

Is BNP a place for freedom fighters?

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

On December 3, 2007, Mukti Joddha Gono Parishad (MGP), an organisation of freedom fighters, arranged a gathering of war veterans attended by hundreds of freedom fighters. The attendees of the congregation in a united voice urged the then government to form a special tribunal to try the war criminals. Presided over by MGP President Ishtiaq Aziz Ulfat, the meeting was addressed among others by language movement veteran Abdul Matin, Lt Col (Retd) Kazi Nuruzzaman, Sector Commander and Maj Gen (Retd) Syed Muhammad Ibrahim Bir Pratik, Mili Rahman, wife of Matiur Rahman Bir Shreshtha, and Prof. Saad Uddin.

Mili Rahman said that it was high time to bring the war criminals to justice. Prof. Saad Uddin said that the then newspapers were enough to prove the heinous activities of the war criminals. Kazi Nuruzzaman said that in order to try the war criminals, all pro-liberation forces would have to be united and come to power in the next elections. Incidentally, Kazi Nuruzzaman's wish came true, and the political party which led us to independence, along with a few other allies who fought side by side in 1971, came to power only a year later. In accordance with their election pledge, and as expected, special tribunals were constituted in March 10, 2010. At present, trials of eight alleged perpetrators of war crimes are either at the end or middle of their trials in open tribunals, in presence of their duly appointed lawyers and media, both local and international.

Aside from Jamaat-e-Islami's predictable movement to derail the trial process, the main criticisms and denigrations of the process are coming from none other than the BNP. To clarify the objective of this piece, I refer to a few speeches and statements of the BNP chief vis-à-vis the ongoing war criminal trials.

On April 2, 2010, after the meeting of its standing committee, BNP's secretary general said: "The government has stepped away from the trials of war criminals and now they are holding trials for crimes against humanity, deviating from the election manifesto." The BNP even opposed the formation of a special tribunal to carry out the trial since, in its opinion, it could be done under the existing criminal law.

On October 17, 2010, the BNP chairperson called the trial "a conspiracy to throw the nation

into chaos in the name of war crimes trial four decades after the general amnesty to the collaborators." She further asserted that plots were also being hatched to use the independence war as a tool to divide the nation.

On October 2011, in a public meeting in Chapainawabganj, BNP chief demanded release of all opposition leaders including those arrested for crimes against humanity. In her words: "Awami League is the real anti-liberation force and that is why actions should be taken against them."

Mentioning the names of arrested Jamaat leaders including Nizami and Mujahid, she said the government arrested them in false cases. "Government branded Jamaat leaders as anti-liberation force but the real anti-liberation force was Awami League," she said.

On December 4, 2011, at a press conference, a BNP standing committee member made no bones about BNP's position vis-à-vis the ongoing trial

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process and the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) Act, and demanded that the government immediately stop the proceedings of the war crimes tribunal. The party also called on the international community "to put pressure on the government to fulfill the commitments Bangladesh had made through signing international covenants on crimes against humanity." It concluded: "The BNP has no confidence in this tribunal. It believes that in the existing legal structure, the tribunal is nothing but a servile, rubber-stamp organisation."

Several years ago, an alleged war criminal, who used to preach against the freedom fighters in all his public speeches and whose trial has ended, visited Toronto. Hundreds of Bangladeshi Canadians spontaneously brought out a shoe procession near the venue to protest his visit. No, it was not organised by any political party.

No one should be at all surprised by BNP's above-mentioned stands because it is in absolute

tune with the main agenda of BNP since its formation by late Ziaur Rahman. BNP and the values and virtues of our liberation war are mutually exclusive.

The reason of my writing this piece is not to play the broken record but to express my perplexity about the news items on December 12, 2012, that ninety or so freedom fighters of MGP under the leadership of Ishtiaq Aziz Ulfat have joined BNP. Welcoming the new entrants, BNP chief claimed that the BNP was a party of freedom fighters who fought in the front and the Awami League was not a pro-independence force. She alleged that the incumbent government has "destroyed" the "true" history of the nation.

Is the public stance of the BNP chief in resonance with the demand of Ishtiaq Aziz Ulfat and his comrades of 1971, which was to form a special tribunal to try the war criminals? Syed Muhammad Ibrahim Bir Pratik, who said in that gathering that in 2007 "there is no compromise with the war criminals," has found strange bed fellows.

