

Changes are Apparent in a New South Africa

Recently an eminent academic from South Africa, Prof Peter Vale of the University of Western Cape visited Dhaka. He was perhaps the first South African academic to visit Bangladesh in the last few decades. Prof Vale is a white South African and has been actively involved with the African National Congress. He drafted the foreign policy position paper of the organisation and heads the Centre for Southern African Studies of his University. He was accompanied by Dr Abdullah H Omari of the Centre for Foreign Relations, Dar es Salaam, a distinguished Tanzanian scholar. The purpose of their visit was to get familiarised with the region and to establish contacts with academic and research institutions of this country. In order to get a better understanding of the complex South African situation and its impact on the region as a whole, Dr C R Abrar, Associate Professor of the Department of International Relations, Dhaka University, interviewed the visiting scholars exclusively for The Daily Star.



Prof Peter Vale (right) accompanied by Dr. Abdullah H Omari

Daily Star (DS): South Africa as a nation is going through a massive transition process. There are so many actors — parties, factions and individuals — each having the capacity to forestall, if not reverse the progress so far achieved. How do you think the ANC will tackle?

Peter Vale (PV): The country is at a difficult moment. It is in the frontier of its history. The ANC will win no doubt. But the problem for ANC and the whole peace process is how to deal with those not participating. By agreeing to put to vote the question of Afrikaaner homeland Mandela has gone a long way to satisfy the moderate elements of the whites. But it is impossible to meet the demands of the 'hard-core' whites. What they are asking for essentially amounts to constitutional guarantee to be racist. That is an absurd proposition. The Buthelezi (Inkatha chief) factor would continue to plague the peace process. He wants to be one of the big three and therefore is conspiring for independence of Natal. That is not a viable option. But he has the ability to wreck the peace process. His relationship with the Zulu king has deteriorated and there has been an erosion in international support.

DS: How do you think the ANC and the National Party view each other?

PV: The whole transition process has been an interesting experience for both the parties. This has been the test for democracy even before you enter the democratic process. Exogenous factors have pushed the parties closer. There has been a deepening consensus on economic policies mediated by the IMF and the Bank. The ANC has informally endorsed the structural adjustment policies negotiated by the government.

DS: Don't you think this could be the Achilles heel for the ANC? Once it is in power surely it has to deliver?

PV: The question of redistribution will be the most important challenge for the ANC. There has to be a significant rearrangement of the present budget allocations. Successful

implementation of policies regarding health, education, social welfare will give the administration a lot of mileage. With its existing industrial base, notwithstanding a significant flight of capital, South Africa is in an advantageous position than many other countries. Fortunately, there is a general agreement between the two main parties, ANC has become more pragmatic and de Klerk's party has come a long way from Thatcherite economics. This has been the outcome of the protracted negotiations. Now they are in accord about the fundamentals of the economy. The National Economic Forum, comprising of the government, opposition, business and labour, has been debating important economic issues, and it is this process which has contributed the parties to be tolerant of each other's views.

DS: How do you think the business is reacting to these developments?

PV: Business in South Africa, like their counterparts in any other country, is very pragmatic. They know which way the wind is blowing. I would say they feel reasonably comfortable at the accommodating spirit of the ANC and the government. However, I would again underscore the issue of flight of capital. Individuals in the owning class are yet to come into terms with the new South Africa.

DS: We understand that the ANC has a good influence over the trade union movement. Don't you think in the post-election phase with the IMF/Bank prescriptions hanging, it would have been better if the trade union movement was more autonomous?

PV: South Africa has a tradition of a robust trade union movement. A team of courageous people had led the movement and had contributed a great deal to the anti-apartheid movement. It is now an important part of the political process and in alliance with the ANC. Many important union leaders will be contesting the elections and that would certainly weaken the labour leadership. It is a pity to see the unions weak at a time

when situation demands a strong leadership.

