

Press Under Attack, Again

PHOTOJOURNALISTS were under attack again, ironically by both the police and the opposition activists. A photographer of this newspaper and another from The Independent came under police fire while vehicles of three Bangla papers, namely Janakantha, Ajker Kagoj and Banglabazar Patrika were damaged by the pro-hartal pickets. Attempt was also made to set the driver of one them on fire.

We have no language to condemn this attack on our photojournalists. This is not the first time that journalists have come under attack, nor will it be the last. But what is most insidious about the recent happenings is that there appears to be a policy of attacking the press by both sides of our political divide. It is not accidental that those three Bangla papers came under attack by the opposition activists. We want the opposition to understand that under no circumstances can any political party professing to believe in democracy can and should attack the media, however unfriendly the latter may appear.

However, our warning is essentially to the government. It is they who are fundamentally responsible for upholding the law and all the provisions of the Constitution. If the police, as the agent of the government, break the law then it has to be construed that the government itself is guilty of the crime. We have eye-witness report that the police fired rubber bullets on the photojournalists when the situation was far from anything that called for such an action. It was unprovoked and completely unnecessary. We are, therefore, forced to conclude that it was deliberate. Then the question arises, why? Is it to intimidate the press which is the only media that still speaks out freely? Every other channel of communication is now under the full control of the government. So is it an attempt to silence the one last resort people have to know the truth? From where does the police get the courage to shoot a journalist? Not only that, while the rule is to shoot below the knee, these members of police shoot aiming at the head and the chest - basically aiming to kill.

We demand of the government to explain to the nation why such a thing should happen in democracy. This attack on the press is nothing short of an attack on democracy and that is how the ruling party will be judged by the people unless proper punishment is meted out to those who dared shoot journalists.

Boost to CHT Peace Process

THE vestigial remnants of PCJSS as a forum of former tribal insurgents are erased by its emergence as a fully-fledged political party. Its armed wing, called the Shantibahini stands dissolved *per se*. The once-revolutionary constitution of PCJSS which had rendered the insurgent organisation clandestine and outlawed in the eye of Bangladeshi government has given way to the demands of open politics in a pluralistic polity of Bangladesh.

One would have thought that all of this was only a matter of formality after the PCJSS had signed the peace accord and, subsequently, as a proof of their bona fides, even got its armed wing Shantibahini to surrender weapons to the government. But they have taken a detour of some two years following the signing of the peace accord to declare themselves as an open political party. The intervening period has been marked by dissent occasionally expressed by the tribal leadership and faced by the government task force involved in implementation of the accord. Old questions were reopened and clashes have occurred between Bengali settlers and anti-accord tribal factional elements.

Against this torrid backdrop, PCJSS' appearance as a political party burying the hatchet of the past certainly marks a qualitative change in the objective situation for implementation of the CHT peace accord. We felicitate the tribal delegates to the open congress that decided to convert the PCJSS into a 'regional democratic party' and put Shantu Larma at its helm. Let's keep faith with the words of advice Larma has given to his partymen: "discard narrow and ultra-nationalist attitude" in the changed context of a peace accord being available since 1997. He has also urged the "misguided" members of the anti-peace accord — Pahari Chhatra Parishad, Pahari Gano Parishad and Hill Women's Federation — to enter the mainstream.

Shantu Larma would do the accord implementation process a world of good by avoiding controversies and leading the way to promote a harmonious relationship between the tribals and non-tribals.

General Takes Beaten Track

WHAT General Parvez Mosharraf told newsmen on Monday at his first press conference since the October 12 coup d'état has the familiar reflection of a military ruler groping for a way to legitimise his authority in the face of sustained international pressure for restoration of democracy. Thoughts on a referendum or "some other legal methodology" to ascertain public opinion on his action are definitely not novel in Pakistan which has a long history of military rule and we, in Bangladesh, are familiar with the ruse, too. The bottomline is: whichever means he employs or however hard he tries, that he has usurped power from a democratically-elected government cannot be wiped out. By toppling the Nawaz Sharif government, General Mosharraf has actually arrogated to himself a right that belongs to the people. Instead of talks on referendum, the international community had expected a definite time-frame from him for restoration of democracy. In this respect, allusion to much-needed economic reforms, time-wise which is an open-ended proposition, does not hold water.

