

Begum Zia must not prejudge Delhi outcome

She ought to raise such issues in Parliament

WE are distressed by the tone and tenor of Begum Khaleda Zia's remarks at Paltan Maidan on Friday. The BNP leader has in effect held out a good number of threats and warnings at the government with regard to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's forthcoming official visit to India. The leader of the opposition has made it clear that if, in her opinion, the prime minister concludes an honourable deal in Delhi, she will be welcomed home with garlands; but if, again in her words, she fails to preserve the national interest, her path once she returns home will be strewn with thorns. Such remarks are plainly and disturbingly abrasive and certainly do little to help either the opposition or those it presumes to speak for.

The unvarnished truth here is that the opposition is presuming a little too much and clearly expects the prime minister to resolve all outstanding issues with India to our satisfaction with just one visit. The position the BNP chairperson has taken is thus quite indefensible, given that she is patently prejudging the outcome of the talks between the Bangladesh and Indian heads of government. In diplomacy, while it may be all right to analyse issues before a summit takes place, it is all wrong to give people the impression that failure will be the eventual result of such a meeting and that national interests will be trampled underfoot. Patriotism cannot be the monopoly of a group or party, which is why we believe Begum Zia should have been more circumspect in her remarks before a partisan audience as the one she addressed at Paltan Maidan. As a former prime minister and as one who ought to be well acquainted with the issues the country faces vis-à-vis dealing with its neighbours, she should have demonstrated more maturity rather than draw the premature conclusion that Sheikh Hasina was on her way toward undermining Bangladesh's interests in Delhi.

Such obstructionist politics has constantly undermined the country. Where the BNP's position on the performance of the present government is concerned, one needs to raise the question of what it itself did about handling the issues the nation is now burdened with when the party was in power. Begum Zia and her followers are today justifiably raising such questions as Tipaimukh and the like. Unfortunately, the nation is not aware of what steps the BNP government took between 2001 and 2006 to handle the crisis.

Begum Zia's assertion that her party is committed to the democratic process is praiseworthy. And yet such an assertion is belied by the fact that the opposition, for no credible reason and despite new assurances by the Jatiyo Sangsad speaker, has stubbornly stayed away from Parliament. Now, the issues Begum Zia raised at Paltan Maidan on Friday should have been placed in the House, for that is where the nation expects all matters to be deliberated on and resolved. By threatening to go for an agitation on the streets, the former prime minister has deeply disappointed and embarrassed the country. The extent to which such a position can undermine democracy and push the country toward chaos can only be imagined.

It is time, we believe, for Begum Zia and her party to rethink their politics. A year ago the nation voted for change. It remains the moral duty of all, especially the opposition, to respect that verdict. Let the nation not be taken for granted any more by anyone.

Highway journey extremely hazardous

Why no monitoring of vehicular fitness and speed?

THE frequency at which highway accidents are taking place in the country has reached an ominous proportion. But the glaring fact remains that there is no authority around to monitor and regulate the speed, fitness as well as overloading of buses and trucks to bring the rate of such accidents down. As a result, bus and private car passengers are paying with their lives for such apathy, for such lack of concern, on the part of the administration, which is extremely lamentable, to say the least. As recent as last Friday, a speeding passenger bus crashed into a roadside tree when it lost control while giving way to a truck coming from the opposite direction on the Dhaka-Khulna highway. The accident left 17 dead and many more injured. It is only likely that if the drivers of both the vehicles had any respect for human lives and fear for the law of the land, they would have been more careful while driving heavy vehicles on highways.

On the highways passenger bus, microbus and truck drivers care little to comply with the laws prohibiting over-speeding and they engage in a mad race for overtaking one another to reach the destination. More often than not such over-speeding results in tragedies like the one that happened on Friday. It is worth mentioning that in 2009, hundreds of similar accidents have taken scores of lives, and despite repeated appeal by the people, no step towards monitoring of the vehicles has been taken by the government.

There have been recommendations for provision of severe punishment for unqualified drivers and law-violating owners but we cannot recall any such action having been taken by the relevant authorities against them. One media report (Prothom Alo, 27 December 2009) says that there are 12 lac (1.2 million) vehicles in the country of which drivers of 8 lac vehicles have driving licence issued by BRTA. That means over 4 lac drivers do not have legal documents. According to BRTA, of the 8 lac drivers with licence, 5 lac had received them without appearing at any examination or test. They were given licence on the basis of a list given by the labour unions. There are allegations that drivers pay large amount of money to have their names on the labour union list.

