'The best profession in the world'

ENAYETULLAH KHAN

HE congregation of media practitioners in the region (South Asia Free Media Conference) takes place at a time when the words "freedom" and "democracy", as understood by the book or practised on the ground, have been literally bombed out of their normative core and objective structures. The US-British invasion of Iraq, the physical occupation of that country under a neo-imperial doctrine, the second sacking of Baghdad leading to the plunder of the civilisational heritages as also the killing field in which hundreds and thousands of Iraqi men, women and children lay slain or maimed, have numbed humanity and changed the world forever. The first phase of the war is nearly over, though not conclusively in terms of its political and economic agenda or the future roadmaps to more such wars or enforced peace in west Asia or any other target country near or far afield.

The extant world order, painstakingly crafted since the Second World War, was already experiencing difficulties and hiccups in readjusting to the post-Cold War realities. Now it has been virtually smashed to smithereens, and the unipolar global village is at present standing on its head. The casualties across the board are not only freedom, democracy and the libertarian think-regime, but the media as well. If it took nearly a century to build the free media brick by brick in a large part of the globe, its architecture has come to totter in one fell swoop, because the media this time became a participant in the dynamics of the

techno-warfare and not the observer of, the witness to, and the scribe of the drastic war itself. This participation with an 'embedded' status of the global media at one end, and the contrary responses of media positioning on emotional, populist, nationalist and religious lines, at the other, have grievously undermined the objectivity of the media coverages in a polar way. Of the global media, electronic that is, the BBC and the CNN are illustrative of the partisan and selective nature of 'embedded' reportage. The global print media, however would make a small allowance with the trifle of alternative or dissenting views on its pages. A bellicose Economist would not even care for such feigned niceties. If the unilateralist invasion has

damaged the global media for its 'embedded', and hence surrogate status, and produced the antithesis of delusional nonobjectivity of lionising Saddam's unloved regime by some among others, the other bane of the global media was its dismissiveness towards the auto-reflexive antiwar mobilisation of a kind never witnessed before. Afsan Chowdhury, a probing media analyst, says in a paper presented at a seminar on the World Press Freedom Day on May 3 that the anti-war mobilisation was "much wider than expected" and "was very significant in the Western world, including the US". In his words, and we agree, "It was the single largest unity of mankind on the issue since contemporary history began, and this happened because of media linkages." But the media of the two countries that mattered chose to ignore it.

Curiously, while "reconstruction" is the buzzword now, the root villain in the causality of the neoimperial invasion, the weapons of mass destruction (WMD), was granted abdication and allowed to disappear from the printed words or the broadcast scripts or the teleimages as conveniently as it was anointed for the purpose of the invasion. Conversely, there is also a non-objective trend in reinventing Saddam and Sons on both obscurantist and old-left lines. This deconstruction of media objectivity at the opposite ends hurts the media in the long run, though in the short run it may serve one of the polar ends to hide behind opportunistic amnesia, and to fan counterproductive passions at the other end -- in that order.

South Asian media environment

The media environment in South Asia, whether that of print or electronics, was infected by the above polarities impacting on objectivity. Historically too, the spill-over effects of the pre-and postpartition communal divide, the high-intensity face-off between India and Pakistan over Kashmir leading to wars and insurgencies, the 20-year-long haemorrhage of Sri Lanka in Tamil insurgencyturned-fullblown-warfare, the low-intensity national minorities insurgencies in the Indian North-East and Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts, or for that matter the Bangladesh-India discord over water sharing of the Ganges and also of other common rivers, and the demographic issue of Nepalese refugees ejected from Bhutan and lately the push-in syndrome on the Indo-Bangladesh border, entered the media domain with stridency, oftener blurring the facts on the

Some of those conflicts or disputes or historical aberrations have been sought to be corrected or resolved or left to heal themselves. Whether or not satisfactorily, the CHT insurgency and Ganges water-sharing have been brought under the framework of treaties. The armed cauldron in the Indian North-East, however, persists and the Sri Lankan peace

the offing. It is the media's opportunity of a century, so to speak.

