

THE FOG OF WAR

Misuse of media as a propaganda machine



ADNAN R AMIN

THE MIDDLE PATH
2005: the War on Terror was in its third year. Hundreds of tonnes of explosives had pummeled Iraq and Afghanistan, and thousands more were in the pipeline. The war machine was flexing hard. TV screens and newspaper headlines

were awash with violent and gory images, accompanied by stories of dubious advances and niche victories. With every passing day, the pseudo-theory of clash of civilisations seemed more and more probable.

However, as the shelling grew heavier, the premises of the wars seemed flimsier. The much-hyped 'last stronghold of Al Qaeda' and 'impregnable cave fortress' of Tora Bora, Afghanistan – shelled and bombed to dust – had turned out to consist of some small, natural caves. Western media had widely reported that Tora Bora housed hydroelectric power plants, armouries, hotels and intricate tunnels among other things. Many newspapers had even published detailed layouts. But once captured, the site revealed only small caves supported by wooden beams and some boxes of ammunitions.

Stories coming out of Iraq were even more bizarre. Saddam's supposed 'Weapon of Mass Destruction' (WMD) was looking like pretext for a unilateral invasion. The Chilcot Report (2006) revealed the quality of intel used to prop up the WMD theory. MI6's prime informant had reported that chemical weapons and nerve agents were being produced and loaded into 'linked hollow glass spheres'. However, investigators soon realised that this unidentified 'informant' may have taken inspiration from the 1996 action movie *The Rock*, starring Nicholas Cage and Sean Connery. Sadly, the cinematic depiction was inaccurate, since such containers were not used for chemical munitions.

With the disastrous deBaathification, immense loss of civilian lives and a legacy of inhumane abuse and torture at Abu Ghraib, it is no surprise that public opinion began to quickly change in the USA, less than five



years after the 9/11 attacks. By 2005-06, Americans who thought the Iraq War was justified – dropped from nearly 75 percent to 47 percent (PEW research). The administration needed to better make their case, better rally citizens in favour of the wars.

In 2005, President Bush Jr. went to the length of making messianic claims, to rationalise the extravagant wars. He explained, "God would tell me, 'George go and fight these terrorists in Afghanistan'. And I did. And then God would tell me 'George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq'. And I did." (*Guardian*, October 07, 2005). During this time the Pentagon decided that they needed human intervention; they decided to produce 'fake terrorist videos', to keep the threat, the

fear and the fight alive. British non-profit watchdog The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) recently broke the story: British PR firm Bell Pottinger was paid nearly USD 650 million to produce "short TV segments made in the style of Arabic news networks and fake insurgent videos." Former Bell Pottinger video-editor Martin Wells spoke of producing white (attributed), grey (unattributed) and black (misattributed) media contents.

For example, Wells says that his team would be sent to collect low-resolution, amateur footage of bombings, which they would then edit into an Arabic-news like segment. After being dubbed in Arabic, the video segments would be sent to TV stations for circulation. If

we consider how common it has become for Western media outlets to use footage from Middle Eastern channels and streaming sites, there is no assurance that these commissioned 'news segments' did not end up on CNN or similar news channels. After all, US military involvement with production of these segments would often be kept secret.

Wells also confirmed that they had produced propaganda videos and claimed they had been made by Al Qaeda. It is not clear how, and how wide, these fake videos were circulated. According to Wells, US marines would drop off CDs (with IP-tracking mechanisms) at raided terrorist dens. Then they would track IP addresses. Now, two points can be raised here: firstly, once

dropped off, the Pentagon would not have control over the fake videos. Even if a segment surfaced on regional news channels, the Pentagon had no motivation or means to claim authorship.

Secondly, in the same report, Bell Pottinger claims to have spent most funds on production and distribution of media content. It seems unlikely that dropping off CDs could rake up a million-dollar bill. Rather, airing or placement costs seem more likely. And this wouldn't be unprecedented. In 2005, Lincoln Group – another PR firm engaged by the Pentagon – was caught secretly making payments to place propaganda articles in Iraqi newspapers. In that case too, the content-source was concealed. Following a leak, the whole episode resulted in a congressional hearing.

Bell Pottinger's track record of navigating legal and moral grey zones creates a further sense of discomfort. Previously, the firm has represented authoritarian regimes from the UK, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Bahrain, Egypt and Sri Lanka. It has bragged about possessing the capacity to alter online search results, change Wikipedia entries and perform "all sorts of dark arts."

