

Stand by the minorities

Stop the anarchy

IN these very columns, and very recently, we had urged caution against any attempt to spawn religious disharmony. Regrettably, stray incidents have escalated to the extent that leads us to believe that there is a deep-rooted conspiracy in marking out a specific minority group at this time. It is regrettable that condemnation from the government has at best been muted while it has come three days too late from the BNP through the statement of the party Chairman.

It is regrettable that in more than 14 districts the minorities have been targeted, their houses burnt and they have been left at the mercy of nature. We want to ask a simple and straightforward question. Why are the minorities being targeted? Are they an encumbrance to any one's political aim? The world will judge us by how we treat our minorities. What has happened in the last three days does grave damage to the nation's credibility as a country of religious harmony.

It is a contemptible for anyone to conceive of such an act, and if it is a political strategy this will deeply affect the very fundamentals on which we fought and liberated the country. Those who are perpetrating violence against the minorities are certainly not friends of Bangladesh, because these may have wider international ramifications.

Bangladesh could justifiably take pride in the fact that it has enjoyed a harmonious atmosphere where all communities and people of all faiths have coexisted peacefully, barring a few aberrant situations, the present being one that must be addressed immediately.

The matter concerns the nation and not just the party in power, since ill effects of unchecked violence on the minorities will engulf the nation and not any one particular party. It is thus imperative that we cut across party lines and unite to stop this madness and anarchy.

Economy is the biggest casualty

Political agitation taking a toll

THE present political turmoil that has engulfed the nation since the declaration of Sayeedi's verdict is exacting a heavy toll on the economy. Long days of hartal coupled with deadly clashes claiming lives have disrupted the supply chain of goods in the markets. This has resulted in price spiral of essentials in all wholesale and retail markets of the capital city. By and large all business and productive sectors of the economy are suffering. The worst hit are naturally day labourers and the poorer segments of society.

What economists fear is that should the present political climate continue its descent into sustained chaos, the very foundations of the economy may become unstable. Trade, both inward and outward, has been adversely affected. Disruption in the import of raw materials and capital machinery is taking its toll on industry. Ultimately, the export basket, of which readymade garments forms an overwhelming, portion will be threatened. Another victim of the ongoing political volatility is the tourism sector. The fact that until very recently some 20,000 tourists were stuck in Cox's Bazaar as road links were cut off, has sent absolutely the wrong signal to prospective foreign tourists that Bangladesh is indeed the country to visit.

It is hardly surprising to see the various chambers of commerce voice concern over the current political impasse. Not only is production suffering, with public perception in government's control over the situation falling, investors' confidence (both domestic and foreign) is plummeting. The multitude of negatives is not going to help the economy reach its projected 7.2% GDP growth rate for the current fiscal. The country will not be served well if factory owners are forced to shut down their plants and thousands are left jobless. Surely time has come for cooler heads to prevail on both sides of the

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

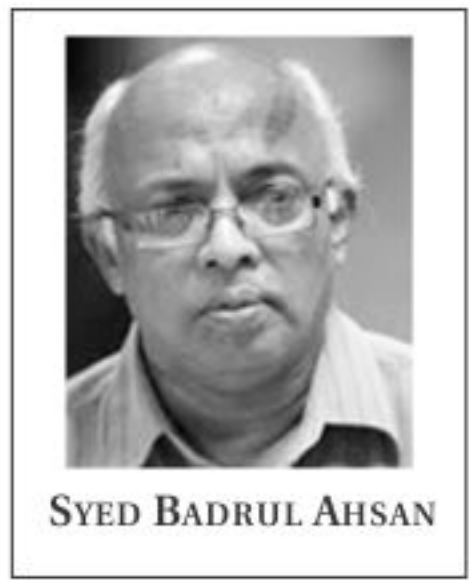
March 6

- 1921** Portuguese Communist Party is founded as the Portuguese Section of the Communist International.
- 1946** Ho Chi Minh signs an agreement with France which recognizes Vietnam as an autonomous state in the Indochinese Federation and the French Union.
- 1953** Georgy Malenkov succeeds Joseph Stalin as Premier of the Soviet Union and First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
- 1957** Ghana becomes the first Sub-Saharan country to gain Independence from the British
- 1964** Nation of Islam's Elijah Muhammad officially gives boxing champion Cassius Clay the name Muhammad Ali.
- 1968** Three black males are executed by Rhodesia, the first executions since UDI, prompting international condemnation.
- 1975** Algiers Accord: Iran and Iraq announce a settlement of their border dispute.

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GROUND REALITIES

They test our piety, again!



