

# UN Picks up the Pieces in the Gulf

Ted Morello writes from United Nation, New York

*It's become almost a traditional role for the United Nations — to wade into the mess created by warring member states, and pick up the pieces. Now it is doing so again, this time in the aftermath of the Gulf war.*

## Future of Radio / TV

In honouring an election pledge, the BNP government has just announced that a committee would be set up soon to recommend what steps could be taken for the reorganisation of the country's television and radio. The statement by the State Minister for Information Mohammad Nurul Huda at the Jatiya Sangsad on Tuesday has not come a moment too soon. If anything, the public at large and media in particular had expected that by now the government would have announced the formation of the committee, its terms of references and the deadline for the submission of its report.

Taking this delay as a blessing in disguise, the authorities should carefully consider what kind of role we want to assign to the country's electronic media. Here, there is little doubt that our main concern is to let our television and radio enjoy as much of the freedom that our print media has come to enjoy in our nascent democratic set-up. In other words, this means that our electronic media should cease to be the mouthpiece of the government but should report, cover and interpret views and opinions of a cross section of our people, including the opposition parties. Yet, we must accept the fact that the government and its various agencies, especially those associated with development, must be able to rely on the electronic media as their immediate channel with the people, especially in rural areas which are more easily reached by radio than by newspapers. However, we must ensure that this reliance does not turn into subordination. Herein lies the challenge.

The current thinking in official circles seems to favour the idea that the Bangladesh Broadcasting Authority which controls both the television and radio should be reorganised into a corporation. It sounds a simple, perhaps even a practical solution. But will it be effective in ensuring not only professional freedom to the electronic media but also in paving the way for its modernisation in both editorial and technical fields? Again, the relationship between the electronic media and the Ministry of Information will become as crucial as the organisation's financial independence.

Unfortunately, there are not many models in the developing world that we can learn from, in trying to place our electronic media on a new foundation. In other South Asian countries, the independence of the electronic media remains elusive. In several Southeast Asian countries, privately-owned radio and television stations operate side by side with the officially-controlled stations, providing their audience with alternative news, views and programmes. Such stations are sustained by the advertising market which, in the case of Bangladesh, may not be all that large to support too many radio/TV stations and a growing number of newspapers and journals.

It is essential that the government does not lose more time in setting up the committee promised by Mr Huda. It is also important that its terms of references are carefully worked out and that its composition is more professional than political. We would also like to see that the committee holds public hearings and consults media groups in arriving at its recommendations.

## Quebec and Canada

Canada today is faced with a problem unique among the top seven industrialised democratic countries of the world. It has a separatist movement which is peaceful to the point of being mundanely legalistic, and one which appears to have the backing of a majority of the people it claims to represent. The state in question, Quebec, is one of Canada's most prosperous and the only one with a mother tongue other than English. The French-speaking Quebecois have not always been separatists. But a sense of nationalism has undoubtedly developed ever since the 1960s when French President Charles de Gaulle raised the slogan "Vive le Quebec".

Quebec's demand for sovereignty has not grown out of a sense of being exploited by English-speaking Canada; nor has it come about as a result of the Quebecois being politically subjugated (both of these factors led to the growth of Bengali nationalism in former East Pakistan in the 1950s and '60s, and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971). The real worry of the French-speaking Quebecois is related to their language and culture, which they fear may be overrun by the English culture dominant in the rest of Canada (again, a parallel can be drawn with Bangladesh, as it was the barely-disguised attack on Bengali language and culture by former West Pakistani rulers which contributed most towards Bengali demand for independence).

Canada however, has recognised the need to address Quebec's fears as the only way to preserve the union. French is the official language of Quebec, and the Meech Lake Accord cobbled together by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney last year recognised the state as "a distinct society". Unfortunately, the accord collapsed after two states failed to ratify the accord, thus increasing Quebec's apprehension about its place within the union. For many in Quebec, the old slogan "Quebec pour les Quebecois" is not only relevant, but increasingly so. Mulroney, meanwhile, is trying again to cobble together another accord that would satisfy everyone, before a referendum is held in the French-speaking province on the sovereignty issue next year.

