

Bangladeshis may not need to register with the INS anymore!

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

In early January of this year, when Attorney General John Ashcroft added Bangladesh to the list of terror-risk nations, requiring Bangladeshis males of over 16 in the US to register with the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS), the writer wrote a protest letter to his U.S. Congressman Dr. Rush Holt. In response, Dr. Holt wrote a letter to Attorney General John Ashcroft on January 23, 2003, and sent the writer a copy. The letter read: "Dear Attorney General Ashcroft: It has come to my attention that the Department of Justice (DOJ) has included Bangladesh on the list of countries under the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), requiring male nationals 16 years or older to undergo a special registration procedure through the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS)."

"I understand your concern for national security and support your efforts to combat terrorism. However, I have not seen any evidence to support the decision to place Bangladesh on the NSEERS list and therefore must inquire why the DOJ would do so. I am concerned Bangladesh citizens are being grouped with nations known to harbour or support terrorist organisations. Your decision to include Bangladesh will adversely affect thousands of Bangladeshi students studying in the U.S. and could stigmatise many of my constituents who have taken an active role in community affairs."

"Racial, national, ethnic or religious profiling can be dangerous and powerful, and should only be used sparingly in emergencies, if at all. I request a detailed explanation of your decision to add Bangladesh to the NSEERS list and any evidence used in making this determination. I would also like to request a list of the specific criteria you use to determine which countries are placed on the NSEERS list. If it is necessary to present evidence in a classified setting, I would be willing to make such arrangements. I thank you for your cooperation in this matter. Sincerely, Rush Holt."

On July 18, Dr. Rush Holt sent

LETTER FROM AMERICA

The purpose of this write-up is not to take credit, for there is none to be taken. Many other Bangladeshis may have done the same thing, and the Department of Homeland Security (DOH) may have substituted an ineffective, irksome procedure with one less so, on its own. The point is there are legal recourses available in the US for protesting unjust laws.

me the following letter: "Dear Dr. Ahmed: Thank you for contacting me regarding the inclusion of Bangladesh on a list of countries whose citizens are required to register with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. I appreciate hearing from you and I apologise for the delay in my reply."

"As you are aware, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has implemented a policy that requires men 16 and older who are not citizens to register with U.S. immigration officials if they're from one of the several mostly Muslim Middle Eastern nations. This requirement to register with INS does not apply to U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees, asylum applicants, asylum grantees, or diplomats. Opponents of this policy believe that the registration programme has resulted in the unjust detention of a number of law-abiding individuals. The INS argues that this programme is a necessary security measure and that INS officials only detain people who have violated the law, including overstaying a visa or being an undocumented alien."

"Please know that I understand and respect the concerns you have raised regarding the effects of these requirements. I, too, am concerned that immigrants from Bangladesh, a politically moderate and democratic nation, may be stigmatised by their grouping with such nations as Syria, Libya and North Korea, which are known to harbour and support terrorism. I addressed these concerns in a letter to U. S. Attorney General John Ashcroft dated January 23, 2003, which I have enclosed. When I receive a response from his office, I will be sure to let you know. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell has

sought to reassure Bangladesh about the state of bilateral relations: 'Bangladesh represents an eloquent, compelling and greatly needed voice for moderation in the world...The United States deeply appreciates Bangladesh's support in the global anti-terrorism campaign.'

"Some Bangladeshi officials have stated that trade and commerce could be adversely affected as a result of Bangladesh being placed on this list. In partial response, you may be interested to know that on May 9th the Bush administration proposed a new free trade framework that potentially could include Bangladesh. The proposed Middle East Trade and Engagement Act of 2003 would provide for duty-free access for goods from up to 18 qualifying Muslim-majority states through 2011. The purpose would be to promote trade, investment, democratisation, and stability in beneficiary countries. To take advantage of the programme, Muslim-majority states would have to meet certain requirements, such as political pluralism, free and fair elections, rule of law, press and political freedoms, human rights, labour and environmental standards and anti-corruption measures."

"While it is important that we try to protect the American people from terrorism, we must also preserve freedom and our democratic values. Once again, thank you for sharing your thoughts with me. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of further assistance on this or any other matter. (In hand writing) Thank you for writing to me. Sincerely, Rush Holt."