Bell Pottinger chairman Lord Tim Bell once said, "We tell stories – I don't mean lies. We work for people who want to tell their side of the story." But his firm has seemingly taken to telling all sides of the story – to producing a complete political narrative for global consumption.

Now, most of us will agree that communications/propaganda is vital for rallying public opinion during conflicts. Regardless of military might, all armies must be able to communicate their moral stance and rationalise their actions (for example, "to free the people of X", "to take plutocracy to Y", "to reclaim Z's homeland" etc.). And it is not the fence-straddling tactic that warrants reflection. But the magnitude of operations and implication of contents in this particular case should raise some questions: why weren't real Al Qaeda videos used? Who profited by magnifying the threat of Al Qaeda? More importantly, when paid professionals write both sides of the story, where do psy-ops end and socio-political narratives begin?

The writer is a strategy and communications specialist.

Fighting food insecurity and undernutrition in urban slums

Facing unprecedented urbanisation, Bangladesh must empower slum dwellers, particularly women, to put nutritious food on the table – or its economy will pay the price.

CHRISTA RÄDER

As anyone trying to negotiate afternoon traffic in Dhaka can attest only too well, Bangladesh's cities are growing quickly and wildly. If the current trend continues, the number of urban residents will be more than double over the next 25 years, and there will be more people living in cities than in villages by 2040.

Urbanisation will no doubt further contribute to Bangladesh's impressive economic progress and propel millions more out of poverty. That's the good news.

But the mass migration from village to city is also bringing new concerns that reach far beyond rush-hour traffic. How will all these people get nutritious food to eat? And what about the slums, where six out of ten city dwellers actually live? This is the highest proportion in South Asia, and it's where most newcomers and the poorest people live.

It's clear that this scenario will carry significant challenges – but little has been known about the unique situation in the poorest parts of Bangladesh's cities.

That is why the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP)

collected data on food security and nutrition in 2013 in the slums of Dhaka, Barisal and Sirajganj. The results, presented earlier this year, bring new, detailed insights into those dynamics.

The study reveals that the nutrition status of young children is far worse in urban slums than in other urban or rural parts of the country. An alarming 44 percent of urban slum children experience stunted growth and nearly one in five (16 percent) are too thin for their height.

Two out of five people in Dhaka slums are severely or moderately food insecure – which is not much worse than in other parts of Bangladesh. There is a paradox, though: although there is a wide range of food available to buy in the slums, and slum dwellers have similar incomes as people in other parts of Bangladesh, this does not translate to better nutritional outcomes. The critical issue still to be understood is how much of expensive, nutrient-dense foodstuff the slum-dwellers actually eat or can afford.

The report shows distinct problems for women living in urban slums. Those living in the poorest slum households are nearly twice as likely to be unhealthy thin than

those in best-off slum households. Further, a worrying picture emerges for teenage girls aged 14-19 years, among whom about two in five (41 percent) are too thin for their height, compared to 20 percent of all women of childbearing age in urban slums.

None of this is particularly surprising – but the detailed information from the study should help policy makers fine-tune their efforts in addressing these issues. This is significant not just for the individuals affected, but for the country as a whole. Undernutrition carries significant consequences also for the economy and health systems, costing Bangladesh an estimated USD 1 billion annually in lost productivity.

So how to focus our efforts better to tackle this crucial issue?

First, by extending social safety nets to urban slums. Bangladesh has substantial and laudable social protection systems, but the urban slums are poorly covered.

The government may consider including women and children in its emerging core programmes. Experience in northern Bangladesh has shown that giving cash, along with nutrition training, to poor women with young children can have

a great impact on child stunting. Empowering women really is one of the most effective ways to improve household food security and nutrition.

Second, as the government aspires to bring all 20 million primary school students into its school feeding programme by 2030, it may need to prioritise the high numbers of undernourished children in urban slums.

Granted, a daily snack or meal cannot reverse the damage done by

nutritional deprivation in the earliest years of life, but it mitigates chronic hunger and helps children focus on their studies rather than their growling stomachs. Improved education for the present generation will greatly increase the chance of better nutritional outcomes for future generations.

