

Bangladeshi premier faces a grim crucible

Today, about two months into her tenure, she confronts her greatest crucible yet: an unusually savage mutiny by border guards last month that left soldiers buried in mass graves and widened the gulf between her fragile administration and the military.

SOMINI SENGUPTA

SHEIKH Hasina survived when gunmen executed her father and extended family late one summer night in 1975. She survived again when assassins hurled 13 grenades at her political rally in 2004, killing two-dozen people.

A Bangladeshi border guard's daughter was consoled by a police officer at the guards' headquarters Monday. Her father was missing after reporting back last week.

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Altogether, 74 people were killed, mostly army officers in command of the border force.

Two separate investigations are under way to identify those responsible: one by the army, another by Mrs. Hasina's government. Whether either will yield credible results is unknown. Mrs. Hasina's fate and the stability of the country depend on the outcome.

In an interview this week, Mrs. Hasina called the mutiny "a big conspiracy" against her agenda to establish a secular

democracy in this Muslim-majority nation of 150 million. She struck a note of defiant resolve.

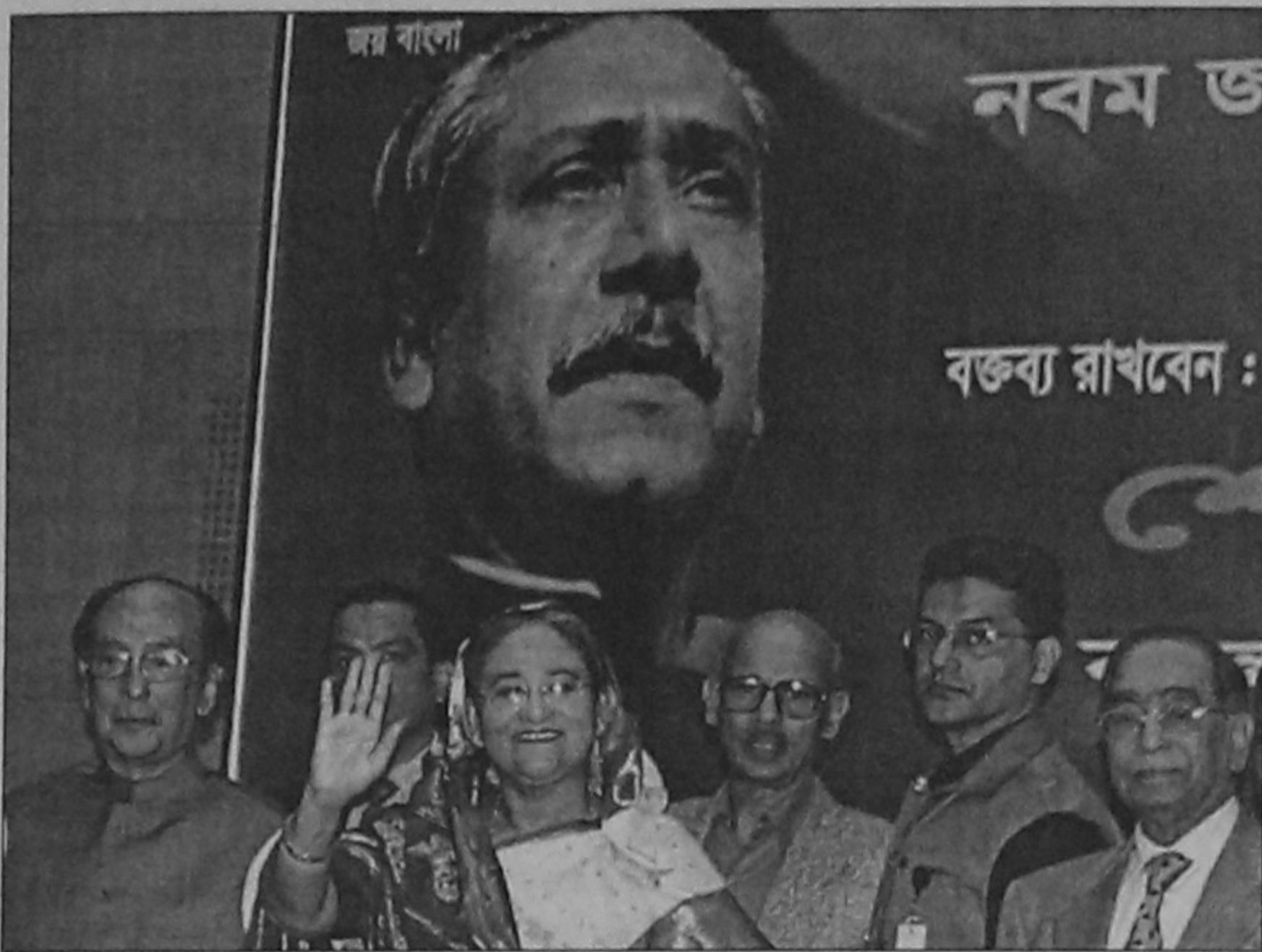
"No one will stop me," she said. "I will continue." Then she raised her eyebrows and offered a hint of a smile. "We have to unearth all these conspiracies."

