

## Deaths of BDR men in custody

Govt must order a probe into the occurrences

NINE detained BDR men have died in inexplicable circumstances since March 9. Of course, the BDR, under its new management, has given it out that the men died of heart attacks or have committed suicide. At a time when intense investigations are going on to unearth the conspiracy behind the carnage that left 55 army officers dead at Pilkhana in February, it is worrying that reports have kept coming in of BDR men in detention dying. We are dismayed by such happenings; and we would like to make it clear that explaining these deaths away being a result of cardiac arrests or suicide is becoming untenable. All of us remember the frequency with which people died in 'crossfires' during the period of the BNP-led alliance government. Those reports of 'crossfires' did not hold water. In much the same manner, the nine BDR deaths are beginning to raise some uncomfortable questions.

We would like to make it clear that what we had anticipated, once the investigations into the February 25 tragedy went underway, would not occur has now sadly begun to happen. It is only natural and morally right to expect that individuals from whom information about a serious incident can be gleaned will be secure in the confines of detention. But these nine deaths raise considerably our fears that important witnesses to or even participants in the murders of February 25 may have been lost. There is no question that these nine deaths have left the inquiry process clouded, and possibly controversial. Unless the authorities take measures to prevent any more such deaths, the entire process of investigation into the February 25 carnage will become questionable, both nationally and internationally. It is from such a perspective that we raise our voice again, to ask that the law and due process be adhered to if there is to be a meaningful conclusion to the BDR-related investigations. Every aspect of the tragedy must be presented before a court of law. For that to happen, it is vital that every suspect, every detained BDR jawan be kept safe, alive and well.

We must say we are surprised at the silence of the government on the issue of the deaths of the BDR men in custody. Now that the uncomfortable truth of the deaths is out in the open, it is for the government to order a probe into the matter. An important point cannot be missed, which is that any failure to get to the bottom of the massacre at Pilkhana and punishing the real culprits behind it can only raise the level of the threat posed to our already frayed national security structure.

## Revving up the administration

Factors that compromise efficiency should be removed

THE Prime Minister has dreams and vision for a prosperous Bangladesh. She is also under pressure of a massive popular mandate to deliver goods to people in terms of stable law and order, good governance and catering to basic needs of the majority who are poor. Little wonder, therefore, that rather early in the day, a couple of weeks ago, she had addressed a letter to the secretaries exhorting them to quicken their pace of work in implementing the directives of the government, so that people can receive the intended services sooner rather than later.

Her impatience is understandable, even endearing, and good intentions obvious, but it seems to us though, in a manner of speaking, what her right hand seeks to do appears to be unwittingly negated by the left hand. The massive and frequent changes in the administration through a series of postings and transfers have sent tremors through the administration unsettling many a ministry. Senior officials being in a state of restiveness and uncertainty as to when the wholesale process of change will end can hardly concentrate and be focused on the job at hand. This is hardly an ideal situation for a new government to initiate the promised qualitative change in the life of the nation.

Of course, there is no mistaking the need for a degree of reorganising the administration with the change of government, especially in our context where a preceding ruling party had seated its loyalists on top positions. This notion, however, discounts the fact that there are officials in the Republic who have track records of probity, integrity, honesty and efficiency that they must be credited for and duly placed by all governments. Then, there is a rather large array of officers who consciously separate any privately-held political belief which they would only apply during elections from what they deem to be their legitimate official functions. In the third category perhaps would fall the adjustable lot in the innocuous sense of the term; and in the fourth the chameleon that any well-meaning government must be wary of.

Given such varied texture of the officialdom, the most rational and effective approach to reorganisation at the advent of a new government should perhaps be a gradualist one based on careful observation and periodic review of the output of officials rather than a sweeping and wholesale one that can not only unsettle or demoralise the administration but also disorient them from cooperating with the political government. A stop must be put to frequent changes in senior positions at the very least.

Just as in the case of transfer, there is an issue about marginalising officials as OSD. We thought that the present government would not resort to it but they seem to be repeating it which should be rolled back in order to utilise the idle capacity of the OSD.

