

# Media 1995

THE scribes have been as busy as the political pundits this past year, trying to keep up with the kaleidoscope of development on the national front. While 1995 has been a year of political parleys and constitutional conundrums, the media has had its heyday with reports, statements, speculations and columns cascading down the pages in reckless abundance. But perhaps the recklessness and occasional irresponsibility, often associated with our press, has been stemmed somewhat. Rather than the direct intervention of the government, the long hand of the law has had a say in the matter. Media disputes are being settled in court and the degree of press freedom being enjoyed by the print media is appreciable, certainly by third world standards. Radio and television is another matter, however. Anyway, the sailing has certainly not been smooth as silk as a glance through the calendar will prove. The press has had its fair share of hassles and headaches.

On January 4 Dainik Janakatha's office in downtown Dhaka was stoned by angry Jatiya Party activists for carrying a story about former JP leaders joining the ruling BNP. The activists warned the paper against using such 'fictitious and politically motivated propaganda'. And a correspondent of the same paper in Mymensingh, was attacked by members of BNPs student front Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) on January 12 because the paper didn't run a story about a minister's attendance of a certain meeting there. On January 11, mobs hurled fire crackers at the Sylhet office of Dainik Bangla, the government-run daily, for running a story against fire crackers. In another skirmish, protesters clashed with police when the latter obstructed the former from demonstrating in front of the state-run Bangladesh Television and Radio Bangladesh on January 23. Backed by the three major political parties, Awami League, Jatiya Party and Jamaat, the protesters demanded that the electronic media be freed from state control, as BNP had pledged during the anti-autocratic state-run news agency.

movement. Meanwhile, the government withdrew its decision to supply light coloured newsprint to newspapers as several newspapers "exaggerated their sales" to get extra tons of newsprint which sold at a profit in the black market. In Natore, Ittefaq correspondent was sentenced to six months imprisonment for assaulting the General Secretary of the local press club.

In February, the US State Department's Human Rights report for the previous year stated that Bangladesh enjoyed press freedom but newsprint quota and distribution of advertisements controlled freedom of expression. Five persons with home-made bombs were caught while entering the Ittefaq office on February 5. They were handed over to the police. On February 14, Tahmina Shawkat, wife of Labour Minister Mir Shawkat and Editor of Shakal Kagoj, was assaulted by Shibir activists while driving past a procession of the group. Her paper is critical of fundamentalist politics. Three press photographers were also injured in the incident. The Editor of Sangram was fined Tk 10,000 by the court on February 16 for publishing 'false and malicious' news against Left Democratic Front leader Rashed Khan Menon. On the February 27, the government banned the Calcutta publication Chiching Fak for containing pictures of the Prophet Mohammed (SM).

On March 19, the High Court issued a rule nisi upon the government to show cause for telecasting political opinion through Bangladesh Television. Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association had issued a writ petition in this regard. And BSS demanded Bhorer Kagoj to apologise for its editorial on alleged irregularities in the agency. Journalists in Barisal protested on March 11 against bomb blasts at the Barisal Press Club premises, deciding to boycott police functions until action was taken. At midnight on March 24, Anwar Hossain Manju, editor of Ittefaq and minister of the previous government, was shot at by unknown assailants while in his car. He was unhurt. Armed persons attacked the office of Dainik

Rupali on March 27. Staff of the paper claim that the attack was aimed at the editor Mustafizur Rahman who was jailed for siphoning depositors' money from the bank he owned. BNP activists handled correspondents of Sangbad and Bhorer Kagoj in Comilla for inquiring into the fertiliser crisis. BNP activists were also blamed for attacking newsmen on the way home from Narsinghdi where they had covered a JP rally. On March 12 arranged persons burst upon a press conference at Rangpur Press Club where a press conference was being held against admission procedure of Carmichael College. The press decided to boycott police functions as the police refused to take up the case. On March 15 Bangladesh Press Council formed a five-member committee to look into the situation of Ittefaq in response to a complaint made by Mainul Hossain, Chairman of the Board of Editors. The Jahangirnagar University Journalists Association decided to boycott news of the VC due to his attitude towards certain members of the body.

