

Ahsanullah murder case

Killers' threats mock government assurances

IT is extremely disturbing to learn that the family members of slain AL lawmaker Ahsanullah Master are being intimidated by the assailants to withdraw the murder case against the latter or face dire consequences. The killers even threatened to dig out the body of the victim, presumably to take it away, if his family does not give up the legal battle against them. What an outrageous display of arrogance!

But even more disquieting is the news that the killers are perceived to be moving freely after committing the crime that has brought forth an avalanche of condemnation from all quarters. The prime minister herself told a four-party alliance meeting that the assailants would be brought to justice, regardless of their political identity. That brought some relief to those who are yet to recover from the great shock. The telephonic threats do indicate that the suspected killers are in circulation; they have not even bothered to go into hiding. So, what are the law enforcers doing? It is not clear why they can't track down the men who have not only committed one of the most dastardly crimes in recent memory, but also have the temerity to intimidate the family members of the victim in such a blatant fashion.

It is not hard to guess how helpless the family members could feel about it when they are still trying to overcome the grief and trauma. But their ordeal has been made unbearable by the killers resorting to intimidation.

The government must direct the law enforcers to ferret out the criminals and take legal action against them at the soonest in order to remove any possible misgiving that they could be enjoying some kind of immunity from any quarter. The real extent of the danger that the family members are exposed to should also be gauged with a protective umbrella cast over them.

The complaints lodged by the victim's family should be treated with utmost seriousness and every attempt to derail investigations thwarted. Let's draw the prime minister's attention to the imperative need for a follow-up on her earlier directive to bring the culprits to justice without any mercy whatsoever.

EPZ trade unions

A sensible compromise struck

WE welcome the draft proposal agreed upon by Bangladesh finance minister, EPZ authority, US ambassador to Bangladesh, WB country director and a representative of investors that promises to end the stalemate over allowing trade union rights in the EPZs.

The simple solution to permit the workers in each of the EPZs to vote on whether to form a trade union or not is a fine one. Now the decision on whether to unionise or not is in the hands of the workers, where it should be. If the workers in any sector vote against forming a union, then the workers' welfare association currently in place will continue to protect their interests.

It has been argued by the investors that the working conditions in the EPZs are much better than in the country at large and that there was thus no need for trade unions. This may be correct. But now the workers will themselves have the opportunity to be heard on the matter.

But we would suggest to the investors that they please reconcile themselves to the reality that workers in Bangladesh can no longer be denied the rights that workers all over the world are entitled to. Indeed, one cannot help but notice that the investors' home countries have some of the strongest trade unions in the world, with no discernible negative impact on productivity, so there is no reason to believe that permitting trade unions in the EPZs will harm their investment.

At the same time, we thought the US insistence on the principle of trade unionism needed to be consistent with the ground realities in the EPZs. From this point of view, leaving the choice to the workers has struck a compromise between being a stickler for it and responding to the special needs of the EPZs.

The agreement reached is the one that is most in the interest of Bangladesh, both as regards the EPZ workers and for the economy as a whole. The investors will also gain from it. That's why it has our support.

Matter of the carrot and the stick



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

THE US Secretary of State during his visit to Islamabad last March announced his country's intention to bestow upon Pakistan the status of a major non-NATO ally (MNNNA). According to him, the new status is the result of the US desire to cement further the already existing strategic relationship, which will manifest in the two countries' future military-military relations.

Pakistan is the fourth Muslim country and the twelfth in the world that have been offered the US manna, generally offered to those countries that acquiesce with the US in implementing its strategic designs. In this instance Pakistan's participation in the US war against terrorism, in particular its role in support of the US operations in Afghanistan as a part of US "War on Terror" has merited such a status.

It has to be said though that in the space of two decades the Afghan situation has come twice as a bail-out for Pakistan. In both instances, once in the 80s and now very recently, the situations in Afghanistan have brought Pakistan, from the sideline, to the position of a frontline state. From what was "peanuts" President Zia came by multibillion dollars of US aid. But for the US operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan would have remained on the margins of relevance to the US policy planners.

