

I am a mother

I am a mother, after all. My daughter is very depressed. When she feels some pain, she calls me and asks, "Maa, when will you come here?" What answer should I give her? I cannot directly tell her that I am living a 'detained' life, no one's even allowed to visit me.

SHEIKH HASINA

JULY, 1971. A small single-storey house on Dhanmondi's road number 18. This is where the Pakistani Occupation army detained my mother. With her were my brothers Jamal and Russel, my sister Rehana, my husband and I, Khoka Uncle, Aunty and their son. I was pregnant. When father raised the flag with his own hands on March 23, he told me "Your son will be a citizen of a free country. Name your son Joy (Victory)." I was four months pregnant with Joy. I was going to get a taste of motherhood for the first time, the first time a child will come to my lap. It was a feeling that I could not describe with words.

When, on March 25, the Pakistani military attacked Dhaka University, Pilkhana, Rajarbagh Police Line and other places, they attacked our house on Dhanmondi's road number 32, as well. They arrested father that night for declaring Independence.

As planned, when the Pakistani occupation forces attacked the unarmed Bengalis around 11pm, the declaration of independence was transmitted all around the country on the East Pakistan Rifles' (EPR, now Bangladesh Rifles) wireless system. Telegrams were also sent to all districts and thanas. People were assigned for this particular task from before, as part of a pre-planned programme.

Around 11pm, Rehana, my maternal cousin Jelly and I were taken to another house, in fear that the Pakistani forces would attack our home. Our home was surrounded by detectives; helicopters were hovering above with their search-lights on our house. When our car left the driveway, they shed their search-lights on our car too. Around 1am, they attacked our house and killed Khokon outside. They arrested father. Before January 8, 1972 we received no news about whether he was alive or dead or where he was taken.

The next day when they attacked our home again, Maa took

shelter at our neighbour's house with Russel. The curfew started on the night of the 25th continued through March 26, but it was relaxed around 3-4pm on March 27. That's when we went from house to house looking for shelter as the Occupation forces kept control of our home.

For two months, we changed our location 19 times with no certainty whether we were going to eat or not. We would be in one place today, but move to another tomorrow. We spent days after days like this, with hardly a place to sleep.

I faced this crisis when I was pregnant, just when I wanted to eat a lot of things. But where would I get the food? We kept spending our days like this, with Maa unable to leave me in such condition. In the meantime, Kamal had left to join the liberation war.

Around this time, we were arrested from a house in Maghbazar and taken to a small house on Dhanmondi's road number 18.

They gave us only a blanket and



a chair for the family. There was no food and there was nothing to cook food with. When they arrested us we hadn't even had our lunch and we had to stay like that through the day and into the night. Anyhow, victims would surely know how it feels to be imprisoned.

While spending our days like this, I got slight labour pains four weeks before the baby was due. They sent me to the hospital and the pains remained for another week. As I was writhing in pain, Maa could not be there next to me. When Maa wanted to come to the hospital, a government representative made it clear: "What will you do by going to the hospital? There

are doctors and nurses at the hospital and they will look after her. Are you a nurse or a doctor? You are neither. You can't go."

Maa broke down in tears when she heard this and said, "I am a mother. I want to stay with my daughter. My daughter is suffering; I want to give her strength, I want to give her my prayers; I want to give her confidence."

But these tears carried no value for the Pakistani Occupation army. They were perhaps happy that they were making Maa suffer so much while I lay there in pain and with every pang of pain I was crying out mother's name. I was in a lot of pain for a week. Then Joy came. I thanked Allah a thousand times that the Almighty gave me a healthy baby. But can I ever forget the pain of not having my mother next to me?

In 1981, when I was elected as the Awami League President in absentia, Joy was nine and a half and my daughter was eight years old. Leaving them with Rehana I took a stand next to the people, with the Awami League divided in two or three factions. Bangladesh was under military rule. I tried to rebuild the party and simultaneously carried on the struggle for democracy. Joy and Putul grew up without the love and warmth of motherhood. When they needed

their mother the most, they did not get their mother next to them. Even when they were brought back to Dhaka and enrolled into school in 1983, I was either imprisoned or under house arrest. Their education kept suffering.

