

Victory Day

Still in search of real victory?

ON this day in 1971 our freedom fighters aided by the allied troop of the Indian Army liberated our land from the clutches of the occupying Pakistani forces. Thus after nine months of blood letting, during which atrocities of unimaginable nature took place, our war of liberation ended. As the victorious army entered one liberated city after another a sea of joyous people welcomed them finding it almost unbelievable that the nightmare had finally ended. Naturally the outburst of joy was the most intense in Dhaka where every street, every open space and every neighbourhood and every house, not to mention every human heart was the venue of celebrations.

The joy knew no bounds nor the patriotism that seemed to flow from every vein of all those who witnessed that historic event. On this day 35 years ago we forgot all our pains, our losses, our pettiness and our divisiveness and had only one thought -- the fact that we were free and independent. After so many years of struggle, so much sacrifice and after millions of lives lost we were finally independent. That sense of freedom, the feeling that we will never have to take orders from others in running our country, that none but our own people will be masters of our destiny gave us an all new sense of pride that we never knew before.

Today as we recall those joyous moments, it seems so far away, as if these things happened in a different planet, to a different people and in a totally different time. Why these memories seem so distant? Is it because the Bangladesh of today is a far cry from that of our distant dreams? Is it because the democracy, the rule of law, the common people's republic that we had visualised on victory day 35 years ago have not been fulfilled? Is it because not only have we not realised our dreams but also for the most part we have forgotten what those dreams were? The answer to the above is not a simple yes or no. It is a combination of both and many more things included.

However, the message we want to shout from the top of our voices today is that regardless of our failures and half realised dreams we have a country that is free, independent and our very own. We may have been bad managers of our affairs but we ourselves are the managers not any outsider. In many ways we have let our people down but in many other ways we have fulfilled some of our potential. On our Victory Day today let us renew our pledge not fret over what we have missed (but definitely learn from our failures) and commit ourselves to build on what we have successfully implemented. Bad politics remain our biggest bane and good politics the best antidote against it. There is no substitute for democracy but we have not worked hard enough to make that work. When and how we'll be able to replace the bad with the good is an open question whose answer is getting fainter by the day. On this auspicious day we pray and hope that good sense will finally prevail over our leaders.

Wide areas not covered yet

Time is running out fast for EC

WITH the voter list correction deadline shifted only by three days, from 15 to 18 December, we are still at a loss to comprehend how the Election Commission (EC) intends to reach even close to the objectives. The main objectives at the moment are striking out thousands of false names and including names of genuine voters that have been left out in the first place either by default or design.

According to media reports, on the ninth day today, large numbers of areas in the metropolis, in the outskirts, as well as numerous villages are yet to be visited by the EC enumerators working at the field level. The scenario at the inaccessible areas is even worse with residents remaining in total darkness about the process of updating. It is only obvious that if the field officer cannot reach those areas within the given time, a large number of false names will remain in the list, which could be used by vested quarters on the poll day to tilt the vote result to their side. Therefore, it is the solemn responsibility of the EC to ensure that no such loopholes exist in the voter list.

It is out of utmost concern that we are writing again and again in this column about the imperatives of having an acceptable voter list on the table on the basis of which a credible election could be held. This all-important instrument should have been ready by now had the chief election commissioner (CEC), who is on leave at the moment, been more proactive and open to suggestions of concerned citizens. He failed to perceive that all the good suggestions that flowed in the direction of the EC from the civil society and various political parties, including the four-party alliance, had stemmed from good intent having no hidden agenda whatsoever. But, the CEC chose to react negatively to the suggestions, often mistaking those as intended to malign his authority. His legendary stubbornness has already cost the country some precious lives, property and its good image.

We may say that it was a sign of good gesture that the EC has signed a memorandum of understanding with the European Union (EU) under which the EU will send about 150 poll observers to Bangladesh. We believe that such visits of international poll observers would further motivate the EC officials and participating political parties to ensure that the election is held in a cordial, free and fair manner.

JALAL ALAMGIR

AN odd sort of conference is underway in Iran. A group of researchers has gathered to "discuss" the Holocaust, the systematic extermination of six million Jews during the Second World War by the Nazis and their collaborators.

