

Journalists under attack

The ruling party must rein in their goons

WE condemn in the strongest possible terms the recent dastardly attack on journalists in Chuadanga reportedly by gangsters belonging to the ruling party.

In this instance not only were the houses of the journalists of several Bangla dailies set upon and ransacked and their family members threatened with dire consequences -- some of whom barely escaped with their lives --, business establishments of some of the journalists were also set on fire; and by the time the police arrived the gangsters had left after creating enough panic and destruction.

The cause of the attack is because the newspapers had exposed the alleged misdeeds of the local AL MP and his brother who happens to be the Mayor of Chuadanga. And these mobsters have not remained satisfied with merely carrying out the assault; they have also instituted cases of extortion and defamation against the journalists. The people and the media in Chuadanga have become hostages to the cadres of the local MP and mayor.

Apparently, nothing has changed from the past except the perpetrators' political identity. This incident, regrettably, resembles the hostility displayed towards the media and is replication of the violence perpetrated on the journalists during the 4-party Alliance regime by the then ruling party members and their cadres.

We feel constrained to remind the government that its much vaunted promise of change is almost coming to naught. The more the government talks about change the more the things remain the same.

We fail to see why the planned intimidation to gag the press when the journalists were merely performing their duty to keep the people informed on issues that intimately concern the public. Is this the example of tolerance for free speech that the country expects from members of a party that has assumed the charge of the nation with a whooping majority? If anyone feels aggrieved by the reports, and these had appeared in more than one newspaper, then certainly there are other civilised means of seeking redress.

No state can countenance what we have witnessed recently in Chuadanga much less endure for long without having the social values seriously damaged. And no government that depends on the goodwill of the people and the media can allow these incidents to go unheeded.

Any government that seeks to establish the rule of law and good governance must take these reports objectively and act upon these instead of tolerating the hostile acts of its cadres to bully the press. Those who try to terrorize the media must be brought to book otherwise the government will stand to lose the goodwill of both the people and the press.

Regional approach to water management

Its growing rationale commends itself

IT is somewhat disconcerting to note that the Kathmandu conference on climate change focusing the Himalayas has ended short of coming up with an official declaration. It seems to have concluded on an academic note highlighting the need for immediate actions to protect water sources being affected by the climate change. India, a major co-riparian country and Bhutan virtually didn't participate in it.

Apart from the huge potential for regional cooperation in water management remaining grossly unrealised, the issue of integrated and cooperative approach to common water resources has acquired added urgency in view of the climate change. The warming up of the north, consequent glacial melting, higher incidence of natural calamities with rising sea-level, untimely and heavy rainfalls, not to mention the diametrically opposite desertification, are the major ramifications of climate change. In the face of such a formidable challenge, what seems of critical importance is that we proceed to adopt a regional approach to protecting, conserving and developing the common water resources with integrated planning and vision.

To the extent, these are manmade, like use of fossil fuel in pursuit of development, deforestation and intra-country installations tending to regulate natural water flows to produce hydro-power and water agriculture, some such issues can be approached in a spirit of cooperation leading to a win-win outcome for all countries in south Asia.

The immense potential of the common river basins that is yet to be harnessed has us sigh and moan over what is and what could have been: generation of energy to benefit all co-riparian countries, vastly improved navigability and establishing interconnectivity, aside from flood-control and restoration of arid land to agriculture.

Therefore, the issue must be unhinged from the purely bilateral context, instead seen through a broader spectrum of regionalism. Actually, the world is moving towards greater regional integration and coordination for mutual economic benefit through harnessing common resources and greater inter-penetration of markets. There are examples of different compacts, conventions and treaties among co-riparian states which we can take a leaf off to effect inter-basin cooperation thereby unlocking dormant potential for collective progress that benefits individual countries.

Let the countries of the region disprove the experts' prediction that future conflicts in the world would centre around water.

Price hike: Need for consumers' resistance

If consumers feel they are powerful with their own association they can resist any moves that militate against their rights. Provided with institutional support any individual as a consumer can take action against a seller or shopkeeper if he finds fault with pricing and qualities of the commodities to be purchased.

DR. MD. SHAIRUL MASHREQUE

THE government, believably, has been trying its best to combat price hike. It is aware of the rising frustration of consumers due to high price of essentials. It seems clear from the recent grave concern of the government on erratic market behaviour that its electoral pledge to keep price index within the reach of the commoners has not faded into oblivion.

