

Arrest and Torture of Journalists Get Close Scrutiny

People attending a recent human-rights conference in Zimbabwe came face-to-face with the kind of abuses they want to see stopped. Gemini News Service reports that the arrest and torture of two journalists is drawing outrage worldwide.

Richard Bourne writes from Harare.

RARELY has a human rights conference so rapidly found itself in the midst of a serious and unexpected case of abuse.

The occasion was even more remarkable because it happened in Harare, the Zimbabwe capital where Commonwealth leaders made the 1991 declaration that set their member states on the path to a new commitment for human rights, the rule of law, and just and accountable government.

When Dr Stan Mudenge, Zimbabwe Foreign Minister — and also the chairman of the Commonwealth ministerial group set up to look at serious human rights crises — opened the conference he was greeted with boos, cries of "Shame", and a walkout by local activists.

The reason? Just that day Mark Chavanduka, editor of *The Standard* weekly paper, and Ray Choto a senior reporter appeared in court bearing tell-tale signs of torture. They had been subjected to electric shock treatment, beating and "the submarine" — where your head is put in a plastic bag under water until you think you will suffocate, and then your head is brought above the water for a gasp of air before the process is repeated.

Defence Minister Moven Enock Mahachi, whose military police were believed responsible for the torture of the journalists, announced rather coolly that they appeared to be injured "because they had scratched themselves."

The conference was funded by the Canadian and British governments, whose high commissioners stood by as Mudenge completely ignored the issue of torture. He launched into a stinging attack on what he called "elitist" human rights organisations, accused them of

ignoring issues of poverty and economic and social rights.

Conference delegates at once passed a resolution of outrage. Attended by more than 100 people from 20 Commonwealth countries, the conference aimed to promote good practice in human rights, peace and good governance in Africa. It was organised by the Delhi-based Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), a coalition of non-governmental organisations.

The foreign visitors realised that they had stumbled on a human rights crisis when they also discovered that Isidore Zindoga, deputy secretary-general of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, had been beaten unconscious by three men. After six stitches to his head, he went to a police station to report the assault, and recognised one of his attackers as a policeman.

Eight delegates — including CHRI director Maja Daruwala and Shirley Mabusela, a South African human rights commissioner — headed to the Harare central police station when they heard that *The Standard's* publisher, Clive Wilson, had also been arrested. They were not told where he was being detained. A few delegates remained behind after the conference formally ended to attend the magistrates court where Wilson was due to appear on 25 January.

Peter Longworth, the British High Commissioner and a former journalist, made a pointed reference to the need to avoid illegal violence during his remarks to the conference. He said a key objective of Britain's overseas missions is the support and promotion of human rights. He demanded confidence-building measures to restore Zimbabweans' faith in

freedom of expression and the independence of the judiciary.

In spite of the drama of the situation, the delegates to the conference covered a great deal of ground on the work of Commonwealth associations for human rights, public interest litigation, human rights commissions, how to maintain human rights in the face of conflict, the right to information, police reform and constitution making.

Olisa Agbakoba, founder of the Civil Liberties Organisation in Nigeria, said that his group has made judicious use of the power of public litigation by inundating the courts with cases. Public interest journalism — a journalism which investigated and crusaded — was credited with initiating the current wave of judicial activism in India by exposing the length of the time prisoners in Bihar had been held awaiting trial. In one case this amounted to 32 years. Following a Supreme Court case, which ruled that no one should be held for longer than the length of sentence for the alleged offence, more than 40,000 prisoners were released all over India.

African organisations were particularly interested in the debate on constitution making. Groups in Nigeria and Kenya working for a new constitution in their countries drew inspiration from the experience of South Africa and Malawi. After exhaustive consultation and negotiation in South Africa, seven million pocket-sized copies of its new constitution were distributed in 11 national languages. In December, a pocket-sized plan for the promotion and protection of human rights was also distributed. The CHRI has agreed to publish a position paper on constitution making in the

light of the discussion.

The conference decided to establish networks bringing together Commonwealth-wide bodies, including the six which back the CHRI, with human rights NGOs to work on specific issues such as the right to information.

Delegates also said the CHRI should coordinate with the Durban-based Organisation for Democracy to ensure that the voice of human rights groups will be heard loudly and clearly during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in South Africa in November.