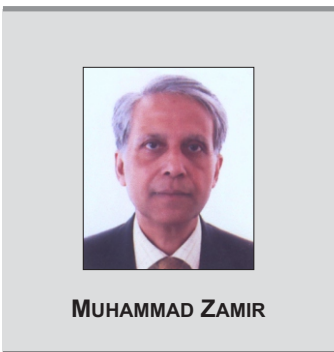
Featured prominently among the attendees are "revisionists," those who deny that the Holocaust happened. Hard-line Iranians are claiming that this is a test of tolerance and free speech that Western statesmen champion. What's more, the Iranians are partly right. In France, Germany, and Austria, it is illegal to deny the Holocaust.

After I read about this, my mind raced to imagine a future in Bangladesh in which the extent of the genocide in 1971 was questioned, and eventually estimated. Our terms for local war collaborators, Razakar, Al-Badr, and Al-Shams, became words that no

longer carried any substance. The effort to seek justice for war crimes was equated with treason. A conference was organised to encourage revisionists who claimed that the genocide was essentially propaganda spread by India to tarnish Pakistan's image.

I couldn't reject my thoughts simply as paranoia. A quiet, yet significant, transformation has been taking place toward revising the history of the independence of Bangladesh. It began in the late seventies and the eighties when known collaborators, who had fled the country, began to creep back in under protection of the erstwhile military rulers. Some of these collaborators went on record saying that independence was a mistake. That type of free speech was allowed, but when Jahanara Imam led a large civil-society movement in the 1990s to expose and try war criminals, it was persecuted by the BNP government and charged with treason.

It is time to fully use our potential



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THIS month the children have been lighting candles at the Central Shaheed Minar in Dhaka. They have been remembering the martyrs of our War of Independence, on this, the month of victory.

Today, thirty-five years later, I feel that time has come for all of us to assess the state of our nation, whose sovereignty was achieved through great sacrifice. Let us, through self-introspection, identify our areas of under-achievement, our true potential and what measures need to be undertaken towards a successful pro-active future.

Three and a half decades might not be too long in the history of a nation. Yet, it is also not such a short span of time. We had pledged for ourselves after our tumultuous birth, a political and socio-economic matrix which we had hoped would create the necessary environment for our progress. The preamble of our Constitution, adopted on 4 November 1972, asserted certain high ideals and fundamental principles. It was hoped that these would guide us towards 'economic and social justice.'

We had also, in no uncertain terms, pledged the realisation of a society 'free from exploitation -- a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured' for all our citizens.

I am celebrating the values associated with Victory Day, but I am also troubled as to whether we are moving towards the goal so enshrined in our Constitution. This has become especially pertinent as, being victorious is one thing, but consolidating our achievement through meaningful expression is another.

We have to remember that we have to be seen as being successful in all the significant areas related to the governance of Bangladesh as a State. This will include important

electoral governance. The Nagorik Forum deserve thanks for their broad-based recommendations prepared on the basis of 54 dialogues at the grassroots level held in 15 District Headquarters of Bangladesh. The Centre for Policy Dialogue patiently distilled the essence of the different discussions and prepared the Nagorik vision of how Bangladesh needs to move forward till 2021. They have identified some critical issues and pointed out how reforms in these areas can

within the country and also for others living around Bangladesh.

A careful assessment of our national performance clearly demonstrates that there is room for improvement and reform within the political system electoral laws, electoral codes of conduct and administrative governance. Such reforms have become vital so that we can graduate out of being a Least Developed Country to a Middle Income Country. There is no reason why we cannot be so.



It is indeed regrettable that all our political leaders talk about equity and equal opportunity and yet have refrained from implementing these basic and fundamental steps. The next elected government must address these issues with all seriousness. We have today, most unnecessarily, slid down the path of political turmoil. Political parties, as well as all of us, have to be the engines of democracy. To this will be added our entrepreneurial spirit. Only these factors can help us to materialise the dream that so many of our martyrs saw during 1971.

factors like -- intensification of the democratic process, eradication of economic disparity and poverty, removal of corruption, observance of human rights and providing of equal opportunities.

