

True meaning of Independence Day

Much to be proud of, much remains to be done

As we celebrate the 38th anniversary of our independence we must once again look at the twin aspirations with which this nation embarked on its arduous but ultimately glorious march to freedom.

We had dreamed of a land of prosperity and opportunity for all, free from the shackles of oppression and exploitation, but more than mere economic aspirations, we also aspired to the full flowering of life in freedom.

In economic and developmental terms, we certainly have much to be pleased about. Thanks to the industry and ingenuity of our farmers, we have become self-sufficient in food production, and thanks to the vibrant NGO sector, social goods and services have been delivered to nearly every corner of the country.

There is no need to enumerate again here the impact of micro-credit, an authentic Bangladeshi innovation that the world has now adopted. It is one of the success stories of our independence. Indeed, in terms of almost every indicator, from women's empowerment to education to health, we have made great strides in independence, though, of course, there is much that remains unfinished.

But, of course, while we have cut poverty rates and created opportunity and growth, it has come at a cost. The gap between rich and poor yawns wider than ever, and inequality, poverty, and hopelessness still exist in large measure.

It is no exaggeration to say that the social upheavals and economic mismanagement that leave too many of our fellow countrymen and women mired in poverty and misery, no less than the culture of political confrontation, has resulted in space being created for misguided fringe and extremists elements to wreak havoc. We must redouble our efforts to include everyone in the fruits of freedom and ensure that no one is left behind.

But where there is the most work left to do is in creating and establishing a culture of freedom. The country had periodically been subject to military rule and in the past even democracy, when we attained it, has not been inclusive or allowed for the voices of the people to be heard and their best interests protected. Today, we can once again take pride in the renewal of democracy, after two years, and hope fervently that this time around the government fulfills the liberal and democratic yearnings of the people.

While we have had elections in the past, scarcely any other marker of democracy and freedom, from rule of law to tolerance of dissent or opposition, to the right to live in security and free of fear, has established itself or flourished, and the end result is that true freedom still eludes far too many of us.

A big part of the problem is the political culture that remains mired in dysfunction and does not at all reflect the aspirations of the people. Bangladeshis have proved again and again that they choose democracy and their own right to determine their destiny and want their leaders to do the right thing. Now it is up to the political class to rise to the challenge and provide the people with the wise and mature leadership that they deserve.

Even more of a frustration than the political dysfunction is the personal and political freedom that Bangladeshis are still denied. Human rights violations, death in custody, and extra-judicial killings still blight the landscape. Access to justice, due process, and rule of law exist only in theory for the vast majority of our fellow countrymen and women. More than anything else, we need to secure these freedoms for our people if March 26 is to truly be the celebration of our independence.

Arms haul in madrasa compound

Involve people in the fight against militancy

A Rab operation in a remote village in Bhola district has led to unearthing of a small ammunition factory run by a militant outfit under the cover of a madrasa-cum orphanage. Rab's success in seizing a large number of combat-grade weapons and ammunition from the place might well have preempted some grisly act of terrorism for which we commend them. Four suspected militants were arrested during the operation carried out with great precision by the elite anti-crime force.

The Rab operation in Bhola has frozen the suspected militants on their tracks with the help of a tip-off from local people. The need for human intelligence is underscored.

Fighting the extremists must go beyond policing. We have to bring society as a whole behind the task of combating terrorism collectively. The goal remains elusive as community involvement in anti-terrorism activities is yet to be fully achieved. There is obviously the need and scope for greater social resistance against attempted exploitation of people's religious sentiments by fringe elements. The fight against militancy has to be conducted with direct involvement of the common people to prevent a totally distorted version of Islam from gaining ground.

We believe it is the Ulema or the Islamic scholars who can raise the strongest of voice against misinterpretation of Islam. They can help clarify matters by pronouncing in unequivocal terms that there is no place for mindless violence in Islam and also that those declaring war against the innocent are causing great harm to the religion itself.

The Bhola arms haul should put the security personnel on the alert as it substantiates the generally held view that the fanatic elements are regrouping themselves for striking again, after suffering reversals in recent years. What must be uppermost in the minds of the law enforcers is the experience of other countries where militants have shown a degree of resilience. It is not possible to knock them off with one or two successful operations. The need is to launch a sustained campaign, with due emphasis on elimination of the potential causes like poverty, imparting true spirit of Islam and streamlining any obsolete system of education so that obscurantism cannot gain any foothold.

