

## Arsenic poisoning looms Government's inaction putting huge number of people at risk

OUR heart goes out to Sumon, a fourteen year old boy who lost one of his legs at such a tender age due to drinking arsenic poisoned water. Our reporter, who has recently visited a small village in Noakhali, says that Sumon is not alone, there are hundreds of others awaiting a similar fate. In fact, estimates show that Bangladeshis exposed to high levels of arsenic vary from a low of 2835 million to as high as 77 million, more than half the country's population. The World Health Organisation describes the arsenic contamination of ground water as "the largest mass poisoning of a population in history." But we fail to understand why a comprehensive mitigation programme has not been achieved since almost all concerned have admitted that it is a serious threat to human lives.

The development partners have pumped millions of dollars into various mitigation programmes ever since dangerous level of poison in underground water was detected way back in 1993. More funds are reported to be pouring in but the question is are they reaching the people who have been most affected by this rapidly increasing menace around the country? Several NGOs have been given authority through the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE), to offer low cost services to prevent diseases caused by arsenic poisoning from spreading. One such project for the 'poorest of the poor' requires a group of fifty to donate as much as Tk. 4,500 in advance to receive a safe tubewell. But the government seems to have forgotten that there are many 'poorest of the poor' who would not be able to gather any money, least of all the required amount.

So what happens to them? Should Sumon and his family continue to suffer and be left out from the project that was primarily designed for them. An official has already expressed his helplessness in including the underprivileged in the programme. The government has to adopt a more practical approach; the donors also need to ensure accountability for the money being spent. Otherwise the life threatening danger called arsenic is likely to overcome us and put many more youngsters like Sumon in peril.

## Bureau for consumers

Right decision but the real test will be in how effectively it works

IT is a sad truth that the rights and concerns of consumers do not receive the kind of attention they ought to. The result is that consumers are exposed to erratic market behaviour, which often upsets all their calculations.

The matter does not end there. Lack of protection for the rights of consumers has created a situation in which the market is glutted with substandard, or even hazardous commodities; people do not know what they are buying; doctors are never punished for wrong diagnosis or treatment; and there is nobody to shoulder the responsibility when the utility services crumble.

The Consumers Association of Bangladesh is the only organisation that represents the people. There was no government initiative in the past to highlight the consumers' side of the story through forming a separate body.

So the government has rightly decided to set up a 'Consumer Affairs Bureau' with an eye to protecting the interests of consumers. This will meet a long-felt need of consumers who can do virtually nothing against the traders and businessmen resorting to malpractice and market manipulation as part of their plan of making undue profits.

The bureau, we are told, will be empowered to take action against hoarders responsible for artificial crisis of any commodity. We fully endorse the plan, but would also like to point out that things are going wrong in several areas as far as general buyers are concerned. So the bureau will have to address issues like adulteration and develop a mechanism for countering irrational and unlawful behaviour on the part of professionals and utility service providers. Most people, not aware of their rights, have developed the habit of accepting gross irregularities and even outrageous violation of professional ethics without demur. The law is on their side, but lack of awareness and institutional support are responsible for their vulnerability.

The government has, belatedly though, found the right move. However, much will depend on how the bureau is constituted and run. It must have a neutral character with protection of the rights of consumers being its sole objective.

## Unrest in Iran

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

RECENT unrest in Iran has once again focused global attention and particularly that of the US on Iran. Hardliners in the US administration would like Bush to adopt a policy that Iran can no longer be allowed to function as the world's "foremost state sponsor of terrorism". Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute of Near East would like to place Iran firmly at the pinnacle of the "Axis of Evil" because of the mix of WMD, together with frenetic state sponsorship of terrorism and sheltering of al-Qaida leadership figures (*Heart of the Axis* May 29th). Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has already criticised Iran for its permissive attitude towards al-Qaida operatives, an allegation totally rejected by Iran which insists that Iran is relentless in its pursuit of terrorists of all shades.

