

Audacious and anti-people

We condemn the warning against war crimes trial

IT is with great shock and disbelief that we must read reports of an announcement by a band of twelve 'Islamic' minded parties that they vehemently oppose the ongoing war crimes trial. They have even threatened to try 'Indian agents' if their demand for stopping the trial were not met.

Nothing could get more audacious, reactionary and outrageous than this. We find no words strong enough to condemn such a repulsive move. The people of this land have waited an excruciating four decades for this trial to happen. This gives hope of a semblance of respect for the victims of heinous crimes against them during the Liberation War and repayment of a part of the debts owed to them. How dare this group, hideous in its intentions, belittle and oppose such an endeavour that may provide a small amount of solace to the gaping wounds the dear and near ones of these victims continue to bear. As a nation born from the supreme sacrifice of our martyrs, we are morally bound to seek justice for these crimes. To oppose the trial is a direct attack on our identity as Bangladeshis.

If these individuals had anything to say about transparency of the legal process that would still have been acceptable, provided proper evidence of such a claim was given with suggestions for improvement, if any. But this group completely nullifies the purpose of this momentous trial which is to seek justice for crimes committed against humanity.

The other demands these people are making -- one of them is to scrap the women's development policy' -- are ominous expressions of fanaticism and distortion of religion that directly contradict the spirit of our constitution and of our Liberation Movement.

We are talking about twelve parties right now. We have no idea how many members each party has or how many more such 'likeminded' groups there are. Whoever they are, they are doing patent disservice to the country. They must not be allowed to make such seditious and antidemocratic statements.

Lawmaker breaking the law

It was neither right and nor honourable

IF people are generally disgruntled with our polity they have every reason to be. Just look at what the Right Honourable Member of the Parliament for Rangpur-1, belonging to JP (E), did at the Rangpur Medical College Hospital the other day. It was neither right, nor, by any definition, honourable. People continue to be surprised by irrational acts of people in position of power.

In this instance the said MP had led a five-truckload of his supporters, all armed with bamboo sticks, demanding quota for jobs at the hospital for his men. What ensued was only inevitable. But we wonder why the police allowed the MP's men to enter the hospital premises in the first place.

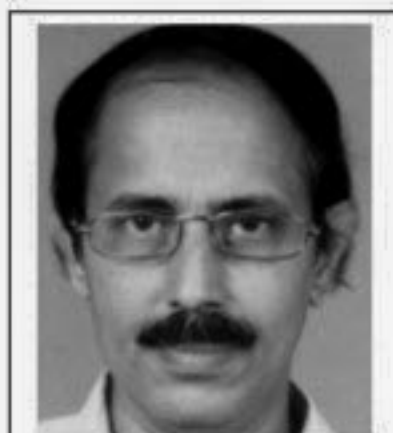
The three-way pitched 'battle' that eventuated between the MP's thugs, the hospital staff and the police, resulted in injuries to many including the MP himself, several newspapermen and a large number of policemen. Apart from that the more than one hour of disturbance at the hospital premises completely disrupted the function of the hospital putting many patients in great distress.

We look at the incident with great deal of alarm, it being precipitated by none other than an elected representative of the people. In the first place is it for the MP to force jobs from the authorities? Is it a matter of right for political parties or their affiliates to do so? We understand that on January 19 and 25 the director of the same hospital was locked in his office by the members of the local BCL and the AL Rangpur unit respectively, demanding jobs for their supporters.

And even if the allegation by the MP, of lack of transparency, administrative incompetence, corruption and nepotism, against the hospital director were true, what he did was not the way to register one's protest or grievances. His action amounted to a riotous act and we are surprised that he has not been charged with under the appropriate section of the law.

We would like to emphasise that no one is above the law. And an act of violence and breach of peace must be

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

OSTENSIBLY, to avert any kind of law and order situation and for the sake of public security, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) is learnt to have clamped Section 144 on any public gathering within the city on January 29 (Sunday). What was the threat to law and order?

The government made no secret of the fact that it was the previously called mass procession by the BNP and its partners in the four-party alliance that was the source of its perceived threat to law and order.

