

How Much does EC Aid Help Bangladesh Poor?

by Ben Jackson
Special to the Star

Press Council

At one time or another, a country, especially a developing one, faces the task of disciplining its press, not the institution but an individual newspaper. This can happen for any number of reasons. However, in an authoritarian state, the strongest reason for keeping a newspaper or even the institution under tight control is to prevent it from offering any criticism, however legitimate or mild it may be, of the policies of the government or even of its officials. When the press, a section or a single newspaper defies this tight control imposed by a dictatorial regime, it is shown no mercy. The history of the press in the Third World is littered with examples of the so-called penalties and punishment, ranging from the closure of newspapers to imprisonment of journalists.

There can be no two opinions here that as it completes its transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system, Bangladesh should have no need for special laws or ordinances for dealing with the press. A high-level committee, set up by the caretaker government last month, has just submitted its report which deals with the laws and procedures relating to the print media. Until the report has been made public, we can not say whether the committee would like the existing laws and procedures to be modified, replaced by new ones or totally scrapped to pave the way for an entirely new approach.

Meanwhile, journalists' unions have done well by urging individuals and organisations to settle any dispute between them and newspapers arising out of publication of any news-item or commentary through the Press Council. In a statement issued on Thursday, unions' representatives expressed the view that while and individual has every right to seek redress from the court if he has been somewhat hurt by a newspaper, the intervention from the Press Council should be sought first.

Unfortunately, this is not as simple as it sounds. To start with, there are doubts in many minds, within the media and outside, about the effectiveness of the 14-member Bangladesh Press Council. At the moment, the Council can only offer "admonition and censure" to an offending newspaper which is found guilty of an offence against an individual, organisation or even a government agency. Herein lies part of the weakness of Council. Hence, if it is thought that the Council should be more effective and quicker in dealing with complaints as well as offer greater satisfaction to an aggrieved party than it is able to do today, the first thing to do is to review its terms of references, powers and authority. In short, it serves no useful purpose to have the council survive as a kind of toothless paper tiger whose ineffectiveness invariably provides reasons to the executive arm of the government, even in a democratic set-up, to introduce, maintain or even strengthen special laws against the press.

How and when we should start the process for reforming the Press Council is for the Interim Government to decide. In our view, the authorities can set up a committee to study the working of the Press Council, collect evidence and gather relevant materials from other countries without any further delay and then leave it to the elected government which will take office after the February election to place the draft of a new legislation before the parliament.

In the changed situation, we need all the press freedom we can use, but we also need newspapers to respect freedom of individuals, the sanctity of private lives and certain norms which determine the behaviour of individual publications. It should not be necessary for a government to enforce tough press laws to ensure that newspapers operate in the way they should. Here, an effective Press Council, one that also undertakes an orientation programme for the media in the field of freedom and responsibility, should help more than anything that a government can devise.

Need for a Watchdog Body

An idea that is currently gaining ground among election enthusiasts is that of a public watchdog body to supervise the finesse of the elections. The idea has merit and deserves our serious consideration, provided that the watchdog body is well constituted, consists of people with national profile and implacable (?) reputation. Before we go about constituting a public watchdog body we must however, carefully examine its objectives, terms of reference and its capacity to be effective.

Public takes upon itself the role of monitoring elections when the neutrality of the government on the relevant agency is wanting. In our instance, such is not the case. Public faith in the neutrality of the Acting President and that of the Election Commission remains so far, above question. There should be no doubt in anybody's mind as to determination of the Acting President of holding a fair and free election. Then, where is the need for a public watchdog body. We think there is, if only to strengthen the hands of the Interim Government and the Election Commission.

As to the objectives of such a body, there should be only one. That is to help make the coming elections a landmark in the history of free and fair polls. The watchdog body should be ready to make public, without fear or favour, the instances of violations of the election rules and of cases of adoption of unfair and corrupt means. To be able to do so, it must have people who are courageous, above reproach and these who enjoy sufficient public trust to be able to withstand pressure from any groups, parties or individuals.

