

WE REMEMBER, WE MOURN

August 15: Events, atrocity, consequences

SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

WE mourn the tragedy, as we ought to. The assassins may not have been aware of what they were doing, but their dastardly action has put the people of Bangladesh to shame and driven the country backwards. That the murderers have not yet been brought to book adds to that sense of shame a nagging feeling of guilt. A people with a guilty conscience cannot make progress in the proper manner.

The events of August 15, 1975 were sudden, and unbelievably cruel and gruesome. The appearance is much too clear to need recapturing. But there was, certainly, a perception behind what had happened as much as there were the inevitable consequences of that mid-night tragedy, both of which are well worth recapitulating.

Obviously, the most important question is how does one account for the happenings? The answer, to put it rather summarily and bluntly, would be that it was due, more than anything else, to the failure of leadership -- both within the government and outside, in the opposition. The governmental failure had occurred in two important respects -- (a) meeting the expectations of the people, which were high; and (b) keeping the elements around the ruling party under control.

However, this in no way should be construed as watering down any of the views expressed through the opening remarks in the write-up.

The struggle for independence was nationalist in character, and it is not unusual for nationalist leadership to fumble and fail while trying to satisfy the aspirations which it had roused in the people who constituted the very strength of the struggle itself. It had happened in the state created in 1947. Mohammad Ali Jinnah was supposed to be in control but he was unable to control those around him -- in the party as well as in civil and military bureaucracy. Jinnah died in neglect, and the person next in command, Liaquat Ali Khan was brutally removed through a murderous conspiracy hatched up by the army. The second failure of the Pakistani leadership lay in its inability to respond to the expectations of the Bengalis of East Pakistan, who not only constituted 56 per cent of the population but had also acted decisively in bringing the Pakistani state into existence. Jinnah himself had displayed a stone-like insensitiveness to the demands of the East Pakistanis by making, soon after his becoming the

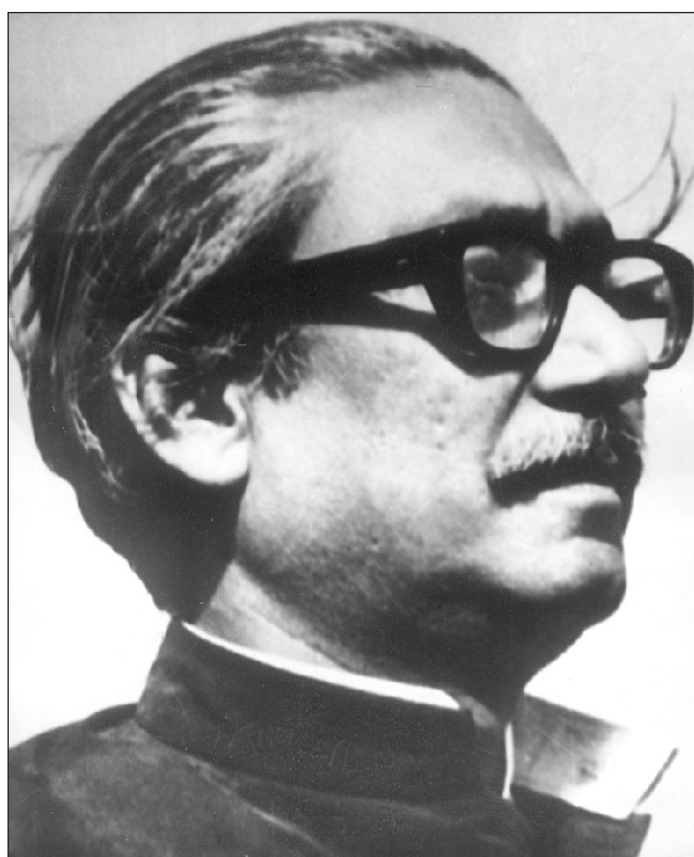
The events of August 15, 1975 were sudden, and unbelievably cruel and gruesome. The appearance is much too clear to need recapturing... Then there is the very important question of trust in the system of justice itself. If criminals of such atrocious nature as perpetrators of August 15 mayhem can get away with it, confidence in the system is sure to suffer, and suffered it has, indeed.