I do not consider such aspirations being based on my naivete. They stem out of my conviction that we are a nation whose citizens are capable of achieving high thresholds. This is also based on past experience where through unity, we were able to overcome repression, genocide and injustice.

This month of December has given us several achievements to rejoice. The foremost among them has been the international recognition of Professor M. Yunus's philosophy regarding micro-credit financing. To this was added the feather of whitewashing Zimbabwe in cricket.

The other important measure was the publication of the wide-ranging report prepared by civil society with regard to possible reforms both in the electoral process and also in

propel us forward and help us to achieve our full potential.

Unlike some armchair pundits in Bangladesh I am not pessimistic about our future. I will agree here with Professor Rahman Sobhan that areas of light punctuate the darkness around us.

I believe that the most difficult decision is to accept one's faults and shortcomings. However once these are recognised, we can move forward quickly and effectively. We can do so by facing up to them and removing them from the scene. This, in a manner of speaking is the first step towards eventual removal of poverty from our midst and the creation of stability and sustainable development. This is consistent with what Professor Yunus observed during his Nobel Prize acceptance speech delivered at Oslo, Norway. It must be understood in this context that lack of good governance and corruption leads to frustration, animosity, tension and anger which are all threats to peace for everyone

The only way to do this is to take a comprehensive institutional approach. It will require consensus within different political parties and also within each party.

Our vibrant print media and our electronic media have been performing very well in sensitising and raising awareness about facets of governance that need attention. They are fulfilling an important task by doing so. Their role in this regard needs to be encouraged rather than criticised. Contrary to the views expressed by the leadership of the BNP Alliance, they are the true conscience keepers.

Quite often we have stimulating discussions on television where participants mention about erosion of values and entry of different factors that are tarnishing the electoral process. I am referring to this because we are presently passing through a phase that is supposed to result in a free and fair election acceptable to all. Such free ranging discussions are important.

They enable us to discover our latent potential. It also facilitates the democratic approach where after discussion: both parties cannot only express their opinions but also, if necessary agree to disagree.

We must be able to grow respect for the opinion of others and also practice the principle of bipartisanship. This will require a feeling of esteem for the political party or parties in Opposition within the Parliament. It has to be appreciated

achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. This will however not be possible unless we stop partisanship among civil servants. Politicisation breeds nepotism and affects efficiency and meritocracy. This aspect is particularly important because no other developing country is probably attempting such wide-ranging diverse avenues of development with such limited resources.

I now turn to certain other important areas where we need urgent attention -- an independent judiciary and an independent Election Commission, a functioning, financially autonomous Anti-Corruption Commission, a strong local government system, improvement in the free flow of information, further empowerment of women and the safeguarding of the interests of the minority groups amongst us. This process can be best assured through the separation of the judiciary from the executive, establishment of the long delayed national Human Rights Commission and the appointment of an Ombudsman. It would also be most useful for Bangladesh to sign and ratify the Anti-Corruption Convention of the United Nations.

It is indeed regrettable that all our political leaders talk about equity and equal opportunity and yet have refrained from implementing these basic and fundamental steps. The next elected government must address these issues with all seriousness.

We have today, most unnecessarily, slid down the path of political turmoil. Political parties, as well as all of us, have to be the engines of democracy. To this will be added our entrepreneurial spirit. Only these factors can help us to materialise the dream that so many of our martyrs saw during 1971.

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Victory Day -- thirty-five years later

MATIUR RAHMAN

DECEMBER 16, 1971. That is the day when the Pakistani forces surrendered to the Allied forces in Dhaka, marking the victory in the independence war of Bangladesh that started in the early hours of March 26 of 1971.

The victory was achieved through an effective combination of the valiant fight that our Muktiyodhas (Freedom Fighters) put up against the Pakistani forces, the resistance that our patriotic citizens built against the Pakistani occupation, the military and humanitarian aid provided by India, the diplomatic help given by the then Soviet Union through its veto power in the UN Security Council, and, of course, the moral support offered by millions of people worldwide.