Mrs. Hasina, 61, has the air of a strict grandmother. She speaks softly. She wears traditional Bengali saris that cover her head. Her eyes are a cool grey.

She said she was keen to hunt down and punish those responsible for the mutiny. She suggested that several factions unhappy with her agenda could have been responsible, including Islamist militants, whom she has vowed to crush.

"There are many elements," she said in her first extensive interview since the February 25 siege. "These terrorist groups are very much active. This incident gives us a lesson. It can happen again."

After two years of army-backed rule in the country, Mrs. Hasina's won a resounding majority of the parliamentary seats in elections last December, after campaigning on a slate of provocative promises. She said she would root out Islamist guerrillas, put on trial those suspected of conspiring against Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, nurture friendly relations with India and stop anti-Indian



Going ahead despite the threats and the danger.

insurgents from using Bangladeshi soil to launch attacks against New Delhi.

The election drew a turnout of around 80% and was cited as among the most credible and least violent here in recent years. Then came the massacre.

On the last Wednesday in February, at the headquarters of the border patrol, known as the Bangladesh Rifles, a guard pointed his weapon at the force commander. Some commotion ensued, according to investigators, and then other guards stormed the hall. Gunfire could be heard block away. Hundreds of civilians who lived, worked and went to school inside the compound were trapped.

Mrs. Hasina allowed the army to take position around the compound but not to storm it. She negotiated with the

mutineers for the next 36 hours, first directly and then through emissaries. She offered a general amnesty and promised to address the rebels' grievances.

On the second day, when they refused to surrender, she threatened to send in tanks. By the time the siege ended, more than 6,000 border guards had escaped, and an unknown quantity of weapons had been taken from the armoury.

As the bodies of the dead soldiers were discovered, the horrific nature of the violence became evident. Some army officers had been shot at close range and then stabbed repeatedly with bayonets. Eyes were gouged out. A stack of 38 bodies was found in a mass grave.

No sooner did the siege end than the arguments began. Today, the bitter points of contention are whether the

army commanders were killed before or after negotiations began (the time of death has not yet been established for all the victims), whether Mrs. Hasina pressed to know the scale of the killings before offering amnesty, and, most important, why she did not permit the army to storm the compound early on.

"The government was not in charge," said Abdur Razzak, a leader of the conservative Jamaat-e-Islami party. "This was an army problem. The army should have solved it in their wisdom."

Mr. Razzak said the mutiny was a conspiracy designed "to weaken the army, to weaken the state." Mr. Razzak's party was trounced in the last election; its share of the 300 elected seats in parliament fell to 2 from 17 in the December elections.

Mrs. Hasina said sending in the army would have resulted in a bloodbath and risked a potential conflict between the 46 border guard battalions scattered across the country and their army commanders.