## Our dirty little secret

These nine deaths of BDR men in custody are a blight on the critical post-mutiny investigation. It is imperative that we get this investigation right and get to the bottom of the massacre. Nine deaths in custody are already nine too many.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

MARCH 9: Naik Subedar Mozammel Haq reportedly commits suicide by hanging himself from a ventilator fan of a toilet on the third floor of the orchestra bhaban at the BDR headquarters in Pilkhana.

March 11: The pesh imam of the central mosque at BDR headquarters in Pilkhana, Md. Siddiqur Rahman, reportedly dies of cardiac arrest during interrogation. The imam reportedly recited from the Qur'an at the start of the mutiny and was a key witness to the incident.

March 15: Sepoy Waheduzzaman reportedly hangs himself in his barracks at the BDR battalion headquarters in Joydevpur district.

March 17: Sepoy Munir Hossain dies in hospital in Dhaka after unexpectedly falling sick in unexplained circumstances at the BDR headquarters in Pilkhana. Seven other BDR personnel are admitted to hospital the same day.

March 22: Lance Naik Mobarak Hossain dies at DMCH after being rushed there from Pilkhana following an interrogation session.

March 24: Sepoy Md. Mizanur Rahman (age 40) reportedly dies of cardiac arrest while stationed at the BDR battalion headquarters in Rangamati district.

March 26: Sepoy Sheikh Waliur Rahman, reportedly commits suicide by hanging himself at the BDR battalion headquarters in Sylhet district.

Rahman had been present at BDR headquarters during the mutiny but, after fleeing the scene, had returned to his battalion headquarters in Sylhet rather than Pilkhana

as he was ordered to.

There are also unconfirmed reports of two more deaths of BDR personnel, one in Barkal district and one in Jaminipara district.

I think we could be excused for wanting to know what -- in the name of truth and justice -- or, to be more blunt, in our name -- is going on with respect to the post-mutiny investigations and accompanying interrogations.

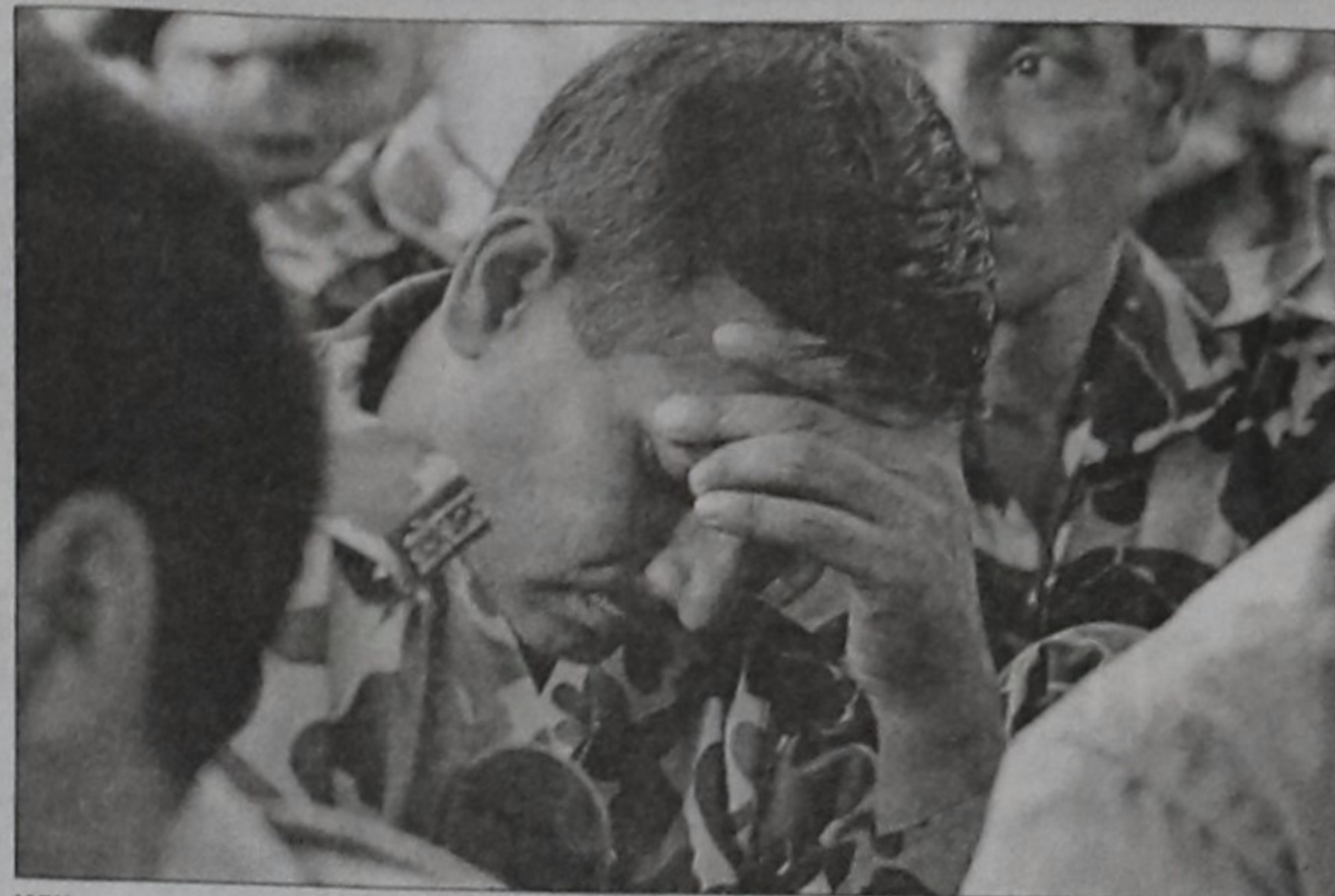
It is one of this country's dirty little secrets that we all know that mistreatment of those in custody and torture during interrogation, leading to serious damage and even death, happen in Bangladesh all the time.