Third, unequal pay and poor support structures for young women, who are increasingly driving the economic engines in cities, have a negative impact on food security and

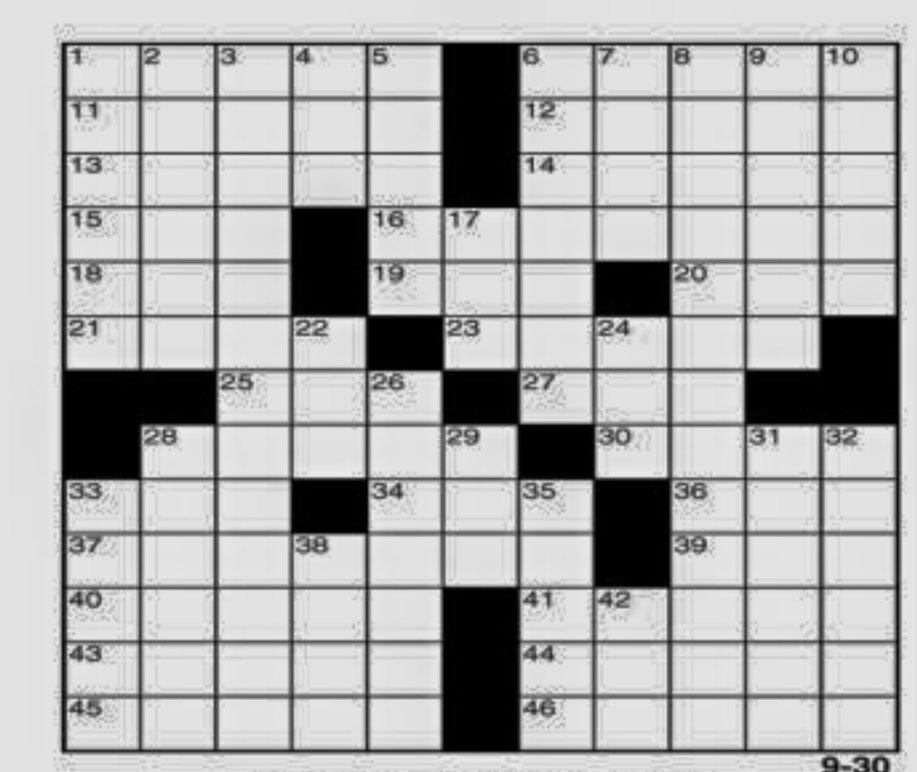
nutrition conditions. Enabling women also in this regard will benefit everyone.

Now is the time to take up the new challenge of food insecurity and undernutrition in urban slums. This will benefit the whole of the economy and society, and move Bangladesh along on its journey to fulfilling the national vision of becoming an inclusive upper-middle-income country by 2021.

The writer is WFP representative in Bangladesh.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Richmond's river
 - 6 Fires
 - 11 Find charming
 - 12 Texas city
 - 13 Make butter
 - 14 "Iliad" author
 - 15 Writer Follett
 - 16 Church topper
 - 18 Gallery fill
 - 19 Anvil's place
 - 20 Capp and Pacino
 - 21 Spring
 - 23 TV's Philbin
 - 25 Descartes' conclusion
 - 27 Decline
 - 28 Like some beer
 - 30 Unseen problem
 - 33 Fitting
 - 34 Uno doubled
 - 36 Damb-building org.
 - 37 Roofed porch
 - 39 Game caller
 - 40 Have -- to grind
 - 41 Happy, e.g.
 - 43 Messy places
- DOWN**
- 1 Wolf's cousin
 - 2 Stick
 - 3 Hiking path
 - 4 Go astray
 - 5 Intuit
 - 6 Globes
 - 7 Soothing plant
 - 8 Pol's place
 - 9 Rings
 - 10 Tender areas
 - 17 Pitch's kin
 - 22 Contrived
 - 24 Balloon contents
 - 26 Folly
 - 28 Willing to try
 - 29 Seed holder
 - 31 Disinclined
 - 32 Set electrician
 - 33 "Halt!" from a salt
 - 35 Egypt's Anwar
 - 38 Skating jump
 - 42 Twisted



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

L I M B P O P P A
 O D O R P I P E U P
 S O L E A V E N G E
 E L E V A T O R
 I M I T A T O R
 T A T T O O H O E
 O K A Y S B L A Z E
 M I X S L A T E D
 A N I M A T O R
 E D U C A T O R
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