

The 'confessional statements' and journalistic ethics

Right now, Bangladesh is passing through a critical juncture in the history. The lack of transparency of the government on some sensitive state issues like the present one has made the situation more complex. So, assessing the above stated background, our media should act cautiously. If the so-called confessional statements are wrong or contaminated, then, in future, the present role of some in the media will be much deplored.

MD. ANWARUL KABIR

THE exposure of "confessional statements" by AL and BNP stalwarts and some business tycoons of the country in the electronic and print media have perturbed the minds of some people in different ways.

Some of the country's key political figures and businessmen have made confessional statements, as reported in most of the media, during the interrogation by the Task Force Intelligence (TFI) cell.

If the information from these confessional statements regarding the two apex leaders of the country tallies exactly with the reality, then we have very strong grounds for describing them as "mafia dons."

Already, due to wide publication of these "confessional statements," the perceptions of some quarters towards these two leaders have been started to change, despite the glorious roles they played during

the movement against the autocratic regime of General Ershad.

In this context, Dr. Kamal Hossain's recent repentance, and his apology to the nation for keeping close association with Sheikh Hasina and the AL, can be cited. Perhaps influenced by the published stories based on the confessional statements, the editor of the highest circulated Bangla daily has advocated for the implementation of the so called "minus-two theory," suggesting the removal of incumbent chiefs of the two major parties.

Now, as regards the publishing of these so-called confessional statements, an ethical question may be raised. So far, the media publishing the interrogation transcripts have not mentioned their sources of information. Mysteriously, the media people received the interrogation transcripts of some AL leaders in audio CDs from an unknown source.

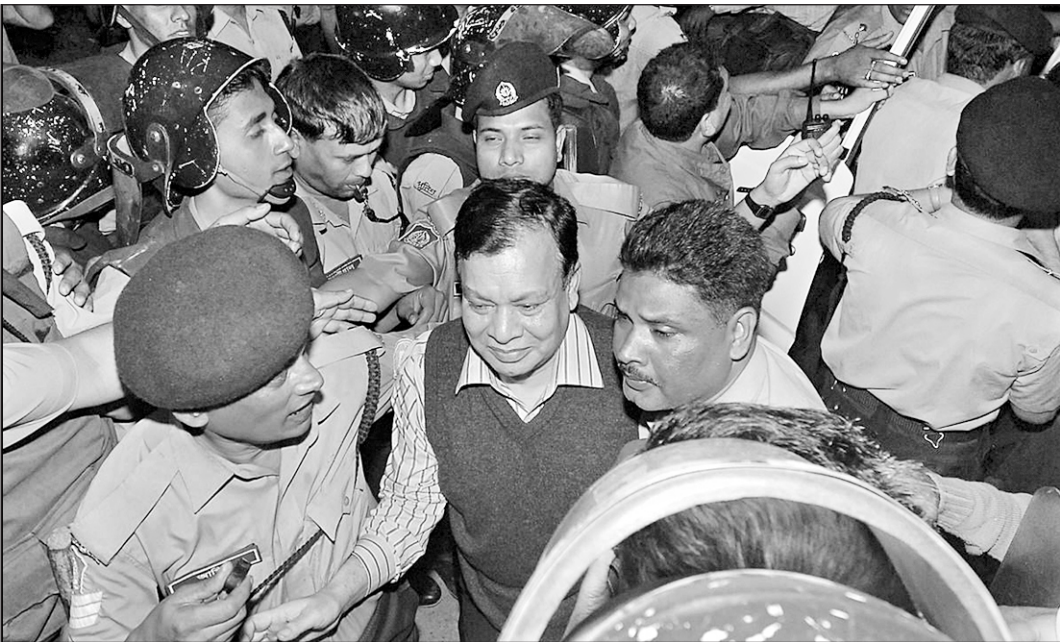
Apart from this, the reports on interrogation of BNP leaders and other businessmen have been

published in the media without disclosure of any source. In this context, it may be argued that the leaders or business tycoons concerned are under government custody, so the reports must have come from a source in the government as no journalist was present during the secret sessions of the interrogation.