The prime minister in the cabinet meeting held on 17 August, directed the commerce minister to take appropriate measures for increasing efficiency of the TCB and to import eggs, chickens and potatoes to meet the increased demand of consumers, especially during the month of Ramadan.

Of course prices of some essential food items remain stable. The endeavour of the government still going on perhaps bespeaks of its sincerity and commitment. All the concerned policy actors are instrumental in finding way forward to mitigate consumers' sufferings and to help them out of the situation.

Instructions have been given to all kitchen market traders to display price list of the available commodities. Four new committees have been formed to streamline governments market vigilance activities in Dhaka. They will watch whether anyone is doing brisk business selling commodities at higher price, selling adulterated products or manipulating weights.

The government has decided to form task force in each district and upazila. Besides, the commerce minister had several meetings with FBCCI. The business leaders promised their co-operation with a strict market vigilance and inspection.

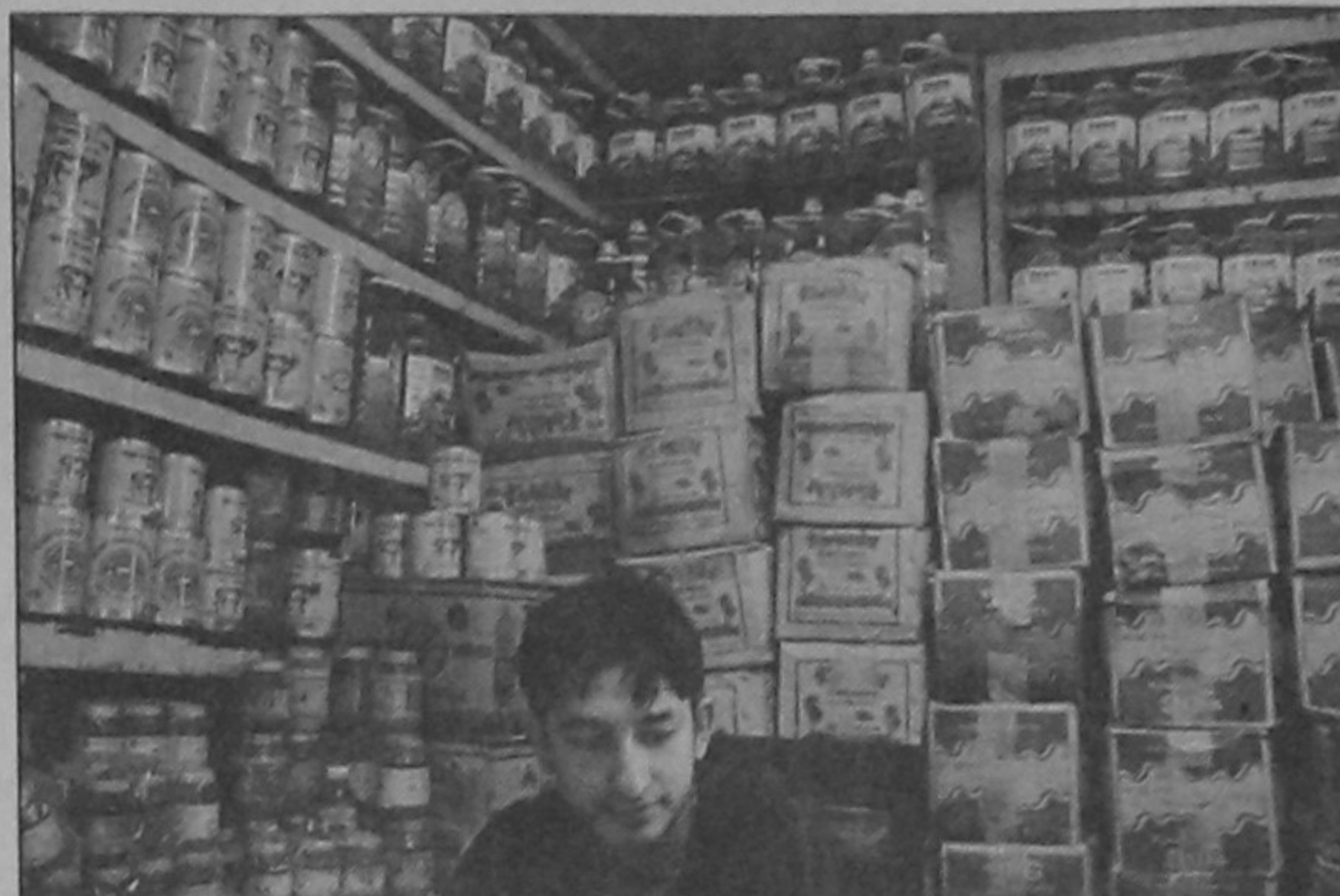
But the market situation is going out of hand as the prices of the essentials are spiraling upward. We wonder whether the measure taken so far by the state to control

