

Four years after August 2004 blasts

Investigations must focus on identifying masterminds

BACK in 2004, the nation was left reeling from shock when bomb blasts at an Awami League rally left as many as 22 people, including the veteran politician Ivy Rahman, dead and scores of others grievously injured. Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina sustained injuries that have required treatment.

Four years on, the questions that arose in the aftermath of the blasts have remained unanswered to a large extent. There are the hard facts that keep alive a collective sense of outrage regarding the public recollection of what happened on August 21, 2004. Evidence that could have helped identify the criminals behind the explosions was washed away within hours of the tragedy. The BNP-led four-party alliance government proved sadly unwilling to pursue meaningful investigations that could have yielded concrete results and indeed was seen to indulge in activities that detracted from the need for justice. In short, a clear attempt at a cover-up was made, to the embarrassment of an entire nation. Not even foreign investigators were able to break through the wall of non-cooperation put up by the alliance government.

In the past few months, under the caretaker government, some headway has been made in identifying the elements involved in the August 2004 blasts. Individuals taken into custody have confessed to being involved in the incident that was clearly the gravest attack not only on a political rally but also on the national conscience. While we agree that the government has advanced the investigations a very significant part of the way, we also feel it necessary, in the interest of justice, that such investigations be directed at identifying the masterminds behind the explosions.

With reports emerging of politicians of the then ruling coalition playing a role in the making of the tragedy, it is of critical importance that the depths be plumbed to ferret out the truth. It is inconceivable that only those who exploded the bombs were involved. Realities such as the destruction of unexploded grenades at the site of the blasts together with the discovery of similar grenades inside Dhaka central jail clearly point to the involvement of people on a bigger scale. It is the enormity of the crime that demands a more concrete and purposeful inquiry. Who stood to benefit from elimination of a major political leadership structure? Who pulled the strings from behind?

There are a few other issues that come with this need for a swift administration of justice in the August 21 outrage. A large number of those who survived the blasts but have nevertheless been reduced to paralysis or have gone about with grenade splinters in their bodies have remained ignored by the authorities. That is an untenable situation and the government must move quickly towards helping these unfortunate men and women. Adequate compensation as well as provision of medical assistance must be ensured for them.

Unless the entire tragic happening of August 2004 is dealt with by the law, to the satisfaction of the nation, we cannot ensure rule of law and democratic governance in this country.

How do we get over this clannish hysteria?

Social thinkers must put their heads together to find an answer

WHEN the backlash to a trivial matter has such upshots as injuring 60 people, damaging private and public property, shutting down traffic and closing of a university sine die then there must be something seriously wrong with our collective psyche. We have the discomfiture for the umpteenth time to comment on a series of errant outbursts, this time originating in a coach conductor's ham-handed treatment to a student of Rajshahi University.

The student was allegedly forced out of a Dhaka-bound bus for demanding a seat he has paid for. The behaviour of the bus conductor was reprehensible calling for disciplinary action, no doubt. What should have been the normal option for the student to exercise was to approach the coach authority to lodge a formal complaint with, ask for refund of the fare and furthermore demand compensation for the journey missed. Instead, he reported the incident to his fellow students which had the effect of agitating them to attack Rajshahi-Dhaka bus ticket booth at Binodhpur Bazar. This in turn triggered a retaliatory strike by the workers of transport services and other local businesses.

At each point of the way there was a trouble-shooting potential to calm the agitating students and the workers. Just as the university authorities, if they were agile and serious enough, could effectively persuade the students to keep their cool on an assurance of taking up the matter with the coach authorities so also the latter should have intervened with their workers making sure that they didn't take the law into their own hands.

We attribute the creation of the law and order situation to the manifest sense of irresponsibility on the part of the students, the mindless behaviour of the workers and their employers and the combined failure of the university authorities and the local administration to get a move on timely. Let the inquiry instituted be not a barren exercise in blame-trading; something should come out of it as a preventive recipe.

