

Bangladesh in the eyes of the world

BY THE NUMBERS

Corruption has reached new heights, making almost all activities without it impossible. The finance minister recently admitted that there is no single ministry without corruption. A country that came into being after the supreme sacrifice of millions and with high hope, now stands at the brink of being considered a failing state in the international arena. It is really a matter of great regret and shame for the nation.



ANM NURUL HAQUE

BANGLADESH has been ranked 141 among 161 countries in the 2006 Index of Economic Freedom. The Wall Street Journal and the Heritage Foundation, a US-based research organization recently published this index. Bangladesh's ranking was also the worst among five of the seven Saarc countries. Sri Lanka was in a better position (92) followed by Pakistan (110), India (121), and Nepal with 125th position. Bhutan and the Maldives were not included in the list. Bangladesh was placed in the third of the four categories -- "free, mostly free, mostly un-free, un-free" -- and listed as repressed in terms of economic freedom. Hong Kong was ranked first in the Index of Economic Freedom followed by Singapore and Ireland, together with 16 other countries dubbed as free and placed in the first category.

The Wall Street Journal and the Heritage Foundation in their report on Bangladesh said: "weak rule of law... manifesting itself in some of the world's worst official corruption, civil crime, and political violence... continues to burden Bangladesh's democracy." It added: "Until the government addresses Bangladesh's many structural weaknesses, there is little reason for optimism about the country's future."

Bangladesh was ranked 17 in the global ranking of failed states by an American magazine named Foreign Policy. The magazine published by the Carnegie Endowment for International

Peace, based in Washington, made the observation in its July-August issue. The magazine grouped Bangladesh with 20 countries deemed most critical and vulnerable. The Failed States Index was prepared in collaboration with the Fund for Peace and used 12 social, economic, political and military indicators to rank 60 countries in order of their vulnerability to violent internal conflict. Bangladesh scored highest in the two indicators of uneven development and criminalization.

The top ten countries in the Failed States Index were Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Iraq, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Chad, Yemen, Liberia, and Haiti. The six other countries behind Bangladesh were Afghanistan, Rwanda, North Korea, Colombia, Zimbabwe, and Guinea.

Among the South Asian countries on the list, Myanmar ranked 23rd, Bhutan 26th, Pakistan 34th, and Nepal 35th. The report said that these weak, failed, and failing states were breeding grounds for terrorism, organized crime, weapons proliferation, humanitarian emergencies, environmental degradation and political extremism that threaten everyone. Mr. Pauline H Baker, the president of the Fund for Peace, called the weak and failing states "nurseries" for violent ideologies and outlaw organizations.

Bangladesh was termed as "the most dysfunctional country in Asia" by the Asia Times in its issue on April 15, 2004. World Bank country director Christine I Wallich termed Bangladesh as a "fragile state." The US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, Bangladesh is becoming "quite troubling" and there is more that the US and India could do. She said this in an interview with the India's leading magazine India Today while visiting the South Asian countries in last March. Christina Rocca, the US Assistant Secretary of State, who visited the country in last May, also made similar comments on Bangladesh.

Ranking of Bangladesh as the most corruption-afflicted country in the world by Transparency International for the fifth successive year, has caused maximum damage to the country's image abroad. There may have been disputes over the ranking of Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in the world, but there is no denying that corruption is widespread in the country. The unabated corruption has been substantiated by the news of corruption in most of the departments of the government including taxation, custom, police, education, finance, and administration.

Frederick Temple, the former country director of the World Bank in Bangladesh, said in unmistakable terms on many occasions that the present rate of reduction of poverty in the country would double if the government could control the unabated corruption in the country.

The Economist, one of the most widely circulated weeklies across the world, published an article entitled "Bangladesh: State of Denial" in its June 18 issue with a caricature picture of Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, suggesting a brawl between them. It was in fact the manifestation of the belligerent politics in the country. The story in the article, however, presented a different picture altogether, and a few lines are quoted hereunder: "Bangladesh is also among the most sparsely covered by the international press. This is in part the government's choice: it makes it hard for foreign journalists to visit. When they do, it tends not to like what they write, especially recent suggestions that Bangladesh is witnessing a rise in Islamic extremism, and becoming a haven for international terrorists."