At this point of time, the general may be of the impression that he enjoys popular support. But, as we have seen this happen on so many occasions and in so many countries, his honeymoon with the public won't last long. Somewhere down the line there will be protests against his regime. Therefore, the wisest thing for him to do would be to immediately announce an election date instead of procrastinating his tenure at the helm.

Two Old Hot Spots in the News Again

The international community in general, and the United States in particular, should try to open avenues of dialogue with the Iraqi ruler so that his weapons can be peacefully dismantled.

vanced on the capital, in the process killing innocent civilians and reportedly creating more than 150,000 refugees. East Timor bloodletting was a mere trickle by comparison.

Chechnya undoubtedly is home to some unwholesome characters. But by now it should be clear that Russia's indiscriminate bombing of Chechen villages has little to do with fighting crime or terrorism. The military campaign is more likely a political cynicism at its ugliest. The nationalistic sentiments it has aroused have boosted the Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's popular support ahead of next year's presidential elections. But Russia's punishment of innocent women and children is hardly the work of a government interested in establishing a rule of law. The problem here is that the developed nations do not care all that much either. The fact that the Russian army and air force have already killed thousands of civilians and are gearing up to level what is left of the republic's capital, Grozny, doesn't seem to perturb the international community. They are bent on cooperating with the Kremlin and are content to let Russia unravel as a politically serious nation.

This is a war that Russia is not likely to win soon, nor can it afford the high costs of waging the conflict. And if large numbers of Russian soldiers are killed in the struggle, the war's



Connecting the Dots

Dr. A. R. Choudhury

popularity is likely to be brief. The international community can make a difference in the Chechnya conflict. For all its huffing and puffing, the Russian economy is weak and highly sensitive to interna-

tional sentiments. It is time for the international community to begin expressing some opinions about Russia's steady degradation that the world will notice, rather than continuing the pretense that they are deal-



A Chechen woman cries standing amidst ruins of destroyed buildings in the village of Chervenoye, Chechnya 31 October, 1999. Russian warplanes have killed "dozens of non-combatants" in the Chechnya conflict, the rights group Human Rights Watch (HRW) said 1 November.

Storming of the Supreme Court

Ardeshir Cowasjee writes from Karachi

"As Muslim Leaguers, we affirm our resolve to remain united, and call for the Parliamentary Party to meet as soon as possible for further debate and decisions. We urge the authorities to make their intervention as brief as possible to put Pakistan back on track as a democratic State by restoring the suspended Parliament and the Constitution of Pakistan."

"LEMMING: noun — A small short-tailed chick-stick rodent related to the voles; a person who unthinkingly joins a mass-movement, especially a head-long rush to destruction."

On October 27, fourteen lemmings of the PML species awoke from their slumber and issued to the press the following statement addressed to their fellow citizens. The fourteen were: Syed Fakhr Imam, Mian Mohammad Azhar, Mansoor Hayat Tamman, Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, Shahzada Mohiuddin, Colonel Ghulam Sarwar Cheema, Sedad Sajjad Haider, Nasir Baloch, Chaudhry Ashraf, Hamza, Sikandar Hayat Malhi, Mian Abdul Waleed, Syed Shabbir Shah, and Syeda Abida Hussain. The text of their statement:

"We, the undersigned Members of the National Assembly of Pakistan, who had prepared and communicated the attached memorandum for former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on August 11, 1999, have reassembled today, under deeply sobering and altered circumstances, to discuss the causes which led to the debacle of October 12, 1999.

It is our considered view that what had obtained circumstantially was a total collapse of institutional checks and balances.

In a parliamentary system of government, for effective decision-making, checks must be made other than by the Opposition, by the Ruling Party as a whole, by the parliamentary party and by the Cabinet. Since all of these checks had been progressively and seriously un-

dermined, the PML workers, office bearers and Members of Parliament are today faced with a formidable challenge to deal sagaciously and effectively with the prevailing situation.

We, the undersigned, therefore affirm before all members of the Pakistan Muslim League and the people of our country that we will first and foremost ensure that in the future adequate checks and balances will be created within the party organization as a defence against arbitrary decision-making, checks to prevent a polity which tampers with the institutions of State.

We hereby also make public the memorandum prepared and communicated by us in August 1999 to the former prime minister to share with the people of our country the direction of our thoughts.

While supporting across-the-board accountability, we would urge that this process not be limited to politicians alone and that any kind of victimization be scrupulously avoided. The Pakistan Muslim League has almost a hundred years of history behind it, during which this party has survived many upheavals.