It is interesting to note that once again Iranian students have captured the centre stage in what could eventuate into a regime change situation. One may recall that in the nineteen seventies uprising against Reza Shah Pahlavi in which armed groups like Mujahadeen-e-Khalgh-e-Iran and Fedayeen-e-Khalgh-e-Iran (drawing sustenance from Islam and Marxism respectively) recruited their members from the universities. Indeed during the 1971-1977 period students became increasingly involved in political activities. Today's student movement is not an extension of the student movement of the seventies simply because two thirds of the Iranians "either were not born at the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution or were too young to remember that dreadful event" (When a Nation's Patience Runs Out-Shaheen Fatem-June 15th). The support the students are receiving now from their parents and other layers of society is a sort of penance for bringing in the clerical rule and no less due to mismanagement and harmful economic and social policies being followed, unemployment of the youth, and stifling political environment. So the students of Iran are as counter-revolutionary as the youth of Eastern European countries or USSR during the dying days of the Soviet rule. Besides Iran's demographic structure the youth account for sixty percent of the total population, a unique phenomenon in Iran's history.

In Western perception Iran is

accused of three gross sins – pursuit of nuclear ambition, support of terrorism, and interfering in the reconstruction of post-Saddam Iraq. Jeffrey Simpson of Canada's *Globe and Mail* wrote "Nuclear weapons. Support for terror. A regime run by mullahs. It adds up to a country that Bush administration is predisposed to dislike". Ironically Iran's nuclear programme began under Reza Shah Pahlavi but was suspended following the Islamic Revolution. The programme was reluctantly resumed by late Ayatollah Khomeini during the eighties because he regarded nuclear weapons as immoral. With Russian and Chinese help Iran began to develop a civilian

school of government at Harvard advises that in order to succeed the US should work quietly with President Putin and avoid pressuring Moscow. Beyond demanding that Tehran sign IAEA Inspection Protocol Moscow must insist that Iran returns the spent fuel to Russia and join international pressure group regarding insistence on Iran to abandon its uranium enrichment and plutonium production programmes. Russia, suggests Brenda Shaffer, should also encourage its scientists and engineers in Iran to provide information on their

projects.

Next item in the culpability statement is Iran's alleged support for terrorism. US State department's 2002 report describes Iran as the most active sponsor of terrorism. The report cites Iran's backing of Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and PFLP. These groups allegedly received money, weapons and shelter from Iran. In recent past Bush administration has accused Iran of harbouring and colluding with Al-Qaida operatives. This allegation is difficult to establish as the Bush administration is yet to prove linkage between Al-Qaida and Saddam regime to the satisfaction of the international community.

Blair of selling half-truths and exaggerations to the British government and the public. British public may not be as supportive of Blair as Americans are of Bush when he pushes under the carpet the vexing question of Saddam Hussein possessing WMD which was the *raison d'être* of Iraq invasion. US case of Iran's complicity with terrorists have been chronicled many times by US government officials. Louis Freeh, former Director of FBI publicly stated "Hezbollah, the exclusive terrorist agent of Iran, has killed more Americans than any other group besides Al-Qaida".

The third issue in the charge sheet is about Iran's meddling in the

In a world where even the route to the UN is getting blurred, where US triumphalism has primacy over security concerns of lesser powers, where traditional concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity are being given new meaning, one would hope that the Iranian problem would be solved by the Iranians themselves.

nuclear structure. It has now been revealed that two additional nuclear facilities have been built. President Khatami's recent disclosure that Iran has been mining uranium and pursuing technologies to reprocess spent nuclear fuel has rung warning bells in Washington. Iran has also declared that the spent fuel, which can be used to make nuclear weapons, may not be returned to Russia. The worrisome situation has been compounded by the existence of uranium enrichment facility and plutonium production plant making fuel supply from Russia eventually unnecessary. This has upset Russia goading her to announce that Russia will supply nuclear fuel to Iran (still needed by Iran) only if she pledges to return the spent fuel. Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov advised that it would be in Iran's own interest for all arrangements to be transparent and controllable in order to avoid ambiguity or divergent interpretations. Centre for Defence Information based in Washington D.C. in an assessment (of June 12, 2003) concluded that Iran has decided to develop its civilian infrastructure to a point where a military applied nuclear programme could be quickly put in place. Iran could exercise two plausible options: covertly produce fissile materials capable of producing nuclear weapons or withdraw from NPT citing "extra-ordinary circumstances".

