

## Free media the cornerstone of democracy and development

*There can be no alternative*

LET us be perfectly clear on this point. After the restoration of democracy in 1991, our free and vibrant media has been Bangladesh's greatest achievement since independence. And, equally important, the vibrancy and vitality of the media has been crucial to our development and advancement.

Thus, we must acknowledge that when it comes to freedom of the press we have seen better days than the current times. The media has known freer times and we await and demand such freedom again. It is no exaggeration to say that if the press is not free, then the nation cannot prosper. The current chill that has descended on the media must end soon.

We are looking forward to elections, and once the elections have been held, we expect and insist that there will be no deviation from the free media that a democratic polity requires to sustain itself.

Indeed, even before the elections, we would like to see emergency provisions against the media lifted. We understand that these are extraordinary times and that extraordinary times call for some adjustment on the part of the media. We accepted it for a while. But this must now end for the sake of good election and genuine democracy.

No one can deny that the media has been extremely responsible so far. The media has exercised admirable self-discipline and restraint, and remains willing to be patient in the hopes of a trouble-free election.

However, in the run up to the election there is a crucial role for the media to play, and it is important that the chilling effect of remote control must end. Things have improved over the past several months, but there is a long way to go, especially for the electronic media.

We would like to see the media bloom in full freedom again and feel that the media's track record shows that this would be squarely in the national interest. A free media is the principal supporting institution that permits government to function smoothly. It is a free media that will make democracy run smoothly when it is restored, and in the run up to elections, the freer the media is permitted to be, the smoother the elections are likely to be.

## Nargis passes away

*Leaves a mixed feeling of relief and sorrow*

BANGLADESH'S sense of relief at the passage of Nargis away from its coastal line is as profound as its sorrow at the devastating sweep of Myanmar has been overwhelming. When the eye of the developing cyclonic storm was scowling, as it were, at the bumper boro harvest we were reaping in our land, an impending sense of loss was pervading our consciousness. The worst kind of premonition set in. Thank stars, however, we have been spared another bout of calamity. Nevertheless, much as we take heart in the providential escape from a cyclone that remained unpredictable till the very end as to its final direction, we cannot but feel deeply concerned over the trails of damages left across Myanmar, especially Yangon, its capital.

Bangladesh and Myanmar are located in a vulnerable cyclonic zone, let alone sharing the same tectonic plate, with the funnel-like Bay fronting out being a conduit through which a cyclonic storm building afar rushes overland with a devastating effect.

The overarching contemporary fact of life in the planet is the climate change that has altered the behaviour of natural phenomena like cyclones and Tsunami. This is evidenced by the way Nargis itself behaved. After nearly a dreadful week of build-up 1200-1800 kilometer away from the coastal belts of Bangladesh and Myanmar, cyclone Nargis shifted its direction at least thrice from its original southwestern location. It moved to northerly, north-easterly and easterly directions making the landfall around the mouth of Irrawaddy river on Friday evening before hitting the economic hub on Saturday morning. In terms of stationary duration, slow movement, frequent change of direction and gathering of momentum, Nargis is worth researching on as a new benchmark.

All of these point to the need for regional cooperation in South and Southeast Asia to facilitate a better understanding of the natural disaster phenomena.

Our heart goes out in sympathy for the cyclone victims in Yangon and Bangladesh government could think of contributing to relief effort, if need be in that country.

## The world's crumbling food security



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

### PERSPECTIVES

Only a few days back, the United Nations said that the "silent tsunami unleashed by costlier food" threatened 100 million people. In London, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said Britain would seek changes to EU bio-fuels plans if it was shown that planting crops for fuel was driving up food prices. The World Food Programme (WFP) chief Jossete Sheeran highlighted the critical situation caused by decline in food stocks and surge in prices that has hard hit the world's hungry -- the poor and the destitute.