During the nine-month long independence war millions of our people lost their lives, and millions more suffered indescribable atrocities and humiliation such as torture, rape, arson, loss of property and harassment of extreme nature in the hands of barbaric Pakistani military.

What was the compelling reason behind all the sacrifices that our people had to make for achieving independence? How did it all come about? If we do not understand the root causes of our independence movement from a historical perspective, and then use them as the guiding principles in shaping our present and future political agenda and state policies, the people's dreams and hopes that they had fought and died for will never be realised in independent Bangladesh.

The people of the then East Pakistan, now a sovereign state of Bangladesh, genuinely felt that they were deprived of their legitimate rights as citizens and subjected to discrimination, undue bias

and prejudice by the Pakistani central government in almost all matters. Therefore, spearheaded by Awami League and joined by many other parties, the people of East Pakistan started a mass movement in 1969 to remove the disparity among the citizens of the two wings of Pakistan -- East and West. Like every other movement, this one also resulted in the loss of life of many innocent Bangladeshi sons and daughters, but caused the ousting of Pakistan's central government through martial law by generals of West Pakistani origin -- not a good outcome at all.

In the spirit of the mass move-

closures of all offices, schools and colleges, for an indefinite period starting on March 07 of 1971. Consequently, the Pakistani government unleashed their military forces with extreme brutality on the innocent, unarmed people of East Pakistan on the night between March 25 and 26 in 1971, and started indiscriminate killing, rape, arson and looting which continued for nine months until the victory day.

This completely unnecessary, irrational and barbaric military action by the Pakistani military left the citizens of East Pakistan with no other option but to fight for independence.

We now need our new generations to regain the lost independence and victory from the clutches of the corrupt politicians through a democratic movement so vigorous that it shakes the ground under the feet of the evil ones. The proposed movement will take honest people and visionary leaders with intellectual resources, democratic values and creative ideas to overcome the obstacles created by the current band of selfish politicians with vested interests and ulterior motives.

ment of 1969, the people of East Pakistan rallied behind, and voted for Awami League to help them win majority seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan in the general elections at the end of 1970. The result of that election reflected nothing less or more than the people's mandate for justice and equality for the citizens of the then East Pakistan, and the rule of law in a parliamentary form of government for the whole of Pakistan.

But, not too surprisingly, the Pakistani generals refused to hand over power to the democratically elected government, showing utter disrespect to the people's will in a democracy, just because the majority of the parliament members were elected from East Pakistan. But the people of East Pakistan were determined not to have their electoral results thrown out by the military generals and started massive protests and strikes, with

In brief, this is why and how the nine-month long independence war started on March 26 and ended with a hard-earned victory on December 16 of 1971, through immeasurable sacrifices that are unparalleled in modern history.

Now, let's analyze the current situation in our country and see whether the common people have achieved what they had fought and died for, in an independent Bangladesh.

First, Bangladesh is fortunately an independent state now, and all patriotic citizens are overwhelmingly happy about this achievement of the highest order that any nation can ever have.

Second, even after the independence of Bangladesh, unfortunately, it took so many years, so many coups, so many dictatorships and so much bloodshed to establish a democratic form of government which the people had fought

the public resources and dispose of public matters any way they desire, without any accountability whatsoever. They have abused public trust time and again, and shown utter disrespect to all the sacrifices that people had made for independence.

In reality, neither our government nor the opposition actually cares about the people's will and desire or establishment of rule of law, as required by democracy. That's the reason why we recently experienced so much wrangling, life-paralyzing nationwide blockades, hartals and unnecessary street killings over the issue of Election Commission and the CEC -- mentioned here as just one of many such examples -- as if there is nothing more important in our national agenda, or people's life, than keeping or removing one individual.

How much rule of law people

enjoys on a day-to-day basis is a measure of how democracy is functioning for the benefit of the people in a society. In that respect, too, we are performing very poorly, maybe even worse than many nations without democracy. Both the government and the opposition parties are to be blamed equally for the miserable plight of the people today due to the unbearable law and order situation.

