

Bangladesh Image Abroad

by Mohammad Chowdhury



You call it 'Sonar Bangla': The virgin land that was.

Photo: Courtesy — Noazesh Ahmed, Naib Uddin Ahmed

EVERY country has to keep up its face to the world. Reasons are both material and patriotic. Both, of course, act on each other. In this age of the 'global village' information are moving amongst countries so fast and so regularly that national boundaries are becoming less relevant. The image of a country abroad created by the foreign mass media is not a simple matter of casual knowledge of the general viewers and readers. Constant orchestrated hammerings on the same themes days in and days out never fail to create durable impressions in the minds of the audience.

One-eyed Monster
Persistent bad news about Bangladesh drive occasional good news from one's mind. Good news then become suspect and seem to confirm often heard bad news. That is human nature. Such impressions transform into actions while dealing with, for example, air travellers by immigration officials. So powerful is the impact of mass media that an American carrying heroin, for example, can be treated with respect and dignity in our country. An honourable national of this country with evident antecedents on his passport can be submitted to an indignity of being singled out of the passengers' queue and kept waiting in America.

Qazi Fazlur Rahman in an article in *The Daily Star* described his embarrassment or shall I say humiliation at the hand of a petty US official. He also described the predicament of his daughter serving abroad in not getting visas on Bangladesh passport for her official tours and the indignant comment of her boss about the futility of holding a Bangladesh passport. I know the son of a Bangladesh UN official in Addis Ababa, of all places, in another case was refused boarding on a flight to London although he was holding a valid UK entry permit on his Bangladesh passport. The extra-ordinary measure of an accompanying letter from the British Embassy with the passport was suggested. The British Embassy rightly thought such a letter was superfluous in the face of a valid visa and refused to write. Indignity apart imagine the predicament of the boy's parents as the boy's academic session was about to start. That incident was repeated to a girl of another Bangladeshi parents resident in Addis Ababa.

UNFPA Joins the Chorus
Incidentally, these Ethiopian occurrences took place after a documentary, produced and distributed by UNFPA, was shown on Ethiopian TV. That showed family planning activities of the slums behind Bangladesh Bank at Kamalapur. Dwellings consisted of

cheap materials for makeshift shelters — bamboos, polythene and other cheap materials. Barely-clothed children and their destitute mothers in an unhygienic environment were shown milling around in the film. Nafis Sadiq of Pakistan had to make a film, of family planning in such a bustee. The last thing that a UN body would do is to denigrate a member country by depicting a non-representative picture of that country in the fringe. A village having decent houses, healthy people and scenic beauty of rural Bangladesh could be representative of 80 per cent population and so would family planning activities. It is there in the villages that family planning made its impact. No, that was not done. A demeaning film instead was produced. All Bangladeshis in Ethiopia, a goodly number of UN officials there were from Bangladesh, wondered why she did not turn her face to her 'homeground' at Karachi's Jhuggis. This cannot be shrugged off like a stoic. But we did. Timidity cannot be diplomacy. This is an instance of how our inaction emboldens what appears to be a despicable campaign against Bangladesh.

One is amazed to know how such a defamatory film could be made without the knowledge of our concerned mission and the External Publicity office in Dhaka. Under existing procedure clearance of written script for a film to be made here for showing abroad is required before visa is granted. It also requires concurrence of the

edited film before showing abroad. Some one dodged the procedure or neglected his duty. A bunch of negligent officials have embarrassed the whole nation. The propensity of the world media to hit us below the belt has to be checked by ourselves. Failure can be so deadly.

Electronic Media

Then take the BBC World. Few months ago a documentary was presented on the Garos of Mymensingh. A person presented as a Christian priest indulged in all kinds of offensive and malicious words to describe how the Garos and the Forest Department clash with each other in the government reserve forest land. A street demagogue could not perform better. No attempt was made by the producer of the report to present the other side of the picture. If inaction of our monitoring authority in reporting it was responsible for the resultant inaction of the government it was indeed a great pain in the neck of the country. Inaction in demanding an explanation from the BBC is assumed because a little later I had the misfortune of watching another bit on the Chakmas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It was again a one-sided narration by the BBC reporter resident in Dhaka. Consider the contrast in coverage of Indian tribal people. Earth has been chosen to focus development in tribal areas. Is it because India would not hesitate to send the BBC outfit resident in India packing if it touches the civil strife in eastern India? BBC learns

from such awkward experiences. A self-respecting nation has to tell the offending foreign media in no uncertain terms that people in this country expect core issues of this nation, as they are for other nations, to be the foundation of news reports from here. Plain talking should be in the interests of both. Remember, even a tiny city-state could bring *International Herald Tribune* to its knees for what was understood to be a libelous insinuation for the world press.

