

Fighting terrorism

# Terrorism and role of the media

BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM  
KHAN, ndc, psc (Retd)

**N**APOLEON'S words find relevance in the state's efforts to fight terrorism. And experts opine that it is the media and not the government or the military that is the ipso facto 'sentinels of mind against terrorism.'

Terrorism is both a strategic and tactical expedient to attain a political end. Counteracting it demands a holistic methodology where the approach takes on board all the resources available to the state. The media happen to be one such capital that the state can invest to address the scourge of terrorism.

Interestingly, experts find a direct relationship between media and terror. In a sense one thrives on the other although it is the terrorists that need the media more not only to propagate but also to sustain through the various stages of its gestation till it either withers away or succeeds in achieving its political objective.

The world is increasingly becoming aware of the important role the media can play in addressing terrorism. Whether we go by the 5-P strategy as enunciated by Kofi Annan, or the 4-Ds formulated by the British to counter terrorism, the media will be indispensable in their implementation since it happens to be a very important adjunct of the anti as well as counter terror operations.

The role of the media

assumes great significance in the fight against terrorism particularly in so far as it relates to the psychological and propaganda aspects of counter-terrorism. While the terrorist endeavours consist of not only propagating their cause it's also an effort to justify the modalities of their campaign and expose the inability of the state to provide security to the people.

A greater part of the early 70s and the 80s in Western Europe and Britain were occupied with the debate on the role of the media and how that should be played given the widespread terrorist activities in that part of the world; and that was compelled primarily by the power of the media which the terrorists were quick to exploit. For the government the power of the media turned out to be a double edged weapon. In a liberal democratic society it could not be done away with yet it hampered to a great degree the counter-terror activities of the government.

What we witnessed in Bangladesh in 2005, and subsequently in the form of suicide attacks on judges, was not entirely unexpected, since the likelihood of such a force existing in some form or the other in our country had been exposed in some sections of the media, particularly the print media, while another section (perhaps with an agenda of their own) tried to project this as an overblown matter, towing the line of the government of the day that the issue of religious extremism was a figment of the



ZOBAER HOSSAIN SINDEE

*"There are but two powers in the world. The sword and the mind. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the mind." -Napoleon Bonaparte*

imagination of the media.

For the terrorists the media has become an indispensable adjunct of their propaganda strategy, and because of the compulsions of making profit, and particularly for the electronic media the need to increase viewers' rating, terrorist acts become a staple diet' for it. The terrorists need the media to survive and the dependence factor has been, and continues to be, so great as to have prompted Margaret Thatcher to term it as oxygen of publicity. In fact according to L. John Martin writing on, "The Media's Role in International Terrorism," says that the free media in the West that survive on the sensational news, and which find terrorist acts so profitable, have actually been responsible for the more than 40 percent terrorist acts in Western Europe and North America.

There is thus an inherent dichotomy that the media need not only be aware of it must also reconcile. While there is the obligation of the media to keep the public informed, not only about the people behind the terrorist acts but also of their causes, it must avoid providing the oxygen for sustenance that publicity through the media provide them with.

In essence, the role of the media will be defined by the nature of state response to terrorism as it would all the other agencies of the government.

The role of the media

depends on some very important and interlinked factors. One is the current state and the character of terrorism in Bangladesh and how this will shape in the future, and two, shaped by the first, the means and the method of the state's response to terrorism.

Three different and often competing perspectives dictate the role of the media in combating terrorism.

There are four things that the terrorists would want the media to deliver to them. One is to give them publicity. Secondly, through the exploitation of the media and unguarded response of it they would like to attain favorable understanding of their cause, which would provide them the third benefit that of acquiring legitimacy for their proclaimed objective. This was what was unwittingly provided to the ringleaders of JMB and JMIB when the TV channels carried their comments to the public who heard them espousing their cause that would have appeared to any common man as innocuous and to the gullible a legitimate stand. And fourthly, they seek the media's help to cause damage to their main job.

Conversely, the state would want to counter all that the terrorist seeks of the media. It would like the media to advance its agenda rather than the terrorists'. It would like seeking the media's help to

diffuse tension, prevent disinformation, and prevent disclosure of any government plans for counter terrorist actions.

For the media its only wish is for unfettered access to information and the ability to cover the issue unhindered. In doing that while it is ensuring the society's right to know it must not overlook the aspect of accuracy, avoid over dramatisation while maintaining objectivity and accuracy.

A very important role that the media can play is to frustrate the militants' aims by exposing their misdeeds. Showing the terrorist up as not any hallowed creature but as perpetrators of misdeeds who are seeking to exploit religion for narrow ends, ought to be their main job.

Responsible reporting that is backed up by rational arguments with objective views can also expose the terrorists for what they are. And in this aspect our personal likes and dislikes for a particular party or philosophy or person must not come in the way of truthfulness and objectivity.

The media can play a very important role of public service by carrying warning to them, particularly on how to react to emergencies.

Counter-terrorism is all about countering ideas and not persons, although the physical elimination or arrests of the operatives will go a long way in addressing the problem. Thus the media can be a forum for informal discussion on the issue with the aim of not only informing the public of the fallacy or the futility of the terrorists' strategy and activity, it can also be an effective medium for conveying to the hardcore amongst them the futility of

their cause. It would help prevent those sympathizers, who are yet to make up their minds, from joining their fold.

Another very important task that the media can play in our country as we have seen being played in our neighboring countries and in some of the countries in the western democracies is to restrain the government from violating the rule of law or abridging the human rights of its citizens or disregarding the need for social justice by keeping the authority informed and making them aware of the need that counter terrorism does not mean less of human rights and rule of law.

While the government has a lot to gain by making the media an integral part of its campaign against terrorism it must never abridge the freedom of speech. By the same token the media must follow a code of ethics in reporting on terror activities. Although there is no universal code in this regard the one such code of from the Society of Professional Journalists, as follows, may be worth following.

Seek truth and report it - Journalists should be honest, fair, and courageous in gathering, reporting, and interpreting information.

Minimize harm - Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects, and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.

Act independently - Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

Be accountable - Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers, and each other.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

