

How Free is the Media?

The New York-based Freedom House which monitors the status of the press in different countries in the overall context of human rights has been more than generous to Bangladesh in rating it as "free". This commendation should certainly boost the morale of the authorities, especially of the Ministry of Information, which claim that the restoration of democracy nearly two years ago had removed the authoritarian control over the media. At the same time, the testimonial from the Freedom House may be used by our communication-related institutions, such as the Press Institute and news agencies, to generate international assistance, especially from UNESCO, in support of training facilities and acquisition of equipment, to raise the level of professionalism in both the print media and the electronic network.

However, all said and done, the question that cannot be avoided is, how free is the media in Bangladesh today? In giving the country an unqualified testimonial, the US-based body obviously used its own yardstick which we should know more about when its full report is published in March, 1993. However, on this and other issues connected with human rights, democracy and freedom and responsibility of the media, we should be able to use our judgement.

In our view, the media in Bangladesh has indeed come a long way in its journey towards freedom since the restoration of democratic system, but it has not yet reached its destination. Here, we would differ with the Ministry of Information as to what constitutes a free press. While the authorities would look at the scenario only in the context of privately-owned newspapers, we see the radio/television network as very much an essential part of the media. We appreciate several new programmes, such as panel discussions and dramas, which have improved the feature side of our television coverage. But we must repeat our criticism that the government control over BTV's news presentation remains wholly unprofessional and almost stifling. In its newscasts, in Bangla and English, most activities of the opposition parties are blacked out, while such events as public rallies addressed by government leaders are treated with extraordinary care and generosity rarely seen even in a government-owned TV station in any other developing country in Asia. The same approach of underplaying or even keeping out news which does not put the government in a favourable light has become something of an unwritten guideline for BTV. This is where press freedom stumbles and falls flat, notwithstanding the certificate from the Freedom House.

There are other areas in the media operation that call for drastic changes. The so-called national news agency, Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) survives largely as a mouthpiece of the government, and that too as a poor one, in an age when most news agencies are striving to offer their clients a balanced and diverse coverage of national affairs. In some ways, it is worse with the government's support for and control over the so-called Trust newspapers which, a legacy from the authoritarian regime of the past, cost a hefty sum of the taxpayers' money in the form of subsidies paid by the government, in one form or another, to these publications.

In all these areas, it is high time that the government modified its position and, hopefully, changed its policies altogether if Bangladesh has to live up to the testimonial from the Freedom House.

Memorial for Shaheed Journalists

The publication of a commemorative album on the martyred journalists, who were killed by the Pakistani army during our liberation war, was a commendable initiative by 'Raktareen', a private organisation dedicated to raising public awareness about the liberation war. This is the third in the series of the organisation's commemorative albums, the first two being dedicated to martyred engineers and doctors respectively. While we felicitate the members of 'Raktareen' a question that we cannot refrain from raising is why such an initiative was not taken by any of the highly respected journalistic bodies such as the BFUJ and DUJ. Why the Press Club itself did not come forward to bring out such an album? In fact these two bodies were conspicuous by their absence even in the publication ceremony of the album that took place last Monday. A publication such as the one brought out by 'Raktareen' should actually have been brought out by the representative bodies of the profession which would have been a befitting tribute from the fellow journalists to their fallen heroes. This is not to suggest that those outside the profession or belonging to other professions should not pay tribute to journalists or vice-versa. In fact, 'Raktareen' can justly be credited with having set a very laudable trend — something that others should pick up.

A very important suggestion was made during the discussions on Monday pertaining to the erection of a memorial, in the Press Club premises, in whatever form architecturally suitable, for our Shaheed Journalists. These journalists who laid down their lives for the success of our liberation war, definitely deserve our highest respect. It is only befitting that the Press Club which they frequented, and the institution of free press to which they brought so much honour and dignity by their supreme sacrifice, should show them due respect by giving them a place of honour in the premises of the Press Club. In addition, there should be a gallery of their portraits with life-sketches in permanent display at the Club to act as inspiration for younger journalists.

