

War crimes, 1971 memories and justice

JULIAN FRANCIS

A couple of days ago, I experienced, in the middle of the night, a very scary bout of cholera like diarrhea. In between my very frequent visits to the bathroom, I slipped in and out of sleep and in my dreams, rather nightmares; I remembered the hundreds of Bangladeshis I saw dying of cholera in the refugee camps in India in 1971. I remembered vividly the mass graves I helped dig. In my dreams, I imagined myself in a hospital bed and the doctor telling me that there was no saline with which to treat me. I told him that in 1971 I saw coconut water being used instead of saline and lives had been saved in that way.

As I was recovering from my stomach upset, I picked up a recent issue of *The Daily Star* and came across Mahfuz Anam's powerful writing of October 4, 'War crimes trial and failure of our politics'. For someone who witnessed the birth of Bangladesh, it is painful and difficult to understand that many Bangladeshis do not support the war crimes trials. Surely justice must be done! There are also those who deny that any genocide took place. Whenever, someone tells me this or I read this, I become very angry indeed and also incredulous. I remember families of Bangladeshis -- Hindus and Muslims -- coming in a traumatised state across the border to access some of the over 900 refugee camps.



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Men, women and children of all ages, struck dumb by the horror of seeing some of their loved ones murdered before they managed to escape. I remember being in a hospital in Krishnanagar, West Bengal, in June 1971 at the same time as an international reporter from, I believe, *Newsweek*. I remember this young girl in a colourful dress and this is how the reporter recorded our meeting with this

girl who was about 10 years old:

The story of one shy little girl in a torn pink dress with red and green bows has a peculiar horror. She could not have been a danger to anyone. Yet I met her in a hospital in Krishnanagar, hanging nervously back among the other patients, her hand covering the livid scar on her neck where a Pakistani soldier had cut her throat with his bayonet. "I am Ismatar, the daughter of the late

Ishaque Ali," she said formally. "My father was a businessman in Kushtia. About two months ago he left our house and went to his shop and I never saw him again. That same night after I went to bed, I heard shouts and screaming, and when I went to see what was happening, the Punjabi soldiers were there. My four sisters were lying dead on the floor, and I saw that they had killed my mother. While I was there they shot my brother -- he was a bachelor of science. Then a soldier saw me and stabbed me with his knife. I fell to the floor and played dead. When the soldiers left I ran and a man picked me up on his bicycle and I was brought here." Suddenly, as if she could no longer bear to think about her ordeal, the girl left the room. The hospital doctor was explaining to me that she was brought to the hospital literally soaked in her own blood, when she pushed her way back through the patients and stood directly in front of me. "What am I to do?" she asked. "Once I had five sisters and a brother and a father and mother. Now I have no family. I am an orphan. Where can I go? What will happen to me?"

Perhaps it is necessary to remind people about what happened in 1971 and for the members of the younger generation it is important to accurately inform them of the genocide unleashed by the Pakistani army and their collaborators. Because of 'Operation Searchlight', 10 million refugees came to India, most of them living in appalling conditions in the refugee camps. I cannot forget seeing 10 children fight for one chapatti. I cannot forget the child queuing for milk, vomiting, collaps-

ing and dying of cholera. I cannot forget the woman lying in the mud, groaning and giving birth.

However, I do remember some happier moments. I remember Muslim families making sweets for the Hindus in the refugee camps for *Durga Puja* in 1971 and the Hindus reciprocating at *Eid ul Fitr*. *Eid ul Adha* occurred in February 1972 and I recall local Hindu shopkeepers in Bongaon handing out sweets to Muslim families who were returning to their Bangladesh homes at that time. The message was loud and clear. "We are not either Hindus or Muslims. We are Bangladeshis and Bangladeshis!"

In 1971, the population of Bangladesh was about 75 million. 10 million came to India as refugees and it is estimated that about a further 20 million were internally displaced inside Bangladesh. Therefore, as Mahfuz Anam indicates, it is likely that, today, you would find that most families lost family members or suffered in some way during the Liberation War. It follows, therefore, that the majority of the population should be in support of the war crimes trials. In any case, what ever happens, it is important that the history of Bangladesh is recorded correctly.

The writer coordinated Oxfam's refugee relief programme in 1971 for 600,000 Bangladesh refugees, continues to live and work in Bangladesh and was, in March 1972, awarded the 'Friends of Liberation War Honour' by the Government of Bangladesh.

The singer not the song

SYED ASHRAF ALI

ONE of the two great festivals in the Islamic calendar, *Eid-ul-Azha* brings for the Muslim world divine blessing, joy and happiness, and Allah's Mercy and Reward through sacrifice, patience and constancy.

