

## Stopping a book launch

*This is unacceptable*

WE take serious note of the government's arbitrary stopping of a book launch ceremony at the Ruposhi Bangla Hotel scheduled for Tuesday. Opposition leader Khaleda Zia was to unveil the books.

The action against the programme came at the last moment without any explanation offered. Why should the government interfere with as simple a programme as launch of a few books about the leader of the opposition and former president Ziaur Rahman? The organisers had every right to stage the programme, which they had arranged with the hotel concerned.

We are appalled at such uncalled-for use of power driven by a political motive thereby denying what amounts to citizens' fundamental rights.

The fact that the contents of the books were asked to be made known is but putting fetters on the right to expression. It is dangerous and unsettling. We register vehement protest against the move.

To close down a perfectly acceptable programme purportedly on the instruction of an intelligence agency is repugnant to civilised norms and democratic sensibilities.

How low the government's intolerance has gone is brought to glaring light by the use of intelligence agencies to spoil a function in a hotel run commercially, to which a client cannot be denied access without justifiable grounds. This shows up a mean undemocratic streak in governance.

On the one hand, the government cries hoarse about its democratic credentials and the claim to championing freedom of expression, on the other, it betrays a certain political chicanery in dealing with the opposition.

This is totally unacceptable and once again we express our concern over an infringement of the opposition's, or for that matter, any citizen group's rights.

In using methods of stifling the opposition, the government seems to be unaware of the fact that it is only revealing its weakness, and not strength.

The government must realise that such an ill-advised, but deliberate action can only damage its credibility as well as blight the prospect of ironing out its differences with the opposition that the people are eagerly looking forward to.

## Honouring our friends of freedom

*A reflection of global friendship*

THE curtain has dropped on a heart-warming event dedicated to the foreign friends who contributed to our liberation war, a process that began last July with the presentation of the "Bangladesh Freedom Honour", posthumously, to former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

At the event organised jointly by the Cabinet Division, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, 83 individuals, organisations, the Mitra Bahini (allied forces) and the people of India were recognised for their unique contribution to our liberation struggle in two categories -- the "Bangladesh Liberation War Honour" and the "Friends of Liberation War Honour". They included politicians, diplomats, journalists, army personnel, musicians and more from India, USA, UK, Russia, Nepal, Bhutan, Japan, Italy, Germany, Ireland, Denmark and Sweden. Some of them had put their lives at risk; others had gone against their governments' official policy at the time on Bangladesh's independence movement; all of them gave us their heartfelt support, helped spread the word and garner international backing and financial aid for our cause.

Forty-one years into independence, the recognition no doubt comes belated, but the delay has not taken away from the giving, or receiving, of the honours. While we as a nation are proud to finally be able to pay whole-hearted tribute to those who supported us in various ways in perhaps our most difficult time of need, the award recipients too expressed no less gratitude for the honours bestowed upon them. The occasion did not only celebrate a historical event and those who contributed to it but, through the massive presence of awardees from around the world, was a reflection of the image of global friendship today. We congratulate the initiators and organisers along with the award recipients who responded to their call, on the successful completion of a soul-stirring event honouring some of our most signifi-

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 29

1849

The United Kingdom annexes the Punjab.

1857

Sepoy Mangal Pandey of the 34<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Bengal Native Infantry mutinies against the East India Company's rule in India and inspires the protracted Indian Rebellion of 1857, also known as the Sepoy Mutiny.

1936

In Germany, Adolf Hitler receives 99% of the votes in a referendum to ratify Germany's illegal reoccupation of the Rhineland, receiving 44.5 million votes out of 45.5 million registered voters.

1973

Vietnam War: The last United States combat soldiers leave South Vietnam.