But it has been learnt that the concerned authorities of the government have straightforwardly denied providing the media with any information regarding those interrogations in TFI cell, or giving out CDs.

Then what is the source of such reports? Unless the reliability of the source is ascertained, these so-called confessional statements can be taken to be mere gossip. As conscious citizens of the country we know that, for honesty while publishing reports in the media, authenticity of the source is a must.

Besides, before publishing such reports the media should have cross-checked with the concerned



parties to confirm their authenticity. Now the question is, to what extent are the majority of our media maintaining these ethics of journalism in publishing such reports on sensitive national issues?

Are the media hundred percent sure about the authenticity of the so-called reports based on the confessional statements? Any positive answer to this question, so far, has not been ascertained.

The so called confessional statements may be distorted, and

even fabricated, if we consider the following points:

- The source of the interrogation transcripts of the secret TFI cell is still undefined. Officially such interrogation is treated as confidential, and no journalist is allowed to be present during the sessions of interrogations.
- So, naturally the question is, who has taken this initiative of exposing secret information to the media? What is the motive behind this? Again, it may be mentioned that

the transcripts of interrogation of only AL leaders were distributed to the media in CDs. The question is, why were such CDs of BNP leaders not distributed? Why has this discriminatory step been followed?

- Recorded CDs of the interrogation of the AL leaders, which were distributed to the media, seem to be edited. These recorded audio transcripts are not clear enough,
- And sometimes they seem to be superimposed over other voices.

Technically, by using the superimposition technique, the statements recorded can be changed or edited. So, in that case, the possibility of such contamination must be investigated.

- In some cases, misinterpretation of the claimed confessional statements is possible. For instance, most of the cases for receiving money from the leading businessmen are termed as "extortion" cases.
- In fact, in bourgeois democracy, receiving money on part of a political party is a norm. Even in the developed countries like the US and the UK, political parties are financially supported by multinational companies or big corporations, and this is called donation or subscription.
- So, when BNP or AL received money from businessmen, it should not be portrayed as extortion. However, the point to be emphasised is whether this money was used for carrying out party activities or taken by the leaders for their personal gain.
- We cannot ignore the possibility of extraction of such confessional statements from political leaders and others under tremendous mental and physical pressure. In this respect, one such interrogated leader, Mr. Obaidul Kader of AL, told the reporters at the court that "everything was lies." To

escape from the torture these leaders might "confess" to what is dictated by the interrogator.

Right now, Bangladesh is passing through a critical juncture in the history. The lack of transparency of the government on some sensitive state issues like the present one has made the situation more complex.

We, the majority of the common people, are confused. We are seeing the aspirants of the so-called "minus-two" theory becoming active again. Maybe, behind the scenes, some are initiating the heinous policy of character assassination of the central leadership to implement their much desired "minus-two" theory.

So, assessing the above stated background, our media should act cautiously. If the so-called confessional statements are wrong or contaminated, then, in future, the present role of some in the media will be much deplored.

Finally, it should be mentioned here that this article is not defending the corrupt politicians. Rather, it asks the media to unearth the truth. The media concerned need to be very cautious, and they must reveal whether any coterie inside or outside the government is working for creating leadership vacuum in the country.

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Losing Bangladesh, by degrees

According to the United Nations, the temperatures this winter in some parts of Bangladesh were the coldest in 38 years. The last time it was this cold, Bangladesh was called East Pakistan. Looked at another way, however, the mean temperature was only two degrees below the average for January. Yet in a country so precariously balanced, two degrees meant the difference between life and death.

TAHMIMA ANAM

IMAGINE, if you will, a country marooned between a snowy mountain range and a churning sea. The country is small, a thumbprint on a vast continent. It holds the youngest and largest delta in the world. This means the landscape is fickle, the rivers often shifting and swallowing giant swaths of land.

It is cleaved by two of the world's mightiest rivers, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. They perform vanishing acts and conjuring tricks. One day your house is dry and the chilies are

airing in the courtyard. The next it has disappeared altogether. You do not want to rebuild so close to the river, but you do: there is no space; the country is full.

For whatever else it strains to hold, it is the crush of humanity that makes Bangladesh what it is: a calamitous country, a country so full of people that every slight shift in circumstance has dire consequences. The weather does not have to be extreme. It has only to be intemperate, and the country does the rest.

