

For Better News Exchange

The Information Minister Nazmul Huda has done well in calling for exchange of information between the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), the national wire service of Iran, and its counterpart here, the Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS). Whether the minister's plea produced a concrete plan of action is still unknown. We hope, it did and that we shall not only know about it but also be in a position to help with some specific proposals.

At this stage, our first thought is to suggest to the Information Minister to look at the two news exchange arrangements that already exist, but which, for a number of reasons, can hardly be regarded as fully operational. One, the Asia-Pacific News Network (ANN), set up by the Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies (OANA) in 1981 in Kuala Lumpur, links BSS with a dozen or more other national news agencies in on-and-off daily transmission. But it is yet to make any kind of impact on the media scene, notwithstanding millions of dollars which have been poured into it to make it viable. The other exchange arrangement, known as ASIA VISION, serves as a grouping for the electronic media, including Bangladesh Television (BTV) and networks of most other countries in this region.

We leave it to the Ministry of Information to find out from our missions abroad how these two networks, ANN and ASIA VISION, are serving the interests of our country, especially when the government wants to emphasise the opportunities offered by Bangladesh to foreign investors.

Seen from this context, the question facing the authorities here is more of activating the existing exchange arrangements than of setting up new links, say, between Tehran and Dhaka. On this score, we must also express our dismay over the near-collapse of the International Islamic News Agency (IINA) which, set up in the seventies, never really got off the ground. The failure of IINA only proves that a news agency, national or regional, cannot operate on the basis of rhetoric or high-sounding declarations. It is, by and large, a professional exercise.

The strength of a regional news exchange arrangement essentially depends on the working of national networks. This is also linked to the overall media development in Bangladesh, covering such issues as the advertising policy of the government as well as of the private sector and the cost of newsprint.

The modernisation of BSS is long overdue. Unless the national news agency is given a new lease of life, it will always remain at the receiving end of foreign wire services, without being able to send out its copy as its contribution to ANN. Again, unless it provides improved service, its persistent claim for raising its subscription from revenue-scarce newspapers will carry little weight.

True, whatever is done with BSS at any level, the question of its operational autonomy cannot be separated from its editorial independence. However, it is still possible to draw up a master plan for BSS that focuses on its efficiency, operational dependability and participation in regional news exchange arrangements. We are sure, these are matters of concern to the Information Minister. What is important is to turn these concerns into firm decisions.

Yanong's Delaying Tactic

On the face of it the refugee problem has not greatly soured relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar but deep down the process it has certainly betrayed the natural irritation. This is despite the repeated assurances by the Yanong administration. During his just-concluded visit, Home Minister of Myanmar Lt Gen Mya Thin was found not at all wanting in expressing good will and friendship in the nicest possible terms. Highly courteous, the visiting Home Minister was also optimistic that the Rohingya issue will be resolved soon.

The Myanmar government may be really meaning what it says but the delaying tactics it has so far resorted to are weighing heavily on both the patience and the limited resources of Bangladesh. Particularly galling is Yanong's reluctance — if not outright refusal — to involve the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the repatriation process. It is fine words when one says with conviction that the two neighbouring countries enjoying the best of relations are more than able to settle the issues without third party involvement. It is also a long time since the Rohingyas arrived in Bangladesh in 1991. Shuttle diplomacy between the two countries only made it possible for Bangladesh to convince the Myanmar government that the problem needed the latter's cooperation to be solved.

Initially, however, Yanong did everything not to recognise the problem. Its reluctance to allow UNHCR supervision and even its representatives' entrance into that country for an on-the-spot monitoring of the refugees' exodus is not an event of the distant past. Now that the process of repatriation started, it has hit several stumbling blocks in various forms and at different times. Only 2,500 Rohingyas have returned home and rest of the 265,000 are still awaiting their turn. For months the repatriation has been stopped for reasons not so clear to anybody other than the receiving authority. This, after all, is no way of strengthening bilateral ties.

