

Closure of Amar Desh is a threat to free press

Government's reasoning is ludicrous

WITHOUT question, cancellation of the declaration of the daily Amar Desh and its consequent closure on the not-so-convincing ground of having had no authorised publisher, is an ill-judged step of the government amounting to a threat to the freedom of the press. Which is not congenial at all to democracy nor is it good for the country's reputation.

The newspaper's publisher being picked up by the NSI, detained and put through questioning and his signature procured purportedly to frame up a complaint on the basis of which the paper's declaration was canceled give rise to a whole lot of questions about the mala fide intent of the exercise.

As Voltaire has famously said, "I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Motivated by the same spirit, we in The Daily Star, consider defence of dissent as an article of faith.

As a newspaper upholding journalistic professionalism and freedom, we have, however, found it difficult at times to appreciate the brand of journalism that the Amar Desh was pursuing. Still it is our firm conviction that a dissenting voice, however venomous and thinly founded, must be allowed space because it is an integral part of a functioning democracy, a touchstone of free press and an axiom that the people will be the ultimate judge of all opinions. No matter how opaque or squinted or biased a report and a view-point maybe for or against somebody it must get a free play not only to enrich environment of free press but also strengthen the institutions of democracy.

Experiences are aplenty that well functioning democracies have the maturity to countenance dissenting views by the power that be. For example, the Fox Television in the USA has been regularly spewing venom and fire against President Obama who has taken it in stride. The Greek president Karolos Papoulias has faced vitriolic attacks by a newspaper with equanimity and tolerance. Such examples abound.

Regrettably, tolerance and discretion are somehow missing in our way of dealing with perceived adversaries. The facts revealed by the government to justify the closure of Amar Desh are simply untenable. The government had several options, like initiating legal proceedings, other than shutting it down in such a crude manner. The ultimate action is coarse manifestation of intolerance of unpalatable views.

It must not be forgotten that Channel-1, an electronic media outlet, was closed down recently on rather flimsy grounds. It is also remarkable how within the hours of High Court judgement on ETV, it was closed down while instances abound where action has been deferred on the pretext of not receiving copy of court judgement for days.

Amid all the gloom and negativity of Bangladesh's image, its free, independent and vibrant press, democracy and free elections have earned good name and attention globally for us as the defender of people's right to know and govern accordingly.

In the end, what we would like to see happen, as the ambiguity about the publisher and the allegations against the editor are resolved by the court, the government must withdraw the cancellation of declaration and let Amar Desh resume publication.

Begunbari building collapse

Put the lessons to use

THE collapse of a five-storey building at Begunbari in the Tejgaon area of the city on the nearby tin-shed houses leading to the death of some 20 people is a glaring instance of calousness on the part of those involved in the construction, supervision and maintenance of that building. From the way the five-storied structure fell down, it appears there was no proper plan for the building, nor was any rule or code followed during its construction. And it is also patently clear that the workmanship and engineering as well as the materials that went into the making of that house were also of very poor quality.

Clearly, the owner as well as the designer, engineer and contractor were in cahoots with one another in constructing the structure with such a fragile foundation so much so that it fell like a sawn-down tree. One wonders, how could the owner of that house rent out its flats to tenants knowing fully well that with its tottering foundation and rickety structure the building may cave in any time endangering the lives of its occupants as well as those of the houses adjacent to it!

All those involved in the construction and owning of the building, therefore, deserve to be punished not only for flouting building rules, but also for the trail of deaths and injuries that the collapsed building has left in its wake.

Obviously, the Begunbari case is not the first of its kind, as we know of other instances of similar building collapse in the past at Tejgaon, Savar and in the older part of the city. The older part of the city in particular deserves special attention, especially for its age-old buildings in dilapidated conditions, many of which crumbled down in the past.

This calls into question the role of Rajdhanu Unnayan Kartripokkho (Rajuk) in ensuring that proper building rules and codes are followed by builders, contractors and owners of the buildings in the city. Had the Rajuk authorities properly supervised and monitored the Begunbari building during all the phases of its construction and ensured strict observance of the rules by all concerned, then the tragedy could have been avoided. And it gives one the jitters to think how many more such buildings are awaiting similar fate in the near future!

