



Time for calm

If we contextualise this a bit further in the operational sense, what it means is that the number of officers we have lost would be enough to man 8 to 10 regiments of the army. Whoever planned the action would have known that they would be killing more than two birds with one stone.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

IT'S only natural that emotions will be high among the army personnel, more so the officers, after the exposure of harrowing stories of brutality inside BDR headquarters. Not to be so would be abnormal. With every passing day pictures of barbaric acts by the mutineers are being bared to us. It is difficult to believe that genuine BDR jawans could have carried out the senseless killings. The brutalities have reinforced the suggestion that the rebels were not working on their own.

It is very clear that the killings were pre-

planned, and all the so-called demands and grievances of the mutineers were excuses to draw public sympathy which willy-nilly the electronic media helped them gain by disseminating them. This is exactly what happened between November 3 and 7, 1975. Large-scale infiltration was carried inside the army ranks particularly in the service corps, and these people went after the officers. But the casualty then was nothing compared to what we have suffered on February 25.

The belief that there was instigation has given way to the conviction that there was much more than mere provo-

cation. From the statements of some of the BDR officers who escaped death and are lucky enough to recount their harrowing tales, it seems there was very likely participation of outside elements in the Peelkhana carnage.

As of today, 72 officers are still missing and 63 bodies have been recovered so far. At last we have a consolidated figure, thanks to the MI Dte. Just juxtapose the casualty figures of the officers in the Liberation War and the profundity of the matter will become evident. Eleven officers were martyred in combat in the 9 months of war and 44 were killed by the occupation forces in the initial period of the war.

If we contextualise this a bit further in the operational sense, what it means is that the number of officers we have lost would be enough to man 8 to 10 regiments of the army. Whoever planned the action would have known that they would be killing more than two birds with one stone, and the idea certainly could not have materialised from the head of an ordinary BDR jawan.

The army must be commended for correctly reflecting the state of the mind of its men. No army can remain mentally unscathed by the kind of cruelty perpetrated on its officers and families. But it has been made amply clear that the army, much as it is traumatised by the horrible events, remains steadfastly a disciplined force and continues to act in the highest traditions of professionalism.

The trauma as I see it is two-fold. The psychological shock brought upon by the experience of the families apart from the loss of husband, fathers, and sons on one side, and the near decimation of a substantial portion of extremely bright and proficient officers of mid-ranks who actually are responsible for effecting the plans of the commanders on the ground. Both the army and the BDR are simultaneously affected.

I feel that in quelling the rebels the government has but addressed only a small part of the problem. While there are questions emerging now as to whether things could have been done differently that might have saved many

lives thereby, post mortem of all that was done and how that was done, the intelligence aspect as well the external involvements we shall delve into eventually, particularly after we come across more substantive facts. As for now, consolidation and cohesion and keeping a cool head and addressing the immediate task are the need of the hour.

Our border is unattended and it is good to see the effort to restore the command structure of the border force underway. What is equally important for the new DG as well as the army is to help restore the confidence of those elements of the border force that are deployed in the BOPs and companies who had had nothing to do with the mutiny and the killings. The question of restructuring the BDR is very relevant now, but can perhaps wait till a semblance of command is restored and the force made operational. But while we may evaluate the aspects of the mutiny and how it was handled threadbare later, for now we would like to conclude by suggesting

that it was time that serious thought was given to setting up a crisis management group. Very frankly, calling a parliamentary committee meeting to discuss how the matter should be handled is not quite the way to combat a rebellion.

It is just as well that the enquiry committee is being recast, but seven days is not enough, not even for putting up a preliminary report.

We also fail to understand why so many ministers are commenting on the matter when really it should be only the home ministry or the PM's press secretary or the PIO that should be making statements on public issues. I do not see why any other minister should make press statement on matters relating to the home ministry such as was made on the reorganisation of the enquiry committee. These are not small things -- the government should get its act together.

Brig. Gen. Shahedul Anam Khan (retd) is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.



The BDR killings and some hard questions

There are, of course, lessons to be drawn from tragedy on such a vast scale. But before you go into those lessons, it is fitting and proper that you ask some hard questions. Perhaps no one will answer those questions, or no one can.

SYED BADRUL AHSEN

TRAGEDY has been part of Bengali collective life for as long as we can remember. Death by violent means has been a pattern of life, of the end of life that we have known for ages. Three million of our compatriots died at the hands of the Pakistani army in the year we wrested freedom for this nation. In 1975, in the space of a mere three months, we lost to assassination the entire leadership that had led us through the long, tortuous struggle for liberation. The corpse of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman lay sprawled on the staircase of his home; and the bodies of nearly his entire family littered the place. And then came the

night when the four leaders of the Mujibnagar provisional government were gunned down in the putative security of prison.

Freedom fighter officers died on a brutal November dawn. In the Zia years, hundreds of men in the army and the air force lost their lives in the serial struggles for power that would go on until Bangladesh's first military ruler was himself shot down in the nocturnal hours in Chittagong.

That was the last time we had violence define our politics? Not quite. Thirteen military officers, tried by a military tribunal on charges of conspiracy to murder General Zia, were hanged on evidence that has by and large been considered dubious. In the times of the nation's

second military dictator, General Hussein Muhammad Ershad, violence claimed the lives of activist students and other individuals.