In any case, few in Bangladesh say they believe that the mutiny was what it first appeared: a rebellion of rank-and-file border guards aggrieved by their commanders, their pay and their working conditions.

In a country where conspiracy theories are a national sport, the mutiny has become a screen onto which many anxieties are projected.

Some point to terrorist groups and anti-Indian insurgents. Others say that it was fuelled by intelligence agencies in either India or Pakistan -- both countries have been alternately friend and foe to Bangladesh. There are those who suggest that it could involve politicians who lost the last election, while others blame people within Mrs. Hasina's party whose

goal is to keep the army in check.

The truth of what happened may never be known. Bangladesh holds many mysteries in its heart, including the question of who ordered the killing of Mrs. Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a former prime minister. Mrs. Hasina was spared only because she had been visiting her husband in Europe at the time. Eighteen members of her family, including her brothers and their wives, were executed.

Central to Mrs. Hasina's survival today is keeping the military on her side. Her face-off with the army came into sharp focus three days after the mutiny ended when she confronted an unusually rowdy room of army officers. They berated her for not allowing the army to take charge early on. The screaming match was recorded and put up on YouTube, shocking the nation.

This week, in the interview, Mrs. Hasina said she sympathised with the soldiers' grief even as she cautioned them against taking revenge -- or power. So far, the army does not seem interested.

Mrs. Hasina's most deadly enemies have been the Islamist militant groups that have put down roots here in recent years. They have been implicated in assassination attempts against her, including the grenade attack on her political meeting in August 2004.

Mrs. Hasina lost some of her hearing as a result of that attack. Sitting under a framed portrait of her father, she said she would not be bowed.

"If I am afraid for my life, the whole nation will be afraid," she said. "I know some bullets, some grenades are chasing me."

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Arrival of colonialism of the third kind

In an odd sort of way, recent colonial-like scramble for natural resources also brings to the fore broader issues of the role of such resources in a changing world. Not long ago the thinking on economic development was dominated by the role of physical capital.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

HAVE you heard the latest about colonialism? I would not blame you if you haven't. With the world economy appearing to be sinking under teetering financial institutions and failing business corporations, and all and sundry trying to understand what on earth collateralised debt obligations and toxic assets are, it is no wonder there is little room for anything else in the public mind.

Furthermore, people of the left, after decades of intellectual jihad against neo-colonialism, look like an exhausted lot, and seem not to notice any new threat to ward off. The suspicion must also be that at least some among them, while quite aware of the new phenomenon, are red-faced to see where it is coming from.

The old colonialism was instantly recognisable. European countries, with their growing commercial and industrial power, were seeking to subjugate less developed countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America economically, often through political and military means. The aim was to extract as much advan-

tage as possible from their economic relationship with the colony, including access to natural resources that the colonialists would otherwise lack. Plantation and mining very largely defined old colonialism.

As Western empires faded and the colonies emerged as independent states, industrialisation and rapid growth of world trade seemed to push this version of colonialism to the background.

But critics of colonialism would soon begin to recognise new forms of the old order in the dominance of the west in trade and finance, in unfavourable terms of trade for the former colonies, and especially in the activities of the transnational corporations. It is the latter two in particular that was soon seen as the new face of colonialism.

Neo-colonialism had arrived whereby the West continued to exploit the South in all but name. (The world had by this time had a strange West-South rather than the older West-East split.) A number of concepts associated with the instruments of exploitation presented problems for the critics. Several shifts in terms of trade in favour of the South

were one such difficulty. The transnational corporations, on the other hand, began to be seen as carrying some benefits for the South. A decades-long debate at the United Nations on the subject that began with a frontal assault on these corporations finally tapered off. This, in particular, and the huge transfers of income to the oil-rich South from the rest of the world, beginning in the early 1970s, is why so little has been heard of neo-colonialism of late.

Now turn to more recent times. Over the last few years, foreign investment has been pouring into exploration and extraction of minerals across Africa in the aftermath of global scarcity and sharply increasing prices of primary products in general and minerals in particular. Foreign construction and mining workers have been swarming into many of these countries to facilitate exploitation of minerals for export.

