degradation, health -- the list is both extensive and exhaustive. Why try to address events that happened "so long ago" when we have so much more to do in terms of the present?

Second, there is an argument regarding resources -- why invest in tribunals, truth commissions, or any other form of mechanism to address crimes of the past, when the resources can better serve the population today?

Third, along the same vein, the resources we do have regarding the judicial infrastructure is better put to use in addressing the crimes of today, not to prosecute crimes committed "so long ago."

Fourth, there is the argument for stability -- we want peace at all costs, even if the definition of peace is based on the minimum requirement of the absence of violence. As eloquently stated by the speaker above, we do not wish to wish to "beat our own citizens on the head and divide a nation." Punitive measures will destabilise the country and create more hostilities when we can easily leave the past behind.

And finally, and most controversially, there are those amongst us, who have not yet reconciled with the birth of Bangladesh and its divorce from Pakistan and who would have liked to see the entity continue as a whole. For them, a discussion of who did what to whom is at the least uncomfortable.

Given both the tenacity and compelling nature of these arguments, what can someone say, sentiments aside (if that were indeed possible), about the dire need to start a war crimes tribunal? Let me begin with three general reasons why burying the past by deliberately forgetting is, simply put, not such a good idea.

First, some may be able to forget; but they are never the victims or the survivors. A national policy geared on the principles of collective amnesia cannot obliterate individual memory.

Second, if the government does not attend to the victims and their injuries, then it fails in one of its basic political duties -- protecting and upholding victims of injury is one of the basic raison dêtres of the state. Creating the space for survivors, liberators, victims to claim their right to remember and to ask for a national response to their trauma is within the premises of what a nation-state owes to its citizens. Bangladeshis are not unique in this demand. The state has both the responsibility to both protect and preserve. The survivors have a right to demand.

Third, grievances without redress tend to fester. Festering leads to not only hatred for the perpetrators and their descendants, but also generates an endemic mistrust of a state that has failed in its duty to vindicate the past once before, and maybe ready to tolerate injuries in the future.

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In the context of Bangladesh, the movement for demanding accountability not only highlights the politics of the different camps with differing opinions about 1971, but also sheds light on certain misconceptions and assertions that can be bandied around in public rhetoric. It is important to point to some of these.

First of all, the demand for justice can not only be minimised by pragmatists as being practically unfeasible, but also conceptually improbable, since they can argue that it is based on naïve sentiments. In reality, the demand for a trial for war criminals is based on legal proceedings; punishment is not being sought for, and neither can it ever be handed down by a court of law for ideological differences. Particularly, conflation of the terms "supporters of Pakistan" and "war criminals" is highly dangerous and misleading. Siding with Pakistan, or supporting the unity of Pakistan, although distasteful for many, is not a crime in legal terms; participation in the destruction of human lives and property is.

The demand for trial is for those who directly or indirectly participated (organised, orchestrated, mobilised) in the killing, raping, torturing of civilians in the course of the war. Punishment is being sought for real crimes, not for political opinions. To distill this in layman's terms, the arms of law cannot punish an individual for thinking of a criminal act, but only for executing it.

Furthermore, those who argue that any form of justice is unnecessary for 1971 basically suggest that a murderer who lives in your own neighbourhood, and has murdered your family member, ought not be tried because it will disturb the peace of the neighbourhood. Surely, even such a crude example captures the absurdity of the understanding of peace at all costs.

Second, what needs to be clarified perhaps is the demand for war crimes is a move towards a systematic appeal to address the issue of accountability. A focus on trials, whether effective or not, or whether they will come to pass or not, is secondary to a more critical issue. The desire amongst those demanding trials is for justice, not vengeance. This should be a move forward through an organised, highly transparent procedure, led by the state, through functional legal and hence legitimate mechanisms whether effective or not, or whether they will come to pass or not, is secondary to a more critical issue. The desire amongst those demanding trials is for justice, not vengeance. This should be a move forward through an organised, highly transparent procedure, led by the state, through functional legal and hence legitimate mechanisms and far removed from narrow political