Governor General of Pakistan, the infamous declaration that Urdu and Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan.

Pakistan broke down when East Pakistan rose in revolt. But the new state of Bangladesh that was set up through enormous hardship and sacrifice did not keep the promise of becoming what it had said it would be. The suffering of the people that went into the making of the state of Bangladesh was much greater than that endured for the establishment of Pakistan. Consequently, the expectations were higher. When the leadership began to fail them after 1971 the disappointment was grave and great. The state was expected to be different, but with every alteration it made it looked sadly, more like the one the people had discarded and fought against. The leadership was unable to lead.

The failure of leadership was evident in many areas, the Awami League, which was in charge of the Liberation War, was not prepared for that undertaking. Indeed the war was forced upon the party by the barbarity of the Pakistani hordes. The bewildered leadership did not know what to do. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested and his lieutenants escaped into hospitable India, without carrying with them any well-thought-out programme of action. The resistance movement that grew up was spontaneous as it was unplanned, and functioned in direct response to the genocide perpetrated by the Pakistani armed forces.

After liberation Mujib assumed full state power as the Prime Minister; he was destined to be one, the question was whether he would hold that position as the chief executive of an undivided Pakistan or of an independent Bangladesh. That question was answered. But, not insignificantly, he was unable to keep his party together, organically. He dropped Tajuddin Ahmed from his cabinet. Tajuddin used to be the man closest to him and was at the centre of 9-month liberation war during Mujib's absence; and yet he was found unacceptable in the new dispensation of power-relationship. Some of the so-called Young Turks in the party became disgruntled in



not being able to get as close to Mujib as the members of the faction led by Sheikh Moni did, and they organised themselves into a party which they meaningfully called the Nationalist Socialist Party (JSD). Clearly, they were seeking to put nationalism and socialism together, perhaps because they thought that nationalism alone would not do inasmuch as it had already been over-used by the Awami League and that socialism would be useful in attracting the restless youth; and in fact, the combining of nationalism and socialism proved very useful indeed.

The lack of vision in the leadership had incapacitated it from giving the people a positive sense of direction.

The Awami League was born as the party in opposition, and had remained so during the pre-liberation period. When it became

the government party it discovered, to its discomfiture, that it did not have the experience and the wisdom to wield state power satisfactorily. It was unable to put the Pakistani collaborators to trial and allowed the war criminals to be repatriated through India, while the Biharis continued to stay in the country despite their impatience to leave. On the economic front, smuggling and black marketing became more rampant than ever before. The Rakshi Bahini and the Lal Bahini created terror among the people. Finally, there was the famine in 1974 in which thousands perished. The stark mistakes and failures stared the government in the face and in bewilderment Sheikh Mujib foisted on the country the one-party system of governance. He who had always sworn by the parliamentary form of democracy abandoned his principles and became

the President of the state.

Sheikh Mujib was great. He was a leader with unique charisma and remarkable courage. But his vision was unclear. There is no denying that when he introduced the one-party system he was a leader who had lost his bearings. His speech in the Parliament on that occasion was a long monologue of disjointed ideas, very different from his famous speech on March 7, 1971. The March speech was, of course, his masterpiece. And in less than three weeks' time the nation found itself engaged in a total war of liberation. In his speech, Mujib had asked the people to fight with whatever they had; but the people had very little in terms of weaponry to fight the organised armed forces of the state backed by foreign support. Mujib had the premonition that he might not be available to give orders; and that premonition did really come true.

Mujib's absence from the actual war created in him a psychological block. What is also tragic is that he was unable to rise significantly above the partisan. The alienation of the leadership from the people began as soon as the new state had come into existence, and it continued to grow with increasing rapidity. So much so that when the tragedy of August 15 occurred the Awami League found itself totally lost.

