

## FEER's prejudiced and one-sided cover story

*Maligned imaging of Bangladesh should be countered with facts and not by banning*

THE Far Eastern Economic Review's thoroughly one-eyed Dhaka datelined April 4 cover story authored by Bertil Lintner and repulsively titled "Beware of Bangladesh", has been a bombshell of incredibly sinister proportions. The highly pernicious gist of the contents as published in the local media ran like this: rising fundamentalism and religious intolerance are threatening secularism and moderate Islam in Bangladesh; militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist groups have been active; these bear implications for the region and beyond; and finally the meddlesome unusual observation -- 'it's not too late for a counter-revolution.' The inside title reading "Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror" fitted into the general format of spreading calumny against a whole country.

It's the product of a prejudiced mind given to seeing things through a jaundiced eye and refusing to take into account mainstream facts and figures.

The cover story, a professional disaster as it is from the point of view of objective journalism is tainted by selective collection of facts to the exclusion of other relevant ones. Secondly, even those selected facts have been presented out of context to weave the story along preconceived lines. Moreover, the whole range of facts the so-called report ignores is a study in maligned imaging of Bangladesh.

The highly exclusionary nature of the report is revealed by the following: our democratic march forward through regular and credible elections, considerable print media freedom, privatised TV channels, judicial activism, etc. has been ignored. Also the rise in literacy rate and the success achieved in women's empowerment and reduction of gender gaps have been overlooked. The excellent voter turn-out among women, their taking to planned parenthood, the micro-credit self-employment spree, their 33 per cent representation in the local bodies and their inclusion even in the Army go to depict a picture of a reasonably healthy and liberal society. As for the human rights records these are relatively better than those of many other countries.

In all, the social indicators showing where Bangladesh has made progress have been conveniently slurred over.

The article does not distinguish between terrorism and one's natural pride in one's religion and heritage. A Muslim Bangladeshi as much proud of his or her religion as a Hindu or Christian compatriot is about his or her religion. To equate the natural loyalty to Muslim heritage with Islamic fundamentalism and militancy is fanaticism in the reverse, something that at least a journalist should not be discredited with.

In truth, there has been an Islamic resurgence, a certain falling back on the inner strength of Islam rediscovered in the light of the definitely absolute and fundamental injustice being done to the Palestinians. Israel's "demolish and annihilate" campaign against Palestine living off the US indulgence has raked up a sense of wound in the Islamic world. It is out of this wounded Islamic sensibilities that a tendency has naturally grown to assert Muslim identity. This is a global trend and Bangladesh is just part of it. This is being neither indulgent of any fundamentalist agenda nor promotional to it by any stretch of imagination.

We can only concede, however, that there is a huge number of madrassahs, many of which can be problematic with their obscurantist proclivities if a timely vigil is not mounted on them. A long-felt need has been to assimilate science and technology into their curricula. But this aspect has not received the attention it deserved.

This hardly detract from the principal point that we must make very forcefully against the Bertil Lintner report in the Far Eastern Economic Review. Mr. Lintner on a flying visit to Bangladesh and fed on one-sided stories filed a report that only attested to his prejudiced mind. But the prejudice has not been his alone, it also reflected on the professional integrity of his peers in the FEER. Never before a whole country was maligned on the cover page of an international magazine as Bangladesh has been under the mind-boggling little -- *Beware of Bangladesh*. This is by far the most grotesque specimen of freedom of expression or opinion, which we, along with the rest of the world have had the misfortune of sampling.

We will defend media's right to free expression but insist that freedom must be accompanied by responsibility, and the Lintner piece was highly irresponsible. We also do not agree with the government's decision to ban that particular issue of the Review. Let the free press of Bangladesh defend Bangladesh and not a censoring edict of the government. We condemn the Review report as a slur on responsible journalism.

## Rhetorics in Monterrey?



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THE international community led by the rich countries seems to play with names, sometimes for practical reasons, at others euphemistically. The International Conference on Financing Development just concluded in Monterrey, Mexico was actually a summit, organised by the UN for tackling global poverty. Poverty may not be a dirty word but sometimes causes embarrassment to those, who are above its reach. It is also redolent with protest and radical politics, which may be disconcerting. Adumbrated under a sanitised rubric like 'development' the word becomes convenient and safe. The portmanteau nomenclature even helps turn the table and can make the poor feel somewhat responsible, if not guilty, for what they lack.

