

BARE FACTS

Pledge on Victory Day

Improve politics and governance to realise growth potential

LIKE every other Victory Day of the past, the nation will again revisit the epoch-making events that had gone into the Bengali people's success in winning the war against the enemy forces leading to the victorious march of freedom fighters into the capital city 40 years ago. Basically, we take stock of our successes and failures since national independence.

At 40, we can no longer claim to be young. It is time we take charge. In fact, we have made no mean achievements in the face of great odds. We have shown an extraordinary resilience at sustaining ourselves and make stride in spite of natural disasters, recessionary trends in the advanced economies and political uncertainties at home.

In the social sectors including Human resources Development (HRD), literacy rate, child mortality, women empowerment and so on the indicators are getting better every year.

There is, however, no room for complacency because formidable challenges remain. In particular, the infrastructures in the communications and energy sectors are in need of serious addressing for a definitive improvement.

The successes are being threatened to be eclipsed by the confrontational nature of politics, and weak governance characterised by lack of transparency, accountability and answerability. After every parliamentary election, the winning party assumes, as it were, the sole ownership of the country and begins to trivialise the role of the opposition and the civil society. The government conveniently forgets that it is for the people and not for the party. Unfortunately, the finer values of democracy are yet to strike roots in our political culture.

Globally, Bangladesh enjoys an enviable position among the list of the countries that are rated very high for their potential for growth.

If we are to realise this potential, we will have to undergo a wholesale change in our political culture and system of governance. Only then the government will be in a position to deliver the goods and facilitate realisation of our potential for growth.

Rising piracy poses threat

Make Coast Guards well equipped

THAT the coastal areas have become a stronghold of pirates is no news to us. But the recent spate of robberies in certain areas of Hatia, Monpura and Noakhali upazila, which has already claimed several lives in the current month, indicates a rising trend in the marauding activities of the pirates. It clearly shows the vulnerability of the coastal people. It also demonstrates how poorly equipped the Bangladesh Coast Guard officials are in containing such unlawful activities.

Reports reveal that a number of islands in these areas have become pirates' den during this time of the year with the fishing boats becoming the worst victims. In the recent incident in Bhola's Bhasan Char, three pirates were killed in a gunfight with the police and several others were beaten to death by the angry mob comprising mostly fishermen. While we stand firmly against mob violence, this public outrage reveals how infuriated fishermen were as a result of such frequent attacks.

Most importantly, the incident calls into question the role of the BCG (south zone) which is responsible for thwarting such activities but was curiously absent in the hours-long operation conducted by the police. We know that the BCG is very poorly equipped with manpower and logistics. Still their inaction cannot be condoned.

We have always considered piracy a potential threat to the economic security and social stability of the coastal people. In order to restore normalcy in the region, we strongly suggest immediate revamp of the BCB so as to equip them with all the necessary logistics to guard against any unlawful activities including those of the pirates. At the same time, we also recommend more invigorated, joint BCG-police actions since piracy is escalating over several districts including Bhola, Noakhali

Forty years of victory



M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WE celebrate today, December 16, the 40th anniversary of our victory against the occupying Pakistani forces. The surrender of the Pakistani forces to the Indo-Bangladeshi High Command at Dhaka Race Course (now Suhrawardy Uddayan) on this day in 1971 made our declaration of independence on March 26 of the same year a reality.

The people dreamt of an independent state in which democracy would flourish uninterruptedly and their effective participation through elected representatives at all levels in administration would be ensured. The people dreamt of a state in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person would be guaranteed. The people dreamt of a state that would take effective steps with a view to securing for its citizens the provision of basic necessities of life. Above all, the people dreamt of a modern and progressive Bangladesh.

Now the question may arise as to whether their dreams have come true or not.

Although the Constitution of Bangladesh adopted on November 4, 1972 provided for a multi-party parliamentary democracy, introduction of one-party presidential system of government and capture of state power by ambitious army generals leading to dictatorial rule impeded the development of democracy. The united movement of the people brought an end to such rule, which helped restore multi-party parliamentary democracy in 1991. But, democracy is yet to take root in the country.

