

Moving beyond pain

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MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

ANYONE residing in Bangladesh gradually evolves a high pain threshold. Since 1971, we have been witness to genocide, horrifying assassinations, coups, indiscipline, corruption, nepotism, lack of governance and abuse of fundamental principles of human rights. The dignity of reason is, more often than not, present through its absence.

What happened on February 25th and 26th in the BDR Headquarters crossed that existing waterline of pain and shame.

Aristotle defined a human being as a "rational animal." What the BDR Jawans did would embarrass animals. They displayed the obscene brute that lurks in all of us and then unleashed a reign of terror that left a bloody footprint on our national psyche.

This collective habit of some small groups of being ungrateful to benefac-

tors was also evident on August 15, 1975. It was carried one step forward with the shameless indemnity granted to the perpetrators by the illegal successor government.

Over the succeeding decades, we have seen how indiscipline encouraged further coups and counter-coups, and the eventual murder of President Ziaur Rahman. The dynamics came a full circle.

Later on, the powers that be deliberately overlooked the violence that was unleashed against the opposition between 2001 and 2006. Members of the opposition were subjected to murder and attempted assassination, and yet, those responsible for providing security looked the other way. The judicial process was also thrown to the wind. Culpability was made redundant.

There is an old English proverb: "As you sow, so shall you reap." I have made the above remarks to show how the erosion of accountability eventually led

to the indiscipline and violence that we saw in the BDR Headquarters

I fail to understand two aspects of this complex incident. Firstly, how could the relevant intelligence agencies have failed to obtain the information that could have prevented this tragedy? It brings forth serious questions about their professional abilities as well as queries about their commitment. Secondly, that such a distressing situation emerged within a security force created nearly two hundred years ago and known for its professionalism.

How could the authorities (within the BDR) concerned have failed to notice the growing grievances among the troops? It was apparent that everything was not "kosher," but it was strangely overlooked. Greed and brutality have dealt a terrible hand to military officers and their family members. In one foul swoop, we have lost more army officers than we did during the war of liberation in 1971.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's wise management of the situation enabled us to avert a greater disaster. The army also deserves a great deal of credit for displaying extreme restraint in exceptional and unbelievably trying circumstances. This was a mature way of bringing the catastrophe to a close.

