

Another journalist dead

Protection of the media must be made priority

THE Sangram Khulna Bureau Chief Shaikh Belaluddin succumbed on Friday to the injuries he sustained in the February 5 bomb attack on the premises of the Khulna Press Club that also left three other journalists in critical condition.

Our deepest sympathy goes out to the family of Belal, another victim of the climate of fear and insecurity in which this nation's media -- specially those in the south-west region -- are forced to ply their trade. Belal was the sixth journalist in Khulna and the fourteenth in the south-west to be killed in the last ten years.

The south-west has long been an extremely dangerous place in which to practice conscientious and honest journalism. One reason has been the vicious environment of rivalries centering around shrimp farming. There are often disputes between different parties over issues such as the use of land and water, and as a result there has grown up a strong nexus between the vested interests and outlaw groups. The police would know better.

This sordid underbelly of the south-west is very difficult for a journalist to report on, as has been evidenced by the series of killings. The journalists who risk their lives to expose the squalid state of affairs deserve our praise and gratitude. They remain steadfast in the discharge of their duty even though the reward is small and the risks very great.

The government must take greater responsibility. In the first place, the criminals' den which south-west is turning into must be removed under local administrative control, and every measure should be taken to ensure that newsmen and women are no longer in danger from the criminal elements. Groups such as the PBCP, which claimed responsibility for Belal's killing, and their sponsors or associates, must be brought to justice so that inhabitants of the region do not have to live their lives in fear.

In addition, it is perhaps time for those of us who are in the industry to do a little soul-searching and address the issue of what steps we can take to help ensure the safety and security of our colleagues. The wanton killing and intimidation of journalists in the south-west cannot continue. The time has come for the journalistic community to close ranks and unite around the threat that we are facing, which is a threat not to one journalist or one newspaper or one point of view, but to the profession as a whole.

Burying somebody alive?

Nur Banu's case, a litmus test one too many

THE ordeal of Nur Banu, who was reportedly going to be buried alive, ended with timely intervention by villagers and her father. The woman of a remote village in Nilphamari district was about to fall victim to a most pernicious manifestation of so-called Fatwa, which is nothing but an abuse committed in the name of religion to whet the tyrannical appetite of a handful of diabolical persons.

The woman was a casualty of the ruthlessness of the members of her husband's family to an extent that her fidelity as a wife was being questioned by her tormentors. So, a 'soothsayer' and a teacher from a madrassah were brought into the scene to decide Nur Banu's fate. They decreed that she be buried alive to prove her chastity, adding that if she hadn't been disloyal to her husband she would come out of the grave without any scratch!

The Nilphamari incident, which might have resulted in the extra judicial killing of a woman in a most barbaric manner, is another reminder of the utter helplessness and vulnerability of poor women in rural areas. These women are destined to suffer as the rural society continues to show a cruel indifference to their cause. However, the men who came to Nur Banu's rescue have shown that there are people who can make a difference in the lives of helpless women by standing beside them. We need more such men to build a strong rampart against orthodoxy in any form or shape or the gullibility in some people to receive any obscurantism-induced message. The gender bias is far too conspicuous -- only women are held responsible for all kinds of suspected moral infractions. Male tyranny at its worst!

Now, the men and women who tried to kill Nur Banu must be given the type of punishment that works as a real deterrent. We cannot allow women to be subjected to such medieval (or worse form of) barbarism.

The loss of a titan

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

BANGLADESH is passing through a very critical period of its existence. The strong bond of nationalism, which, despite the fissures in society, was so long thought to have bound the country into a strong entity, is proving to be irremediable tectonic fractures. Societal degeneration has reached the stage where the building blocks of a modern democratic polity are fast disappearing. Elections do not democracy make, nor do they give license to a group to misuse the people for a fixed period. Supportive cultural values, political trust, social tolerance, basic political liberties and gender equality are essential to make democracy work.

