

Trouble in Gus Dur camp

The party of Indonesia's ex-president Abdurrahman Wahid – who has grown increasingly authoritarian – is falling apart.

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REVIEW

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Cellphone as disease tracker

THE cellphone has been cursed as much as it has been embraced by users. Using it to trace exposure to infectious disease could give the gadget a certain nobility. The suggestion made by a British epidemiologist, Sir Roy Anderson, at a symposium here has merit. With dengue and chikungunya stubbornly persistent and bird flu a lurking threat, the public health system should welcome any tool that can give it an edge. Ring tones may jangle nerves, microwave transmission has revived the cancer question, and the handheld device itself often picks up and passes on germs. But as well as posing such concerns, the cellphone could be useful as a supplement to conventional epidemiological methods in detecting and containing infectious diseases.

Together with the computer, the Internet and, increasingly, the Global Positioning System, the device has enabled health authorities to track disease outbreaks as they happen. Pioneers have used such systems successfully in developing countries that, lacking land lines, rely solely on cellphones to transmit data quickly from remote points. Voxiva, a mobile information technology company, deployed a disease surveillance system in India's Tamil Nadu state after the 2004 tsunami, and an HIV-Aids drug inventory network of 94 health centres in Rwanda in 2005. Using a similar system more recently, Indonesia started a pilot scheme to help speed up bird flu reporting. Singapore has vastly different conditions. Its compact urban setting and vulnerability to person-to-person or vector-borne transmission of disease as well as high phone subscriber rate make it a suitable environment to test how cellphone data can help stop disease transmission. For contact tracing, researchers will need to capture information that is usually regarded as private, namely, phone numbers and names of people a subscriber has called, so that exposure can be ruled out or preventive or curative action taken. This is a privacy concern not to be treated lightly.

A Harvard School of Public Health survey done shortly after the 2003 Sars epidemic found 38 per cent of respondents among international travellers "very concerned" about possible privacy breach, although most would give airlines their phone number or e-mail address. Singaporeans would not be any less concerned about a more intrusive reach via the phone. They will expect adequate protection against abuse. Telephone service providers will need assurance against legal liability. But in the interest of preserving public health, the state should have sufficient legal justification to override a right that consumers should be prepared to suspend for their own good.

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PUNCHLINES



» CNN OF THE NOUGHTIES?

Like it or not, Al-Jazeera's the TV station to watch



BY WILLIAM CHOONG
Senior Writer

AT A Nato base in Kabul, American soldiers pound on their treadmills every morning, gazing at television screens broadcasting news from Arab news channel Al-Jazeera.

When Osama bin Laden makes the news, "America's finest work beneath the solemn gaze of their most wanted enemy", the New York Times reported.

In the early 1990s, CNN was widely watched by American policymakers as missiles rained down on Baghdad during the first Persian Gulf War. Has Al-Jazeera become the CNN of the noughties?

"We are reaching two million households in Afghanistan. The American military watches us because we give them valuable insight that affects their day jobs. The US military is probably one of our biggest viewers," Mr Phil Lawrie, Al-Jazeera's head of global distribution, told The Straits Times in a recent interview.

The network has made some headway in Asia in recent years. It has won many accolades. Viewership of Al-Jazeera English, which went on air in late 2006, now stands at 110 million households. And it has ambitious plans for further expansion. In Singapore, Al-Jazeera has been broadcasting on SingTel's mioTV since March.

In the 1990s, the so-called "CNN effect" – the live coverage of major global events in graphic terms – shaped opinion worldwide. Now, media watchers say a similar "Al-Jazeera effect" is operating in the Muslim world and beyond.

Al-Jazeera was formed in 1996 with funding from the Emir of Qatar. It recruited journalists from BBC Arabic, which had founded that year. Its journey since then, however, has been plagued by controversy.