Given the fact that post Cold War Pakistan was relegated to the backwaters of US strategic consid-

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erations, that it had to cry itself hoarse to have the money it had paid as advance for the purchase of F-16s, that it was slapped with some stringent sanctions as a result of its efforts to join the "nuclear Brahmins," for Pakistan to be vested with such a status by the US is indeed remarkable.

Although the MNNAs do not enjoy the guarantees of mutual defense and security, the status nonetheless carries some important perks and benefits. As an MNNNA Pakistan would be eligible for priority delivery of defense articles, stockpiling of military hardware, purchase of depleted uranium for anti-tank rounds, cooperation in defense and research programmes and loan facilities. The designated non-NATO allies also enjoy some advantages in the foreign-assistance process as well as a close working relationship with a country's defense forces.

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The stick will come by way of various US pressures on Pakistan. Although Pakistan has gained in many ways it has had to face the negative political as well as economic effects of Pak-US cooperation against the US "War on terror." The r a i s o n d'ê t r e of US presence in Afghanistan remains unfulfilled in that the Al Qaeda leadership is yet to be apprehended. The writ of the US forces does not run more than only a few kilometers around Kabul. Elec-

tions are still a far cry and the local warlords continue to call the shots. Therefore, it would not be wrong to presume that Pakistan will come under increasing pressure in the US election year to hound out Osama bin Laden and his followers.

Furthermore, countries holding MNNNA status have their troops in either Afghanistan or Iraq. Commentators are of the opinion that Pakistan may come under increased pressure to send troops to either of these countries or be asked to sign a "Status of Forces Agreement" (SOFA). And of course, the MNNNA designation under section 517 of the FAA can be rescinded any time by the US president with a notification to the Congress.

In elevating the status of Pakistan the US has validated the arguments that the attainment of national interest can never be circumscribed by the archaic notions of morality and ethics and that principles must give way to expediency in the formulation of country's foreign and defense policies. This had been amply illustrated by US treatment of Pakistan following the erstwhile Soviet Union's Afghan debacle. There is much truth in the comments that, "their (Pak-US) close friendship has always ended once the US achieved its objectives." Perhaps the present US move is to remove the common perception about the US being a fair weather friend only.

Nonetheless, the increasing pressure on Pakistan is bound to have its internal ramifications. Thus, while the carrot appears tantalizing the stick may be difficult to tolerate.

Brig. Gen. Shahedul Anam Khan is Editor, Defense & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

The Greenspan of Japan

RICHARD WERNER

FOR years it has been said that Japan cannot reform without major recovery: a wholesale shift from Asian-style welfare capitalism to U.S.-style stock-market capitalism. Now investors are buzzing about "recovery" despite very few real changes under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. Why? Investors are not betting on Japan's political leader, but on its central-bank chief to deliver real economic growth. Toshihiko Fukui, governor of the Bank of Japan for a year now, has been hailed by the markets as a breath of fresh air, following years of misguided central-bank policies. Unlike his predecessors, we are told, Fukui knows his brief, is innovative and aspires to become the Alan Greenspan of Japan.

The idea that the economy depends more on the central-bank governor than the prime minister is not controversial. Many foreign investors never fully believed that reform was the key to Japan's future; they know that stock markets can surge irrespective of economic structure, as long as monetary policy is stimulative. It is the job of the central bank to ensure that the right amount of money is circulating so that there is stable growth without deflation or inflation. Japan is the only modern industrial economy ever to suffer from deflation, which is now in its sixth year, and many investors have blamed the Bank of Japan for failing to do its job. The result has been businesses fighting over pieces of a dwindling national income pie, as bankruptcies and unemployment rise.

Many foreign investors now believe that Fukui has stemmed the tide. He took over his job at a time when the stock market was at a 20-year low and the financial system was on the verge of a meltdown. Things have changed dramatically in the past year. Nominal GDP has picked up sharply, growing 0.9 percent in the fourth quarter of 2003. Housing starts rose by 9.4 percent in December, and passenger-car

With old-style policies of bureaucratic "guidance" still in place, the Japanese recovery is not the result of necessary structural changes, but merely a central bank prone to creating vast boom-bust cycles. We may be at the beginning of the next boom phase, and that's the fun part. But it is clear by now what follows after this. So let the buyer beware.

sales jumped 11.7 percent in January. Many bank stocks have soared more than 500 percent.