Interestingly, the main opposition, which has all through been claiming that its programme would be a peaceful one, made the announcement about three weeks back from a meeting in Chittagong. In fact, the opposition has been holding similar programmes over the last few months. And the government had allowed those programmes to take place without creating any hindrance.

Then what has happened now to strike fear in the administration that the programme scheduled to be held on Sunday might create law and order situation or disrupt public security?

What will the man in the street make of this behaviour of the government? Is the government guided only by fear and apprehension to deny a political party its constitutionally granted democratic rights to assemble, meet and voice protest or raise demands?

The government cannot justify its action even with the argument of "threat to law and order," if we take into account that the ruling Awami League (AL), in a hurriedly called

meeting of its city unit last Thursday (January 26), had announced its own meeting to be held on the same date (January 29) in front of its central office in Bangabandhu Avenue. And the central leaders of Awami League who spoke at that meeting had unabashedly declared that the aim of their meeting was to counter BNP's programme on that day.

And the rest was simple arithmetic. Given the history of any confrontation

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between these two major political parties, DMP had no other choice but to prohibit the opposition's, and, if you like, also along with it, the AL's programme, of Sunday. In case, Awami League remained stubborn about holding its programme and BNP about its own, a bloody clash would be inevitable.

So, the question naturally arises about the basis of the government's fear of BNP's programme and its potential for disrupting law and order. Had the opposition been allowed to carry out its previously announced programme without obstacle, would there be any cause for such apprehension, in the first place?

In that case, is not the ruling party, or the government for that matter, itself to blame for the situation leading to the DMP's order restricting the

opposition's programme? Does the ruling AL think that the common people lack the commonsense not to understand its self-contradictory stance?

Some leaders of AL in their Thursday's meeting were on record to have vainly announced that they wouldn't any more allow further space to the opposition or that they wouldn't leave the ground free for it (opposition) to operate. Add to these,

the government ministers' fulminations against the opposition party with words like "we will not tolerate" and so on.

Why should a democratically elected government be prompted by only threat perceptions? Since they are in power, all the law enforcement and security agencies of the state are under their command. Those agencies' job it is to inform the government from time to time of any plot or threat from the extremists or any other kind of destabilising force to create chaos in the public life.

In addition to police and intelligence agencies, the government, unlike any military one, has its party connections down to the grassroots level to know about the exact situation on the ground.

Once the government leaders begin

Remembering the Mahatma

M.A.S. MOLLA

MOHANDAS Karamchand Gandhi is the full name of the great Indian lawyer-politician whom the world knows as Mahatma Gandhi. He was born in Porbandar (otherwise called Sudamapuri) Gujarat, India in 1869 to Karamchand -- alias Kaba Gandhi -- and Putlibai. The family was a Vaishnava one, having very conservative attitude towards many things. Mahatma Gandhi was a rare combination of a number of laudable characteristics like simplicity, frankness, truthfulness, firmness and perseverance. He was instrumental in realising the freedom of the Indian subcontinent from about 190 years of British colonial rule. That is why he is regarded as the father of Indian nationhood. But this great man was assassinated while going to evening prayer on January 30, 1948.

M.K. Gandhi titled his autobiography "The story of my experiments with truth." I knew about it in my adolescence, and the phrase "experiments with truth" attracted me much, but I could not find the book in Bangladesh. Only recently could I find the 505 page book published in 1957 by Beacon Press, Boston, USA. This book is a document of his candid expression of truth.

Although born to a state minister of India, Mohandas led a very simple life all through. He used to eat bread and vegetables, even when studying for Matriculation and Law in England. He walked 8-10 miles daily both to keep the body fit and to limit his expenditure to the minimum. During the climax of his social movement (called non-violent non-cooperation), he wore a dhoti and was ready to have

even a short one (of 30 inches width, if the weavers failed to make a required 45 inches Khadi cloth for him). One is amazed to see most of the photos of this great leader bare bodied!

As a member of Vaishnava family, Mohandas was a vegetarian. His school friends used to eat meat and even tried to convince him of the "goodness" of a carnivorous diet. Once, in his high school days, he and his elder brother started eating meat. This event he termed a "tragedy," and could come out of it because he had the conviction that he could not tell a lie to his parents, and if eating meat was really essential to have enough strength to fight the Englishmen to have Swaraj, he must do that "openly." Even in a cold country like England, where most people eat meat and drink wine, he successfully avoided these "forbidden" (by his mother) items by dint of conviction and truthfulness (to his mother). Instead, he organised a Vegetarian Society in England and campaigned for vegetarianism.