From Iran's point of view poten-

School of government at Harvard advises that in order to succeed the US should work quietly with President Putin and avoid pressuring Moscow. Beyond demanding that Tehran sign IAEA Inspection Protocol Moscow must insist that Iran returns the spent fuel to Russia and join international pressure group regarding insistence on Iran to abandon its uranium enrichment and plutonium production programmes. Russia, suggests Brenda Shaffer, should also encourage its scientists and engineers in Iran to provide information on their

Iran is a clerically ruled Shia majority country. Al-Qaida subscribes to a fundamentalist version of Sunni Islam. Besides Al-Qaida controlled Afghanistan and Iran were mortal enemies. Common enmity towards the US could have created a common bond between non-state actors. But it is difficult to readily accept Iran-Al Qaida linkage without proof beyond any doubt in order to avoid a situation now being faced by Tony Blair as a result of Robin Cook-Claire Short testimony to the British parliamentary enquiry body to which both former Ministers accused Tony

reconstruction of Iraq. Though it has not yet been possible to draw up a coherent and immaculate context and lineage of the alleged meddling it is possible that Iran may consider, Iraq being an immediate neighbour and an enemy in the past, any evolving situation in Iraq as a matter of legitimate concern for her own security. In this context one should be cautious in his belief that just because both the countries have Shia majority population Iran would have an automatic advantage in establishing her influence in the war devastated and chaotic Iraq. Ethnically Iraqis are Arabs while Iranians are Persians. They fought an eight-year war. Iraqi clerics have not embraced Velayet-e-Faqih, the doctrine from which Iranian clerics draw their legitimacy and exercise power. In today's US ruled Iraq where even the UN and the Europeans have to line up for entry permit it is difficult to imagine how an Iran in turmoil can get a foothold in Iraq in the face of unrelaxed American vigil.

Prudence would dictate that Bush administration may wish to deal with Iran peaceably instead of threatening Iran with rapacious lapidary of its military might. Convulsed expression of might which can have cataclysmic consequences may be seen by the world as being viscerally communal. Despite protestations to the contrary the fact remains that both Afghanistan and Iraq are Muslim



## Peace can only be achieved by understanding

MEGASTHENES

THE Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea, has been in the news for some time for some very wrong, possibly even ominous reasons. Now that the little matter of Iraq is all but history, the DPRK and possibly also Iran may emerge as the next landmarks on the roadmap to a brave new and hopefully safer world. The Iraq conflict -- in retrospect -- would seem to have been largely about regime change. WMDs -- the ostensible and much vaunted casus belli which were said to pose such an imminent threat to international peace and security that military intervention, with or without UN imprimatur, could not be deferred to achieve a peaceful resolution of legitimate concerns -- are still embarrassingly elusive. Authoritative casualty figures on the Iraq side -- of civilians and combatants -- should afford an idea of the human costs of regime change effected from without. Time -- a healer and a legaliser -- alone will tell whether this will have been worth it.

The DPRK is believed to possess nuclear weaponry and also the means of their delivery -- an acute security concern to some States. The proximate protagonists, the two Koreas, Japan and China, have close historic, cultural and ethnic links. Buddhism and also artistic influences are said to have travelled from South Asia to China and then on to Korea and Japan.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Shang dynasty in China was supplanted by the Chou dynasty. Ki-Tse, a dignitary of the ousted regime, with 5000 or so followers, left his country and went eastwards to Korea and founded a kingdom. There is the view that his descendants may have moved further east to Japan. Some archaeological findings would tend to corroborate this, although any suggestion that the Japanese people are descended from Koreans is anathema to many in Japan even to-

day. There are undercurrents in Japan's relations with the Koreans. Japan's suzerainty over Korea, followed by outright annexation early in the last century and subsequent rule that was far from benevolent, have left scars and memories that still rankle in the minds of many.

Nuclear weapons, whether possessed by the DPRK or any other country are above all else an abomination. These cannot, of course, be disintegrated but nuclear disarmament has been on the international agenda for decades. The very first resolution of the UN General Assembly in January 1946 had called for nuclear disarmament. In an advisory opinion in July 1996, the Inter-

The DPRK is not the most alluring of places to visit. Nor does it seem to have a very effective or palatable system of governance. It is, however, a sovereign member-State of the UN, with all the rights and responsibilities that appertain to a sovereign State. An awkward question thus becomes inescapable. If thousands or hundreds of nuclear warheads are indispensable for the legitimate security concerns of some States, how in all fairness can the possible possession of a handful of such weapons for the same reason by the DPRK be unacceptable? The nuclear non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), the mainstay of the global nuclear regime, is cited to buttress arguments against any nuclear

however, did. It may appear incredible today, indeed the imagination boggles, that at that time the US, under the Baruch Plan, actually proposed that this prodigious source of energy be harnessed for peaceful purposes for the benefit of all humankind and placed under some form of international control. The plan did not, of course, materialise due in large measure to the absence of mutual trust and confidence -- so essential for any such endeavour -- between the US and the then USSR.

