

## International Women's Day

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KAMAL UDDIN AHMED

**T**HE International Women's Day (IWD) is being observed today in both developed and underdeveloped countries to underscore women's equal rights and opportunities worldwide. The struggle for realising women rights has a long history.

In 1857, thousands of working women in New York took to the streets to protest against inequitable wages, a 12-hour work day, and sexual nuisance in the workplace. On March 8, 1908, a large number of women assembled in New York City to realise their right to suffrage.

In 1910, as many as 100 women representing 17 countries decided to initiate an International Women's Day at an International Conference of Socialist Women in Copenhagen, Denmark. The first IWD was held in 1911 in Germany, Austria, Denmark and some other European countries. The IWD has emerged as a universal event for celebration.

The United Nations for the first time formally proclaimed International Women's Year on March 8, 1975. Since

then, IWD has emerged as the most important day for women across the world to remember their prolonged struggles and commemorate their social, political and economic achievements.

IWD is an official holiday in more than 15 countries, including China, Russia, and Vietnam. This year's special focus is on "Women and Education," in which women everywhere lag behind. Indeed, women's education is vital to any country's progress, be it social, political or economic.

One of the fundamental principles of state policy is: Bangladesh "shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children." Bangladesh has been spending nearly 10% of its national budget on education. The constitution stipulates that "steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life."

Successive Bangladesh governments and women's groups and activists have been striving to ensure equal rights and

opportunities and expand women education. The aim is to ensure that women are properly educated, secured, and free from any violence, oppression, and discrimination. Many pragmatic policy programs undertaken by Bangladesh governments have improved female education to some extent, and women have also been empowered.

For example, in September 2004, with technical and financial support from a consortium of 11 donors led by the Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh launched the Primary Education Development Programme for ensuring "education for all" by 2015.

There are over 81,000 primary-level schools across the country, which are run fully by the government, with around 17.5 million students, of whom about half are girls.

According to a 2007 United Nations Economic and Social Council study, the net enrolment rate of students at the primary level was 87.27%, with 84.63% being boys and 90.14% girls.

Although gender parity has been achieved in primary and lower secondary school enrolments, there have been large dropouts of girl students at the higher secondary level. This is mainly due to socio-economic obstacles, traditional mindsets, biases and attitudes based on gender roles.

According to the World Bank, more than 40% of the country's population lives below poverty line (less than \$1 a day) and 35% are unemployed.