The authorities in question should therefore not waste any more time in forming a probe body and list all such buildings with vulnerable foundations and structures and arrange for their demolition or reinforcement where feasible before they may act out more tragedies like in the Begunbari case.



The new US security strategy

Coming as it does, after two strategy papers of the Republican regime under Bush, this has evinced a good deal of interest and generated a mixed reaction. While some see major departures from the policies of the Bush regime, some see it as a "Bush redux," the president having retained the option of unilateral action.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

IS it really a new strategy? Some prefer to see the new national Security Strategy paper, released recently by the White House, as a set of pointers rather than a strategy, articulation of intent rather than canonical imperatives. Some of the salient features of the paper are those dealing with terrorism, "soft power," multilateralism, and the expanded meaning of the term "security."

It seems that President Obama has learned from his predecessor's shortsightedness; was it not an American humourist who had said that there is a lot for the wise man to thank the fool for?

The document is the first of its kind from the Obama administration, and is in keeping with the requirement of the Senate since 1986 obligating the president to layout his threat analysis in order to make rational budget appropriation for defence. And no wonder, in keeping with the traditions, it has come to be called the "Obama Doctrine."

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papers of the Republican regime under Bush, this has evinced a good deal of interest and generated a mixed reaction. While some see major departures from the policies of the Bush regime, some see it as a "Bush redux," the president having retained the option of unilateral action.

The thrust of the new doctrine stems from the recognition of two very important realities.

One, that there is a limit to raw power, and modulating policies to conform to such a philosophy becomes counterproductive for a nation in the long run. The Bush administration had perhaps perceived the kernel truth during the terminal phase of its regime, but was either unwilling to acknowledge, or unable to implement, it, having put all its money on the policy of unilateralism and preemptive attack. By the time it realised that it could not go it alone, either in meeting its security objectives or its economic goals, it was too late for George W. Bush to redact his plans.

The second universal truth that Obama draws upon is that, because of the perva-

sive worldwide presence of, and absolute reliance on, military power as a tool of world domination, there is always a possibility of being entrapped in an "imperial overstretch" which, without a strong economy to prop it up, will cause the collapse of the state. And there are many historical instances of it, the latest being the collapse of the Soviet empire.

That is why, there is such an overwhelming emphasis on domestic policies particularly the economy, to the extent of stressing that "the key to America's future security will hinge on its ability to reinvent its rusting domestic economy." The billions of dollars being spent everyday to fight the War in Afghanistan and Iraq and the effect of world recession have added to the woes of the Americans.

The renunciation of force is very evident in the new approach, and we are hearing of "Smart Power," a new phrase being bandied about. One might call it "soft-power" too, a Kautilyan prescription of use of influence (as an alternative method of domination) that can prove to be more effective than raw power. And as Hilary Clinton admitted recently: "Even the US military has come to recognise the limits of the use of force examining its experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan," and that it is, "Moving from mostly the direct exercise of power to a more sophisticated and difficult mix of indirect power and influence." The only point that one would like to make here is that there are limits of US "influence" too, that is imposed by the double standards the US has exercised in

its foreign policy.

Some see the new approach to counter international terrorism as abandonment of the US global war on terror. But is it really a goodbye to GWOT? While the new approach, which emphasises the fact that it is, "Not a world war against a tactic -- terrorism -- or a religion -- Islam," may assuage the feelings of many, one wonders whether it is realpolitik that has motivated the position or compulsion stemming from innate beliefs.

To look at terrorism as a tactical measure is a narrow way of looking at an expedient that can be used as a strategic tool too. But more importantly, it is a legitimate question as to how the Obama administration will ever, "Seek to end the legitimacy of the use of terrorism and isolate those who use it," without stopping its biggest ally in the Middle East, Israel, using terrorism as a state policy. The latest instance is the killing of nine people on a relief mission to Gaza on board a ship in international waters.

Mr. Obama has come for a bit of stick for moving away from the traditional definition of security and including under the rubric a host of issues apart from the military and economy, which is at it should be.

One is waiting to see how the new policy will be implemented, because, according to the critics, the document is incomplete since it does not go far enough to spell out the ways to achieving the goals.