How does such a small place hold so much? You worry that it will burst. But your worry is misplaced. You should worry that it

will sink. For as the sea level rises, its waters will flow upward like fingers into a glove, turning the sweet river water into salt. The salt will destroy the crops and kill the fish and raze the forests. At the same time, the Himalayan peaks will melt, and they, too, will flow into the country.

The rising sea and the melting mountains will meet on this tiny patch of the world, and the people who strain at its seams will drown with it, or be blown away to distant shores, casualties and refugees by the millions.

Here in the capital, winter is a festive season. The cool weather allows women to wear their heavy

est saris and wrap thick twists of gold around their necks. There is little rain; the ground is solid -- good for high heels. Buildings across the city are draped with strings of lights. You can buy hot, crunchy jilapis by the roadside; the markets are full of winter vegetables.

One day this winter, I landed at Dhaka airport just before dawn. The fog that had delayed my flight clung to the ground and looked like snow; as it lifted, a milky haze took its place. On the way home I saw groups of men huddled over coal fires by the side of the road.

They wore puffy jackets and acrylic sweaters, castoffs from the sweatshops that dot the highways between the airport and the city. When they blew on their hands, I saw clouds whistling out of their mouths. Their heads were wrapped in shawls and towels and mosquito nets. The sun did not make an appearance until noon that day, and even then it

was only a heatless, watery orb.

In the evening I went to the other side of town, where my uncles live by the long, pencil-shaped Dhanmondi Lake. I watched from the window as the lake appeared to go still, as though deciding whether it was cold enough to freeze over, and there were tiny dots of fish moving toward the shore, not swimming but belly up, drowned.

According to the United Nations, the temperatures this winter in some parts of Bangladesh were the coldest in 38 years. The last time it was this cold, Bangladesh was called East Pakistan. Looked at another way, however, the mean temperature was only two degrees below the average for January.

Yet in a country so precariously balanced, two degrees meant the difference between life and death. In the districts of Rajshahi, Nilphamari, Srimangal and Gaibandha, people died of the cold

because they had no protection against the weather, no walls between them and the elements -- not a long sleeve or a sock.

Only two degrees, but instead of enjoying their jilapis and weddings and cauliflower, 134 people died. A mere two-degree rise in the global climate will cause large tracts of the delta to disappear, and two degrees after that, the rivers will be wider than the plains, and two degrees after that, the water will have swallowed Bangladesh.

Two degrees either way for this country is not two degrees: it is catastrophe itself, borne on the waves of our warming world.

Tahmima Anam is the author of the novel *A Golden Age*. This piece was first published in *The New York Times*.

The Gaza effect

America can only be, at best, a guiding hand behind an international system that is disposed to democracy and open markets. Bush is himself coming to acknowledge this, especially by maintaining a multilateral front with the Europeans to deal with the nuclear threat from Iran.



MICHAEL HIRSH

THE Israelis didn't want Palestinian elections back in January 2006. Even Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, had been worried about them and kept asking for delays. As early as the spring of 2005, Abbas had warned American officials that he did not have the popular support to disarm Hamas, the Islamist party that turned suicide terror bombings into a standard tactic in Israel and which both Abbas and the Israelis saw was growing in power.

powers of democracy. Later, after Hamas stunned the world by winning control of the Palestinian Parliament, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice claimed: "Nobody saw it coming."

The line could describe much of what has resulted from George V. Bush's efforts to transform the world -- or at least one part of it, the Middle East. As long as the Islamists of Hamas refused to recognize Israel, the United States refused to deal with the Hamas-dominated Palestinian government.

The hope was not that ordinary Palestinians would suffer, but that

they would realize such a government was not in their best interests. At the same time Washington tried to bolster Abbas and his Fatah movement -- the secular Palestinian party founded by Yasir Arafat. The strategy backfired. America was seen to be taking sides.

Hamas, under pressure, built up its own paramilitary forces to counter those controlled by Abbas (and trained by the United States). Then, last week, as tit-for-tat killings in Gaza spiraled out of control, those Hamas fighters in Gaza turned out to be far more fierce than their better-funded opponents.