In the absence of these cultural values, the emergence of the tyranny of the majority becomes an inescapable reality, and the claim to continue to misuse by the group who were elected renders itself obsolete because such claim is devoid of ethical and moral foundations inherent in the concept of good governance. In making such claims, failed governments often forget the advice proffered by James Madison that government should be formed not only to control the governed, but also itself.

If the legitimating argumentation of Maximilien Robespierre's French Revolution is to be found in the decadence and failed governance of Louis XVI, his eventual downfall was also caused by the excesses committed during the Reign of Terror that Robespierre and his ill-advised supporters let loose on France, in which thousands of people were killed. Nero, Caligula, Hitler and the 20th century dictators left the lesson of history that those who live by the sword also die by the sword. While gelling of resistance to tyranny may take a while, ultimately the will of the people prevails.

In the interregnum period, people suffer at the hands of the marauders and murderers that cannot be apprehended by the government elected by the people to keep these marauders and murderers at bay. Unfortunately, the hunger for power being basic to human nature, and where politics becomes the conduct of public affairs for private advan-

tage, Teddy Roosevelt's realization that exercise of power should be tinged with responsibility does not resonate in societies like ours. In many Fourth World countries, and Bangladesh is perhaps one of them, people in authority, more often than not, prove Lord Acton right that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The senseless murder of SAMS Kibria, a Titan among Lilliputians, has once again put Bangladesh in

which SAMS Kibria was the latest victim. The Daily Star, examining sixteen bomb explosions, from Udichi function to the assassination attempt on the leader of the opposition in parliament, found forensic experts being ignored in the probes into bomb blasts. The winter of our discontent has already stretched too long without any glimmer of sunshine. One wonders whether, like John Steinbeck, Bangladeshis would have to remain as chroniclers

fuelled by religious extremism. It is generally recognized that madrassas (religious schools) contribute to religious intolerance not because Islam is an intolerant religion, as Princeton Professor Bernard Lewis would have the world believe, but because the madrassa teachers are not sufficiently equipped with knowledge to instill tolerance and secularity in the young minds of the students they teach. It is believed that the number

believed to be wedded to Islamic fundamentalism. Though these are early days to conclusively connect radical Islamists with the murder of SAMS Kibria because investigations are in progress, yet one has to take into account that victims of political violence have largely been secularists like Awami League and left party leaders, progressive minded intellectuals, and people who went to cinema halls and cultural functions. Added to this trend

to flee to adjoining states threatening their peace and stability. None of these signs apply in the case of Bangladesh.

Robert Rotberg provides some other characteristics. Failed states are unable to provide security throughout their domain. Citizens depend on the government for their security and to free themselves from fear. They have flawed institutions, only the executive functions. Legislatures, if they exist, are rubber stamps. Judiciary is a derivative of the executive and does not enjoy the confidence of the people. The bureaucracy having long lost its professionalism exists only to carry out the order of the executive. Corruption flourishes in failed states and is widespread. State failure is man-made. Leadership failures weaken the fragile politics and leads to state failure.

In the context of reduced significance of sovereignty in the post-Cold War period, former UNSG Boutros Ghali had suggested that UN intervention would be appropriate in the face of collapse of domestic governing authority, displaced population or gross violation of human rights. The Anglo-US misadventure in Iraq has amply demonstrated the futility of intervention in a sovereign state without global consent, however compelling the arguments in favor of humanitarian intervention may be.

Luckily for Bangladesh, despite the current difficulties, it is still regarded as a functioning member of the international community. It would however be foolhardy to assume that the international community would look on indifferently if terrorist activities like the murder of SAMS Kibria, one in a long line of violent acts, is allowed to be buried in oblivion. For Bangladesh, the death of SAMS Kibria is a national loss. A superb intellect, a diplomat par excellence, and a politician with a difference is gone. One hopes that we will be able to save the few remaining ones from harm's way. We further hope the government and the international community will spare no effort to find out and punish the guilty. It is not too much to ask.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

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the eye of a storm. Known for natural calamity, endemic poverty, and deep-rooted corruption, Bangladesh has distinguished itself as a lawless country as well. As it is, personal safety has become mythical in the last several years. Notwithstanding legally questionable actions of some law enforcement authorities to curb lawlessness (criticized by some human rights activists), the law and order situation has not appreciably improved despite governmental claim to the contrary.

