

Journalists sitting duck to lethal attacks

People's right to know in danger

ONCE again journalists have fallen victim to murderous assault by vested quarters in Khulna, with bombs having been planted at the press club exploding on Saturday. If one takes stock of the incidents it would appear rather extraordinary that it's in Khulna in particular that journalists have been made targets of attacks with regular frequency. Thirteen journalists have been killed in the south-western region in the past ten years.

The recent victims have been very senior members of the Khulna journalist fraternity. Reports in the press regarding the vested elements, not ruling-out anti-state groups, that emanated from journalists of the region may be the cause of their incurring the wrath of the perpetrators.

Journalism carries with it the hazards of the profession; in Bangladesh it is even more so. We are faced with assault from many sides. Gathering information as well as reporting events truthfully are fraught with unforeseen dangers. Yet the journalist community in Bangladesh have been unflinching in their professional pursuits, fully aware of the dangers that go with their mission. Needless to say, such selfless yet hazardous endeavour stems from our commitment to expose the truth as well as the evil that work against the country's interest. This is also in keeping with the desire to fulfil the people's right to know and attacks against the press can be seen as nothing but an effort to stifle its voice.

There is a fear psychosis amongst the entire community of Khulna journalists because of death threats made against the frontline journalists of this area for their reportage. Such threats are common knowledge, which we are sure the law enforcing and intelligence agencies are well aware of.

Both the recent cases of death due to bomb attacks remain sub judice, yet one wonders whether we would ever be able to know the identity of the real culprits behind these attacks.

It is our demand that not only do the authorities get to the bottom of these attacks but also take appropriate measures to protect journalists who have become an endangered species in the line of duty.

Now, it's a strike call for port city

As if two country-wide hartals were not enough

CALLING for three-day-long hartal in Chittagong after two long, excruciating spells of countrywide shutdown, had raised a big question-mark on the rationale for the same. Thankfully, the duration of the hartal programme has been whittled down to eight hours. Still, we wonder why another hartal in the port city which is still reeling from the effect of the recent general strikes!

The reason being given by the opposition leaders of the port city is police highhandedness during the preceding general hartals. As a matter of fact, police action against opposition activists has been extensively covered by the media; hence, the public are far too well-aware of the goings-on to be retold through an exclusive hartal in Chittagong. The issue has been very much under national focus from the beginning. There is very little doubt that the common people remain outraged over the uncalled for police heavy-handedness.

We also have, many times in the past, voiced our condemnation against denial of democratic space to the opposition. We have repeatedly said that not allowing anyone to express dissent is a mockery of democracy. In spite of all these, we wonder why, and on what ground, did the opposition parties of Chittagong deem it appropriate to force another long spell of hartal on the Chittagonians.

No one knows better than them the implications such complete stoppage has on the economy. It basically brings to the fore the illogicality of hartals as such. For example, cargo handling in the port is already on the verge of collapse, and according to reports, container congestion has reached a record high, thereby upsetting the timetables of importers and exporters, not to mention the financial losses they will incur in consequence. Particularly, the readymade garments sector, which is already under threat in the post-MFA situation, is likely to suffer even more in such unstable and uncertain circumstances.

All we want to say is why take out the anger due to government excesses and police actions on business and commerce, on top of causing hardship to common people? It is entirely unacceptable and totally repugnant to economic sensibilities. We believe that a joint statement by the opposition parties condemning the police actions would have been prudent and garnered more public support to their cause.

Saarc postponement: Why?



THE 13th Saarc Summit has been postponed twice. The first postponement was due to the natural cause of devastating tsunami of December 26 which resulted in the death of thousands of people and massive destruction of property in Saarc member countries India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The second postponement appears to be entirely due to the perceived unstable political situation in Nepal and Bangladesh.

The postponement of the summit does not augur well for the image of the Bangladesh government. The timing is unfortunate for the government because the assassination of Kibria has raised concern in the international community as to where the country is going and why under the current government. The postponement of the summit strengthens the negative perception of the Bangladesh government.