In 1991, on the eve of the Commonwealth's Harare Declaration on human rights, NGOs from Commonwealth Africa held a pioneering conference supported by the CHRI. Some of those organisations were in Harare again this year. While the situation in Zimbabwe itself shows that progress has been uneven, the latest gathering demonstrated that African NGOs have become much more sophisticated and knowledgeable about human rights.

Senator Margaret Reynold, the Australian who chairs the CHRI's policy-making advisory commission, said another such conference will be held next year in the Asia-Pacific region. Once again the aim is to bring Commonwealth NGOs and grassroots human rights campaigners together for networking and advocacy.

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Publicity of Development Activities

by Alif Zabr

The return on the investment is critical in the private sector, where loss cannot be tolerated; but in the public sector, anonymity is a cloak discouraging the fixation of responsibility, and enforcement of punitive action against the defaulters or offenders.

THE news on 'achievements' of 'development' projects and activities are depicted in the mass media in different formats, from different sources. The general audience (at the public meetings), and the readers and the viewers are showered with bits and bytes of information and data, leaving them a bit confused of the general overall picture. All projects take off with a bang, most are completed, many go into successful operation, some limp along, and the rest lie dormant or die out. It happens in countries, but here the liability list is made to react positively. Where to stop, and when to start?

The negative information is not easily available publicly without investigative reporting, and the perennial use of committees and commissions. The former probing tool is new in application in Bangladesh; but judging from its recent introduction, investigative reporting is becoming popular and a useful public tool for criticism. The bodies at the receiving end must be made to react positively.

Many tubewells have to be repaired or replaced each year, and a large number are inoperable — why so many years after year? The health centres lack medicines and facilities. Public

services perform poorly — the proverbial bureaucratic delays. Corruption, nepotism and pilferage are rampant. A new bridge is sinking. The quality of work is never in the 'excellent' category. These 'leakages' drain the national economy. These solutions are technical, and beyond the scope of this commentary, but known to the authorities.

Hundreds and thousands of shallow tube wells have been sunk, or resunk in current locations. Similar number of primary schools have been opened, and the number of health centres doubled, for example. The success stories are in similar vein, emphasizing the physical dimensions of the structure. What about the weaknesses?

The comes the headaches — the nagging problems of operation and maintenance. The first is visible, and the second is invisible. Both need several types of support environment. O & M studies are not publicised in depth in the media. The nuts and bolts have to be reviewed at the policy-making level for ironing out the weaknesses, and increase efficiency. There is marginal improvement after three decades. All studies have to be modular, for later integration.

The management must be smart. The latter include many factors, such as professionally trained and experienced teams; backed with the necessary facilities (it is a complex subject). Having a budget is not enough. It is generally found that development and project allocations cannot be utilised fully and properly every year in most cases. This is attributed to system loss. The latter have many components, which need not be elaborated here.

There are other angles of evaluation. The 'human factor' is very sensitive in the development regimes — QC or quality control being the greatest bug in the system. Most of the weaknesses and faults could be traced to the quality of the human resources. The cynics point out to the classic story of seven blind men examining an elephant.

Hartal is a visible manifestation of the reaction due to internal frictions (and national ones at the political level). This sort of dissatisfaction is a general overall symptom which need not be elaborated too much when discussing project efficiency.

To improve efficiency in the public sector, the operation and maintenance (O & M) networks

have to be constantly monitored internally, and through external agencies professionally qualified, enjoying the required authority to implement remedial measures. This is in addition to the role played by the Controlling agencies and set-ups (it is similar to external auditing, or the job of the Ombudsman).

The civil service has long experience and expertise to undertake O & M and project works year after year in different departments. It has been established that even if sufficient funding were made available, the efficiency was still low. The return on the investment is critical in the private sector, where loss cannot be tolerated; but in the public sector, anonymity is a cloak discouraging the fixation of responsibility, and enforcement of punitive action against the defaulters or offenders.

This is quick review for general awareness of the 'outsiders', who are directly or indirectly affected, adversely or otherwise, through the services offered to the public.

The Other Side of Chinese Brain Drain

Pushpa Adhikari writes from Beijing

IN the fifties and sixties, a popular Chinese slogan urged citizens to go to rural and frontier regions and places that needed talent. Today, that slogan may well be 'go to foreign countries, big companies and places offering high salaries'.

