

# Press stands patriotic in times of national crisis

## City roundtable told

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The press in Bangladesh has always played a significant role since the inception of the country and especially at times of national crises.

Although the press apparently looks divided, it alone stood 'unitedly, courageously and patriotically' to uphold the sovereignty of the country, its image and the national entity. But the successive ruling parties have not given due importance to the press because of their 'ignorance,' which obstructed its proper growth.

This was the unanimous view of participants at a roundtable on "Media Aggression Against Bangladesh" in the city yesterday, organised by the Centre for Human Rights.

The called for ensuring full freedom of the press and building a 'defensive' mechanism to fight media propaganda against Bangladesh.

The speakers said the recent campaign in a section of the international media greatly damaged the image of the country. Only the domestic media can give a befitting response to such malicious campaigns and help restore the country's image.

The participants included political leaders, educationists, former civil and military officials, journalists, lawyers and businessmen. Former secretary Dr Shah Mohammad Abdul Hannan chaired the discussion and Barrister Abdur Razzaq moderated it.

Several speakers blamed Bangladesh missions abroad for their 'inactivity' and said it seems the diplomats based there are just doing government job. They 'not pro-active'

and in many cases they are 'over reactive.'

Speaking on the occasion, Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan lauded the role of the domestic media and said the press here stood unitedly when a section of the international media launched an orchestrated campaign against the country recently.

He mentioned that the two foreign journalists who came to Bangladesh and wrote fabricated and imaginary reports did not visit any part of the country. "They even did not come out of their air-conditioned rooms and wrote reports without any attribution," he said.

Referring to his recent meetings with a number of world leaders and ministers, the foreign minister said most of them did not believe those reports.

Now the impression of most world leaders including those of the USA is that Bangladesh never patronises terrorism and fundamentalism, he noted.

Morshed Khan thought that publication of reports against Bangladesh in a section of the international media might have been initiated and funded some quarters. This is becoming clear to all gradually.

The minister brushed aside the contention that Bangladesh is a moderate Muslim democracy and said " Bangladesh with a Muslim majority is truly practising modern democracy."

"If anybody terms Bangladesh a Muslim democracy, then I will say there is Christian democracy where

Christians are majority, Hindu democracy where Hindus are majority and Jewish democracy where Jews are majority. Bangladesh believes in modern democracy and is practising it," he added.

About freedom of the press in Bangladesh, the foreign minister said he is enjoying full freedom and there is no restriction on it. The press here is enjoying maximum freedom compared to that in the other Third World countries, he added.

Journalist Sadek Khan said both the government and the media in Bangladesh should develop a defensive mechanism to face any media propaganda against the country.

Prof Ataur Rahman of Dhaka University said the country's diplomatic missions abroad miserably failed to come up with a defensive strategy when a section of the international media launched false campaigns against the country.

Former foreign secretary MR Osmani said the diplomatic missions abroad should be more active to protect the image and interest of the country.

Former vice chancellor of Dhaka University Prof Emajuddin Ahmed said India has launched 'anti-Bangladesh campaign' through the media as it wants to 'continue illegal pressure on us' in various ways.

"We must have our own agenda and the government should develop a diplomacy involving educationists, media and professionals to counter any campaign against the country," he said.

The media in Bangladesh is playing a wonderful role but it has to be more active to uphold the image of the country, Emajuddin observed.

Major Gen. (Retd) Ghulam Qader categorically denied Indian charge that Bangladesh provides training to its insurgent groups and said India makes such charges just as a tactic to overcome its own internal problems.

Major Gen. (Retd) Syed Mohammad Ibrahim said politicians, intellectuals, media men and such others in the country are divided. "We are fighting against each other and this should be stopped at any cost immediately."

Editor of the weekly Holiday Enayetullah Khan said the domestic media is playing its due role, rather, the government is not doing so.

Editor of The Daily Star Mahfuz Anam emphasised full freedom of the press and said the media should be allowed to work on its own.

About the reports against Bangladesh in a section of the international media, he said it is wise for the government to invite the editors and senior journalists of the media concerned to visit Bangladesh so that they can realise that the country is not at all a safe haven for terrorists.

