

Leaders Mustn't Fail Our People Again

by Ahmed Zaker

A Preventable Disease

Diarrhoeal diseases which broke out in the south of the country over a month ago are showing no sign of letting up, despite official assurances that things are getting better. Over 600 have already died, but if this represents a situation "under control", then we dread to think to what level casualties must rise before the situation can be called an epidemic.

Of course, diarrhoea is not a strange phenomenon in this or any other part of the developing world. Diarrhoeal diseases are an ever-present danger during a dry spell when underground water level drops significantly and subterranean aquifers run dry, and even tubewells fail to pump water. Under the circumstances, people take to drinking surface water which is invariably polluted, exposing themselves to diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases. In our case, the 28 districts that have so far been hit by the epidemic — let's stop pussy-footing around and call a spade a spade — have been suffering from near-drought condition for a couple of months. The consequent spread of the disease did not alarm or even surprise medical experts in this country.

However, the situation still represents a major failure on our part on several accounts, the most obvious one of which is our inability to provide clean water to drought-stricken areas either permanently or even on an emergency basis. A second but serious shortcoming is our failure to act swiftly enough to prevent so many deaths. A seasonal health hazard that was more or less limited to three or four districts a couple of months ago was allowed to assume epidemic proportions spreading across 28 districts. A major part of the responsibility for this state of affairs has to lie with local administration as well as the Ministry of Health. For weeks, newspapers including this one have been reporting severe shortage of hospital beds and medicines, mainly salines, in affected areas; yet young children have continued to die from nothing other than lack of proper care.

Simply because this happens every year we seem to have grown complacent. But there is no reason why so many lives should be lost to a disease that is eminently preventable as well as easily curable. What good are grand roads and highways in a country which cannot even supply clean drinking water to its population? What is the point of building bridges over this or that river — with foreign aid money — when we cannot even save our children from such an uncomplicated disease? We seem to have got our priorities the wrong way round, but there is still time to inject some commonsense into our approach.

The top priority is, of course, prevention. That would require a major effort to ensure supply of safe drinking water to as many as possible. That would naturally take a great deal of time, effort and money, but the initiative has to be taken on a priority basis without delay along with a grass-roots campaign to increase awareness about community hygiene. In the meantime, a system of early-warning, through monitoring of rainfall and availability of fresh water across the country, ought to be constituted so that health authorities are in a position to act in good time. The fact that hospitals simply ran out of salines also warrants urgent attention. District surgeons should make sure hospitals and mobile medical teams in their areas are adequately stocked with salines and other anti-diarrhoea medicines, particularly from late winter onwards. Even if we are unable at present to provide the most effective answer i.e. primary prevention through fresh water and clean environment, then let us act in the secondary stage and save lives. No miracle drug is needed; rather, thorough planning, good organisation and dedicated application are the requirements.

No Laughing Matter

It is not a laughing matter. Malaysian women are pursuing it seriously. It is a question of married men in the country's civil service taking one week's paternity leave so that they can be with their wives at the time of delivery of their children.

The proposal has passed the stage of discussion in local newspapers and in seminars. It is now the subject of a recommendation being prepared by the country's National Council for Women Organisations (NCWO). Since the Minister for National Unity and Social Development, Napsiah Omar has already commented favourably on the proposal, one can be reasonably sure that it won't be long before a Malaysian male civil servant starts performing a range of household chores, while his wife is nursing a new-born baby. We assume that, in the process, he will at least learn how much workload his wife normally carries in running the house and looking after the children. He may even come to appreciate the benefit of having a small family, instead of a traditional large one.

The call for paternity leave for male civil servants in Malaysia stems from changes in the socio-economic life in the country. It is now quite beyond the financial reach of average mid-level civil servant to hire household help, even during the delivery of a child.

Will such a proposal, perhaps unprecedented in Asia, find favour from women in Bangladesh? Perhaps the response would be negative among the people who do have household help. On the other hand, lower-level civil servants and office employees would probably regard it as a boon, better than being absent from work without leave or intimidation. Whether or not such a proposal is ever considered in this country — we are really in two minds about it — a male government employee should enjoy the week-long paternity leave only during the delivery of the first child, and let him (and his wife) think twice before having the second delivery.

PEOPLE have finally exercised their franchise and clearly voted for a more accountable government. A reasonably free and fair election has been held. The cynics would of course argue that precious little would change, because the inequitable institutions and power structures would not allow the vast majority to attain their economic freedom. Nevertheless, a mass upsurge has overthrown an autocratic regime, which earned world wide notoriety of being one of the most corrupt governments in the world. Country's reputation had reached its lowest point; its economy, eroded by corruption and mismanagement, was in shambles. The elections represent an ardent desire of the people to bring about a change and ensure that the future government will more adequately reflect their aspirations.

But is it possible to bring about a change in the quality of our government? Most of the institutions and systems which could have reinforced the rule of law, have been deliberately demolished by the previous regime. Strong authoritarian traditions were already established during the rule of Awami League and the BNP. These were aggravated by the arbitrary style of government and the mindless psychopathy which characterised Ershad's rule for more than nine years. The judiciary, the legislature, the administrative services, the institutions of local government, the political parties, the universities and schools, have all come under

attack. In most cases these have been destroyed or at best have been so badly mutilated and demoralised that they no longer serve the purpose for which they were established. Government is no longer a credible institution in Bangladesh! Under these circumstances it is feasible to contemplate a more responsive, more accountable and more efficient government system to emerge following a democratic transition? The odds are probably too many.