Indeed, so routine is its incidence, as has been amply documented in reports of human rights organisations, both within the country and outside it, buttressed by reams of inarguable evidence and harrowing first-hand and second-hand testimony, that, frankly, it would be disingenuous to imagine that it was not going on at this very moment.

Now, in the midst of the most important investigation that this country has undertaken in recent memory, the success of which has significant implications for our political stability, it is nevertheless the right time to once again raise the issue.

First, surely we can all agree that the mistreatment of prisoners and suspects is simply wrong, a moral obscenity that has no place in any civilised society. In addition, tolerance of this kind of abuse helps create a culture of violence and cruelty, and demeans any society that acquiesces to it.

The second reason to be concerned about these deaths is that the post-mutiny is a very delicate situation and we are a long



Will we ever know the truth?

way to go to restoring BDR as an effective border security force. If people are dying in custody it is certainly not going to help the process.

Third, this kind of thing does not, in fact, help the investigation. Statements elicited under duress are notoriously unreliable and of questionable legal significance.

But for me, the deaths raise even more troubling and fundamental questions about the investigation. Is it possible that the deceased knew too much? When a witness or a suspect dies, he takes his secrets with him to the grave. For all we know, people could be being killed to hush up the truth.

Now, we don't know for sure if any of these deaths are anything other than what they have been reported to be: suicides and cardiac arrests.

Of course, Mozammel Haq was the proud father of two children and had never previously evinced any inclination towards suicide.

And Mobarak Hossain, it is admitted, died following an interrogation session, and his wrists, arms, knees, and shoulders

showed signs of stress and other abnormalities.

Similarly, the imam, Siddiqur Rahman, who reportedly suffered a cardiac arrest, also died after collapsing while being interrogated. He was 40 years old.

By the same token, the reports of the BDR personnel committing suicide by hanging themselves, even if true, seem to me to be even more sinister.

It seems axiomatic that anyone taking his own life in such circumstances would know something or have something to hide, and, at the very least, one would have thought that it would have been possible to secure all witnesses and suspects in custody to ensure that they stay alive long enough to give their testimony in full.