All thanks to Fukui? Over the past year he has impressed journalists by engaging them and avoiding gaffes of the type that made life difficult for his predecessor, Masaru Hayami. Fukui has also impressed the experts through his virtuosity in handling central-bank operations. Instead of engaging in futile debates with academic economists, Fukui simply introduced a number of new ways to put money in circulation, demonstrating that he understands what his predecessor denied: the problem in Japan is not weak demand for money (small businesses are clamoring for loans) but problems in supplying money through standard banking channels. As a result, Fukui has been praised as both a technical expert and a good communicator.

I happen to agree with the more positive outlook for the economy. But it could turn out to be an expensive mistake if investors rely too much on Fukui, or on Greenspan, for that matter. Remember, the Fed chief's excessively loose monetary policy created a massive speculative bubble in U.S. asset markets during the 1990s, followed by a sharp downturn when tight policy pricked it.

Fukui has a similar background. He has been Japan's leading central banker for decades and has been known inside the Bank of Japan as "The Prince" because he was tapped in the late 1960s as a future governor. Sure enough, Fukui rose quickly through the ranks, passing through key posts, such as the banking department, which he headed in the crucial late 1980s,

when Japanese banks expanded their speculative real-estate-related lending. Indeed, it was Fukui who used the central bank's infamous "informal guidance" to expand such speculative loans between 1986 and 1989, and thus was responsible for the creation of Japan's bubble and subsequent bust. From 1994 to 1998, as deputy governor and most senior central banker (the governor was an outside appointee), Fukui was responsible for the Bank of Japan's excessively deflationary policy, which was the cause of the long slump.

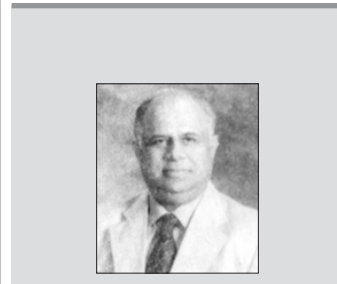
The question is: If Fukui is so good, why did he mess up in the previous two decades? Should we really place our trust in the man who was at the heart of Japan's financial mess of the past 20 years? Why does deflation persist? Another puzzle is why the Japanese media have steadfastly refused to cover Fukui's dismal track record. The problem seems to be one criticized by U.S. trade negotiators in the 1970s and 1980s: the old-style Japanese-press club system, still operated by the Bank of Japan. This has allowed the central bank disproportional influence on Japanese financial media.

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Richard Werner is the author of "Princes of the Yen" an account of the rise of governor Fukui.

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Media in Pakistan



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

THE fundamental ingredient making democracy possible is the flow of information, without which people cannot possibly govern themselves. The media (electronic, print, cyber and internet) ensures this flow of information. If restricted, censored or hindered in any way the people will remain ignorant, ignorant of events, ignorant of their rights, their duty to the State, their needs and the role that they can play for the betterment of the society they live in and the country as a whole. The media play an extremely important role in transmitting the claims of social, economic and political movements to the decision-makers and the public. There are several possible interaction-channels between the media and public opinion. On the one hand, we expect the media to frame and report movements to influence public opinion. On the other hand, media coverage may also reflect the existing public attitudes towards the movement, meaning that the media are themselves affected by public opinion.

In my article entitled Media as an Economic Force Multiplier (The Nation, Nov. 8, 1999), I had written, "Democracies depend upon the media to maintain the sanctity of trust imposed by the people on any government. Without the media to exercise an effective check, authority has a tendency to go berserk in

all senses of the word, combining misuse of powers with nepotism, favouritism and outright corruption. One of the greatest flaws of any kind of dictatorship, military or political and however benign, is the lack of fear among the underlings of exposure, causing misdemeanours to multiply and culprits to flourish."

A truly independent media can be an effective trustee of future generations, therefore efforts should be made to empower media to become

responsible for the benefit of the successor generations. Over the years the media has been shackled by the various governments that took over the reins of power, sometimes quite blatantly and sometimes subtly, rendering ineffective its reach and clout. Pakistan's media policy is quite impractical and is tilted inwards as opposed to the requirement of being bold and courageous. As such it has been difficult for the media to flourish in a healthy manner, its growth remains stunted and its influence still ineffective. The media presently enjoys more freedom than perhaps at any time in our short history, it is free to air its views and criticise freely, a wholesome and welcome change from traditions of yesteryears. Despite the change, the press still does not enjoy the type of freedom that is its right in a democratic set-up.

