

## The media and the military



Photojournalists of different newspapers and news agencies put their camera on the ground of national press club as a protest against the attack by some members of the Rapid Action Battalion on their fellow photojournalist S M Gorki of Dainik Jugantor on June 22, 2002.

BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, Ndc, Psc (Retd)

**T**HE press is the watchdog over the institutions of power, be they military, political, economic or social. Its job is to inform the people of the doings of their institution... BE Trainor.

The occasion of the World Press Freedom Day may be a fitting moment to dwell on the relationship between the media and the military in Bangladesh. Having spent 35 years in uniform and the last three years as a journalist, and having lived on both the sides of the fence, I perhaps have the benefit of looking at the issue from both sides of the divide, with greater objectivity, and with more dispersion.

To some it may appear that inquiring into the media-military issue is an acknowledgement of a continuing tension that underlines the relationship between the fourth estate and the military. That is actually so. However, such an environment is not unique to Bangladesh -- it exists in all countries where the military has a significant influence in the country's policy priorities, in both peace and war.

In Bangladesh, the divide has sometimes been more pronounced, while at other times there was a realisation of the real nature of the two institutions and acceptance of the fact that the two must play a supportive role in order to attain national aim and preserve national interest.

Let us also acknowledge the fact that both, the media and the military, are national institutions that must work under a definite regime, for the military that regime is more codified, in order to deliver the public good to the people. Therefore, the situation can brook no adversarial relationship between the two.

According to military historians, the "first real confrontation between the military and the media was in the

Crimean War, when William Howard Russell of the London Times exposed gross incompetence within the British high command -- and brought down the government.

He proved that an unfettered journalist is a burden to the military in the field, anathema to a government at home, but essential to a free society." And we have evidence to believe that the pressmen were the most unwelcome creatures in the military camps during times of war.

This is what General William Sherman, the famous general of the American Civil War, had to say of newsmen. He said: "I hate newspapermen. They come into camp and pick up the camp rumors and print them as facts. I regard them as spies, which, in truth, they are. If I killed them all there would be news from Hell before breakfast." Such a perception about the media had preoccupied the mind of the military in Bangladesh since the inception of the country, and the tussle has continued ever since. However, the fault was not of the military establishments alone.

Apparently, the Unionist general had very little idea about the magnitude of the media's role, and of the newsmen's in the successful pursuit of military campaigns. It has, after almost 150 years, been articulated by another scholar of the American military fraternity that "The media, in the modern era, are indisputably an instrument of war. This is because winning modern wars is as much dependent on carrying domestic and international public opinion as it is on defeating the enemy on the battlefield.

And it remains true regardless of the aspirations of many journalists to give an impartial and balanced assessment of conflict."

While that illustrates the media's obligation in war, the obligation extends equally, in our case in particular, to fulfilling the peacetime obliga-

tion of nation building, an effort of which the military is also an indispensable part.

The media-military relationship resides in the realm of civil-military relations, and when that is handled proficiently one can manage the media and its role in the pursuit of the national aim more efficiently.

I think the tussle arises from the compulsions of the two, that are seen as being mutually exclusive. While it is the responsibility of the media to keep the public informed, it has been the military's effort to give out as little as possible. That is also a feature of the media-military relationship in other countries too.

And this phenomenon, as an American scholar puts it while describing media-military relations in his country, occurs when the "members of the fourth estate seek to obtain and report the truth, while the military seek to control the flow of the truth.

This tension, combined with goals and unique personality traits of those called to each profession, has been cause for a multitude of disagreements and high level of distrust." This proves that truth is not only contemporary it is also universal.

The military psyche was a legacy of the colonial rule that was difficult to shrug off. The military during the colonial rule was part of the colonial power, forming a coercive arm of the state, and was used as an instrument for suppression of the people.

The Pakistan Army, before and upto 1971, displayed a similar psyche, and preferred to be treated like a holy cow. The existence was that of a creature living in a watertight compartment, isolated from the outside environment, hoping that no news would prove to be good news for the media and the military. But, in fact, the underlying compulsion was perhaps an intense lack of trust in the media, either to be able to project the

military in the right manner or to deliberately misproject it.