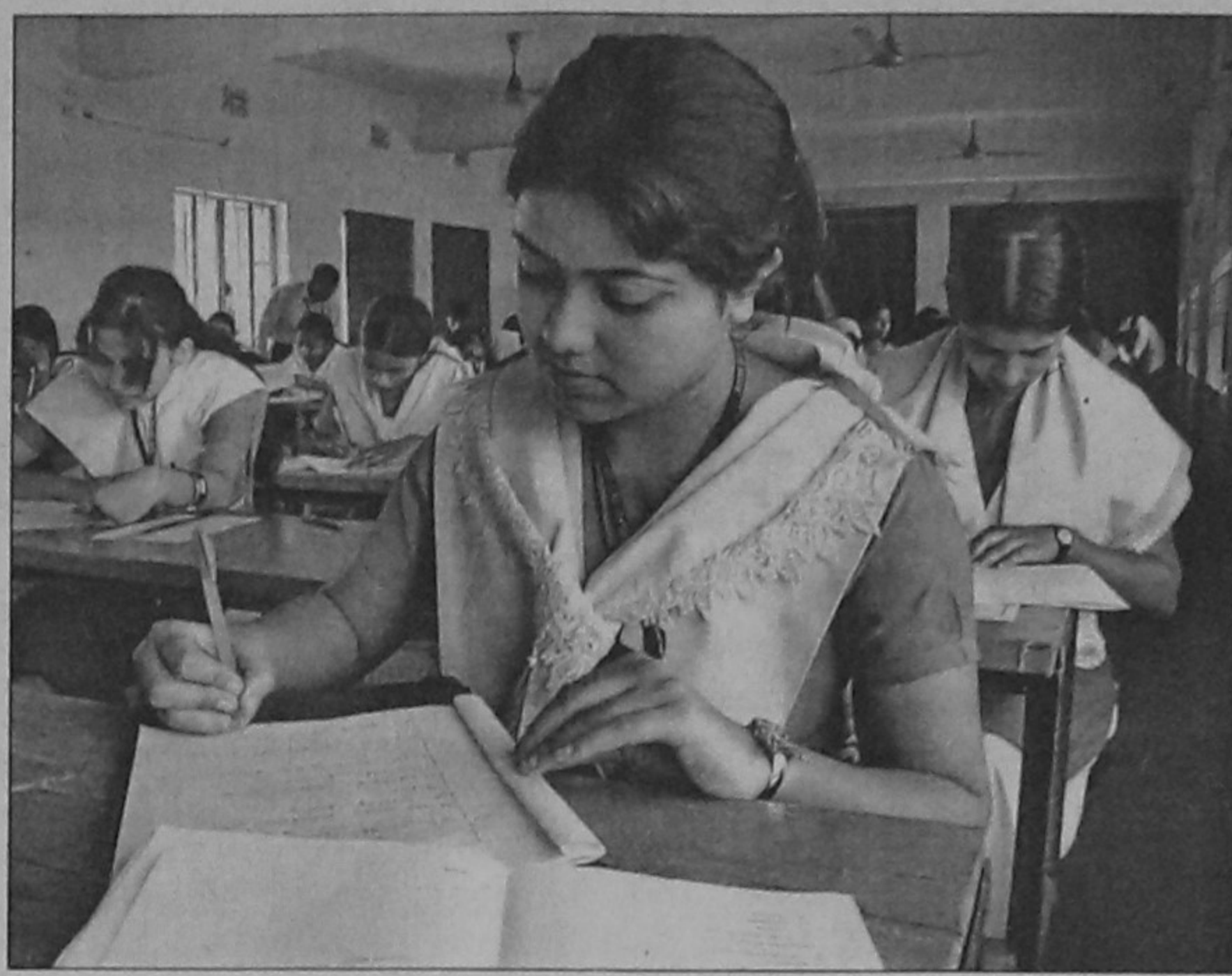
Obviously, poverty-stricken families are unable to meet the cost of education of their children. Moreover, in rural areas of Bangladesh, families prefer to educate their sons rather than their daughters.

In the mid-1990s, a female school stipend program was introduced to support secondary education for girls in the rural areas of Bangladesh, which has had a positive impact. However, despite the benefits of the stipend program, there has been a high rate of dropouts of girls at the higher secondary level.

Policy makers and intelligentsia believe that there is still a lack of consciousness among the rural people about the value and importance of women's education.

Nonetheless, the overall achievements and performance of female students in higher education are actually striking. In view of their relatively better grades in the SSC and HSC examinations, in recent years, an ever-increasing number of female students are pursuing higher studies in the public and private universities. For example, female students comprise about 50% of the students in Dhaka University.

On the whole, the performance of the female students is also comparatively better than their male counterparts. Moreover, as of June 2007, women teachers in Dhaka University constituted 26.2% of the total number of teachers. Five years back, female teachers comprised merely about 16%.



We want education, we need empowerment.

Women teachers got their positions through their own educational excellence. A large number of females are also entering the civil service on their own merit. These are some impressive developments in women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

However, if we want to make Bangladesh competitive with rest of the world, further development and expansion of women's education is indis-

pensable. Undeniably, education is the most helpful means for increasing women's self-confidence, enabling them to participate equally and effectively in the development process in a country. For that reason, this year's IWD slogan, "Women and Education," is most pertinent.

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## I want to believe

I want to believe. I do believe in Bangladeshis. In living memory, we have secured freedom, established a democratic order, and are aspiring to be a middle income country before our 50th national birthday.

JYOTI RAHMAN

*On that day, no soul shall be wronged, and you shall not be rewarded aught but that which you did.* (The Quran, 36:54).

**S**URAH Yasin is usually recited in Muslim households when someone passes away. The above-quoted *ayaat* from the *surah* has been in my mind lately. I want to believe those words, not just in the promised day of reckoning, but here and now, in this People's Republic of ours.