2002

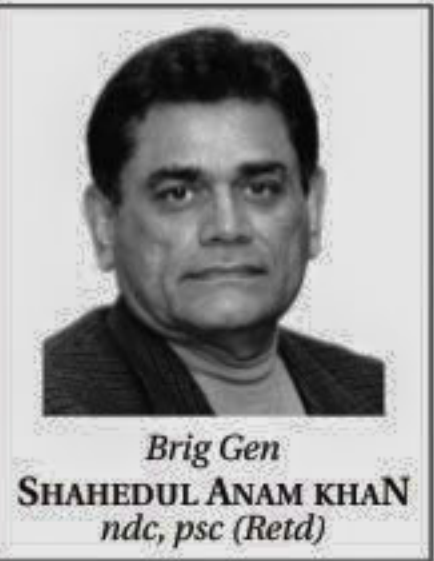
In reaction to the Passover massacre two days prior, Israel launches Operation Defensive Shield against Palestinian militants, its largest military operation in the West Bank since the 1967 Six-Day War.

2004

Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia join NATO as full members.

### STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

## Shrinking political space for the opposition



Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

IT is not only shrinking, political space of the opposition is shrinking at a frighteningly increasing rate. And that is alarming for any country that claims to be democratic and civilised. To be civilised is the first essential criterion that makes for a democratic nation, and one that is not cannot claim to be fully democratic. Looking at the way the government has gone about curtailing the political freedom of the opposition by denying them the room to conduct legitimate and lawful political and civil activities, and which were neither potentially disruptive nor posed danger to public life and property or to national security, one wonders whether we can claim to be either democratic or civilised.

On the heels of the government action in respect of the March 12 BNP rally, which went ahead despite everything that was done by deploying the entire state machinery including the AL party appendages to see that the programme did not come through, the two recent incidents concerning the BNP leader make one wonder whether by acting in this manner the government is not shooting itself in the foot.

What can one make of the report that the leader of the opposition was hindered from going to the National Memorial by the law enforcing agencies? As reported in the media, she was stopped right at her doorsteps till she and her entourage literally forced themselves through the barricade and moved towards Savar. And obstructions were set up in quite a few places along the road also, reportedly by AL cadres.

The predictable denial was not long in coming. We are by now used to the overused remarks of the home minister in such instances. In reply to question from journalists whether such action was ordered from the top, she said that the government had not passed any such order to any agency to bar the movements of Begum Zia on the morning of March 26. Really?

*One wonders whether it is an indication of the party's political bankruptcy or is it that the AL has run out of options to counter the opposition. Curtailing the opposition's political freedom demeans the significance of the month of March.*

Then what we saw and read in the media, of policemen in uniform creating obstruction for the opposition leader's entourage, must either have been stage managed by the BNP to malign the government or these were some cosmic apparitions doing the dirty job for somebody.

