due to frequent changes in national policy and political decisions; rather, demonstrated a declining trend during the last few decades. In the recent past, sectors like, garments made a significant contribution in export earning with increasingly government support and patronization. But, the present situation indicates, how vulnerable such sectors may often

be. Similar is the situation with earning through manpower export. Considering the current and future contexts, it is urgently needed to give emphasis on local resources, value addition of agricultural products through improved and appropriate technologies, increasing the production of export oriented quality fresh and processed agricultural products and establishing more and more agro-based industries including fisheries and livestock, both for domestic and export markets. However, development in these sectors will need trained manpower and specialists in the respective fields. This justifies the need of establishing more and more Agricultural Universities in the country with multi-dimensional need-based course-curriculum.

I do not disagree with the need of developing academic facilities in the fields like, computer and information technology and business administration. In the recent days, more and more private Universities, Institutes and Centers are coming up with such courses. If the trend continues in the current rate, it will not take a long time to reach the point of saturation of demand. The private Uni-

versities and Institutes are obviously profit oriented. None of those are showing interest in offering courses on crop science, fisheries or live-stock science; as students for most of these courses come from rural resource-poor families. We all know the fate of private Agricultural Colleges of Bogra and Rajshahi. The only alternative is to establish public Universities and Institutes for offering these courses for a sustainable agro and socio-economic development of this country.

Considering the above stated situation, delegations and representations given to the Government by different professional and development organizations, views of the eminent agricultural scientists and experts and contents of the articles and news items published in different dailies, the Government should take immediate necessary steps for changing the Hajee Md. Danesh Science & Technology University into an Agricultural University through an amendment of the "Hajee Md. Danesh Science & Technology University" Act. This will also fulfil the long-felt need and demand of the people of the under-developed north-western part of the

country.

Now, I put forward the following suggestions for overcoming the unrest and crisis situation created concerning the "Hajee Md. Danesh Science & Technology University", as published recently in different national newspapers including the daily "Pratham Alo", "Ittefaque", "Korotoa" and "Dinkal".

1. The government should take an immediate decision for bringing necessary amendment of the "Hajee Md. Danesh Science & Technology University Act 2001", leading to change of the University into an Agricultural University.

2. Necessary amendment of the act should be made through the parliament as soon as possible. The government should be able to do that at the shortest possible time for greater interest of the country and people.

3. The Ministry of Education should take initiative and immediate necessary steps, in consultation with the Bangladesh

Agricultural University, for holding special examinations of 250 students enrolled by the Hajee Md. Danesh Science & Technology University. The concerned students and their parents will be tension-free

and feel comfort with such an arrangement. For example, such special examination of the students of East Pakistan Agricultural Institute, Dhaka having a completely different course-curriculum (B.Ag.) was conducted by the then East Pakistan Agricultural University in 1966 under certain unavoidable circumstances.

4. Until necessary amendment of the University Act could be accomplished, the respective authorities should immediately appoint a new Project Director, having adequate background in agricultural education, in order to remove stagnancy of the present situation and to take necessary steps towards development of the proposed Hajee Md. Danesh Agricultural University.

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