Two issues to take note of

Let not the judicial system be short-circuited. Let the law take its course and let the best judicial minds decide the best forum to try the killers and their masterminds. Let every accused have the full protection of the law and let not their human rights be curtailed.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE first is the threat of terrorism, which we should neither underplay nor overplay. Everyday a new dimension is being added to the Pilkhana massacre investigation. No sooner did the investigation start than the minister for commerce informed us that there was a link between JMB and the killings that took place on February 25. This information, he claimed, emerged from the interrogation of the BDR soldiers. And he had kept repeating the same assertion in different places at different times after that.

The commerce minister is, we are told, the coordinator of the investigations. One wonders what is there to coordinate between the functions of the two investigation committees except for occasionally throwing the spanner in their work, as he has done for a few days after his assumption of the "coordinator's role" by his comments on the matter.

The minister has now surprised us with the retraction of his earlier statements on the alleged militant-Pilkhana killings link, saying that the statements he had made before were not based on probe findings, rather, they were his personal observations.

Should a minister be giving personal observations on a matter that is still under investigation? And really, do people have the time to digest another round of personal opinion -- as if we have not had enough of theorising on the matter.

What this has done is provide more fodder to the detractors and give the impression to many that the comments may be motivated. What the motivation could be one cannot say, but surely it gives

one the impression that the issue is being overplayed, quite the opposite of what we saw during the 4-party alliance tenure when we found the then government in a completely denial mode insofar as the existence of militants was concerned -- at the cost of the country's interest.

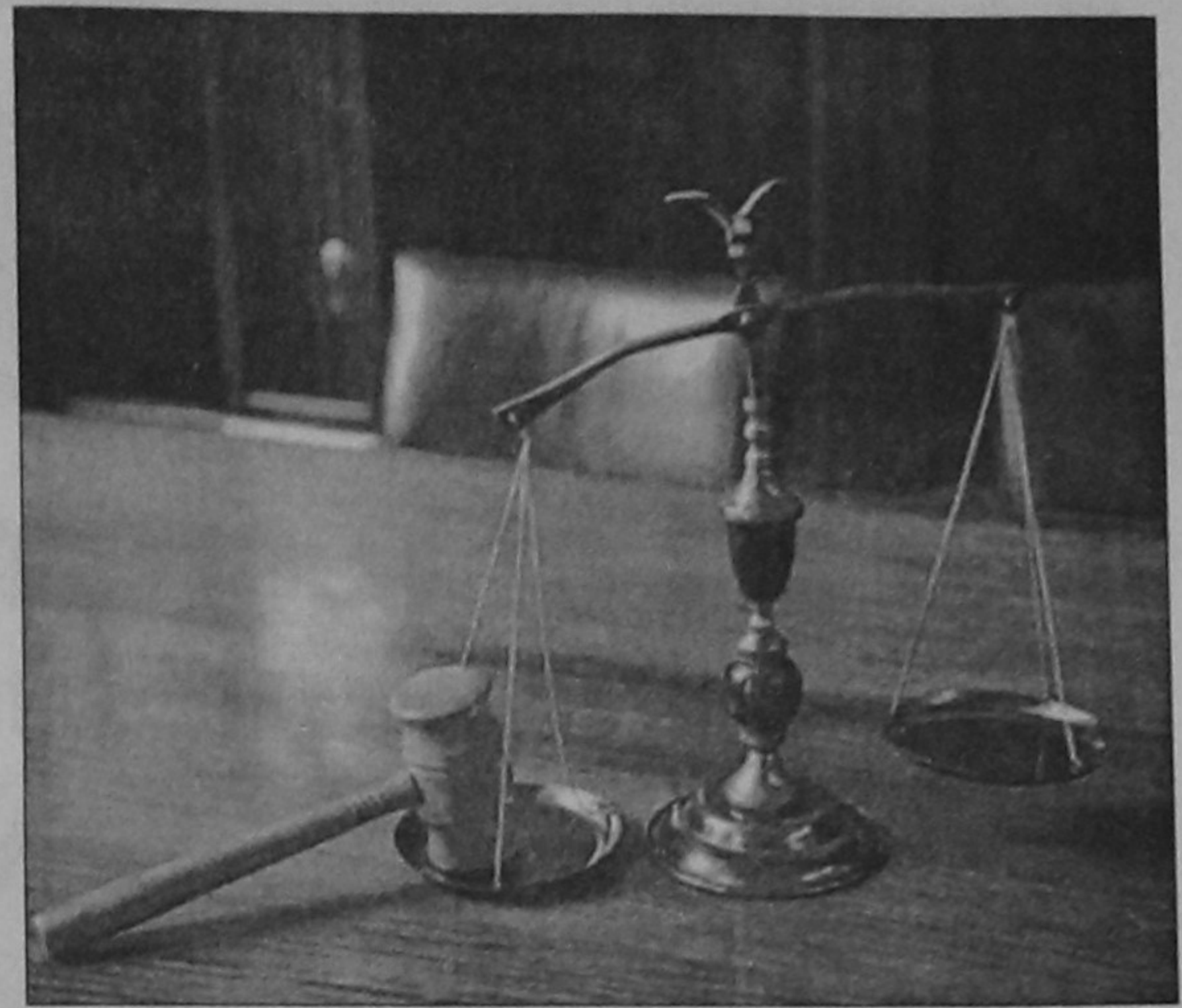
No one can and should discount the presence of Islamic militant's in the country, and their capability to create damage. But what we are now given to understand is that the country has been saturated by militants, and some interesting figures by a researcher on the number of terrorists in Bangladesh, if taken literally, would have us believe that lurking behind every lamp-post is a terrorist waiting to strike.

