

Recalling the great victory of 1971

We must deal with threats to our sovereign dignity

WE remember the historic victory the Bengali nation achieved on this day in 1971. A recapitulation of it pacifies increased intensity when we recall the many tribulations and the immensity of suffering that went into our national triumph. The emergence of the sovereign state of Bangladesh in 1971 was not a run of the mill affair brought about by political negotiations around a table. It was an achievement arising out of a concerted war of national liberation, in which tens of thousands of men and women in the Mukti Bahini in particular and the people of Bangladesh in general put their lives on the line as they sought to send the Pakistan occupation army and its local collaborators packing. It was a war forced on us and over the nine months of it 3,000,000 of our fellow Bengalis were to die; 200,000 women would be raped by Pakistan's soldiers; 10,000,000 would seek refuge in India and whole villages and towns would be left ravaged. We opted to hit back, to let the enemy know that the country belonged to us and that sooner rather than later his stranglehold on Bangladesh would go.

Today, thirty-six years after that momentous victory, it is appropriate that we pay tribute to all men and women who made it possible for us to take our place in the comity of free nations. We recall the historic contributions made by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to the growth of our nationalism and indeed to our armed struggle for freedom. We will be failing in our responsibilities if we do not pay tribute to the brave men who, as the leaders of the guerrilla war that would eventually lead us to freedom. We recall the great contributions made by all our sector commanders and all the soldiers of the Mukti Bahini in the war. And we have not forgotten the very significant moral and material support given to us by Indian government and people in our struggle against the forces of occupation. No remembrance of victory can be complete without recalling the courage and resilience of the entire population of Bangladesh in that time of fear.

As we observe Victory Day this year, let us remain aware of the priorities before us. And they centre on what we must do to face up to the assaults lately made on the spirit of the War of Liberation by the known collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army. The sector commanders of the war formed a human chain demanding trial of war criminals. Large sections of society, indeed the people of Bangladesh as a whole, have clearly supported such moves. It now remains for us to have that goal realised, for that is the only way in which we can do away with all threats to our national sovereignty and cultural dignity.

Demolition disaster

A tragic tale of incompetence

IF anything, the way RAJUK has gone about the business of demolishing the Rangs Bhaban exposes grave shortcomings of government agencies in undertaking a sensitive and delicate operation demanding maximum precision such as demolition of a high-rise building. It is a classic example of a shoddy and clumsy work, undertaken without detailed planning and adequate precaution and safety measures.

One could not help but notice a cynical hurry in the RAJUK action soon after the court order, declaring the construction above the sixth floor of the Bhaban illegal, was given. No sooner was the verdict announced than we found the RAJUK workers raring to undertake the demolition of the building, only with shovels and picks. The occupants were not given adequate notice to vacate the premises and shift their movable property elsewhere. The entire operation looked so amateurish as to betray a definite bias and a premeditated mindset of the establishment, as if there was an agenda to fulfill in a hurry.

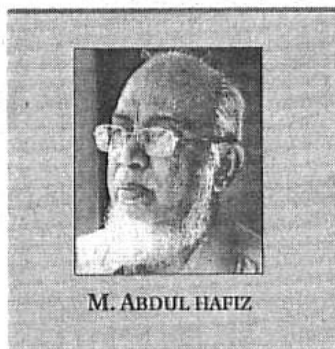
To learn that Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) was not complied with by the very agency that is tasked to ensure its compliance is a sad commentary on the concern for public safety of a government agency.

The blame for the incompetent, careless and haphazard way that the demolition work has been undertaken is not only for RAJUK alone to shoulder. The government cannot shirk its responsibility of the mess that has been created which has not only cost a dozen lives but also poses potential threat to the many buildings and lives in the vicinity of Rangs Bhaban, let alone thousands of commuters that pass by it daily. One would have expected the government to exercise more supervision and control before the work commenced and during the process as well.