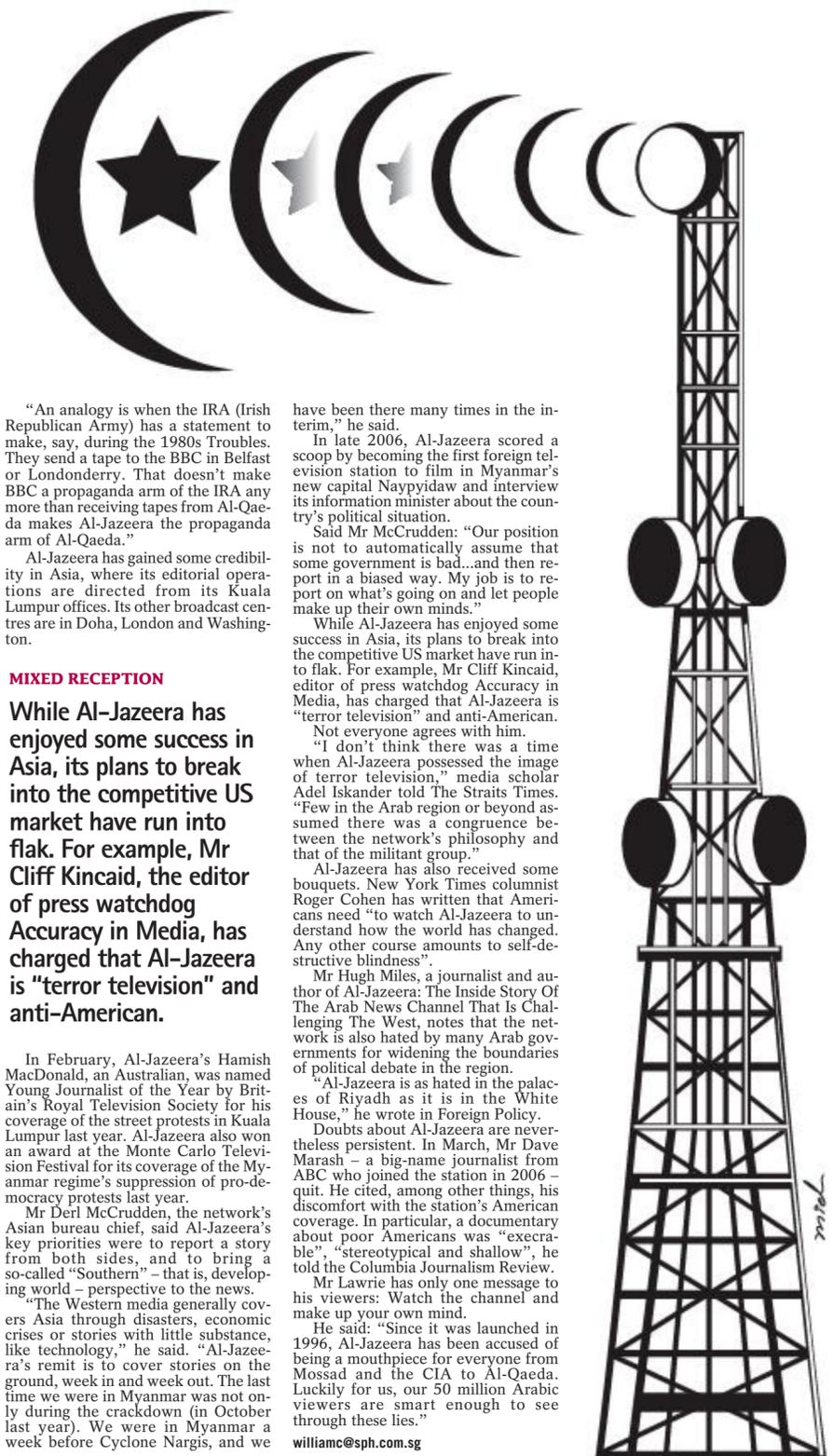
Former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld once called Al-Jazeera's coverage of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq "inaccurate and inexcusable".

The most common and widespread allegation is that Al-Jazeera supports terrorism and is "Al-Qaeda's mouthpiece". After the US attacked Taleban and Al-Qaeda elements in Afghanistan in 2001, the station aired an exclusive statement from Osama bin Laden.

