

Home Ministry should do a better job of press briefings

People have a right to know more about the crackdown

WHAT we have seen so far by way of home ministry press briefings about the countrywide Army-led crackdown on criminals is nothing short of perfunctory work. On Sunday's session with pressmen, the first one since the operation began, the home secretary was duly present. But when a volley of questions were tossed up to him by newsmen on the back of a brief written statement read out to them, he unceremoniously brought the session to an end. Three days later, on Wednesday, the second press briefing was even a bigger disappointment.

Between the two we have had a picture of evasive, at best half-hearted, press briefing that simply won't do in the future.

Anyway, for the second session with newsmen, the home secretary deemed it fit to be represented by a joint secretary and coordinator, BDR cell of the home ministry. A written press statement was again read out. And, again as journalists rose to put their questions to the government spokesman (not the designated one by any prior announcement, though) the official present quipped that it was 'a press briefing and he would not reply to any question.' That is, to the home ministry's understanding, a press briefing is not a question-answer session.

To shove that idea, they have only to watch the CNN and BBC more closely. They must have seen that a spokesman after reading out a prepared statement to pressmen would invariably take questions from the floor as a matter of routine practice.

What is the point in inviting newsmen to a briefing session and then dishing out a written statement to them? Isn't it the same thing as issuing a press release with meaningless fanfare? The spokesman -- and it better be a designated one -- must come fully authorised and equipped to answer all legitimate questions arising out of a massive and extraordinary campaign launched against criminals since the last weekend.

Press briefing ought to be an integral part of the type of countrywide law and order operation the government has set in motion. It is the sternest possible measure that a democratic government has taken, so that controversies would be a natural part of it. Hundreds of questions may arise and need to be answered to clear the air of any misgivings about the operation.

The other way of saying this would be people are interested to see an unqualified and genuine success of the operation against criminals, extortionists and mafias.

In that context open, free and authentic press briefings become a rallying point for clearing the air of any unhealthy controversy, speculation and rumor mongering that could revolve around an otherwise public-spirited anti-crime drive.

If the home ministry press briefings are to serve the ends of public information dissemination on such a sensitive campaign then these must be prepared to answer the following queries as and when they arise: first, how many arrests have been made and under what sections of law; second, how many of them have been placed on police remand; third, how many of them are listed criminals; fourth, how many arrested on suspicion were released; fifth, how many of them are 'most wanted criminals'; sixth, how many weapons were seized; and last but not least, how many were sent to court.

The allegations about custodial deaths do give rise to a serious issue of administrative discipline, ethics, law and human rights. There have been four-five such deaths in close succession. In case of at least three of them they landed on the hospital with 'chest pain'. The dead bodies were handed late to their relatives. Were the autopsies done in all cases? It is difficult to brush aside such questions given the suddenness of their death. It's a matter of internal discipline which calls for an administrative inquiry at the army level. This will help establish accountability and uphold the principle of transparency pertaining to what has happened while at the same time seal the routes for any future recurrence. We rely on the army's wisdom not to let anything happen, even unwittingly, that might go to diminish their image as the most disciplined force in the country.

Another incident that has cut into the credibility of the operation is the airport arrest of Saber Hossain Chowdhury purportedly on 'subversive grounds'. But the manner in which it was done smacked of playing the ruling party's card in public perception. It is an anti-criminal battle the army has launched and that's what it must concentrate on to succeed in their campaign.