Elsewhere, rising food prices have led many food importing countries to scout for suitable land in developing countries. The idea is to strengthen food security at home by buying up land for production of food meant for export for home consumption.

Examples of the latter abound. Foreigners are looking for land to buy in fertile Punjab in Pakistan, there has already been sizeable investment in food production in the Sudan. Foreigners have farmed in Ethiopia, a country ravaged by repeated famines, for export. Perhaps most importantly, huge tracts of land, in millions of acres of it, are said to be ready for purchase in Madagascar.

All of this looks like Colonialism Type 1. The startling difference is that in this case it is not the Western countries that are buying up land and scouring for mineral resources in the above examples. It is, for instance, the Chinese who are after Africa's mineral resources; it is the oil-rich Middle East, especially the Saudis, which is scouring for farm land in Pakistan the Sudan and Ethiopia; and the bid to buy up land in Madagascar has come from South Korea. Authentic newspaper reports have it that the first shipment of rice from Saudi-owned farms in Ethiopia has already arrived in Saudi Arabia and was ceremonially presented to King Abdullah. It is safe to conjecture the king saw that it was good.

The truth is that if exploitation of a developing country's natural resources by the West is colonialism, so it is when rich countries of the South do the same. And if acquisition of land in a poor country by a rich developing country looks particularly sinister, this may be because it is. It would be hypocritical not to recognise this. Sadly, that recognition seems to have eluded those who not long ago were so ardently defending developing country interests against colonialism. Somewhat ironically, voices denouncing the new neocolonialism have begun to be heard in liberal western press. The Financial Times, for example, has called the Madagascar deal "positively neo-colonial," and termed it rapacity bordering on piracy. One hopes this might some day shame some in developing countries themselves into taking a critical look at the emerging phenomenon.

The overwhelming consideration in

any inquiry must be: who benefits from such acquisition of natural resources and how? And that question must go beyond arguments bandied about, in the case of acquisition of land for farming, that new projects will create jobs. Setting up of an enclave can secure food security for Saudi Arabia but might do little else for the overall development of the host country. The fact that some poor countries acquiesce in the arrangement does not change the argument.

In an odd sort of way, recent colonial-like scramble for natural resources also brings to the fore broader issues of the role of such resources in a changing world. Not long ago the thinking on economic development was dominated

by the role of physical capital. This was followed by increased emphasis on labour skill and technology. The thinking appears to have come full circle, or it should if it hasn't. It appears that the role of "land," in the broadest sense of natural resources and the environment, is now due for recognition in an increasingly resource-scarce and environmentally-conscious world. Much of future world economic development will depend on how we view that role. But unexamined acquiescence to scramble for resources in poor countries is not a policy option.

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The land is ours, someone else takes the crop.

A visit to Japan



THANK you for reading this website post. Thank you for reading the previous sentence and now this sentence.

Thank you for not surfing to something far more interesting, such as YouTube.

Today, this columnist has decided to adopt Japanese standards of politeness. You see, there's ordinary politeness, and there's Japanese politeness, a different thing altogether.

Last week, a Canadian was crossing the border into the United States when a border guard told him to turn his car off. Desiderio Fortunato asked the officer to "say please."

The guard repeated his order. The motorist repeated his request. The officer blinded the motorist with pepper spray, dragged him out of his car, handcuffed him and detained him for three hours. This is how American border guards say, "Welcome to our country, honoured guest."

Compare Japan. In that country, everyone spends so much time saying "please" and "thank you" that it takes several hours to exchange even the tiniest bit of information, such as, "You are standing on my foot."

And you don't just use words. You bow. The more polite you are, the lower you bow. Losing your balance and collapsing onto your boss's wife's knees is quite common and is considered an extremely polite thing to do.