In 1971, ours was a people's war. Aside from the men in uniform, the freedom fighters could be divided into two broad categories: student (political) activists and the ordinary youths, who were guided by sheer love for their motherland. After our victory, many nonpolitical activists joined politics. I believe Ishtiaq Aziz Ulfat and his comrades belonged to the second category, and were able to refrain themselves from joining any political party for the last 41 years.

It is beyond comprehension why, at this defining moment of the nation, these valiant patriots whose principal objective over the years was to bring the war criminals to book have joined a political party whose chief's unhidden stance to overturn the trial process is obvious. The BNP chief also promised to revive the "true history" which, in her words, has been "destroyed" by the current government. Does it mean that Ishtiaq Aziz Ulfat and his freedom fighter comrades would be happy to see the revived history that was presented to the nation for 21 long years, where Hamlet was played without King Claudius of Denmark, where *razakar* and "Pakistani occupation forces" were forbidden words?

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Time to turn grief into action



MILIA ALI

I vividly recall the day when my daughter was in second grade and I received an unexpected call from her teacher asking me to bring her home because she was running a fever. I dashed to the school expecting to see her slumped at the back of the class, probably sobbing. Instead, I was directed to the nurse's office where I found my little girl comfortably snuggled in a cot with a blanket wrapped around her. I cannot describe the sense of relief and comfort I felt. Since then I have always thought of school as a safe haven where children are nurtured and cared for. The news about the tragedy in the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut has completely shattered that belief and sent my world awry.

All I can think about is the crushing grief of the parents of the little children. The emotions of the mother who had promised to finish the bedtime story that she had started the night before and the dad who put the beautifully wrapped gift under the Christmas tree hoping to see the joy and happiness in his daughter's eyes when she opened it. Nothing will ever be the same for them again. Like everyone else I, too, am overcome with grief.

Aside from grief, I am angry and disappointed that despite the spate of senseless killings in the country there has been no concrete action by the government to address this issue seriously. This may be a good time to ask how a demented person armed with a semi-automatic rifle forced his way into an elementary school and slaughtered twenty innocent kids and six wonderful adults.

It is shocking that the supporters of the gun lobby still argue that if the staff at Sandy Hook Elementary had been

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armed, the incident would have ended with fewer deaths. No it would not, because there could have been a two-sided carnage. And, exposure to gun battles in the school corridors is not the kind of education we wish for our kids. It's bad enough that guns have invaded our public spaces to the extent that we are scared to enter a theater or a temple or a train. Now the gun supporters are telling us that we need to destroy the sanctity of our schools by turning them into battlegrounds?

Unfortunately, the debate on gun control is mired in semantics and ideological battles about the second amendment in the US Constitution which gives citizens the right to bear arms. Those opposed to stricter gun laws argue that the problem does not stem from gun availability but mental illness. It would be natural to ask: why are mentally ill people getting their hands on a gun? Today, there are reportedly 300 million privately owned guns in the US for a population of 314 million. The National Rifle Association, the group that promotes the right to own firearms, is one of the most powerful organisations in the country. So powerful that, despite the fact that 3000 Americans die each year from gun violence, the Congress has been unable to address the issue.

I realise that one must respect the individual rights of the people as stipulated by the Constitution. However, the Constitution might give citizens the right to bear arms but not the right to kill innocent men, women and 6-year-old children. And let's not forget that the second amendment was adopted in 1791 -- two hundred and twenty one years ago. Since then the world has changed substantially. Based on the demands of the current situation there is an urgent need to take a closer look at the amendment and find ways to impose restrictions on gun ownership.

President Obama in his address to the nation said that there is need for "meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics." I really don't know much about the politics and neither do I care. All I know is that guns are no longer a political issue; they have now become a parenting issue. And we parents ask our president, the most powerful parent in the country, to take resolute action and introduce tighter gun control laws.

Finally, a personal appeal: Mr. President, my grandson is 4 years old. In two years time he will be ready for elementary school. I don't want to sit at home biting my nails, wondering whether or not some crazy, trigger-happy person with easy access to guns will attack him and his school mates! Please do something -- and now!

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The massacre of children

CHANDRA MUZAFFAR

THE whole world condoles with the families of the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut. It is a terrible tragedy: 27 people dead, 20 of them six and seven year-old kids. It is the worst school massacre in the history of the United States.

