

## Prime Minister's call to Leader of the Opposition

*Irresponsible utterances can only undercut BDR investigations*

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's call to Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia makes sense. It was rather surprising for the nation to know from Begum Zia the other day that the killers of the BDR officers were foreign spies and hired from outside. Sheikh Hasina has responded by asking Begum Zia that if she has any evidence to back up her point of view she should provide it to the probe bodies now at work on the BDR tragedy. There can be no denying that the killing of the army officers on February 25 has left the nation traumatised and we will all remain in the dark for as long as we are unable to delve into the roots of the conspiracy behind it. The country now expects Begum Zia to respond to the Prime Minister's request and come forward in aiding the process of investigation in any way she can.

Having said that, we can only register our grave discomfiture and displeasure at any and all irresponsible comments that have been and are being made about the BDR tragedy. All quarters, including the media, should apply discretion in any assessment of the tragedy. And at a time when every effort is required to ensure a speedy and absolutely foolproof investigation of how matters got out of hand on February 25, we must remind everyone (and that importantly includes political leaders) that the inquiry cannot be allowed to be influenced or undermined in any manner whatsoever, even unwittingly. All subjective assessments of the situation can only slow down, perhaps even undercut the entire purpose of the investigations. Let no one forget that the whole nation is waiting keenly to see those who perpetrated such a heinous crime identified. And that will be possible only if the investigations take their own, natural course. Obviously, a very big need today is for the political quarters to resist any temptation to bring narrow partisan politics into the picture as a way of gaining mileage. Anyone who tries that (and it does not matter what brand of politics he or she believes in) will be conducting the business of politics in sheer bad taste.

Let no one understate the grave crisis we are passing through. We have lost some of our brave soldiers through a well laid-out plot that certainly must be unearthed. More importantly, we realise that national unity with the objective of ensuring the survival and success of democracy is today called for. The people need to come together. Given such bare, unassailable truths, it should be the prime concern of all that no one demonstrates a cavalier attitude to the BDR issue. All of us have a common stake in the investigations leading to a conclusive outcome, with the truth finally and firmly established.

## Water crisis

*Reduce woes with some appropriate measures*

WATER supply situation in the metropolis is beginning to look serious with the advent of summer. Already we have seen angry demonstrations and blocking of roads by disgruntled residents in Mirpur area where water supply has dwindled sharply since February. Similar stories concerning shortage of water in other areas are also being reported in the media. With hot summer days ahead, when demand for water will rise further, it is likely that Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (WASA) might be in for similar demonstrations if the supply situation is not improved soon enough. Although the crisis is seasonal, we seldom plan for it.

The WASA officials at Mirpur have already explained that groundwater level has gone down in the pump area for which they cannot extract the required amount of water to meet the growing demand. With the rivers surrounding the city drying up and narrowing down because of illegal encroachment and rains still to come, there is no easy solution to groundwater scarcity. We believe, instead of going for ad hoc arrangements, the authorities concerned will have to think of more durable solutions that would make procurement and conservation of water possible.

Frequent load-shedding is a factor that affects pumping and smooth supply of water to the households and the authorities concerned will have to address this crucial issue before summer fully sets in. According to Power Development Board (PDB) the official load-shedding on Saturday was 810 megawatts (MW) and it was between 350MW and 500MW a day during November and December last year.

We would urge the authorities concerned to make water, the most essential commodity for living, available through undertaking all possible measures. They should also ensure that there is no wastage of water in the supply network through system loss while the consumers themselves exercise thrift in the use of water.

## Let there be light

The AL government will do itself a great favour by involving a wide spectrum of political forces in bringing out the facts from the dark recesses of the tragic incident by throwing plenty of light to dispel the darkness first. So let there be light, accompanied by frankness and transparency of the politicians of all hues and shades.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

*And yet out of eternity, a thread  
Separated itself on the blackness  
A horizontal thread  
That fumes a little with pallor upon the dark.*  
T.S. Eliot.

EVER as "Operation Rebel Hunt" is in progress and the nation mourns the carnage and pays homage to the memory of the slain heroes who courted martyrdom with their boots on, the trauma of the tragedy in blood-soaked Pilkhana is far from over for those directly and personally affected.

The trauma has only intensified, because the nation, still flummoxed, has failed to placate their agony and has only been able to give them empty words. As a result, with every passing day, cynicism is building up, the mystery is thickening and confusion mounting. In tandem, the clamour for justice is reaching a crescendo.