DS: Do you think that the process of integration in the army will succeed? Wouldn't it be a rather difficult task to unite the liberation fighters with the South African Defence Force?

PV: Real integration will be difficult to achieve. For the coming elections a four to six thousand strong National Peacekeeping Force is being raised with ANC armed cadres and SADF contributing. Here also the configuration has been hierarchical — mainly white officers and black rankers. This issue also figures prominently in the transition talks.

DS: How about tensions within the ANC leadership?

PV: ANC is a broad church. It is more of a movement than a party and obviously there are some tensions. Some hard-core are opposed to what they perceive as 'bourgeois accommodation', others such as Winnie Mandela have large township followings. They represent the idiosyncratic elements within the party. Some grassroots level activists may face problems to relate to those who were in exile or those who were interned as freely as can relate to those who provided leadership at the township level. It will again be a very delicate task for the ANC leadership to control the dissident elements.

DS: Two important sectors are defence industries and nuclear capability. Do you think there will be any major shift in these areas once ANC takes over?

PV: It will not be fair to expect South Africa abandoning its technological advantage in the defence sector. Of course, keeping track of the arms shipments will be an important item of the new government's defence agenda. On the question of nuclear capability I believe that there are a number of unanswered questions. The account for the yellow cake doesn't add up. Nonetheless, I am sure South Africa will do well in handling the nuclear question in this post-isolationist phase and prove its credentials as a responsible, regional and international actor.

DS: So far we were discussing the state. How about the civil society? Has there been interactions between the races at the civil society level?

PV: I must say success at that level is rather modest. Exchanges and interactions between the races at professional levels — bar, medical and university faculty etc — has not started with the urgency that the hour needs. One does not see proliferation of multi-racial cultural groups or organisations of that sort.

But certainly there are obvious signs of change. Now one can see black bank managers supervising whites, an unimaginable scenario only a few years ago. Assimilation is taking place amongst the youths, there are more blacks in erstwhile all-white schools, and it is not really a rare sight that young couples from diverse racial backgrounds strolling in parks and watching cinemas. In a way, it is the youth who were more quick to adapt to the changes and there I believe lies the hope for the new South Africa.

'Neighbours' Perceptions

DS: Dr. Omari, how do the neighbours view developments within the ANC?

Abdullah Omari (AO): In a way such developments were anticipated. We have lived together, trained and provided logistic support and transit facilities to the liberation fighters. The ANC is an extremely complex movement, having several tendencies within it. There is also the question of generation gap, cleavages between the cadres and the combatants. In the training camps there used to be occasional tensions between these tendencies. But I must add here, such tensions never reflected ethnic divisions, as has been the case with ZANU and ZAPU. They were more ideological in nature.

DS: South Africa's neighbours, particularly the front-line states, suffered a great deal due to policies pursued by the white regimes. How do you think the neighbours' perceptions are of the new South Africa?

AO: All the countries of the region have already passed 10 to 30 years of independence. In that respect South Africa is the newest member in the regional community. The neighbours are watching developments in South Africa with interest. We want the region to be stable and therefore want the ANC to win decisively. We know their programme. Civil war in South Africa will plunge the region into a grave crisis. The Cold War worked against a peaceful transition and gave rise to a complex situation. Now I believe there is a good scope for regional cooperation. Here we must take notice of one important factor. Compared to its neighbours South Africa is a big country with a disproportionately large economy. It is the centre of mining, manufacture and source of employment to migrant labourers from Mozambique, Swaziland and Zambia. One of the major problems will arise when the new administration following the April 27 election will try to provide jobs to the South African blacks. That would have a major impact on the migrant workers from the neighbouring countries.

DS: What impact would the change have on the regional organisations?

