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What lies below

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

THE Pilkhana incident has restored mutiny and violent deaths to the centre of political discourse after many years. The role of institutions like the army and its auxiliaries like the BDR and the Ansars have returned in full force, making everyone anxious to understand what they mean in terms of law and order stability and the character of the state institutions that house such forces.

The blood spilled at Pilkhana has shattered everyone's sense of a secure space where the armed branches of the state are concerned. Now, many will wonder if, given the existing framework in the armed branches of the state, somewhere, something is brewing or not at any time which can suddenly explode as it did this February.

Most view the matter largely as a law and order issue, which can be fixed through punishment and discipline. Few analyses are exploring the internal crisis of a state arrangement where an entire institution of the armed variety

can turn violently on another, in this case, the BDR on the army.

To dismiss this as a law and order problem only would be troubling, especially in case of Bangladesh where military intervention in matters of the state has a long history, as have been such revolts, especially in the army. Nor can conspiracy theories alone accommodate the explanations.

The large-scale involvement of BDR personnel has also created blanket demonising of the jawans, which means all are presumed guilty until proven innocent. Till date around 150 have been charged and latest reports say at least nine have died from "suicide" and "heart attacks," presumably during questioning.

While custodial deaths are a common practice in Bangladesh, it is disturbing now because if one falls into the trap of violating human rights of accused persons by an investigating agency, the price is always paid by the entire state.

We do hear a lot of voices demanding death penalty and the harshest possible



punishment for the mutineers. The numbers of mutineers also rise with every count. Prescribing death is always

easy, but as our history shows, if, after all these years of formal management, violence can occur with such extreme

force within the military and the paramilitary because some basic flaws were not repaired, some fundamental system

of check and balance was not maintained by the armed branches with all their resources and personnel, there is cause for deeper worries.

And it is not an internal crisis but it becomes a matter of public discourse. When so many are involved, it's not a conspiracy of rogue elements, but a structural problem.

As the incident involves a gruesome array of killing of army officers, and human sentiments are still raw, any analysis of the situation has a chance of being perceived as either "pro-army" or "pro-BDR" in the present environment.

For the moment, there is some feeling that the issue is very black and white, and that punishing the guilty will restore the situation. However, that is only partly true, as the problem is certainly much more complex in the context of our history since 1971.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on Monday, April 6.

Afsan Chowdhury is a journalist writing for Bangladeshi and South Asian publications.

Chronicle of tragedy and the pendulum of sentiment

SYEED AHAMED

IT was appalling to witness the fast swinging of the "sentiment pendulum" during the course of the BDR mutiny. When the first news of the mutiny broke, the sentiment pendulum decisively swung towards the mutineers, partly owing to their socio-economic background but mainly due to the stories of deprivation they managed to deliver to the public.

