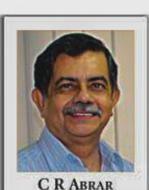


MONITORING JOURNALISTS ABROAD

# Decision, Revision and Reactions



C R ABRAR

**L**AST Wednesday (May 17, 2017), the Foreign Ministry came up with a draconian directive to Bangladesh missions. It urged all Bangladesh missions abroad to monitor the activities of Bangladeshi journalists abroad. "If anybody's involvement is found against the interest and image of the country, s/he must be identified and their negative activities must be reported back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately" the directive noted. The heads of missions were advised to take up the matter "seriously".

On Thursday, while assuring journalists that they would face no obstacle during their travel abroad and performing professional duties, the Minister for Foreign Affairs argued that it was "necessary" to monitor if anybody was doing anything while travelling abroad that went against "the country's image and interest". He went on to say that such monitoring was necessary not only for journalists but "for all citizens". The minister underscored that "interest of the country" was the paramount consideration.

The government decision raised deep concern in various quarters, nationally and internationally. On

Friday (May 19, 2017), the foreign ministry withdrew the directive and conveyed the revised decision to all heads of missions abroad. A diplomat quoted by a wire agency noted, "It has been decided to withdraw the letter under reference with immediate effect as it was not appropriately coordinated". Thus, lack of coordination was assigned to be the principal reason for retraction of the earlier order. Interestingly, this time the ministry refrained from issuing any media statement in Dhaka, although its earlier decision (taken on May 17) was released to the local media. In the latter, the ministry clarified that the decision was taken on the recommendation of the parliamentary standing committee (PSC) on foreign affairs.

The PSC, at its meeting on April 30, "expressed its concern over the 'harmful activities' of some Bangladeshi journalists abroad which send out wrong information on Bangladesh to the international arena", and viewed that "any Bangladeshi journalist travelling should be monitored and accordingly will have to be reported back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ascertain whether their activities are against the interest of the country".

The turnaround in the decision to monitor journalists abroad is a welcome move. However, the matter raises some important questions. It also discloses the perception of the



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ruling elite about the role of journalists and the state of freedom of expression in the country. The foreign ministry cited the PSC's recommendation as the basis

for issuance of the original directive. This leads to a sub-set of questions. Why was the ministry in haste to implement the decision of the PSC? After all, a plethora of the PSC

recommendations remain unattended for years, and the recommendations are not mandatory to implement. Did not such an important matter merit consultation with other ministries, such as information and law, let alone with journalists' platforms? If the PSC recommendation prompted the ministry to issue the notification, then has the PSC revoked its recommendation of April 30? While withdrawing the directive, the ministry stated that it was doing so as the May 17 directive was not "appropriately coordinated". Doesn't that leave the option open for instituting such monitoring once the appropriate coordination is worked out?

The botched monitoring saga begs the question as to what the members of the PSC meant by 'harmful activities'. It is also fair to ask, what did they mean by the 'interest of the country'? It will also help if PSC members rise up to the challenge that a commentator of a leading Bangla daily posed: "to provide example of any country which monitors movements of its journalists abroad" other than authoritarian regimes such as that of North Korea.

In a polity that is sharply divided along partisan lines, it is not surprising that the reaction to the May 17 directive of the foreign office among the mainstream journalist community was muted. In his reaction, the president of

pro-government Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) expressed hope that the directive would be withdrawn and if that did not happen then "we will issue our formal reaction in the next few days". The General Secretary of Dhaka Union of Journalists appeared to have endorsed the government move when he stated that if a journalist or a group was engaged in a campaign 'against the development, interest and image of the country' then steps could be taken. In contrast, the Dhaka Reporters Unity was unequivocal in its condemnation of the directive, terming it "insulting for the entire journalist community". It viewed the government move as hindrance to "freedom of expression and freedom of movement".

Unlike the BFUJ, the Washington DC-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) was quick to raise the demand for immediate and public rescinding of the foreign office directive. The CPJ noted "the directive turned Bangladeshi diplomats to media spies".

The PSC-prompted foreign office directive has exposed their disdain of the free media. Although at the end good sense prevailed, the monitoring question has laid bare the thin line that journalists have to tread in this country and the fissures that exist in the fraternity.

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## INTERNATIONAL FISTULA DAY 2017

# Hope, healing and dignity for all

SHEIKH NAZMUL HUDA and DESDEMONA KHAN

**F**EMALE genital fistula is an important health concern for women in about fifty Asian and African nations. As the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates, in today's world some 10 to 20 million women are living with genital fistula. It is estimated that some 50,000 to 100,000 new cases are being added to this figure every year.

May 23 has been declared the International Day to End Obstetric Fistula by the United Nations, with this year's theme being "hope, healing and dignity for all."

Bangladesh, like other South Asian and African nations, is celebrating the day in a befitting manner.

In Bangladesh there are uncertainties about the exact number of fistula cases. According to a survey carried out in 2003, done by 'EngenderHealth' and UNFPA, approximately 71,000 women were suffering from fistula-like symptoms at the time. In our experience, approximately 2,000 new cases per year are added to this number. About 900 to 1,100 cases of female genital fistula are treated by different hospitals at the present moment. We suspect that a similar number of such patients are shunning treatment even today. Thus it is fair to estimate that a large number of women are living with fistula in Bangladesh, taking the treated and the untreated together.