The lure of independence is quite considerable for the economically advanced Quebec. By opening its borders to free trade with neighbouring United States, it feels it has much to gain, while preserving its distinct culture. But there is no reason why that cannot be done from within the Canadian union, particularly now as the country's political establishment has virtually accepted Quebec's contention to be a distinct nation. Canada's democratic and free market dispensation is a successful one, and Quebec owes much of its advance to the union. The new plan being worked out by Mulroney will delegate greater power than ever to Quebec and all the other provinces to run their affairs. Under the circumstances, Quebec's future looks brighter within Canada than without, and the Quebecois would do well to dilute their nationalism with appreciation of what unity has to offer.

THE United Nations is once more faced with picking up the pieces. This time it is the shards of the video-arcade war waged under US President George Bush's generalship and the "final solution" holocaust inflicted on Kuwait and his own citizens by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

It is a triumph of hope over experience to believe that the surprise accord between a faction of the Kurdish leadership and Hussein will hold.

At least, the UN appears to be acting on the assumption that the organisation's help at one level or another will be required for a long time.

On the military side, the Security Council has authorised formation of the UN Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM), which comprises 1,440 peacekeepers from all ranks from 35 countries. For the first time, all five permanent members of the Security Council — France, China, the US, Britain and the USSR — have contributed military personnel to the same operation.

UNIKOM deployment is along the demilitarised Iraq-Kuwait frontier zone three miles deep on Kuwait's side and six miles on Iraq's.

It is not a new experience for the UN to pick up the pieces. The former Secretary-General U Thant used to complain that the UN was called into a crisis only after the adversaries had bogged themselves down in a morass (Bush calls Iraq a "quagmire") of their own making.

This time the pieces are the aftermath of the Gulf war. The UN peacekeeping apparatus, already stretched to a thin blue line by demands for its services, is now being called on to monitor the cease-fire and protect hundreds of thousands of refugees from Hussein's vengeance.

The situation is complicated by the fact that the axe may fall on the Kurds at a more distant date, now that the

canny Hussein has been forced to conclude the accord as a matter of Realpolitik. But he has a long memory and — in the region at least — a long arm.

While he thought he was winning, Hussein rejected international appeals and a dozen condemnatory Security Council resolutions, beginning with the straightforward demand for an immediate withdrawal of his invaders from Kuwait.

Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar himself suffered a humiliating rebuff when he flew to Baghdad to plead personally with the Iraqi

leader.

When the US-led coalition routed Hussein's troops, the Iraqi strongman turned his frustration on his own people within his own borders. There have been mass killings of Shi'ite Muslims in the south and Kurds in the north.

American public and congressional critics accuse the Bush administration of sharing responsibility for the massacres, which reached near-genocidal proportions during and following the abortive rebellion to topple Hussein.

The critics point out that the rebels were led to believe that if they rose up against

Hussein, the US would support them by whatever means were necessary.

But when they did, Bush refused to intervene on their behalf, pleading that the revolt was an 'internal affair' and that he didn't want to fall into a "quagmire". American intervention, he argued, would infringe Iraq's sovereignty.

Without the half-promised US assistance, the rebellion was crushed by Hussein's still formidable military.

The survivors — most of them women, children, older people and other non-combatants — fled in a massive exodus toward Turkey and Iran, or huddled along the Kuwait frontier to escape Hussein's fury.

Bush attempted to keep the focus on the military victory and to downplay the post-war human tragedy. It was only after his national popularity, boosted by unprecedented heights by the victory in Kuwait, began to slip amid congressional and public outrage that the president, in a dramatic turnabout, sent troops to set up safe havens for the Kurdish refugees.

He made it clear, however, that the American presence would be temporary and that the UN would be expected to assume the burden in short order.

For his part, the Secretary-General was eager to get the Americans out, if not necessarily to get the UN in.

In the event he had little choice. Hussein was prodding him to rid northern Iraq of the Americans, British and French by replacing them with UN civilian personnel to handle the Kurdish humanitarian mission, in accordance with an

agreement signed between Baghdad and the UN.

