

# AIDS crisis looming ?

Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

IN the 20 years since its effects were first medically recognised, the immunodeficiency virus is thought to have infected almost 60 m people around the world and that number grows by 16,000 a day. Plainly speaking, in human terms HIV is a disaster. Of those 60 m people, more than 22 m have already died of AIDS, the disease it causes without any medical intervention. Shockingly, around 3 m more will die over the next 12. But death caused by AIDS is something that is avoidable than deaths caused by nature. Moreover, AIDS kills predominantly in poor countries, compounding the problem.

Almost 70 per cent of new infections and existing cases -- a daunting 28.1 m people -- are in sub-Saharan Africa. AIDS is now cutting 15 years of average life expectancy in this region. According to some estimates, it will slice 8 per cent of national incomes in the worst afflicted countries by 2010. Although a few countries such as Uganda are coming to grips with the disease through education, condom distribution and other preventive measures, lack of money and political will is thwarting efforts elsewhere.

But Africa is not alone in its suffering. Eastern Europe now has the world's fastest growing AIDS epidemic, with 2,50,000 new cases in 2001. A projection by Imperial College, London suggests Russia may have 5 m people infected with HIV in five years time, 4 m of them suffering the symptoms of AIDS. Most worrisome, not only sub-Saharan Africa or Eastern Europe and Latin American countries, two of the world's most populous countries China and India are threatened. The Chinese government admits to 1 m infections -- widely regarded as an underestimate. India admits to 4 m.

In China, the same old story of downplaying the diseases still goes on. After China's first AIDS victim died in 1985, hospital authorities burned the man's belongings -- and even the furniture he used -- in a bonfire. HIV patients in China and in most of the African countries are facing social ostracism and government indifference. Shockingly true, in 1996, in China, Li Ning 9, a young kid got the affliction because of tainted blood transfusion. His father Li Suijun, a factory worker was fired from his job for his son being diagnosed to be infected with HIV. Many of the country's hospitals and health agencies are still willfully ignoring such grave health issues. To them, HIV was a foreigner's disease. But without effective countermeasures, says UNAIDS, the number of HIV cases in China could skyrocket -- reaching 10 million by 2010. However, the grim fact is: for HIV patients everywhere, contracting the virus evokes feelings of helplessness and isolation. In China, only a few individuals are lucky or well-connected enough to obtain AIDS "cocktail" -- a mix of drugs from Western countries that has proved effective in fighting the virus.

It's now a common knowledge that by far the worst affected continent is Africa. That is where HIV leapt the species barrier from chimpanzees to people some 70 years ago. But infection rates are rising, in several cases rapidly, in many Asian countries and in many of the successor states to the Soviet Union. At the moment, the place with the largest number of cases is South Africa.

Encouragingly, the mood in Barcelona, Spain where the 14th AIDS Conference was held in the early part of 2002 took stock of the whole situation and agreed to take measures to stop the rot. The conference in the first place agreed to spread the use of condoms. Second, the best way to stop infection in children is to curb mother-to-child transmission with cheap, one-shot drugs given just before birth. Third, empower women to choose freely whether and with whom they have sex, and what sort of contraception they use. Fourth, perhaps above all, educate people about the risks they face. Encouragingly, several countries most notably Uganda, Senegal and Thailand have shown the way to mount steps in that direction.

The drug treatment situation has

ing to the Global HIV Prevention Working Group, a group of experts financed by the Gates and Kaiser Foundation, about \$ 1.2 billion is spent on prevention in the world's poor countries. In a paper published in the "Lancet", another group of experts John Stover of Futures Group International and his colleagues, estimate that increasing spending on prevention to the tune of \$ 4.8 billion that Dr. Schwartzler recommended could avoid 29 m infections by 2010 -- if the money were spent well.

Strengthening the medical infrastructure of the poorer countries is a vital necessity and obviously it will cost more. The Commission for Macro-economics and Health (CMH), headed by Jeffrey Sachs, a well-known development economist based at Columbia University, reckons that infrastructure development would raise the price to \$ 15 billion.

