

## For Upholding Freedom of Press

BOTH the police and the journalists work under and enjoy certain Constitutional obligations and prerogatives. As the employees of the republic the main responsibility of the police is to protect and ensure the life and property of the citizens. The journalists, on the other hand, cater to the fundamental rights of the people to be informed through the process of horizontal and vertical modes of communication. Apparently, there should not have been any clash of interests between the police and the journalists as both serve the people in their respective ways. But, unfortunately, the country's police appear to be antagonistic towards the journalists, which should not have been the case in a democracy. When the police fail to perform their duties, it becomes imperative upon the journalists to point out their failures so as to correct them and to make the people aware of the situation that is befalling on them.

The recent police action against a reporter of a vernacular daily for what has been termed as a defamatory piece of news purported to have been published for tarnishing the image of the police has, once again, brought to the fore the highly intolerant attitude of the law enforcers towards the journalists. According to reports, a rejoinder from the police against the report was duly printed by the daily along with comments of the reporter concerned. Not satisfied with this police swooped down on the reporter apprehending him under Section 54 CrP which is indiscriminately used by the police against any individual on the flimsy ground of suspicion. This brought an instant outcry against the highhandedness of

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by Mansoor Mamoon

the police and demonstrated how vulnerable the journalists are in discharging their professional duties.

This is not the first instance of harassment meted out to the journalists under the present government, who loses no opportunity of projecting itself as adhering to democratic principles and free and uninterrupted flow of information. A few months back the police reportedly ransacked the office of a vernacular opposition daily. The photo-journalists in Dhaka were on several occasions mercilessly beaten by the police while performing their professional responsibilities. Different international human rights bodies in their reports on the press scenario in Bangladesh have unhesitatingly commented that due to several overt and covert reasons the journalists were compelled to practice self-censorship. The top hierarchy in the government, on different occasions, demanded accountability from the journalists forgetting that such accountability in a democracy rests not with the government, but with the readership. Newspaper offices also came under attack by hired goons for their dissenting voices. There are allegations of opposition dailies being discriminated in terms of issue of government advertisements. In Bangladesh the government is still the primary source of ad-

vertisement which contributes to the main revenue earning of a daily.

During the regime of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia the journalists were also treated in a similar manner. The police had then entered the sacred precincts of the National Press Club in Dhaka and bludgeoned the journalists in a brutal and sadistic manner. No action was known to have been taken against the police personnel involved in the shameful incident. Journalists were also hauled into jails and cases were instituted against them. The very same policy of discriminatory treatment in respect of doling out government advertisements and newspaper offices also came under attack on several occasions.

This perfidious attempt of muzzling the press was a legacy of the era of the first AL government. For publishing a special telegram issue of now defunct Dainik Bangla on the first January 1973 killing of students in Dhaka both its top editors were summarily sacked and no amount of pleading by the journalists' bodies could soften the rigid stand taken by the government. When in the wake of 1974 famine things were turning from bad to worse the then government gagged the press in an unprecedented manner keeping only four dailies for serving the cause of perhaps the monolithic BKSAL.

During the military and quasi-military rule of General Ziaur Rahman and General Ershad the journalists were under constant threat of the dreaded midnight press advice from the cantonment and frequent summoning of the obdurate reporters by the military intelligence and NSI. With the fall of autocracy and the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991 things have not much changed with regards to free play of the press. Only the patterns have undergone some metamorphosis, but the mind-set of authoritarianism lingered.

When a government commits excesses, it has a tendency of becoming increasingly intolerant of all criticisms and its wrath is then obviously directed towards the press, which in a democracy acts as a watchdog, informs the people about the wrong doing of the government and censures it. With the recent increase in the incidences of crimes, extortion, corruption etc involving government functionaries and their close relations and the publication of the same in the newspapers, appear to have greatly irritated those at the helm of power. Newspapers are the opinion-moulders and as election nears, the countdown for the final reckoning approaches, the ruling party increasingly becomes distasteful of the press which takes an increasingly critical role against

governmental misdeeds.