Its terms of reference should be work closely with the Election Commission and assist them in every possible way to achieve the objective of a free and fair polls.

There is some talk of the NGO community forming a watchdog body. The NGOs, most of whom are funded by foreign sources, should not arrogate to itself solely the right to monitor the election. They as a group have done useful work in the development process. They should join hands with other citizens groups, professional bodies and concerned individuals and form a watchdog body.

Any step we can take to help the process of holding a free and fair election should be welcomed by all. Constituting a public watchdog body in the above lines is such a step.

MOST European Community (EC) aid to Bangladesh does little to help the poor and is often inefficiently run and monitored, according to a recent report from Europe's official watchdog, the European Court of Auditors. Issued last month, the damning report shows the findings of a special mission to Bangladesh by Court representatives to examine all aspects of the 517 million ECU (2585 crore Taka) EC programme to the country between 1976 (the start of the programme) and 1988. The report may fuel the critical debate over the role of foreign aid in Bangladesh development in the run-up to the national elections.

Table: European Community aid to Bangladesh (1976-1988)

Type of Aid	Millions of ECU	Crone Taka
Food Aid	321	1605
Finance for delivering food aid	11	55
Projects	163	815
Compensation for lost export earnings	14	70
Joint funding of non-governmental projects	6	30
Emergency aid (floods etc)	2	10
TOTAL	517	2585

SOURCE: Official Journal of the European Communities, December 1990.
Exchange rate 1 ECU = 50 Taka.

ORDINARY Soviets and pro-perestroika democrats in Leningrad are unequivocal in their condemnation of the Soviet military's move into Lithuania. The Vilnius nightmare, which invoked macabre memories of the Romanian Securitate's crackdown on anti-Ceausescu demonstrators in December 1989, left in its trail at least 14 dead and 160 wounded.

Protesters in Leningrad call the act criminal, label its perpetrators as killers and have dubbed the event "Bloody Sunday". They compare it with the Bloody Sunday of January 22, 1905, when Tsarist police fired on a crowd led by a priest as it marched to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to present a petition. Eighty-six years later demonstrators at the Winter Palace in Leningrad carry banners saying: "Murderers Get Out! The army -- Are You The Shield of The Motherland or The First of The Mafia?" and "God Save Us From A Peace Nobel Prize Laureate." But the public ignored the two-hour protest strike called by the Democratic Russia movement following the clashes in Vilnius.

Many see the Lithuanian bloodbath as a confirmation of what former foreign minister Eduard Shervadnadze said in his resignation speech on December 20 about an imminent surge of neo-Stalinism.

Said one member of Democratic Russia: "Democrats, you may as well go to bed.... and sleep. Perestroika is dead and buried. Red fascism and neo-Stalinism have won the battle." Gleb Lebedev, Leningrad's City Council Deputy said: "Today is Lithuania. Tomorrow it will be the turn of Riga. The day after tomorrow it may be here in Leningrad. We are sliding towards an authoritarian regime." Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, together with his Army and Interior Ministry

was still less than three-quarters implemented after eight years. One cereal seeds project started three months after it was supposed to finish. The report goes on to list a long list of further projects way behind schedule - deep tube wells, irrigation, food storage depots - amounting to virtually all the Community's major projects in Bangladesh.

The report says that finance for aid deals was rushed through before enough information had been collected or the success - or otherwise - of previous projects had been assessed. Aid was given to improve veterinary services for livestock assuming this was behind the shortage of animal power for ploughing and other tasks in Bangladesh. In fact, the shortfall many have had more to do with a lack of local fodder or credit for farmers to buy animals - which the project did nothing to tackle.

Replying to these charges, the European Commission says it is common for aid projects to run behind schedule. It says most problems arise before the start of the project - when it is being negotiated and staff recruited. Long delays are mostly due to the administrative procedures of the Bangladeshi aid administration, claims the Commission in its official response to the report's criticisms. It promises that things

imported equipment even where cheaper, more appropriate alternatives are available. In the Bhoira irrigation and livestock project motorcycles were used for field staff. Although suitable Dhaka-built machines were available, EC rules insisted that motorcycles were bought in Europe (under the heavily criticised practice of 'tying aid'). These cost the project an extra seven and a half lakh Taka, while spare parts and maintenance of the foreign bike are set to be a continuing problem.