If he fell ill he would treat himself and the members of his family with indigenous methods like water treatment and fasting. Once in South Africa, he was attacked by diarrhea and was about to die. But no physician could convince him of the need of a carnivorous diet or of modern medicine. Instead, he treated himself

with fasting and vegetarianism.

Being a barrister, he liked to travel by train in the first class. But the white British railway officers would not let a "coolie barrister" (the word "coolie" was used for Indians in South Africa because most of them worked as labourers there) travel by the first class. While traveling from Durban to Pretoria, he had a first class ticket, but the officer in-charge asked him to get out and board a van compartment. At one point, the officer was pushing him from the train while he clung on

to the brass rails of the coachbox. He was determined to keep the hold even at the risk of breaking his wrist bone. He practiced perseverance throughout his life. This virtue was most expressed in advising and practicing it during his patronisation of the movement against obligatory indigo cultivation and the

less than adequate wages for mill workers. The downtrodden workers were on strike, and he told them that under no circumstances should they break strike before realisation of the legitimate demands. But at one point the strikers grew impatient. Then he himself fasted until the strikers' firmness on the demand came back.

Another appreciable characteristic of this great man was his containing capacity. He knew well of the white people's prejudice against the darker Indians and also of the economic injustice done by the Britishers to

to see only threat to peace and stability in every meeting or demonstration by its opponent political party or any other cross-section of the population, then it is bad news for the government. It harks back to the military regimes of the past, who saw similar threat to the security of the public or the state in every meeting or programme by students, or politicians. And people still remember how they would come down with vengeance on any such meeting or gathering using various repressive measures including Section 144, curfew, etc.

The military governments behaved in that way because they were always haunted by the fear of public wrath against them as they had come to power illegally against the will of the people.

But why should a government elected to office with a huge popular mandate be so fearful of the opposition's programme of public meetings or processions? Has it then lost its faith in the very public who had voted it to power?

The government, by slapping Section 144 on Dhaka and four other major cities, namely, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna and Sylhet as well as Pabna and Sirajganj, has not just foiled its adversary's, the BNP's, programme. It has at the same time caused irreparable harm to democracy.

The political stand-off between the two parties will remain as long as they continue this game of throwing a spanner in each other's work.

The cat-and-mouse game must stop. The government must allow democracy some space to function.

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them. Yet, he helped the Britishers in WW-I by recruiting both African and Indian volunteers. Although he had firm belief in Hinduism, he always respected others' beliefs. When he attended the War Conference arranged by the Britishers, the Ali brothers (Maolana Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali) were in jail. Gandhi demanded their release several times. Lastly, it was his greatness in preaching Hindu-Muslim brotherhood that was said to be the alleged reason (from the assassin's point of view) for the assassination of this great leader.

In short, Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, his firmness on truth and the passion for independence began a drive for freedom that doomed British colonialism. We in East Bengal had to strive for freedom (due to our short-sighted leadership in 1940s) again in 1971. Tajuddin Ahmad -- the Prime Minister of Bangladesh during our Liberation War -- was a student leader in 1948 when Gandhi was assassinated. Yet Tajuddin could realise the greatness of the Mahatma and wrote in grief the following lines in his diary: "Sun declined and beacon light of humanity declined too. Is it darkness then? Light and darkness, darkness and light; night comes after day and day chases the night."

Here our "star politician" Tajuddin termed Gandhi a "sun." The sun "declined" but day really chased the night in India (through establishment of functional democracy); the "star" had also been made to "decline" (on November 3, 1975), but has the day started chasing the night or the night is still too long in Bangladesh?

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 30

1948

Indian pacifist and leader Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi known for his non-violent freedom struggle is assassinated by Pandit Nathuram Godse, a Hindu extremist.

1964

In a bloodless coup, General Nguyen Khanh overthrows General Duong Van Minh's military junta in South Vietnam.

1972

Pakistan withdraws from the Commonwealth of Nations.

1989

The American embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan closes.