about the interpretation of history as



DHAKA FRIDAY DECEMBER 27, 2002

Khaleda's high-profile China visit

Dhaka-Beijing relationship expands, takes on new gloss

HE first thing to note about Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's five-day official visit to China is the significant background against which it was set. Since her itinerary is nearing its completion one's mind should be chiefly occupied by the thoughts of what her visit has produced; even so. it will be worthwhile to back-track a little to put the results of her China trip in perspective.

First and foremost, with the Sixteenth Congress of the Communist Party of China marking a smooth and meaningful transition from one generation of leaders to another set of them, Begum Zia was required to do two things: first, pay her respects to the old guards who have initiated the process of leadership change; and secondly, welcome the new generation leaders and establish contacts with them as early as possible.

Basically, her trip was, therefore, geared to a renewal of contacts between two friendly countries at their highest official levels amidst the changing dynamics of Chinese polity. Prime Minister Zhu Rongji had visited Dhaka last January. In less than 12 months on, Begum Zia has just paid a return visit as part of what appear to be sustained high level contacts being in prospect between Beijing and Dhaka.

Apart from her fruitful talks with the Chinese Prime Minister Zhu, Begum Zia met President Jiang Zemin, Chairman of NPC and ex-PM Li Peng and Vice President Hu Jintao. To get a flavour of what transpired in the meetings between the Bangladesh leader and his distinguished Chinese hosts these were all auspiciously marked by a commonality of views shared between the two sides. The emphasis was clearly on greater exchange of high-level visits as would be evident from Khaleda Zia inviting President Jiang Zemin and the new generation Chinese leader Vice President Hu Jintao to Dhaka and their acceptance of such invitations with promptitude.

It was only natural for two traditionally friendly countries like China and Bangladesh to exchange notes on the latest spate in regional and international developments that can profusely impact on Asian security.

A plethora of accords have been inked between the two sides, some of which, of course, were by way of taking forward previous agreements. An umbrella defence cooperation agreement has been signed to integrate piece-meal accords so as to maximize cooperation in defence training, maintenance and in some areas of production. China is to provide with a grant of U\$ 7.25 million for construction of the Sixth Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge over the Dhaleswari river. Additionally, a soft loan of over 6.04 million US dollars will be given to us. In all, three agreements have been signed, including a protocol under which a US\$ 3.02 million worth of credit will be converted into grant. China has made a nice gesture of giving the shiny conference centre at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar to Bangladesh as a 'gift of the Chinese people.' That expression of friendship towards Bangladesh should not be measured in terms of the loan amount waived, which was not much really, but rather counted for the goodwill it exuded.

Much as we value our cultural and historical ties with China and the developing defence cooperation with her, there is something else that we would like to touch on very briefly. We cannot overlook the tremendous unrealised potential that exists for further economic, trade and investment cooperation with Beijing. Chinese help in the bridge-building sector is gratefully acknowledged by us and now we look forward to her assisting us in setting up a power plant in Khulna. There is more that China can do in the field of power generation, including helping us create alternative sources of energy. The projects we aspire after are not one-way traffic type; these could be mutually beneficial

China is a big prospering economy having sustained a growth rate that is a marvel in an otherwise recession-hit world economic paradigm. They can do two things for us: one, increase imports from Bangladesh to help narrow the trade gap that is heavily favourable to Beijing. In this context, w urge the Chinese government to allow duty-free access to 34 Bangladeshi items as proposed by us under the provision of the Bangkok agreement. The economic ties need to be diversified with greater Chinese investment in the EPZs. Indeed, there is a vast potential for Chinese investment to pick up in diverse fields here. Both countries have had a penchant for labour-intensive industries because of their vast reserves of manpower but it's time they launched an era of technological cooperation including in the IT area. And why not?

Interpreting history

and the Aryan Theory, one by one (Interpreting Early India). The former

was developed based on ideologies

pertinent to nineteenth century

Europe, while nationalist historians

promoted the latter during the colo-

nial period. Oriental Despotism

theory focused on the unchanging

nature of Indian society and was

influenced by the English utilitarian

philosophy. James Mill, its first

ideologue, sought to critically inves-

tigate the traditional institutions of

India. He found them to be static.

retrogressive and conducive to

economic backwardness. These



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

ISTORY is about the past. But the past can be as alive as the present. It can haunt the present on its own or can

be resurrected to serve particular ends. Because of these possibilities, history is not always of mere academic interest. It can be hard-wired into the psyche of a nation or communities, serving as a source of rightful or misguided pride. Contrary to popular view, history has power. It can be manipulated for good or evil.