According a recent *Washington Post* report, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is pre-

paring to abandon its "special registration" programme, which requires male "visitors" over 16 years old from 24 primarily Muslim countries and North Korea to appear at immigration offices to be finger printed, photographed and questioned. Critics had argued that the system had alienated law-abiding visitors while doing little to enhance the country's security. The *Washington Post* report titled, "US set to revise how it tracks some visitors: Muslims have protested use of registration," quotes a government source as saying, "A decision to end the programme is likely and

could be announced within the next few days." A Homeland Security spokesman and other officials said that a new border control effort, set to begin on January 5, the US Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology programme (US VISIT), would play a similar role in monitoring visitors. This programme would also use photographs and fingerprints to log entry and exit points.

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the same thing, and the Department of Homeland Security (DOH) may have substituted an ineffective, irksome procedure with one less so, on its own. The point is there are legal recourses available in the US for protesting unjust laws. If the writer and his congressman contributed a tiny amount towards alleviating the harassment of Bangladeshi visitors to the US, the effort was well worth it. A word about our congressman Dr. Rush Holt. At one time Dr. Holt was the head of Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory. He is one of those geniuses who won the general knowledge TV show, "Jeopardy," five days in a row (maximum possible)! We have a bumper sticker to boast about him: "Our Congressman IS a Rocket Scientist!" Bangladeshis in his constituency love Dr. Rush Holt, because, as the above letters prove, he is and has always been a true friend of Bangladesh.



HIV/AIDS: A ticking time bomb?

DR. ZAKIR HUSAIN

There is a prevailing sense of comfort in the currently reported low incidence of HIV (Human Immuno-deficiency Virus) infection and AIDS (Acute Immuno-deficiency Disease Syndrome) in Bangladesh. But this is dangerous because the disease is fatal, HIV incidence and prevalence is high in countries around Bangladesh, there is no immunity against the virus. All predisposing conditions are present and public awareness is still not high.

Yes, there is a National AIDS Committee, a National Programme and Strategy, and Plan of Action for HIV/AIDS prevention and control. Necessary as these are, the effective outreach and impact of these formal mechanisms remain doubtful. Public information and education activities remain sporadic; actual impact of present information dissemination on motivation and behavioral change is not evaluated. There still is an air of denial and or complacency around the incidence and prevalence of HIV. Unjustified comfort is placed on culture and tradition as protective forces while it is widely known that sexual transmission of infections is widespread and rising. Thus present reported number of HIV infections and AIDS cases could well be misleading, merely the tip of an iceberg, and certainly is no insurance against the possibility of a future epidemic of HIV and AIDS.

The experience of India, Thailand, Myanmar: that devastating epidemic of sub-Saharan Africa are strong reminders of what a climate of denial, complacency, and lack of preparedness and early action can result in. Learning and taking the cue from countries around Bangladesh, there is a very strong case for intensification of prevention and control activities with all earnestness and energy irrespective of the current reported level of infections: equally strong case for adopting innovative and appropriate strategies that suit the situation of Bangladesh society and people but not making compromise on proven and prevailing facts, a real need to monitor closely not only the inputs provided but more importantly the outcomes of all prevention and control activities. A comprehensive action programme will have many components; some of that list will have relative priority on evidence of their net outcomes and impact rather than on external direction or high visibility. Some of these measures are mentioned below.

HIV infection is preventable by information and education: As there is no vaccine yet, no effective cure either, education and motiva-

tion are the main instruments. Information on HIV touches very private and intimate personal matters. To be effective information and education must move dissemination a step further towards belief and motivation. Information must be accurate, consistent, and delivered in ways that does more than passively give information but also make an impact on the receiver and peers; stimulate thoughts on held ideas and eventually change belief and behaviour. Information has to be clear and factually driven, not clouded with compromise. Mention of words such as condom and safe sex is still confined to seminars and are largely avoided in public and classroom communication. Adolescents and young adults are a major segment of population who will soon enter reproductive and sexually active stage of life; this group is also exceptionally vulnerable and benefit most from education and empowerment that correct knowledge only brings. Public

denied knowledge; knowledge and information is power, ignorance is not. Condom use should be mandatory.

Protection from HIV and other sexually spread infections are relatively simple and straightforward. Use of condoms may be made far more convenient and free by improving access; machine dispenser of condoms may be placed at as many strategic places as possible, their use monitored and changes made as necessary.

Not by government alone: HIV prevention and control succeeded nowhere when left to government departments and bureaucrats alone. As stated, it is a personal belief and behaviour issue where government functionaries even if designated exclusively are not best trained or equipped to bring about necessary changes. Governments can provide policy direction based on evidence, technical and financial support based on broad strategies, but other partners who have effective outreach and penetration

The same goes for some TV spots that are either so vague or so foggy that miss the object of the message. A clear message can be disseminated in a subtle manner but need also be understood without unnecessary camouflage.