And in April, the Dhaka University Journalists Association decided to boycott news of Chhatra League until an apology was issued for misbehavior towards the Dainik Bangla university correspondent, as part of BNP inner rivalry, a group of persons attacked Desh Janata, a pro-ruling party paper, on April 1. The same month, T&T Board filed a case with the Press Council against Dainik Inqilab for not publishing a rejoinder of a 'motivated' report published on March 28. On April 1 journalists and employees of Aker Kagoj marched towards the Prime Minister's Office protesting the government's stoppage of advertisements to the paper for nearly two years. A press release of Inter Service Public Relations (ISPR) of the Defense Ministry on April 5 castigated the press for 'misleading, fabricated and motivated' reports about the armed forces. On April 27 Jatiyatabadi Mukti-joddha Dal, a front of BNP, announced that they would lay siege to the Press Club and punish journalists for certain 'distorted' news items about two ministers. The siege never took place.

On May Day, The Daily Star photographer Amran Hossain was stabbed in the city when miscreants tried to forcefully take his motorbike. He was rushed to hospital. Rajshahi Metropolitan Magistrate warded bail to Rajshahi correspondent Subrata Kumar of Aker Kagoj. A BNP leader had pressed charges against the paper on April 19 for tarnishing his image. On May 17, Dtin Mohammed Bhuiyan, editor of Ganajagaron was arrested under the Special Powers Act for selling allotted newsprint in the black market. He was released on June 29. Closure due to mechanical trouble at the country's lone newsprint mill on May 15 plunged the newspaper industry into uncertainty. Janakatha protested at the government dropping its name from the list of newsprint allottees. And on May 19, newspaper owners in Khulna protested the government allotment of newsprint to papers of Dhaka, Chittagong and Rajshahi only. And in the disputes between the two rival bodies of the split Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), arrest warrants were issued against General Secretary Amanullah Kabir and former Treasurer Sajjad Quadir for defalcation of the union's funds. On May 22, damage suits were set aside against 14 journalists by the Magistrate's Court in Pabna. The publisher of Sangram died during the case.

The government announced Fifth Wage Board for journalists and employees of the newspaper industry on June 7. On June 14, the court issued a stay order on the registration of the Glas Kamal-Amanullah Kabir faction of BFUJ. Helal Uddin, Strajganj correspondent of Bhorer Kagoj, was picked up by police, having annoyed Jamaat and the local administration with his reports. He was released after 96 days. Journalists observed Repression Day, marking the second anniversary of police attack on journalists on June 21, 1992.

Mohammed Sarwarul Alam Noman, Mymensingh correspondent of Bhorer Kagoj and also local president of Chhatra League, was killed in a clash between rival splinter groups at Mymensingh Agricultural University on July 15. On July 22, the editor and a reporter of Weekly Manchitra were released on bail after being arrested on defamation charges brought about by an officer of the Road & Highways Department. On July 30 Farhad Mazhar, Executive Director of Ubining and editor of the fortnightly Chintna, was detained under the Special Powers Act for an article supporting the Ansar rebellion of December 94. He was

later released on August 28. On July 30 allegedly false cases were brought against Arif Islam, editor of Chittagong's Daily Life, for annoying police with stories about law and order in the port city. On the same day Additional Attorney General Abdul Wadud Khandker served legal notice on the editor of Aker Kagoj for publishing news which "undermined his status and prestige". And a case was filed against the Editor of Janakantha for a story accusing Narcotics and Liquor Department officials of involvement in drug smuggling.

In August, newspaper offices and the local press club in Dinajpur were attacked and set on fire by angry mobs following the rape and killing of a young girl Yasmin while in police custody. The people accused the local press of distorting the facts. On August 5, hooligans attacked the office of the Metropolitan Union of Journalists in Chittagong. On August 14, Asim Bose, crime reporter of Jessore's Daily Runner, was stabbed. The paper was vocal about cross-border smuggling. And on August 28 hoodlums attacked the Bangladesh Photo Journalists Association office in Dhaka, injuring The Daily Star's photo journalist Anisur Rahman.