Barely two months ago, when we ushered in democracy, we thought we had reached the summit. But alas! The ascent of one ridge only revealed the next daunting challenge. The nation has been overtaken by a storm following the BDR bloodbath, and it now appears that the interested

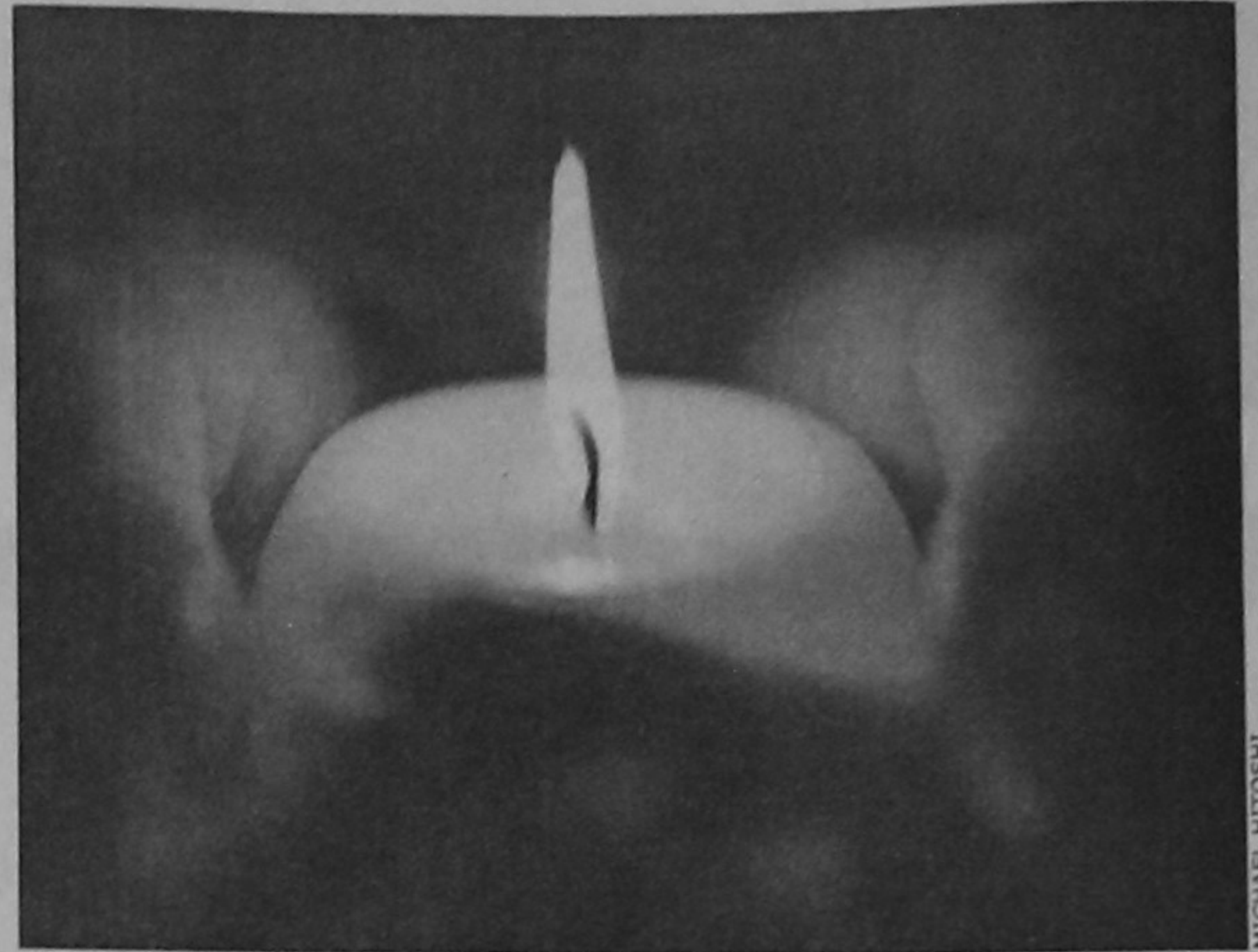
groups and politicians are vying for control. A visible gap can be discerned in their stances with regard to the tragic happening.

The architects of our independence gave us a great country but we little men, mired in mean practices and petty politics, destroyed their legacy. With the country's political culture hardly changed, democracy is merely a numbers game and a caricature of itself. No wonder the national firmament is again overcast with gloom darker than night.

With the tragic assassination of a good number of officers in uniform the country faces nothing less than a national crisis, which ought to be dealt by an approach commensurate with its gravity. The bravery of the army officers, who left a lesson in making a rational and moral choice before they tasted the kiss of death, must be emulated by the nation in its own interest. That will help the nation in setting its own moral standard.

