

To all the armchair generals: A rejoinder

The proof of a pudding is in the eating. We may debate endlessly whether an assault would have caused big or small losses. Either military action or inaction carried risks. But, in my opinion, on balance, action carried the lesser risk.

MUMTAZ IQBAL

MUHIH Rahman's indignation (DS Mar 12) would have been more effective had his language been more judicious and his examples more relevant.

He writes: "All you armchair generals, can you cite one instance ... in history where an armed force of thousands had taken over a barricaded area with a large trapped civilian population in a dense urban setting and another armed immediately (within two to other hours) and successfully rescued hostages and/or disarmed the hostages."

First, there was no "armed force of thousands." There were nearly 5,000 riflemen. But only a small number were armed, and amongst them a smaller number of cowards did the killing, molesting, and looting.

When riflemen found that officers were being killed from around 10 a.m., that's when the first desertions also started and swelled throughout that day and next (DS Mar 10). Most riflemen had not bargained for a cold-blooded massacre of innocents, but money and benefits.

Pilkhana is not barricaded but walled, a big difference. There is little evidence to suggest that the mutineers erected barricades, established strong points, dug

trenches, or placed machine guns or mortars in defensive positions to repel an attack.

The trapped civilians inside Pilkhana were mostly dependents of riflemen. It's unlikely other riflemen would harm them. Civilians targeted and harmed were the wives of officers. The area inside Pilkhana has open spaces. The dense urban setting is outside the Pilkhana perimeter.

Rahman's question about "immediately" attacking is a red herring. The timing of any attack is determined by circumstances that vary from place to place. A proper assault would take reconnaissance, planning, organisation, and execution, and probably could have been launched by early afternoon (say 3 pm) of February 25.

However, against this point is late Col. Gulzar's request to his Rab colleagues at 9:30 a.m. on February 25 to send two platoons (sixty soldiers) as the killers "don't seem to be organised." (DS Mar 12).

As an experienced anti-terrorism fighter, Gulzar's observation cannot be brushed aside. This suggests that an operation involving between two companies (300 soldiers) to two battalions (all within the local infantry brigade's capability) assisted by commandos likely



Could Pilkhana have been stormed?

would have had a high probability of success.

Another red herring are the words "successfully rescued." Any assault carries risks. The writer is asking for certainty in a situation where certainty is inherently impossible. No battle plan survives the first contact with the enemy (Moltke the Elder). But certainly successful assaults have been achieved against terrorists, e.g. the successful Entebbe rescue.

The examples of Moscow, Beslan, Waco, and Munich are inapt. In these cases, the militants were prepared to die for their beliefs, political and religious.

This was not the case with the BDR mutineers whose demands were entirely

self-centred and monetary. This was why the cowardly perpetrators fled. They were not prepared to die for their cause that was neither noble nor just.

The DS of March 11 has this headline: 450 BDR men found involved so far. That means about 10% of those present. This figure per se makes sense. It suggests most BDR riflemen were not involved.

Rahman cites that the first action in a hostage situation -- and Pilkhana certainly had this characteristic among others -- is ICER (isolate, contain, evaluate, and report). This wasn't done. If not, why not? Rahman fails to comment on this elementary but fatal lapse.

Rahman really goes overboard in when he writes: "The reality is that the world's

most highly trained forces could not have secured Pilkhana by force without massive loss of innocent lives ranging from innocent BDR personnel and their families who may have been coerced or were swept up in the mutiny, to the very hostages that they were going to save."

This is surely incorrect. UK's SAS, US Delta Force, and Germany's GSG9 would have made mincemeat of the cowardly riflemen in a short time, say two hours including mopping up, from the time the actual assault was launched.

So would Pakistan's SSG (Red Mosque), India's NSG (Mumbai), and our commando battalion.

An army assault carried the risk of casualties. The question is: how many?

We really don't know. But taking account of Gulzar's comment; the lack of purity of the mutineers' cause; their poor motivation as judged by massive desertions; their unwillingness to die and their lack of defensive preparations (see above) suggest that casualties would have been small rather than large.

On February 16, 1972, a revolt by BDR in Pilkhana was put down by troops of S (Shafullah) Force, on Bangabandhu's prompt orders without loss of civilians.

Similarly, the Pakistani assault on Pilkhana on March 25, 1971, the various mutinies in our army since 1975, and India's Operation Blue Star (attack on Amritsar's Golden Temple in which Sikh troops loyally fought their co-religionists) in 1984 also saw relatively little or no civilian loss or property damage.

To concentrate on whether or not an assault should have been mounted is to focus on a tree and miss the forest.

The real question is the process followed and decisions taken by the high civilian and military authorities including the intelligence leadership since 9:30 a.m. when by all accounts they became aware of the mutiny. An assault was one option on the table.

