

## The Meghna disaster

How we have insulted the dead

NEARLY four hundred lives were lost in the biggest launch disaster in recent times. In a sense we are used to people dying in such accidents but the scale of the latest one has shocked us all. But has it taught us any lessons so that such disasters may be averted in the future. We have no reason to think so.

The first question that we would like to raise is was the launch fit for service? If so what was its allowable capacity? We still do not have any official report on how many passengers were loaded on that particular trip. That is so because no record is kept on the number of people who board a vessel by any of the operators of the more than two hundred launches that leave from the Sadarghat terminal everyday. In other words what is going on in our river transport sector is a situation of little government control and flouting of all rules and regulations that exist. It has been reported that the launch responsible for the latest disaster had structural defect, which may have caused it to sink faster than it would otherwise have in such weather conditions. It has also been suggested that its capacity to carry passengers was recently expanded beyond its original limit without proper authorisation and inspection.

Who will answer these questions for us? We see no sign of a thorough internal investigation by BIWTA that such a disaster calls for. We are back to business as usual and most of the launches are plying as they did before with overloaded passengers and literally unlimited amount of cargo on board. We seem to have learnt nothing and feel no need for doing so.

The second point we want to make is the way we handled the dead bodies once they were recovered from their watery grave. It showed our total disrespect for the dead and complete insensitivity regarding human remains. Couldn't we have provided some sort of chemicals for the decomposing bodies to prevent them from rotting further? Was there no way of covering them up in white clothes and thus giving the dead a semblance dignity before transporting them for mass burial? We knew very well that once the sunken boat is salvaged that hundreds of bodies would be recovered from it. Yet, we seem to have been totally unprepared for it. Will the minister, who at least had the decency to visit the spot, explain why he or his ministry took no step to handle the disaster while we waited for the launch to be recovered from the riverbed?

## A tribute to Kaifi Azmi

The man of great sensitivity is no more

WE are saddened by his death. And immeasurably so, because he died of prolonged illness. Heart ailment and asthma were a painful combination but he died in peace with the quietude of his forbearance.

Kaifi Azmi lived life to its productive, resplendent and rewarding fullness. An Urdu poet, film lyricist, social activist and a visionary for an egalitarian society, his works and thoughts spanned seven decades of his octogenarian longevity. He was child prodigy of a poet, his first published poem dating back to age eleven and receiving critical acclaim attesting to his in-born poetic qualities.

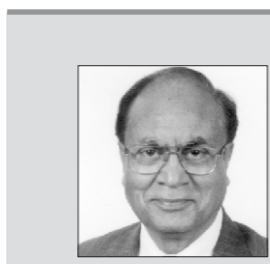
The mellifluous spell of his lyrics and the power of his words have a resonance that physical death cannot silence or draw a curtain on. He has been widely translated, especially in the Russian language. Our own poet Shamsur Rahman has rendered a Kaifi poem in Bangla under the title *Merir Putra* (Son of Mary) where imageries like *tales without number, panting youth, distress sale of a land leaving me a slave and bohemian am I after centuries* find place to give a feel of Azmi's poetic tone and temper. He was urbane, yet had the closest of rapport and communion with the common man. The shifts in Indian political and economic lives notwithstanding, he retained his belief in a socialist future for India till his tomb-time.

In his death, India has lost a powerful voice against communalism and sectarianism at an hour of her need.

He was a legend in his life-time with all the awards he received for his extraordinary works. And he now lives on as a beacon of humanism and a tower of strength for the cause of sanity in human societies.

We deeply mourn his death and send our condolences to the members of his bereaved family, some of whom bear his torch carving an extra niche to his cherished memory as an icon of lyrics in the Indian literary firmament. We also express our sorrows to the government and people of India.

# Role of Bangladesh in maintaining world peace



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

I still recall we had telephone conversations -- more than once -- in 1994 and you were good enough to accept my request." This was the beginning of conversation of President Bill Clinton of America, following exchange of greetings, at his meeting with the then Leader of Opposition, Begum Khaleda Zia, during his visit to Dhaka in early 2000. Begum Zia paused for a moment, nodded her head and smilingly replied, "Of course, I remember it well." "I am grateful, you accepted my request," President's eyes twinkled.