Among the historians who congregated recently in Dhaka on the occasion of an international conference, was Romila Thapa. She is one of the outstanding historians in the world today, acclaimed for her scholarly studies on Indian history. She is also one of the few of its objective interpreters. In showing the courage of her conviction she has criticized an interpretation of history that has the imprimatur of a major political party. This has earned her bouquet and brickbats, plaudits from scholars and liberals and denigration from die-hard ideologues. Her critique of the manipulation and misinterpretation of history that is now gaining ground in India has been no mere rhetorics. It is based on hard historical and other evidences. But while contradicting the misconceived and unfounded notions about the past, she has also been sympathetic to the nationalist historians whose musings are now being exploited for

narrow political purposes. After recognizing the role of deology in historical interpretation, Romila Thapar proceeds to demolish the theory of Oriental Despotism

being against the principles of nineteenth century utilitarianism, in his view. called for a radical restructuring of society through introduction of a new legal and administrative system. This interpretation of India's history suited the needs and purposes of imperialism. Support of this view was found even in the writings of Hegel and Marx, the former pointing out the absence of dialectical change in Indian history and the latter incorporating the idea of unchangeability into his theory about Asiatic Mode of Production. Both the imperialists and the Marxists thus used the theory of oriental despotism with the same goal in mind, viz. change of power structure in society, albeit through entirely two different means. There was a political agenda behind the theory for both groups of

ideologues. The Aryan theory, on the other hand, was sponsored by historians in India as a nationalist agenda during the colonial period. It began as a form of cultural nationalism. The depiction of Aryan society, as an

into a political one. The ultranationalists have argued that the political struggle for independence from colonial rule had the establishment of Hindutva as a political goal which was replaced by secularism, an act that amounts to betraval of the original ideology. From being an extremist movement on the political fringe, the ultra nationalist ideology now seems to be gaining ground, as seen by the electoral success of its protagonists. The issue of interpretation of history gains importance and relevance in the context of this religious chauvinism.

idyllic one, appealed to the sensitivi-

ties of Indian historians and schol-

ars. It also appealed to some middle-

class Indians as they saw in the

appearance of the English even as

rulers, a re-union of 'parted cousins',

the descendents of two different

families of the ancient Aryan race.

The present polemicists and politi-

cians in India have embraced the

Aryan theory in their campaign for

Hindu revivalism or Hindutva. They

have resurrected the nationalist

interpretation of history that was

promoted during the colonial period

as a cultural agenda and converted it

Aryan theory may be questioned on the basis of three different disciplines viz. archaeology, linguistic and social anthropology. The discovery and excavation of the cities of the Indus civilization has pushed back the beginnings of Indian history to the third millennium B.C. and the Indus civilization has replaced the Vedic Aryan culture. The Indus cities represent a copper-bronze-age

merce both within the northwestern area of India as well as West Asia. If the Aryans had conquered northwestern India and destroyed the cities, some archaeological evidence would have been found by now, Thapar has argued. What is of even more significance is the fact that recent evidences from excavations in western India and the Indo-Gangetic divide show some continuity from the Indus civilization into later cultures. From this, it has been concluded, that the earlier hiatus between Indus civilization and the Vedic culture is not acceptable. The

Indus civilization thus emerges as

existence of different social groups, or the conquest of one by the other. The hierarchy in such a society was dependent on occupation, on certain ethos (beliefs about purity and pollution) and on, more or less, permanent settlement of a population in a particular area. The formation of a new caste has thus to be seen in terms of historical change. According to this process a tribe incorporated into a settled community e.g. peasant, could become a caste. Though social attitudes were often fixed and rigid, the opportunities for social change were available

and availed of.