Eid-ul-Azha is celebrated on the 10th of *Dhul-Hijja* through immolation and prayers in memory of the glorious sacrifice of the Prophets Ibrahim and Ismail (peace be upon them) and shows the way in which both father and son cheerfully offered to suffer any self-sacrifice, however painful or difficult, in order to obey Allah's Command.

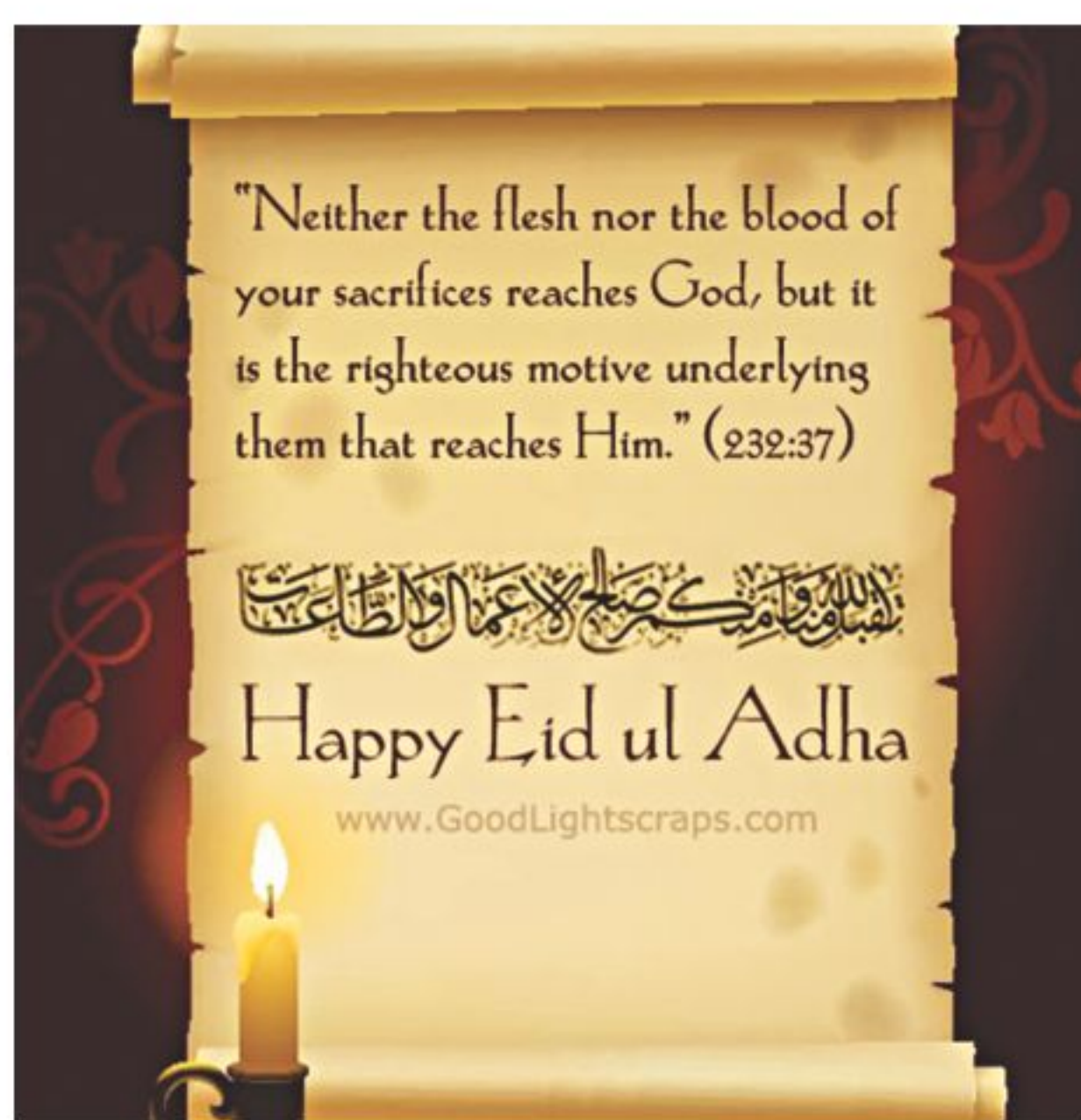
The word *Eid* in Arabic means 'joy.' But *Eid-ul-Azha* is certainly not an occasion for immoderate gluttony. It is a solemn, sacred festival which enables a *banda* to enjoy through *azha* -- sacrifice and surrender, resignation and renunciation, selflessness and total submission to the Will of *Rabbul Alameen*.

