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Abject Failure of State PR

CHINTITO

I refer to a front-page commentary "Propaganda and the war crimes trial" by our editor Mahfuz Anam (7 Nov 2014); I quote "...we have never made any effective effort to counter the propaganda of the Jamaat and their supporters and have never challenged their narrative in an organised, consistent and sustained manner". Anam indirectly exposes the apathy of our government, missions abroad and all concerned in projecting to the world the 1971 atrocities perpetrated by Pakistan and their Bangalee cohorts, failing which we find Al-Jazeera, Turkish, and EU patrons among others making us feel guilty when our courts and tribunals hand out sentences on those really guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

We have a Ministry of Liberation War Affairs since 2001, but it is now obvious that it has been kept busy giving away untruthful certificates to government servants and others including to its own secretaries, and therefore it cannot be really faulted for not having an agenda or the time to project the need and the justification for the trial of Golam Azam, Matiur Rahman Nizami, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, Mohammad Quamaruzzaman, Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, ATM Azharul Islam, Delwar Hossain Sayedee, Abdul Quader Mollah, Mir Kashem Ali...,

who under the circumstances will obviously do their part to vilify Bangladesh to any listening ear beyond our borders.

Not that I have any first-hand document, but I fear the Liberation War Ministry would have come across serious hurdles if it tried to contact anyone outside Bangladesh without going through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which could be due to established norms of proceedings or even the MoUs of the respective ministries. The point to note here is that the M/o Foreign Affairs is not seeking approval from anyone when it expresses its opinion on matters from Padma (M/o Communications) to potato (M/o of Food), or from Ebola (M/o of Health) to Elephanta (M/o Culture).

The above conjecture is based on the confusion that often unfolds after a crime occurs in midstream or in areas overlapping neighbouring police stations as to which station will record the case. The naughty amongst us may term it 'shrugging responsibility' or 'avoiding work', but actually the law-enforcers are going by the law. The delay sometimes is so annoying and the paperwork so cumbersome that any interest of the complainant in a case also goes.

The red-tape with which the British packed the subcontinent's gift of independence (1947) will

help bail out every concerned ministry from culpability of the failure as explained in our editor's commentary but the fact is that 43 years after the last Pakistani barrel was muffled, we still apprehend what the outside world might be thinking about people killing us, how much some party out there might pressurise us for wanting justice on account of it. Our state public relations has failed us miserably. Will the ministry responsible please raise their hand? I see none. Anyone with a better eyesight will see likewise.

The paradigm reminds us of the ghostly 'short circuit' that is readily blamed (if it can be) after almost any incident of fire. Why so? Because some wise guy with the intellect of a defence lawyer was able to establish sometime in our history that no one is responsible for an electric 'short circuit'; it just happens, me lord, even perhaps even in places where there is no electricity. Truth be told, a short circuit causes fire because a person or more did not design, execute, inspect or use the system and the appliances correctly, and there were flammable materials around. There are people behind a short circuit; therefore, hold them liable.

What about our diplomatic short circuit? Obviously, some ministry or more failed to think about it, let alone chalk out a plan to carry out an aggressive campaign. Does the Foreign Office have a desk for handling anti-trial comments, TV reports, editorials...? Does the M/o Liberation War Affairs have one? Have our embassies and high commissions organised seminars (ever?) explaining to the foreigners, public and government, that the genocide in Bangladesh was real? That indeed our mothers were raped mercilessly? There is no other way. That our children were killed brutally? There is no human way. That our men were selectively picked up, often at the behest of Razakars, Al-Shams and Al-Badr, lined up, bayoneted or shot at close range most cruelly. There is no defence.

We are traditionally shy to project our nation and our nationals. Otherwise, why will one of the biggest restaurant businesses in the world, plus 15,000 restaurants in Britain, 85% of which are run by Bangladeshis, mostly from Sylhet, and valued at about £600 million annually, be coined as Indian? The Tajmahal owned by Sukkur Ali! The Bombay Balti owned by Anis Miah! The joke on the punters; they are but consuming Bangladeshi chicken tikka masala. But where is the Bangladeshi pride? Where is the PR?

Why do we have to wait for National Geographic to tell us that mountaineer and activist Wasfia

Nazreen is a world celebrity in adventurism and women empowerment? Did we not already know that she had peaked Mount Everest? Did we not know each time she was conquering the highest mountains, continent after continent? This November when Wasfia annexes Oceania's Carstensz Pyramid, she will be among an elite group of another about 350 climbers, not many of them women, who will have been atop the Seven Summits of the world. But then she is a Bangladeshi is what stops us from beating her first drum. Of course we will ape anything international.

Why did Shakib Al Hasan, sustaining for a handsome period as the number one all-rounder in the world, have to be a victim of BCB's 'misunderstanding' when playing in the Caribbean professional league? Was he not humiliated? Could he not have been coached, counselled, cooled and cajoled in just a wee bit more balanced way? In any of the other top Test-playing countries, Shakib would have indeed become an Ian Botham or an Imran Khan, but then he had to take 10/124 after scoring 137 runs in the same Test early Novemberto join their ranks, officially. Now we are going over the moon (Are we really?) because the 27-year old is only the third player in history to achieve the enviable double. The nation should help him to climb even greater heights, even if he is a Bangladeshi; say a century and ten wickets in another Test match.

Does any of our embassies anywhere have photographs of a Londoni Bangladeshi restaurant operator? Do the walls in Berlin or Beijing have Wasfia's beaming face? Is Shakib seen playing a masterly stroke or spinning an unplayable delivery at Prague or Lisbon? Of you have answered 'no' to all the questions, then you have a good idea about our international public relations.

Let this be the future.

If a Bangladeshi visa seeker arrives at our embassy in Tokyo, wide-eyed he should ask pointing at a big picture, 'Who is that?'. Our embassy staff should answer politely, "Oh! That is a very famous Bangladeshi painter, SM Sultan".

In Budapest: Who is that? Oh! That is one of our favourite singers, Sabina Yasmin.

In Ankara: Who is that? Oh! That is Kabori, our celebrated film actress.

In Oslo: And that? Oh! That is a great Bangladeshi footballer, Salam Murshedy.

In London: Why is that photo-frame blank? Oh! That is Chintito. We have no idea who he is.

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