

Saifur's tirade against media

Don't blame the media for your failures

THE finance minister's comment that the media is responsible for the country's negative image abroad is the most outlandish, outrageous, incoherent, illogical and far-from-the-truth statement that one has had the misfortune to hear recently.

The minister is well known for his acerbic and inchoate remarks against the media, and it appears that the performance of his government, for which he has very little to show, is telling on him. It is only our sense of propriety, modesty and sobriety that prevents us from terming his comments as the uttering of a man in delirium. The minister may be forgiven, for he knows not what he speaks.

The minister has maligned the media for smearing the image of the country abroad. But look at what the finance minister had himself said in recent times. He had made very rueful remarks on corruption in Bangladesh, sparing no one, not even the ministries, for being pervaded by this cancerous ailment. His admission of his inability to cleanse the NBR of the corrupt officials illustrates the level to which some of our government institutions have sunk. Even the Parliamentary Standing Committees that are dominated by the ruling coalition have repeatedly brought out the corruption issue. His comments on lack of good governance raised the hackles of his party men and the ruling coalition partners in the past. So where have the media gone wrong? Should the press be faulted for carrying comments on what legislators and ministers utter?

The media have from time to time, as is its duty to do so, brought up the lack of transparency in government deals, the instances of corruption, some in very high places, of misgovernance, of interministerial conflict and lack of coordination that have wrecked our standing in the eye of foreign donors due to failure to timely implement government projects. Had these timely warnings been heeded the image of the country would not have been tainted at all.

Without going into the litany of failures, suffice it to say that the government's expressed rationale in constituting a new force in the form of RAB, demonstrates the abysmal law order in the country as well as the erosion of confidence in the judiciary and judicial process of the land. These are but a sad commentary on the national institutions and negation of their role. Was the media wrong in pointing these out?

It is not so much the country's as the government's image that the minister is perhaps worried about. And it is the government's own doing that the image is bad. Don't blame the media for it.

THIS is the stuff of a break-neck speed in which as serious a matter as an amnesty petition was processed and a positive result obtained that should perhaps enter the Guinness Book of World Records.

The beneficiary Mohiuddin Jintu has a tell-tale set of irresistible credentials: one-time Chhatra Dal leader, reputedly since founder-president of BNP's Sweden branch, a fugitive from law, more precisely, from a death sentence handed to him in a double murder case 22 years ago, he has got himself Presidential pardon in record time. At least, by international standards. He arrived back in the country and surrendered to a court on January 3 this year and managed to get the clemency on January 13.

The hot haste in which his case was moved up, getting it whizz past the home and law ministries and the PMO, before eventually reaching the President's table for his grant of mercy, leaves an impression that somebody, some vested quarter, has hand-carried the file for decision on a double-quick basis. There was obviously a short-circuiting of the process and procedures which is likely to happen in a contrived and orchestrated movement of a file. More seriously, the withholding of the vital information about the two other co-accused who had been sentenced to death and were executed, in the summary placed before the President, is a culpable omission when in the exercise of such a constitutional prerogative as granting clemency the head of the state must be in full possession of facts before deciding one way or the other.

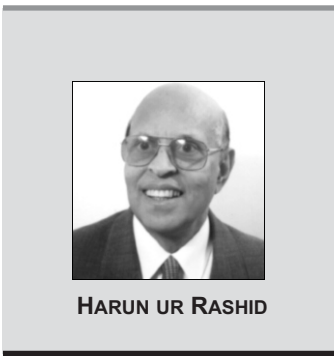
For first time in Bangladesh's history a monumental bungling at the ministerial level appears to have fooled the offices of the head of the state and the head of the government, what with the tossing of blame between ministries of home and law which cannot make it look any better. What has happened and the way it has happened therefore sounds anachronistic to the spirit of clemency which consists in compassion and humanitarian concern for a convict facing death row.

There are reasons to believe that the lofty sacrosance and benevolent temper associated with clemency have been compromised in no small measure. It is therefore our demand that a public inquiry be held to bring every aspect of the amnesty case out into the open.

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This usage was innocuous when people lived in the confines of their own surroundings, where a boy was habitually called by his nickname and a man as the father of his son. But at an age when Bangladeshis are found in remote corners of the world, this common use of Muhammad/Muhammad at the beginning of names may lend to some risks and much confusion. In some countries, particularly in the US, a Muslim is often subjected to a

Sowing the seed of instability? American 'bribe' to India can trigger arms race



HARUN UR RASHID

THE recent visit of India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to US has been a turning point of relations between the US and India. Gone are those days when both countries mistrusted each other during the Cold War. While Pakistan was in the US camp, India had aligned with Moscow and in 1971 August signed a Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union (though India is a Non-Aligned nation).

