

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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48 years as an independent nation *Let this be a moment of deep introspection*

TODAY marks 48 years of Bangladesh as an independent country. Today, we feel proud as a nation for how far we have come in only a little less than half a century since independence. But not only is today a moment of elation for us all, it is also one of grief and mourning. The massacre that the barbarous Pakistani military junta embarked upon in March 25, 1971 has left permanent scars on our collective conscience.

As we observe the Independence Day today, we pay our deepest respects to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu, for his unparalleled role in Bangladesh becoming an independent nation. Bangabandhu's leadership and guidance during those tumultuous times will forever remain unmatched in the country's history.

Today, we also pay homage to our four national leaders—Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, Captain Mansur Ali, and AHM Quamruzzaman—who were brutally killed in 1975 in Dhaka Central Jail. These four heroes, who played a key role in the formation of the Mujibnagar government that guided the War of Liberation, can never be forgotten.

We also pay our respects to all those freedom fighters, men, women and children who lost their lives during the bloody nine-month-long war.

We are still waiting for a formal apology from the Pakistan government. Pakistan, as a state, should realise that apologising to Bangladesh would not belittle it—rather it would be a sign that the country is beginning to acknowledge the role of its leaders in the events leading up to our independence.

We also feel there is a need for deep introspection to assess what we, as a country, can do for a more egalitarian and just society that our martyrs gave their lives for. It is equally important to recognise our achievements on the one hand, and acknowledge our shortfalls on the other. Income inequality is rising, millions still live in extreme poverty, violence against women is rampant, and corruption in our public institutions and banking sector is yet to be rooted out. Without a mindset of honest reflection, it will not be possible to address the shortcomings.

The endless revisions of Purbachal Project *Why are plans being changed to accommodate certain quarters?*

THIS newspaper on March 24 reported how Rajuk is trying to change land allotted for educational institutions and environmental preservation in the Purbachal Project into commercial and business plots. Since the scheme was launched in 1995, due to pressure from “influential people”, the plans have been changed five times, leading to arable land and flood flow zones being gradually reduced. In the latest revision, Rajuk intends to decrease the 269 acres dedicated to 157 educational institutions to 119 acres for more residential, commercial and other purposes.

We reported insiders telling us that this has been done to increase the number of plots, thus allowing allotment to more applicants. More importantly, we also learned that doing so would compromise “some indispensable standard characters and features”. One result would be that educational institutions, which would have had their own playing fields, would now share common fields.

That a planned project is being changed over and over again as per the wishes of the wealthy, influential and politically-connected people, is absurd. More so because a common complaint about our rapidly urbanising city is the lack of green spaces and playing fields for children. The High Court's comment, in declining to approve the proposed revision earlier this year, comparing it to a “smart trick” turning playgrounds of educational institutions into commercial plots, is revealing. Yet, Rajuk has now appealed the HC's directive.

Going back further, we see more anomalies in this project. There are allegations of secretly allotting institutional plots from areas earmarked for schools and playgrounds, violating a 2014 HC judgment. Officials approached for our report turned out to be evasive or vague in their answers. Trees have been felled and water bodies have been filled up indiscriminately, which could harm the environment and make the area concrete jungles with very little open spaces. No one in Dhaka is unfamiliar with the consequences of such a scenario. The court's decision is yet to come. But we would urge the authorities to launch an independent investigation into the anomalies and allegations of pressure from certain quarters. Otherwise, it is public money that will be spent in an unaccountable manner according to the whims of the rich and influential.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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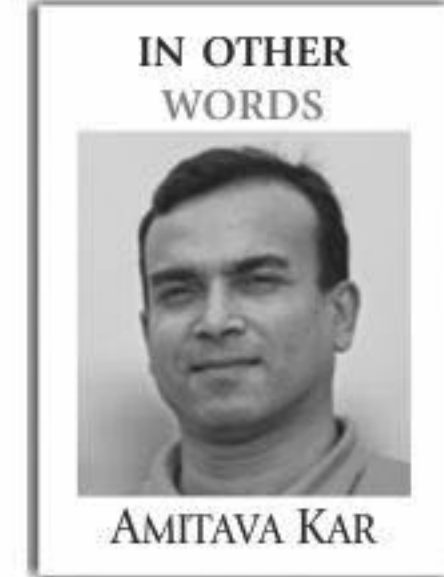
What if the Rohingya repatriation bid doesn't work?

The government of Bangladesh has given moral, financial and basic support to the Rohingya people. The world media as well as the world leaders have appreciated Bangladesh's contribution for this persecuted community by using words such as “laudable”, “exemplary”, etc. Without a doubt, this is one of the biggest challenges that Bangladesh had to face in recent decades. We have already noticed the trickle-down effects of the crisis on the local economy, health, society, and environment.