We urge the BFUJ, the DUJ and the Press Club office bearers to immediately look into the possibility of implementing the above proposals and show, however belatedly, appropriate honour to those but for whose sacrifice our nation would not be free today.

It takes a Government an extraordinary ineptitude in conducting foreign policy to unite all the political forces in a neighbouring country against it. And this is precisely what the Government of India has succeeded in achieving by its "Operation Push-back" of the so-called illegal entrants from Bangladesh. When the issue was debated recently in the Bangladesh Parliament, the Indian action was universally condemned. Sheikh Hasina, the Awami League leader, called it "illogical, inhuman and against the spirit of SAARC". The Parliament adopted a resolution which characterised the measure as "illegal" and "unfriendly".

The way the operation was carried out will disgrace any nation which calls itself civilised. Beginning from early September, a few thousand Bangladeshi-speaking persons were hounded out from different places in India, including Delhi, taken to selected border posts in batches, tortured so that they could be identified and pushed into the Bangladesh territory. Following massive protests in Bangladesh and outrage in India, the entire operation was suspended in the third week of October.

In the process, a new major irritant was created in Indo-Bangladesh relations just at the time when they had started looking up in the wake of Begum Khaleda Zia's visit to India and the successful leasing out of the Tin Bigha corridor. When the Indian Prime Minister goes to Dhaka later this month for the SAARC summit and has his bilateral meeting with Begum Zia, Operation Push-back will be the major issue staring at their face. By singling out the members of only one community for this inhuman treatment and

then giving a communal twist to the whole affair, the government has played into the BJP's hand.

What we have witnessed recently is yet another example of non-issues being raised by the BJP to whip up chauvinistic emotions for serving its narrow political end and of the short-sighted opportunistic response of the Government to such moves. This is one more instance of political expediency getting better over the principles which alone can hold the nation together. This is unfortunately the tragic syndrome in which the entire political process in India is trapped — be it Ayodhya, or the singing of Bande Mataram, or the issues of Tin Bigha or illegal migration. That the Government of India's response is motivated by political expediency is also borne out by the fact that the Governments of the two States directly affected, i.e. Assam and West Bengal, did not request the Central Government to come to their rescue and one of them i.e. West Bengal Government, actually opposed this Operation.

There is no doubt that there is a one-way traffic of illegal entrants from Bangladesh into India. But the figure of 15 millions emanating from BJP sources is a gross exaggeration. As illegal migration is a clandestine affair, it is not possible directly to ascertain its magnitude or level. The data that Government agencies have been collecting relate to the number of persons intercepted at the border and sent back and the number of those who enter India with valid docu-

INDIA'S "OPERATION PUSH-BACK"

Inept Handling of a Sensitive Issue

by Muchkund Dubey

The truth about the illegal migration from Bangladesh to India is that it is a movement of people from a poor to a less poor country. Only a dynamic Bangla economy can stop this. India can help in this.

ments and do not go back. With the exception of the years of great political upheaval, the figure under the first category has varied between 8,000 to 20,000 and that under the second category between 6,000-8,000. If we assume that the number of those who enter clandestinely is twice the number of those who are intercepted, the total number of illegal entrants will not exceed 50,000. At this rate, it will take 20 years for the number to reach one million. Thus, the figure being given by the BJP sources may under closer scrutiny, turn out to be as gigantic a hoax as the pitiable plight of the residents of Kuchlilbar painted by BJP before leasing out of the Tin Bigha corridor.

Another tendentious twist given to the whole issue of illegal migration has been to impart it a communal character. This is not only factually incorrect but also a very dangerous game to play because it strengthens the communal forces on both sides of the border. It will have the effect of shattering the dreams of those in Bangladesh and India who have been working hard to build a genuinely pluralistic society in their respective countries. In the beginning, communal elements in India perpetrated the myth that most of the illegal entrants are

Hindus who are being forced out of Bangladesh because of the atrocities to which they were subjected by the majority community. The religion-wise breakdown of the figure of those who were intercepted and sent back told a different story altogether. The proportion of Hindus to Muslims among those who were intercepted along the Bangladesh/West Bengal border was roughly 60:40 and along the Bangladesh/Assam border 25:75. Now the same elements are asserting that Muslims from Bangladesh have flooded the adjoining districts of West Bengal and Bihar and spilled over as far as near Delhi. This also has very slender factual basis. Moreover, the two assertions cancel each other out.

