



Constitution Drafting Committee, 1972.

Achievements and challenges

Let us make Bangladesh a progressive, prosperous and democratic country for our future generations. We must bear in mind the old adage "united we stand and divided we fall."

HARUN UR RASHID

MARCH 26 is our independence day. It is a day of reflecting on the past and looking forward to the future. Our independence was brought about by the supreme sacrifices of the people, and we remember them on this day with prayers for peace of their souls.

March 25 night of 1971 was when Bengalis faced the demonic power of the Pakistan military. It was on that night when brave Bengalis, irrespective of religious faiths and gender, decided to fight for independence on the basis of the inspirational historic speech of March 7 by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The clarion call on March 7, 1971 of Bangabandhu for "muktir sangram" and "swadhinatar sangram" meant not only freedom from poverty and oppression but also achievement of a democratic, independent country for Bengalis.

On March 25 it seemed that the lamps had gone out all over Bangladesh and on March 26, we saw them being lit again. There was hope on March 26, but the indomitable spirit and thirst for an independent country originated on March 25 night. Our grim determination to fight emanated from the darkest hour of March 25 night.

Although it was the darkest hour for Bengalis, we felt not only powerful but also morally righteous to fight against the Pakistan military. The international community, including media and scholars, supported our liberation movement.

As independence enters the 39th year, we need to take stock of our achievements and challenges.

Success was achieved in communication and physical infrastructure. Many large bridges were built over mighty rivers, which allowed increased economic activities.

Poverty has been reduced by 9.2 percent. Dependence on foreign aid and loans has diminished considerably and now hovers around only 2 percent of the national budget, per capita income has increased to \$699 dollars, despite population growth.

Bangladesh has almost achieved self-sufficiency in food production. Economic growth has been more than 5 percent, and even reached 6.2 percent in fiscal 2000-01. The effects of the global financial meltdown have been managed with prudence.

Enrolment rate at primary level has increased to 82.7 percent and the child mortality reduced to 82 per 1,000 live births. Some of the social indicators in Bangladesh are better than those in India and Pakistan, according to UNDP.

Foreign direct investment in Bangladesh stood at \$1 billion in 2009 from \$14 million only in 1996. Our exports have increased on average almost 15 percent each year due to innovative policies of the private sector. Remittances from migrants stood at almost \$10 billion last year. Regular servicing of national debt (about \$18 billion) is being maintained.

Relations with India and China have opened avenues of cooperation and partnership due to the landmark visits of our prime minister to both countries. Relations with Myanmar and Bhutan were considerably improved. Sea-boundary issue has taken a positive momentum with Myanmar.

Because of pragmatic policy, Bangladesh will emerge as a transportation conduit for the entire region through interconnectivity with other regional countries. Bangladesh has been on the right path towards becoming a part of regional and global economy, taking full advantage of its geographical location.

In foreign policy, Bangladesh has made a mark as a responsible nation. The trust and confidence reposed in Bangladesh by the international community is demonstrated by the fact that it became a member of the UN Security Council four years after its admission to the UN (1978), a rare feat of success. Bangladesh was again elected in 1999 as a member of the Security Council. The Bangladesh foreign minister was president of the UN General Assembly in 1986.

Bangladesh's commitment to peace is

demonstrated by its contribution to UN peacekeeping missions. So far, about 70,000 soldiers have participated in 35 peacekeeping missions in 26 countries.

Bangladeshi army generals led the peacekeeping mission in Mozambique in 1994, in Georgia in 2002 and Liberia in 2008. Currently, a Bangladeshi general is leading a UN Mission in Ivory Coast.

Bangladesh has been reelected to the Human Rights Council and has secured a seat at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (2010-12), the Executive Committee of Unesco, (2009-13), ECOSOC (2010-12) and International Maritime Organisation (2010-11).