Why should a country like the DPRK, impoverished and virtually isolated, desperately short of even basic necessities like food, go for the nuclear option? Nuclear weap-

generosity and imagination of the powers that count. In the Cold War era, the US State Department's Sovietologists constituted an elite corps. The *crème de la crème* of this elite included George F. Kennan, who once wrote, "If we are to regard ourselves as a grown-up nation...then we must, as the Biblical phrase goes, put away childish things; and among these childish things the first to go, in my opinion, should be self-idealisation and the search for absolutes in world affairs: for absolute security, absolute amity, absolute harmony".

It has been some 25,000 years since humankind has left the habitat of the jungle. The time is certainly overdue also to shed the habits of

sonal level: "It is hard to believe that a man is telling the truth, when you know that you would lie, if you were in his place". This thesis, with some adaptation, could conceivably apply to interactions between States as well, because at the end of the day interstate relations come down to interactions between individuals and peoples. Hence, of course, the importance of confidence-building measures between States.

As regards effort, differences are so patent in a nation's approach to war and peace. In war, nations are prepared to "spend anything, sacrifice everything and to give all". To organise peace there is not the same sense of exigency and thus the tendency to make haste slowly. The talk is invariably of an initial step, cautious beginnings, a graduated process or step by step strategy. The result, often and predictably enough, is "an unending sequence of beginnings that do not begin". A true peace, as Einstein put it, cannot be kept by force; but can only be achieved by understanding. Woodrow Wilson sought a "peace without victory". The Prophet Isaiah of old foresaw a time when the "wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together".

It is unlikely that Isaiah's prophecy will come to pass tomorrow or in the near future. Over a hundred years ago though, Longfellow had concisely and in verse prescribed a course toward this end, a course that applies even more so today: "Were half the power that fills the world with terror. Were half the wealth bestowed on camps and courts. Given to redeem the human mind from error. There were no need of arsenals and forts".



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national Court of Justice unequivocally stated that there "exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control". Progress toward this "consummation devoutly to be wished", has been at a sedate, even glacial, pace. Such weapons are thus not proscribed. Nuclear weapons are claimed to be a deterrent to war; they kept the peace in Europe during the Cold War and are doing the same in South Asia today. Perhaps. What is true, beyond cavil and conjecture, is their power of absolute and indiscriminate devastation and annihilation and long term adverse effects. Such weapons may be a bane or a boon or both but none has disavowed the ultimate objective of their elimination.

programme of the DPRK. This may not be altogether tenable because the NPT contains a clear proviso, Art. X.I, by which a State-party may opt out after giving a notice of three months. The DPRK did give such an intimation, which was not specifically invoked or revoked, several years back, if I recall correctly.

Nuclear weapons -- as also other WMDs -- are abhorrent, it would seem, not so much for their inherent power of wanton slaughter and mayhem; rather it has more to do with who or which country possesses them. When the US had a monopoly on nuclear weaponry, the States of New York or California, non-producers of such weapons, felt more reassured than threatened by the fact that the States of Tennessee and New Mexico were producers. Neighbouring Canada or Britain did not perceive any sense of menace or unease either. Distant USSR,

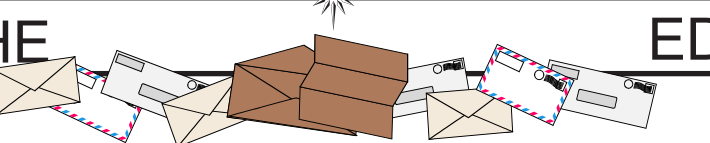
ons are expensive to produce and also to maintain. Three reasons suggest themselves: 1. The DPRK intends to understand Chengiz Khan and the Mongols of old. Most improbable. 2. It is deemed a security imperative, especially after Iraq. Not unlikely if they perceive the US and the UK as aggressive and irrational powers, determined to impose a conformity on States that are militarily vulnerable. 3. Such weapons would afford a leverage to be parlayed into economic benefits which the DPRK desperately needs. Quite possible.