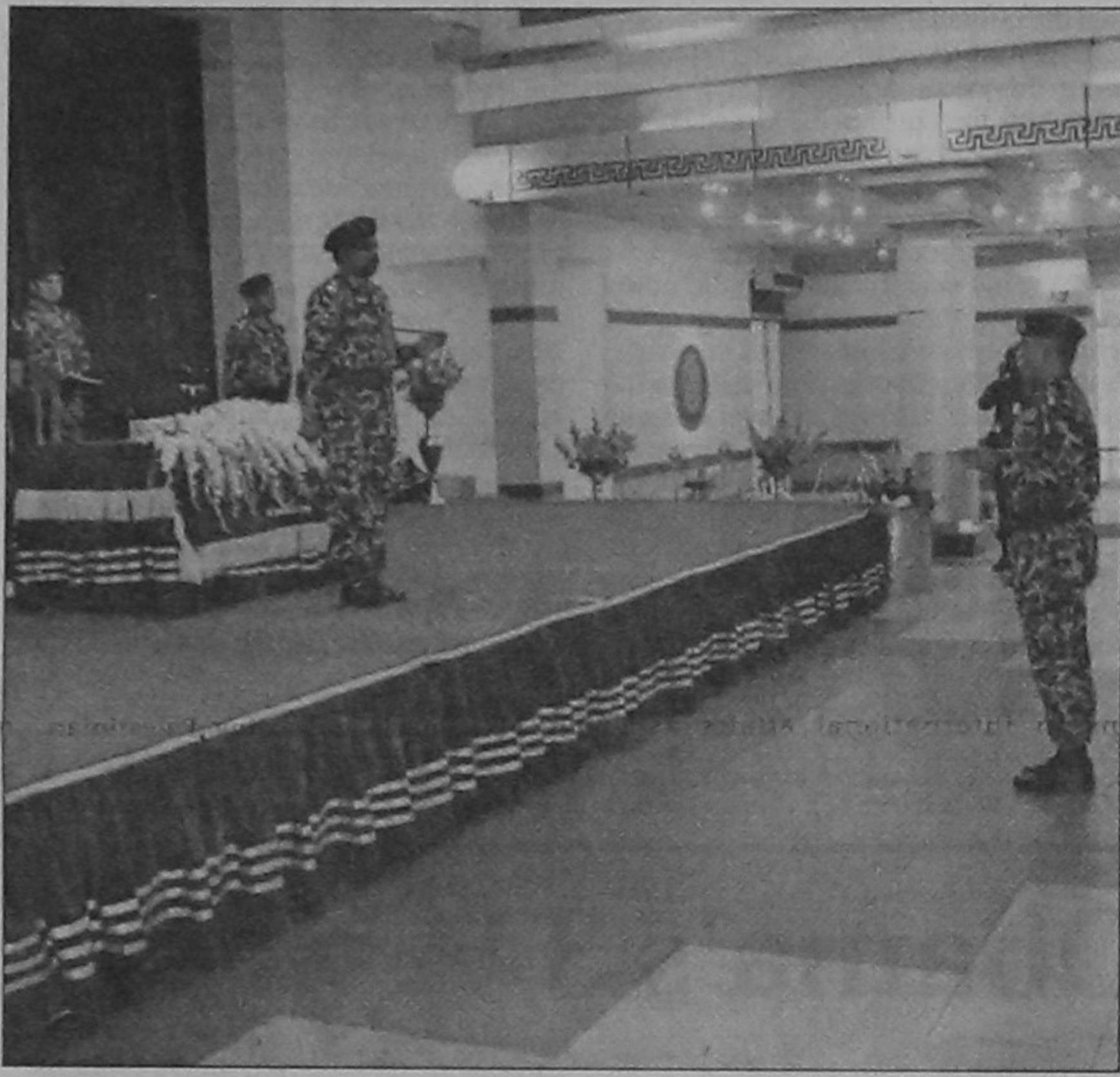
We saw people gathering around the BDR gates shouting solidarity, media focusing on the deprivation of soldiers, and some pundits even going as far as portraying it a "class revolt."

After the mass graveyards were discovered, however, the sentiment pendulum swung hard in the opposite direction. People were shocked with the brutality of the massacre. Media switched from "mutiny" to "carnage" in referring to the incident. Around the world people took part in spontaneous candle light vigils.

The initial pro-BDR public reaction dearly hurt the feelings of friends and family members of the army officers -- this sentiment was evident in the blog posts of cadets and army officers. The subsequent anti-BDR momentum should have created an equal anxiety for the family members of the innocent BDR soldiers who are still waiting for the fate of their sons and brothers.

Disturbing, but not surprising, was the political blame game that took place subsequent to the massacre. While the raw emotional outbursts of the victims were received with sympathy, the widespread conspiracy theories added spice to everyday conversation.

But most importantly, it was this swinging of sentiments that should remind us the consequences of extreme



emotions, awkwardness of ignorant preconceptions, and fallacy of prejudiced belief.

The investigation is ongoing, and it is best to leave it to the proper authorities to find the answers to all the unanswered questions. Instead, this article uses the actual eyewitness accounts of the surviving army officers to form a detailed timeline of events.

Using this timeline, we can explore a range of questions without emotional prejudice. Specifically, we can address the viability of a military solution to avoid the atrocities.

The eyewitness accounts of the event that happened inside BDR HQ are collated from the interviews publicly avail-

able in the audio and video format. Secondary sources such as the printed reports were used mainly to narrate the events that happened outside the BDR HQ in parallel. The narratives of the surviving officers could easily be placed in a rough timeline. Given the horrific nature of the events and trauma, the inconsistencies that are in the details are quite reasonable. Preferences were given to available hard facts (e.g. images) and comparable narratives of senior officials.