Japanese aesthetics



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THE celebration is going on. For over two months the completion of thirty years of diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Japan has been observed by events that range from intellectual to cultural. For a change, festivities have taken over formal activities that usually enjoy pride of place on such occasions. All in all, it has been a rich fare offering a representative sample of Japanese culture. In Dhaka and elsewhere, Bangladeshi cognoscenti and laypersons alike, have been treated to a sumptuous programme that included Ikebana, Bonsai, dolls, shamisen music, traditional drum play and films by famous directors. In between, Japanese dishes have been served pleasing both eyes and palates. Food in Japan is as much a cultural expression as it is a gastronomic pleasure for the taste buds of the connoisseurs. It is not very well known outside Japan that each of these activities has been integrated into the daily life of the Japanese so unobtrusively that culture and life have become inseparable even for the ordinary people. To the Japanese culture is not something to be set aside from the daily grind of life to be enjoyed only in leisure. It is both a spectacle and an intimate personnel experience in the course of a normal day. In very few countries has culture

become a part of the way of life so spontaneously. Where else would one find a salesgirl packing a humble purchase in wrapping paper with such care and artistry? In which other country one would expect the delicate arrangement of flower greeting busy visitors in a public toilet? Where do the doors of shops, whether along a busy thoroughfare or a languid lane, flaunt a decorated split noren that serves both as a curtain and a work of art? So far, only in Japan.

aesthetics in each. Being an integral part of life the various activities comprising Japanese culture, developed skills for the practitioners to enable them to reproduce these generation after generation. To maintain the essential purity in form and content these also developed a body of principles. Over time each branch came to have its own aesthetic or philosophy of beauty based on these principles. More than the practical skills required for reproduction it were

each, nature with its change of seasons and cycle of birth, death and rebirth predominate. It is, therefore, small wonder that aesthetic principles in each cultural form have many elements in common.

It is obvious from above that in addition to individual characteristics in different cultural activities, there are certain broad principles suffusing Japanese culture in general. It is this multi-layered realm of aesthetics that make

ture by being less specific in conveying an idea. Ambiguity is a well known feature of Japanese language and is very often used by writers to suggest an atmosphere and an emotional state. A sense of mystery is thereby intensified. Many haiku poems illustrate the use of this principle. Much of what is considered as suggestive in Japanese aesthetics, particularly in writing, stems from Zen Buddhism. This is in departure from simplicity pre-

phy, too, Japanese taste prefer the lopsided.

Simplicity, a product of Zen philosophy, is another general principle of Japanese aesthetics. The best example of simplicity as an aesthetic principle is seen in traditional tea ceremony where the ideal sought is 'sabi' which can be translated into rust or deprivation. Sabi in tea ceremony is the deliberate avoidance of easily accessible luxury. Japanese food in general also lacks the extravagance and intensity of taste. The barely perceptible differences in flavour between different varieties of an item are prized highly by the Japanese. In the No theatre, too, the absence of extravagance in setting and costume help focus attention on the acting.

The most distinctively Japanese aesthetic ideal is perhaps perishability. While in the west the attempt is to achieve immortality, the Japanese have usually built for impermanence. No nation has appreciated the frailty of human existence and celebrated it as the Japanese have. Life's mortality and the cycle of birth, death and rebirth in nature have given rise to a sadness that pervades their aesthetic sensibility. They rejoice at the beauty of cherry blossoms because of their overriding sense of the sadness of things (mono no aware).

By any account, Japanese culture is robust and thriving. It has survived the vicissitudes of history because a strong body of aesthetics has underpinned its various forms. There is something to be learnt here by others who are yet to base their culture on such strong foundations.

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IN MY VIEW

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There are other aspects of Japanese culture that do not escape attention, only if little more time is given to learn. Whether it is an artistic form like Ikebana or a mundane activity like food, each cultural endeavour and product has its own standard of beauty. Each is guided by a unique set of rules. The standard of perfection that evolved over the years creating a rich tradition is distinct in each branch. Because of this standard, purity of content and expression is upheld assiduously and without compromise. The long and rich tradition in each cultural activity has helped stave off external influences while allowing it to adapt to changing time. The durability and survival of many Japanese cultural forms could not be possible without their innate strength that was nourished by the individual

these principles, the aesthetics, which have nurtured the cultural activities preserving their pristine qualities. It is interesting to analyse these principles and trace their origin to religion (Buddhism, Shintoism) and philosophy (Zen). Beyond religion and philosophy lies changing nature evoking wonder and awe. Ikebana illustrates this embodiment of religious and secular principles graphically. Originating in the religious practice of paying homage to the souls of departed ancestors, which is what Shintoism is about, flower arrangements gradually evolved into forms and sophisticated expressions of Zen Buddhism and finally ended up with the abstraction of asymmetry found in nature. As in Ikebana, aesthetic principles developed, more or less along the same way, for each of the cultural forms. In

Japanese culture so unique. To miss this is to be deprived of a sense of complete appreciation of the Japanese creative mind.