In the wake of America's successful revolution in 1776, the mak-

ers of the US Constitution decided government would be accountable to the people. The people, in turn, could only hold the government accountable if they knew what it was doing and could intercede as necessary, using their ballot, for example. This role of public "watchdog" was thus assumed by a citizen press, and as a consequence, the government in the United States has been kept out of the news business. The only government-owned or govern-

ment-controlled media in the United States are those that broadcast overseas, such as the Voice of America. By law, this service is not allowed to broadcast within the country. There is partial government subsidy to public television and radio in the United States, but safeguards protect it against political interference.

Nearly 60 percent of the world's nations today are declared democracies, a monumental change from a mere two decades ago, nevertheless most have instituted press laws that prohibit reporting on a whole array of subjects ranging from internal activity and operations of government to the private lives of leaders. Some of these are well-intentioned efforts to "preserve public stability." But all of them, undermine self-governance. Pakistan's rulers used to believe that keeping the press under control, and denying access to information, was one of the ways to defend -- and cover

up -- the country's weaknesses. However, corruption and cover-ups are inextricably linked. The mass migrations referred to earlier led to a windfall for many bureaucrats in cases relating to properties left behind by Hindus. The exploitation of evacuee property for massive personal gains was the first instance of widespread corruption in Pakistan and that goes back right to the beginning. The press in Pakistan, perhaps believing it would be unpa-

triotic to expose corruption in the newly independent State, exercised self-censorship and refrained from any exposures.

Control of the press and flow of information, therefore, ensured that the web of corruption grew unchecked. The only exposures of government corruption became the official "white papers" issued by each usurper about the government it had overthrown. Such attempts not only lacked total credibility; they created an environment of suspicion of all officially disclosed cases of corruption. This is one of the reasons why political governments dismissed on charges of corruption have been later brought back into power by the electorate. On the other hand, some of our journalists and newspapers owe their existence to sensationalism in reporting thereby distorting the truth at will and destroying reputations of law-abiding citizens; they owe alle-

giance to none but to their own crass interests. This kind of reporting is not confined to Pakistan only, in the west (and elsewhere) profit-driven news organisations are under great pressure to boost ratings by sensationalising the news: focusing attention on lurid, highly emotional stories, often featuring a bizarre cast of characters and a gripping plot but devoid of significance to most people's lives.

The control of information and

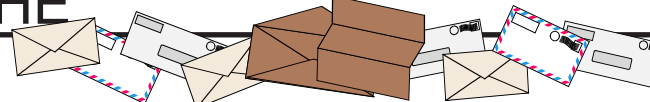
analysis but rather it may be derived from their adherence to bonds of Biradari, Tribal affiliation or influence of the local landlord or the local politician of the area. In addition to illiteracy, widespread poverty has resulted in a further erosion of awareness in the people about the influence that they can wield.

The Pakistani media continues to contribute to the institutionalisation and strengthening of democracy by promoting good governance, inculcating civic culture and democratic parliamentary culture as well as imparting civic education. They have exposed crimes and raised a strong voice against misdeeds of the national/international criminals, smugglers and terrorists. They have played constructive role in arousing mass consciousness about universal concepts like democracy, human rights, good governance, civil societies, environmentalism, gender equity, disarmament, peace, etc thereby providing knowledge about Pakistan's endorsement to various international agreements. All this has raised the level of knowledge among the people.

The media is a bridge between the government and the opposition, between the government and the people, between people and their representatives and between national and global interests, it has unearthed the grievances of the neglected people in society. If the media in Pakistan is to become more effective as a tool that moulds and influences public opinion and national decision making, media executives such as reporters, newscasters, editors, etc must undergo sustained education and training similar to other professionals in their respective fields.

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.

Man on Fire

Do you remember the novel "Amanush" by Humayun Ahmed? or the "Masud Rana" episode of "Agni Purush" by Kazi Anwar Hossain? (I liked "Amanush" better...)

The original story "MAN ON FIRE" by AJ Quinell (a best seller of the 80s) is now a major movie (released in the US last month) with Denzel Washington playing the MAN.

