

## Media policy on defence!

Where is the need, the rationale for it?

WE are taken by surprise at the Prime Minister's announcement at the Formation Commanders' Conference at the Army Headquarters that the government would formulate a specific policy soon relating to media publicity on Army and defence.

There is hardly any instance of a separate media policy for an institution of a state. Especially in a democracy this is an outright anathema.

Basically, we wonder what prompted the PM and what formed the background for her in making such a declaration! With full respect to her words, may we submit that if there are any misgivings about the media in any national institution for any reason whatsoever these are better removed or allayed or provided against, by engaging with the media, rather than by distancing from them through new policies. We are fully aware of and alive to the sensitivities of the armed services and the defence institution so far as these relate to national security concerns. And speaking of a policy, the Right To Information (RTI) Act has an Exemption List that is meant to address the concerns of the Defence Forces and similar bodies.

In the last few years there has been a spurt in efforts to forge closer civil-military relations through increasing contacts with the media and the public. The National Defence College engages the media and a high powered conference on civil-military relations has just finished its work. These efforts should be nurtured and taken forward, so that they can gather momentum and acquire depth and diversity on a progressive scale.

At the purely media, and operational level, it must be realised that a newspaper is a daily product and so is a TV channel news broadcast and, hence, they are in constant need of timely, authentic and factual information. So the answer lies in strengthening the Inter-Services Public Relations Directorate (ISPR) into a truly professional and functional agency of the armed services. That is where the government needs a policy to be formulated in consultation with the armed forces. There can be media inputs into the exercise for a balanced outcome in terms of mutual accountability and transparency across the board. Here lies the solution, not in a new media policy related to the armed forces.

## Nowazesh Ahmed's passing

We are saddened

THE passing of Dr. Nowazesh Ahmed on Tuesday night has overwhelmed us with grief and a deep sense of loss. He collapsed just after delivering a characteristically brilliant speech at our "Celebrating Life" programme, a joint effort by this paper and the Standard Chartered Bank.

A renowned photographer and agriculture scientist, Dr Nowazesh broke the frontiers of race and community to embrace the world at large. Here was a man who projected Bangladesh with his photography that always bore the indelible mark of patriotism and commitment to the nation. A confirmed bachelor, Dr. Nowazesh was associated with everything decent in our cultural arena. He was a liberal humanist who refused to be inhibited by dogmas and irrational orthodoxy. His dream was a tolerant society that would stand for certain core values.

A great believer in not only political independence, but also intellectual liberty of the nation, the versatile man had great faith in our own traditions and customs and he made determined efforts to keep those alive. A frontrunner of civil society, Dr. Nowazesh was always vocal against any violation of people's rights.

He represented a school of thought that attaches great value to refinement and liberal thinking. Dr. Nowazesh worked with success in at least two fields. While as an agriculture scientist he had to delve deep into the mysteries of nature, his sense of aesthetics coupled with technical excellence made him one of the greatest photographers we have ever had. He was active till the last moment of his life and left an example of hard work and devotion. In his last speech, he left a message for the budding photographers, telling them that carrying a camera was not enough to be a good photographer. What he was referring to is the supremacy of the mind over matter.

Dr. Nowazesh, as his friends and well wishers know, was a fine gentleman always bubbling with friendly warmth and bonhomie. Today the nation needs men like Dr. Nowazesh whose sobering influence and wisdom will help it overcome the challenges ahead. We express our sympathy for the members of the bereaved family and pray for the salvation of the departed soul.

## Do not allow political space to extremists

It would do well for the mainstream political parties to remember that extremism thrives because of political space they are afforded, wittingly nor unwittingly. Preventing that must be the top priority.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

IS the method of combatting terrorism any different from addressing the issue of extremism? How does one relate the issue of human security to the issue of extremism?

It too simplistic to suggest that once all the factors that militate against human security are removed, and by empowering the less endowed, we will be able to reduce the chances of extremism finding roots? These were some of the issues that international scholars of the region and from Japan had been delving in last week under the auspices of the BIIS.

Extremism, terrorism, radicalism are fungible words and the less perspicuous may be forgiven for using it as such. It would not be wrong to suggest that while the term radicalism is not normally considered pejorative there is little substantive difference between extremism and terrorism.

It provides little comfort to be told that while all terrorists resort to violence, that is not necessarily the main expedient of the extremists. Our views of extremism have been shaped by our experience of various extremist groups in Bangladesh and the region of South Asia, which compels us to believe that there is little to choose between the two when it comes to their method of operation.

Extremism had been glorified in the past and that perhaps may validate the premise on which the "non-violent" attribute of extremism is situated. Clearly the US Republican candidate's comment in 1964, that extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue, relied on the passive aspect of

the phenomenon to justify the defence of a good cause.