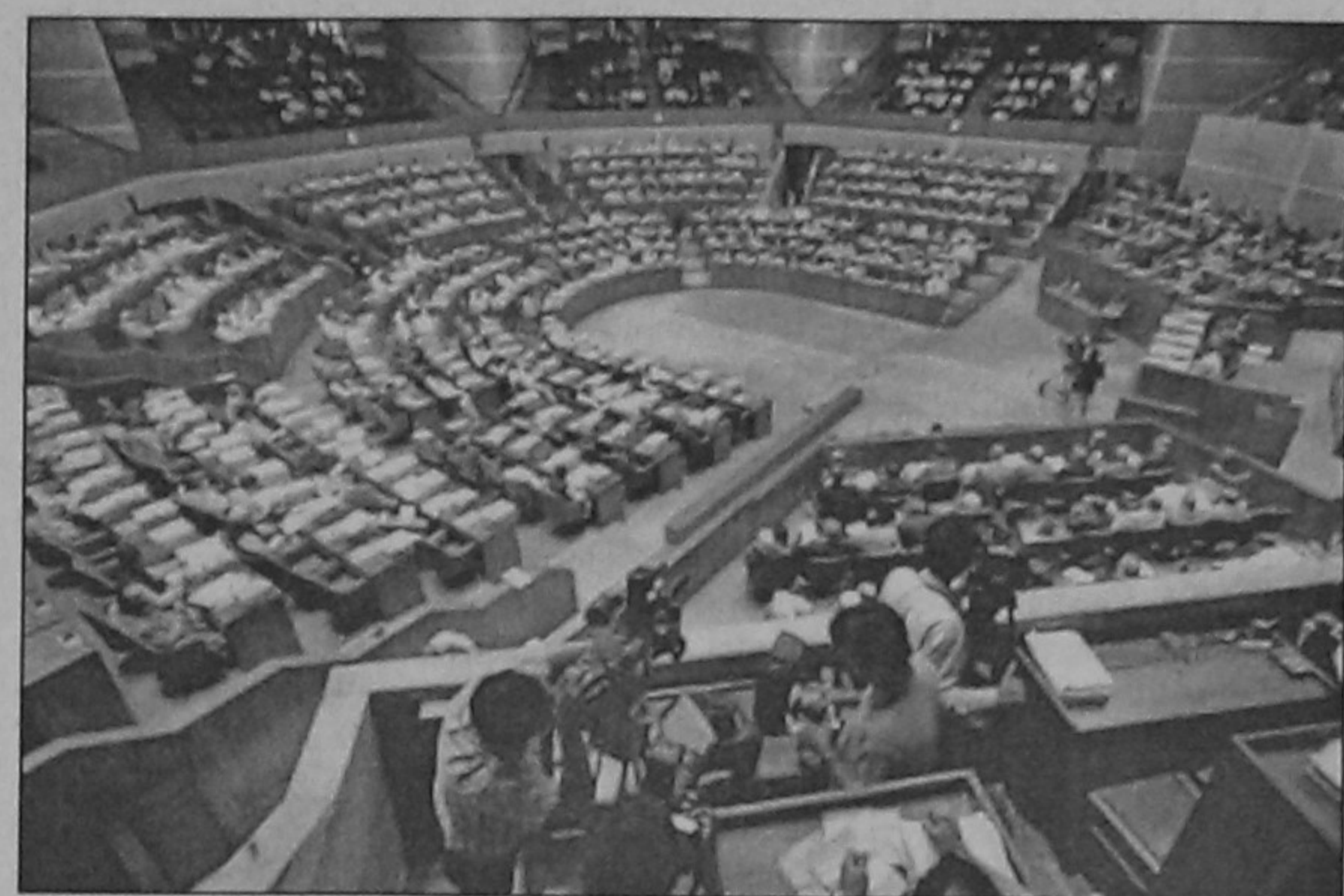
This terrible incident has left the

government with the unenviable task of not only pacification but also of restoring discipline in an institution responsible for the security of the state. In addition, there will be several other tasks, which will require patience, serious analysis, fact-finding and adjudication.

The armed forces and the civilian administration have set up inquiry committees. They will have to determine what led to the explosion and will also have to identify the "agent provocateurs." Some unnecessary controversy has been created over the ambit and denotation of the "general amnesty" declared by the prime minister. There has also been some criticism over the lack of use of force to quell the mutiny.

We must now forsake debate and work together. During this crucial juncture, there has to be bi-partisanship within and outside the Parliament. Recriminations must stop to achieve the desired closure. The Parliament should examine the report prepared by the appointed Committee to assist in the reorganization of this paramilitary force and redress of just grievances. Firmness needs to be displayed in punishing those guilty of transgressing established rules operative for this disciplined force.

The mutiny has raised once again the point pertaining to future civil-military



Only unity can make us stronger.

relationship. This becomes more pertinent given the significant role played by the armed forces as well as the BDR in improving our state of governance.

We have today, again, a challenge in the sustaining of institutional democracy. We have to be careful because the stakes are very high. We have a crisis but we do not need to suffer from despair. It has definitely harmed our image in the international arena and within the potential of UN Peacekeeping.

Nevertheless, we will have to be professional in our attitude and emotion must not get in the way.

We should also refrain from rumour mongering and in the politicisation of the on-going judicial process or in its review. Democracy requires tolerance and forbearance. That will be the only way to move beyond our pain.

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Macabre murders and the myopia

The most serious occupational hazard in the intelligence field is prejudice. While we are all creatures of prejudice, we must be able to avoid bending of facts obtained through intelligence to suit or defeat a particular political viewpoint.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE gruesome killings of defence service officials at Pilkhana on February 25th are deliberate acts of murder by conspiratorial persons gone berserk. While the motive behind the mayhem may take some time to be unearthed, the inability to forestall such a tragedy needs to be looked into.

