

Finance minister's media tirade

Can it hide the facts?

MEDIA bashing is a new pastime in the city among certain circles having been spearheaded by no less a person than finance minister M Saifur Rahman. The minister has blamed media reportage on corruption for the Berlin-based Transparency International's ranking of Bangladesh as the most corrupt among 146 countries tested on a uniformly applied corruption perception index (CPI).

The dynamic, public-spirited and professionally committed independent media for which Bangladesh is respected all around the world is being ironically portrayed as the sole villain earning a bad name for the country. Placing all the blame at the doorstep of the media for 'the most corrupt' image of the country is ludicrous. Does the media create news or report news? Any medium of information manufacturing news will be discarded by the public with disdain, the minister should have known better.

All of this is stifling public access to information about the corruption in government, and that too in the extraordinary situation where the opposition has had no effective voice in parliament, partly due to the walkover it gave to the government, and no less owing to the latter's denial of space to the opposition.

The minister doesn't have to look far to find out who are maligning Bangladesh; a close look in his own vicinity will reveal the names, if he cares to take one.

We strongly decry Saifur Rahman's attack on the media, his comments being totally unjustified and thoroughly misplaced. What's dreadful about this mindset is that it could lead to measures for media control which are occasionally vaguely hinted at, as something of a ruse.

The bankruptcy of his position is revealed by the fact that there was a BNP gloating over the first TIB report that perceived Bangladesh as the topmost corrupt country because it came out during the AL rule. A negative report is good and authentic if it covered AL rule but it is bad and unacceptable if it's released when BNP is in power. Without taking a single corrective step during the last three years of the four years on a trot we have been perceived at the top of the corruption pyramid, the government, if Saifur Rahman is to be believed, is taking refuge in so-called media failings in the seeming absence of any other sanctuary.

What can the government tell the people in self-defence when the promised anti-corruption commission, Ombudsman's office and separation of the judiciary from the executive have remained on the wish, or shall we say rhetoric, list of the government for the last three years.

The final demolition of Saifur Rahman's *blame-the-media theory* comes from TIB's clarification that the graft report was based on data received from different global agencies.

Saifur Rahman's remarks coming as they do from one who has had an impressive global exposure, are unbelievable.

Israel's Gaza pull outplan

No unilateral move will solve the crisis

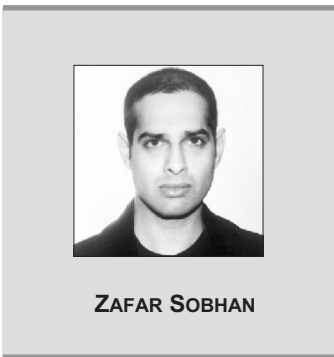
ISRAELI Prime Minister Ariel Sharon might feel relieved at the support of his party members and largely his opponents in the parliament to the controversial Gaza pullout plan, but whether it means the end of violence in the region is a worry that will continue to haunt Sharon. Because first of all there are no visible plans or signs of pulling out of the other occupied territories, especially the West Bank. It may never be possible for Sharon at all, seeing the stiff opposition he faced in the case of Gaza only.

Secondly, does a simple pullout of the settlers from the region mean freedom of movement for the Palestinians at all? The area will still be ringed by the Israeli troops twenty-four hours a day. According to the approved plan, they will continue to control Gaza's borders, coastline and airspace. We wonder whether this was the kind of freedom that the Palestinians were fighting for.

And lastly -- and most significantly -- were the Palestinians, the major stakeholder in the crisis, ever consulted about the plan? As a leading Palestinian negotiator aptly put it -- the Israelis were 'negotiating with themselves'. The Israelis discussed the future of the Palestinians, decided the fate of their children, but one vital component was missing in the whole procedure -- the Palestinians themselves. Such unilateral decision is totally unacceptable. In fact, there has been no negotiation with them since the erection of the wall. This was a prime opportunity for Sharon to bridge that gap. Unfortunately he gave no emphasis on it.

Peace has been eluding the region for far too long. There have been attempts galore in the past, some even have been rewarding and recognised as such by world bodies. But where is peace? Each side blame the other for failure in the negotiations; in the bargain, innocent lives on both sides perished in terrorist acts. Israel must understand that no amount of pressure or force or for that matter any unilateral move, even if it is ostensibly positive, will bring the peace that, at least, they are hoping for. Bring the Palestinians back to the negotiating table and find a solution acceptable to all.

