

A cocoon of lies, not terror

HARRIS CHOWDHURY

THE response was swift and sharp. Backed by an overwhelming support from across political, intellectual and social spectrum, Bangladesh has fired an exocet to a report printed in the Far Eastern Economic Review on April 4 that was widely seen as a despicable attempt to harm this country in whatever way possible.

The sign was, indeed, very welcome. A nation usually divided by narrow political squabbles has come together to tell the Hong Kong-based weekly in emphatic terms that the growth of so-called Islamic fundamentalism, attack on moderate Muslims and minorities and the dwindling Hindu population are just a cock and bull story. It has also been told that its campaign for a "counter-revolution" in Bangladesh won't work.

The piece by Bertil Lintner, a Swedish national married to a Burmese girl, was in fact a Cocoon of Lies, not of Terror as he had tried to asseverate. It deserved to be thrown into a shredder bin by any top line newspaper or magazine anywhere in the world. But for a terrible editorial misjudgment in this case, the Review would ordinarily have done the same. From top to bottom, it was a wild charade of falsehood, a figment of imagination, and a specimen of infantile journalism. It sought to confirm the fear that its author had either some political script to follow, or had some bizarre personal score to settle with the people of this country. From top to bottom, it was the work of a pen poisoned by conjectures, inferences and unconfirmed sources.

Lintner visited Bangladesh for just few days in the last week of March in a somewhat surreptitious manner. He came here from Kolkata on a tourist visa -- not on a journalist visa because his passport, (No 12639686) issued from the Swedish Embassy at Bangkok, suppressed his real identity. It showed his profession as "Educational-textbook", meaning he specialises on writing textbooks. He stayed in the Dhaka Club, met some friends, and perhaps a couple of lower-ranking diplomats and had been to Cox's Bazar for a day. Evidences do suggest that his piece was preconceived in that he had written it much before he had set foot on this soil. His visit, therefore, simply was an alibi, an attempt to formalise his sinister mindset.

Leaders of men and former professionals denounced the Lintner reportage in apposite terms. Even Sheikh Hasina, the fiery former Prime Minister wellknown for her pathological hatred towards the

ruling party, said her party "strongly condemns any motivated effort to tarnish the country's image abroad". A former Bangladeshi diplomat, who seldom sees eye to eye with the way the ruling party is running the country, said the piece must be the outcome of a man who "has been motivated to serve the interest of those quarters who, for some reason or the other, do not wish Bangladesh well".

Majority of the country's top newspapers has variously pulled up Lintner for his wayward dissertation. Some described it as a report "made to order." Others said it was a "prejudiced and one-sided cover story". Another said it was a "smear campaign designed to incite international terrorism". And another reputed Weekly said: "Lintner's piece is laden with untruths, political rhetoric and hearsay."

Bangladesh has also officially described Lintner's report as "tabloid journalism". It has strongly reacted to his macabre attempt to prove that this country is going Islamic fundamentalism the whole hog. "Rising fundamentalism and religious intolerance are threatening secularism and moderate Islam," he writes. "The implications for the region and beyond are grave, but it is not too late for a counter-revolution."

A protest note to the Far Eastern Economic Review sent by Bangladesh's Consul-General at Hong Kong said, "In a country that is deeply committed to democratic practices and tolerance, religious disharmony is farthest from the people's mind. On the contrary, Bangladesh has been universally described as a moderate, functioning Muslim democracy. These remarks have been attributed to the highest political leadership in the United States, Europe and the rest of the world. British Prime Minister Tony Blair in a recent signed message to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia spoke of his highest regard for the people of Bangladesh and has spoken highly of democratic practices prevailing in the country."

The most striking gap between Lintner's fairy tale and the reality obtaining on the ground is not lost on any discerning eyes. The report is completely bereft of any straight sources. Direct attribution of sources is the basic pre-requisite of international journalism. A journalist's manual of the Guardian of London says as follows: "A report without the attribution of source is no report. It is not to be trusted. Unsourced report must be seen as a clear case of deception. This is to be judged as an attempt to sell the reporter's own ideas. Stay out of it like plague."

