

Freedom to Express

Allegations have recently been made that a number of newspapers are being subjected to threats from some extremist quarters because of certain items of news and comments they carried. Few issues are of such vital importance for a fledgling democracy as that of the freedom of the press and the seriousness of the matter was amply highlighted by the fact that the issue was raised in parliament on Monday. The Jatiya Sangsad's concern over the matter was a most welcome one, and the prompt undertaking given by the Minister for Information Nazmul Huda that the government would do its utmost to uphold freedom of the press was reassuring.

However, we have come to recognise, through experience, that the threat to the media's independence does not necessarily come from governments. Forces within the profession itself and various socio-political factors can work as an obstacle to the exercise of a citizen's constitutional right to freedom of expression through the press. While an authoritarian government invariably poses a direct threat to press freedom, a democratic government can be expected to reduce its interference with the free flow of information and views to a minimum, if not to zero.

That, however, is not where the government's responsibility ends. One could argue that the scaling down of encroachments is only the first step a democratic government could take to establish press freedom. The real task comes when attempts are made to terrorise the press through threats of violence and actual acts of assaults.

It is then that the government, as the custodian of law and defender of fundamental rights, has to display greater concern and vigilance in defence of press freedom. In that context, the minister's statement to the House, while a most welcome one, still fell short of the unequivocal commitment we expected to find.

The allegations narrated in parliament were quite clear and explicit. Threats have been made to at least two national dailies, with some of the threats being made publicly at open gatherings. In addition to reiterating his determination to uphold press freedom, the minister should now order an inquiry into the allegations and establish the correct source of those threats. Once the culprits have been identified, the government should issue public warnings to them as a first step, no matter to which end of the political spectrum they may belong. The government needs to make it absolutely clear that it will not tolerate any activity, whether conducted publicly or in private, that may prevent newspapers from carrying out their vital task of informing the public as well as contributing to the forming of public opinion on various issues of the day.

Editors and journalists are well aware that there are laws in this country designed to protect individuals, groups and communities from slander and libel. The government should let it be known that aggrieved parties are expected to take recourse to the law, and not try to silence a paper's independent voice through intimidation.

The journalist community itself carries a great responsibility to resist any action, whether from the government or otherwise, that may pose a threat to a journalist's freedom to carry out his professional duty. In any democratic polity, it is expected, indeed desirable, that newspapers will take definite and varied stands on issues affecting the nation. It is this diversity of views that must be preserved and allowed to prosper if we are to progress further in our quest for democracy. The journalists, and in particular the profession's representative body the Union, should display greater boldness in defence of a paper's freedom to express itself. We must remember that if we allow one paper to fall victim to an intolerant and undemocratic state of mind today, then we may not be in a position to defend other papers from being terrorised by the same bigotry and extremism tomorrow.

A Bill for Tokyo

One must bow to the people in East Asia — in real Japanese style — for their incredible sense of history, in never allowing it to die with time. How we wish, we had a bit of it too, in our own context.

Again and again, Japan has apologised to Koreans and Chinese for the atrocities its army had committed against them during the Second World War, more than four decades ago. Similar apologies have been offered to people in some South East Asian countries which were also invaded by Japan, and to the United States for the bombing of Pearl Harbour. During the war, the Japanese army had come as far as Imphal in India, while its air force had bombed Chittagong and Calcutta. As far as we know, governments of India and Bangladesh have no plans for asking for any apology from Tokyo, as long as Japan agrees to buy more of our products to correct the balance of payment deficit!

For Japan, the latest problem lies elsewhere, indeed, in a sensitive area. South Korea has decided to ask Japan to compensate Korean women who were forced to provide sex to Japanese soldiers during the World War II. What's more, three Korean ladies who, during the war, were called "comfort women," have already filed a suit in a Tokyo District Court seeking \$1,60,000 in damages. The suit has touched off new demands. It is said that Tokyo should not only pay the victims but also put the findings about these "atrocities" in text books! What has not been said so far as to how the so-called damages would be calculated, taking into consideration what these "comfort women" were paid four decades ago, the exchange rate and the interest accumulated in favour of these women. Finally, if the suit is settled in favour of the Korean women, why should women with similar histories in other countries which were also occupied by Japan stay quiet? So, wake up ladies, if you are still around. It is not too late to send your bill to Tokyo.