Praxis of press freedom

Having profiled the media as above in these seasons of drastic newsfall (the 9-11 tragedy, the war on terror, and last but not the least the Iraq conquest), it needs to be seen how some of the fundamentals in the praxis of press freedom are observed on the ground. The South Asian countries, now mostly under a representative and pluralist political order, have constitutional guarantees of free speech and free press. In this praxis, India can take pride in its longest history, followed by Bangladesh of the last one decade and earlier in late seventies, with Sri Lanka close on their heels. Even Pakistan, where the military holds the whip hand, the press is eminently free unlike the olden days. Content regulations like registration of media outlets and prepublication review have now been put behind. Postpublication punishment, considered prejudicial by the governments, and oftener meted out under criminal law, is also becom-

The absence of freedom of information leads to the media's dependence on leaks, routinely attributed to sources speaking on condition of anonymity. This can be a two-edged sword, in the words of Stiglitz. He says, "They are an important way of getting information, that would otherwise be secret, into the public domain and an important way for government officials to shape coverage in the ways that advance their interests and causes. Hence, leaks may lead to more information but also to

more distorted information." On another plain, the absence of the above also leads to higher dependence on exogenous sources for data on public and governmental affairs and conduct like that of the Jane's weekly on military matters, Transparency International on corruption and even the BBC and the CNN, whose credibility has now come under a cloud.

In sum, governmental information under a legally-mandated disclosure and compliance regime has the highest reliability for reporting and analyses by the press to be shared with the people.

Coming to the region, the

Internet has afforded country-

specific media with linkages,

formal or informal, with the media

of another South Asian country.

Besides the few and far between

correspondents based in another

capital, the media linkages in

respect of columns or op-ed arti-

cles between the newspapers of the

South Asian countries on the basis

of mutual arrangements vis-a-vis

copyright, are being set up more closely than before. This helps

sharing the other perspective(s) or

the logic of argument in media

discourses on issues, policies and

events impacting on relations

between the South Asian countries

or even getting to see things hap-

pening in Dhaka, Delhi,

Íslamabad, Colombo, Kathmandu,

Maldives and Thimpu through the

lenses of the respective country's

journalist or analyst. This opens

the window on the problems and

tries to one another. If the windows

invite some flies with the whiff of

fresh air, to plagiarise Deng Xiao

Ping, it is better vet. Demonisation

then does not stay as a habit.

Instead, such openings lead to

Labelling and stereotyping

In these days of labelling and ste-

reotyping countries summarily,

the South Asian media on each

healthy discourse.

prospects of the South Asian coun-

The cocoon of terror by Bertil Lintner and Alex Perry's thriller fiction in the Time magazine are cases in point. The Reuters story, later withdrawn by the pioneer news agency of the world, and the Channel 4 episode leading to the restrictions on foreign journalists and the incarceration of two local stringers and two foreigners, since relieved, are among the unhappy episodes at both the ends of the government on one side, and the news agency and the journalists concerned on the other. While the government's reaction was kneeerk in being heavy-handed, those episodes were directly proportional to the clandestine cooking of

guard against networked hate

ournalism by stringers and

egmen feeding on hate staples and

living off them. Although it has

abated somewhat in the last few

months, the years from the mid-

nineties to date saw the surfeit of it

entering the media domain with

calculated vehemence. The cam-

paigns sneaking into the interna-

tional press as well, say on Bangla-

desh, not only harms the media's

objectivity but damages the victim

country when anti-terror passion

runs wild and becomes the most

handy and convenient excuse

giving the dog a bad name and then

hang it. Such disinformation, when

planted for material or propaganda

gains at another's cost, is one of the

most baneful aspects of stringer

ournalism.

The episodes have two lessons: one, visa facility for movements of foreign journalists into the country helps establish the subjectcountry's openness, and two, reduces chances of sneak entries, speculation bubbles, and fictitious journalism as those were from the word 'go'. On the positive side, the openness, though at times marred by intelligence tails, puts a premium on objectivity over disinformation or calculated hate campaigns. Phillip Bowring's reports in the IHT and the South China Morning Post and Amy Waldman's in NYT may not all be bouquets for Bangladesh and the government of the day, but are probing, balanced and neutral.