By overplaying the matter we play into the hands of those that would want to paint us as a terrorist state going down the Afghan way, in the same manner as underplaying the issue does. In both instances, the state stands to suffer because of untimely observations emanating from official sources.

While the refusal to acknowledge the existence of militants in the country has been counter-productive, (arrest and recovery of arms and ammunition in a madrasa in Bhola on Tuesday amply proves that the militants are organised and still active) it is equally self-defeating to create a panic situation by publicising threats that create a general alarm in the public.

We saw this happening with some schools in Dhaka recently, and only the day before yesterday did we come to know, from the statement of the state minister for home, that the garment factories are under threat from militants.

It is not that such scenarios are beyond the realm of possibility, but one can take



The law is the final arbiter.

pre-emptive actions and build public awareness without creating panic. People in responsible appointments must not forget that every single utterance has far-reaching ramifications, both at home and abroad.

The other issue that we must take note of is the concern expressed by the human rights groups regarding the treatment of the BDR soldiers who are being screened and those that will be facing trial. No civilised society can overlook this important value on which the social system depends for survival.

What has drawn our attention is the remark of the HRW chief in Dhaka recently that a trial by military court will not be fair. The reason given is that since the army is a party in the matter, and an aggrieved party, emotion rather than objectivity will motivate the judgments.

This statement would be comical were it not for the fact that the matter is related

to a very tragic situation. If we take the statement to be of substance can we not extrapolate the argument and apply it to the US trial of 9/11 suspects? It is like saying that since the US as a nation was affected by the attacks and the deaths, one could not expect justice from any US court.

Let not the judicial system be short-circuited. Let the law take its course and let the best judicial minds decide the best forum to try the killers and their masterminds. Let every accused have the full protection of the law and let not their human rights be curtailed. But do not also forget that the 75 people, including 52 officers who were brutally killed, and their families, have human rights too, which we cannot afford to overlook either.

Brig. Gen. (Retd.) Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc, is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Traffic in Dhaka: How not to do anything!

Occasionally, the PM or some minister meet with "experts" and traffic enforcement officials. The experts come up with recommendations like building an underground railway, sky rail, circular riverine transport etc. Thus the meetings go on, while a few thousand more vehicles clog the Dhaka roads.

MUFFAZEL HOSSAIN

YOU live five kilometres from Motijheel C/A or the Secretariat. What time do you think you should leave home to keep an appointment for 10 a.m. Going by car, you think that 9 o'clock would be good enough to get you there by 9:30 or 9:45. You are totally mistaken, sir. It would take you anywhere between 90 minutes to 150 minutes because of the gridlock.

This is not a problem for one day, or for one particular hour of the day. It is perennial, and with each day it is aggravating.

Occasionally, the PM or some minister meet with "experts" and traffic enforcement officials. The experts come up with

recommendations like building an underground railway, sky rail, circular riverine transport etc. Thus the meetings go on, while a few thousand more vehicles clog the Dhaka roads.

To city dwellers, it seems that the policy makers and implementers are ignorant of the magnitude of the problem. Agreed, that we need a mass transport system, but think of the investment and time needed to implement such an ambitious project. During that time, another thirty or forty thousand vehicle will be on the road. It would simply not be possible to keep more than one appointment or to do more than one job in two different places. Of course, we will have to go for mass transit as soon as possible.

But, in the meantime, what should we do to ease the situation?

Here are some options the government could consider:

- The traffic police must be trained to regulate traffic flow. Some donor agencies, including UNDP, are willing to provide technical support to train our traffic police and modernise our traffic system.
- The duty hours of the traffic police should be reduced to a maximum of six hours. They should be paid adequately.
- We cannot increase the existing road surface overnight. As such, we need to ensure efficient use of the available road surface. A considerable part of the roads is occupied by parked vehicles, vendors and construction materials. The government has to be absolutely sincere in removing these obstacles.
- Traffic rules have to be followed religiously.
- Make sure that buses and mini-buses stop at designated places, and do not double-park to get passengers.