An added element has been the venality of "political terrorism." Bangladesh society appears to be deeply divided along political lines, between "loyalists" (to the government) and "others." Between friends and foes. Between "patriots" and "traitors."

Perhaps poet Percy Bysshe Shelley would have better described the situation as a desolating pestilence polluting whatever it touches, making slaves of men and obscuring genius, virtue, freedom, and truth. What surprises most observers of Bangladesh politics is the sheer inability and/or lack of sincerity on the part of the authorities to apprehend and bring to justice the perpetrators of these heinous crimes of

social unrest and injustice, whether ice age is approaching the Bangladesh political scene, whether we are regressing from modernity and turning towards tribalism where primordial loyalty to fellow tribesmen supercedes our commitment to cultural values so essential to nurture democratic practice.

One wonders whether, like Henry David Thoreau, immersed in Emersonian transcendentalism's belief that God being inherent in nature and human beings, each individual should rely on his own conscience and intuition and thereby have a free attitude towards authority, Bangladeshis should not begin to introspect into and take actions relating to observations that "when power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule not because they are most likely to be right, but because they are physically the strongest." Thoreau incidentally did not advocate armed rebellion but passive resistance which decades after his death was successfully used by Mahatma Gandhi to end the British rule in India.

The continuing socio-political violence in Bangladesh is also partly

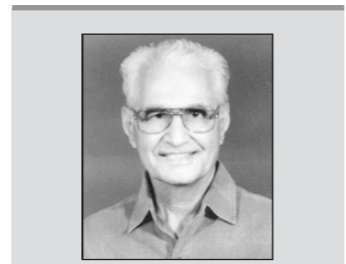
of madrassas is increasing at a phenomenal rate. Government published sources reveal that during 1980-2000 the number of junior and high madrassas increased by 271 percent while growth of secondary schools was only 185 percent. During the same period the number of students in junior and high madrassas increased by 818 percent as opposed to 317 growth rate for students of secondary schools.

Bangladesh would do well to avoid the Pakistani example where Islam has become the central issue in Pakistani politics through conscious and consistent state policy aimed at excluding secular politicians from power. Albeit rivalry with India encouraged successive Pakistani governments to use Islam as a national unifier. Yet one must be equally aware of the emergence of Al-Qaeda due to mono-centric Western policy to help Afghan mujahedeens through Pakistan to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan and subsequent carnage of 9/11 and many others. As it is, the major political party in Bangladesh government shares power with two Islamist political parties who were not only opposed to Bangladesh's war of liberation, but are widely

has been the emergence of Bangla Bhai whose brutality is well documented, who has vowed to establish a Muslim state in Bangladesh and who remains at large despite reported police actions to arrest him.

Does the murder of SAMS Kibria, coupled with governmental inability to unearth the culprits behind other terrorist acts, qualify Bangladesh to be classified as a failed state? All Bangladeshis would immediately reply in the negative. Despite international criticism of governmental inability to solve the crimes and strong condemnations of the murders and mayhems, the world at large has not yet bracketed Bangladesh in the same group as Afghanistan (in pre-Karzai period), Angola, Burundi, Congo, Sierra Leone, and Sudan. Failed states have some telltale signs. They are utterly incapable of maintaining themselves as members of the international community. These states face serious "internal problems that threaten their continued coherence" or "significant internal challenge to their political order." They are significant violators of human rights. Civil strife, economic collapse and breakdown of food and health system may force refugees from failed states

Iraq exit strategies



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

THE polls held on January 30 are said to hold the key to the US exit strategy from Iraq. An elected Iraqi government will soon emerge; for all its initial troubles, bombings, boycotts and compromises, Iraq has had national polls. Some deny that the new government truly represents Iraqis. Sunni exclusion from the process is clear. Kurds were happily onboard. That is thanks to US sympathy for Kurdish wishes and latter's distrust of Arab intentions. They want substantial autonomy in under a federal set up. Shias are cautious and pragmatist; they have given least trouble to Americans and the British, wanting early polls to corner as much power as may be feasible.

The first question should be taken up first. How keenly do the Americans want an early exit strategy? Arguably, the Iraqi war planners ignored the likelihood of popular resistance. Even so, it is strange that world's mightiest power and a nicely-working democracy could be pushed into an ill thought-out war in a sensitive region while virtually the whole world opposed the Anglo-American project.

No war in history was so much opposed by common citizens every-

where. It is impossible that the war party did not have compelling reasons or interests to start a war of aggression. Only they did not choose to convince the world. Thus one will need to be convinced that the desire for exiting from Iraq is so deeply felt that (a) the US is prepared to forget those initial reasons or interests, or (b) that the exit strategy will be so designed as also

differences among Iraq's three main communities: Kurds, Sunnis, and the Shia majority.

Long before the longer-term consequences come to pass, there is the problem of the legitimacy of the polls and the government it has produced. An election held under foreign occupation is anyhow suspect. And in the January 30 polls, at least one community, the Sunnis,

egging on the Kurds to stand firm on the autonomy demand. There are other international complications: Kurds live in fairly large numbers in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and what is now Russian Federation. None among these states wants to see a Kurdish state or even a truly autonomous province in Iraq; Turks make no bones about their intentions; they will intervene and perhaps occupy

objectives of the war.

It used to be said that both Sunnis and Shias of Iraq understood each other and were loath to fight; perhaps Saddam and the Baathists had sufficiently secularized Iraq. Lately, al Qaeda and Zarqawi have become more prominent in the resistance and some Sunni militants have begun choosing Shia targets. Even so Shia reaction is restrained; they

today meshes in with pragmatism. Even as Sunnis are riding a crest of popular resistance and many younger Shia clergy -- remember Muqtada-al-Sadr last year -- echo their sentiments, qua Arabs. But Sistani, shunning publicity or active political role, asked for early elections and a fair share in power. It is more mature politics: majority's right to rule is going to be written into the constitution. That will open many doors for Shias.

But a Shia-Sunni conflict and dark apprehensions about Iraq's future remain possibilities; they are not necessarily likely. Much will depend on the Shia and Sunni leaderships. So far, both appear to believe in living together in one state nor their main actions have belied this assessment. As for al Qaeda's entry into Iraq, from probably Saudi Arabia -- the main nursery of Militant Sunni Islam -- requires careful investigation of who may be using it.

Iraq's future depends on many factors. The biggest is posed by the US: what do its priorities re the Middle East require? Oil is a major consideration. So is Israel's security. Should the neo-cons again convince the US that the goal of permanently benefiting from Iraqi oil can be achieved through destroying a united Iraq state by dividing it -- thus enhancing Israel's capacity to assist the US -- the outlook for the Middle East is bleak. Accidents apart, the disappearance of Iraq will throw the whole Middle East in the melting pot; new dictators, more intolerant and militant, might give Israel and the US a harder time than did the old Kings and Amirs.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

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to serve the original American interests or purposes, while still sharply reducing GI casualties. In short, the idea may be to combine the so-called departure with ensuring the promotion of the original objectives. Wouldn't the US try to do that? After all, why did it go to war? At the whim of King George W?

One is not denying that the US will adopt an exit strategy. The question is what kind of strategy it will be. Will it be simply getting out of Iraq soon after the new Iraqi government results from the January 30 election? Or will the GIs stay on "at the request" of an embattled government that is likely to have its representative character questioned. The emphasis on training a new army that will effectively kill the opponents in Iraq suggests that the Americans are not leaving next month or the month after that. Then, the polls may have worsened the

did not take part in bulk; they actively opposed the polls and asked the people to boycott. True, an effort will be made to associate them somehow with constitution writing. That can only be on an ad hoc basis of selection of "moderate" Sunnis. What legitimacy such deputies or experts will have? Endless contention can be expected.

There are fears about the constitution-to-be not being acceptable to all. Kurds lay claim to Kirkuk and oil fields around it that is bound to be opposed by many Arabs. Remember, Saddam tried to change the demography of Kirkuk by settling a large number of Arabs. This, plus the Kurd's demand for substantial autonomy from the Baghdad government, can spark possible civil strife. Many foreign intelligence agencies, mainly of Israel, America and Great Britain, are said to be

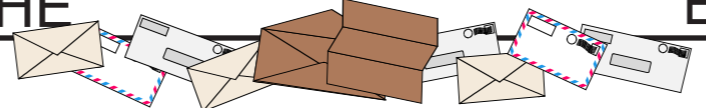
the Kurdish region.

But the biggest putative threat is a civil war between Sunnis and Shias of Iraq. It is the first time that Shias are going to be dominant in any Arab state. This civil war is hugely feared in Arab ruling circles throughout the Middle East. The Jordanian King has raised the bogey of an arc of Shia power spanning from Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, parts of Syria and Lebanon; Shia minorities in Gulf states, especially in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Rub-al-Khail, will start demanding rights and may take help from other Shia states. An analysis of American policies in Iraq and their separate dealings with each of its three main communities, and of course their media twists, produce dark suspicions of US probably wanting to see that civil war happen. Maybe a break up of Iraq along confessional lines might promote long-term

have not retaliated. No communal clash has taken place. All manner of western pundits were forecasting a Sunni-Shia civil war because Shias were kept suppressed ever since 1920s; it is assumed that Sunni minority will not tolerate Shia empowerment. But a Shia-Sunni civil war might yet not be on the cards; Iraqis may be more sophisticated than western experts had expected.

In part, Iraqis have had truly secular governments for the last 38 years or more; the contribution of Baathist Arab nationalism has made Iraq different from traditional Arab states: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, or even UAE. Current peace is due to the sophisticated Shia clerics, especially Ayatollah Sistani. The latter belongs to the more traditional Shiism that emphasized individual piety, prayers, and good works, and little politics. This quietist tendency

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.

Saarc summit

The scheduled date of the Saarc summit was shifted due to Tsunami. The shifting was appropriate as three out of seven member countries were affected. To offer the guests all possible security and all the needed facilities is a duty of the host country. When the host ensures safety and the guest raises the question of inadequacy, the former is embarrassed. Almost every country in the world has internal chaos, but that is not preventing holding of summits.

Had there been no security problem in a country, then nobody would bear the huge costs of maintaining security forces. India is a vast country. It has its problems at Jharkhand, Assam, Kashmir and elsewhere. Still they are in a continual process of hosting international seminars and summits. None of the guests ever question the security arrangements. But the decision of India as a large and important country not to attend the summit at

the eleventh hour does not convey a cordial message to a small neighborhood.

This was really unfortunate. Tapader Md Khalilur Rahman Mirpur, Dhaka.

Save us

Please help us. I am one of the victims who do not have any powerful relative who could help me right now when I am about to lose all of my property to the land developers, in Kamalapur, Savar, (just beside Ashulia). My late father had bought a land like many other Dhakaites in the said area. But a few days ago about a thousand unknown people with a red flag in hand reached there and took over the lands calling themselves members of some 'Bhumihheen Punorbashon Shanga' and saying that the government had given them this authority. The local people had a fight with them. By this time one land developing (false/real?) organisation has set up an office there. They

are pressing all the owners to sell the lands to them at a far lower price than the real one. They even threatened us. We all think it is a cruel joke. We can't even offer a proper price to other customers. We need the law enforcers' help.

We all think that it needs a proper investigation and reporting by the newspapers so that his type of land grabbing by force can be stopped. They gave us a deadline to settle the issue. Please help us. Scared, Dhaka

SAMS Kibria's death

Trying to soak up the dreadful images of Mr. Kibria's shrapnel inflicted body of what must have been his final moments is enough to turn anyone bleary and teary eyed. My sympathies are entirely with his family and my admiration is immense for the dignity they have shown.

Mr. Kibria was not a typical self-styled trumpet blowing Bangladeshi

politician. He wrote in the local papers about many issues in an analytical and cohesive manner. In a country where most politicians' views, characteristics and convictions leave much to be desired, Mr. Kibria held his position admirably well.

The tribute he has received over the past several days is an indication of the personality he was and the friends he had. So the sheer brutality, with which a former diplomat, freedom fighter and finance minister was struck down, should make us question our levels of tolerance and acceptance of what is happening.

For if we accept what is happening without questioning it, we are allowing our humanity to erode. The graphic details and articulate writings describing the carnage without any warning to its readers & viewers serve as a reminder that our society is also at risk of becoming influenced by these horrific images. Mr. Kibria's death is rightly mourned because it also symbolises a demo-

cratic institution which is yet to be free of fear. It also serves as a warning to the next person willing to take the podium.

N. Rahman Oxford, UK

Keeping on track

Bangladesh cricket is on the track, now, within a short period of a few years, compared to the time taken by other new entrants to Test cricket. The boys have both the Test and ODI series in one season against one visiting side. It is a leap over the rainbow. The booster effect is tremendous. How to diffuse this new culture, for the trickle-down effect to be felt by the man in the street?

The sense of direction has been discovered, and from now on the motivation, dedication, and the sense of discipline would be automatically self-controlled to a large extent. Feedback (inside any system) is an essential function in human life, and in nature. A system

is essentially of two types: open and closed. Our leaders (in any field) have to learn more about this ventilation system. The period of fall-outs is over, and it is time to get down to the serious business, compared to the huge systems losses encountered earlier from time to time.

With this background in mind, it is very tempting to compare the deplorable state of our political culture, which is showing no signs of improvement. Two vital ingredients are missing: competition, and diversification. The new entrants have limited options. Opposing these two parties is taxing the people of the smaller parties, and calls for a lot of patience and suffering. Now the rules of the game are changing, with the intrusion of violence and religion.

The monopoly controlled by the two big parties is harming the growth of healthy politics. This bipartisan polarisation is inhibiting the new dedicated entrants to be new, bold and beautiful. The viruses are the evil godfathers hidden within

the current political system.

We are following unnatural procedures, like the suspect neutral non-political caretaker government system (CTG). It is not a purification filter, but it is jarring on the other smaller parties. The cost of politicking has gone up in the LDCs, which few newcomers can afford. There are many chicken-or-egg situations in life. In public service, such situations introduce systems losses--akin to reinventing politics. We do not follow the natural laws, and the man-made laws cannot be imposed universally, as in economics, politics, and human rights.

Is the CTG similar to the third umpire system introduced in cricket? No. It is a magnification unit, employing slow-motion study, like finger-print or DNA test, offering better accuracy in judgement roles. Are the umpiring rules being changed in local politics? Why? CTG is similar to the digital analysis of suspect bowling actions? There appears to be too many leg-before appeals in our politics. How to curb

this unwanted exuberance? The political experts may guide the voters on such issues, for formation of correct public opinion.

Now the pre-election campaigns are warming up. This is the time to impose regulatory practices, duly edited from the experience gained so far on the Dhaka political turf.

The millions of voters would love to see some laundering of dirty politics. But how the washerman cleans his hands? It is all so frustrating--this beating about the bush?

Alfa Ahmed, Dhaka

Dear readers,

We have a new e-mail address for the Letters to the Editor page. Please send your letters to letters@thedailystar.net