

I'm a journalist, don't shoot me

BY THALIF DEEN

UNITED NATIONS — After nearly 10 years as a columnist, cranking out weekly pieces for the Sunday Times from “Inside the Glasshouse” at the United Nations, I decided to call it quits back in December 2008.

After my 500th piece, I told the editor, Sinha Ratnatunga, I was going into a “semi-retirement” mode, and was looking for a graceful exit strategy while the going was still good.

I am not sure whether I convinced Sinha, but I did tell him that no one in this world is indispensable—not even journalists.

And as former French President Charles de Gaulle once said in a timeless remark: “The world’s cemeteries are full of indispensable men.” But he confined himself to “men” because gender discrimination was not politically incorrect in the bad old days.

Although bred and professionalized at Lake House, first on the Observer and then the Daily News, I was convinced (or was I strong-armed?) to switch loyalties to the Sunday Times by Consultant Editor Iqbal Athas.

As the Sunday Times celebrates its 25th anniversary, I remain mostly an anonymous contributor, particularly at a time and age when there is no answer to a rhetorical question facing journalists worldwide: “Is journalism worth dying for?”—whether in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan or Sri Lanka.

The journalistic awards for some foreign correspondents, specifically in the world’s battle zones, arrive long after they have vanished from the face of the earth.

When I was in Iraq during the 1990 Gulf War, I was armed with a military flak jacket with a cautious warning inscribed on the back: “Press. Don’t Shoot.”

Now, I occasionally wear it in the mean streets of New York, a city where I have lived uninterrupted for over 35 years, and where a bank robber, they say, can get mugged as he flees to a getaway car.

Having travelled to more than 50 countries on journalistic assignments, mostly covering international conferences — from Rio de Janeiro and Rome to Havana and Harare — I also had the privilege of writing my weekly Sunday columns based on visits to various capitals, including Cairo, Vienna, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Brussels, Caracas, Amman, Beirut, Doha, Nairobi, Manila, Seoul and Tokyo, to name just a few.

But since I have cultivated the ability to laugh at myself, I recount the words of Tom Stoppard in “Night and Day,” a play on post-colonial politics and journalism, when he took a passing shot at roving journalists.

“A foreign correspondent,” he said, “is someone who flies around from hotel to hotel (five star?) and thinks the most interesting thing about any story is the fact that he has arrived to cover it.”

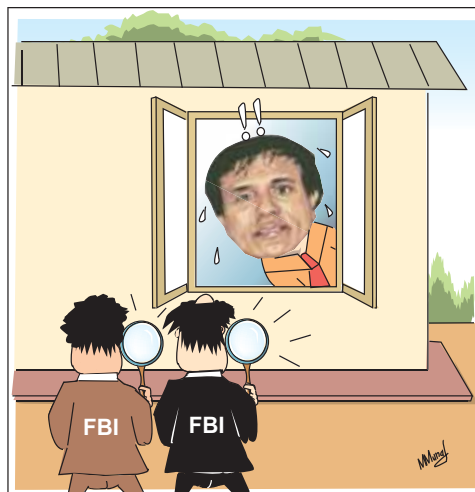
If that does not deflate roving correspondents worldwide, what would?

I may have semi-retired from the Sunday Times but I still remain a full-time UN Bureau Chief and Regional Director for Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency (www.ipsnews.net) which will soon mark its 50th anniversary.

In reality, journalists rarely retire. And these days, they probably die with their Blackberrys and their I-Pads on. Forget boots.

At her 84th birthday celebrations, a woman editor of a New York-based magazine was asked when she plans to retire. Her response: “I am too old to retire.”

Having covered the UN since my student days at Columbia University in the late 1970s (at a time when Ambassador Shirley Amerasinghe was Sri Lanka’s Permanent Representative followed by more than 10 other Permanent Representatives since then), I never considered myself an authority on any subject relating either to the UN or international politics.



I realized I learn something new every day.

H.M.G.S. Paliakkara, a sharply-witty former Foreign Secretary and a one-time Permanent Representative to the UN, once paid a compliment, perhaps back-handed, when he said in an email message: “Permanent representatives are never permanent. Sri Lanka’s only Permanent Representative at the UN is the IPS UN Bureau Chief Thalif Deen.”

He said I had survived more than 10 Permanent Representatives — perhaps most of them only transiting through New York, as politics transcends professionalism in Sri Lanka’s foreign service.

When I wrote my first column for the Sunday Times back in December 1998, I focused on Senator Jesse Helms, a rightwing Republican from the state of North Carolina, who hated the UN — passionately.

A fulltime chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a part-time UN basher, Helms publicly complained that providing funds to the UN is like pouring money into a rat hole. Helms wanted the “Glass House by the East River” shipped out of New York — for good.

For most conservative, right-wing American poli-

ticians, the UN had perhaps outlived its usefulness — except when it serves as a political fig leaf for US military strikes overseas.

The US decided to dispense even with that flimsy fig leaf when it attacked Iraq without Security Council authorization, described as “a modern day version of gunboat diplomacy.”

After the US invasion of Iraq, I wrote a series of articles strongly critical of the foreign policy of the Bush administration.

The articles obviously irritated the then US Ambassador in Colombo Jeffrey Lunstead who fired off a confidential cable to the State Department in Washington producing verbatim one of my articles titled “US Boggled Down in Iraq, Crawls Back to UN” (published in the Times in 2004).

Lunstead’s cable, revealed subsequently by Wikileaks, described my article as “resolutely anti-American” and “a virulent attack on US policy in Iraq.”

Still, the American ambassador was constrained to admit in his cable that the Wijeya Group, which publishes the Sunday Times, is “among the most respected newspaper groups” in Sri Lanka.

As is well known, newspapermen around the world, including in the US, are closely monitored both by democratic governments and also by repressive regimes.

Just after the 9/11 attacks in the US, two agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) visited my neighbours to check my credentials — possibly to find out whether, as a journalist, I was a “good Muslim or a bad Muslim” by American standards.

Perhaps they were wondering why a guy who came on a State Department Fulbright grant to Columbia University should write such “anti-American” articles.

But then, isn’t the US a free country?

If they checked my files (the FBI and CIA maintain such files on virtually all journalists here), the FBI agents would have discovered that I hold an American passport; worked as a military analyst at Defense Marketing Services (once accused of having ties to the CIA) and married an Italian-American (whose family, my friends joke, is linked to the Mafia in Calabria, Italy) in a wedding ceremony officiated by an Egyptian imam in a New York city mosque.

At the John F. Kennedy airport, where racial profiling continues despite denials, one of the security officers confiscated my razor, probably assuming it could be used as a dangerous weapon, which was in my hand-carrying luggage during a flight to Europe.

I looked at him and said with a mischievous smile: “You take my razor away from me. And if I grow a beard, you call me an Islamic fundamentalist. Either way, I lose.”

(The writer, a former deputy news editor at the Sri Lanka Daily News was also a Senior Editorial Writer on the Hong Kong Standard and Military Editor, Middle East/Africa at Jane’s Information Group in the US)