AO: So far member-states of these regional organisations were more or less of equal stature. There is a concern that these structures may be dwarfed by the hegemonic South Africa. Attempts are being there to build up mechanisms to check that hegemony, if that happens, I believe the new leaders of South Africa will be sensitive to the perceptions of their neighbours. There has to be positive initiatives towards confidence building. We should explore areas of cooperation. There has been a rapid increase in the business traffic between Dar es Salaam and Johannesburg. All these would lead to greater regional stability and cooperation. And finally, this trip to Bangladesh of a white South African academic accompanied by a black Tanzanian scholar itself is indicative of the big changes that are taking place in the region.

New Window to Egalitarian Islam

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

THE idea propounded by many feminists that religion is a tool for woman's eternal repression may seem a little too extreme for many. Yet even a perfunctory glance at the history of patriarchal religions gives overwhelming evidence supportive of such an allegation. Whether it is Judaism or Christianity, the constant refrain has been woman as the inferior one, as the sinful one. In the case of Islam, no quite intrinsically but as interpreted in some traditions, a kind of discrimination has been apparent. Just a look at the status of women in the Islamic countries of the world today, shows that women whether in a poor society or a rich one, will always have to bow down their heads before the dictates of their men and accept themselves, as subordinates. Yet how did this blatant arrogance originate and become so integral with religion? How much of this discrimination was in the holy books and how much of it got distorted by careless interpretations? These questions are provocative enough and may even constitute blasphemy for some, but they must be examined carefully before we condemn a religion as discriminatory or unjust.

Riffat Hassan a scholar of the Quran, has attempted to do just this. She has been studying the holy book in its minutest details to understand the Quranic teachings regarding women and gender relations. The search has been an exhaustive, not to mention a painful one for Hassan who has had to battle with challenges from both feminists and orthodox Muslims in addition to her own personal quest for truth. Although a trifle emotional to be completely objective, Hassan nevertheless does suggest some interesting ideas. Hassan's extensive study of the Quran started as early as 1974 when she was teaching at Oklahoma State University, USA. Using the Quran as a text book, Hassan systematically analyzed each passage especially those mentioning women.

In 1984 Hassan went to Pakistan, her home country, to spend a year long sabbatical. During this time, a major change was taking place in Pakistan with General Ziaul Huq's relentless effort to make Muslims more Muslim. The laws were geared toward two main targets, one to put women 'in their place' and secondly to impose Islamic punishments that did not seem to be concerned with social justice. In 1979 the Hudud Ordinance said that if a woman was raped she would need at least 4 male believers to give evidence for her story to be believed. If she did not have any witnesses then tough luck. "This was having a tremendous impact on society," says Hassan, "with an enormous amount of literature very negative towards women, being circulated and an alarming increase in violence against women".

The overriding question that began to plague Hassan's mind in 1984 was that how could laws as unjust and archaic be applied to a modern society? The answer to this was that these laws were possible because of a self-evident fact believed by both males and females that men were superior to women. Hassan contends that this idea of male superiority so prevalent in Muslim societies, is based on three myths.

The first myth is that God's primary creation was Adam, with Eve being derived later from his rib, thus being secondary and subordinate. The second myth is that although woman is secondary, she is primary in guilt because she was the one who tempted Adam into eating the apple. The third myth was that woman was not only derived from man but for man to be his help-mate. So while he is fundamental, she is instrumental. The origins of these myths can be traced as far as Judaic and Christian traditions. Hassan says that in the original creation stories of the Bible, Adam represents both male and female and there is no rib story. It is in the versions written after the 10th century that the rib story begins to take root.

But it is in the creation stories of the Islamic tradition that Hassan has made some shocking discoveries. The primary source of these is in the Quran where there are 30 passages on human creation. In all these stories there is not a single rib story says Hassan. The three generic names used all refer to humanity as a whole. Out of the 25 references to 'Adam' 21 use 'adam' as a symbol for humanity comprising both male and female. In any case, continues Hassan, the very word 'adam' in Hebrew is a word which means earth or soil. Thus Adam means — of the earth or from the soil. Hassan concludes that since there is no Eve in the Quran there is no distinction between male and female in the creation stories.

