

The press needs uninhibited access to information

M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE press has reported that a circular dated July 15, 2004, issued from the police headquarters under the signature of the Inspector General of Police (IGP) directed police officers below the rank of superintendent of police (SP) not to share information with reporters. Even officers of the rank of SP and above will have to take prior permission from police headquarters before divulging any information to the media. The reason for such an embargo, according to the IGP, is: "While speaking on sensitive incidents, many police officers carelessly share information that causes embarrassment to the whole police administration. Maybe they say things without knowing the consequences of sharing such information."

This means that newspapers will now have to obtain information on sensitive incidents from police head-

quarters or from the SPs and others senior officers authorised by the headquarters. This has come as a shock to the media and the conscious citizens of the country. The editorial of The Daily Star dated July 26, 2004, termed the ban as a bane and expressed the view that the old arrangement had served well the cause of public interest and the administration's need to be accountable. The Ittefaq of July 27, 2004, published a report which stated that one organisation named Manobodhikar had requested the police headquarters to withdraw the aforesaid circular to enable reporters to collect undistorted information on sensitive cases from the field level police officers. It is expected that some other organisations and civil society leaders will shortly come up with similar demand.

Murders, rape, acid throwing, bomb blasts, extortion, trafficking in women and children, smuggling of dangerous drugs and narcotics, and many other

criminal offences have become routine affairs in the country. Our daily newspapers carry reports on heinous and sensitive criminal offences although many such acts, particularly in rural areas, remain unreported. Since these

possible honesty and speed. Secondly, obtaining clearance from police headquarters is a time consuming affair. There is no doubt that police headquarters will seek clearance from the Ministry of Home Affairs for sharing

facts of the sensitive cases and to feed people with such information which the party in power wants to hear? Or is it to put the blame on the main opposition party in parliament for all such incidents? People have observed for

in Ramna Park on the Bangla New Year's day during the period of the immediate past Awami League (AL) government, arms haul at Bogra and Chittagong, and the recent killing of the member of parliament of Gazipur-2

ensured the right of the press. Originally incorporated in the Swedish constitution of 1809, Ombudsman system has been introduced in Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, and Great Britain. In all these countries, the Ombudsman is an officer of the parliament whose duty is to ensure that civil servants carry out their administrative duties according to law and to institute proceedings if they fail to do so. Report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990s (vol 2) published in 1991 states:

The success of the Ombudsman is hard to explain. He does not have any executive power. It appears that the publicity given to the Ombudsman's criticism of the administration in his Annual Reports to Parliament and especially to the daily briefings to the national press together with his prestige is the source of his authority. Every day members of the Swedish press call

at the Ombudsman's office to examine the complaints and the decisions of the previous day. The files are laid on the table ready for inspection by the press. The pressmen select those cases which are of general interest and they have the right to criticise the Ombudsman's handling of a case. This wide and continuous publicity has proved more effective as a weapon that prosecution."

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M Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary, Government of Bangladesh.

Our Constitution has guaranteed the freedom of the press (clause (2) (b) of article 39). For translating this freedom into action, the press needs uninhibited access to information. Article 77 of our Constitution provides for the establishment of the office of Ombudsman. But this office has not yet been established. It is unfortunate that a constitutional obligation remains unimplemented for decades.

criminal activities take place under the jurisdiction of different police stations, the officer-in-charge of the concerned police station is supposed to know the facts of the case(s) best. So, obtaining information from "the horse's mouth" normally ensures accuracy and this enables the media to discharge their duty of informing people with maxi-

mum information with the media on sensitive cases. Maybe such clearance will require the nod of the Prime Minister who is also the Minister for Home Affairs in the absence of a full minister in that ministry. Such delays will lead to dilution of news and manufacture speculation and rumour.

Then why the ban? Is it to conceal

the last thirteen years of democratic rule that whenever a sensitive incident took place, the government hastily issued a press note or the policy makers of the party in power came out with statements putting the blame on the opposition political parties, particularly the main opposition party in parliament. Instances are bomb blasts

constituency under the present BNP government. More instances may be cited.

Our Constitution has guaranteed the freedom of the press (clause (2) (b) of article 39). For translating this freedom into action, the press needs uninhibited access to information. The Scandinavian Ombudsman has

Florida is the biggest voting swing state, and it could well decide the election this November as it did in 2000. Recent polls show Kerry is widening his lead over Bush in the state, but given the spectre of electoral corruption in Florida, it could be a different story on Election Day when the votes count.

Public confidence that the electoral system will work to make each vote count is essential to a well-functioning democracy. But African-American leaders say that they are meeting many young blacks who don't plan to register to vote because they feel their vote won't count. Other blacks who distrust the new electronic voting system plan to stay away as well. The failure of the Bush family and its Republican machine to ensure fair elections threatens to make the US the laughing stock of the world democracies come November. Sad to say, achieving victory at any cost seems more important to the Bush administration than does ensuring the health and viability of the American system.

Daily Star columnist Ron Chepesiuk is a Visiting Professor of Journalism at Chittagong University and a Research Associate with the National Defence College.