On September 2, Dinajpur journalists observed a pen-down strike demanding judicial probe into attack on four newspaper offices and Dinajpur Press Club. At midnight on September 15 two bombs were blasted in front of Banglar Bani in downtown Dhaka.

Rivalry between the two owner-brothers if Ittefaq led to a gun-battle within the newspaper office, resulting in the death of one and injury of three on October 1. A case was filed by Labour Minister Lt Gen (ret'd) Mir Shawkat Ali against the editors of Banglabazar Patrika, Ittefaq, Banglar Bani and Dainik Rupali, for publishing a statement of social activist Haji Mohammed Selim. In Pabna, four journalists were sent to jail on October 5, following a defamation case brought about by local union parishad chairman for reports on his selling relief goods in the back market. After papers published pictures of lungi

clad officers staying back in office on the eve of hartals, the Home Ministry issued a circular on October 16 banning entrance of news photographers into the secretariat.

On November 18, during his concluding speech in the parliament, the Speaker rebuked newsmen for publishing imaginary news about statements made in the House. The parliamentary secretariat, though, had not sent any rejoinder to any news item during the four and a half years of the parliament. Journalists and newspaper employees stopped work for three hours on November 19, demanding implementation of the Fifth Wage Board. And on November 23, the Election Commission urged the state-controlled media to provide balanced news coverage of all political parties participating in the parliamentary polls. On November 24, BNP activists in Bhola brick-batted the Banglar Kantha office and burnt copies of the paper for publishing 'motivated and distorted' information about the ruling party.

Bombs were hurled at the residence of Parveen Anwar, correspondent of Worldwide Television Network in Dhaka on December 11. No one was hurt. On December 19, miscreants attacked Chittagong correspondent of Bhorer Kagoj for refusing to publish a certain report. Bulbul Ahmed, photojournalist of The Independent was assaulted while passing a procession of Shibir in Dhaka on December 16, Victory Day.

A 21-member central action council was formed at a joint meeting of the Federal Union of Journalists, Press Workers Federation, Newspaper Employes Federation and Dhaka Union of Journalists on December 23. The council was formed to press the demand for a full-fledged fifth wage-board for journalists, press employees and workers. A newspaper strike was announced for December 27 in this connection.



## A Year of Hartals

Continued from page 18

repeated the next day. The last hartal of May was held in Jessore town on the 29th at the call of Chhatra Moitri. A leader of the organisation was shot and stabbed the previous day, allegedly by Chhatra League activists.

**JUNE**

June began with a half-day hartal on the 1st at Netrakona in protest of a rise in Municipal taxes. And on the same day a faction of the ruling party itself, along with its youth front Jubo Dal and student front Chhatra, called a half-day hartal demanding the release of BNP leader Tamizuddin. The next day a full-day hartal was called in Siranganj following Chhatra League leader Najmul Haq being shot dead. On June 6 a half-day hartal was observed in Narayanang following the killing of Chhatra League worker Murad and Jubo League worker Afzal there. And in Sunamganj an anti-corruption committee observed hartal on June 8 protesting against the district administration. And Munshiganj saw a half-day hartal on June 9 following a headmaster of a local school being killed in a road accident. And on June 16 a full-day hartal was observed in Rangpur by Projonmo Ektattor and other pro-liberation groups protesting the visit of Jamaat leader Golam Azam. A half-day hartal was called on June 24 by the All Party Anti-Terrorism Committee in Comilla. On the same day a half-day hartal was called in Rajshahi by Jamaat-Shibir demanding the release of 32 leaders and workers of their party. A six to two hartal was called on June 27 in Dhaka by JP protesting against former President Ershad being entangled in the Manzur killing case.

**JULY**

On July 1 a half-day hartal was observed in Kalapara and Mirzaganj of Pataukhali protesting an attack upon municipal commissioner Maksud Ahmed. Four or five persons were injured during the hartal. A full-day hartal was observed the following day in Kulara protesting an assault upon a local businessman. And the day after that a rickshaw strike was carried out in Sylhet protesting the killing of a rickshawpuller. Forty were injured during clashes and lathi charge. And on the same day a hartal was observed in Bogra in demand of a division to

be declared. Workers Party called a hartal on July 9 in Chuadanga following seven persons being hacked to death. And on July 12 a six to noon hartal was called by the Chhatra-Janata Sangram Parishad in Naogaon protesting an assault on teachers and students by transport workers. Rickshawpullers observed a 36-hour strike in Pirojpur protesting a rickshawpuller being killed by a minibus. And transport workers called a strike in Sherpur on July 16 protesting toll collection at the local bus terminal.

