

Journalist bashing portends an ominous trend

MEMORIAM

Nasreen, my heroine

FAHMEEDA WAHAB

THIS morning, twelve thousand miles away from where Nasreen, our friends, and I grew up together, I heard of her accident and passing away. Where can I begin to speak about a friend of thirty-one years? What can I say about someone whom I have always seen as a heroine amongst us?

My first memories of Nasreen are from class nine in Holy Cross School, when she had her unruly hair tied, under Sister Joanne's admonition, into two reluctant pigtails. My last memory of her was waving me goodbye from the verandah of my parent's house, where she had come to visit me, wearing a white cotton jamdani sari, her long hair flowing freely down her back, on January 8, 2006.

She died seven months short of hitting 48. Maybe because she was destined to leave us so soon, she achieved so much. Nasreen befriended those who had no one beside them. Acid burn victims, for whom we indulge in the luxury of sympathy, were treated by her as friends.

Who among us will be so big hearted as to share with total strangers our homes, our lives and our friendship? It was Nasreen, in whose house these women and girls found a welcome abode. Nasreen treated them the same way as she treated us: with sincere friendship, warm humour and an indulgent tolerance.

Nasreen was among the first people who championed the cause of acid burn victims, arranged for their reconstructive surgery in Italy and other parts of Europe, and organized advocacy campaigns against acid violence. Nasreen was vocal about women's reproductive health and rights. She was passionate and true in her thoughts and work. She was her own self, unpretentious and original.

Nasreen had time for everybody, her father and elder brother when they were alive, her mother, her siblings, her nephew, her many friends, her husband and, above all, in recent times, her daughter. Despite being the busiest among us, she was the one who would make time to visit us when we visited home. Despite her big achievements, she always remained our Nasreen.

I have never seen Nasreen lose her temper or be abusive or malicious about anyone. She had a ready chuckle which followed remarks made in her deep distinctive voice. In this day, when most of us are busy chasing personal betterment, Nasreen thought only of what she could give. She adopted her daughter and spent the last year and a half as a contented mother. She had dreams of setting up an orphanage in the name of her brother Monty, who had died several years ago.

Nasreen left us all after our SSC exams to study in the US. She received her degree in nutrition from Berkeley and could have easily opted for a life of material gain and comfort in any country of the world. But she chose to come back to Bangladesh and to follow her vocation as an activist and a development practitioner.

At BRAC she worked to promote the use of backyard



vegetables as a source of vitamins to prevent blindness, at Helen Keller, she devoted her efforts for policy reform and programmes to benefit the visually impaired, and finally, at ActionAid she ran programs in disaster management, education, rehabilitation of sex workers, and campaigned for equitable benefits of LDCs in global trade. All the time, she championed women's rights.

In her professional and personal life, Nasreen broke barriers and set new standards of progressive thinking.

Nasreen used to insist on calling recipients of acid violence as survivors, not victims, to give them courage, to make us look at them not with pity, but with respect and a determination to resist this form of violence.

If she were with us today, as we are shocked and lost at her going away, I am sure she would chuckle in her characteristic way and tell us to focus on what she achieved, and what we shared together.

Among all our friends, she had to leave first, but only after making an impact and leaving a legacy. I know I speak for all our friends when I say that while we learn to deal with our terrible loss, we salute her memory and cherish that legacy; and feel proud and complete for having had her friendship.

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[The namaj-e-janaza of Nasreen Huq, country director of ActionAid Bangladesh, will be held today (Friday) after Juma prayers at Dhanmondi Eidgah Mosque.]

Patronage of criminals by politicians vis-a-vis a demoralised police force has pushed up crime in the country. One wonders if there is anything remotely close to government having administrative control of the country. Even after the media focused on the clandestine activities of Siddiqui Islam Bangla Bhai right from the early part of 2004, the administration apparently played second fiddle to all such menacing groups. Shockingly, the administration's blatant failure to book the perpetrators of journalists' killing one after another have thrown the journalist community into utter despair.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

IT is hard not to be shocked and alarmed by the manner in which police excesses have exhausted the patience of the citizenry. On 17 April last citizens already weary of the Kansat incidents and volatile political situation were caught off-guard when they watched the evening TV news bulletin: Some cops seemingly gone berserk were beating the media persons and photo journalists mercilessly at the entrance of the Chittagong stadium, the second venue for the Bangladesh-Australia cricket Test match. The cops swung into a savage action on the on-duty journalists. As reports carried by the newspapers indicated, trouble that brewed in the morning delaying the start of the match by ten minutes erupted into a violent form in the afternoon with assaults perpetrated by the cops led by DC (port) Ali Akbar who himself pounding the veteran photo journalist Al-haj Jahirul Huq. People learnt to their dismay and shock that the dastardly incident left in its wake 20 journalists injured, two of them critically.

