

# Credibility of foreign media

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PEOPLE of Bangladesh in general give a lot of importance to whatever is written in the foreign press, whether it is a news report, a commentary or an analysis pertaining to politics of Bangladesh. Such a news report in two foreign newspapers gave rise to a wave of allegations and counter-allegations in the political fiefdom of Bangladesh in recent weeks. After the interview aired by BBC of the former ISI chief, the issue should rest if the transcripts of the proceedings of the Pakistan Supreme Court do not reveal anything otherwise. However, it is only incumbent on the two newspapers to explain how the supposed baseless story found a place in their "esteemed" dailies. People should also learn not to accept those foreign media reports or analyses as divine words, as they do very often.

During the tenure of the last CTG, a confessional statement made by the erstwhile BNP government's State Minister Lutfuzzaman Babar came out in the local news media (DS June 12, 2007). It said: "The governments of Pakistan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia contributed a total of Tk.300 crore to immediate past premier Khaleda Zia's election fund, with each of the states contributing Tk.100 crore, according to the confessions of Babar." Babar provided vivid accounts of the flow of that money with details of who shared how much and where they were kept. Yet, probably as it was published only in local press, no further investigation was made into that confession after the end of the tenure of the last CTG.

During the recent debate on the acceptance of foreign fund, a counter-allegation was made by BNP acting secretary general where he reiterated a passing comment in a news analysis, not a report, made by the British weekly the *Economist* in its July 30, 2011 issue, in which its analyst wrote: "Ever since 2008, when the Awami League, helped by bags of Indian cash and advice, triumphed in general elections in Bangladesh ...." Referring to ongoing war-crimes trials, the same article went on to accuse: "They are being used less as a path to justice than to crush an opposition Islamic party, Jamaat-e-Islami."

If one looks at a few stories the *Economist* ran in recent months about Bangladesh affairs, it would glaringly reflect the inconsistency and lack of objectivity that seriously jeopardise the credibility of that otherwise widely read weekly. The *Economist* published the rejoinder of the Bangladesh government, without any words of substantiation or defence in favour of its own analysis regarding the "bags of Indian cash." The rejoinder said: "This is a blatant lie and aptly speaks about the writer's utter disrespect for responsible journalism. The international community, including independent observers, hailed the historic elections in December 2008 as the freest ever in the history of the country, which was reflective of the aspirations of the people."

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Amazingly, the *Economist* itself ran another story (August 13, 2011) on Bangladesh that echoed most other international media, observers and Bangladesh government's own rejoinder as well. It said: "The election of December 2008 seemed to mark a watershed for Bangladesh. In the fairest poll in the country's four-decade history, the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina, swept to power in a landslide, on a wave of national optimism." Do the unsubstantiated allegation of "bags of Indian cash," which the League's detractors love to repeat, and the widely perceived affirmation of the "fairest poll in the country's four-decade history," which its adversaries hate to accept, complement each other?

There have been concerted propaganda campaigns initiated by BNP-Jamaat to derail the ongoing trial of the alleged war criminals. Jamaat's big cash resource is purportedly playing a crucial role in that campaign. The *Economist's* story on November 26, 2011, entitled, 'Asia's dismal record on tackling war crimes,' said: "The tribunal could have been laudable. This was a

horrific spell of history, and justice might have helped reconciliation. Instead, it risks being a travesty. The prosecution looks biased. The defendants seem to have been made targets because of their political role today as much as for earlier wrongs.

Jamaat is an ally of the main opposition; some of the accused were ministers in Bangladesh's previous government. Should they be convicted before the next election, which would handily weaken the opposition? Yet a nakedly partisan trial would only deepen historical wounds, not salve them." Do these nakedly biased observations seem to have come from an internationally "reputed" weekly? Is there any such thing as "biased prosecution" in the vocabulary of judicial proceedings? If not known, it would be difficult to tell if the observations were not coming from an avowed BNP-Jamaat propagandist. In fact, the whole article is full of so many half-truths and imaginative speculation that it would be hard for the *Economist* to shrug-off the allegation that it was penned by a mercenary writer.