Now the question is, what the Myanmar government has to lose if UNHCR were involved in the Rohingya repatriation. Nothing. But it continues to keep the question at bay and for the same reason it is stalling the process in breach of the agreement reached between the two countries. What is the option then for Bangladesh? It has signed a memorandum of understanding with the UNCHR to involve the organisation in the process. Whether the nice words are part of the delaying tactics or they just expose the weakness of diplomacy of the Bangladesh side will soon become clear. But about one thing we can be sure that Yanong should not be allowed to buy any more time. Relentless diplomatic pressure should be sustained to make it see the Bangladesh point of view on the issue.

It was 1950, less than three years after partition. I was nine years old. We lived in Purana Paltan area of Dhaka and in those days, it used to be one of the nicest residential localities of the town (Dhaka was not a city then) with a canal flowing through the neighbourhood. It had grassy banks with trees and boats would ply in summer. During 1960s, everything changed so thoroughly that I cannot identify the lanes and bylanes of my childhood any longer. I feel like a stranger at a place where I gathered the most cherished memories of my early life. It is all gone forever.

But it is not the physical transformation: most striking and brutal had been the heartless and tragic change of the human environment — soaked in blood and tears. It was the recurrence of Hindu-Muslim riots in 1950. There were many Hindu families living in Purana Paltan; the original inhabitants of the area. In fact, they had made beautiful Purana Paltan into what it was at that time. On the fateful day of the riot, I saw the butcher located next to Bijon Bari (I do not know if Bijon Bari still exists) rushing down Purana Paltan lane with a big open knife in his right hand. My father persuaded him to calm down. He obeyed — after all he was a good fellow. It was and still is the deliberate propaganda and rumour mongering that induce people to commit unwanted violence.

I was too young to be a direct witness to the brutality of

Communal Violence and Continued Poverty: An Individual Perception

communal violence. Obviously, I was grounded — well within the limited confines of the house and did not dare to step out of the front door. Yet I perceived violence deep inside my heart when my Hindu neighbours, at least 50 of them, sought protection in our house. They spent the night, in fact the next 24 hours, and thereafter they left, first for refugee camps and then across the border to another country. Very few of them ever returned, even for a short visit, since they carried with them stains of blood and taste of tears.

Terror

At that time, I did not find their departure to be of any particular importance, leaving their ancestral home back in Dhaka, since we ourselves had come from Jalpaiguri in late 1947. However, the most vivid memory that still persists, in fact burns, within me is that of the terror-stricken eyes of Paresh and Hiren, the two boys of my age from the locality. On that brutal day, they came to our place seeking shelter for the evening. For the first time I came to know what is terror in real life; same as the horror movie I saw the week before at the Britannia cinema, demolished 24 years later to make

way for Bangabandhu Avenue of today.

I could perceive the devastating consequence of communal violence in those two kids like me. "What have they done?" I asked my father. "Nothing," he replied, "their only fault is that they were born in this wretched country." He was utterly disgusted and hurled abuses at both Gandhi and Jinnah — I distinctly remember.

It was long time back. The images of terror-stricken Paresh and Hiren are dormant

forget the pains and sorrows of life. But it seems that in the subcontinent, we want to challenge God's will and that in the name of religion, renew the reign of terror and force the innocent to suffer. It is utterly inhuman, senseless — to say the least.

The young Muslim boys peering through the glass-panes of the Bombay Madrasah were exactly same as Paresh and Hiren, 40 years back, staring at the street from House, No 2D/12 Purana Paltan Lane.

WINDOW ON ASIA Shahed Latif

deep within the inner reaches of my conscience. It was only the other day, after long 40 years, that the same terror image suddenly flashed back in all its morbid details when I saw in the newspaper the picture of three young boys exactly like Paresh/Hiren peering through the closed shutters of a Madrasah in the riot-torn city of Bombay.

Forty years later, the same terror still persists. It is said that within our mind and body there is a unique mechanism to

The purpose of religion is to bring peace and harmony. Be it any religion, the best in man should flourish. We have challenged religion, all religions for that matter, through violence and riots. The innocent victims are the manifestation of cremation as well as burial of humanity. We are an anathema in the last decade of the 20th century when the gospel is economic growth, progress in technology, health, education and, above all, banishment of poverty from

the face of the earth. Nation after nation to the east of the subcontinent are progressing at 6 to 9 per cent rates of growth while we languish in our cesspool of past anguish, nurturing past animosities and continuing blood-feuds.