The real truth about the illegal migration from Bangladesh to India is that it is a movement of people from a poor to a less poor region. Just as water finds its own level, similarly people try to move from regions of no opportunity to regions where they see at least some opportunity awaiting them.

So long as there is an asymmetry of opportunities, this kind of migration will continue to take place. It is only through the growth and dynamism of the Bangladesh economy that such a migration

can be brought to a halt. This is essentially the responsibility of the Bangladesh Government and people. But India can play an important role by opening up its market and allowing Indian capital and technology to flow freely to Bangladesh. In the ultimate analysis, the problem of migration can be tackled only within the framework of bilateral and regional co-operation between India and Bangladesh.

Begum Zia has categorically rejected the Indian contention that a large number of Bangladeshis are staying in India illegally. Some of us in India have felt disappointed, and even frustrated, by this stance. But if we place ourselves in Begum Zia's position, we will clearly see that she had no alternative to the position she has taken. The consequences of accepting the fact of illegal migration of Bangladesh to India can be politically and economically disastrous for her country. She simply cannot afford to take back the millions who are alleged to have crossed over to India. Moreover, even if the allegation is true, no self-respecting government can admit publicly that its citizens are running away because they see no opportunity of seeking out a livelihood in their own country.

Finally, by asserting that there has been no large-scale illegal migration of Bangladeshis into India, Begum Zia is simply adhering to the position taken by successive Governments of Bangladesh right from the time of President Ziaur Rahman. Despite this formal posi-

tion, in the past we have received the co-operation of these governments of Bangladesh in arresting illegal infiltration. Begum Zia's Government was also extending us such co-operation. With our unilateral move under Operation Push-back, we have destroyed the prospect of co-operation in this vital area.

Batches of Bangladeshis have been surreptitiously crossing over to India and settling down here ever since the liberation of Bangladesh. They have become de facto if not de jure citizens of India as they have been issued ration cards and included in the voters list. How is it then possible to prove that they are Bangladeshis and not Bangla-speaking Indians?

If we want to repair our bruised relations with Bangladesh, then the first thing to do is to bury the Operation Push-back and to give a categorical assurance to this effect to Begum Zia at the time of the Dhaka Summit. Secondly, the Government should go about setting its own house in order for stopping illegal migration. Finally, the Government should meet the challenge posed by BJP headlong in co-operation with like-minded political forces in the country, and not by stooping to their level.

Migration is going to be a major international issue by the turn of the century and beyond. Both India and Bangladesh have a great deal at stake in this issue. They should, therefore, co-operate and co-ordinate for safeguarding their interest.

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New Nations Add to New World Disorder

by Daya Kishan Thussu

On New Year's Day Czechoslovakia splits into two new states — one year after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Anniversary of break-up of USSR is December 31). Dismantlement of the socialist states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has brought in its wake ethnic and religious conflict. And at a time when new states are being created in Europe, the very concept of a sovereign state is under threat, argues Gemini News Service's Associate Editor. More and more decisions are being made at a supranational level.



Republic which led to the rise of Nazis in Germany. Russian President Boris Yeltsin has warned of the dangers of extreme nationalist forces taking control. This has already led to an exodus of Russian Jews to Israel.

The Russian Federation faces its own border conflicts, where they cut across ethnic and religious communities, notably in the Chechen-Ingush region in the Caucasus and Tatarstan in Russia's heartland.

Valery Tishkov, former chairman of Russian State Committee on Nationalities Affairs, told an international seminar on conflict resolution in London that borders were a "result of historical accidents". He said: "You cannot draw ethnic borders... there are divided people, transborder cul-

tures and ethnic trends." In the developing world, most borders were created by colonial powers with scant respect for tribal, ethnic or linguistic considerations. The nation states established were artificial creations, with power structures imposed from outside. As the imperial rulers withdrew, these collapsed, causing bitter conflicts to re-establish ethnic and national identities.