ALL the evidence suggests that the food crisis now gripping the world will only aggravate over time, and may even trigger conflicts. Indeed, it has already rocked several countries, including Bangladesh, where simmering discontent over scarcity and spiraling prices of cereals has been becoming volatile, with the public ire targeted at the authorities unsuccessfully grappling with the issue.

While the government has been toppled over the chronic food shortage in Haiti, food riots are reported from Egypt and the Philippines. Elsewhere in the world the experience isn't dissimilar.

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"silent tsunami unleashed by costlier food" threatened 100 million people. In London, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said Britain would seek changes to EU bio-fuels plans if it was shown that planting crops for fuel was driving up food prices. The World Food Programme (WFP) chief Jossete Sheeran highlighted the critical situation caused by decline in food stocks and surge in prices that has hard hit the world's hungry -- the poor and the destitute.

Notwithstanding this widespread concern over the looming disaster, so multifaceted are its causes that it becomes difficult to see how the global food shortage can even begin to be tackled. As a matter of fact, the whole planet is

involved in addressing this basic human problem. Yet, a beginning in the direction of saving the humanity from hunger has been long overdue.

At long last, a warning bell seems to have been rung. On April 13, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) along with the World Bank called for urgent action to attend not just the present crisis but also the need for medium term development in the region most vulnerable to falling food supply and spiraling prices.

At the very basic level, the problem is that food production has failed to keep pace with population growth and its increasing food requirements. Also, the early effects of climate change have

started to take their toll. The UN estimates that fertile land equivalent to the size of Ukraine (609628 square kilometer) is lost every year across the world to climate change related phenomena such as deforestation, drought and erratic weather. The FAO reveals in a report that crop yields in major food exporting countries like Australia and Ukraine -- the bread-baskets of the world -- have already taken a hit from "unusual weather events."

In the developing countries, the element of desertification linked with global warming has been eating away vast chunks of arable land, while fertile coastal regions are under threat of rising sea-level occasionally resulting in tidal bores and cyclonic

storms. The production of essential food items is being adversely affected by the shortage of water in vast swathes of Asia, West Africa and Central America.

The push for grain-based ethanol is, in the meantime, diverting corn from human consumption, as is the growth of livestock farming. The economic boom in parts of Asia has significantly increased the demand for meat. As a result, the grain that could feed people is instead being fed to cattle.

Compounding the problem, the rising fuel prices have substantially increased the cost of shipping and transporting of food, besides making farm inputs like fertilisers more expensive. Even in countries where the staples are available, they are beyond the reach of the poorest. Among the developing countries, "China and India carve out a bigger place at the table, and a new dinner guest -- bio-fuel -- threatens to become the biggest glutton of all," according to a western analyst. The two emerging powers have the largest populations to feed and, hence, an enormous amount of food to

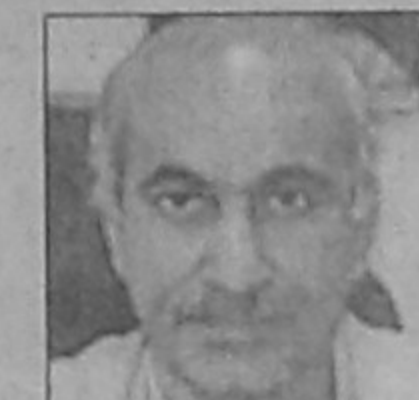
grow to meet their needs. According to Jossete Sheeran, the current food crisis is the biggest challenge in her organisation's 45 year history. "The era of cheap food is over," said Rajat Nag, managing director-general of Asian Development-Bank. He urged the Asian governments not to distort markets with export curbs but use fiscal measures to help the poor.

To combat the impending crisis, former UN secretary general Kofi Annan's stress, however, is more on climate change which, according to him, is fast aggravating and could bring about a major hunger disaster.