The final countdown



THIS is it. The 2004 US presidential election is four days away and the final countdown has begun. On November 2, the rest of the world will hold its breath while Americans go to the polls to determine their president for the next four years. Never before have people around the world been so focused on an election in another country, and never before has so much been at stake.

All week, if not all month, people have been asking me to predict who I think will win. In a sense it is flattering that people think that I might have some special insight into the election, but the truth is that everyone has access to the same information that I do over the internet.

I think that, more than anything else, the people I have spoken to want reassurance or hope. Almost everyone I have spoken to is petrified of another four years of President Bush in the White House and wants to know if there is any chance -- please -- that he be defeated.

I am not planning to make a true prediction for a number of very understandable reasons. The first of these is that making predictions is a mug's game for a columnist, and we run the very real risk of ending up looking a bit silly if our predictions are off the mark. The second is the fact that it is very possible that my

own bias interferes with my judgement and keeps me from looking at the hard facts as clearly and objectively as I should.

The final reason is that anything could happen even in the four days between now and election day to throw everything off and change the likely outcome beyond anything anyone could possibly predict.

This is why predictions made too far in advance are more or less meaningless. In this day and age there are simply too many variables to accurately predict anything six months down the line. Now, of

the ultimate closeness of the finish. In fact, Bush was so confident of victory that he took a couple of days off campaigning and it was Gore's last gasp whirlwind campaigning on the eve of the election that helped to swing undecided and independent voters to his side, resulting in his winning the popular vote by half a million.

So many things could still happen between now and election day. There could be a terrorist strike somewhere in the US. Bush could pull Osama like a rabbit out of his hat

and minority voters, both groups which vote predominantly Democratic.

It is worth recalling that in 2000, of the 41 polls that were run the last week before the election, 39 of them predicted a victory for Bush by an average margin of 3.6 percent. In the end, Gore actually won the popular vote by a razor-thin margin.

Besides which, as 2000 showed, the share of the popular vote really isn't that important. The thing that matters is how the candidates are faring in the battleground states that

immense desire to see President Bush sent packing back to his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

More crucially, it seems as though the Bush team still has plenty of dirty tricks up its sleeve for the home stretch. Internal Republican polling suggests that the key to a Democratic victory is minority turn-out, and so the Republicans have put in place a nation-wide effort to intimidate and disenfranchise minority voters in the hope of depressing the turn-out.

If these efforts prove more successful than the Democratic efforts

lying down this time. The question is, who is more motivated this year. More motivated to get their people to the polls, to ensure that the polls are fair, to ensure that no irregularities are permitted to give the other side an unfair advantage.

I think it's the Dems who want it more this year, but if recent history is anything to go by, the Republicans will stop at nothing to ensure victory -- by fair means or foul. I suspect that it might be difficult for the Republicans to win if they fight fair -- but then again when have the Republicans ever fought fair?

The rest of the world can just sit and anxiously watch CNN and BBC to find out the result. The US ambassador recently asked me who people in Bangladesh were rooting for. I told him that the breakdown was probably something like 90 percent to 10 percent in favour of Kerry -- but I was sugar-coating it a little -- in truth I suspect that it might be hard to find ten people in the country who prefer Bush, let alone ten percent. In this we are joined, according to a recent poll, by most of the people of the world.

This election could have a decisive impact on how Americans are viewed in the rest of the world. The reputation of the country beyond its borders has never been lower, and now is the opportunity for Americans to either cement their negative image in the eyes of the world or to demonstrate what their Declaration of Independence calls "a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind."

Let's hope that they make the right choice and that if they do that the election result reflects the will of the people.

Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

This election could have a decisive impact on how Americans are viewed in the rest of the world. The reputation of the country beyond its borders has never been lower, and now is the opportunity for Americans to either cement their negative image in the eyes of the world or to demonstrate what their Declaration of Independence calls "a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind."

course there are many people who will predict a winner six or twelve months in advance, and many of them will pick correctly. It's a fifty-city shot after all. But anyone who confidently tells you that they called the election for Kerry or Bush six months ago is simply being unrealistic about the many variables in a modern day political campaign.

Six months is too far ahead. Frankly, one week is too far ahead. The landscape changes on a day to day basis and a slight shift here or there could make all the difference. Even with four days left it is still difficult to call how things will pan out and how things will look on election day.

