

When newspapers are targets of terrorism

By Rashed Rahman

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Dawn
Class

The bomb blast in the offices of *Nawa-i-Waqt* and *The Nation* in Karachi on November 6 has succumbed to his injuries. The death of Sajid Mahmood, who suffered 74 per cent burn injuries in the blast, brought the number of fatalities in the incident to four. Two persons, a staffer and a passerby, were injured.

It goes without saying that people of all shades of opinion would condemn this incident involving loss of innocent lives and injury. The reasons for the blast in the offices of a newspaper are intriguing and the stuff of much speculation. What we know so far would suggest that the bomb was carried by the still unidentified woman. The only question that remains to be settled is whether she was a willing suicide bomber or an unwitting collaborator/victim.

If it was the latter, she may have been told that the bomb had a timer, and all she had to do was to leave it there. It may be that the timing device went off accidentally and prematurely. Worse, the people who had sent her on the mission may have kept from her the fact that the bomb could be detonated by remote control. Their motive in setting off the blast to ensure that the carrier was also killed may have been intended to eliminate a possible source of information later for the investigating authorities.

On the other hand, if the incident was a suicide bombing, it would be the first such incident of its kind in Pakistan. This would represent a significant escalation of the stakes, both for the perpetrators as well as their intended victims. A short list of the possible parties or organizations capable of such acts does not appear very long. What would be common to all of them though, would be a conviction that leaves room for fanaticism, to the extent of taking the risk of sacrificing oneself for some perceived greater cause. The mere fact that such suicide missions should now be in evidence on Pakistani soil is a frightening thought.

The target chosen, too, is intriguing. The location of the offices of the *Nawa-i-Waqt* and *The Nation* in Karachi have been the object of such unwanted attention in the past too. One incident a few years ago, the firing of a rocket grenade at the building, was attributed at the time to the MQM. The latter has, however, denied it. The other incident was the setting on fire of the office by an enraged, apparently sectarian mob.

Incidentally, the attack that damaged the offices of the *Business Recorder* was also suspected to be the work of some religious extremists. In none of these blatant attacks on newspaper offices have the perpetrators been brought to justice. The raid by a team of KESC inspectors

But to return to the latest bombing incident, it may be noted that it was after the earlier two incidents, in neither of which, fortunately, were people killed or injured seriously, that the *Nawa-i-Waqt* newspaper group decided to move its editorial and production offices to another location far away from its traditional abode. The attacked office was only functioning as a centre for collecting advertisements.

This was precisely the purpose of her visit stated by the mysterious woman bomber. The bomb went off during a conversation between her and the advertising manager, who was attempting to explain to her the documentary, etc, requirements for placing the advertisement that she purportedly wanted to. This reinforces the two plausible theories of either a deliberate suicide bombing or a detonation set off by remote control from outside, without even the carrier being

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After seeing the pictures of the remains of the woman, the theory of a suicide bombing acquires greater weight, simply because all that remained of her after the blast was an undifferentiated mass of mangled flesh and bone. This sort of effect would suggest that the bomb was indeed strapped around her body. If the bomb had been placed in a bag carried by her or something, perhaps the ripped flesh and bone would have appeared different. Of course we have to wait upon the forensic and bomb disposal experts to determine finally what happened. The only problem is that our forensic and investigative expertise in such matters leaves a great deal to be desired. We neither have the equipment nor the trained personnel to carry out such delicate tasks effectively. The mystery therefore, judging by past performance, may well remain unsolved.

One line of reasoning suggests that the recent campaign by *Nawa-i-Waqt* against Altaf Hussain's pronouncements regarding the two-nation theory, partition and the making of Pakistan, may have brought the wrath of some of his followers upon the paper's head. *Nawa-i-Waqt* is recognized as a paper that does not take kindly to such questioning of the basis of the

MQM cadres are said to have been picked up for questioning in Karachi alone. This kind of heavy-handed conventional police work is unlikely to provide much clue to the source of the bombing. It may, however, inadvertently fuel the MQM's protests against 'victimization'.