Owl Mentality

It is so unfortunate that we consistently fail to see the light of the day. We possess an owl mentality and prefer the night to the day. There are multiracial countries like Malaysia who have brought about such communal harmonies that progressing at sustained rates of economic growth, they soon should be catching up with the developed countries in terms of standards of living. Already majority of families own cars in that country while majority of South Asians ride rickshaws and bullock carts. We had a Nobel laureate in Bengal when there was hardly a single native university graduate in Malay peninsula. Today, that country has achieved almost universal literacy while even to this day we are largely illiterate nation. Along with brutalities of communal violence, these agonizing facts of life must be confronted by all of us in the subcontinent.

Living within our insular world of poverty and deprivation, we eagerly promote a restrictive life-style of withdrawal from the global mainstream and look inward where the heavy hands of our past historical animosities come immediately to the forefront. Consequently, we find hatred in place of harmony and agonies of the vanquished stemming out of poverty. Always the political cultures are waiting behind the wings to carve out their pound of flesh well within the immediate short term at the cost of what is good and human. Politics is the last resort of the worst scoundrel — we have proved it times without number in this subcontinent.

Paresh and Hiren, I do not know where they are today. I only hope and pray that they have not passed on the experience of terror (which is my shame of Purana Paltan) to the next generation. Inevitably it would turn into hatred. Same is true of the three young boys at the Bombay Madrasah who will not, I fervently pray as a fellow Muslim, transmit their agonies on to those who are yet unborn so that violence and hatred must not thrive in the subcontinent.

In support of my hope and prayer, I wish to furnish a simple argument: If one Europe after centuries of war could be a reality today, why can't we at least live in peace and harmony in this subcontinent? Why must we look only at the past? Let us look forward to the future into the next century and ensure a better world for our children and grand-children.

'We Fight till We're Free,' Say Armenians

David Orr writes from Stepanakert, Nagorno Karabakh

Nagorno Karabakh in the former Soviet Union is still the centre of a geographic tug-of-war between Azerbaijan, with which it was integrated in 1921, and the Armenians in the region, who want to be reunified with Armenia. Fighting has intensified in recent months. Neither side is willing to make major concessions, and efforts to bring peace may prove unsuccessful.



MONTE MELKONIAN
A Californian Armenian commanding Armenian forces in South East Karabakh

grated into Soviet Azerbaijan. Over the decades, Azerbaijan has pursued a policy of economic and social discrimination against the Armenians of Karabakh as well as subjecting them to politically repressive measures.

Following Soviet refusals to accede to Karabakh demands for reunification with Armenia and after pogroms against Christian Armenians in Muslim Azerbaijan in 1988, tensions in Karabakh rose significantly. Within months, the enclave's Armenian population had launched its armed struggle.

"The campaign is going well for us, though the Azeris are making serious attempts to resist," said Serje Sarkissian, chief of the Karabakh Self-Defence Force. "We're prepared to talk peace, but we'll continue fighting if the Azeris

won't recognise our right to live as we want. Our main task is to defend Karabakh and, at the moment, the best means of doing that is by defeating the enemy."

The Karabakh Self-Defence Force took the military initiative for the first time in the five-year war, and by the end of March captured a large area of Azeri territory around the town of Kelbajar. It effectively established a second corridor between the enclave and Armenia. Last May, it opened a 12-kilometre supply corridor to Armenia running through the former Azeri town of Lachin.

"We don't want to take control of Azeri territory," said

Sarkissian in his chart-strewn command centre in Stepanakert, the capital of Karabakh, "but we had to secure our western flank and to protect the Lachin corridor. That was the reason for the Kelbajar offensive."

Fierce fighting next broke out in northern Karabakh at the end of March and continued through April, with heavy losses on both sides. The Karabakh militia now claims to control 80 per cent of the Martakert region in north-eastern Karabakh and much of the Shaumian region in the north.

