

Advisor's comments on media unfortunate

Culture of denial is no way to handle problems

WE are surprised at the characterisation of the September 17 incidents in Pabna as a media exaggeration by prime ministerial advisor H.T. Imam. He has indicted the media for what he calls making an issue of the sobbing which government officers resorted to when, in his view, no such emotional scenes took place. The advisor clearly misses the point, which is that there is much more involved here than the tears of those who came under assault by ruling party activists bent on preventing a recruitment of employees in the DC office that was not to their liking. That the office of the Pabna deputy commissioner was attacked, that his officers were assaulted by these elements is the glaring truth. That is what ought to have been the focus of the advisor's attention. Instead, he has conveniently tried to zero in on the doings of the media rather than on the interference in administration by ruling party followers.

We believe, like so many others across the country, that this unhealthy culture of media bashing every time the newspapers and television channels report misdemeanours committed by those claiming to be close to the powers that be should come to an end. We have observed with dismay a growth of the culture of denial and disowning that can in the long run have a very adverse effect on national politics. While HT Imam has sidled away from the real issues involved here, minister of state for home affairs Shamsul Haque Tuku has claimed that those who carried out the attacks were not involved with the Awami League. Such a claim is not only saddening but plainly assailable because it takes the culture of denial another step lower. Again, the main point is being lost: whoever the criminals may be, is it not the responsibility of the government to act fast and effectively in nabbing them and thereby convincing the nation that governance is on track?

The prime minister's advisor has suggested that such media reports as have emanated in the light of the Pabna affair in the end damage the image of the administration. We differ with his assessment, for two very good reasons. The first is that it is the moral and professional responsibility of the media to highlight the truth, however unpleasant that truth may be to some, before the nation. The second is that the image of an administration is damaged considerably when those responsible for ensuring its smooth functioning are reluctant or powerless to keep their partisan followers from interfering with it. In Pabna, the government should have taken a serious view of the activities of the local lawmaker involved rather than resort to a patch-up of sorts.

Finally, we think that the fallout from the Pabna incident of September 17 could have been averted if the authorities had acted swiftly against those who let loose that reign of terror in the examination halls. By trying to explain away the situation, the government has only been getting caught in newer and tighter knots. It has not helped the situation any.

Neglect at DMCH under fresh spotlight

Observations of HRC chief should bring a marked improvement

THE critical remarks of the chairman, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), following his visit to different wards and units of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) hardly come as a surprise. For, DMCH has had a rather deplorable public image -- for a long time, something that scathing newspaper reports have failed to change. But what hopefully should have a trigger effect on the authorities now to move into corrective action is the emphasis laid by him on public health being a rights issue.

It is worth noting that the disparaging remarks have issued from a pre-announced visit in which case a spruced up look was sought to be presented. This is in a way an indicator of how worse things would be in normal times?

NHRC chairman Professor Mizanur Rahman's finding that DMCH remains a neglected centre for the treatment of lower-middle class and the poorer segments should cut both ways. First, it is a pointer to government health bosses' indifference topped of by politicisation over time to DMCH affairs and the persistent need for capacity building in and expansion of DMCH. Secondly, and more to the point is the chronic mismanagement besetting the DMCH itself that needs to be reversed.

We agree with the NHRC chief's diagnosis that in spite of the limitation of space and other logistics 'better service can still be offered to the patients' through improved management. Examples abound where such basics as wheelchairs or trolleys are not available to elderly or debilitated patients. This, even in a ward, claimed to be a 'model' one. Attendants wouldn't move if not bribed. The reply of one having been queried as to why a wheelchair was not provided to an elderly patient sounded typical of the attitude: 'it was not asked for'. Lack of information is symptomatic of a corrupt mentality. There is no list of medicines available neither one of those the patients need to buy.

In the end, we welcome the NHRC's intervention and hope that there will be a close monitoring followed by an improvement of the state of medicare, especially for the common people who are so heavily reliant on DMCH, or for that matter, all public hospitals for treatment.

Those self-effacing freedom fighters



STAR FILE PHOTO

They sell tea at rundown roadside rural stalls and talk wistfully of the times when they destroyed a Pakistani convoy or blew up a bridge to slow down the enemy.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WHEN you go through the story of how these 190 individuals exploited the War of Liberation to come by their jobs as sub-registrars, you really should not be surprised. After all, in these nearly four decades since our valiant freedom fighters made it possible for Bangladesh to emerge as a free nation, many have been the individuals and groups drawing attention to their dubious credentials as part of the Mujibnagar experience when all they did was stay safe in the occupied country with not much of a comprehension of the twilight struggle the nation as a whole was going through.