Bangladesh's role at the Copenhagen UN Conference was duly recognised in December 2009. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina presented Bangladesh's vulnerability to ill effects of climate change at the UN General Assembly in September 2009, in Rome at a roundtable conference in November 2009, and finally had a video-conference with world leaders in November 2009.

Bangladesh can rightly take pride for introducing the concept of micro-credit to the world. It is a country which houses the largest NGO in the world -- Brac -- and many of the programs of the Grameen Bank and Brac are being replicated across the world.

Against these achievements, Bangladesh confronts major social and economic challenges in such areas as food, energy, water, environment, and economic and personal security. Another challenge is confronting extremists.

The political environment during the last few decades has been replete with

bitterness, animosity, and violent behaviour of mainstream political parties. Confrontational politics has been the hallmark of political atmosphere in the country. There is little energy left for giving constructive views on national issues in Parliament. Cooperation, accommodation and tolerance among political parties are almost non-existent.

The infrastructure of democracy consists of free media, rule of law, transparency of all government decisions, accountability of government to the people and Parliament, independent judiciary, gender equality and vibrant civil society. Peaceful co-existence, tolerance and mutual respect for each other are the basic elements of democracy. Tyrannical majority and recalcitrant minority, according to constitutional expert Sir Ivor Jennings, are enemies that destroy democracy.

Corruption has been widespread in the country. Combating corruption is necessary for stimulating economic growth and social development.

The export basket is too small, and there are too few buyers. The garment industry generates between 75 and 79 percent of the exports. Export needs to be diversified and has to be targeted towards a large number of countries.

The widening disparity between rich and poor within the country is very stark. According to Bangladesh Economic Association, 50 percent of the total households are landless, while on 6.2 percent families own 40 percent of the total land in the country. Two-thirds of rural people do not own any land. About 90 million have practically no access to standard health care, 60 million people

have no access to safe drinking water, 119 million do not have electricity and about 130 million have no access to piped natural gas.

Most economists suggest that investment up to 34 percent of GDP is needed in the next three to five years to reduce poverty and become a middle income country in a decade or so. Some say that an investment of \$28 billion would be required by 2013-14 to achieve the targeted growth of 8 percent of GDP.

Bangladesh stands at the crossroads, and the emergence of a new invigorated Bangladesh depends on the political atmosphere. The "winner takes all" mentality must be discarded.

Lawrence Ziring, in his book Mujib to Ershad (1992) writes: "Bangladeshis were exemplary democrats and staunch liberals when highlighting the dictatorial exploits of their distant, alien and non-Bengali overlords. They were something else when made responsible for their own affairs."

Many people will not agree with the dismal and provocative assessment of Ziring about Bengalis. Personally, however, I am optimistic for a bright future for Bangladesh because the overwhelming majority of people are resilient, hardworking, innovative and adaptable in changing circumstances. Let us make Bangladesh a progressive, prosperous and democratic country for our future generations. We must bear in mind the old adage "united we stand and divided we fall."

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.



Apology Day for Pakistanis

I am sure that Pakistan is changing fast. A day will come very soon when the government of Pakistan will officially say sorry to Bengalis and March 26th will become an apology day for patriotic Pakistanis.

HAMID MIR

SOME people hate me a lot in Pakistan. They hate me because I said sorry to Bengalis two years ago in Islamabad Press Club for the atrocities committed by Pakistan Army in 1971. They hate me because I also demanded an official apology from the government of Pakistan to the people of Bangladesh for the genocide of March 1971. They say I don't know anything. They say I am not a good Pakistani.

They say I was very young in 1971 and I am not aware about the truth. When I say yes I was only a young schoolgoing boy in 1971 but I heard and read a lot about the genocide. How can I deny my late father,

Professor Waris Mir, who visited Dhaka in October 1971 with a delegation of Punjab University students? My father was a teacher of journalism in Punjab University, Lahore. He was asked by the University administration to organise a visit of the student's union office bearers to Turkey, but he took the boys to Dhaka with their consent. They wanted to know what was actually going on in Dhaka.