That is exactly what China's educated mass are doing, some to pursue studies overseas, others to find jobs increasingly hard to find at home.

This process has been going on since the introduction two decades ago of reform and opening-up policy by China's legendary leader Deng Xiaoping but is being heightened by economic and social forces unleashed by the transition from a centrally planned economy to one shaped more by market forces.

China's 'brain drain' is also being fueled by a desire by many families to see their children succeed in 'modern' professions, ranging from computer science to medicine and business.

In effect, parents have been encouraging their children, who were in cradle during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to go abroad. For this, Chinese youth are ready to pay any price.

Going abroad is not new for Chinese elite. From Sun Yat Sen, the father of the nation of China, Deng Xiaoping, the father of reform and opening up, and President Zhang of new ideas, all have studied abroad and said to have brought new ideas for China.

But majority of Chinese youth today want to go abroad not just for study, but for much more.

A 55-year-old woman, a mother of two grown-ups, says the situation has been changed dramatically among the youth and she is simply unable to understand it. During her youth, she recalls, she dreamed of going to foreign countries but not to study or stay permanently but just to see those places.

But now, Chinese who are educated or have enough money often want to go abroad if they get the chance. "But maybe it is because of the frustration at home," she concedes.

The "going abroad" movement of Chinese students has gone through three stages in history. It began at the end of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) when a number of Chinese were sent abroad to study industrial technology. The second stage lasted from the 1930s until 1945, when the people's republic was founded, and the third wave started after China adopted its reform policy which continues to this day.

This last police exposed Chinese youth, much more than their parents, to the western style of life, often through media. Economic forces play a role as well. An increasing number of college graduates have found it difficult to obtain employment in recent years, compelling them to try to go abroad.

Students specialising in computing, communications, machinery, electronics, building, economics, automobiles, finance, the English language and clinical medicine generally have no worries about finding any job upon graduation. However, those studying basic theories, management science, agriculture and forestry have not been so much in demand in the last few years.

Li Tong, who graduated with a sociology degree from China's most prestigious university, Beijing University, five years ago, is still unemployed. He has been trying to go abroad since then.

He says: "Once I get a chance to escape, I will never come back. Even if I come back, I will not get better job opportunities here."

The changing signals from the labour market stem from China's reform efforts, which put pressure on restructuring the economy and improving efficiency against the previous practice of pouring money into large, state-owned enterprises. Due to this shift, the professions that were previously the major recruiters of college graduates have currently become the main source of mass layoffs.

College students also tend to have fewer opportunities to enter Communist Party and their affiliated institutions, as a result of programmes underway to streamline the bureaucracy. Reports from the State Statistics Bureau indicate that only 6 per cent of Chinese on the mainland have received higher education, but an increasing number of college students have found it difficult to obtain employment in recent years.

A recent survey conducted in five renowned Beijing universities shows that majority of their students want to go abroad. Most of them prefer the United States. Some 135,000 Chinese students went to United States to study between 1978 and 1996, according to official media.

At the same time, job fairs are sparking fierce competition among college graduates as work units now have a wider choice, including students returning from overseas and experienced staff from other enterprises.

But even for those with

higher degrees in science and technology and other demanding professions, the government pay scale is so low that these experts seek better salaries abroad.

Alarmed, the Chinese government recently announced a plan to increase three fold the salaries of selected scientists and professors from 63 universities. But even after "hike" in salary, they will be getting 100,000 yuan or a bit more than 12,000 US dollars a year.

The Chinese government does support scholars going abroad in order to learn, but hopes this backing will encourage them to come back and serve their country.

Cao Guoxing, secretary general of the China Scholarship Council, says that given the disparities in development across the country, the council will continue to give priority to the state's key development programmes and projects in remote regions when selecting candidates to go abroad.

According to the Department for International Cooperation and Exchange of the Ministry of Education, China has sent more than 200,000 students and scholars to more than 100 countries since the start of reform and opening up policy in 1978. A total of 1,709 scholars are to be sent abroad this year.

Only about 60 per cent of the scholars who go abroad for higher studies return home, government statistics show.

Still, the council's executive vice chairman, Li Dongxiang, says: "The state has been implementing the principle of encouraging scholars to return and giving them freedom to leave and return, and this principle will remain unchanged in the future."