These facts paint a clear picture of what is happening in the road transport sector, right from obtaining licence to getting away from the clutches of law. Therefore, unless the high-ups in the government step forward with clear intentions to reduce accidents, through installing a mechanism of monitoring and detection, our highways will remain virtual death traps for anybody. This, by all means, should be taken up as a priority.

Things of concern for a freedom fighter

The best way to make the freedom fighters happy, especially by those who are now at the helm, would be to present before them a better prospect for the nation where their progeny may live in peace and prosper.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE subject matter of the present write-up is an article, the title of which may be rendered in English as "Definition of Freedom Fighters and their number" by Abid Anwar. The article was published on the Oped page of the Bengali daily *Prothom Alo* in its December 31, 2009 issue.

The writer, a veteran freedom fighter, started guerrilla operations in the wake of the Pakistani military's crackdown of March 25, 1971 on the defenceless residents of Dhaka first from the Dhaka University (DU). He was then a third year Honours student of DU at its chemistry department. Later, he organised the War of Liberation under Sector No.3 in his home district of Kishoreganj (then a subdivision) after receiving training as a *gonobahini* commander from India.

As a writer he hardly needs any introduction as he has a long track record in the print media as a poet, columnist, literary critic and a popular science writer. But the article in question cannot be categorised as just another of his usual literary exercises. To all appearances, it has to do with something that touches his very personal space, his

pride. A discreet reader would not fail to notice that he has gone off the deep end in his narrative of the Liberation War and the definition and number of the freedom fighters. Small wonder he has felt the obligation to speak out in a manner that might have surprised many.

Any proud freedom fighter who took up arms to wrest the independence of his motherland was propelled by sheer patriotism. A person who did not go to war out of any desire for personal gain or greed is naturally upset by any suggestion, implied or otherwise, that questions the genuineness of that urge. As one would expect, the entire hullabaloo over the issue of true or fake freedom fighters or their exact number around four decades after the war has pricked his self-esteem.

True, Bangladesh's independence would not be possible had not the whole nation, excepting a handful of renegades, participated in the War of Liberation. The mass people waged this war in a hundred and one forms. The number of fronts, too, was countless. Some members of the population took the neighbouring India to fight enemy soldiers and their local collaborators at the different battlefronts.

Others, who stayed back, provided food and shelter to the guerrilla fighters. Many

were persecuted by the enemy forces and their local accomplices for their support to the war of independence. If truth be told, the entire populace was in the war and fought the enemy on a thousand and one fronts. In that sense, all of them were freedom fighters.

But during the independence war, the identities of those who went against the people and joined the enemy camp were unambiguously marked. Their number was easily calculable as every villager and resident of a ward in a big or small town knew them too well.

But how is one to count the numberless masses, all of whom took part in the Liberation War? Abid Anwar pointed exactly at this fallacious proposition of counting the "real freedom fighters" of that glorious war.

Though the size of the population has doubled during all these years after independence, the time that has come in between has not blurred the people's memory a bit about who had been with the cause of that people's war and who had not. Hence, his suggestion that it would be rather easier to revisit the records and count up the collaborators.

The people who fought the war of independence out of their love for the country are least concerned about all these efforts at listing and re-listing of the genuine (!) freedom fighters, an exercise they had always taken with a grain of salt. On the contrary, a freedom fighter is more willing to take stock of the successes and failures of the nation they finally created through the war.

Are they happy with what has become of the country some four decades after the

Pakistani occupation forces had signed the paper of their surrender? What do they tell their children about their dreams and struggles during the war? Do they rejoice at or regret their roles during the war and, if so, what gladdens or saddens them most? The inducements of allowances, job quotas or other benefits for which some think they might fall are completely in the wrong.

In a similar vein, they, for certain, do not take all the claims and counter-claims over who were the real champions and who were less than that in the Freedom War in a light-hearted manner. They did not after all dream of a fractious nation after the war. For they cannot forget for a moment the rock solid unity of the people that injected courage and hope in their heart to stake their dearest lives in the cause of national freedom.

Where is that unity among the political forces that is so essential for waging the other war, the one for building a prosperous nation?

