

Duty-free cars for MPs

It comes at a huge cost

THE finance minister AMA Muhith gave an account of how majority of lawmakers have imported expensive cars on a duty-free basis on Monday. He has also explained how much money the national exchequer has been denied just to go by this entitlement.

The cost to the public exchequer is estimated at Tk.10 billion in terms of unpaid taxes. The question is does it behove the elected public representatives of a country of which the majority population is poor? And is it ethical on their part to take advantage of this kind of privilege stretching it too far oblivious of how people might take it?

Of course, the need for suitable vehicles to visit their constituencies cannot be overemphasised. But what is at issue here is the application of discretion in terms of enjoying entitlements. Although resale has gone down lately, nonetheless some may be still taking place.

The argument that the MPs have not committed any wrong as they acted within their rights does not stand to reason. Because, the objective of the government in creating the provision of tax-free cars for MPs was definitely not meant for such wastage of money. The idea of supplying them with tax-free vehicles for increased mobility is acceptable. But what is at issue is discretion in using a privilege.

The redeeming feature amidst this widespread craving for luxury is that only a minority of some 35 MPs including the Leader of the House Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia have showed some discretion in using the opportunity.

While the PM and the opposition leader have set an example before the nation with their decency and consideration for the people, it is worthwhile to note that their gesture hardly inspired their party colleagues.

It may be recalled that the arrangement was introduced during the reign of Ershad as an inducement for lawmakers to buy their loyalty. Unfortunately, far from scrapping this unethical practice, or limiting it to modest specifications, the successive elected governments since 1991 have kept it intact.

After the revelation at the Jatiya Sangsad, it is time the government had a rethink of the provision of allowing such privilege for the MPs in a no-holds-barred manner. This is especially necessitated by their position as public representatives and lawmakers in view of the fact that other citizens have to pay taxes.

We condemn the killing of a teacher by his pupil

The reactive road blockade was unacceptable

WE are at a loss for words at the murder of Shakhawat Hossain, a teacher by profession who was stabbed and killed because he was only doing his duty as an invigilator. Mr. Hossain was killed by a SSC examinee in South Keraniganj who was caught in the act of cheating during the examination and prevented by the teacher in question. And this is the reaction? To take a knife to repeatedly stab the teacher until death is repugnant to all sensibility of normal teacher-student relationship. We condemn this heinous crime in the strongest possible terms and demand the perpetrator face the full brunt of the law to answer for the crime he has committed.

While it is easy to condemn the act and demand punishment, the sad truth of the matter is that focus will soon shift away from this incident to cover the next big one which should be arriving any time now. And when the camera flashes and media coverage have died down, the bereaved family members of Mr. Hossain will be left to face the music of an uncertain future. We are grateful for the sorrow expressed by the Education minister. We would be even more grateful if the authorities took measures to compensate the family for Mr. Hossain, who was a school teacher of modest means and leaves behind a family in need.

The initial reaction to the murder by students and teachers of Chunkutia Girls' High school and the locals was familiarly predictable. The highway connecting Dhaka and Mawa at the locality was halted for five hours. We don't see any sense in blockading of the road. All it produced were assurances, which had already been given by the local administration and public representatives. Hence this culture of blockading roads is

GROUND REALITIES

Catharsis at Projonmo Chottor



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

LET us get one thing straight. History has no room for quislings and collaborators. There comes a point in time when even the toughest of foreign agents succumb to circumstances; and once that happens, they never ever again come back to life, in that political sense of the meaning.

Now, there are these days in Bangladesh a pretty good number of people who appear to be mighty upset with the trials of those who assisted the Pakistan occupation army in committing genocide and rape in this country. We will not suggest that these people are all Jamaat supporters or sympathisers. But without question they are people who would want the Awami League and by extension the nation's secular politicians and parties to be pushed out of power. Include among this group all those men and women who had a most wonderful time under the sun in the twenty one years the Awami League was kept away from power. These men and women, after August 1975, came together in an elitist mould, separated themselves from the nation's rural majority and made sure that assassinations and coups d'etat were protected by a mauled, mutilated constitution.