However, while extremism resides primarily in the realm of the mind it tends to be exclusive and intolerant. And that possibly drive extremists to find acceptability of the majority, and finding little resonance of their position in the psyche of the common people violence becomes the only means of imposing their conviction. Therefore, the line, that apparently separates the two, is breached more often out of compulsion if not conviction.

In our effort to devise countermeasures it would also stand us well not to be bogged down in conceptual discourse and hair splitting on categorisation of extremism. Extremism is not a singular construct and the motive force may differ, but the ultimate aim remains the assumption of political power or attaining enough clout to achieve parity with other state actors to influence politics and policies.

The purpose of mapping extremism is to use the findings to formulate appropriate responses. Therefore, the focus should be on why it occurs in the first place i.e. the root causes, and certainly that would differ from country to country and with the types of extremism.

And the point that one would like to stress here, when the focus is on human security as a vehicle to counter terrorism, is the "poverty-conflict trap." It is a universal argument that poverty resists good governance, which in turn generates extremist tendencies. While not in anyway downplaying the impact of poverty, it will be worth our while to look at other regions of the world which were more endowed in resources and more affluent yet suffered



No pandering to militancy.

the wrath of violent extremism.

In trying to assess the footprints of extremism in South Asia one is faced with some very interesting realities. Not only do the scope and intensity vary from country to country, the potential to impact on politics is more severe in some countries than others.

Looking at Pakistan, it seems that the extremists are no longer going only after soft targets but making the centre of power their objects of attack. They are now being engaged in classical combat by the Pakistan army and only time can tell whether they will meet the same fate as the LITE. Do they have enough in terms of military resources to put up a protracted fight? But the issue is not their military defeat alone. It is their ideological position that has many supporters within the Pakistan army, which will determine the future of Taliban and the nature of politics in Pakistan.

The Indian picture is equally alarming. The fact the politico-religious extremists have found firm roots in Indian politics

through political parties is indeed frightening. Extremist organisations like the VHP and the RSS are represented in Indian politics through the BJP; that they backseat-drive the party is no secret, and the BJP had held the powers in the centre and is the ruling party in certain states in India.

Sri Lanka has defeated the LTTE in battle, but the point at issue remains unresolved.

As for Bangladesh, there is suspected link between the religious extremists and certain religion-based parties. While the extent is yet to be ascertained, these parties have never been voted to power as a party but have managed to assume state power through electoral alliances.

It would do well for the mainstream political parties to remember that extremism thrives because of political space they are afforded, wittingly nor unwittingly. Preventing that must be the top priority.

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## Short on help for the hungry

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ABDUL HANNAN

THE 3-day UN World Food Summit held in Rome last week, attended by more than 60 heads of state and government and with participation from 192 countries, was a disappointment. FAO failed in its bid to establish a target for eradicating hunger by 2025 and to get rich countries to commit to spending \$44 billion a year -- 17% of their foreign aid budget, in agricultural development aid to developing nations.

Instead of the binding goals, the summit declaration reaffirmed its commitment to the UN millennium development goal of halving the number of hungry by 2015 but failed to pledge specific funds.

Yet, in July, the G8 nations promised \$20 billion in agriculture aid over 3 years. The FAO director general regretted the absence of a deadline for the total eradication of world hunger. Oxfam decried the outcome of the summit as a "massive wasted opportunity, and unfunded and unaccountable." Besides, none of the leaders of the G8 countries, except for Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, even attended the summit.

According to UN estimates, the number

of the hungry in the world crossed one billion this year; almost one-sixth of the global population does not have enough to eat. Pope Benedict, speaking on the occasion, was critical of the opulence and waste in the industrialised countries, and blamed the greed of speculators in the food market for soaring food prices and aggravating world hunger. He could not be more correct.

Developing countries are often vulnerable to manipulation and movements in international food markets, which are used as political bargaining chips. Farm subsidies in the EU and America benefited consumers in rich nations, dumped farm surpluses in developing countries, depressed the prices of farm produce of poor farmers and drove them out of work to join the swelling ranks of nameless and faceless slum dwellers in the cities.

Bangladesh had the bitter experience of famine in 1974, when shipment of PL 480 food aid was deliberately delayed. Once again, our nation faced a hard time in procuring food in the wake of the devastating cyclone Sidr in 2007.

Meanwhile, India has been stockpiling rice and wheat for its own food security. This is a national political issue for India,

and as a result India dithered in living up to its promise of supplying 500 tons of rice to Bangladesh to meet our food crisis in the aftermath of Sidr.

