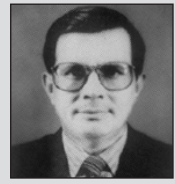


Prevention is always better than cure



ABDUL BAYES

WHEN we were celebrating the social development statistic that roughly over four-fifths of Bangladeshis have access to pure drinking water -- hence we were up a step on the pyramid of progress -- a news item suddenly saddened us all, stalled our celebrations, and drowned us in deep despair. The news was that many of the tube-wells that supply pure drinking water in rural areas have arsenic.

As we all know, arsenic (As) poisoning has become a major public health problem and an environmental issue in Bangladesh. Contamination of groundwater by As has been reported from many countries including Australia, Chile, China, Hungary, Mexico, Peru, Thailand, Vietnam, and USA, but the most seriously hit areas were identified to be Bangladesh and West Bengal (India). One of the most important natural misfortunes is said to be the contamination of ground water by arsenic in the deltaic region, particularly in the Gangetic alluvium of Bangladesh.

It is reported that most of the ground water, which is widely used for drinking and irrigation, is highly contaminated with As. Many research reports have been in circulation and we can cite, and possibly paraphrase a few, just to make a point. Ground water from shallow tube-wells in 60 out of 64

BENEATH THE SURFACE

It would be judicious on the part of the policy makers to initiate a country-wide study on arsenic contamination in rice, and its effects on human health. Quite obviously, we cannot abandon groundwater irrigation as it is used to water boro paddy in the dry season. We also cannot give up cultivation of MVs like BRRI Dhan-29 with very high level of yield. In case that happens probably millions will have to face starvation. Thus the choice before us is between the disease and the deaths. Those who advocate an abandonment of the cultivation of HYV rice are, in fact, suggesting cutting the head to remove the headache, or accepting death to remove the disease.

districts in Bangladesh has been reported to be contaminated with varying quantities of arsenic. Based on the total population of Bangladesh in 1999, it was estimated that the number of people exposed to As concentrations above 0.05 mg/L (the Bangladesh standard for acceptable limit of As) was 28-35 million, and the number of those exposed to more than 0.01 mg/L (WHO guideline value) was 46-57 million.

Until recently, the most attention -- in fact the only attention -- was given to the contamination of drinking water by As. But recent researches have pointed out that irrigation with arsenic contaminated groundwater may lead to elevated levels of arsenic in the soil. And plants grown in such soil could lead to increased levels of As in the crops, such as rice and vegetables. The findings are tentative and, to be conclusive, need to be validated with credible research, based on large samples and accurate measurements.

But the problem, if it exists, seems to be appearing at a time when: (a) most of the ground water (mostly from shallow aquifers) withdrawn in Bangladesh is utilized for agriculture; (b) to meet the growing demand for rice, shallow tube-wells are being used in the dry season for irrigat-

ing boro rice that now accounts for half of the total rice production and (c) on an average, a Bangladeshi adult drinks about 4 liters of water a day and consumes about 450 grams of rice. Assuming that water and rice have 0.05ppm and 0.5ppm arsenic respectively, the dietary intake from water and rice would be 380ug (200 from water and 180 from rice). This is about double the FAO/WHO limit of dietary intake of arsenic. This does not take into account the arsenic intake from other sources such as leafy vegetables, meat and milk, since the animals feed on rice straw which may also be contaminated with As.

In a nationwide survey, conducted by various Bangladeshi and international institutions, it was found that the concentration of arsenic in rice grains varied between 0.04ppm to 1.1ppm. About one-fifth of the rice grain samples had arsenic levels greater than 0.5ppm. In another survey, with limited sample, the CIMMYT in Bangladesh found that BRRI Dhan-29, the most popular rice variety grown in the dry season with ground water irrigation, contains the highest amount of As. That ground water irrigation is the villain of the piece has not yet been proved conclusively. The concentration of shallow tube wells is the highest

in the northwestern region where the As contamination of ground water is low, while in the Faridpur and the Noakhali regions, where the As contamination is very high, the major source of irrigation is surface water.

In any case, we wonder whether our policy makers are aware of the devastation looming large on our horizon if the rice grains get contaminated with As. It would be judicious on the part of the policy makers to initiate a country-wide study on arsenic contamination in rice, and its effects on human health. Quite obviously, we cannot abandon groundwater irrigation as it is used to water boro paddy in the dry season. We also cannot give up cultivation of MVs like BRRI Dhan-29 with very high level of yield. In case that happens probably millions will have to face starvation. Thus the choice before us is between the disease and the deaths. Those who advocate an abandonment of the cultivation of HYV rice are, in fact, suggesting cutting the head to remove the headache, or accepting death to remove the disease.