Print Media

Let us now turn to the print media. News about the country naturally originate from the country itself. Reuter has its bureau in Dhaka and was headed so long by a senior Bangladeshi journalist. It seldom despatched political, economic or financial news reports. It went for all kinds of sordid reports. The story of the running battles at Tanghar between proponents of prostitutes and their opponents made a three-column story for several days of initial and follow-up coverage in the world press. The isolated story of a rape of a child by a police constable at Chittagong was the subject of another Reuter report. Reuter seemed to have gone out of the way to commission a fel-

low to write a story on the handicapped beggars by violating all tenets of ethics — human and journalistic. Loss of a foot or a hand is a great misfortune to a person. The loss denies him the capacity to work and earn. Where the state does not have a social security system, he turns to begging. This is a society which cares for its old, the unemployed and the disabled. People in the fringe, however, remain uncared for. This fringe became the subject of Reuter's ghoulish stories of wickedness in those Bangladeshi people.

One suspects that the effect of the story was intended. After all, none can accuse Reuter of 'naivete'. Reuter and BBC are two British institutions. It should therefore be known to both how prosperous Bengal was and how Bangladeshi textiles (known in history as Indian or east Indian textiles) were systematically destroyed to breathe life to British Industrial Revolution through nascent British textiles of the time. They may also recall how the British plundered Bengal's wealth after the battle of Plassey in 1757. The loot of gold and silver alone was despatched in "a thousand ships" by Robert Clive. That amounted to 4 million pounds equivalent to today's \$40 billion dollars.

After a long debate in Britain, she concluded peace in thirteen American colonies so she could keep Bengal in subjugation in view of its being a source of fabulous wealth. That is some measure of the wealth and prosperity of Bangladesh of not so distant a past.

Mahasthangar is a reminder of the old civilisation of this country. It existed many centuries before the birth of Christ. Europe was steeped in the Dark Ages then. A mighty military force of infantry and cavalry from this land under the command of a Bangladeshi king Nanda faced the forces of Alexander the Great on the banks of river Beas in advance and forced him to retreat. Bangladesh thus entered the European history with a victory. This is a new nation with an ancient history of enormous wealth, ancient civilisation and brave people.

Stories relating to macro-economic achievements of Bangladesh have seldom, if ever, been observed by this multinational wire service. Trends in inflation, deficit finance, foreign exchange reserve, liberalisation of trade, growth in exports, developments in stock exchange and the like are the bread and butter line for this organisation in other countries but not so in Bangladesh. Foreign agencies are unable to observe how Bangladesh leads in social engineering like the Grameen. Some global wire service have to their credit rather balanced reports on Bangladesh. The stringers and correspondents of some newspapers make occasional contributions to the newspapers of their employment. Often they choose their own topics and sometimes their employers ask them to report on certain subjects. Whatever is the case they can remain honest and objective and at the same time cause no harm to their country and their people. They are supposed to provide local colour and make presentation in a manner that country's good name does not suffer. Not all stringers will pass this test. The lure of handsome lineage can be quite corrupting to some. The pull of the self, however, should not be stronger than love of the country.

The electronic and print media of the world have been carrying on the Bangladesh-bashing long enough to give it the property of a malicious campaign. Our own commissions and omissions have given wrong signals to them. More of that on another occasion.

Call for Universal E-mail Access in US

Edmund F Scherr writes from Washington.

EXPANDED access to electronic mail (e-mail) in the United States can strengthen citizen participation in the democratic process, according to a new study. The report from RAND, a private, non-profit research and development organisation, also calls for the United States to support international connectivity to information systems, since this "may aid the spread of democracy."

The report, "Universal Access to E-mail," proposes a national goal of access to e-mail for all Americans — a result of a two-year study by RAND researchers, which was released November 21 at a Washington press conference.

Noting that e-mail assists relationships to transcending national frontiers, the report stressed that "universal e-mail in the United States with abundant international connections can help spread the seeds of democracy even to non-democratic lands." Scholars, the report pointed out, have said that the future of democracy in the United States is "inexorably linked to the state of democracy worldwide" and the US national commitment to global democratisation.

The study said that e-mail access is fast becoming a basic requirement for full participation in American society. However, it cautioned that income and educational gaps in access to computers and information network services have widened significantly, and ethnic and age-based gaps remain substantial. The authors warned that as more and more social, commercial and government transactions take place online, "information haves" may leave the "have-nots" further behind unless we make concerted efforts today to provide all citizens with access to technology.