It is well to keep in mind that demolition of a structure in a way is more difficult than its construction. We wonder whether RAJUK or indeed those that were given the contract to bring down the building, had the necessary expertise and equipment for such an undertaking. We feel that this should have been thoroughly scrutinized by all the concerned agencies beforehand.

We strongly recommend that the government take action against those responsible for the mishap. As for compensation, not only the relatives of those that have died must be adequately compensated, RANGS, the owner of the building, and all those that owned property in the said premises between the third and sixth floors, which is a legal structure but now stand destroyed by the collapse, should also be fully compensated for their losses.

My celebration of victory in 1971



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

I listened to it spellbound. It was a brief, mesmerising news bulletin announcing the fall of Dhaka. The broadcast was loud and clear: Dhaka had fallen and there was a ceasefire in the eastern front under local arrangements.

In other words, Bangladesh was liberated -- marking its victory. It could not be disbelieved because Radio Pakistan itself was broadcasting the bulletin. The news kept reverberating, first in the bunker I was listening to the news from, and then in my heart for the rest of the night.

Till about 10 at night we sat glum in the dug-in field mess. On previous nights there would be discussions for hours about the battle situations in different sectors punctuated by roars of laughter, discussions to show one's military knowledge, from minor tactics to grand strategy, in the presence of

PERSPECTIVES
I was listening to the news from Radio Pakistan immersed in ecstasy and pain. I listened to the news, which might not come in one's lifetime or in a generation, except only once in the whole span of thousands of years of the history of a people. The great moment that eluded us for hundreds of years had come at long last. One can keep his sorrow to himself. But joy? The joy can turn into pain or even torture unless shared with others or rejoiced in public in its fitting manner.

their superiors.

But tonight there was no discussion, no laughter, no enthusiasm. Only an eerie silence prevailed, sending the chill of an unknown fear down my spine. For the last few days of the war, the situation certainly took a clear turn and was fast approaching its denouement. Pakistani defences seemed to be crumbling on the western front also, particularly in the battle for the control of the air.

Indian bombers flew low over our battle location near Luliani on the Lahore road almost unhindered and there proceeded towards Lahore in majestic formation. Minutes later we could hear the thud of the exploding bombs on the elegant city that was the pride of the Pakistanis. In spite of such setbacks, none, however, thought that the war would come to such a decisive end so quickly.

Apparently, the Pakistanis had broken since the afternoon,

when for the first time Pakistan admitted that the allied forces had entered the city of Dhaka. Fed with false hopes of an imminent victory and inspiring news of big Pakistani gains on different fronts, the Pakistanis now appeared crestfallen. I had never seen them so dispirited in the field where, under any adversity, they always put up a brave face. They could never countenance defeat.

We left the men a little before our usual time. It was a great relief because the mood inside the mess was about to suffocate us all. For the first time, the commanding officer did not turn up for dinner. Others were morose and they preferred to remain quiet.

Only Captain Parvaiz, the talkative adjutant of the regiment tried to dilute the gloom with his rather poor attempt at humour but that did not click. "Finally the victory will be ours. So what that they have taken

Dhaka?" He mimicked the speech of President General Yahya Khan delivered at the outset of war, and continued to assert that the first goal did not mean victory. He referred to some Olympic hockey match where the first goal was scored by India, but Pakistan ultimately won the match.

Sceptical of such a prospect in inter-state conflict, no one wanted to share his optimism. They were the same people who had been claiming to be the descendants of Delhi's sultans and emperors and were always hopeful of storming the historical Red Fort. Surprisingly, on a melancholy December night of 1971, that bravado vanished, leaving no trace of it on anyone's face. As Parvaiz kept chattering, a disgusted second-in-command curtly asked him to simply shut up and abruptly left. In no time, others also dispersed.

I then hastened for the

bunker. I wanted to be in time for the 10 p.m. news. For the entire duration of the war, the bunker was the world of my own. It was now that I could get access to the forbidden news of Bangladesh -- defying, of course, the military's writ that no soldier would listen to the news from other than one broadcast by Radio Pakistan.

