

GROUND REALITIES

Abul goes

The last hurdle to Bridge financing removed

SYED Abul Hossain has gone at last. If he is expecting kudos from us he should forget it. He should have gone much earlier; his name has been in the news since September, 2011. Indeed, it was mainly due to him that the World Bank (WB) scuttled the Padma Bridge loan. Whether the minister is guilty or not, only future will tell upon successful completion of investigation, which we hope, the government will carry out in all earnest. But as a minister, he should have exited, for his own sake, for his prime minister's, and for the sake of the country and people, as soon as the matter had come to the fore, and spared the country the embarrassment.

However, much as we blame Abul Hossain for his procrastination, we feel the head of the government has to share much of the blame for the thing to have come to such a pass. Whilst the minister in question may lack objectivity, foresight or judicious judgment that is not expected of a prime minister who has a government to run, a country to govern and a people to lead. The country as a whole cannot be expected to suffer for the inability of the decision makers to take correct and timely decisions, and in all fairness, she should have shown Abul the door. We fail to understand why she did not do so. We understand that with the exception of a handful of her advisers and ministers, most of her cabinet colleagues were in favour of his exit. Is it a lack of understanding of the gravity of the matter or her arrogance or her 'could not care less' attitude, or some other inexplicable reason that she did not do so?

As for the WB, now that all conditions have been met and knowing that the scrapped deal cannot be revived, we would urge it to reprocess the financing of the project as soon as possible. Given that all the necessary groundwork is in place, such a process should not take long to complete and we hope that the much aspired Padma multipurpose bridge project gets off the ground, sooner rather than later.

Humayun, farewell

May you live in our hearts for eternity

WITH a heavy heart the nation has bidden farewell to its master storyteller in his last journey of life. The sea of people that turned out to have a last look of him was unprecedented in this country, particularly at the death of any other writer or cultural personality of repute. It again showed what place the author occupies in the hearts of millions, the majority of whom belong to the younger generation. That we are certain will continue for long.

It is worthwhile to note that the thousands that showed up at the Shaheed Minar with flowers to pay their last respect were avid readers of his books. We may also recall the long queues of book lovers at the stalls of Bangla Academy book fairs that sold Humayun's latest novels every year during the month of February. Admittedly, he had been the driving force behind creating the habit of book reading among the post-independence generations of youths.

Unfortunately, the last journey of this man could not be made completely smooth and peaceful, as a controversy arose among his bereaved family members over selecting the place of his burial. The incident has left a bad taste in the mouth. This should never have been allowed to happen.

Thankfully, his family could at last overcome the differences, and unanimously opted for Nuhash Palli, the serene and tranquil retreat covered with trees and creepers in Gazipur that the shy and reclusive writer loved so much, to lay him to ultimate rest. Though he has left us physically, the magic of his works will keep his fans and readers under spell for years to come.

We again pay our heartfelt tribute to this great word



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

A powerful presence, without being present, in all the frenzy of emotion generated by the death of the writer Humayun Ahmed has been astonished a whole lot of people. Her children were there, of course, beside the coffin of their dead father. She was not. Which again, when you seriously reflect on it, is not surprising at all. Her silence, you could argue, is only natural. People who have been hurt, have been cast aside for little fault of theirs, have either protested loudly or have gone quiet and out of public view. It was the latter course which Humayun Ahmed's first wife, a woman of dignity by any measure and by any interpretation, chose to adopt. Her life was rudely trifled with when she least expected it. She was simply left behind, abandoned to fate. Her children suffered with her. Their father had strolled away.

And thus it is that as we mourn the passing of Humayun Ahmed, we spend some amount of time remembering Gultekin and her children. Like so many others in our time, and before our time, they have been victims of a destiny they did not cause to be foisted on them. Their lives, in a particular sense, were left wounded for reasons that had nothing to do with them. It is, as you might note, a tale we have heard quite often in our neighbourhood. Back in the early 1970s, Humayun Faridee married the woman he loved with a simple and

yet poignant expression of passion: he gave her beli flowers. And the couple were blessed by none other than Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was a marriage made in heaven, in that clichéd manner of speaking. And yet it would not last. Faridee would, in time, find the time and the inclination to walk out of his fairy tale marriage and shuffle into another.