In times closer to the present, the August 2004 attacks on an Awami League rally in Dhaka remain notorious for all the lives they claimed and all the maimed people they left behind. A respected former finance minister was silenced by assassination in Sylhet; and the life of a well-regarded lawmaker was brought to an end in Gazipur.

That is the legacy we have seen shape up, stone by dark stone, in this free people's republic. Often, we have persuaded ourselves that democracy is what we have been trying to cobble into form, in however tenuous a fashion, since December 1990. Murder and mayhem, we reasoned with ourselves, would be no more. That was an illusion. That tribalism is yet part of our lives, that political cannibalism still has the gruesome power to sink its teeth into our moral fibre, is a truth that has not gone away.

What transpired at the Bangladesh Rifles headquarters on February 25 was not a mutiny. It was murder plain and simple. It was a brutal assault on the army, on officers in whose hands rested the capacity for military professionalism. In the larger sense, the murder of Major General Shakil Ahmed and scores of senior army officers at the hands of the jawans under their command was the incapacitating of a whole nation.

There are, of course, lessons to be drawn from tragedy on such a vast scale. But before you go into those lessons, it is fitting and proper that you ask some hard questions. Perhaps no one will answer those questions, or no one can. But how is this for starters? Given that a huge conspiracy had been laid to murder the army officers, as events have by now so conclusively proved, how do the many intelligence agencies explain their failure to detect it, to smell something of foul note in the air?

Traditionally, intelligence failure has

generally been a hallmark of statecraft in Bangladesh. That sordid tradition was tragically reinforced once more as the BDR hierarchy died one by one on the morning of February 25.

Go on to the next question; how did all those pieces of red cloth (or call them large handkerchiefs if not masks) suddenly appear on the faces of the murderous BDR jawans? It was clear, even as those men thirsting for blood spoke to the media, that a well-laid-out plan to eliminate the officers had been in place. And now try answering question number three; as the electronic media focused on the probable reasons behind the mutiny, how did they not think of raising the matter of the missing officers, of what had been done to them, whether or not they and their families were safe? Two whole days went by and yet no one thought, in that serious manner of speaking, of the captive (we now know they were already dead) officers.

Now for question four; why did the government not insist, before a precipi-

tate announcement of clemency for the mutineers, that the BDR jawans lay down their arms, free everyone trapped inside and reveal the whereabouts of the officers? Toughness would have yielded results. You do not negotiate with mutineers until they have met some conditions. So why were fourteen NCOs and JCOs of BDR allowed to meet the prime minister, and what exactly did they tell her?

Final question; how did all those thousands of mutineers/murderers make their escape from BDR headquarters without anyone in authority knowing anything about it?

It is now our collective job, indeed our patriotic duty, to hunt down all these criminals and bring them to a speedy trial. They have maimed the army. They have shamed every Bengali. Morality and the law demand that such criminality be handled with a heavy hand.

Syed Badrul Ahsen is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

Through the eyes of a child



Memo
To: God.
From: Nury Vittachi.
Dear Sir or Madam,
I am writing to apply for a new position. I realise you have not advertised any vacancies in the area in which I am interested, but I thought I would write in anticipation of a

post becoming available.

The job I want to apply for is "Child."

I realise that I am a little bit (okay, several decades) past the usual age for this position, but I believe I can be retrained.

Last week, I was crossing a pedestrian walkway with my child when we saw a beggar. I saw a smelly man flouting society's conventions and speeded up my steps to pass as quickly as possible. My child saw a person in need and gave him a huge smile.

Then we crossed a car park. I saw a patch of dirty ground with oily

puddles to be avoided. She saw rainbow-filled pools to be stirred into psychedelic patterns with the toe of her shoe.

Then we passed a group of men digging a large hole in the road. I saw an irritating danger to traverse. She saw a glimpse of the heart and lungs of the city and insisted on stopping to watch for a full eight minutes.

Then we headed to a shopping street for lunch. As a boringly predictable adult, I suggested Starbucks. But she smelled fried noodles and dragged me into a workmen's cafe where we shared a really tasty meal for less than the

price of one designer cappuccino.

Then I scanned the newspaper to look for cinemas, shopping malls or theme parks to visit. She decided "the fun-est thing to do" would be to take a ferry nowhere in particular and then take it straight back to where we started.

So that's what we did. It WAS fun. And then we headed home.

On our journey, it became clear to me I am not cut out to be an Adult. How could I have got it so wrong? In my teen years, I believed I was born to be one. Not only was I growing taller, but my voice was getting deeper, my skin hairier and my birth-

days greater in number. Drifting into Adulthood seemed natural.

However, I now realise this was a gross error. I had not fully considered the consequences.

So I resign from Adulthood with immediate effect. Please find enclosed my car keys, my house keys, my credit cards and my gold membership card to the Old Codgers' Club.

I will no longer pretend to like subtitled European art house movies. When asked what my all-time favourite movie is, I shall admit to it being The Lion King.

I will no longer buy suits from

tailors who offer me a choice of colors limited to grey, grey, grey or grey.

I will no longer pretend to enjoy books which have won the Booker Prize and will re-read The Magician's Nephew.

I will no longer pretend I like sitting in bars late into the night discussing politics. I will go straight home after work and play Monopoly.

I will no longer eat organic lettuce drizzled with olive oil. I will have Coco Pops for dinner.

Why not join me? You might like it. Amen.

Visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com