In 2000, it wasn't until the last couple of days that the polls showed Gore closing in on Bush, predicting

on the eve of the election. Bush could land a seriously low blow against Kerry that halts his momentum in its tracks. Kerry could commit some horrendous gaffe that could cause his popularity to plummet. Any of these could turn the election decisively.

But -- and please bear in mind that this is not a prediction -- if none of the above transpires -- and it's a big if -- then Kerry is in with a decent chance of being elected the 44th president of the United States.

One thing that I will state with some confidence is that no one should take the current polls that indicate a slight Bush lead too seriously. The polls are skewed towards Republicans for a number of reasons and undercount first-time

will decide the election. The latest indications are that Kerry is pulling slightly ahead in the battleground states, and has a slight but perceptible lead in likely electoral college votes.

One theory that I have found persuasive is that the election may not in the end be as close as the polls predict, and that in the last few days the voters will shift decisively one way or the other, as happened in the 1980 election won by Ronald Reagan. This analysis suggests that many undecided voters will not make up their minds until the very last moment -- perhaps even in the polling booth -- and there do seem to be signs that undecided and independent voters are trending Kerry's way.

But this is all mere speculation, influenced greatly, no doubt, by my

to get minorities to the polls in record numbers, then the Republicans will stand a good chance of winning.

There have been credible reports of attempted voter suppression and intimidation in the battleground states of Florida and Ohio, and all sorts of underhanded shenanigans -- from malfunctioning voting machines to electronic voting machines that leave no paper trail to missing or confusing absentee ballots -- have been detected that suggest that the fix is in.

Both sides have armies of lawyers deployed the length and breadth of the US and if the election does end up close there is every possibility that recounts and legal challenges will delay the determination of the winner as in 2000.

No one is going to take anything

Four more with GWB



LAST chance to write about George W. Bush before the Big Election next week. If he wins, he will get four more years in the White House. If he loses, perhaps he will walk into the sunset of his political career, occasionally resurfacing in debates and discussions with regards to Iraq and terrorism. If you want me to drop a bet on this election, I would say GWB is going to win unless there is any last minute upset. My wager on him is not because I want him to win but because that is how it looks to me.

Throughout his election campaign, Bush has accused his opponent of being a flip-flop. John Kerry voted for war in Iraq and then said he would have voted differently if he knew then what he knew now. Saddam Hussain did not have WMD, and he did not have any links with the Al Qaeda network. These are facts confirmed by investigation after investigation. But Bush is not a flip-flop; he is a stick in the mud. Right or wrong, he is not going to change his mind or admit his mistake.

So he sticks to his guns. The Bush Doctrine is a firm conviction of preemptive strike, which means burning the bed before the bugs can bite. The President of the United

States has a duty to protect his country from terrorist attack, and he has sent his armies to distant lands to search and destroy terrorists and their breeding grounds. But the preemptive strike is also working at home. The no-fly list had 16 names on it after 9/11 in 2001. That list has now swelled to more than 20,000 names and each month hundreds of new names are being added to the list. Senator Edward Kennedy has been stopped five times for questioning at the airport, because his name appeared in the secret no-fly list of the US government.

question. "Fanaticism consists in redoubling your efforts when you have forgotten your aim", he wrote in "The Life of Reason" published in 1905, the same volume in which he had also famously observed: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Perhaps Bush is going to do more of the same thing in four more years, sending more troops in Iraq, going after new countries like North Korea and Iran. Perhaps he will be like the mad old man in the village market, poked and provoked by rogue nations to lose his temper and go

nations coming under Bush's preemptive strike. The Palestinians will still be fighting against Israeli occupation, and more nations in the world will take side with them.

It is possible that GWB's attack on terrorism will increasingly turn into an attack on the Muslims. The going wisdom that although not all Muslims are terrorists, but most terrorists are Muslims, will significantly change. Perhaps Islam will turn into more than a religion, a kind of a rallying idealism for anti-American sentiments in the Third World. If history is any lesson,

CROSS TALK

Cognitive psychologists use a term for a common logical error, which is called the "availability heuristic." It means making judgments about the future based not on a broad body of historical evidence but on recent, vivid events that skew our perceptions. The U.S. voters will vote for Bush because their minds are playing the same trick on them. Despite all the lies and mistakes of George Bush, they think of 9/11 every time they think of him.