dynamic context

A number of questions have been

raised with reference to the Vedic

period based on these archaeologi-

cal. linguistic and anthropological

evidences. A purely Indo-Aryan

domination over Indian culture is not

borne out by history, it has been

pointed out, rather, a mingling of

Indo-Arvan and existing culture is

seen, requiring a new definition of

each. Romila Thapar thus appears

to be agreeable, at the most, to meet

the Arvan theory half of the way. not

fully. She is evidently concerned with

the diachronic history of cultures in a

The Aryan theory served to pro-

mote cultural nationalism in colonial

India. Whether this was also used as

problematic. But there is no doubt

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narrow political ideology, that of

a political ideology at the time is

provided by the Aryan theory. There are no evidences to support this theory as has been argued by Romila Thapar. If the theory of oriental despotism was a convenient, even expedient, justification for imposition of colonial rule and alien culture, the Aryan theory is nothing but a pretext for installing religious nationalism at the heart of politics. From this point of view the campaign for reinterpretation of history will appear as just another face of religious fundamentalism. Faced with the reality of politicizing history, Thapar has given hints about the role of historians. This is seen in her conclusion: 'The perspective of the ancient Indian historical tradition when seen in juxtaposition with the more recent analyses of early Indian history can suggest the ideological issues of the pre-colonial period. These might provide to the historian of early India a clearer vision of the priorities of the Indian past than have been provided by the polemics of more recent times". The need for such an approach to the interpretation of history has been explained by another outstanding historian, Eric Hobsbawm, in a general context: "Modern nationalist movements, which can almost be defined as movements which forget history or rather get it wrong, insist on defining them in historical terms and actually attempt to realize parts of this ficti-tious history (On History). It may be stimulating for historians also to remember the challenge thrown at them by another historian of great eminence, E. H. Carr. While regretting the cynicism about the future shown by the intellectuals of younger generation, he hoped that progress would be the future of mankind. whatever the threats from evil doers and the failings of intellectuals. (What is History?). He seemed to bestow a degree of autonomy on history that is beyond human machinations as well as errors in judge-

Hindutva. One may, of course, argue that the line between cultural and Hasnat Abdul Hve is a former secretary, novelist political is a thin one. While agreeing and economist on this, one may not be convinced

IN MY VIEW

The Aryan theory served to promote cultural nationalism in colonial India. Whether this was also used as a political ideology at the time is problematic. But there is no doubt that it is now being used to serve a narrow political ideology, that of Hindutva. One may, of course, argue that the line between cultural and political is a thin one. While agreeing on this, one may not be convinced about the interpretation of history as provided by the Aryan theory. There are no evidences to support this theory as has been argued by Romila Thapar.

> the bedrock of early Indian culture. In respect of language, recent linguistic analyses of Vedic Sanskrit have confirmed the presence of non-Arvan element, specially Proto-Dravidian, both in vocabulary and phonetics. Consequently, it has been suggested that Proto-Dravidian, not Sanskrit, was the earlier language of northern India and perhaps also the language of the Indus civilization. According to this view Vedic Sanskrit was the language of a particular social group that slowly spread across northern According to Romila Thapar, the India. In the process it became modified by indigenous languages. A possible period of bilingualism has also been suggested.

Anthropological studies of Indian Society, on the other hand, have led to a reappraisal of the social history of earlier periods. The most significant and meaningful contribution has been made by the study of the formation of castes. These studies have made it evident that a society urban civilization based on combased on castes did not require the

Hollow men, stuffed men!

what they give.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

know successful men who are dishonest. God gave them everything, talent, skill and opportunity. God gave them luck,

health, looks and longevity. Things come naturally to them like fruits grow on a tree. Yet they resort to unfair means lie cheat steal and scheme. Yet they hurt others, deprive many, and destroy some to remove those who stand in their way. They are successful men who climb the ladder and crush others every rung of the way. They are fortunate men, who finish the race ahead of others. They eat well, get plump, and work hard to defeat others. They are the winners, the children of life, who wish to get all its toys. They are ruthless, calculating, rapacious and clever. Their eyes are always on the prize, because life is not important without a result.

