

THREAT TO SHUT DOWN THE DAILY STAR Journo leaders worried

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Journalist leaders yesterday expressed concern over threats to shut down leading English newspaper The Daily Star and arrest of its editor.

The threats were issued from the close circle of the government's power centre, leaders of a fraction of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) and Dhaka Union of Journalists (DUJ) said in a joint statement.

Their reaction came a day after two defamation cases were filed against The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam in Khulna and Laxmipur for, what the plaintiffs claimed, publishing reports based on unverified information given by the DGFI, which allegedly tarnished the image of Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina.

BFUJ acting president Shamsuddin Harun, its Secretary General M Abdullah, and DUJ President Abdul Hai Sikdar and, its General Secretary Jahangir Alam Prodhan issued the statement.

"We think that the threat to the newspaper and demand for the editor's

arrest over almost a decade old controversial issue are made with ill intentions and is an attempt to create panic in the media. We strongly condemn and protest it," the statement read.

Referring to detention of journalists, closure of media houses and killing of journalist couple Sagar-Runi, the leaders said the freedom of the press is threatened by "the government's repression and control".

The new threat to shut down The Daily Star and arrest its editor exposed the government's "anti-media attitude".

They also condemned the arrest of Amar Desh acting editor Mahmudur Rahman and former Jatiya Press Club president Shawkat Mahmud. They called upon the government to reopen the media houses it closed earlier.

At a television talk show on February 3, The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam made an introspective comment about a lapse in editorial judgement in publishing a few reports in 2007 that the newspaper could not independently verify.



Traders showing off a giant Baghair fish, weighing about 65kg, at Paradoho Fair, a 400-year-old tradition, in Bogra's Gabtoli upazila yesterday. Different items -- including big fishes, inset, sweetmeats and furniture -- were displayed on the first day, called Jamai (groom) Mela as only males go there on the day. The second and last day is known as Bou (bride) Mela and only women attend the fair that day.

PHOTO: COLLECTED



Follow norms, values of the judiciary

CJ urges judges enjoying state facilities

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha yesterday expressed his hopes that current and retired judges, who enjoy state facilities, would follow the norms and values of the judiciary.

He made the comment when Justice Nozrul Islam Chowdhury, a retired HC judge, appeared before the Appellate Division of the SC as a defence counsel for convicted war criminal Mir Quasem Ali.

The court was hearing an appeal by the Jamaat leader challenging his death penalty.

Earlier, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam told the court that Justice Nozrul retired as a HC judge a few months ago and was still living in a government residence and using a car and gunman given by the government.

If Justice Nozrul practises (as a lawyer) in the court under the circumstances, it would be against the ethics of the judges, he said.

In reply, Justice Nozrul, who retired on December 12 last year, said he was aware of his enjoying the state privileges and claimed that he was not misusing the facilities.

After the hearing, he told reporters on the Supreme Court Bar Association premises that he was practising in the apex court as per the law and the constitution.

A judge of the Appellate Division or the HC is entitled to get government facilities for one year after his or her retirement under the relevant law, and a retired HC judge can practise in the Appellate Division as per the constitution.

A five-member bench of the Appellate Division, headed by the chief justice, held the hearing on the appeal of Quasem Ali, a member of Jamaat-e-Islami Central Executive Council, for second day yesterday and set February 15 for its resumption.

Quasem Ali's lawyer SM Shajahan yesterday placed arguments before the apex court.

The Jamaat leader filed the appeal challenging his death penalty awarded to him for his crimes against humanity during the country's Liberation War in 1971.

The International Crimes Tribunal-2 on November 2, 2014 sentenced Quasem to death after it found him guilty on 10 charges of abducting, confining and torturing people during the war.

Sri Lankan president due next month

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

President of Sri Lanka Maithripala Sirisena is expected to pay an official visit to Bangladesh in March at the invitation of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Diplomatic sources said foreign ministry officials of Dhaka and Colombo had already started preparations for the visit.

They are working to find suitable dates for the visit when Bangladesh and Sri Lanka will sign several deals to further promote bilateral ties, added the sources.

This is going to be the first visit of Sirisena to Dhaka since he was elected the president.

He visited Bangladesh in 2013 and 2014 as a minister.