The police in this country, since the British rule, never enjoyed good reputation in the society. Whoever is in power uses the police, politicises them and uses them to cling to power by harassing and suppressing the opposition. Recently there are reports of connivance of police with the criminal gangs, which has pushed the crime rates to an unprecedented high level. The police are also helpless in many cases due to pressure from the high-ups in the ruling party. This is a dangerous trend against which the country's independent press has taken a bold stand. The administration as well as the ruling party have, therefore, turned inimical to them and are taking various punitive measures in a vain bid to bring them under control.

This in no case is a happy augury for the sustenance of democracy in the country. One of the pillars of democracy is a free press. If the press is not free there cannot be genuine democracy in the country. A free press is like a garden having hundred flowers in full bloom constituting a mosaic of a vibrant and dynamic democratic society. The journalists also with the people should, therefore, resist any coercive method to stifle the press. It is axiomatic that the very first victim of authoritarianism is press freedom. Hence for the sake of continuation of democratic polity in the country the press must uphold its freedom against all brow-beatings whatever might be the cost. It should be remembered that freedom is not a gift on a platter. Freedom is to be wrested. The journalists are, therefore, required to be in the forefront of the struggle for their freedom no matter whatever is the cost and whether those in authority like it or not.

## Emran in Retrospect

by Abu Abdullah

K.M. Ejazul Huq — Emran to family and friends — is dead. He Passed away on June 16 in the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, where he was being treated for lung cancer. At one point the doctors were cautiously optimistic, and he sent an e-mail message thanking the Almighty for His mercy. We, who loved him, heaved a sigh of relief. After all, Nurul Quader Khan had lived a perfectly normal, active life for ten years after the same kind of surgery.

But the Almighty, in His infinite wisdom, had other plans.

I don't remember exactly when I met him, except that it was very early on during our university days. We were very different people — he was an extrovert who could and did bond effortlessly with everyone, and a keen athlete who played cricket, hockey, and table tennis with equal enthusiasm and panache. It has to be admitted that while he had great elegance of style, he never quite made it to the top in any of these pastimes, which did not bother him in the least. For my part, I was comparatively reclusive, moody, and passionately addicted to English literature. Nevertheless — or may be because of this — we were instantly drawn to each other.

I hope I am not conveying the impression that he was a jock. Nothing could be further from the truth. He was bright, articulate, and witty, and what he enjoyed most was conversation, at which he excelled. At this stage of his life, as I recall, his ambition was to be a barrister,

which, given his verbal fluency, self-confidence, and intelligence, seemed an obvious choice. Actually it still remains a bit unclear to me why this changed. From time to time during his career as a civil servant, when he had to deal with a particularly difficult superior, he would express in colourful language his regret at his final career choice. This did not, however, ever become for him an excuse for slacking off in his job.

In 1965 the golden days of our university life ended, and in 1966 I went abroad for higher studies. I came back in 1970, but went away again early 71. I came back for good (or bad) in 1972, with my wife Chitrita. Emran became an instant favourite with her, and vice versa. He, along with A.M. Khan Babu (who died in 1995 or thereabouts) and Shafiqur Rahman (my friend from Dhaka College days, working at that time in the Freedom Fighters' Welfare Trust Fund) became our most frequent visitors. Emran in particular would frequently drop by in the evening, after a long day of playing cards somewhere, and take us out for a drive (at that stage he was probably the only one among us who had access to a car), frequently ending with Kabab-Paratha at 'Darul Kabab' on Green Road or caramel custard at the Intercontinental.

In 1975 or thereabouts he wooed, as far as I could gather largely over the telephone, won,

and finally wed Nusrat. Fortunately for our friendship, Nusrat also took an instant liking (well, maybe there was a short probation period) to me and Chitrita, and vice versa. Perhaps we spent a little less time together, but it was always quality time.

