

Still waiting for justice

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ASMA KIBRIA

It has been four long years since my husband Shah A. M. S. Kibria, M.P. was assassinated in a grenade attack at a political meeting in his Habiganj constituency. It is difficult for me to express the overwhelming sense of loss and grief I have felt every moment since that terrible event of January 27, 2005. The worst part has been a sense of helplessness as his murder has not even been properly investigated and that the real culprits may get away without punishment.

We will never get back the person we have lost but, perhaps as his family, we might at least obtain a sense of closure once his killers are identified and punished under the laws of this country. So many other families who have been the victims of murder have also been waiting, sometimes for decades, for justice. It is important for all the citizens of this country that such crimes should not go unpunished. Where murderers operate with impunity not only is the rule of law undermined, the integrity of the entire democratic framework of governance is imperiled.

The problem goes back to the Liberation War of 1971, and the subsequent failure to investigate and punish numerous crimes perpetrated by the Pakistan army and its collaborators. This was followed by the killing of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, together with much of his family -- even his six-year old son was not spared by the murderers -- and soon after, that the jail killing of the four national leaders.

All these terrible crimes remain a blot

on the national psyche, given the failure to complete the legal process, creating a sense of impunity among those forces using murder as an accepted means of dealing with political opponents. After the 2001 elections, victims' families watched in horror as the killers of their loved ones took office under the flag of the Republic.

The general elections of December 2008 may well be regarded as a decisive turning point in the history of our nation. The electorate, bolstered by a new generation with a strong commitment to the ideals of the Liberation War -- unencumbered by the narrow communal hatreds of an earlier age -- completely repudiated the politics of murder, corruption and intimidation of the BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami coalition. In constituency after constituency, the BNP-Jamaat leaders were swept aside by members of the Awami League-led coalition, which achieved a landslide victory, winning three-quarters of contested seats.

The assumption of office on January 10, by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina -- daughter of the Father of the Nation -- brought a sense of relief and renewed optimism to the people. There is a pervasive sense that the dark age of mismanagement and misrule has at last come to an end.

This victory has also rekindled the hope for justice among the families of the victims of political murders. Perhaps few other leaders will understand and empathise with our anguish as the prime minister herself, who lost so many members of her family on that terrible day in August 1975, and who herself was the intended target of an assassination attempt in August 2004.

We are hopeful that she would give high priority to finally dealing with these crimes.

Since my husband's assassination, our family has carried out a peaceful campaign of protest demanding the proper investigation and justice for all such political murders. Our campaign met with a gratifying degree of public support and participation, and we were able to generate considerable interest both in Bangladesh and among our friends overseas in my husband's case. Our campaign continued during the

darkest days of BNP-Jamaat misrule, ceasing only during the period of the caretaker government when we did not receive permission for even our peaceful demonstrations.

Shah Kibria returned to Bangladesh in 1992 and joined the Awami League (AL), first as a member of the Advisory Council, later as political advisor to Sheikh Hasina (then Leader of the Opposition) and then, in 1996, as Co-Chairman of the AL Election Monitoring Committee. During the 1996-2001 Awami League government headed by

Sheikh Hasina, he served as finance minister with considerable distinction. While he was finance minister the country achieved strong economic growth with low inflation, despite the catastrophic floods of 1998.

Before he returned to Bangladesh my husband had a distinguished career as a diplomat (he was secretary, foreign affairs in 1972 under Bangabandhu) and a United Nations official (he was executive secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok from 1981 to 1992, holding the rank of under-secretary general). Over the years he had developed an international network of friends and admirers, many of whom have continued to support us in our quest for justice. Throughout the period after his death, agencies such as the International Parliamentary Union have closely monitored the murder trial and investigation.

During the BNP-Jamaat government period, my husband's murder investigation was carefully limited to avoid implicating the real masterminds behind his assassination. A number of mid-level BNP leaders of Habiganj were identified and arrested as the persons who actually carried out the attack, but the investigators carefully avoided two key questions; 1) who actually ordered the killing and, 2) what was the source of the grenades used in the attack.

There was an attempt to rush the case through the courts on the basis of the incomplete investigation, which our lawyers successfully resisted. The important thing is to ensure that a complete investigation is undertaken before the case finally comes to trial, and we faced a situation where the investigation was seriously flawed. Key witnesses and members of the administration who were likely to know about the events of that day were not questioned, despite repeated demands through the courts.

A team of investigators from the FBI arrived soon after the assassination but soon left, reportedly due to the lack of cooperation by the government investigating team. Toward the end of their tenure, the BNP-Jamaat government sought to turn the investigation toward

the outlawed terrorist group Harkat-ul-Jihad (sometimes referred to as Huji). However, in statements to the press the arrested members of this group admitted to involvement in various attacks but always denied knowing anything about the Kibria assassination.

