

# Moves against media: Some disturbing new occurrences

FROM PAGE 1

the following day, an intelligence agency surrounded the whole office of Channel-i and questioned the staff about the same story. A police team also visited the Sangbad office in Dhaka and inquired about the sources of follow-up items of the same news. The paper later withdrew part of their earlier story.

We will be the first to admit

that we can and do make mistakes. That is why we publish corrections, rejoinders and even apologise when necessary. But why should the government send a police contingent to a news organisation when the matter deals with journalistic work? The principal information officer (PIO) under the information ministry or some other official could have dealt with the TV channels and Sangbad about any

'wrong' information they may have carried. Surely, there was no need to send police followed by an intelligence agency if the intention was a simply a 'correction' of the 'wrong' news. The link between the visit and the quick change of the story is lost to no one.

So we have warrants against editors for defamation charges and police and intelligence agency visiting TV stations and

newspaper office. What all this means and how such behaviour impacts on the freedom of the media is a question best left unanswered. The question in our mind is why this onslaught is against the independent media. Five of the six warrants against editors came from cases lodged by ministers or people holding such rank. Are we to understand that these actions reflect the adoption of a more aggressive policy towards the free media? If yes, then we can say without any hesitation that such a policy will not be good for the country, the elected government and of course, for the media in general, not to mention, for democracy.

One of our best 'faces' at the international level is our free media. We proudly tell the world about it and say how our free and independent media has helped us to strengthen democracy. We proclaim to the world that we write fearlessly, and yet warrants are issued, defamatory and fabricated statements are made on the floor of parliament and police visit media organisations to ensure 'correct' news. Will the government care to answer how all this reflect their repeatedly proclaimed policy of unstinted support for media freedom?

More laws or public proclamations of adherence to it do not make a free press. The attitude of the government towards it forms the most important functional (as against statutory) component of the overall environment in which a free media can flourish. This is all the more important because pointing out government's failures and finding flaws in its performance form a crucial part of public expectations of the media's role.

US President Richard Nixon's 'Watergate' fame Washington Post Editor Ben Bradlee once said "if a government is happy with its media then obviously the latter is not doing its job". If a government cannot accept and respect the "watchdog" role of the media, and asks "who elected the media to pass judgement on us" then the latter cannot fulfil the task people in a democracy entrust the media with. If the government's approach is to strike and punish the press when it criticises it then a free media cannot operate. And if free press does not operate, neither will democracy.

Are we making an exaggerated claim because we form part of the media? No. Just look into history or look around the present world - is there democracy anywhere without free and independent media? Need we say more?

An interesting example of the question of 'attitude towards the media' is provided by the current tussle between the British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the BBC. The issue is whether or not Blair actually exaggerated the intelligence reports on Iraqi weapons before the war, which the BBC had accused him of. Blair termed the BBC report "as serious an attack on my integrity as there could possibly be". He added, "The charge is untrue and I hope they accept it. That is all I am going to say." The British prime minister is not going for a criminal defamation case, neither is he going to insist that a warrant be issued against the editor concerned of the BBC, nor is he going to send police or any intelligence agency to the BBC office. What is Tony Blair doing when he says "The charge is untrue and I hope they accept it"? He is giving the BBC a chance to re-examine its story and correct it if necessary. The BBC can do so, or contrarily say that it will stand by its story, as it has done. In fact, the BBC has refused the prime minister's request to reveal its source -- another 'privilege' that democracies grant the free media to perform its duty -- the RIGHT to protect its sources of information. Think also of how the US media is attacking President Bush for his statement about the Iraqi WMD. Nobody is sending the FBI to US media bodies!

That is how free media in a democracy functions. The point we are trying to make is nowhere in the Blair-BBC episode is there any arrogant use of a government's power, neither is there even the remotest hint of punishment or retaliation. That is the 'space' democracy gives to the media because experience has shown that such freedom given to the media ultimately contributes to an accountable, transparent and responsible government. That critical 'space' comes not only from public support and the legal framework but also from the 'atti-

tude' the executive branch of the State has towards the fourth estate.

We, more than it may be apparent, are fully aware that this is not Britain neither are we the BBC. But can we not be Thailand where The Nation (Thai English daily) fought a head-on battle against Prime Minister Thaksin Sinawatra on his stock scam issue. At no time during the long drawn battle did the Thai PM use his government's power to raid The Nation's office, issue arrest warrants against its editor or reporters or have his intelligence agencies harass the media. The

PM was later exonerated from that charge but did not take The Nation or its editor to court for criminal defamation. As a result, Thai media's independence remains unfettered, democracy strengthened and the PM more popular than ever.

It all boils down to the question of respect for freedom and genuine belief in democracy both of which are prerequisites for respect for a free press. When elected officials claim that only other elected officials have the right to criticise them, then he effectively denies citizens, voters,

tax-payers, the media, writers and conscientious objectors the fundamental rights of free expression guaranteed in any democratic constitution, including, of course, ours.

A free press is still one of the brightest aspects of Bangladesh's democracy and the world respects us for it. We should immediately stop all such activities that constitute a threat to free media and erode our credibility as a genuine democracy.