

Britain's new approach

Liberal traditions the victim

It is a sad day for the UK and for the rest of us as well when Prime Minister Tony Blair unveils a series of proposals intended to counter terrorism in the country, but which go decidedly against the grain of the great tradition of British liberalism.

The UK has long been known for its liberal and humane approach to those who are stalked by fear of oppression and persecution in their home countries aside from welcoming immigrants in general. For centuries, the UK has been a shining example for the world when it came to being the last refuge of those seeking asylum. Of all of the European countries, the UK was the one that had done the best job of creating a thriving, vibrant multi-racial and multicultural society.

This is why it is with a heavy heart that we have received the news that in the aftermath of the July 7 bombings the British government has decided that to reverse their age-old policies of openness and inclusion. Some of the proposals that have been set forth by the PM are hard to accept, not merely in their stringency, but also in terms of their broad sweep and consequent vulnerability to abuse.

We, of course, realise that the events of July 7 and immediately thereafter form the backdrop for these changes, and it was to be expected that some quite radical shifts in policy and outlook would be made. But while Mr. Blair's policies may achieve success, it seems to us that in going so far they run the risk of deeply fracturing British society and doing more harm than good.

We would thus like to raise a word of caution that the proposed measures not be enacted until after deep deliberation on the physical and psychological impact they are likely to have.

And while the British authorities have acted in an exemplary manner so far, we would like to also sound the warning that they must continue to keep distinct Muslims as a whole from the fractional minority who would commit acts of terror.

The spectre of terrorism has created a dilemma for free societies the world over: how to protect one's citizens and at the same time safeguard civil liberties and liberalism. This is a global problem, not just one the British are facing. The real tragedy is that it seems as though the axe is falling on liberalism everywhere.

We are all diminished today, but we must strive to recover the status quo-ante of sanity as nearly as possible. Liberalism must triumph.

Hospital in ruins

That too meant for FFs!

THE hospital for Freedom Fighters (FFs), Trust Adhunik Hospital, set up in 1991 with a view to attending to the medical needs of FFs, has not been functioning for the last six years, despite having the equipment and, we suppose, fund provisions for running it. That's an unpardonable waste of resources and also a measure of insensitivity to the cause of a highly revered group of citizens the FFs.

Most of the FFs, numbering more than 175,000, are above 50 years of age, and in need of medical attention. The setting up of the hospital under the aegis of the Muktijoddah Kalyan Trust was a commendable step. It functioned smoothly in the first three years and was leased out to a private medical college in 1994, and finally to another private organisation three years later. The decision to rely on private management didn't yield any result as proven by the fact that the hospital ceased to function six years ago.

In a resource-poor country where setting up a medicare unit is a difficult proposition, we have managed to virtually spoil something that was on the ground and flagged off.

There are allegations that some elements within the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs are scuttling the hospital's re-emergence. Are we to believe there are people who could subvert even a move as positive as the reopening of a hospital, that too for the FFs? However, this is not the first time we are hearing about costly equipment lying idle and rusting through disuse.

Mismanagement has already caused loss of valuable time. And, there is just one solution that the government must consider in all seriousness immediate reopening of the hospital under a professionally run and thoroughly dependable management.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

SINCE the beginning of the new fiscal year, the price of rice and other essential commodities has been spiralling. This has made the lives of the people, particularly the poor and the fixed wage earners, miserable. The price of rice and vegetables generally spirals in September and October when there is no harvesting of rice of any variety and vegetables are damaged by floods. The important departure this year is that the price of essential commodities including rice has increased in the month of July when the harvesting of *boro* was just finished and there was no serious food to damage the standing vegetables on the field.

In recent years, there has been no price hike of essentials during this time of the year. According to information available from the food and disaster management ministry, the average wholesale price of coarse rice in the last week of July fluctuated between Tk 1600 and Tk 1625 per quintal (Tk 16 to 16.25 per kg). The average wholesale price of coarse rice in July 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004 was Tk 1103, 1107, 1228, and 1296 per quintal respectively (Tk 11.03, 11.07, 12.28, and 12.96 per kg respectively).

Compared to last four years' July price, the price of coarse rice in July this year marked a rise between Tk 300 and Tk 500 a quintal. The price of medium and fine quality rice has been much higher. The price of coarse rice has been cited in view of the fact that more than 80 per cent of the people in the country eat coarse rice.

Why is the price of rice spiralling

at this time of the year?

First, even a good *boro* harvest (production stood at 140 lakh tonnes against the target of 137 lakh tonnes) could not meet the shortfall in *aus* and *aman* production. Available information suggests that domestic foodgrain production fell short by at least 12 lakh tonnes in 2004-2005.

Second, food aid has sharply

completely failed due to serious shortfall of production and higher prices of rice and wheat in the open market compared to the government administered prices. The government has taken up a programme to procure 10 lakh tonnes of *boro* by August to build up the food security stock. About 7 lakh tonnes of rice have reportedly been procured so far. Unlike in

Last but not the least, the big landlords are expecting another jump in the price of rice in September-October. So they are not going for large-scale sale of their rice at the moment. The big businessmen are also reportedly hoarding rice in anticipation of a further rise in the price of rice.

