

## An extraordinary flood relief campaign

Let's keep up this culture of volunteerism

An extraordinary example has been set on the Dhaka University (DU) campus over the past three days. Under the leadership of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, DU students have launched a massive relief campaign for the flood-affected people of the country. The campaign, which began on the morning of August 22, is still ongoing, with people from all walks of life—from corporate workers to homemakers, from small children to elderly citizens, from day labourers to rickshaw pullers—contributing whatever they can. While students from DU are working around the clock to collect and organise relief goods, students from other institutions and volunteers have also joined the effort. The nation has not witnessed such a display of compassion and unity in a long time.

Since the start of the student-led mass uprising that led to the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government, Bangladesh has witnessed the power and unity of students, as well as the general populace, who have been desperate to bring about real change in the country. Now, as the country faces one of the deadliest floods in its recent history—which has already affected 48 lakh people in 12 districts—our students have once again shown us the way by uniting the entire nation. And it's not just the students of DU—other educational institutions and voluntary organisations across the country have also come forward to help those affected.

Over the past few decades, we have somewhat forgotten the culture of volunteerism that once existed in the country. The last times we witnessed such volunteerism were during the floods of 1988 and 1998, when people from all walks of life came forward to help. After the fall of the Awami League government, when there was virtually no government in the country and the police force was reluctant to perform their duties, we saw how our students managed traffic and safeguarded their localities and places of worship of religious minorities. We must revive this culture of volunteerism and stand by our people during any future crises—whether they be natural disasters or other emergencies.

Reportedly, by the second day of the relief campaign on August 22, around Tk 1.5 crore had been deposited into the relief fund operated by the students at the TSC, which is truly remarkable. While the biggest challenge in any such mass effort is organising the relief goods and utilising the received funds efficiently, it seems that the students are well-organised to do so. To help support the flood victims, we should all step forward to contribute whatever we can from our own positions. We must be prepared to help them after the water recedes, as they will need more assistance with rehabilitation and livelihood opportunities. And finally, we should continue such volunteerism for the sake of improving our country and for the betterment of all its people.

## Prevent a repeat of Rohingya atrocities

International community should play a more active role

We are deeply concerned that the United Nations has stated the Myanmar conflict is becoming so volatile that the atrocities of 2017 may be repeated against the Rohingyas. The UN human rights chief Volker Turk expressed concern on Friday, saying that the situation across Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine, has sharply deteriorated recently. Additionally, reports suggest that hundreds of civilians have been killed while trying to flee the fighting.

Exactly seven years ago today, the second phase of the Rohingya genocide had started. It is estimated that between August 25 and September 24, 2017, at least 6,700 Rohingyas were killed. Despite the Myanmar government dismissing these findings as exaggerations, the UN found evidence of widespread human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, summary executions, gang rapes, the arson of Rohingya villages, businesses and schools, among other horrific atrocities. Currently, a case is ongoing at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Myanmar of abetting genocide against the Rohingya ethnic group.

Following the events of 2017, an estimated 750,000 Rohingyas fled from Myanmar into Bangladesh and took shelter in various refugee camps. Despite repeated dialogues between Myanmar and Bangladesh for the safe repatriation of these Rohingyas back to their homeland, we have seen little to no progress made over the years. With clashes between the Arakan Army and Myanmar's ruling junta worsening, the possibility of further destabilisation in the region due to the ongoing situation in Myanmar seems to be rising rapidly.

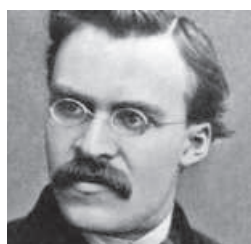
Reportedly, thousands of Rohingyas have already been forced to flee again on foot, with the Arakan Army herding them repeatedly into locations that offer scant safe haven. Finding themselves trapped between the military and its allies and the Arakan Army, many of them are again looking to cross into Bangladesh. Given that Bangladesh is already overwhelmed with its own issues, as well as struggling to continue providing support to the Rohingyas that had earlier sought shelter within its territories, the influx of even more Rohingyas into Bangladesh could prove disastrous.

