

The banalities in journalism ✓

By Eqbal Ahmad

ON THE darkish horizon of Pakistan's political life the Press often appears as drawing a silver line. When someone tries to inject a positive note on the state of the nation, the Press is invariably mentioned. The refrain goes something like 'we have never before had such lively and free Press.'

Nods of agreement follow occasionally with caveats like 'yes but the Urdu Press...' The consensus reflects the Pakistani Press's considerable achievement in the last seven years but it also ignores its many failings. In effect, the absence in any newspaper of an ombudsman, and lack of a tradition of media criticism deprives the Pakistani Press of a mechanism for correction and reform.

The dailies' greatest failing is the excessive amounts of prime space they devote to printing non-news. Newspapers are so called because their trade is to print the news, commentaries and opinion related to news, and features intended to serve the public interest. Advertisements are published both to yield income and to apprise the public of the availability of jobs, goods, services, etc. In addition some extraneous or eccentric matters do make their way into newspapers the world over. But only in dictatorships, where the state controls the Press, as much attention is accorded to official banalities as it is in Pakistan today. In most of our English language dailies they occupy somewhere between a quarter to a third of news space. A few examples from just five days follow:

"Violence to End Soon: PM", read a head-line on September 20, 1995. There were numerous other occasions on which the PM had made a similar declaration; all were accorded multi-column headlines. Like its many predecessors this was vacuous statement dislodged from history, unrelated to policy. As such, it was as newsworthy an event as "Dog Bites Man", the stock example of non-news usually offered to first-year journalism students. One may argue in this instance that the prime minister's words are newsworthy regardless of their content. But on the same day General Naseerullah Khan Babar also caught a head-line: "Government committed to banishing drug abuse." Is there a government anywhere that is not similarly committed?

Properly speaking, General Babar would have merited a head-line if he had declared his government as being committed, to pro-

attempts to compel the Press to conform. In punishment for a critical article or editorial, government and semi-government agencies may cancel thousands of a journal's subscription. Government advertisement, a major source of Press revenue in Pakistan, is also used to manipulate editorial and news policy. Above all, the sword of taxation damocles hangs over publishers, a truly ironic instrument of harassment in tax-evading hands.

Apart from salaried employees, less than two dozen persons are reported to be paying taxes honestly in Pakistan. Not one of the upright taxpayer is a politician. Yet tax laws and departments are misused by parliamentary governments to punish opponents and critics. In 1992, I witnessed the terror and anxiety which a publisher suffered as the income tax department hounded him, clearly in behalf of the parliamentary government. When he agreed to soften his criticism the tax issue evaporated. (In the last two years the same method has been deployed, albeit more mercilessly, against Mr Nawaz Sharif and his family). Where there are punishments there are also rewards. Many publishers fear the punishment and relish the rewards, which may be a reason why they are averse to separating the roles of publisher and editor.

There must be a limit then on paring down the spaces occupied by the banal statements of our rulers. This limit ought to be tested, and the liberated space be used to better purposes. There is need for more and better reporting from the districts and rural areas where Pakistan's majority resides. There is news out there of great import and significance to our future. There are ghost schools and illiterate teachers, hospitals without doctors and clinics without medicines. There is cruel and punishing alliance of landlords and bureaucrats, and violence of the strong against the weak, especially women. Then occasionally you find

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ment as being committed, to promoting drug abuse. That would be a political equivalent of 'Man bites dog.' In the following four days I counted, among others, these headlines: September 21: "Azfar asks students to devote to studies". September 22: "Pakistan capable of protecting its frontiers, says Mirani." And on September 25, Ms. Bhutto struck again with — "People to get basic amenities: PM."

What compels our editors to accord the quotidian banalities of our officials the status of news? A stranger to the inner life of publishing in Pakistan has no authentic answer. One has recourse only to speculation. A very bad practice inhibits good journalism in Pakistan, and renders it vulnerable to power and influence. Here, publishers generally assume the title and powers of editors. This practice is frowned upon in democratic

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a headmaster who runs against all odds a first-rate school with dedicated and imaginative teachers and motivated students; a deputy commissioner who serves as a motor of economic and social development; a police officer who upholds the law. Together these and other realities constitute the portrait of a nation which the Press has so far