Celebrated concurrently with the slaughtering of the animals in Mina by the *Hajjis* and the days of *Tashriq* in the auspicious month of *Dhul-Hijja*, *Eid-ul-Azha* is also known as *Eid-al-Kabir* or "the Great Festival." Some also call it *Eid-ul-Qurbani* or the "Sacrificial Feast," and "*Yaum an-Nahr*." In Bangladesh and Paschimbanga it is also known as *Kurbanir Eid*.

Sacrifice has always played a significant role in the chequered history of mankind. Sacrifices have been made to get rid of natural calamities like flood and cyclone and earthquake, to evade famine, to solicit rain, to stop volcanic eruptions, to win wars, to allay tyranny, to appease or eulogise gods and goddesses.

Human sacrifices have indeed been made by various nations in various forms and for various purposes since the dawn of civilisation. The glorious and inimitable attempt of *Hazrat Ibrahim Khalilullah* to slaughter his son *Hazrat Ismail Zabihullah* (pbut) as a sacrifice in obedience to God's Command, however, stands unique in the annals of history. Never, never indeed, on the clay of this cold star has any other father tried to slaughter his own son with his own hands, and in full senses, simply to obey the Master's Command.

It was indeed a momentous occasion when two men, with concerted will, "ranged themselves in the ranks of those to whom self-sacrifice in the service of Allah was the supreme thing in life." The glorious incident, which took place in Mina some 3,800 years ago, commenced a new era in religious history. It teaches us the very essence of our religion that the keys of life and Death, and the mysteries



of everything around us, are in Allah's Hands; that our honesty, determination and upright conduct are not matters of policy or convenience; that no task or responsibility, however difficult or heavy a burden it may be, is greater than what we can bear. It teaches us, in the words of the Holy Quran, that "short is the enjoyment of this world: the Hereafter is the best for those who do right." It teaches us that a Muslim does not live with his body, but he lives with his spirit. It teaches us not to love life over much, seeing that we must one day part with it. It teaches us to face death with resignation.

The historic incident in Mina, wherein a ram was sacrificed in lieu of a human being, put an end to the horrible system of human sacrifice which was common among most ancient people. The world today stands indebted to the righteous Patriarch and his dedicated son for their noble example in uprooting the age-old savage custom.

Muslims all over the world celebrate *Eid-ul-Azha* every year and hundreds and thousands of sheep, cows, goats and camels are sacrificed on the 10th day of *Dhul-Hijja* in the name of Allah. Unfortunately, however, very few of us celebrate this auspicious occasion in a befitting way. Very few realise that *Rabbul Alameen* does not need the flesh and blood of the animals. What He asks for is the *Taqwa* and not lives in a physical sense. *Sura al-Hajj* in the Holy Quran

declares very clearly: "It is not their meat nor their blood that reaches God, it is your piety that reaches Him. He has thus made them subject to you, that ye may glorify God for His guidance to you. And proclaim the Good News to all who do right." It is not the singer but the song that matters.

It is very clear that what Allah, in His infinite Mercy, desires from the *bandas* on this sacred occasion is giving of our whole being to Him. It is by the mention of Allah's name that an animal is sacrificed. The utterance of the Quranic verses affirms and asserts over and again: "Truly my prayer, and my sacrifice, my life and my death, are all for God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds." It is not an empty mention of a word that Muslims make, the very hearts of the momens tremble at the mention of the Holy Name. Each and every Muslim sacrificing an animal should bear in mind if he can sacrifice an animal over which he has full control for a particular period of time, how much more necessary it is that he should lay down his life in the Way of Allah, Who is not only his Master but also his Creator and Sustainer.

It will indeed be a sin if we forget the supreme sacrifice made by the Prophets Ibrahim and Ismail (pbut), buy an animal, slaughter it just for the sake of fun and gourmandism, and celebrate this auspicious day through mere pleasure and gaiety, extravagance and dissipation, unbridled merry-making and uncouth entertainment. No Muslim, nay, no human being, has any right to humble the unparalleled sacrifice of the Prophet Ibrahim and his son (pbut) by equating it with the mere slaughtering of an animal with no *taqwa* behind it. We will certainly insult those salts of the earth if we celebrate *Eid-ul-Azha* only through expensive clothes and delicious dishes, and not through prayers and penance, sacrifice and benevolence.