An alcoholic, washed out ex-CIA operative who has given up on every purpose in life, takes on the job of a bodyguard of a 10-year-old daughter of an industrialist in Mexico City plagued by kidnappings. Despite his bitterness, the girl wins his heart and they become good friends. Just as the MAN begins to re-discover life, the girl is kidnapped

and he is critically injured during the shoot-out, only to come back with vengeance to unleash his rage on those involved in the crime. This movie, however, is the second venture.

The first movie was released in 1987, with Scott Glenn playing Creasy (the MAN), left a lot to be desired although Glenn himself was not really a bad choice.

This latest attempt follows the original book at a closer level and is undoubtedly a better product. Though Denzel was a surprise choice, he makes it up with his massive talent and superb screen presence. Dakota Fanning, playing Pita, the 10-year old girl, is as good as the book. Although the movie has an entirely different end than the book, it is justified in every sense if one understands the personal

trauma of Creasy trying to come to terms with his humane and killer instincts. Available in Dhaka in copied (camera-print) DVD formats, the movie is must-see for all Denzel Washington and Quinell fans.

Reaz Shaheed
DOHS, Dhaka

ZIA in disarray

A few days back, I went to Zia International Airport to receive one of my relatives. As usual, the newly extended terminal of ZIA was buzzing with people who were waiting for their near and dear ones. After reaching the terminal, I became bamboozled, as there was no electronic display board from where one could know about the whereabouts of flights. How can people know whether their expected flight has landed or not without the display

board? A tiny information box is there, consisting of two people, but that can hardly meet the curiosity of hundreds of people. Finding no other alternative, I stood outside the terminal and was hoping against the hope that my expected flight landed on due time.

I think the easy way to avoid this hassle is to erect a modern electronic display board, clearly citing the latest location of the flights.

To mitigate the sufferings of people, the airport authorities should take appropriate steps.
Md. Nazrul Islam Sumon
Dept of English, DU

JMJB: A substitute for police?

The Northwest region of Bangladesh has long been dominated by

the Sarbaharas and other outlawed operatives. The region is virtually reigned by them through extorting money and killing people at will. Our under equipped police could never match them.

Now we are watching the rise of an anti-Sarbhara "vigilante" group which extorts money and kills 'suspected' Sarbahara very much the same way. But it has the administration's blessings. The under equipped police are playing a supportive role while the JMJB members are wielding their sophisticated arms openly. The police have urged the people to cooperate with Bangla Bhai, the leader of the group.

Common people have to support the movement, otherwise they will be labelled as Sarbaharas and will end up in the torture cell of 'the

terror' alias Bangla Bhai. With 300,000 followers, the movement is trying to enforce strict Islamic codes in the region.

The police are urging people not to take the law in their own hands and at the same time abetting the JMJB activities. Have police failed in that region? Do they need support of some group to face the extremists? The recent developments put a question mark on the ability of our police force in general.

Joy
Dhaka

An exemplary punishment

Ershad Shikder, a notorious killer, walked to the gallows on May 11 at the Khulna district jail. He had unleashed a reign of terror in

Khulna before his capture in 1999.

He killed more than 55 persons brutally to perpetuate his supremacy. Shikder's hanging is exemplary as such punishment deters criminal activities.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept of English, DU

Noise pollution

Twenty-first century is the age of commercialisation.

We very often find that factories are flourishing rapidly. Along with this, the number of vehicles plying the roads is also increasing day by day. The major problem thus created is noise pollution.

We are living in a modern world where all kinds of pollution is commonplace. Noise pollution is a source of great concern. From the morning till night, we have to

absorb different types of noises. Early in the morning, there are shouts of the vendors. If we go to roads, there are different types of vehicles like rickshaws, motorcycles, vans, cabs, buses, trucks etc.

All these vehicles create different types of noises which bother us a lot. The blaring horns of buses and trucks are the most horrible noise in our cities. Besides, there are lots of people who campaign for political parties. These campaigns also create sound pollution.

Noise is unavoidable, but the situation can be kept under control if we take some steps. If the markets and industrial areas are located far from residential areas, then there will be less sound pollution.

Hasna Hasan
Dhaka