Two years ago at the UN's millennium summit in New York world leaders publicly committed to the long-standing international goals of reducing global poverty by half by 2015. This was to be achieved along with the goals of getting every child in the developing world into primary school and reducing infant and maternal mortality within the same time frame. Meeting these goals would need US\$40 to US\$65 billion extra in aid annually. This amount is roughly double the current spending in aid across a broad spectrum including military. Given the past record and the current performance both the objectives and the

targeted amount in aid were ambitious. It was a triumph of hope over experience. But the beginning of a new millennium coming in the wake of the end of cold war provided the backdrop and the justification. The UN would have been criticised for thinking small and failing to rise to the occasion with a grand vision for the future.

About twenty years ago the UN appointed a high powered independent commission to estimate the requirement of development

of the US. Besides aid, the European Union also gives more preferential treatment in trade to developing countries, particularly the LDCs, compared to the US.

Haunted and embarrassed by their meagre contributions in aid the big donors attended the summit in Monterrey with new pledges for the future. Just days before the summit America announced a US\$5 billion package of help for the poorest countries, spread over the next three years. Not to be left

dismissed the hopes that the UN summit would mobilise significantly more resources for the world's poor. "Monterrey would not be a pledging session," a state department spokesperson had declared matter of factly a week before the conference. The EU with its willingness and readiness to increase aid for the poor countries was an important factor for the turnaround in American policy. The war against terrorism spearheaded by America may also have

person argued that quality was more important than quantity in the "aid game". The under secretary of state for economic affairs commented: "I don't thank anyone knows whether the correct amount or the needed amount of development assistance is any particular number." Either he was not aware of the Pearson Commission Report or did not set any store by the recommendations regarding aid as a percentage of the rich countries' national income.

democracy and good governance through socio-economic development? If aid has not been effective in promoting these objectives it may be because of the way aid is dispensed and utilised rather than with aid itself. Denying failed states aid is tantamount to throwing the baby with the bath water. Failed states need more, not less, aid and international attention. Like individuals, no country is an island. Both on moral ground and practical considerations they need to be helped to come out of the morass. The 'failed states' should be seen both as cause for discomfort and worry. They can be left by the wayside at others' peril.

The world after September 11 is at the crossroads. As the British Chancellor of Exchequer observed on the eve of the Monterrey summit, winning the war on poverty and despair which breed terrorism is as important as the military campaign. Poverty is also the reason why multitudes are trying to enter the rich countries illegally every year defying all barriers. Whether for security or for social stability a New World Order with reasonable distribution of wealth is imperative both for the poor and rich countries. Globalisation has brought countries too close together to breed indifference and neglect by the privileged towards the less fortunate. If not for philanthropy, in their enlightened self-interest the rich countries should translate their rhetorics for poverty alleviation into reality. Let not the summit in Monterrey be trashed as just another talk-fest by the critics. International relations have become too delicate and volatile to allow sceptics' opinion about the outcome of the Monterrey summit to prevail.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

### IN MY VIEW

**Whether for security or for social stability a New World Order with reasonable distribution of wealth is imperative both for the poor and rich countries... If not for philanthropy, in their enlightened self-interest the rich countries should translate their rhetorics for poverty alleviation into reality... International relations have become too delicate and volatile to allow sceptics' opinion about the outcome of the Monterrey summit to prevail.**

aid by the developing countries and the contributions that would be called for from the rich countries. The Pearson Commission recommended a target of 0.7 per cent of the national income of the rich countries to be contributed in aid annually to help the developing countries. Except the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the three Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden and Denmark), no other rich country has reached this target during the last twenty years. The US spends just 0.1 per cent of national income on aid in an average year. It has the worst record of spending its aid budget on itself. Seventy per cent of its aid is spent on US goods and services. Worse still, more than half of American aid is spent in middle-income countries in the Middle East like Egypt and Israel. In these two countries most of the aid money goes for military spending. The EU average is three times that of the US but is still lower than the UN target of 0.7 per cent of the GNP. In terms of utilisation of aid the EU's record, however, is better than that

