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CPJ used dubious information

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ON World Press Day (May 3), the New York-based Committee To Protect Journalists (CPJ) singled out 10 government leaders around the world for harsh censure because - in the eyes of the group - these leaders are guilty of suppressing Press freedom in their countries.

Evidently they depended on dubious information to arrive at their conclusions.

Small wonder, the group has stigmatised the leaders of some countries as enemies of the Press. They include Chinese President Jiang Zemin, our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, President Alberto Fujimori of Peru, Ayatollah Ali Khameni of Iran, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazabayev and Cuban President Fidel Castro.

The executive director of this self-appointed US watchdog of Press freedom Ann Cooper spat venom when she sneered: "These enemies of the Press use methods that range from outright torture and murder to more subtle techniques aimed at keeping uncomfortable truths from being told."

Perhaps, the sanctimonious Cooper was referring to truths that were adulterated to sound like music to her kind, or to please scandal-hungry editors.

She certainly has no moral right to condemn world leaders who do not revere the Fifth Amendment of the US Constitution as sacrosanct. Heads of independent and sovereign governments are under no obligation to administer by American laws.

Cooper's charges betray a deep aversion for anyone or anything that does not dance to the tune of the Washington consensus. The 10 leaders who have been singled are prejudicially categorised as enemies of Press, not because they are adversaries of their own people, but because they have the courage to stand up to the bullies in Capitol Hill and thumb their noses at Uncle Sam's attempts to propagate American hegemony.

Independent countries of the free world have the right and liberty to choose their own destiny. Surely, there are no laws against this freedom of choice.

The CPJ's exclusion of leaders across the Causeway is too glaring to go unnoticed. Being a global watchdog of Press freedom, it is inconceivable for the group not know that freedom of the Press south of the border is virtually non-existent.

Even the Speaker's Corner in the Island State is too tied up in a Gordian knot of draconian laws to be of much effect. Either the CPJ is practising selective condemnation or knows next to nothing about the situation in this part of the world. Whichever way, it's credibility as an impartial observer is destroyed.

Lately, the International Herald Tribune has come under fire for biased and unfair treatment of two stories on street demonstrations - one in Kuala Lumpur and the other in Washington. The Kuala Lumpur episode was patently uneventful by comparison.

According to a foreign wire service report, the planned massive demonstration at the National Mosque to mark the anniversary of the downfall of the former deputy prime minister drew a disappointingly small number of people.

Ice-cream vendors, instead, were reportedly doing brisk business among a curious crowd of on-lookers outside the mosque compound.

For the extensive publicity it generated both at home and abroad, the

Kuala Lumpur demonstration on the day itself was relatively tranquil.

On the other hand, the protests against the IMF and the World Bank meeting in Washington took on a different dimension altogether. Fully-armed policemen charged demonstrators with truncheons, fired tear gas at them and sprayed pepper gas into their eyes. Those arrested were handcuffed and unceremoniously dumped into prison-bound police vans.

Although there is a stark difference in the degree of violence between Kuala Lumpur and Washington, the Herald Tribune was quick to condemn the former and exonerate (and even unashamedly praise) the latter.

It and other newspapers of the same ilk have resorted to blatant hypocrisy to cast aspersions on countries that do not hold with the US administration's propensity to bully and interfere with the domestic affairs of small nations. Perhaps the CJP might like to draw up another list for "enemies of the responsible Press" and make the Herald Tribune its first nominee.

Other government leaders on the CPJ's "enemies of the Press" list this year are Foday Sankoh, leader of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, Tunisian President Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali, and Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

One cannot help but wonder that these leaders might have been singled out for condemnation because Uncle Sam had to do all within its power to discredit them.