In this age of modern science, especially when advanced science and cutting edge technologies are used to achieve and sustain food security and food safety, one needs to be far-sighted rather than frightened. In my last



column, I mentioned how two Bangladeshi scientists have been working at IRRI to develop technologies for adverse environments. Mr. Iftekhar has succeeded in infusing submergence tolerant gene (Sub 1) in BR-11 so that it will survive under water for up to 15 days in the flood-prone regions subjected to flash floods and poor drainage. Another scientist, Dr Rafiqul Islam, has just received his Ph.D degree for fine mapping a gene for salt tolerance and developing rice varieties that could be grown on saline soil.

I am also hopeful that, given adequate support, rice scientists can develop high-yielding rice varieties that have the capacity to stop the transfer of As from soil to grain. In this context, given our poor research related resources, international organizations like IRRI can, and should, help us in two ways. First, by developing varieties of rice which are arsenic-resistant and second, by strengthening our national organizations like BRRI through

imparting training to the scientists there.

It is being alleged that: (a) we are notoriously unresponsive to new ideas and innovative technologies and (b) we are more curative than preventive in our thoughts. While I shall rule out the first one -- as Bangladeshis have always been one of the best adopters of technology -- I dare not dismiss the second one. There were many occasions when a stitch in time could have saved us nine -- be it in politics or in economics. I think serious initiatives from now on regarding the arsenic contamination in rice should relieve us of a severe health risk that is looming large on the horizon. The decision about disease and death should be taken up immediately, before it is too late.

Abdul Bayes is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

BNP's grandstand show

But PM's remarks perplexing

THERE is very little doubt that the BNP has used the occasion of its 28th anniversary to exhibit its political clout by holding a three-day long programme that culminated in the grandstand 20-kilometer march on Sep 3. It was an impressive show, which demonstrated very clearly the formal launching of BNP's campaign for next election. However, as impressed as one might be at the massive rally, in spite of the unmitigated suffering it caused to the public, one cannot but be equally worried to hear what the PM had to say to her party men or rather what she did not say, regarding the Election Commission and the Caretaker Government reforms. This bears great significance given that there are less than two months before the caretaker government takes over from the ruling coalition to hold the next general election.

The reform agendas are still on the table, and one would be mistaken to consider these as being in a moribund state either. This is evidenced by the efforts of various groups to bring the two major parties to the table as well as the efforts by elements in both the parties in this regard. And this is a noteworthy effort. We ought not to lose sight of the very important fact that dialogue is the most important aspect of the three interlinked actions that will shape the likely course of politics in Bangladesh, the other two being the necessary electoral reforms and broad based acceptable elections consequent upon that. Thus we strongly believe that dialogue remains a live agenda and to overlook that may put our democracy in a bind.

Our worry stems from the fact that the PM's speech at the rally, stating her intention to follow the constitutional provisions regarding the next election, when taken in the backdrop of what we have stated, is distressing as well as disheartening. It is all the more disheartening because BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan keeps harping on the need for starting a dialogue with his AL counterpart Abdul Jalil. While that is the way to initiate talks on the reform agenda, the PM's articulated stand vis-à-vis reforms at the Sunday grand rally, may have slammed the door on a dialogue with the opposition in the near future. This is perplexing.

PM's utterances fall short of the people's expectations and do nothing to reinforce the concept of participatory democracy. Rigidity in politics is counterproductive since election needs participation of all the parties concerned. Otherwise, it might turn out to be a wasteful exercise, not to speak of the uncertainty that might result because of it.

A flipside to Sunday programme

Scant regard for public convenience

WE notice that the major political parties, especially the ruling party, fail to show any sensitivity to public inconvenience that would be caused by their much-vaunted political programmes, like rallies and processions. The organisers don't hesitate to paralyse life in the cities which could only mean insurmountable problems for the people in general for hours together. Ingrained in this attitude is a fundamental disregard for public welfare and convenience.

That's anything but democratic. People stuck on the road for hours not only lost valuable time and energy but also man hours, as the ruling BNP supporters marched through the city roads, bringing it to a virtual standstill. It seems the party high command didn't even bother to think how the people would take the programme that created so much trouble for them. There were emergency situations where patients had to be carried to hospitals, let alone all sorts of appointments to be kept and errands to be run. Obviously, the problems that people might face didn't figure in the ruling party's plan for the day?

It is hard to overlook the fact that the prime minister is not only the head of her party but also the head of the government obliged to ensure that the flow of normal public movement was not hindered. The ruling party used its entire paraphernalia to add to the grandeur of the show; but how would the party view the situation had the opposition tried to organise anything like it?

Why couldn't they stage the election rallies at the weekend with a reduced fallout in terms of traffic congestion. The three-day programme included Friday and Saturday.