You read the comments of some of these people, especially in light of the resurgence of the popular will in relation to the War of Liberation at Projonmo Chottor, and you wonder why they are so intent on deluding themselves. Their naivete is appalling. Here you have tens of thousands of young men and women informing the country that they remember the struggle in 1971, that they will not have Bangladesh slip into the hands of the old collaborators again, that while they are apolitical they are resolute about their loyalty to the country.

Now observe these doubters who lose little time in sprinkling their faux wisdom all over the place. If these youths are so concerned about history, ask these unhappy,

angry individuals, why don't they raise their voices against the corruption of the government? There is an elemental problem here, one that afflicts people who do not understand the lessons of history or do not accept history that has no room for their reactionary ideas, if you can call them ideas.

The whole point about the crowds at Projonmo Chottor is being missed by these self-appointed keepers of the nation's conscience. And the point is not

assassinations of the generation of liberation leaders and soldiers in 1975, little men with big dreams of power let these bad men go free. And one day these peddlers of death drove around the country in vehicles displaying the very flag they tried to tear apart in the dark months of our twilight struggle.

The irony today is that those who are put off by that liberating catharsis of feeling at Projonmo Chottor, who see in the movement a conspiracy by the ruling party, stay quiet

who, oblivious of the fact that it is some seminal moments of history that are being talked about, introduce the rather uncouth issue of what they feel was Bangabandhu's assumption of a dictatorial role in early 1975. If it were up to these elements, they would kill Bangabandhu and the Mujibnagar leaders all over again. Not a word is there to condemn his assassins; nothing about the twenty one years in which his killers roamed free, thanks to two military regimes and a civilian elected government. The absence of a sense of history in these critics of secular Bangladesh is striking. It then becomes fairly easy to understand why the 'Bangladeshi nationalists' are so disinclined to part company with people who once loved Yahya Khan and Tikka Khan in this land.

But history has a way of striking back. It has little patience with ghosts which emerge from unquiet graves, with disinterment of the corpses of murderous politics. It is history which is now at play at Projonmo Chottor. There is no government behind it. No political parties are fuelling these protests. The machinery of the state is conspicuous by its absence. It is the young, always the young, who make history. They are doing it again.

The young have always been there -- in the Language Movement, in the agitation against Ayub Khan's education report in 1962, in the mass upsurge of 1969, in defying the Yahya regime in March 1971, in the war against Pakistan. And lest the wise critics of the nation's founding fathers forget, we will tell them that it was a young Bengali leadership that between February 1966 and December 1971 steered this nation to freedom.

It is the young, all across the country, who will preserve freedom in all its sanctity. These young have grasped the truth of history, which is why they will always remain miles ahead of those who have made it their life's purpose to deny history. Baying at the moon has always been to little purpose. The moon does not care.

.....

The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*.
E-mail: ahsan.syedbadrul@gmail.com



HABIBUL HAQUE/DRK NEWS

about legalities. It is not about narrow partisan politics. It is, simply and fairly stated, all about morality. And morality tells us that those who do not respect their country, who assist alien forces in killing their fellow citizens, are truly symbols of evil. And evil men must not be permitted to join the company of respectable society.

The Bengali collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army committed evil in 1971. It is our misfortune that in the vacuum created by the

about the crimes the men of the Jamaat committed so cheerfully forty two years ago. You will bump into individuals, politicians as well as readers, whose one unchanged, irritating refrain is condemnation of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. You speak of the Six Points, of the non-cooperation movement of 1971, of the war, all of which are part of history where the Father of the Nation had a major role to play.

Ah, but there are the philistines

SHAHBAGH MORH

Righting historical atrocities

HASANUZZAMAN

2013 will go down in Bangladesh history as a special year.

The year witnessed the reincarnation of the spirit of 1971 through a mass mobilisation process at Shahbagh, demanding death penalty for the perpetrators of the 1971 genocide.