The trial of alleged war criminals is probably an issue, among many others, for which the AL received an unqualified mandate in the last election, and still has massive people's endorsement. In spite of the propaganda campaign initiated by BNP-Jamaat duo to sway international opinion in their favour, very few organisations that are genuine human rights watchdogs found any flaws in the ICT and its proceedings. In my limited research I have not come across any war crimes tribunal whose proceedings are so transparent and where the defendants are given VIP treatment. Yet, the *Economist* contrived that "witnesses and lawyers are being harassed and journalists attempting to report as much have been intimidated," which is yellow journalism at its worst. The observations of the *Economist* run counter to the reality of the high degree of transparency the ICT is exhibiting. Do they help to enhance the credibility of the weekly?

The writer is Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

## SHIFTING IMAGES

### What's in a game?



MILIA ALI

AS the dust settled after the Asia Cup Cricket Tournament, an American friend of mine asked: "Can you explain to me why you guys get so excited over a mere ball game?" I could have retorted: "Just like folks in America get all worked up about the Super Bowl... the annual football extravaganza!"

But, I didn't, because I, too, have been thinking hard about the cricket fever that has gripped Bangladesh.

All over the world, sports fans become passionate and competitive about their favourite teams. Often, tempers flare up, fistfights occur, and the law authorities are called to take care of skirmishes between rival fans. But, in Bangladesh, cricket just isn't another ball game. It's something much larger. Cricket unleashes passions that touch the core spirit of the masses!

There are several overlapping layers of emotions that affect the psyche of cricket lovers in this country. First and foremost, what draws spectators to cricket is the sheer love for the game. I remember accompanying my schoolmates to watch live cricket matches in the Dhaka Stadium as a teenager. Then, of course, there was a gap of some 30 years when many of us lost interest in cricket because Bangladesh didn't have its own team. Supporting other teams was not as exciting, partly because it resulted in divided loyalties and created more tension than fun.

Watching the tournament live at the Mirpur stadium this year, my passion and fervour for the game was rekindled. It was a rare treat to be with cricket lovers (especially the younger generation) and ride the wave of the crowd's energy and enthusiasm. In my opinion the greatest and most durable contribution of the Bangladesh cricket team has been to reignite a sense of

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national pride among ordinary folks. In fact, the Bangladeshi cricketers are like harbingers of positivity and hope amidst bickering politicians, "hartalling" party leaders and corrupt officials.

The grit and determination with which Bangladesh played the three major teams of the region have been exemplary. In a country where divisive forces are constantly at war, the young cricketers taught us a few lessons about teamwork and commitment. Even the star, Shakib, showed us that success is not defined by simply competing to be an individual hero -- rather it's achieved through collective heroism! And, most importantly, no one played the blame game.

The narrative of the Bangladesh freedom struggle is replete with glorious chapters of sacrifice and courage. Unfortunately, its nation-building efforts have left much to be desired. The "ifs" and "whys" are being analysed and dissected by social scientists but these are, at best, marginal to the crux of today's discussion. One doesn't, however, need researched data to understand that there is a sense of uncertainty about future prospects, especially among the below-30 age group. These youngsters are desperately searching for role models who can reinstate their faith in the fairness of the system and the resilience of the country's future. At some abstract level the cricket team has restored the belief that, if required, Bangladeshis can once again unite under a single banner and strive toward a common goal.

True, Bangladesh didn't win the Cup, but in this case the equation of winning and losing is not a simple, linear one. The positive externalities and hidden variables far outweigh the numerical result. Listening to 20,000 spectators singing "Amar sonar Bangla" in unison was a reminder of how far we have travelled from the fledgling nation of 41 years ago. As I immersed myself in the enthusiasm of the vibrant crowds, I silently saluted the heroes of 1971 who made it possible for Bangladesh to play world-class cricket, and, that too, with the very country that threatened its right to exist as a free and sovereign nation. By any standard, this is a significant achievement!