The impoverished world have the example of Brazil in front of them, to have a grasp of what a well-organized treatment campaign can achieve in a country that is struggling an economic mess. In the backdrop of the prediction of the World Bank Model that about 1.2 m

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changed much in the meantime. There was a time when the cure was too expensive to be worth considering: a year's course of highly active anti-retroviral therapy (HAART) cost \$10,000 - 15,000. But now with the emergence of Global AIDS Fund and because of the drug companies "tiered pricing" for poorer parts of the world, and due to bilateral donations by the drug firms themselves, the cost per patient is just one dollar a day. But even then it is beyond the purse of most Africans. Only 30,000 people in that continent use it. Only diamond rich Botswana has an official anti-AIDS drug programme in place. Other countries await, fairly "godmothers" who will help them pick up the bill. According to estimate made public by Peter Piot, head, UNAIDS and Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, the "Global Fund announced will require \$ 7 billion -- \$É10 billion a year, but in practice it has attracted \$ 2.1 billion in its first year of existence, chipped in largely from the Gates Foundation along with U.S government funding. A mathematical model developed in 2001 by Bernhard Schwartzler of the World Health Organisation and his colleagues estimated the maximum amount that could be spent usefully per year by 2005 as about \$ 9 billion. Of that, \$ 4.8 billion would be allocated to prevention, and \$ 4.2 billion to treatment. At the moment, accord-

people in Brazil would be infected with HIV by 2002, effective anti-AIDS fighting campaign was launched. The actual figure is now 600,000. This is in part because 1,50,000 people are on HAART. Since HAART reduces a person's viral load to a negligible level, it helps to curb transmission to others besides maintaining the health of the patient. This treatment was made free at point of use by the Brazilian government in 1996, and as a direct result, the number of people dying of AIDS in Brazil has fallen by 50 per cent.

In Bangladesh, tragedy and ruin stare the middle class in the face as the virus that causes AIDS moves beyond the red-light areas. The UNICEF report made public in the early part of December last year revealed that the country has now about 310 under-14 HIV infected children. Although the official figure puts the HIV infected persons at 248, the number has spiraled to 13,000 according to AIDS Epidemic Research Report published by UNAIDS in 2001. Most worrisome, the report adds, each day 6000 children are being infected with HIV in Bangladesh. Perhaps the most worrying aspect is the growing evidence of what HIV experts call "transmission chains" by which the virus percolates insidiously through social sub-strata and afflicts low risk individuals like housewives and

children.

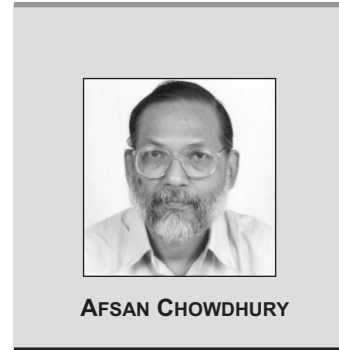
Even in China where authorities viewed community organisations and independent researchers with suspicion, government has woken up. Like China, AIDS awareness classes should now be mandatory in all schools, colleges and universities in Bangladesh. Often the classes are the students' first exposure to sex education -- and other stark facts of life. Volunteers in the class would demonstrate how to sterilize hypodermic needles. Till now 70 percent of HIV cases in this region are spread via needle-sharing by drug users.

Experts reason out the rise in HIV cases in the country other than tainted blood transfusion and needle-sharing to dramatic shift in the sexual behaviour of the middle class. Changes in workplace is cited as a major reason. Unemployment situation in the country has spawned a breed of travelling migrant workers who spend nearly half their working lives away from home. At the same time women in the country have become an increasingly visible part of the professional workforce. Put these factors together and you have the settings for an increasing number of casual sexual relationships. Experts further feel that the growing affluence of the middle class and influence of blue films proliferating the homes and clubs of a certain class of people have something to do with changing moral values. While in the West having multiple sexual partners is now considered a "high risk behaviour", in our region it has just become fashionable. Undoubtedly true, with pre-marital sex gaining increasing acceptance among the new generation, the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS has risen. Teenagers and those in the early 20s constitute a majority of the cases testing HIV positive. On the other hand, prostitutes these days are not confined to the restricted areas, they are roaming the streets, parks and secluded posh houses and hotels in the cities and towns. Doctors indicate these trends as danger signals.