Anything forbidden has its irresistible attraction, and I had to resort to this indulgence at the gravest of risks. It was in this bunker that I could lie down under several layers of blankets and tune in to the frequencies desired -- audio stations like BBC, VoA, or Akash Bani. I had been doing all throughout without remorse or sense of guilt. I thought it to be the rightful quest for seeking truth. Tonight, I was at it again. I was listening to the greatest of news as if I had survived the hazards of the war only for that moment.

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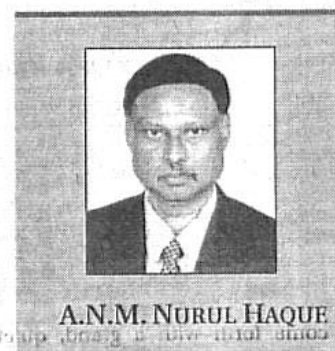
shared with others or rejoiced in public in its fitting manner. I alone had no capacity to bear its burden. I was squarely facing history's avalanche which I had no power to withstand. During the cold night of December 16, 1971 an utter helplessness tormented me. I was seized with a strange feeling which afflicted me with an agonising convulsion. And the news kept reverberating in the ether for the rest of the night.

At this midnight hour of long winter night my Pakistani colleagues were in their bunkers -- either sleeping or tossing on their sides with an inexplicable anguish. A little distance away were the bunkers of the other ranks and their assorted sleeping arrangements. Some slept in command post or in the communication exchange while others were resting in their camouflaged vehicles in dug-in position. With all quiet on the border and no guns booming, tonight could be ideal for rest. But alas! A shroud of insult seemed to have descended on them not to allow them that.

However, a few sentries were wide awake. They were trying to drive away sleep by pacing up and down. I was their only companion at the dead to night, with, of course, Bangladesh covering the whole space of my bosom.

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The verve of Victory Day



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE nation celebrates today the 36th Victory Day for paying tributes to the untold number of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for liberating our motherland from the clutches of Pakistani occupation forces. Freedom had dawned on this day 36 years back at the end of a nine-month long war against an enemy who did not desist from committing genocide to retain their repression and exploitation over the people of this land.

The Victory Day is, therefore, not only a gala day of triumph and glory, but also an auspicious occasion for the nation to rekindle its patriotic fervour and renew pledges to fulfill the dreams of the martyrs.

Our liberation war was, in fact, a struggle of the common people who had been deprived of their basic needs. But their perpetual cries for food, cloth, shelter and health-care have not yet been diminished. One would obviously like to know as to why the

BY THE NUMBERS

No amount of glowing tributes, no homage will be enough in honouring the valiant souls of our martyrs, unless we could deal severely with the anti-liberation elements who are now trying to denigrate the war of liberation, the greatest event of triumph, glory, and pride in the history of this nation. Let the verve of the Victory Day animate the nation and their united efforts be directed to make the country safe for the ideals and values for which the heroes of 1971 sacrificed themselves. We all owe this to our martyrs, who considered death preferable to a life of subjugation.

majority of people in the country are in such a miserable condition even after more than three and a half decades of owning independence.

When the first poverty survey was carried out in the independent Bangladesh in 1973-74, more than 70 per cent people were found living below the poverty line. The percentage of such people came down to 58 per cent in 1991-92, and further down to 49 per cent in 1999-2000. Though the percentage of people living below the poverty line has come down to 40 per cent, the rich-poor gap has increased instead of diminishing over the years.

Bangladesh, 36 years after achieving freedom, is still not far away from the trauma that it went through during the last quarter of 1970s. Admittedly, there have been a few glories of achievements over the years, which include micro-credit development, drop in child mortality, lower birth rate, and women's empowerment.

But the successes that Bangladesh has achieved in all these years, are quite insignificant. The long list of utilities has soiled these meager achievements. The right to justice, equity and equal opportunity for all citizens that the people aspired to achieve after independence still remain a distant dream.

