

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# The importance of being free press



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**T**HIS year's theme for the World Press Freedom Day is: "21st Century Media: New Frontiers, New Barriers."

Although the day passed off last Tuesday, the ritual may have been over, but the theme is meant for the whole year to exercise our minds on. If not for some more years to come.

When we are going through internet and mobile revolutions with news at the fingertips, concepts of "new frontiers," "new barriers" have an obvious relevance. The new frontiers are here, so the focus rivets on to the barriers. One can see three humps on the road: first, the new frontiers provoke barrier-like reactions from establishments; secondly, there are barriers in the shape of the new media's limited outreach; and thirdly, "the new frontiers" pose a challenge to the existence of traditional print media.

The electronic media comes somewhere in-between. Despite its appeal with its audio-visual and live advantages, daily newspapers and the periodicals can have a niche of their own because of their summation, interpretative and analytical characteristics. Rather than being fleetingly impressionable, as in the case of the other media, the print version evokes durable interest.

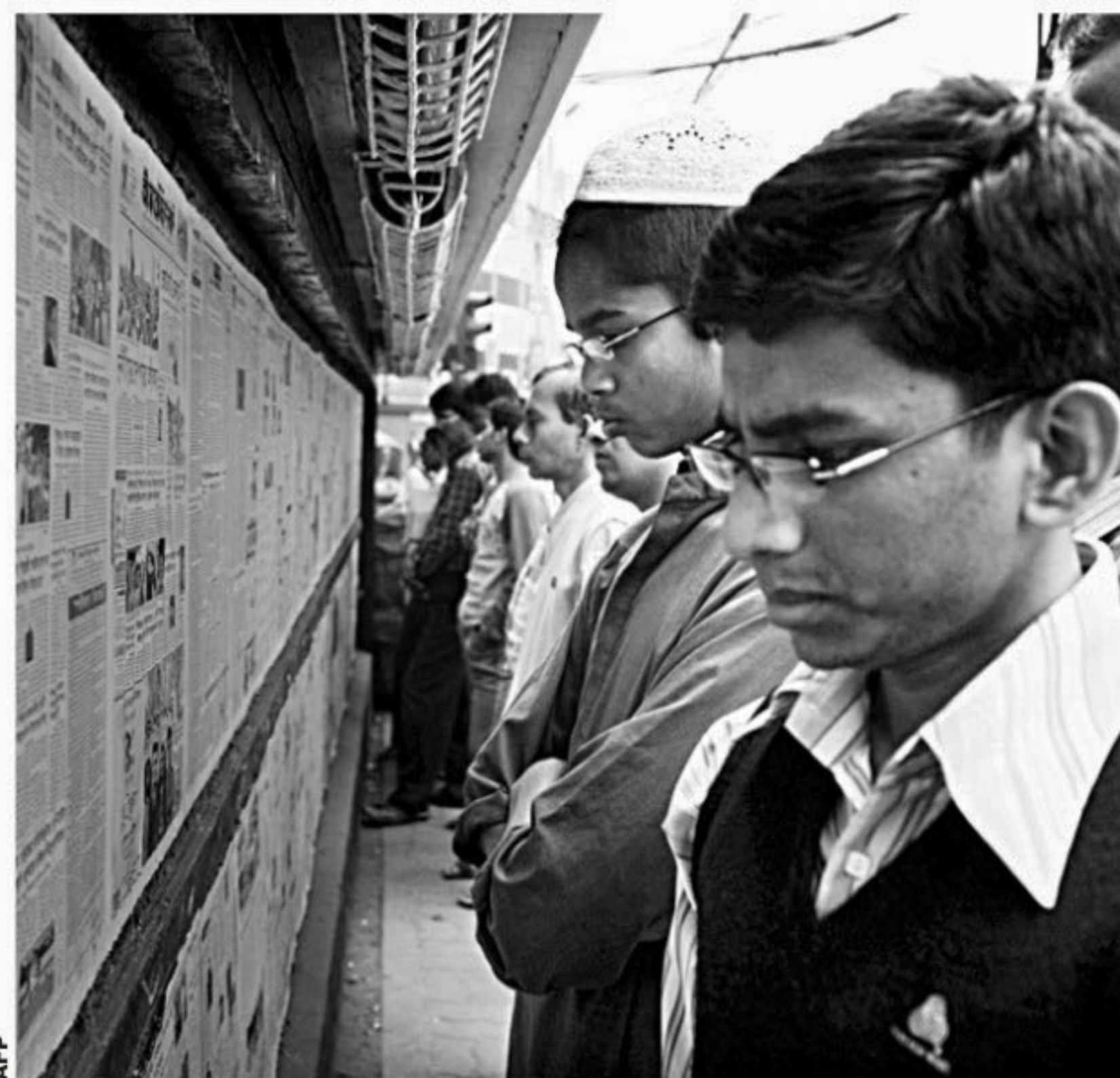
This is not to underplay the huge existential challenge print media faces in a fast moving world with an equally rapidly changing media culture.

Through all these semantics, however, the fundamental spirit of the World Press Freedom Day, now into its twentieth year, lies in the core issues of freedom of expression and access to information drawing on freedom of the press.