Now let us see as to why the rising price of rice is a cause for

of necessary intake of calories, women and children in poor households suffer most. For example, under-five mortality rate is 102 and maternal mortality rate is 4.3 per 1000 live births. Incidence of low birth-weight is estimated at 30 percent to 50 percent. Apart from loss of lives, there is a heavy loss in work output associated with malnutrition.

Food consumption has lowered by 10-18 percent, while people now have to spend more money to buy food, curtailing their expenditure on education, health, and housing.

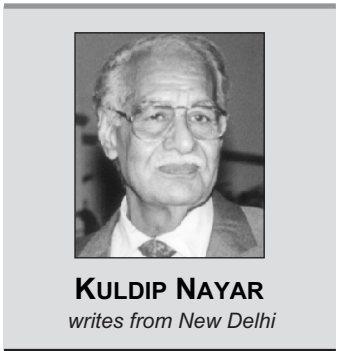
Sixthly, the rise in the price of rice influences the price of the secondary cereal, wheat. Information available from the food and disaster management ministry reveals that during the last year, production of wheat in the country stood at 12 lakh tonnes only (as compared to the previous production record of about of 19 lakh tonnes). Consequently, flour is selling at Tk 18 or more a kg.

Lastly, the rise in the price of rice leads to migration of the rural poor to the towns and cities for their subsistence. The situation worsens especially during seasons of slack labour demand and high price of rice. The capital city Dhaka has to bear the main burden of this seasonal migration of the rural labour force.

To conclude, considering the importance of rice in our socio-economic life, production of rice and other food products should be heavily subsidised so that the producers can produce rice, vegetables, and other food products according to the nation's requirement at a lower cost and sell the same at lower prices. All necessary measures have to be taken so that the price of rice is within the means of the common people of the country.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary, Ministry of Food.

Commercialisation of the press



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

MANY years ago, Krishna Menon, who later became Defence Minister, said that it was the jute press that India had. The remark generated a lot of heat. It was not a wild one. Indeed, what constituted the opinion then was the writing by half a dozen English dailies which were in the hands of businessmen dealing in jute.

The remark has rubbed off on the press. It has got linked to industrial or other interests that many newspaper proprietors have. This thought might have ranked Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when he said a few days ago, while inaugurating a Mumbai English daily in Delhi, that "the convergence of corporate interests and the control that market men have come to acquire on editorial policy can militate against pluralism and even the freedom of the press."

His fears are not unfounded. The media has been commercialised. Newspapers reflect more of industry's thinking than of people's afflictions. A wit says that news is what is written on the back

of an advertisement. A couple of leading English dailies have even begun to sell their editorial space to a hick, provided he has the money to buy. The purpose is not so much to earn revenue as to throw down the gauntlet to the democratic political machine. What it can do is the challenge. There has not been even a whimper from professional bodies or the Press Council of India which was established to safeguard

It is not difficult to trace the time when the editorial side took a back seat. After the end of the emergency (1975-77) there was such an outlet of pent-up emotions and ideals bottled up due to censorship that newspapers themselves were taken aback by the freedom they could exercise. Whatever skeleton they could find in the government cupboard, they brought it out and wrote candidly about the crime and corruption

the owners introduced the contract system that restricted journalists' tenure to a particular period, to be renewed after two or three years. This was like a Damocles' sword hanging over the head of journalists. Her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, had given the working journalists permanent appointments. Owners could not dismiss them under the law. Nehru thought that the security of job would enable them to resist

gumption to stand up now. Owners have expected obedience, and they have turned to be right.

Ninety-nine per cent of Indian newspapers are today owned and edited by the same family. Leaving a few of them apart, others are run like any business. The son inherits it, passes it on to his son and so on. The owner's name appears as editor. The old, classical type of editor is vanishing. Journalists

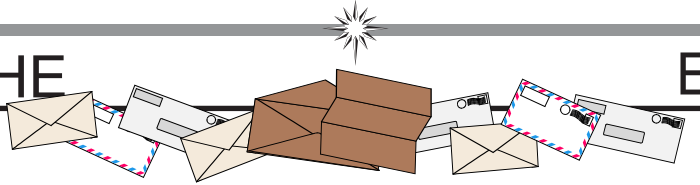
information they get. They often write one-sided versions of events and about people who do not matter absolute non-entities. Often good stories are not followed up properly. Planted stories make the front page. Even factual information given in a newspaper is often incorrect.

Yet, the press, by and large, has acquitted itself well in the field of pluralism, one of the key elements the prime minister underlined in his speech. The press has risen to the occasion when secularism has been sought to be replaced by fundamentalism. Take the demolition of the Babri masjid and the Gujarat carnage. On both occasions the press took the BJP, the culprit, to task, and made it apologise.