Around 1981, a son was born to them, and Emran discovered the joys of fatherhood. Then, probably in 1990, a daughter, and Emran was over the moon. Emran was now more content than I had ever seen him. Marriages frequently become boring and even embittered with time, but his relationship with Nusrat seemed to be constantly growing in mutual supportiveness and appreciation. He loved his son and doted on his daughter. Always convivial, he entertained and went out more and more. Over the last year or two, he decided that he needed to take better care of himself, and would spend about an hour at the Sonargaon Health Club on his way home from work. As far I could see, it was working — he looked trimmer, fitter, more energetic.

And then the roof fell in. There is a Simon and Garfunkel song that starts, 'Old Friends. Sitting on a park bench at seventy'. When I think of that park bench, you are the old friend I think of sharing it with. If I am still around at that age, I will find a bench (I think they are putting some up near Dhanmondi Lake), close my eyes, and imagine you are sitting next to me.

## Goodbye Fellow Gemini

by Neeman A. Sobhan

THERE is an email in my in-box addressed to my husband Iqbal and I, which I wish I had the power to delete without reading it, because it has deleted from our lives a beloved friend. The email is from another bereaved friend in Washington, and is sharp as a knife in its briefly worded message, which I am reading and re-reading in shock: 'Emran passed away at 4:30 this afternoon. May God rest his soul in peace.'

After the initial wave of disbelief and grief, I go over old photographs and come across something tucked away among the pages. It's a piece of paper on which our friend had, after a literary evening, and on a dare, written for us a poem. He was staying with us in Rome, and was sitting across a piece of rug on which I had once dabbled some paint and hung on the wall: the silhouette of a black tree against a crimson sky. He had gazed intently at this for a while and scribbled the poem, untitled and in Bangla. Over the years, we had forgotten about it. Once or twice, when I remembered, I thought that I would ask him to translate it for me in his immaculate English. It is now too late, and today to assuage my sense of loss, I attempt a crude translation because I wish to share it with his many grieving friends and family.

But before that I wish to say this. Emran bhai, dear friend and fellow Gemini: if you think your untimely death will bring our torrents of sentiment in me, you are wrong, for I have a quarrel with you. WHO GAVE YOU PERMISSION TO DIE? Who gave you leave to break our illusion that death only happens far away, to distant people beyond the safe network of friends and family, to those with unfamiliar, anonymous faces? Who allowed you to admit the apocalyptic stranger in our magic circle, to break the cosy belief in our immortality?

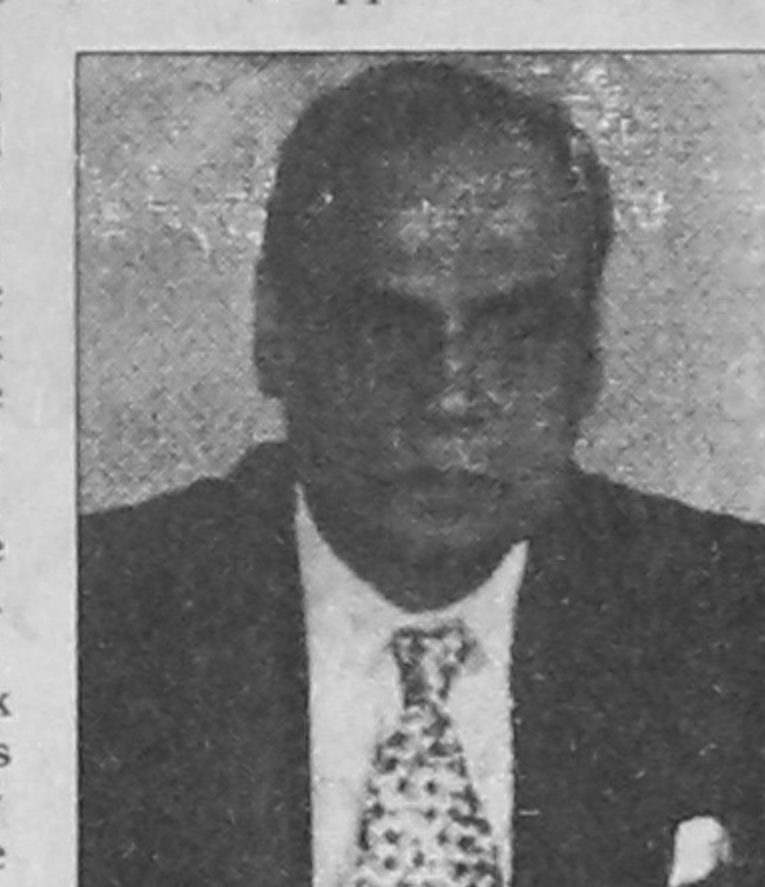
At first I was angry with you for your treachery, for breaking faith with life, for just leaving the party without saying goodbye. Now after the tears, I allow myself to absorb the physical facts of your departure, but I am sorry, just because you were in a haste to depart does not mean you have our permission to leave, certainly not from our hearts, our thoughts and memories. I have a quarrel with you because you have left everything incomplete, interrupted. What about all the books we still have to discuss, the jokes we haven't shared yet, the world problems we need to solve? Who will read the first draft of my unwritten novel? Who will supply me with the Bangla literature to nurture my quest to match your linguistic prowess which I envied, that ability to be equally articulate in English and Bangla? If any one individual inspired and helped me to improve my Bangla after an education based exclusively on English and Urdu, it was you.