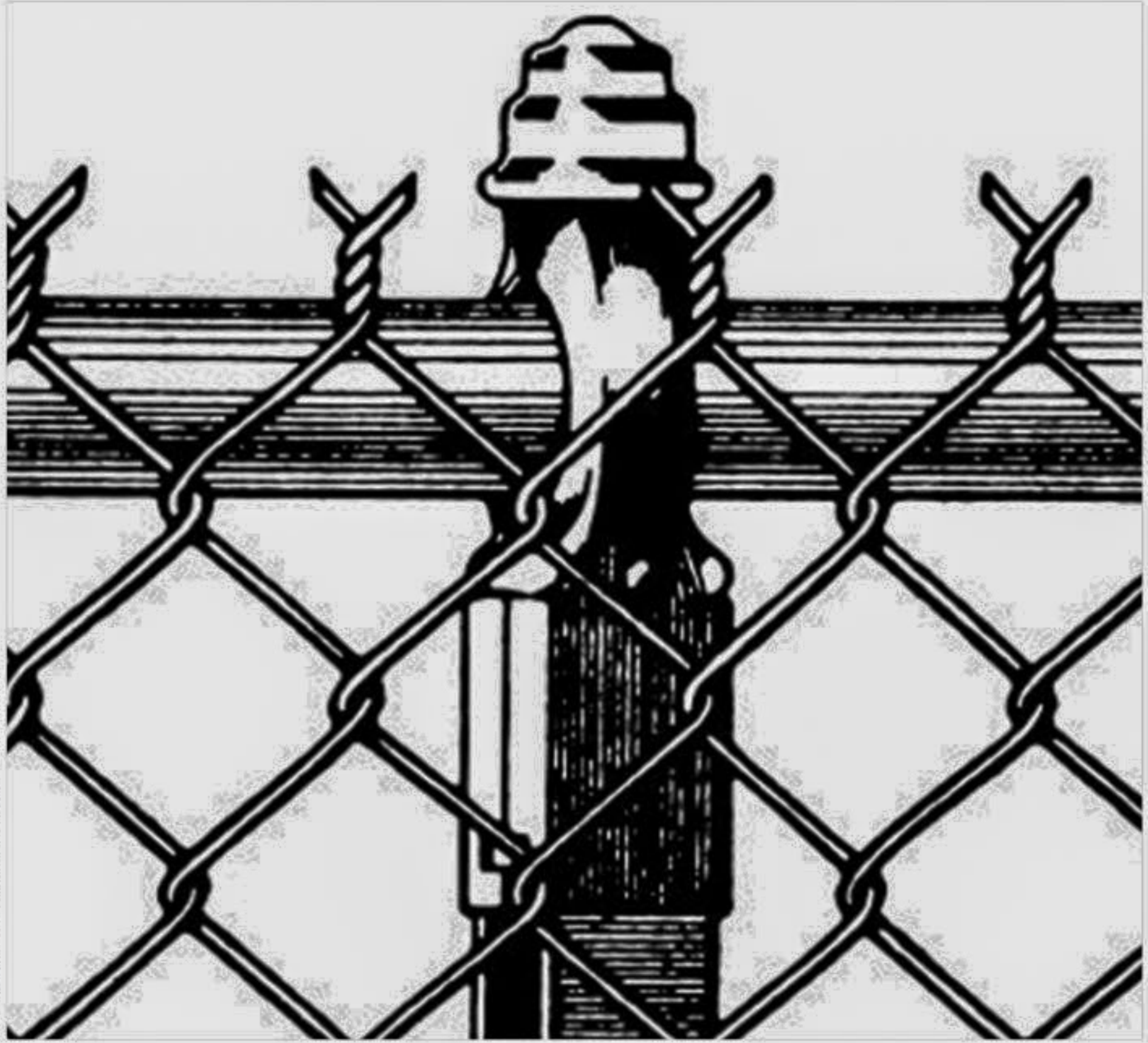
That these people were neither apparitions nor cosmic interventions was clear from the way they behaved with the people around them. Pictures don't lie and unoriginal explanations do not wash with the public. But the explanation given by another person holding responsible position in the government sounded so comically ridiculous as to compel one to wonder whether we are destined to suffer at the hands of little men with little minds who take the people for granted and give no credit to their intelligence. He said, without directly answering the question, that nobody would be allowed to create law and order problems in the name of exercising political or civic rights. Are we to believe that the intention of the leader of the opposition on the morning of our National Day was to create law and order situation for the

government?

It is for the government to enquire as to who ordered, and on what grounds, the obstruction of the opposition leader on her way to the National Memorial, because if we take the claims of the government to be true then there is reason to be worried because it seems that there is somebody who is acting over the head of the legitimate authorities. And if the police were there without specific instructions from the lawful authorities we are surprised that the relevant persons have not been asked to account for their actions.

As for the other incident, the proposed launching of some books on the late BNP leader, it could not be held because the reservation of the programme venue, which happened to be a hotel owned by the government, was cancelled at the very last minute.

Here again it seems that some non-corporeal entity must have been at work, because nobody has taken the responsibility of having passed the order to cancel the booking. In fact the government has denied having instructed anybody to that effect. But



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as reported in the media, the cancellation was done on the orders of the "higher authority." We are confused once again, and, even more, disappointed that no one has the gumption to own up the responsibility for passing the order to cancel the reservation. And if it was not a part of an underhand wily scheme of some half-witted mind in the administration, then the government should come up with a plausible explanation as to why the hotel management acted in the way they did.

These actions of the government, and we find very hard to accept what the government has said with regard to these two incidents, puts the political wisdom of the AL in very poor light. Such is not expected of a party with a long political tradition. One wonders whether it is an indication of the party's political bankruptcy or is it that the AL has run out of options to counter the opposition.

Curtailing the opposition's political freedom demeans the significance of the month of March.

The writer is Editor, Op-ed and Strategic Issues, The Daily Star.

