

GROUND REALITIES

Old images from a long-ago war

Clashes at the National Memorial

Utterly reprehensible

WE note with deep sense of anguish the clashes that occurred at the National Memorial on the national day. The morning of 26 March at the Memorial was denigrated by the three-way clashes within the BNP as to which group should be the first to receive begum Zia which was followed by clashes between the AL and BNP supporters, after the President and PM had left the Memorial as to who should be the first to lay wreath and, not to be left out of the news, the Jatiyo Party factions locked horns with each other as to who should be the first to receive General Ershad.

The net result was more than the 25 public and private vehicles damaged as a result of the clashes during which time the police were mute spectators for some inexplicable reasons. The significance of the day and the solemn environment that should have been the general order of things were severely tarnished by the insensible and loud behaviour of the political activists of these parties. One wonders who should pay for the damaged vehicles and property. And we wonder why the situation could not be controlled before it escalated when the area was brimming with law enforcing agencies.

We fail to understand why politics has to be dragged into every national event and why the common people who want to observe the day with due dignity and respect should be denied the right to do so without being hampered by the goons of these political parties. And why should a matter of the sequence of entering the Memorial, or who should receive the party boss first, should become so important as to involve the party activists in activities that mar the sanctity of one of our most important national days.

It seems that the political parties are losing control of their followers. It must be made clear that public places cannot be hogged by political parties. The common man has as much right of access to it first as the party followers if not more. The National Memorial for a certain period of the morning of March 26 this year did not appear to be so.

Cheery applause for top achievers in O and A level exams

We must appreciate schools that produce such students

THE Daily Star on Sunday honoured the nation's top achievers in O and A Level exams for their outstanding scores in different subjects on an international scale. They are the sons and daughters of the soil who through their brilliant results on the world stage have done us proud as well as bolstering our sense of belonging to the world. We felicitate them for their excellent achievements. We also congratulate their parents, teachers and schools for their collective efforts to guide them to reach such heights.

Having said that, we'd like to bring it to their attention that they are the luckiest of the lot who got this world class education in a country where quality of education is generally under a question mark. They should always bear in mind that this is a unique opportunity which will enable them to realize their full potential in a competitive world. Hence, it is only expected that they will make the best use of their talents not only by enriching their own careers but also by giving something back to the country they truly belong. They can never move ahead unless the nation makes progress as a whole.

As they will make their mark in the international arena what with their excellence in higher secondary level exams, they will undoubtedly uphold the image of the country. Their feat, however, should not make them feel complacent. It should rather draw them ever closer to the land of their birth.

If the nation's fundamental social indicators take a plunge, their individual successes will count much less than these would have had if these were turned into collective strength. While their wider access to the outside world should always be welcome, their spontaneous efforts to contribute substantially to the development of their own country cannot be overemphasized. It is this



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

MARC H is a good month to remember history. Beginning in April 1971, the Bengali resistance to the Pakistan occu-

pation army Mukti Bahini would be swelled by increasing numbers of Bengali deserters from the Pakistan armed forces as well as the police and East Pakistan Rifles. But the bulk of Mukti Bahini strength throughout the weeks and months to liberation would come from Bengali youths in the villages and district towns of the occupied country.

Among the officers who would take charge of the eleven sectors of war were Major K.M. Safiullah, Major Ziaur Rahman, Major Khaled Musharraf, Major M.A. Manzoor, Lt. Col. Abu Taher, Major Nuruzzaman, and Major Rafiqul Islam. Of the group, Manzoor and Taher would escape from cantonments in West Pakistan they were posted in and make their way to Mujibnagar. From the air force, there were A.K. Khondokar and Khademul Bashar. Over a period of time, other military officers would turn up and join the war effort.

There were many others who, while trying to cross over to India from West Pakistan, were detected by Pakistan's border forces and placed under arrest. In August of the year, Flight Lieutenant Matiur Rahman, a Bengali based at the air force station in Karachi, took off on what was to be a training flight for his Pakistani junior officer in his care, Rashed Minhaz. Once in the air, Rahman tried to seize the jet fighter from his pupil and steer it towards the border with India, his obvious objective being to go over to Bangladesh. An apparent struggle between the two men led to the plane crashing in the deserts of Sind.

Apart from the operations launched by the Mukti Bahini against the Pakistani forces in various parts of Bangladesh, other guerrilla groups such as Abdul Kader Siddiqui's Kaderia Bahini operated inside Bangladesh and never crossed the border into India. The ferocity of the Kaderia Bahini in time became the stuff of legend and even had Pakistan's soldiers encamped in Kader Siddiqui's native Tangail district

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fearing for their safety. Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni and the younger elements formed a new group of freedom fighters they called the Mujib Bahini. Broadly speaking, it was the Mukti Bahini that provided the thrust of the movement against the Pakistani forces. The guerrillas, coming from middle class Bengali families in the country's rural regions, quickly gained a reputation for swiftness of movement and precision attacks on the soldiers.