The visa restrictions on journalsts, particularly those belonging to Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, need to be eased for the above reason. This will facilitate further media-linkages and more credible and objective news-gathering of journalists, seeking to cover one or the other country first-hand.

Through the looking glass

Now seen through the looking glass, I am made curiouser by the description of a journalist by English novelist Evelyn Waugh.

His description of foreign correspondents covering a war in the fictional country of Ismaila in his 1930s novel *Scoop*, paints them in these words: "rat-like cunning, a plausible manner, a little literary ambition". It is not exactly complimentary. When rat-like cunning is stretched too far, it produces the Dhaka stringer's tale of a 5-time country's home ground must checking of a quote from a Minister

over telephone calls that never were. A little ambition produced the miscarriage of Channel 4's filming of a fictional Allah's party in the very heart of Dhaka and a purloined interview in which one of the two foreign contractournalists, a UK citizen, faked herself under a *burqa*. Right to free speech is not the right to cook up vhite lies.

I will rather go by the conviction that print journalism is of a literary genre, though penned in a hurry. It somewhat anti-intellectual in so far as it is governed by empiricism. It is creative and hence beautiful in so far as again, in Marquez's words the "best news" is what is not obtained first but very often the news that is "best presented" for its news value and 'truth'.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who started as a journalist in the 24hour roving academies of newsrooms, print shops, run down corner cafes and at Friday night parties, and remains a journalist besides winning the Nobel prize for his Hundred Years of Solitude, calls it the best profession in the world. To quote Marquez: "Journalism is an unappeasable passion that can be assimilated and humanised only through stark confrontation with reality. No one who does not have this in his blood can comprehend its magnetic hold, which is fuelled by the unpredictability of life. No one who has not had this experience can begin to grasp the extraordinary excitement stirred by the news, the sheer elation created by the first fruits of an endeavour, and the moral devastation wreaked by failure. No one who was not born for this and is not prepared to live for this and this only can cling to a profession that is so incomprehensible and consuming, where work ends after each news run, with seeming finality, only to start afresh with even greater intensity the very next moment, not granting a moment of

Having topped off my write up vith Marquez's soul-lifting words, conclude that the assembly of leading journalists from the South Asian countries must commit themselves to the security of the countries, the peoples of the region and the region itself by building the bulwark of unarmed peace and cooperation and giving life to the inert printed words.

"Not the rat-like cunning, nor the little literary ambition" -- it is the passion for truth and the romanticism of the words which one thinks are worth their weight in gold that make the true journalist run. That is the highest compensation for those who have fallen in love with it for a lifetime. It is hence the best profession in the world. Let's all make it beautiful.

Enayetullah Khan is the Editor-in-Chief of weekly HOLIDAY and its monthly magazine 'SLATE'. This

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> process remains fragile. Kashmir, however, remains the hottest spot and impacts on the media environment more than anything else. The media feeds in this regard are highly partisan on both sides of the contention, and oftener enter the third country media domain in South Asia.

These subjective and objective factors notwithstanding, closer media-linkages between the countries of South Asia and initiatives of assemblies and platforms like the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA) preceded by the South Asia Media Association (SAMA) have contributed significantly to broader awareness, understanding of issues obtaining in each country or confronting the region as a whole. This assembly furthermore affords us an opportunity to take a searching took at the media in the context of each country and the

It may be noted that media objectivity in the South Asian countries is oftener distorted by the internal political dynamics and partisan power struggle in a given country and also by the demonisation of one country by another. The 9-11 al-Qaeda terrorist attack led to a loaded media campaign of painting one or the other country as an al-Qaeda nest. Also, a variety of idioms, encapsulating polemics and malignancy, got an evil spurt in political utterances as also in media contents, before and during the US-British invasion of Iraq. While it is counterproductive to cite instances of some of these open or clandestine campaigns, those certainly helped neither the campaigners nor the subject countries, nor even the region. The media unfortunately was an active party in inventing al-Qaeda among some and sundry.

