

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Release Saleem Samad and Priscilla Raj

To start, I would like to commend your Government for releasing the two Western journalists, but as a member of the National Writers Union (U.S.), and a scholar on South Asia, I am still concerned over the continued detention of Ms Priscilla Raj, a Bangladeshi national who was arrested on November 25th, 2002 and charged with sedition and treason under sections 419 and 505 of the Bangladesh Penal Code. Up till this time, the concerned authorities have failed to provide any explanation or basis for the charges. Ms. Raj was contracted as an interpreter for two days for Channel 4 journalists Zaiba Malik and Bruno Serrentino. Ms. Raj's work was limited to translation; she was not involved in the substantive work of the journalists.

On 26 November, 2002, Ms. Raj was produced before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate and was sentenced to police remand for 5 days. On November 26, Ms. Raj was transferred to the custody of the

treatment she was forced to give a statement on 2nd December that states her involvement with the two channel 4 journalists. Although ordered by the court, the authorities failed to produce Ms. Raj at her hearing into the concern court scheduled on December 2nd and also on 4th December.

On December 5th, Ms. Raj was finally permitted to meet her lawyers and detailed the torture she has undergone. Her lawyers could see marks left from the electric shocks on Ms. Raj's arms and legs. On December 9th, Ms. Raj was produced in front of the court. Despite her deteriorating physical condition, the court denied Ms. Raj bail.

Ms. Raj remains in detention and vulnerable to further abuse. Her fundamental rights under the Bangladesh Constitution have been flagrantly violated.

I urge you to ensure that Ms. Raj is not subjected to further detention. She should be released immediately and all charges against her should be dropped.

**Geoffrey Cook, Member
Peace & Justice Commission
Episcopal (Anglian) Diocese of**

to stay in her birthplace and struggle to make Bangladesh a better place. What a sad day for us that today Priscilla herself stands accused as "desh drohi" and in jail on the nebulous charges of "sedition". The meaning of patriotism seems to have been perverted forever.

Everyone is very concerned about our "image abroad". This latest fiasco is a fine way to improve that image. For the last two weeks, the American papers have been carrying news of the arrested journalists. With the foreign journalists now sent back home, but Bangladeshi journalists still in jail, our Government's rage and lust for vengeance still remains clear. If anyone thinks negative coverage overseas has stopped with the release of two EU passports, they are badly mistaken.

Government of Bangladesh (whether BNP or AL, they all blur into one these days...) will one day learn that torturing our own citizens is a crazy way to build a "strong nation". The ghosts of torture regimes came back to revisit Argentina, Chile, Peru, Iran and many others. They even came back to

Maldives, or having small and large scale confrontations with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Therefore, SAARC does not have the peaceful environment that is needed to foster economic growth.

Thailand, on the other hand, is the neighbour who is not politically adverse to any government we have. They come with the know-how and seeking investment opportunities. We have been not in the best of terms with Myanmar. This has to change. If Myanmar one day is to join the world community in full fledge, let Bangladesh be a conduit for this outcome. We should welcome a highway linking Bangladesh to Thailand through Myanmar. Bangladesh should explore the possibility of exporting gas to Thailand and Myanmar. We should ask our Thai friends to help us develop our tourism and service industry.

Eventually, Bangladesh should try to become more closely linked to the other members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) -- an association which is robust in trade between neighbours, sharing a common understanding that the good of one is good for all and vice versa. Moreover, many ASEAN member states -- particularly Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia -- have just gone through a maturity in their economies from being commodity producers to assemblers to now highly sophisticated manufacturers of advanced electronics and computers and computer chips and silicon wafers. They also been transforming from agricultural economies to industrial ones to now service dominated ones, transformations that Bangladesh is ready to make, but lacks the expertise. Surely, Bangladesh can learn a lot from ASEAN neighbours, and can surely benefit from ASEAN's experience in manufacturing. It in return can provide cheap and increasingly a more educated work force.

We have wasted enough time dragging our feet with SAARC. It is time we stepped out in the sun, and rose towards the east. It is a much more shining prospect.