There are a number of broad aesthetic principles that run through various facets of Japanese culture and bind them together as a single experience. Superimposed on the individual aesthetics of particular cultural activities these general principles elevate them from the immediate to the eternal and from the physical to the ethereal. If it is said that aesthetics of individual areas in Japanese culture deal with the question of how and where, the general aesthetics then address the use of "what and why? These broad principles can be discussed under a few heads. The first is suggestiveness which highlights beauty in a work of art or a litera-

ferred in Shintoism. Suggestion, as an aesthetic principle, has been given one of its most prominent and appropriate use in No theatre. The role played by suggestiveness, as contrasted with explicit descriptions of people and situations, imparts to No theatre a power that evoke awe.

The second aesthetic principle that underlie many cultural expressions is irregularity which implies lack of symmetry. From time immemorial symmetry has been considered undesirable by the Japanese. Leaving something incomplete makes it interesting to them and gives the feeling that there is room for growth. A partiality for irregularity can be seen in the ceramics preferred by the Japanese. Instead of a perfectly formed round bowl, the Japanese will normally select a misshapen pot. In calligra-

Operation Clean Heart



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IN 1796 Henry Carter wrote a prologue for, but not recited at, the opening of the Playhouse, Sydney, New South Wales, when the actors were principally convicts. It went like this, "We left our country for our country's good./ No private views disgraced our generous zeal./ What urged our travels was our country's weal." People have more than one way to love their country. They don't always have to live in or die for it. Often they can flee it for its good.

More than two hundred years later, the convicts and criminals are also fleeing in this country, some to their hideouts within the country and others to destinations abroad. But what urged their travels is not the country's weal, but the military crackdown. They fear that they will be badly whacked if picked up by the army.

Which in many cases has been true. Several people have already died during interrogations, which made headlines in the country. It is common sense that these interrogations weren't calm and relaxing like couch sessions with a psychiatrist. The criminals are wise peo-

ple. They can smell trouble when it is coming. And they are fleeing.

The credit goes to the Operation Clean Heart. It has sent fear into the hearts of those who ruled our lives by fear and held us captive in their reigns of terror. It has also brought us a sense of relief that is comparable to that of the people when liberating forces enter occupied territories. All said and done, the army campaign has jarred the choke of crimes around our necks

and loosened it a bit, however short-lived it may be. There are people who believe that such words of praise for the army is an affront to democracy, and there is a whole lot of sensitivity building around that issue. One school of thought is concerned that the Operation could victimize innocent people. Others are worried that it might give the military a smack of power. Now who can deny that these are not within the realms of possibilities?

But what could be better option in the country, which began to look like patchwork of turfs run by gangsters? What innocence is left to be victimized, when musclemen rape to vacate a plot of land, democracy if the lives of people have a sigh of sudden relief? And let us for argument's sake, believe that the army will be despotic and persecute a few who are not guilty. But how is it worse than before? How is it worse than young girls raped in front of their parents, people carrying cash killed on the streets or children sacrificed in the wrath of contentious adults?

Look at the amount of muck that has been dug up by the Operation Clean Heart. Look at the amount of horror that seethed under the surface of our society, the homes of many respectable citizens disgorging enviable arsenals. And count the number of people being arrested across the country every

day, although many of the big fishes have escaped the dragnet. What does it indicate to us? It indicates that so many unwholesome minds have been living amongst us. That all these crimes and violence, which bring havoc on our daily lives, are but the work of pretentious people we had mistaken for some of us.

