

AMIC-SIDA Seminar on the Role of the Media in a  
National Crisis : Colombo, May 15-17, 1991 :  
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**Address**

**By**

**Vijay Menon**

Address by Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary-General, at the Pre-Inaugural Session of the Seminar on "The Role of the Media in a National Crisis", Colombo, Sri Lanka, May 15 - 17, 1991

We are having this morning what the hotels like to describe as a "soft opening". We are ready to do business but we are not ready to tell the world that we are ready. We shall do that this evening, in the presence of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of Sri Lanka.

So, let me informally bid you welcome to this seminar on "The Role of the Media in a National Crisis". We have a distinguished group of participants, an absorbing topic, the friendly ambience of the Taj Samudra -- all the necessary ingredients for a stimulating seminar.

My colleague, Vic Valbuena, has pored through all the material in our documentation unit on the theme of this meeting. While coverage of conflicts has been dealt with by several scholars, the specific topic of our discussion does not appear to have been favoured by scholarly dissertations.

This is not surprising. The predicament in which the countries represented at this meeting find themselves seems to be uniquely South Asian. Whether we view it as a failure of leadership or as an inevitable stage in the development of the democratic process, the problems facing the media in the region are clearly formidable. The media have a role to play in a crisis situation but there is a lack of clarity and unanimity about the nature and extent of that role.

It is for this reason that we decided to hold this meeting -- to bring together journalists and related communication professionals to discuss the problems in reporting national crises: to reflect on the problems; to gather professional insights through a sharing of experience and, hopefully, to formulate guidelines for the benefit of journalists and other media professionals.

We are greatly encouraged by the understanding and support extended by the Colombo Office of The Asia Foundation and by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA). We would also like to acknowledge the modest but welcome contribution of the World Bank. We are happy that the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association agreed to co-sponsor this meeting.

Today's seminar is one of sixteen that AMIC will be holding this year on various aspects of mass communication. In addition, we have a number of activities relating to Documentation,

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Publications and Research. All these are made possible by the support we receive from the Government of Singapore and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, an independent foundation in Germany, besides a number of well-wishers and benefactors, including The Asia Foundation and SIDA who have made today's seminar possible. All these institutions help AMIC to function as a non-profit, non-governmental agency serving the cause of mass communication in the Asia-Pacific region.

In the final analysis, the success of a seminar is what the participants make of it. We are grateful to all of you for being here with us today. We look forward to your vigorous participation so that we can collectively derive the fullest benefit from these deliberations.

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Address by Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary-General, at the Inauguration of the Seminar on "The Role of the Media in a National Crisis", Colombo, Sri Lanka, May 15 - 17, 1991

In East Asia this is the Year of the Ram. And doomsayers have been predicting all manner of calamities and catastrophies. This is therefore the right time to be holding a Seminar on "The Role of the Media in a National Crisis".

But levity apart, there is cause for serious concern, especially in South Asia, at the crises facing the nations of the region. This brings into sharper focus the possible role of the mass media as an ameliorating force.

The fact is that in the four decades and more since most countries in the region attained independence, there has been an enormous growth in the reach and coverage of the media. However, it would appear that there has not been a corresponding increase in the developmental role of the media.

Today, western academics question the assumption that the better people understand each other, the easier they will find it to arrive at common solutions to mutual problems. They state that communication is not a universal panacea for human predicaments; that where large inequalities exist, exclusive concern with the communication process would be futile. This clearly requires deeper consideration.

And this is indeed the purpose of this seminar:

- a. To bring together journalists and related media professionals to discuss problems in reporting national crises;
- b. To gather professional insights through a sharing of experiences; and
- c. To formulate guideline on reporting national crises.

We have at this seminar senior professionals from Bangladesh and India, from Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. They represent the media and academia, policy-makers and practitioners. It is a measure of their concern that they readily agreed to join us at this meeting. We were gratified at their response and also at the ready willingness of the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association to co-sponsor this seminar on a topic of such great regional relevance. We are grateful to The Asia Foundation, the World Bank and to the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) for their support which made the meeting possible.

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The Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre is a regional mass communication body based in Singapore and supported by the Government of Singapore and by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung of Germany. AMIC, to use our popular abbreviation, is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting mass communication in the region. Our activities cover documentation, publications, research, seminars, workshops and institutional development programmes. We are seeking to organise an information network covering ten Asian countries, including Sri Lanka. We have brought out a number of titles recording the Asian experience. And an on-going research programme deals with Media and the Electoral Process in Asia.

Today's meeting is one of about sixteen workshops and seminars scheduled in 1991. Last month, we held a Consultation on "Press Systems in SAARC Countries". Among the recommendations of the delegation were that:

The SAARC Press should assist in nation building and human resources development; The Press should recognise that our societies are multi-lingual and multi-ethnic and strive to eschew ethnic and linguistic differences and, the Press should promote friendly relations and South Asian regional cooperation.

Our seminars help in the attainment of these recommendations.

We thank you, Honourable Prime Minister, for joining us this evening to formally inaugurate the seminar. Your presence will be a source of added encouragement to all of us to work for the successful attainment of the seminar objectives.

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