East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, was a victim of economic disparity. All the indicators of economic development were highly unfavourable. The US diplomat Henry Kissinger called Bangladesh "a bottomless basket." Kissinger has been proved wrong. Bangladesh may not have achieved the desired economic goals, but its successes in the past forty years are by no means insignificant.

In the last seven years, Bangladesh achieved GDP growth rate more or less at 6%. Against per capita national income of \$100 or so immediately before independence, per capita national income and GDP in FY 2010-11 stood at \$818 and \$755 respectively. (Source: Bangladesh Economic Survey, 2011). All indications suggest that Bangladesh will graduate into a middle income

country by 2021.

Although Bangladesh has not been able to achieve self-sufficiency in all foods, it has achieved near self-sufficiency in rice, the staple food. While total production of food grain (rice and wheat) for 75 million people of the country was around 10 million tons in 1970-71, food grain production stood at about 35 million tons in 2010-11 for 150 million people or so. This means in the past forty years food grain growth rate has surpassed the population growth rate.

Fish is the main source of protein for our people. Total production of fish (open water, closed water and marine fisheries) in 2010-11 stood at 3.1 million tons against our demand for 3.3 million tons. This means that our fish production meets about 94% of our requirement. Our frozen shrimp and fish products are exported to the US, the EU countries, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and some other countries.

Although the achievement of the industries sector in the past forty years has failed to meet

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expectations, the performance of the ready-made garment (RMG) industry has been astounding. The RMG sector is not only the highest foreign exchange earner in the export sector, it also employs about 5 million labourers of which around 4 million are poor women.

In the past forty years, there has been rapid expansion of educational facilities both in the government and the private sectors, resulting in the increase of literacy rate to about 60% from 18% on liberation. More importantly, there has been a tremendous improvement in the enrolment of girls at the primary and secondary levels, which has exceeded that of male students, due to various incentives provided by the government.

There has been tremendous improvement in some areas of health sector. Average life span for men and women has increased from below 50 years in 1970 to 65 plus years. While child mortal-

ity rate (per 1,000 live births) was 146 in 1970-71, it has now come down to 53. This falls short by 3 only to achieve the MDG target of 50 by 2015. Maternal mortality rate (per 100,000 deliveries) has come down to 348 from 574 in 1990-91. The rate of population growth now stands at 1.36% compared to 2.67% on liberation.

Our achievements in the fields of international sports are not insignificant. Our boys are well established in all forms of international cricket. Bangladesh women's cricket team has recently achieved ODI and T20 status. Bangladesh co-hosted the ICC Cricket World Cup 2011 along with India and Sri Lanka.

Observance of February 21st as Language Martyrs' Day in memory of those who laid down their lives in February, 1952 for the cause of Bangla language is no longer limited to Bangladesh. The UN has declared February 21st as International Mother Language Day. We confidently hope that Bangla will be one of the languages of the UN in the near future.

We have many other achievements that cannot be mentioned here due to shortage of space.

We have failures also. The march of our democracy has been halted several times. The people are concerned about the fate of their hard earned democracy due to confrontational politics of the two major political parties, AL and BNP, and lack of minimum understanding between them on major national issues.

In the past forty years, fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution have been violated again and again. Arbitrary arrests, detention and custodial deaths have become routine matters. Freedom of media is under constant threat.

We have so far failed to establish good governance which has, amongst others, hampered the growth of FDI and business.

According to government sources, 31.5% people now live below the poverty line. This means that out of 150 million people of the country, 45 plus million are living below poverty line. They cannot afford two square meals a day due to lack of purchasing power.

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CROSS TALK

Nine by three patriotism



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

OUR patriotism works like the recoil of a rifle. In 1971 we had fired the shots of freedom for nine months, and ever since then have been living in its back thrust three months of a year. The number of months we didn't fight in that fateful year matches exactly with the number of months we are overwhelmed by patriotic zeal. The number of months we actually fought is exactly the number of months when that exuberance goes to sleep.