Which also shows how deep evil has struck its roots amongst us. It is often said that crime is a fact of

life. Still it is shocking to know that the centre of gravity of that crime is located amongst the rich and famous. Not that crime will never exist in our lives. For as long as humans will be humans, they will be guided by their instincts, by greed, arrogance, ambition, dishonesty, cruelty and duplicity. Let us remind ourselves that the pre-eminence of this truth is what prompted the formation of human society in the first place, that each man will partially surrender his freedom to ensure the freedom of all.

But if human societies were built on that optimism, laws were made to countervail doubts and despair that there might be those who

would violate this contract. It was felt necessary to punish those offenders so that they would be corrected, and the recurrence of their offences would be prevented. Therefore, the society is not a guarantee that crimes will disappear, but it must not tolerate, let alone nestle, crimes either. Crime and justice, good and evil, cruelty and kindness, filth and decency, face and mask, all have a place in life and one must never be con-

arrested the brothers, relatives and accomplices of Lai, while he remains under house arrest in a modest apartment in Vancouver.

The moral of this story is obvious. Ill-earned wealth is no excuse for a few good acts. It is not right to rob Peter to pay Paul. That is one logic that remains forlorn and misunderstood amongst us as unscrupulous people rise through muck with their money and buy respect and recognition. If you think hard that is what has been the bane of our lives in this country. That is what has corrupted politicians and police alike, while bureaucrats and intellectuals got slowly drawn into its mischievous spheres.

Now the army is engaged in the destruction of those spheres. Sad, that a few people have died during interrogation and few more might die in future. While my sympathy goes to their families, let us also remember that 1000 people, on average, choke to death on ball-point pens throughout the world every year. We must have the collective will to suffer a few losses for the sake of greater interests.

Let me tell you beforehand that nobody will be able to erase crime from the surface of earth. But it is possible to make a dent on it for so long as one does it with an open heart. Crime is like aging. It cannot be stopped but slowed down with the right measures. The Operation Clean Heart is doing the right thing. Until it proves otherwise.

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CROSS TALK

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OPINION

Technological innovation key to agricultural productivity

ZEBI | SERAJ

A press release by one of the NGOs, UBINIG, after a press briefing at the Jatiya Press Club on the 16th October, 2002, asking for pesticide-, fertilizer-, hybrid- and genetic engineering-free agricultural products seems like a childish statement at best. Use or adopting the above has resulted in tremendous increases in crop outputs. There have been minor problems but the key issue here is management of the food crop, not turning a blind eye to advanced technologies.

Total ban on use of fertilizer is not practical as yet: The key to stable yields and good crop production, which is absolutely essential for the economy of our country is, management of inputs to be provided to the crop. This should start from healthy seeds, good germination practices, giving the right amount of fertilizer and water at the right time, integrated pest management, etc. The problems faced with pesticide and chemical fertilizer is that excess amounts

have been used due to lack of knowledge of the farmer as to when to put in the right inputs and relevant knowledge in integrated pest management. So NGOs like UBINIG should engage themselves in providing this knowledge to farmers. Once farmers require know-how, they themselves will be the best judges of what inputs to use. Seed health and distribution networks should be encouraged so that middlemen do not take advantage of farmers. Blind, propaganda-like statements, which will scare farmers and lead to bad management practices during crop growth stage, can have a serious impact on crop productivity.

Organic farming will be unable to meet our needs at the present time: It is definitely ideal if farmers can use organic fertilizers only, something that is referred to as organic farming. In order to do this, one needs to continually put in organic matter into the soil. At the moment crop yields are too low to provide much left over stalk to put back. Livestock in Bangladesh are

not very fit, and produce poor-quality manure -- much of which is burned for fuel. Fifteen years from now, one may be able to afford the luxury of organic farming, but only if a large quantity of nitrogen is first put into the soil with chemical fertilizers out of bags.