**AUGUST**

Hartals began later in August with a half-day hartal held on the 23rd in Fatikchhari at the call of the Chittagong Unit Awami League demanding release of a local leader of the party. And, in demand of announcing Bogra as a separate division, a hartal was held there again on August 30.

**SEPTEMBER**

In September activities stepped up and from the second day of the month the three major opposition parties observed a continuous 32-hour hartal demanding that the government resign, the elections be dissolved and proclamation be held under a caretaker government. Six were arrested on the first day and bricks were hurled at ministers' cars. A couple of police constables were injured. On the last lap of the 32-hour hartal, during six till two on September 3, a rickshawpuller was killed, police arrested 13 and 50 were injured. The following day a half-day hartal was held in Mirpur protesting the killing of the rickshawpuller.

**OCTOBER**

The 32-hour hartal of the major Opposition began on October 7 in the five divisional towns including Dhaka. On October 16 the three parties called for a 96-hour hartal for the caretaker and related demands. Ten were injured during lathicharges on the very first day. Police arrested 47. Two were shot dead in Bhalimanbaria and Kushtia. Five were arrested on the second day. Sixty-eight injured on the third day. A six to noon hartal was observed at the call of AL in Noakhali protesting the damage done to the party office there. A dawn to dusk hartal was called in Feni demanding the release of a former AL MP and also the dismissal of the DC there.

**NOVEMBER**

A half-day hartal was observed in Jessore on November 2 at the call of Jamaat-backed Shibir protesting the killing of a Shibir leader there. Fighting fire with fire, on November 8 a fifteen-minute token work stoppage was observed all over Dhaka City from noon till 12:15 at the call of FBCCI in protest of regular disruption of work due to political unrest. The Opposition began a six day hartal on November 11 demanding a caretaker government, the resignation of the present government, dissolution of the parliament and stability in price of commodities. This has been an all-time record in duration of hartal.

Flood-affected Rajshahi was exempt from hartal. On the first day over 50 were injured and 31 arrested. On the second day hartal was observed from six in the morning till three in the afternoon in Dhaka City and from six till noon outside Dhaka.

Nineteen persons were arrested on the second day. On the third day hartal was from six till two in the capital and six to noon elsewhere in the country. On this day 28 were arrested. Police used batons and hot water to control the picketers. From the fourth day the hartal nationwide was from six till noon. Jatiya Party organised a dawn to dusk hartal at Rangpur on November 19 for proper treatment of its imprisoned leader former President Ershad. The party held a six to two hartal in the capital city on November 25 for the same cause. Nineteen were arrested.

**DECEMBER**

The first hartal of December was held in Lakshmipur at the call of Shibir. A leader of the organisation had been killed there. On December 9 AL, JP, Jamaat and JSD (Rab) called a 72-hour hartal in Dhaka for the caretaker and other demands. Fifty were injured on the first day. On the second and last day of the hartal, eighty were injured. Clashes and bomb explosions continued throughout the hartal. Following clashes with the All Party Students Unity (APSU) in Mymensingh Agricultural University which resulted in the killing of three Shibir activists, Chhatra Shibir called an eight-hour hartal in Dhaka on December 20.

Continued from page 18

five session on October 23. Shahjahan Siraj, JSD leader who joined BNP, was made State Minister for Shipping, Minister for Religion Keramat Ali was made minister without any portfolio.

The opposition parties observed a blockade of roads, rail and riverways on November 6. Police attacked the AL office on November 8 while a press-conference of Hasina was being held. Several persons were hurt. On November 13, AL leader Matia Chowdhury was injured by police while picketing on the last day of the Opposition's three-day hartal. She was admitted to hospital.

On November 21, Khaleda Zia called upon the Opposition to form an interim national government for the election period.

