Undeserved Brickbats

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If it wasn't for the media playing its role with passion, vigour and commitment, the flow of information about catastrophic human tragedies would have been under-whelming rather than overwhelming. The naturally hyped coverage has served as a scanner on evacuation, rescue, treatment and rehabilitation activities; otherwise these might have hit a snag or two. Being watched means being active, not clinically but humanely as well. This was as much true in the aftermath of the Savar building catastrophe as it has been in the case of cyclone Mahasen.

The power of the media was felt through the fast track information inflow about the depth of a human tragedy. On the other hand, the one liner breaking news like cyclone leaving Bangladesh territory on Thursday afternoon gave all anxious people of Bangladesh a sigh of relief.

'No self-respecting fish would be wrapped in a Murdoch newspaper,' said Mike Royko, a Chicago newspaper columnist and winner of the 1972 Pulitzer Prize for commentary. If this was one extreme of corrupt, flirtatious media ethics, at the other pole perhaps qualifies Bangladeshi media as being passionately benevolent.

Yet, the national media has received some brickbats, undeservedly for the most part, about the coverage of the Savar tragedy. The criticism was focused on two broad points: First, we were blamed for 'exaggerated reporting' bringing the country's image to 'disrepute', this coming from not entirely unlikely quarters. To some of the top brass in the BGMEA, repeated illustrative reportage by the media, both electronic and print, brought down the image of the country. The spoilers of image should take a look into their own bag of faults. They are now doing it under international gaze.

Secondly, in some instances, media's lack of sensitivity to the victims in dire physical conditions when they were barely able to speak and needed undistracted treatment of their emergencies, drew flak.

The press, especially the electronic media, found itself in a highly passionate mode to come out first with the news and more with intimate details for lending a humane touch to their stories. Some reporters or anchorpersons who crossed the line must be knowing where they did so and this would help them on the learning curve. Then there is the question of decency and respect for the sensibility of the readers and audiences about how much of the trauma they were prepared to share with the injured, decapitated and those struggling for life.

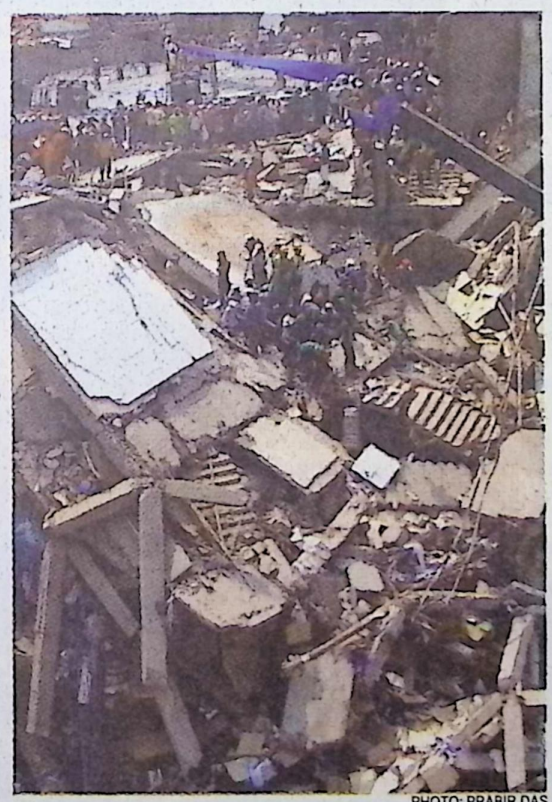


PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The standard practice in reporting human catastrophe has been for the editors, news editors and chief reporters to send out reporters to the spot with a briefing. This would have been about where the ethical boundaries would be drawn in their discharge of duties.

In the western media, particularly in Britain they use Pixelated (blurred) photographs to keep the victims anonymous out of respect for their sensitivities. Yet, their coverage has been extensive and intensive with comments pouring in from the western perspective.

It is said that even negative publicity has a positive side to it as a country's name is recited frequently placing it on the international radar screen. Few people take interest in a lackadaisical non-happening country.

In the final analysis, no one is above reproach and that very much includes the media more so because it plays a very sensitive role as an information gatherer, disseminator and eventually builder of public opinion and informed judgment.

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