This scribe comes of a generation that observed the war from the rather circumscribed conditions of internal exile in 1971. And he, like so many others, remembers all those "politically correct" Bengalis who had little trouble speaking of the war as a civil war or, in Bengali parlance, gondogol. Translated roughly, gondogol approximates chaos or confusion or trouble in

English.

But, yes, these 190 individuals, most of whom were no more than ten (one was just three) in 1971, the oldest being a single eighteen year-old, give us renewed cause to recall the many ways in which some sinister quarters have tried humiliating our struggle in 1971 through trying to turn it into a farce.

Back in 1972, before you knew what was happening, thousands of young men, armed with forged freedom fighters' certificates bearing the signature of General M.A.G. Osmany, descended on the country. And among them were people you were certain had never gone a step beyond their city or their village and indeed had nothing whatsoever to do with the war.

These were the young men, all of them now in their late fifties and early sixties, who earned notoriety as the 16th Division, elements who turned into "freedom fighters" as soon as the Pakistan occupation army surrendered on December 16, 1971. These men, in possession of guns stolen in the euphoria of liberation, did not respond

to Bangabandhu's appeal for a surrender of their weapons.

It was only the genuine freedom fighters, typified by Kader Siddiqui and many others, who obeyed the Father of the Nation. The fake soldiers went on commandeering homes from hapless citizens, demanding jobs they did not qualify for and in general adding to the miseries attendant on the conclusion of a war.

And now think of the deep divisions which have always assailed our brave freedom fighters. In the era of military rule in Bangladesh, the Muktiyoddha Command Council split right down the middle, to the dismay and even outrage of the nation. Some of its leaders went all the way to ensure that they stayed in charge, that their entrenched dominance did not come under any threat. You already had, post-1975, politics that was taking a vicious turn away from the principles you had fought for in 1971.

On top of that, you had this searing division among the freedom fighters. It was not a pretty sight. And it would cost us dear. Just what the costs could be is something which comes through a study of the years between 1975 and 1981. This was that dark age when we lost most of our iconic freedom fighters to the internecine conflicts then tearing the nation's military apart.

Khaled Musharraf, Abu Taher, Ziaur Rahman, M.A. Manzoor and a whole range

of officers who had served with distinction in 1971 died in brutal fashion in the country they had freed from Pakistani colonialism. Most of the officers convicted of conspiracy to murder Zia in 1981 had waged war against Pakistan ten years previously. The death of these men was but one more lesson for us in how a revolution often ends up consuming its own heroes.

So we ought not to be shocked at the behaviour of these 190 "sub-registrars". People like them have always tended to make their proprietorial claims on the War of Liberation. Sometime in mid-1972, Awami League leader Salahuddin Yusuf indignantly asked a drawing room audience (this scribe was present in that room), when the guests murmured something about the uniforms of the Rakhi Bahini resembling those of the Indian army, if they knew what it was to battle it out in the war zone. No one answered, but the politician had made his point: the war belonged to men like him alone.

Quite a good number of years down the road, Col. Oli Ahmed, a freedom fighter and at the time a minister in Khaled Zia's first cabinet, threw a rather odd challenge to the Awami League. Count the freedom fighters in your party and we will count the freedom fighters in the BNP, he intoned. Quantity was the point, as you can see. The struggle for freedom was dwindling into a matter of partisan statistics.

In 1996, a quarter century after the war, an individual aged twenty-five applied for a position at a leading newspaper in Bangladesh. His curriculum vitae made note of his "contributions" to the country as a "freedom fighter." He had forgotten to do some basic arithmetic: it would call for an incredible miracle for a new-born child to take up arms against a foreign enemy!

You want to know where the real freedom fighters are? They work in cheap hotels all day long before trudging back to their villages far from the lights of the city. They have dogs pull a sledge-like contraption they use as cheap transport for villagers as poor as they are. They slog away as workers on foreign shores. And they slip, by the minute, toward death in circumstances of poverty while their children struggle to come by decent jobs and slices of dignity. They sell tea at rundown roadside rural stalls and talk wistfully of the times when they destroyed a Pakistani convoy or blew up a bridge to slow down the enemy.

These selfless, humble, quiet, self-effacing men gave us our freedom as a nation. What have we given them?