It also puts back many ideas for regional cooperation, particularly in economic areas, that India has been insisting on for other member countries, including agreement on some elements of South Asia Free Trade Agreement, proposal of bilateral FTA, transit rights and introduction of single currency in South Asia among member countries. The summit would have been the "catalyst" for resurgence of economic activities within the South Asian region as Saarc enters the third decade of its existence.

On February 2, Prime Minister of

India Dr. Manmohan Singh decided not to attend the summit in Dhaka to be held on February 6-7. India's External Affairs Secretary Shyam Saran explained why Prime Minister Singh would not be able to attend.

He reportedly said: "The decision has been taken against the background of recent developments in our neighbourhood which have caused us grave concern."

He used the term "neighbourhood" implying Nepal and Bangladesh. He obviously referred to the

time when their state of bilateral relations was low because of the Kashmir situation.

The 13th Summit met a similar fate. Although two reasons were cited by India, there appears to be other reasons, some of which may deserve mention below:

First, Saarc had a limping start from the very beginning (1985). It is a forum of regional cooperation in name only. Political misunderstandings and distrust underlie the implementation of the objectives of

volatile political situation in Nepal as the 63-year old King dismissed the government on February 1 and took control of the country himself, contrary to the system of Constitutional Monarchy. Further, Saran was quoted to have said in a press release issued by the Indian High Commission in Dhaka that "the security situation in Dhaka has deteriorated in recent days following the fatal attack on the former Finance Minister of Bangladesh."

India has not been seen to be enthusiastic in attending the summit in Dhaka as it had shortened the duration of the summit to the minimum possible. Whether it is due to security or other reasons, it is difficult to pinpoint.

The Saarc summits have never been held regularly. The 12th summit in Pakistan had to be postponed because India's then Prime Minister was not comfortable to meet with the Pakistani military President at a

without calling him to face confidence motion in Parliament appears to be a "dictatorial" one and arguably such action has no justification under constitutional monarchial system where the King reigns but does not rule the country. Naturally India is gravely concerned with the situation because Nepal comes within the security parameters of India.

Fourth, India's offer of assistance to the democratic government in Nepal to address the Maoist insur-

gency has become irrelevant because of the change of political situation. India does not wish to help a monarch who has been consistently accused of indulging in factional politics, destroying the edifice of a democratic government under constitutional monarchy.

In fact, India perceives some "hidden agenda" in the King's action in dismissing for the second time the parliamentary government and taking charge of the country. Recently Nepal, believed to be under pressure from China, has shut the door on Tibetans fleeing through Nepal to India. The Dalai Lama's office in Nepal has been closed.

Fifth, The King's action raised concerns in the US, the UK, and the UN. Secretary General Annan is quoted to have said that the King's action is a serious setback for the country. The US which provides Nepal's army with weapons, has

who was scheduled to attend the summit would not go well internationally. This would convey that nothing had been politically wrong in Nepal and imply the acceptance of action of the King in dismissing the government. Such position is also not acceptable to India and to Nepali political leaders, some of whom have been arrested.

Sixth, the assassination of Mr. Kibria, an important member of Awami League and an MP, strengthens India's perception that the current government in Bangladesh is not doing enough to contain intolerant conduct of some extremists towards opposition political leaders and other religious sects including the Ahmadiyyas.

The report of the *New York Times* on January 23 by its reporter Eliza Griswold who traveled to Bangladesh has been damaging indeed. She concludes: "The global war on terror is aimed at making the rise of

regimes like that of the Talibans impossible, in Bangladesh the trend could be going the other way."

Although the government dismissed outright the report of *Times*, it does not impress people outside the country because Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the US counter-terrorism chief of State Department, Ambassador Cofer Black expressed concern on the emergence of unacceptable level of intolerance in Bangladesh.

Finally, under the prevailing situation in Bangladesh, Prime Minister of India does not want to give the impression that democratic principles of moderation, compromise, and tolerance have been sailing smoothly in Bangladesh. His action to not attend the summit could be for both domestic and external reasons. His non-attendance will give a strong negative signal to donor countries of Bangladesh.