The EC's large food aid programme also comes in for strong criticism. Bangladesh is the Community's largest food aid recipient and the programme accounts for 62% of all EC aid to the country. But, maintains the report, most food aid does not reach the millions of poor people who go hungry in Bangladesh every day. Instead, under the programme, food did go to subsidised prices to the more prosperous urban and public sector and is sold to raise money for the government.

Three lakh tonnes of food aid cereals (largely wheat) a year, twenty-eight per cent of the total, went straight to civil servants, the armed forces and government employees between 1975 and 1985, according to the Court of Auditors. A further 34 per cent was sold at subsidised prices in theory for the poorest rural population, although it frequently failed to reach them. Only the remain-

ing 36 per cent which is distributed (jointly with the UN's World Food Programme) for emergency relief, 'vulnerable groups' and 'food-for-work' programmes, really did much to reach the hungry. The report also criticises the Bangladesh Government for lax accounting for EC food aid going through the Government's 'Public Food Distribution System' (PFDS). It calls on the European Commission to find better ways of targeting food aid to the poorest.

The report, however, found a brighter picture where EC aid had been used to fund projects run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) - both European and Bangladeshi-backed. Although financial supervision of such projects should be improved, said the Court of Auditors, most projects investigated were 'worthy of support'. It noted that, a particularly cost-conscious and well-organized Bangladeshi NGO had built schools and teachers' accommodation and planned. Yet the comparative effectiveness of this kind of funding is in stark contrast to the fact that it only accounts for one per cent of the total EC programme.

Ben Jackson is Campaigns Officer of the World Development Movement, the UK-based pressure group on development issues. He is presently on a research visit to Bangladesh in collaboration with the Bangladesh Centre of Advanced Studies.

Baltic Bloodshed Raises Fear of Bad Old Days

Charles Quist Adade writes from Leningrad

Many in the Soviet Union who once saw a brighter future for their country because of the breakthroughs that accompanied perestroika, are now looking on in horror at the actions of the Soviet military in Lithuania.

chiefs, Dmitry Yazov and Boris Pugo, have absolved themselves of any blame. The authorities have instead blamed the Sajudis-led government of Vytautas Landsbergis for "flagrant violation" of the constitutions of the Soviet Union and Lithuanian Socialist Republic. Landsbergis and his supporters are also accused of waging an anti-Soviet and anti-Russian campaign, plus what hard-liners call "restoring bourgeois order and crude capitalism" in Lithuania.

Leningrad University lecturer Vladimir Vydrin says Gorbachev seems to be tak-

ing cover behind the Soviet Constitution when it comes to the Baltic Republics. Vydrin fears Gorbachev is leaning on the constitution and has lost his political acumen. The spark that ignited the keq was price rises announced by Premier Prunskiene early in January. Demonstrators, mainly ethnic Russians, picketed the local parliament building on January 8 and demanded the resignation of the government. Sajudis followers then staged a parallel demonstration in support of the government. As tensions moun-

ted, Gorbachev addressed to the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian Socialist Republic, which by the new Lithuanian Constitution no longer exists. On January 11 a Save Lithuania Committee apparently set up by the ethnic Russian group Yedinstvo (Unity) appealed to the Kremlin to introduce direct presidential rule in Lithuania. After this the scenario unfolded at reckless speed.

The main printing house was occupied by Interior Ministry troops on orders of the break-away pro-Moscow Communist Party of Lithuania.

Then, came the fateful January 13, when the Army surrounded the Central Post and Telecommunications Centre, the railway terminal and airport, effectively cutting the Baltic Republic from the rest of the country and outside world.

At 1 am, airborne forces stormed the republican television and broadcasting buildings, firing indiscriminately. At the same time a column of armoured tanks moved to the parliament building where in response to a Landsbergis' call thousands of people had gathered to prevent the army from taking it over.