The governmental leadership had failed; so had the opposition leadership. A viable alternative leadership could have come only from the left. But the leftists were in complete disarray, some of them ideologically, most of them both ideologically and organisationally; the left had acted in the past as the vanguard of people's movements, including that of 1952; they had spoken of the necessity of the independence of East Pakistan long before the nationalists. But they were not united. There were the softliners and the hardliners. The softliners had chosen to toe the government line, and had gone to the extent of joining the one-party dispensation; the hardliners had gone underground, most of them having acted rather foolishly during the liberation war. The JSD (the Nationalist Socialist Party) made

many noises and gestures, but was, in the main, an extension of the Awami League itself.

The consequences of the August tragedy are reflected nowhere more clearly than in the constitutional changes that Ziaur Rahman introduced after he had taken over state power. Secularism, which was one of the fundamental state principles, was replaced by "full faith in the Almighty Allah." Socialism, another state principle, became the rhetorical and innocuous 'social justice.' Democracy remained, but as subsequent events displayed, only in name and not in practice. The state had, in reality, taken a turn towards capitalism under bureaucratic tutelage, both ideologically and practically. That was what the state was like during the Pakistani days and also at the time of British rule.

After the establishment of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was obliged to speak of socialism in deference to the will of the people as also to lean towards the Indo-Soviet power axis in view of the help received from it in achieving independence. With his fall that obligation ceased to be operative.

August 15, 1975 was, therefore, a decisive point in the history of the new state. It was tragic for the leadership that fell and sad for the country as a whole. The assassins had their own personal axes to grind, but they were also acting as instruments in the hands of much greater forces than they were aware of. Instead of moving in the direction the people wanted it to move, the state took a turn towards bureaucratic capitalism, which the people had discarded and, in fact, fought against. Independence became, in substance, nothing more than transfer of power inasmuch as the state refused to change its character. Inequality in society has galloped and patriotism has declined.

Then there is the very important question of trust in the system of justice itself. If criminals of such atrocious nature as perpetrators of August 15 mayhem can get away with it, confidence in the system is sure to suffer, and suffered it has, indeed. We have other political murders too, hanging on our conscience, speeding up the trial of this case and implementing the judgment effectively will make it possible for other cases to be heard and dispensed with, appropriately. We must move ahead.

Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury is former head of English Department, Dhaka University.

A day to mourn

Leaders should be judged by history and not by the political power of the day

SINCE 1993 (much before it dawned on Sheikh Hasina's rule) editorial position of this paper has been that 15th August should be observed as our National Mourning Day. Every year since then we have, in our own humble way, observed it as such and we will do so today. During Awami League rule the day was declared as a National Mourning Day which the BNP government promptly cancelled once it came to power in October, 2001. We welcomed the AL decision at that time because it reflected our own editorial position taken three years earlier. By the same logic today we express our fundamental disagreement with the present government's decision to reverse it.

We would be the first one to admit, and we wrote so numerous times during the period, that the AL government was going to an absurd extent, and almost ludicrous level, to glorify Bangabandhu. In fact more harm was done to Sheikh Mujib's image than good by the sycophancy that we saw at that time. But BNP's actions regarding Bangabandhu are extreme ones of a reverse kind. We see political vendetta in it rather than a sober assessment of facts. One of our tragedies has been that prejudice and partisanship were allowed to hold sway over every aspect of our life -- social, cultural and political. Our history became the worst victim of this phenomenon. With every change in regime it changed. In such a world, facts didn't count, prejudices did, and what one could claim to have happened became far more important than what actually did. It was a world at best of exaggeration and at worst of blatant lies. We are now living through sycophancy of the reverse variety.