The totality of response by the authorities reveals some puzzling episodes. For example, the dispatch of odd and untrained intermediaries at the mutiny's outset; meeting with the mutineers; declaration of amnesty; and announcement that consideration would be given to implementing their demands are well documented.

These actions may have been well-intentioned, but amounted to giving away the bank, imperiled the security of the nation, and set a dangerous precedent.

It is standard operating procedure that authorities don't negotiate with mutineers -- certainly not face to face at the highest level -- nor concede to their demands without knowing the fate of the hostages, especially where they are employees of the state.

Thus, to give an A to the civilian government for its handling of the crisis is to be exceedingly generous. The writer also gives the army an A for restraint. Restraint is irrelevant to judge military efficiency.

The proof of a pudding is in the eating. We may debate endlessly whether an assault would have caused big or small losses. Either military action or inaction carried risks. But, in my opinion, on balance, action carried the lesser risk.

The author is an ex-banker and freelancer.

Bailing out businesses

Infusion of bailout money has a negative effect on the economy, and the worse if the recipient businesses fail to survive. The inflation created from deficit spending will hurt the poor consumers and the public servants living on fixed incomes.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

THE Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the country's prime foreign currency earner, has made the following bailout proposals at a press conference on March 16.

- Rescheduling of 3 and 5yrs term loans to 7 and 10yrs term loans;
- Lowering interest rate from 15% to 7%;
- Withdrawing VAT from readymade garment (RMG) sector;
- Subsidising diesel for RMG, like the farm sector;
- Cash pay-off to stay competitive.

Last Sunday, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and

Industry (FBCCI) proposed a Tk 6,000 crore rescue package for the export businesses. It included a Tk 3,300-3,500 crore bailout plan for the RMG exporters. The Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) demanded a 10% cash incentive for knitwear exporters.

The BGMEA chief Salam Murshedy asked for an additional Tk 10 against every dollar of 30% total export value. In addition, he urged the government to ask banks to reschedule BGMEA outstanding loans by at least 10 years and slash the bank interest rate to 7%.

Murshedy pleaded that these measures would help BGMEA members withstand the global recession-driven

demand slack culminating in declining exports, which reached 17.58% in February. To justify the demand for bailout, Murshedy said that three major buyers of Bangladesh's RMG products, including UK-based Woolworth, went bankrupt recently.

To promote exports in the present global downturn, BGMEA plans to promote RMG products in old markets and some potential export destinations. This seems to be the prudent approach to fight the recession-demand slack.

FBCCI, BGMEA, and BKMEA's (the trioka) plea for bailout money is no different from tax payers' subsidy to the RMG sector. The US and other governments have already started doing that through tax payers' part ownership of the businesses receiving bailout money until they stand on their own. (For example, 80% of AIG shares are owned by tax payers.)

Asking banks to reschedule loan terms may endanger cash and income flow of the banking sector, putting healthy banks at risks of insolvency and requiring them to ask for bailout money later. That's a dangerous route to take. Besides, why

should government persuade banks? It is the businesses' that need to make such a move.

Businesses should always discuss with their bank whether additional emergency funding is available. The medium and long-term plans should form part of any dialogue. Timely communication with the bank is important as bank managers and financiers who are aware of the problems are likely to come to their rescue.

Following the US example, what the government can do is subsidise some portion of the interest if the banks are willing to lower the interest on existing loans for a limited time period. Since some of the foreign retail clients have gone bankrupt it won't be easy to achieve the previously targeted \$14 billion goal of RMG exports. So, in the process, some of the weaker factories won't survive. Hence, proving them bailout money would be tantamount to knowingly buying the failing businesses with tax payers' money.

Reducing VAT is a possible option but that will be equivalent to subsidy because, to make up for the lost tax revenue,

the government must resort to deficit financing. Subsidising gas to the RMG sector is similar to reducing VAT. The worst proposal is "cash incentive," which literally means "print money and give it to us." However, the trioka may ask the government to initiate guaranteed financial schemes to help viable businesses with provisional cash flow predicaments.

By any measure of economic rationality, the trioka is asking for too much -- in essence, nothing is left out -- which can be interpreted as an attempt to run businesses with tax payers' financing. Just because these businesses earn foreign exchange does not make them any different from other businesses, which also generate domestic employment and income, and contribute to GDP.

What about the expatriates who used to remit dollars and now are unemployed, and returned home empty handed and broken hearted? Why not some bailout money for them in the form of unemployment benefits?

In order for the government to inject bailout money or stimulus spending in

infrastructure building, it must first take money out of the economy through new taxation or borrowing. Infusion of bailout money has a negative effect on the economy, and the worse if the recipient businesses fail to survive. The inflation created from deficit spending will hurt the poor consumers and the public servants living on fixed incomes.