Another example of cunning and dishonest journalism is reflected on the picture the Review used on the cover. It was an image printed long ago by a Bangladeshi daily of a man by the name of Amir Ali Howlader. He was in front of a march protesting the carnage in the Indian state of Gujarat in which hundreds of Muslims were massacred and their property torched. Now, the Weekly has projected Amir Ali as a representative of the so-called "funda-

mentalist" leading an angry march to annihilate the moderate Muslims and Hindus. What a blatant distortion of facts!

Like the Bangladesh government, Amir Ali Howlader is also thinking of suing the Review for its grave professional misdemeanour. He says he belongs to a family of freedom fighters. His father and two other members of his family were killed by the Pakistani army in 1971, a fact acknowledged by the then president of the new country, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

"What a pity that a foreign newspaper is now trying to paint me as a Taliban and a fundamentalist," he said in an interview with the daily Manab Jamin on April 7.

Lintner has also discovered an exodus of Hindu population to pursue his manufactured views. "The government seems powerless and unwilling to stem the tide, which includes growing attacks on moderate Muslims and dwindling Hindu population," he wrote. He did not say how he could establish that the Hindu population was dwindling.

The fact is quite the opposite. Compare the last Census figures; take a close look at the voter's list of the general election that took place last October. All those will lead any one to the inexorable truth that the Hindu population in Bangladesh has increased exactly commensurate with the increase of Muslim population. About 300,000 more Hindus cast their ballot in the last election than those who did in the previous ones. How then is the Hindu population dwindling?

Lintner has also lamented that some Western diplomats he met during his alibi visit to Dhaka did not go along with his views about the

existence of Islamic extremists in Bangladesh. "But the United States and its allies seem to have paid scant attention to the deeper long-term danger as they expand the war on terrorism from Central Asia to Southeast Asia," said Lintner.

"There are some extremists here, but the belong to the fringe groups and are not part of the mainstream," says a Western envoy in Dhaka, trying to downplay the threat," he wrote Lintner did not

go berserk and frown upon Bangladesh if he could successfully raise the bogey of the existence of so-called Islamic extremists in this country. Little did he realise that the Americans and their allies are equipped with solid intelligence about a given country. A bogeyman like Lintner is just of no use to them.

Lintner also seemed to challenge the West's intelligence capabilities vis-a-vis Bangladesh. "Some observers say their (West's) intelligence channels are not very good", he wrote. Now, are those obscure observers, or Lintner, competent to size up the intelligence ability of a given agency? For them to a question the intelligence channels is like an unknown soccer goalkeeper sizing up the run-getting ability of a prolific international cricketer.

The indirect attribution to the Indian police officers and analysts had found quite a bit of space in Lintner's sordid essay on Bangladesh. He sought to prove that some members of Harkat-ul-Jihad-Islami, an organisation said to be based in Bangladesh, was involved in January 22 attack on American Cultural Centre in Kolkata. He also quoted the Indian sources, again without naming anybody, as saying that Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence agency, secured a foothold in

West Bengal by infiltrating through Bangladesh.

Whether Lintner really talked to the Indian police officers or not will never be known. But, as stated earlier, unattributed sources do not generally stand up to scrutiny in as much as they are deemed to be the product of the author's own thoughts. What is intriguing here is that he never cared to ask any Bangladeshi officials or leaders their views on such allegations.

was another piece of hearsay devoid of even an ounce of evidence.

Lintner made no bones of his sympathy with Taslima Nasrin, the feminist writer living in Sweden, the author's own country, since 1993. "Ironically, the rest of the world first became acquainted with the growing religious intolerance and creeping fundamentalism in Bangladesh in 1993, when Muslim author Taslima Nasrin fled the country after receiving death threats for being critical about aspects of Islam in her writings," he wrote and added, "She returned to see her dying mother in 1998, but was soon forced to flee once more. Bangladeshi human rights groups say the Harkat was behind the threats against her."