The occasion referred to by the President was when he had called Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia from Washington in 1994 and sought her country's participation to the UN peacekeeping operation in Haiti. President of the United States of America, richest and mightiest leader of the unipolar world, does not telephone with a request to the leader of one of the least resourceful countries of the world, unless the subject matter is of paramount importance. Here lies the signifi-

cance of the UN peacekeeping operations and priority the international community attaches to it. The primary responsibility of preservation and promotion of international peace and security rests with the United Nations, as the principal and permanent forum of the international community. The UN Charter has devolved this responsibility entirely on one of its five principal organs, the Security Council. The Security Council,

York I was woken up at 6 o'clock in the morning by my colleague, Rafeuddin Ahmed, also a Second Secretary (recently retired as Under Secretary General of the United Nations), to inform that the Indian troops had violated international frontiers and attacked Pakistan so that we, the diplomatic officers, could assemble promptly and be present with the Ambassador with a written complaint at the Security Council sharp at 8 am. So speed

the top place among the troops contributing countries to the UN within a short period of time. Bangladesh till last year participated in 25 UN peacekeeping missions. Currently, with 6020 peacekeepers deployed in 11 out of the total 15 ongoing missions, Bangladesh enjoys the enviable status of being the largest troops carrying country in the UN peacekeeping operations. At present Bangladeshi peace-keeping forces are composed of

during the Kuwaiti war in 1990-91. But all these were not accomplished without a price. Bangladesh had to pay it also. In these operations, Bangladesh so far lost 18 peacekeepers 14 from the Armed Forces and four from the Police who died in action. Besides, 35 sustained injury. The 14 missions successfully completed by Bangladesh are UNIMOG (Iraq 1988-90), UNTAG (Namibia 1989-90), UNTAC-UNMLT (Cambodia 1992-93),

enhance its scope and capacity to make it a regional training centre. The United Nations does not have any permanent military or police force. The Security Council is entrusted with the responsibility of raising peacekeeping forces from among member states as and when necessary. It devises the mandate, provides broad guidelines and secures financing from among member states for peacekeeping operations. Strict impartiality and non use of force, except in self-defense, are among the cardinal principles of peacekeeping operation. Though there is no explicit provision in the UN Charter on peacekeeping, its operations have become a crucial instrument at the disposal of the international community to advance its primary goal to maintain international peace and security. In recent years, peacekeeping operations and peacekeepers, often referred to as "blue helmets" have become the centre piece and focus of UN activities.

It is a matter of great pride and satisfaction that Bangladesh has been able to provide so many contingents of blue helmets. The noble role played by Bangladesh in this field has not only earned for itself universal acclaim, but also substantial funds in foreign exchange by way of earnings for providing officers, troops, vehicles and equipment for peacekeeping operations. This has, indeed, enabled Bangladesh to enhance its image in the international community substantially.

M M Rezaul Karim, a former Ambassador, is a Member of BNP's Advisory Council.

## CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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unlike other consultative bodies, is in permanent session and meets at a short notice, to debate conflicts and contentious issues threatening peace among member states or in any region with a view to contain, abate and, if possible, to resolve those. Such an issue can be raised in the Security Council by a member state or by the Secretary General whenever, in their opinion, a situation arose that threatened world peace. The Council tries first to urge the contending parties to exercise maximum restraint, seek to diffuse tension and work for a solution initially as a preventing measure. I recalled how in 1965 in New

and dexterity required to meet an emergent situation is an important characteristic of the 15-member Security Council. This applies also to the UN peacekeeping operations. Bound by its constitutional commitment to the cause of international peace and security and to the principles and purpose of the United Nations Charter, Bangladesh has always responded positively to UN's call for restoration, maintenance and strengthening of peace and stability worldwide. The fact that Bangladesh's participation in UN peacekeeping missions started only in 1988 with UNIMOG in Iraq, could not stand in the way of her securing

military, police, including women police, and civilian personnel. In addition to the 5,813 troops from Bangladesh, drawn mostly from the Army and some from the Navy and the Air Force, there are 198 civilian police and eight civilian judicial and administrative personnel. Bangladesh has successfully completed participation in 14 UN missions. In addition to the present contingent of over 6,000 troops engaged in 11 operations, more than 17,000 troops and 970 civilians had already served in 14 completed missions. It may be noted that 2,193 soldiers from the Bangladesh Army took part in the "Operation Desert Shield"

