

Sheikh Hasina criticises the media

Half truths and some serious issues

THE Awami League chief had some very nasty things to say about the media, especially about the newspapers. She uttered some half-truths and, in our view, some serious issues. Her comments should, we think, result in some serious introspection and soul searching. However, her language could have been less crude, less offensive and her manner less taunting. But then habits die hard.

Of the three successive elected governments -- since the restoration of democracy -- none has been free-press friendly, with the first Khaleda Zia's government being the least offensive and the following two getting successively worse. Sheikh Hasina's government was neither supportive of the independent media nor helpful to the journalists as she claimed in her speech. She has never been able to accept The Daily Star and Prothom Alo's role in fund raising for Tipu Sultan, which she always considered to be a deliberate move by us to discredit her government, an accusation she repeated last Wednesday. Her comment that our fund raising move was motivated because we didn't take similar measures for others is like saying doing one good thing is wrong because we are unable to do other good things. One positive, constructive and helpful action is its own justification whose motive does not need to be proven by doing anything else. Yes, it would be nice (and we would love to do it) to save the world. However failing that, it is not a crime (as AL chief would like to believe) to save an individual.

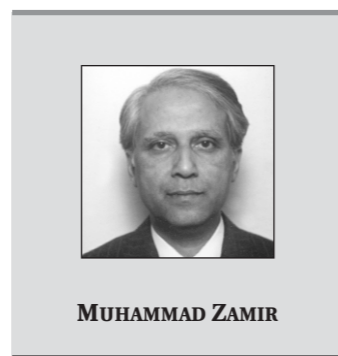
The truth is the governments we have had so far have all been fundamentally 'failed' governments, and it is the nature of failed governments to blame the critical press for their failures. Our leaders have never tried to see what the independent media are saying but have always attempted to 'discover' the motive behind what has been written. When no motive could be found, it is automatically assumed that it was done to help the opposition. What plagues our leaders is the mentality that they can never do, or have done, anything wrong and that all wrongs are done by their opponents and critics.

In the last 13 years of our democracy -- and we are not even talking about the military leaders from whom we do not expect democratic behaviour -- neither Sheikh Hasina nor Khaleda Zia have ever accepted, even for once, that they made a mistake or took a wrong decision. How can such people ever accept an independent and critical press? Without the slightest bit of democracy within their respective parties and in the absence of any gutsy and conscientious intellectual daring to speak the truth in their faces, it is only the free press where they face criticism. Tragically, most of the press is also politically divided. This leaves only a handful of newspapers that 'dare' to be 'impertinent' and thus earn wrath of the two top leaders.

As for the present, and here we think Sheikh Hasina has raised a pertinent issue, we see some ominous trends in the attitude of the government vis-à-vis the free press. The more it is failing to come to grips with domestic problems the more it is becoming critical, suspicious, intolerant and repressive towards the critical press. We are alarmed at news reports of proposed laws to control electronic and print media. We are sad about the comments in the parliament on the press, the harassment meted out to editors and journalists, and the arrest warrants issued against them only to intimidate and repress independent voices. And we are outraged to see no steps being taken when journalists are killed by terrorists or criminals. Most incredibly a 'list' of journalists to be killed has been published by a terrorist group and yet no commensurate action from the government has been seen about it.

This paper, and journalists in general, are proud of the fact that neither the government nor the opposition like us. We are happy that our readers continue to trust us and support us. We need nothing more. We pledge to our readers that the independent media will continue to perform its duty for freedom, democracy, rule of law, accountable and transparent government and for individual and collective rights. We will fight for the rights of all minority groups and for the marginalised and the downtrodden. And of course we will always fight for a FREE PRESS.

The evolving situation in Afghanistan



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THERE was a very interesting news item in the papers recently. It related to something that we are used to in Bangladesh. In fact it is commonplace in the whole of South Asia. However, it was a great stride forward for our neighbour -- Afghanistan.

AFP reported from Kabul that for the first time in a decade, Afghan public television had telecast images of an Afghan lady called Salma, singing, and that too a romantic ballad. The song lasted for about five minutes but was telecast at a time when most Kabulis are in front of their television. The idea apparently was to derive the maximum possible symbolical publicity. The important aspect was that this was the first time such an event had taken place since the fall of the communist regime of former President Najibullah in 1992. Considering the fact that under the headline Taliban regime, women were unable to openly work, girls were denied schooling and television was forbidden from showing images of women, this was indeed a movement forward. It was also a sign that moderation was slowly returning to Afghanistan.