In neighbouring Latvia and Estonia, where Gorbachev has ordered troops to "bring back" servicemen who had deserted and hunt out hiding draftees, human shields around local parliament buildings where immediately formed by thousands of loyalists in case the Lithuanian scenario snowballed into their republics.

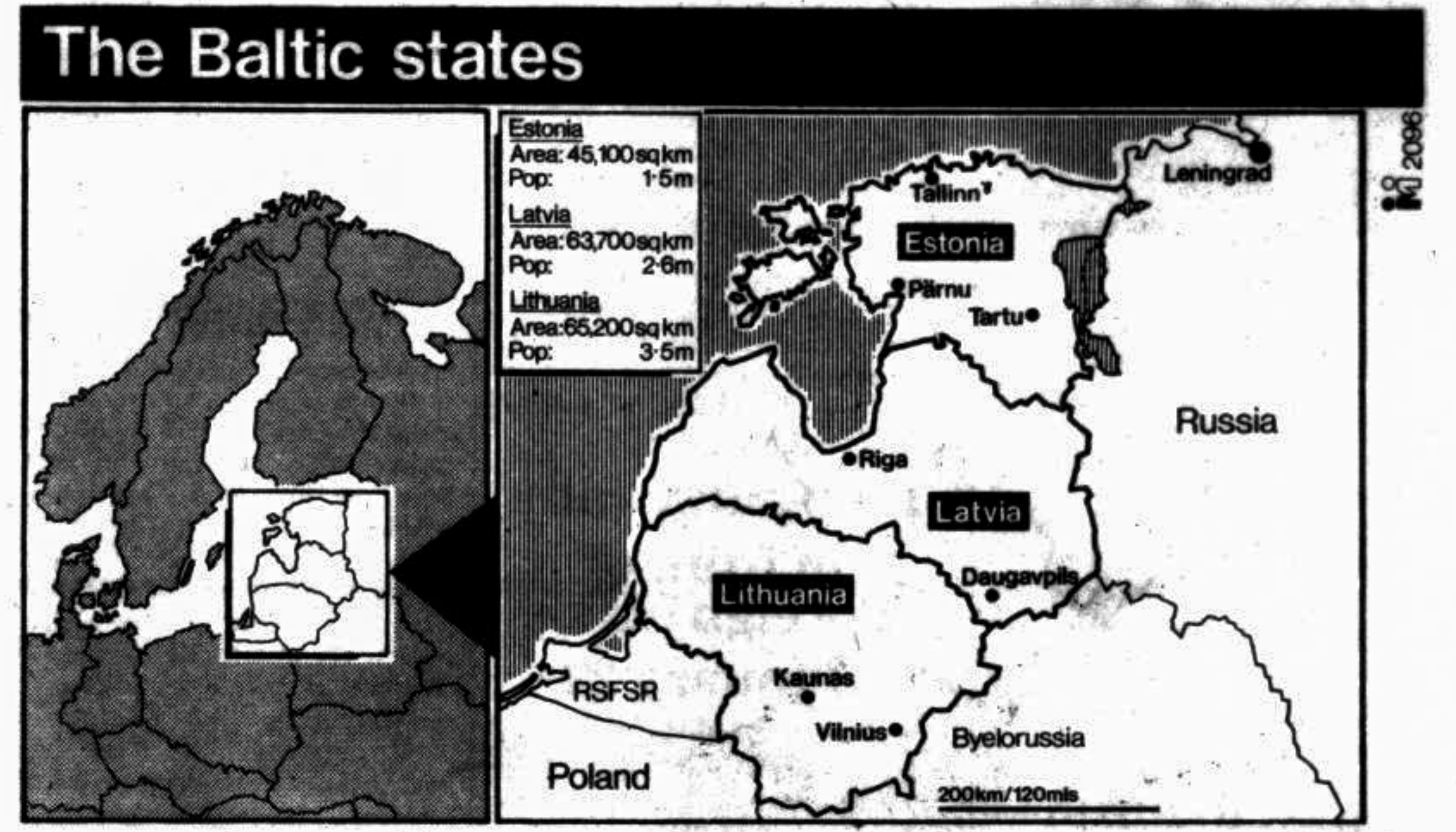
The simmering brew in the Baltic's cauldron points to an imminent civil war as the state-controlled mass media, particularly Central Television, and the republican media engage in an acrimonious war of words in which anti-Baltic and anti-Russian sentiments are promoted.