Initially the investigation during the 2007-2008 caretaker government followed a similar pattern to that during the BNP-Jamaat regime (at first the same investigators were retained), except that they sought to place the entire responsibility for the killing on the Harkat-ul-Jihad, despite the fact that no direct motive could be established. It was argued that the Harkat-ul-Jihad did actually carry out the killing, but there was no attempt to identify those who actually ordered it.

With the new Awami League government, we are hoping that a proper investigation can finally be undertaken. There should now be no problem in requesting FBI assistance for the investigation. This will be particularly important as the FBI will be able to make an assessment of the available forensic evidence (the forensic capabilities of the Bangladesh police are very limited) and indicate whether evidence available at the time of their 2005 visit is still intact. There are fears that the investigators appointed by the BNP-Jamaat government have systematically destroyed what evidence was then available.

If there has been a cover-up and attempt to protect the real killers, we would hope that the current government would have the resolve to unearth the perpetrators and ensure that they are punished. The criminal coterie behind the killings during the BNP-Jamaat regime left behind many supporters in the police and civil administration. It is vital for the survival of our democracy and the establishment of the rule of law that the killers and those that aided and abetted them are identified and removed from positions of trust. Our family and all other victims' families are now hoping that with the new government we will get justice at last.

Asma Kibria is the wife of late S.A.M.S. Kibria.



Shah A. M. S. Kibria

The quintessential diplomat

It was precisely for this high reputation that Kibria, in preference to our official candidate, was selected by the then UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim for the post of Executive Secretary of Escap. The post carried the rank and status of under secretary general, and Kibria was the first Bangladeshi to attain such a high-level post in the UN system.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

On this day four years ago, the country lost one of its outstanding sons, Shah Abu Mohammad Shamsul Kibria, in a dastardly grenade attack in Habiganj. His death has been an irreparable loss to the nation. If Kibria were alive today, he would have been the happiest man on earth to see that his dear party, Awami League, under the able stewardship of Sheikh Hasina, had triumphed at the just-concluded Parliamentary elections. What a valuable asset he could have been to the nation at this important juncture!

Kibria was a multi-dimensional genius. He was a meritorious student, standing first in most examinations, including the

CSS; he was an internationally recognised diplomat, a brilliant political strategist, a valiant freedom fighter, a language movement activist, and a highly successful finance minister. At the same time, he was a loving husband, an affectionate father, a caring senior colleague and, above all, a humble and polite gentleman. To his junior colleagues in the foreign service, Kibria was a role model.

It is a pity that no proper investigation had been conducted by the previous governments to identify and punish the murderers of Kibria. Some petty criminals were arrested and prosecuted; but for the sake of justice and fair play, a full and proper investigation should be undertaken to identify the real culprits. In the face of the highly adverse situation under the BNP rule, his widow, our dear Asma Bhabhi, and

their children, Reza and Nazli, had steadfastly pursued a non-violent campaign demanding proper investigation and justice. They deserve our full sympathy and support.

I had the privilege of knowing, and working very closely with, Kibria for nearly four decades. I spent the critical days of our nationhood together in Washington DC, with this fierce nationalist and patriot. It was Kibria, Enayet Karim and AMA Muhith who had jointly inspired the Bengali officials of the Pakistan Embassy in Washington DC to leave the embassy en bloc and declare our allegiance to the provisional government of Bangladesh, thus creating history. After Calcutta, this was the largest "mass defection" in favour of our national cause during the war.

The "Bangladesh Mission" in Washington DC, that we founded, became the epicentre of our round-the-clock lobbying and public relations activities in the US. Kibria's contributions in all the activities of the mission were invaluable, and his sense of judgment and assessments were always accurate.

During those critical days, I shared the same office room with Kibria. He taught me how to mount a political campaign, convince important people in the US

Congress and government, and motivate common American people to our cause. At the end of the day, I would discuss with him the course of events and what would give me his assessment. What impressed me most was the depth and dimension of his knowledge, and his deep sense of patriotism.

After our independence, he was transferred to Dhaka and, as a founding member of the Foreign Ministry, he played a major role in the setting up of the Foreign Office and our missions abroad. Kibria served as the foreign secretary during 1979-81 and, being stationed in Dhaka at that time, I had the good fortune of working very closely with him.

Nearly three decades later, one can still see Kibria's touch in all the activities of our Foreign Office. It was Kibria who pushed forward the argument for the creation of a specialised foreign service cadre, setting up a Foreign Service Academy, construction of the ministry's annex building, and finalisation of the ministry's detailed organisational structure. Kibria drafted the initial proposal outlining the justifications for the launching of the Saarc, and was the initiator of the proposal for the cancellation of debts of the LDCs by the OECD countries.