## Transcending India-Bangladesh relations

SMRUTI S. PATTANAİK

ANY celebration of Bangladesh struggle for independence invariably invokes memories of the liberation war, the role played by its masses, individuals from different countries who contributed to its independence and the role of India. It also reminds us that the people of India and Bangladesh share common values and principles that the liberation war embodied. India and Bangladesh have traversed a long road of cooperation and friendship with occasional hiccups that are natural in any bilateral ties. The two in the recent past have earnestly attempted to resolve some of the intractable problems and have succeeded, notwithstanding the failure to sign Teesta agreement which is under negotiation.

Teesta alone should not be the yardstick to measure bilateral ties between the two countries. Making this issue the core of relations would lead to politicisation. It is likely to be scrutinised by the two countries in terms of gain and loss given the political salience. This fear of zero-sum game would make the policy makers careful, resulting in red-tapism. A resolution of water-sharing of Teesta may have salutary effect on bilateral ties but landmark agreement on demarcation of boundary, exchange of land in adverse possession and enclaves is going to be crucial as it would impinge on the border management.

Tipaimukh dam project that is proposed to be constructed on river Barak is another issue that would require more debate and discussion.

India has proposed to Bangladesh to become equity partner in the project to share the power to be generated. This dam has provisions for flood control. Debate on Tipaimukh has degenerated into political stance and consequently the beneficial aspect of the project gets undermined in the plethora of arguments and counter arguments.

Though a Promoters Agreement was signed in October between the state of Manipur, National Hydel Power Corporation Ltd and Sutlej Jal Vidut Nigam Ltd, known as Tipaimukh Hydro-electric Corporation Ltd, to produce 1,500 MW of electricity, the project is yet to get any funding from World Bank or other multilateral organisations. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his visit to Dhaka last year said: "Concern has been expressed from time to time on the Tipaimukh dam project in India. I wish to make a public statement and make it clear that India will not take steps regarding the Tipaimukh dam that will adversely affect Bangladesh."

To assure those opposing the Tipaimukh in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also said that it would not support construction of the dam if Bangladesh's interest was hampered. India's willingness to share information on the project would help generate informed opinion if the issue is looked at from a

developmental perspective rather than for scoring political points.

Apart from the water issue, problems related to border have emerged as a major stumbling block. In the meeting between the Border Security Force and Border Guard Bangladesh held last week the two countries submitted a list of transgression incidents at the border that includes breaching

of fences, smuggling, human trafficking etc. In spite of exchanging almost an identical agenda on incidents in the border, cooperation remains wanting.

The two countries also need to harmonise their standard operating procedure at the border. India imposes a night curfew in the border to prevent smugglers and traffickers from coming near the border, but similar

steps are lacking on the Bangladesh side. The two countries have initiated joint and coordinated patrol since last July to address some of the common challenges. Illegal immigration remains a major problem. In the recent home ministers' meet in February this year Indian home minister said: "We have identified the border outposts that are vulnerable and both sides will strengthen border management in these outposts."

In spite of such hurdles the two countries have been able to synergise

their efforts in enhancing bilateral trade and investment, developing infrastructure to facilitate trade, etc. The issue of transshipment, transit fee, and service charges on goods that are to transit through Bangladesh territory has not yet been decided. The government of Bangladesh has formed five sub-committees to look into the issue of infrastructure, and economic and legal issues pertaining to providing transit.

India has requested trans-shipment of food grains to Tripura using the Ashuganj port. Such a request is pending as the government is debating over fixing a transit fee. An extradition treaty between the two countries is at the final stage of negotiation. Signing of this treaty would help the two countries to deal with the issue of criminals seeking cross-border refuge.

Bilateral exchanges of views, meetings, etc alone will not determine the future of Indo-Bangladesh relations. The political temperature between Delhi and Dhaka will be determined by centre-state relations, compulsions of coalition politics and localisation of foreign policy issues in India. In Bangladesh it would be determined by the relations between the two political parties and their approach to India, their willingness to engage their domestic political constituency, and their ability to create multiple stakeholders for their India policy. People should be at the core of this policy. Mutual trust, respect and empathetic attitude towards each other's sensitivities will ensure a strong foundation that goes beyond regime and state-centricism in foreign policy decision making.

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