Recent food price increases led to violent protests in Latin America, Africa and South Asia. In, 2008, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia agreed to form an organisation of rice exporting countries, Orec, a rice cartel similar to Opec's oil cartel, to be set up by 2012. Food price spiral and world hunger are inevitable with projected rise of world population to 9.2 billion in 2050.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's summit call for a "fair and equitable food governance system," and the statement that "only production of food alone could not guarantee food security" seemed a trifle out of synch with the current focus of the UN on the debate on food security.

There has been an international strategic shift of policy in fighting hunger, away from the age-old system of dependence on food aid handouts to helping farmers in poor countries to produce enough to feed their own people.

Food aid is indeed not what developing countries need. They must be offered agricultural aid to build their capacity to produce abundant and healthy food; aid that is managed by the countries themselves within their own policies to increase farmers' access to modern technology, irrigation, and fertilisers.

Local age-old practices to produce high yield seeds must be encouraged, and not the genetic modification aberrations of multinational Monsanto. Improved rural

infrastructure and roads for the easy transport of inputs and marketing are also essential and require development.

Food security and climate change are interconnected. The world cannot achieve food security without tackling global warming. Food security is held hostage to climate change that produced a high incidence of droughts, floods, cyclones and earthquakes. A deal on climate change is crucial for fighting global hunger.

The prime minister succinctly drew the attention of the international community to the urgency of giving attention to the adverse effects of climate change, particularly for the least developed countries, when she underscored the need for a special fund for them to mitigate their sufferings.

Developing countries need development funds and policy tools to boost agricultural production and productivity, the key to overcoming hunger and poverty. The current food crisis is the result of 20 years of underinvestment in agriculture and neglect of the sector.

Directly or indirectly, agriculture provides the livelihood for 70% of world's poor. Sustained investment, especially in smallholder agriculture, key to poverty reduction, is critical to developing food security. UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon was right when he said: "Our job is not just to feed the hungry but to empower the hungry to feed themselves."

Abdul Hannan is a former Press Counselor to the Bangladesh Mission to the UN, New York.

## Adieu my colourful friend!

ALY ZAKER

*The sky full of sun and stars, the world full of life,  
In its midst have I found my space, so  
My song awakens in wonder.*  
Rabindranath

THIS was the favourite song of Dr. Nowazesh Ahmed. Our Nowazesh Bhai. He had wanted it to be sung when he would be carried to his final resting place. He was about fifteen years older than I, but as my fellow traveller Sara Zaker would put it, he was the youngest of us all. It is difficult to describe what he was, a botanist, an agronomist, expert in plant genetics, a world class photographer a writer and, foremost, a lover.

Nowazesh Bhai was at a function of The Daily Star, judging films and photographs. The function was named "Celebrating Life." The man who was keen to celebrate every little thing that life throws across, from a blade of freshly sprouting grass with dewdrops on it, to the smiling eyes of a



Dr. Nowazesh Ahmed.

young village belle. From the glimmering, wet fishing net in the setting sun to the form of fingers of a classical dancer. From

the saffron clad monk carrying a bowl full of rice, to the dancing paddy field beside the Dhanshiri River. Every apparently small detail caught his eyes and fancy.

He photographed these with fanatical devotion and enjoyed being immersed in them. He was one of the most colourful persons I ever saw. I have such a vivid memory of Nowazesh Bhai that it seems he is right there waiting to venture out on yet another mission of his eternal search for exhilarating natural beauty. I have been in his company on a number of such missions. We were photographing the wild flowers of Bangladesh together for about three years. And I had the privilege of being in his direct tutelage in photography or in discovering the wonders of nature.

I was a witness to his exuberance about the life in the tea gardens of Sylhet, or his errands in the corridors of Wisconsin University's dorms. There wasn't a time that I found him gloomy. He was at the forefront of all Bengali cultural movements, a personal friend of cultural icons like Sanjida Khatoon and Wahidul

Haq and a compatriot of the Chayanaut and all cultural movements of Bangladesh.

His work took him to the Mekong delta and he went down the Mekong river several times. He was our expert on the region. Whenever any of our friends went to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam we found enormous help by way of tips about these places. Even during the last Eid vacation, when we went to the north of Thailand, he gave us a rundown on the region and the must see places like Chiang Rai, the Golden triangle et al.

In fact, just about a week back, we were talking about touring Myanmar together to discover that country, its flora and the people. We will still be waiting for you Nowazesh Bhai. And find a sense of direction in our artistic endeavours that has been inspired by your untiring devotion to perfection. Adieu my friend, you will always be in our hearts and inspire us towards greater artistic glory.

Aly Zaker is an eminent theater personality.