On this auspicious day 36 years back, destiny provided us with an opportunity to govern ourselves and lead the nation towards progress and prosperity. But the dreams and hopes of the people, for which they had fought and died, have not been materialised in the independent Bangladesh. The persons who ruled the country in all these years were responsible, more or less, for this failure.

The people of Bangladesh, who have faced and survived so many ordeals in history, now happen to confront the biggest challenge for electing honest and competent candidates in the next general election. Politics in the

country had gone to the dark grip of hypocrisy, and nexus between crime and politics was widespread. It has now become the prerogative for the people to put pressure on the major political parties for nominating competent candidates.

The most disgraceful thing for the nation is the emergence of war criminals in the political mainstream of the country. As the BNP became more dependent on Jamaat-e-Islam for its support in the power-sharing electoral game, the Jamaat now holds an enviable position in the country's political arena. The fundamentalists against whom we had fought in 1971 have been nurtured under state patronage.

Of late, these elements are rearing their heads to snap at the ideals and values of our liberation war. What an irony, a university teacher informs us that there are no war criminals in Bangladesh as the war in 1971 was between India and Pakistan. The nation

feels quite aggrieved when a retired civil servant says that it was a civil war and not a war of liberation that took place in 1971. These persons are now even trying to prove that they did no wrong for collaborating with the occupation forces.

The ideals for which our freedom fighters embraced martyrdom are now getting lost. A darkening of cloud is overwhelming the country and once again we need to display the force of unity to safeguard the country from the machination of all evil forces.

The freedom fighters, who were untrained and were barely armed, fought bravely against an organised army armed to the teeth. Still victory was won because the people of this country, whether in the battlefield or in their homes, were united and built strong resistance against the occupation forces. There is no family in the country that did not pay a severe price in the liberation war.

But the murky politics has pathetically divided the nation. Not only that, it has created a fertile ground for rehabilitation of the anti-liberation elements who have also wiggled their way to parliament and the cabinet, the highest seat of our national dignity.

Though the battlefield victory was won 36 years ago, the struggle for implementation of the ideals and values that our people believe in and for which the peo-

ple had fought and died in 1971 must be intensified. The Victory Day this year should be observed not in pomp but in the spirit and vigour that went into the making of Bangladesh.

A stable democracy still eludes us. A sort of national consensus has developed against the futile politics. It is the national unity which is now badly needed. Only a united nation can really bring a real victory and the venue for its celebration will be our hearts.

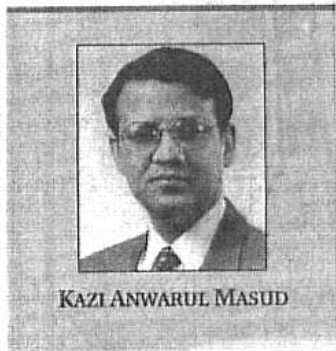
The Victory Day always brings back to our minds the horrific scenes that occurred during the nine months of liberation war and made us unwilling to forget or forgive those of our compatriots who were actively involved in committing crimes against humanity.

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Threat identification and resolution



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THERE is a school of thought that not only describes three great civilisations -- Greek, Egyptian and Roman -- as slavery based civilisations, but has also ascribed their eventual demise on being based only on sword and not on values.

This sweeping generalisation denies the contributions made by these civilisations to art and culture in its various forms, and the values imparted by them. The Greek philosophy that flowered between 600 and 200 BC, in the words of one eminent scholar, "foreshadowed many theories of modern science, and many of the moral ideas of the

GOING DEEPER

One, therefore, has to be aware as to where the threat lies to the welfare of the people of not only of this generation but of the ones following us as well. The incidence of poverty in Bangladesh is about 40% of the total population. One wonders whether we have taken proper lessons from the devastation caused by Cyclone Sidr.

pagan Greek philosophers were incorporated into Christian moral doctrine. The political ideas set forth by the Greek thinkers influenced political leaders as different as the framers of the US Constitution and the founders of various of 20th century totalitarian states."