Critics point to other examples: Tayseer Alouni, Al-Jazeera's Kabul bureau chief, was convicted and sentenced to prison in Spain for being an Al-Qaeda agent; cameraman Sami Al-Hajj spent six years at Guantanamo Bay facility for being an "enemy combatant".

Mr Lawrie dismisses such allegations as "misconceptions" and "urban myths". He withheld comment on Mr Alouni's case as it was still under appeal, but noted that Mr Al-Hajj was released last month without trial.

Mr Lawrie, a Briton, added that Al-Jazeera's airing of Al-Qaeda footage did not amount to an endorsement. Moreover, Al-Jazeera was the sole foreign news agency remaining in Kabul in 2001.



"An analogy is when the IRA (Irish Republican Army) has a statement to make, say, during the 1980s Troubles. They send a tape to the BBC in Belfast or Londonderry. That doesn't make BBC a propaganda arm of the IRA any more than receiving tapes from Al-Qaeda makes Al-Jazeera the propaganda arm of Al-Qaeda."

Al-Jazeera has gained some credibility in Asia, where its editorial operations are directed from its Kuala Lumpur offices. Its other broadcast centres are in Doha, London and Washington.

MIXED RECEPTION

While Al-Jazeera has enjoyed some success in Asia, its plans to break into the competitive US market have run into flak. For example, Mr Cliff Kincaid, the editor of press watchdog Accuracy in Media, has charged that Al-Jazeera is "terror television" and anti-American.

In February, Al-Jazeera's Hamish MacDonald, an Australian, was named Young Journalist of the Year by Britain's Royal Television Society for his coverage of the street protests in Kuala Lumpur last year. Al-Jazeera also won an award at the Monte Carlo Television Festival for its coverage of the Myanmar regime's suppression of pro-democracy protests last year.

Mr Derl McCrudden, the network's Asian bureau chief, said Al-Jazeera's key priorities were to report a story from both sides, and to bring a so-called "Southern" – that is, developing world – perspective to the news.

"The Western media generally covers Asia through disasters, economic crises or stories with little substance, like technology," he said. "Al-Jazeera's remit is to cover stories on the ground, week in and week out. The last time we were in Myanmar was not only during the crackdown (in October last year). We were in Myanmar a week before Cyclone Nargis, and we

have been there many times in the interim," he said.

In late 2006, Al-Jazeera scored a scoop by becoming the first foreign television station to film in Myanmar's new capital Naypyidaw and interview its information minister about the country's political situation.

Said Mr McCrudden: "Our position is not to automatically assume that some government is bad...and then report in a biased way. My job is to report on what's going on and let people make up their own minds."

While Al-Jazeera has enjoyed some success in Asia, its plans to break into the competitive US market have run into flak. For example, Mr Cliff Kincaid, editor of press watchdog Accuracy in Media, has charged that Al-Jazeera is "terror television" and anti-American.

Not everyone agrees with him. "I don't think there was a time when Al-Jazeera possessed the image of terror television," media scholar Adel Iskander told The Straits Times. "Few in the Arab region or beyond assumed there was a congruence between the network's philosophy and that of the militant group."

Al-Jazeera has also received some bouquets. New York Times columnist Roger Cohen has written that Americans need "to watch Al-Jazeera to understand how the world has changed. Any other course amounts to self-destructive blindness."

Mr Hugh Miles, a journalist and author of Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story Of The Arab News Channel That Is Challenging The West, notes that the network is also hated by many Arab governments for widening the boundaries of political debate in the region.

"Al-Jazeera is as hated in the palaces of Riyadh as it is in the White House," he wrote in Foreign Policy.

Doubts about Al-Jazeera are nevertheless persistent. In March, Mr Dave Marash – a big-name journalist from ABC who joined the station in 2006 – quit. He cited, among other things, his discomfort with the station's American coverage. In particular, a documentary about poor Americans was "execrable", "stereotypical and shallow", he told the Columbia Journalism Review.

Mr Lawrie has only one message to his viewers: Watch the channel and make up your own mind.