Disenchantment of the Opposition

Each Party is Unhappy in its Own Way

PRIME Minister Narasimha Rao's strongest point is his knack to disarm the opposition. He has not given either the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Janata Dal or the Communists much room for complaint. They too have avoided any confrontation lest the pause in the fiercest political battles the nation has gone through in the last two years should be disturbed. Their assessment has been that by pulling down Rao's minority government they may be forcing upon the exasperated electorate a third poll when they faced the last one only six months ago.

Lately the scene has been changing. Rao is not being taken at his face value. There is some disenchantment. Each party is unhappy in its own way. The BJP has felt slighted over the manner in which Chenna Reddy, the former Andhra Pradesh chief minister, was imposed as the governor on Rajasthan where it rules. That Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, the state chief minister, was not consulted is only part of the messy story, it has been discovered that Reddy's approval was obtained some time in December while Shekhawat was rung only a few days ago. Ironically as it may sound but the fact is that the notification for Reddy's appointment was prepared in the Home Ministry more or less at the time when the inter-state council, also sitting in the ministry where Shekhawat was present, was discussing how to ensure that the state was not ignored on governor's selection.

To BJP's chagrin, Reddy has made no secret of his intention to stay "active" in politics.



NARASIMHA RAO

What he means to convey is that whenever the Congress (I)-ruled centre decides to dismiss the opposition government in Rajasthan, he is available for the hack. If Rao's purpose was to remove him from Andhra Pradesh, where he was constantly plotting against his successor, it may not be served because he has reportedly assured his supporters on joining the battle once they are able to gather enough assembly members to challenge the chief minister, Janardhana Reddy.

The Janata Dal is annoyed because it believes that the prime minister has gone back on his undertaking to shift chief election commissioner T N Seshan. During the budget session when a motion for his impeachment was sought to be introduced in the Lok Sabha, Rao promised to remove him. At the last session, on the complaint by V P Singh, former prime minister, Rao telephoned to reiterate that

Seshan would be shifted in a few days. But there has been no action since. The Janata Dal goes as far as alleging that 'the prime minister's word has no meaning.'

Why he has been equivocal on Seshan has been a matter of conjecture even in the Congress (I) circles. Significantly, his retention as the chief election commissioner and his rejection of allegations that some candidates were stopped from filing their nomination in the prime minister's constituency are discussed in the same breath. Seshan's challenge that none can remove him gives credence to the rumour that he

knows too much. The Janata Dal is, however, going ahead with the impeachment motion now that it has the 135 odd Lok Sabha members, the requisite number, to initiate the process. The Prime Minister's reluctance to announce a package of concessions for Punjab before the polling date to the Lok Sabha and the Assembly elections in the state has upset the communists. Harkishen Singh Surjit, the CPI(M) Secretary General, feels personally let down because Rao gave him to understand that before announcing the election the centre would integrate the Union Territory of Chandigarh with Punjab, refer its water dispute with Haryana to the Supreme Court and take action against the guilty in the 1984 riots following Mrs. Gandhi's

assassination. Even the Akali leadership was conveyed this. That is the reason why it did not announce the boycott before the elections were announced. Surjit rationalises that the "irresponsible" speeches made by the Akalis at the Muktsar gathering recently quered the pitch and "some tale-bearer" poisoned Rao, who ultimately ruled out any package for Punjab before the elections.

Still, all the points of unhappiness, whether Reddy's appointment, Seshan's retention or the absence of package in Punjab, have not made the opposition parties intractable. They are disillusioned. But they have not yet reached in their relationship with Rao the stage where they may think of challenging him or initiating concerted agitations against him.