Kabul in the late 1960s was a cosmopolitan city. One recollects that the first Marks and Spencer store outlet in our part of the world

was in fact opened in this city at that time. Subsequently of course, conservatism gained ground and liberal principles fled the scene.

This singing on television has been an important psychological step. However, one should be careful in reading too much into this. The situation on the ground in Afghanistan is still far from stable and very delicate.

The war in Afghanistan emanated from the US quest for security. The Bush Doctrine that drove the war was best explained in President Bush's address to the

people. The sooner the better. Karzai has been taking small steps forward. The beginning of the year saw the adoption of Afghanistan's first post-Taliban constitution. The document, worked out by Afghanistan's loya jirga during three weeks of intense negotiations and after three months of public consultations, enshrines a presidential system of government with a bicameral parliament.

This represented the determination of the Afghan people to see their country transform into a stable and democratic state. UN

children.

This note of anxiety on the part of the United Nations is important in more ways than one. Continued violence in Afghanistan could jeopardise crucial mid-year elections. Unless checked, it will also delay reconstruction efforts in Kabul and also in the surrounding provinces. The association of international voluntary groups and activities of different NGOs have already been affected. Their presence outside Kabul and a few other cities is minimum to say the least.

team would like having the elections in Afghanistan as soon as possible. It could then be projected as a foreign policy victory. One hopes however that this calculation to have the vote in June has not been too hasty.

It might have been preferable to have gained greater control of the countryside and then to have held the election in the autumn of this year. Inadequate security, a resurgent Taliban, Al-Qaeda and renegade warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar could have a field day terrorising voters in the Provinces and unleashing waves of violence. A low turnout and dubious, conflicting results might subsequently undermine credibility and discourage confidence in the newly elected government.

The new constitution created by the loya jirga has many important principles. It needs to be carefully explained to the Afghan people. Elements like association of women in politics, provision of a President elected by universal adult suffrage, answerable to the Parliament, having two Vice Presidents chosen from ethnic communities other than that of the President, having two national official languages, the Dari and the Pashtu, are new in scope and content. These have to be understood by the general citizens.

The United States and her allies in Afghanistan need to understand that they are there for the long haul. Their political calculations should not be based on what is going to happen in Washington at the end of this year. It needs to be remembered that the electoral process in Afghanistan is a dry-run for later events in Iraq. If it fails in Afghanistan, overall peace and stability will also not be secured elsewhere.

In an election year, quite understandably, President Bush's

Secretary General Kofi Annan observed very rightly that this was 'another important step in the peace process that justifies the commitment of the Afghan people and the international community. He also underlined the importance of this dynamics being sustained with international help.

However, at around the same time, the UN Secretary General in his report sent to the Security Council pointed out that Afghanistan had undergone 'a deterioration in security at precisely the point where the peace process demands the opposite.' This report, it may be recalled was released just hours after a bomb ripped through the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, killing at least 12 people, including several

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

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graduating class at the US Military Academy at West Point on 1 June, 2002. It was projected that the Doctrine rests on a definition of the threat being based upon a combination of radicalism and technology -- specifically, political and religious extremism joined by the availability of weapons of mass destruction.

The above perception led to the emergence of what the Bush Administration has chosen to call "anticipatory self-defence." It is also in this context that events unfolded in what is now called the 'war against terrorism.' The Taliban were removed from power and Kabul saw the return of the monarch and the emergence of the moderate President Hamid Karzai.