I want to believe that justice will

prevail; the perpetrators will be apprehended, tried in a transparent court, and given exemplary punishment; any conspiracy or intelligence failure will be unearthed; and there won't be any torture, extraordinary renditions, or black holes run by any government agency. I want to believe that we will have justice, because only then will we have peace.

I want to believe that our Republic will prevail. While we have focused mostly on the atrocities -- understandable, given their scale -- let's not forget that a week ago, we were on the

brink of becoming a failed state.

I want to believe that we will never become a failed state. We have lost scores of bright officers, and our border remains to be secured. Our national security apparatus is incredibly stretched. It's time we let the army and paramilitary do their jobs, and not become relief workers, firemen, or shopkeepers.

I want to believe that we never have to ask again; how could this happen? And yet, there is no getting away from the grim reality that this nightmare was true. The initial reporting suggested, seemingly reasonably, a mutiny of the have-nots.

Ours is a grossly unequal society. Rising inequality among those who share the same language, culture, and religion -- as is the case for nine out of ten Bangladeshis -- means an explosion is always just a matter of time.

And yet, there is more to our story. We

don't have a historically embedded feudal class or caste system. A randomly chosen senior bureaucrat, successful businessman, or acclaimed professional will have some family member in the heart of rural Bangladesh.

Unequal our society may be, but we also have had, at least until now, social mobility. I want to believe our dreams of a better day.

I want to believe that the army and the BDR accept each other as brothers that they are. And yet, blood was shed by brothers. How could this happen? Deep-seated class resentment? Conspiracy? Perhaps. But can we also deny that ours is a violent society?

I want to believe that we can control our id. And there is hope, even in this dark hour. In a country where students shut down highways when their friend gets hit by a bus, our soldiers waited, knowing their comrades were brutally

assaulted, because the order to fire never came.

Our soldiers exhibited valour, not in a violent battlefield, but by not raising their arms. Our soldiers are our brothers and cousins, sons and nephews. I want to believe that we can all perform our duties as they have done theirs.

And they performed their duties because the government ordered them to hold back. Throughout this crisis, it was a civilian government that was in charge. It was that government, which showed utmost patience and yet demonstrated a steely resolve, when the prime minister said "don't try my patience."

Rights and wrongs of the way the crisis was handled will be debated for a long time to come. But, ultimately, it will be the people who will judge. That is the power of democracy. I want to believe that our democracy will endure.

And our democracy can only endure

if we are brave enough to face criticism. The government will be criticised, sometimes unfairly, often with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight. The army will be criticised for what was ultimately a command failure. And the media will be criticised for failing to portray the facts. I want to believe that we are strong enough to absorb these criticisms.

I want to believe. I do believe in Bangladeshis. In living memory, we have secured freedom, established a democratic order, and are aspiring to be a middle income country before our 50th national birthday. In the past two years, we have beaten the spectre of famine and debilitating political crises. I want to believe that we shall overcome. I want to be able to write that I do believe.

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## Murder in Pilkhana

As for the motive of the crime, the apparent grievances of the unruly jawans over service conditions seem too trivial to give rise to an outbreak of violence of such massive scale and intensity.