That is the sign of a country, which is jittery and paranoid. Even though Bush has been tough on the terrorists, he has also terrorised his own country at the same time. Take a look at the airports, federal offices, national monuments and landmark buildings. The security checks, roadblocks and dividers have turned them into besieged fortresses. The terrorists may be a threat to America, but it is George W. Bush, who has successfully taken that threat to the American hearts.

So, if GWB is elected -- God help us -- for another term, what will happen in the four more years? Perhaps we could use a little bit of George Santayana to answer that

completely berserk. Perhaps he will scowl a bit more, cackle more often, and take his arrogance to its logical conclusion. Perhaps there will be more bomb blasts and more deaths, yet vaunted claims coming from a more megalomaniac President that the world has been safer because of his madness.

In four more years, Iraq is likely to descend into greater chaos. The trial of Saddam Hussain might be over or draw near its end, giving him life or death sentence, if he is not already dead by then. Four more years of heightened security in the American airports, borders and cities, because the pale of terrorism will have widened due to more

hostility breeds hostility and revolutions thrive on attempts to suppress them. In four more years, it is possible that terrorism will be cultivated more as Bush tries to crush it more. The composition of terrorists might change as well. Most terrorists will be Muslims, while more terrorists will be non-Muslims.

Bush will muddle through the domestic economy in the next term just the way he did it in this term. More jobs will go abroad, healthcare will be ignored, and the high-income group (above USD200,000 I am told) will continue to enjoy the benefits of various tax breaks and tax rebates. But then the most common sense of all is that the U.S. economy

Don't ask me why, I have a gut feeling that GWB's return to power will also mark the beginning of the American decline. He will preside over the lowest point of American goodwill in the world. He will find Iraq and Afghanistan different from Vietnam, which had semblance of idealism and political wisdom. Iraq and Afghanistan are sheer vengeance turned into show of might. America is hobbling in the zigzag between moral ambiguity and military power. GWB is going to head the most hated government in the world.

Polls show that more Americans actually believe GWB is a decisive leader not a flip-flop. But decisiveness in error only proves arrogance.

And arrogant power is the steppingstone of ruinous end. GWB is undermining democracy in his own country to export democracy in faraway lands. Iraq and Afghanistan have been feudal societies in the garb of autocracy. GWB will be dismayed in his second term that the fragile plant of democracy doesn't grow in the rugged soil of occupation. It is tantamount to convincing someone who is in a straightjacket.

George Bush will come back in 2005, and that is how it looks to me. Cognitive psychologists use a term for a common logical error, which is called the "availability heuristic." It means making judgments about the future based not on a broad body of historical evidence but on recent, vivid events that skew our perceptions. One example is that if a list of men and women are flipped before your eyes, you will tend to think that you saw more men than women.

The U.S. voters will vote for Bush because their minds are playing the same trick on them. Despite all the lies and mistakes of George Bush, they think of 9/11 every time they think of him. It is a sort of mind game, where the name George Bush is the joystick in their hands. It helps them relentlessly zap Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussain, Abu Musab Zargawi and the terrorists who attacked their country in 2001.

Let me tell you what is my best bet. I hope my mind is also playing the same trick on me. I wish the American voters were flip-flops and changed their minds not to vote for GWB. Actually, I want John Kerry to win. He needs to win.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

OPINION

To the honourable members of parliament

SHAMMITA

WE, the common people of Bangladesh, would like to draw the kind attention of the honourable members of the Jatiya Sangsad, as the whole nation is in a terrible crisis today in every sphere of our lives. Honourable members of parliament, we elected you in the hope that our basic demands would be fulfilled and our thoughts reflected in your policies and activities. We are deeply concerned with what you both, the ruling party and the opposition, are doing. One party wants to cling on to power, under any circumstances and at any cost. The other party desperately wants to topple the ruling party right away. The other parties and independent members don't know on which side of the divide they will sit on.

We hear that the Awami League and some other parties are getting prepared to launch a movement to force the present government to resign due to its failure in fulfilling important pledges made in its

election manifesto.

Honourable members of the main opposition, do you have any concrete agenda in this regard which will unite us to come under your umbrella? We are once again confused with your indecisive plans and somewhat tactless acts done in the past. Suppose, hypothetically, if you are given the power to run the government, will you be able to make drastic changes to the current practices? Are you sincere about your commitments? We expect you to do some self-criticism before pointing fingers at others. We don't want hartals any more; neither do we support the burning of vehicles, public and private structures, and disruptions to the economy. We appreciate your other ways of showing no confidence in the government. You should remember that the background of the non-cooperation movement was different and the nature and strategy of the movement for independence was different as well. Today, the situation is similar, but not the same, and this is the reason why you need

to organise your movement to remove misrule from the country in a different way. The strategy will have to be different and modified as well.