Who will say 'touché' to a consciously clever repartee of mine, and who will provide me with the opportunity to complete a quotation skipping easily from your tongue? In an age when book learning and reading is a thing of the past, dear erudite friend, I already miss you.

You have taken away the joie from vivre, the sparkle from

wit, the lustre from conversation, the grace from intellect, the uproarious from laughter, and as we used to say 'the idiosyncrasies from semiotics'. Who will read out Ogden Nash and Shukumar Roy in one breath and in the next recite an obscure line from Coleridge or a familiar one from Shuneeel Gongopadhyaya?

Now there is no one who has the answer to personal passions that opened up hosts of shared experiences and memories. If Iqbal or I said: 'Bhej Mowla! there was only you who could complete it with the figure: 'Chappan karore ki



Late Ejazul Huq

chowthai! It meant more than a humorous prayer to God asking him to send a facetiously exact sum of money. Things are obviously not right in heaven for not only did we never receive any monetary windfall, today we have actually lost much more than a quarter of 56 crores in terms of friendship.

Now there is no one who will laugh and say 'remember' when one of us mentions 'R.A.' Iqbal and I had thought that we would lean back over our twilight years and allow you to relate with many an exaggerated embellishment, one of our favourite narratives—about that particular memory of the first time we were robbed in Rome, at which you were present, and which led to the acronym you invented. That was over those wonderful years when you were with the Agriculture Ministry and used to come often to FAO and Rome.

Remember? It was a warm evening in July and as usual we were sitting out on the balcony of our apartment till late into the night basking in the joviality of your company. Early in the morning we woke from a particularly heavy sleep, later confirmed as vapour induced, since my elder son, then just a baby, had not woken up for his late night feed. The first thing that attracted my attention was that all the drawers of the bureau in my bedroom were gone! Then I noticed the wardrobe doors were wide open, and finally I saw that the room was littered with our belongings. By the time I went out into the corridor I saw that every room had been rifled. I didn't have to say anything. Iqbal and you came out, and we looked at one another and realized that we had now been bonded into a first time experience: We had been burglarised!

I lost all my jewelry. You, Emran bhai, lost your wallet! But we all took the episode with humour, and I even pretended to be rather insulted that the robbers had disdained from taking my silverware in spite of strew-

ing them all over the apartment, when they realized that much was plated stuff. As I retrieved the pieces from room to room, I had shouted, 'What! My silver is not good enough for you? How dare you reject my things?' We had laughed and joked away the trauma, because your presence boosted our morale. That's when you said that since people add strings of educational degrees and qualifications after their names, from now on you would proudly add after yours: 'R.A.' or 'Robbed Abroad!' Dear friend, I lost many a 'precious jewel' on that 'trip of yours', but what no burglar can take away, not even that greatest of robbers, Death, are our memories of you. During the 80's we saw a lot of you, and much of our early Italian experiences are associated with you. In Bangladesh, a precious memory is a duck-shooting trip to Sylhet with you, our families and that other mutual friend—the bon vivant Kaiser Rashid Chowdhury, who is already 'al di la' to receive you.