**Wasim Choudhury
On e-mail**

Letter from Reporters Sans Frontieres

Mr. Robert Menard's extraordinary letter consists of such a combination of contradictions and arrogant bluster that it throws serious doubt on the credibility of his own organization, Reporters Sans Frontieres.

The crux of the matter is that the two foreign journalists who were detained appear to have come to Bangladesh with pre-conceived ideas and determined to project a totally distorted picture of this country, not in order to "understand the situation" as Mr. Menard claims to know for sure. This hardly constitutes ethical journalism and, coming in the wake of a series of other similar attempts by a now discredited section of the international press to portray Bangladesh as an intolerant and communal state, we have every reason to suspect a conspiracy. As such the Government were duty-bound to investigate the matter thoroughly until the two disclosed in full who exactly put them up to their expedition, who financed them, who gave them their detailed briefings and who made the logistical arrangements.

Mr Menard asks why journalists need to travel on special visas. It seems to me that most genuine journalists find this to be entirely desirable as it serves to give them the protection they need to carry out their activities undisturbed. Otherwise even spies could claim immunity simply by calling themselves journalists which would have the paradoxical effect of putting real journalists under constant suspicion that they were actually engaged in espionage. It is simply amazing that someone who claims to defend the rights of reporters could overlook such a consideration.

On sedition charge against journalists

The present Bangladesh Government is suffering from Al-Qaeda phobia. The Government has been forced to this state of phobia proba-

By some Indian Newspaper and accusation by Indian power politicians that there is al-Qaeda base in Bangladesh. While it is expected that the Govt. will face such wrong accusation by diplomatic effort, it has become repressive on some local journalists and suspicious of its own people of being involved with such damaging propaganda.

Already several journalists have been taken under police custody in charge of sedition for their alleged involvement in preaching Al-Qaeda's presence in Bangladesh or helping foreigners in doing so. In the broad sense they tried to tarnish the positive image of Bangladesh.

History says that sedition charge has always been brought against the patriots. Despite the fact that they had been executed, they became heroes of eternity. In this modern world sedition charge is rarely brought against a state leader or a military leader let alone journalists. Even the "Nazis" were not charged with sedition. They were tried in Nuremberg for committing "Crime against humanity". That was

Indonesia occurs. They have already killed many people in Udichi function in Jessore, Ramna Batamul and finally in Mymensingh cinema halls. How many more lives do we have to sacrifice for Khaleida Zia to accept the truth?

They have already killed many people in Udichi function in Jessore, Ramna Batamul and finally in Mymensingh cinema halls. How many more lives do we have to sacrifice for Khaleida Zia to accept the truth?

Shafiqur Rahman Khan, On e-mail

Who will save the Iraqi people?



Climbing the ladder of hardship!

Except for Pol Pot in Cambodia, Saddam Hussein is the only tyrant who has used weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against his own people. Though Pol Pot had no WMD, he killed more people through his weapons of mass execution, i.e. torture and starvation. The UN did nothing to stop Pol Pot, only Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia put a stop to it. But Saddam has used most sophisticated weapons against his own people, killing 5,000 Kurds and maiming thousands more through chemical attacks. Kurds' only crime was to ask for autonomy for their region. Still we frequently hear this question: "Why is Iraq singled out when India, Pakistan and Israel have nuclear weapons?"

The answer to this question is: Saddam Hussein. Here is a brutal leader as megalomaniac as Hitler, but lacks Hitler's conventional military might. He is trying to compensate for his lack of conventional military capability through developing weapons of mass destruction and he is likely to use them again against the Kurds if he is allowed to do so. The United States worries about Saddam's using the WPD against his neighbours, but the real concern should be about his using the WMD against Iraqi Kurds, who might face total annihilation if the Americans abandon them once again. As long as Saddam Hussein is in power, Iraq's Kurdish minority and Shia majority will always face a great danger. As Prof. Salim Mansur, professor of political science at the University of Western Ontario, recently wrote in *The Toronto Sun*: "Saddam's compliance with the security Council Resolution 1441 will ensure his survival, and liberal democracies will proclaim this to be a victory of UN multilateral diplomacy. It will be, however, a hollow victory purchased by confining Iraqis once again to the silence of their gulag."