However, there is immense disappointment and frustration as regards the failure of the world leaders to take substantive action against Myanmar. Bangladesh will face unimaginable challenges if the repatriation bid is not successful. Therefore, the question that naturally arises: are we ready to face that possibility in the name of humanity?

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Time to speak up for Palestine



IN OTHER WORDS
AMITAVA KAR

ON March 20, 2019, the UN Human Rights Council held an interactive dialogue with Michael Lynk, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel since 1967. In a video message, Lynk expressed grave concerns about the growing Israeli illegal settlement in Palestinian territories since the beginning of the year, with the announced construction of 6,000 new housing units, accompanied by high rates of demolition of Palestinian homes in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

The session was followed by a general debate attended by more than twenty-five countries that unanimously condemned the continuous violation of human rights by Israel in the form of excessive use of force, arbitrary detention, construction of illegal settlements, obstruction of freedom of movement, demolition of houses, violations of the right to education and health, and the illegal seizure of camps. They also criticised Israel's refusal to cooperate with the Special Rapporteur, thus undermining international human rights norms and the letter and spirit of the Charter of the United Nations.

Representatives of Israel, as the concerned country, did not bother themselves with being present in the room. As I watched the video presented by the Special Rapporteur, I was reminded of *Angelus Novus*, a watercolour by Paul Klee, the Swiss-born German surrealist painter, which depicts a wide-eyed angel with hands raised into the air as though in shock. This is how the angel of history must look if he saw the piles of destruction of Palestinian homes growing toward the sky.

There was hardly any mention of the session in international media. This silence is the greatest success of the Israeli establishment's hasbara—say one critical word about Israel and you will be called anti-Semite. Perhaps that is why the United States Congress, until very recently, has remained mostly mum on Israeli atrocities in the occupied territories. Representatives from both houses, who operate in an atmosphere where the pro-Israeli lobby holds significant power, have consistently minimised and deflected criticism of Israeli policies, even as it has become more aggressive in its occupation of Palestinian territories and adopted several practices similar to apartheid in



A Palestinian waves a flag near a destroyed section of the border wall between the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

PHOTO: REUTERS

South Africa and Jim Crow segregation in the United States.

Many civil rights activists and organisations have remained silent as well, not because they do not care about the Palestinian people, but because they fear the stigma of being labelled anti-Semitic. They are also worried about losing funding from powerful foundations. They are afraid that their social work will be disgraced by smear campaigns. Many students in North America are fearful of expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people because of secret organisations such as Canary Mission, which reportedly blacklists students, activists, professors and organisations that dare to publicly support boycotts against Israel, and sends the names to prospective employers, jeopardising their employability and careers.

Just look at what happened to Ilhan Omar, the first Somali-American and one of the first two Muslim women elected to US Congress. She got in hot water earlier this year for questioning why it was okay for her to talk about the influence of the NRA (National Rifle Association), of fossil fuel industries or Big Pharma, and not talk about a powerful lobbying group that is influencing policies. “I want to talk about the political influence in this country that says it is OK for people to push for allegiance to a foreign country.”

For the first time in history, someone dared to tell the truth to the American people about Israel but the fierce engine

of the Jewish lobby started doing everything to crush her. “ Hamas has entered the House,” comedian Roseanne Barr was quick to cry out. “A black day for Israel,” tweeted president Donald Trump. House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Eliot Engel asked Omar to retract her statement. President Trump mentioned removing Omar from the House Foreign Relations Committee. It remains to be seen how long she will be able to withstand the pressure.

Notice the machinations of the Israeli propaganda engine; how it was able to equate constructive criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. Abdul Matin, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Dhaka University, talking about how to think clearly, once said to me, “It is important to make distinctions and make those distinctions clear.” It seems that most Americans and Europeans have failed to make a distinction between the two.

The Israeli lobby has managed to construct an alternative reality where the world is reminded constantly of Israeli victimhood in the face of Palestinian terror and nothing about occupation, expropriation, bombing, assassinations and military tyranny. This may explain why there has been no significant public support in the capitals of North America and Europe for Palestinian statehood, when millions marched in the streets of these places when George Bush invaded Iraq.

This has to change. Ilhan Omar started a new discourse to American

politics and public opinion despite being told repeatedly to shut up. The rest of the world must join in.

The pressure cooker cannot hold indefinitely. Israel needs a viable Palestinian state for its own existence. “The biggest existential threat facing Israelis is not a nuclear-armed Iran. The real peril is to be found at home: the corrosive effect of the Palestinian problem on Israel's international standing,” said Shlomo Ben-Ami, a former Israeli foreign minister.