Many of the villages taken by Azeri forces last June are once again in Armenian hands.

The Azeris still hold the wheatfields of eastern Karabakh and parts of the south around Hadrot. The theatre of war has since switched to south-eastern Karabakh, beyond whose borders Azeri forces began to mass during April.

Though not officially at war with Azerbaijan, Armenia is supporting Karabakh's struggle for self-determination. Technical supplies and fuel are being delivered to Karabakh via the Lachin corridor and Armenia continues to feed the enclave from its own much depleted electricity supply (Armenia's only power source, a gas pipeline through Georgia, is regularly blown up by Azeri commandos inside Georgia).

Fidathner, or freedom fighters, from Armenia and the scattered Armenian diaspora also pour into Karabakh. They are men like Serap Serobian, recently killed in battle. At his carnation-strewn graveside stood family members, among them his son holding a photograph of his hero father. Also there was fellow fighter, Telman Hakobian.

He said: "The situation in Karabakh is very bad, but we're going back to fight. There are hundreds of volunteers and we'll fight till Karabakh and our fellow Armenians are free."

Fighting alongside the local farmers in the trenches just beyond Martakert in south-eastern Karabakh are Armenians from Iran, even Turkey, Armenia's traditional enemy.

"Objectively, the Azeris are

much stronger," said Monte Melkonian, a third generation Californian Armenian now commanding Karabakh forces in the Martakert sector. "But we've got the motivation. A lot of the enemy are conscripts. Our force is made up entirely of volunteers."

From the front line can be heard the increasingly insistent boom of Azeri artillery 15 kilometers to the south. It is hard to believe these men could withstand a strong Azeri attack. Their uniforms are peasant workclothes and Soviet army castoffs.

Most of their guns and all their heavy weapons have been captured from the enemy. Yet all around is evidence of their successes: the tail plane of a shot-down jet fighter and, stranded in no-man's land, a gutted Soviet tank, its turret askew and its cannon tilting skywards.

This is a cruel conflict in which 3,000 have died and countless thousands been made homeless. Both sides have been inflicting terrible suffering on population centres with the indiscriminate use of long-range Grand multiple rocket-launchers and both sides, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), are taking civilian hostages.

Until last year, Stepanakert was subject to daily shelling by the Azeris. Though the town is now securely in Armenian hands, many people have fled and half its buildings have been razed or damaged.

In the latest peace initiative Azerbaijan has so far given no indication that it will accede to demands for the self-determination of Karabakh. And Armenia is unlikely ever to abandon support for the liberation struggle of the enclave.

— GEMINI NEWS

DAVID ORR is an Irish freelance journalist.

OPINION

DU: Poor Management

AS Islam

Mr S M Ali's commentary of the special convocation of Dhaka University to confer honorary D Sc degree on Nobel laureate Professor Salam, depicts the real picture of what had happened on this historic occasion.

One young teacher of the university told me that on the day of rehearsal it was so arranged that staff members of junior cadre would occupy the gallery at the first floor of the Curzon Hall. On the convocation day, as the procession was getting ready there was a brief announcement that seats for all teachers have been arranged inside the main hall and none needs to go upstairs. Was this announcement motivated/engineered? This should be immediately looked into. Who authorised the announcer to make that announcement which disrupted the entire sitting plan much to the inconvenience of senior staff members and officials?

It's beyond me to understand why adequate planning was not made ahead of time. True that on this occasion, the university authority didn't get enough time to make the preparation but what about the inaugural function on the occasion of Diamond Jubilee celebrations? The invitation to this momentous event was extended the previous day through television and radio. Some distinguished guests remarked that, "had it not been for love of the university, we wouldn't have come at such a short notice."

Another most interesting thing with us is that we forget our inconveniences as soon as we pass through them. On the following day we are least bothered to rectify the situation. Mr Ali has rightly said that acoustic problem was always there since the day of commission of the hall but none would take initiative to equip this historic hall with modern device to make it acoustically sound. Let us hope that the university authority would take immediate steps to modernise this hall with all kinds of facilities like air-conditioning and those for simultaneous translation.