Any bailout money must be distributed in a transparent manner with proper accountability. The criterion must be the viability of the specific RMG factory concerned -- not who owns the factory. The global recession may be used as gambit by many powerful and well-connected factory owners, including some lawmakers, to cash in their ailing business with tax payers' money.

In the US, businesses and banks that received bailout money have squandered hundreds of millions in paying bonuses and partying in luxury resort hotels in the name of promoting businesses. Why would the business people in Bangladesh be any different?

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LEST WE FORGET

A son's tribute

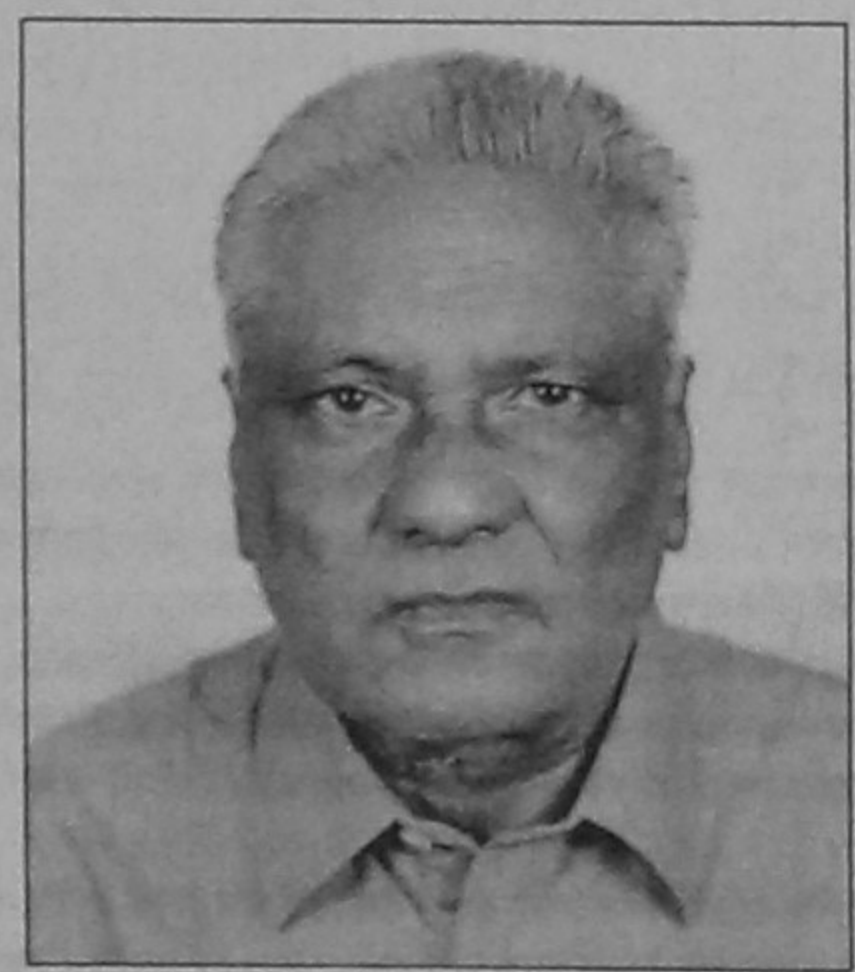
ZAKI EUSUFZAI

AT 2:15 a.m. on February 12, we received word from Labaid hospital that our father had passed away. All four of us -- his children -- were in Dhaka. He had suffered a cardiac arrest on February 9 and slipped into a coma, and never regained consciousness.

My father had been a professor of Civil Engineering at Buet. From 1975 to 1977 he was also the Chairman of the Civil Engineering Department and the Dean of the Engineering Faculty.

In 1977, he joined the Bangladesh Planning Commission as a member. In 1987, he was appointed Bangladesh ambassador to Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. He formally retired in 1989, but continued to be active professionally.

Abba believed strongly in the transforming power of education. He used to



Professor S. H. K. Eusufzai

say it would have been impossible for him to achieve as much as he did without education.

He set very strict standards for his students (and for us), but the students admired him just as much as they feared him. That was probably because they understood that he genuinely cared for them.

My father grew up in very harsh financial circumstances. His father, a doctor, had graduated from Campbell Medical School in Calcutta. He died when my father -- his eldest child -- was only nine. With the sudden loss of the breadwinner, the family was left in financially dire straits. Within six years my grandmother also passed away.

With both parents dead, my father had to complete his SSC and HSC while staying in relatives' households as a jaagir. Later in life, he would reminisce about how he had even been forced to hawk matches.

