

Media and Human Rights Violations

By BIPIN ADHIKARI

The National Human Rights Commission has largely been successful in mobilizing the media sector, especially those run by private sector, in the protection and promotion of human rights. At times, these private media outlets have even carried the Commission materials at no cost. Most of them have few resources to pursue human rights stories and are happy to use Commission as a source of information which, more often than not, is critical of the government and bolsters the media's own independent stand. The Commission regularly issues press releases on cases that may be of particular public interest, but more often, it is the media themselves that take the initiative in approaching the Commission. No doubt, it has expressed its gratefulness to the media sector for its support in disseminating the activities and views of the Commission.

A draft media strategy was developed by the Commission in late 2002 and is being implemented by the Promotion Division and other divisions of the Commission with the help of the Capacity Development Project. The success is notable. This has been extremely important for the Commission's public legitimacy.

It needs to be noted, however, that the media - official or private sector - have highly been selective in the contents distributed by the Commission, especially in conflict related human rights investigations and monitoring. They are more vocal in human rights violations committed by the government side, but the Commission's views on abuses committed by the Maoists are not carried with equal strength. This might be because they feel the threat of Maoists more than the threats from other quarters. There are many analysts in the country, who think that the irresponsible response of the media to the Maoist violence in the beginning helped the Maoist movement expand with such a momentum. In other words, there is the view that the Maoists have achieved a status, which they never expected to achieve because of immature response to their propaganda, and inability of the media to condemn violence in all forms. The international media, especially the Indian media also carries news of the Maoist movement without demonstrated objectivity. While the Commission has largely been objective in its approach, the media has not followed its approach impartially on all occasions. That has often invited sharp criticism from the government entities and members of the security forces, who have been voicing the concern that the Commission is sympathetic to the Maoists, and its approach towards the security forces is not balanced, citing media reports. In most of the cases, this comment has the basis on the behavior of media outlet to focus on issues that attracts more readerships, making their reports lopsided.

In the fifth year of its operation of the Commission, it is now time to review the structure, operating practice and systems of the Commission to ensure effective media and communications work; make specific recommendations for improvement and implement practical changes as agreed; prepare protocols to guide all such work and systems. This includes the finalisation of the draft media strategy. Strategically, it is now time to identify the key internal and external stakeholders; assess the potential of media and communications work to enhance NHRC's strategic objectives and develop a media and communications strategy in line with the organisation's Strategic Plan, which takes account of the organisation's current and expected development between 2004-2008; addresses the status of the Nepalese media and its approach to and understanding of human rights; utilizes the international and foreign media to achieve leverage; addresses a range of promotion related needs from awareness raising to fundraising, and develop an internal communications strategy.

In practical terms, this involves a provision of direct and indirect training to the staff and members of the Commission and other human rights groups in the conduct of media and communications work. This also involves working directly with key staff and officials to provide

'on-the-job' learning and skill-sharing in the conduct of media and communications work, along with monitoring and guiding the day to day communications work of the Commission to ensure that it is compliant with the strategy and to achieving 'on-the-job' learning. This can help finalize the present draft media strategy and also give inputs to the specific recommendations for future development, including the establishment, if appropriate, of a professional media desk.

The job is very broad and exhaustive and could be handled in one of the following two ways- either through the appointment of a temporary member of staff with the Terms of Reference as set out, or as a consultancy with an external expert who will not undertake every area of work directly but rather guide some areas, lead others and take hands on responsibility for the rest. There are pros and cons to both approaches. With an in-house member of staff, the Commission can get a daily contribution, flexibility and, even allowing for 'on costs', a cheaper option. The Commission may not, however, find the calibre of person required, and it is easier for the in-house staff to become distracted by immediate needs and it is also often more difficult for them to objectively identify and secure change.

With a consultant, the Commission can get the expertise it requires, a disciplined approach to delivery of the brief, a greater organizational openness to hear and accept recommendations and change and the flexibility to bring in more than one set of skills. The Commission does not, however, have someone physically with it on a daily basis, in this case. Nevertheless, a consultant is the best route at this point, as the start-up phase of a new project is often crucial and it is a period during which a consultant can add most value.

The aim is to establish an internal capacity to carry this forward without a consultant but generally consultants have the most to offer over the slightly longer term. On a purely practical point, experienced consultants of any worth tend to be in demand and the Commission may not be able to find one able to offer a concentrated burst of activity for few months. The project would benefit from less actual days of consultancy than the Commission might currently envisage, but it should spread out over a longer time frame. In this way the Commission will have achieved much what it hopes for by the end of, for example, a period of three months. Some work will still be outstanding and paced so as not to lose key parts of the organization along the way. The Commission will then have support and monitoring over a longer time frame to ensure that the good work is not all lost and that anything which needs adjusting is given attention.

It is tempting to have one consultant to do everything for a project like this (effectively take on the role of an in-house person) but in terms of cost effectiveness and internal growth, it may not be the best approach. The extent of the project is such that it will be necessary to identify the work, which the consultant can do and can add most value to and then identify that work which the organization could undertake itself, building on the skills and disciplines imparted by the consultant. So, for example, rather than having the consultant do all the training, key members of staff are identified to receive 'training the trainers' coaching so that they are equipped to go out and spread media training with other human rights NGOs or members. In this way, in house skills could be acquired which remain even after the departure of the consultant, and officials and staff of the Commission in turn will have the capacity to train new members or staff in the future and will reduce the time commitment and therefore, cost, of the consultant.

The role of the media as a tool for human rights education is also important. As advertising in the media may be extremely expensive for a low budget organization like the Commission, an effective media relation in the above light is very important. ■

[Adhikari is a lawyer. He may be accessed at human_rights_nepal@yahoo.co.uk]