Expression of dissent is pivotal to the right to freedom of speech and thought. This has been recently tested in the Middle East, Arab lands and North Africa as people defied the state machines to vent out their resentment against repressive longstanding elected and unelected regimes which clearly overstayed people's hospitality. Through the new media comprising internet, Facebook, social networking sites, etc. all the suppressed sentiments against oppressive regime spilled overseas, connecting people to what is being eulogised as the Arab Spring.

This hit home a very powerful message that news out of its own momentum creates a space for itself whatever fetters might have been placed on it. This message holds good for all establishments and needs to be internalised by people in authority.

Now the status of press freedom in Bangladesh. Admittedly, scribes in our country have earned a fair degree of freedom by pushing boundaries over time and raising



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the level of tolerance of governments. But some antiquated laws still cast a shadow over the media. The Official Secrets Act is yet to be quashed, even though we have the RTI Act; the Special Powers Act; and Press and Publication Laws are on the shelves. Although democratic governments promised their oblit-

eration before polls, they tended to keep them in power.

The government influence and corporate control over media, print and electronic, tend to dilute objectivity and freedom of press topped off by the journalist community itself being divided along political lines. Sometimes balking at express-

ing oneself freely may have resulted from self-censorship on the part of a journalist.

Whenever press reports go against any vested and entrenched interest, the reaction is sharp and sometimes violent. At district and mufassil levels in particular, journalists have been a threatened species when attempting to reveal instances of corruption, malpractice or abuse of power. The number of casualties among the journalists in the line of duty has been quite large over the years.

Although democracy and free but responsible press are supposed to work hand in hand, it is somewhat paradoxical that a law considered unfriendly and anachronistic to press freedom was amended not by a democratic government but by a caretaker government. In 1990, Justice Shahabuddin as the caretaker president revoked those provisions of Special Powers Act which were inconsistent with the professional functioning of newspapers. These included waiver on suspension of publication of a newspaper and closing down of a printing press and simplification of the procedure for obtaining declaration for a newspaper.

However, under clauses 500 and 501 of the Penal Code that relate to defamation and libel charges, the court can summon a journalist through a letter or by issuance of warrant procedure.

If the Bangladesh Press Council plays the role of an Ombudsman

and is empowered to adjudicate complaints then an organisation or a reader feeling aggrieved by a newspaper report can find redress while the editor, publisher or journalist are spared the consequences of an offence being treated as a criminal act. A recent decisive verdict of the BPC in favour of Prothom Alo editor, who was vilified in a Kaler Kontho report, stands out as an example of upholding the cause of healthy journalism.

This is not to, in any way, detract from the absolute necessity on the part of the journalists to work with responsibility and professional integrity, steadfastly adhering to the standard ethics of journalism. The point about journalistic responsibility is brought home most succinctly by a Polish editor who, having run a paper from underground for some years, was set free to run it openly. He summed up his feelings thus: "Yes, I have run a paper clandestinely for some years but now the problem is the heavy onus on me to determine what is true and what is not before I go to print."

Let me end with a picturesque comment on free flow of information by a former US Supreme Court Justice Louis D Brandeis: "Publicity is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases. Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman."

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# Osama Bin Laden goes, what next?

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**T**HE surprising announcement by US President Barack Obama about the killing of Osama bin Laden was dramatic, but well thought-out. "Justice is done," he said. For Obama there could not have been perhaps a more opportune moment. His popularity was sliding, the ratings of his Democratic party had come down, and in spite of the public uprising in different parts of the Maghreb and the Middle-East championing democracy, human rights and reforms, things did not appear to be under his control.

Under his control. The failed air-rescue mission launched by President Jimmy Carter partly contributed to his defeat in the presidential election, but the operation ordered by Obama will definitely enhance his image and put him up very favourably in the mind and esteem of the American electorate. What President George Bush failed to achieve in his two terms, Barack Obama accomplished. Even any protest against the murder of Gaddafi's son and three baby grandchildren by US aided Nato forces would not be considered important enough for a significant reaction.

However, the killing of Osama will be welcomed in varying degrees the world over with a sigh of relief, except perhaps by the terrorists and misguided religious extremists and strategists. Pakistani President Zardari and US President Obama have mutually congratulated each other on this. Prime Minister Gilani has hailed this as the most remarkable victory in the war against terrorism.

One could be certain that there had been active collaboration both in planning and in execution between the Pakistani authorities and US, much more than what President Obama gratefully acknowledged. There is always a chance of backlash in Pakistan, particularly from those supporting Sharia law. From that point of view, there will be an effort on the part of Pakistan government to minimise, in public eye, its role in the operation.

Such a military operation with minimum blood-shed would not have been possible, particularly in a highly sensitive well-supervised cantonment area, without cooperation. To imagine that in a country that has nuclear capability, military and civil intelligence failed to take note of a huge structure with a 5.5 meter high wall being built in a most strategic locality is mind-boggling. At least normal curiosity should have drawn an intelligence agency to that abode.

