

## A tribute long overdue

### We must promptly complete the martyred intellectuals' list

As we observed Martyred Intellectuals' Day yesterday, honouring the bright minds of this land who were brutally murdered by the Pakistani occupation forces with the help of their local collaborators before our liberation in 1971, it is deeply disappointing that we have yet to finalise a complete list of these martyred intellectuals. Reportedly, the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs initiated efforts in 2020 to prepare a comprehensive list, as no complete record has been compiled even after five decades of the country's independence. Although the work was supposed to be completed by December 16 this year, it has remained suspended since July, casting uncertainty over its progress.

Over the past four years, the ministry published four gazettes listing the names of 560 intellectuals based on recommendations from a national committee, which also had a sub-committee to scrutinise the list. However, the sub-committee held its last meeting on July 1, and there have been no updates on the project since then. It appears that the political transition in the country might have created a vacuum in the committees, stalling progress. Some committee members have anonymously suggested that the work was postponed to avoid potential debates over the number of martyred intellectuals. Nevertheless, we believe that transparency and efficiency in the enlisting process can prevent any such controversy.

There should be no controversy or disagreement about the invaluable roles these intellectuals played in shaping the course of our history. These luminaries—academics, journalists, politicians, artists, litterateurs, philosophers, scientists, physicians, and engineers—played a pivotal role in the mass movements against the widespread inequality and oppression of the Pakistani regime, culminating in our Liberation War. Beginning on the night of March 25, 1971, the Pakistani army, aided by local collaborators, started abducting and killing these intellectual leaders. As their defeat became imminent, they intensified efforts to eliminate these prominent figures in the lead-up to December 16, 1971, to intellectually paralyse the emerging nation. Their loss has left an irreplaceable void in the intellectual sphere of the country.

Compiling a complete list of these national icons and learning from their lives and contributions is more critical now than ever, as we endeavour to build a nation free from discrimination following the ouster of a 15-year autocratic regime. Numerous sources exist from which information about the martyred intellectuals can be collected. For example, their names can be found in *Shaheed Buddhijibi Koshgrantha*, the 1972 documentary *Bangladesh*, Banglapedia, postal stamps, and various books and research works. These sources should be properly verified to ensure accuracy and inclusivity, avoiding any disputes.

We, therefore, urge the interim government to promptly resume the initiative to create a comprehensive list of martyred intellectuals and complete this vital project without further delay.

## We must have breathable air

### Urgent steps must be taken to address the air quality emergency

Physicians and health workers at Dhaka Shishu Hospital are struggling with a surge of child patients suffering from pneumonia. All the hospital beds are full and each day hundreds of children are treated as outdoor patients. Adults with breathing related problems are also suffering. Doctors say that air pollution is one of the main contributing factors behind cold-related diseases. As we know, Dhaka's air pollution has reached unbearable levels, recently ranking as the second highest in the world, prompting a government advisory for people to wear masks outdoors and for individuals with respiratory issues, allergies, or other vulnerabilities to avoid going out unless absolutely necessary.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), air pollution kills an estimated seven million people worldwide every year, mainly due to increased mortality from stroke, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, and acute respiratory infections. Over the last decade, the air quality in Dhaka, as well as in towns and villages near toxic smoke-emitting industries, has deteriorated significantly. Air pollution worsens during the colder months, with a persistent smog that lingers, unlike the monsoon months when rain temporarily alleviates the issue. However, the air quality remains poor throughout the year, causing chronic respiratory problems, particularly among children and the elderly, who are more vulnerable.

Unfortunately, little has been done over the years to mitigate the factors contributing to air pollution. Dust is a major nuisance for Dhaka residents, caused by year-long infrastructure and real estate development projects. This unregulated construction has led to unprecedented levels of airborne dust. Additionally, unfit vehicles spewing noxious fumes into the air worsen the situation, especially during daily traffic gridlocks, trapping people, including children, in clouds of poisonous gases. Brick kilns, which have proliferated on the outskirts of cities, further contribute to air pollution, affecting nearby residents.

