democratically elected government earlier that year. The amnesty declared by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in November 1973 had pardoned those who had no specific charges of war crimes against them, leaving in jail for trial those accused of murder and rape. The repeal of the Act in 1975 would release some 11,000 people from jail who were facing these charges. But the real rehabilitation of the enemies of our liberation would come later, when they would be given a political platform and invited with open arms to join it.

The saga of events that led to the political resurgence of the nihilist forces would begin with an amendment of the Constitution that allowed them to compete again in the political arena. This would be followed by induction of personages who worked shoulder to shoulder with war criminals into the political party formed under patronage of the new leadership. The tables would turn, and with aid and abetting from the top, the fugitives would become pursuers, the hunted become the hunter -- all in less than four years of our independence.

This sad and unforgiving turn of events not only derailed our efforts to hold the perpetrators of the heinous crimes accountable for their misdeeds, but it also has deprived our succeeding generations of their rightful claim to see justice served, and the martyrs of their country's freedom honoured. Collusion of a succession of dictatorships and their political cohorts that were imbued with the ideology of our former rulers and anti-liberation sentiments would ensure that the cry of war crimes trial did not reverberate across the country. The enemy within us that made possible the war atrocities would ensconce themselves securely with the powers that be, and let the cry for justice die in the wilderness.

The attempt of the Bangladesh government for trial of war crimes has come after 39 long years. A whole new generation has grown in this interregnum without knowing the sad saga of unmet justice for the millions who had perished in a nine-month war that was actively aided from inside by an enemy within us. They do not know these faceless people because they blended with the rest of us before the blood of the martyrs had even dried.

Even now the detractors of the war crimes trial are at their usual game, calling it a politically motivated act -- a "hate campaign against some individuals". It is sad to watch and hear that in an ethnically homogeneous society there would be sections that would question genocide of their own people by the occupying forces and their home-based allies. The people who perished and suffered from these heinous acts were not mere collaterals of a "civil war". It was not a civil war; it was a war of liberation. The people who fought against it perpetrated war crimes, and those who supported or collaborated with the war criminals participated in a common plan and conspiracy to accomplish these crimes. Their crimes not only comprise war atrocities, but also atrocities against minorities and women and killing of intellectuals.

It is true that a majority of the perpetrators of war crimes and their collaborators are no longer on the scene. Many have departed this world and others could be safe in their country of abode. But we owe it to our posterity and the world at large to show that crimes against humanity are not forgiven or forgotten. We need to demonstrate that people who had participated in these crimes are brought to justice to prevent recurrence of such dastardly acts in the future. This is not revenge or a vendetta against any individual or a group of people. This is bringing to closure a grievance of millions affected by the crimes, and restoring the faith of our next generation in justice. We may not be able to hold to account all who were responsible for the crimes; but the trial of even a few principals associated with these hateful acts will bring solace to the survivors of the fallen millions.

While we prepare for this long-awaited trial, we have also to remember that the efforts and resources to this endeavour lead to productive and long-lasting results. We have to be careful that both the investigative process and the trial are carried out in a transparent manner. Experts on trials for war crimes and crimes against humanity agree that a major factor of success or failure of a tribunal is the quality of evidence placed before the court. The court will not be convinced by hearsay or secondary evidence. Our prosecutors need to be careful on these accounts. They would also need to focus on crimes that have been committed and not necessarily on the reputations of the potential suspects, or else the validity and effectiveness of the trial may be undermined.

There is a widespread desire and hope that the culprits of 1971 atrocities will be brought to justice. Few of these people may survive now, but the crimes they and their associates committed four decades ago still rend the hearts of millions of the survivors. Despite the efforts of the enemy within us to undermine the process, I genuinely hope that we can now bring that black chapter of our history to a close.

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