The sequence was all too familiar, yet another assault after the recent Kansat carnage so much of the country's peace of mind. Once again the law enforcers earned a bad name and Bangladeshis were steeped in a feeling of shame, pain and bewilderment. The grotesque manner in which DC (port) Ali Akbar and sergeant Anwar resorted to atrocities, as people watched in total shock and amazement on the televised screen, has become a symbol of excesses done and a rallying point for collective national anger and disgust.

Despite the fact that torture either in police custody or on the street is a punishable offence, police resort to all sorts of brutal methods when the alleged offenders are either in police custody or leading protest marches in the street. If arresting crimes only make room for bigger crimes resorted to by the people supposed to curb crimes and at the same time if the method employed creates suspicion, despondency and erosion of respect for the rule of law among the citizenry, then the necessity of law enforcement agency itself must be open to question. Could any law enforcer either in D. B. or in uniform, especially in the rank of cadre officer indulge in such macabre activities that borders on insanity or criminality?

On a larger canvas, the country presents an awesome maze of rules but very little compliance, especially by those holding the long arm of the law. Tragically, the law enforcement agency personnel these days have almost taken it upon themselves the right to silence protests or disintegrate peaceful demonstrations through torture, not perhaps the responsibility of curbing crime.

Speaking about Ali Akbar, he has had somewhat otherwise chequered career. He rose to dizzy heights in the service from the rank of an OC(sub-inspector) allegedly not by merit, efficiency and honesty but by influence peddling and connections as reports appearing in the newspapers indicate. The reports further indicated that he crossed the hurdle of B.C.S (Police) service examination through questionable means. The non-cadre police officer is said to have bagged the kind of postings that would be the

envy of even well-connected cadre service officers. The plum postings were the result of political connections he had developed from his student days and nurtured till the last time he was in Chittagong. And there in the Chittagong stadium his strength of connections were visible..

But this time the message has also been forceful enough. Millions across the country rallied behind the journalist community in the country, held meetings and protest rallies. The public outcry over this dastardly incident, in which the alleged offender has just been closed, forced into the glare of attention the inadequacy of the law enforcement when dealing with its own breed.

People are questioning why after such a terrible incident in Kansat that undermined the image of the government, another sad drama was played in Chittagong bringing in its wake further ignominy for the government. The question that looms in mind is, were the two incidents related? Was some shadowy group determined to thwart or undermine Bangladesh's march to democracy by bashing the most vibrant and fearless group of media? Brutality in any form at the behest of the government is a barbaric means of sending a message. The problem here is deciphering the message. While the law enforcers resort to every possible tricks and oppressive measures to silence the peaceful agitation of the people demanding the most vital inputs linked to their living and survival, they remain superbly indifferent to the depravity and erosion of values in folks within their own ranks.

Let us recall some gory incidents of the yester years where

police failed to establish its image by booking the offenders within its own rank. The death of Sheema Chaudhury, a 17-year-old garment worker, in Chittagong and the case of Yasmeen who was first raped and then killed by some policemen in Dinajpur in 1995 give eloquent testimony of depravity of a section of the people in uniform. The killing of Rubel, a meritorious college student in Dhaka in 1998 in police custody must be construed as a shameful barbarity committed not by a band of outlaws but by a few members of the police force employed for maintaining the rule of law in the country.

How come this guarantor of public security is fast becoming a threat to civilized norms or order? Of course police crimes, atrocities and corruption have become common place occurrences and people are afraid to approach the law enforcers for redress of their sufferings because of the reprisals they often meet. Police crimes against individuals or groups provoke popular outcry only when fatality results. And after an incident becomes public, the immediate reaction the authorities show is to close the offending member as they have done in case of D.C (port) Ali Akbar in Chittagong. In most cases penalty goes no farther and the enforcement branch forgets as soon as the agonised public or the media stops asking or reporting about it.

There is no shadow of doubt about the fact that in a media-driven world private distress is often catapulted into the public arena. Most ominously, when either media people are killed, or mercilessly beaten or their voices stifled, then all hopes for the recovery of the society from the quagmire of dirty depths are lost. Other than the assault and beating and damage of cameras they suffer, there is a general sense of alarm across the nation that such a crime wave targeting newsmen and photojournalists serves the objective of disuading them from exposing the vices of society. For example, Humayun Kabir Balu, a veteran and famed journalist of Khulna received several death

threats for focusing on the crime situation in Khulna, especially voicing anger, disgust and protest at the ineffectual and flawed investigation into the killing of Manik Shaha, another veteran journalist in Khulna.