The current interim government, along with future administrations, must take responsibility for controlling or eliminating the factors that have made our air almost unbreathable. Measures include banning unfit vehicles, enforcing public safety rules during construction, and prohibiting developers from leaving piles of dust on the streets. Air quality must be monitored regularly, particularly in high-pollution areas. Implementing low-emission zones, such as pedestrian-only streets and public spaces, creating more cycling and rickshaw lanes, and facilitating pedestrian-friendly areas are additional ways to improve air quality.

In the long term, Bangladesh must phase out fossil fuels and adopt renewable energy sources. Preserving existing greenery, planting more trees, and encouraging rooftop gardening will also contribute to making the air more breathable.

# Time for many to apologise



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MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

Given the politico-administrative culture of Bangladesh, it was quite refreshingly surprising to watch the Inspector General of Police (IGP) apologising to the citizens for the criminal excesses committed by the police during July-August mass uprising. He promised to bring the deviant police officials to book for their blatant criminal acts to meet the ends of justice. In fact, this is the minimum he must do to assuage the agonies of the near and dear ones of the victims who suffered immeasurably from the deaths and injuries caused by police action. The enormity of the casualties, numbering a thousand, and the injuries of several thousand shall remain an indelible shame on our national consciousness.

While the police force appears to be the visible principal offender in the indiscriminate loss of lives, a question arises as to whether other organs of the state that resorted to disproportionate use of lethal force have similarly apologised to the nation or, at the least, displayed some remorse or repentance. Then there are others at the policy level and at the strategic command position who are no less culpable in the deaths of scores of defenceless civilians

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during the uprising. Don't they need to apologise, notwithstanding their corporate criminal liability? Specifically, shouldn't our



Our politicians, civil servants, kleptocrats, media, and educators must apologise for their collaboration with Hasina's fascist regime.

FILE PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

politicians, whose unbridled desire for power and single-minded pursuit of money have landed us in this mess, atone?

It is time for discerning citizens to ponder over the factors and circumstances that have brought us to this precarious condition. During the preceding years, particularly in the last 15, the establishment has subordinated the individual to the government so completely that, with few exceptions, the nation is now made up of one-dimensional human beings. The government has dwarfed its citizens so that they may be docile instruments, without realising that with small men, no great thing can really be accomplished.

We have devalued the judiciary, as we have devalued every other important institution. Instead of defending our judges against political pressures and threats, and instead of insisting upon integrity and impartiality in judicial appointments, we have deliberately allowed the executive to supersede judges of calibre and courage and appoint persons who "subscribe to

the philosophy of the ruling party." The underlying disease that has destroyed our democracy is moral, political, and constitutional, and to cure it, we must recognise it as such.

Our politicians need to appreciate that the tone of public life has reached an all-time low. We have been burdened with so-called democracy without meritocracy, wherein

Our educators who are fondly addressed as the builders of the nation have largely failed to act as the moral supervisors. Quite disgracefully, many of them have been willing collaborators in the continuation of undemocratic dispensation, both within and outside academia. A number of senior teachers have jockeyed for key appointments in

ignorance, incompetence, and dishonesty are no disqualifications for high public office. Sadly, persons have been appointed to such offices because they represent a group or belong to a particular region. The ethos of public service has been badly compromised, and many government officials have behaved and acted subversively.

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It is no secret now that some of our prominent businessmen and bankers have fleeced the economy so comprehensively that it is becoming a mind-boggling exercise to put the house in order. Our kleptocrats had a field day while the nation bled. Don't they need to apologise to the nation?

an unbecoming manner, creating unhealthy precedents. Don't these educators need to apologise for their failings?

A segment of the media, the vital corrective institution aptly called the Fourth Estate, has been sadly and conspicuously biased and polarised in reporting and commenting on the state of public affairs. Some of them have towed official propaganda in the most unprofessional manner. The deviance in the media, no doubt, makes us look petty and small. Don't the conscientious gentlemen and women in the media need to apologise?