Who will save Saddam's Iraqi victims?
**Mahmood Elahi
Ontario, Canada**

Notice
The readers are requested to send their comments on the series of bomb blasts in Bangladesh starting from the Udichi meet at Jessore, Ramna Batamul to the recent Mymensingh Cinema Hall incident and other similar incidents.

The readers may focus on the efforts of the authorities to bring the culprits to justice, the accusation and counter accusation from amongst the political parties regarding the incidents and the consequent effect on the general people about the carnage.

Editor

Bangladesh: A free country?

As members of the younger generation of this country, we are frankly quite confused with the present political situation as is reflected in the dailies and television news everyday. We all know that Bangladesh is a democracy and yet we are witnessing events which show signs of quite the contrary.

As we all know a few citizens of this country were arrested a few days ago. Citizens just like us who happen to be writers and columnists. We are also very much aware that these very people are responsible for millions of people loving and respecting this country. Their writings have made young people like us think twice about running away to foreign countries for higher studies. We respect and admire these men and when one fine day they get arrested for 'anti state activities', questions do arise. Questions like whether writing about one's opinions is an anti state activity. Whether voicing one's thoughts is an anti state activity.

Last time we checked, this was a free country and has been for the past thirty years. Then why do we have to witness such inane acts of vindictiveness? The final question to be asked is whether this country is in reality a free one any



Arrested intellectuals

more.
**Diti, Esha
Dhaka**

Shahriar Kabir is arrested for involvement in anti-state activities, I could not believe it. I practically grew up reading his books. There is hardly any book where his love and pride for our country and our Liberation War were not expressed. He was once accused of sedition because he gave some news of fanaticism in the

country to a foreign news agency. Since when telling the truth has become a crime and as a journalist isn't it his job to tell the world what is happening in Bangladesh? It is true that allegation of fundamentalism against a country is disgraceful but what good can come from denying it.

We all know that there are groups who in their acts and words practice fundamentalism and the situation is getting worse. Some previous and the

recent Mymensingh bomb blasting clearly prove their growing strength. It is very sad that instead of fighting the problem our government is trying to hide it through indirect censorship.

How many people have to lose their lives before the Government changes its denial policy and takes positive action?

**Mujtoba
On e-mail**

joint investigation cell, constituted by Criminal Investigation Department (CID), National Security Intelligence (NSI), Defence Forces (DF) and Special Branch (SB) for interrogation. During the joint interrogation she was denied access to her lawyers. Her lawyers were denied access to the documents related to this case. Her family members also were denied to access to Priscilla for giving clothes, food, pure drinking water all are fundamental violation of her rights under the Bangladesh Constitution.

On December 2, The High Court issued directives to the government to allow the accused persons: a.) to consult with their lawyers twice a week and meet their representatives, b.) access to related documents, c.) not to be tortured, and d.) relatives are allowed for supplying food, clothing and water. However, in the joint investigation cell and also in jail Ms. Raj was denied access to all her fundamental rights. Subjected to intense interrogation, death threats and electric shock

California
Berkeley, California, USA

I first met Priscilla Raj more than ten years ago in Dhaka. We met at some cultural events in the city, and also had journalist friends in common. We knew each other very slightly, but she was always very friendly. I had already started going to college in the US, and there was an issue of "distance" between myself and the people in the arts-culture front. During one conversation, Priscilla gently chastised me for being one of the thousands who leave the country and contribute to the "brain drain". I tried to strike a note of unity with her, and at one point said "I may be in America, but I am from Bangla Medium just like you. We're the same." Although it was all good-natured banter, being called a "desh drohi," even in jest, was a serious matter. I hope I was able to convince fiercely patriotic Priscilla that I was a "desh premik".

People have many reasons to leave their own country and seek a living elsewhere. But Priscilla chose

haunt Henry Kissinger, forcing him to resign from the 9/11 commission. The injustice that is being done today to Priscilla, Saleem and others will come back to haunt our despotic politicians.