They remember and they forget depending on which is convenient. They transact in everything they do, and take usuriously for every little of They have got character like the gear in a car. They shift it according

to the motion of ambition, and ambition is their roadmap, which the soul. becomes their conscience. Evervthing that helps ambition is right, everything that challenges it is wrong. There are many elusive bends on the stretch of their moral

Yet they are unscrupulous, desperate and inconsiderate, when they go after success. It is the end of their world, their raison d'etre. They want everything to happen their way and that is the only way they keep burn-

bereft of that zeal like a body without So the successful men repeat the Faustian fate again and again, and strike a deal with Mephistopheles. I am only talking about those success-

friends, the walk they walk, the talk they talk, everything and anything that requires an effort has an estimated rate of return, and success is when that estimate works and brings

T.S. Eliott writes that success is relative and it is what we can make of the mess we have made of things. The successful men I know make mess of things because they are dishonest, although different people do that in different ways. But the question is whether we can call it

cess in life is to be a good animal. Can we call them good animals? If they are successful by debauched means, then how are they different from those who use their success to debauched ends? If those who earn money by ill means are successful,

then what about those who successfully spend it to ill ends? Often they combine together to close the circle, when the ill-gotten wealth of the father is squandered by his frivolous son. Do we say that both of them are successful? Do we then

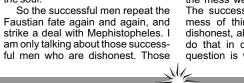
merit list of the Board exam. The successful father who fails in his son would still envy the failed father who has succeeded in his son.

ment. History may be made by man

(and women) but it has a mind of its

The successful men I know are dishonest because they don't understand it. They don't know that certain people choose honesty over success because they are comfortable with it. Perhaps the dishonest men I know are successful because they are also comfortable with it. But are they comfortable with their dishonesty or are they comfortable with heir success?

At least the people who choose honesty over success are either cowards or conscientious. They abstain from what is wrong or are afraid to do what is morally repugnant. These are thinking men, who are rational animals, who are coura-The successful men I know are dishonest because they don't understand it. They don't know that certain geous (or cowards) and use their people choose honesty over success because they are comfortable with it. Perhaps the dishonest men l judgement to contain the temptations of life within profound princiknow are successful because they are also comfortable with it. But are they comfortable with their These are re marka dishonesty or are they comfortable with their success?.. These successful but dishonest men give away who choose to fail in order to succeed in their own conscience. What about the men I know, those who are dishonest and flaunt their success? What about them? They are surely the go-getters, but they are also people who mistake an act of acquisition for an act of success. Success is something one earns, not grabs. These successful but dishonest Dylan Thomas is an American men give away their human essence singer, who sang "She knows there's every step of the way. They comprono success like failure/And that mise and lose out in the process of gaining, yet they have no consideration and they have no qualms. They must be what T.S. Eliott said. The because the failure is often seeded in hollow men, the stuffed men.



them results ing their zeal for life. They feel empty

CROSS TALK

their human essence every step of the way. They compromise and lose out in the process of gaining.

Besides, China's proven skill in agro-based and processing industries is waiting to be shared by Bangladesh.

We believe 'sky is the limit' for economic cooperation between Bangladesh and China. We have just about reached the tall tree level; so much more is left to be reached out to for the good of our two countries and peoples.

They plan their lives and don't waste their time. Everything they do is measured, the nap they take, friends they make, invitations they attend and gifts they exchange. They do nothing, which is useless and doesn't build success on success.

shoreline. Every crisis is an opportunity for them, and every opportunity

for them is a crisis for others. Success justifies everything for them, and failure only makes things worse. They shed the burden of conscience so that they can soar high. They want to go far in life and they travel light. They are flimsy and they are ferocious. They treat success like an end first, and then they treat it as means to ends, which mean nothing in the end. King Midas had succumbed to that sense of void when the loved ones he touched turned into gold.

who cheat, lie, steal and scheme to get position, wealth, honour and fame. Those who have talents, skills and opportunities, yet deflect the course of their actions to ensure their success.

I know quite a few men who are successful and dishonest. Jean Renoir, the French film director asked if it was possible to succeed without any act of betraval. These men will betray anyone for their success. They will do anything to win their prize. Life for them is one hell of an investment and its return must be high. The time they spend with

success. How do we then separate say that one has successfully wasted the success of a killer who has what the other had successfully snatched or stolen? Do we say that finished off his target from that of someone who has given his life to success is doing what one intends defend a cause? How do we then without any moral consequences? separate the success of a thief who has stolen from others from that of a man who is kind and giving? How do we separate the success of a prevarfailure's no success at all." Success icator who has fooled others from and failure rotate in a vicious cycle. that of a prophet who has brought when one leads to another. That is enlightenment for millions?