This rancorous trend seems to have trailed off blissfully as the agenda of peace and cooperation has been upgraded again in the offagain, on-again bilateral processes among the South Asian countries. The India-Pakistan exchanges are taking place at the highest political level and the Bangladesh-India talks on the border and related issues have ended on a happy note. This time there are no screaming headlines or caustic commentaries. Even Sri Lanka's internal power-divide on the peace process has been mended in good time.

The US-British conquest of Iraq was a fait accompli. But the antiwar mobilisations in the respective South Asian countries and across the world, which the NY Times designated as the other superpower, hopefully in the making, have put peace highest on the agenda as the only instrument in the service of national and regional security. The South Asian media also took note of the broad sweep of the mobilisations on their respective home grounds. As Afsan Chowdhury notes in the same presentation cited earlier with reference to Bangladesh: "The activist anti-war space, in which religious groups were dominant, was ultimately taken over by the civil society. And the religious groups then tried to create new spaces by turning violent, which didn't add much to their credibility and popularity. Again, for those who were activists without any religious stamp on their political and humanitarian position, this was an opportunity.

The same opportunity is also being seized by the media to advance the cause of peace both in its advocacy and the highlighting of news and events contributing to peace, and thereby secure the security interests of the countries and the region. Happily, this congregation is taking place also at a time when a thaw in the relations between the adversaries in the South Asian region is seen to be in

ing scarcer. Use of the criminal law and unspecified charges of sedition et al. are abhorrent establishment practices and those can be easily reconciled under the express dictum of the civil law.

Access to information is, however, stonewalled by the bureaucratic excuse of secrecy interests. The Official Secrets Act of 1923. instituted in those days for guarding against espionage or restricting access to security installations, is used as the shield, though it has not been used for penal action for any leak of information having security implications either by the press or by an official. Nevertheless, it is strongly felt that the right of a journalist or the civil society to request and obtain documents from public institutions or, on refusal, to have access to relief from, say, an independent freedom of information 'umpire', needs to be guaranteed by law and not left to bureaucratic discretion or blanket

Into the looking glass

Now into the looking glass, freedom of the media is seen exactly what is in the beholder's eve Hence, in applied journalism and not academic or clinical ones, in terms of hands-on practice with the printed word, the print-fare of the 'best' news 'that is very often best presented' by Gabriel Garcia Marquez's definition, and the editorial decrees coming from the editor's tribune, means different things to different people.

To illustrate the faces in the eyes of the beholder.

Only recently a Bangladeshi dignitary holding statutory high office called the populous Bangladesh print media a "rumour industry". The politicians in power routinely rant on the virtue of 'responsible" and "constructive" journalism. The development partners, particularly the multilateral organisations, designate 'information' as a public goods and measure its short- and long-term input-output value on the calculus of the market and the percentage points in developmental statistics. Some donors find solace in NGO iournalese.

In the more abstract sense, press $\,$ freedom is also seen from the instrumentalist perspective, 'in rendering, by way of expose', governmental abuse of power more and more difficult and less likely. That is what Joseph Stiglitz had to say before he parted with The World Bank and collected the Nobel award. The theoretical paradigm is drawn from the thesis of a preceder Nobel-laureate, Amartya Sen, who says: "Countries with a free press do not encounter famines because the free press draws attention to the problem and people will view a government failure to act in such situations as

intolerable". Be those as those may, to use a cliché the boon or the bane of a free press are not necessarily axiomatic. Those vary widely and are oftener like the above perceptions or precepts, which are neither right nor wrong, or perhaps either or both.

The relationship between free media and democracy is like what comes first: the chicken or the egg. But as Roumeen Islam points out in The World Bank publication, The Right to Tell, "it seems obvious that generally more democratic countries have freer press, but do free media promote greater democracy or does a functioning democracy promote a free media?" Although the measure may depend on many other variables quite unrelated to media and democracy themselves. we are committed to practise both media freedom and democracy and have the freedom of informa8X3

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