Bangladesh scored the lowest marks among 209 low income countries in 2004 in the World Bank's governance situation survey titled "Bangladesh PRSP Forum Economic Update: Recent Developments and Future Perspectives." The survey was



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conducted on the basis of six indicators of the governance issue which were voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. These indicators, that covered 209 low income countries across the world, showed lowest ranking of Bangladesh in four of the six indicators and second lowest in the two others.

The rating of Bangladesh on political stability was 11.7, for regulatory quality 13.3, for rule of law 22.2 and for control of corruption 10.3 -- all of which put it in the lowest ranking. Bangladesh, however, did somewhat better for government effectiveness, in which rating was 26.4, and for voice and accountability which was 28.6.

"Improved governance is essential for the success of Bangladesh's economy and poverty reduction, and none of Bangladesh's major development partners will be able to sustain its support if the government does not squarely address the governance agenda," said the report categorically.

The international development partners of the country on November 17 came down heavily on the government for its failure to combat continuous killing and terrorism, lack of justice, mal-governance, and massive corruption: "If the trends continue, Bangladesh will be known to the global community as a land of more and more killings, terrorism, and insecurity."

The intellectuals of the country

often debate vigorously whether Bangladesh is a failed state or not. While we refuse to accept the arguments of a failed state for Bangladesh, it would be really very difficult to deny that partisanship has come to dominate all aspects of life. The bureaucracy has been thoroughly politicized and the police has been made a political force. The election commission has come up for controversy and violated the High Court directives while preparing voter roll. Even the appointments of High Court judges are being made on a partisan basis. All these are the plain truths that the government cannot really escape from.

Corruption has reached new heights, making almost all activities without it impossible. The finance minister recently admitted that there is no single ministry without corruption. A country that came into being after the supreme sacrifice of millions and with high hope, now stands at the brink of being considered a failing state in the international arena. It is really a matter of great regret and shame for the nation. What the nation has got during the past four years is nothing but the grand total of failures of the government as well as of the opposition to play their respective roles properly with a view to lift the country out of the abyss of despair. The time has now arrived for the government and also for the opposition to ponder seriously how to make Bangladesh a country of our dreams.

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Pakistan under Musharraf

COL. (RETD) SYED ARIF

ON January 1, yet a new sun rose harbingering the year 2006. It is a time for reflection on what we as a nation gained or lost in the last year. One would be tempted to assess the year in terms of improvement or otherwise in the quality of life of our citizens. The new sun brings new promises and new hopes. Let us analyse the past year and think where things went wrong and who was responsible and how things can now be improved.

Let me recall a few incidents. A gentleman was picked up by the police on suspicion of some minor offence, a few months ago in a town called Khanewal, around 300 km south west of provincial metropolis Lahore. The police started the routine chittor-parade (the slang word given to the police beating suspects with leather straps), the helpless guy could do nothing, but he hurled curses at his tormentors. He had forgotten the golden rule of our society that one should keep his mouth shut after suffering injustice. His mouth was physically sewn shut by policemen to silence him. The picture was carried by all television networks in Pakistan, and some abroad, and he was produced in the courts. The police denied any torture and lo and behold, everybody got down to his business thereafter.

Another person who forgot the above golden rule was a lady now famous in the world for her courage

Mukhtar Mai. She raised her voice against injustice. She was denied permission to visit the US by the self-proclaimed champion of Pakistan's image, General Musharraf. Of course, that a respectable lady, who had been teacher of Holy Koran for a long time, was publicly paraded naked and gang-raped had done nothing to our image, only her visit to United States would have done so. And also Pakistan being represented by a military general in itself does nothing to tarnish our image since our civilian dummy Prime Minister, with no powers, is usually not allowed to make international visits. At least, Mukhtar Mai shares this commonality with the minister, neither can go to the US without the permission of our military chief!

The above were just ordinary mortals, but what happens to VIPs is not so different. By the way, in Pakistan's political jargon, VIP stands for Very Important Person or Very Idiot Person. Two of the former Law Ministers also forgot the golden rule; the Law Minister of Pakistan and the Law Minister of Azad Kashmir technically a separate state. Probably the learned ex-ministers had thought that the police would respect them as their former bosses.

Or had they forgotten the visit of the Mongolian Maritime Affairs Minister whom one of our Prime Minister had asked why was there a Maritime Minister in Mongolia, when it was landlocked. The minister looked askance and said, "But, sir, you have a Law Minister, don't you?"