What looks like taking some shape of protest is the disappointment over the economic situation. Again, all the three parties have their different perception, and they are worried on different counts. The BJP welcomes liberalisation as well as loans from the World Bank and the IMF. But the traders' party as it is, it does not want foreign companies and multi-nationals to come to compete. Its mentor, Balasaheb Deoras, the RSS chief, has said that the Rao government's unbridled invitation to multi-nationals would have the same crippling impact on India as the opening of the country's gates to the East India Company had two centuries back.

The Janata Dal, whose leader, V P Singh, had started the process as Finance Minister in the Rajiv Gandhi's government, is criticising the consequence, the price rise, but not the cause, the various measures. George Fernandes, the Janata leader, has charged the government of bartering away the nation's independence through its economic reforms. But he has joined a Gandhian group, the Azadi Bachao Andolan (save independence front), because the Janata Dal is not yet willing to

come in the open against Rao's economic policies.

The communists are picking on the US for their attacks but it is more ideological than economic. They are not opposed to the "reforms" after watching the end of the Soviet Union and they feel less angry with the government after its assurance that no public sector undertaking would be wound up without finding alternative jobs for the labour employed there.

True, the economic measures have not been exploited politically. But it will depend on the groundswell of public opinion so far the people have accepted without demur an increase of 20 per cent in prices and a decrease of 26 per cent in rupee's value. But this is on the expectation that happy days are around the corner. If the period between the changes and the benefits is to be three to four years, as Finance Minister Manmohan Singh has reportedly said, it will be dangerous. The opposition will not sit idle then.

It is difficult to say whether the government has bitten off more than it can chew because the changes can lead to violent unrest. But there is no going back because there is nothing to go back to. India has more or less dismantled the structure which it had built in the past four decades. If it does not build something new quickly which betters the people's lot, it may have the worst of both worlds. The opposition parties may or may not emerge powerful, but there is no doubt that Rao or, for that matter, the Congress(I) will become weak.

Between the Lines

Kuldip Nayar

transfer of Fazilka and Abohar, two towns in Punjab, to Haryana in exchange. It is somewhat difficult to imagine that Bhajan Lal could have said 'No' to Rao, who is also the Congress(I) President, deciding about the fate of his party's chief ministers. Equally incredible is the rumour circulating in Delhi that Seshan stopped the announcement of the package because it would have amounted to a pre-election concession, which is construed a bribe. After the Janata Dal's decision to renege on the impeachment motion against him, it is not possible to believe that he could have acted on his own steam. He is completely at the prime minister's mercy; Seshan would not have objected to the package if Rao's intention was to give it to Punjab.

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Young Offenders Law under Close Scrutiny

NEW ZEALAND legislation aimed at protecting young people apprehended by the police has come under critical scrutiny following the controversial acquittal of a 16-year-old youth on a murder charge.

The teenager walked free from the High Court after the judge ruled his statement to police could not be admitted as evidence because they had not followed the correct procedure under the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act.

The Act requires police to inform suspects that: They have the right not to say anything but if they do it may be used in evidence; They have the right not to go anywhere with police unless arrested; They have the right to have a lawyer or other person present when questioned; They can be arrested if they refuse to give their name and address.

Police said Jason Irwin, a 15-year-old schoolboy at the time, was with another 15-

year-old youth parked in a car beside the road when a farmer stopped to help them because he thought they had broken down.

The other 15-year-old got into the farmer's car, shot him twice and drove off, dragging the farmer along caught in his seat belt halfway out the door as he desperately tried to escape.

The 15-year-old youth pleaded guilty to the farmer's murder and was sentenced to mandatory life imprisonment. Evidence was given that Irwin was seen in and near the car during the incident.

He was taken from the scene of the murder but, due to a misunderstanding between police officers, he was not advised of his rights until he was at the police station.

According to the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act this was too late, even though a social worker sat with him during the police interview. The judge ruled that, because police had failed

to comply fully with the act, a confession Irwin made was inadmissible as evidence.

"It followed that there is no evidence that the jury could properly conclude the accused was guilty from," he said, dismissing the murder charge.

Police Superintendent Don McConnell said police had

proving he was guilty of murder. But Irwin's acquittal caused outrage, with the sobbing widow of the dead farmer featured on national television holding a picture of her husband and children as she bitterly attacked the judge's decision.