the unbridled horse-like galloping market price, both wholesale and retail, will help the consumers out of the situation. The government warned stern actions to stop unbridled extortions that are blamed for the fast deterioration of price situation. Food and disaster management minister also of late stated that extortion in the transport sector was responsible for price hike.

The finance minister pointed to the need for consumer's resistance. I share the same sentiment, fully agreeing with the view that "it is necessary to rouse people's rage and hostility against the so-called syndicates of a few businessmen, which are blamed to have worsened the price situation." But I cannot support "passing the blame on to the media for runaway price hike." I believe the media is playing an active role in sensitising community participation and awareness building about criminalisation of trade and serving as channel of communication between the administration and the public.

The need for consumers resistance is admittedly great. All consumers scattered in different city points should be organised into a single entity to fight against the dishonest traders. We do not like to see cat and mouse game between the actors in the policy community. Only community organisations at the city points can mobilise the docile consumers as a countervailing force to make an organised move against the excessive profit making traders. They are supposed to be aided by voluntary policing if they are operationally committed.

Once tough resistance of the social forces is on, the state will come forward as a facilitator of consumer movement even going to the extent of cracking down on the whimsical traders who are increasing price almost every day especially during the holy month of fasting.



There is a limit to traders' profit.

Well-organised social forces must be there to prevent distortion and malfunctioning of market. They are required to see that the proceeds of business are according to rules, not the other way round. I wonder whether consumers' associations have action plans to prevent any unethical trade practices like restrictive supply of essential commodities, collusive price-fixing and swindling buyers about set prices and weight. The traders pursuing unholy practices are more organised than the powerless consumers who are yet to develop as social force aware of their rights like what we see in other countries.

There was a policy advocacy for protection of consumers' rights. The result was formulation and passing of consumer right protection law, 2009. The recent law is, however, inadequate rather creating some institutional constraints. Despite this law the ordinary consumers have much less access to the authorities concerned with their complaints. Bureaucratic tangles are stumbling blocks and truly so.

We are so poorly organised and indifferent that we bother little about exercising control over nearby retail kitchen market and groceries. Realising this consumers' association must be formed in each city point. Consumers' association at this point may well be empowered so that they can play active role in community sensi-

sation. They must have the power of price monitoring and market inspection within the territorial jurisdiction. I suggest the formation of co-operative market societies in each neighbourhood for the supply of necessities at a fair price.

If consumers feel they are powerful with their own association they can resist any moves that militate against their rights. Provided with institutional support any individual as a consumer can take action against a seller or shopkeeper if he finds fault with pricing and qualities of the commodities to be purchased.

Ramadan comes every year as real test of economic performance. The question remains why government has to worry about the challenges of abnormal market forces during this holy month.

The consumers should not rest content with any assurance from the policy community. The traders mostly at retail market use the holy month to sell essential commodities at an exorbitant rate. The consumers continue to be betrayed and cannot repose confidence in all-talk paper-tigers. Taking lessons from the poignant experience the consumers should fight for their rights of course avoiding any confrontation with the traders that they come into interaction in every day life.

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Nato and the EU: Whither greater coordination?

The evolution of the international scenario clearly demonstrates that there is need now, more than ever before, for a comprehensive approach not only within the Nato and the EU separately, but also together. Appropriate planning and coordination will be required in this regard on the basis of consensus. It could start with Afghanistan and also help to move forward the peace process in the Middle East.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE winds of change are blowing across Europe. Recently there has been transformation in the higher command of Nato. The new Secretary General is former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen. He has taken over from Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

Javier Solana has announced a few days ago that he will not seek a new mandate as High Representative (HR) for the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) when his ten-year term ends in late October this year.

In other words, by December 2009, completely new teams will be in charge of Europe's security and relations between the two key regional organisations dealing with it. Even though the Alliance and the European Union Headquarters will continue to be in the same city -- Brussels, changes in their leaderships will necessitate recalibration of their strategic planners. They will have to identify least common denominators all over again.