INSIDE AMERICA

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compared to one-third of whites. In the 2000 election, more than one million blacks voted, but many of the voters were nullified by tossed ballots and purged voters' rolls. Last August in a speech in Washington DC, before the Unity Conference, the largest gathering of journalists of colour in US history, President George Bush, Jr., in his typically clumsy and weird manner, tried to reassure African-Americans that their vote will count this November. "Just don't focus on

unpopular presidents among African-Americans in the country's post-apartheid era. Moreover, African-Americans in Florida don't trust Jeb Bush with good reason. Looking at recent developments in Florida, it's easy to conclude that the Bush administration in Florida is making moves that look deliberately designed to frustrate Blacks who might want to vote and perhaps might even be designed to disenfranchise them.

Most states allow felons to vote, but

had committed mere misdemeanours and not felonies and so were eligible to vote. With Bush winning by 537 votes, the conclusion is easy to draw. This year, Florida again hired a private company to prepare a list of 47,000 ex-felons. Investigations by the Miami Herald and Tampa Tribune newspapers found that the new list contained Democrats by a three-to-one margin and contained no Hispanics, an ethnic group that tends to vote Republican in Florida.

new electronic voting system that has been brought in to replace the so-called "hanging chads," the small pieces of paper that jammed the punch card machines during the 2000 election. And well they should be. Election officials have no paper records to back up the system, if the new touch-screen machines go haywire, meaning that they have no way to recount the vote.

The Bush administration in Florida has refused numerous requests to put in place a paper backup system. And

get this the Republican led state legislature has exempted the machines from any kind of recount as required for other voting methods. Florida election officials have assured the public that the new system will work. Yet, when Florida had its first major test of touch-screen voting in March 2002, the computers failed to start properly, and the bureaucrats overseeing the technology acted like they didn't know what they were doing. The loser in the election, Janet Reno, Bill's Clinton's former Attorney General, lost by just 4,794 votes.

This August, Florida officials found archival data from the 2002 gubernatorial primary election in Miami Dade County courthouse, adding another to the growing list of cases electronic voting opponents cite when criticising touch screen voting machines. Will Doherty, Executive Director of Voting.org. Inc., a group advocating a paper trail for electronic records, said, "It's not acceptable for electronic records to be lost, even if temporarily."

Election-related developments in Florida has led the New York Times to comment: "Florida's election system was an total disgrace in 2000 and it's well on its way to being one again."

to the crisis politically.

Politics have very little meaning when people are struggling to simply live another day. The situation in Darfur is disturbing and seriously warrants a genuine concern before its too late. The international community cannot rely on a false hope that the turbulent winds of violence will breeze through by a mere resolution that cautions action.

There is an ambiguity as to what the international response will be if the Sudanese government fails to adhere to the terms of the resolution at the end of the 30 day period. The international response has been somewhat dismally slow and disorganized. While the United Nations are doing outstanding humanitarian work, it is still struggling to be cohesive and effective in responding

Sudan's quest for peace

FATIMA CHOWDHURY

CONFLICT seems to have become a way of life for Sudan that has struggled to find peace and stability since its independence in 1956. The years of fighting between the Arab-dominated Muslim north and Animist south has led to a nation devastated by death and suffering. In May 2004, after years of intense diplomatic efforts, a historic peace agreement was finally reached between the Arab-dominated Khartoum government and the foremost southern ethnic rebel group SPLA. But Sudan is yet to change the tide of its turbulent and violent past as a whole new conflict takes root in the western region of Darfur.

The recent conflict in Darfur has been more than a year in the making. Tensions have long existed between the mainly nomadic Arabs tribes and the African farmers belonging to the Zagawa, Massaleet, and Fur ethnic groups. There has been sporadic inter-communal conflict as desertification has led to rivalry over scarce land and water resources. The attack by the various Arab tribes has led to the emergence of two main armed rebel groups, Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA). Propelled by a sense of neglect and

prejudice by the Khartoum government, the rebel groups launched an attack in February 2003 against government establishments. In April, the government signed a ceasefire agreement with the two rebel groups that have since failed.

There are now attempts to bring the conflicting parties back to the negotiation table to broker a more concrete peace. But the conflict is far from simple for various armed elements from government forces to criminal gangs seem to be taking advantage of the ensuing turmoil.

One of the main partakers in the Darfur conflict is the armed Arab militia group Janjaweed consisting of horse and camel-riding fighters mostly from the Baggara tribe and other nomadic Arab groups. The militias are believed to have strong support within the ruling government as they are seen as an effective opposition to the rebel groups. There are already reports that the Janjaweed assisted by the cover of air strikes by the Sudanese air force attack villages and unleash hell through a systematic policy of ethnic cleansing. The Sudanese government does not acknowledge any association with the Janjaweed but definitely there seems to be a reluctance to restrain them, hence a suspected nexus. The Sudanese government claim to be making initiatives to disarm the

militias, an assertion that is being supported by the Arab League. The African Union on the other hand is urging for new and more comprehensive negotiations and is already

response from the International Community.

The US has drafted a resolution, which was adopted by the UN Security Council in July. This resolution asks the

voting. As expected, Sudan has refused to abide by the resolution, seeing it as a mere resolution that cautions action. The people of Darfur are looking beyond its grim reality with a weak optimism that the international community can bring an end to the misery that they bear so heavily. So, can the world really look the other way as humanity faces yet another test of time.

and organized international intervention. The lessons of the past remain unlearned and discarded on the fringes of conflict resolution. Darfur is a reminder how ill equipped the

debate so long to draft a resolution to address the Darfur crisis. The time frame of 30 days in the resolution is an eternity for the people of Darfur who face the terror day after day as murders are blatantly committed, rape is rampant, and death stalks the arid region like an ominous shadow.

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