Take a ride on the Gomen Nahari Line, a railway in Kochi Prefecture and you'll find one station is called Arigato, which means "thank you", and another is Gomen, which means "sorry."

Turning the pair into Thank You Station and Sorry Station was the idea of Takashi Yanase, 85. Mr Takashi is famed for his original thinking, being the creator of the cartoon superhero Anpanman, a bean paste-filled roll of bread, which fights crime with superhuman (superbakery-item?) powers. I'm serious.

The obvious question, at least to anyone non-Japanese, is: Why? Why do they have those names? What is Thank You station thankful for, and what is Sorry station apologising for?

There's no answer to this. Polite terms do not need a reason to be uttered. "Just saying 'sorry' and 'thank you' together

makes you feel good," Yanase says.

The Japanese, like the British, scatter polite terms around like confetti to create a general feeling of positivity. Summit meetings between Japanese and British delegations often run out of time before the first item on the agenda, because of the sheer scale of pleasantries involved.

Last week, a US sports reporter attended a Tokyo baseball match. "At the end of games, the players bow toward the field, and even the losing team," wrote an amazed Bob Sherwin of the Seattle Sports Examiner. "That's such a wonderful tradition and I believe you will find it only in Asia."

But you can take the whole politeness thing too far. In Japan, people have bowed on railway platforms and had their heads hit by trains.

There have been cases where two individuals have met and bowed simultaneously, knocking each other out.

Escalators in Japan are really dangerous places. People going down recognise someone going up, and they bow, losing their balance and causing fatal accidents.

But no one complains about it. That would not be polite.

Thank you for reading this posting. You may now go do something else.

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Zardari on the brink

To head off protests, the Zardari-led government has arrested lawyers, civil-society activists and opposition leaders. It has also suspended the right to free assembly; blocked access to cities, including Islamabad; and attempted to muzzle cable-news channels.

FASIH AHMED

EFFORTS are increasing to save the unraveling presidency of Asif Ali Zardari and resolve Pakistan's deepening political crisis ahead of a planned sit-in scheduled for Monday in Islamabad. Diplomats from Western nations are meeting with political and judicial leaders, and the Army, is urging all sides to step back from the brink.

The sit-in is the culmination of a nationwide protest march organised by lawyers demanding the restoration of the country's top judge, illegally removed from office by Zardari's predecessor, Pervez Musharraf. They're also demanding the restoration of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's government in the Punjab province, which was overthrown last month through a controversial court order.

To head off protests, the Zardari-led government has arrested lawyers, civil-

society activists and opposition leaders. It has also suspended the right to free assembly; blocked access to cities, including Islamabad; and attempted to muzzle cable-news channels. Several police and government officials who have publicly refused to accept the government's orders to arrest protesters have further eroded the president's authority. The Army has been asked now to assist police in controlling protesters.

Zardari has been stung by a recent string of high-profile resignations protesting his handling of the political crisis. Two senior party members stepped down from their posts within the Pakistan People's Party, and two senior cabinet members have also resigned. Zardari-loyalist Sherry Rehman resigned as information minister today, reportedly over the government's attempts to gag the media.

Diplomats are pressing Zardari to release jailed lawyers and opposition

leaders, allow peaceful protest in the capital, reinstate the deposed chief justice (without his powers to institute or reopen cases against Zardari or Musharraf) and restore the opposition-led government in the Punjab.

Such an about-face from Zardari seems unrealistic, and the opposition and lawyers will not agree on curbing the chief justice's powers if and when he is restored. Diplomats are also concerned about former PM Sharif's allegation that elements within the government are plotting his assassination.

The head of Pakistan's military, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, met with Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani again Friday and urged them to resolve the political impasse. Some columnists and talk-show hosts have urged the general to step in and remove the recently elected government and president, which, for now, remains an unlikely scenario.

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Corrigendum

The article 'Brushing our Investigative skill is imperative' (March 14, 2009) was mistakenly republished under the title 'Must we beseech FBI-Scotland Yard ad infinitum?' (March 16, 2009). We regret the error.