It is not what Bangladesh government perceives it to be. Its countless denials of the current intolerant situation in society must be demonstrated by determined actions. The two violent incidents of grenade attacks -- one on August 21, 2004 and the other on January 27, 2005 -- have generated serious concern among friends of Bangladesh.

What counts is how the rest of the world looks or views Bangladesh under the current government. Perception of a country is derived from a multiplicity of contacts and interactions that Bangladesh has with the rest of the world at different levels, governmental and private, and in different spheres. Perception derived from one sphere spills over to another and they cannot be separated. The sooner the government takes visible actions to hold the culprits accountable, the better is for Bangladesh's image around the world and among its friends.

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Bad news from Bangladesh

NAEEM MOHAIEEM

ONCE again, bad news about Bangladesh is in the foreign media. Eliza Griswold's New York Times report "Bangladesh: The Next Islamist Revolution?" has Dhaka's chattering classes up in arms. To be fair to the Times, there was a positive story about Bangladesh a month back. "Surviving to Export Another Day" was an article about how Bangladesh was coping well with the end of MFA quotas in garments export. That glowing article (accompanied by photos of working women, none wearing hijab) came out in the weekend Business Section, which actually has a higher readership than the weekend magazine where Griswold's article came out. But because of the government's furious reaction, the negative "Islamist Revolution" story will get far more publicity.

What about Bangladeshi expatriates? Shouldn't they play some role in publicizing good news about Bangladesh? This is a fair argument and one I faced repeatedly last year. Through most of 2004, I was in Bangladesh, first working on my film *Muslims or Heretics?* and then screening it at various venues. The film is a documentary on persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims, and ended with an appeal to withdraw the government ban on Ahmadiyya books. In the course of the year, the film was screened at British Council, Russian Cultural Center, BRAC Center, Goethe Center, Chittagong Press Club, Prabarthana, and many villages in Bangladesh.

One of the people I met during the screenings was musician Maqsud, who famously said, "Ami BNP ba AL er dalal na, Ami Bangladesh'er

dalal. (I'm not a stooge for either BNP or AL, I'm a stooge for Bangladesh)." At my film screening, his first question was, "I don't understand you expatriates. Isn't there anything good in Bangladesh for you to make films about?" Maqsud's question gave me pause. Later we had a long discussion during an interview for his website. My response at that

iPod and Jay-Z, was the familiar Sangsad Bhaban, with a skinny Bangali kid staring up at it. *My Architect* had just been released in New York's art-house theaters, and the posters were everywhere. I was euphoric, excited and above all, proud. By then I had seen the film and was convinced that, finally, this film would show something positive

producer: "Look, we can't just be interviewing Indians. We need some Bangladeshis. Farhad Mazhar is very prominent in this movement, I'm going to Dhaka to interview him." I also thought I would use this opportunity to set up a screening of *My Architect* -- perhaps the government could be convinced to "officially" invite him.

As long as there are Bangla Bhais, Ahmadiyya book bans, mysterious arms shipments in Chittagong, and unsolved bomb blasts, the newspapers of the world will continue to report bad news about Bangladesh. Don't waste time looking for "conspiracies." Start creating some good news -- expatriates will be the first to publicize it. It's that simple.

I arrived in Dhaka and interviewed Mazhar, and then began research into a screening inside the Parliament building. Suddenly, bad news intruded and pushed my plans aside. To everyone's surprise, the government announced a ban on Ahmadiyya books in response to street protests by radical Islamists. Civil society was thrown into uproar, Jamaat e Islami and its allies openly rejoiced and an emboldened Khatme Nabuwot began attacking Ahmadiyya mosques. I had ties to the community (one of my St. Joseph classmates was Ahmadiyya) and was immediately drawn into the issue. Human rights has always been my first priority, so I had no choice but to start shooting interviews -- with the intention of making a short film. Propelled by events and a sense of looming crisis, I finished the film quickly. In the process, I saw that inside this crisis lay larger issues of religion and state. What sort of country would

we have? One where religion was a private matter, or one where the government interfered in religious beliefs?

