

Selected extracts from the December issue of Forum

Bangladesh holocaust of '71

SHAHRIAR KABIR

It was the most brutal genocide ever known in the history of mankind. History has never seen such a large number of people wiped out in such a short period of the nine months of the Bangladesh liberation war. Between March 25, 1971 and December 16, 1971, Pakistani occupation army and their local collaborators killed 3 million innocent, unarmed people, violated more than a quarter million women; destroyed most of the factories, roads, bridges and culverts, burned houses, engaged in indiscriminate arson and plundering and created such an unbearable situation that 10 million people were forced to leave their country.

The Pakistani military junta headed by General Yahya Khan carried out a genocide in Bangladesh, which has no comparison. Systematic killing, rape and

other barbaric methods were used on the Bengalis in the name of 'protecting the integrity of Pakistan' and 'to protect Islam'.

On March 25 midnight, the Pakistani forces suddenly cracked down on the sleeping people of capital Dhaka. Their first target was the residence of teachers, officials and employees and student dormitories of Dhaka University, once known as the Oxford of the East. The police and East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) headquarters followed. Then came the slums, markets and Hindu-populated areas in Dhaka, most of which were torched. They killed university teachers, employees and students either in their rooms or by firing squad in the campus gardens. Some were taken away and remained missing. They sprayed bullets as people fled from burning homes. These people died without knowing their crime. It is estimated that around



60,000 people of the city were killed on that single night.

The Pakistani occupation forces followed similar methods across the

country and the genocide continued during the next nine months or until the country was freed from their clutches. Apart from mass killings, systematic killing of identified personalities or professionals was carried out under a blueprint. This process started with the slaying of Dhaka University teachers and reached its peak ahead of the Victory Day on December 16, 1971, as they realised their defeat was imminent.

In conducting the killings, there was a priority list. They had identified five sections of the populace as their main enemies: 1) leaders, activists and supporters of Awami League, 2) communists and socialists, 3) freedom fighters and their associates, 4) the Hindu community irrespective of sex or age and 5) students, intellectuals and professionals.

There was no specific type of killing. The Pakistanis at first shelled by tanks

and mortars to kill a large number of people of a locality. Then they killed innocent ones lining them up after taking them away from their houses. Some were put to death by bayonets or burnt alive by the barbaric Pakistani army. They also slaughtered people like animals. In some cases, people were tortured for months until death emancipated them. The last method was followed especially for the freedom fighters. There are many people who witnessed freedom fighters being dragged on the streets pulled by army jeeps, which would only stop to confirm whether or not their prey was dead.

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

Shahriar Kabir is a writer, journalist, filmmaker, researcher on the liberation war and genocide of 1971 and a human rights activist.

My right to justice



DR. NUZHAT CHOUDHURY

A few hours before the birth of the new nation, on the evening of December 15, 1971, a microbus covered in mud, drove up to the front of our house. They took my father Dr. Abdul Alim Chaudhury away. On December 18, we found his lifeless body lying in a pool of blood in the Rayer Bazaar brickfield along with hundreds of other leading intellectuals of the day.

Dr. Abdul Alim Chaudhury was an eminent ophthalmologist, a politically active leader of his community. Trained in UK, he came back to serve his country. He was not only a leading ophthalmologist but also leader of the doctor community. Even though he was born into a zamindar family, he dreamt of a classless society where rights of all human beings would be upheld. He was deeply involved in the language movement in 1952 when he was a student leader at Dhaka Medical College. In 1954, he was taken into custody by the then Pakistan Government on

the anniversary of the language movement for his political activities. Later in life, he served as the Secretary General of the Ophthalmological Society of East Pakistan and Secretary General of the Ophthalmological Society of Pakistan.

Dr. Abdul Alim Chaudhury was a multitasking personality who was active not only in the political and professional arenas but also in cultural movements. As a student, he was sub-editor at the *Dainik Ittefaq* and the *Dainik Millat*. From his third year in medical college he edited a monthly literary paper *Jatrik*. He was also the editor of another literary paper *Khap Chhara*. While studying in UK, he helped found the London based Bangla academy.