The paramount question that we must find an answer to is: Why can't we rise above petty-fogging and clannish mentality in dealing with things that can be perfectly soberly handled with a positive and constructive attitude. If we can't do it, clannish reprisals will make the society descend into total anarchy. The sociologists and community leaders must put their heads together to find a solution out of this vicious circle.

Lessons of August 21



ZAFAR SOBHAN

TWO years is plenty of time for political amnesia to set in. There is a meme going around the chattering classes that the more the current government continues to play hardball with the BNP, the greater the sympathy generated for the party, and all its sins from its last tenure in office are being white-washed away in the public's mind.

This is entirely possible, though, of course, mostly conjecture and wishful thinking on the part of the party die-hards. No one really knows whether the voting public has forgiven the BNP for its shameful reign or how the party would fare in open national elections against the AL or anyone else.

Contemporaneous reports and the available polling data suggested that prior to the aborted elections of 2007, the BNP was extremely unpopular with the voters due to its misuse of the previous five years, and that had free and fair elections been held that the AL-led alliance would most likely have come to power.

August 21 seems to me to be a good time to revisit the tenure of the last BNP government, and to ponder for a moment what the country looked like then, for those with short memories.

STRAIGHT TALK

So when one hears BNP stalwarts and stooges intoning piously about the glories of democracy, it is a little hard to take them seriously. The last BNP government, though democratically elected, was as little democratically inclined a government as we have ever seen in our history (and we have seen a few).

After all, what price parliamentary democracy when a grenade attack kills 22 opposition party leaders and workers, including Ivy Rahman, the party's women's affairs secretary, only narrowly missing the leader of the opposition herself. Lest anyone forget, this was the political climate we were living in prior to 1/11, when opposition leaders had to worry about actually being physically eliminated.

Nor was August 21 the only political assassination attempt. Let us not forget that two of the senior-most and most popular AL members of parliament, Shah A.M.S. Kibria and Ahsanullah Master, actually were assassinated during the last BNP tenure.

Nor were these killings the only incidents of political repression. Senior AL leaders Sabir Hossain Chowdhury and Mohammad Nasim were beaten unconscious in the streets when at the head of non-violent rallies, and the beating and abuse of opposition party workers was a daily occurrence.

Nor should we forget the treatment meted out, first to the BDB when it was formed in 2004 and then to the LDP in 2006. The two break-away parties had their public meetings broken up by stick-wielding BNP cadres and saw their businesses and homes

fire-bombed and burned to the ground as retribution for having the temerity to try to split from the BNP to form their own party.

So when one hears BNP stalwarts and stooges intoning piously about the glories of democracy, it is a little hard to take them seriously. The last BNP government, though democratically elected, was as little democratically inclined a government as we have ever seen in our history (and we have seen a few).

Nor was the BNP (perhaps wisely) willing to leave it to chance the next time. People may bemoan the missteps of the current EC, but they pale in comparison with the machinations of the Justice Aziz-led EC that were intended to deliver the 2007 elections to the BNP, if anyone cares to remember.

Prior to 1/11, we were well on our way to a stolen election, which would have given the BNP another five years at the helm to complete the process of dismantling the country's democracy that the party had begun in 2001.

Anyone thinking that an incoming BNP government in 2007 would have been democratic in its inclinations or actions, or would have ruled with any semblance of respect for democratic principles, is either the casualty or

the perpetrator of a cynical propaganda job. But then, the BNP always did excel at revisionism.

I haven't even gone into detail about the hallmarks of the BNP rule, the 900-plus extra-judicial executions (many committed to advance the business or political interests of party leaders), the tens of thousands of arbitrary arrests, custodial abuse and mistreatment, malicious denial of due process and bail, a mockery made of the judiciary. Any of these sound familiar?

Now, the current caretaker government has hardly covered itself with glory. It has made mistake after mistake, and continues to do so. The injustices of the past BNP rule -- from extra-judicial executions to denial of due process to custodial abuse -- have all been continued, and many of the abuses that were rife under the BNP have taken even worse form under the current dispensation.

