

## SUNDAY POUCH

## Police onslaught on journalists

*To whom are they answerable?*

**B**RUTAL attacks on journalists that marked the past month blatantly demonstrate how vulnerable they have become while discharging their professional duties. In the last week, some police personnel attacked and manhandled three photojournalists of Prothom Alo in the line of duty. In quick succession, three court correspondents were beaten up and dragged and bundled into the police vehicle as they came forward to protect a teenage girl and her parents from police harassment. Add to these the attacks on two journalists in Pabna engineered by vested quarters.

When the state of affairs as regards the journalists has taken such a plunge, we are shocked to note that the home minister claimed that the police are doing better than ever before and the state minister had the lack of sense to ask journalists to be at a safe distance from police while at work. Only the other day we commented on this but what now evokes a reaction from us is the delayed expression of regret from the home minister on some police men's conduct. The issue here is not again one of expression of regret but of taking responsibility. What we would like to see is exemplary, punitive action against the offenders without much ado.

First it is the denial mode and then it is the protective attitude from the high authority that give wayward elements in law enforcement agencies a sense of complete impunity.

Journalists work relentlessly to point out anomalies and expose surreptitious, collusive goings-on in different public and private sectors, purely actuated by professional motives and in public interest. This they do only to ensure people's right to know. But when they are attacked while discharging their duties, both freedom of expression and people's right to information come under assault dealing a severe blow to democracy as such.

The culprits are let off with light or no punishment at all. Neither an impartial investigation is carried out, these being invariably departmental, nor is the outcome of such probes followed through. In view of some recent specific instances of police excesses against journalists, we call upon the government to fix responsibility and mete out punishment to those found guilty.

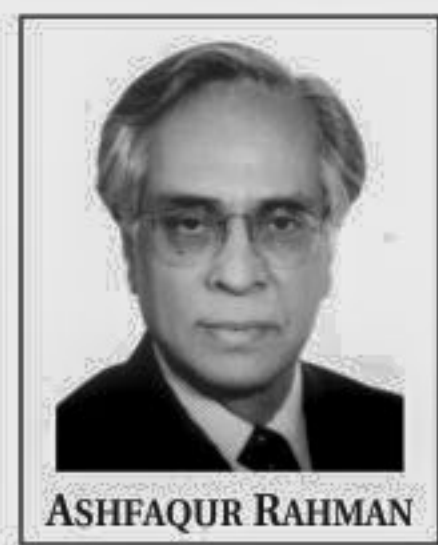
## No respite for consumers

*Poultry prices go through roof*

**O**F late, prices of eggs and now, abnormal rise in poultry prices have become the subject of discussion for most city dwellers. According to even conservative estimates published by the government, poultry retail price has shot up by at least 22 percent in the last week alone. With current prices varying between Tk180 to Tk200 per kilo, depending on which city one resides in - Dhaka or Chittagong, one thing is painfully clear and i.e. that all forms of government interventions at arresting the hyperinflation being witnessed in kitchen markets have failed.

The news isn't getting better anytime soon. Depending on whom one talks to, retailers or the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh, higher prices are here to stay. The cause cited at both wholesale and retail levels for higher price is shortage of supply. According to Bangladesh Poultry Industries Association (BPIA) some 8,000 poultry farms have resumed production after the outbreak of the H5N1 virus last year. But one must not forget that nearly 13,000 poultry farms that went off production at the fag end of last year had a debilitating effect on the supply chain. Losses incurred by most smaller farms led to their forced closure. They will take sometime to resume normal production and that too is highly suspect unless they receive some form of financial support from the government.

The downside to such price hikes is that today, both eggs and poultry have gone beyond the purchasing power of lower-income families and many middle class families consume the items sparingly. Deemed to be an essential part of the food basket of most families regardless of income levels, their absence will most certainly play havoc with nutrition. The poultry industry plays a crucial role in the rural economy and the disbanding of thousands of farms due to culling and lack of capital brought on by the avian flu would have to be rolled back. With thousands of farms risking permanent closure that will inevitably threaten livelihoods of hundreds of thousands, is it too much to ask for the government to provide short-term



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

**B**AHADUR Shah Zafar, the last Moghul emperor was not the sovereign of India. He ruled only over the Red Fort in Delhi. But he was a consummate Urdu poet. In one of his rambles, he wrote a *ghazal*, when translated reads: "I asked for a long life/ I received four days/ Two passed in desire, two in waiting."