What about screening *My Architect* and spreading good news about Bangladesh? All those positive, idealistic projects fell by the wayside -- a victim of the cloud of bad news that the government had created

with the book ban. My final words to Maqsud were, "Look we expatriates are the first to shout about good news from Bangladesh. But the problem is, there is too much bad news coming out, and too many things to be fixed, so we never get a chance to talk about the good news." Talking to a government employee at the BRAC screening, I added, "The Ahmadiyya issue can be solved in one day. All the government has to do is withdraw the book ban. If my film becomes useless tomorrow because the ban has been removed, I'll happily go back to my original project about *My Architect*."

I said similar things at all my film screenings last year. At that time I felt optimistic that the government would do the sensible thing. But a year later, the government has taken very few positive steps. Although police were sent to protect the Dhaka Ahmadiyya Mosque, the government ban on books is still in place. Only the lawsuit filed with the

High Court has temporarily blocked the ban.

As long as there are Bangla Bhais, Ahmadiyya book bans, mysterious arms shipments in Chittagong, and unsolved bomb blasts, the newspapers of the world will continue to report bad news about Bangladesh. The government is now on the warpath -- attacking the Times, sending intelligence officials to find out who spoke to reporters, threatening to shut down websites like Drishitpat.org, and blaming expatriate Bangladeshis. Previously, another Times reporter was in Dhaka and was tailed by Detective Branch the whole time she was there. Later she told a seminar in New York that not even in disputed Kashmir had she seen these censorship tactics. When Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* was the top seller in England, the Bangladesh Embassy only saw "journalist" on her visa application and refused her entry -- creating another media storm. The more the government tries to crush journalists, the more the world pays attention. Because of all this muzzling of press, Committee to Protect Journalists called Bangladesh the "most dangerous place for journalists." Instead of wasting resources trying to squash reports about Bangladesh, why not try to solve the problems these reporters have discovered?

Don't waste time looking for "conspiracies." Start creating some good news -- expatriates will be the first to publicize it. It's that simple.

Naeem Mohaiemen's new project is *Disappeared in America*, a film about detention of American Muslim men after 9/11, which premieres at Queens Museum of Art on February 27, 2005.

OPINION

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed and The New York Times

AIR CDRE ISHFAQ ILAHI CHOUDHURY (RET)

I read with bemused interest the "Letter from America" by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed that appeared in the Daily Star on January 31. In that column, Dr. Ahmed challenged the article written by Ms. Eliza Griswold in the *New York Times* in December 2004 on the threat of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh. While I appreciate the forthright stand taken by Dr. Ahmed on an issue that is of vital concern to all of us, I cannot but contradict a number of statements that he made and factual errors that he presented.

Dr. Ahmed does not agree with Ms. Griswold's statement: "In Bangla Bhai's patch of northwestern Bangladesh, poverty is so pervasive that, for many children in the region, privately subsidised madrassas are the only educational option." According to him, "those who go to madrassa choose to do so and in any case the numbers of students in the madrassa are negligible." Is it really so? Northwestern Bangladesh is indeed economically the most backward in the country -- poverty is endemic there and we are all too

familiar with the annual *monga* or famine that visits the area. Indeed, dire poverty and destitution are boosting the extremist elements of all varieties in that area. Children are the first victims of poverty. Although successive governments have taken steps to encourage enrolment in mainstream schools, thousands of school-age children stay outside the net. Ms. Griswold is right when she says that for the very poor and destitute children, madrassas are often the only option open.

The number of madrassas in Bangladesh is increasing at a phenomenal pace and so is the number of students. According to government published sources (BANBEIS), during 1980-2000, the number of registered junior and high madrassas increased by 271 per cent compared to 185 per cent growth of secondary schools. During the same period, the number of students in junior and high madrassas increased by 818 per cent compared to only 317 per cent growth of secondary school students. Today, 30 per cent of all secondary level students are from madrassas and they are catching up fast. These statistics do not include thousands of unregis-

tered "Quomi" madrassas all over the country, nor does it include English medium "Cadet Madrassas" that are sprouting up in urban areas. Therefore, Dr. Ahmed's claim that "the numbers of madrassa students are negligible" is not based on fact.

numbers of madrassa students are getting into every cadre of administration and will soon be able to exercise significant influence in the statecraft. Successive governments encouraged the growth of madrassa education in the country. Over the last two decades, revenue

expenditure per madrassa student was much more than for the students in secondary high schools.