Over the last few years we saw less of you. We saw you once in Washington and again briefly in Rome and in Dhaka more superficially during our home leaves. I regret the decrease in contact, but nothing lessens the intensity of true friendship. Surely you knew that.

Today, I take out that piece of paper on which you scribbled a poem, and I feel that you did not leave without saying goodbye. Dear fellow Gemini, in this our birthday month, I wish you a happy journey to a place which you have now made less daunting, less terrorizing, more acceptable. If you are there, the party is there. We are in the anteroom, waiting out this life. Till we meet again, dear friend, you live among all the familiar faces that remember you fondly. As you return to the earth and to the springing grass, you return to us, healed, whole, more perfect than life. For didn't we agree that life is a dream, a painting or a poem, a mere reflection of some other larger reality?

You affectionately dedicated the following poem to me, your kid sister Titi, and today I dedicate it to you. I did not dare attempt a translation, so this is only my English version of your original Bangla, a mere fraction, a sort of poetic 'chappan crore ki chowthai'.

'Bring me a brush and an easel I feel the urge to paint today a darkling tree against a reddened sky; or an endlessly extending vista of Hope where Life in all its unrestrained, self-focused glory exhausts itself in its own, obscure incantation. But what should I really paint, again that old question: should it be about myself, or life, or the beginning of things, in the moistly springing grass? Hand me the brush. I think I know what I must paint, a landscape, peopled only with familiar, friendly faces and just a brush stroke of Love.' (By Ejazul Huq, Rome, 26 November 1986)

## Sweet Ambon Sours as Religious Enmity Flares

THE Spice Islands of Indonesia's Maluku province have intermittently been embroiled in inter-communal conflict since January 1999, so 'conflict resolution' seemed an apt subject for a journalism training course. Dangerously apt, as it turned out.

Confident in the knowledge that there had been little serious fighting in the provincial capital, Ambon, we were based in a hotel located on the line which divides the Muslim and Christian communities, thus allowing access to journalists from both communities.

Unfortunately our visit coincided with the arrival of bands of commandos from Java, calling themselves the *Laskar Jihad*, or 'Holy War Warriors'. They are bent on revenge towards Ambon's dominant Christian community whom they accuse of persecuting Muslims.

Their presence heightened nervousness on both sides and, whether or not they precipitated it, seems to have been the main factor in a fresh outbreak of fighting that engulfed our hotel on the second day of training.

The local journalists we were training and our group of trainers from Britain and Indonesia spent an uncomfortable hour flat on the floor at the back of the Hotel Ambon Manise, which translates as 'Sweet Ambon'. There was gunfire all around us. Troops guarding the hotel had come inside and were returning fire and we were fearful that the hotel itself would be set ablaze as we had earlier seen buildings opposite go up in flames.

We were confronted with a difficult choice. Having vowed to stay together we were advised that, for our own safety, we should split into Muslim and Christian groups lest the attackers broke in. We thought at that stage the gunmen outside were Christian and we feared for the safety of our Muslim colleagues, trainers and trainees.

When fighting broke out in the Indonesian city of Ambon recently, a group of journalists taking part in a workshop on 'conflict reporting' suddenly found themselves part of the story. For Gemini News Service, a journalist at the workshop gives a personal account of their escape — one participant had a machete held to her throat — and explains the background to the dispute that is rocking the province of Maluku.

Nicholas Nugent writes from Ambon, Indonesia

There was little scope for argument and a Muslim police captain led the Muslim group to the relative safety of the Al Fatah mosque behind Muslim lines. As they 'escaped', the gunfire was continuous.