The burden of supporting the Rohingyas—on humanitarian grounds, and rightly so—has been massive on Bangladesh. As such, we invite the international community to be more active in solving the Myanmar crisis so that this burden can be lifted and the region can regain some of its lost stability. We hope that every influential member of the international community, including the collective West, China and India, will urgently respond to this call.

### THIS DAY IN HISTORY

## Friedrich Nietzsche dies

On this day in 1900, German Classical scholar, philosopher, and critic of culture Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the most influential of all modern thinkers, died at age 55.



# Regain the land and regain its soul too

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN



We had lost both in the last decade and a half. We belonged to the land, but the land was anything but ours. Those who usurped power over time became like Doctor Faustus, and sold not only the soul for an eternal life but its body too to the devil. Otherwise, how can one be moved to tears at the destruction of a statue but remain impassive and unmoved by the deliberate killings of hundreds of young people? Ambition and greed trumped over ethics and morality, public good was sacrificed for personal aggrandisement, and the country was subordinated to the self. We were ruled, not governed.

The land was not ours because we were deprived of the right to choose our leaders to represent and govern the country. We were not only denied the right to shape our own destiny and determine the trajectory of our progress, but we were also robbed of our right to criticise the usurpers, to question them and hold them accountable.

Imagine for a moment that the people, being the employer—because it is their money that pays for the perks, privileges and all the trappings that go with the VIP tag, from the highest office of the country to the lowest paid peon—had lost their right to question whether their employees were doing their jobs properly and, if necessary, admonish them for dereliction of duty. Various anti-people and anti-democratic laws, such as the Digital Security Act, were enacted through a submissive parliament and validated by a compliant judiciary, hanging over the people like the sword of Damocles. Crossing their defined line meant incarceration, enforced disappearance and, in some cases, death.

So great was the fear infused by the coercive nature of the administration that even the media—the very few that had not surrendered to and become a part of the establishment—exercised such extreme level of self-censorship that it contradicted their primary responsibility of informing the people and holding the establishment to account (my article, "Surrender of the Fourth Estate?", *The Daily Star*, February 27, 2019).

Can we rightfully claim the land to be ours when emissaries from a



We now have the opportunity to correct the wrongs that were done over the past 15 years.

PHOTO: STAR

disappearances, extrajudicial killings and stage-managed encounters with the same narratives. Government agencies' operatives, in plain clothes, were on overdrive, picking up people without even adhering to legal norms. The agency that was supposed to provide security to the people became the cause of their insecurity (my article, "When state becomes the cause of its own insecurity," *The Daily Star*, July 22, 2010).

How can we claim the land to be ours when our strategic assets are frittered away to meet the so-called security concerns and geo-strategic and economic interest of a big neighbour? I don't recall any bilateral agreement or treaty in the last 15 years being ratified by Parliament. National interest was sacrificed at the altar of partisan interests. The comments and actions of some advisers to the prime minister made one wonder whether they were appointed to uphold the interests of the nation or the neighbour (my article, "What have we done with

exist with multiple identities.

We lost our soul when the constitution was ravished by the combined effort of a warped parliament and judiciary—the greatest harm done to the country's democracy by a dissolute chief justice whose fealty to the party in power borders on criminality.

democracy in Bangladesh?). Only the people are sovereign. As a corporate entity, they are beyond question.

The judiciary should be separated from the administration, and the Election Commission delinked from the administration.

The police should be recast, more than notionally like bringing changes

The ultimate damage to the soul was inflicted by corrupting the judicial system. This is to be expected when the chief justice is forced out of office at the point of a gun for a verdict that did not sit well with the party in power, as it obstructed their efforts to exert control over the judiciary.