In short, these nine deaths of BDR men in custody are a blight on the critical post-mutiny investigation. It is imperative that we get this investigation right and get to the bottom of the massacre. Nine deaths in custody are already nine too many.

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## Calibration of a celebration

Political brinkmanship goes out of control for the same reason playing with fire burns hands. Thirty-eight years ago, we had started with a spirit of change. Yesterday, a change of spirit was clearly evident. This nation was tired and restless. It looked already aged before coming of age.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

YESTERDAY, this nation turned thirty-eight years old, a time of life when an individual stands at the threshold of middle age. But a nation is expected to live hundreds of years, and thirty-eight for it is still formative days. It doesn't have to worry about dwindling eyesight, hurting knees, fluctuating blood pressure, not even receding hairline or diabetes. A nation is still young and fresh, hope and freedom roaring in veins.

Yet, thirty-eight proved critical for this nation. Yesterday, we celebrated our Independence Day in a cloud of gloom. Missing was the panache of parade, a nation's show of might in the disciplined air of its uniformed men. Missing was the aerial exercise in the sky above sun-glassed men and women seated in rows under colourful canopies. We celebrated the birth of our nation with the anxiety of a kid who doesn't want his stepmother to find out the cake.

It was a celebration in the midst of heightened security, conspiracy theories

circling like vultures overhead. Soldiers checked vehicles on the roads, and their darting eyes frantically frisked slouching traffic and streaming crowds. There were sandbag bunkers in front of key public installations. A morbid nation shuddered because suddenly it was a dangerous place.

For the most part, the celebration faltered. It was a holiday for us, another long weekend by happenstance. The buzzing drone of chirping talkshows drowned our homes. All day long speeches flowed from the ectoplasmic mouths of our politicians and intellectuals, mostly invectives and misgivings, ruminations of heroism thirty-eight years ago. They were full of passionate intensity for the past, their empty hands clutching the future on its uncharted course.

At thirty-eight, this nation's mind is overly cluttered. It wants to try the war criminals, punish the killers of its patriarch, investigate into the arms haul in Chittagong, and probe into corruptions by a former speaker of the parliament -- including all the corruption done by all the speakers since 1972. Then there are so

many loose ends dangling from the two years of a caretaker government, which was neither

Of course, deep down inside the celebration was blotted by the bloodshed at BDR. It has been a month, but the pain still permeates down our hearts, our best killing their best, apparently in collaboration with foreign hands. The irony is that even after thirty-eight years of independence, we still have to rely on foreign collusion either to hatch a plot or to scratch it on the surface.

In 1969, Kris Kristofferson, an American singer-songwriter, sang a song, which captures the dilemma in our hearts: "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose." Freedom rang hollow in the midst of imminent threats, and a paranoid nation groped in its amniotic depth. The jubilation looked inadequate because so much was at stake.

So, yesterday this nation turned another year older, but its invocation was like an anguished soul behind a smiling face. It was more miffed than matured, more diffident than confident, more jolted than jubilant, more harried than hailed, more panicked than proud. It never looked so remote from dreams, never so proximate to nightmares. In fear and fury, this nation was more nervous than nascent.

In fact, our freedom has shrunk in thirty-eight years at an incremental pace. We are afraid to go out of our homes. We look over our shoulders whenever we gather in public meetings or national festivals. Now even

our children are afraid to go to their schools. This nation exudes the fright of someone cocooned in the rabid fear of his own delusions.

That's right! Fear consumed the better part of this Independence Day, when a perturbed nation retracted itself into its shell. Subject to debate, this watered-down celebration could mark a watershed in our history, signaling a significant departure in our national mood. We might never know the taste of real freedom again; never again celebrate a national day without being afraid of gunshots and explosions.

It reminds us of the boy who cried wolf. He thought it was fun that the villagers should come running to his rescue if he screamed for help. When the wolf finally came, the villagers didn't believe his cries. The beast ate the boy and his flock of sheep.