New driving forces have filled the ideological vacuum left by the ending of the Cold War. Nationalism, tribalism, religious fundamentalism all seem to provide certainty in the new world disorder. Although in many areas people have greater freedom and repression, the demise of the

Soviet Union has been a big blow to progressive ideas worldwide, and secularism is under threat from Poland to India. Religion is increasingly becoming a rallying point for ethnic and national identity. Islamic fundamentalism is on the increase in the new countries of Central Asia, where after decades of indoctrination of an alien ideology people are now discovering their Muslim roots.

In the Middle East, in Maghreb countries, in Afghanistan and in Sudan, Islam is gaining new ground. Orthodox Christianity has seen a revival in Serbia, Russia and the Caucasus. Catholicism is on the rise in Croatia. In many developing countries evangelical churches are gaining more converts than ever before. The fanaticism of Hindu fundamentalism was evident in the destruction of a historic mosque in Ayodhya.

Yet the break-up of the Soviet Union has been hailed by the West as a victory for democratic ideals. It is said that the one condition for democratisation is that a large majority of the people share a political identity. This was the basis for the nation-states which evolved in Europe after the French Revolution. Today that condition is noticeably lacking in many countries. In the recent elections in Lithuania, the Russian-speaking minority was denied the vote.

As early as 1990 President Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia warned that "pluralism may be throwing open the gates and unleashing a phenomenon that it may be unprepared and impotent to check."

In parts of the developing world, there is a virtual absence of central state control. In countries like Liberia, Somalia, Sudan and Afghanistan swathes of land are held by different warlords linked by ethnic or tribal bonds.

The weakening of the state has meant that there are calls for a greater role for the United Nations. Since the ending of the Cold War blue helmets are in evidence in many world crisis spots. There is much debate about how far the UN should intervene in sovereign states. Violating the sovereignty of Iraq, Western nations sent in troops in 1991 to form a "safe haven" in northern Kurdish areas of Iraq. And in August 1992 the West created a "no-fly zone" in southern Iraq.

The UN is considering using Nato forces to check Serbian expansionism. Many fear that this may create a precedent for using Nato — a Western defence alliance and Cold War relic — to act as a military wing of a US-dominated UN. The Americans are now in Somalia — their biggest military involvement in Africa

— in what they characteristically defined as a "friendly invasion." The ostensible aim is to guard and distribute humanitarian aid to the starving Somalis. (The reported discovery of oil there may just be a coincidence.)

Critics who detect neo-colonialism in Western actions ask who decides where and when to intervene? What is the nature of decision-making inside the UN Security Council? It remains a privileged club, dominated by the US, which is quite capable of highjacking it, as was witnessed during the 1990 Gulf crisis.

With the Russian "defection" to the Western camp, the developing countries have lost a valuable ally in the Security Council, while the West has effectively gained one more veto.

Other Western-dominated international institutions are also undermining the sovereignty of Third World states. Major international economic and political decisions are being made in a highly undemocratic way at a supranational level by executives of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and GATT.

In effect, it is these executives who dictate to the Third World, often in league with multinational companies, what they should grow, how much to spend on health or education, and how to "reform" their economies. Few commentators seem to have noticed this assault on democracy and on state sovereignty.

The optimism for a post-Cold War new international order of peace and tolerance sadly has had a very brief existence. And yet in a world which has 170 sovereign states speaking 4,000 languages, it is very much needed.

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.

Research workers

Sir, The other day, while attending a scientific seminar, I heard rather articulate participant emphasising the need for encouraging persons with proven aptitude for research work.

Listening to him, I remembered that in Pakistan days there was a system of awarding merit prize for inventor by the Special Technical Committee of the CSIR (Council of Scientific and Industrial Research).