At the mosque they were confronted by a mob wielding machetes and home-made firearms demanding proof of their convictions. One local female reporter had a machete put to her throat before she was recognised.

Some of the militia spoke Indonesian with a Javanese accent, seeming to confirm that they belonged to the group of up to 3,000 *Laskar Jihad* commandos, who were trained in April at a camp near Jakarta and are now active on Ambon and other islands in Maluku province.

Our group, evacuated behind Christian lines, fared a little better after we also risked intensive cross-fire escaping from the hotel by a side door. Like

our colleagues on the Muslim side, we found an amazing display of home-made fire arms as we walked through back alleys to relative safety.

The next day both communities openly sported these so-called 'country' weapons on the main streets. They say they carry them only for self-defence. The Indonesian army and police made no attempt to disarm them, yet it was evident that much of the firing of the night before involved these home-made weapons. More than 40 people died in Ambon in the first 10 days of this latest round of killing, including several members of the security forces. Many more have been wounded.

As was the pattern last December, the killings in Ambon have led to a renewed outbreak of bloodletting in the north of Spice Islands archipelago. At least 70 Christians have been reported killed in the island of Halmahera. There, too, the

*Laskar Jihad* have been blamed.

The *Laskar Jihad*, whom we now believe were responsible for the firing around our hotel, may have provided leadership for the local Ambonese Muslim militia, but the latter were already well armed. The commandos had arrived on this island without weapons. That is why, according to the province's military commander, Brigadier-General Max Tamaela, the authorities were powerless to prevent them from sailing to Ambon.

Local people, both Christian and Muslim, regard the failure to prevent the commandos reaching Ambon and other Spice Islands as a clear sign of the impotence of the armed forces, who have been variously accused of stirring up the conflict and of taking sides. They are certainly failing to keep the warring communities part or to disarm them.

Locally it is said they are

making money out of the conflict, or else that they are protecting their commercial interests in the province. Similar charges were made against the armed forces in East Timor before they surrendered control of that province in an orgy of destruction.

Whether or not the military helped foment the communal violence, the main destruction in Maluku has been caused by the people themselves, whose level of bitterness towards the rival community seems to have reached a new high. At least 400 years of living side by side, and the cross community tradition of *pela* under which Christians helped build mosques and Muslims helped build churches, have given way to warfare in which burning mosques and churches to the ground is the main target and killings are celebrated by decapitation.