Patronage of criminals by politicians vis-a-vis a demoralised police force has pushed up crime in the country. One wonders if there is anything remotely close to government having administrative control of the country. Even after the media focused on the clandestine activities of Siddiqui Islam Bangla Bhai right from the early part of 2004, the administration apparently played second fiddle to all such menacing groups. Shockingly, the administration's blatant failure to book the perpetrators of journalists' killing one after another have thrown the journalist community into utter despair and many of them are under pressure from their families to leave this 'hazardous' profession. Unless the government takes some drastic measures to provide security to the members of this vital community, democratic values would be put to severe test and the nation as a whole would suffer.

People these days seem disillusioned with the police behaviour and mentality. Battered, oppressed and severely traumatised, people seek the help of law enforcers for redress of their sufferings and grievances. But when they suffer a further beating in the hands of these people, what hope remains of them? It has driven home the message to the public that the law enforcement agency in the country has acquired primacy without any corresponding accountability. Apart from sticking with the rule of law and restraint in the face of highest provocations, there is an alarming tendency among them to ride roughshod with human dignity compounded with abuse of power. If things are allowed to go like this, it only fuel public disenchantment and apathy for such a vital force of the nation bringing in its wake chaos, disorder and total indiscipline in the society.

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Should US attack Iran?

American people do not want another war and cannot allow their elected officials to play foul with the fate of their lives and those of other nations at their sweet will under the pretext of providing security to Americans from so called rogue states. Iran crisis, much of which is of Bush Administration's making, is deepening and may soon spiral out of control unless American people as well as the international community unitedly rein in the long arm of President Bush.

ABDUL HANNAN

PULITZER prize winner journalist Seymour Hersh, famous for his report disclosing the My Lai massacre in Vietnam and prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, quoting an unnamed Pentagon adviser and former intelligence officials, has now leaked a mind numbing news story in the April issue of New Yorker magazine that the Bush Administration is planning a massive bombing campaign including the use of bunker busting nuclear weapons against Iran to destroy suspected key Iranian nuclear facility. He quoted the former intelligence officials as having depicted the planning as 'enormous', 'hectic' and 'operational'. The story was repeated a day later in the Washington Post. President Bush, however, dismissed the report as 'wild speculation'. The British foreign secretary described the report as 'nuts' and 'inconceivable'. He said there was no 'smoking gun or casus belli' in Iran. But so did neither in Iraq. And there are indications to suggest that the report may have substance and is not merely a bluff. The anti Iran rhetoric describing Iran as an 'axis of evil' by President Bush four years ago after 9/11 has now gathered steam and America is drifting towards a military/nuclear strike against Iran.

According to Guardian (London, April 1) report the Pentagon is preparing to set off a record breaking bang detonating 635 tonnes of high explosives and sending a mushroom cloud into the sky over the Nevada desert. The blast on June 2 is designed to test the impact of bunker busting nuclear bomb aimed at underground targets. Hans M Christensen, a highly valued physicist in the Federation of

American Scientists in an article published in the Baltimore Sun said that according to Pentagon's contingency plan. Washington is edging towards a policy of nuclear preemption. According to an article by Philip Giardi, a former CIA official, published in the August 2005 issue of American Conservative, vice president Dick Cheney has issued a request for using tactical nuclear weapons against Iran. Republican Senator John McCain told US television recently that 'Iranian threat to the world is the biggest since the cold war'.

President Bush addressing an audience at George Washington university recently charged Iran of persistent efforts to manufacture nuclear weapons and that coalition forces in Iraq had seized Iranian supply of explosives to insurgents. 'America will confront the threat', he said. President Bush talked of 'mushroom clouds over New York' to raise fear among Americans about the danger of a potential Iranian nuclear attack and to manipulate support for military action on Iran. The Administration is repeating over and over again the warning that Iran is trying to build nukes and there 'is no choice but to address the Iranian problem and defeat it'. Defence Secretary Rumsfeld accused Iran of dispatching the Al Qaeda division of its Revolutionary Guard too stir trouble inside Iraq. The Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte recently told US Congress that Tehran has been responsible for the 'increasing lethality' of anti coalition attacks by providing Shia militias with the capability to build improvised explosive devices. Secretary of State Rice has declared Iran as 'the central banker' for terrorism in the Middle East as well as the single most dangerous threat to the US. In its latest version of

national strategy, the Bush Administration has reiterated its belief in 'preventive war' threatening a future Iran/ US confrontation and labeling Iran as 'cold war enemy number one'. 'We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran', it said.