The anti-corruption drive has been a shambles. The current government has signally failed to deliver on almost every item on its original agenda. At the end of the day it may be able to boast of one or two achievements, such as the new voter roll and certain institutional reforms, but it seems likely that the damage done in the past two years may well outweigh the

good, and that we will spend the next several years fixing all the problems that were created during the last two.

But the mistakes of the current government and our opposition to military rule should not blind us to the deeply undemocratic and authoritarian government we would have been subject to had the BNP been permitted to steal the 2007 elections.

We can all agree that we do not want military rule. We can all agree that we do not want continuation of the current unelected government beyond the end of this year. We can all agree that we want a democratically elected government that will move the country forward and will not have its hands tied by any unelected entity.

But be careful what you wish for. Do not think that a government which is filled with deeply undemocratic and authoritarian leaders who have nothing but contempt for the voters and no compunction about stealing elections or repressing their political opponents is any solution to the problems we face as a nation.

One of the hopes post-1/11 was that leaders such as these would finally be brought to book for their crimes committed against the people of Bangladesh. So compromised was the judiciary that the hope that these criminals would ever be brought to account through judicial means under a political government was laughably naïve. As if there was rule of law and due process during the last BNP government and all one needed to do to receive justice was to file a case!

So we hoped that under the current government that the

criminals would be brought to book. Now we know that that hasn't happened. For whatever reason, the current government has been either unable or unwilling to prosecute the really serious crimes of the previous five years, and has seemingly made a hash of its inexplicable prosecutions for much more minor offences.

But that doesn't mean that the crimes committed were not serious or deserving of prosecution. There are countless Bangladeshis who suffered severe and actionable injustice at the hands of the last government. Do they not deserve their day in court?

They would never get it under the BNP, had the party been permitted to steal the last election. And now we know that they will never get it under this government, either. But that doesn't mean that those who committed the crimes against the people of this country deserve to walk free.

So, as we move forward, hopefully, to elections and to a democratically elected government, and bring the curtain down on the current government, let us not forget the lesson of August 21. That lesson is that a political party that resorts to violence and thuggery against its opponents, steals elections, and has no respect for democracy is hardly much of an improvement over the current situation.

I look forward to the upcoming elections and will be glad to see this non-democratic interregnum come to a close. But if the elections bring to power those who are undemocratic in their inclinations and their actions, we won't have much to celebrate.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Making the poor rich



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IN Joseph Stein's musical megahit *Fiddler On The Roof*, a character named Tevya is told by his future son-in-law Perchek, that "money is a curse." Tevya responds by saying that "God should smite him with this curse." He then sings a song called *If I Were A Rich Man*. One of the great lines of that song is, "... when you're rich they really think you know."

If not for the poor who share this earth with the rich, that song today could become the anthem of the well-to-do in a world which is run by them. There is a growing number of rich people, while in the last quarter of a century poverty has also grabbed more space. Almost 3 billion people, half the world's population, are poor while 8.7 million millionaires walk upon the earth, their number grown by 6.5% in 2005 alone. United States has the highest concentration of millionaires, that is 2.7 million, or

CROSS TALK

The fact of life is that if all people are prepared to become rich, some of them must be prepared to stay poor. But what we hear is a new religion where the priests of money regularly preach that the salvation lies in earning. There is so much talk about money these days that splurge of it has become synonymous with the survival of men. If the world once swirled around necessities that were luxuries, it's now swirling around luxuries that have become necessities.

about 0.9 percent of its population.

By the World Bank definition, poverty is when someone earns \$2 or less per day. So, here we need to draw the contrast. More than one billion people in the world live on less than \$1 a day. Another 2.7 billion struggle to survive on less than \$2 a day. But the measure of earning isn't the only measure of poverty. Every year 17 million children die from completely preventable causes like malaria, diarrhea and pneumonia.

If we go by the dimension of hunger alone, every 3.6 seconds another person dies of starvation. Nearly 800 million people go to bed hungry every day, 300 million being children amongst them. Of these 300 millions, eight percent are victims of famine or other emergency situations and more than 90 percent are suffering from malnutrition and micronutrient deficiency.