I still remember that when my father came back from Dhaka he wept for many days. He told us stories of bloodshed. These stories were similar to the story of my mother. My mother lost her whole family during migration from Jammu to Pakistan in 1947. Her brothers were killed by the Hindus and Sikhs in front of her

eyes. Her mother was kidnapped. She saved her life by hiding under the dead bodies of her own relatives. I remember that my mother cried a lot when my father told her that Pakistan army officers raped many Bengali women. My mother said: "We made sacrifices for the safety of our honour but why we are dishonouring each other today?"

My father always said that Bengalis made Pakistan and we Punjabis broke Pakistan. Once he said that March 23rd was Pakistan Day, March 26th should be the apology day and December 16th should be the accountability day. I started understanding the thoughts of my late father when I became a journalist in 1987.

When I first read the Hamoodur Rehman Commission Report I felt ashamed. This report of a Pakistani commission admitted murder and rape but, despite this documentary evidence, many people still live in a state of denial. They say Sheikh Mujib was a traitor who created Mukti Bahini with the help of India and killed many innocent Punjabis and Beharis. I say that Sheikh Mujib was a

worker of the Pakistan movement, he was a supporter of Fatima Jinnah (sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah) till 1966. He only demanded provincial autonomy but military rulers declared him a traitor. In fact, these military rulers were traitors because their troops raped their own mothers and sisters. They say I am a liar and an enemy of Pakistan. How could I be an enemy of Pakistan? My mother sacrificed her whole family for Pakistan. My problem is that I cannot deny truth.

A senior colleague of mine, Afzal Khan, is still alive. He is 73 years old. He worked with Associated Press of Pakistan (APP), and was secretary general of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) from 1980 to 1985. He was sent to Dhaka on March 28, 1971 for the coverage of the army operation. He told me many times that yes Mukti Bahini killed a lot of innocent people but what the Pakistan army did was not the job of a national army. Once he was staying in Ispahani House in Khulna. An army major once offered him a girl to spend a night with. When Afzal Khan asked who the girl was, the major said that

she was the daughter of a local police officer and she could come to Ispahani House at gun-point. After this incident Afzal Khan came back to Lahore in May 1971. He says that all those who were responsible for the rape and genocide of Bengalis never enjoyed any respect in Pakistan.

The name of General Yahya Khan is still like an abuse in Pakistan. His son Ali Yahya always tries to hide from people. General Tikka Khan is still remembered as the "butcher of Bengal." General A.A.K. Niazi wanted to become "tiger of Bengal" but is remembered as "jackal of Bengal." The majority of Pakistanis hate all those who were responsible for the genocide of their Bengali brothers. That is the reason the family members of these army officers don't even mention publicly that who their fathers were.

But still there are some people who are not ready to admit their blunders. These people are a minority but they are powerful. I consider them enemies of the Pakistan for which my mother sacrificed her family. Why should we defend these

enemies? Why doesn't our democratic government officially apologise to Bengalis? This apology will not weaken Pakistan. It will strengthen Pakistan.

I am sure that Pakistan is changing fast. A day will come very soon when the government of Pakistan will officially say sorry to Bengalis and March 26th will become an apology day for patriotic Pakistanis. I want this apology because Bengalis created Pakistan. I want this apology because Bengalis supported the sister of Jinnah against General Ayub Khan. I want this apology because I want to make a new relationship with the people of Bangladesh. I don't want to live with my dirty past. I want to live in a neat and clean future. I want a bright future not only for Pakistan but also for Bangladesh. I want this apology because I love Pakistan and I love Bangladesh. Happy Independence Day to my Bangladeshi brothers and sisters.

Hamid Mir is Executive Editor of Geo TV in Islamabad. He will receive Saarc Lifetime Achievement Award on March 26th in the Saarc Writers' Conference in Delhi. Email: hamid.mir@geo.tv