Third, our right to justice, equity, equal opportunity and security for all citizens that the people aspired to achieve after independence still remain a far cry. In fact, in our society today, might is always right

by crook, amassed huge fortunes by depriving the common people of their legitimate share in the national economy. By many estimates a large chunk of our national resources is now in the possession of a handful of individuals, without any lawful disclosure or explanation of the sources of their wealth.

In conclusion, it appears that our politicians have totally forgotten the reasons for the sacrifices that our people had made for achieving independence from the Pakistani rulers. And, it is also apparent that our corrupt politicians and their cronies have robbed the people of their dream of true national independence, hijacked people's hopes and aspirations about a democratic society with justice and equity for all, and turned the people's victory into their own selfish gains. So, it is no wonder today that, thirty-five years after the victory, people in our country still have not seen the results that they had fought and died for.

Therefore, we now need our new generations to regain the lost independence and victory from the clutches of the corrupt politicians through a democratic movement so vigorous that it shakes the ground under the feet of the evil ones. The proposed movement will take honest people and visionary leaders with intellectual resources, democratic values and creative ideas to overcome the obstacles created by the current band of selfish politicians with vested interests and ulterior motives. It may be a long and hard road ahead, but a determined people with patience and persistence will definitely reach the end.

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On denying the holocaust, and rewriting 1971

The genocide in '71 is a universal outrage, a clear-cut case of a crime against humanity by all internationally accepted definitions. However incomplete, documentation already exists about both the human cost and the role and identity of war collaborators who helped to perpetrate this heinous act and are now living comfortably in Bangladesh. The more we shirk away from trying to bring them to justice the more vulnerable we become to having this fundamental aspect of our history threatened, and perhaps erased quietly and unceremoniously.

In the past few years, the second BNP-led government has persistently tried to establish Ziaur Rahman as the person who first declared independence. Over the last two decades, national school curricula have been changed subtly to downplay the role of war collaborators, and to avoid terms like "Pakistani" or "Razakar." School children are learning that freedom fighters had fought a faceless enemy called "Hanadar Bahini," without any other identity, national or religious. The list goes on.

In Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I live, we organised a confer-

ence at Harvard University two weeks ago to commemorate the 35th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence. It was attended by academics from many different countries, as well as a large number of Bengali expatriates. Our experience, even within that small universe, reflected the far-reaching success of the revisionism in Bangladesh.

We shuddered to hear from an attendee that when he tried to stage a play about independence in his prominent English-medium school in Dhaka, permission was refused because the play used

offensive words like "Razakar." We learnt that it is now anathema in some circles to acknowledge the crucial role that India played in the liberation war. While historians from Pakistan and India paid tribute to the Bengali intellectuals who were systematically killed in 1971, some members of the new generation of Bangladeshis saw, for the first time, documentary evidence of our own Holocaust.

Our two-day conference ended with a dramatic musical, performed by a group called Amra Kojon, recounting the history of independence, which brought tears to the

eyes of a packed audience. I didn't foresee that this would also serve to rally some local "Bangladeshis," who rejected our portrayal of independence as one-sided, and went on to denigrate the leader of that troupe. His fault? He is Hindu.

This is where survivors of two of the biggest atrocities in modern history differ. The Jews who endured the Second World War were able to establish the Holocaust as a moral affront to humanity as a whole, a crime worthy of universal condemnation, and something that is simply beyond the narrow confines of

party or even national politics. Supported by the victors, they were able to bring to justice many perpetrators in the first international trial for war crimes in 1945-46. Those who profited from the Holocaust are still being tracked down and prosecuted. Evidence of the extent of this genocide has been gathered painstakingly worldwide, and will easily hold ground against assertions made at this conference in Iran.

Can we confidently say the same for ourselves? The history of the genocide in 1971 has been thoroughly politicized, thanks to revisions sponsored first by military juntas, and then by parties that grew out of those regimes. It is understandable that thirty-five years is not a long time, and that a lot remains to be written and documented about the war. But the genocide is one aspect of our struggle for independence that cannot be denied. We cannot allow it to be further reduced by political

or religious affiliation. The movement to try the war criminals of 1971 must be revived, and we must insist that doing so is not an Awami League agenda, a Hindu conspiracy, or anti-Islam propaganda.

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