When I was imprisoned in 1985, father's friend Aziz Sattar Uncle took Joy and Putul to Nainital and enrolled them in schools there. They lived in hostels thereafter and came back and lived in the small two-bedroom apartment at Mohakhali's Atomic Energy quarters. I would stay so busy even then that I could not spend any time with them. They studied at a missionary school at a modest cost and didn't even receive good food. Even though I'm their mother, I robbed them of their mother's warmth for the sake of the country and the people. I deeply love the people of my country. I can't stay away from them. But, I carried my children and the pull of their warmth and love compels me to spend time with them, too. Who doesn't like to spend time with their children and their grandchildren? I don't look at the people and my children in different lights. I have perhaps given 300 out of 365 days in a year to the people. But, even then, I am grateful to Allah for giving my children a good education and raising them to become

good human beings. That is my greatest attainment.

I lost my parents and brothers on 15 August, 1975. My sister Rehana and I had to spend time overseas. When I have suffered so much for the sake of my two children, I was not allowed to stand next to them when they needed me the most. Why did they make my daughter suffer so much? Meanwhile, there are all these games being played with the democratic rights of the country's people. How much more should Bangladeshis suffer? They aren't even letting me stand next to them.

In 2007, I stand here as a citizen of a free country. My daughter is pregnant and she will give birth within a few days. Doctors have said that her baby is due on the ninth of this month. I thought I would go a few days early. She drives for an hour to get to work and she worked until June 24. She thought if she earns more money, it will be easier to receive a longer maternity leave. So she had to drive to work carrying this child inside her. At least I could have cooked for her; taken a little care of her. She was to cook after coming back from work, look after her children and do everything else. You cannot get maids in the United States, they cost too much and my daughter cannot afford them. I

thought I would go to Putul in June. I even booked a ticket. I was about to start. But there were three layers of security with hundreds of police. They even instructed the airport authorities not to allow me to fly off. They have filed two false cases. When I went to visit Joy's sick wife and tried to return, they wouldn't let me return. Now they will not let me leave.

I am a mother, after all. My daughter is very depressed. When she feels some pain, she calls me and asks, "Maa, when will you come here?" What answer should I give her? I cannot directly tell her that I am living a 'detained' life, no one's even allowed to visit me.

The current government will not let me go.

She will have to go to the hospital within another 3 or 4 days. When she will call for her Maa, she will not find me next to her. The pain that I felt in 1971, will my daughter suffer the same pain? Aren't we living in a free country? Putul, your mother could not come to you. Can you forgive you mother for this failure, please?

I want to know what is my crime that I cannot be next to my daughter. Are we still living in the same 1971? (Translated from Bangla)

The above text was sent to the press yesterday by the writer, who is President of AL and former PM.

Reform for people's redemption

To put it bluntly, reforms that guarantee people's true redemption are the reforms the people are interested in. However, any reform for reinstitution or rehabilitation of crooked leaders -- no matter whether they are reformists or conformists -- is unlikely to go down well with the battered and shattered people of the land. They have had enough of it. Believe me! They are no more ready to make do with superficial changes.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

THE campaign for political reform in the major political parties can be said to be on a roller-coaster in view of the proposals, counter-proposals, speculations of councils, straightforward cum strategic minus formulas, and so on. While BNP reformists have set the stage for Khaleda's direct exit from politics, AL reformists have prepared their ammunition to send Hasina packing some way or the other.

Yes, the "minus-two" formula seems to have been reinvigorated in the kaleidoscopic political landscape of Bangladesh. Interestingly enough, many BNP reformists seem to be rallying round their reform guru Mannan Bhuiyan, while AL reformist kingpins are also not sitting idle. However, the general people are watching things with great interest and judging the happenings from their own viewpoints.

Truly, reform is more than essential. But what for? For the devoted yet neglected party leaders, reform is for purging the parties of unhealthy elements. For the opportunists, however, reform has turned out to be an escape route and, in a sense, an avenue for respectable

rehabilitation. But, what special import does reform have for the common people? Yes, I can say for sure that people want unfailing reassurances, or rather, guarantees.

Yes, the people want a guarantee from the political leaders that they will get permanent relief and redemption from all the evils the leaders had inflicted upon them in collusion with decaying machineries, crooked mechanisms, patronised musclemen, and overpowering mafias.

