

ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN A NATIONAL CRISIS

By Bradman Weerakoon

One of Sri Lanka's most distinguished civil servants, Mr. Weerakoon has served as Secretary to six Prime Ministers. Currently Presidential Advisor on International Affairs, he is also the secretary of the All Parties Conference and a member of the newly formed Human Rights Task Force.

We have in the past few years as a nation had to deal with two unprecedented crises – anti-systemic in their nature, sometimes inter-locking in their implications, which have had critical and far-reaching consequences for our country. One crisis which is now virtually over was the insurgency of the JVP. A national crisis by definition would be a set of socio-economic-political circumstances which pose a serious threat to the survival of the State and society. I believe the characterisation of what the country went through in 1988 and 1989 as a national crisis is not unwarranted. It was in a sense the classic national crisis, since it threatened the freedom of the national polity, the economy and society. It was total in its opposition to all of the institutions – Parliament, the Courts, the Administration and the Press itself – which are the accepted foundations of a democratic State.

The other crisis we faced, and are facing, is the ongoing conflict in the North and East with the LTTE. The intensity, the pervasiveness and the duration of the conflict, coupled with the fact that it threatens the integrity and unity of the Nation State, clearly makes it a major national crisis. As a matter of fact, some commentators recognizing the endemic nature of the problem, of which the present phase of terroristic conflict is an extreme manifestation, have sometimes termed it the national question.

The role the Media of Sri Lanka has played and is playing in reporting these national crises, will surely recur in your deliberations and provide important case material for the Seminar's conclusions

and the guidelines which you propose to formulate for Media professionals in reporting a national crisis.

I merely wish to take this opportunity to flag a few concerns which any assessment of the role of the Media in dealing with a national crisis must contend with.

* The first is the question of definition. What kind of crisis are we talking about and when do you expect from the Media professional behaviour which is different from that you would expect from the Media in normal times? Given that something special is expected of a responsible Media at a national crisis, what do we, the public, the Government, the Opposition, expect from the Media in normal times? Very shortly and inadequately, I might say that it includes

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the right to be informed clearly and accurately, and if possible, educated as well – not in a patronising way, but in the sense of being assisted to think and to make up one's mind on the issues raised through Media reporting. At this point, it might be tempting to argue that there are in fact in today's turbulent and inter-dependent world, no normal times, some would say that one moves from crisis – some man made, some natural, some internal, some external, some acute and shortlived, some chronic and long-termed. What about economic crises, the gun culture and pervasive poverty? Are they not national crises and should not

the media response to these conditions be also looked at?

* The second concern would I suppose, relate to the structure of the Media in any country, in terms of the Media's relationships with the State. Here the meaningful questions would include the degree of Government control and how much of the Media is independent in a formal sense of the Government. I believe it will be true to say that in many of the countries in our Region, the Electronic Media, that is the Radio and the Television are usually handled through Government Corporations. The day to day running would be in the hands of Boards of Directors, usually multi-disciplinary, but finally appointed and accountable to a Minister to the Government. As for the Print Media, the picture is different and in many of our countries, the Press would be largely independent of the Government in terms of ownership. Of course, as is well known, indirect control could be effected through the granting or withholding of Government advertisements and the supply of newsprint, which itself is often a Government activity. The relevance of the structure of the Media to our discussion is fairly obvious in that to the extent that a particular part of the Media can be

directly influenced by the State than to that extent responsibility for the role too becomes that of the Government.

* The third set of concerns relate to what must be the heart of your present discussion. That is the responsibility of the Media for reporting and dealing with the issues involved when the nation State is at war, either externally or internally. I make bold to say that it is such a national crisis where the State is at war internally against a group or groups of its own citizens that raise the most profound and complicated problems – moral, ethical, technical, and so on, to Media professionals. That is why the Sri

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Lankan experience could provide you with very relevant and illuminating material.