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

SADEK Hossain Khoka, freedom fighter, former mayor and well-known politician, has served warning to our patriotic young people at Shahbagh. They must, he has said, desist from what they are doing. If they don't, he and his political camp followers will wage a movement against these young people in every locality. Now that is quite interesting. Not even in the worst days of Ayub Khan and Monem Khan did they or their loyalists speak of waging war against the young who wished to see democracy return to the country.

Khoka has his priorities wrong here. Besides, as a freedom fighter, he is in the wrong party. Any politician, any individual with a minimum of respect for the principles of the Liberation War cannot fail to see why these young men and women and with them an entire nation are today united in a movement against the war criminals of 1971. For Khoka, his very background as a freedom fighter should have alerted him to the dangerous game his party is today playing in alliance with the Jamaat. In 1971, he was engaged in a war against the Pakistan army and its local collaborators. That memory should have made him think twice before castigating the young people who, fortunately for us, are today much more of a vanguard of freedom than Khoka and his party are.

Khoka's threat of a movement against the young in every locality is fundamentally a call to war, an invitation to a crisis that will spin out of control for everyone in Bangladesh. The former mayor may not see eye to eye with the Awami League, but the fact that he appears to be seeing eye to eye with people who once

opposed our struggle for freedom is troubling. It is troubling not so much for the nation but for those who, having fought for national liberty, have in these more than three decades cohabited with the enemies of freedom in the BNP and, in an alliance of questionable convenience, with the Jamaat.

The tragedy for the BNP is that its ambivalence about the War of Liberation has today pushed it into a corner where its friends are the very people we have known as the collaborators of the Pakistan army. The BNP did not have to be there, not in 1979, not now. The nation's problem with General Ziaur Rahman is not that he cobbled his political party into shape. It is, that in his intense desire to keep the Awami League at bay, he saw absolutely nothing

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wrong in letting the old murderous forces of darkness out of their lairs and back into politics without at all reflecting on the long-term damage his moves would cause the country. The BNP could have been a credible, respected political party had its leading lights gone for a harnessing of the light which comes of a serious, sustained reading of history.

And today, the BNP appears determined to place itself at an ideological variance with the rest of the country. Its chairperson thinks the Awami League-led government is committing genocide. Do we have to believe that no one in the BNP knows the meaning of genocide? Its acting secretary general suddenly decides that these perfectly Muslim, perfectly secular Bengalis at Projonmo Chottor

are endangering Islam in the country. Haven't we heard all this before -- in 1952, 1966, 1969 and 1971 -- when the men responsible for leading Pakistan tried to pull the wool over our eyes with talk of Islam every time we demanded democratic justice and social equality?

Why must men like the BNP acting secretary general test our piety all the time? And why should we indulge them in their dark game of turning this state into a communal undertaking through attempting to prise us away from our historically secular moorings? Yes, it would be fine if the BNP and its followers wished to speak about Islam out of their own religious conviction. But Islam and the Jamaat? The two don't go together; and if now the BNP has banded with a historically Islam-

damaging Jamaat to defend Islam, it's sheer nonsense.

Besides, whoever has suggested that Islam is in danger in Bangladesh? If there is any community which is truly and gravely in danger here, it is the Hindus. It is the Buddhists, whose temples were set afire and whose religious scriptures were burnt in Cox's Bazar last year, who are in danger. Have we, in this country and for all our diversity of political beliefs, ever reflected on the question of why the Hindu population in Bangladesh has been declining and why the Buddhist community, after Cox's Bazar, feels betrayed by a land it has called home for centuries?

No, it is not Muslim sentiments that are in danger. Those politicians

who are worried about saving Bangladesh's Muslims from themselves should, if they have the courage and if they believe in the power of politics to do good, go out and reassure those Hindus and Buddhists that this country is a home for all and a shared heritage for everyone.

Sadek Hossain Khoka thinks the youths at Shahbagh are working against the country and its people. Perhaps someone should tell him those youths are the country, that they are the people? Perhaps he should be reminded, because he once was a soldier for freedom, that those who are up in arms against the country are those who vandalise property, beat up policemen and send terror sweeping down the streets? Perhaps he ought to ask people whose leadership he swears fealty to why they do not know what the definition of genocide is?