To be frank, reform for democratisation within the parties is a bare necessity, but emancipation from the clutches of hardened criminals in the guise of political leaders bears real significance for the common people.

Yes, the people want a guarantee that no minister or leader will loot public money and build palaces, while people languish in abject poverty. If the ministers decide to go straight, the officials under them will always be under obligation to follow suit.

Meanwhile, a campaign against corrupt officials is also on. People also want the leaders to say that they will not use luxury vehicles while the people hang like monkeys in and outside the crammed public

transports.

Yes, the people want a guarantee that no minister or leader will turn himself into a godfather, thereby turning public life into a veritable hell by his own, or his hooligans', actions. People also want permanent relief from the relatives and hooligans of leaders who snatch people's property. People also want a firm guarantee that there will not be a rebirth of maastans who grow up to be petty godfathers under the care of leaders and mafias.

The people want a guarantee from the leaders that national institutions will not be turned into rehabilitation centres for party cadres, and that party-loyalty or money will not be the criterion for being selected for government jobs.

People also want a guarantee that recruitments will not be made for serving the party rather than the country, and that question papers of various examinations will not be leaked to facilitate entry of unqualified party cadres in government jobs.

People want a guarantee from the leaders that people who toe the party line will not man responsible positions. Rather, that people of caliber and commitment, who will remain committed to performing their duties efficiently for the best

interests of the nation, would be in such positions. Yes, people also want a guarantee that they will not be fleeced by business syndicates that operated mostly under state patronisation in the past.

Unfortunately, the syndicates were so ingrained in the previous political regime that even the current interim government is yet to be successful in debunking the sinister cartel. This, however, makes it imperative for the political leaders to hammer out practical measures to salvage the country from the curse of unremitting syndication.

People want a guarantee that they will be able to move on the streets without the threat of being attacked by hartal picketers. People also want a guarantee that they will not be burnt alive in vehicles set on fire by hartal supporters, or saboteurs.

People want a guarantee from the leaders that none of their acts will induce calls of unending blockades, and that the blockade supporters will not paralyse public life and hold back people's movements for life and livelihood.

Yes, people also want a guarantee that no prime minister will sit idle despite knowing the fact that his son is engaged in patronising militants, a deadly game which threatened to tear apart our nationhood in the recent past.

Yes, the people also want a guarantee that no prime minister will advocate for a hated criminal and roar that the criminal will survive, and the ones who are out to nab him will be finished.



To put it bluntly, reforms that guarantee people's true redemption are the reforms the people are interested in. However, any reform for reinstitution or rehabilitation of crooked leaders -- no matter whether they are reformists or conformists -- is unlikely to go down well with the battered and shattered people of the land. They have had enough of it.

Believe me! They are no more ready to make do with superficial changes.

Nothing short of foolproof assurances of total deliverance from the future misdeeds of the leaders and their retinue is likely to gratify them. Such a scenario might appear too idealistic, but another opportunity to seek such a state of affairs might not reappear in our lifetime. Arguably, a

tug of war among reformists and conformists in major political parties is on the cards.

There is, then, every possibility of people's expectations and desires being sandwiched in between. In the cutthroat rivalry for establishing command in the parties, leaders might even revert back to their heinous activities and trample the redeeming features of the intended

reforms. A constant vigilance on the part of the citizenry is thus sine qua non, so that the all-important "redemption" issue does not get lost in the hullabaloo.

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Bombers without borders

British and US officials contacted by NEWSWEEK said investigators were still trying to figure out how the suspects in the plot -- eight have now been arrested in the UK and Australia, and seven are believed to be doctors or medical students -- got together to plan and carry out the failed bombings.

MICHAEL ISIKOFF AND MARK HOSENBALL

IN the hours after last weekend's foiled car bomb attacks in London and

Glasgow, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown strongly suggested that Osama bin Laden's terror group was behind the incidents. "It is clear that we are dealing in general terms with people who are

associated with Al Qaeda," Brown told the BBC. But is there really a connection to the network?

US and British authorities are looking into the possibility that one or more of the medical workers

arrested in the failed attacks may have had contact with Al Qaeda in Iraq, formed after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and loosely affiliated with Al Qaeda's high command.