How political relationships change with the passage of time and one thing does not change is "national interests". That was emphasised by the 19th century British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston (1784-1865) when he said that there were no eternal enemies or perpetual friends. What remains eternal and perpetual is national interests..

Dr. Singh was received with warmth and cordiality by the Bush administration. It was for the first time India's Prime Minister spoke before the joint session of the Congress. In his address, Dr. Singh praised President Bush's steadfastness for war on terrorism, music to the ears of the top leaders of the Bush administration, when Iraq is in shambles, portraying powerlessness of American might and acting as powder keg for terrorism. President Bush needs a boost for his image in his country as more than 50 per cent Americans now question him for misleading them

on the Iraqi war.

Nuclear cooperation

The most important diplomatic triumph for India during the trip is that President Bush has agreed to share civilian nuclear technology with India, reversing decades of US policy designed to discourage countries from developing nuclear weapons. The agreement is a significant victory for India as it gets involved in strategic cooperation with the US with all the attendant consequences including enhancing its strategic power in Asia.

The agreement has one important exception that India will not be subject to international monitoring of its military programme. India has only accepted to place its civilian nuclear facilities under international scrutiny. The agreement does not call for India to cease production of weapons-grade uranium, which will enable it to expand and improve upon its nuclear arsenal.

Under the terms of the agreement, India will have access, for the first time, to conventional weapons systems and to sensitive US nuclear technology that can be used in either a civilian or a military programme. Furthermore India can also buy the long sought- after *Arrow Missile System* developed by Israel with US technology (Israel had to cancel recently an agreement to supply US technology based weapons under pressure from the Bush administration). In effect, India now locks itself strategically with the US and Israel.

experts think that this agreement has been made at the cost of a consistent attack on the dangers of nuclear proliferation. They argue that the deal is likely to undermine US efforts to confront Iran and North Korea on nuclear programme. How could the US allow India to build nuclear weapons without international monitoring while at the same time it insists on Iran and North Korea halting their nuclear programme? It does not make sense as a policy, experts argue, because the US picks and chooses a country that could have nuclear proliferation and another that could not even develop nuclear programme for energy (Iran).

How China and Pakistan will accept it?

Then there is a fall-out from the deal: How Pakistan and China would react to this agreement.

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The US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns (he visited Bangladesh at the end of June this year) described the agreement as "a major move forward for the US" and "the high water mark of US-India relations since 1947." It is rare in the past 100 years that a US Secretary of State has sent a signal of this dimension.

A blow to non-proliferation of nuclear weapons

However some non-proliferation

the US in Asia Pacific. When the US Secretary of State visited India this March, Dr. Rice reportedly told India's Prime Minister that it was America's policy to help "India become a major world power in the 21st century" and the State Department "understands fully the implications, including military implications" of that policy.

It seems that the Bush administration has a high opinion of their own strategy to counter China as the emerging strategic rival and clearly wants to draw India into a "military alliance" with it (US failed

China's claim to Taiwan is a domestic issue under "one China policy" affirmed by the US and many other countries.

As for Pakistan, it will be a worry to see such agreement with India. Pakistan has provided strategic contribution to war on terrorism of the US. Pakistan withdrew support from the Taliban regime and allowed US forces to transit to Afghanistan through its territory. It is reported that Pakistan has also permitted US soldiers and military equipment on its soil for the purpose. Pakistan will be seriously

disappointed of the action of the US, for she is considered the strongest ally of the US in Asia after 9/11.

However, the US does not always see that way. Pakistan is not a democratic country and it is ruled by a General who wears his uniform as the Army Chief. India is the largest democratic country and the US can have genuine business with India. Furthermore India is a victim of terrorism by Kashmiri militants, claimed to be supported by Pakistani militants. This perhaps binds US with India more than Pakistan does. Furthermore India with its resources and location can be a counter-weight to China, while Pakistan does not.

How India looks at it

China's Prime Minister visited India in April last and both India and China have committed to broader, deeper and stronger relationship. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reportedly said : "India and China can together reshape the world

order". This implies that India can afford to play politically with both the US and China to advance its national interests.

India is a large country and its population will surpass that of China by 2050 (according to UN, India will have 1.5 billion while China 1.3 billion by 2050). It is emerging as great industrial power. It is already a nuclear power with about 95 nuclear bombs, according to US-based the Arms Control Association.

India claims that the deal with the US is not directed against any country. It is for its national defence. As a regional power, India further claims that it is cognisant of maintaining a balance of its relations with both the US and China. India will not be influenced in its decision by the US or China. India stands on its own legs and is determined to pursue its national interests.