More than 2.6 billion people -

over 40% of the world's population -- don't have basic sanitation and one billion still use unsafe sources of drinking water. Four out of every ten people don't have access to simple latrine.

Not a surprise that in today's world, poverty alleviation and wealth creation are going hand in hand. While poverty remains contemptible, attempts are being made to bring more affluence.

To say it more specifically, poverty is now being handled from rich man's perspective instead of poor man's imperatives. In other words, the concept of poverty is being squeezed by the expanding virtue of affluence. Yes, there is lot of emphasis on poverty alleviation, but the crux of that emphasis is income generation.

What is the difference? It goes without saying that the most effective way to overcome poverty is to earn more money. But must that income come from

just any source? The world has changed in that respect. It's hard to find people who will refuse a financial inducement in the fear of moral compromise. Today, fewer people exist who will rather go hungry than touch dirty income.

So, most people live in a mathematical madness or an arithmetic apologetics where expenses don't add up to income. Income is guided by spending, not the other way around. Morality is dictated by greed, partly by speed, but seldom by need. Success is defined by acquisition, not by sacrifice. If nature is predisposed to create discrimination amongst men, that discrimination is now inculcated in the nature of men.

The push and pull of economic forces are both focused on the same thing. It's wrong to be poor, because it's right to be rich. It's the rich who are devising methods to overcome poverty, and the poor are simply

following. The suggestions are that poverty alleviation is possible through income generation, reduction of illiteracy, increased healthcare and empowerment of women.

Abraham George is the founder of George Foundation, an NGO engaged in humanitarian work in India, and the author of *India Untouched: The Forgotten Faces of Rural Poverty*. He has argued that there is very little evidence that foreign assistance has made much difference in overcoming the poverty trap in any country. The reasons of this ineffectuality are misuse of funds, limited role of NGOs, and lack of private sector participation.

He has also strongly argued that micro-credit programs weren't the panacea for poverty. If poverty alleviation were a matter of lending, then the world could eradicate poverty easily.

Since the average size of micro-lending is \$100, it would cost the world about \$300 billion, which is a small sum compared to the trillions that have been already spent on poverty alleviation. The present form of micro-credit, as practiced in India, has resulted in little or no sustainable benefit for the poor, Abraham concluded.

The fact of life is that if all people are prepared to become rich, some of them must be prepared to stay poor. But what

we hear is a new religion where the priests of money regularly preach that the salvation lies in earning.

There is so much talk about money these days that splurge of it has become synonymous with the survival of men. If the world once swirled around necessities that were luxuries, it's now swirling around luxuries that have become necessities.

Let us accept that the world is now ruled by the haves, not by the have-nots. The good news is that, unlike the wealthy people of the past centuries, the wealthy people of this century care for the unfortunate. They have worked out plans to help the poor, and the only way to come out of poverty is to amass wealth.

Abraham George gives an example of how, in the process of saving the poor, the rich are getting further rich. Commercial banks in India receive funds to run micro-credit programs from the government-run NABARD at 5% to 6%. They lend at 10% to 12% to a micro-credit intermediary, which in turn lends out to the final borrower at 24% to 36%.

It's true that the rich know everything. That includes plundering the poor in their plight of poverty.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star.

Preventing possible anarchy

The recent elections of four cities and nine municipal corporations indicate that no longer can the central leaders ignore the strength of local leaders. There are enough indications that smooth and successful elections can be accomplished in upazilas as well under relaxed emergency, as was possible in the August 4 election. We are heartened to learn that both the major parties are taking keen interest in the ensuing upazila elections, though they do not admit it openly.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

WE are worried about recent developments of some ominous signs. With hardly 4 months left for completing 350 upazila elections and the national election, the political situation is warming up even in a relaxed emergency. Some senior politicians say that they are taking full advantage of the relaxed emergency. Already, Sheikh Hasina has criticised (mildly) some activities of the CTG. The BNP secretary general is striving hard for the unconditional release of Khaleda Zia and

her eldest son Tarique Zia. He did not even hesitate to issue a 72-hour ultimatum to the CTG in this regard.