ABDUL HANNAN

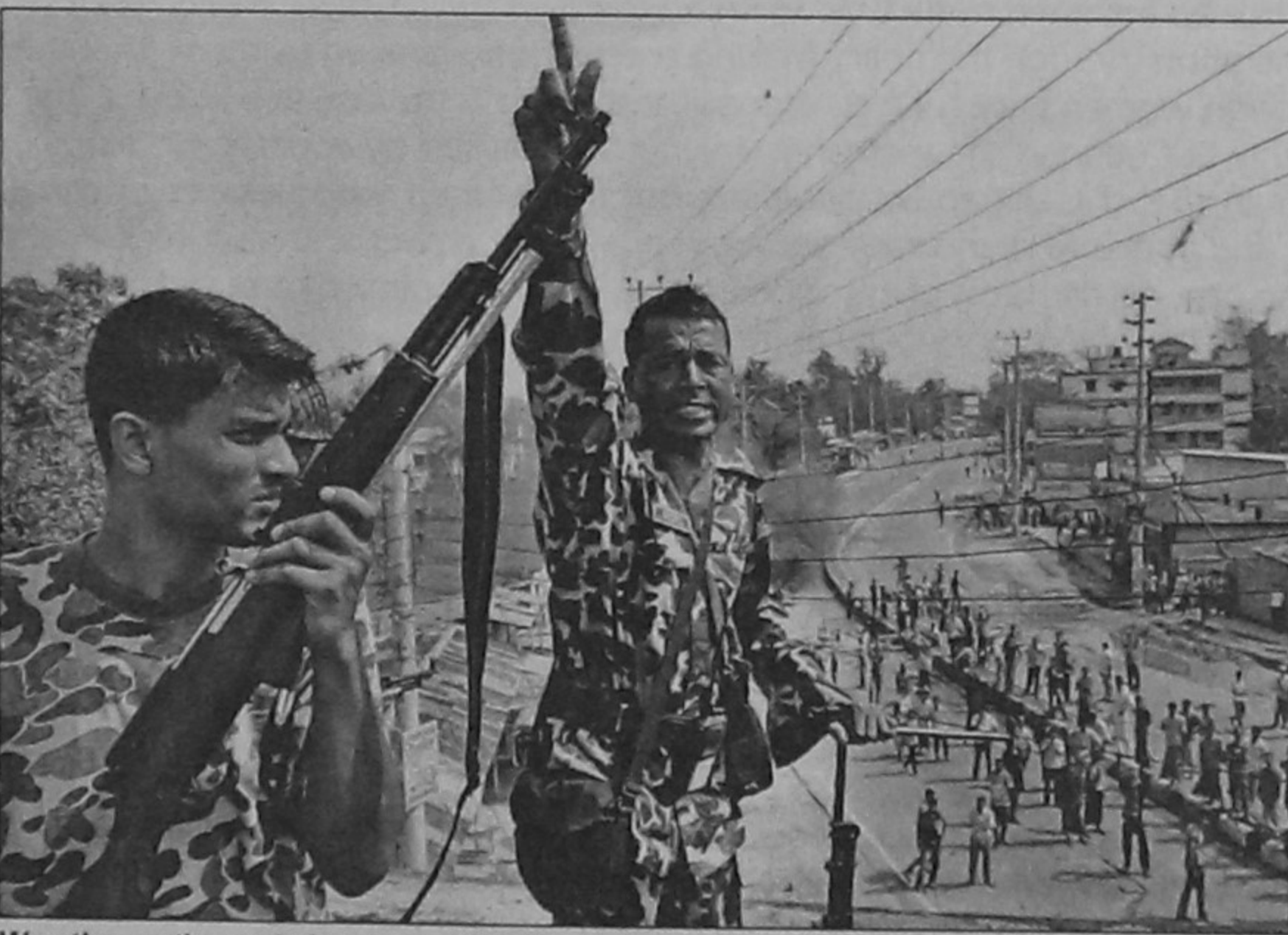
**T**HE unfolding details of the murder of very senior army officers in the uprising in BDR have overwhelmed the nation with deep shock and disbelief, anguish and wrath. It is truly a national tragedy of incomprehensible proportion. The government rightly observed three days of national mourning.

This despicable and ghastly incident has raised more questions than answers. How could it happen? Who exactly are the perpetrators of this heinous crime? Were there any collaborators outside the scene of the crime? Why did it happen? Could the casualties

be contained? The answers are many and bewildering, as indicated by extensive and in-depth television talk shows, media reporting and comments.

Everybody has raised an accusing finger at blatant intelligence failure, without which the tragedy could have been averted. It was pointed out that the intelligence negligence was all the more conspicuous because the prime minister had only a day earlier visited the BDR HQ to attend the annual parade.

It was argued that the intelligence agencies were busy keeping an eye on politicians, teachers and businessmen rather than concentrating on matters in the armed forces and similar other



Was the mutiny only because of their grievances?

agencies. It was suggested that the intelligence failure be thoroughly investigated, and existing flaws identified in order to make the intelligence

agencies more effective.