The tragedy of our times is that even after 38 years of independent nationhood we have to seek external assistance in properly and impartially investigating criminal offences. How galling is this to our national prestige and sovereignty?

What is the public or national interest that intelligence agencies must bear in mind? It may, thus, be relevant to look at our constitution, which defines our national interests. It says that the aim of the state is to realise the democratic process in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice will be secured for all citizens.

This constitutional stipulation has been highlighted because apparently the mission and strategy of our crime fighting and intelligence organisations had not been stable, at least insofar as the domestic threat scenario is concerned. It is felt that those have substantially altered with the change of a political government. It has been our unfortunate experience to witness the differing political agendas often clouding the understanding and appreciation of our real national interests.

Ensuring internal security is closely associated with collecting and collating intelligence in the interests of the state. In our situation, the interests of the state often get mixed up with the interests of the government of the day. There is an unfortunate lack of understanding and appreciation of the requirements of the state and the government in a democratic and pluralist society like ours.

The unpleasant truth is that intelligence agencies maintain files on and shadow the leaders and workers of constitutional



The people's interest must always come first.

politics-oriented parties belonging to the opposition, who are partners in politics. When such an opposition party comes to power, there is an uneasy relationship between the political bosses and the agencies.

In such a scenario, professionalism becomes the worst casualty, the sense of direction is lost, the organisation becomes lackadaisical and the interests of the state take a back seat, surrendering greater space to partisan considerations.

Intelligence agencies can effectively serve national interests only if directed appropriately by the political authority. If they (agencies) have to remain preoccupied with largely inconsequential partisan matters to the detriment of national interest, then we will not be able to manage any crisis, not to speak of forestalling the tragedies of recent times.

We have been criticising the agencies without, however, appreciating the impediments to the growth of an apolitical pro-

fessional organisation. Time has come when we must have the honesty to call a spade a spade and realise that the governments will change hands but not the state.

We have been disappointingly reactive in responding to the threats to national security. The whole approach appears to be on a case-to-case basis. Somehow, the establishment wishes to assure itself by imagining that a hydra-headed monster has surfaced all on a sudden and will wither soon to the relief of the concerned population.

Intelligence agencies should not be the judges of their own operations with regard to the necessity and propriety thereof, nor should they be allowed to operate as instruments of politicians. There must be inbuilt constraints.

Security of the state should not involve:

- Assessing the election prospects of the ruling party;
- Ascertaining the suitability of the candidates for contesting the elections on behalf of the ruling party;
- Acting as the super-watchman over the activities of politicians regardless of party identity;
- Being used as an instrument of political spying.

There should be a charter of duties for the intelligence organs, stating responsibilities beyond doubt and indicating what is

permitted and what is prohibited.

The purpose for which intelligence has to be collected has to be clearly spelt out. It should not be to serve the interests of a political party or to blackmail or control the opponents of the political party in power or hostile elements within the establishment.

The legitimate purpose of intelligence should be to anticipate developments that may imperil national interests so as to enable appropriate action with the imperative that any effort to equate national interest with party interest should be guarded against. Once the purpose is known, the chances of non-observance of fairness and objectivity in intelligence collection will be reduced.

The most serious occupational hazard in the intelligence field is prejudice. While we are all creatures of prejudice, we must be able to avoid bending of facts obtained through intelligence to suit or defeat a particular political viewpoint.

The most important safeguards lie in the character and self-discipline of the leadership of the intelligence services and of the people who work for their integrity, their respect for the democratic processes and their sense of duty and devotion in carrying out their delicate tasks.

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Mutiny or conspiracy?

Sensible citizens are not inclined to believe that the Pilkhana tragedy was rooted in the *dal-bhat* issue as shown over TV by a shouting group of so-called mutineers with their faces covered.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE brutal killing of unarmed senior level army officers at BDR headquarters in Pilkhana on February 25 by disgruntled jawans of BDR in collusion with some intruders masquerading as BDR jawans, as reported by some officers escaping quite miraculously from the tragic scene on the following day, was an act of such horror, such barbarism that there is almost no Bangladeshi who does not feel personally ashamed.