He was deeply involved in our freedom struggle. His chamber became an underground meeting place for political leaders and his clinic provided shelter and treatment for injured freedom fighters. He collected money and medicine for the freedom fighters and supplied them to their secret hideouts. He was told about

the danger looming over his life but he preferred to stay in the country, saying that if everyone left the country, who would be there to work from within the country. On December 15, just a few hours before the dawn of our independence day, he was taken from his home and killed, along with other intellectuals.

Why were these brilliant people killed? They were not fighters with arms. But they had something more powerful than that. They had ideology, vision, brain and dedication. Ideology that led the way towards the freedom fight. Vision, brain and dedication that could have built a great nation. How could the enemies of our country tolerate the prospect of such a brilliant future for us? Near the end of our war of independence, the Pakistani army and their collaborators, the Razakars, the Al-Badr and the Al-Shams realised that they were losing the war. In a final attempt to destroy the nation, under a meticulously planned blue print, they methodically picked up the most accomplished members of the society, leaders of different professional arena, the most progressive visionaries, the leading intellectuals, from their homes and tortured and brutally murdered them. And thus our enemies have successfully managed to cripple our nation forever. I therefore think that the intellectual killing was not only a crime against individuals, but a crime against the whole nation. How can such a big crime go unpunished?

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

Dr. Nuzhat Choudhury, daughter of Martyred Intellectual Dr. Abdul Alim Chaudhury, is Assistant Professor, Department of Ophthalmology, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University.

An end to impunity

DR. MIZANUR RAHMAN

THE phrase *juddhaporadhider bichar* can sometimes give you a misleading impression. If you take the words in the sense of "trial of war criminals" then there is an apprehension of losing the complete sense it tries to convey about the ongoing trial of international crimes suspects. The words confine the meaning within only "war crimes", which should be its genus "international crimes", i.e. war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, and crimes against peace and international law.

From this perspective, it is suggested that the more accurate phrase should be *juddhokalin shonghotito oporadh*, i.e. crimes committed during the war of 1971. The use of words like *juddhaporadhider bichar* or *manobatar biruddhe oporadh* by the media and the public tends to bewilder the people at large and provides a space for the critics. However, the much-awaited trial of the alleged perpetrators of "international crimes" committed during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War is in the queue. It is a matter of the highest interest and concern for both the national and the international observers as to how the constituted investigation agency and the tribunal function. How the government responds and helps the prosecution is also a matter to be seriously looked at.

An end to impunity

It is because of the culture of impunity, from the unprecedented Bengali-



massacres in 1971 to massacres in Darfur; from the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and the Srebrenica enclave to the attacks on Kosovo Albanians; and from Sierra Leone to Uganda that the world has continued to witness malevolent deeds that surpass understanding.

At home, it is because of the culture "of impunity that we have lost the Father of the Nation and the national political leaders. These atrocities recur in spite of the increasing interest in bringing the perpetrators to justice. The perpetrators of international crimes sicken the conscience of a civilised society.

The Statute of the International Criminal Court, to which Bangladesh is a party, in its preamble, has laid down that there should be an end to impunity for the perpetrators of the

heinous crimes and states that it is the duty of every state to exercise its criminal jurisdiction over those responsible for international crimes. International crimes are abhorrent conduct of the crudest form of denial of the basic right to life of individuals. Preservation of human dignity is an obligation of the states in the human rights regime created by the international community. It is not only for the rule of law, not only for the sake of justice, but for the sake of humanity that the perpetrators of genocide in 1971 be brought to justice and duly punished through a trial conducted in accordance with due process of law.

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

Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman is Chairman, National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh.

Healing the hidden wounds of war

KAJALIE SHEHREEN ISLAM

War as gendered

THROUGHOUT history, war has been gendered, having different implications and consequences for women and men. Gender norms are used to shape the war system and vice versa, by which men are the chosen combatants taught to equate "manhood" with toughness under fire and women are given "feminine war support roles". Gender also plays a role in ethnonationalism, where the nation and the state are often gendered female and male respectively, with "women's bodies as symbols of the nation, markers of the in-group, and national 'property' to be defended and protected by men".