Annual AIDS day parades are colourful ceremonial occasions before TV camera; how much these contribute to raise public awareness remains open to doubts. Each day is really AIDS day; awareness and action need go hand in hand. If there is anything to be celebrated, it is the good and responsible sexual practice and safety becoming a way of life, when ignorance is replaced by power of knowledge, when personal responsibility to protect the family and community becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Serious behavioral research is suggested, the findings of which need to inform the policy makers and producers of publicity campaigns. Anthropological evidence is available and need not invent the

vatic counseling without fear or prejudice. Integration with treatment and social care will enhance the credibility and acceptance of the prevention programme itself. To those who are content to accept the status quo, all these seem utopian, easier said than done. But we have to look only just beyond our borders to see how Thailand dealt with the serious problem of stigma and rejection of HIV and AIDS sufferers. Countries and communities within countries have shown examples of how to integrate care and counseling, how to remove rejection and condemnation, how to remove prejudice and include compassion. HIV infection is even less contagious than many other infections that have been cared for in hospitals and homes. It is a matter of education and removing fear and misinformation from minds.

Education will help reassure but some courageous individuals and committed outfits in civil society will help too. Commitment in this

Public opinion or self-assumed prejudice. Being representatives of public, their duty is to serve and accommodate the needs and convenience of all, not few, of those who sent them to those offices. The same goes for all other public representatives, including the parliament. As to the civil society, rather than float with the floatsome of superstition or bask in the lights of posh seminars and conferences, some of them must come out of their self-woven cocoons, and stand ready to be counted.

End notes

Considering the current HIV/AIDS situation in neighboring States of India (with highest number of HIV/AIDS outside Africa), in Nepal, Myanmar, and Thailand, Bangladesh has no room for comfort or complacency with current low incidence and prevalence. Conditions that favour spread of HIV infection exist in Bangladesh; when combined with low public awareness and lack of mobilisation and motivation to fight this menace aggressively, Bangladesh might be sitting on that proverbial time bomb that is ticking away silently but relentlessly. Lessons are to be learnt from sub-Saharan Africa, India and Nepal where initial denial and hesitancy delayed determined response. Culture and tradition might help but unfortunately do not confer much immunity to HIV. While fear of HIV may do some good but fear and stigma without power and will to prevent or care do serious harm. With no effective vaccine in sight, HIV prevention still is a function of change of personal behaviour and beliefs. That is why HIV prevention and control is a societal responsibility, a challenge to be overcome by social movement for action and not by a government health programme alone.

If the people, the parliament, the government, and the international community believe, as they indeed have to, that HIV and AIDS represent a serious security threat to countries and peoples in greatest need of development, does it not make enormous sense to meet the threat of HIV and AIDS by winning the war of prevention and pre-emption? The other day, Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, challenged the international community to do enough to tackle the HIV/AIDS, which he called the (real) weapon of mass destruction. If Bangladesh is perched on a time bomb of HIV waiting to explode (as some believe it is), are we all willing and able to defuse that ticking time bomb?

Dr. Zakir Husain is former Director, Programme WHO South East Region.

In defence of Corruption Perception Index

SHAMAILA MAHBUB

COMBATING corruption is considered a crucial step in stimulating economic growth and addressing issues like sustainable development and poverty. It's time to enable discussion on corruption in Bangladesh, moving from the realm of anecdotal hearsay to informed discourse. Practical measures need to be identified to significantly reduce the incidents of corruption prevailing in our country. At this juncture, instead of disputing facts and figures, we need to focus on lessons learnt from our past malfunctions.

Transparency International has been publishing its Corruption Perception Index (CPI) since 1995. Bangladesh has been included in the index four times: 4th most corrupt in 1996 and the most corrupt in 2001, 2002 and 2003.

CPI 1996

The findings of CPI 1996 were that Bangladesh was the 4th most corrupt (out of 54 countries included in the index). The media in Bangladesh barely covered the news. However, the scenario was completely different in 2001.

CPI 2001

TI released its CPI 2001 on June 27, 2001. On June 28, the Bangla and English newspapers carried it as headline news. The government of the day was about to be dissolved due to impending general elections. The country was in an election mood and the campaigning had already started unofficially. The fact that Bangladesh was identified as the most corrupt nation, ignoring the fact that only 91 countries were on the index, became a highly charged point of contention among politicians, academics and commentators.