Then, what? What do we call the the success and success is hidden ir the failure. The son of a shipping successful men I know who are dishonest? According to Herbert magnate pushes drug, and the Spencer, the first requisite to sucgatekeeper's son makes it to the

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

Resolution of European Parliament: Whose human rights are violated?

OPINION

M H CHOWDHURY

HE unanimous resolution passed at the European Parliament on November 21. '02 regarding Bangladesh is nothing but a blatant interference in the internal affairs of an independent sovereign state. The present government was voted to power by an overwhelming majority of two-thirds, thirteen months back. The people in general and the voters in particular in Bangladesh have been appalled at the attitude of the European Parliament as expressed in the resolution and especially the threats it has conveyed to the four-party alliance government of abrogating the EU Cooperation Agreement with Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh are particularly disturbed to find how donor assistance is being used openly to dictate the policy and actions of a sovereign state.

It may be worthwhile at this stage to recapitulate briefly the worst law and order situation that prevailed in the country during the previous regime. Killings including political killing and repression, extortion, abduction, forced eviction and occupation of others' properties by the mastans, their associates and close relatives of high-ups of the party in power were the order of the day.

At that time, on average eleven murders were committed every day and hundreds were rendered invalid or maimed by systematic torture by the party cadres and their godfa-

be ruthlessly suppressed and many protestors, wherever they might have been, met with dire consequences. Dissident journalists were made target for factual reporting Opposition rallies were used to be broken down by the armed party hooligans. In one such incident, four opposition workers were shot dead in Dhaka by the terrorists from a procession led by a ruling party MP On the very day in 1996 when the Awami League government was sworn in, an opposition worker was brutally murdered. Another opposition worker died in police custody and it was said that the victim committed suicide hanging himself with the lace of his boot -- what a mockery with a tragic death! In some cases, bodies of killed victims were mutilated beyond recognition and cut into pieces and thrown in the river to suppress identity. Such examples could be multiplied. People had their

back at the wall and started losing

faith in state authority as police force

place at that time. The ruling party

attributed these incidents to the

opposition parties especially the

Islamic parties and branded those as

acts of anti-freedom forces and as

attempts on the life of the them Prime

Minister. Opposition leaders and

workers were rounded up indiscrimi-

nately and were tortured. However,

during their tenure, they could not

prove anything of the sort. The

A series of bombing incidents took

was also used like a private force.

thers. Any protesting voice used to

office appointed a judicial enquiry commission to probe into those incidents. The commission found that those were stage-managed to harass the opposition parties and were engineered by high-ups of the government One of the two priorities of the

four-party alliance in their election manifesto was elimination of terrorism. On assuming office, however, they found that thousands of illegal arms were around and terrorists and godfathers were actively at their work determined to cause deterioration in law and order situation with a view to malianing the present government and tarnish their image. The situation had deteriorated so much so that four City Corporation ward commissioners belonging to the ruling party were gunned down by the terrorists in a matter of few months

present government on assuming

It is in this backdrop that the fourparty alliance government decided to launch "Operation Clean Heart" jointly by army, BDR, police and Ansar because a desperate situation needed a desperate solution. Government rightly identified that terrorism has been adversely affecting development and investments in the country and made life of the people hell. The decision was further influenced by the fact that the police force was virtually ineffective against terrorism and it was alleged that a sizeable section of them had clandestine entente with the terrorists.

"Operation Clean Heart" has been welcomed by people of all walks of life including even the men in the street. People have heaved a sigh of relief as they now can go out of their home without the fear of being killed. wounded, robbed, abducted. It is for the first time that during this year's Ramadan and Eid festival, the market places and business centres were free from extortionists and snatchers for which businessmen and shoppers expressed their gratitude to the government. Hundreds of criminals in the 'wanted' lists of police hitherto moving scot free, because of police inaction, indulging in criminal activities, have been rounded up. A large number of deadly weapons including AK 47 rifles, M-16 rifles have been recovered. Still many terrorists and their godfathers have gone underground or escaped to a neighbouring country finding there a safe haven. The only exception is a particular political party and its henchmen, who have raised a hue and cry in the name of human rights forgetting how nakedly human rights were violated during their regime. They also propagate that only their partymen were being victimised, though, interestingly, the fact is that large number of activists of the ruling party have been taken into custody and their number is larger than those of the opposition parties. "Operation Clean Heart" is absolutely neutral and the allegation of European Parliament about partiality is totally baseless. It is legally and constitu-