"As Muslim Leaguers, we affirm our resolve to remain united, and call for the Parliamentary Party to meet as soon as possible for further debate and decisions. We urge the authorities to make their intervention as brief as possible to put Pakistan back on track as a democratic State by restoring the suspended Parliament and the Constitution of Pakistan."

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of State have in the past been tampered with?

A.2 : You know better.

Q.3 : What did you do when members of your party stormed the Supreme Court on November 28, 1997?

A.3 : Uh uh hmm uh mmm. Q.4 : "Whilst supporting across-the-board accountability we would urge that this process not be limited to politicians alone ...". Would you like the judiciary to be also accountable?

A.4 : Naturally. Everybody.

Where were these supporters of democracy when their leader pushed through Parliament the 13th and 14th Constitutional Amendments, suspending the rules of procedure and disallowing any debate? Why did they only awaken when their livelihood was at stake?

As for the storming of the Supreme Court, the matter remains very much alive. On May 14, 1999 the Bench of three judges — Justices Nasir Aslam Zahid, Munawar Ahmad Mirza and Abdur Rahman Khan —

found themselves unable to convict any man of having committed contempt in the face of the court by storming the Supreme Court of Pakistan. On May 19, journalist Shahid Orakzai filed a petition in the

Supreme Court against the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz Group) and Others, inter alia, pleading that —

... the proceedings conducted by a full bench headed by Mr Nasir Aslam Zahid were coram no judice as they violated the rules of the Court as well as the Constitution of Pakistan ... The first betrayal surfaced when the wrong-hand of the Prime Minister, Senator Saifur Rahman, was intriguingly excluded from the list of respondents though the inquiry had pinpointed his role in obstructing the Court by ordering the policeman not to block the entry of rowdy supporters of the Prime Minister.

This petition was heard by Chief Justice Ajmal Mian and Justices Saiduzzaman Siddiqui, Irshad Hasan Khan, Raja Afrasiah Khan and Mohammad Bashir Jehangir on June 14, 1999, and the full bench of five ordered:

"This criminal original petition has been filed under Rule 1 and 7 of Order XXVII of the Supreme Court Rules 1980 for initiating contempt of court proceedings de novo in respect of rowdyism, which had taken place on 28/11/97 at the Supreme Court premises, inter alia, on the ground that the bench which heard the case was

not properly constituted as it was not headed by the Chief Justice. In view of the Full Bench judgment of this Court in the case of Muhammad Ikrar Chaudhary and Others v. Federation of Pakistan and Others, reported in PLD 1998 SC 103, the judgment rendered by a Bench of this Court on 14/5/99 in the above contempt case cannot be reviewed through the above original criminal petition on the above ground or on any other ground. We would therefore convert this petition into an appeal and direct the office to treat it as such and issue notice to the respondents, the Attorney-General for Pakistan, and the persons against whom the charges were framed."

On October 28 1999, Orakzai filed an application for immediate hearing of Cr. Appeal No. 162 of 1999, inter alia, asking —

"That while the rowdies and vandals who hurled abuses at the court in the most vulgar language and called the Chief Justice of Pakistan a 'kutta' right inside the principal seat of this Court are still enjoying their time and roaming around freely ... That the said appeal relates to the most serious and contumacious of contempt ever committed in the judicial history and is prior in time to other contempt matters pending before the Court as well as raises issues far more serious than other cases ... Therefore, this appeal be given the due priority guaranteed by the Constitution and the Rules of this Court."

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Import of used syringes: Truly sad

Sir, The recent story of importing plastic syringes from South Korea, Malaysia and China with the professed purpose of manufacturing other plastic items out of them is truly sad. The local traders have been importing and selling these plastic syringes and endangering our national health.

Such an evil act can only be carried out by mentally twisted people. We thereby request the government to intervene to ensure that the import of used disposable syringes from abroad is banned. We also request the law enforcers to sanction the culprits for their acts.

Monyur Alam
Dhaka

Hartal and two-day weekly holiday

Sir, We abhor hartal. We also dislike two-day weekly holiday. When we compare and contrast between hartal and two-day weekly holiday we do not find much difference between the two. While hartal is observed by the opposition on political ground, the two-day weekly holiday is enjoyed by the government for rest and recreations.

In both the cases, the country plunges into inactivity, all government offices, public sector corporations, banks, hospitals and private establishments are paralysed and the suffering of the people is immense.