behind, the EU foreign ministers pledged an increase in European aid of US\$7 billion every year culminating by 2006. For the American administration the pledge of increased aid marked a major shift from publicly expressed scepticism about the usefulness of aid. Both under the Republican and Democratic administrations during the last decade there was a steady decline in aid and growing dislike for the same. It may not be a coincidence that aid fatigue in America came along with the fall of communism. If the amount pledged at the Monterrey summit materialises, it will be the first increase in US spending on aid after a decade of stagnation and decline.

The spectacle of the USA and Europe committing rival aid bids inevitably prompted an unaccustomed rush of optimism among some development aid campaigners. After a decade of declining western aid budgets most of them had low expectations of the Monterrey summit. In the run up to the conference Washington had

something to do with the subsequent change of the policy declaration. Be that as it may, the leading nations including America have a long way to go if they are to provide enough aid to meet internationally agreed targets for reducing poverty. As against the annual requirement of US\$40 to US\$65 billion, the amount pledged will merely provide an extra US\$12 billion a year to aid spending by 2006, a far cry from the Pearson Commission target fixed more than twenty years ago. The cost of western miserliness can be measured in children's lives, according to Oxfam. The UN predicts that by 2015 about 10 million children a year will be dying before their fifth birthday compared with a target of 4.2 million. This is just one measure of the outcome of rich countries' failure to contribute their mite. Other indicators of the result of wallowing in poverty are not less dramatic and harrowing. Washington was apparently desperate to deflect attention in Monterrey from the size of its aid budget. Its spokes-

Even then, Washington's commitment to the cause of effective aid with the pledge for increased aid was hard to swallow for aid campaigners. Their guarded optimism was considerably deflated by the terms of aid as enunciated by America at the summit. More than the dismal record of the past, the US promise to restrict the new money pledged to countries which implement its preferred economic reforms alarmed campaigners and made them look askance at the US pledge. "Do you judge countries on the basis of their success in reducing poverty or on what the US thinks is good for the world's poor?" asked Oxfam. The speech by the American president declaring that the rich countries will not subsidise for "failed states" added a new dimension to the problem and also great uncertainty. If 'failed states' mean those where there have been failures of democracy and good governance according to western perception, are the poor of those countries to be penalised for that? More importantly, is not aid meant to promote

## The sound of silence



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE mother has made this prediction for the future of her son, that one day the telephone was going to grow inside his ears. This young man has been wasting his life in idle talks, she proclaimed.

The mother wondered why on earth should the son talk so much on the phone, emptying his precious mind into that horn-like thing! But the son kept on talking, his ears glued to the phone like a leech to the flesh of its victim. He talked all night, then in the morning and afternoon, his days flowing from one to another as though in a seamless conversation. Often he would forget to eat his lunch or dinner, drink only water to soak his throat, and struggle throughout his wakeful times to catch up with sleepless nights.

Much to their horror, the servants watched him laughing on the phone, occasionally standing up to dance or skip, at times arguing and screaming, but mostly lying inert on his back facing the ceiling like someone who was no longer of this world. They would bring these dreadful stories to the mother, who worried if her son was losing his mind.

The son knew nothing of it, his mind always astray with anticipation for the next round of conversation on the phone. It would start with butterflies flapping their wings in his stomach, a sense of titillation spreading in his body like the mist of vapour. Then he would feel the compulsive pull of addiction to call again and again, and talk on the phone as if its urge possessed his soul in the manner of an evil spirit. One day the mother asked if he

one conversation led to another. He was taking his phone to the toilet, bringing it to the dining table, and walking around with it on the balcony and rooftop. The man was now inseparable from his phone, the bags under his eyes clearly indicating that the relationship between them had begun to take its toll.

Servants picked up bits and pieces of conversations whenever he spoke loud in his unguarded

he carried the cordless with him wherever he went, as if one missed call could have ruined it all. He avoided talking to others, answering their questions with eyes and nays and ambled around like a man driven by his thoughts.