UNSOM-II (Somalia-1992-94), ONUMOG (Mozambique-1992-94), ONUMUR (Uganda/Rwanda 1993-94), UNAMIR (Rwanda 1993-95), UNPROFOR (Yugoslavia 1992-95), UNAVLM-III (Angola-1991-99), UNMIH/JUNF (Haiti-1994-96), UNSMA (Afghanistan), UNTAES (East Slovenia), UNPREDEP (Macedonia) and UNMOI (Tajikistan). In recognition of the need and reputation earned by Bangladesh, Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan inaugurated the newly established full-fledged peacekeeping training centre at Rajendrapur near Dhaka last year. Steps are being taken to

## OPINION

# Democracy needs more responsible conduct

A. K. FAEZUL HUQ

THREE most successful and outstanding general elections held within the span of twelve years, followed by peaceful transfer of power by the caretaker governments on each occasion has certainly left an indelible mark in our political arena which shall ultimately become a part of our history; yet for ostensible reasons, a faint grumbling seems to have been surfacing here and there, as people have already started asking a very pertinent question: Are we really fit for democracy? And to be honest, you can't really blame them, because our conception and interpretation of democracy, in most of the cases, is quite amusing and rather selfish -- all rights and privileges with no corresponding duties or responsibilities. In short, do as you like. However, to discuss a topic as sensitive and intense as the one above, one probably needs strong nerves; because when you touch a sensitive chord you must be prepared for the eventualities also.

Reverting to our topic, as we proceed onwards, it is worth mentioning here that the once casual public murmuring seems to be gaining ground as each day passes. What does it signify anyway? Have we suddenly lost faith in all our potentialities or is it a pent-up resentment of the masses against the majority of our politicians, who have by now earned for themselves an ill reputation of letting them down, which in turn is slyly taking its toll in the form of 'democracy bashing'? The answer perhaps is both a 'yes' and a 'no'; yet the hard realities of life ought to be faced squarely if we are to march ahead and sincerely wish democracy to take a permanent and firm footing in our country; because without a true democratic set-up, stagnation at all levels will automatically manifest itself and no progress worth its name will ultimately be possible.

To be very frank, as a new nation, striving hard to establish democracy, there is obviously no room or scope for us to be complacent at any stage, howsoever much our

achievements may indicate, since the establishment of democracy is an unending process which demands adjustments and reassessment, periodically. Someone, with a note of caution, had therefore most aptly said that, "the most serious threat to democracy is the notion that it has already been achieved." [Anonymous]. And that applies to us in full. In our case, however, the 'sense of achievement', of which we have just mentioned above, is not only prominent (no matter what shape or state our democracy is in), but a queer and rather disquieting notion exists, that visualizes democracy as some sort of a product, which has been stored somewhere, within the reach of our benevolent politicians, who at regular intervals generously keep

expressed will of people through regular and scrupulous methods, with consensus on major national issues, and the presence of morality. Indeed a tough calling by all means, but then that is what democracy is; that is what democracy demands.