I think the agencies, both Pakistani and US, were biding for the appropriate time, either self-chosen or imposed. And the opportune moment arrived after hectic activities since August 2010 and a series of meetings held by President Obama since March 2011. It is not exactly known as to when bin-Laden crossed over to Pakistan and when he took shelter in this urban centre. But Secretary of State Hilary Clinton did say that "cooperation with Pakistan helped lead the US to the hide-out where Osama was killed by US forces." She added: "It is important to note that our counter-terrorism cooperation continued over a number of years now with Pakistan contributing greatly to our efforts to dismantle al-Qaeda."

The casualties included Osama's son and two others -- but no US personnel got hurt. One or two women reportedly got hurt, but they might have tried to act as human shields. It is not clear as to who killed Osama, it could have been an invading assailant, or it could even be of one of his bodyguards, who had prior instructions to kill if the leader's capture seemed imminent.

The dead body was taken custody of, and even before any demand or claim for appropriate burial or performance of customary religious rites could be made, the dead body or bodies was/were buried at sea with proper Islamic rites. These precautions were thoughtfully taken so that the burial ground could not eventually be turned into a rallying point to continue to inspire religious extremists, nor could anyone

allege that the dead Osama was denied of his inalienable right to be buried under Islamic rites.

It may seem strange that Osama bin Laden and his advisers decided to live in a well-marked residence in a sensitive area of Abbottabad, where any resident could have been certain of being detected. It appears that al-Qaeda bigwigs in Pakistan chose crowded urban centres as their hideouts, and not mountainous caves like Tora-Bora, or inaccessible regions in the Pak-Afghan border area. Drone attacks were at



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least unlikely in such urban centres. But for Osama to select a custom-built mansion near Abbottabad still appears to be mystifying.

In 1996, while giving an interview

to journalist Abdul Bari Atwan, Osama said that he was prepared for and would look forward to die in harness, and one of this bodyguards told Atwan even at that time that, as per instructions, bin Laden would be shot to death if his capture became unavoidably imminent any time. And so perhaps Osama lived there as long as he could, with his family and personal staff, continuing to act as a source of inspiration and not getting involved in any practical command or operations.

Al-Qaeda ceased to assert its role

the necessity of having a unified central command had diminished. In different interviews with journalist Hamid Mir, Osama said that "my enemies may kill me but cannot capture me alive." This is exactly what happened.

However, it is uncertain as to how long his memories will continue to inspire the jihadis or the oppressed Muslims around the globe. His likely successor Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the doctor strategist from Egypt, does not have Laden's charisma or authority. I think that, except for some sporadic outbursts, there will not be any big operation, and the influence of al-Qaeda will decline. Even in the popular uprisings in many countries of the Maghreb and the Middle-East, the religious or anti-American elements are minimal. They are championing democracy, human rights, economic and institutional reforms, mostly of local nature. The seeds are all home-grown.

Osama's final departure from the world-scene has been hailed by most world leaders. The known allies of the US have been prompt and congratulatory. Pakistan's Prime Minister Gilani called this "a victory." However, it may be noted that the countries have their own angles. Turkish President Abdullah Gul said: "This is a lesson that terrorists should learn from." David Cameron hailed it as a big relief. The presidents of European Union and European Commission, in a joint statement, called it a big victorious step in the fight against terrorism.

And the people all around the globe, particularly Muslims, would perhaps hail this, expecting respite (?) from the large scale anti-terrorist activities that caused immense loss and hardship to many. This would also, hopefully, be helpful in creating an opportunity for restoring the image of real Islam -- which is peaceful and non-violent. In Bangladesh also, we should try to ensure that elements of religious extremism and extra-legal fatwabagji are eliminated, facilitating the establishment of a tolerant, non-violent, democratic society.

Osama bin Laden's death offers a golden opportunity to the US and the West to seek to establish a terror-free non-violent world. If they give up false double standards and hypocritical pretensions in their dealings with Muslims, cease to unnecessarily malign Islam, and settle the Palestine issue in an acceptable manner, then there would be no reason for clinging on to the spirit of resistance and justice as espoused by bin-Laden. Just solution of issue of Kashmir and withdrawal of US and Western occupation forces from Afghanistan and Iraq will also help the process and eradicate the sense of frustration among Muslims.

Why should there be unwanted foreign forces in Iraq and Afghanistan? Let their governments deal with their problems and settle them as best as they can. Democratic practices should be allowed to operate and flourish unhindered. In Afghanistan, let the foreign occupation forces go, and President Hamid Karzai has also demanded this. Let there be fresh elections and, provided they declare their adherence to democratic practices, the Taliban may also join the election as a political party.

In Pakistan, the mindless drone attacks should stop. The government can utilise the opportunity to curb religious extremism, and the civil society could come forward to lend support in this initiative. Pakistan can fully restore its image in the Western world if it can play its cards well. Pakistan and US have actually jointly won the battle, and the war on terrorism can also be won if they work together honestly and sincerely.

President Obama was cautious and wise in his choice of words in the speech declaring the death of bin-Laden. He emphatically said there was no quarrel with Islam. Osama bin Laden was not even a Muslim leader -- he was just a person who led a terrorist group. We believe in this, let the US prove it now.

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