Former state minister for foreign affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury expressed concern that Bangladesh is being polarised day by day and said it is really very bad for the country.

Attorney General AF Hasan Arif said information management in Bangladesh is not good and it should be developed for further responsible journalism.

# Jamaat for a fundamentalist Bangladesh: Shahriar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The coalition government, especially its partner the Jamaat-Islami, is intentionally destroying the image of Bangladesh as a liberal democratic country with an aim to turn it into a fundamentalist one, said writer-journalist Shahriar Kabir.

"The arrests of AL and BNP leaders and activists in the name of army drive, and the tortures and deaths in custody substantiates this," he said.

He was speaking at a press conference on 'Human rights in Bangladesh: Repression on divergent views' organised by the South Asian People's Union against Fundamentalism and Communism in the city yesterday.

People are losing confidence in law and order as the government is misusing the Special Powers Act, Section 54 of the CrPC and the

preventive detention to muffle divergent opinion, noted Shahriar.

"The government has innovated a system of punishing the accused before his crime is proven for which Bangladesh cannot claim to be a civilised democracy," he added.

Shahriar narrated the physical and mental torture perpetrated against him during his detention. He was also disallowed to meet his lawyers, he noted.

"A large number of prisoners in the jails where I had been are leaders, activists or supporters of the AL who are being deprived of their basic human rights," Shahriar said. "They are not getting proper food or a place to sleep," he added.

The speakers said the present government is violating the constitutional rights of the people, but hardly any case is being filed against it. Moreover, they alleged that in many cases the verdicts given by the

lower courts reflect the government's wish since the judiciary is influenced by the executive wing.

The political forces should come together to protest the latest trend of arrests and harassment of and torture on the dissidents, speakers at the seminar said.

"When a violation of human rights takes place, we sue the state. But the violators are not held personally accountable," said Barrister Tania Amir.

Professor Kabir Chowdhury said a special tribunal comprising five High Court justices should be formed to investigate the deaths in army custody to ensure human rights.

Human rights activist Ajay Roy, Ferdousi Priyabhashini, Wahidul Haque, Justice K M Sobhan and Advocate Syed Rezaur Rahman were present in the occasion, among others.

# Micro-credit paved the path for full-scale war on poverty: Yunus

UNB, Dhaka

Grameen Bank chief executive Prof Muhammad Yunus has said micro-finance has made the foundation for initiating a full-scale attack on poverty, targeting to halve the number of poor people by 2015.

"The base has been established -- now we've to look for the next tier," he told the concluding session of an international seminar yesterday, highlighting the benchmark successes of two decades of micro-finance activities, of which he is a pioneer.

Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) organised the two-day international seminar on "Attacking poverty with micro-credit" at its conference room at Agargaon. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia opened the seminar Wednesday, also attended by South African first lady Zanele Mbeki.

He said micro-finance has changed lives of 12 million families in an orchestrated manner and in

particular, it has empowered women a lot.

For the next step, micro-finance institutions (MFIs) need a legal framework guided by an independent micro-finance commission, he felt.

He denied the common allegations often raised against MFIs for charging high interest rates and torturing the borrowers for recovery.

"All these stories are made up. The man who criticises us for high interest rate himself does not know what rate we charge," he told the function.

Later, at a press conference at the same venue in the evening, he also encountered the notion that micro-finance did little to alleviate poverty. "First make a list of poor people in a village, then follow it every year, you will see the result," said Dr Yunus, the Managing Director of Grameen Bank.

But Grameen Bank can be questioned for the affairs of its members only, not of the street beggars, who are not members of Grameen Bank,

but often referred by many as indicators of Bangladesh's poverty situation, he said.

"In principle, Grameen Bank does not believe in giving relief to poor people," he told a questioner who asked about the bank's response to emergencies like disasters or cold waves. "Whatever the bank gives, it takes money back for creating an emergency fund meant for future use in emergencies," he added.

He said overlapping of MFIs in rural areas is not a problem from a commercial point of view so long as borrowers can afford to pay back.