Meanwhile, the foreign ministry of Bangladesh has deferred the joining of present Bangladesh High Commissioner to Sri Lanka Tarik Ahsan in the Islamabad mission due to the upcoming visit of the Sri Lankan president.

Read before you react

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First, it was not baseless. It was sourced as coming from the joint interrogation cell. An ominous twist was given in the third para of the story. The line "Running those graft stories against Hasina based on unsubstantiated DGFI information" was manufactured and joined to Mahfuz Anam's original quote "It was a big mistake". Even his standalone quote was distorted into "my biggest mistake". The Star editor never said that the stories were either "manufactured" or "baseless". He only said that his mistake was to publish reports that he could not "independently verify".

Sajeb Wazed Joy was first to react through his Facebook account. He demanded Mahfuz Anam be detained and tried for treason for trying to facilitate a military coup by running a smear campaign against his mother, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. What followed is known to all.

Being an independent voice, The Daily Star is quite familiar with hates and threats. Since the reports in question are about nine-year-old, we felt obligated to refresh memories of our critics about the journalism of the newspaper pursued during the 1/11 phase and to reaffirm the pledge to our readers about Star's journalism without fear or favour.

Were our reports in question baseless? No.

Star published a total of 11 news items between June and July of 2007 without verifying them independently. The truth is there was no scope to verify stories of this nature. Of the news items, seven were on alleged corruption of Khaleda Zia, her two sons -- Tarique Zia and Arafat Rahman Koko -- and other BNP leaders. Three reports were about Hasina and one about the chief conservator of forests, Osman Gani.

The source of those news items was the TFI (Task Force Interrogation) cell.

The "confessions" from the interrogations were made available to the media, often by telephone calls or through CDs. In addition to newspaper reports, TV channels also played the audios of their "confessions". Many of these audio tracks are still available on YouTube.

What Star could not do was to verify those information independently and crosscheck with other sources (that is, the people under interrogation, their relatives, party men or even their lawyers) and add their sides to the reports. However, it was impossible to do so during the emergency rule, when all forms of freedom were curbed, especially media freedom.

Then again, the publishing of stories without "independent verification" continues till date. The media continue to publish stories on crossfire, briefing of police or Rab about a crime and the accused. All these stories of today in every media are one-sourced and one-sided and published without "independent verification". The media also run political diatribes without independent substantiation and verification.

Mahfuz Anam's regret should have touched off a debate to find ways to plug holes in coverage by the media. Unfortunately though, that has not happened. It has now turned into vilification of this newspaper and its editor. As to the reasons for that, we leave it to our readers to conclude.

Had the Star manufactured those stories? No.

None from the government or families of the accused had challenged the stories we ran at that time. When they were freed and democracy was restored, none of them ever said that they did not give any confessional statement during interrogation by the task force. They said the confessions were given under duress. And Star duly published those news.

Had reports of The Daily Star created 'grounds for Hasina's arrest'?

No.

This is the most tendentious aspect of the present accusation against this newspaper and one least based on fact. The first corruption charge against the present PM was lodged on April 10 in connection with Westmont Power Company. The second was on April 12. On April 13, the Anti-Corruption Commission announced its intention to start its own investigation against Sheikh Hasina. Then on April 19, the government decided to block Sheikh Hasina's return to Bangladesh. On April 20, the government declared that "action would be taken against her" if she returned. Thus it clearly shows that long before Star printed any stories, the government had filed corruption cases against the AL chief. Then again, the specific charge for which Sheikh Hasina was arrested on July 16 was one that was filed by a prominent businessman on June 13. This report Star did not publish. The reports we published were neither investigative nor Star's own. All three were based on TFI sources. Thus in no way can any link be established between reports appearing in Star and Sheikh Hasina's arrest. It must also be remembered that almost all papers and TV channels carried the same news. So how can one newspaper's reports be identified as the cause!

We repeat, she was actually arrested on July 16 for an extortion case filed on June 13 by a prominent businessman. And Star did not publish any report, let alone intelligence-supplied information, that could lead to filing of a case or her subsequent arrest. In fact, grounds for an arrest were created when the first extortion case against her was filed in April.