— IPS/APB

Bismarck Unified Germany by a False Telegram Police Wrecked Absar by Referring to a False Fax

by A R Shamsul Islam

Human mind has a characteristic frame to spew questions before accepting any contention. The arduous police explanations spark off many a note of interrogation. First, why didn't the police verify the genuineness of the fax in the first instance by contacting the Interpol in London through electronic media?

AT last we knew about the reactions of the police on the recent sensational incident of Nurul Absar's arrest and detention. The police chief IGP remarked: "The police are embarrassed by this incident. But they have not committed any unlawful act. There is a section of law providing for arresting a person purporting to be suspicious and interrogating him in police custody."

Thus the Nurul Absar drama was coming to an unceremonious close. It kept us on tenterhooks for ten days over denudations and deflections of the events. It started with a bang but was ending on a note of a mountain's mole-hill. If Rubel tragedy is the height of police atrocities, Absar false accounts for the nadir of their sense of responsibilities.

Let us take an objective view of the entire case.

As gleaned from the press the outlines of the incident are as follow: In a pre-dawn swoop on 8 January the detective police of Chittagong arrested one Nurul Absar from his rented residence in Chittagong Chawkbazar. This was done on the basis of a fax from London through Interpol received by the Home Ministry the previous afternoon at 5 pm. The fax allegedly branded Absar as a high ranking international terrorist involved in smuggling of arms and explosives. He was identified as a member of Germany-based secret organisation named "Freedom in Bangladesh". He was reported to have travelled Libya, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Ireland etc. on routine training and smuggling of arms and ammunition. The police alleged that he was preparing for doing subversive activities in land installations of Bangladesh to jeopardize

country's sovereignty and internal security.

The police produced him in court which ordered him to be on seven days remand to the police for interrogation.

Nurul Absar, 44, hailed from Rangunia Thana of Chittagong district. He belonged to a low middle class family. He went to London in 1996 with his wife and son and served there as a waiter in a restaurant. He married one Nurun Nahar of Chittagong in 1986.

Absar, his mother and sister complained that Nurun Nahar, an ill-disciplined lady who alone went off to London in September last, might have conspired to trap her husband.

Vigorous interrogations by different agencies of the government proved that allegations against Absar were absolutely baseless and the so-called London fax was false. The court ordered his final release on 15 January.

The key-notes of explanations handed out by the IGP on behalf of the police are as follow: The fax in question came from London through Interpol in the name of David S Jones, a detective sergeant belonging to anti-terrorist unit of NCIS (National Criminal Investigation Service). It was received by the Home Minister on 7 January at 5 pm. He asked the IGP over phone to take necessary action.

During interrogation the police smelt that Absar might not be a terrorist. On 10 January they sent a copy of the fax to NCIS in London for verification. From their detective sergeant D C Loyd replied over phone that the fax appeared genuine. But the officer of the fax David Jones was absent from office on leave. He said to have sent the copy of the fax to

the office of David Jones. The latter joined office on 11 January and confirmed that the fax was false.

Human mind has a characteristic frame to spew questions before accepting any contention. The arduous police explanations spark off many a note of interrogation. Some are as follows: First, why didn't the police verify the genuineness of the fax in the first instance by contacting the Interpol in London through electronic media?

Second, the Home Minister asked the IGP to take proper action on the fax. It is common sense to verify first before taking arrest action. What led the police to skip off this essential preliminary? Why they went overenthusiastic to catch Absar as if it was a big haul? Had the police demonstrated a bit of this degree of enthusiasm to chase terrorists and anti-social elements the law and order would have never sunk so low as now.

Third, the police say they feel embarrassed. Embarrassed what for? Naively acting on the fax? Or being required to explore explanations for their actions?

Fourth, do the police believe that a routine eyewitness explanation to the press and public is enough to conceal the excesses they commit every now and then?

Fifth, the police alleged that Absar was linked to the killers of Bangabandhu. He wanted to free them by unseating the government. Do the police think that any pretext in the name of Bangabandhu will save them from facing punishments by the government? How long will the police play upon this oversensitivity of the government? How long can the government

afford to play naive to this trickery?

Sixth, had detective sergeant David Jones extended leave wouldn't the detention of Absar have been correspondingly lengthened? Is it that the urgent works of a London-based NCIS office, supposed to operate 24 hours a day, remain shelved when the deskman is on leave?