Thus patriotism has become a seasonal thing for us. February for the 21st, March for the 26th and December for the 16th are three months in a year when this country goes into patriotic overdrive. Cultural shows, television programmes, newspaper articles, seminars and workshops abound in the country reminiscing on our struggle for freedom. The remaining months we are oblivious of the usurious price paid in blood and tears to win that freedom.

Numerology is study of the purported mystical relationship between a count or measurement and life. Without placing excessive faith in numerical patterns, it can be said that we have inherited 1971 in the reverse order. We remember as much as we should forget and forget as much as we should remember. We have inherited three months for the price of nine.

This year we are celebrating 40 years of victory, but are we celebrating the nine months or the three months? The contradiction is conspicuous. For three months patriotic juice overflows in this country. Then the dry spell runs for nine months.

That is because, in some curious way, we have been able to create separate drawers in our hearts. Our love of country is neatly stacked like fashionable people keep their

For nine months we live in the humdrums of life. Here also lies the conundrum. This is where our children who attend the festivals of freedom for three months shockingly watch their corrupt parents hurting the country rest of the year. This is also where we all watch our politicians shift their gears. This is where all of us participate in the grand illusion that it is enough to love the country for three months and neglect

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watches, ties, handkerchiefs and cufflinks, each to match an occasion. Then we also have other drawers filled with apathy, greed and corruption. We maintain these copious wardrobes so that we can instantly dress as we like.

In fact, we are perhaps the only country in the world that is so ostentatious of patriotism. We have three month-long festivals dedicated to this cause when the air resonates with the sound of patriotic music. This is also the time when we scour history for language activists or freedom fighters who may still have been missed out. This is the time when we also ransack our memories to tell every tale of sacrifice and valour that may have slipped our minds.

it for nine months.

In medical science Ergomania is defined as excessive devotion to work, especially as a symptom of mental disorder. Forgive me for asking, but are we suffering from some kind of a patriotism disorder? It is never wrong to love one's country, and one can never love it too much. Our martyrs laid down their lives because they loved their motherland more than others.

But how is it possible that this love can be so unevenly distributed? What does the child think of his father riding on whose shoulder he goes to February 21st, March 26th and December 16th functions and then grows up to learn that his corrupt father is also engaged in unpatriotic

acts? What do we think of our politicians and intellectuals when we get high-altitude haranguing on patriotism from them while they are busy settling down their children abroad? What do we think of ourselves when for three months we ululate with patriotic ecstasy and then silently witness its mindless depredation for nine months?

What are we then celebrating on this 40th anniversary of victory? Are we celebrating freedom or farce of it? Are we celebrating victory or its vaunted illusion? Are we celebrating the spirit of patriotism or the specter of its agonising perversion?

English author Samuel Johnson, who was a critic of what he viewed as false patriotism, made the famous statement: "Patriotism is the last resort of the scoundrel." In our essential yearning for seasonal celebrations, the collective love of the country has been overshadowed by the protocol of profligate opportunism.

On a scale of twelve months, we are one-quarter jubilant and three-quarters delinquent. If eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, we should know where we stand. The victors have always been victorious under the Afghans, Mughals, British and Pakistanis. This time their victory is twofold. They have given three months to the vanquished and taken the whole year.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 16

1773
American Revolution: Boston Tea Party Members of the Sons of Liberty disguised as Mohawks dump crates of tea into Boston harbor as a protest against the Tea Act.

1957
Sir Feroz Khan Noon replaces Ibrahim Ismail Chundrigar as Prime Minister of Pakistan.

1971
Bangladesh War of Independence and Indo-Pakistani War of 1971: The surrender of the Pakistan army brings an end to both conflicts.

1979
Libya joins four other OPEC nations in raising crude oil prices, having an immediate dramatic effect on the United States.

1998
Iraq disarmament crisis: Operation Desert Fox The United States and United Kingdom bomb targets in Iraq.