The consequence was inevitable. Lack of information was the mother of all speculations. In fact, the attempt to distance the media was seen as an effort to keep the people from knowing what the military was up to, and there was plenty to keep away from the public.

In Bangladesh, the typical military psyche inherited from the Pakistani military determined its attitude towards the media. An attitude of remaining in isolation was the order of the day, where the military was distanced not only from the media but also from the society at large during the very early period of our existence.

What the leadership at that time, both at the political and military levels, overlooked was the fact that information was power, and one of the four constituent elements of Grand Strategy.

A classic example of not disseminating information and failing to take the media and, consequently, the public opinion along was during the early period of the counter-insurgency campaign in the CHT. Failure to keep the public informed not only hampered operations, it gave rise to many half-truth, and speculative reports.

However, it would be wrong to put the blame for the state of the military-media relations on the shoulders of the military alone. Misreporting, speculation, padded report by journalists with very little background knowledge of the issue, and even poorer knowledge of the military, among other things, were responsible for much of the tension between the media and the military. There is no reason why that should continue to be so. In fact, one is very encouraged to see the very positive trend in this regard at the moment.

There is no doubt that our military leadership is well aware of the fact that in the age of information technology, and in the conduct of military strategy, the mass media has been added as the tenth Principle of War. And perhaps they need no reminding what General Eisenhower had to say on the eve of the Normandy invasion.

The truth that, "The first issue in military operations is that no information of value is given to the enemy. The first issue in newspaper work and broadcasting is wide-open publicity. It is your job and mine to reconcile those sometimes diverse considerations," holds true even today.

And while we are sure that the military leadership will continue to reconcile the diverse requirements, the media for its part must understand the various constraints and compulsions the military has to work under. It will be well for us to remember that both, the media and the military, are essential for maintaining the republican character of our state.

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## Of truth against power

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**W**HEN you deal with the question of press freedom, you actually ought to be confronting its many dimensions. And then try to answer them as best you can. It is always the questions that throw themselves at you. It is immaterial whether they emanate from the dark corridors of political power or the dungeons of misanthropic men.

There is the tragic tale of Daniel Pearl, the American journalist who disappeared on a Pakistani street and then had the terrible misfortune of being decapitated by elements holding a perverted view of faith. Of course, Pearl was a courageous man.

You are not a journalist if boldness is not part of your character. But there is also the inevitable, though unpalatable, truth that courage can often be an invitation to disaster, to an immensity of suffering for the one armed by it.

If you have trouble with that line of argument, you only have to go into the recent instances of the murder of a Turkish newsman and a Russian journalist. We have some idea of why the Turk died, and it all had to do with his views on the place of Kurds in Turkish society.

He died at the hands of a fanatical teenager. But that Russian journalist, a woman who set out to expose the corruption and the conspiracy at work in her own country? She had been warned earlier of the consequences of possessing a mind that was in endless, ruthless investigation. She warded off death, until death finally prevailed.

Here in Bangladesh, the killing of men like Manik Shaha and Balu, and so many others, leaves many of us in the media despondent for days and months on end. In the end, though, we emerge from the shock renewed in our ability to expose misdeeds at the top.

It does not matter that a ruling party lawmaker from Kushtia turns into a predator in search of newsmen to beat up, perhaps even kill, when they speak of his conspiratorial deeds. What matters is that the journalist in our times does not mean to give up the power he wields to put bad men and women in their places. That cheers you up, somewhat.

But just as you think you are a free journalist, you remember all the calls that governments have over the years made about the need for objective journalism. Does it not strike you as peculiar that the profession you are engaged in should be coming to you in such an adjectively defined way?

You know as well as the rest of us that you are either a journalist or you are not, just as it rains or it does not. Therefore, when that bit about objectivity is pushed in your face, you know that objectivity is not what men in power are after. They are informed



In a brutal display of power, police assault a senior journalist covering an international cricket test match in Chittagong stadium. One of the most condemned attack on journalists in recent years.

re-election in 1968, told journalists that he would cross the bridge when he came to it. Days later, Time newsmagazine printed a cartoon depicting the US president surveying a bridge broken and burnt by the fires of Vietnam.