Excellent potential of hybrid seeds: The concern about big companies capturing seed markets may be legitimate. That is exactly why we need to produce our own improved seeds, whether hybrid or genetically modified. In order to get a jump-start, we may also borrow some technology from the developed nations. However, one must also consider that seeds that produce excellent crops in the country of origin, may not do so in Bangladesh. Therefore we need to modify our own crops if necessary, where conventional technologies have failed. Bangladesh Rice Research Institute has released its first hybrid seed and it is not only doing well but also some farmers have been trained in the production of these hybrid seeds. We need to develop more of our own

for the different ecological zones in Bangladesh as indeed BRRI is doing with inputs from the International Rice Research Institute or IRRI. China increased its average rice yields from 5 tons/hectare to 7-8 tons/hectare just by planting suitable hybrids.

Need for biotech solutions for increasing and sustaining crop productivity: Now to come to the burning and controversial topic of genetically modified crops. Does anyone realize why we need technological innovation to increase crop production in the first place? With the increase in life expectancy and decrease in deaths during birth, populations soared in the 20th century as never before in the history of mankind. That resulted in the need to increase food production. Breeders have so far done a marvellous job of breeding and selecting for high yielding crops. However, now it seems that most of the yield genes have been exhausted. Some new ones have been discovered in wild germplasm, but need

further refinement or purification, before placement in cultivated crops. Therefore, in order to raise crop yield there is a need to breed for pest resistance, disease resistance, salt tolerance, drought tolerance, etc. Sources for these qualities are however not found in cultivated crops. The rapid growth in population did not allow the evolutionary time for plants to develop their own mechanisms for resistance. What genetic engineers have done is taken genes from important sources and put these into a crop of interest. It may simply be defined as a form of assisted breeding.

Genetically enhanced crops may prove to be useful for Bangladesh: Genetically-modified (GM) crops have been around for about ten years now. GM crops represent promising technologies that can make a vital contribution to global food, feed and fibre security. One useful way to portray a global perspective of the status of GM crop is to characterize the global adoption rates of the crops.

In 1996 there were only 1.7 million hectares (mha) of biotech crops planted in the world. In 2001, this figure increased by 19% -- up to 52.6 mha. This includes statistics of developing countries. There will be over two billion more mouths to feed by 2020. The only way to do this is ecologically sound agriculture and biotechnology.

Bangladesh is lagging behind in biotech work: Need for rapid formation and implementation of the National Council for Biosafety of Bangladesh: Pest resistance or virus resistance by genetic modification has now already been shown to work in Africa, and some South East Asian countries. Vitamin A-fortified genetically modified rice has already been produced, including enriched BR-29 from Bangladesh. The latter is at the moment in IRRI and is awaiting permission from Biosafety committees in order to be brought into Bangladesh. The NCBB, or National Committee for the Biosafety of Bangladesh has not started functioning as yet, but

needs to do so with immediate effect. Enriched rice BR-29 has the potential of eradicating Vitamin A deficiency, which causes blindness and immune deficiency diseases in over 20 million children in Bangladesh every year. In this particular instance, scared multinationals like Monsanto actually relinquished claims to some of the patents they had on the genes that produce Vitamin A, so that the developing countries may benefit for non-commercial purposes.

Risks associated with GM crops are minimal and remain as potential risks: I cannot deny that GM crops may pose some risks. But these will be tested before release, as has been the practice all over the world. Bangladesh also has its own gazetted Biosafety Guidelines. We simply need its rapid implementation. The only environmental risk is the possibility that implanted genes; such as those for herbicide-resistance can escape from cultivated crops into wild relatives and create superweeds. This is more of a problem

for cross-pollinated crops like mustard. This however remains as a possibility only. For self-pollinated crops like rice, there should not be any risk of this nature. Some insects may evolve resistance to insect resistant crops, but there are many counter measures.

In the end, I would like to reiterate that any technology would have its good and bad sides. It is for us to assess whether the good outweighs the bad. We simply cannot afford to not look at all options available to increase food production for the toiling masses of Bangladesh. We owe it to them to educate them correctly and encourage any technology that can improve their livelihoods.

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