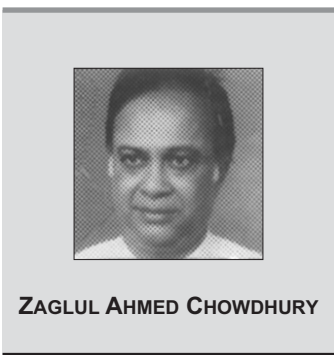
Conclusion

Many political observers believe that the reinforced relationship between the two countries seems to be a replay of what France and Britain, after 1914, sought to contain the rapid growth of Germany's industrial power by making an alliance with the other rising power, Russia. And that led to the First World War. Although analogy is hard to provide, they argue that India may play the role of Russia in the 21st century.

The agreement is most likely to trigger arms race in Asia because both China and Pakistan will closely monitor India's military strength and they are likely not to lag behind. If India falls within the trap of US strategy, it is likely to drive China and Pakistan into a needless arms race with her. Many pacifists believe that the Bush administration has sown the seed of instability in Asia.

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

Sri Lanka bracing for a new crisis?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE South Asian island state of Sri Lanka seems heading towards twin problems at a time when a ray hope had emerged for a better time both for a settlement of the bloody conflict over the Tamil issue and reconciliation of the government with the opposition.

The government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga had succeeded in reaching an agreement with the Tamil rebels for tsunami relief operations, and thereby raised hopes for restoration of the peace dialogue between the two sides. The opposition led by former premier Ranil Wickramasinghe pledged to support the deal on the relief works, and in the process the differences between the government and opposition had also somewhat narrowed down.

But the brighter conditions turned otherwise rather unexpectedly and both the developments now appear to be on the jeopardy. The supreme court has struck down the accord on disaster management, calling it "illegal" and also questioned the source of the huge

funds of billions of dollars from the international community, and this dealt a serious blow to the government-rebel understanding.

At the same time a key ally of the ruling coalition -- communist JVP -- has withdrawn support from the government, protesting the deal with the rebels and this has reduced the government to a minority. The situation prompted the opposition to demand mid-term polls and the spectre of political instability is stalking the island state.

but the verdict of the supreme court came as a big setback to their understanding. The peace process between the two sides have been stalled for long, and many thought the accord could provide an opportunity to two warring sides to come closer, which may have helped to restore the negotiations aimed at ending the civil war. The court ruling only contributes to blocking the two sides from coming closer.

The peace talks are stalled for long and took a beating following

Both these came as contrary to expected healthy developments. Sri Lanka, consequently, now faces the prospects of an early election, and the non-implementation of the agreement on the relief management means going back to square one as far as whatever scope had existed for bringing the government and the rebels closer.

It is unfortunate for the country which has been experiencing bloody civil war for two decades and also intermittent political instability owing to rivalries among major political forces. The governments are not proving stable.

The government-rebel deal on humanitarian operations was reached after painstaking efforts,

exit from power of former prime minister, Ranil Wickramasinghe, whose government had initiated the dialogue with the rebels but was dismissed by the president, Chandrika, evidently for being "soft" on the Tamil militants. The elections that followed brought Chandrika's supporters to power under a new prime minister, Mahindra Rajapakse, and chances of a settlement of the two-decade civil war through discussions have since been hanging in the balance.

Six rounds of talks between the Colombo government and the Tamil Tigers during Ranil's time raised hopes for a negotiated settlement of the contentious civil war in the country, which was virtually bleed-

ing to white because of the long drawn conflict centring on the minority Tamil's armed struggle for a separate homeland in the north of the country.

There was no decisive outcome of the civil war, as success on the battlefield swung from one side to the other, and occasional cease-fires produced no tangible results, and hostilities resumed in quick time. However, the situation marked a qualitative change when the government of Prime Minister

ing was the marked willingness to find common ground towards a permanent settlement of the problem. Notwithstanding differences on some key areas, both sides demonstrated a commendable attitude in carrying forward the parleys. Admittedly, talks occasionally went into rough weather and even had at one stage been suspended indefinitely, but both side never spoke of resuming hostilities.

Unfortunately, things turned bad when President Chandrika

that she would have to shoulder the blame should the fragile cease-fire finally collapse and hostilities resume.

The powerful Western nations like the United States, Japan, and the European Union have urged her to take steps for resumption of talks with the rebels. Norwegian peace mediator Eric Solheim played a key role in facilitating the accord on relief between the government and the militants. Diplomats in Colombo are now disappointed by the supreme court ruling since this will rob the two sides of a chance of working together and this could have helped resume the stalled peace dialogue. Now the scenario is different.

The communist JVP was against the relief deal, saying this would give extra importance and leverage to the rebels. The party is against concessions to the militants. As it parted ways with the ruling coalition, the government turned into a minority in the 225-member parliament. Not unsurprisingly, the opposition has begun demanding snap elections, and Ranil Wickramasinghe is touring the country with this demand.