- There are too many intersections and turnings. Vehicles taking U turn cause interruption in traffic flow. The necessity of having so many U turns needs to be examined and re-adjusted.
- The government must make it compulsory for schools to introduce school buses.
- Making it a rule that private vehicles with even registration numbers will ply on the roads on even dates, and the odd registration numbers will ply on odd dates.
- There must be a restriction on the import of vehicles for private use, but import of buses and mini-buses should be encouraged.

There was a time when we visited relatives and friends, but because of the traffic problem such socialising has almost stopped. This is causing a distancing between people.

Dear readers, the traffic jams not only cause many problems, they also make a dent in the social fabric.

Muffazel Hossain is a former Secretary.

Politicinomy.com

Any new developments in any area of science, engineering, medicine, economics, and so on, that are relevant to Bangladesh will be considered for posting on the website and updated on a weekly basis to allow enough time for interested readers to benefit.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN, FARRUKH MOHSEN, ARIF MAHMUD and KAWSER JAMAL

HOW many English newspaper readers in Bangladesh have instant access to the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and so on, and magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Economist* and so on? Obviously, not too many. But how can we help? Well, how about a Website, politicinomy.com, to do just that -- at least partially.

The mission statement of politicinomy.com says that the objective is "one that aims primarily to serve the political, economic and all other related interests of Bangladesh in various formats."

Many columnists and readers of international events often complain about the slow access to the internet and the frequent interruptions due to power outage.

The idea finally caught up with us. We decided to develop a website on which to post links to various articles published in the western print media (including professional journal articles to help specific researcher) on various issues on request

from anyone, and on our board members' own choosing.

The name politicinomy was chosen to reflect our writing interest. It is a composite word that broadly encompasses various aspects of political and economic life of the citizens of a country -- Bangladesh for us. The website is primarily intended to propagate news, views and commentaries strictly adhering to objective journalism -- professional and scholastic in all its manifestations -- and aims to serve the political, economic and all related aspects of Bangladesh in various formats. The website may not be dubbed as a web blog.

Any new developments in any area of science, engineering, medicine, economics, and so on, that are relevant to Bangladesh will be considered for posting on the website and updated on a weekly basis to allow enough time for interested readers to benefit.

One important feature included on the web page is the "panel of experts," which will help the government and the private sector in their search for people of various expertise and scholarly attributes

living outside Bangladesh. Until the list is incorporated, we may be contacted through the website -- all services are purely voluntary with no strings attached.

Once Abdullah Dewan's article is published in the DS, a downloaded version is transmitted to over 2,000 recipients via email across all continents. Some of these recipients forward the article to their contacts via group-email. Many of the comments and feedbacks from readers are truly important for policy making and policy executions. We plan to post readers' comments selectively on the website for concerned authorities.

The website will now allow us to selectively list internet links to news headlines and "titles and links" to published articles of editorial board members and columnists of the DS and other dailies, which will take the non-resident Bangladeshi readers directly to the online version of the newspapers.

This format will also help the readers in Bangladesh the same way when they click the international news headlines and op-ed titles on the web page of the leading newspapers and magazines. As we all know, despite intense interest, many of us often do not have the time to browse and filter an exploding multitude of information.

One may now see why politicinomy.com isn't intended to be a web blog, or competition for any print media in Bangladesh. It is, in fact, a free promoter of newspapers and a mover of

newspaper reading traffic to various news headlines and commentaries. If it seems like a publicity organ of the *Daily Star* or any other newspaper -- it isn't. The whole purpose is dissemination of information to benefit Bangladeshi communities of diverse interests.

The website is not a web blog. To "blog" is to post one's own ideas, opinions, internet links, and other elements on one's web site. We aren't at all averse to blog journalism. In fact, we read articles regularly posted by many accomplished bloggers. Our problem is lack of the time needed for blogging.

This blog form of instant and global self-publishing has contributed enormously to educating and enlightening readers over the last decade. Because of blog's popularity and accelerated growth (an estimated 115 million exist now) numerous newspapers and magazines are going bankrupt in the US and elsewhere, and many others are down on their knees.

We strongly believe that the contents of politicinomy.com will benefit anyone who chooses to access, it regardless of their professional affiliations. We also wish to make it evolve in a manner to complement digital Bangladesh with information contents that is not easily accessible to distant subscribers.

Dr. Abdullah Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University. Dr. Farrukh Mohsen is Environmental and Water Resources Engineer in New Jersey. Arif Mahmud and Kawsar Jamal are ICT specialists in Michigan and Arkansas respectively.