The result: the radicals are now in charge of Gaza, a 140-square-mile strip of land on the Mediterranean Sea along Israel's western border that is packed with 1.4 million Palestinians, most of them desperately poor. Until late 2005 Gaza was occupied by Israeli troops, and until last week Bush still saw it as part of the new Palestinian state he wanted to create along with the larger West Bank. Now Gaza may become Hamas's private enclave and perhaps even an ungovernable font of terror.

The violent takeover of Gaza by Hamas is not just a death knell for Israeli-Palestinian peace, splitting Bush's dream of a Palestinian state into two armed camps. It is also, along with the quagmire in Iraq, a historic rebuff. In his second Inaugural Address, the president embraced the promotion of democracy as his top priority, declaring: "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands."

But in Iraq and the Palestinian territories, as in Russia, Pakistan and other places, liberty is retreating. And the fact remains that those places where Washington has most actively and directly pushed for elections -- Iraq, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza -- are today the most factionalized, chaotic and violent in the region.

Why does the disaster in Gaza matter? In part because the defeat of the secular -- and more moderate -- Fatah forces could, along with the insurgents' success in Iraq, inspire Islamist radicals in the region and around the world. Hamas is not the Taliban, and it knows that an uptick in rocket attacks against Israel will be met with a harsh response.

But, as Bush said in his second Inaugural, the whole point of promoting freedom is to blunt the hopelessness and anger that breed radicalism. Gaza faces 50 percent

unemployment in the best of times. Qaeda-like splinter groups that have carried out kidnappings of foreigners have already begun to appear. Further isolating the territory is not likely to fill its residents with faith in the future.

Citizens of countries where Washington has called for greater democracy -- Iran, say, or Syria -- now have three less-than-inspiring examples close to home. In Lebanon, Iranian-backed Hizbullah reigns as a power unto itself.

In Iraq, the sect-based parties that came to power in the 2005 elections have created a bloody nightmare, and stymied any attempts to forge a truly national consensus. And in the Palestinian territories, Washington simply rejected the election results.

Optimists in Israel and America argue that Abbas, having dismissed the Hamas-led Palestinian government, is now free to receive millions in aid money and customs revenues that had been held back. The idea seems to be to bolster the wealthier, less radicalized West Bank and starve Gaza (of attention and respectability, if not food).

But simply walling off Gaza, and more than a million Palestinians, will bring the region no closer to peace. In a recent interview with Newsweek, Rice said that establishing the idea of a "two-state solution" was one of her proudest achievements. "You now have a broad international consensus," she said. "That's a conceptual breakthrough." What she's left with now, at best, is a one-and-a-half-state solution.

Gaza also poses a lesson in the limits of imperial power in the 21st century. Let's face it: Americans have always made crummy imperialists. A century ago Teddy Roosevelt complained that "America lacked the stomach for empire."

A senior White House official echoed that lament early in the Iraq

occupation, noting that America has the power of a true empire, like Rome or like Britain in the 19th century, but not the taste for acting like one. "Look at us in Iraq -- how much difficulty we have in saying we will anoint people to run the country. Does anyone think the Romans or the Brits would have been deterred?" he grumbled.

Nor did many hard-liners in Washington ever fully understand that using raw power to "impose" democracy on peoples who were not ready to seize it for themselves was a chimera. By insisting on cure-all elections in countries and territories that had no institutions of justice and security, or a politically aware economic middle class, to sustain democracy, the Bush team clearly seems to have overreached.

The next American president will have to grapple with a Middle East that is messier and quite possibly angrier than before 9/11. But also, in a larger sense, he or she will have to confront anew a harsh lesson in the limits of power.

America can only be, at best, a guiding hand behind an international system that is disposed to democracy and open markets. Bush is himself coming to acknowledge this, especially by maintaining a multilateral front with the Europeans to deal with the nuclear threat from Iran.

Rice, in her Newsweek interview, acknowledged that the administration had scaled down its hopes for "transformational" policy. "We're laying the foundations for someone else to succeed in the future, and I think that's fine." But right now, success looks very far away indeed.