Kibria's capabilities were known all over the region and the world. Time and again he was elected to high posts in various international conferences. It was precisely for this high reputation that Kibria, in preference to our official candidate, was selected by the then UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim for the post of Executive Secretary of Escap. The post carried the rank and status of under secretary general, and Kibria was the first Bangladeshi to attain such a high-level post in the UN system.

During his long 11 years tenure at the Escap, he restructured the legislative bodies to protect the interests of developing countries, and made major and lasting contributions. In addition, he served as the Secretary General's Special Representative on Kampuchea.

After his retirement from Unesco, Kibria could have comfortably settled in any developed country on his generous UN pensions, yet he chose to return to Bangladesh promptly. Soon thereafter, he joined active politics and, because of his nationalistic and progressive ideas, Awami League emerged as his natural choice. Within a short period, he received due recognition from the party president and high-ups and was made the chief election coordinator for managing the

party's campaign for the parliamentary elections of 1996.

Kibria's efforts were successful, and Awami League, under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, returned to power in 1996 after long 21 years. Kibria was made the finance minister. His clear perception, honesty, undisputed intellectual superiority, and love for the greater benefit of the country and its people, especially the poor people, helped him to emerge as a highly successful finance minister. During his tenure, the country witnessed remarkable macroeconomic stability, with prices under control and the economy displaying high growth and low inflation.

Kibria occupied his parliamentary seat from Habiganj, outside his natural constituency, in 2001, and was elected by a huge margin. He made important contributions in Awami League's new role in the opposition. To his opponents, he became a formidable challenge. He could not face him directly. So they took cowardly steps to eliminate him. They will surely get the punishment they deserve. On this day, the nation pays its tributes to one of its outstanding sons and prays for eternal peace for his soul.

Syed Muazzem Ali is a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh.

In Gaza city, muted hopes for Obama

From Gaza to Goa, people have invested Obama with their hopes. Take Omar Tawel, a 24-year-old computer-science graduate who, like most young men in Gaza, is unemployed. During the campaign, Tawel got so fired up that he organised dozens of his English-speaking friends and began cold-calling voters in America using VOIP on his laptop.

ROD NORDLAND

THERE were no cheers in the Ranoush Cafe in Gaza City when Barack Obama was inaugurated. A few dozen young Palestinians watched the proceedings on one of the place's four televisions, listening to Al-Jazeera's Arabic voice-over as they sucked on Hubby Bubbles, which are big water pipes with burning charcoal in the bowl. Afterward, the patrons said they were tentatively pleased.

"He will be such a change from Bush, and maybe he won't be under Israel's belly like all the other presidents," said

Mahmoud Saqiya, 24, an IT engineer. If there was a consensus, that was it: cautious optimism. Many noted favorably that Obama spoke of reaching out to Muslims; indeed, he was the first president to use the word "Muslim" in an Inaugural Address.

From Gaza to Goa, people have invested Obama with their hopes. Take Omar Tawel, a 24-year-old computer-science graduate who, like most young men in Gaza, is unemployed. During the campaign, Tawel got so fired up that he organized dozens of his English-speaking friends and began cold-calling voters in America using VOIP on his laptop. "You



Wondering what the new US president will mean for them.

wouldn't believe how many hang-ups there were," he told Newsweek. He never heard from the Obama campaign, but an Arab-American group called and asked him to please stop. "They said it wouldn't

help, a lot of people already think he's a Muslim from Africa."

Now Tawel is despondent. He feels betrayed that Obama, as president-elect, refrained from speaking out after Israel pummeled Gaza. And yet, at this cafe in a

shell-pocked building, Tawel's view was roundly ridiculed. "He has many problems to solve," said accountant Rafaf Ali, 31. "We need to be patient." Several others noted that it couldn't be a coincidence that Israel declared its ceasefire only two days

before Obama's swearing-in just enough time to pull most of its troops out of Gaza.

"Ah, he'll screw the Palestinians," said Marouf Dagmouch, a burly 200-pounder, plopping unbidden onto the arm of my chair. He sat too close to be friendly, though he bristled with bonhomie. "The Israelis are just taking a week off for this ceremony." My translator confided that Dagmouch had already asked whether I was an American and where I was staying. "My family's the one that kidnapped Alan Johnston," he boasted, referring to the BBC's Gaza bureau chief who was held for three months in 2007 by militant members of the Dagmouch clan. "Maybe I should kidnap you," he said. I wrote that down. "Don't do that, I'm only kidding."

Very funny. As the old saying goes, Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. It was a grim reminder that Gaza is still run by terrorists from Hamas, who were popularly elected. Until Palestinians do something about that, there will be limits to what Obama can do for them.

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