* Such dilemmas, both for Government authorities and for Media personnel have been confronted by many countries in war-time situations. Restraints on the freedom of the Press and Media, especially against violation of the official Secrecy Act, incitement to violence, the spread of rumours, and so on, have been held to be warranted in the greater interests of the security of the State by most democratic Governments around the world. We have examples of such curbs on Press freedom as in the US, in the invasion of Granada and in the Gulf war, and in the UK, during the Falklands war.

may well take us down the wrong path. Having been privy to decision making at high levels of Government, I have not the slightest doubt that full and complete knowledge is what top leadership hopes for in order to make the correct policy decisions.

The problem of credible information is further compounded by the advances in information technology which have made our age, at least in a media sense, an age of transparency. Two factors, modern technology and the ubiquitous foreign correspondent, I believe, have made a difference. Through the communication satellite, the optic fibres, the video, the facsimile and the international computer networks, the mass media has been made a more powerful factor

ing the economy and society. Over the last 3 months the All Party Conference, consisting of twenty of the twenty-eight registered parties in the country, has been engaged in the discussion of the Media Commission Bill, a piece of legislation whose primary objective is the Liberalisation of the Media, both Print and Electronic. It has several objectives. But if I were to quote you only a few, I think you will appreciate the profound nature of the task we are undertaking. The objectives of the Media Commission include—

- * the ensuring of the freedom and independence of the Media – Print and Electronic in Sri Lanka.

- * to safeguard the citizens right to be informed freely, truthfully and objectively on all matters of public interest, national, regional and international and to ensuring a balanced and free presentation of views on questions of public importance,

- * to ensure the strengthening of national unity, ethnic harmony and multiculturalism and promote tolerance and pluralism and the elimination of discrimination and prejudice based on ethnicity, language, religion, etc.

The Media Commission has also the object of—

- * ensuring the maintenance of high standards of journalistic ethics and to improve methods of recruitment, education, welfare and training of Journalists.

A new deal both for Journalists and for the Media.

As for myself, I believe that the best service which the Media can provide to a country in a time of crisis is to follow the advice John Delane, the Editor of the Times gave to his reporters during the reign of Queen Victoria almost one hundred and fifty years ago. When one of his men from the front, concerned with the sacrifices, the waste and the blunders of the Crimean war inquired whether, "he was to tell these things or hold his tongue" John Delane responded, "continue as you have done to tell the truth and as much of it as you can."

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In addition to restraints by the political authority, attention has been recently focussed on the internal constraints of self-imposed censorship which a national crisis seems to spontaneously nurture. John Pilger, a reputed media person many of you must know of, makes a telling point about the eclipse of objectivity in war-time situations in even such a venerated institution as the BBC. He quotes the minutes of a BBC Weekly Review Board Meeting which shows that during the Falklands war, the BBC had decided that its reporting of the war was to be shaped to suit, "the emotional sensibilities" of the public and the impartiality was felt to be "an unnecessary irritation."

It is not unreasonable to assume that similar attitudes pervade editorial policy making in our part of the world as well and exert some subtle pressures which make the reporting of events less accurate and objective than they would otherwise be. If this be indeed so, what moral and ethical dilemmas does this raise for media reporting in a state of war. While knowing the truth, however unpleasant and disagreeable it may be might enlarge one's options and the range of choices, ignorance of the truth

today than any other in determining the level and intensity of social consciousness on any issue. The foreign correspondent through his relative immunity to local pressure and his access to international networks contribute to the generation if not of a more balanced picture, at least another point of view. So information provided in one nation's press or broadcasting network has to take account of what the outside world may be saying. Perhaps it may be true to say that the need for transparency exerts its own subtle but formidable pressure in inducing the national media to move towards greater accuracy and objectivity in its own reporting.

I have attempted to touch very superficially the surface of the fascinating areas you will be probing in depth in the next three days. These personal thoughts reflect the concerns we have gathered in the recent ongoing discussions on the Liberalisation of the Media on which the Sri Lanka Government is launched. The decision to move in that direction is in line with the Government's broad philosophy of openness, of consultation, participation and striving for consensus. It is part of the ongoing process of dismantling controls and free-