PKSF Managing Director Dr Salehuddin Ahmed said micro-finance has had a significant contribution to poverty reduction, although it could not be measured against the wide canvas of poverty of the country.

PKSF Chairman Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud said the contribution of micro-finance, however small it may be, should not be underestimated in the perspective of rural life. There may be some setbacks, which would account for hardly 5 per cent of the total operations of micro-finance.

"Many people are taking money and paying back -- they could not rotate the money for years if there was no viability," he said.

## Dr Kamal

FROM PAGE 1  
The Constitution, he said there are provisions for indemnify, but it should come only after parliamentary debate on the issue.

He pointed out that Article 46 puts a limitation, stating specific circumstances under which indemnity can be applied. It should be discussed whether the indemnity ordinance was prepared according to Article 46, he said.

As per the Constitution, any one can challenge in court legitimacy of this ordinance, he added.

Former law minister Abdul Matin Khasru has termed the ordinance 'anti-constitution' and 'in contrast' with its basic structure.

"No constitution support legitimising killing of members of the public," he said in his immediate reaction.

## Indemnity

FROM PAGE 1  
The Joint Drive Indemnity Ordinance 2003 says no one can seek justice and no complaints can be lodged against any person involved with the joint drive for any arrest, death, torture, violation of rights and if any damage of physical, mental or financial nature between October 16 and January 9.

In addition, no complaints can be lodged against the person or persons who had ordered the Operation Clean Heart.

And if cases or proceedings were filed in any court regarding any act during the joint drive it would automatically be cancelled, the ordinance says.

The government launched the Operation Clean Heart on October 16 through an order. Members of the armed forces, paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), police and ansars are engaged in the anticrime drive.

As many as 44 people have died in custody and hundreds have been injured since the drive began, sparking off criticism for human rights violation.

The joint forces have so far arrested more than 11,000 people, including some 2,400 listed criminals.

Human rights violation by the army during the drive has also become evident following several cases filed against some army personnel for torture and deaths of innocent people.

The drive will continue but the scope and nature of the joint forces will change, said Moudud. However, he did not elaborate.

# Muntasir freed Bangabandhu

FROM PAGE 1  
out any specific charge and placed on a three-day remand for what was said to be involvement in subversive activities.

On December 12, Muntasir was sent on a one-month detention under the Special Powers Act.

On January 5, the High Court declared his detention illegal. He was released after the court order reached the Dinajpur Jail yesterday.

## Ordinance to curb

FROM PAGE 1  
the issue in the upcoming session of the parliament.

Matia Chowdhury, a presidium member of the party, observed that by indemnifying the troops from any challenge for their actions during the Operation Clean Heart 'the government has established the right to kill'.

## Mercury dips

FROM PAGE 1  
Forty-year-old Islam Mollah died yesterday in Charashdirajpur village. In Iswardi, a 75-year-old man (name unknown), Fatema, 65, and Maiful, 70, died on Wednesday night.

The correspondent also said relief was inadequate and most people in char areas did not get any warm clothes distributed by the district administration.

Hundreds of people, most of them with cold-related ailments, were admitted to various health centres in the district.

Cold-related diseases are on the rise in the capital as well. Hundreds of people are reported to have been hospitalised over the last couple of days. They complained of throat infection, headache and pneumonia.

The children with pneumonia are the worst affected. According to sources, several children, especially newborns, have been admitted to hospitals in the past few days.

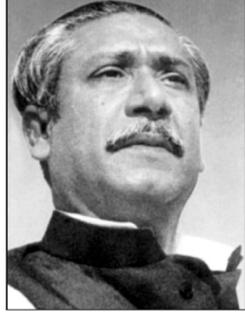
The BSS reported 31 deaths from cold in three districts in the last 36 hours.

The news agency reported that life in Joypurhat, Panchagarh, Dinajpur, Kurigram, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Gaibandha and Bogra came to a standstill.

FROM PAGE 1  
prison.

Immediately before his arrest, Bangabandhu called upon the people to free the country from Pakistani occupation at any cost.

The nation achieved victory in its Liberation War on December 16, 1971 and the then Pakistani authorities were compelled to free the



Bangladesh leader from jail. Bangabandhu returned home on January 10.