It is difficult to disown Socrates' description of the soul as a combination of an individual's intelligence and character. Equally Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Ethics have continued to exercise the intellect of the global community till today. While the power of the sword brought coherence among disparate elements that the Greeks and the Romans ruled, for that was the order of the day, it would

be incorrect to conclude that the foundation of the three civilisations rested only upon the might of the sword.

Consequent to the disappearance of these civilisations, in the opinion of one school of thought, arose religion-based civilisations, that of Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Judaism. These civilisations have continued to survive till today because these are based on a "cluster of human values."

Interestingly, the school notes that all four religion-based civilisations were born in Asia, and two, Hinduism and Buddhism, were born and nurtured in South Asia. It would, however, be too optimistic to think that the sword would become irrelevant

in the present-day context and that the commonality of the "cluster of values" would protect us from inter and intra-regional conflict.

As Samuel Huntington wrote in his oft-quoted thesis: the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or economic, but cultural: "A civilisation is a cultural entity...[a] civilisation is the highest cultural grouping of the people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species."

Though Huntington has put economic differences at a lesser level of non-military security threat (NTS) it would be unwise

to give total credence to Huntington's premise because economic disparity between people of the North and the South, inter-regional and intra-regional disparity, and disparity within the country, are more likely to deepen the possibility of conflict that no "cluster of values" can dissipate.

Therefore, be it Adam Smith's dominant self-interest; competitive efficiency based on social Darwinism; Newton's principles of natural law; utilitarian views of greatest good for greatest number; transition of Western political economy from feudalism to mercantilism to industrial democracy and promotion of globalisation of trade through competitive efficiency and communication, the Western politico-economic superiority over the rest of the world has come to stay.

Then again the West would be well advised to be aware of NTS like climate change, cross-border environmental degradation and resource depletion, natural disasters, irregular migration, food shortage,

human and drug trafficking, and other forms of transnational crimes.

If Al Gore's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech is anything to go by, then the culprit is decidedly the West, and primarily the US which should sign on to the Kyoto Protocol without delay. Indeed, Gareth Evans' "responsibility to protect" takes a hundred and eighty degrees turn, because the survival of not any system or country is at stake -- what is at stake is the world itself.

The UN Environmental Program Report published hours ahead of the Oslo ceremony awarding the Nobel Peace Prize noted that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh face especially severe risk from climate change led by glacial retreat in the Himalayas that will threaten the water supply for millions of people. Sea level rise and cyclones will threaten the coast line of the Bay of Bengal and change in monsoon rains will hit agriculture.

According to one report: "These dynamics will increase the social crisis potential in a

region which is already characterised by cross-border conflicts (India/Pakistan), unstable governments (Pakistan/Bangladesh), and Islamism." US State Department in a recent report stated that more than a billion people in Asia can face reduced water availability by mid-century.

One, therefore, has to be aware as to where the threat lies to the welfare of the people of not only of this generation but of the ones following us as well. The incidence of poverty in Bangladesh is about 40% of the total population. One wonders whether we have taken proper lessons from the devastation caused by Cyclone Sidr.

Would holding of an election, giving us electoral democracy with fragile or even embryonic state of the institutions supportive of democratic structure, give us the answer to the inequities that have been our lot for decades? Does Bangladesh have the economic strength to withstand such dreaded events without external assistance, should

these recur? Would electoral democracy necessarily give us the discipline essential for export-driven and investment-friendly economic development?

Discounting the obvious differences in the size of population and that all three are island states, did South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan make a mistake in the early years of their development by following the policies of Park Chung-Hee, Lee Kwan Yew, and Chiang Kai Shek?

Our current leaders have repeatedly stated that elections will be held on schedule to bring about representative democracy. One only hopes that the reports crowding our media of the tears flowing down the face of the cyclone affected people would cease and others waiting for decades to get out of the poverty trap would be able to do so. Growth that is iniquitous and morally insupportable is no answer for the trials and tribulations of Bangladesh.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.