We have been desperately waiting for things to change. We had hoped that BNP would take a larger and more objective view of history and start the process of much needed reconciliation in our politics. The two leading parties have both had their turn in office. It was our expectation that after its experience in the first term and after seeing what happened to its opponents for abusing political power, the BNP would sober up and realise that their earlier policy of mutual destruction did not work. It needed to be replaced by one of mutual tolerance and giving each other, and their leaders, what is legitimately theirs. Keeping the National Mourning Day intact would have made a good beginning. Whatever mistakes Sheikh Mujib made, and he made plenty of them, the worst of which was BKSAL, cannot and must not justify his assassination and the killing of almost his entire family. Bangabandhu's contribution in our independence struggle is second to none. It is for leading us to freedom, to self-respect, to dignity and the incomparable joy of getting an independent country for ourselves that Bangabandhu must be respected, honoured, and loved, and it is for that reason alone the day of his brutal assassination should be observed as our National Mourning Day.

Govt decides to deregulate land and cell phone sector

Partial now but a great policy move

FINALLY the call to deregulate the telecom sector made by public demand has been answered. The authorities have announced that four more cell companies are going to be asked to participate in the private mobile phone service. More significantly, the landline sector is going to be opened up. That news unexpected as it arrives as a pleasant surprise.

Nobody will ever know what pleasure or profit were gained by limiting landline connections but that's what the government has done since telephones came in. In fact, landlines were considered very precious and a huge black market flourished. People who have applied for and got a landline without recourse to *tadbir* or bribe are a minuscule minority. If there is one department which has contributed as much as the electricity sector in making governments unpopular, it's this telephone department. And yet the government was in charge. This suicidal tendency has been on for long.

And now the government is being deservedly congratulated for deciding to open up the sectors. There are a host of people who are willing to pay a lot to invest and many more willing to pay for decent telecom services. The government's job is to bring the two together and let each serve the other. And for that the people will be grateful to the authorities. This is a good move worth a big smile.

A H DEWAN

WE are an ungrateful nation seemingly with more ungrateful people at the helm of state affairs. Otherwise we would not have heard that the National Mourning Day on 15th August will go without any official programme of solemn observance. That East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, ceased to be a part of Pakistan since 16th December '71 and that you got an identity of your own as a citizen of a sovereign and independent Bangladesh are the eventual outcome of relentless struggle Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman waged against Pakistani exploitation and subjugation. Pity on you that you now deny that man of his rightful due and make deliberate attempts to obliterate him from people's fond memory.

Pakistanis who ruled us came to realise fully well that it was no other leader but Sheikh Mujib who made hell of their sleep. They found a

Tartar in him and also found him made up of such stuff as not to yield to any compromise formula or budge an inch from his magna carta -- the six point programme that enshrined total economic emancipation and full autonomy for Bengalees, Pakistanis were too cautious not to smell a rat. So the Pakistani military ruler Yahya Khan on March 25, 1971, for the last time, took him to captivity and made an arrogant utterance: "This time Mujib will not go unpunished". So they reached the denouement to condemn him to death. But the people of this land entrenched with the motto of emancipation from Pakistani oppression as instilled by their undisputed leader and imbued by the final directives he had left for them, took up arms against the savage Pakistani soldiers and fought the nine-month long liberation war, verily in the name of their beloved leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, then languishing in the dungeon of Pakistani prison cell.

OPINION

National Mourning Day: Government's apathy regrettable

The freedom loving people inside the besieged land, besides providing support and succour to the members of 'Mukti Bahini', also kept praying to he Almighty that their leader was saved. The whole world came to know Sheikh Mujib as the supreme of the then East Pakistan and therefore the world leaders as well as the world press raised their voices to press home for his release. In fact the name of Sheikh Mujib became a synonym for Bangladesh.