A freedom fighter, who was in her/his early youth during the War, has already reached early or late middle age by now. What may a person at this critical stage of her/his life yearn for? They would rather like to leave behind a nation that is safe for her/his progeny and where they may lead a prosperous life.

So, the best way to make the freedom fighters happy, especially by those who are now at the helm, would be to present before them a better prospect for the nation where their progeny may live in peace and prosper.

Syed Fattahul Alim is a senior journalist.

We should not miss the train

As an effective answer to the sceptics, we have to impart quality education to meet the demands of the developed and the developing worlds. Otherwise, if we keep on living in the past the train will leave the station on its way to a fast moving globalised world.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

ONE wonders why the Taliban are committing suicide in the name of the Muslims by destroying educational institutions in the lawless region of Pakistan. The signal given to the global community by such wanton acts of terrorism is that Islam has compressed in its the Holy Book the ultimate knowledge necessary for mankind and no further knowledge is required, an impression that contradicts one of the fundamental teachings of Islam -- instructing Muslims to go to China (a far away place in the seventh century), if necessary, to seek knowledge.

Paul Krugman (*The Uneducated American*-October 2009) wrote that if one had to explain US's economic success in one word it would be "education." In the 19th century America led the way in universal basic education and as the other nations followed suit the "high school revolution" of the 20th century took the Western world to its height of prosperity, and the US continued to lead the world in higher education. The US continued to produce a greater number of scientists, doctors and engineers and along with Europe and Canada accounted for about half of the global GDP (adjusted to reflect purchasing power parity) in early 21st century.

This picture, writes Jack Gladstone (*The*

New Population Bomb- Jan/Feb 2010- Foreign Affairs), is going to change mainly due to demographic factors. The UN Population Division has identified four historical shifts that will fundamentally alter the world's population in the next four decades -- the relative demographic weight loss of the developed countries by 25%; shifting economic power to the developing countries; labour force in developed countries will substantially age and decline; and, most of the global population growth will occur in the poorest, youngest and Muslim countries short of quality education, capital and employment.

The World Bank predicts that by 2030 the developing countries would have a middle class of 1.2 billion people, that will be larger than the combined population of the US, Europe and Japan. As the factors driving economic growth, translated into greater productivity in the developed world in the second half of the 20th century, were better education, movement of women into the labour force and innovation in technology then the violent acts of the Taliban and Islamic extremists against secular education can only lead us towards the dark ages and the periphery of the global village.

In his article Gladstone mentioned that in 1950 Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey had a population of 245 million that rose to 886 million in 2009, and

another 245 million might be added by 2050. Pakistan, for example, faces a "demographic disaster" if its leaders fail to invest in the youth population. Half of Pakistan's population is aged less than 20, with two-thirds still to reach their 30th birthday.

Countries with younger populations are more prone to civil unrest and political destabilisation, and suffer from Dickensian poverty and anarchic violence. They have less belief in accommodating dissenting voices and are more likely to resist pluralistic, multicultural, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic society. Gladstone suggests that Turkey's admission into the European Union, despite reservations of some European nations, is not only to regenerate youth and economic dynamism in the EU but is also a signal to the Muslim world that EU is not a Christian club.

Gladstone would favour the division of the world, as opposed to the Cold War terminology of First, Second and Third World, as aging industrialised world, second world consisting of fast growing and economically dynamic countries, and the third world of fast growing, urbanised and poor economies with weak governments. In order to regenerate economic dynamism immigration has been suggested to fill up the gap between the aging and working population in the industrialised nations.

Harvard Professor Bruce Scott (*The Great Divide in the Global Villages*) criticises the industrialised nations for erecting barriers against immigration by forcing the poor people to remain in badly governed states and denying them the opportunity to "move up" by "moving out," and making the global economy more like a gated community than a global village. A recent survey shows that qualitatively Indian immigrants to the US are head and shoulders above the other immi-

grants -- possibly due to higher standard of education in India, knowledge of English language and the compulsion felt by the first generation to be better than the natives. The same traits are also present among the Chinese but they lack in linguistic skill.

Despite Islamophobia, described in the Runnymede report of 1997 (chaired by Professor Gordon Conway) as the illogical fear of Islam and Muslims fueled by al-Qaeda and other extremist terrorists, the Western developed countries will have little option but to allow immigration from the developing countries to keep up productivity and economic growth from youthful, energetic but poor countries provided we arm ourselves with education and skill that the developed world would need.