However, neither the global shortfall in production nor the fuel prices are entirely to blame in our country. Smugglers, politically connected hoarders, and syndicated mafias also create artificial shortages even in bumper years to profit from the misery of the people. Happily, there is now a growing consensus among the experts that food security should, without delay, be placed at par with national security issues, and anything related to be food treated on a war-footing.

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## The alibi game



M.J. AKBAR

### BYLINE

Inevitably, if not wisely, politicians rush towards the false comfort of alibis when under threat. The Indian consumer does not want lectures on whether food prices are rising across the world; he wants to know what the government has done about it. In any case, this phenomenon was evident at the beginning of last winter, and that is already six months ago. What did Finance Minister Chidambaram, or his economics-professor boss, Prime Minister Singh, do about it last November and December?

LOGIC and politics are not necessarily incompatible. If you live by the sword, you die by the sword. If you live by market forces you die by market forces. Inflation is the most logical face of market forces. It is the market that sets the agenda. It is the market that raises prices based on its assessment of supply, demand and profitability.

The market has no loyalty, least of all to government. The market has no social conscience: no food-trader ever died of hunger in the famine, or emerged out of the crisis with his bank balance depleted. The market is loyal to one concept, profit. The politician wants to win; the market wants to profit.

Their paths converge most of the time, but not all the time. When their interests converge they are the best of pals: see the width of Finance Minister P. Chidambaram's smile when, in normal times, the Sensex booms across the skyscrapers of

Mumbai. But that boom follows its own laws, and not those of the government. If profits can be sustained then the Sensex will boom even during a period of high inflation, at least temporarily, when there is still purchasing power in the market.

When the interests of politicians and the market diverge, they can be obstinate in the protection of their own needs. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi would dearly love to wake up one morning and discover that prices had levelled off, or were even showing a downward trend.

If they could order businessmen to do so, they would have done it, for a general election cannot be too far away. But the businessmen who cozy up to politicians in the privacy of drawing rooms, doling out large bundles of cash, will not take such orders even at the cost of hurting their political friends.

It is, to use an apt phrase, a

trade-off. The market should not cry when the politician lets it down. The politician must not weep when the market betrays him. In public life -- and both the market and politicians are in public life -- you need not only a thick skin but also a strong chin. You have to take the blow on the chin and keep standing. A totter is not a pleasant sight in public life.

Inevitably, if not wisely, politicians rush towards the false comfort of alibis when under threat. The Indian consumer does not want lectures on whether food prices are rising across the world; he wants to know what the government has done about it. In any case, this phenomenon was evident at the beginning of last winter, and that is already six months ago.

What did Finance Minister Chidambaram, or his economics-professor boss, Prime Minister Singh, do about it last November and December? If they had taken the measures that

suddenly seem wise to them now, things would have been under some control today. Instead, they were cooling their heels and heating the market. Now the market is cooling its heels and lighting fires under the government.

Alibis can be cruel. Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar has already blamed the changing consumption pattern of the Indian poor for rising prices. Sharad Pawar has never blamed the bloated stomachs of the rich for rising prices -- ever wondered why? He believes food to be the natural right of the rich, and an unnatural right for the poor. He does not quite put it like that, because that would be too direct, but that is the foundation of his thought process.

Mr. Pawar has now some help from the Lord Protector of the World, American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. She too blames the rise of food prices on the Indian poor. Has she ever paused a minute to think about

the consumption pattern of pets in American households? They consume food worth over fifteen billion dollars each year, enough to stave off hunger among Africa's poverty-stricken children. I know this is an unfair world, and I don't believe that pets should suddenly be cut off their feed. But, at least, we should be spared pomposity from the privileged.

Prime Minister Singh seems to have a strange, hands-off look these days, as if he is not really responsible for the mess that has collected beneath him. Indifference may be the last alibi left, but it is not an answer. When the mask of indifference is punctured by incidents like the exposure of help given by the Prime Minister's Office to a less-than-honest minister like the DMK's T.R. Baalu, the search for alibis reaches panic-station because the image of a clean prime minister must be preserved at all costs.