With HIV cases growing alarmingly, Bangladesh's over-burdened and crumbling health system apparently isn't able to cope with the looming epidemic -- not medically, not financially and certainly not emotionally. Some NGOs are quietly working to fill the gap. But there is a lot of prejudice and coldness out there because most people don't understand the seriousness of the affliction. Presumably, the task before the government is formidable. If AIDS is to be defeated, war must be waged against poverty, ignorance, stigmatisation, violence and promiscuity.

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# Got an Al-Qaida story? Sure man, how much?



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

AT an office in Dhaka where this Channel 4 team first landed and then went about doing their job, they were mostly objects of derision more than rage. "Not good enough... got the job because they are from the UK ....Channel 4 has no funds so they hire such teams...."

"I have been told that within an hour after landing they were shooting."

"They don't seem to believe in research", someone said.

"Maybe they were insured", added another.

They are thought to be bad journalists, not bad people. Some seem to know a little more about the two than others. Some are safer than others I suppose, because not all who came in touch with them have been touched [by our government].

For one, we know, their visa declaration isn't the only fabrication they made... and put people in trouble.

The GUARDIAN report doesn't say -- and why should it -- that both Saleem Samad and Priscilla Raj [the two Bangladeshi journalists who were arrested for translating for the two UK journalists] may have been tortured. It only says that "they" [the Ch 4 journalists] haven't been touched. "They" are different from the "other", for those familiar with post-modern lingo.

The Channel 4 duo wouldn't be touched and they haven't been. Zaiba and Sorrentino come from donor lands and their safety has been bought through aid packages which Bangladesh can't do without, or so they say, while Saleem and Priscilla come from around here...locals....

No matter how hard they try it's difficult for an Englishman to write with concern about people from a land which has no profile in the West. Now, even in the same jail, Z&S share Division prisons while S&P are with the plebeians. You don't have to do much, you just have to be -- to stay in the lesser jail..

That Ch 4 came to do a "simple political story" may be difficult to buy when all evidence is examined, but that's not the point anymore. Did they not scout to read the mood? Or was it unnecessary in Bangladesh because Western media has the right to go where they want?

Did they play a role in enhancing the crisis now in our country, that has led to all kinds of situations truly beyond our control? Bombs, arrest of "secret agents", arrest of intellectuals. We are shit scared. And the list will get bigger, but did we need an extra load because some Ch 4 goofs thought that this was a great place to do a story?

This morning, as I was interviewing someone about 1971 war, the man was guarded. "Days have changed" he sheepishly smiled. He listened to every recorded minute just to make sure. We are becoming cowards and soon people will say "how come the people of Bangladesh are not rising in revolt against loss of freedom?" This society creates cowards more easily than another where you can return home. Here you live in the "unreported world." This is home.

Late last night, while waiting for news to arrive we chatted about the future or the lack of it. "We are becoming a storeyard of other people's wars.. other people's stories..." In the last two months there have been many queries from international media. "Do you have an al-Qaida story..?" a new Zealand outfit asks... "Sure man, how much?".....

Why haven't the journalists of Dhaka risen as one against the inurement of Saleem at least? Because they are no longer one and will never be. Perhaps they never were.

Are we really anybody anymore? And its this missed opportunities. The opportunities that never came that define us. We can't get commissioned...not good enough... western audience...western eyes...

Zaiba's sister lauds her saying that her father wanted her to be a lawyer or a barrister but she became a journalist. She is a brave lass! If you asked today, Priscilla would like to be a lawyer or barrister anytime, but can never become one. Saleem never made it past high school. He has been forced to become a fixer -- this man who now is not hireable anymore by the local papers.