The remedy that the prime minister has suggested to remove deficiencies in the press has been tried and found wanting. The Press Council has been a washout because it has become another court of law. The ombudsman appointed by a leading English daily found that the entire newspaper was not open to him. He could give his opinion only on the matters referred to him. It is time to look at the entire media, print and electronic. A Media Commission -- on the lines of the two press commissions since independence -- should be appointed to find out the relationship between owners and journalists, newspapers and TV networks, and radio and online media. Only then will the prime minister find out whose interests lie where.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

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.

Murderers escape

In my very first year in the BUET I eye witnessed a gunfight on my campus between criminals who were so-called students of my university and the neighbouring Dhaka University. The gunfight was for grasping a tender. The two leaders of that gunfight were from BUET and DU. That gunfight on the campus cost us the life of Sabekunnahar Sony. After that murder, the terrorist from DU was arrested in Dhaka but the BUET man has not been arrested yet. There is a whispering we often hear that immediately after the death of our Sony Apu, he managed to get the shelter of one of the most influential leaders of the BNP and after that the ruling party has sent that murderer abroad. After more than three years of that murder, we are observing that the verdict on that case has not been executed.

In Bangladesh, as it is possible that a convict is granted presidential amnesty with the help of the big-wigs of the ruling party after twenty two years, it is also possible that the main accused in Sony murder case will never be punished.

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Role of media

The Point-Counterpoint article by Mr. A.N.M. Nurul Haque addresses a serious issue in our country. For years whenever Bangladesh is portrayed in the news in CNN and BBC it is due to some natural calamity, strike, riot, murder etc. The pictures are extremely dispiriting. The only time Bangladesh has been presented in positive light in recent years is when the subject was Grameen Bank.

Journalists and newspapers have a duty to provide us with facts

and the actual news. Unfortunately, corruption in our country has reached such a level that more often than not we have bad news. The Ahmadiyya group is being persecuted and the media has a responsibility to let us know the developments. The continual strikes in our country called by political parties are a reality that cannot be ignored. The existence of bribery and other forms of corruption are a day to day affair that when rated against other countries show us as one of the most corrupt nations.

However, the government has done nothing to improve the situation. We do not have a proper representation of Bangladesh anywhere. When US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Bangladesh is becoming "quite troubling", we did not see the government launch a factual yet effective media strategy to prove it otherwise. When Eliza Griswold

wrote the article "The Next Islamist Revolution?" the citizens of our country were affronted but the government did nothing to address this issue. Articles in journals, magazines and newspapers of high circulation can only be negated by articles in media with greater coverage. The public relations of our country are such that it is poorly led.

India is one country to learn from in public relations. Everything they do and everything they say receive attention and not because of their sheer size but their ability to simply be heard. The riots in Gujarat received a lot of media attention but the country managed to steer attention elsewhere. The nuclear testing in India received a lot of media coverage but today India and the US have a nuclear treaty set up. We hardly see our leaders making meaningful state visits to other countries to strengthen our foreign policies.

It of course doesn't help to have members of the opposition party announce existence of extremism and fanaticism in our country in the western world when such things are feared just to receive attention from the media. Our political parties are so determined to rule that they are willing to ruin the country to achieve their own goals. The media does not have to be the worst enemy, we simply have to learn how to make it our greatest ally.

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Terrorism and its roots

Peoples all around the world express their grief and sympathy for the people who lost their lives in suicide bomb attacks in London and Sharm-al-sheikh, Egypt. By any moral parameters, the incidents are evil and go against

humanity. We are assured that world leaders are united against all kinds of terrorism and racial malice. In the mean time, Scotland Yard tightened their security measures and promptly moved towards sophisticated data analysis, by which they succeeded to identify the culprits. So far everything proceeded smoothly and in a logical manner, though a few groups attacked mosques and Muslims. In those steps we witnessed what is terrorism and its outcome. Now, if we actually want to examine the exact fabric and genesis of terror attack, we have to concentrate on the facts which are related to this malignant growth.

The attackers must have been inspired by some motto. What's their motto or ideology? Then we can turn our attention to Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine as our sample areas to find out the roots of terrorism. Palestinians are out of their homeland for many decades.

They are frustrated and desperate. So they are resorting to desperate measures.

The same is the situation in Iraq where hundreds of people are dying every day. So the roots of terrorism must be eliminated before we can expect any tangible improvement in the overall situation.

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Let his soul return to his land

You are in deep, divine, eternal sleep. Above you the vast blue sky. Isn't this the sky that you wanted to conquer? Passing over this sky you wanted to reach your dreamland-- Bangladesh. For the sake of the bond with the motherland, you severed all the bonds- your cherished fatherhood, your beloved family, your desired job- everything. Even did not think for a while

of your valuable life. Being emotionally aroused by patriotism, you wanted to rush with a plane to your small country where the struggle for liberation had started. You just thought about the future not about the past. You sacrificed yourself for the next generation. The barbaric Pakistanis could not destroy your spirit.

Dear readers, our great hero Shahid Matiur's grave is still in Pakistan. It is our sacred duty to draw the attention of the government to bring back his mortal remains to Bangladesh. Our expatriate brothers and sisters have taken this noble initiative. Please go to the web side - www.bangladesh-association.com and sign up your name to lend support to their effort.

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