The explanations trot out, one after another. The PMO letters were "routine." There is nothing routine about a Prime Minister's Office recommending that gas supplies be made available to the industries of a cabinet minister's son. There is nothing routine in the fact that a reminder was sent within five days, the first of seven. In government snail-mail the first letter would probably not have reached its destination in five days. A sec-

ond in such a hurry is not routine.

Oil and Gas Minister Murli Deora suggested that there was nothing in helping a colleague. Really? Even at the cost of rules and regulations? And if there is nothing wrong, why was nothing done? The answer is simple: the bureaucrats in the ministry did not want to break the rules. That is why eight letters were needed. Clever Mr Deora wants to have his cake and eat it too. Difficult.

The Indian in the bazaar has a right to ask how many letters the prime minister sent his finance minister on inflation. The prime minister is a calm man who hides his stress under a self-imposed blanket of resignation. He was the surprise choice four years ago, and his personality aroused hopes at street and village level. All that remains of that once-promising reputation is the belief that he is personally incorruptible. But what use is his personal integrity when all around him there is rampant corruption and mismanagement.

Is there a friend of his who can tell him that there are many kinds of dishonesty in public life? Permitting cabinet ministers to feed from the corruption trough so that you may preserve your job also amounts to disservice to the people.

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## Celebrating the Spanish intifada

### LETTER FROM EUROPE

We should consider ourselves very fortunate that the Bangladeshi War of Independence gave birth to a free democratic nation where sovereignty belongs to the people. Unfortunately, in Spain, the end of the war meant the restoration of an infamous character like King Ferdinand VII to the throne as an absolute monarch who completely disregarded the sacrifices made by his people during those long years of struggle.



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

THE inhabitants of Madrid have just celebrated with much pomp and pride the two hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the "intifada" against the French occupiers of their country. Although the uprising first started in Madrid on May 2, 1808, it soon spread like wildfire to other parts of Spain and then evolved into a full-fledged war of independence in which Napoleon's imperial army, the most powerful military machine of its time, was pitted against bands of ill-armed and loosely organised Spanish peasants and workers.

The history of this popular uprising could be of interest to the Bangladeshis because, in spite of the huge difference in time and geography, some may find certain similarities between our own struggle for independence in the late twentieth cen-

tury and the Spanish war of independence of the early nineteenth century.

At the beginning of 1808, both politically and economically, Spain was in a difficult situation. A weak but amiable man called Charles IV sat on its throne. As he had neither the capability nor the inclination to govern the country, an inept aristocrat called Godoy ruled it despotically.

Godoy had many enemies among the Spanish nobility who considered him as an upstart. Even the king's own son, Ferdinand, who was the heir to the throne disliked him so much that he and his friends spent most of their time plotting against the king and Godoy with the objective of forcing the king to abdicate, which would also have meant the end of Godoy's rule.

Because of continuous warfare, the state treasury had

reached a near-bankrupt situation. Inflation and unemployment were high. There were frequent food shortages. No wonder, all this caused widespread discontent among the ordinary people. Godoy had also alienated the powerful church authorities because of his attempts to raise cash by selling church properties.

In short, Godoy had become extremely unpopular with every sector of the Spanish society. In order to get out of this desperate situation, Godoy devised a plan which ultimately was going to be his undoing.

While all this was going on in Spain, on the other side of the border, in France, Napoleon was watching and waiting for an opportunity to fulfil his ambition of conquering Spain and Portugal. That opportunity was unwittingly provided by Godoy.

In 1807, Napoleon and Godoy

signed the Treaty of Fontainebleau in which they agreed to conquer Portugal and divide it between France and Spain. The Spanish government authorised French troops to cross Spanish territories on their way to Portugal. Godoy was naive enough to think that Napoleon's troops would help him conquer Portugal and then withdraw. Napoleon, of course, had other ideas.