Thus when Zafar was indicted by the British, as the inspiration behind the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, he was sent on exile to Myanmar (then known as Burma). They felt that Myanmar was so remote from Delhi that by exiling the Emperor they would finally bury the name and fame of the Great Moghuls. Yet little did they know that this would not happen and Zafar's poignant *ghazal* would play for India for years to come. In any case the British action then did not amuse the Myanmar.

Nor were the Myanmar amused when they discovered that thousands of Indians from the sub-continent had quietly come to settle in their land. These people came to do business, to work as indentured labour, to be government clerks as well as be proxies for the British. There was resentment when Indian officers and staff functioned as tools of the British colonial power.

But in the 1940's things started to improve when both India and Burma became independent. Prime Ministers U Nu and Jawaharlal Nehru were personal friends as well as prominent figures in the Non-aligned Movement. India gave military and economic aid to U Nu's government. So the seeds of desire for closer Indo-Myanmar ties were sown in those heady days. Zafar's couplet was being somewhat vindicated.

However, in 1962, a military coup took place in Myanmar, when General Ne Win took power. The Revolutionary Council nationalised all private businesses, of which 60% were owned by people of Indian origin. So in the next four years, from 1964 to 1968, more than 150,000 Indo-Myanmar fled Myanmar. The warm relations sud-

denly became cold.

Two of Myanmar's big neighbours, India and China, were however quite aware about the country's strategic significance. They knew that it was a bridge between South and South East Asia. It also had long borders with each of them. So Burma made deep geo-political sense to them. When the army under Ne Win took over, India pushed hard to restore democracy there. But this alienated Myanmar's military government. It threw its lot with China, which was then a "source of low interest loans, grants, development projects, technical assistance, etc." India was thus sidelined and China became Myanmar's principal friend.

*Between India and Myanmar, things may not work out as predicted. At the ground level, the game could be played differently. Myanmar now knows that it has the upper hand. All its big neighbours, and far off USA, are wooing it.*

But then India fell into a quandary. It had to do something in order to get back into Myanmar's favour. It needed that country's cooperation to stymie the insurgent groups that were creating trouble in its backyard and were taking refuge in Myanmar. So India contemplated reversing its policy. It felt it needed to befriend the military regime. India also knew that Myanmar had a surfeit of natural gas. So by coming close it could access some of this gas for its industrial development.

In the 1990's, during the watch of Prime Minister Narisimha Rao, India concluded that Myanmar's democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in spite of her charismatic personality, was not making any progress in re-establishing democracy. India also realised that the military regime would not give up power easily. So it stopped basing its foreign policy there on high moral grounds and decided to accrue advantages from Myanmar.

Three major reasons prompted India to then distance itself from Aung San Suu Kyi and woo the generals. First was the need to access Myanmar's huge hydrocarbon energy sources. Second was to fulfill India's dream of

building transport corridors from her landlocked north east states through Burma to the Bay of Bengal. India also wanted to connect the Indian city of Imphal to Yangon in Myanmar and onwards to Bangkok in Thailand. The third reason was to checkmate China in the Bay of Bengal and deny it any strategic advantage there. Democratic India therefore embraced an autocratic Myanmar.

But in 2010, the game changed again inside Myanmar. The military regime that had ruled for over four decades decided to hold elections and ease their vise-like grip on the country. They released most political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi. She and

at a personal level Suu Kyi has attachment for that country.

So will this fresh Indian embrace of Myanmar affect Bangladesh, another of Myanmar's neighbours? First, India wants to ensure that it does not lose out in trade and investment opportunities that are opening up in that country. To some extent this may mean that Myanmar may have less interest in trading with us unless we diversify our exports. Second, India's dream of building a transport corridor bypassing Bangladesh is now likely to be fulfilled.

Take the case of the Kaladan Multimodal Transit-cum-Transport Project on the river Kaladan which India is implementing in Myanmar. This river meanders from Myanmar to Mizoram in India and then re-enters Myanmar to empty into the Bay of Bengal near the port of Sittwe (Akyab). India is investing heavily in that port and access roads to get to Myanmar's forest wealth. India wants to develop sea lanes running from Sittwe to Kolkata and Visakhapatnam. It also wants Sittwe to be a major oil and gas distribution centre for India's north eastern states.

Myanmar's President U Thein Sein is likely to visit Bangladesh next month. In order to catch up we must quickly complete the formalities that will establish a smooth payment system to enable bilateral trade. Only then can we press for more trade and investment opportunities. We must also expeditiously establish air, sea and road links with Myanmar.