The Election Commission, on November 22, announced the by-election schedule for 145 seats on December 15. The Opposition announced its decision to obstruct the by-elections.

The PM addressed the nation over radio and television on November 24. At her request, President Abdur Rahman Biswas dissolved the parliament on the same day.

And on November 24, at separate rallies, the opposition parties announced their week-long programme including rallies and processions on November 28 at the thanas and on the 29th at the districts. The other programmes included a rail, road and riverway blockade on December 7 and a mass procession towards the PM's Office on December 9.

Jatiya Party held a half-day hartal in Dhaka on November 25, demanding that former President Ershad be removed from jail for proper medical treatment. On November 26 a telephone conversation took place between Khaleda and Hasina. Hasina requested Khaleda to hold elections under a caretaker government. The conversation proved futile. On November 30 PM Khaleda began a train march to Chittagong.

On November 30, addressing a rally at Fatikchhari, Chittagong, AL chief Hasina called for elections under a non-party neutral caretaker government. She announced a continuous blockade programme from December 7. The five-party Left Democratic Front also took up anti-government programmes. But, due to AL's affiliation with JP and Jamaat, the Left Front did not join with AL in its movement. Gono Forum criticised the government and the Opposi-

## Politics '95

tion but did not take up any organisational programme.

In 1995, the business community also became politically active, reacting from the beginning of the year against the politicians' failure to resolve the political crisis. The business community were frustrated at the harmful effect of the continuous hartals and blockades upon the economy. On November 8, the business community observed a 15-minute token strike. After this, FBCCI called a grand gathering of business persons in Dhaka. Many quarters viewed these activities as personal ambition of Salman F Rahman, FBCCI chief. This became all the more apparent when, on December 19, he floated an organisation under the name of Samridha Bangladesh Andolon.

Going back to the political perplexities, the Opposition had resigned from parliament on December 28, 1994. In accordance to the Constitution, the resignations ought to have come into immediate effect, but the Speaker took a great deal of time to announce his decision in this regard. On February 23, 1995, that is 56 days after the resignation letters were submitted, the Speaker declared that it was not legal to resign en masse from the House. His ruling created a furore in the Opposition. They accused the Speaker of acting on behalf of the ruling party and, in protest, observed a sit-in strike outside the Sangsad Bhaban on April 24, 1995. The parliament's nineteenth session commenced from that day. BNP was relieved that the opposition members' resignation had not been accepted as this would create complications of having to hold by-elections in the vacant seats. And it was obvious that the Opposition would obstruct by-elections. That would call for a general election. Analysts felt that if the Opposition challenged the Speaker's ruling in court, it might be overruled, but the Opposition did do so. They had hoped that perhaps now a chance had emerged to resolve the impasse. But that was not to be. The situation became all the more complex. The government was adamant in its stand and the Opposition equally so. Hartals highlighted their movement.

The budget session, twentieth of this parliament, commenced at the beginning of June. This was an impor-

tant session, as the Opposition's boycott reached an absence of 93 working days on June 19. Thus, in accordance to the Constitution, their seats were to be considered vacant. Article 67 (1A) of the Constitution states that if any member of parliament is absent without permission for 90 consecutive days, the member's seat will be declared vacant. Thus the 141 seats of the resigning opposition members became vacant but the government decided to play for time. It did not feel safe in declaring the seats vacant at that particular juncture. On July 4, President Abdur Rahman Biswas sent a reference to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court as to whether the boycott of the House by opposition members would be considered as their absence from parliament. After a seven-day hearing, the Supreme Court gave its opinion that if any member of the parliament remain absent from the House without permission for 90 working days, the seat would fall vacant. This threw the government into a quandary. Certain quarters within the Opposition were also somewhat taken aback. Leaders of the Opposition took up speedy measures to invigorate their movement.

Once the seats of the opposition were officially declared vacant, constitutionally it became imperative to hold by-elections. In this case, the ruling party had maintained a stand in their own interests all along. This served to tarnish the Election Commission's image and gave an opportunity to the Opposition to identify the EC as an agent serving the interests of the government.