Yesterday, we saw a glimpse of that wolf. Not to say that terrorism doesn't exist. Not to say that we don't need to worry about it. But terrorism was never the cause of our contentious politics until our contentious politics finally made it so.

Political brinkmanship goes out of control for the same reason playing with fire burns hands. Thirty-eight years ago, we had started with a spirit of change. Yesterday, a change of spirit was clearly evident. This nation was tired and restless. It looked already aged before coming of age.

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## Patriotism in divided Bangladesh

Students, factory workers, accident victims all express their grievances by blocking roads, breaking cars, burning factories, looting and killing because they have been taught that vigilantism is the correct way and national interest comes last.

OMAR CHOWDHURY

THE tragedy at Pilkhana was no mutiny; it was premeditated mass murder. We could have called it a mutiny if the BDR jawans had held the army officers captive until their demands were met, but by the time the negotiations had started all the army officers had already been executed. The intention was to destabilise the country, and these cold-blooded murderers had no intention of ventilating their grievances and returning to their barracks.

Men who kill in God's name are willing to die for their cause, but these cowards murdered unarmed army officers and civilians, looted and fled. This is not the modus operandi of Islamic militants, but we cannot rule them out as the instigators.

The BDR jawans were so easily instigated because the masterminds were able to exploit their discontent, indiscipline and lack of patriotism. Besides inequalities between the army and BDR, discon-

tent is prevalent in all developing countries. The ever widening rich-poor gap, inflation, inability to make ends meet -- this kind of discontent exists even in developed countries.

Discontent is hardly a motive to warrant this kind of extremism. But what sets Bangladesh apart from other nations, and makes us particularly vulnerable to the slightest instigation, is our culture of indiscipline and lack of patriotism.

The political parties, especially AL and BNP, have actively promoted this culture. Students, factory workers, accident victims all express their grievances by blocking roads, breaking cars, burning factories, looting and killing because they have been taught that vigilantism is the correct way and national interest comes last.

The colonial attitude of our political parties, of dividing and ruling this nation, has marginalised our patriotism. If you watch BTV programs on independence, it seems like Bangabandhu made all the contributions and Zia had no contribu-

tion at all. Murals of Zia have been removed from Chittagong airport, history has been distorted in parliament, primary school textbooks are being changed to glorify Bangabandhu and erase the memory of Zia.

When BNP was in power, they took similar actions to erase the memory of Bangabandhu and even celebrated fictitious birthdays on Bangabandhu's death anniversary. The holidays of August 15 and November 7 are two more examples of an elected government's policy of dividing and ruling.

The real changes were brought about by the previous caretaker government (independent judiciary, EC, ACC, PSC, local government, national ID cards), but I doubt that these reforms will be sustainable under an elected government. Our politicians are just as corrupt and inefficient as those in any developing country, but in other countries their citizens can expect that their politicians will put the national interest above all else.

In our parliament, they should be talking about dismantling the student wings of the political parties, but that is a power they will never relinquish, least of all in the national interest. Instead, they debate the validity of Zia's proclamation of independence.

Our disdain and mistrust of our politicians is so deep rooted that they are not

above suspicion of being involved in the Pilkhana tragedy. All the conspiracy theories circulating seem to involve BNP/Jamaat/JMB/ISI or AL/RAW. Depending on which theory you are inclined to believe, it appears that all our elected representatives in parliament are agents of foreign intelligence agencies or terrorist organisations.

I will not speculate on any of these theories, but I do believe that they are all capable of instigating further bloodshed to get absolute power, regardless of the consequences to the nation. We are our own worst enemies.

Years of orchestrated division has diminished our patriotism to such an extent that we are all looking for an exit strategy, like rats leaving a sinking ship. The rich buy residency in Canada and Malaysia while the poor sell their land and borrow money to get a ridiculously low paying job in a foreign country.

I fear that we are perilously close to being a failed state, unless the next generation of leaders can unify us, give us hope for a better future, and inspire us to be better citizens. A first step in that direction would be to redefine patriotism: You don't have to love Bangabandhu or Shaheed President Zia to be a patriot -- you just have to love Bangladesh.

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