It is an unfortunate fact of our public life that the majority of our leaders personify the arrogance of power—the exact opposite of the unfeigned humility of great souls. One might not be wrong to assume that we now have two sharply divided castes—the rulers and the ruled. The ruling caste too often displays a dangerous blend of unscrupulousness and plain wickedness. It is now time for them to apologise and atone to the ruled.

## Could the Indian foreign secretary's visit create positive optics?



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Given the steady decline in Bangladesh-India relations since August, it is tempting to view Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri's December 9 visit to Dhaka and his talks with top leaders, including the interim government's Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, either negatively or positively. It all depends on one's own perception.

However, Misri's visit, the first by a top Indian diplomat since Hasina's escape to India, appears to have provided a much-needed welcome break from the rising cacophony of megaphone diplomacy and the shriller voices emanating from a section of the media which made the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India frosty, if not downright hostile.

It may be argued that Misri's interaction with Yunus, Bangladesh Foreign Adviser Md Touhid Hossain and Foreign Secretary Md Jashim Uddin did not yield new meeting ground, nor were they expected to during this initial round of talks. What it did at best was for the two sides to bring to the table their respective concerns and expectations of each other. Yunus flagged the issue of Hasina's continued stay in India and her statements from there which he

says added to the strained ties. Jashim Uddin conveyed Dhaka's concern over border killings and described India's comments on the plight of minorities in Bangladesh as "interference" in his country's internal affairs.

Bangladesh has resented a security breach at Bangladesh Assistant High Commission in Agartala during a large protest there against alleged attacks on Hindus. In Dhaka, Misri articulated the attacks on "religious, diplomatic and cultural properties" which fuelled resentment in India.

But it would be grossly unfair to just look at areas of concern. More than anything else, the Indian foreign secretary's visit underlines that the two countries are willing to not allow the incidents since August to prevent the efforts for charting a new journey. According to media reports, Yunus, during his meeting with Misri, said that the relations between Bangladesh and India were "very solid" and "close" and asked India to help "clear the clouds."

For his part, Misri stressed India's "desire to work closely with the Interim Government of Bangladesh." The Indian foreign secretary made it a point to recall that since the political changes in Bangladesh, Prime

Minister Narendra Modi was the first world leader to greet Chief Adviser Yunus on his assumption of office, the two leaders had a "very cordial" telephone conversation thereafter, and Yunus accepted Modi's invitation to speak at the online event 3rd Voice of Global South Summit in August. Plus, there was the meeting between Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Bangladesh Foreign

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Adviser Touhid Hossain in New York in September this year. Misri emphasised, "India desires a positive, constructive, and mutually beneficial relationship with Bangladesh."

Misri also made two important points. First, he conveyed that India has always seen in the past and will

continue to see in the future the relationship with Bangladesh "as a people-centric and people-oriented relationship, one that has the benefit of all the people as its central motivational force." Secondly, he made it clear the development projects executed by India in Bangladesh reflected mutually beneficial engagement on issues ranging from trade, commerce, connectivity, power, water and energy, consular cooperation and cultural cooperation. He said there is no reason why this cooperation should not continue to deliver in the interest of both Bangladeshis and Indians. This should be seen as a counter to criticism often aired in Bangladesh that India has invested in the Awami League rather than the people of that country.

After the Indian foreign secretary's visit, the two sides indicated their readiness to resume the unfinished challenges in bilateral ties—border management, trade and connectivity, water, energy sectors, development cooperation, consular, cultural and people-to-people ties. The jury is still out if the visit helped create largely positive optics. For that to happen, India and Bangladesh must be mindful of each other's areas of concerns and priorities and not brush them aside. It is to be noted that a day after Misri's visit, Yunus's press secretary Shafiqul Alam told the media that there have been 88 incidents of communal violence against the minorities between August 5 and October 22 (with him also saying that many of them were connected to the previous ruling party) and 70 people have been arrested in connection with those incidents.