He said: "Since it was launched in 1996, Al-Jazeera has been accused of being a mouthpiece for everyone from Mossad and the CIA to Al-Qaeda. Luckily for us, our 50 million Arabic viewers are smart enough to see through these lies."

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» URBAN MANAGEMENT

Mega-challenges for megacities

BY ANDREW TAN
For The Straits Times

THROUGHOUT the developing world, cities are growing bigger and larger, but not necessarily more liveable.

For the first time in history, more than half of the world's population, some 3.3 billion people, now live in urban areas. In 1950, there was only one megacity with more than 10 million people – New York. Asia had none.

Today, Asia has more than half of the world's largest cities, including 10 megacities: Bangkok, Beijing, Kolkata, Jakarta, Seoul, Shanghai, Tokyo, Mumbai, Osaka and Karachi. By 2015, Asia is expected to have 12 megacities. The UN estimates that Asian cities will double in size by 2030.

Underpinning this rapid urbanisation is the region's unprecedented economic growth over the last few decades. Economic growth and urbanisation go hand in hand. The building frenzy in Asia is a concrete manifestation of this trend. Outstanding architects from Norman Foster and Rem

Koolhaas to Fumihiko Maki and Zaha Hadid are in high demand as Asian cities seek to create their own "Guggenheim effect" that put Bilbao on the world map.

The rising living standards in Asia will spur new patterns of consumption, trade and commerce as well as interlinkages between cities. If the 20th century was an era of new nation states, the 21st century could see the emergence of cities as significant players in the global economy, along with their trans-boundary networks of capital, knowledge and talent. But none of these is a given.

According to the UN, close to one billion people live in slums across the world and this figure is expected to double by 2030. Half of them are in Asia, where income disparities are widening. Many of Asia's cities are also becoming overcrowded and congested. Yet they continue to attract more people.

The challenges facing Asia's cities will therefore grow in scale and complexity. There is under-investment in

public infrastructure and utilities. Lack of good sanitation, proper housing, accessible transport, clean air and water continues to plague many Asian cities.

There has also been over-exploitation of existing resources. Rivers have been polluted, entire eco-systems damaged and forests depleted. With the growing concern over climate change, managing these issues has become of compelling importance.

Four areas require urgent attention.

First, dealing with the region's water scarcity: According to the Asian Development Bank, Asia already has one of the lowest per capita availability of fresh water among the world's continents. One out of five people in the region does not have access to safe drinking water. Furthermore, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that Central, South, East and South-east Asia will face freshwater shortages due to climate change. Competition for scarce water resources could lead to friction among states.

Second, keeping pollution

within limits: A study led by the Stockholm Environment Institute in 2006 showed that the air quality in the majority of Asian cities still exceeded international guidelines for human health for certain pollutants.

Third, promoting greater energy efficiency: With oil prices at record highs, it makes sense for Asia's cities to pay attention to making their buildings, power plants, transport systems and industries energy-efficient. When coupled with investments in renewable energy, the cost-savings of energy efficiency – not to mention the ensuing reduction in carbon emissions – can be significant. Japan is able to grow its economy over the three decades since the oil shocks of the 1970s by being more energy-efficient in nearly everything it does.

Fourth, making cities more liveable: While there is no one definition of "liveability", there is growing recognition that cities have to balance the imperatives of economic growth, social harmony and environmental protection. The solution is not to curb eco-

nomics growth, for there can be no development without growth. The challenge is to ensure that growth is sustainable in the long run.

Dealing with these four challenges will require political will, a whole-of-government approach and pragmatic deployment of scarce resources. But unfortunately, there is no single formula that can be applied across the board. Urban management is a highly contextualised affair. No two cities are alike. Each country should adopt its own solutions based on the best practices of other cities.

In the United States and Europe, many cities are trying out innovative approaches to urbanisation, energy security and climate change. Likewise, Asian cities can play a similar role as catalysts for change in their countries.

Ultimately, Asia will need to chart its own sustainable growth path, one that balances the need for economic growth with the need to preserve the environment for future generations.

The writer is the director of the Centre for Liveable Cities.