As for the motive of the crime, the apparent grievances of the unruly jawans over service conditions, includ-

ing pay rise, openings in UN peace keeping assignments, assumed corruption among senior officers etc., seem too trivial to give rise to an outbreak of violence of such massive scale and intensity.

It is agreed by almost all that the attack on the army officers was pre-planned and premeditated and was perhaps masterminded by ideologically motivated and hardened collaborators in collusion with a small group of infiltrators in the ranks with a view to deriving political dividends by creating a wedge and internecine conflict between the army and BDR.

The ultimate purpose was perhaps to destabilise the country, posing a potential threat to the democratic government. The enquiry committees will certainly unearth and unravel the mystery of the deep-seated plot, and bring the missing links and quislings to justice.

However, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina rose to the occasion with

remarkable political wisdom and foresight, resolve and equanimity. She consulted with the army and kept them in confidence every step of the way. She opted for a peaceful political solution rather than military action, which could metastasise the conflict into a full-blown bloodbath within the BDR compound.

It must be appreciated that the army showed remarkable good sense, maturity and restraint under extreme provocation. They had every reason to be agitated and angry at the loss of such a huge number of their fellow senior officers of outstanding distinction and merit.

However, democracy in Bangladesh seems to be safe for now. Our hearts, minds and prayers are with the members of the bereaved families who may bear the loss of their loved ones with courage and fortitude. This is a defining moment for the nation. With faith in the future we shall overcome.

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## How to fix the world



**N**OT again! Every day I pick up the newspaper and every day I read the same thing. "World Financial Crisis Gets Worse. Experts Baffled."

What's the big deal? Last weekend I fixed a broken kitchen blender, which is a darn sight more complicated. And it only took me seven hours and help from three neighbours.

Yet the people who run the planet seem to have no idea how to fix the banking system.

Now I hate to be racist or sexist, but how about we try being racist and sexist about all this? White guys have run the planet for years. Look at the mess we're in. How about letting non-white females have a go?

I sat down at the night market with a group of friends, none of whom were bankers, and most of whom were Asian women. I asked them for suggestions on how to fix the world. The women accepted the challenge and used a secret weapon to generate ideas: Extra-Hot Sweet Chili Sauce. (The chili triggers endorphins in the brain and

the sugar powers the neurons.)

Here's the list they made.

All male world leaders should immediately step down and hand their jobs to their wives. No exceptions. Bye-bye, Barack, hello, Michelle.

The price of oil should be raised 10-fold. This will force businessmen to walk to work until they realise they need to make vehicles using natural energy.

It should become illegal for any country to adopt a single religious ideology. Whenever national borders and religious borders match, trouble follows.

Marijuana should be made legal and taxed at the same level as alcohol and

cigarettes. Crime would fall, government income would shoot upwards -- and universities would become funky, creative places.

The wording on wedding services should be switched around so that the guy promises to "love, honour and OBEY" the woman.

The rulers of one-party states (listen up, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore) should stop pretending to be democratic. They should call themselves "dictatorships" or actually become democratic. Only democratic countries can become rich, stable, free, happy, creative societies. (Two out of five ain't good enough.)

Chinese leaders need to realise that

human rights are for humans, and that includes their people.

It would be a fantastic service to humanity if a hacker got into the Swiss banking system and located all the details of people with secret accounts. Then we'll publish their names so that everyone can look and gasp.

The death penalty should be abolished in every country, although I don't mind if you keep it for people who send out spam emails.

A law should be passed which says that no one is allowed to get married until they have dated at least one person of a different ethnic background.

The constitutions of Sri Lanka, Israel, Palestine and America should

be replaced with the words of Abraham Lincoln, here paraphrased: "You can't destroy an enemy with a gun. You can only destroy him by making him your friend."

Every community needs to have a genuinely free press, printed and online (China and Singapore, are you listening?) so that people can trash stupid officials, bad governments and bad ideas.

And so articles like this can be printed.

You know it makes sense.

For more ideas on how to fix the world visit our columnist at [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com)