One thing that Pakistan's Law Ministers and the law enforcement machinery has nothing to do with, is law, since the law does not exist. The only thing in Pakistani society that is close to law, is an unpalatable lady relative called the "mother-in-law."

Former Law Minister Afzal Haider was part of the mixed marathon in Lahore along with human rights activists like Asma Jahangir and others, who tried to exercise their right to free assembly in a free country. Just a few days before the government had taken a somersault, when it converted from being the champion to an opponent of mixed marathon events in Pakistan, under mullah pressure. The way Haider was dragged by the police and thrown in a prisoner van, in front of the world cameras, was shameful especially when the learned senator had already gracefully given his arrest any way.

Azad Kashmir's former Law Minister Farooq Ahmad was treated more roughly. He and just fifty of his supporters held a small demonstration

against the shifting of a local girls college in Muzaffarabad. On the orders of the Prime Minister of Kashmir, the police made an unprovoked baton-charge on the protesters. The ex-minister was beaten so much that he received multiple bone fractures. Many of his supporters were left seriously wounded on the road and Geo television showed policemen still kicking them. Worse was to come, Farooq Ahmad was later picked up by police from a local hospital bed and ten cases under various criminal and anti-terrorist laws were registered against him. If he ever comes out of the his physical and emotional injuries, the court cases are likely to take at least the next ten years of his life. Whether Pakistani Kashmir's police has received training from their Indian side's counterparts or vice versa is not known.

An isolated incident betrays the mind of our military rulers who arbitrarily sacked and persecuted a distinguished and decorated civil servant Saad S. Khan for speaking his mind about the affairs of the country in a column titled "Open Letter to the Prime Minister." Khan, a Cambridge educated author and writer, was one of the most respected top civil servants of Pakistan. He was the former head of the civilian intelligence in the troubled province of Balochistan. He had been granted Siachen War Medal for his gallantry years ago. He was known among officer circles, for courage of conviction. He has since been run out of Pakistan.

On the economic side, although we were not doing extremely well anyway, the natural disaster of massive earthquake has compounded our problems. We are now flaunting the very same begging bowl that each of our rulers in the past 56 years claimed to have broken. We do not have enough money to pay for the tents. The 504 billion rupees that we are spending on a new GHQ in Islamabad, when we already have one just 25 km away in Rawalpindi, we cannot spare, of course. As long as aid and charity does not dry up, we are not going to tighten our belts.

Why not beg when we can easily gloat over the fact that lately even the United States received international aid after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. And we can easily justify the police brutalities in Sargodha jail when the prisoners captured the whole premises to protest against water shortage and gang bullying, because we had luckily read the report that in many prisons in the UK bullying is common of weaker prisoners. After all, these are the only two things on God's earth, in which we have to compare ourselves with the US and the UK!

The new year is bracing up for centennial celebrations of Muslim League, where a request by Chaudhry Shujaat and twenty odd prime ministerial hopefuls waiting in the wings, shall be made to President Pervez Musharraf of accepting centennial presidency of the Muslim League, giving him a uniformed lever head to continue to remain president beyond 2007. Jinnah's democratic soul would cry in his mausoleum in Karachi.

The most controversial dam in Pakistan's history would also be laid foundation to this year. Over the cries of even allied parties, over police beatings of anti-Kalabagh riots that will happen next year, over the dismissal of Chief Ministers of Sindh and Balochistan, the president would try to start construction. Already his flatterers have asked him to accept the re-naming of Kalabagh dam as "Pervez Musharraf Dam." The dam will have to be dropped the moment Musharraf goes, but another 300 billion rupees or so would have been spent by then on Musharraf's personal ambitions.

We, the Pakistanis, are reaping the destruction caused by the Zia-ul-Haq years. It will take us another few decades to come out of the Musharraf follies.

The writer is a retired military officer who was Special Advisor to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto during 1993-96.

Bush's assault on the American media

The Bush administration has attempted to spin the news, confuse the American people with misinformation and bribe the messengers. Such a strategy, no doubt, undermines the press's integrity, although no one knows for sure what the Busheviks attack on the media will have on health of American democracy. Bush still has three years left in office to hammer away. Yes, it's a good idea for the US to promote democracy abroad. But at the same time its leadership should not be adopting strategies that undermine it at home.