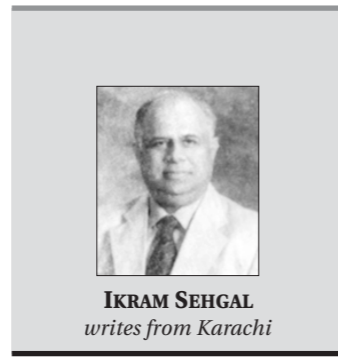
However, as political analysts

Laden is now believed to be hiding in the vast, rugged mountains that separate Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the population is largely sympathetic and US forces have limited access and mobility. Senator Jack Reed (D-R.I), member of the US Senate Armed Services Committee has identified the problem rather well. He has acknowledged that the Coalition forces lack 'good human intelligence' in Afghanistan. Another US military analyst has interpreted this situation most interestingly. He has commented that the US authorities 'have to win over the confidence of the people, or pay them or get lucky and pick somebody up who will talk.' The catchword in terms of phrasing is winning over the confidence of the

areas, (4) boost economic and technical support for institutions of good governance -- the courts, parliament, police, democratic political parties and revenue collection, (5) use appropriated funds to buy back Pakistan's official debt to the US and (6) ease restrictions on Pakistani textile imports into the US, avoiding new barriers after the multifibre agreement comes into effect in 2005.

In contrast to the unfettered positive recommendations made by the Task Force for India, Pakistan must view with concern

The US and South Asia



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

US' positive vibes about India is nothing new, it has been in existence since 1947 but the relationship has had its ups and downs, particularly during the period India was an ardent anti-US champion as leader of the "non-aligned" countries basically an anti-West pro-Soviet Russian bloc. The pro-India lobby's views were best expressed by then US Ambassador (to India) Chester Bowles in his May 25, 1965 Memo announcing that India should be the main US partner in Asia for containing China. The times may have changed, the policy has been revamped to reflect the same aim. Earlier to the recent SAARC event, an Independent Task Force co-sponsored by the "Council on Foreign Relations" and the "Asia Society" took out a report, viz 'New Priorities in South Asia: US Policy towards India, Pakistan and Afghanistan'. As the Task Force states "India represents a partner of great value" for the US, being one of the world's largest economies and its increasing security presence in the Indian Ocean region. Despite policy disagreements there are many converging issues of consequence that encourages the US to "transform this relationship into a genuine partnership".

The Independent Task Force recommended that the US and India must, viz (1) expand political security, military and intelligence cooperation, (2) intensify dialogue on economic and trade issues, (3)

negotiate a trade agreement in services. Further that the US should, viz (1) ease restrictions on cooperation with India in the civilian satellite sector, (2) grant India "friendly" country status in export licences for transfers of defence equipment, (3) ease restrictions on the export to India of dual-use items of civilian and military uses and (4) encourage US official and private entities to expand and develop cooperative programmes with Indian counterparts. It encouraged India to viz (1) implement domestic economic reforms with greater vigour (2)

open its economy by reducing administrative restrictions and other barriers to foreign trade and investment and (3) reduce administrative restrictions impeding cooperative, academic and foundation activities. This has now been expressed as a policy statement by President Bush in offering India a "Strategic Alliance". It may be noted that when the new US administration took over in January 2001 and announced its National Security Strategy, China was labeled as a "strategic competitor" and India an ally to contain China; 9/11 had made US change its course but it seems that the Bush Administration is now returning to its original policy statement.

The Task Force recognised that US-Pakistan relations have improved considerably since 9/11 because of Pakistan's important

geo-political role in the "war against terrorism" but noted that the interests of the two nations only partially coincide, mainly because of differing perceptions of the two countries about freedom fighters and militants in Kashmir, and while the US faults Pakistan for failing to restrain Taliban elements from using the tribal territories as a safe sanctuary, it worries that continuing India-Pakistan tension may hamper US' relations with India. Despite Pakistan's laudable goal of making (in Musharraf's words) "Pakistan a modern, progressive and dynamic State",

the Task Force opined it cannot be achieved given "unstable political institutions, weak economic and social development", and "an uncertain military commitment to reform".

The Pakistan policy recommended states that US should viz (1) obtain early congressional approval for a five-year, \$3 billion assistance package with two-thirds (\$400 million annually) allocated for economic and on-third (\$200 million annually) for security assistance, (2) condition the release of aid on Pakistan's progress in political, economic and social reform implementation, cooperation in the "war on terrorism" and prevention of leakage of sensitive nuclear technology and material, (3) make education the principal focus of US assistance with high priority for projects that develop Pashtun

that almost all the recommendations for Pakistan were conditional. Obviously we cannot equate ourselves with India economically and politically but then again we have been a consistent ally to the US while India remained vocally in the opposite Soviet camp. This "India first" policy of the US should not only be regarded with concern but with consternation.