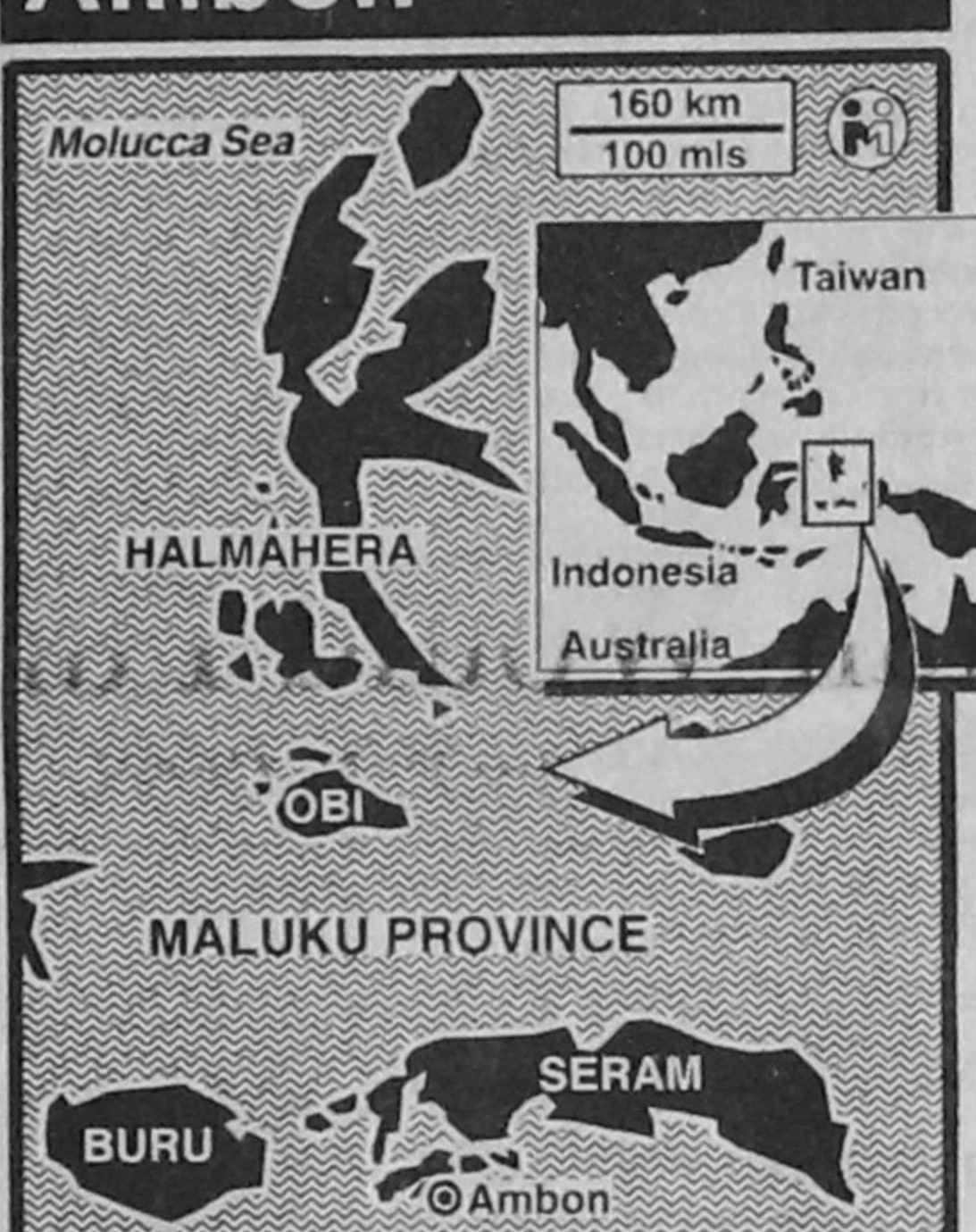
Something has gone badly wrong in Maluku, which I remember from 25 years ago as a remote and tranquil paradise. The Jakarta government's efforts at peacemaking have been as unsuccessful as the Indonesian army's attempts at peacekeeping. It is unclear whether it is of the islanders' own making, resulting perhaps from Christian nervousness about a demographic and power shift as Muslim migrant workers increase their hold on the economy. Alternatively it could be a consequence of Indonesia's own shift towards greater democracy and regional autonomy.

Those who see the army's hand behind the conflict regard the Maluku crisis as further evidence, after East Timor, of the military's unwillingness to surrender control to civilian rule and a determined attempt to prove that the armed forces provide the 'glue' that holds this disparate nation together. There is little or no evidence for the Muslim charge that this is another Christian attempt at separatism, a resurgence of RMS, the Republic of the South Moluccas, which was declared after Dutch colonisers withdrew in 1950 in a short-lived attempt to resist incorporation within Indonesia.

We were forced to leave Ambon prematurely, unable to complete our training. Those we had hoped to train did not have that option. For Indonesia, Maluku has superseded East Timor as the most intractable regional problem facing the new government of Abdur Rahman Wahid, especially now that peace moves in another troubled province, Aceh, seem to be making progress. Together they are seen as tests of whether this nation can hold together now that the iron grip of former president Suharto has been relaxed. The worrying thing for Wahid is that nobody seems to have any idea how to end this internecine strife to begin the investment — in fishing and oil exploration — that Maluku so badly needs.

The author is a writer and broadcaster on Asian affairs, working mainly for the British Broadcasting Corporation's World Service.

### Ambon



TOM & JERRY

