**Our parting blow**

BY M A H I R A L I 2021-03-24

IT would be tricky to designate the starting point of the subcontinent`s second partition. The seeds, it could be argued, were sown during the late 1940s and fertilised through much of the succeeding two decades. There can be little question, though, that the point of no return was reached around midnight on March 25-26 half a century ago.

That was the night the massacres began.

The initial targets stretched from Awami League stalwarts and strongholds to the intelligentsia more generally among them university students, professors, writers, journalists, doctors and engineers. All too many of an incipient nation`s best minds were obliterated before its birth.

That could be described as Pakistan`s parting blow in the aftermath of the nation`s first properly democratic exercise the preceding December. The elections had been postponed from October after floods wreaked havoc in East Pakistan. They were followed in November by a cyclone and tidal wave remembered as one of the deadliest natur al c atastrophes anywhere in the world.

The estimated death toll hovered around a million. Pakistan`s military ruler, Yahya Khan, stopped over in Dhaka on his way home from a state visit to China, witnessed the devastation during a helicopter ride, then promptly resumed his journey to Islamabad.

He returned in due course, purportedly to oversee the relief effort, but by then the eastern wing was already fluttering in the wind, poised to take solo flight. Much of the assistance in its hour of dire need had come f rom foreign countries. This inevitably reinforced the impression among Pakistani Bengalis that their `brethren` in the West couldn`t care less about their trials and tribulations.

This sense undoubtedly fed into the December elections the first to be based on universal adult franchise, 23 years after independence. The nationalist Awami League, with its six-point agenda for provincial autonomy, won 160 of the 162 directly elected seats in East Pakistan an absolute majority in any putative national parliament.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto`s Pakistan Peoples Party surpassed expectations in Punjab and Sindh, but its total seats were barely half that of the Awami League and, much to Bhutto`s consternation, Yahya effectively designated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the next prime minister of Pakistan.

Within less than four months, though, Mujib was designated a traitor (not for the first time) and taken into custody, the Awami League was banned, and voters in East Pakistan faced a bloodbath. The feroc-ity of the military action was all but unprecedented in the postwar decades.

Through the remainder of 1971, the denizens of West Pakistan were kept uninformed by the local media, of ficial as well as `independent`. With the start of the military action on March 26, complete censorship was imposed and only of ficial versions of the events were allowed. The `trouble` in the eastern wing, we were relentlessly told, was an Indian plot. Sure, there were some `traitors` and a lot more `miscreants` but they were all being adequately dealt with by our fearless `jawans`. The implication was that in due course all would be well, the `patriotic` Bengalis were anyhow in a majority, and the necessarily harsh treatment would bring the rest to their senses.

In the 50 years since then, this kind of nonsense has never entirely been superseded by a more objective narrative. The recent cancellation of a Lums seminar on the topic reinforces the impression that thesources of power in what was once deemed the rump state still can`t handle the bitter truth.

Perhaps we don`t wish to be reminded of the f act that for all its foibles, follies and inherited flaws, Bangladesh is doingbetter than Pakistan on a number of economic indicators. Or, for that matter, to recognise that the pattern began to be repeated, soon after the bifurcadon, in Balochistan.

By then the military chief in Pakistan was Tikka Khan, a former military governor of East Pakistan. It was under his aegis that the army has claimed in March 1971 that it could `restore order` within 72 hours or so.

That particular delusion came a cropper some nine months later, albeit only after India had openly pitched in.

The lessons of history are difficult, if not impossible, to learn without acknowledging the facts. All too many nations, including Pakistan and India, are often shy of facing up to their past. Not long ago, Poland made it a crime for anyone to suggest that some Poles had collaborated with the Nazis in perpetrating genocide against Jews. And so itgoes.

As far as Pakistan is concerned, it might be too late to atone for what happened half a century ago, but remembering it accurately might suffice as a warning against repeating the experience. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com