To live amicably with one another, India and Pakistan will have to address the core issues, contain the inherent dangers and pursue a settlement actively. Kashmir remains the greatest single threat to regional stability and the possibility of a nuclear confrontation all too real. The US has been engaging in crisis management. Given the dangers the inherent inability of India-Pakistan to achieve progress on their own, this approach was

judged inadequate by the Task Force. There should be a long term US diplomatic effort to facilitate and sustain a bilateral process that will gradually lead to resolution of bilateral differences, including the core dispute over Kashmir. The Task Force feels the US should stress on Pakistan the need to (1) permanently prevent infiltration across the LOC and (2) modify its present negotiating stance, which makes progress on Kashmir a precondition for dealing with other India-Pakistan issues. As for India, the US pressure is perfunctory, they need to (1) actively engage in

States is advised by the Task Force to, viz (1) urge India and Pakistan to initiate nuclear discussions without holding these hostage to progress on the Kashmir dispute, seeking agreement on nuclear CBMs, including establishment of nuclear risk reduction centres, to lessen the chance that accidents, misperceptions, or misunderstandings might trigger a nuclear response. The US government is urged to search for ways to find a place for a nuclear India and Pakistan within the global nonproliferation system. At the same time, it is essential that more rigorous controls to prevent the export of sensitive nuclear technology or material be implemented.

The US has always been deeply interested in South Asia, both for economic and political reasons. No sooner had the SAARC Summit concluded successfully, a whole bunch of analysts opined that US pressure was the major reason for the resumption of India-Pakistan talks. Even though US officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell denied being an "unseen presence" in Islamabad, they made no secret about actively encouraging peace measures between the sub-continent's two nuclear rivals and a readiness to facilitate further dialogue to ensure that the present "peace mood" persisted in both the near and distant future.

US lives with a recurring fear (shared by the developed world) that the possibility of a conventional India-Pakistan conflict becoming a nuclear conflagration remains very real. The United

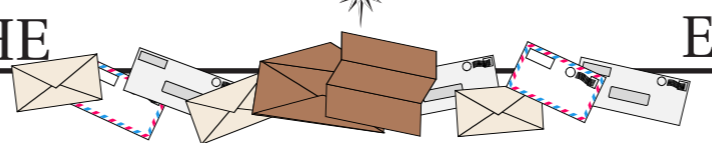
trying to reach an understanding with the elected Jammu and Kashmir State Government to better address the aspirations of Kashmiris and increase the pace of economic development and (2) reduce the level of activity by Indian security forces and improve their human rights record. US diplomacy should help India and Pakistan develop a framework that will enable them to address more constructively issues such as nuclear confidence-building measures (CBMs), de-escalation along the LOC and the Siachen Glacier, expanded trade relations, easing movement of people and reducing hate propaganda.

It was Bangabandhu, so great a man of head and heart that as President of the Republic he spared them from being eliminated by granting general amnesty. And that helped them to come out of their hideouts, later reinstated and flourished in religious bent of politics that we witnessed in the post-75 era.

Under the present coalition regime although the detesting word 'razakar' is much less used in insinuations, its pungency is entrenched in the heart of every freedom loving man. Mr. Nazir Rahman owes our thanks and gratitude for his bold utterance.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



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.

Politics of 'khatir'

Our debased political culture is a prisoner of influence petting, otherwise known as *khatir*. Nepotism is at all time high. Misuse of power and influence had been rampant with all the regimes. Opportunism prevails at all levels. A neutral stance has no value in society; hence the intellectuals fall into different camps. The third pressure is scattered, although the press media have some bright spots.

This type of political culture had been the cause of ruin in many newly emerging countries (analyse the African nations). It breeds corrupt practices, which soon become institutionalised. The base became porous resulting in financial collapse in Asia in several developing countries in the late 1990s. In South America the same virus prevails.