**Naem Mohaiemen
New York, USA**

Before the last election I managed to get a video copy of the "Shabash Bangladesh" created by BNP which some say, turned the election for them. The program amplified the stories of the people who were victims of heinous crimes and did not get justice during the previous regime. Fast forward 5 years and I see AL making a new "Shabash Bangladesh - 2" with Priscilla Raj and Saleem Samad among others.

The serious injustice and torture that is going on against them has the marks of making of another "Shabash Bangladesh". Our Government should realise that in this age of information technology, the impact of any action by them has an immediate and counter effect. From past experience, it is obvious that

by some Indian Newspaper and accusation by Indian power politicians that there is al-Qaeda base in Bangladesh. While it is expected that the Govt. will face such wrong accusation by diplomatic effort, it has become repressive on some local journalists and suspicious of its own people of being involved with such damaging propaganda.

Already several journalists have been taken under police custody in charge of sedition for their alleged involvement in preaching Al-Qaeda's presence in Bangladesh or helping foreigners in doing so. In the broad sense they tried to tarnish the positive image of Bangladesh.

History says that sedition charge has always been brought against the patriots. Despite the fact that they had been executed, they became heroes of eternity. In this modern world sedition charge is rarely brought against a state leader or a military leader let alone journalists. Even the "Nazis" were not charged with sedition. They were tried in Nuremberg for committing "Crime against humanity". That was

Indonesia occurs. They have already killed many people in Udichi function in Jessore, Ramna Batamul and finally in Mymensingh cinema halls. How many more lives do we have to sacrifice for Khaleida Zia to accept the truth?

They have already killed many people in Udichi function in Jessore, Ramna Batamul and finally in Mymensingh cinema halls. How many more lives do we have to sacrifice for Khaleida Zia to accept the truth?

Shafiqur Rahman Khan, On e-mail

Bangladesh does not enjoy a very positive image in the West. The West has many misconceptions about our society. As a Bangladeshi Christian studying in the USA, I have a unique perspective into how the West really looks at Muslim countries like Bangladesh. Usually, every time I meet someone new here, the two most frequently asked questions regarding Bangladesh that I face are, "Aren't you persecuted in Bangladesh for your religious beliefs?" and "Will you guys [Bangladeshis] try to kill us [Americans] if we visit your country?" These questions seem absurd to me, and I answer them in the negative, again and again, explaining what my country is really like. But I can't blame them for their misinformed questions.

We never enjoyed a very positive image abroad; the Western media rarely publishes anything about Bangladesh, let alone anything positive. The West simply does not care about the truth. So, I request my democratically elected Government, "Please don't imprison our own fellow citizens for 'tarnishing' the country's image, when there was no positive image to be tarnished in the first place." The British and Italian governments have taken care of their citizens, regardless of what laws these citizens had broken. We, Bangladeshis, have no one to take care of us other than our own government.

Jonathan Adhikari, USA

Bangladesh's image abroad

After the publication of the news reports in Far Eastern Economic Review, Wall Street Journal and New York Times, and the adoption of a resolution at the European Parliament, it is obvious that our country is confronted with a serious image crisis. What is the duty of the government in a situation like this? Blaming the opposition and putting the critics behind the bar will definitely not solve it rather damage it further. Let us locate the cause and try to solve it soon. If necessary, we should not hesitate to seek assistance from other countries. Unfortunately, some of us are so paranoid and biased that the moment someone talks about it openly they believe he is a traitor and working against the interest of the country.