But then where did the rib story come from? Hassan says that it entered the Islamic tradition and into the two Hadis texts, Sahi Bhukhari and Sahi Muslim which are basically guide books on how to be good Muslims. Each Hadis has at least three references to the rib story. Interestingly, Hassan points out, that the stories repeatedly allude to the crookedness of the rib which is connected somehow to the woman. In the Quran the stories are totally egalitarian. Hassan argues that if the Quranic statement has the power to overrule everything else and if there is no rib story

in the Quran, then the Hadis is in fact against what the Quran says.

The Hadis being written by a variety of writers is subjected to many different kinds of interpretations. Yet critical analysis is very difficult, she adds, since criticizing any companion of the prophet (the compilers of the Hadis) can be punishable by death. Nevertheless, it has been concluded by many scholars such as Imam Bhukhari that an 'overwhelming number of stories in the Hadis are not authentic although the average Muslim accepts them blindly. Hassan philosophizes that if creation is an act of God and if there is total equality in creation as implied by the Quran, then any kind of inequality is not justified. Hence any laws that have unjust consequences cannot be God's word.

Hassan also points out the problems of translated versions of the Quran which may not always be reliable in their authenticity. This has to do with the nature of the Arabic language. Hassan explains that every Arabic word has more than one meaning. Linguistically, therefore, it is not possible to say that a word means only one thing. Thus the translator will put only his understanding of the word, which may be very different from what another translator will use. "Given the nature of the Arabic language," Hassan comments, "the Quran has to be treated as an open text."

Hassan implies that mis-translations and misinterpretations of Islamic teachings occurred because of mistakes made in the beginning "We got off track from the beginning so we must go back to the beginning to know the truth".

Over the centuries, Islam has become more of a legalistic system, says Hassan, where the freedom of explaining, or thinking, has been gradually diminishing.

Hassan's views may seem too simplistic or too impassioned for sceptics who may question her objectivity. Yet her intensive knowledge about the Quran and her ideas are certainly thought-provoking. If anything they raise the issue of authenticity of the Hadis doctrines which are being accepted and implemented unquestioningly, sometime having damaging results. This kind of blindness has become a 'longue morte' to progress and liberate women. Hassan's views, if they can be taken seriously, may therefore, change the way Islam is seen, especially regarding gender equality.

The contents of this article are based on a lecture given by DR RIFFAT HASSAN, a professor of the University of Louisville, USA. The lecture was arranged by Ain O Shalish Kendra at the WVA auditorium in Dhaka.

The Chiapas Uprising

Was Information Suppressed to Save NAFTA?

An uprising at the beginning of the year by a band of Mexican Indian guerrillas left hundreds dead and rocked the government. Now evidence is coming which suggests that the discontent leading to the insurgency had been known to the government for some time but that the information was suppressed. A Gemini News Service correspondent reports on recent developments, and gives his on-the-spot impressions from the scene of the fighting.

John Ross writes from Mexico City and San Cristobal de las Casas

DESPITE professed astonishment at the New Year's Day Mexican Indian uprising in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, both President Carlos Salinas and US President Bill Clinton had access to intelligence that the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was preparing for armed conflict.

Both governments apparently chose to ignore verified reports because public knowledge would have endangered passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). "It is my impression that if Congress had known about the guerrillas before November 17th, NAFTA would have been dead," the highest-ranking US diplomat on the ground in Chiapas told me.