Morally it is a fight with materialistic temptation. The intolerance

exhibited by some political parties is something different. Democratic practices develop on patience, tolerance, and respect for other players in the field, (and those outside the political field). Thus the 'winner-takes-all syndrome has emerged. Remaining in the opposition, and to wait patiently for five long years, is not attractive for obvious reasons. Add one more factor: boycotting the parliament sessions. Thus the main arena of political activity is transferred to street agitation, which results in violence and law and order situations. The hate campaigns snowball, and man's inhumanity to man comes up front on the stage. Goodwill and benevolence have long since retired from society.

In Dhaka, the problem is deeper than the peculiar behaviour of the political parties. The very political base (approach to issues) has been polluted and made subjective, thereby cornering objectivity in

tackling issues at the national level. A society thus divided into virtual factions cannot do well to itself, as the cementing bond of consensus is missing. Who will correct the politicians?

The wrong base has to be shattered and new politics built up on new lines. It is a huge waste of time, energy and resources, which no LDC or DC can afford. Thus we have wasted three decades in useless bickering, and the future is not bright. These are no base for a new type of evolutionary leadership. So, it appears, ad hocism in changing leadership would continue for sometime.

As an ordinary citizen, I have no solution to offer. True leadership is a super-refined speciality, cultivated for a lifetime. Even the head of the super power state is fumbling. What can we expect from the leaders of the most 'corrupt nation' in the world?
AMawaz

Dhaka Political unrest in RU

Rajshahi University is one of the best universities in the country. After passing HSC, a student plans to get admission in a technical subject or a university for higher studies. So the students submitted their application forms to the RU and were waiting for the admission test, when the university was closed up to 7 February 2004. The JCD and Chhatra Shibir activists were locked in a bloody fight.

This is highly obnoxious that students are victimised for politics. At the starting point of life, the students are facing a great barrier. They will be disappointed and discouraged, no doubt. Report says that general students and teachers are afraid of Shibir's terrorism on the campus.

Finally, I want to put a question - have our so-called politicians any right to make fun with the future of the students?

Md. Anwar Hossain Mollah Bogra.

Atomic R&D in LDCs

The letter from a young scientist at BAEC (DS Jan 22) made sad reading. It is difficult to find resources in the third world countries to initiate even small poverty-oriented applications, not to speak of R&D.

Today we cannot generate enough market attraction for small solar light and energy sets in the rural areas. There has been some small application of GE in the agricultural field, but more and more controversies are emerging in the press on the long-time probable after-effects (trying to improve upon Nature!).

Like world trade problems (Cancun and elsewhere), peaceful atomic applications in DCs need UN support. But UN agencies cannot act alone, as energy taping

is a critical issue with the big powers and industrialised nations. Atomic disarmament has become a big issue (N Korea, Libya, India and Pakistan). Atomic power stations are out of fashion.

Under the circumstances, the peaceful role of institutions, such as the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission, needs proper local review at the highest level, global acceptance, for regular flow of funding, however small.

AHusain Dhaka

Hats off to Nazir Rahman

Finally it was Mr. Nazir Rahman Manjur, Chairman of the BJP, who showed his guts to sharply retort to the objection made by the Jamaat General Secretary Ali Hsan Mujahid to the former's reminding the prime minister of her commitment to hang the portrait of

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in government offices, while she met the party chiefs of the coalition. "You (Jamaat) are controversial as razakars for your opposition to the War of Liberation, you don't have any right to suggest anything about Bangabandhu," Mr. Manjur is quoted as saying (DS Jan 15).

The Jamaat leaders with the patronisation of the BNP are at the helm of affairs of the nation state called Bangladesh, which they know it well come into being because of the indefatigable struggle of Bangabandhu. They are now sharing the slice of the cake, but they cannot brook and forget the secession from their beloved Pakistan, for what they make Bangabandhu solely liable. So during the whole nine months of the liberation war they, the razakars, resisted Bangladesh being liberated from the clutches of Pakistanis. They betrayed with

the people by helping the Pakistani marauders to carry out genocide, loot and devastate our wealth, get our mothers and sisters raped, and finally emasculate us by killing our intellectuals just two days ahead of our victory.

It was Bangabandhu, so great a man of head and heart that as President of the Republic he spared them from being eliminated by granting general amnesty. And that helped them to come out of their hideouts, later reinstated and flourished in religious bent of politics that we witnessed in the post-75 era.

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Ahmad Niaz Dhaka