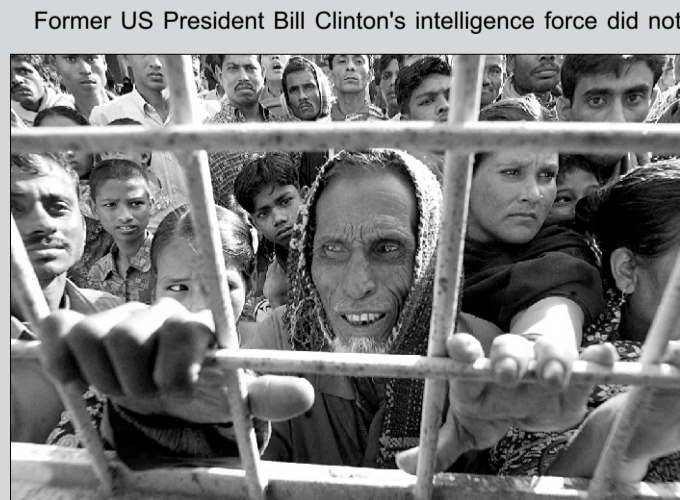
Government and country is not the same. Government comes and goes, but country remains there. Every citizen has a great responsibility to protect the interest of his/her country and while doing so if he has to criticise the government, he should not hesitate to do so. Criticising a government for its misdeeds or for failing to run a country can never be termed as a seditious act. Having failed to stop killing, extortion, tender hijacking and rampant corruption government itself has called in army. Do we need further evidence to prove that we have a serious problem at home?

Is our memory that short? Have we forgotten about the slogans "Amra Shobai Taliban Bangla Habe Afghanistan" ("We all are Taliban and Bangladesh will become Afghanistan") made almost on a daily basis in front of the north gate of Baitul Mukarram mosque by Jamat, IOJ and other similar party activists? Pro Jamat newspapers openly supports Taliban and Al-Qaeda philosophy and activities. So far Jamat and IOJ the two partners of the 4-party alliance government have not distanced themselves from this standpoint. We can therefore with conviction claim that there is a pro Taliban force in the government.

Former US President Bill Clinton's intelligence force did not

'Image' in confinement

consider his helicopter trip to National Memorial at Shavar safe due to existence of Al-Qaeda. No one opposed that notion at that time. BNP was rather busy portraying the cancellation of the visit as the then government's failure instead of trying to convince Mr. Clinton to carry on with the trip. In other words the presence of Al-Qaeda in Bangladesh has long been accepted by BNP. Denying this fact today might serve its own interest, but not the interest of our country. It will only be wise to accept the fact and to stop these bloodthirsty creatures before a catastrophe of the magnitude of



'Image' in confinement

consider his helicopter trip to National Memorial at Shavar safe due to existence of Al-Qaeda. No one opposed that notion at that time. BNP was rather busy portraying the cancellation of the visit as the then government's failure instead of trying to convince Mr. Clinton to carry on with the trip. In other words the presence of Al-Qaeda in Bangladesh has long been accepted by BNP. Denying this fact today might serve its own interest, but not the interest of our country. It will only be wise to accept the fact and to stop these bloodthirsty creatures before a catastrophe of the magnitude of

Indonesia occurs. They have already killed many people in Udichi function in Jessore, Ramna Batamul and finally in Mymensingh cinema halls. How many more lives do we have to sacrifice for Khaleida Zia to accept the truth?

They have already killed many people in Udichi function in Jessore, Ramna Batamul and finally in Mymensingh cinema halls. How many more lives do we have to sacrifice for Khaleida Zia to accept the truth?

Shafiqur Rahman Khan, On e-mail

Bangladesh does not enjoy a very positive image in the West. The West has many misconceptions about our society. As a Bangladeshi Christian studying in the USA, I have a unique perspective into how the West really looks at Muslim countries like Bangladesh. Usually, every time I meet someone new here, the two most frequently asked questions regarding Bangladesh that I face are, "Aren't you persecuted in Bangladesh for your religious beliefs?" and "Will you guys [Bangladeshis] try to kill us [Americans] if we visit your country?" These questions seem absurd to me, and I answer them in the negative, again and again, explaining what my country is really like. But I can't blame them for their misinformed questions.

We never enjoyed a very positive image abroad; the Western media rarely publishes anything about Bangladesh, let alone anything positive. The West simply does not care about the truth. So, I request my democratically elected Government, "Please don't imprison our own fellow citizens for 'tarnishing' the country's image, when there was no positive image to be tarnished in the first place." The British and Italian governments have taken care of their citizens, regardless of what laws these citizens had broken. We, Bangladeshis, have no one to take care of us other than our own government.

Jonathan Adhikari, USA