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Syed Ahamed is a public policy analyst and can be reached at ahamed.saeed@gmail.com

Untangling the web

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THERE is very little that one can add, at least nothing very insightful, to what has already been said and written on the BDR massacre. The opposition political parties have given their verdict on whom they think is responsible for it. And the AL has come out with theories of its own, courtesy the daily comments on the investigation by the minister for commerce. However, there are differing views on several important aspects of the matter in the Grand Alliance, particularly between the AL and its major component the JP, principally on how the matter should have been handled.

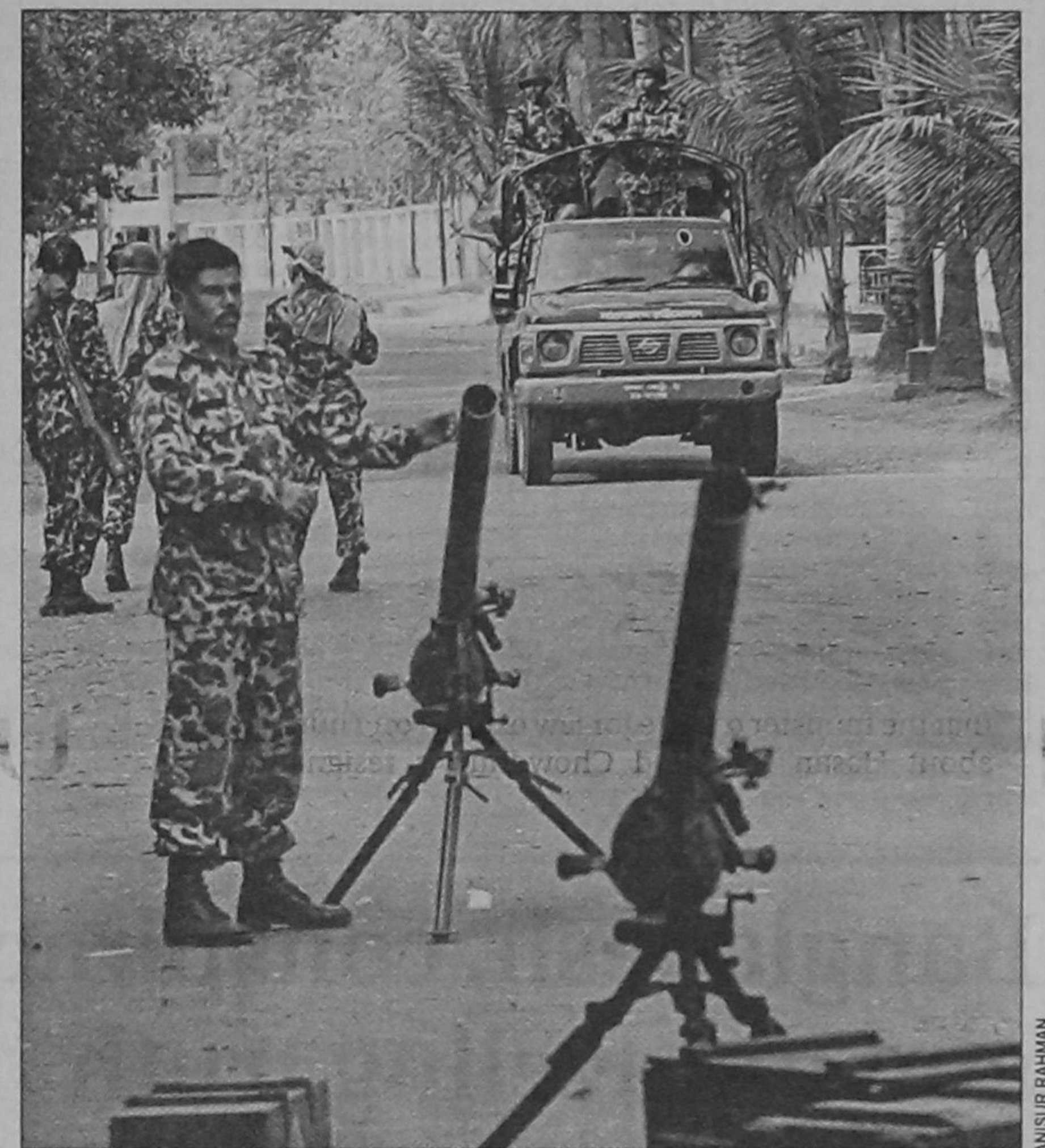
And the media in some of our neighbouring countries have not been far behind in giving their verdict in their own way as to who were behind the planned killing of the army officers. In fact, several Indian print and electronic media have already identified by name the party and the individuals that, according to them, were behind the BDR massacre, well before the situation subsided.