Because of this grave misjudgement of Napoleon's real intentions, by the end of March 1808, a large part of Spanish territory found itself under effective military occupation by French forces. Then the French, together with the discontented elements of the Spanish society, engineered a plot to create a power vacuum in Spain so that they could neutralise the Spanish administration and directly take charge of the

country and its government.

On March 17, 1808 Prince Ferdinand, the king's son and heir to the throne staged a coup d'etat against his father and forced the king to abdicate the throne in his favour. Godoy was dismissed and taken into custody.

Ferdinand did not, of course, know that Napoleon had other plans. Ferdinand was allowed to rule only for a short while. He was soon deposed and sent to exile, together with his father, by Napoleon and the crown was given to Napoleon's brother Joseph. Napoleon put his brother-in-law Marshall Murat in command of all French troops in Spain. Many members of the Spanish aristocracy and the intelligentsia accepted the arrangement because of their own personal interests.

But it was the ordinary people like bakers, masons, blacksmiths and grocers who had become sick and tired of seeing French troops strut around Madrid and misbehave with complete impunity. Anger had been simmering for weeks under the surface, and it needed a spark to ignite it into a full-fledged fury.

On the morning of May 2, 1808 crowds of men, women and children armed with knives, blunderbusses, scythes and

sickles started gathering in front of the royal palace in anticipation of the forced exile of the rest of the royal family. As one of the princes came out of the palace and got into the waiting carriage, the crowd started attacking the French gendarmes stationed in front of the palace.

Marshall Murat, who was observing all this from the window of a palace just across the street, ordered his troops to fire on the crowd, and that was the spark that ignited the fire. Thousands of ordinary people across the city rose up in arms, against the occupiers in a completely spontaneous and disorganised manner. For the first time in Spanish history women took part in actual fighting and many of them died. "They fought alone, abandoned by their king, their government and the well-to-do," because the Spanish army had received orders from the king's regent not to intervene.

This was intifada in the real sense of the term. Hundreds of those ordinary citizens were massacred by French troops. True, one aristocrat and two artillery officers called Daoiz and Velarde also fought and died but they did so out of a personal sense of honour, and not as part of the official military establishment.

Today, in memory of those artillery officers, there are two huge bronze lions called Daoiz and Velarde, who guard the entrance to the Spanish Parliament.

During the night of May 2, hundreds of suspects were rounded up, and in the morning of May 3 they were executed without any trial. The Madrid uprising was put down with extreme cruelty, but its spirit travelled far and wide across the country. In 1809, Napoleon himself invaded Spain with an even bigger army.

The Spaniards adopted guerrilla tactics to fight the French. Provincial juntas were set up for the purpose of cutting off or intercepting supply lines to French troops. The Spanish regular army also fought valiantly. Even though it lost battle after battle, it did not surrender.

In 1808, the British government had already sent a large contingent of soldiers under Duke of Wellington to Portugal to fight the invading French troops. In 1809, he was asked to participate in the Spanish War of Independence. Although he won important victories over the French, the war dragged on until 1814 when Napoleon was forced to abdicate. Thus the Spanish War of Independence came to a

successful end.

Like most Bangladeshis who acknowledge the enormous contribution made by the Indian army in our war efforts against the occupying Pakistani army, the Spaniards also acknowledge the sacrifice made by the British army to win their independence.

This is where the similarities between these two wars of independence end. We should consider ourselves very fortunate that the Bangladeshi War of Independence gave birth to a free democratic nation where sovereignty belongs to the people.

Unfortunately, in Spain, the end of the war meant the restoration of an infamous character like King Ferdinand VII to the throne as an absolute monarch who completely disregarded the sacrifices made by his people during those long years of struggle.

One of first things he did was to abolish all constitutional rights granted by the Constitution of 1812. It also meant the return to power of the most conservative elements of the society and exile for many of its most liberal minds. It took many more years to restore democracy and full constitutional rights to the Spaniards, but that is another story.

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