The Daily Star was the only newspaper to condemn the arrest when its editor wrote a commentary the next

day, boldly demanding her immediate release. Ironically, none of today's critics of Star wrote or spoke for Sheikh Hasina's release that day. Only The Daily Star did it.

Was The Daily Star responsible for 1/11? No.

Politics had gone from bad to worse when then ruling BNP extended retirement age of judges, resulting in Justice KM Hasan being in line to head the next caretaker government to oversee elections. Awami League was hell-bent on foiling what it called was a BNP plot to influence the polls. Violence, death, hartal and mass arrest dominated daily headlines for two years. Two most powerful parties stuck to their guns, pushing the country to the brink of a constitutional crisis.

And what did the Star do during 2005-2006? It's all there in print for all to see.

In the news pages, we reported on what was happening and in the editorial, we kept on writing against such violence, mass arrest by law-enforcers to foil AL movement, and for political dialogue to come out of the crisis. A staggering 282 editorials were written by the newspaper, highlighting the importance of holding free and fair elections and asking the two parties to loggerheads to hold talks for the sake of democracy.

We elaborately and critically reported how the then president Iajuddin Ahmed assumed the office of the caretaker government, ignoring the constitutional provision, on the advice of the BNP, the party that elected him president, and his activities against the then advisers' move to resolve political deadlock.

Had The Daily Star tried to prolong the interim government rule? No.

From the very first day of the caretaker government, we firmly rooted for democracy and election both in

our news and views coverage. The first line of our first editorial, written on January 13, the day after Fakhruddin Ahmed took oath, read, "Nation looks forward to a free and fair election."

In the news, we kept on putting pressure on the interim government for quick election by reporting on its priority -- a free and fair election. We continuously reported on the progress in preparation of a fresh voter list to get rid of about 1.3 crore fake voters and also on electoral reforms, and whenever it lagged behind, we raised concern in our reports.

When a quarter, led by errant intelligence officials within the caretaker government, was busy forming King's Party in order to replace the existing political parties and leaderships with new ones, we exposed those moves to the public. We also critically reported on the same group's move to split political parties in the name of intra-party reforms. In our reports, we spoke in favour of lifting ban on indoor politics, allowing political parties to resume their activities.

In our editorials, we continuously hammered on the importance of holding free election for returning to democracy. Star published 203 editorials during the emergency caretaker government rule, which is one editorial every third day, demanding repeatedly the earliest restoration of democracy and handover of power to elected representatives after a "free and fair election."

One of the beauties of the print media is that everything is printed and on record forever. In the context of the ongoing controversy, we think we owe it to our readers to explain how their newspaper covered the events.

We invite our critics to examine our record and leave it to our readers to judge the newspaper that they support.

Gen Moeen goes public on politics

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question in the public mind acquires more poignancy. So what do we make of the General's speech? Was it a mere intellectual exercise? Or a purposeful floating of ideas to gauge public reaction? On both counts there should be wide ranging discussions, in fact public debate, on the very important questions that he has thrown open.

As to the timing, we feel that such a policy speech on the future direction of the country, its politics, its government, its political parties and several vital related issues should have come, as a part of the reform agenda, from the head of the caretaker government which is being ably backed by the armed forces. Coming from the head of the army, it has given rise to the question as to whether there are differences of views between the government and its most important backer. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Chief Adviser was away attending his first summit as the head of the government when the speech was made. Imagine his discomfiture when such a fundamental policy speech is made about the future structure of the government without him being anywhere near the picture. How much credibility is he likely to enjoy under these circumstances? How seriously will the world leaders and global media take him from now on?

So far the armed forces had done very well in remaining behind the scene. Now that has changed. The CAS' speech told the nation, as well as the world, as to who really is running the show. Does this coming out into the open serve the interest of the nation and that of the armed forces? From now on the full responsibility for all

political decisions, both good and bad, will automatically fall on the armed forces. They are now out in the open with all the attendant vulnerabilities.