People in general have to bear the brunt of it all. Yet, they are the voters that the political parties are trying to woo for election victory. But the existing political culture has little space for the people, otherwise they wouldn't be subjected to harassment in the name of staging political programmes. Obviously, practice of democracy has to begin with attachment of greater importance to the sensibilities and convenience of people.

Iran and the nuclear crisis



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THE deadline of August 31 set by the Security Council of the UN against Iran's nuclear enrichment program has come and gone, and there does not seem to be any urgency to impose sanctions.

Of all the protagonists in favour of sanctions, the lead has been given by Israel and the US, who has been following the Israeli lead in the Middle East with disastrous consequences for them, the region, and the world.

We are all familiar with former Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon's advice to US President George W. Bush in his unprovoked attack against Iraq, which has brought terrible tragedy on the head of the Iraqis, who are merely killing each other and some times an odd US soldier. This tragedy shows no sign of going away so long as President Bush occupies the White House.

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

There is sometimes talk here of the Greater Middle East project launched by President Bush a few years ago. That project has really not made any headway. A map was bandied about the project. Israel was very prominently displayed and a large part of Turkey was gobbled up by a Kurdistan. The Middle East pot is always boiling. The Iranian nuclear program has only added a new dimension to that boiling pot.

Taking a cue from the US attack of Iraq, tiny Israel launched an unprovoked attack against defenseless Lebanon on the pretext of cleaning Lebanon of Hezbollah fighters. Like her protector the US, Israel suffered a humiliating defeat and had to retreat from Lebanon. The US is totally stuck in Iraq.

The Lebanese crisis has brought to the fore the Security Council of the UN, who after much foot dragging by the US, adopted a cease-fire resolution. This has been followed by resolution 701 of the Security Council on the strength of which a Peace Force, which is estimated to go up to 15,000 has started to arrive in Lebanon.

Large contingents from France and Italy are on the ground. They have the huge task of maintaining peace and help in the reconstruction of Lebanon. By month long fierce bombardment by Israeli military planes large parts have been

turned into rubble. The Lebanese, who had fled their homes by the hundreds of thousands, have been returning home only to find that there is not much left except rubble.

Israeli threats to Iran on the nuclear question remind me of 1981, when the OIC annual Foreign Ministers Conference had just ended and I, as acting secretary general of that organization, was seeing off foreign ministers at the airport. Suddenly the walls of the VIP lounge shook violently and we thought that there was an earthquake. We learnt later that Israel had carried on air strikes to totally demolish Iraqi nuclear facilities, not far from Baghdad. Israel appears to be goading her mentor the US to allow her to carry on a similar operation near Tehran.

The US has been operating through the UN. Thus after much haggling the deadline of August 31 was set. Now comes the ques-

tion of economic sanctions. According to reports, veto-wielding members of the UN, China, and Russia do not appear to favour such drastic action against Iran, with whom they have multifarious ties, among which is access to Iran's vast oil reserves.

The campaign against Iran by the US and the world media, which is largely controlled by the Jewish lobby, has reached a near climax. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been crying hoarse that his nuclear program is purely for peaceful purposes. The Head of the International Nuclear Energy Baradei after his inspection tour of Iranian nuclear facilities has given a clean bill of health. This is one reason that the US has not shown much enthusiasm to work through this Vienna based organization.

The world anxiously waits. Is



Iran going to be the next member of the nuclear club. Israel is very uncomfortable by the fact the there is an Islamic bomb in the possession of Pakistan. Pakistan is not exactly in the same geographical region as Iran and Israel and in any case Israel's boss the US has strong hold on Pakistan. Iran has often taken hostile position against the US since the overthrow of the monarchy in the late seventies.

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The Middle East pot is always boiling. The Iranian nuclear program has only added a new dimension to that boiling pot.

Arshad-uz Zaman is a former Ambassador and Acting Secretary General, OIC.

Shinzo Abe's vision of a beautiful Japan

CLOSEUP JAPAN

At the core of his policy platform is the proposal to amend the constitution. Announcing his candidacy for party presidential race, Abe made it clear that he would like to see Japan having a constitution appropriate for the country in a new era. In the past too Abe did not hide his intention of revising the Japanese constitution to bring it in line with what he considers the reality of present day global politics.

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

JAPAN is getting ready for a new prime minister to assume the office in less than three weeks' time. The September 20 election of a new head of the main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is to draw the final curtain of five-year rule of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and pave the way for a new leader to guide the country, taking a probable new course.

If everything goes as expected, the chief cabinet secretary of the Koizumi cabinet, Shinzo Abe, is to become that new leader and take the helm of running the govern-

ment at least until he proves himself capable enough of holding the balance of power within various factions and party stalwarts. A number of recent opinion polls give a clear indication that he is ahead of two other candidates by far in the leadership race and it would be a miracle if the outcome turns out to be different.