An official familiar with the investigation said that no firm connection had yet been established between any of the suspects and the Iraq group, and there certainly is no evidence yet that it might have orchestrated the UK plot. But, said the official, there may be reason to suspect that those detained have been in touch with known associates of the ultra-violent insurgent group set up by Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi.

However, because the Iraq connection is so tentative at this stage, officials on both sides of the Atlantic remain skeptical that the UK plot was orchestrated by Al Qaeda's top leaders.

For a start, the bombings themselves were so thoroughly bungled that it's seen as unlikely that Osama bin Laden or his main associates had any direct role. US and British officials said it was still a possibility that the attacks were largely planned on British soil, even though it appears that few, if any of the plotters, fit the profile of the native-born, alienated British Muslims who have been implicated

in other recent UK terror plots.

All three known car bombs evidently failed to explode as intended. Two were seized by police without incident and the third car went up in flames after two suspects drove it headlong into a Glasgow Airport terminal building.

A British counter-terrorism official, who asked for anonymity when talking about the investigation, says the "amateurish" performance of the plotters is leading investigators to discount the notion that the attacks were orchestrated "from some cave in [Pakistan's] Northwestern Frontier" -- the remote Afghanistan-Pakistan border region where bin Laden is believed to be hiding. Nor are investigators confident that a "mastermind" orchestrated the British plot from outside the UK.

British and US officials contacted by NEWSWEEK said investigators were still trying to figure out how the suspects in the plot -- eight have now been arrested in the UK and Australia, and seven are believed to be doctors or medical students -- got together to plan and carry out the failed bombings.

A British official said it was possible all had somehow cooked up the plot before coming to Britain. But it is also possible they did not

meet up until after all were in the country, where they appear to have had easy entrée to Britain's medical education and nationalised health-care systems.

British authorities have not officially released either the names or nationalities of any alleged plotters. Two British officials indicated this was because investigators are still looking for other possible suspects in the case and going public with that information could hamper the investigation.

An official familiar with the investigation would not say which or how many of the suspects might have had contacts with Al Qaeda in Iraq, but one of the suspects in the Glasgow Airport attack, identified as Bilal Talal Samad Abdulla, is an Iraqi who graduated from medical school in Baghdad.

As is frequently the case in the early stages of a UK terror investigation, there are conflicting accounts of how much the police now know about the plans. A US official said he did not believe the British were still conducting a huge manhunt for more suspected conspirators. But an official in London said that UK authorities were definitely "still looking for individuals"; another London official said the Scotland Yard

investigation was so intense that detectives were cancelling scheduled meetings with officials of other agencies.

US and UK officials privately acknowledge the accuracy of news reports indicating that a majority, if not most of the suspects arrested in the case are doctors or medical students -- all from the Middle East region, including Iraq.

None, apparently, was born in Britain. Several counterterrorism officials on both sides of the Atlantic said that so far as they could recall, there is no previously known case in which an apparent cell comprised of medical personnel has been implicated in an Islamic-inspired terror plot. "I've never heard of it before," said an official in London familiar with the views of UK intelligence agencies. "It's unique, baffling," said a Washington official familiar with U.S. intelligence reporting.

Several counterterrorism officials and experts noted that bin Laden's chief deputy and longtime sidekick, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was a practicing physician before he became consumed by radical jihadi politics. A US counterterrorism official said that certainly upper-middle-class extremists had been implicated in past terrorist

plots and networks, though he too acknowledged that the extensive involvement of doctors in the UK case is "strange."

Guido Steinberg, a terrorism expert who advised former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, said that years ago, Zawahiri and other doctors and professionals were among early recruits to violent factions, including Egyptian and Palestinian Islamic jihad movements. But, says Steinberg, these professionals tended to move up the ranks and become leaders of radical movements, rather than launch themselves into frontline plans.

Steinberg says information about the doctors' role in the failed London and Glasgow attacks runs counter to the historical profile investigators had assembled of likely UK-based Islamic terrorists.

The fact that the latest case has confounded profilers and other experts has them concerned that it may be more difficult to spot and shut down future terror plots before they get off the ground.