Unfortunately Nurul Absar also has had reason to consider him lucky that David Jones did not extend leave. Another fine piece of fortune he had was that the schemers of the fax were not clever enough to send it in the name of a person whisked off on a longer leave.

Seventh, poor Absar may get a bit richer by successfully instituting damage suits against the government. Cynics say that last doses of 'police custodial special', generally administered to exact confession, were meant to contain Absar from venturing to the courts of law. If so, doesn't it doubly vitiate the rule of law?

Poor Absar! How erroneously arrested! Printing mistakes of a book are compensated by an errata list. But what balm can dilute the pains of mistaken arrest of Absar?

Bismarck, the Imperial Chancellor of Prussia, completed unification of Germany by a false telegram (Ems telegram). Some words of a telegram sent to Bismarck by the Prussian king were twisted to a confusing text that inflamed the war passion of the French and Germans against each other. The resultant war (Sedan) in 1871, the likes of which Bismarck longed for, resulted in the completion of unification of the German states. On the other hand, acting on the false fax the police wrecked Nurul Absar.

by Jim Davis



efforts.

The hurricane — the further strongest ever in the Atlantic basin — packed winds of nearly 300 kilometres an hour. But most of the damage was done by the downpour as Mitch dumped as much as 65 cm of rainfall in a single day, especially in areas where there was very little or no vegetation, mainly due to deforestation, thereby triggering floods and mudslides.

Clear-cutting logging, hillside farms, and rampant housing development exacerbated mudslides and floods, according to experts. In Honduras alone, loggers and farmers have stripped away more than 9,000 hectares of forest cover every year.

After a week an exhausted Mitch moved towards El Salvador, Guatemala, South Mexico and Florida before heading back to the Caribbean.

According to the Inter-American Development Bank, floods and mudslides have swept away 90 per cent of Honduras roads, bridges and power lines. Large chunks of the Pan-American highway, the crucial link for Central American, has been eaten away.

The two governments, overwhelmed by the need for relief work and frustrated by broken

communication links, have yet to calculate the full magnitude of the economic loss, which is somewhere in billions of dollars — roughly \$1 billion in Nicaragua, and \$4 billion for Honduras.

Rebuilding the country's infrastructure is the top priority for the governments, though it could take two to four years to do so. Be it bridges and roads, houses for the millions, left homeless, or creation of jobs for the scores unemployed, the governments' face a daunting challenge ahead.

Honduras and Nicaragua require new homes for an estimated 25 per cent and 20 per cent of the population respectively. The government plans to discourage construction in flood-prone areas such as riverbanks.

But before anything else, there is an urgent need to build bridges, without which the government must rely on planes and helicopters to get emergency food and medicine to needy areas. And that could get costly. Honduras alone faces the task of rebuilding 94 bridges that were lost.

The destruction of crops will have a severe impact in the region. Agriculture plays an important role in economies of

Central America. In Honduras, for instance, about 54 per cent of the work force is employed in the agricultural sector. The storm destroyed as much as 70 per cent of the important crops in Honduras and Nicaragua, in addition with most of the roads and bridges needed to carry the produce from the mountains to the markets.

Coffee and bananas — the two most important sources of export income for the two countries — were hit especially hard. Honduras lost one-fourth of its coffee plantations. Shrimp farms, citrus and sugarcane have been wiped out. Small farmers have lost everything.

Central American countries, of which Honduras and Nicaragua have a high share, account for nearly eight per cent of world coffee supplies, and their quality arabicas, favoured by American coffee drinkers, are exported largely to the US. But because Mitch's torrential rain damaged crops and washed away transport links, the future of coffee planters and traders looks bleak.

Mitch has also put thousands of people out of work. Agriculture accounts for a quarter of Honduras's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs nearly two-thirds of the work force. In Nicaragua, it accounts for 15 per cent of output and employs more than 40 per cent of its work force.

The storm is over but it has left behind more problems to tend to besides floods and mudslides. Disease, starvation, accidents and landmines are raising the death toll.

Authorities fear an outbreak of cholera and other water-borne diseases. Thousands of bodies and sewage contaminating drinking water supplies have raised the spectre of epidemic. Morgues overwhelmed by the number of dead and bodies are being buried in mass graves.

"We're surrounded by mud, waste and contaminated water", said Manzanera de Manzanera of the Honduran Red Cross. "This is going to cause epidemics."

CSE/Down To Earth Features