RON CHEPESIUK

A series of recent media reports has exposed how the US military in Iraq is paying local journalists to plant favourable articles about the Iraq War and the rebuilding effort. To listen to the US military defend the policy, the published stories were not propagandistic, and the US military does not lie. Major General Richard Lynch, a senior military spokesman in Baghdad, told the press with a straight face that terrorist Abu Murab al Zarqawi lies to the Iraq people; the American military does not.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan feigned surprise. He told the press: "We are concerned about the reports of planted stories." McClellan reminded me of Captain Renault in the movie Casablanca who also feigned surprise when he said he was "shocked, shocked to find there was gambling going on here."

The reality is that the Bush administration has launched a concerted campaign to undermine the independence of the American media. The campaign is showing that the Busheviks fear the existence of an informed public almost as much as they do another attack on domestic soil.

The campaign involves manufacturing fake news, not just in Iraq, but also the US, as well as the bribing and intimidating of journalists.

Let's begin with the bogus news. In early 2003 local television stations in the US aired what looked like a typical news report. A narrator identifying herself as Karen Ryan explained the changes in Medicare brought by 2003 Medicare Drug Improvement and Modernization Act. Ryan "reported" that the new changes should help seniors to "stay healthy and have a better quality of life."

Ryan, the media learned, was a former journalist turned public relations specialist who owned a PR firm in Washington, DC. She had contracted with the US Health and Human Services Department's Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to produce the Video News Release (VNR) promoting Medicare's new drug benefit.

A media firestorm erupted when it was learned that several stations aired the VNR without identifying its sponsor, and many critics questioned the ethics of using VNRs in broadcast journalism. John Stauber, Executive Vice President for the Washington DC based Center for

Media and Democracy, described the use of the material as "plagiarism."

He explained to me: "When a print reporter or editor lifts verbatim from a press release, doesn't identify the source, and puts it out as news, that's plagiarism. Likewise, the use of VNRs is plagiarism because the media has routinely pawned them off on the public as authentic television news reports, and they make no effort to verify the accuracy of the sponsors' claims." The centre is a non profit dedicated to ensuring quality local television.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defended the VNR as the television equivalent of the print news release. In an article at its website, the PRSA complained Ryan was "thrust into the centre of the mud-wrestling pit that is the nation's capital" and that her name had been "summarily dragged through the sludge."

The US Government Accounting Office (GAO) issued a report, revealing that 20 federal agencies had produced and distributed VNRs during the Bush administration and concluded that the Bush administration had violated rules against "publicity and propaganda." The administration countered that

the GAO report "fails to recognize the distinction between covert propaganda and purely informational video news reports."

But how would you describe fake and deceptive stories broadcast on television stations without any acknowledgement that they were prepared by the federal government rather than by local journalists?

Further, in pursuit of their propaganda campaign, the Busheviks have not been content simply to manufacture the news. They have also bribed reporters into championing its policies. The most high profile example of this has been prominent conservative newspaper columnist and television commentator Armstrong Williams, who received payments of \$240,000 from the federal Education Department at the same time he was promoting the Bush administration's education policies in his columns. Williams said that he has no doubt other journalists were still on Bush's payroll, singing his praises.

In addition to buying off unethical and greedy journalists, the Busheviks have also moved to intimidate the media. Bush has summoned newspaper editors to his office in an effort to prevent publication of stories he considers damaging to national security. What I've seen of the Bush administration the past three years, however, I believe it's more a move to protect its incompetent behind.

Bush reportedly had meetings with the Washington Post and New York Times executive editors before their newspapers published stories about the

existence of secret CIA prisons in Eastern Europe that have been used to interrogate terror suspects and the use of wiretaps without court orders to spy on Americans.

After meeting with New York Times editors about their newspaper's article about domestic spying, Bush described the leak of classified information as harmful. But what many media analysts consider shameful was the New York Times holding of the story about domestic spying for more than a year after its editors had earlier meetings with the Busheviks. You remember the New York Times? That was the newspaper that played a big role in pushing the US into a disastrous war with Iraq because it fed the American public bogus information about weapons of mass destruction.

These are a few of the examples of how the Bush administration has attempted to spin the news, confuse the American people with misinformation and bribe the messengers. Such a strategy, no doubt, undermines the press's integrity, although no one knows for sure what the Busheviks attack on the media will have on health of American democracy. Bush still has three years left in office to hammer away.

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