The Commissioner for Children says the legislation is working well. But one judge calls it an 'absolute minefield'

been called a horrific incident where a man had been dragged for several kilometres along the road from a car.

"We were treating Irwin more as a witness than an offender," he said. "And we placed our emphasis on that, as opposed to his rights."

Irwin's lawyer said he would probably have been acquitted even if his trial had gone ahead. The prosecution would probably have had difficulty

police trying to operate under the complex legislation when they were attempting to get statements from children. "The requirements of the act are exceedingly complex, especially if there is a volatile incident requiring an immediate police response," he said.

But Justice Minister Douglas Graham said there was no point in police blaming the act, despite their claims that it was deficient and impossible to work with. "I can understand their concerns about the act, but in this case they failed to comply with the rules," he said.

But Mr Graham said the law was being reviewed in the face of claims that some young offenders were abusing it, although this did not apply in Irwin's case.

The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act, passed by Parliament two years ago, lays down principles to be applied in dealing with young offenders.

These provide that the fam-

ily or tribe should wherever possible participate in decisions concerning the offenders, children. Young offenders should be removed from their family only in case of serious risk, and criminal proceedings should not be instituted.

The Commissioner for Children, Dr Ian Hassall, says the legislation is working well. "But one judge has described the act as an 'absolute minefield.' He ruled that a serious assault charge against a teenager must be dismissed because his confession was inadmissible.

The detective who first spoke to the youth and invited him to the police station for questioning neglected to tell the boy it was not compulsory and was free to leave at any time.

Police say the Act is too strict in its rules governing the apprehension and questioning of offenders, resulting in street-wise young people escaping liability on technicalities. — Depthnews Asia

Central Asia

New Republics Transform Asian Map

A lasting legacy for Asia of the lingering death of the Soviet Union in 1991 is the emergence of a crescent of six new predominantly Muslim republics with a total population of about 60 million.

All but one of the republics is in Central Asia, and their independence has transformed the geopolitical map of south-central Asia. The new republics are reaching across the southern borders of the former Soviet empire to fellow Islamic countries like Iran, Turkey and Pakistan to revive centuries-old ties.

Proof of the gradual gravitation of the new republics towards the Muslim world is the membership granted to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan at the meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Dakar last month.

Five predominantly Muslim Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizia, Tadjikistan and Turkmenistan) and Armenia have decided to join the new Commonwealth of Independent States.

Azerbaijan is expected to join later.

Pakistan and Turkey have already recognised Azerbaijan as an independent state, and there has been a flurry of visits in the latter half of 1991 between the new republics and other Muslim countries in the region.

A high-level Iranian delegation led by Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited Central Asia and toured the republics for 10 days in early December.

Islam Karimov, the president of Uzbekistan, visited Turkey in late December — his first foreign visit since the republic proclaimed independence in August. Agreements of trade, diplomatic and cultural exchanges and a new air link between Ankara and Tashkent were announced.

There have also been ministers from Pakistan with large delegations of academics,

journalists and businessmen forging new ties across the borders. Pakistan is already on the Central Asian bandwagon with a memorandum of understanding with each of the six republics. Under them, Pakistani banks will open branches, diplomatic missions will be opened and new air links will be established.

Landlocked Kazakhstan and Kirghizia are also reportedly interested in forging a road link to the Arabian Sea across the Karakoram Highway that slices through the Himalaya

from Chinese Central Asia into Pakistan.

Pakistan has agreements with Uzbekistan and Tadjikistan for an overland trade route via Afghanistan for the export of their goods through the Pakistani port of Karachi. But this route will have to wait for peace to be restored in Afghanistan.

Analysts here also expect some of the Central Asian republics to join the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) which groups Pakistan, Iran and Turkey when its leaders meet in Teheran in

February.

Kazakhstan's possession of part of the former Soviet nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) arsenal and the presence of tactical nuclear weapons in all four other Central Asian republics have aroused US concern.

US Secretary of State James Baker toured the region in late December to defuse fears of an "Islamic bomb". He also wants to seek reassurance that nuclear scientist based there will not be recruited by countries like Pakistan, Algeria and Syria which Washington feels have nuclear ambitions.