The Awami League (AL) and its front organisations have chalked out elaborate programmes to mark the day.

The national flag and the party flag will be hoisted atop the AL central office and the Bangabandhu Bhaban in the city and party offices across the country at 6 am.

Party leaders and workers will assemble in front of the Bangabandhu Bhaban at 7 am to place wreaths at the portrait of the Father of the Nation. They will also place wreaths at the National Memorial at Savar at 7:30 pm.

Wreaths will also be placed at the mazar of Bangabandhu at Tungipara in Gopalganj.

This time the AL is holding the day's main programmes at Tungipara. A discussion meeting will be held there in the afternoon. Party President and Leader of the Opposition in the Jatiya Sangsad Sheikh Hasina is likely to be present there.

Meanwhile, AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil in a statement yesterday asked all units of the party and its front organisations all over the country to organise processions, rallies, discussion meetings and milad mahfil to mark the day.

## Secular spirit

FROM PAGE 1  
Minister for Disaster Management and Relief Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, State Minister for Cultural Affairs Selima Rahman, Cultural Secretary Nazmul Ahsan and Director General of Bangla Academy Monsur Musa also spoke on the occasion.

The prime minister in her address reminded all concerned of the responsibility towards society and the state that restrains one from self-destruction and vengeance and paves the way for progress of the nation.

Paying due tributes to the great bard, Khaleda Zia said Jasimuddin is the pride of the nation and his works need more research and analysis.

Hopes, expectations, sorrows, happiness, exploitation and deprivations of common people are well-reflected in Jasimuddin's writings, she noted and recalled the poet's contribution to enriching the country's folk culture.

The prime minister also urged qualified translators and publishers to take initiative to translate the works of eminent writers in foreign languages, which can bring international repute for them.

"Cross the language barriers and uphold Bengali literature before the world," she said assuring her government's all possible assistance in this regard.

## 7.5 kg gold

FROM PAGE 12  
seized two more packets of gold chains hidden under a passenger seat of the aircraft.

The sweeper was arrested and later handed over to the Airport Police Station. A case has been filed with the police station in this regard.

The customs deposited the seized gold ornaments at the customs warehouse. A departmental case was also filed in this connection.

## Army pullout

FROM PAGE 1  
early hours of October 17 last year, aiming to quell violent crimes across the country.

Some 44 people so far died during the joint drive while 11,245 were arrested, including 2,482 listed criminals. During the same period, 2,028 arms and 29,754 rounds of ammunitions were recovered.

Sources at the civil and military administrations said although there are cantonments in Dhaka and Chittagong there may be some army camps outside the cantonments in these two major cities. Because the authorities still apprehend further breakout of violent crimes in absence of the army.

However, army intelligence will keep vigil on the situation. Moreover, if need be the army may assist the Rapid Action Team (RAT) composed of highly trained policemen which is likely to swing into action from January 17.

Sources said one of the reasons of troops pullout is that most soldiers will get busy with the winter exercise. Troops are to engage in the winter exercise which is crucial since their promotion and posting greatly depend on their performance in the exercise.

Sources said the troops withdrawal goes along schedule and that it has nothing to do with the Union Parishad elections to get underway on January 25.

Government policymakers believe the troops deployment has greatly contributed to a fall in crime incidents. But the deaths of more than 44 people following arrest and detention during the drive has drawn scathing criticism from the government.

# Domestic event

FROM PAGE 1  
ing the Indian media reports on the reported deportation move and following the developments in this regard.

A Reuters report from New Delhi, quoting the Indian interior ministry, said Tuesday that India would deport more than 20 million 'illegal' Bangladeshi immigrants on security grounds.

The foreign secretary dismissed the notion that the recent Indian actions against Bangladesh might be the latter's 'Look East' foreign policy and move to forge closer ties with China in particular.

The foreign secretary termed as "totally untrue and baseless" Indian media reports that Bangladesh is trying to procure nuclear reactors from China for power generation.

"The Look East policy is not against any country. It's an extension of our policy of bettering relations with all countries including the neighbours in South Asia," he said. "We've been having deep relations with China for long and it's not directed at any third country."