However humanitarian the alliance's purpose, Hussein argued, its military presence clearly compromised Iraq's sovereignty. Most UN member governments, always wary of putting their cachet on intrusion into a sovereign state's domestic affairs, tended to agree.

Bush himself, having now shown the humanitarian flag to silence his domestic critics, was eager to end US involvement in Iraq while he was still ahead.

The US had already drawn up conditions, rubber-stamped on April 2 in Resolution 687 by the Security Council, that Iraq would have to meet before the de facto truce was converted into a formal ceasefire. Among other things it called for:

- A demilitarised zone along the 1963 Iraq-Kuwait border and the deployment there of UNIKOM.
- Iraq's agreement to the destruction and non-acquisition of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and certain ballistic missiles.
- Iraqi liability for loss, damage and injury caused by the invasion of Kuwait and creation of compensation fund.

As a concession, the UN agreed to lift the sanctions against the sale to Iraq of foodstuffs and civilian necessities.

From then on things moved swiftly.

Two days after adopting 687, and with Hussein's troops slaughtering the fleeing

Kurdish refugees in the north and the Shi'ites in the south, the Security Council adopted resolution 688.

That measure, adopted at the prompting of Turkey, condemned Iraq's repression of its civilian population and demanded an immediate end to it, which the Council branded a "threat to international peace and security".

The following day, April 6, Hussein's UN ambassador notified the Council that Iraq had no choice but to accept the terms of 687.

On April 10, the Secretary-General appointed Major-General Gunther Gretindl of Austria as UNIKOM's chief military observer.

Simultaneously with peace-keeper deployment, Perez de Cuellar dispatched a series of humanitarian and damage assessment missions to the region. Other UN teams scouted possible sites for refugee sanctuaries, and food, medicine, tents and other necessities were conveyed to the Kurds.

By the time the Security Council had begun to tackle the delicate issue of phasing out the allied military presence, there were over a million displaced people who had fled into Iran, 416,000 inside the Turkish border and 200,000 to 400,000 still on the Iraqi side of the northern frontiers.

Observers recalled that similar masses of humanity — Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Cambodians in Thailand, Palestinians in the Near East — had for years been unable or unwilling to return to their homes.

Given Saddam Hussein's track record, diplomats predicted that the Kurdish refugee problem would be around for a long time.

— GEMINI NEWS.

TED MORELLO is a UN correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor.



## Ravi is four years old. He refuses to touch a plastic toy helicopter someone gave him.

Last year, he watched as helicopter gunships swooped low over his village in northern Sri Lanka. His father was riddled with bullets as he tried to run for cover.

Ravi's uncle, who also saw the attack remembers: "The helicopters started firing, and suddenly there were bullets raining down from the sky."

In Sri Lanka's war-ravaged northeast, children have been the most vulnerable to the effects of the decade-long war, and many of them cannot remember a time when their land was at peace.

"Everytime I hear a dog bark at night I am afraid," says 14-year-old Kamala. "Our dog was barking the night my father and mother were killed. My sisters and I ran into the jungle and escaped."

Orphaned by a brutal war, Kamala and Ravi are among thousands of Sri Lankan civilians who have escaped being killed, but bear physical and psychological scars of a cruel and seemingly-endless conflict.

"Some of the victims may be traumatised for life," says Hiranthi Wijemanne, who works for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Sri Lanka.

UNICEF has teamed up with two Sri Lankan psychiatrists to produce a booklet and training manual for social activists and government relief workers to

## Sri Lanka Perspective

# No Toy Helicopters

*In Sri Lanka's war-torn north, many children have grown up with war. They have no memories of peace-time. Rita Sebastian who visited a refugee camp for orphans, writes from Colombo.*

help children deal with war shock.

"Our message is: Conflict is bad," explains Wijemanne. "What we are trying to tell the policy makers is that something must be done. The best thing is peace, but in the absence of peace, our young need help."

UNICEF has been urging the government in Colombo to provide children special protection against the consequences of armed conflict, and has offered to help train volunteers who will assist in "healing minds".

A new voluntary organisation called 'Nest' is trying to take care of the psychological needs of child victims, and UNICEF is training its workers on the ways to deal with orphans.