True, it is wrong that Iran has threatened to wipe out Israel from the map and denied holocaust of Jews in Germany during the second world war. But Iran is more sinned against than sinning. Iran offers no threat to the region let alone the US. Iran has repeatedly pledged that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes for producing energy. Iran has not broken any obligation under the NPT to which it is a signatory. Iran has allowed unrestricted inspection of its nuclear facilities by IAEA Inspectors who found no evidence of its nuclear weapons programme. IAEA chief Mohammad AL Baradei issued a report in November 2004 that Iran was in 'substantive compliance' not only with NPT obligation but 'those of additional protocol'. There is not the slightest evidence it has the required quantity of centrifuges to enrich uranium to weapons grade material. Iran has enriched uranium to a small 3.5 percent with 180 centrifuges, much short of required 80 percent enrichment which would require 16000 centrifuges. Iran is at least 8-10 years away from making a nuclear weapon, according to scientists and CIA experts. Granted that Iran becomes capable to produce nuclear weapons, but then it will be no more a threat than Israel, Pakistan and India are as nuclear powers.

Iran has no record of disruption of regional or international peace. Iran has not invaded another country in 250 years but has been subjected to western

interventions beginning in Anglo-Russian inspired revolution of 1906-11 to Anglo-American coup in 1953 against democratically elected government of Mohammad Mossadeque for installing US controlled monarchy of the Shah to Anglo-US support to Iraq in its war with Iran launched in 1980 after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Ironically the western aid to Iraq included scientific and industrial support for Iraq's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programme. Despite the 1988 US cruise missile attack on Iranian civil airliner killing more than 100 passengers on board, Iran cooperated with US to unseat the Taliban in Afghanistan. Iran has also arrested and repatriated hundreds of Al Qaeda suspects in the past two years in a display of willingness to bring terrorist under control.

Then, why is this vitriolic attack against Iran by the US? May be, it is to shore up the plummeting popularity rating of Bush by winning a short, swift and sharp victory in Iran. May be, US is acting on Israel's bidding. May be, it is to avenge the humiliation of American embassy staff held hostage in Teheran shortly after the Islamic revolution under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. May be, the answer lies more than anything else in the perceived 'ideology of hatred that needs to be dealt with' in the Middle East against the values and culture of the west.

A nuclear attack on Iran, in which millions of innocent men, women and children will perish and become disabled, maimed and disfigured, will be insane. Speaking of consequences of nuclear attack on Iran, Dr Hirsh, professor of physics at UC San Diego said, 'Each bomb would deliver an incalculable number of corpses, radiation fall out, both immediate and residual, unparalleled in magnitude to the tragedy in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Besides radiation fallout in Iran and beyond its borders, the political and economic consequences of nuclear attack on Iran will be enormous and far reaching with the disruption of oil supply lines, increasing radicalisation in the region and the Muslim world and potential dan-

ger of involvement of any combination of nuclear actors including China, Russia, Pakistan and Israel unleashing the Armageddon of nuclear cataclysm wreaking death, devastation and annihilation of the human race.'

The clock is ticking to the defining moment for a final decision on Iran by the Security Council which gave an ultimatum to Iran last month to suspend enrichment of uranium by 28 April. Iran, meanwhile, in defiance has successfully enriched uranium. It remains to be seen what the Security Council does when it resumes early next month to consider the Iran dossier submitted by the IAEA. America, Britain and regrettably France, apparently in a departure from its stance in the Iraq debate, may in all probability opt for tough action including economic sanctions and military force. But China and Russia who have entrenched political and economic interests in Iran will most certainly veto any such resolution. Under such circumstances, will the West go along its trodden path of unilateral preemptive attack on Iran for a regime change?

American people do not want another war and cannot allow their elected officials to play foul with the fate of their lives and those of other nations at their sweet will under the pretext of providing security to Americans from so called rogue states. Iran crisis, much of which is of Bush Administration's making, is deepening and may soon spiral out of control unless American people as well as the international community unitedly rein in the long arm of President Bush to disabuse him of the delusion of grandeur of conquest which provides neither honour nor security.

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DNA test can help curb rape crime

With the availability of DNA test facility within the country and through adequate media publicity it is hoped that the rape victims would get justice. The culprits would not dare to reject the claim of the victims. The Sylhet example should act as an eye opener for other rape victims of the country.