We may now settle down quietly to find out, by applying the above formula, as to how far democracy has been achieved in our case and whether we are truly fit for it. Conclusions may eventually be drawn, based not on assumptions or emotion, but by taking into account the hard realities, which may or may not be all that soothing, after all. Nonetheless, at all times, it must be clearly borne in mind that democracy needs to be established, not in one go, but in phases, through

Unfortunately, in our case, it is so appropriate today when we find, surprisingly, wisdom to be so rare and pride unusually abundant! And the problem is further compounded when tolerance, even the minimum that one can think of or expects, is conspicuously missing. Our leaders who are supposed to lead us at all times, are often led by irresponsible and non-committed mobs, who have neither any goal nor objective. They resemble a drifting raft in a vast sea, which may or may not reach the shore eventually. In this regard, Vaclav Havel, once remarked that, "The best government in the world, the best parliament and the best President, cannot achieve much on their own." "Freedom and democracy", he said, "include participation and therefore

graphs, democracy demands high standards, responsibility, active participation and a reasonable degree of sacrifice. It is invariably a two-way traffic, with a set speed and earmarked lanes that lead us safely to our ultimate goal if discipline is adhered to and the rules of the game are seriously followed at all levels and times. Establishment of democracy also demands peace and tranquillity and it is here that the government of the day and the major opposition parties combined can do a lot and deliver the goods. Democracy can never thrive nor can be established in an atmosphere laden with the dark clouds of terrorism or confrontation as Mahatma Gandhi once said: "The spirit of democracy cannot be established in the midst of terrorism, whether

ers are always found to be at 'daggers drawn' and it appears to be the only thing that we have inherited from our great grand ancestors, some of whom might have been great warriors, who knows!

Today, therefore, it is for us to judge as to where we really stand. Let us frankly ask ourselves: Do we have respect for human rights, and freedom of speech? Do we possess a reasonable degree of tolerance? Is our electorate vigilant and active? Do we have a truly free and responsible press and, above all, an enthusiastically participating population? What is the status of our parliament, our judiciary and what is the limit of powers that our executive exercises? If the answers to the above queries are mostly in the negative or discouraging, the message should be clear. It would be useless to blame democracy and say that it does not work or would not work, because Alexander Woolcott had once beautifully remarked: "I am tired of hearing it that democracy doesn't work. Of course it doesn't work. We are supposed to work for it." That probably sounds better and indicates a ray of hope once again; because even if we have failed in the past to achieve significantly as a civilized polity, there may be still some scope left for amends in the future, notwithstanding the present scenario which may appear to be quite dismal and appalling. It certainly would, therefore, depend upon our collective will and attitudes, as has happened to many countries and nations who have proved their critics wrong by establishing a sound democratic order after a long and arduous journey, only because their determination was solid like a rock. Let us therefore, not lose faith in ourselves, since as a nation there is nothing which the other humans can achieve that we cannot! And that is no big boasting, because we have proved that many a time in the past. Haven't we?

AK Faezul Huq is a lawyer.

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on distributing it (like alms) to the nation in whatever quantum and form they may deem it fit! Perhaps there lies our weakness, our frustration and our inability to come out of the darkness, or shall we say, a dark alley; because democracy certainly is not a product, rather it is a unique system based on certain institutions and a set of principles.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the high standards set in by democratic societies all over, demands a lot from those who crave for it. For instance, the minimum prerequisites for establishment of a true democratic order are: a sense of tolerance, a free and responsible press; an effective parliament, (not the one that suffers from perpetual quorum crisis and discusses useless, time wasting and unproductive issues and subjects), a truly independent judiciary and a responsible executive; vigilant, enlightened, reasonably educated and a participating citizenry (not mere passers-by), freedom of expression, presence of individual liberty/human rights, periodic self criticism and reassessment, unhindered and

development of permanent democratic institutions to which our commitment should be explicit and honest; because without solid democratic institutions, democracy can never stand on its feet and in all probability would crumble down today or tomorrow.