Sri Lanka used to be cited as a model for a low-income development country which has achieved a very high standard of child care. Its literacy rate is among the highest in the Third World, its child mortality rate among the lowest.

But past achievements have been eroded by the conflict, which has not only diverted resources to military purposes, but also directly affected health care, nutrition levels and education of children.

One million refugees have fled fighting in island's northeast and are living in overcrowded camps. Half the refugees are children.

Many have grown up with the familiar sound of gunfire and mortar explosions. They have watched their parents, relatives or neighbours being massacred in cold blood. They come from all three of Sri Lanka's three main communities: Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims.

"Here children have stopped playing ordinary games like hide-and-seek. They hide from imaginary bombs, and play with imaginary guns," says a priest from the northern Jaffna peninsula, describing the life of children in refugee camps.

"They have seen so much violence, it has become a part of their lives."

Psychologists say that exposure to daily violence and death has left many children

when the war began in the north, they have known no other way of life.

"Every child wants to join the army. They only see and hear about killings, war bombs and guns," says Wijemanne.

As the fighting drags on, UNICEF is also reaching out to children in the northeast through international voluntary groups like the Save the Children Fund and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to share the training manuals on treating traumatised children.

Since last September, UNICEF has also been trying to make both the government

and Tamil Tigers implement a 'Plan of Action' adopted at a World Summit on Children in New York last year designed to protect children during armed conflicts.

The Tiger guerrillas and the Sri Lankan government have been urged to set aside "corridors of peace" to allow supplies to reach civilians in war zones and 'days of tranquility' to provide health services to women and children.

Last week, the sounds of war ceased temporarily as both sides agreed to stop shooting while the children took their crucial school certificate examinations. In Colombo, Defence Secretary Cyril Ranawana told journalists that the army was asked to stay away from schools where the exams were being held.

When the examinations were over, the helicopter gunships were flying again. —IPS

## To the Editor...

### Bangladeshi calibre

Sir, A Bangladeshi has won Astor 1990—Commonwealth Award for Journalism. The prestigious award recognizes the journalistic attainments and reflects the standard of professionalism in the mass media sector symbolizing the dedication required for such an international honour that is worth a role model.

The profession's credibility underscores precision and dynamism in mass communication processes. As regards Bangladeshi journalism, the advancement is well evidenced by the quality, variety, and popularity of publications and audio-video materials in a country where only one-fourth of the population is literate.

Naturally, the Bangla-deshi news media have been profoundly burdened with a great duty, despite being dependent on foreign know-how, to elevate the nation's mass communication levels in the world of information revolution that will contribute to the development of national perspectives.

In addition, developing and utilizing domestic resources instead of copying alien ones will protect national heritage. The country's mass media

ought to target each aspect of livelihood so as to promote civic responsibilities to be the guiding forces for a developed society.

M. Rahman  
Zila School Road,  
Mymensingh 2200.

### Sports coverage

Sir, Sports and the Press reciprocate each other very much. So far development, overall performance of a player or team are concerned, at present, the role of Press is really irreplaceable the world over.

Keeping an eye on our players' performance in different international sporting events, although most of the time we get disheartened, but it is also not deniable that on several occasions our players also have shown their courage and ability, winning events abroad. Unfortunately all these news do not always get proper attention of or coverage in our Press.

It would perhaps be wise to point some specific coverage. Recently Davis Cup winning results of Bangla-desh Tennis Team against Bahrain did not get a privileged coverage but, on the contrary, Sri Lanka got a wide coverage in our local Press. The achievement shown by our stars was really a

positive step for Bangladesh Tennis but we, the sports lovers, had to dig out these news from the congested columns of a few local dailies.

Hope from now on our Press will show its interest in giving wide coverage to our players' performance for the benefit of both — the players and the sports lovers.

Md. Byzidur Rashid  
Naya Paltan, Dhaka.

### BUET

Sir, The authorities of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) took more than eight weeks to conduct first year examination another five weeks to publish results. Those who passed HSC in 1989 and got admission to BUET are waiting for their classes to start. Students who passed HSC in 1990, will sit for BUET admission test in July while by October next another batch will be ready for admission. Under the above circumstances, I am tempted to say: Who is to blame after the fall of disgusting autocracy? Should we now hire services of some experts in university administration and management from abroad? I feel just ashamed of our failure!