And now, after this, no Editor (or not many) will dare hire him. After 25+years in the profession he will still have to do fixing for foreign journalists because he has a family to keep. It's been months without any regular work, otherwise why would he do this...he said a few days before the incident.

Priscilla is recently divorced and Bangladesh society will not forgive someone who has been jettisoned from that deadly cocoon of social security. With electric shock burns on her as per her statement she is reluctantly brave and unemployed. Unless some "kind" Westerner takes her away or hires her..

None of this makes great journalists because we get beaten so regularly and routinely rather than

report. "But you have to work for gora (white) outfits if you want the world to notice...it just doesn't work any other way"...Last week when the bombs went off in Mymensingh and body parts travelled in many directions, it didn't mean becoming victims of a bomb only. It meant becoming victims of a livelihood loss. This is something the West can't understand. That we live next door to penury. That, for most of us, courage comes with a ticket to loss of job and work. Even as our jobs die on us so many times. That we shall pass this life without facing full starvation like many others but we will just never be secure. Always hoping that a fixing job will take us a few months longer.

It's this mix of our realities that we can't make others understand. Least of all our own leaders -- and to be comfortable, you need to be leaders... you don't have any other option. Nobody wants you to be a good journalist, they just want to fix

you...fix for you...and take the plunge...

Where do lies start? How can the West understand the meaning of Saleem being fifty and still without a decent job after 25 years in the profession? Fixing for careless strangers from the West who come visiting in victorious media boats carrying explorers into the uncharted unreported world...

Biswa Ijtima [World Muslim Council] on Dec 12, so opposition party has withdrawn hartal. Largest gathering of Muslims ...many potential terrorists ... won't a bomb go off please and fill the wires with news the world is waiting to hear..

Long before we had governments we had terrorists. Anybody wants this story?

Afsan Chowdhury, Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star, wrote this in response to Guardian story on two arrested UK journalists. This was earlier published in The Guardian.

# Not a bad dream, but hard reality

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

THOSE among the readers who might have read the London Letter that appeared on 24 November 2002, may recall the account I wrote about Britain facing the risk of possible terror attacks. Security sources had hinted at intelligence reports warning of Islamist extremists planning poison gas attack on London's public transport system, particularly the Tube. In his New Year message to the nation this year, the British Prime Minister also expressed his fear -- based on what he called "the mass of intelligence flowing across my desk"--of the dangerous and difficult times facing the country in the days ahead. That nightmarish scenario is now actually threatening to turn into cold, hard reality. On 5th January, in a joint operation mounted by MI5, Scotland Yard and the Metropolitan Police, no less than seven persons living in the North London area were taken into custody on suspicion that they were indeed engaged in the production of a dangerously poisonous substance which could be used to infect widespread public areas. The location from where these persons were arrested is very near -- practically at a stone's throw -- to where I and my family live. Six of the seven are of Algerian origin, one is from Ethiopia, all are Muslims by religion and at least two of them -- according to French intelligence sources -- have proven links with Al Qaeda, one of them had even allegedly received some form of training from that organisation in Afghanistan. The poisonous substance that these men are suspected of having been engaged in producing is called 'ricin' -- pharmacological name Ricinus communis -- which is a naturally occurring protein extracted from castor oil seeds and can be used as an insecticide. It is one of the most powerful biological toxins in existence, so powerful

indeed that just one granule -- about the weight of a grain of common salt -- can kill a human being if it gets into the bloodstream. Theoretically, 20 pounds of ricin should be enough to kill everyone in Britain, and it may be inhaled in an aerosol spray, ingested in a drink or food, or injected directly into the bloodstream. Ricin is known to have been used in the past in assassination attempts. The most famous -- or should we say 'notorious' -- victim was the Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov who was

gone to search a flat on Crumpsall Lane of Manchester city. The three inmates-- all Algerians-- were at first believed to be guilty of nothing more serious than breaching immigration rules. But in the skirmish that followed as the officers were attempting to take the men in custody, officer Stephen Oake, 40 year old father of three, was fatally stabbed by one of the men and four other officers received serious knife injuries. The men were finally subdued and arrested and only then came to light that the 27 year