We have not remembered that young bride drenched in the fragrance of beli flowers. We have not stopped to ask ourselves how she and her children, if she has children, have fared all these years. Like any

with the wife of an Iranian diplomat based in Karachi. He and she fell in love, to a point where Mirza ended up marrying her. Mirza made sure, however, not to divorce his first wife even as he relished his new marriage to Naheed. But that hardly made any difference. His children never respected Naheed. His family consistently looked upon Naheed Mirza as a wrecker of their family.

Of course it is a most healthy thing to fall in love. But when new love destroys the edifice of a family built through a patient placement of old love, brick by brick and emotion by emotion, it is not love any more. It

Did Zulema Yoma deserve to be thrown out of the presidential palace by Carlos Menem in Argentina? The thespian Dilip Kumar once committed the inexcusable blunder of his life when, unknown to wife Saira Bano, he secretly married another woman. The marriage proved unsustainable. He went back to Saira Bano, fell at her feet and beseeched her for her forgiveness. The lady obliged him. If she had not, we would today be looking at a Dilip Kumar without a future. The repository of deep respect he is today would not be there. It felt good that he came back. But that still does not answer our question of why he needed to stumble into that fleeting infatuation.

Good men, even great men, have hurt their wives and their children both in public and away from the crowd. Gultekin was hurt and remains hurt. Her dignity has kept her going, just as the dignity in Nelson Rockefeller's first wife helped her carry on when her husband Nelson Rockefeller cast his eyes on a very young woman named Happy. She made Rockefeller happy, but that act of giving happiness came at a cost. The first wife lost her hold on life and Rockefeller never made it to the White House.

Long years ago, as the historian Antonia Fraser went around saying goodbye to everyone at a dinner, the playwright Harold Pinter pushed a question at her. "Must you go?" he asked. Months later, she came to him as a lover, as a wife. The hurt her children and her former husband must have gone through, the degree of it, is a reality we can only imagine.

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Pain and the remnants of love

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family suffering from a grievous hurt, Faridee's former family has gone out of our orbit. It ought to have been the responsibility of society to keep track of them, the better to know if they were safe, if they were as happy as could be expected in the circumstances. Nothing can be more agonising for a woman and for her children than blundering into the truth that her husband and their father has turned his back on them for another woman.

Pakistan's first president Iskandar Mirza, happily married and terribly fond of his children, nevertheless found himself unable to control his passions when it came to dealing

shifts to being something else, to something of the selfish kind. The late British foreign secretary Robin Cook, on his way to the airport with his wife on what was to be a first step to a holiday together, calmly confessed that he had been having an affair with his secretary. His marriage ended right there. A pained wife, with her children, moved away from him. And he went ahead and married his secretary. He died after a fall on the Scottish highlands some years later. The question he left behind, though, was one he probably could not answer: did he have to humiliate his wife and their children when they did not deserve such humiliation?

Red tide rising

IRFAN HUSAIN

IN the wake of the most recent mass killing in the United States, several people tweeted that they hoped the Colorado killer wasn't a Muslim. Some asked on email why James Holmes wasn't being referred to as a "terrorist" instead of as a "gunman."

Although the semantic difference means little to the victims, the generally accepted meaning of a terrorist is somebody who targets civilians indiscriminately to spread mayhem and fear. His purpose is to make a political statement. A lone gunman, on the other hand, kills at random for largely irrational, non-political reasons. Often, he is a lone wolf with paranoid fantasies.

Although terrorism is not a new phenomenon, it is being deployed across the world by a growing number of violent but dedicated groups and individuals ranging from neo-Nazis in Germany to Islamist extremists in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Recently, a BBC special report focused on a German group calling itself the National Socialist Underground that killed seven Turks, plus a Greek and a German police officer, over a 10-year murder spree. Despite the similarity in its methods, police failed to make a connection between these killings until a botched bank robbery last November revealed the truth.

It appears that the German police had barely tried to investigate the murders, attributing them to an unknown Turkish mafia. In the subsequent uproar, federal agents discovered that some documents had been destroyed, leading to suspicions of a cover-up by right wing sympathisers.

In the BBC report, one racist activist said that he could understand -- and sympathise with -- the motive behind these killings. He then trotted out the same drivel about the need for racial purity that so many

extreme nationalist right-wing groups use. The term "Nazi," of course, is the abbreviation for National Socialist German Workers Party, the formal name given by Adolf Hitler to his party.