The newspaper owners' and editors' bodies have condemned the incident and castigated the government for not providing security despite having been forewarned of the possibility of such incidents, given that the newspaper group had been receiving threatening messages. The APNS, CPNE and the journalists' unions have launched a campaign to protect freedom of the press, seeing the bomb blast as a direct attack on the freedom of expression. So far, so good.

But when we in the press desire this freedom to be defended and maintained, a perfectly honourable demand, we should perhaps also spare a glance for our own track record generally in defending and maintaining these freedoms. The press in Pakistan, let it be stated at the outset, has had to wade through the mire of censorship and lack of freedom for decades. When the relative freedom came, starting in the eighties, it should not have surprised us that some sections of the press sometimes exceeded the limits of good taste or even professional ethics. After all, it was a new-found freedom and an unfamiliar territory. Therefore, they could not be judged too harshly, given the long night of censorship. If sometimes we failed to exercise this freedom with a desired sense of responsibility, it was understandable.

These were transitory teething pains of a press that has by and large acquitted itself well. Maturity will no doubt bring a greater sense of professional responsibility as time goes by. What would help such a process would be a revival of the institution of professional editor. The temptation to don two hats and thereby retain control of both the commercial and editorial side of newspapers has proved far too strong to resist in some older and some new papers that have seen the light of day in recent years. The principle of separation of the two functions, which lies at the heart of freedom of the press, has been practised largely in the breach, one or two honourable exceptions aside. The record of *Dawn* in maintaining this principle speaks for itself.

When the decision to publish hinges on possible commercial advantage or disadvantage, managements of newspapers would have to be very brave to take that risk unless the decision-making was in the hands of a professional editor of integrity. The track record of the press in Pakistan and elsewhere indicates that when a publication disregards immediate commercial advantage or disadvantage for the sake of its responsibility to inform the public's right to know, it comes out on top in the

ing, it would be the first such incident of its kind in Pakistan. This would represent a significant escalation of the stakes, both for the perpetrators as well as their intended victims. A short list of the possible parties or organizations capable of such acts does not appear very long. What would be common to all of them though, would be a conviction that leaves room for fanaticism, to the extent of taking the risk of sacrificing oneself for some perceived greater cause. The mere fact that such suicide missions should now be in evidence on Pakistani soil is a frightening thought.

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Incidentally, the attack that damaged the offices of the *Business Recorder* was also suspected to be the work of some religious extremists. In none of these blatant attacks on newspaper offices have the perpetrators been brought to justice. The raid by a team of KESC inspectors accompanied by armed soldiers on the offices of *Dawn*, ostensibly to check their electricity consumption but which clearly showed intent to intimidate and disrupt the working of the newspaper, should also be taken into account when reviewing the perilous state of security for the independent print media. The record of governments, past and present, in creating an environment that allows freedom of expression and the press to

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The finger of suspicion in that case would obviously veer once again towards the MQM. Interestingly, the MQM was quick to condemn the blast. Sceptics, cynics and critics of the MQM ascribe this quick response to a desire to head off the obvious conclusions in the minds of some people. However, as far as the investigating agencies are

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When the decision to publish hinges on possible commercial advantage or disadvantage, managements of newspapers would have to be very brave to take that risk unless the decision-making was in the hands of a professional editor of integrity. The track record of the press in Pakistan and elsewhere indicates that when a publication disregards immediate commercial advantage or disadvantage for the sake of its responsibility to inform the public's right to know, it comes out on top in the long run because of an accretion in its credibility. For that reason alone, professional editors, a threatened species in Pakistan, have to be found and duly installed everywhere in the independent media. The Doubting Thomases regarding the credentials of our print media to talk of defending press freedom when the institution of professional editor has gone abegging would thereby be effectively silenced.

Death of a think tank

CONVENTIONAL wisdom holds that institutions created in Washington have no end. That may be true of most, especially where government agencies are concerned.

Would that the notion of permanence applied to the Overseas Development Council, the renowned international

development policy research group founded in Washington 30 years ago.

The news about the ODC, however, tells a different — and an unhappy — story. After three decades as one of the premier international development policy research groups in the United States, the council has

announced that it will cease operations at the end of the year.

The council served as a focal point for international brainstorming on development issues and performed ground-breaking research in international economics and development.—*The Washington Post*