Despite the tears and heart wrenching scenes at the closing ceremony, the loss of the Cup may have been a blessing in disguise. It has helped the cricket team (and may be the nation) take a step back and evaluate its achievements and failures and learn valuable lessons for the future. No one could have captured this thought more aptly than Brian Lara, the all-time great cricketer, who said: "Bangladesh lost but won the hearts of millions. In fact they won everything except the Cup!"

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# ITLOS verdict: Ensuring our rights

M. SAZZAD HOSSAIN SIDDIQUI

DECEMBER 16 is the most memorable day for all Bangladeshis as Bangladesh came into existence as a sovereign

nation on that day in 1971. To me, another blissful day is March 14, 2012, when we won in a historic verdict given by the UN International Tribunal for Law of the Seas (ITLOS). This verdict has established Bangladesh's territorial, political and economic rights to the immense resources of the Bay of Bengal. As the proverb goes: "It is better late than never."

Bangladesh and Myanmar had held prolonged negotiations over the dispute since 1974, but failed to reach a solution. Finally, the two countries, by mutual consent, invited ITLOS in 2009 to exercise its jurisdiction over the maritime boundary dispute.

ITLOS delivered its judgment on March 14, demarcating the maritime boundary between two countries based on the equitable share in the coastline of the two countries. It is a victory for both states because the problem was resolved amicably and according to international law. The verdict is indeed the result of our relentless and determined efforts to protect our national interests and national power to ensure our legitimate share of the resources in the Bay of Bengal.

However, if we look into some facts and figures of the litigation and the historic verdict we can see that the main focus of the dispute was on maritime boundary between two countries centered on Bangladesh's views to demarcate on equity basis North to South while Myanmar wanted equidistance system along East to West boundary. The maritime boundary Myanmar had claimed cut directly across the Bangladesh coastline, severely truncating Bangladesh's maritime jurisdiction to a narrow wedge of sea not

extending beyond 130 miles. It also claimed that the tribunal lacked jurisdiction to award continental shelf rights beyond 200 miles (111,000 square kilometres) from either State's coast.

The court also identified the coral island St. Martin as the landmark to demarcate the territorial and economic rights surrounding the island up to 200 nautical miles toward continental shelf at an angle of 215 degrees. So, Bangladesh's full access to the high seas out to 200 nautical miles and beyond was recognised and our unquestioned rights to the fish in our waters and the natural resources beneath our seabed were ensured.

There are two ways of resolving international conflicts and disputes: one is negotiating settlement of disputes while the other is judicial or legal means of resolving bilateral and multilateral conflicts. Bangladesh, after failing to ensure its legitimate rights in the Bay of Bengal through negotiations, went for judicial settlement of the dispute confidently and with full preparation and proper ground work. The question is, since negotiation has not worked in different cases with India, why should we not take the same legal path to ensure our rights which we have been deprived of for a long time?

Bangladesh and India have a common cultural, economic and political history. Especially,

the role played by India during the independence war of Bangladesh in 1971 is unforgettable. Being a small and weak state (in terms of both military and economy) Bangladesh should have excellent negotiating capability to resolve disputed issues with the neighbouring countries and to ensure its

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legitimate rights. Now the window has opened to resolve the same dispute with India as the ITLOS president has also formed an arbitral tribunal regarding the maritime boundary dispute between Bangladesh and India.

The newly-appointed Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Pankaj Saran, said on March 17 that India wanted to resolve the maritime boundary dispute with Bangladesh bilaterally (*Daily Star*, March 18). So, what Bangladesh needs to do is be persistent and confident, and make sure that India does not procrastinate to protract the issue in the name of negotiation or of bilateral discussion.

At the end, I must emphasise that we should increase wide-range maritime patrol preparedness to detect violation of our boundary. The navy also needs land-based wide range surveillance radar to keep watch on the vast sea resource. It is also important to chase off invaders and fishing trawlers from Bangladesh territory. It is good news that Bangladesh Navy is going to procure a patrol aircraft from Germany and a team is currently there to negotiate a deal.

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