On the questions of the CAS' idea of "having our own brand of democracy" we want to point out that our first brush with a General in politics was with Ayub Khan back in 1958 and he wanted to "reinvent democracy according to the genius of the people" and we ended up having "basic democracy" that was thoroughly rejected by our people, though it took a while. Much later in Pakistan came Gen Ziaul Huq who also wanted to redefine democracy. His was quite a clever ploy and very original. In order to deprive the Pakistanis of exercising their right to elect a government Zia said "I cannot accept democracy where sovereignty belongs to the people. In my book sovereignty only belongs to Allah". So Ziaul Huq ran Pakistan under his personal fiat, as accepting the sovereignty of the people was against his belief. Ask any Pakistani for the great and irreparable damage he had caused to their country.

In independent Bangladesh, the first unfortunate entry of military into politics was the dastardly murder of Bangabandhu along with his family (save two daughters) by a section of army officers and troops. This was followed by the killing of four national leaders in the jail, coming of power of Gen Ziaur Rahman, his shameful act of indemnifying Bangabandhu's killers and the subsequent tragedy of his killing by another section of the armed forces. None of these brought any credit to our army and contributed in making

them more and more controversial and their intervention into politics hated by the people in general.

We all remember Gen Ershad whose own version of "democracy" gave corruption for the first time its massive and destructive character. He was truly the father of mass corruption from the curse of which we have never recovered.

Tragically, our elected leaders instead of stemming the rot only expedited it further until it became so very unbearable that we had to have emergency to save us from it.

It took our armed forces 16 years (1991-2007) to recover from the ignominy that Gen Ershad had brought upon them. It is to their tremendous credit that through sheer professionalism, dedication, discipline and, most importantly, staying out of politics that our Armed Forces regained their reputation and the place in the hearts of our people. Their ever readiness to help during natural disasters and their services to humanity through international peacekeeping have earned them pride of place in the global community and as well in our midst. Public respect for them got further consolidated when in 1996 the armed forces collectively fought back their own members in an attempt to capture political power.

So what is the collective experience of military interventions in politics globally, in South Asia and in Bangladesh? There are some definite short-term gains but in the long run they never work. As we see here the emergency has done wonders like arresting those in business who thought they were above the law, forc-

ing necessary changes in the system that had been usurped by vested interest, catching well known criminals, etc. Emergency cannot last for long, nor can army's intervention.

It has been shown time and again that the only durable solution to political crisis is political reform and subsequent return of power to elected leaders. There is just no other way. As it is said, the only method to cure flaws in democracy is to have more of it, so also the best way to have good politics is to have pro-people political reforms and their quick implementation followed by election to restore representative government. This is the only route to durable solution. Everything else is short-term and any attempt to prolong it is fraught with danger.

The fundamental truth for us is that we need political reforms so that democracy can be practised as it was meant to be. We need, in Lincoln's words, a "Government of the People, By the People and For the People". Such a government can only come from a truly free and fair election devoid of intimidation, black money and muscle power. That is what the emergency came for and that is what the emergency should stick to. As the CAS knows so very well that the best guarantor of success of any military mission is to keep its objective focused. Any widening of the objectives brings into the picture unknown factors and hidden enemies that jeopardize the whole operation.

Translated into the present scene, the objective of the emergency should be its original focus to hold a free and fair election within the shortest possible time so that true leaders of the people can run

the country. The objective also was to cleanse our politics of the criminals and the corrupt and bring about fundamental political and electoral reforms.

There exists an unwritten consensus on the above reform agenda. The emergency and the armed forces behind it enjoy public support simply because people see them as a force for good, implementing the reform agenda. Any deviation from it, and widening of objectives or changing of direction will cause an immediate evaporation of public support. This may dismantle the present edifice causing immense damage to our prospect of a better future. We have missed so many opportunities to change our course for progress. We cannot afford another one.

Simply put, we strongly feel our armed forces should not involve themselves in politics. They have a mission behind which there is popular support, which they should accomplish and return to their barracks. This will tremendously enhance their moral standing and bring them far greater dividend in terms of love and respect of the general people, which is the greatest gift for any patriotic army. And ours is such an army.

In the past both the political parties and their sycophants saw our critical views as antagonistic ones. As a result, arguments made out of genuine effort to help were taken as attempts to weaken, to damage or even to destroy them. So instead of examining what we said, we were harassed for having said them. Given the professionalism, the high level of education and global exposure of our armed forces and especially of their leaders, we hope our sincere attempt to help will be seen as such.