I can't help mentioning the gross printing errors which marred the nice citation read out on the occasion of conferment of D Sc degree on Professor Abdus Salam. Some of the mistakes like 'knowledge' were so obvious that it was apparent to even a casual observer. The other mistakes such as 'theoretical', 'significant' instead of 'theoretical', 'significant', and the spelling of the same word like 'centre' in two different ways (centre and center) would pain anybody to whom the glorious tradition and the prestige of Dhaka University take precedence over anything else.

The university would find among its staff members a large number of workers who would be too glad to extend their wholehearted cooperation to make such functions a grand success.

To the Editor...

Reintroduction of Senior Service Pool

Sir, It is one's our discretion which cadre he/she would prefer to join. A person may give first preference to Customs Service while another to Administration Cadre or Audit & Accounts Cadre/Taxation Cadre. And for our easy understanding let us think that every person those have given first preference to the Cadres enumerated above has been selected for the respective Cadre. We know that every Cadre has its own line posts, say, for instance, in case of Customs Cadre the highest line post is Member-Customs, in case of Administration Cadre the equivalent highest line post is Divisional Commissioner and in case of Audit & Accounts Cadre the equivalent is Controller General of Accounts and in case of Taxation Cadre, Member-Taxes.

From the above description it is evident that none of the posts in the Central Secretariat from Deputy Secretary to Secretary is the line post of any particular Cadre.

The Secretariat is the principal centre for macro-level policy making monitoring and evaluation. So the role of junior

officers as well as senior officers is very important in this regard. Since the senior officers have to play very vital role in formulating macro-level policies and evaluation thereof, so these policy posts in different ministries might be manned by the most efficient and brilliant officers of different Cadre Services. No single Cadre can claim that all of its members, are brilliant in comparison to other Cadres, rather every Cadre is blessed with some brilliant officers. Therefore, to bring those efficient and brilliant officers in policy making process there must be a permanent system, and Senior Service Pool (consisting all posts from DS to Secretary) deserves to be come that system. Under this system, if any body wants to become Member of SSP he/she must go through an examination and this examination might be conducted by an independent agency like the PSC and here other things that may be taken into consideration are — ACR, academic attainments, combined merit order (prepared by the PSC), honesty, sincerity, service length, etc.

The present quota system has already created a sense of

frustration, resentment, disinterest among the officers of different Cadres excepting BCS (Admin) Cadre. Because, under this system, 65 per cent and 60 per cent posts of Deputy Secretaries and Joint Secretaries, respectively, are reserved for BCS (Admin) Cadre and only 10 per cent and 20 per cent of these posts, respectively, are reserved for other 26 Cadres. Moreover, although no quota was fixed for the posts of Additional Secretaries and Secretaries, more than 90 per cent that are occupied by the Officers of BCS (Admin) Cadre.

Therefore, taking into account the dismay and frustration which in turn lead to inefficiency and disinterest on the part of the prospective officers of different Cadres, the present government should reintroduce SSP and posts under this Pool should be filled in by the most efficient and meritorious officers of different Cadres after qualifying in the open competitive examination which is to be conducted by the PSC. In this context, we do appreciate the government's step to constitute a committee, headed by Mr Nurul Huda, honourable State Minister, Ministry of Establishment,

which will look after the services anomalies and we would request the committee to analyse the real situation that prevails in respect of appointments in senior services and hope that the committee would look after the situation neutrally and give a proper guideline in this regard.

Md Saiful Islam
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Overbridge at Tejgaon

Sir, Due to location of a truck station near Tejgaon rail gate, pedestrians simply cannot move from one side to another, neither can other vehicles — for lack of footpath and passage. The problem was brought to the notice of the relevant authorities but no action towards its solution has yet been taken.

However, we like to propose that an overbridge should be constructed from Farmgate to Tejgaon "Satrastra" terminus/crossroad. This may involve a considerable expense but would certainly ease the problem to a greater extent, and pay off in the process.

M A Mobin
Survey of Bangladesh, Dhaka