tionally a right step and none has so far challenged it in a court of law. It is unfortunate that some deaths have occurred during the operation Government has assured that every such incident of death probed into and action will be taken if any one is

found guilty. It is rather unfortunate that in spite of the positive aspects of "Operation Clean Heart", the European Parliament has chosen to impose various derogatory conditions on the government of Bangladesh and threaten to abrogate the European Union-Bangladesh Joint Cooperation Agreement unless those conditions were complied with. Not only that. they have even ignored the various accomplishments of the government. What the European Parliament has failed to realise is that security of the people is supreme to the government and is also a primary responsibility of a democratic government. People's security cannot be compromised in the name of human rights. It may be said that human rights of only the terrorists have been violated if human rights can be defined in that way. It is also very sad that an august body like the European Parliament did not even feel the necessity of deputing a probe mission to Bangladesh to find out the factual situation and discuss the matter with the government. Its sources of information is not clear. European Parliament resolution is

also not consistent with the position taken by the US government. In his message to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on the eve of holy Eid, President Bush has lauded her effort to fight terrorism and wished her success.

And now several questions to European Parliament: (1) What had they done when there were gross violation of human rights during previous Awami League regime? What had they done when the highest judicial authority in the country i.e., the Supreme Court and the High Court were threatened with dire consequences for upholding the supremacy of judiciary? Was any unanimous resolution passed at that time? At least we are not aware.

(2) Is it that the European Parliament has found it easy to intimidate a small poor country like Bangladesh? This is absolutely untenable and unacceptable to a sovereign and independent country like Bangladesh.

(3) The European Parliament resolution has also brought into focus the issue of persecution of minorities although there is no such issue in Bangladesh. Some interested quarters have tried to mix up personal hitches, political disputes. as persecution of minorities. In fact, in the October election a large section of minorities had voted for fourparty alliance breaking Awami League monopoly of getting minority votes. As a matter of fact, why the winning party should persecute them when they have already won the election. It is only logical that Awami League out of grudge might have done so.

May we in this connection refer to the recent massacre of over two thousand Muslims in Gujarat, India, with the active connivance of the fundamentalist government. In fact, communal riots are common phenomenon in India though constitutionally it is a secular state. Has the European Parliament ever made any effective protests against these violations of human rights. In the face of provocative Muslim carnage in Guirat, there was restraint in Bangladesh and complete communal harmony prevailed in the country through efforts of the government. During the current year, the Hindu community celebrated their biggest

religious festival, Duga Puja, with unprecedented festivity. And what about state terrorism in Kashmir by India where the population have been fighting for emancipation? Mention may also be made of Palestine where Israel has been committing worst kind of human rights violation for over fifty years with all modern weapons in its arsenal against the stone throwing Palestinians. Palestinians have now been compelled to respond with suicide squads. Does anybody blow himself up just for fun? Israel has been occupying Arab lands against bundles of UN resolutions. No European Parliament resolutions in these cases also except some lip service. Bangladesh has extended its unflinching support to US sponsored war on terrorism all over the world The present government has also

time and again reiterated that Ban gladesh soil cannot be used for terrorism in any form. What is the point of dispute if Bangladesh's present government wages such a war against Bangladeshi terrorists which is supported by millions of citizens as they now can sleep peacefully and return home without the risk of being robbed in the streets and gunned down? Finally, we beseech the European Parliament to see things pragmati-

cally and try to find out the truth by themselves. Hunting criminals cannot be called violation of human rights. Distinction must be made between protection of human rights of peaceful and law-abiding citizens and those who are indulging in criminal activities. Please send to Bangladesh an investigative team and see things on the spot, discuss any issue you like with the government and put forward your suggestion and recommendations. Please do not try to intimidate a small poor country like Bangladesh. Please do not be swayed by the propaganda of defeated elements in the last elections. That election was recognised throughout the world as most fair and impartial by any democratic norm. It is expected that European Parliament will rescind its resolution in the interest of millions of people of European Union and Bangladesh and our fight against terrorism and poverty.