Female genital fistula is a devastating condition for women, characterised by continuous leaking of urine or stool or both through the vagina. It happens when in course of delivery a baby's head remains stuck in the birth canal for long hours (i.e. for longer than twelve hours). As a result, the vagina wall is destroyed in places and abnormal holes develop which connect the vagina with

bladder, urethra and/or rectum. If the vagina gets connected with the urinary system (urethra, bladder or ureter) through abnormal holes, there will be continuous leaking of urine through the birth canal. If it gets connected with the rectum, then stool will be leaking through the same route.

further marginalised in society. Obstetric fistula had been eliminated from North America many years ago; in fact long before the discovery of antibiotics and modern contraceptive procedures. But it still prevails in many developing countries and in unacceptably high rates.

contribute to many health risks for women, including the increasing risk of fistula.

There is, however, a silver lining. Devastating obstetric morbidity, which still reigns supreme in poor developing nations even today, is largely preventable. If care is sought at the right time in case of obstetric labour, or if the woman is taken to a hospital during delivery where adequate obstetric care is available, there is a strong likelihood that fistula will not develop. Approximately five percent of all deliveries end up in obstructed labour, which happens to be the cause of eight percent of maternal deaths in today's Bangladesh. Prevention (or serious control) of early marriage is also an important way to prevent fistula for the population at large. Birth control measures, in case of unfortunate early marriages, could also help to prevent unwanted pregnancy before the appropriate age.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is working in partnership

with both international and local allies for the prevention and care of fistula in Bangladesh. The USAID, through its 'Fistula Care Plus' project with EngenderHealth, and the UNFPA are supporting leading public and private hospitals to conduct free fistula surgeries. The National Fistula Center at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital and the University Fistula Center at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University are two key institutions where quality fistula care is available free of charge. Travelling and subsistence expenses of patients and their companion(s) are also provided by the hospital authorities.

To make matters easier for fistula patients, we would like to mention that apart from these two institutions, free fistula repair surgery is also available at Ad-din Hospital, Moghbazar, Dhaka; Hope Foundation Hospital, Cox's Bazar; Kumudini Hospital, Mirzapore, Tangail; LAMB Hospital, Parbatipur, Dinajpur; Mamms Institute of Fistula and Women Health, Eskaton, Dhaka; and Dr. Muttalib Community

Hospital, Bijoynagar, Dhaka. These hospitals also help in social rehabilitation of the women treated there by providing skill training and self-employment support.

In honour of the International Fistula Day, we want hope to prevail and allow everyone to have a fair chance for healing from this disease. All fistula victims, irrespective of the state of their ailment, should be guaranteed the human dignity they deserve. If fistula can be healed (it is possible to heal), let it be healed. Let women of all classes and of all sections have right access to safe motherhood services and fistula care without hassle. We need to let the word out that women with fistula, have a right to treatment, in an equal and respectful manner. Our collective support for a better life for fistula patients will help make having an international day in its name worth the effort.

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PAINTING: JAMINI ROY

A woman who suffers from fistula leads a very miserable life. Very often they have to deal with a foul odour coming from their body. They cannot sleep well because their bed gets soaked. They lose self-confidence. Very often, they are isolated from the community, shunned by the family, are divorced by their spouses and become

Fistula victims usually come from the very poor section of society, or one should say the 'ultra-poor'. Poorer families can hardly afford treatment or a safe delivery service during pregnancy, even when the baby gets obstructed in the birth canal for hours. Poverty, as is well-known, has many faces. Early marriage and malnutrition

### QUOTABLE Quote



JULIAN ASSANGE AUSTRALIAN COMPUTER PROGRAMMER AND FOUNDER OF WIKILEAKS

Only revealed injustice can be answered; for man to do anything intelligent he has to know what's actually going on.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 URL part
  - 6 Detest
  - 11 Cellist Casals
  - 12 Annoyance
  - 13 Tea-growing region
  - 14 Does KP work
  - 15 Finished
  - 17 Let off steam
  - 18 Cruise stop
  - 20 Big galoots
  - 22 Baseball's Gehrig
  - 23 Gleeful laugh
  - 26 State game
  - 28 "Nonsense!"
  - 29 Like the QR
  - 31 Eden evictee
  - 32 Soccer's "Black Pearl"
- DOWN**
- 1 Relaxing spot
  - 2 -- Palmas
  - 3 Useful musical ability
  - 4 Spartacus, e.g.
  - 5 Residence
  - 6 Phone download
  - 7 Dam builders
  - 8 Words before
  - 9 Roasting spot
  - 10 Take 10
  - 16 Fan's cry
  - 18 Miseries
  - 19 Flue filth
  - 21 Vatican VIP
  - 23 Spring shape
  - 24 Wash
  - 25 Lambs' moms
  - 27 Cloying sentiment
  - 30 Guitarist Paul
  - 33 Ninny
  - 34 For two, in music
  - 35 Litter's littlest
  - 37 Ibsen's home
  - 39 That lass
  - 41 Luau strings
  - 42 For each



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

L A I R L O P I N G  
 U L N A U N I Q U E  
 T I C S S E E S T O  
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 R A D F R I S K  
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