

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 reporting. 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.



HARUN UR RASHID

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

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-

came out with a statement that it is "deeply troubled" by the apparent step back from democracy. In London, the Foreign Office summoned the Nepalese Ambassador to convey its "grave concerns" over the King's action.

India claims to be the largest democratic country in the world and is proud of its democratic and secular principles. In light of the international concern over events in Nepal, the Indian Prime Minister's sitting face-to-face with the Nepali King

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.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

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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

regionalism. There seems to be no glue sticking together all the member countries. India does not feel comfortable sitting with the other member countries because of perceived absence of democratic traditions in those countries. Essentially, there is no golden common thread binding the member countries.

Second, India is strategically located in the middle of South Asia and almost all member countries are its neighbours. Although neighbours maintain the "correct" political relationship with India, there is a murmur of complaints against India on many unresolved bilateral issues. India is regarded as a "bully" by others, whether the perception is right or wrong, that is another matter. India suspects that other countries may gang up against India's policy towards them.

Third, The Nepali King's dramatic action to dismiss the Prime Minister

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

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. 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 the disappearance 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 CDR ISHFAQ ILAHI CHAUDHURY (RETD)

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 madrassas choose to do so and in any case the numbers of children in the madrassas 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 *onga* 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.

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

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

was the result of "forward looking movement" and not reactionary. "Darul Uloom 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-

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 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 Nizamuddin in Baghdad in the 11th cen-

tury. Most of the "Quomi" madrassas in the sub-continent are run on the Deobandi line. A Deobandi madrassa at Akora Khattak in NWFP, Pakistan caught international attention in recent years. Most of the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan graduated from

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 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, circuses, and Jatra shows. After the recent

sphere of bombings of Jatra shows, government, instead of providing protection or nabbing the culprits, stopped all Jatra performances throughout the country. That was exactly what the religious extremists were demanding. Those who raise their voice are declared *murtad* (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.

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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 *Darul Islam*, not just a part of it. Once in Pakistan, he raised the issue of declaring Ahmadiyyas as non-