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JAHANARA IMAM

The brilliance remains

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

JAHANARA Imam's life ended thirteen years ago, in a blaze of glory. That is the truth. The courage she demonstrated in her final years of temporal existence remains an inspiration for all of us to follow.

When you consider the criticism she came under in her later years, from old collaborators of the Pakistan army to such men of the law who displayed little shame in mocking her after her death, you have that certain belief welling up in you that she caused imprints of her cause to be left behind nearly everywhere.

For a woman who had seen a son taken away by the Pakistanis, never to be returned, it was a monumental task taking upon herself the responsibility of waging an old battle in new form. For an individual who witnessed the swift decline and death of a husband who had survived, barely, degrading torture at the hands of the Tikka-Niazis hordes, it was sheer bravery setting bad memories aside and coming forth to inform her fellow Bengalis that not all had been lost, that indeed we had it in our power to point the finger at those who had once humiliated us in the company of their foreign masters and tell them that shame was writ large for all time on their dark lives.

When you reflect on the life that Jahanara Imam went through, you will have cause to recall the glamour that once defined her being. It was glamour that did not come with the glitter one associates with it. It was indeed a pattern of living, which once was emblematic of the urbanity and sophistication that came easily to Bengalis in the days when nationalism began to dig increasingly deeper roots in their consciousness.

Imam was part of a generation that saw in the resurgence of Bengali nationalism an inevitability that politics, Pakistani politics, could ignore at its own peril. With individuals like Sufia Kamal and Nilima Ibrahim already around to provide intellectual impetus to the nationalism idea in the 1960s and early 1970s, it was only proper to assume that Jahanara Imam and countless others would come forth as foot soldiers, at some point in time, to inject greater substance to the cause. And that time came soon enough.

As the Mukti Bahini waged war against Pakistan through the months of the war of liberation, it was Imam's son Rumi who epitomised for her and for her family the shape of politics to come. It was one of those dark periods in history when bad men coming from a foreign land resorted to the bestial and the medieval. And into that chaos were sucked such good, patriotic Bengalis as G.C. Dev, Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Fazle Rabbi and millions of others.

When Rumi and his father were taken away, to be mercilessly maltreated in the cantonment, life for Imam hovered between the shadow and the reality. Rumi died. His father died soon afterwards. The war moved along, quickened its pace, and Pakistan went through a natural burial in the land of the Bengalis.

And yet the ghosts of Pakistan, of the quislings it had organised in the year of the genocide, needed to be exorcised in free Bangladesh. Jahanara Imam, like so many others,



knew that strong leadership had become an absolute necessity in order for the old values of the armed struggle for freedom to be revived and passed from door to door, from hamlet to town, in this country.

And so it was that, despite her reluctance to be at the head of the procession, she found herself in the role of an individual who could make a difference. She was the mother of a martyr. In essence, therefore, she spoke for all mothers, all parents who had seen their children march off to war, most of them never to return.

She was a wife who had seen her husband close his eyes on the world in supreme suffering. Beyond and above it all, she was a Bengali who had experienced, first hand as so many other Bengalis had, the molestation of history and the brutalisation of a civilisation. Who better than her to give voice to the 1971 Ghatik Dalal Nirmla Committee?

Even as physical infirmity claimed her, drop by drop, she went around the country reminding Bengalis of the cause their sons and daughters and parents had died for. That the men who had sided with the enemy, and had gone on a sinister campaign against Bangladesh across patches of ill-meaning deserts deserved no compassion was a constant refrain in her. That the genocide had not been forgotten, that Pakistan's collaborators needed to be brought to justice, that the Bengali heritage called for a swift revival, were all music to our ears, a message that we needed to respond to.

And respond we did. From the far corners of the land the people of Bangladesh heard Jahanara Imam, lined up behind her, and stayed there until mortality claimed her. In a broad sense, they have stayed on, to reinforce her belief that life cannot be purposeful without a recapitulation of history and a retrieval of it.

In a landscape where icons are hard to come by, Jahanara Imam remains a symbol of the power of integrity against primordial evil. That is reason enough for us to keep a candle lighted in her memory.

(The thirtieth anniversary of the death of Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam is being observed today).

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