Sadik Alee  
Maghbarar, Dhaka.

## OPINION

### Bracing the Disaster

The colossal damage in life and property caused by the cyclone has once again drawn Bangladesh to the attention of the international community as the most disaster-prone country in the world. The trail of devastation left behind will take years to rebuild. And there is no guarantee that no sooner have we done it there would not be another to undo it and aggravate things further. With the monsoon not far behind, we cannot be sure that the '1988 floods' will not revisit in greater fury. It is so frustrating that we can see it coming and destroying and there is nothing we can do about it!

No self-respecting nation would like to extend its hand to the outside world for help, had there been some other way. Nature's choice to repeatedly direct calamities against a poor country like ours appears inexplicable to the common man. Affluent countries however reluctant have to feel morally obligated to come to our aid. While we curse our luck and attribute the causes to divinity, they perhaps assign the blame to our poverty and unbridled population growth.

There appears to be two clear-cut choices before us: a) to put up our hands in despair and accept natural disasters as fait accompli; b) to pull up ourselves together and do what we can to stand up and take on nature in whatever way we may.

There was a time when we were seen as fatalists and would have accepted the first alternative. History will however testify that we are not and that the second would be our obvious choice. The problem however lies in the fact that as things start to get better after a disaster, we tend to forget what we went through. As a result whenever a new disaster strikes, we have to start afresh. True, disaster preparedness in

no child's work. It requires expertise and it requires money, and we are constrained with both. A lot of studies funded by international agencies have been made in this field and some actions have been taken. Yet after seeing the hopeless situation that seem to emerge after each disaster, I feel obligated to tender simplistic suggestions which I believe could take care of the immediate situation.

1. Contribution to the President's /Prime Minister's Relief Fund should be a continuous process. People must be motivated to regularly contribute to the Fund in cash or kind so that a healthy stock could always be at hand to meet any emergency situation. The motivation could be done through regular advertisements in mass media similar to the ones undertaken by U.N. bodies such as the Wild Life Fund, Blood Donation etc. Incentives such as income tax relief etc. should be highlighted. Branches of the Relief Fund and Relief Godowns should be made available at the Divisional headquarters and more importantly in the Coastal and off-shore islands.

2. Erection of high rise structures in the coastal areas and islands which could serve both as storage silos and shelters, should be undertaken as a matter of priority. These silos should have sufficient stock of lifesaving drugs, C.I. sheets, tents, water purification tablets, bleaching powder, in addition to food stuff and clothing.

3. The government should consider building up a sizeable squadron of helicopters suitable for relief operations. Foreign NGO's operating in Bangladesh should be encouraged to have their own helicopter strength. In the light of our recent experience, we may also consider procurement of

sea planes in due course.

4. Inflatable sea-worthy motorised rubber dinghies should be procured as a matter of priority.

5. Every coastal island must be provided with wireless/ radio communication.

6. A brutal reality of life is that man tries to hold on to his bare belongings until the last moment. This is one of the principal reasons for loss of lives during tidal surges. When he decides to move out, it is perhaps too late. I suggest that the government should adopt a scheme of distribution of life jackets to the population of the coastal areas and off-shore islands. I sincerely believe that it will help in saving many lives from drowning and bring down casualty figures during tidal surges.

7. Every homestead in the coastal and off-shore islands should be advised to build small underground storage dumps. If possible, government may offer subsidy in making the storage pucca with cover. In an impending disaster, the dump could be stored with emergency foodstuff and drinking water for the immediate post disaster period.

8. A massive afforestation programme has to be launched in the islands. The Forest Department, if necessary, will have to acquire the coastal belts and launch the programme as a matter of top priority.

Lastly, the government would have to adopt a scheme to discourage permanent human habitation of the newly emerged islands. This is a gigantic task if not an impossible one. Nevertheless, I feel it is also one which has to be addressed if human lives should mean anything to us.

A.K.M. Jalaluddin  
Tallabagh, Dhaka.