It may be recalled that since the launch of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) and appointment of Mr. Solana as the first-ever HR for CFSP -- at the Cologne EU Summit exactly ten years ago -- closer links have been established, but not as close as many had expected. Some advances had been achieved but efforts will probably have to start all over again in most sectors.

Nato has had a difficult time since 9/11. The first Bush administration preferred to deliver its immediate riposte in Afghanistan after the terrorist attack through a selected coalition of the willing. The USA ignored Lord Robertson's (the then Nato Secretary General) offer to activate the Washington Treaty's Article 5 for the conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Later on, the Alliance had to evolve its own strategy and relevance (for its membership) by becoming increasingly

involved in Afghanistan -- first with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Kabul; then through an ever-expanding counter-insurgency role in other provinces. It is now fighting for its reputation far away from its original theatre of expected engagement.

Analysts have pointed out that like the EU, Nato, has also over the past decade, undergone a process of expansion not only of its membership, but also in its geographical outreach. Its functional scope has also become diverse. It is now dealing with tasks that were never envisaged before -- rescuing civilians in earthquake-hit Kashmir, guaranteeing air and ground surveillance for the 2004 Athens Olympics and the 2006 World Cup in Germany etc. Its membership portfolio has also changed with France formally returning to Nato's fold (43 years after General de Gaulle's decision to pull out of the Alliance's integrated military structure).

There has been a remarkable evolution but Nato appears to be still struggling to find a new and shared vision of its role in the 21st century. Divergence of interests and priorities amongst its membership are not helping matters.

On the other hand, within the EU, under Mr Solana's stewardship, European "foreign policy" appears to have moved forward. There are some who claim that it might have almost come of age. I don't know if I can totally agree with such an assumption. However, it is true that initial tensions with the US (and Nato itself) gave way in early 2003 -- just before the divisions over Iraq became apparent -- to the signature of the "Berlin-plus" agreement that eased military cooperation between the two Brussels-based organisations.

Observers have pointed out that the impact of such an understanding has been more political and psychological than operational, especially since Cyprus joined the Union in 2004 and constant skirmishes between Nicosia and Ankara have rendered EU-Nato relations partic-



They need greater coordination between them.

ularly tricky. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to deny that the EU has managed to develop an ability that has enabled it to carry out some 20-odd operations around Europe and elsewhere in the world (especially in Africa) to restore stability and security in troubled areas.

These operations have been mostly small in size and short in duration, and have often taken over from previously existing missions (by the UN or Nato). They have been predominantly civilian in nature, if not always in form. They have also embodied, in other words, the Union's "yes we can" claim in what had hitherto been a no-go area for Europe. They have also demonstrated that the EU has strong potential when it comes to soft peace-building, thanks to its multiple competences and resources in increasingly relevant areas.

Peace-enforcement has however remained a much more challenging and controversial goal for EU's 27 members. This has probably been because of what once Henry Kissinger pointed out the inability of the EU High Representative to give the world one single telephone number that could give a face and a voice to Europe's common foreign policy.

This detracting factor within the EU, pertaining to its High Representative, might eventually be overcome if the Lisbon Treaty enters into force and creates the double-hatted HR who will also chair the Council's foreign affairs meetings and be a European Commission Vice-President. There is no obvious candidate for this virtually impossible job, but there are indeed expectations and hopes that he or she will be instrumental in establishing at least a single

'switchboard' for the EU's international partners.

On the other hand, one of Mr Rasmussen's most important challenges within Nato, Afghanistan notwithstanding, will be the drafting of Nato's new Strategic Concept, expected to be approved at the Lisbon Atlantic Council in October 2010. The last such concept was published in March 1999, just before the Alliance launched its first-ever large-scale military operation since 1949: the Kosovo war.

The world, US, and Europe have all changed since then -- and so have the threats and risks they face. The role of military force as a tool to solve international crises has also swung back and forth, from the success of 1999-2001-2003 to the ensuing setbacks.

The evolution of the international scenario clearly demonstrates that there is need now, more than ever before, for a comprehensive approach not only within the Nato and the EU separately, but also together. Appropriate planning and coordination will be required in this regard on the basis of consensus. It could start with Afghanistan and also help to move forward the peace process in the Middle East.

Nato and the EU have many interests and values in common. They also have distinct functions and goals. I believe that for the greater interest of maintenance of international peace and security, Nato and the EU should not only learn from one another, but supplement their respective strengths.

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