Bangladesh in particular, threatened as we are by the adverse effects of climate change, should be acutely aware of this vital need. Let us forget, critics of immigration from Muslim countries (Christopher Caldwell -- *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam and the West*) remain unconvinced of the wealth generated by the immigrants, which is cancelled out by the cost of accommodating them and the remittance sent home by them added to the inability of post-enlightenment Europe to play host to people yet to find comfortable mooring as minority community, are present and pose imminent danger to societies like ours who depend significantly on money sent by immigrants.

As an effective answer to the sceptics, we have to impart quality education to meet the demands of the developed and the developing worlds. Otherwise, if we keep on living in the past the train will leave the station on its way to a fast moving globalised world.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Ushering in the new year

There is a saying that the streets of Philadelphia are safe, but it is the men and women who make them unsafe. A year can also be called good, but it is the men and women who shape the year and make events either good or bad. Let us usher in the new year to bring happiness and prosperity for the nation.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE year 2009 has passed away in the eternal flow of time with all its glories and ignominies. Although all the years are equal in the scale of time, some years are more memorable than others, either for heights of achievements or for depth of miseries. The year 2009 will be remembered in Bangladesh as the year of hope and introspection.

As 2010 starts, it is quite clear that our main problem is still clinging to us, as the ruling AL and the opposition BNP are looking like their usual selves. The bitter relations between the government and the opposition, with each side blaming the other unjustifiably, has become a pervasive problem that we have been facing over the years.

The opposition has failed as a responsible opposition, just as the government has failed as a responsible government. Both the BNP and AL, when in opposition, did not promote the cause of democracy and their electorate, as they boycotted parliamentary sessions.

Politics has really gone awry, and needs to be placed on the right track.

The new year starts its journey with the fourth session of the 9th Parliament. It is an encouraging development that the main opposition BNP has said that it will return to Parliament and play a role in decision making on important national issues. But the downside is that this interest is not without condition. The opposition wants the government to create a congenial atmosphere for its return to Parliament.

The prices of foodstuff, including rice, wheat, edible oil, onion, lentil, and baby-food, have registered another round of steep increase on the eve of the new year, after implementation of the new pay scale.

The prices of rice and wheat had declined in the first few months of the new government, but registered a sharp rise again as the government did not give due emphasis to tackling the issue. The majority of the people in the country have already become crippled with the persistent pressure of price spiral of all essential commodities.

The new year brings some relief for 1.2 million government officers and employees amidst rising inflation, who are drawing their salaries in the new pay scale. But it will be momentary if the government fails to tame the kitchen market.

By putting the clock back to the original position on the eve of the new year, the government has given some relief to the suffering masses. Many people consider it as a new year's gift for the people from the government, as they had been suffering much during the winter days because of the tyrannical time.

No other step of this government was so annoying to the people as the DST was. But it is a mystery why the same unnecessary step, on the plea of saving electricity, will be repeated after three months despite public discontent and protests against it.

Climate change, although a concern for all, poses a greater and immediate threat to Bangladesh. The country is likely to face a severe food crisis by 2050 due to sharp fall in rice production because of shift in monsoon due to climate change. The farce that was played out in Copenhagen has achieved nothing in terms of its stated objectives. So we need to build our own approach to face the spectre of climate change.

The people in Bangladesh will remember 2009 as a year of redemption from the burden of guilt. The landmark judgement by the Supreme Court on the killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on

August 15, 1975, is one of the defining moments of the nation.

Twelve months is not enough for evaluation of the achievement of a government which faces a backlog of unresolved problems accumulated over the years. The people are hopeful again in 2010, the though overall performance of the government is not satisfactory.

Although much light is not seen on the political spectrum, the year 2010 is likely to be politically and politically significant for the country. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is scheduled to fly New Delhi on January 10, on her first state visit to India during her present term in office. Her visit is expected to remove the distrust between the countries in the past.

The economy, which has survived the shocks of global recession, is now in a reasonable shape. The country ended the fiscal year 2009 with a 5.9% GDP growth and it is close to 7% in the first half of the on-going fiscal year. So there is reason to think of a bright future ahead.

There is a saying that the streets of Philadelphia are safe, but it is the men and women who make them unsafe. A year can also be called good, but it is the men and women who shape the year and make events either good or bad. Let us usher in the new year to bring happiness and prosperity for the nation.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail-annmhaque@hotmail.com