All said and done, let's hear a joke by Omid Djalili, a British stand-up comedian of Iranian descent:

The Palestinian delegate at the UN says, “Before I make my point, let me tell you a little story. Hundreds of years ago in Palestine, Moses was walking through the desert and he came across a rock. He banged the rock with a stone and a fountain of water came out creating a pool. Exhausted from the heat, Moses bathed in the water. But as soon as he got out of the water, he realised that his belongings were gone because they were stolen by a thieving Jew.”

At this point the Palestinian delegate was interrupted by his Israeli counterpart. He said, “Objection. At that time in Palestine, there were no Jews there at all.”

To which the Palestinian delegate said, “Now that this fact has been established, I would like to start my speech.”

Amitava Kar is a mechanical engineer.

Bangabandhu: Up close and personal

SYED BADRUL HAQUE

BANGABANDHU'S 99th birth anniversary was commemorated on March 17, the date with an asterisk mark in our nation's calendar. Beyond this day's significance in our national life, I cannot resist recalling my memories as Bangabandhu's press officer.

In 1956, after a stint in journalism, my induction into government job as press officer to the then high-profile minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a benchmark in my service career. In the

around the main table and a sofa set. The curtains of his one-door room and the two windows were of moderate variety as was the norm in those days. It exuded a gentleness and a quiet ambience that characterised the secretariat premises at the time.

Visitors were few and far between. Regrettably, his room is still unmarked and unrecorded by the secretariat authorities. Also, the time that he had spent in the secretariat as minister rarely finds mention in the writings that appear about him or in the electronic and print media, although every stage of his career

was indeed the defining time to chart his next political strategy.

At times, there were moments when he seemed austere private, a loner—it was rather impossible to recognise his inner turmoil in his faraway look and the frozen melancholy of his features.

In one of his official tours to Faridpur town, Bangabandhu asked me to accompany him on his inspection visit to the district jail. He suddenly stopped in front of a cell and remained standing there for some time. I still vividly remember those unforgettable moments when he seemed lost in nostalgia. Later,

There were moments when he seemed austere private, a loner—it was rather impossible to recognise his inner turmoil in his faraway look and the frozen melancholy of his features.



An artist working on a mural portraying Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Tejgaon, Dhaka, on March 17, 2019.

PHOTO: STAR/PALASH KHAN

beginning, to be frank, I was a little nervous. But soon I felt reassured and comfortable. Initially, I used to show Bangabandhu my copies but later it was not needed. He sparkled in extempore speech; his baritone voice was indeed a bonus for his audience.

The room which he occupied as minister was located on the first floor of the Shahbag canteen (presently, Secretariat canteen), which was rather inadequate for ministerial accommodation. It had wooden chairs

was significant in shaping his political thought and career in politics. His tenure as a minister had, in fact, offered him a unique opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the exploitation of Bengalis by the Pakistani rulers since Partition. It reinforced his conviction that liberation was the only option left for the Bengalis if they were to live honourably in the comity of nations. It should be mentioned that this was the only appointment that he had accepted under the Pakistani regime. But then that

he told me of his imprisonment in his earlier days in that particular cell for protesting repression by the then government.

But only after some months in office, Bangabandhu elected to opt out from the cosy club of ministerial comfort and authority and be with his hapless people to galvanise them to fight for freedom albeit on a graduated scale—a role that he seemed to be preparing for all his life. Since then, much time had elapsed, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became

Bangabandhu and the Father of the Nation, as Bangladesh emerged on the world map from a classic war of liberation in contemporary history.

In the early days of independence, we had streams of visitors from all corners of the globe. On one occasion, I, then an information officer, accompanied a venerated German writer on her visit to Bangabandhu at Dhanmondi 32. Bangabandhu received the guest at the doorstep of his residence and took her to the drawing room. The writer complimented Bangabandhu on his unique leadership in the liberation movement that won freedom for the Bengali nation. Bangabandhu was also appreciative of the support extended by her country in building our ravaged economy. I was amazed by the superb memory of Bangabandhu when he called me by my first name even after so many years, and wanted to know about me. Never to forget, I was deeply touched by his kind words that remained etched into my heart. I recollect, it was rarely though, he accompanied by Wadud bhai was seen reading newspapers at the Press Club (then housed at old Press Club building).

Notably, Bangabandhu's unfinished memoir is the most seminal document for our understanding of the great leader. Hopefully, the country, headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangabandhu, is on the right track to make “Shonar Bangla” a reality after the cherished dream of the Father of the Nation.

Syed Badrul Haque, formerly public relations officer to the President, People's Republic of Bangladesh, is a contributor.