The seats of the opposition members were considered vacant from June 23. According to the Constitution, by-elections to these seats were to be held within 90 days from that date. But, since almost half of the seats of the parliament were empty, it was hardly practical or feasible to perform these by-elections. The floods were an excellent excuse to postpone the by-elections which were then delayed till mid-December. The by-election schedule was announced but never came to materialise as the parliament itself was dissolved. The Election Commission, in a manner of speaking, had more or less been forced to take all these steps, serving a blow to the image of this

constitutional institution. This was not in keeping with the government's repeated assertions that a strong Election Commission, not a caretaker government, would serve the purpose for free and fair elections. This only projected the Opposition's allegations that government intervention in the EC's role necessitated a caretaker government to conduct the polls.

Five sessions of parliament were held in 1995. The twenty second and last session was of only three days. Meanwhile, foreign intervention in Bangladesh's internal affairs became an accepted, even welcome, feature of 1995. Diplomats in Dhaka were active throughout in their endeavours to resolve the prevailing political crisis. Such foreign interference never took place before, but there were no protests against it. In fact, most quarters involved in the fracas encouraged the diplomatic dabbles. This began from quite some time back, when Sheikh Hasina herself asked the Commonwealth Secretary General to intervene and resolve the crisis. The arrival of his envoy, Sir Ninian Stephen, was hailed, though eventually his efforts at mediation proved futile. Then, on September 4, 1995, US Assistant Foreign Secretary Robin Raphael came to Bangladesh on her routine visit, which set tongues wagging once again. It was felt that she would establish some sort of rapport between the two sides, but here too speculations proved wrong. Thirteen leaders of the opposing sides did discuss their differences unofficially at a dinner hosted by the US Embassy for Raphael, but the differences remained differences. Incidentally, AL President Sheikh Hasina also met Raphael during the former's visit to the US.

The US Ambassador David Merrill again took initiative to resolve the crisis at the end of the year. In fact, it was the US Embassy which was the most active of the foreign missions in Dhaka in this regard. Merrill met with leaders of the government, including Khaleda and Hasina, from time to time. The British, Indian and Japanese missions were also involved in the attempts to patch up the political problems. These endeavours, if nothing else, highlighted the futility of the politicians themselves.

Throughout the year, political issues arrived on the doorstep of the courts. Though these could perhaps have been resolved politically, the sensitive nature of

the issues pushed them to the courts. In October, five eminent citizens, Barrister Ishtiaque Ahmed, former Chief Justice Kamaluddin Hossain, economist Rehman Sobhan, former Foreign Secretary Fakhruddin Ahmed and journalist Fayed Ahmed, took it upon themselves to set matters straight. They met with Khaleda and Hasina several times. But Jatiya Party and Jamaat were not keen on the intervention of these five from the very outset of the exercise. Later, AL leader Tofael Ahmed also criticised the group of five's move. Eventually this effort also fell through and the five were viewed with suspicion. Fayed Ahmed told the press that the PM had been sincere about a resolution but Jatiya Party and a section of AL had upset the cart.

Khaleda Zia's train march to Chittagong on November 30 was a fresh political gimmick up the ruling party's sleeve.

The political arena heated up a bit after the by-election schedule was announced on November 22. On November 24, the PM addressed the nation over radio and television. The parliament was dissolved on that day. The government's was forced to dissolve the parliament, when it was apparent that no quarter would contest in the by-election. The by-election issue has been used in a play for time. It was a laughable more than a laudable move, and also hurt the constitutional sentiment. The government had similarly dilly-dallied over accepting the resignation of the opposition members.

With the dissolution of the parliament, the general election has now loomed up large. Constitutionally, parliamentary elections are mandatory within-90 days of the parliament's dissolution. But there is still an uncertainty over the issue. The political stalemate remains unresolved. The Election Commission, postponing its initially announced date, now has set the election for February 7.

December has seen a culmination of efforts, both from local as well as diplomatic quarters, and perhaps the process of an understanding is underway. US Ambassador Merrill met with the Commerce and Information Minister Shamsul Islam and with Awami League leader Amir Hossain Amu several times. The government has kept up informal communication with the Opposition to resolve the crisis.

If the election cannot be held in time, a constitutional crisis will follow.