Having surrounded these unarmed officers from all sides in the Darbar Hall at the BDR headquarter, the murderous BDR jawans brush-fired them, assaulted their families, and looted their properties after ransacking and burning some of the houses inside the HQ.

No sooner had this macabre mission been completed than the cruel jawans and the accomplices who, it is alleged, joined from outside melted away in the darkness. But the heat generated by the senseless killings, and the outrage stoked, are far from ebbing days after the incident.

There was a feeling of revulsion about the killings. It was as much the method as the people who were killed.

Locking patriotic unarmed senior level officers inside a meeting place and killing them or burning them alive is simply barbaric.

The human mind has its limits. It will find it impossible to explain the abominable ferocity against the most patriotic members of the country about whom they had no grievances or misgivings earlier.

Bangladesh is a resilient country. We have weathered many crises like floods, cyclones, food shortages, price hike of essentials, sleazy politicians and businessmen, and insensitive bureaucrats, but an attempt to create discord and conflict in the patriotic armed forces, who stand by the nation in the most trying circumstances like natural disasters or external aggression, is most terrifying. It is, one believes, the only thing that can tear this country apart.

Every man, woman and child in the country has been united as rarely before by a collective sense of revulsion. Believable, the land is no stranger to tensions, conflicts and discord. Even so, it has to be recognised that the Pilkhana tragedy has breached the line between human and animal behaviour.

Sensible citizens are not inclined to believe that the Pilkhana tragedy

was rooted in the *dal-bhat* issue as shown over TV by a shouting group of so-called mutineers with their faces covered. Taking advantage of a paltry matter of discontent in a group, they carried out the most heinous attack against the army officers -- against the armed forces to destabilise the government and, more so, the country as a whole.

These evil forces were not alone in their killing mission, they were joined by some intruders carrying the most sophisticated arms and weapons in an ash-coloured jeep, as revealed by some surviving officers from the holocaust. The whole operation was neatly planned and well-coordinated, leading to calculated massacre amounting to genocide.

It was not only surprising but also shocking why there was no intelligence information reaching the highest places of the government. It has also been learnt that the army or the BDR does not use some of the weapons and arms recovered. This reinforces the belief that arms and ammunitions were supplied from outside and some very organised groups in collusion with the disgruntled BDR jawans orchestrated the massacre inside the Pilkhana.

There are reports that till March 2, some 4500 jawans in civilian dress and 500 in uniform had reported for duty in Pilkhana. In an effort to find out the truth and the real culprits, all of them should be subjected to interrogation and the mobile phone companies may be asked to provide a list of calls made from around the

Pilkhana area at the time of the mayhem.

With the reconstitution of the enquiry committee, comprising members of the three branches of the armed forces as well as the new director general of Bangladesh Rifles, the people are hopeful that there could hardly be any misgivings about the acceptability of the findings of the probe. But the terms of reference must include or focus on the involvement of other groups or agencies that worked behind the scene, and most primarily the intelligence failure that made room for such a horrific drama to be staged.

During the state funeral followed by the *janaza* of 49 martyred army officers, it was learnt from the group discussions before the *janaza* that the so-called frenzied mutineers had shouted: "Where is that Gulzar?" The same version was corroborated by Maj Gen (Retd) Mainul H. Chowdhury in a talk show on Channel i on March 3, and also in a write-up by Major General (Retd) Amin Ahmed Chowdhury in the Financial Express. This might give an important clue to both the enquiry committees in finding out the identities of the "behind the scene players."

Col. Gulzar Uddin Ahmed is one of the 5 army officers still missing. Col Gulzar, during his 2 year service as Additional D.G of Rab (intelligence wing), played a significant role in raiding JMB dens and arresting JMB stalwarts from different places in the country.

Some people question the wis-



Why did he take up arms?

dom of transferring officers who served in sensitive posts to field level organisations immediately afterwards. One retired major general opined that in the interest of their personal safety and security they should be taken back in their

parent organisation (army), enabling them to serve there for at least two years to avoid public exposure and vendetta.

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