But between India and Myanmar, things may not work out as predicted. At the ground level, the game could be played differently. Myanmar now knows that it has the upper hand. All its big neighbours, and far off USA, are wooing it. Like an attractive maiden it can opt to be choosy and tempestuous.

Emperor Zafar's words could yet ring true. India may be kept waiting longer that what it had bargained for, before it is able to take advantage of improved relations. The twisting tale could twist still further.

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## The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

# A peace plan in name only

HAITHAM MALEH

**S**YRIANS have been killed almost since Hafez al-Assad took power in the 1970s. Now that the bloodshed has escalated under his son Bashar, history repeats itself, and no one seems to care.

In March, the international community put its faith in the peace plan that Kofi Annan, the former United Nations secretary general, struck with Assad. However, his brutal crackdown on the Syrian people -- which has killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands -- continues. Gruesome atrocities happen as soon as United Nations inspectors turn their backs. Civilians are targeted for having dared to speak up to the inspectors or are killed indiscriminately for protesting. Over the weekend, more than 100 people -- including more than 30 children -- were massacred in the village of Houla. On Tuesday, 13 more bodies were found -- bound and shot -- in eastern Syria.

It was clear from the start that the Annan plan was hopeless. It called for a cease-fire under United Nations supervision, but a cease-fire is usually between two armies; in this case, there is only one army slaughtering its own unarmed population. In addition, the United Nations has authorized far too few monitors -- 300 to cover an area of 71,429 square miles. Some areas, like Homs, need 10,000 monitors. The peace plan also called for Assad

and his cronies "to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people," but they know that if any power is conceded to the opposition, it will mean the end of the regime. Dictators like Assad work on absolute power -- the aspirations of the people are not compatible with dictatorship. The plan called for freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists. But the Syrian press has not been free for 50 years, and citizen journalists have recently been sentenced to death.

With all these points, Annan set himself up for bitter disappointment. For the international community to think the peace plan would work simply showed how detached it was from the reality in Syria.

The West is very good at talking; it has used a vast array of vocabulary to describe the situation in Syria and how appalling it is. However, actions speak louder than words. I had been calling on the Western powers to expel Syrian ambassadors since last July. Unfortunately, it took a massacre on the scale of Houla to get them to agree

to do so this week. Thousands of innocent civilians died in the meantime. The West must now recognize that the regime has reached a point of no return, that resolutions are worthless and that the only future for Syria is without the Assad political dynasty.

We are not asking for boots on the ground but for a no-fly zone similar to the ones imposed on Iraq and Libya and for support for the opposition's

Free Syrian Army. The no-fly zone would keep the government from bombing civilians indiscriminately. It would also help the opposition build a democratic political platform, because its leaders would be able to travel and speak with civilians without fear of being killed by government forces. And it would give the Free Syrian Army room to operate. The army also needs weapons, and the West should help supply them -- though they should be distributed in a controlled manner and not just dumped on the streets of Syria.

The West supported the overthrow of Col. Moammar Ghaddafi of Libya, whose activities now appear minor compared with what is going on in

Syria. To fail to do the same now is hypocrisy.

Of course, Syria is getting special treatment because of the support of Russia, a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. But if Russia's aim is to maintain its influence in the Middle East though military contracts with Syria and the strategic port of Tartus, then the best way to do that is by supporting the uprising. The government is a sinking ship, and the Russians, who appear not to care about the atrocities that are being committed in Syria on a daily basis, should care about that. If they think that the regime is about to fall, then and only then will they change sides. In the meantime, the Assad government can also count on some support from China, as well as active assistance from Iran and its client Hezbollah.

The West cannot stand idly by. The longer this conflict drags on, the greater chance there is for Syria to fall into chaotic war, with grave consequences for the international community. We do not want to see more failed states like Afghanistan.

The region's best hope is a free and fair Syria, representative of all aspects of Syrian life, respectful of the judiciary, international law and human rights and life. And right now Syrians need all the help they can get.

The writer is a human rights lawyer, a former judge and a leader of the Syrian opposition.  
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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 3

1665

James Stuart, Duke of York (later to become King James II of England) defeats the Dutch fleet off the coast of Lowestoft.

1984

Operation Blue Star, a military offensive, is launched by the Indian government at Harmandir Sahib, also known as the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine for the Sikhs, in Amritsar. The operation continues until June 6 with casualties, most of them civilians, in excess of 5,000.

1989

The government of China sends troops to force protesters out of Tiananmen Square after seven weeks of occupation.

2006

The union of Serbia and Montenegro comes to an end with Montenegro's formal declaration of independence.