The only difference between hartal and two-day weekly holiday, we find, is that while the former is damaging for the state and the latter is destructive for the country.

O. H. Kabir
6, Hare Street
Wari, Dhaka

Sir, I am fed-up and frustrated beyond anything about the politicians calling hartals without thinking about the country. The government on the other hand is making no attempt to stop those politicians. These politicians NEED to understand that when people are not coming out of their houses they are not "observing the hartal and making it successful." Rather they are afraid of the terrible things that might happen to them.

The politicians HAS NO RIGHT to make the whole nation suffer for their personal and political differences! We have our parliament and one of the main purpose of the parliament is to have "talks" as far as political differences go! I am sure if there is a true survey as to how many people want a hartal, the politicians would be surprised.

A Bangladeshi Citizen

rilarating of things he vowed to pull up. Sensing public sentiments he emerged to face the citizens "with full threatened ease." He lamented that the villain of hitting snags of his ambitious enterprises was the then government in power. As an Awami League leader, Mayor Hanif had obvious difficulties. His municipal corporation's coffers was badly cash strapped, and heavily dependent on government to keep his outfit kicking. We Dhakaites nodded in agreement.

With Awami League winning the election and forming the government in 1996, we heaved a sigh of relief at the obvious consequent removal of obstacles incapacitating the Mayor. Months rolled by into years. To our frustration we observed

that things started deteriorating in all sectors. The entire city now swims in fetid garbage and trash, terrorists became active more than ever neighbour and the city roads got literally clogged with countless unlicensed rickshaws. The Mayor enjoying status of a state minister ascribed his limitations to various government agencies which were not at his beck and call. The panacea, he suggested, lay in the creation of a city government with the Mayor at the helm. Meanwhile, the Dhakaites found that the Mayor was bracing for the next election with his earlier agenda.

Of late, our Mayor appears to be only promoting his political party's interest and is oblivious of commitments made. A sea-

soned politician, he may have been laughing within his sleeves at the brevity of public memory. Flip side is the Dhakaites are gifted with proverbial sense of humour. Who knows, they may have the last laugh when the elections are over.

Lt. Cdr. (Rtd) M. Gholam Mostafiz Dhaka

played in power section, especially in DESA, by its unscrupulous bigwigs. I am so deeply tortured by them which has no parallel in modern times as I happen to be an unfortunate LIT consumer in Tongi Industrial Area.

One may be a defaulter on non-payment of electricity bills for a longer period of time. Consequently, he has to get his power supply disconnected. But there won't be any problem at all if the consumer concerned knows the with-words to pacify the greedy buys of DESA. Example may pile up. Usually and allegedly a gang headed by a Sub-Assistant Engineer cuts off the power line of a defaulter consumer. But the defaulter consumer does not have to have much headache for power restoration as the said engineer is not an angel but an Adam who is easily coaxed in eating the forbidden fruits.

How wonderful our land is! We pay and the power thieves enjoy their lives forcing in financial losses to DESA and sufferings to its utility users.

A depressed and oppressed LIT consumer.

Hi-deluxe hoax

Sir, I take it as a duty to tell my story of a really bad experience to the travelers of Dhaka-Chittagong highway. On the 15th of October '99, my wife and I got on a hi-deluxe coach; we were on our way to Chittagong.

The above coach is one of the most popular air-conditioned luxurious coach services in Bangladesh. This 'hi-deluxe' service charges an extra fare over the usual rate for its extra comfort (now I am not sure whether it is comfort or discomfort).

From the very beginning of the journey, we were sensing that something was wrong with the air-conditioning system. There was not enough air. When we reached Shahi Akhra, one by one, started to speak out and ask the host what was wrong with the AC, realising that it wasn't working at all.

The host regrettably admitted that the AC was not working. Then we asked without a proper technical checking, why they had launched the vehicles and put us into such discomfort. There was, obviously, no reply. The windows of these coaches cannot be opened.

Therefore, the sealed inner space of the coach got extremely suffocating at one time. We started to sweat, suffer respiratory problems and other discomforts associated with suffocation. One of us vomited a couple of times. A couple with an infant got down from the

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coach in the middle of nowhere without second thoughts and without asking for refunds, saying, "Please, let me out of this hell. I need to save my child". Probably they returned to Dhaka.

We asked the coach to stop and call Dhaka office for another coach either with a proper AC or with no AC but open windows. On a telephone message, the Dhaka office informed that there was no extra coach (believe