And of course there was a plethora of theories in Bangladesh on why and how it happened, and there was no dearth of articles both complimenting as well criticising the manner in which the government handled the situation.

An interesting feature of the post BDR-carnage theorisation was the similarity of views of the two major parties that the killing was a well-planned operation aimed at striking at the very substance of the state.

But that is where the agreement ended -- because both the parties had theories of their own as to who might have been the masterminds that exploited the so-called grievances of the BDR soldiers, to reap the benefits of the outcome. Only recently the PM pointed fingers at the "evil force," meaning the defeated forces of 1971, for the BDR carnage.

Although articulated many times, it bears repetition that the Pilkhana mayhem was one of the most brutal events in



the annals of the country's history -- proving once again that we Bengalis can be the most violent and cruel creatures when we want to be. Even the rapacious Pakistan army did not kill so many Bengali officers in one operation, and even during the nine-month war of liberation only eleven of our brave officers were martyred. And this is perhaps the unkindest cut of all -- that couldn't have been delivered by genuine members of a disciplined force like BDR. Therefore, my personal conviction that the killings were done by some professional groups is reinforced with every passing day.

Since it is the most traumatic event

since 1971, and something that one hopes would never be repeated, it is imperative that we study the event dispassionately to draw lessons from it. This must be done in order to assess objectively as to what went wrong and why. But first of all it is necessary to remove some of the misconceptions about the issue that were created by debates and comments some of which betrayed a limited understanding of the matter.

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Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan (ret'd) is editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Picking through the wreckage

JYOTI RAHMAN

THE emerging conventional wisdom at the time of writing is that the events were premeditated, and not spontaneous. If this view is true, then it is important to scrutinise the rank and file of the BDR. Failure to do this means we run the risk of a rebel soldier killing an Indian officer during a flag meeting. The repercussions of such an incident could be far reaching indeed. And even if nothing like that happens, it seems difficult to ask a 25 year-old captain to command a BDR platoon in the remote border areas. It is no surprise then that officers are yet to join their men at camps.

And yet, mysterious deaths in Pilkhana and elsewhere -- five at the time of writing -- do absolutely nothing to improve the trust between officers and their men. Every such death makes it that much harder for the average BDR jawan to feel a sense of camaraderie with his officers. Indeed, every such death fuels an institutional antipathy amongst the BDR men towards their army brethren. The higher this death toll climbs, the less feasible it is to rebuild BDR.

And yet, the current situation is clearly not sustainable. What we are



faced with is the necessity to overhaul our border security and paramilitary forces, without tarnishing thousands of innocent BDR jawans who had nothing to do with this, men who shed their blood regularly defending our border. That is a huge task. That is the first part of the security crisis.

And who gains from this crisis? Who gains if our border is undefended? It's not the Indian government. They have

as much to lose from an unguarded border as we do, perhaps more than we do. An unsecured border will be used by smugglers of drugs, arms, and people. It will be used by violent jihadis, Naxalites, or separatists in the Indian north-east. They are the real beneficiaries of our crisis.

Could they have plotted something? Perhaps. No atrocity was necessary plotted. Something along the line of an

assassination-army attack-bloodbath would have achieved the desired end of a security breakdown. The first stage of such a plot came to pass, but the second stage did not because of decisions taken by the government and adhered to by the army. Unfortunately, the atrocities may have created the same effects that any putative plotters might have sought.

And even if there were no conspiracy, extremists of various types or multi-national organised crime pose a threat to our national security as a result of this crisis. They are now connected. They can now move to and from the Indian north-east, or from Nepal to Burma, with impunity. Bangladesh has now become a dark passage. To complicate matters, the Burmese regime is already amassing troops in the border.

Inter-connectivity is the latest euphemism to describe India's desire to use Bangladeshi territory to move people and goods to and from its north-eastern states, and Bangladesh's desire to move people and goods to and from countries like Nepal and China via Indian territory.

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Jyoti Rahman is a blogger and can be contacted at dpwriters@drishipat.org

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