It is useful to recall that the rise of the Nazi Party coincided with a period of acute economic misery in Germany after its defeat in the First World War. Hyperinflation reached such a level that it took a suitcase full of cash to buy a loaf of bread. Unemployment was rife, and middle-class Germans found themselves fighting for survival.

Much of this economic shambles was caused by the harsh reparations forced on Germany by the victorious allies. Billions flowed out of the exchequer in Berlin to London, Paris and Washington. The resultant anger that built up was channelised by Hitler against the allies abroad, and the Jews at home. Millions of Germans flocked to Hitler's banner, and the National Socialists won 37.3% of the votes in the 1932 elections that propelled Hitler to the position of Chancellor. In the following year, the Nazis had upped their share to 43.9% following a campaign marred by extreme violence and bullying. Thousands of Communists were locked up, and several left-wing candidates murdered.

The point here is that a sudden economic collapse and a feeling of resentment against the "other" can trigger a transformation in political and social attitudes. This lesson from history is relevant in an era of a crisis

of capitalism. As unemployment in many European countries soars and social benefits are slashed, right-wing forces expand by focussing public anger against immigrants.

In France, the National Front gained its highest number of votes ever, with close to 20%. Once widely rejected as a gang of racist goons, the party has now attained a level of support and respectability. If Hollande's Socialist Party has to impose unpopular spending cuts, Le Pen and her National Front would be the major beneficiaries of the ensuing backlash. Needless to say, the party stands for severe restrictions

on immigration.

In Greece, months of fiscal belt-tightening imposed by the EU and the IMF has resulted in shocking levels of poverty in a well-off European country. Almost overnight, millions of Greeks see an uncertain future as jobs and pensions disappear. Here again, attacks against immigrants have risen sharply, with the neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn leading the way.

In a post-religious Europe, extremism takes the path of violence against non-white foreigners. Here, because race and colour is the defining identity of many, anger is directed against those from other ethnic groups. In Muslim countries where, all too often, faith forms the first and most important layer of identity, those not subscribing to the majority creed are being increasingly targeted.

In Pakistan, for instance, Ahmadis, Christians and Hindus and also Shia Muslims are being attacked and killed in growing numbers. In Iraq,

hundreds of thousands of Christians have had to flee their homes. In Egypt, Copts have been discriminated against for decades. And now in northern Mali, we have the spectacle of people being lashed by extremist thugs.

It seems that rising intolerance, fuelled by a variety of causes, is leading to increasing violence. In some cases, as in Kashmir and Chechnya, nationalism feeds freedom movements. In Balochistan, state repression has sparked off a low-level but deadly separatist struggle.

After the collapse and break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, many of us had expected a safer and saner world to emerge. Over two decades later, we learned to our cost that actually, the stand-off between the two superpowers acted as a force for stability, barring in the areas where they clashed through proxies.

Now, in a world awash in weapons, it seems that violence is the first -- and not the last -- recourse to settle any difference of opinion. All manner of ideologues want to impose their ideologies on the rest of us. Sadly, it is a warped belief in political Islam that motivates so many of these extremist groups. But religion is not the only motive for violence. As we have seen all too often, people like the Norwegian killer Anders Breivik can slaughter 77 people in cold blood without claiming any divine right to kill.

We should all be worried about this trend. In the West, security forces are so preoccupied by the Islamist threat that they often overlook the far deadlier danger posed by home-grown nuts like James Holmes who, with easy access to arms, regularly gun down so many innocent people.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 25

1139 Battle of Ourique: The Almoravids, led by Ali ibn Yusuf, are defeated by Prince Afonso Henriques.

1261 The city of Constantinople is recaptured by Nicaean forces under the command of Alexios Strategopoulos, re-establishing the Byzantine Empire.

1799 At Aboukir in Egypt, Napoleon I of France defeats 10,000 Ottomans under Mustafa Pasha.

1943 World War II: Benito Mussolini is forced out of office by his own Italian Grand Council and is replaced by Pietro Badoglio.

1979 Another section of the Sinai Peninsula is peacefully returned by Israel to Egypt.

1993 Israel launches a massive attack against Lebanon in what the Israelis call Operation Accountability, and the Lebanese call *Seven-Day War*.

1994 Israel and Jordan sign the Washington Declaration, which formally ends the state of war that had existed between the nations since 1948.

2010 Wikileaks publishes classified documents about the War in Afghanistan, one of the largest leaks in U.S. military history.