Old photographs of Bangladesh's War of Liberation show carrion feeding on the bloated bodies of Bengali civilians along the rivers and marshes of the country. And among these pictures is the odd spectacle of grinning Bengali villagers holding up the severed head of a Pakistani soldier killed by the Mukti Bahini. Those members of the force caught by the army were subjected to medieval forms of torture before the life went out of them. Many were the tales of Bengali civil and military officers being picked up by the soldiers and carted off to death or prolonged torture.

Colonel Ziaur Rahman, a Bengali officer in the Pakistan army medical corps and principal of Sylhet medical college in north-eastern Bangladesh, was picked up and never seen again. Alamgir Rahman, representative of Burmah Shell, was confined to the cantonment and tortured for the entire duration of the war. He survived, just, but the torture had clearly taken its toll. The husband and son of Jahanara Imam were picked up by the Pakistan army. The son never came back. A few days after his release, her badly tortured husband died. In the early stages of the war of liberation, a young lieutenant in the army, Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, was captured by the soldiers and tortured throughout the nine months of

the war. He miraculously survived and emerged free once Pakistan surrendered.

The War of Liberation turned out to be an inclusive affair that united Bengalis across the spectrum and beyond the confines of the occupied country. Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, the vice chancellor of Dhaka University representing Pakistan at a human rights conference in Geneva at the time of the crackdown, denounced the military action and switched his allegiance to the Bangladesh cause. He was later deputed to take charge of the Bangladesh mission in London, where he played an instrumental role in organising overseas Bengalis towards disseminating information about the national cause in Europe.

Bengali diplomats in Pakistani embassies abroad began to defect to the independence cause within days of the crackdown and the declaration of independence. K.M. Shahabuddin and Amjad Hossain, stationed in the Pakistani consulate in Bombay, in a public statement condemned the atrocities committed by the army and switched loyalty to the Bengali cause. In Calcutta, the Bengali deputy high commissioner for Pakistan, Hossain Ali, hoisted the Bangladesh flag atop the building housing the mission and claimed it for his occupied country. When the Pakistan government, despite its efforts, was unable to reclaim the building, it simply closed down the mission. The office then became one of the focal points of the Bengali struggle.

In the West, A.E.M. Abul Fateh, the senior-most Bengali in an ambassadorial position, declared his rejection of Pakistan. Infuriated, the Islamabad authorities tried to have him recalled to

Islamabad and failed in trying to do so. Shah A.M.S. Kibria, Humayun Rashid Chowdhury, Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, A.H. Mahmood Ali, M.M. Rezaul Karim, Waliur Rahman and Mohiuddin Ahmed, among a number of others, swiftly opted to serve the government-in-exile through public condemnation of Pakistan's actions in Bangladesh.

The sinister nature of the war was not lost on a senior West Pakistani diplomat, Iqbal Athar. In a move that amazed not only his own country but also the Bengalis, he defected to the Bangladesh cause. In independent Bangladesh, he was to serve as ambassador in a number of important countries until his death.

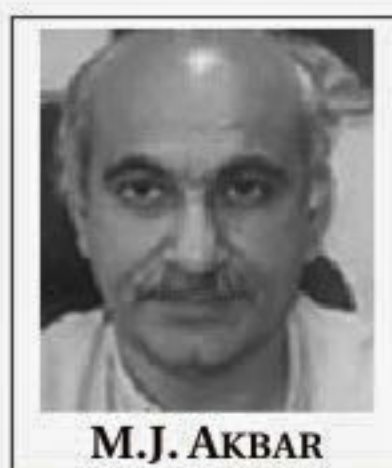
In China, Khwaja Mohammad Kaiser, who belonged to the Nawab family of old Dhaka, faced a particular dilemma. He was Pakistan's trusted envoy in Beijing and highly regarded by the Chinese authorities. Clearly inclined to identify with the Bengali cause, he was unable to find the means to do it, given particularly the vocal support China was giving Pakistan over the Bangladesh crisis. It was for Premier Zhou En-lai to advise him to carry on as best he could, a job he fulfilled till the end. In later years, Kaiser was to go back to Beijing, this time to serve as Bangladesh's ambassador in a country where he had for a long time upheld the interests of Pakistan.

Within West Pakistan, a very large number of Bengali military as well as civilian officers were stranded as a result of the war. In the case of the military personnel, the authorities exercised particular measures to prevent them from escaping or acting in a way that could recreate the sense of crisis caused by the Matiur Rahman affair. The most senior officer in the army was again a man with roots in East Pakistan. Khwaja Wasiuddin, a son of Ayub Khan's minister for information Khwaja Shahabuddin, served as a lieutenant general in the Pakistan army. Respected by his Pakistani colleagues, nevertheless during the entire duration of the war, he remained deprived of any specific responsibility. He was repatriated to Bangladesh after the war and honourably retired from the army. The government sent him off to Kuwait as the new country's ambassador.