Instead of exploring creative titles and painting the emotional state of Shahbagh, this article hopes to remind readers of the 1971 Liberation War and its aftermath. This has been done with the optimism that it will help the Shahbagh movement gain momentum and solidarity to withstand the anti-liberation forces in Bangladesh.

The entire March 26 to December 15 period is significant because it was a time when, in the quest for a national identity, we lost many of our bravest and brightest citizens, when hundred thousands of women lost their dignity, when children became orphans and mothers wept themselves to sleep unaware of the fate of their sons and daughters.

Professor Rounaq Jahan, a distinguished political scientist, divides the liberation war into three phases. In the first phase (April to mid-May 1971), the Pakistani army engaged in killing civilians, particularly young males, and burning in order

to terrorise the population.

During the second phase (mid-May to September), systematic and organised rape was the weapon of war used by the Pakistani army. Professor Jahan observes: "Girls and women were raped in front of close family members in order to terrorise and inflict racial slander."

The second phase remains one of the key turning points in the history of Bangladesh because it was during this period that the Pakistani government deliberately recruited Bengali collaborators from the Islamist political parties such as the Muslim League and the Jamaat-e-Islami, who were opposed to the Awami League's call for an independent Bangladesh.

In the third and final phase (October to mid-December), with the objective of depriving the new nation of its most talented leadership, the Pakistani military killed the most respected and influential intellectuals. The impact of this phase can still be felt today in our society where one can only conjecture the contribution that such talents could have made to the socio-economic advancement of Bangladesh.

The aftermath of the genocide committed by Bangali collaborators created mistrust in the society, which continues to divide our ideas

and perceptions about our motherland. Professor Jahan writes: "The sheltered and protected life of women, provided by the Bengali Muslim cultural norm, was virtually shattered in 1971. Thousands of women were suddenly left defenseless and forced to fend for themselves as widows and rape victims."

BNP's stance on the war crimes is an ideal example to help comprehend the consequences of the Liberation War. On the one hand, in late 2012, they invited freedom fighters for a party excluding their major ally Jamaat, and on the other hand, they are refusing to play their role as the "opposition" that is expected of them in a parliamentary democracy.

Awami League won a landslide victory in the 2008 election promising to prosecute the perpetrators of crimes committed in 1971. The AL government set up an International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) with the mandate to prosecute Bangali collaborators involved in those crimes.

Organisations such as the Sector Commanders' Forum, which is committed to releasing Bangladesh from its blood-stained shackles, need to join hands with those in Shahbagh in order to obtain the desired verdict. In addition, Prothoma publication's Ekattorer Chiti (Letters from 1971) could play

a pivotal role in mobilising both public and international sentiment.

Much more can be done by our media and civil society groups to fulfill their duty to their motherland by reminding us of our struggle for independence, the Liberation War and all the factors that enabled us to claim our national identity.

The perpetrators of the 1971 genocide should, at the least, be tried for their attempt at dwarfing a nation's development by depriving Bangladesh of its most talented and intelligent citizens, and shattering social norms. We can only hope that may be one day Pakistan will confess to its war-crimes. We can only hope that one day we will be able to bring the Bangali perpetrators to justice in order to set right our historical records. Finally, it can be hoped that the present government, with its unprecedented mandate on Din Bodol can bring about qualitative changes in the way we conceive and identify ourselves as Bangladeshis. We must continue to demand the trial of the 1971 criminals until we are able to see the dawn of justice, and let the ghosts of the past rest in peace.

.....

The writer is a Senior Research Associate, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).
E-mail: zaman.h1984@gmail.com

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 13

1739

Battle of Karnal: The army of Iranian ruler Nadir Shah defeats the forces of the Mughal emperor of India, Muhammad Shah.

1931

New Delhi becomes the capital of India.

1984

Konstantin Chernenko succeeds the late Yuri Andropov as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

1990

German reunification: An agreement is reached on a two-stage plan to reunite Germany.

1991

Gulf War: Two laser-guided "smart bombs" destroy the Amiriyah shelter in Baghdad. Allied forces said the bunker was being used as a military communications outpost, but over 400 Iraqi civilians inside were killed.