The community has lost a very fine police officer." The Conservative party has, meanwhile, accused the Government of creating the worst asylum system in the civilised world. The Shadow Home Secretary Oliver Letwin claimed that the asylum system "is a complete shambles. This (the Manchester incident) is yet further evidence that people are getting through who intend to pursue terrorist activities." Former Conservative minister Michael Jack said: "Up to now members of the public have

however, a refugee is defined as someone who fears persecution from any source in their home country. Most of the Algerian asylum seekers arrive in Britain via France, but hardly any of them carry proper identification. In the absence of documents proving their national identity, Algeria can refuse to take them back. On the other hand, the Dublin Convention stipulates that asylum seekers whose applications have been turned down must go back to the first EU country they entered. But without proper documentation, it is nearly always impossible to prove which country that may be. So there is a stalemate, to say the least, providing all would-be asylum seekers with a loophole which they tend to utilise in order to continue living in the UK indefinitely. Dr Mohammed Sekkoum, who is associated with the Algerian Refugee Council, cautioned about the dangers of this situation by pointing out that hundreds of Algerians seeking asylum in Britain had actually been criminals and terrorists in their home country and "they are not going to stop killing when they get to this country."

**Tailpiece**  
The Prime Minister has been criticised by many for sounding too gloomy a note in his New Year address. But, as circumstances are beginning to warn, he was perhaps not being unduly pessimistic, especially with the 'poison attack threat' following so close behind. If there is some truth in the saying "Morning shows the day", there is probably reason to be somewhat apprehensive -- as well as extra-vigilant -- about the days ahead. At the same time, perhaps we can find some hope from the vagaries of British weather. In Britain, "morning does not always show the day" -- a dark and gloomy morning can turn, almost magically, into a bright and glorious afternoon.

## LONDON LETTER

**The Prime Minister has been criticised by many for sounding too gloomy a note in his New Year address. But, as circumstances are beginning to warn, he was perhaps not being unduly pessimistic, especially with the 'poison attack threat' following so close behind. If there is some truth in the saying "Morning shows the day", there is probably reason to be somewhat apprehensive --as well as extra-vigilant--about the days ahead.**

murdered in 1978 on London's Waterloo Bridge by a ricin-bearing pellet fired from an umbrella-gun, allegedly by an agent of his country's secret service.

There is a strong possibility that the persons arrested in North London were actually trying to produce the poison because when the police raided the flat where they had been living for several months, a tiny residue of ricin was found in a room which also contained some crude chemical equipment. The police are now continuing a massive hunt in different parts of the country for a quantity of the poison that may have already been passed on to others who could be the accomplices of these men or terror sympathisers. Meanwhile, the operation has led to several more arrests and also a most unfortunate tragedy. Acting on a lead, Special Branch officers had

old Algerian who had stabbed officer Oake to death was in fact the prime suspect in the case involving the discovery of the so-called 'chemical factory' in North London. The arrest of these men brings the number of Algerians detained in the last three weeks to fourteen, ten of whom are asylum seekers either awaiting a decision on their applications for asylum or those who have been refused asylum but have not been deported yet.

The Home Secretary David Blunkett has ordered the security services to urgently investigate all those who may have been allowed into the UK without adequate checks in recent months. The Prime Minister Tony Blair who knew the murdered police officer personally as part of his protection team on his visits to Manchester, led tributes to Stephen Oake, saying: "His family has lost a very fine man.

accepted that there is a genuine need to provide asylum to those who are in fear of their lives. But in the light of the tragic death of the police officer and the apprehension of persons from North Africa some will look at asylum now as the Trojan Horse for terrorism." It is understandable that the Tories would naturally be eager to pounce on any opportunity to criticise the Labour Government and find fault with its policies. But there is no denying the fact that the recent happenings do point to the Government's failure to put adequate checks in place to ensure the genuineness of applications for asylum. The clause in the Geneva Convention determining the status of refugees is usually interpreted by European countries like France to mean that the only genuine refugees are those persecuted by their own Governments. In Britain,