Perhaps, one of the most appropriate characterization of democracy was spelled out by President Jimmy Carter in a landmark speech to the Indian Parliament in 1978 when he had said, "The experience of democracy is like the experience of life itself -- always changing, infinite in its variety, sometimes turbulent and all the more valuable for having been tested by adversity." President Carter had rightly compared democracy with life itself and had pointed out the stark similarities. But way back in 1871, a gentleman named H.F.Amiel, for the first time brought in two important points associated with democratic rights. He said, "I do not deny the rights of democracy, but I have no illusions as to the uses that will be made of those rights so long as wisdom is rare and pride abundant."

responsibility from all of us". Abbie Hoffman went a step further to say that, "Democracy is not something you believe in or a place to hang your hat, but it is something you do. You participate. If you stop doing it, democracy crumbles." And Louis L'Amour summed up beautifully by saying, "To make democracy work, we must be a nation of participants, not simply observers. One who does not vote has no right to complain."

That obviously drags us to a rather dismal scenario pertaining to the recently concluded Corporation polls where people's participation, for whatever reason one may argue, was anything but satisfactory; which once again painfully reminds us of our failure to rise above narrow and selfish interests, yet shamelessly, (equipped with reasons and excuses galore to outwit each other and) passing on the blame as far as possible on the shoulders of our opponents. With that sense of spirit prevailing, I am afraid, democracy will always remain a distant star and a far cry; because as we have observed in the preceding para-

governmental or popular."

However, despite all odds and an uneven surface at times, the charms and advantages of democracy cannot be ignored as all great men from time immemorial have pointed out. The all time great Greek philosopher Plato once remarked that "democracy is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike." US President, Harry S. Truman had said that, "no government is perfect, but one of the chief virtues of a democracy, however, is that its defects are always visible and under democratic processes can be pointed out and corrected." John Dewey later pointed out one of the main characteristics of true democracy when he said that, "the method of democracy is to bring conflicts into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged." However, after going through all these words of wisdom, I am still somewhat confused, as to which category do we belong, since our leading lead-

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

## Solving traffic problem

The proposal of Engr. Mohammad Masud Reza for solving Dhaka City's traffic problem by constructing an underground metro rail line of about 35 km in about two years at a cost of Tk 2500 crore (May 7). "Underground metro rail can ease traffic congestion sounded very interesting and encouraging. Referring to such metro rail service in Kolkata Mr. Masud said since the soil condition, climate and standard of living of Kolkata was very much similar to Dhaka's it would be very easy to install such rail line in Dhaka also.

But disappointingly enough, according to a reliable source the chief engineer of Kolkata metro line project expressed great dissatisfaction over it. He said that under the geological and climatic conditions of Kolkata such metro rails were not practicable. Its construction and maintenance costs went up far higher than the estimates. They therefore stopped making any further addition to the rail line. Would Mr. Masud throw some more light on this matter? I would suggest Mr. Masud should visit Kolkata metro line and speak to its authority first before embarking on such a big project.

**M. Myser Ali**  
*Banani, Dhaka*

**Changing fiscal year**  
It has been reported that our Finance Minister has proposed that the financial year (July-June) could be changed to, say to a January-December period in view of the fact that when release of money for development work starts, monsoon sets in. The idea of a change is commendable.

Why not introduce the new fiscal year on April-March as was in our country before 1.7.1959. This would be beneficial for development work as well. Moreover, this will be closer to the Bengali Calendar year.  
**SMS Zaman**  
*Dhaka*

**DCC ward commissioners**  
The unreluctance of the elected commissioners at their swearing in was amusing. It is a reflection of the uncouth class of people that the

BNP has nominated to run our cities. As far as I can recall, so far BNP has not given any explanations nor bothered to rebut the continued accusations of nominating murderers and extortionists for these posts.

That Mannan Bhuiyan and Sadek Hossain Khoka were present at the swearing in makes them accomplices in the setting up of a BNP supported organised crime racket through the various city wards.

I would appreciate it, if *The Daily Star* continues to give coverage of the various antics of our boorish commissioners in the months to come. They are sure to be amusing.  
**Don Quixote**  
*Dhaka*

**Minority issue**  
I wonder what persuades people of one religious group who are majority in a country to become spokesmen of the religious minority living in that country!