In the gory trail of death and destructions in Pilkhana they indelibly inscribed with their blood the moral they upheld -- the nation first, and above everything else. They cannot but be assured of their rightful place in the pantheon of national heroes.

However, the challenge of the moment



Unity and the openness can dispel the gloom.

for the nation is to be able to dispel the darkness enveloping us from all directions. Its syndrome can be seen in the resurrection of obscurantist religious militancy, denying us moderation, tolerance and an enlightened perception of life. The militants seem to have bared their fangs across the country after their brief hibernation.

All eyes are now fixed on the inquiries underway to find out the whole truth surrounding the tragedy. Many investigations were sabotaged in the past by the government itself by twisting facts to hide the truth. And justice? That was a cruel joke during the BNP Jamaat regime.

Now, it is both an opportunity and a test for the AL government -- an opportunity because it can prove its sincerity by dis-

pensing justice, and a test because the public is keenly observing whether it twists fact and resorts to BNP-style chicanery both in investigation and in dispensing justice.

The AL government will do itself a great favour by involving a wide spectrum of political forces in bringing out the facts from the dark recesses of the tragic incident by throwing plenty of light to dispel the darkness first. So let there be light, accompanied by frankness and transparency of the politicians of all hues and shades. An investigation thus carried out will enjoy much more credibility and will not let justice be subverted.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## Justice with due process

It will also not be wise to rush into new laws and tribunals to try the killers. We have strong existing laws to deal with murder, assault, and treason. We dilute our commitment to the constitution every time we bypass existing laws and courts and create alternative channels.

ASIF SALEH AND JALAL ALAMGIR

NEVER did we think that we would be haunted with mass graves in independent Bangladesh. Never did we think that we would have to unearth mutilated, bayonet-torn dead bodies. And yet, today, we are assaulted once again by mass graves and the cold-blooded murder of our army officers, their families, and civilians.

We mourn our loss. We offer prayers in solidarity with the families and their loved ones. And in no uncertain terms, we want the killers responsible to be brought to justice.

But how we deal with this trauma and deliver justice will put under the light the very definition of our collective identity. Do we want to remain wedded to endless cycles of revenge? Do we serve the need of the moment, or do we go back to the values for which we fought our liberation war? Do we take expedient shortcuts, or do we assert that the virtues enshrined in our constitution are non negotiable?

The choices we make will show our mettle and worth for decades to come. In all these, we must choose justice over vengeance, and we must choose to strengthen, not dilute, our democracy.

In the coming days, we will be severely tested in three areas. First, who will deal with the perpetrators? Too many times in our history have we handled national crises by delegitimising existing authority and creating new ones. As a result, we have a political culture of disrespect and discontinuity; there is no reliable hand to steady the ship during times of need.

This time, our army showed great professionalism as our political leadership stepped in to defuse the crisis. We need to fully utilise this positive break from past trends, and we must continue to allow our constitutionally-mandated political leadership the central role. There will be emotion-laden arguments for creating new high-powered security and intelligence bodies. We should question the long-term consequences of any such initiative in the

context of our fledgling democracy.

Second, how will justice be delivered? While we want to hunt down the rebels quickly, we should not assign law enforcement to the army; otherwise we risk exposing the army to unnecessary controversies at a highly sensitive time. Outsourcing the work of the police to the military, which is not explicitly trained for law enforcement, led to excesses in the past.

It will also not be wise to rush into new laws and tribunals to try the killers. We have strong existing laws to deal with murder, assault, and treason. We dilute our commitment to the constitution every time we bypass existing laws and courts and create alternative channels. We weaken principles of jurisprudence every time we apply laws retroactively. At the end of the day, we make no one secure from arbitrary treatment.

From the 1970s through the just-concluded caretaker government, summary tribunals have violated due process, rotting the integrity of laws to such extent that the innocent have been convicted for political reasons and real criminals and puppet-masters have found it easy to escape through loopholes.

We must not let any doubt arise over the integrity of the trials of the Pilkhana tragedy; otherwise we will have done the victims and their surviving families a great disservice. We must persist with transparent, open trials by fully applying existing laws.

Third, how do we minimise the danger of such gruesome events occurring in future?

Amidst all the theories and finger-pointing, the government must set the record straight by disclosing its investigation report transparently to the public. In it, we will confront painful facts. We will also have to ask larger, uncomfortable social questions. But only an environment of openness can help us understand what led some of our own countrymen to spew such hatred and commit the horrific and unjustified killings.