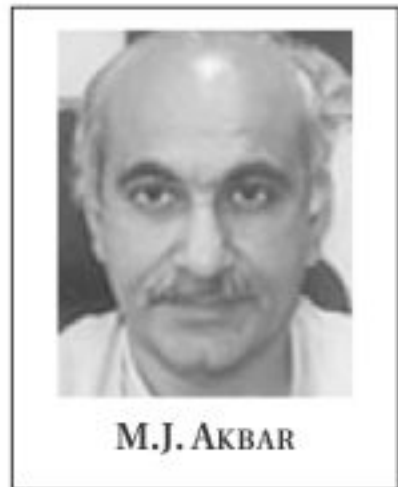
Khoka warns the young that they should understand the people's mind. That is again a fallacy. The people of this country know what they need; they know the enemies they must defeat for good; they know that three million of their compatriots died for a country they loved. That is the people's mind. If Khoka does not understand that, if his party is afraid to read the message, it will be a pity.

The Muslim League went against the people and so died a predictable death. The Jamaat, having helped the process of genocide in 1971, can do nothing more than call up its old tactics of scare-mongering. Why must the BNP emulate the Muslim League and the Jamaat? Where are the historians and intellectuals that will help it to come closer to the people of Bangladesh? Why must it be a party of perennially angry men and women?

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BYLINE

The politics of not having to apologise



M.J. AKBAR

IF an apology could change the past, it might mean something. If it could rescue the future, even more so. But no apology arrives until the mind has already changed, making it a historical tautology. It took a British PM 93 years and 11 months to admit that the Jallianwala massacre was "deeply shameful." The "sorry" word still did not slide through British constipation, but who cares?

The slight delay in David Cameron's pseudo apology was logical. The British remain convinced that the Raj was a good thing for the natives. Britain's best-known, as distinct from its best, historians get lucrative media space and happy television assignments to add decibels to collective self-congratulation. Their narrative glosses over some inconvenient facts. The British empire was launched in 1765 with the zamindari of Bengal. Almost immediately, a man-made famine killed one-third of Bengal's population, estimated at a staggering 10 million, because of the East India Company's insatiable greed for land revenue. British rule ended in an equally devastating Bengal famine; this time, some three million died.

The average rate of growth in the last five decades of the Raj was just 1%, and the rural economy lay devastated, but who dare argue with the march of bagpipes at heaven's command through textbooks? Even our

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh thanked the British for their rule.

The majority British view was that Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer saved the Empire in 1919 when he ordered his Indian and Gorkha troops to open indiscriminate fire on peaceful protestors gathered at Jallianwala on Baisakhi day, April 13. With 1,650 rounds, they killed 530 and left over a thousand seriously wounded. That was efficiency. Barely a bullet was wasted. Dyer had not imposed martial law, nor given warning. He shot to kill and justified

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this decision before the subsequent Hunter Committee by claiming that he had scotched a serious Punjab rebellion with this show of force.

The governor of Punjab in 1919, Michael O'Dwyer, thought Dyer went overboard when he ordered Punjabis to crawl, but supported the carnage at Jallianwala. Public opinion in England was vigorously supportive of Dyer. The Morning Post opened a subscription to reward Dyer, "Defender of the Empire;" its editor, Sir Edward Carson, was the first to send a donation, followed by O'Dwyer. The grateful British gifted a purse of £30,000 to Dyer.

Dyer and O'Dwyer (who was shot dead in London in March 1940 by

mask of British colonisation.

But colonisation was an achievement, not a regret, in the age of empires. There is no particular reason for Cameron's contrition. But there are many reasons why Indians should apologise.

When will Indians and Gorkhas apologise for killing fellow Indians at Jallianwala? They continued to squeeze the trigger on unarmed, helpless civilians amid screams and shock until ammunition ran out. When will brown bureaucrats of the Indian Civil Service, who found clever explanations for colonial exploitation, apologise? British rule was never a solely British enterprise. It could not have survived a day

without an obedient Indian comprador class, most purchased by nothing more glamorous than a salary. When will the zamindars and nawabs, who squeezed a famished peasantry to death and feasted in garden-palaces on the rewards, apologise?

The British used a million Mir Jafars, who queued up to serve, during their 150 years of true power. They had come a long way to rule, not to turn the other cheek. A transfer of wealth to the "mother country" was standard procedure in the era of European colonisation, and not uniquely British. It must also be stressed that British rule, for all its faults, was much more humane than that of France in Algeria, Belgium in Congo or the Dutch in Indonesia.

India's problem with history is a consistent unwillingness to do some serious research in a mirror. The British did not establish their rule, step by careful step, merely because they were strong; they succeeded because Indians had become weak. How about a collective Indian apology on behalf of our recent forefathers?

Cameron could do both Britain and India a favour by clarifying that his "deep shame" was only a political nod to his domestic Punjabi voters ahead of a difficult election in 2015. That would make sense. Britain and India could then forget about any silly apology, and continue treating each other like very good tourist destinations.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.