The mother noticed that lately a storm had gathered in her son's face, his eyes saddened by its turmoil that was searing his soul. She wished she could talk to him

hollow voice of deep sorrow ringing in the bated air of the room.

The mother consulted friends and relatives, and they all agreed that this young man had to be shaken out of his telephonic stupor. Man has a funny destiny, one of them observed, because in a woman he is created, and in a woman he is destroyed. Other said it was just an expression of youth, and perhaps he was but an extreme example of what had

the room like a swift beast lurking in a corner. Those who were standing in the room looked flustered as if each of them found that others were mischievous. But the visitors now closely scrutinised the subject who looked wrecked by the havoc of his words.

He refused to talk to them when they started asking him questions. But then he finally opened his mouth, telling that he was deeply hurt inside him. They wanted to know if he was hurt by anyone who was talking to him on the phone, but he didn't respond to it. His lips quivered, and the muscles of his face twitched as if the exterior was reeling from the blows, which were bruising the interior.

The visitors patted him on the back, said words of assurances, and left the room in the same order as they came. Outside the anxious mother was waiting to know what was it that the telephone had done to her son. One by one they told her that the son was going to be all right.

The mother ordered the servants to take away the phone from her son's room. The son, who was crouching on the corner of his bed, stood up and vehemently opposed. There was a silence in the sound of the phone, he said, which convinced him that mother's love was the best on earth, free and pure.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

### CROSS TALK

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was talking to a girl and he pretended that it was the silliest thing anyone could ever ask. The disconsolate mother walked away fuming, her mind burdened with the anguish of an unsolved mystery. She told the servants to keep an eye on her son, who was the bane of her life ever since she had conceived him. It was a difficult pregnancy, she explained, which was interrupted by bouts of illness, and this ungrateful son would start kicking her inside the womb in its advanced days. Childbearing was a sorry job unless children grew up to become good men and women, she concluded.

The son, meanwhile, had no mind for anything else; his life caught in the whirlwind of words as

moments, and they repeated those amongst themselves as if the house had turned into a theatre complex. They laughed and jeered at the condition of their master, because the man, they thought, was consumed by the passions of his own distress. He was in love, some of them said. Other said he had gone mad without any hope to recover. But they all agreed with the mother that, all said and done, her son was going to need some attention.

It aggravated over the next few days. He refused to open the doors of his room, and started to skip meals altogether. He would ask for tea only many times a day and leave his room to go for a stroll on the rooftop in the evening. But

and find out what was bothering him. Children are bizarre, she thought, who take sustenance from your blood and flesh yet become such strangers when they grow up. This son never gave her the peace of mind, she told the servants. Then she wept in seclusion, hiding from the world the greatest mystery of motherhood.

Of late, the servants discovered cigarette butts scattered on the floor of his room as he gradually stopped shaving his face and started to look untidy and unkempt. His room would be filled with stench of a life lived in quiet desperation. Smells of cigarettes, sweat, stuffiness and bitter soul, all of these mixed together into an odour of chaos and confusion, a

happened to most of them in the youth.

They all decided that it was time to sit down with the young man before he sank further into the abyss of void, which he was building around himself. So they knocked on his door one evening as a team, filing in order of age as if wisdom would be the first line of attack in a situation like that. When the door opened after a long silence, standing in front of them was the ghost of a man whose face looked older than his body. The small crowd slithered into the room like a scurried reptile, and then dispersed in the smoke-filled darkness in quick reflexes.

One of them turned on the switch, and white light leapt into

### OPINION

## Cocoon of terrorism?

IMTIYAZ HUSAIN

Refer to your report (April 1) on the cover story of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. I had believed the *Review* to be a fair and honest journal published by Dow Jones. In particular the author Bertil Lintner is known for his in-depth and honest coverage of insurgencies in the golden triangle area. Unfortunately this news will become the deathblow to our economy particularly the much-needed prospects of capital infusion into our secondary market. Our stock market, already suffering from the rigours of over supply of equity, not unlike the housing market, may now need another decade to assimilate the excess capital floated during 1993-1995 unless there is help of international funds. If we do not have interna-

tional capital then it will be difficult to bring harmony back to the capital market in the medium term. Let me explain.