Taslima Nasrin left the country of her own volition, not out of a threat. She thought she had a better prospect in Sweden than in Bangladesh. She cashed in on the so-called threat to get a permanent residence permit in the country of her choice. He returned to Bangladesh again on her own and went back as she wished. There was no threat to her life, neither will there be one even if she chooses to return to her motherland. Her stay in Sweden as a Bangladeshi diaspora is a common cause both for her and those who seek to make a political capital out of it.

Another Lintner allegation, again unsubstantiated, is far more serious. He has discovered a link between the Bangladesh military with what he describes as "Islamic militants." He says "a powerful military with its to the militants are combining to transform the nation" into radical fundamentalists.

"While the threat is growing, the influence of fundamentalism is nothing new. The door was opened

The move perhaps was to hit the Achilles' tendon of the US and its allies at a time when they are engaged in the hot pursuit of terrorists all over the world following the September 11 tragedy... Perhaps Lintner thought that the US and allies would go berserk and frown upon Bangladesh if he could successfully raise the bogey of the existence of so-called Islamic extremists in this country. Little did he realise that the Americans and their allies are equipped with solid intelligence about a given country. A bogeyman like Lintner is just of no use to them.

name the so-called Western diplomat; this is another trick to push his own views down the reader's throat. And yet he was caught in his own trap. Why must a Western diplomat downplay the threat if there is a threat at all? He is neither a Bangladeshi nor a supporter of the so-called fundamentalists. What is, therefore, holding him back? On the contrary, by withholding the answers, Lintner has put his own statement to questions.

The move perhaps was to hit the Achilles' tendon of the US and its allies at a time when they are engaged in the hot pursuit of terrorists all over the world following the September 11 tragedy. Perhaps it was a blueprint worked out by the elements at whose behest Lintner was working. Perhaps Lintner thought that the US and allies would

Such views were essential for any professional-journalism for the sake of, what is called in international parlance, "balancing off the story". The piece was, therefore, one sided in all respect.

Had he cared to talk to any Bangladeshi officials, he would have been told that the Indian police and the Indian government have repeatedly clarified that no Bangladeshis were involved in January 22 attack in Kolkata. He would have been told that the name of Harkat is being brought into the picture simply because its members keep beards and wear caps, a sort of outfit that instantly, in Lintner's eyes, makes them Taliban or the supporters of bin Laden. He would have been told that the presence of the so-called Pakistani Interservices Intelligence agency

Of human rights and natural resources

BILLY I AHMED

HUMAN Rights violation is not something unheard of; many cases of violations such as arbitrary arrest, obstruction to free expression, slavery and death in conflicts have now become a part and parcel of our day to day life and it seems that we are becoming accustomed to them.

Violations of Human Rights are also connected with natural resource extractions, by national and transnational organizations that extract petroleum, gas, minerals, wood and other resources. Some examples:

1. On November 10, 1995, after 17 months in custody, and a trial that was universally condemned as being a sham, Keny Sara-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists were hanged in Port

Harcourt, Nigeria. Their only crime was their success in exposing an international oil company's role in destroying their land, their society, and their people.

2. On October 13, 1996, a second lawsuit was filed by 15 victims of Human Rights abuses in a U.S federal court against yet another international oil and gas company. The lawsuit was brought by Jennie Green, staff attorney with Center for Constitutional Rights, Earth Rights International, Had Sell and Stormer, and Paul Haffaman, on behalf of 15 anonymous victims of rape, forced labour, forced relocation, assaults and the death of family members. All the victims were Karen, an indigenous ethnic minority group affected by the pipeline project, who live near the Thai border. Lawyers described how a SORC officer kicked one of the plaintiffs -- a woman, who was nursing her baby -- into fire. The baby died as a result of burns after SORC soldiers prevented the mother from medical assistance.