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10th anniversary of MDG

MDGs have proved useful in focussing on the problems of the poor and women. They are possibly the most important in ensuring that economic globalisation becomes a positive force with a "human face."

HARUN UR RASHID

ON September 20, world leaders started a summit in New York, on the sidelines of the 65th session of the UN General Assembly, aiming to inject a new sense of urgency into a global campaign to achieve the targets of Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

In 2000, the world leaders adopted the UN Millennium Declaration, committing their nations to achieve a set of targeted goals in eight sectors by 2015. The goals are:

- Eradication of extreme poverty;
- Achievement of universal primary education;
- Promotion of gender equality;
- Reduction of child mortality;
- Improvement of maternal health;
- Combating HIV and other diseases;
- Ensuring environmental sustainability;
- Development of global partnership for development.

So where are we now? With the above eight key goals, it appears that many countries are behind the schedule and tens of billions of dollars will be needed to pay for the promises made in 2000. There are only five years left until the goals' target date, and the global economic crisis has badly hit funding.

UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, hopes to get new commitments of up to \$45 billion during the summit. He especially expects to announce new money to combat child and maternal mortality where progress toward the goal worldwide is slow.

The European Union is to announce \$1 billion of MDG money and the World Bank \$750 million dollars for education, according to aid groups. The US is not expected to make any significant new offer. Therefore, proposals for innovative funding methods need to be devised during the summit.

The industrialised countries are expected to pay as official development aid 70 cents for every \$100 generated by economic activity, a target that only five northern European countries now meet. The US pays only 20 cents or less per \$100 generated. Furthermore, the financial crisis is not yet over in the West and all governments are cutting their expenditures. In the

light of the economic environment, this is not an appropriate time for getting funds from the Western countries.

Philippe Douste-Blazy, a former French foreign minister and now a special advisor to the UN leader on the topic, said: "We need to build on... about mobilising the sustainable, predictable and additional resources we desperately need to put the MDGs back on track. The example of the solidarity tax on airline tickets proves that micro contributions taken from large numbers of individuals yield important sums."

He highlighted possible imposition of tax on tourism, the internet, mobile phones and transactions of financial markets. However, the US and other free market nations are wary of imposing new surcharges on their tax-weary populations, according to diplomats.

On September 19, Bangladesh received a UN award for its remarkable achievements in attaining the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in reducing child mortality. The rate of child mortality had gone down by almost two-thirds, from 149 deaths per thousand live births in 1990 to 54 in 2008, in Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accepted the award in New York. The award was conferred upon Bangladesh and five other countries a day ahead of the MDG conference.

In New York on September 20, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina presided over the opening session of the summit and spoke about the Bangladeshi experience of trying to achieve the MDGs. She pointed out that Bangladesh would require \$4.4 billion a year to reach its own targets by the deadline of 2015.

On MDG goals, although the country has taken some big strides in areas such as net enrolment in primary education (up from 61% in 1990 to 92% in 2008 -- MDG-3), and eliminating gender disparity in primary as well as secondary education. It also needs to drastically reduce dropout rates from primary education, and improve the standard of education provided in schools and universities.

In order to reduce poverty, which is the aim of MDG 1, Bangladesh needs to create more secure employment opportunities



for the working age population, a large portion of whom remain seasonally unemployed for long periods every year, as well as more employment opportunities in general for women.

The maternal mortality rate, which had gone down by an impressive 40% from 1990 to 2005, seems to have stagnated in recent years, and policymakers have to devise ways to reignite the decline if the country wants to achieve the key target under MDG 5 of reducing maternal mortality by three quarters.

Bangladesh is vulnerable to the effects of climate change and has been struggling to maintain and protect bio-diversity, including wet-lands and forests.

Many members of civil society in various countries believe that governmental actions need clarity and accountability. Transparency is the key to when it comes to the question of who is doing what toward

which goal and to what effect. What is being suggested is an independent unit -- made up of people from governments, private sectors and think-tanks -- to track pledges and progress towards MDG goals.

MDGs have proved useful in focussing on the problems of the poor and women. They are possibly the most important in ensuring that economic globalisation becomes a positive force with a "human face." The goals are not to be considered a promise of rich countries but a compact, a partnership in development where eradication of poverty along with other goals are to be achieved.

In essence, to achieve the goals, the dilemma is, how do we get from where we are, to where ought to be, when states that have the power lack the will and those that have the will lack the power?

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