When Bangladesh was born with a national flag of its own Pakistan's new PM Z A Bhutto had to free the hero of heroes. His return to his freed homeland on 10th Jan 1972 was also a historical event of unprecedented spectacle. Dhaka saw the surge and waves of people in the ever biggest number, many coming even from the remotest places to see their beloved leader with joy and tears. But this great son of the soil who unconquered himself in every heart of the Bengalees because o the long

political persecution he had suffered for their liberty and who, therefore, earned the title, of Father of the Nation, was brutally put to death along with his family members on August 15th, 1975 by some disgruntled army men. It is most unfortunate that the saddest day of the killing of the nation's architect will go off without paying him due respect and tribute, he so rightly and effusively deserves from any party heading the government in Bangladesh.

But BNP's posture makes it clear that by sidetracking the Day it is only exhibiting itself as totally prejudiced by vengeance against AL. AL was not above reproach when it paid no respect to BNP leader late Ziaur Rahman, made no mention of his contribution. But that should not be the guiding policy of BNP government to ignore the death anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who, when fought with Pakistani rulers (from Ayub Khan to Yahya Khan) for the legitimate

rights and privileges of 75 million people of the then East Pakistan, no longer belonged only to AL, but became the undisputed leader and priceless possession of that whole population. BNP leaders should have taken this into their good sense.

BNP has at the very outset jumped to detracting the great leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by stripping him of the title 'Father of the Nation' through enacting law and by pulling down his portrait from the deserved position and also by suppressing in books of our children the truth about many of the sagas of his political struggle leading to the creation of Bangladesh. This was no glorious job, rather sully our history and image to the outside world who, prior to and during our liberation war, heard of or knew no other leader but Sheikh Mujib. Many Bangladeshis not akin to AL but disposed to Sheikh Mujib for what colossal sacrifice he had made for the cause of Bengalees got exas-

perated at BNP's distorting of the nation's history. By this BNP and its think-tank appear out in their pursuit to make all of us forget the name of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. But they forgot the abiding saying of Santayana, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it."

Only the collaborators who had sided with Pakistan and abetted in the genocide of our brothers and sons and raping of our mothers and sisters, perpetrated by Pakistani marauders and who still wistfully long for Pakistan and make Sheikh Mujib solely responsible for having clipped Pakistan of its eastern wing will not tolerate this day or other such day of ours observed in a befitting manner. To the accused killers, awaiting justice, the day is a stark reminder of the monstrous crime they have committed. The government's ignoring otherwise invariably borders on pandering to the interest of the killers to escape retribution.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

August 15

This letter is in regards to the ongoing debate on revoking August 15 as public holiday.

When people are dying, children are being murdered, women dishonoured and most of Bangladesh standing on the brink of moral, social, ethical and environmental disaster, why debate on Sheikh Mujib or Ziaur Rahman?

First achieve what countries like the US or the UK has achieved and then talk about honouring our leaders.

A frustrated citizen
Dhaka

Deadly dengue

25 people have already died in dengue and still the government is nonchalant about the gravity of the problem!

In your report (August 14) a resident of Gulshan area complained, "The ward commissioners appear on the spot only when there is a TV

camera". This is absolutely outrageous and intolerable. While a deadly disease continues to take its toll on the citizens the policy makers crave for TV coverage!

Shamsad Sultana
Banani, Dhaka

Correct me if I am wrong but didn't Sadek Hossain Khoka make a pledge to kill mosquitoes if elected mayor of Dhaka?

What about it Mayor Khoka?

Orlando
Dhaka

"Great Army"

I would like to second Sohana Kahn's letter (August 14). Nafis mentions civilised countries like Britain and Germany as examples to justify our army's behaviour with civilians. Well Sohana makes an excellent point, in which country do you find retired and serving officers being given the stewardship of civilian public institutions? Sohana cites the examples of WASA,

DESA, PDB and BIMAN, well I would like to add the Prisons and DMCH. Not to mention all the Generals who are ambassadors.