NURUL HUDA

THE question which is being asked in different forums now is whether DNA test will help curb the growing rape crimes in Bangladesh. The country has been facing increasing incidents of rape as in most cases the culprits responsible for the crimes escape punishment taking advantage of the lacuna and weaknesses in investigation and corruption of a section of police and medical officers.

Besides, the country's legal procedure remains cumbersome. Law in most cases seems to be for the privileged few having money and access to powerful quarters. Majority of the people usually do not get justice as they cannot spend the amount of money required for fighting legal battles. Besides, in the absence of adequate number of judicial officials thousands of cases remain pending with different courts for years together.

The fatherhood of an unwanted baby has been established in Sylhet recently through DNA test, which indeed is a matter of relief for the rape victim. DNA activity started in Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) in January this year with the establishment of a laboratory in the country. Prior to this DNA test, if required, had to be done in foreign countries by sending specimens.

Rahima, a young housewife who was a domestic aid at the residence of Al-Haj Saimullah at a remote village in Sylhet, deserves congratulations for the bravery she has demonstrated by establishing the fatherhood of her unwanted baby with the help of DNA test. The report was recently published in a Bengali daily.

The victim was raped by the master of the house in 2004 following which she was driven out by the family of Saimullah and later abandoned by her husband. The crime of Saimullah has, however, been established following a case filed by the victim with Balaganj police station in Sylhet. The person held responsible for the crime has however, been rejecting the findings of the DNA test and blaming his political opponents for damaging his social image.

DNA test has been a recognised mechanism for stabilising fatherhood, settling immigration dispute, determination of heir, identification of persons killed in accidents and help protect women's rights as well

as curb various crimes. In this backdrop the allegation of Saimullah needs to be given serious consideration so that none can ever raise any controversy over the findings of DNA test. None should be allowed to play any foul game over the DNA Laboratory which has for the first time been set up in the country. Necessary measures have to be taken by the authorities concerned for protecting the image and credibility of the DNA Test laboratory.

Wide media publicity on the availability of DNA test facilities at DMCH is also required so that people, if and when require, can go there for establishing identity of the rapists through DNA test. In the process it is believed that the criminals would get little scope to escape punishment which would gradually help curb the heinous crime. The punishment of the criminals can be expected to act as a check against the growing incidents of rape. The examples of punishment should also act as a check against this heinous crime.

The sex scandal of former US President Bill Clinton with Monica was established through DNA test. Even the death of Chittagong businessman Jamaluddin was confirmed with the help of DNA test of his skeleton recovered from a forest couple of years after the murder. Such test has been an accepted and dependable scientific mechanism for detecting criminals.

Compared to the number of incidents of rape the rate of punishment of the criminals is very negligible. Some figures of incidents of rape are given here to describe the alarming rate of the crime taking place in the country.

A total of 2798 cases of rape including 166 involving minor girls were recorded in the country in 2005 (excluding December). A total of 88 women were killed most of them after rape during the same period, records available with the police headquarters revealed. During the period 11 minor girls became victims of death after rape.

The incidents of rape in the country will be much higher than recorded with the police headquarters as in many cases victims' families want neither to file cases, nor divulge the shameful matter to others, according to relevant officials of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. Once an incident of

rape becomes known the victim is ostracised in Bangladesh's male dominated society.

A total of 5201 persons were arrested against 31,665 accused in incidents of rape of women during 2005, meaning only one out of six accused was arrested. Of those arrested, only a very negligible would finally get punishment. Most of the criminals escape punishment reportedly through manipulation of the investigation reports greasing the palms of a section of corrupt policemen and medical people.

The number of arrests in child rape incidents was merely 339 against 1133 accused, meaning apprehension of only about 25 per cent of the accused, according to records of the Home Ministry.

Women and Child Repression Law of 2000 was amended in 2003 with provisions of stringent punishment for crimes against women and children with the objective of curbing the crime with an iron hand. There are provisions as per the law for punishment of people for dilly dally or negligence of duty in preparing medical reports of the rape victims.

The application of law is still limited as in many cases submission of charge sheet report is delayed on flimsy grounds. In the process the evidential or circumstantial proofs get destroyed taking advantage of which the criminals escape punishment.

There are also at times settlement of rape cases through 'Shalish' outside the court. When such settlements do not work, the matter is taken to the police and in the process very often the evidential proofs get destroyed making the case weak.

With the availability of DNA test facility within the country and through adequate media publicity it is hoped that the rape victims would get justice. The culprits would not dare to reject the claim of the victims. The Sylhet example should act as an eye opener for other rape victims of the country.

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