The diplomat was explaining the State Department's reluctance to make public civil and military accounts of armed

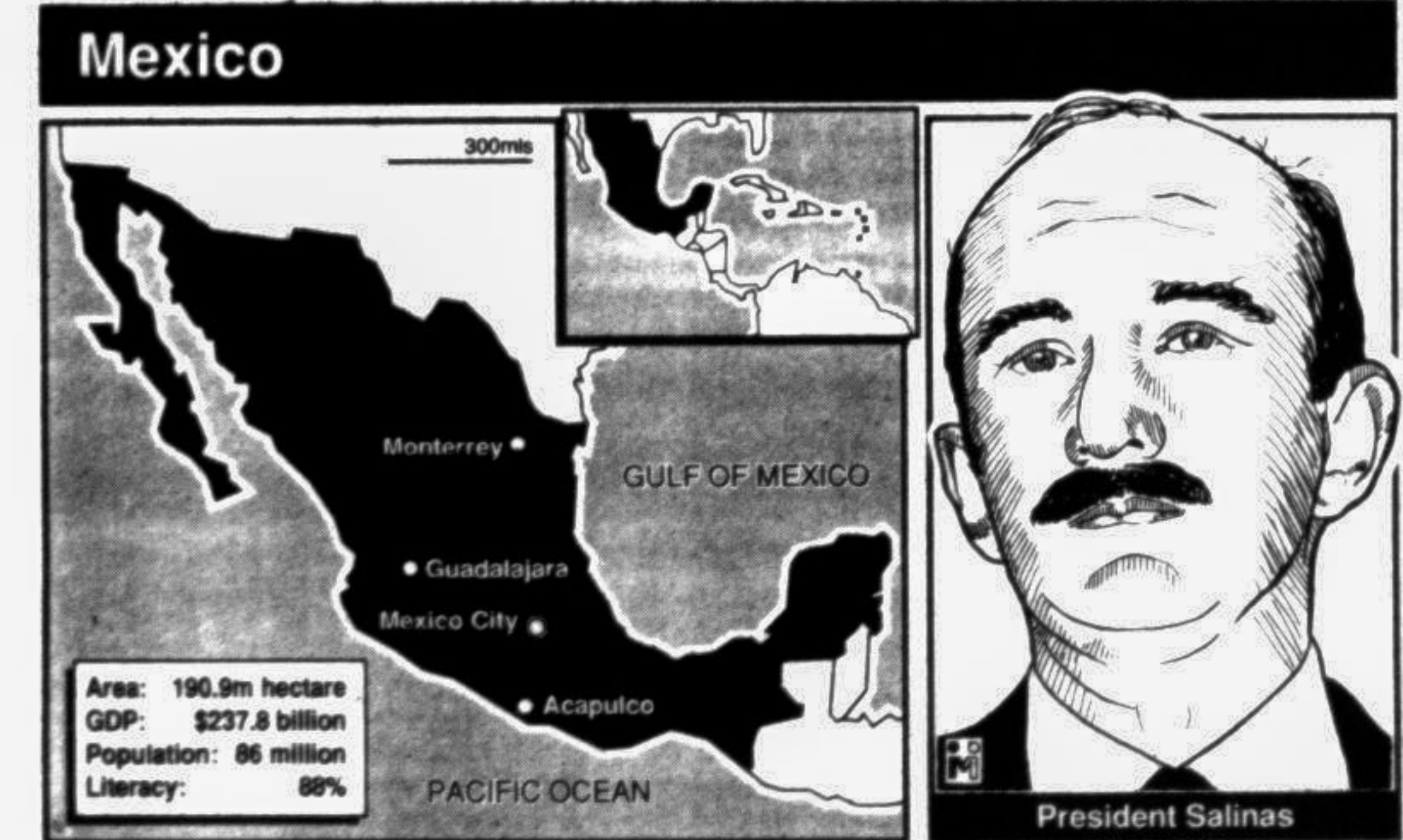
confrontations and sophisticated training camps deep in the Lacandon jungle in the Chiapas region.

As early as last March, when two army officers were ambushed in a village 25 kilometres from San Cristobal de las Casas, the Mexican military was insisting on the presence of armed guerrillas in Chiapas.

After a May gunbattle between what the military characterised as "40 armed men" and troops performing "social services," the military seized 13 Tzeltal Indian villagers and charged them with treason and armed insurrection.