It would be infinitely preferable, more cost effective and also predictable in its consequences -- one should think -- to meet the DPRK's real requirements through peaceful dialogue rather than to resort to what may be construed as minatory pressures. Security guarantees as well as an effective aid package are surely not beyond the resources,

the jungle. General of the Army George C. Marshall, as commonsensical, stout-hearted and honourable a soldier as any that ever wore the uniform, observed wryly in his biennial report as Chief of Army Staff in 1945: "If man does find the solution for world peace it will be the most revolutionary reversal of his record we have ever known". Why should this be so when countless good men and women of all nations surely dream the same dreams of lasting peace and happiness? In large measure this paradox may be attributed to two reasons: a lack of mutual trust and confidence between and among nations, and perhaps also a want of earnest and unremitting effort for peace.

The sage of Baltimore, H.L. Mencken, in one of his less acerbic pronouncements, once lucidly explained the nature of mutual trust and confidence at the individual and per-

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Stop destruction of public property and calling hartal

I have been so shocked and I find no language to condemn those who come out on the streets and burn down and damage public buses and private transports on flimsy grounds. Just the other day, the burning and damaging of buses would cost the exchequer nothing less than take one crore, as estimated by the BRTC. But as I estimate it would be manifold for they have not calculated the subsequent damage of the Volvo bus. Could you tell me what is the benefit to the benefactors or to those who get involved in such

colossal loss to the nation? And what solution they are giving to the public by calling 'hartal' every now and then for their individual or party politics? Are we any way benefited by such unreasonable and unrealistic stoppage of work or communication? Do they think their goal is achieved by these unpopular activities? NO, never; we do not bring out our transports and keep our shutters closed during hartal only to save our properties from damage and looting-- not to support hartal.

Where are those leaders who promised not to call any strike and those who shed crocodile tears for our cause by destroying our properties and obstructing us

from going to work?  
**AF Rahman**  
Dhaka

### "What is Hamas?"

Recently I have been noticing a lot of letters in The Daily Star regarding the Palestinian movement known as Hamas. However, I have seen a lack of factual information when it comes to discussing this organisation. That is why I have decided to present some history about this organisation as well as my personal opinions about this situation.

Hamas (in Arabic meaning zeal or courage) was formed in 1987 from a branch of the Muslim

Brotherhood. It was originally developed for community work by distributing aid and food that was given mostly by foreign NGOs. Hamas soon began to move into the political front and used their community service as a means to spread their beliefs. Their primary goal is to replace Israel with an Islamic Palestinian State. They have run candidates in Palestinian elections and they have a lot of support from the Palestinian people. The organisation itself feels that it shows courage and defiance in the face of western powers, mainly Israel and the US. However these countries feel that this is a terrorist organisation that kills the innocent for no reason.

My personal opinion in this situation can be best described by a quote from President J.F. Kennedy that said "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." To me this means that there needs to be cease-fire on both sides and peace talks needs to begin with all groups at the table, including Hamas. The Bush Administration needs to lose their arrogance and sit down with Hamas if the US wants to achieve anything in the Middle East. Unless this is done, violence on both sides will continue.

**Philadelphia Trent**  
Markham, Ontario, Canada  
**Promotion in**

### nationalised banks

Something is somewhere grossly wrong in the promotion of nationalised banks. It is an open secret that an officer has to pay taka fifty thousand to two lakhs if he wants to be promoted in a nationalised bank. Bank officials not only charge money from the borrowers but realise a handsome amount shamelessly from their own subordinate officers. A racket is working for the purpose. Government can verify the matter through its intelligence agencies.

To get rid of this malaise it is suggested that Ministry of Finance or Bangladesh Bank should frame the principles of promotion and constitute promotion committees

with some retired judges who can be paid for their services by the concerned banks at rates prescribed by the government. Otherwise the high bank officials will continue to play havoc with promotion of low and mid-level bank officers for their own selfish ends.

**Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury**  
Mohakhali, Dhaka

### Evangelicals and their agenda

Rev Robinson provided a balanced world wide Christian view regarding the mission of Christianity. Most churches in the US opposed the war on religious and humanitarian grounds. The fundamentalist Christians, with their Book of Revelation and politics of self-

fulfilling prophecies spearheaded the pro-war lobby.

I have to agree with Rev Robinson that these fundamentalist Christians are out to convert everyone (including Jews, Catholics and fellow Protestants) to their own church. Most of these churches are also preachers of misogyny, anti-Semitism and white supremacy. Their message, simply put, reflects hate. How profoundly copycat of their Jihadi/Shiv Sena brethren of South Asia! After all, Shibir/Sangh Parivar/KKK all come from the single worldview that their ideology is superior to the rest of humanity!

**Yahya**  
USA