After its national trauma on 9/11, America had unprecedented world support. Yet we saw how quickly it lost that support, and indeed its moral ability to fight extremism, by choosing to take short-cuts with justice.

By translating public support into unchecked power and by labeling as "unpatriotic" any criticism of the government, the Bush administration gave us Guantanamo and Iraq, where hundreds of thousands more died. In that vein the British foreign minister, David Miliband, recently wrote: "We must respond to terrorism by championing the rule of law, not subordinating it."

Let's not make similar mistakes in Bangladesh. Let's muster whatever strength we have to ensure we deliver justice decisively while holding firm our values of democracy, rule of law, and due process, however trying the times may be.

Asif Saleh is Executive Director, DrishtiPat. Jalal Alamgir is Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Massachusetts, Boston.

## Test of statesmanship

The gratifying part of the Pilkhana tragedy is that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, with great sagacity, wisdom, and rectitude, like a true statesman, avoided a greater tragedy. Now the onus lies on her to also resist the designs of the conspirators by forging a strong unity of all quarters.

A. N. M. NURUL HAQUE

THE bloody mutiny by a section of BDR soldiers, brutally killing more than 75 people including 58 army officers, put Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to a grim test of statesmanship. She has not failed, but has rather shown wisdom, courage and tolerance, which are needed in tackling such critical situations in very trying times.

Avoiding the military operation, which might have caused a much bigger tragedy, and taking the political option has certainly shown that she is capable of standing up to the test of statesmanship.

The firm and cautious speech of the prime minister, declaring general amnesty, played a pivotal role in the surrendering of arms by the mutineers. It was also an appropriate and timely step on her part to establish calm among the army officers, giving them a patient hearing for three hours, who took the occasion to let off their

emotions relating to BDR carnage.

The prime minister's process of tackling the mutiny through holding a series of meetings with her senior cabinet colleagues and also with the armed forces, who responded quickly and decisively to the crisis, was the essence of her statesmanship.

Mutinies by the army, air force and BDR have occurred in the country since its independence in 1971, but the mutiny at BDR headquarters on February 25-26 surpassed them all in terms of its depth and enormity. The whole nation is reeling from shock at the tragic death of many bright and worthy sons of the soil.

Sadly, when a national crisis like the BDR carnage demands a united response from the politicians, transcending partisan differences, some political leaders are trying to discredit the government and giving provocative statements for narrow political gain.

The brutal action by a section of BDR

soldiers has been aptly described by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as a national crisis. Political leaders on either side of the divide should realise that their words and statements with narrow partisan mindsets may create a wrong impression, while a national crisis calls for unity of the political leadership for its resolution.

The nation now needs the highest level of tolerance from all quarters for protecting democracy and dignity in a united way. The way our valiant army has held its grief in check and performed its duties with utmost discipline for greater interest of the country really deserves to be commended.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has hinted that the BDR carnage was not the outcome of blood rushing into hot heads but a pre-planned sinister design against the country from some quarter. The leader of the opposition, Begum Khaleda Zia, was even more straightforward in linking the mutiny to a deep-rooted conspiracy against Bangladesh.

Whether the BDR mutiny was a grave conspiracy against the nation or not, it had the potential to destabilise the AL-led alliance government -- barely two months in office -- if timely steps were not taken by the government and army leaders.

Therefore, the mysteries centering the Pilkhana carnage must be unveiled, however agonising they may be. To get to the bottom of the tragedy, the government must strive to identify its instigators, aiders

and abettors and bring them all to book. The government must not hesitate to point fingers at the culprits, even if they belong to its own party. The possibility of external hands in the mutiny must also be explored.

Bridging the knowledge gap between the rank and file and the officers is an imperative for our armed forces, as it is a factor that creates socio-economic discrimination. The inequality should not be considered as the prime cause for this mutiny.

Conspirators must evolve a foolproof mechanism to keep all our security forces free from infiltration. The issue of intelligence failure also needs to be reviewed seriously, as no one will ever want to see the repetition of such a painful event.

The gratifying part of the Pilkhana tragedy is that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, with great sagacity, wisdom, and rectitude, like a true statesman, avoided a greater tragedy. Now the onus lies on her to also resist the designs of the conspirators by forging a strong unity of all quarters.

The world has seen very few successful statesmen like Winston Churchill, who said: "A politician thinks about the next election, the statesman thinks about the next generation." With all humbleness I wish Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina such statesmanship that will differentiate her from a just politician.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.