In 1953, he obtained a First Class First

in Civil Engineering from Buet -- then known as Ahsanullah Engineering College. At times he did not have money for meals, and would eat a small loaf of bread sprinkled with sugar for breakfast.

He always helped the poor and destitute, even when his own income was not high. In later years, he bore the educational expenses of all his siblings, and even helped his cousins and other relatives. He regularly helped some of the Class IV employees at Buet with their expenses.

Abba was a true teacher at heart. When he was on leave of absence from Buet and moved in high government and international circles, he preferred to introduce himself as "Professor Eusufzai" rather than the more grandiose, "Dr. Eusufzai."

He had a simple lifestyle. When he

became a Member of the Planning Commission, he was offered bigger and better accommodations at Minto Road. He refused, preferring to stay on in the Buet faculty flat where his children had grown up.

He was also a patriot. When, after his retirement, we wanted to apply for a US green card on his behalf, he simply refused to have anything to do with it. He first came to USA in 1954 to study for a Master's degree at Texas A&M University. In 1964 he came to USA again to complete his Ph.D. Even though he visited USA many times, he never considered living there permanently. While he admired USA, he referred to living there permanently as living in a "first class jaiikhana."

His true pride lay in being able to help the people of Bangladesh. He was enor-

mously proud of his students, his profession and of Buet. He also believed that to substantially increase the standard of living in Bangladesh, there was no alternative to developing and adopting appropriate technology, and that engineers should thus participate more actively in society.

He was very close to our mother. When she died in 2001, his life became empty. His health deteriorated and in the next few years he had a series of medical setbacks, including four or five strokes. Still, he hung on with a faltering body but, unusually for his age, an insightful and sharp mind. On February 12 he could hang on no more and slipped away to eternity.

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How to write an international pop hit



A wannabe pop star asked me to write lyrics for his group. "Sure," I said. "What style would you like? Asian? Western?"

Well, that's the issue, he said. He wanted to have a hit that people would sing along to, all over the world.

So I called a DJ friend for advice. He said the top-selling international record at the moment was the latest disc from The

Prodigy, a British group. I surfed to a lyrics website called www.365.com and looked up the lyrics. The new song was called "Invaders must die."

The first verse was:
Invaders must die
Invaders must die
Invaders must die
(And so on).
Then there's an instrumental break followed by the second verse:

Invaders must die
Invaders must die
Invaders must die
(And so on). You get the picture.

The guy who transcribed the lyrics was unconfident that he had got them exactly right, and added a disclaimer: "If you find

some error in the 'Invaders must die' lyrics, would you please submit your corrections to me? Thank you." It seems to me that it would take extraordinary talent to get those lyrics wrong.

He also set up an on-line discussion area so that people could discuss the nuances of the lyrics. Despite this song being a mega-hit, the discussion board was blank. I wonder why?

I called the deejay back. "The lyrics are kind of, well, strange," I said. "They lack romance." He grunted in agreement. "Modern Western pop lyrics are like that: all weirdness and hostility."

I decided that South Asian pop songs might be a better model, and asked a friend in India to send me a typical mod-

ern hit. He sent me a Bollywood song sung by a buxom actress named Sadhana Sargam.

"When I speak, everyone's health flips. When I dance, my blouse tightens around my heart. No one listens, no one knows what all I have hidden in my blouse."

I asked him why so many Indian songs were about blouses. He replied: "Indians find the word 'blouse' so sexy that when they hear it, they lose control of themselves and fall to the ground, frothing from the mouth and other parts." I looked up some Bollywood music videos (see picture at the top) and realise that they were, indeed, focused on blouses. I just couldn't see a song about Indian

garments exciting Westerners, so I turned to East Asian music. Although this comes in many varieties (Cantopop, J-Pop, Korean pop, Mandopop, and so on), 99.99% of them are love songs so sugary they can give you Type 2 Diabetes at 200 meters.

They usually managed to be strangely worded yet bland at the same time. Here's an example.

A pop fan gave me Daffodil by Cyndi Wang.

"Fabled Prince. Frog. Where are you? I'm by the pool waiting day by day. Wait for that day, kiss his face and bring about with the sound of a rumble."

Hmm. I called the guy who had given me the

assignment. "Writing an international hit isn't easy," I told him.

After a discussion, he suggested that I make it a love song in a rap or hip-hop style: "Asians like love songs, and Westerners like rap." So I asked my DJ contact for a hip-hop love song. He gave me My Humps by the Black-Eyed Peas. I looked up the lyrics:

"My hump, my hump, my hump, my hump, my hump, my hump, my hump, my hump, my hump, my lovely lady lumps."

Okay, I give up. Maybe I am old-fashioned. But that definitely lacks romance. I'd rather write about blouses.

For more tips on how to write international pop songs, visit our columnist at www.vitchachi.com.