Senseless, mindless killings of this sort have been happening at regular intervals in the US. They have become more frequent in the course of the last couple of years.

Lax gun control laws that vary from state to state are seen as one of the causes. The ruling elite should have the courage to introduce tough gun control laws at state and federal levels. These should pave the way for the eventual prohibition of private gun ownership.

But over and beyond the question of gun control, US society as a whole will have to deal with its deeply entrenched culture of violence. Its emergence as a state was characterised by unspeakable violence against the indigenous people of the land. The African slave population was also a victim of cruel violence perpetrated by slave owners and the ruling elite. Violence has continued to be perpetuated in politics and social life through the ages.

One of the main reasons why violence figures so prominently in US society is because its global power has been built around the institutions and instruments of violence. The US is the world's biggest military spender. In 2012, its military expenditure was \$711 billion, more than 40% of total global military expenditure. Its 800 odd military bases gird the globe. It has the most devastating arsenal of weapons in the possession of any nation or empire in the history of the human race.

This huge killing machine has gone into action on a number of occasions in the last six decades in pursuit of its agenda of control and dominance. And among its millions of victims have been thousands and thousands of children. US clandestine wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, among other Latin American countries, from the fifties to the eighties, testify to this fact. Who has kept a count of the children killed by US bombs in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the sixties and early seventies? Have we forgotten

the 650,000 children who died as a result of the severe Anglo-American engineered sanctions against Iraq from 1991 to 2003 -- sanctions which in reality served as a weapon of war? After the US led invasion and occupation of Iraq in March 2003, thousands of children continued to die in the unending sectarian conflicts unleashed by the war. The US-Nato occupation of Afghanistan has had a similar effect upon children. Many children have also been killed in the unmanned US drone attacks along the Afghan-Pakistan border. The US had participated actively in the Nato bombing of Libya in 2011 in which scores of children per-

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shed. Today, the US, in collusion with some of its allies including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, is providing material and military support to rebels and foreign mercenaries in Syria who have deliberately and brutally massacred children in various parts of the conflict ridden country.

In this regard, there is also the violence against children committed by the US's special ally, Israel. Weren't a disproportionately high number of Palestinian children killed in Operation Pillar of Defence in 2012 and Operation Cast Lead in 2008-9? What about the children killed in the 2006 Israeli assault on Lebanon? Or, the large number of children wiped out in Lebanon in 1982 by the right-wing Christian Phalangists in Sabra and Shatila, who were working hand-in-glove with elements in the Israeli political and military leadership?

We ask, who weeps for all these children killed over decades in different parts of the world by the

might of power? Who mourns for these innocent lives? Who sheds tears for these buds of beauty crushed to death under the heels of the rulers of the world? Has the mainstream Western mediaCNN or BBC; *The New York Times* or *The London Times* -- ever highlighted the massacre of these little ones? Do politicians across the globe trip over one another to offer sympathies to the families of the children killed?

But let us be clear about this: it is not just the US and its allies who have killed children. During its occupation of Afghanistan, the demised Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was also guilty of killing children. The Iraq of Saddam Hussein tortured and killed children of dissidents. So did the Syria of Hafiz Assad. In confronting the militants in his country, his son, Bashar al-Assad, has also killed children. The Taliban, in and out of power, have not spared children either in their military operations. Some Palestinian freedom fighters have, without batting an eyelid, blown up Israeli children in a school bus or in a school cafe.

This utter lack of humanity has manifested itself in countless other situations involving children. In Sudan, in Somalia, in Kenya, in Rwanda, in the Congo and in Mali, children, trapped in violent conflicts, have, in the past as in the present, paid the ultimate price. Violent conflicts, whether internal or external, in any part of the world in Indonesia or Thailand; in India or Sri Lanka; in Ireland or Serbia invariably take a huge toll on the lives of our little ones.

This is why we must do all we can to minimise violent conflicts. We must address the underlying causes of these conflicts which are often related to political power, economic resources or religious/cultural sentiments. Sometimes violence at the individual level may have a psychological root. There may be elements in our primary socialisation that may explain our tendency to resort to acts of violence. An attempt must be made to rectify them.

It is only if we are prepared to overcome the underlying causes of violence that we would be able to eliminate one of the most horrific crimes against humanity--the massacre of children.

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