What kind of soul resides in a body that allows wrongful confinement for indefinite periods, or endures the complicity of the judiciary and law enforcing agencies in scuttling the investigation and trial of the gruesome murder of a journalist couple, allegedly killed for possessing information related to people close to power who would have exposed their anti-state activities (my article, "The long road since 48 hours," *The Daily Star*, February 14, 2023), or that of a young soul from Narayanganj killed by a member of a family belonging to the ruling party?

A raft of issues needs addressing. Admittedly, each requires separate treatment. We must start by assessing

in the dress, but by implementing the measures recommended in the Draft Police Ordinance 2009. Their operational procedures, arms and accoutrements should be revamped. In a civilised society, we cannot afford for the police to become the armed wing of the party in power, the kind we suffered over the last 15 years (my articles in *The Daily Star*, "Can citizens' expectations from the police be met?" and "Who will guard the guards?").

Lastly, among internal issues, the duties and terms of reference for intelligence agencies should be revisited immediately. Over the past 15 years, it seems that these agencies, instead of ensuring state security and countering hostile intelligence, focused on securing the future of a political party. The Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, in particular, requires special attention (my article, "DGF's Lakshman Rekha," *The Daily Star*, February 9, 2012).

As for our external relations, we need to revisit all bilateral agreements and treaties to assess the benefits the country would draw from those. Otherwise, we ought to recast them in a manner and form that enhances our national interest. It was as if we were the Sindbad with the proverbial old man who would never get off our shoulders. We need to cast that old man off our shoulders.

The country can be regained by pursuing a robust and dynamic foreign policy where bilateral and multilateral relationship will be based on sovereign equality. Our foreign policy should be driven by our national security and interests, independent of another country's diktat, and should be designed to enhance our diplomatic manoeuvrability rather than be constrained by neighbouring demands. Treaties and agreements should be mutually beneficial.

Only when we are able to establish an egalitarian and pluralistic society—where the constitution will be respected by adherence to it and not by its violation, where the people will be governed by the rule of law, wherever it stems from, and not of men, when a person's qualities will be the prime consideration for his advancement and not his family connections, where the son or grandson will not have to bear his fathers or grandfather's cross, where people will be free to practice his creed without apologising for it and where people can coexist with multiple identities—will we be able to regain the nation's soul. This can be achieved by a new crop of leadership that builds bridges rather than divides the nation and is inclusive in their dealings. I believe it is time to pass on the baton.

I believe the student revolution was an outburst against the wrongs done to the people and the country. We now have the opportunity to correct those wrongs. Failure is not an option.



Children of the victims of enforced disappearances hold their photos at a rally in front of the National Museum in Dhaka, May 28, 2022.

PHOTO: STAR

so-called friendly country applies "friendly" pressure on an opposition leader unwilling to participate in an election which had zero credibility, urging his participation to lend it validity so that a proxy in Bangladesh could come to power and do their bidding? The result: 15 years of politics without democracy, a parliament with a peculiar and unique arrangement where the opposition was also a part of the government and where laws were enacted by trampling on the people's interests.

Can we claim the land to be ours when the state abdicates its bounden duty to ensure safety and security of individuals and groups? Dissenting voices were silenced through enforced

our strategic assets?," *The Daily Star*, August 16, 2022).

The country lost its soul too. And it began with the commercialisation of the most revered and sanctified part of our history the Liberation War, and with it the name of Sheikh Mujib—the two were commercially and politically overused. And what excesses were done in their names!

A wedge was driven that divided the people into various camps, into "we" and "they." And it was done successfully. The people were asked to think in binary terms—to choose between their faith and their ethnic identity, defying the underlying essential truth that the two were not mutually exclusive, and that one can

the loopholes in the system and how they have been exploited to corrupt it.

The guiding document—our constitution—should be the first focus for the current regime. We cannot have elected representatives turn into autocrats. Mere elections do not make a country democratic. We want democracy not just every five years, but every day of our lives. The past administration was essentially a one-woman show. This must be prevented by adding appropriate provisions to the constitution. Remember, Hitler was also popularly elected. Politics must be spared from becoming a family affair (my articles in *The Daily Star*, "Democracy means more than the ability to vote" and "Who killed