We feel sorry that members of parliament could not explain properly that the terrorist attack on August 21 is not similar to similar incidents in the US and Indonesia. The reason the people of these countries did not want the removal of their governments was that the governments themselves were the victims of the attacks that occurred in those nations. To the contrary, in our country, the victims of the violence are a particular political party, not the government. In Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, and Chechnya, the stories are different. We pity you that you kept on unilaterally accusing the religion-based parties for the heinous attack. We hope that you will broaden your thinking and make your list of suspects a bit longer, so that you can include more suspicious persons on it.

Anyway, every government does some good work. Any opposition should appreciate the positive

efforts taken by the government. You, too, could take the initiative and make an example of such a good gesture. Our request to you is to keep your commitments intact.

Members of parliament from the other parties and independent MPs, you can also contribute through your political wisdom and experience to policy-making and its execution. Whichever party or parties form the government, its main goal should be development of the country and its people in a non-partisan manner. No party should use power to further personal or vested interests. No party should exploit the poor and uneducated people through narrow-minded pursuits such as buying votes or giving petty benefits before elections.

Honourable members of parliament of the ruling party, it is praiseworthy that you give your full support and loyalty to your leader and the party as well. Please remember when loyalty transforms into blindness, the result is dreadful. Our request to you is not to recite that

same "rhyme" in the same "tune" as you were taught to defend yourselves for the grenade attack and the parliament episode of "Section 62." We really got fed up listening to the same words.

Now, with your kind permission, we would like to request you to differentiate amongst the following: (1) Leader, (2) Charismatic political leader, (3) Politician, and (4) Head of the Government, as most of you confuse others very often.

Dear lawmakers, you have committed a blunder at the very beginning of your voyage on the ocean of politics. It seems you believe in "computerised independence" where one presses the cursor and immediately the screen displays "I Major Zia, on behalf of our great leader, the supreme commander of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, hereby proclaim independence of Bangladesh ... Joy Bangla."

This statement was given on March 27, 1971. Before that, on March 26, 1971, MA Hannan, the leader of Chittagong Awami League, made the

formal announcement of independence as directed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and that is the reason we observe March 26 to mark our special day -- I hope you will not change it from the 26th to the 27th in future.

After so many years of our independence, why this question of "formal announcement" is once again being raised, what is the intention behind denying the significant contribution of Sheikh Mujib in achieving an independent and sovereign Bangladesh? Don't you have any other and more urgent and important current issues to work on?

You hate the previous policy-makers but love the policy (eg Special Powers Act, judicial system, etc). In the matters of development you take all the credit to you own account, on the issues of violence, insecurity, corruption, and all other problems, you apply the theory of "law of inheritance." If you always tend to go back to cover your weaknesses, then what is the necessity of the existence of the present rule.

Regarding arms haul in Bogra, Sylhet, and Chittagong, your mouth

is sealed with rubber cement. You accuse the victims themselves for the heinous grenade attack. You are brilliant!

You watch and enjoy the "drama" played on the scheduled days of delivering verdict of the Jail Killing Case.

You do not seem serious in finding out who was responsible for perpetrating the heinous act of August 21. The special agencies recently formed are successfully removing some suspected terrorists; it does not mean they are making our country free from terrorists. They are trimming the front faces of the terrorists -- the stems and roots remain untouched. We want rapid action to eliminate terrorism from its very roots. We want rapid action to reform the complicated laws having thousands of loopholes, we want rapid action to reform the whole administration, and we want rapid action to set up human rights and anti-corruption commissions. We want rapid action to separate the judiciary from the executive, we want rapid action to reform the election process, we

want rapid action to establish law and justice, we want rapid action to remove unemployment, we want rapid action to control price hike, we want rapid action in bringing accused criminals to book and not to kill them without trial.

However, you are the elected government. You have got the power, position, and logistics to rescue us from misrule. In the last 33 years we never found the sovereignty of our country in jeopardy. The problems we have are all internal. We are still hopeful that these problems can be solved if you have the honesty and the bold intention to do so.

Let our politicians, leaders, experienced and specialised personnel, intellectuals, and lawmakers sit together to establish unity and national integration which is needed badly to protect the process of democratisation in Bangladesh and to protect our existence as well.