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BYLINE

The past is more than memory



M.J. AKBAR

DR. Henry Kissinger had just become America's Secretary of State when Egypt's President Anwar Sadat surprised the world and stunned

his Arab world by launching a successful war against Israel on October 6, 1973, the day of Yom Kippur. Within 24 hours Egyptian troops had crossed the Red Sea and raced across the Sinai desert to recover territory lost in 1967. At the end of that fateful day, Kissinger sent a simple but powerful private message to Sadat through a non-official channel: "You have begun the war with Soviet weapons, but you will need the power of American diplomacy to establish a peace."

Sadat understood. Israel's counter-offensive was inevitable, shifting the course of war. America and Soviet Union went on high alert. It was America which helped establish not only the ceasefire lines that have held to this day, but also, over the next five years, negotiate the tripartite settlement between Sadat, Menachem Begin and Jimmy Carter that still constitutes the framework of peace in the region.

It was the kind of role that Delhi could have, and indeed should have, played in the Sri Lanka civil war that

ended in such a bloody climax in January 2009. The DMK was in power in both Tamil Nadu and Delhi then, but it accepted the policy of restraint crafted by Dr. Manmohan Singh and his Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee. That was wise. But wisdom petered out when the Congress-DMK alliance simply forgot that wars do not necessarily end with defeat; and in the specific case of Lanka Tamils, they had an obligation to ensure a comprehensive rehabilitation of Tamils that accommodated post-defeat realities. The message that Delhi should have sent to Colombo is obvious: "You have won the war with others' weapon, but you will need Delhi to find peace." However, the UPA government walked away from this responsibility, even though Tamil Nadu voted for the DMK-Congress alliance in the summer of 2009, which in turn played a decisive part in the re-election of UPA.

Perhaps the momentum was lost when Pranab Mukherjee left external affairs to go to finance, but a shift in portfolios cannot absolve a government whose first duty is protection of the national interest. Delhi refused to use the power of Indian diplomacy to eliminate the reasons that had led to the Lanka civil war. Kissinger, conversely, ensured the withdrawal of Israeli troops on Egyptian soil but recognised the necessity of letting Egyptians keep their military gains since they had repos-

sessed their own territory from Israel. He understood that Egypt could not negotiate even an interim settlement with Israel as long as its land was under Israeli control. But in the three years that have passed since the death of Tamil Tigers leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran, Delhi has behaved as if the Tamil problem in Lanka was over, and the past is a bad memory which should be allowed to lapse in silence. But the past is never so cooperative, particularly if there are demons hidden in its fog.

Guilt is something that governments rarely, and foreign policy establishments never, admit. One wonders if there is a story of Delhi's collusion with Colombo during the last phase of the war, when some 40,000 civilians were allegedly butchered, that this UPA government would prefer to lock in the secrecy of archives. Is UPA worried that public debate will release ghosts that it wants safely buried?

The American resolution in the United States will not succeed in punishing anyone in Sri Lanka who committed war crimes. If anything it could increase the domestic popularity of President Rajapakse, who showed the necessary resolve to win a war that had lasted most of a generation. The Tamil Tigers did not fight by any rules; they spread havoc through terrorism when they could. They took the life of a prime

minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. But it has succeeded in reviving a debate which went quiet, but never disappeared.

It was public pressure from Indian Tamils that finally forced DMK and Congress to take a position; they had enough time to take the initiative themselves, but did not do so. Indian diplomats surely do not need the United Nations as a player in what, ideally, should have been part of the bilateral process between India and its neighbour. The sin of omission was compounded by the sin of commission. The manner in which UPA took this decision betrayed its vacillation and weakness.

When foreign policy becomes hostage to coalition compulsions, it is evident that the political class is not doing any thinking. Over the last three years, there has been a sequence of blunders in the neighbourhood, from mentioning Balochistan in a communiqué with Pakistan to dropping the Teesta ball with Bangladesh and now a faux pas with Sri Lanka. Political uncertainty has made Indian diplomacy weaker than India's weight would warrant. The consequences will last longer than this government.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 28

1854 Crimean War: France and Britain declare war on Russia.

1871 The Paris Commune is formally established in Paris

1930 Constantinople and Angora change their names to Istanbul and Ankara.

1959 The State Council of the People's Republic of China dissolves the Government of Tibet.

1999 Kosovo War: Serb paramilitary and military forces kill 146 Kosovo Albanians in the Izbica massacre.

2006 At least 1 million union members, students, and unemployed take to the streets in France in protest at the government's proposed First Employment Contract law.