I disagree with the assertion by Dr. Ahmed that there is nothing like "Deobandi Islam." Indeed, Sunni Islam in the sub-continent has many "Tariqas" such as Deobandi, Berlevi, Chistia, Quaderia, etc. These Tariqas vary significantly in their interpretation of religious doctrine. Contrary to Dr. Ahmed's assertion that the Deoband School

was the result of "forward looking movement" and not reactionary, "Darul Ulum Deoband" was a reaction to the establishment of Anglo-Oriental College (later Aligarh Muslim University) in Aligarh by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. The Deobandis reject modern scientific and techni-

this, otherwise inconspicuous, madrassa. So, Deobandi Islam is there and still kicking.

Dr. Ahmed wanted to whitewash Maulana Maududi by quoting Karen Armstrong. We all know what the Maulana stood for. Maududi opposed Pakistan movement because in his vision the whole of India should have been *Dar-ul-Islam*, not just a part of it. Once in Pakistan, he raised the issue of declaring Ahmadiyyas as non-

Muslim that started a riot in Punjab in 1954. The government imposed martial law in Lahore to control the violence. A special tribunal sentenced Maududi to death for instigating rioting; the sentence was later commuted. It is true, Maududi was not a Deobandi, but he was the forerunner of what is now described as "political Islam." He founded the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan, and actively collaborated with the military regime during the Bangladesh War in 1971. The rest is common knowledge.

I wonder how Dr. Ahmed came to the conclusion that "Over the last few decades, Bangladeshis in general have become more secular." The truth is to the contrary. Secularism as a state principle was dropped from the constitution. The constitution was amended more than once to enhance its Islamic character. Islam is now the state religion. On the political front, the Islamic parties are on the rise. Religious bigots are demanding that the Ahmadiyyas be declared non-Muslims, just as in Pakistan. On the societal level, many of the age-old Bengali cultures and traditions are now under threat. Bombs are hurled in the cinema halls, circus, and Jatra shows. After the recent

spate of bombings of Jatra shows, government, instead of providing protection or nabbing the culprits, stopped all Jatra performance throughout the country. That was exactly what the religious extremists were demanding. Those who raise their voice are declared *murtaad* (heretic). Dr. Ahmed Sharif, Poet Shamsur Rahman, and Dr. Humayun Azad have each faced the brunt. Now it is the turn for Dr. Kamal Hossain. Are we becoming more secular?

Killing of Mr. SAMS Kibria has once again exposed the vulnerable law and order situation in the country. The whole civil society is under threat. We are indeed passing through a critical time. While we must vigorously defend Bangladesh abroad, we cannot be oblivious of the growing danger at home. In these days of Internet and global communications, we cannot hide our vulnerabilities. If we cannot deal with our situation, there will be others to take care of us. Look what happened to Sudan in Darfur affairs. Dr. Ahmed's quoting of the incidents of racial discrimination in the US will not help us. If we wish to live with dignity and honour, we must get our house in order.

Dr. Ahmed states, "Because of their lack of formal education, no madrassa educated man holds any position of influence in the bureaucracy." This statement is also not based on fact. While the career choices of the students of traditional "Quomi" madrassas remain extremely limited, those from the government recognised ones are now streaming on to various disciplines. They are especially prominent in the education sector. Large

cal education and hope to push the clock back to the medieval days. They are an obscurantist brand for whom "Communicating in English, wearing of coat, trousers, shorts, tie, eating with knife and fork etc are haram (prohibited)." Deobandis believe all forms of music, songs, dances, TV, cinema, radio are unIslamic. They still follow the "Darse Nizamia" -- a syllabus prepared by Grand Vizier Nizaum-ud-dawla in Baghdad in the 11th cen-