In order to understand the ethos of the international institutional investors one should first try to find what attracted them to this market. It would be over simplification to say it was their greed. But the fact is that international investors saw the transition of the country in 1991 from years of military dictatorship to democracy as a vehicle of good governance and perceived it hold a great potential for tremendous economic growth.

There was confidence in the quality of governance in Bangladesh. *Far Eastern Economic Review* has now 'established' that we are a nation of terrorists and thus destroyed any scope to attract foreign investment. Who would like

to invest in a country which is not safe? The macroeconomic data of the early 1992-3 showed marked improvements in a dismal economy inherited by the BNP government. There was a potential for economic growth. Bangladesh was able to install a successful VAT system.

Tax/GDP ratio was improving, foreign exchange reserve was high, inflation was at its lowest. Asian Development Bank's intervention brought in some 'premature' changes in the capital market deregulation in 1991-2. But all these facts attracted foreign portfolio investors for the first time because there was confidence in the economy of Bangladesh.

During the period 1993-95 many issuers placed multiples of right shares or reduced the promoter's holdings. Companies used the

new funds from right issues to expand and diversify their production, some did take up ventures, others did not keep their promise. The desire for equity shares induced many prominent business groups to make public offerings and carry out international road shows for green-field projects, or diversification and expansion of existing non-listed companies. Many of green-field issues were sold at substantial premium not because of economic justification but because the foreign investors were willing to pay a premium and the local mom-pop investor more than willing to follow the pied piper foreign investor.

Late 1994 started perceiving stagnation in the confidence of foreign institutional interest in the Bangladesh market, which practically petered out by end 1995, with

the imposition of a lock-in on all placements soon after many promises that had been made by the government in an International Investors Forum. The endearment of foreign investors remained very short when both good governance and potential of growth were overshadowed by 'hartals' on the streets during 1994-96. Confidence evaporated and did not change even after the election of Awami League in June 1996. In 1996 lock-in on placements was withdrawn under the assumption that this would restore confidence of the foreign investors. But unfortunately the confidence in this market had evaporated much earlier mainly because whatever had attracted foreign institutions did not exist any more. But people's overconfidence in the new government was enough to lead to

the creation of a great bubble mania in the stock market. Even the government of the day remained confused and started believing in their own magic leading to further effervescence in an already bubbly kerb market. To the foreign investors this was a boon and an opportunity to divest the block investment as quickly as possible, which they did.

The boom and bust that took place in Bangladesh market in 1996 started because the harmony and the long accepted principles of marketing and distribution of securities was disturbed in the primary market. Also there were too much capital -- estimated around \$146 million on issue than what the domestic market could assimilate in ten years. There was a crash in 1996 only because there was an unmitigated rise in the

supply and price of shares both real and fake and manipulation on the streets. The fact to note is the prices rose because there were large pockets or blocks of shares, which could be sold without dampening the market unlike mom-pop trading volumes. This flow from block to retail trading sapped the liquidity out of the institutional market and in turn increased the liquidity in the retail market which did not have either the strength or sufficient number of players. Many of these blocks were sold outside the market and in turn had great distributive velocity to be traded many times over in a single day on the street. In the hindsight, the management of the primary market has not been consistent.

Market have been crashing for over three hundred years. Boom, doom and gloom are natural cycles

and eventually stock markets are revived by incentives and policy and not by coercion. But our economy and stock market is taking a bit longer than any other known stock market. Whatever chances that we had to correct the situation now had been strapped and crippled by *Far Eastern Economic Review's* portrayal of our government, our economy, our bureaucracy and our people. Mr. Safiur Rahman may titillate the market once in a while with shortsighted fiscal measures but the intrinsic damage to our psyche by this journal may take decades to heal. Albeit we may not be able to attract investment to our capital market and industrial growth but indeed we may attract drug lords from South America, the Mafia kings from Italy, the Yakuba's from Japan to investment in death and mayhem.