Restoration of ties with Afghanistan is complicated by divisions created by decades of Soviet intervention and the continuing civil war.

All Central Asian republics have condemned Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan, but the

leaders of most of those republics are the same ones were ruling when the Communist Party was supreme in Moscow.

These "reformed" communists still have close ties with the regime of Afghan President Najibullah.

"Our Central Asian brethren should join the Islamic fraternity wholeheartedly and condemn the (Central Asian) Marxists and Stalinists who are trying to create hurdles in the path of an Islamic revolution in Afghanistan," said prominent Afghan Mujahideen leader, Abdur Rab Rasul Sayyaf.

Other Afghan Mujahideen leaders have also been critical of the recent statement of the Uzbek president Karimov who referred to the approximately 300,000 people of Uzbek origin in Afghanistan as Uzbek citizens.

Afghans feel Uzbekistan is trying to claim affinity to them on an ethnic basis, and say they fled the Soviet Union in 1917 and many were born and grew up in Afghanistan.

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.

The shirtless ones

Sir, When we speak of the rickshawpullers, the vision that comes to us, is one of a hardworking labourer (in most cases an unskilled one), possibly without a shirt, or a pair of even rubber sandals. This speaks of the human mass, who now live in Bangladesh, and remain untouched by all the changes that are taking place in different parts of world. In the early sixties the Chinese coolie in the crown colony of Hong Kong had at

least a vest, a half-trouser and a rubber shoe to wear. But this has become a part of ancient history now, as Hong Kong is now regarded as one of the little giants of Asia, and its per capita income has multiplied many times over since then.

Begum Khaleda Zia while addressing the members of the Dhaka Officers' Club recently, said that the land and people are the real assets of the country. A democratic government that we have now has a tremendous responsibility to the electorate in fulfilling the

'basic' needs of the people. The hands of the government should be strong enough to address itself to the minimum needs of the people.

On the one hand, we have the problem of unemployment/part employment, and on the other the unfulfilled needs. All the textile mills are running at a loss and at the other end we have the shirtless ones. Our weavers are unable to sell their wares, because of the flooding of the market by foreign products.

Many regimes have passed by, over the last two decades, without bringing in any tangible changes in the face of Bangladesh. It reminds us of the writing of S. Wajed Ali's "Bharatborsha" (India), where nothing changed in a whole generation. We cannot conquer the natural calamity which visits us time and again; we can

only lessen its severity by the indomitable spirit of our people, and the leadership of a democratic government.

The Government and the opposition must have a consensus regarding the primary needs of the people. It is only a democratic government, that can take the whole country with it. Both the major parties have to work together, if we want to succeed in the business of true development.

Shahabuddin Mahabub Dhanmondi, Dhaka

'Jute and jute products'

Sir, The above captioned article of Dr Abdur Rahman appearing in your esteemed daily on January 17 has pointed out a major cause of our remaining

poorest among the third world countries. We have many research organizations financed from public exchequer. Also there are universities where scholars pursue study and researches on matters of importance to the nation. But the state of affairs indicates that research and industry go their own ways, completely oblivious of each other's existence.

I remember an incident of 1976/1977 when in a friend's office someone, evidently an officer of BCSIR, was in innocence narrating how he 'developed' a process to recover glycerine from the 'wastes' of soap-making. It was unknown to them that at least one industry was exporting both crude and refined glycerine to some European and other countries at that time. If Dr Rahman has succeeded in drawing the attention of those

who matter steps should be taken to develop interaction between academics and industry.

Dr Rahman's article in its brevity tried to focus on the potential of jute. Allow me to add here that jute is a raw material for pulp and paper making. It, being renewable (annual crop), can stop ecological hazards caused by felling of trees and bamboos for pulp making. BJRI can definitely show the cultivators how to get higher yield per acre and some other research institutions can find out how to increase yield of pulp from jute. Several countries are known to use jute/kenaf for paper making and cost of production has not increased because of achievement in the two fields mentioned above.

M A Haq West Rajbar, Dhaka