During times of war, men and women are injured and die different deaths based on the physical differences between the sexes and the different meanings culturally ascribed to male and female bodies. The immediate aftermath and ultimate legacy of war also plays out differently for the sexes. Women, who are considered to be carriers of culture and their bodies as symbols of the nation to be defended by men, are especially vulnerable in situations of battle, where their very identities as women come under threat. Through the common tactic of rape, women have become weapons of war, where rape has been used as a means of humiliating the enemy and breaking their spirit. It has also been employed as a tool of genetic imperialism and ethnic cleansing by impregnating women to bear the enemy's children, and been a mechanism of genocide, as in the cases of Bangladesh, Rwanda, Yugoslavia and



Sudan.

During Bangladesh's independence movement against Pakistan in 1971, this strategy was adopted by the Pakistani army, as a result of which, between 200,000 and 400,000 women were raped and made sex slaves in Pakistani military camps. (It may be mentioned that non-Bengalis in East Pakistan were also said to have been killed and raped, but that is beyond the scope of this article). While the target was said to be largely Hindu women, Bengali women, irrespective of religion, caste or class came under the attack of the West Pakistan military aided by local collaborators, who were being fought by the guerrilla forces, the Mukti Bahini. Women from the ages of seven to seventy-five were raped, gang-raped and either killed or taken away by the military and made to become sex slaves of the officers and soldiers for the duration of the war. Even as the Pakistani forces surrendered in December 1971, some

reportedly claimed that they were leaving their "seed" behind in the women they had impregnated through the mass rape.

Women as weapons of war

Historically, the rape of women during times of war has been seen as a "by-product of war", a matter of indiscipline, of soldiers revved up by war, needy, and briefly, 'out of control'. Research over the last several decades, however, has explored the broader issue of sexual violence in wartime and the gendered nature of war. Women have been seen to be targeted in military conflicts, due to misogyny, combined with the fact that they are seen as carriers of culture, and their bodies "as both territory to be conquered and vehicles through which the nation/group can be reproduced".

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

Kajalieu Shehreen Islam is In Charge, Forum.

CHT accord: hope and reality

MANGAL KUMAR CHAKMA

IN order to resolve the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) problem through political and peaceful means, the CHT Accord, popularly known as CHT Peace Accord was signed between the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) on December 2, 1997. This Accord was achieved after a series of dialogues between the government and PCJSS. This Accord paves the way for re-introducing special government system in CHT.

It is mentionable that the CHT is a region inhabited by the indigenous Jumma peoples. During pre-colonial period, this region maintained its sovereignty under its own feudal kings. After inclusion of this region under the British Empire in 1860, the British government enacted the CHT Regulation of 1900 to preserve a separate administrative status for the Jumma peoples of this region. Later, the Pakistan government recognised the CHT Regulation of 1900 to be in effect under its 1956 constitution, preserving the status of the CHT as a region with a separate administrative system. The second Pakistani constitution of 1962 also used the term "tribal region" to recognise the CHT as a special region.

In 1964, when the Tribal Area status of the CHT was revoked in the Constitution of Pakistan, despite demands from the Jumma peoples, the special status of the region was not revived. Then in 1972, the demands of the late M N Larma for constitutional



safeguards for the CHT and recognition of the identities of the indigenous peoples of the CHT fell on deaf years. Hence, PCJSS launched an armed struggle for right to self-determination since 1976 onwards when all democratic avenues failed to draw the attention of the government.

Though the armed struggle continued for about two and a half decades, the PCJSS always kept open the path for a political solution to the CHT issue by peaceful means. Consequently, formal negotiations started in 1985 with the government of General Ershad. Finally, the historic CHT Peace Accord was signed with the Awami League government led by Sheikh Hasina in 1997. The CHT Accord had ended the

decades-long fierce armed conflict between the Jumma people and the Government of Bangladesh. This Accord has laid down a basis upon which to bring forth people-oriented development in the CHT.

Though the then Awami League government signed the CHT Peace Accord, the regime as a whole showed a lack of seriousness in implementing the Accord. It nevertheless took several initiatives toward implementing it.

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

Mangal Kumar Chakma is Publicity and Information Secretary of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti.