LATE S. M. ALI **DHAKA WEDNESDAY MAY 4, 2005**

Media still under siege Government must do more to protect press freedom

HE statistics, which were unveiled by the human rights group Odhikar on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day on Monday, make for sobering reading for all of us. The fact that five journalists have been killed and 176 injured during the course of their professional duties in the past two years should shock and distress everyone, not merely those of us in the media.

The reason for this is that an outspoken and unfettered media is the sine qua non of representative democracy. It is the media that uncovers evidence of wrongdoing, both public and private, and thus keeps both administration officials and private operators honest. If the media are muzzled or intimidated or coerced into silence, then it is the country that suffers.

The government must therefore do more to protect the press from violence and intimidation at the hands of those who would seek to silence them. However, the record of prosecution for violence against newsmen and women is dismal, and this sends the wrong signals to the perpetra-

More than merely not prosecute the offenders, the government has, time and again, actually spoken out against the media, accusing it of bad faith, political agenda, and harming the country's image. There is little doubt that those who want to silence the press have been emboldened by the government's words.

Furthermore, the government remains extremely secretive and it is often hard for the press to get hold of information needed to serve the public. This must end. Information must be made available. The government must stop bashing the press and it must take action against those who commit violence against newsmen and women.

The government's current stance of treating the press as the enemy is misguided on a number of counts. In the first place, it seems to misunderstand the function of the press and its duty to keep politicians accountable. In the second, it betrays the government's own anti-democratic inclinations. Third and most importantly, it attempts to shift the blame for the ills of the country away from the government and onto the media

Undoubtedly, the media has work to do to improve itself. We need to be more professional and more objective. We need to make sure that we report responsibly and fairly, and most importantly, honestly and accurately.

But the government does both the country and itself a disservice when it fails to appreciate the value of a free media and uses the media as a convenient scapegoat for

Election Commission's action

A praiseworthy step

E commend the Election Commission (EC) for its prompt action against the Chittagong Metropolitan Police Commissioner, following the allegations against him by the Nagorik Committee of harassment of the opposition activists and of favouring the ruling alliance candidate. The directive of the Election Commission (EC) for his removal 'for his failure to discharge his duties impartially' was not only an appropriate step, it is also a

It clearly shows that the EC is capable of taking such actions; and can actually take such actions when it wants to. We are also glad to see the expeditious steps taken by the authorities after the verdict was announced in that it was quickly followed up by the ministry concerned, which attached the official to the headquarters. Such prompt action by the administration will reflect positively on the public perception of the relationship between the government and the EC. Especially since the two did not see eye to eye on certain issues in the past.

We, at The Daily Star, have always been protagonists for an independent and effective EC. We want an EC that would be objective and fair, and which would not only not give in to any extraneous influence, it should be also seen to be as such. And, needless to say, the latest action by the EC is a prime example of that.

If the EC were not allowed to function according to its mandate we are afraid the debate over unfairness on its part in holding elections would continue. That's why, in keeping with our demand for electoral reforms, we want to take this opportunity to categorically state that the EC should not only be allowed to act independently, it must also be vested with more powers to do so effectively. It's high time the authorities amended the relevant laws to this effect. The EC is one of the most important adjuncts of our politi-

cal institution whose credibility in holding fair and free elections will add to the credibility of our political system.

Asia-Africa summit: Will it bring new dawn?



HE Asia-Africa Summit that took place in Indonesia on April 23-24 was held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Bandung conference of 1955. Out of 106 Asian and African countries, almost 90 countries, including Bangladesh, attended the conference.

The combined strength of the countries is about 4.6 billion people, almost two-thirds of the world's population, and their GDP is estimated to be \$9.4 trillion (the GDP of the 106 countries need to be put in perspective against the GDP of the JS which is larger than that of the 106 combined, i.e. GDP of the US is more than \$11 trillion).

Indonesia's President Dr. Susilo Bambang Yudhovono stated that the purpose of the conference is to rebuild the bridge across the Atlantic from Asia to Africa. It is to connect both the continents and the conference will serve as a "missing link" of the Asian and African people

The Bandung conference of 1955

It was for the first time, the leaders of the Third World met on April 18-24 in 1955 in Bandung (Indonesia), in the backdrop of the Cold War and emergence of new nations from colonial rule. The idea of the Asia-Africa Summit in Bandung was to remind the super-powers that the Third World should have a role in their decision-making process that affected global affairs

It was a bold move initiated by five Asian countries -- Indonesia, ndia, Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The charismatic Indonesian leader Ahmet Soekarno introduced the idea in 1954 at the Bogor conference to the Asian leaders. Prime Minister of India Nehru was initially skeptical of the value of the confer-

ence, partly because Pakistan, a partner of the US military alliance, was associated with it. It was reported that Prime Minister of Pakistan Mohammad Ali Bogra enthusiastically supported the idea, and this made Nehru uncomfortable with the idea. However, later India

China's participation

It was India that suggested Indone sia to invite communist China to the Bandung Conference. China's Prime Minister Zou En-lai agreed

from the Soviet orbit. Third, China is an Asian country and could not be left out because of its size and future

At the end of the Bandung Conference, the final communiqué had several parts: (i) Political cooperation, (ii) Cultural cooperation, (iii) Human rights protection, (iv) Promotion of world peace, and (v) Problems of dependent peoples.

The most important contribution of the Bandung Conference was that it prompted the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade Saharan Africa live on less than a dollar a day. The idealism of Asian and African leaders to make their countries prosperous did not occur. Some authors have suggested that many African people were better off in colonial days than they are now.

The Asia-Africa Summit in Jakarta was to take stock of what went wrong with their economies, nature of their governance, and issue of reduction of poverty. Governance of a state is of crucial importance in the process of economic growth. Neither satisfactory

cally independent. The former colonial masters continue to act in a disguised manner to control the economy of the Third World. The present economic system perpetuates an arrangement where developed countries will sell manufactured goods at a higher price, while developing Asian and African countries will sell raw materials at a cheaper price. This new international division of labour appears to be one of the essential components of economic globalisation.

The leaders must recognise that

BOTTOM LINE

Some observers cynically have stated the Asian-African alliance will tantamount to what in 1956 H.S. Suhrawardy termed the alliance of the Middle East countries -- "zero plus zero" -- unless they are able to govern with accountability and pool their resources to advance their technology and scientific research and design a new system of market economy where they can sell their goods to each other.

The participation of China during the heightened phase of the Cold War to an international Asia-Africa summit drew sharp attention to the rival super powers -- the US and the Soviet Union.

China came under communist rule in 1949 and China's policies at that stage were not clear to the Asian and African countries. Furthermore, China totally aligned with the Soviet Union during the 50s. The guestion that troubled at the time was whether China would advocate the export of communism to other countries.

In the light of the above background, it was politically brave for the leaders of non-communist Asian and African countries to invite China to their meet. There were many hypotheses to involve China at the summit and some of them deserve mention.

One was that many countries in Asia and Africa had active domestic communist parties that had large following among the people. They were concerned of the impact of the communist parties in domestic politics. They believed that good and friendly relations with China would have beneficial impact on domestic politics. Second, if China had been exposed to wider contacts, it would be able to move away

in 1961 by India, Indonesia, Egypt, and Yugoslavia to keep the Third World countries "non-aligned" from the rivalry of the super-powers -- the US and the Soviet Union

2005 Asia-Africa summit

It appears none of the commitments made at the 1955 Bandung Conference were taken seriously by the Asian and African countries, and as a result they remained as pious wishes only. Soon after, when all Asian and African countries achieved political independence, they started fighting with each other, tacitly supported by the rival super powers, in wars known as "proxy

The world has dramatically changed from what it was in 1955 Furthermore, the Iraqi war led by the US in 2003 has not only undermined the credibility of the UN but also nstilled a sense of insecurity among the Third World countries.

Many of the leaders of Asian and African countries have demonstrated unaccountability of their actions. Poor leadership, inefficient management, and lack of democratic institutions has eroded economic and political bases of development. Some of them considered public property as their own prop-

Many of the people in Sub-

growth nor poverty alleviation can be achieved if the state of governance is poor. Among the aspects of governance in most Asian-African countries, corruption and decadence of public morality have been the focus of a great deal of concern and controversy.

Why were they not able to overn their countries with transparency, accountability, and with democratic traditions? It is an occasion for self-examination for their failures and the causes.

The conference provided an opportunity to the new generation of leaders as to what is required to govern with accountability, vitalize their economy, alleviate poverty. and how not to become debtridden with loans from donors.

In 1955, the clarion call at Bandung was freedom from colonial rule, while at present the call is 'protection of human dignity, good governance, and accountability. Human dignity implies poverty alleviation, gender equality, and empowerment. Empowerment gives creativity, innovation, and improvisation to people. Empowered people give their best to improve their status and position.

The leaders recognize that although the countries are politically

over-centralisation in administration and planning was responsible for their lack of economic development. Insufficient attention was paid to development through mass participation. Women's role in development was ignored. Land reforms which lead to equitable patterns of ownership and more efficient use of land were neglected.

Challenge for Asian and African leaders

The challenge to the Asian and African nations is to mobilise and deploy their resources more effectively -- nationally and collectively -to energise their development, draw strength from joint cooperation, exploit global opportunities and to make the international system more responsive to their people. Policies need to be changed, institutions reformed, and new mechanisms created. What is needed is transparency and accountability of the actions of the rulers in Asia and Africa.

The new vision is to achieve a people-centred development: a form of development that is selfreliant, equitable, participatory, and sustainable. Development is achieved through active participation of the people, in their own interests as they see them, relying

primarily on their own resources and carried out under their control Commitment to gender equality, raising the social and economic status of women along with primary health care services should be

There were many pious and motherhood statements made by the leaders at the conference. The reality is that the economy of many of Asian and African countries are competitive in many respects and they compete with each other to sell their commodities and products to the US and Europe.

Some observers cynically have stated the Asian-African alliance will tantamount to what in 1956 H.S. Suhrawardy termed the alliance of the Middle East countries -- "zero plus zero" -- unless they are able to govern with accountability and pool heir resources to advance their technology and scientific research and design a new system of market economy where they can sell their goods to each other. Economic cooperation among them will lack its firm edifice under the existing mindset and as a result their cooperation will remain a pious wish.

Conclusion

Although the leaders have committed to make rapid social and economic transformation through sustained cooperation, it will be seen in 2009 at the next conference in South Africa how much they have translated into action of their well-meaning words at he Jakarta conference.

One of the positive outcomes of the Asia-Africa meet was the meeting on the sidelines between the Chinese President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan to reduce bilateral tension that became a concern in Asia, because it two Asian economic giants fight, nterests of other Asian countries suffer. Furthermore, it is reported that support from several countries for Bangladesh joining the Asian Regional Forum of Asean has been achieved, and for Bangladesh this can be considered a good political outcome.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a forme Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN

government for the prime minister.

The prime minister exercises enor-

mous power without any sort of

accountability to anybody. Under

the circumstance, it might not be an

overstatement to say that the pres-

Governance issues in Bangladesh

G M QUADER

N every sphere of our life we

wide. Governance issues exist in schedules one's time, and may under the guidance of an able nance issues of a locality or society (e.g. maintaining healthy environment) which need consolidated effort by a group of people under effective leadership. Covering all other segments is the governance of the state which extends to all the localities and reaches to each and every individual within a state terri-

The responsibility of state governance lies with the national government. Anything good or bad occurring within the country or with its citizen anywhere is to be considered within the jurisdiction of governance by the government. In a way, the leader of the national government must be able to assume the role of an able guardian of each and every citizen and also that of an effective leader for all the localities within the territorial boundary of the country to be able to fulfill the expectations of

for the head of government of Bangladesh with a vast population of 140 million within an area of about 144,000 square kilometres. Bangladesh is still listed as an underdeveloped (or developing, as is called affectionately and modestly nation, and that is not the expectation of the nation.

There exists a government in Bangladesh with the prime minister as its head and having a cabinet of ministers assisted by a big bureaucracy. Citizens of the country spend a large sum of money for maintaining the governmental expenditure.

good governance, any planning or program taken by the government

that when new laws or rules are

administration is to be ensured by the subsequent higher level and

cabinet) must become pioneer in being responsible for their actions and activities to the people. If they could be made aware of their duties and obligations and could also be made to suffer dire consequences (by the people of the country) in case they fail, they would probably be more enthusiastic in ensuring accountability of the administration

ability of the government to the people through their elected representatives in parliament. But our constitution bars government party MPs (in fact, all MPs) to go against the dictate of their party. This provision of the constitution allows the government to have captive support of the MPs belonging to the government party for all its activities.

The idea was to ensure account-

Parliament, without the majority of government party MPs on its side to scrutinise activities of the government, has reduced to nothing but a debating club where it is known to all

ent system has resulted in dictatorial rule of the prime minister. When the PM and cabinet members can remain beyond any accountability for their day to day activities it is not natural to develop

accountability down below. This may be considered the cause of the present state of affairs in Bangladesh where good governance is rare if not totally absent. For establishing good governance, the PM and the entire cabinet need to be made accountable to the people on a day to day basis. The parliament needs to perform its desired func-tion of obtaining accountability of the government regularly. Necessary amendments to the constitution must be carried out to ensure

Government should not be accountable once only on the election date at the end of its five-year term. Not only that, but conditions also exist for success of that one day of accountability. The election would have to be conducted in a free and fair way so that it could reflect the will of the people without any undue influence and distortion.

It is seen there is a continuous effort by the government from day one of assuming power to start influencing and preparing the environment in their favour for manipulating the next general election results. This is an effort to bypass the final say of the people on the performance of the government. The election commission must be made more effective and powerful to monitor and stop those unethical acts and ensure a free and fair pool, reflecting the true wishes of the people

by our donors) country. As such, it is cannot be implemented in its proper good governance trickles down perspective. It may be quoted as an example that Bangladesh has a understood that in Bangladesh it is from the top. difficult to achieve good governance So, the topmost management of as per the standard of a developed constitution which is acclaimed with the government (prime minister and

expect good governance, be it in family matters, in our social environment, or in state affairs. We desire food to be served as per our need in due time, sanitation facilities in operation, medical attention and treatment when needed, safety and security of life, property, and prestige, etc. to mention a few. Whatever we deserve to get if available as per expectation, the situation may be referred to as a result of good gover-

The sphere of governance is very personal life, such as how one possibly be tackled in a better way guardian. There are certain gover-

This is of course a Herculean task

So it is rational that the people would

praise by many international experts in the line and also there is no dearth of fair laws and rules. But practically speaking, it is found that in most of the cases neither the constitution nor the laws or rules could achieve the goal for which those were formulated. In most of the cases it is seen

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have some expectation to feel the presence of government in their life, and that too, in a positive way People for the same reason have a right to become frustrated in case that expectation is not met. There are far too many examples to quote in support of the statement that in Bangladesh today citizens do not find the government at the time of

There is hardly any doubt that most of us would accept the statement that people face governmental agencies as an unreasonable and sometimes brutal foe and consider the same as a source of harassment and torment. There are cases of no governance and bad governance under any standard which are too rampant to be considered exceptional or accidental. It may be concluded that Bangladesh is an illmanaged country, lacking good governance.

It is obvious that in the absence of

imposed, they become a source of problem for the society. They are misused and abused in a way causing more sufferings to the At times, the particular people. harm done by a rule becomes more problematic than the difficulty for the solution of which the rule was imposed at the first place. In short, it may be said, in spite of so many good laws, the rule of law cannot really be considered to hold sway in Bangladesh.

The causes of this distortion, if identified, would show corruption as the major cause, but mismanagement due to negligence or lack of knowledge, etc. is also a contributory factor. The root cause for all the said menace is in fact lack of accountability in the administration. To achieve good governance, accountability of the administration at all stages needs to be established. It is a well known fact that the accountability of the lower strata of

The democratic system of governance is widely appreciated because it

under them.

is supposed to provide the best quarantee for accountability of the government to the people, and that is the reason it results in good governance. Inversely in case there is lack of good governance in a country, there is reason to doubt whether the system of governance is democratic in reality. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, the

chief executive officer of the country (the PM) along with the whole cabinet is practically running the affairs of the state without any effective means of accountability to the people. As per our constitution, the responsibility of making the whole cabinet accountable to the people lies with the parliament. Government ministers are to face the parliament members on the floor of the parliament and also in different parliamentary standing committees to explain their actions

always be the winner in the ultimate voting. As such, the idea of parliament making government responsible to the people is in fact not working. Parliament has lost its effectiveness now, not only to the citizens of the country but even to the members of parliament. Quorum crisis has become chronic and the parliament may be considered dysfunctional for all practical purposes.

that the government side would

With this provision of the constitution and also due to our feudalistic political culture, the chief executive officer of the country has become too powerful to face meaningful challenge from any quarter. It is observed that our governmental system in practice has made the PM the focal point of all activities and the PMO the most important institution of the state, so much so that it is referred by many to be the government of the prime minister, government by the prime minister, and

G M Quader is a member of parliament.

Kofi Annan's reform package and US rejection What lies ahead for the world body?

A M M SHAHABUDDIN

HETHER we talk of the 'United Nations,' or a 'disunited world', you can guess very easily who has the last augh. The world had witnessed in the recent past that it is the 'gunman' that rules this good earth, and not the 'pen-man'. The saving that 'the pen is mightier than sword' had gradually lost its sharpness. 'Rule of thumb' is the renewed gospel being sermonised and preached by the world peace champions. That is why out of 192 member states of the UN, America has the great merit to say 'No' to the kev-issues. most vital to re-build the present backboneless and toothless world body, presented by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. in his 63-page report at the recent special session of the UN

General Ässembly in New York. Thus America has not only thrown a big challenge to Kofi Annan's reforms programme, it has also invited, indirectly of course, all the member states of the UN to throw their hats in the ring to meet the challenge. These are the two

third side is the allegations brought against Kofi Annan's involvement in inancial mismanagement of the 'food-for-oil' programme in which his son Kojo is alleged to have embez-zled millions of dollars.

sides of a triangular fight and the

Kofi Annan's proposals

Presenting his 63-page wideranging UN reforms programme, which he calls 'reforms package,' Kofi Annan urged the world leaders to adopt his proposals to give the moribund world body a new life 'fully in line with to-day's realities.' His proposals include, among other things, an expanded Security Council, either adding six new members to its present five permanent members or adding a third tier of semipermanent members; and setting of guidelines to determine when military action can be authorised, that is, nations could go to war under UN banner, against an aggressive nation, an issue which has been haunting the world body since America invaded Iraq without Security Council authorisation. Annan had urged the world leaders that the major and vital changes, proposed by him, should be adopted at the summit of world leaders at UN Headquarters in New York in September next which will mark the 60th anniversary of the world body, as a 'package' and "not as an a-la-carte

US rejection

America, which wants to have its last say and get a walk-over in every game, has reacted sharply, rejectna some of the key issues for which Annan had proposed reforms. Moreover, while Annan had emphasised that the reforms proposals should be adopted as a 'package,' Bush Administration had quickly decided to go Annan's opposite direction, saying that there should not be "artificial deadlines," and that it would be "unrealistic" to adopt "a package approach." It is quite understandable that America had been beaten by Annan's dubbing of the US-led war against Iraq as "a fork in the road" of the UN. It would, therefore, be not surprising that America would now consider Annan as a 'poisonous thorn' on

America's way of doing things through the UN. Naturally, America would try to remove the 'thorn before it is too late. Perhaps that is why we had started hearing from American leadership of Annan's resignation and attempts to get him involved in criminal activities like embezzlement by his son. Annan had been cleared off the allegation, no doubt, by a UN enquiry committee. He now stands there to face the storm to carry on his reform package to a successful end. His former friends in the White

House won't spare him so easily perhaps. Their ultimate aim will now be to give a decent burial to his reforms package by derailing it at any cost. Bush had already mounted two 'missiles' at right places and at right time to achieve this end. One of these 'missiles recently picked by Bush Administration is hawkish Bolton, a firey preacher against recent UN activities, as US Ambassador to UN, with the main purpose of regaining America's lost glory and leadership in the world body. Bush has put

another of his hawkish adviser, Mr. 'Wolf' (read Wolfowitz), at the helm of affairs of the US-controlled World Bank to 'shepherd' the 'lambs' (read the poor nations) world over. Strangely enough, none of the powerful permanent members had raised their fingers against it. Perhaps they are busy in collecting their share of the booty. One country is to have proposed to make its citizen chief of the IMF, another wants the post of deputy chief of the World Bank and yet another wants to be the chief of the UNDP, so on so forth. It has once again proved beyond any doubt that "honey catches more flies than vinegar.'

Ghali and Annan: Fall from US grace In this context. I think it won't be out of

place to mention that Kofi Annan's predecessor Boutros Ghali also from Africa -- from Egypt -- fell from the grace of America, as a result of which Ghali had to miss his much-desired second term as Secretary-General. Ghali served as SG from Jan 1992 to Dec 1996, with full support of America and was expected to run his

second-term for another five years. But whatever might have been other reasons, a great rift was visible when Ghali took a strong stand on the two "No-fly" zones. Naturally it sent a wrong signal in US Administration which started looking for a fresh candidate, ditching Ghali for good. But perhaps the biggest blunder on the part of Annan, who was supposed to work as "the ears and eyes" of the world body, was showing glaring lapses. One such instance was the mysterious silence when then foreign minister of Saddam regime sent him a letter to do something, through the Security Council, to stop unabated joint Anglo-US air action on the socalled "no-fly" zones in north and south of Iraq, on false pleas, killing innocent Iraqi people.

Perhaps as a reward Annan received big pats and great applause from US Administration when he had announced his decision to run for his second term, although it was supposed to be Asia's turn to push for their candidate as the new SG. because the ten-vear period for the African region was shared between

Ghali and Annan. But America preferred to install Annan instead of an Asian candidate. It was, however, no problem for America as a mighty country in the UN, whether Asia lost its turn after waiting for some three decades since U Thant of Burma (now Myanmar) served as SG from 1962 to 1971, as the third SG of the UN, and whether Africa enjoyed a ifteen-year term, breaking the traditional schedule of ten years. Thus it once again proved that whether it is a UN issue, or non-UN issue, the last laugh lies with America.

Annan turns the table But there is always a new chapter

opening on a new angle of vision. So it happened with Annan when he started showing his neutrality as the UN Sec Gen. He was now singing a new song to describe US-led war against Iraq as a "fork in the road" of UN. The situation with America further deteriorated with the recent submission of the new "reforms package" by Annan at a recent special session of the UN General Assembly of 192 members, urging world leaders to adopt the package" at the up-coming summit

session of the Assembly when it would celebrate UN's 60th anniversary. It will not be surprising at all if America goes to the extreme to sabotage Annan's move, by derailing the whole process. Perhaps Annan's recent actions that is not liked by Bush Administration tantamount to biting the hands that fed

The ball is now in the court of the 192-member countries of the world body. Now they can make it, or mai Some undesirable forces had already created a vicious circle around Kofi Annan and his latest reforms proposals, creating a smokescreen of confusion among member states. Therefore, it is time to show political will and maturity on the part of the member states at the forthcoming September Summit of the General Assembly to save the UN from any disaster. Any wrong step on their part may allow the hanging sword to fall on their necks.

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