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Risky business of politics

If the health of a nation is to be measured by what its media presents, then India is ill, says Claude Arpi

I have been barred by doctors since several weeks to follow Indian politics too closely. In October, I suffered a severe myocardial infraction. After three days in a private clinic, I was shifted to the Institute of Cardio-Vascular Diseases in Chennai, where an emergency quadruple bypass surgery was performed.

The worst punishment was not the strict diet or the daily exercises, but the decision from the doctors: "No question of reading newspapers or surfing the net at least during the first few weeks." They believed that reading scores of articles every day was not conducive to a smooth recovery. "You must do nothing which can make you tense," was their instruction!

It is true that during my interview with the psychologist and the cardiologist, I observed that most of the time the morning news was upsetting and even anguishing. India is still not what I would like it to be! Corruption, slow judicial process, bloated ego of the bureaucrats spoiling the creativity of the Indian people, antediluvian Communists, incoherent foreign policy, etc. Indeed, there is no end to what can irritate.

But the addiction is not easy to overcome and I soon managed to get some glimpses of what was going on in the world. I began watching French news on TV5, the public channel: I could get informed 'leisurely'. The news items are usually well-presented and daily images of worldwide events given. During these weeks, the TV5 showed several short reports on the aftermath of the earthquake in Kashmir. Unfortunately, my leisure could not be complete because each time the reporter showed images of the Kashmir tragedy, a map of the State would appear with the Siachen in possession of Pakistan.

In the past, I have often written about this map aggression orchestrated by Pakistan and I have always regretted that the Indian embassies abroad did not take up this matter seriously with respective foreign government (the CIA 'reference' map of Pakistan still shows the glacier as part of Pakistan).

After wondering for months as to why the embassies were not more diligent, I came to the conclusion that perhaps some South Block babu did not know where exactly was Siachen on the map! I wish Mr George Fernandes would become Foreign Minister for a few months and send all officers of the rank of Joint Secretary and above to Siachen to study the location and the situation on the glacier.

My anguish about the maps was counterbalanced by other images that made me rejoice: Hundreds of Kashmiris from the so-called Azad Kashmir trying to cross through a newly opened checkpoint on the LOC. The crowd was teargassed by Pakistani Rangers, taking away their chance to run towards more freedom (and most probably better life). Where is the real 'Azad' Kashmir?

These few images demolished 57 years of Pakistani propaganda. From January 1948 when Zafirullah Khan, then Pakistan Foreign Minister, gave a five-hour speech which made the UN Security members cry over the fate of the Kashmiris still in the clutches of Hindustan, till the recent declarations of General Pervez Musharraf and Mr Shaukat Aziz about 'self-rule', Islamabad has tried to make the world believe that the inhabitants of the Valley were reluctant prisoners of India.

With one image the myth was destroyed. When the Berlin Wall fell, which side did the Germans run to? To the side where freedom prevails! A couple a weeks later, I was authorised to read the newspapers headlines. Though I could not read the details of the Oil-for-Food scam involving Foreign Minister Natwar Singh, I was flabbergasted.

Without knowing the finer points the CPI(M)'s comrades (including a 'national' newspapers from the South), stood like one man to defend the minister. It seemed strange to me. A similar scam happened in France a month earlier. Two former diplomats were implicated in the Oil-for-Food Iraqi deal. Both were former French Ambassadors to India and were very senior: One later became Foreign Secretary and the other Ambassador to the UN.

A judge was immediately appointed and contrary to India started interrogating the protagonists the same day. In India, it takes months before a judge is operational: He has to be allocated a room, an official car has to be bought, then furniture has to be purchased (three quotations required), and then peons, PS, PA have to be appointed. All this takes



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time. It gives time to other Government agencies to enquire into the matter on behalf of the Government! To come back to France, the two gentlemen were quickly charge-sheeted; by now, they have probably been arrested.

Would it not have been logical that the comrades ask for the result of the Commission of Inquiry or more serious proofs before deciding upon the innocence of the accused? It is probably the way Communist justice system has always functioned. With the mounting evidence, they seem less vociferous today.

Six weeks after the operation, I could finally read the newspapers. A piece that amused me no end was the declaration of Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz. Dawn reported him as saying that "Pakistan supported demilitarisation and self-governance in Kashmir in an effort to bring its long-standing dispute with India to an end". Mr Aziz is supposed to have added: "Pakistan is a peace-loving country and desires a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue according to aspirations of the Kashmiri people."

This is quite laughable when one looks at the situation in Gilgit-Baltistan. Since November 1947, when Major Brown offered the region to Pakistan in the name of the British Crown, Gilgit-Baltistan has never known the meaning of democracy, even less of 'self-rule'. In this part of Jammu and Kashmir, 'self' only means Pakistan and its successive rulers.

Pakistani Human Rights organisations have been speaking about the treatment meted out by Islamabad to the people of this region. Recently, the Human rights Commission of Pakistan sought an immediate cease-fire by Pak Rangers engaged in clashes with local people. It termed the situation as 'volatile'.

The Daily Times quoted the Commission Secretary General Iqbal Haider as saying, "The federal government is directly responsible for this sorry state of affairs." Communal clashes fuelled by Islamabad 'self-ruled' policies have claimed more than 200 lives in 2005 alone. The region is directly ruled by Islamabad. A Minister of State for Kashmir and Northern Areas Affairs along with six officers (including the Chief Executive Officer, the Inspector General of Police and the Judicial Commissioner) constitute the Northern Areas Council, none of them belonging to the Gilgit-Baltistan region.

The Dawn reported on December 5: "With the onset of winter, the city (Gilgit) is again facing a severe shortage of water and the main reason again is considered to be theft of water by influential people through illegal connections... the officials of the water distributing agency were encouraging water theft and consequently creating an artificial water crisis."

The officials have installed large illegal pipes as a result of which ordinary consumers are left without water. Is this 'self-rule'? But Mr Shaukat Aziz dares to speak of 'self-rule' for the Valley. Of course, there will always be Kashmiri politicians ready to jump into the bandwagon. National Conference leader Omar Abdullah declared that he would discuss 'self-rule' issue with President Musharraf: "It is the only solution to the Kashmir problem." He should spend a year in Gilgit before talking to Gen Musharraf.

But I should not get irritated: It is not good for my heart.