President Chandrika is confronted with the demand of fresh polls on one hand and the fall-out from the unexpected supreme court ruling on the relief accord on the other. Both were unexpected, but the reality is that both have happened.

Zaglul A. Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

Some reflections on Mohammad, Muhammad and Md

R. H. KHANDKER

DOES anyone know why many male Muslim Bangladeshis start their names with Mohammad or Muhammad or Md? It is commonplace in Bangladesh, perhaps less so in India and Pakistan, and even less in other Muslim countries. While it is worth researching how this practice came to be a trend in the first place (this writer would appreciate any clue), this piece is limited to some reflections concerning such common usage in our country. The pervasive use of the Prophet's name at the beginning of a Muslim name demands explanation, but it is more so about the use of Md. as an abbreviation of Muhammad, which is really perplexing.

Does the holder of the name, or more appropriately his father, consider the first name Muhammad as an integral part of the name? It

does not seem so. It stands to logic that a father would like to make a distinction between the names of his sons. How can he do that if each son's name is Muhammad? Perhaps in his inner mind the father does not consider it as an integral part of the name, it is put to add some honour to the name. However, the owner of the name is stuck with it for his life. And he always gives it while pronouncing or writing his name.

This usage was innocuous when people lived in the confines of their own surroundings, where a boy was habitually called by his nickname and a man as the father of his son. But at an age when Bangladeshis are found in remote corners of the world, this common use of Muhammad/Muhammad at the beginning of names may lend to some risks and much confusion. In some countries, particularly in the US, a Muslim is often subjected to a

There is evidence that Md. is considered something honorific. It happened to this writer many a time that, when he gave his name to some service provider, say a film studio while depositing a spool of film to be printed, the provider put an unsolicited Md. before the name. A protest often produced a vacant look or a look of scorn from the provider, implying that the writer was not a quality Muslim.

rigorous questioning, particularly in the borders. A name Mohammad/Muhammad invites instant attention and unwanted aggravation, without which the person could perhaps pass with little trouble.

So many people, all with the same first names, are also difficult to be identified individually. Moreover, in the western world a person is normally known by his first and last names. Brothers with Mohammad/Muhammad as the first name and the same last name can create utter confusion. There are three Bangladeshi brothers

who live close by in Canada, all with Mohammad as their first name and Huq as the last name. This caused a lot of quandary for their foreign wives in sorting out their respective husbands. A solution was worked out by designating the husbands as Mo1, Mo2, and Mo3.

While writing Mohammad or Muhammad is a matter of preferred spelling, the use of Md. as the abbreviation of Muhammad is completely a different matter. It may raise some basic questions. First, why the abbreviation? Is it because Md. is not considered a name but an honorific title? The

Englishman introduced Mr. representing Mister and Dr. representing Doctor in our region centuries ago. That might have induced Muslims at that time to abbreviate Muhammad to Md., which after all was considered an honorific title. However, a person does not call himself Mr. or write Mr. at the beginning of his name. On the other hand, a Muslim having Md. abbreviation of Muhammad at the beginning of his name, always give it or write it as a part of his full name. This clearly indicates that the holder of the name Md. considers it as a part of his name, not an honorific title. If it

is really a name, there is no explanation for writing Md. in place of Muhammad.

An example may be cited how absurd the use of Md. can be. A relative of this writer stayed with him when visiting New York some years ago. This relative gave his name as Md. Nurul Alam while opening a bank account in New York. The bank could not make any head or tail of the word Md., but soon account statements started coming to the writer's address bearing the name Dr. Nurul Alam MD. Our Finance Minister is wiser; he writes his name as M. Saifur

Rahman.

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The name Muhammad is Arabic, as the Prophet of Islam was an Arab. But the Arabs apparently do not approve of the use of Md. for Muhammad. An instance can be cited as evidence. A prominent Bangladeshi Muslim, chairman of an Islamic institution, applied for a Saudi visa. Though the chairman knew the Saudi Ambassador well, an unsuspected official of the consulate rejected the visa application

objecting to the use of Md. at the beginning of the name. The visa was eventually granted. This may be an isolated incident since Bangladeshis with Md. as first name have been getting Saudi visas for quite some time. However, this rare evidence demonstrates that Arabs do not take kindly to the use of Md. for Muhammad. This practice might be considered degrading, since Muhammad is the respected Prophet of the Muslims.

The long and prolonged use of Md. in place of Muhammad has made it an established fact. These reflections are to shake things up and invite further reflection.

Dr. R. H. Khandker is an elderly economist, returned home after a long stay abroad. He may be contacted at: rezaul@bananinet.com

OPINION