Altaf Hossain may not have been a legendary journalistic figure, but he was a well-known editor of Pakistan's leading English language newspaper Dawn. He should have stayed there.

He did not, for it was a berth in Ayub Khan's government that attracted him more. In early 1965, he became Pakistan's minister for industries and natural resources. He, thus, got lost in woods that no one wanted to venture into.

A free press is not what you should expect from journalists always looking for a role in politics. Neither should you think that the media are autonomous, when newsmen in the West are happy to be in a queer condition we now have come to know as embedded journalism.

You report from behind the lines set by a government, in this case the Bushies in Iraq, and expect people around the world to take you seriously. Well, people have other directions to turn to. And one of those is Al-Jazeera, where the truth offered is a whole lot more wholesome than what embedded journalism can bring to you on its platter. Why else would David Frost be there?

In Bangladesh, there have been newsmen who have cheerfully belittled the War of Liberation through radio programmes they called Plain Truth -- it was neither plain nor the truth -- before going on to serve in high positions in the very country they once lambasted as a waste of pleasing their masters in distant Ralpindi.

One among them would go on to achieve notoriety through engaging in innuendo and calumny against the jailed leaders of the Mujibnagar government in November 1975. All those incarcerated men were then done to death in the dark confines of prison.

You are saddened to think that there are circumstances when even journalists can turn out to be fearsome beings. When that happens, what happens to the freedom of the press? Let the answer be. And, yet, let us not forget that some good journalists have often pushed us into deep disappointment through their forays into bad government.

## May 3: Press freedom webcast

DRINKNEWS

**O**N the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, DrikNews has organised a roundtable discussion and live webcast. In recognition of the globalised, interconnected nature of news media, and the growing international interest in Bangladesh issues, a big focus of the event is the live streaming of the event on the Internet.

Presenters at the event will be Khaled Mohiuddin (bdnews24.com), Tipu Sultan (Prothom Alo), Munni Saha (ATN Bangla), Probir Sikdar (Samakal), Mainul Islam Khan (Reporters Sans Frontières) and Afsan Chowdhury ("Media in Times of Crisis"). Shahidul Alam will moderate the event.

The physical event will be held at Drik gallery, but for those inside and outside Bangladesh who cannot attend, a video stream of the event will be viewable (with a 10 second lag) on the Internet. 'Streaming video' is a key component of many live events today, but due to low and irregular bandwidth capacity in Bangladesh, it has not been popularised here.

A key need for streaming video is high bandwidth over a certain period -- if too many people try to view a video stream at the same time, a low bandwidth network can shut off. The streaming

capacity is provided by Givan Bela of Belgium based Okno -- the server itself will be in Belgium, but Bela will be monitoring it from Slovakia.

Since the majority of the discussion will be in Bengali, there will also be simultaneous translation in a separate window, updated every ten seconds following the model of live, scrolling cricket scores made popular by websites like cricinfo.com.

The technical aspect of the event was coordinated by Naeem Mohaiemen along with a team from Drik and DrikNews. The organisers cautioned that the live streaming might face technical hitches on the actual day. "We tested it on May 1, which was a holiday so a lot of people are not online. May 3, 4:30 pm is right in the middle of peak office hour, so if too many people are choking up the general bandwidth, the signal could break down."

The actual one-to-many streaming is from the Belgian server, which has high capacity. But getting the signal from Dhaka to Brussels depends on local bandwidth. Shahidul Alam points out that if the webcast breaks down, the team will have learnt the local technical barriers and be able to do a better stream at the next event.

Details of the webcast are at <http://www.driknews.com> and <http://www.drik.net/webcast>

## Backsliders

### Ten countries where press freedom has most deteriorated

COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

**T**HREE nations in sub-Saharan Africa are among the places worldwide where press freedom has deteriorated the most over the last five years, a new analysis by the Committee to Protect Journalists has found.