CPI 2003

TI released its CPI 2003 on October 7, 2003, which ranked Bangladesh as the most corrupt country out of 133 countries for the third consecutive time. Following the publication, Shah AMS Kibria wrote an article criticizing the methodology and terming it as essentially subjective and seriously flawed. He further alleged that these perceptions were essentially subjective opinions based on unverified newspaper reports, preconceived notions, prejudices, gossips in expatriate drawing rooms and, above all, hearsay. The allegation appears to be untenable.

The statistical work to this index is carried out annually at the University of Passau. In addition, the International Steering Committee, comprising prominent statisticians and economists, extensively reviews the CPI methodology. The framework document containing the in-depth methodology of the CPI is available at the Transparency International website. But, for the understanding of the general readers, I would like to outline a few basic points.

It is important to note that the CPI is a composite index, making use of surveys of business people

and assessments by country analysts. In the case of Bangladesh, that included both local and expatriate residents in the country. The TI Framework Document 2003 on CPI states, "Unbiased, hard data continue to be difficult to obtain and usually raise problematic questions with respect to validity." By building on a range of comparative data capturing the experience and perceptions of those who are directly confronted with the realities of corruption, and with the assistance of international team of economists and statisticians, TI has compiled what is widely considered to be a highly effective indicator of the extent of corruption in the country.

CPI 2003 drew on 17 different polls and surveys, originating from 13 independent institutions. The index is thus not based on gossip or hearsay, as alleged. Rather, in the case of Bangladesh, eight surveys of six independent agencies of repute (e.g. World Economic Forum, World Bank, Economist Intelligence Unit, Columbia University, World Markets Research Centre) were used as sources. Only surveys with robust standards would qualify for inclusion. I would like to further mention that the survey of World Economic Forum was conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), which is done publicly. So, the allegation of the perceptions being preconceived notions or gossips in expatriate drawing rooms does not hold good.

The strength of the CPI lies in the fact that a combination of data sources is integrated into a single index, which enhances the reliability of each individual figure. Countries featuring in at least three surveys were considered for inclusion in the 2003 index. The idea of combining data is that the non-performance of one data source can be balanced out by the inclusion of at least two other sources. Thus the probability of misrepresenting a country is seriously lowered.

The CPI along with the Bribe Payers Index (which addresses the propensity of companies and risk analysts, both resident and non-resident, to paying bribes) have contributed to a large extent to understanding the prevalence of corruption around the world. The CPI which reflects the bureaucratic and political corruption needs to be amply recognised in generating a greater awareness about this malaise.

Public opinion and pressure will have to be relentless in order to bring about significant change. No matter what, the scourge of corruption is rooted in the criminalisation of politics. Political leaders maintain an indifferent look while many of them directly partake in exacerbating it, thereby wreaking mayhem on the polity and economy. In such cases, counter institutions like the anti-corruption commission and the ombudsman must be instituted to combat corruption.

Shamaila Mahbub is a researcher.



All health information to keep you up to date

Simple tips on 'back pain'

Almost every person, at some stage in his or her life, usually suffers more or less from back pain. This can be caused by a wide range of different backdrops, including abdominal, renal (kidney) and of course, 'spinal problems'. The onset could be sudden/linked to trauma or slow. Well, if you have severe or chronic pain, you should immediately discuss with a doctor and a thorough screening will be essential. But unfortunately, there are lots of misconceptions around this back pain.

ABC of back pain

* Bed rest is not the best way to cure back pain. A bad back can be so sore for the first week that nothing other than bed rest can be tolerated, but after a while, mobility is important when the really acute phase is over. Some study reveals that if it is worse after rest, an inflammatory cause is likely.
* Most back pains ultimately do not need any surgery. In many cases, back pain is temporary and will naturally heal itself, otherwise other simple measures like physiotherapy and massage may help.

* It's not always true that X-rays, CAT scans or MRI can identify the real cause. Sometimes, diagnosing back pain can be very difficult. If the problem appears to be a disc, from time to time orthopaedic surgeons recommend a discomogram, as this not only gives the picture of a disrupted disc, but also the pain source.

* Back pain is thought to be hereditary; so if your parents suffered, then take extra precautions.

Some very simple tips

* Keep away from putting on weight
* According to some specialists, exercise on a regular basis -- walking and swimming -- are helpful to strengthen the back. There are also roles for rehabilitation exercises.
* Try to learn (from doctors/qualified physiotherapists) safe lifting skills; during lifting, always bend your knees and keep your back straight.
* If you smoke -- give up smoking (it restricts blood flow to the spine).

Did you know?

Yelling too loudly too often can cause lesions on the vocal cords. Vocal cord means two thin folds of tissues within the larynx that vibrate as air passes between them, producing sounds that are the basis of speech.