Why should civil servants who work their whole lives for far smaller pay and benefits be denied their rightful promotions? How do you think a Foreign Service official feels after working his entire life for a miserly salary to one day be appointed ambassador only to see a retiring general grab it for himself? Career civil service officials are the only ones who have the right to run these NOT Generals.

Kishore Pasha
Dhaka

This is in regards to Nafis' letter on August 14 about intolerant civilians demanding their civil rights. Nafis goes on about the militaries of the west whose garrisons are secured and all that.

Nafis seems to forget a few discrepancies between our military and that of other developed coun-

tries. To cite one fact, please name some countries where the army, in addition to defending the nation, also runs a five star hotel, all the golf courses in the country, a filling station, cinemas, supermarkets, a bank, wedding halls and so on and so forth and all that ONLY in Dhaka. A few nations whose armies are business conglomerates do come to mind, China and Indonesia. Does Nafis defend this as well?

Did I mention about those who connived with the past government to cheat our country out of its hard-earned money? Note the frigate and MIG scams.

In his letter Nafis says nothing of the fact that although civilians are denied their rights to enter the cantonment, retired officers, politicians and civil servants face no hindrance.

We are here only speaking of Dhaka Cantonment, what about the ones in Comilla, Chittagong etc? In any civilised country expansions of military garrisons are

issues considered, debated and approved by parliament in conjunction with the peoples of the localities. In Bangladesh the army is relentlessly swallowing up land with no debate or justification. When you are back in Dhaka on your next vacation drive over to Trishal outside of Dhaka; there is a shortage of arable land there because the army is buying it all up.

In the civilised countries Nafis mentions, like Britain, Germany etc., the military budget is the first one to be cut in times of fiscal troubles. In Bangladesh even suggesting that civilians be allowed to enter the Cantonment is considered an affront to our 'Great Army'. With our finances in such dire straits, wouldn't this be a good time to cut the defence budget?

No institution is above criticism or civilian oversight.
MA, Dhaka

Whither humanity?

While we were still in deep shock

and grief by the murder of school student Shihab, another small boy fell prey to the abductors. Bappi, an eight-year-old student was abducted for ransom, strangled and his body was thrown into the river Shitalakhya.

I do not know how to express my anguish, hatred and despair over these incidents. A deep sadness and hopelessness have engulfed me. What is the future of our country? How can we claim ourselves to be human beings?
Nur Jahan
Chittagong

On education

I read an opinion published on 12th August on education and politics written by Md. Sahed Ali. The opinion really attracted my attention. I agree with the writer that education does not seem a priority rather it is a way to get ticket to entry into politics and becoming wealthy without any investment. It is really the political culture of

our country that patronises teachers and student politics to achieve political goals.

I thank Md. Sahed Ali for such a thought-provoking article.

A. H. Mithu
Gulshan,
Dhaka

"Former CA as President"

I hail the suggestion by 'a citizen from USA' to elect former caretaker chief Justice Latifur Rahman, as the next President of the Republic. Right, he has been 'tested and trusted' and found to be one of the most likeable and suitable person at the helm of affairs of the state. At this juncture the country needs a person like Latifur Rahman.

If there is no legal bar and he is willing to give it a try, the people could not expect anything more.

Let us all go for him, please.
Fuad bin Rahman
Dhaka

Agarwal Modi Scam

I am really beginning to get interested about this ongoing scandal over the Marwari businessmen. It sets a good example when people whose only means to riches was to plunder our banks are caught or at least publicly shamed. Nothing works better at keeping (relatively) honest businessmen like me on the right track than knowing I might get caught.

I am particularly fascinated with the Agarwal connection and Doel Group. Doel is one of the major exporters of RMG in Bangladesh, and I have often wondered how they managed to expand so fast.

Did you know that one of the friends of this group was a Commercially Important Person (CIP)? That would suggest that the nexus goes up higher than just the banks. *The Daily Star* shouldn't just let this matter drop but continue reporting more about this scam.

Dorji,
Dhaka