"We find that the use of e-mail is valuable for individuals, for communities, for the practice and spread of democracy, and the general development of a National Information Infrastructure, the Clinton administration's programme to bring the information age to all Americans," the RAND researchers emphasised.

One of the report authors, Tora Bikson, told the press conference that universal e-mail access in the United States can lead to greater political participation by Americans, providing direct contact with the various levels and services of government. Also, e-mail is a means of social affiliation with like-

minded persons anywhere, she continued. In addition, e-mail allows persons to participate in the decision-making process of electronically-linked groups.

The authors emphasised that there is no single solution to giving people greater and cheaper access to e-mail and computers at this time. They noted that the use of e-mail is often the catalyst for persons to use other computer technology. Researcher Robert Anderson said that cheaper network access devices are coming — simple machines that will do only e-mail and Internet. But then, you incur the charges of the service providers. While encouraging public locations for e-mail access, Anderson emphasised that the home is the "most natural place" for an e-mail use. It has an ease of accessibility and "most likely involves the whole family." Training and technical support for the family in computer uses would be difficult in the home, he added.

Public and private policies should support universal access to e-mail, the report said. Industry must find "creative ways" to make networks more accessible and use cheaper. Public and private sectors should encourage computer recycling — discarded computers made available to schools, organisations and individuals in under-served groups.

Full implementation of universal e-mail access for Americans, the report said, could take a decade or more, but efforts should start with those groups with the most severe and growing "deficits" in access to computer and e-mail technology. The authors emphasised that convenience is the single most powerful predictor of e-mail use, so priority should be given to equipping US homes with this capability. They said that subsidies to a "narrowly targeted" group of marginal computer users would cost \$1,000 million a year or less.

The authors also called for the development of a simple scheme for providing every US resident with an e-mail address. They said there is a need for only limited government intervention in the development of universal e-mail. They urged a "level-playing field" for competing suppliers of e-mail and computer services. The interoperability of current e-mail systems and common addressing standards could be areas for government policy.

Edmund F Scherr is USIA Staff Writer

A Little Bit of Love Goes a Long, Long Way

by Tanya Mahnaz Huq

WHERE the mind is without fear and the head is held high — this is the motto of Surovi, a voluntary social welfare institution set up for the countless, under-privileged street children of Bangladesh. The institution was established on the 1st of February, 1979 with only one 'slum child' as its student. Surovi's number-one priority was and still is to enlighten them with knowledge, give them love and help them get a better chance in life. The founder, Syeda Iqbal Mand Banu started this organisation with her own funds. This genteel, well-spoken lady has always been involved with voluntary organisations. Her goal of life always was to improve the condition of the under-privileged slum children of the country. Their terrible plight



curricular activities like music, dance, painting, recitation and sports. They are always encouraged to participate in programmes on TV, radio and at the Shishu Academy. Some have even won prizes for music and dance! They also receive valuable advice and support from Surovi during their crisis periods.

Other than child education, Surovi also provides adult education and one of the interesting new activities of this organisation is the Bazar Scheme. It was first inaugurated in June '95. This is a unique scheme — an educational programme for the poor shopkeepers, day labourers and fruit and vegetable sellers, and their under-privileged children. The first to be started was Karwan Bazar Surovi Adult Education Centre in Dhaka.

At the centre, classes are held on the 2nd and 3rd floors of the municipal market building. The ratio of teachers to students is 1:30 and teachers are trained and orientation courses are held every month. Besides being taught to read and write, the students are given lessons on health, environment and cleanliness. By December this year, the organisation hopes to cover all the districts with this scheme. Surovi's only work is to help the under-privileged of our country to become worthy citizens. Ms Syeda Iqbal Mand Banu runs Surovi almost single-handedly with only a little financial assistance from the government. She has donated two of her houses for this project and sold much of her property to bear the expenses of this organisation.

Still, she is embittered by the fact that Surovi is suffering from financial problems. Even though the institution has asked many aid-giving organisations for financial assistance, hardly anyone has come forward. According to Ms Banu: "Everyone makes promise which they hardly bother to keep. We only need very little!"

Agricola Medal for the King of Thailand

On 6 December 1995, His Majesty the King of Thailand will graciously grant an audience to Mr Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, who will present to him the Agrícola medal honouring His Majesty, says an FAO press release.