Abe also is aware of this reality perfectly well, and sensing a clear victory, he announced his candidacy last Friday with a full-fledged plan for what he proclaimed as a blueprint for a "beautiful country -- Japan." The blueprint, as was expected, unveiled the arsenal of weaponry that Abe possesses,

along with some flowers that he also has at his disposal.

At the core of his policy platform is the proposal to amend the constitution. Announcing his candidacy for party presidential race, Abe made it clear that he would like to see Japan having a constitution appropriate for the country in a new era. In the past too Abe did not hide his intention of revising the Japanese constitution to bring it in line with what he considers the reality of present day global politics.

His eyes have always been firmly focused on Article 9 of the constitution that renounces war as a sovereign right of the state. It is no wonder that the blueprint for "a

beautiful Japan" puts so much stress on the amendment of constitution. Abe has long been regarded as hawkish on defense issues and in the past he even argued that Japan's war-renouncing peace constitution, even without amendment, should be interpreted as allowing the country to use the right of collective self-defense. But one important missing link in his announced policy plan is, though he is advocating constitutional amendment, he did not elaborate on how he would like to do that.

It is also interesting to see that in making public his desire to revise the constitution, Abe echoed the voice of his late grandfather, former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, who long cherished the desire to create a new, self-made constitution and do away with the legacy of Japan's post-war occupation. In the speech Abe delivered in Hiroshima to announce his candidacy, as if reflecting the ideas of his grandfather, he said: "The constitution was established under an occupation and we should draw

up a new constitution of our own." We know Kishi, despite his strong desire, could go nowhere near constitutional revision. It would be, therefore, quite interesting to observe how far the grandson, representing a new generation of Japanese citizens, would be able to go on this particular issue.

Abe also announced that he intended to reform the education system so that the coming generations of Japanese could feel proud of their beautiful country. Education reform is another thorny issue being debated in Japan for quite some time now. The extreme right-wing opinion among politicians of the ruling group holds the view that the current education system is mostly to be blamed for what they see as erosion of social and cultural values among the young Japanese. They are working for quite a long time to bring in the changes and what Abe would like to see is acceleration of the process. Abe wants students to get the right message that nurturing a strong attachment and love for their beautiful country is what the

education system should infuse in them.

As to diplomacy and foreign policy, Abe spoke of the importance of improving relations with China and South Korea, in addition to the already strong Japan-US ties. He did not hesitate to declare that he would regain the trust of Beijing and Seoul. But here too, we do not see any concrete proposal of how he intends to do that. On the contrary, there is a deliberate attempt on his part to avoid mentioning the most controversial issue of Japan's bilateral relations with China and South Korea, the Yasukuni Shrine visit debate.

Tokyo's relations with both China and South Korea soured because of Koizumi's repeated visits to the shrine, which honors convicted war criminals along with the nation's war dead. Abe has earlier always supported Koizumi's Yasukuni visit, and it had been revealed in the Japanese media recently that he too visited the shrine in spring as chief cabinet secretary. Moreover, he also refuses to confirm if he will visit the

shrine again. As a result, how far in reality he would be able to mend ties with China and South Korea remains to be seen.

It maintained his hard-line policy toward North Korea as he mentioned that solving the problem of abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea will be one of his priorities. As South Korea is increasingly coming closer to her northern adversary, the position of Abe on North Korea might give rise to new diplomatic tension with Seoul. He also spoke of his intention of strengthening the Japan-US alliance. Abe believes that the strengthening of the Japan-US military alliance is a pre-requisite for maintaining peace and stability in North East Asia.

It is not only political rhetoric concerning few controversial domestic issues in addition to Japan's diplomatic standing that have been included in the policy outline of Abe. He has flowers too at his disposal and did not hide his desire to offer those to the people, should he become the next leader.

Abe said he plans to drive policy

via political leadership rather than bureaucracy. He called for economic growth and prosperity through innovation and proposed reviewing the country's work habits, encouraging more people to work outside the office by making better use of the Internet and other technology. He also said he would establish an easy-to-understand pension system and work on to create a society prepared to give people a second chance. It all sounded too good for many in Japan as he proclaimed: "I want to make Japan a nation that is respected by the world's people and in which children will feel glad to be born."

It is most likely that September 20 party leadership race of LDP will see Abe emerging victorious. As a result, many in Japan are already focusing on how in reality he is going to deliver results based on all these promises and commitments. No doubt there will be a long wait before people find out how firmly he can stick to the commitments he made.

Monzurul Huq is a Daily Star columnist.