In Lithuania, dual power between Sajudis Lithuania and the Communist Committee of Lithuania Salvation has led to chaos and near anarchy.

A Supreme Soviet delegation sent to Lithuania for on-the-spot investigation returned to report of "an explosive situation which could lead to large-scale blood shed."

The Lithuanians have no alternative. Neither government nor parliament exercises any real power. It is a David versus Goliath situation. — GEMINI NEWS

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Acupuncture
Sir, Acupuncture is a Chinese way of treatment of a number of diseases like asthma, diseases relating to the spine, sometimes deadly diseases like cancerous ones. Often patients become so fed up with chronic diseases that they do not have the mental stamina to endure any more. Thus they are ready to try any method which would release them of their maladies. Among such means acupuncture seems to have made quite a progress in solving a number of physical ailments. This method of treatment has become quite popular here also, as it has been successful in

treating a number of patients. Those who suffer from chronic diseases, may like to try this method to obtain better results. There are however, some acupuncture clinics here too, but some more, and that at district or at least divisional headquarters may serve the purpose better. Rounak Mojumdar, Rajbari, Faridpur.

Traffic and pedestrians
Sir, The vehicular traffic is always impeded on our streets by the pedestrian who either carelessly or callously walk on the main traffic lanes ignoring the

sidewalks. There are many who just don't care to give a passage and seem to be intentionally doing so. But then not all the blames on pedestrians alone. The sidewalks remain occupied by vendors and people just loitering or standing there hoodwinking the pedestrians. Such an apathy and on the whole, such a state of affairs, would never allow the traffic situation to improve. One main reason of congestion and traffic jam on our roads is the slow-moving rickshaw. But the next then is the 'don't care' pedestrians making a melee by their stance. A sufferer, Dhaka.

More public libraries
Sir, Reading is one of the easiest and established way of acquiring knowledge, and it can be a fun also. But it is not possible to buy every book one wants to read, as recently the price of books have also gone up. So the best place to borrow books from, and to read them at, is a library. Unfortunately though in such a big metropolis as Dhaka their number is scanty. We can count them on our fingers. When this is the condition of public libraries in the capital, we can just imagine the situation in other towns of the country. Despite difficulties, understandably of space and fund, the authorities and enthusiasts could embark upon establishment of more public libraries. So far could hope. Munim Tahir Wari, Dhaka.

Women and democracy
Sir, The days of women staying at home are nearly over. There was a time when a woman's role began and ended with looking after her household and bringing up children. Things have changed now. Not only are they

equal contributor to the family income, but they also perform a number of social duties as well. It was indeed a great step forward when in the wake of the movement that led to the fall of Ershad's government, the women took a far greater part than they had ever done before. They were out in the streets welcoming the re-birth of democracy. They rejoined as much and took part in the jubilation as men did. It's not as if they had not felt like this before, the difference is that they could also participate along with their male counterparts more than before. The journey for women to win her rightful place in the society, has already begun. It may be a long one but one day she through her future generations will be able to fulfil her most cherished dream. Ruhul Salauddin Chittagong

Looking to War and Beyond
No matter how bright the immediate impact of Iraq's defeat appears to be in Western eyes, the effect in the longer term could be ominous for peace in the region and beyond. — Times of India (New Delhi).

An Affront to the Haitians
The putsch attempt was an affront to the international community, which had committed itself to seeing that the honesty of the election [Dec. 16 of Jean-Bertrand Aristide] would be respected and which had obtained the Haitian army's support toward that end. It was an affront to the United States, which had used all its influence to avoid dirty tricks by Duvalierist forces. And it was an almost farcical denial of the will of a population that had voted en masse for a man who embodied resistance to terror and promised to bring dignity and social justice to his country. — Le Monde (Paris).