The subsequent discovery of a training camp, complete with mock-ups of army vehicles, was substantiated in a civil document prepared by the Public Ministry Investigators in the state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez.

The document was passed to the then Interior Secretary



Patrocinio Gonzalez, who described the May events as rumours designed to derail passage of NAFTA by the US Congress. The document was subsequently leaked to the press. Gonzalez has since been replaced.

Other information about events in the Lacandon jungle was available as a result of anti-narcotics operations in the region. This was clear from a news conference in Mexico City a week after the outbreak of the Zapatista offensive, at which the Secretary of Defence revealed details of EZLN training manoeuvres, equipment and re-

crutment practices, using information gathered over previous months.

Joint US-Mexican anti-narcotics operations have been taking place in the region for some time.

Impressions from the Aftermath

'We're from the ruling party'

On the fifth day of the rebellion by the EZLN, radio journalist Sandina Robbins dived for cover from a pair of jet fighters which streaked in low, strafing

the village from which she was reporting.

Inside the house in which she sought refuge, a group of Tzotzil-speaking women huddled together, gasping for air. One pulled out her voter registration card and flashed it skywards. "Somos del PRI!" ("We're from the ruling PRI party") she screamed. "Somos del PRI, del PRI" echoed her companions in terror.

'Why has our government done this to us?'

In front of his modest farmhouse in Chilil, Manuel Moshon Continued on page 10

Technology Transforms Journalism in a Generation

IN a single generation — the historical equivalent of an eye blink — technology has transformed the way news is covered and reported around the world.

The era of pen and pad, typewriters, teletype machines, simple telephone lines and tape recorders, and smoke-filled, overwhelmingly male newsrooms has been replaced by one of computers, cellular and portable satellite telephones, digital audio, and fiber optic and satellite transmission. Newsrooms tend to be smoke-free and now welcome women in droves.

Along with those technological and personnel changes, say four of Washington's leading journalists, has come an explosion in the amount of general and special interest news available. Unfortunately, they add, this has included an enormous rise in the reporting of entertainment and sensationalism passed off as news.

As journalism approaches the 21st century, they see all these trends continuing, with audiences becoming segmented by whether they want quality and substance or entertainment and sensationalism.

William W. Headline vice president and Washington bureau chief for Cable News Network (CNN), has witnessed all the changes during his 30

years in broadcast journalism, including the rise of CNN and simultaneous decline of journalism at the American television networks.

Headline, 62, worked at CBS News — home of Edward R. Murrow and a second-tier journalistic giant who sharpened their craft covering World War II — from 1967 to 1983, lastly as Washington deputy bureau chief.

Eleven years ago, the then fledgling CNN backoned, "and in spite of dire predictions of a short-term employment boom, many colleagues and other networks I joined to go ahead and gamble and I think I won." Headline said in an interview at his office.

"I was one of the people who laughed and said things like, 'Who is Ted Turner to get into the news business?' and 'Who has got cable and who the hell is a pay-to-be looked at a 24-hour news operation. Not a 24-hour news operation.'"

"I was reflecting, I think, a complacency that existed across the broadcast networks. They had the market. They had it locked."

Nobody was going to take a chunk out of this niche that they had.

there are cheaper ways to do what they do; there are better ways to do what they do, and, by God, we're going to give it a shot. And he did, and he was absolutely right. No, nobody is laughing anymore."

Headline's prediction said, the news profession changes have been the move from film to videotape, "and then the geometric acceleration" in audience.

Television news, particularly from far away, used to be covered by a correspondent and a five- or six-man camera crew which then had to ship the film and edited tape by plane to a major television center or back to the United States for processing and transmission.

There is still some shipping, but as Headline discovered when he accompanied President Clinton on his recent trip to Europe, CNN was able to beam the president's press conference live from the White House.

"You know the briefcase-size satellite transmitting dish, it exists," he added. "Governments are using it. The military is using it. And Moscow to broadcast Clinton's visit to the Ukrainian capital live."