"We've not as yet received any official communication from Indian side about the reported deportation move," he said. He also said Dhaka has asked its mission in New Delhi to report on the issue. "Bangladesh's action depends on the Indian follow-up."

Even West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee was not

communicated about the New Delhi decision, he said referring to reports from Kolkata.

The foreign secretary also informed reporters that two Bangladesh-India joint experts groups would meet in Dhaka in the third week of this month.

The first joint meeting at secretary level and the other at joint secretary level would discuss issues, including sharing of common river waters and common borders, he added.

He termed the meets as very important being held against the backdrop of recent difficulties in the bilateral ties between the two next-door neighbours.

Asked about the postponed Saarc summit, the foreign secretary said it was the responsibility of Nepal, the current chair of the South Asian grouping, to take initiatives for reconvening the 12th summit by persuading both India and Pakistan.

"But Bangladesh wants reconvening of the summit at the earliest possible time, keeping bilateral issues out of the forum," he said.

Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan was told by his Nepalese counterpart on the sidelines of BIMSTEC ministerial meet in Colombo last month that Kathmandu would initiate talks with India and Pakistan, the foreign secretary told reporters.

## 14 more

FROM PAGE 12  
four people including a pourasabha chairman.

A team of joint forces raided different areas of Mirpur thana area and arrested Saiful Haq Khan Chowdhury alias Faruq. They also arrested Alauddin Hossain, a BNP activist and a top criminal of the town, from Arupara area, police said. Hossain is the director of the Kushthia Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The joint forces also arrested two criminals - Delware Hossain Dili and Kawshar Ali - from Mirpur thana area yesterday morning.

In Sherpur, the joint force arrested five people, including a ward commissioner, and recovered some smuggled goods.

The joint forces arrested a wanted criminal, Abu Taleb, from Bakshiganj and three others with 2.5 kilograms of marijuana. They also recovered smuggled timbers worth about Tk 15 lakh from Bakshiganj bazaar.

Our Barisal correspondent reports that the joint forces arrested a person and seized firearms from his possession from Awliapur in Bakeragj upazila

In Chapainawabganj, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) arrested a man along with some Indian currencies from the bordering village of Ajmatpur in Shibganj upazila.

The police headquarters in the press release yesterday said 1,271 people, including 19 identified criminals, have been rounded up from different parts of the country in the last 24 hours ending 6:00am yesterday.

They also recovered six firearms, 21 rounds of bullets and an explosive.

# AL hartal

FROM PAGE 12  
plan at 7:00pm.

"We have got positive responses and we hope to launch united programmes in future," the former commerce minister told newsmen later.

The AL had contacted the left-leaning 11 parties, pro-Ershad and pro-Manju factions of the Jatiya Party and two factions of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), one led by Hasanul Haq Inu and the other by Nur-e-Alam Jiku for a united programme.

The left-leaning parties were still in a meeting when the AL made the call unilaterally.

"Rise in fuel price would adversely affect our agricultural production. Commuters have to pay more and prices of essentials would swell further to make life miserable," Jaliil told the press briefing.

He added the price hike would compound the misery of people already burdened with deteriorating law and order, killings and rapes, and human rights violations.

The AL general secretary hoped the people would give a befitting reply to the government's misdeeds by making Thursday's shutdown successful.

Abdus Samad Azad, Zillur Rahman, Sajeda Chowdhury, Matia Chowdhury, Syed Ashraful Islam, Abdul Mannan and Ivy Rahman were also present at the press conference.

Earlier, the central AL leaders addressed a demonstration against the fuel-price hike at the Mukhtangan.

The Dhaka city unit of the AL

# Vietnam

FROM PAGE 12  
East policy," he said.

The Vietnamese resident mission in Dhaka, which was first opened in 1972, was shut down in 1979.

Shamsher told the weekly press briefing at the ministry that reopening of the mission of Vietnam, which is fast emerging as a major economic player in South East Asia, would strengthen relations between the two countries.

Bangladesh opened its resident mission in Hanoi in 1993.