Violation of environment also abounds. Amount that global mean temperature has already risen by is 0.3-0.6C; percentage contribution of deforestation to climate change is 17; number of countries with frontier forests threatened by oil gas exploration is 22; number of countries with coral reefs threatened by oil and gas exploration is 38; number of countries with mangroves threatened by oil and gas exploration is 46; number of countries where indigenous people are threatened by oil and gas exploration on their territory is at least eight.

There are quite a few organizations which operate on a global level as well as on regional level and address the Human Rights problem. In the UN system, the human rights commission and its sub-commission for protection against discrimination and the protection of minorities have the authorities for securing the rights of populations affected or threatened by petroleum

activities and examine serious and systematic human rights violations in UN member countries.

Unfortunately these organizations have their limitations, as they are not empowered to entertain any individual complaints. However, there are working groups and special functionaries who attend to individual complaints in special circumstances.

In general, in cases of human rights violations, complaints can be presented by: an individual; a group of persons; a person representing another individual or group; a human rights or other organization representing an individual or group.

An international campaign began recently to give effective power to the International Human Rights Court (The Hague). The Court was established in Rome on July 17, 1998 as a permanent mechanism with jurisdictions and penal codes. The Court will however be able to exercise its jurisdiction in any signatory state, and through a process of special accord, in the territory of any other state also.

At present, 90 countries have signed the Statute, to legally begin its mandate under United Nations. Besides a coalition of 600 non-government organizations has been formed to promote the Human Rights Court.

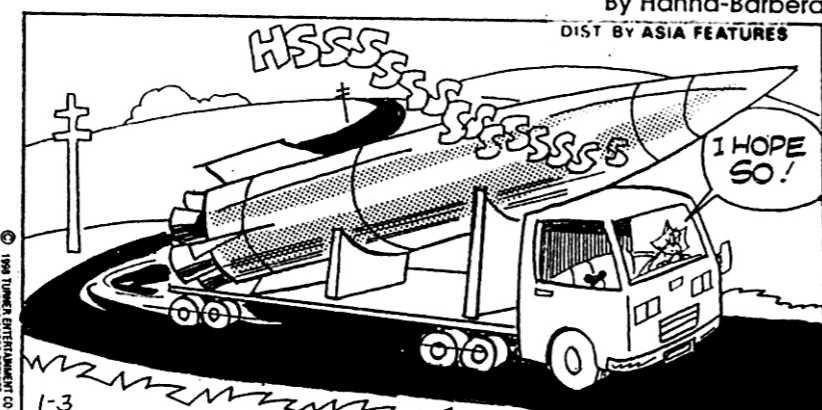
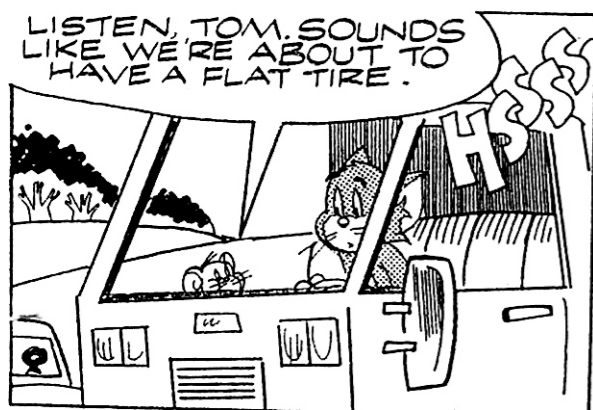
The court makes it possible to prosecute the authors of serious rights violations. More than 100 states, through their approval of the statute of the International Human Rights Court affirmed that the impunity of humans rights violators can be stopped.

But it is sad to note that the kind of violations referred to above just continue.

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