The recent elections of four cities and nine municipal corporations indicate that no longer can the central leaders ignore the strength of local leaders. There are enough indications that smooth and successful elections can be accomplished in upazilas as well under relaxed emergency, as was possible in the August 4 election. We are heartened to learn that both the major parties are taking keen interest in the ensuing upazila elections,

though they do not admit it openly. However, it appears that BNP is more serious about release of Khaleda and Tarique, instead of organising the divided party. Sheikh Hasina is returning to Bangladesh after completing her medical treatment by the end of September, and her party is trying to have a new round of talks with the CTG about various political issues.

Some front ranking leaders of BNP are saying that the CTG has failed to frame any charge against Khaleda and Tarique as they are innocent and their detention is politically motivated. Delaware

has been silent for the last few days because he is frustrated at the nonchalance of the CTG towards his ultimatum.

Only the vice-president of BNP, Mr. M.K. Anwar, is trying to impress upon CTG the importance of release of Khaleda. The other prominent leaders like Major (rtd) Hafiz and Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan are waiting for the final decision about the unity of the party from Khaleda.

Both the parties are pressing hard for complete lifting of emergency. Even some donor countries are in favour of complete withdrawal of emergency to make the election credible, though they are satisfied with the successful local government elections of August 4.

The demand of AL for allowing Hasina to contest may be met if she obtains honourable acquittal from the charges against her. The same treatment can be applied to

Khaleda as well. Khaleda's refusal to become a voter may have some ulterior motive. However, we wish that good sense will prevail on her soon.

It may give us some idea about the characters of some politicians close to Khaleda and Tarique if we discuss, in brief, about acquisition of huge wealth by Harris Chowdhury, the political secretary of Khaleda. Among his assets the following are mentioned:

- A 2550 sq. ft. flat worth Tk. 5 million in Dhanmondi;
- A flat in Gulshan (market price about Tk. 13.7 million);
- A two-storied house on a 5-katha plot in Bashundhara Group worth Tk. 10 million;
- A flat from Boishakhi Television (worth Tk. 15 million);
- A grabbed government residence worth Tk. 125 million;
- A shop in Bangabandhu National Stadium (cost of

- possession Tk. 1.2 million);
- Illegal monthly income of Tk. 3 million;
- A SUV from Orion Group Tk. 10 million;
- Illegal purchase of Lira Industrial Enterprise from Privatisation Commission;
- Earning of around Tk. 300 million through underhand dealings with M/S Salim (MP) and Mamun; and
- Carrying out of more than 50 unusual transactions.

If the political secretary can acquire so much wealth through his influence over Khaleda and Tarique, what should be our natural conclusion about them? How can we accept their innocence? Let the court decide about it.

BNP is pressing for release of Tarique for his medical treatment abroad. We hear that his treatment can very well be done in Bangladesh. The relentless effort

to release him, according to some, is nothing short of a trick to defeat the CTG. The latest proposal to send Tarique abroad before Khaleda creates more doubt.

It may not be far from the truth that, through her experience in politics, Khaleda has realised that after the exposure of the activities of the BNP-led government during 2001-06, and division of BNP in three groups, there is hardly any possibility for BNP to win the election. She is all the more convinced after the result of the local elections.

The CTG wants to hold a national election fully participated by all parties to convince the outside world about the credibility of the election. At this stage, the government should take the following actions:

- An intensive discussion with the donors, particularly US and EU, about the risk

involved in lifting emergency totally. It may point out to the possible disturbances by various students groups, secret reorganisation of militant groups like JMB and Huji, and the inadequate number of law enforcing forces to contain possible violence prior to and after elections due to unfriendly relation amongst political parties; and

- In Bangladesh common people generally do not bother much about ethics, morality and discipline. The CTG should see that these weaknesses are not exploited by the politicians before and after election.

The CTG will have to take a clear and firm decision as to what extent it can concede privileges to major political parties to ensure a credible election.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.