Ethiopia, where the government launched a massive crackdown on the private press by shutting newspapers and jailing editors, leads CPJ's dis-honor roll. The African nations of the Gambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo join Russia and Cuba among the world's worst "backsliders" on press freedom.

"Democracy's foothold in Africa is shallow when it comes to press freedom," said CPJ's Director Joel Simon. "These three African nations, as diverse as they are, have won praise at times for their transition to democracy -- but they are actually moving in reverse on press issues. Journalists in Ethiopia, Gambia, and DRC are being jailed, attacked, and censored, a pattern far worse than what we saw only a few years ago."

In issuing its report to mark World Press Freedom Day, May 3, CPJ is calling attention this year to long-term erosion in press conditions. Rounding out CPJ's "Top 10 Backsliders" are

Pakistan, Egypt, Azerbaijan, Morocco, and Thailand.

The backsliders reflect a mixture of relatively open countries that have turned increasingly repressive and traditionally restrictive nations where press conditions, remarkably, have worsened.

Nations such as Thailand and Morocco have been considered press freedom leaders in their regions but have charted sharp declines over the past five years. Other countries such as Cuba have long had poor records but have ratcheted up press restrictions through widespread imprisonments, expulsions, and harassment.

The behavior of all of these countries is deeply troubling, but the rapid retreats in nations where the media have thrived demonstrate just how easily the fundamental right to press freedom can be taken away," Simon added.

To determine trends in press conditions, CPJ analyzed case data worldwide for the years 2002 through 2007. Its staff judged conditions in seven categories: government censorship, judicial harassment, criminal libel prosecutions, journalists deaths, physical attacks on the press, journalist imprisonments, and threats against the press.

Patterns that emerge from CPJ's analysis include:

- Authorities in several countries are silencing critical coverage by imprisoning journalists. Cuba and Ethiopia became two of the world's leading jailers of journalists in the past five years. Morocco, often cited as a regional model for press freedom, is now tied with Tunisia for the dubious distinction of sentencing the most journalists to prison in the Arab world.

Here are CPJ's "Top 10 Backsliders." The figures cited are annual unless noted.

In **Ethiopia**, under the leadership of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, imprisonments rise from two to 18. Dozens forced into exile. In 2006 alone, authorities ban eight newspapers, expel two foreign reporters, and block critical web sites. Only a handful of private newspapers now publish, all under intense self-censorship.

In **Gambia**, under the leadership of President Yahya Jammeh, editor Deyda Hydara murdered in 2004. The Independent, a leading newspaper, is targeted by arsonists and closed by the government. Criminal penalties instituted for defamation. Eleven journalists jailed for extended periods in 2006.

Taliban figures. Government's own Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence is suspected in some abductions.

In **Egypt**, under the leadership of President Hosni Mubarak, government agents assault reporters covering demonstrations. Editor Reda Helal disappears in 2003. First Internet blogger sentenced to prison. Top editor Abd Halim Kandil abducted and assaulted in 2004. Egyptian Organization for Human Rights says 85 criminal cases launched against press between 2004 and 2006.

In **Azerbaijan**, under the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev, editor Elmar Huseynov slain in 2005. Criminal defamation cases rise from one to nine. Criminal libel cases rise from none to nine. Imprisonments climb from three to 11. Leaders of press freedom group Journaliste en Danger forced into hiding in 2006.

In **Cuba**, under the interim leadership of Raul Castro Ruiz, twenty-nine journalists imprisoned in massive 2003 crackdown. Four foreign journalists expelled after covering 2005 opposition meeting. Another 10 barred entry when Fidel Castro becomes ill in 2006. Cases of government harassment increase in the past year.

In **Pakistan**, under the leadership of General Pervez Musharraf, eight journalists killed in the last five years. At least 15 journalists abducted in that time. Government security agents interrogate reporters who interview

interrogators.

In **Thailand**, under the leadership of military appointed interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont, new military junta nationalizes Thailand's only private television station and orders radio stations to broadcast military-prepared news. Foreign news broadcasts blocked when former prime minister is mentioned. New constitution is being drafted. Press guarantees uncertain.

PHOTO: AZUR RAHIM PEU DRINKNEWS