The medal is a token of FAO's recognition of His Majesty's tireless endeavours to alleviate the plight of the poor and his outstanding leadership in agricultural development in Thailand. It has on the obverse the portrait of His Majesty armed with a

camera and a map, a familiar sight to the rural Thai, together with the inscription "Golden Jubilee of His Majesty's Reign". The reverse side shows a vision that his subjects have of the monarch in the field of agriculture: a leader close to his people, it bears the inscription "Sustainable Development for a Secure Future". For His Majesty firmly believes in helping the rural underprivileged to 'uplift themselves in a sustainable way towards self-reliance. The medal marks the 50th Anniversary of His Majesty's Accession to the Throne and the 50th An-

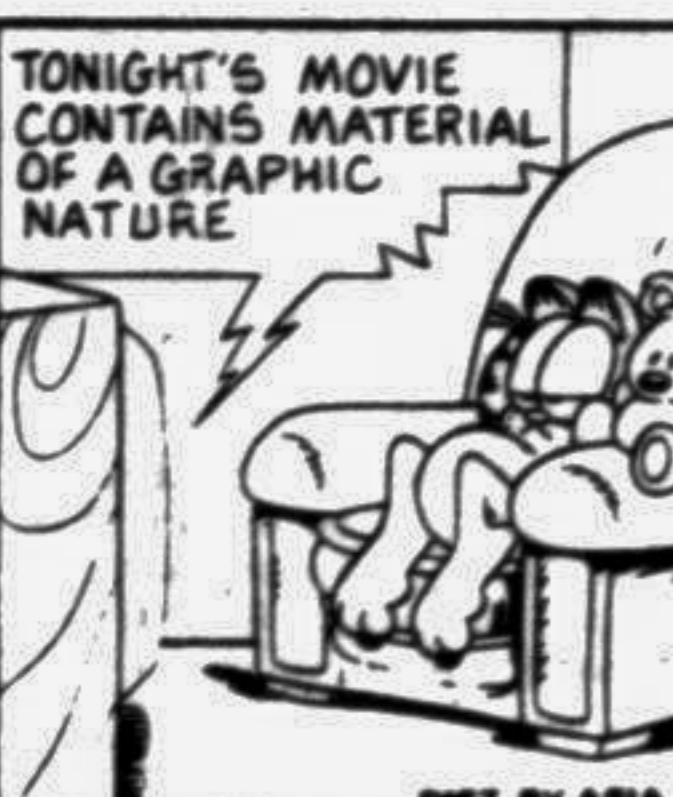
niversary of the founding of FAO. The medal was designed by Mr Nonthavath Chandhanapalin, Dean of the Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts Faculty, Silpakorn University of Thailand.

The Organization issues the Agrícola medal to honour distinguished leaders who have made important contributions to FAO's ideal of "Food for All". Agrícola is the Latin word for farmer, whose welfare FAO seeks to promote. The medal is not an award in itself like the Nobel Prize but makes known to the world the Organization's recognition.



Garfield®

by Jim Davis



only heightened her desire (in her words) to give them a chance for a better life, a better future and so Surovi was born.

The main work of Surovi is to urge all the citizens to inspire the impoverished and destitute street children all around to come to Surovi, where help awaits them. Even though Surovi's non-formal education centre was started with only one student, 16 years ago, currently there are almost 12,000 students enrolled in such schools all over the country. From 1979-1995, 50,000 students have passed out completing the courses from classes I-V. At the head office the classes are from I-VIII. The head office is situated at House No. 16, Road No. 5, Dhanmondi and there are 11 more branches in Dhaka city. The branches outside the city are in Comilla, Rangpur, Barisal, Bagerhat, Khagrachari, Bogra and Panchagarh. There is a free hostel for the boy students in Adabar, Dhaka. Here they get free food and books. The students of the institution comprise of children of rickshaw pullers, day labourers, stone-break-

ers, domestic servants and street children. Basically these are the boys and girls living in the urban slums where the lack of education and civic amenities, poor access to health care and lack of proper sanitation facilities lead to serious health problems. So other than trying to impart basic education and skills to the participants, the project also attempts to bring about awareness towards improved health, sanitation, environment and human rights. The focus of the programme is on women and children, who are deprived of formal

education due to poverty. It also aims to bring sustainable social development mobilising the impoverished people to organise and educate them for their own development and train them in an enhanced individual skill, thus to bring about sustainable development.

The students of Surovi receive books, other educational materials, school uniform and bags — all free of cost. In spite of that, warm clothes are also provided during winter. Other than studies, the students also receive training in extra-