I want to repeat (in several articles in Bangla I wrote) that only the minority communities know how well they are either in Bangladesh, or India or elsewhere. I strongly

disapprove the Muslims of Bangladesh giving verdict on the condition of the religious and ethnic minority groups. Let them speak for themselves and about themselves. We should help them to speak out the truth, of course, not in a 'planned stage-show' but in a safe secured normal environment and ensure that they can survive after saying the truth. Let us work towards that end.  
**Momtaz Latif**  
*Dhaka*

**Troubled by terrorism**  
In a world troubled by terrorism, the conflict is often seen as being caused by religion, even though both sides often have no idea what the others' religion is about! (i.e. Islam vs Christianity).

Many are frightened by the others' religion, purely because they are unaware of what it teaches. I am a Christian, but have read the Quran and lived with a Muslim girl, and would invite all people to lay aside prejudice and read both for themselves. This gives a first hand understanding of what it teaches for oneself, instead of listening to all

the different views about it. If any of your readers would like a copy of a Bible reading chart, I would be happy to send them a free copy of it (can email me annette\_henriksen@yahoo.com or write to PO Box 184, Belmont 2280 NSW Australia).  
**Annette Henriksen**  
*Australia*

**"A ray of hope"**  
I fully agree with the idea proposed by Mr. Rezaul Karim (May 7). It is really heartening to read the report in *The Daily Star* about the success of Dr. Khaleque, a Scientist of Bangladesh. I congratulate Dr. Khaleque for his achievement and request:

(i) A follow-up story with more details.  
(ii) Arranging a reception of Dr. Khaleque on behalf of *The Daily Star*. In this connection may I request you to create a platform in *The Daily Star* so that such talents are rewarded every year on a regular basis?

In our country there are so many organisations rewarding and recognising many people of different

arena but there is no one to recognise scientific achievements which may lead the country to economic emancipation.

**J Kobir**  
*Mirpur, Dhaka*

**Boost for export**  
That the Finance Minister backed out of his threat to stop textile subsidies is not at all surprising. Nor do I find it surprising that he's gone about raising the subsidies and benefits in a whole host of industries except of course the most important (and threatened) one, the RMG industry.

I do find it astonishing that he has no idea what it will cost. Is this how the Finance Ministry takes his decisions? Without knowing how much it will cost or how it will be paid for? And after policies like this he complains about the IMF and the WB?

The whole policy also seems like its being set up to arrange kickbacks all through the system. In the case of unresolved textile sector subsidies, he's proposing a team from the yet unnamed audit firm, the central bank and customs to inspect and approve what is to be sanctioned.

Either my Finance Minister is a sweet naive man or there's something rotten going on.  
**Bewouff**  
*Dhaka*

**The Language of politics: BNP style**  
Prime Minister Khaleda Zia had issued a message on the occasion of our Independence Day on the 26<sup>th</sup> March, which was published in *The Daily Star* on March 25. In the rather lengthy message she never mentioned 'Pakistan' even once. It is as if, we had waged the Liberation War against a faceless and nameless enemy! Needless to say, she did not mention the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman either in that message.

It will be noticed that whenever BNP leaders speak of Awami Leaders they do not mention their names. They merely talk of 'opposition' leaders. Even when they seem to urge the Awami Leaguers to join the parliament, they refer to them as 'opposition' MPs. This clearly shows their lack of sincerity in coming to terms with the main opposition party, namely, Awami League.

Recent developments in the

political arena clearly demonstrate such attitude of the Ruling Alliance towards Awami League. The latter is not even allowed to hold outdoor meetings with prior permission!  
**Abul Mohsin**  
*Siddheswari, Dhaka*

**Mobile phone and police**

Police officers under the rank of ASP are not permitted to use cell phones. This is one among many discriminating actions towards the lower ranked police officials. The high-ranking police officers suspend and "close" the O/C of their subordinates according to their wish. I do not know who they are to ban cell phones. The Police Act of 1861 has made permanent division between the "senior" and the subordinates which is insulting. The ban must be withdrawn and the field level officers should be provided with mobile phones free of cost by the government.  
**Nazmur Rahman**  
*Sub-inspector of police*  
*Brahmanbaria*