Press announcements were made every financial year inviting technical research workers or inventors to submit their research ideas (with diagrams, etc.) for the award of prizes. The applicants used to be interviewed and their ideas screened by a committee of scientists (which included the eminent Dr Muhammad Qudrat-i-Khuda) for objective evaluation and awarding prizes and financial grants for devel-

opment of the innovations finally selected by the committee.

Many a Bangladeshi scientific intellectual feels that this award should be re-instituted and I would like to draw the attention of the Public Relations Officer of the CSIR to urge the relevant governmental authorities to introduce these incentive prizes for technical research workers. This act will, in the long run, contribute indirectly to the industrial development of Bangladesh.

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Less known to China!

Sir, At the invitation of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Beijing and under the auspices of Bangladesh-China Friendship Association, Dhaka recently I had the for-

tune to visit the People's Republic of China as one of the members of the seven members good-will delegation led by Julmat Ali Khan, senior vice president of BNP.

We had been to Beijing, Shanghai, Xiamen, Guangzhou provinces and its neighbouring places. It included visits to primary school, university, medical university, hospital, women federation, prison, villages and few joint venture industries. We met cross sections of people. Many of the commonmen including the persons serving in the administrative hierarchy at such establishments and the travellers, buses, railways had not as yet heard the name of Bangladesh.

We had the opportunity to meet Liu Xiaoping, the popular TV and film heroine in China who was travelling to Shanghai with us in the same plane. Her innumerable fans crowded Shanghai airport to receive her. Yet she managed time to meet us and talked to us individually and freely through our interpreter. Unfortunately she also did not know the name of Bangladesh.

The history of war of liberation in Bangladesh, the natural

calamities at par with indescribable sorrows and sufferings of the Wanhoo river in China, role of Bangladesh in the polity of third world nations and neighbouring countries of China are still unknown to the Chinese commonmen who are our neighbours. The commonmen including many intellectuals wrongly treated us to be the people from India. They, however, know the name of Pakistan, India, Bhutan, Nepal. Most unfortunate was that the telephone operator at the 5-Star Hotel where we stayed did not know the name of Bangladesh and so she failed to connect a member of the team at Dhaka over telephone since the code number of Bangladesh was not known to her. The code number of overseas to the Public Overseas telephone of Bangladesh had to be collected from our guide. In Singapore too the Public Overseas Trunk call booths have no Bangladesh code. I had to telephone Bangladesh Biman Office in Singapore to know it.

China is a great country, the third largest in the world, with the largest population. China is sixty-eight times the size of Bangladesh. The Chinese people are extremely social, hospitable, intelligent and hard-

working. They don't know English. The barrier is off language. The vastness, the tremendously rich — resources — exploited and unexploited and phenomenal developments — economic, political, social, cultural — due to open door policy call for introducing Bangladesh to the common Chinese people. Unfortunately Bangladesh is still unknown to them. Would the Government, specially its appropriate agencies take measures to do the needful in this regard.

Md. Anwarul Afzal, Ratinagar, Naogaon

Arm for peace

Sir, Bangladesh has proposed a UN tribunal to try the violators of human rights in war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the special OIC Foreign Ministers' meeting in Saudi Arabia recently, Bangladesh has urged the UN to allow arming the people of that troubled country (for their self-defence).

When her own Anti-terrorist Act is underfire, this stand of hers over this (East) European nation she recognized without fail can be justified by one or all values of present civility chiefly because of her sympathy for the victims

of the innocent citizens. A similar experience during her independence struggle for about a year has been persuing her to be the Switzerland, while her strategic location, surrounded by Indian and Myanmar borders, has remained a threat to her territorial sovereignty.

Nevertheless, for an LDC like Bangladesh that is trying hard to be capable of defending herself against aggression from her neighbours, maintaining impressive armed forces can only be luxuriously offensive to her average citizens.

A number of countries in such a condition, if not worse, have preferred other disciplines (favouring larger proportion of their budgets for development) to military necessities, and Switzerland may be one example that has virtually no regular military power.

As regards the 8th most populous state Bangladesh, probably the best use of her human resources can be a well-trained multipurpose force ever ready to combat any natural calamity as well as to take part in national development.

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