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Bapu would have laughed at the Gandhi pen

The Mahatma communicated through the journals he edited, and their names were as didactic as their content. Gandhi was also an inveterate scribbler; no politician has written more letters, quite often on scraps of paper, for he was the ultimate conservationist.

M.J. AKBAR

WHY did the world's most famous, and priciest, makers of writing instruments launch a lakhpati pen in the name of a man famous for wearing nothing more than a handspun loincloth?

They did not honour Mahatma Gandhi because research turned up fascinating data suggesting that the world's millionaires had overnight converted into apostles of non-violence and abandoned their T-bone steaks for goat's milk. The reason was that its marketing department identified India as their best growing market.

Modest ink pens used to be a staple of Indian stores, with stained-finger school-children as customers. The triumph of the ball pen has reduced that to a quaint memory. Having lost its base, the pen showed astonishing powers of reinvention; it became upwardly mobile without doing much more than it did in its populist avatar.

Within the last decade, high-end pen shops have moved from an occasional presence in Delhi's five-star boutiques to

high-rent markets where the elite come to spend a thousand rupees for a hundred grams of cheese. If the price of these pens makes you stagger, just remember that cheesymillionaires do not stagger easily.

Why have branded pens become such a hit with the Indian rich? Is it because the rich have shifted their primary loyalty from the goddess Lakshmi to the goddess Saraswati? Have they become so literary that, after a day rewriting balance sheets, they spend their evenings stringing pearls of wisdom in variable verse? Alas, not true. The wheeler has not turned into a dealer in poetic phrases.

The demand for pricey pens has multiplied because it has risen from the tarmac of legitimate need, lifted towards pocket-showoffs, and now rocketed into the stratosphere of ruling class affectation. It has become a most desirable gift for those in power because it comes attached with respectability. This is not considered a bribe, mind you. The most expensive pen in history would be inadequate as substitute for cash for a minister on closure of a deal.

The pen, particularly one with contorted shapes on its head, is just right as a

gesture towards the new royalty in return for an audience, even if the new royals use it only to scribble their initials. It is the kind of male jewellery that helps to keep a file moving. The movement may or may not be in the right direction, but why risk immobility in mid-journey?

Delhi's corruption has a caste system, in addition to being creative. The most widespread form is lifestyle protection, or enhancement. A successful collection of Diwali hampers, for instance, could be sufficient to stock your bar through winter; and if you are influential enough, then Christmas will ensure a heady time till Holi; and Holi will keep you in high spirits till June. Monsoon may be the only time when you actually have to pay for anything spiritual. Pens and handmade watches are reserved for the heaven-born.

As happens so often, the pen-marketing chaps got the facts right and conclusions wrong. Identifying India as the market was totally correct; making Gandhi the icon was silly. The Indian who buys boutique pens dismisses Gandhi as a sermonising bore with crackpot theories, the sort of hero safer dead than around, useful for street names but not for the boardroom or indeed the cabinet. A pencil might be more appropriately named after Gandhi, preferably one sold in stub sizes.

A Nehru pen could have been a better idea, for Nehru was an extremely good author. Gandhi, on the other hand, was a great crusader-journalist. The Mahatma communicated through the journals he

edited, and their names were as didactic as their content. Gandhi was also an inveterate scribbler; no politician has written more letters, quite often on scraps of paper, for he was the ultimate conservationist.

On his days of silence, Gandhi conducted full conversations, and even crucial talks with viceroys, by scribbling his part of the dialogue carefully on small bits of paper.

If the pen chaps had wanted to do themselves a favour, and lift the image of their brand with a dedication to the generation that gave us freedom, then they should have opted for Jawaharlal's father Motilal Nehru. Motilal, a man with epicurean panache, a personification of honour in its widest sense, a patrician who entertained (before he became a Gandhian on the eve of the Khilafat movement) with a generosity that princes might match if they had both taste and money in addition to heritage.

He may have never written a book, but he certainly pored over a brief; he was one of the great lawyers of his time. One can visualise the finest contemporary pens, not to mention quality ink, strewn across his handsome teak writing desk.

What would Gandhi have done if someone had gifted him a lakhpati pen? Laughed with toothless abandon, and immediately lost the gift.

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