Allah has very kindly given us power over the brute creation and permitted us to eat their meat, but that too if we pronounce His Holy Name at the solemn act of taking the animal's life. Through this solemn invocation are we reminded that wanton cruelty is not in our thoughts and is never permitted in Islam. Nor does the Most Perfect *Deen* of Allah permit extravagance or wastage, arrogance or cruelty in the name of religion on any occasion, *Eid-ul-Azha* is the system of denying ourselves the greater part of the food derived from the sacrificed cattle for the sake of the poor brethren; our symbolic act finds practical expression in benevolence, and that exactly is the sublime message that *Eid-ul-Azha* conveys.

The writer is a former Director General, Islamic Foundation Bangladesh.

S.M. Ali: A life in dedication



SYED BADRUL HAQUE

NINETEEN years ago, on October 17, S.M. Ali, icon of our journalism passed away in Bangkok where he had been taken for treatment. His was an inspiring portrait of a journalist who decided early in life to devote his intellectual and writing gifts to serving the nation. He made his debut in journalism in the early fifties as a reporter of the erstwhile premier English daily *Pakistan Observer* and made his mark for his feature-reportage, 'The City We Live In.'

On his return to Pakistan from England he served in senior positions in reputed dailies like *The Dawn* in Karachi and *The Pakistan Times* in Lahore, where he also served as a part-time teacher in journalism of the Punjab University. He was the managing editor of *Bangkok Post* from 1966 to 1970 and made a name for himself as a journalist of great distinction. Later, he worked for *The New Nation* (Singapore) as roving foreign editor and *The Hongkong Standard* as managing editor.

Though he was away from newspaper world for more than a decade since joining the Press Foundation of Asia in Manila and later Unesco as its Regional Communications Advisor for Asia in Bangkok, his romance with journalism remained passionately singular. In late eighties, after a stint as editor of *The Bangladesh Observer*, he launched his dream project, *The Daily Star*, as its founding editor in 1991. And that was his finest hour, the grand finale of his stellar career in journalism spanning over four decades. Under his able stewardship, the paper caught the eye of discerning readers. In no time, its readership soared steadily outpacing its contemporaries.

Beyond solemn editorial appeal, his writings stirred the conscience of the nation. Through his writings he forcefully articulated the paramount need for national consensus on the core values to consolidate national unity through mutual accommodation. Verily, he had a great deal to do with the prosperity of the paper and its role in a free nation. He had introduced new features, columns and layout and repressed the worn-out looks of our journals. Although English dailies that have appeared in recent times have the characteristics of contemporary journalism, *The Daily Star* could still claim to have something near a monopoly of certain features.

He was always keen to help his younger colleagues, particularly those who wanted to make a career in journalism, with his professional expertise. Like a guardian-angel he, in his later years, cautioned me "not to nurse any illusion about journalism. Life in journalism is too hard for most of us, often it may seem almost unbearable." Yet, there were young aspirants who wanted to face the challenge -- the moving urge, its thrill apart, being to serve the society from a 'vantage point.'

S.M. Ali's novel, *Rainbow Over Padma* is a strong addition to the genre of fictional work on our nation's resurgence in the aftermath of the grueling War of Independence. Humanity is never in doubt in his works. In the desperate sociology of the society, the writer in his prescience finds in our downtrodden people a promise of a new Bangladesh where they would be lifted out of poverty and live with human dignity. The book was published posthumously in Dhaka in 1994 while another book, *After the Dark Night* was published by the Thompson Press (India) in 1974.

The esteem in which he was held as a journalist-writer was evident when the Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos addressed him as Dr. Ali when the latter called on him at his presidential palace in Manila. Taken aback, he informed the president that he had not been conferred with such degree. In reply, the president said: "If your writings were any measure, you had already earned the degree much earlier than now."

Reassuringly, *The Daily Star*, with his successor-editor Mahfuz Anam, has been sailing commendably well on the legacy left by its redoubtable founder-editor, S.M. Ali.

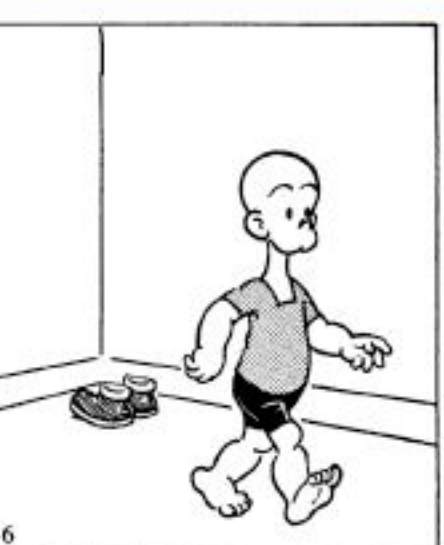
The writer is a former press secretary to the President and a contributor to *The Daily Star*.

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