The people have very clearly given their verdict. The

concerned not so much with problems which are technical in nature. Rather what we are concerned about is the style of political leadership that can bring about changes in government to make it more responsive to people and their urgent development needs.

As we look back at the past elections in 1947, 1954, 1970, 1973, 1977, 1981 and finally the historic 1991 elections, it is obvious that the people had unambiguously

troubling style of government. Awami League received an overwhelming mandate after liberation, at a time when no doubt the government had to deal with many crises i.e. infrastructure was in ruins, armed groups were terrorising people, drought and floods had destroyed crops. Yet the government was too personalised, identified too much with the charisma of a single person. A coterie of psychopaths had grown around Sheikh Mujib. A

the behest of cronies surrounding the two charismatic leaders. It is not suggested, however, that the two leaders did not have many other desirable qualities. But what was missing was the capacity to promote a government that is based on a genuine consultative process and democratic values which would encourage others to express their views on an issue objectively, without fear of scorn or reprisal.

A democratic government cannot of course emerge overnight in Bangladesh. It has

too many examples of humility amongst our leaders. The classic instance probably was that of Indira Gandhi who went with folded hands to her electorate and publicly apologised for the excesses committed during emergency. But it came after a costly mistake and she had to pay the price for it.

Pitfalls of an otherwise charismatic leader who decides to travel alone, are too many. He tends to get surrounded by psychopaths; his vision gets clouded by virtue of praises heaped on him; he loses sight of what is practicable and in the process loses touch with reality. But decision-making in modern government is never the outcome of any whizkid's intellect. In the political context of a fragmented society like that of Bangladesh today, it requires careful and discreet blending of many viewpoints, many skills, many experiences. The next leader must be a consensus builder, a harmoniser of divergent views, a healer of many wounds. Another leader, even though charismatic and steadfast in character, but with authoritarian temper who is not prepared to consult, simply cannot deliver the goods.

People by exercising their franchise have once again in a forthright manner chosen their leaders. This time they have voted not for an authoritarian style of government; they have voted for moderation, balanced development and accountability in administration. Leaders need to listen to the voices of people. They must not fail them again!

What we are concerned about is the style of political leadership that can bring about changes in government to make it more responsive to people and their urgent development needs.

leaders who take over the reins of next government must try their utmost to abide by it. They need to provide the leadership that people have voted for; the new leadership must be honest; it must have a sense of priorities in development and it must not once again try to develop a personality cult based on senseless psychopathy. This means that they must set their goals; they must have the capacity to draw up a practical implementation strategy; finally they must have the strength to implement it. The numerous task forces mobilised by Professor Rehman Sobhan would have identified and prioritised some of the urgent issues which the new government will have to cope with. Presumably these would be technical matters, amenable to technical solutions. But to my mind we are

given their verdicts. They had signalled to their leaders as to what were their aspirations; they had very clearly given the endorsements sought by their leaders. Ironically enough it was the leaders who had failed the people. It is the leaders who had failed to fulfil the mandates given to them. One need not be engrossed with a pathological passion to find faults with individuals, but still some generalisations can be made. It would be useful if we could do some stocktaking and analyse our shortcomings a bit more candidly. Leadership in the past had failed for a number of reasons. The military bureaucratic leadership in Pakistan for example failed to recognise the rights of the majority and its distinct cultural heritage. Instead of cultivating democratic values it decided to crush them through an au-

ruthless party militia was raised that would not hesitate to murder for political reasons. Arbitrary decisions, like the farcical fourth amendment which overnight transformed the parliamentary form of government into a presidential one, could be taken at the behest of the government leaders. Ziaur Rahman as a freedom fighter and because of personal honesty, had also developed a charisma of his own. Yet his style of leadership remained quite authoritarian and arbitrary. A mutinous army was ruthlessly suppressed; many institutions were destroyed reportedly through cunning politicking by his trusted lieutenants. Political parties were split and fractious politics was encouraged. The authoritarian traditions were frequently backed by ruthless actions at

taken other countries many decades or even hundreds of years. Given the complexity of problems in Bangladesh, the poor state of the economy, our dependence on external economic assistance, social backwardness and a rapidly deteriorating environment, it would be impossible for any single leader, however intelligent or well-meaning he or she may be, to cope with these problems single-handedly. There is need for collective wisdom; there is need to listen to other views; there is need for regular consultations with others who may hold divergent views but may be equally concerned about the nation's welfare and progress. There is need for leaders to be a bit more humble; acknowledging one's mistakes when one makes them. Unfortunately, we don't have

THE Punjab daily Ait published at least three large display of advertisements in memory of Indira Gandhi's assassins.

It illustrates the growing controls of newspapers and radio by gun-wielding militants in the Punjab, wracked by secessionist violence.

But others in the Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi press have openly defied terror. Fifty-two people of the Hind Samachar group of newspapers — including hawkers and newspaper agents — have paid with their lives for their professional commitment.

Scores of newspapers, some operating in small districts, are supervised on a daily basis by militants who have even published a code of conduct.

They have threatened that editors and reporters who violate this code would be punished with death.

The "take-over" of media started in July 1990 when a 21-page letter written by the killers of former Army Chief General Vaidya was ordered published. The letter was addressed to the President of India.

One editor who refused to publish it was given a second warning. Then he resigned and left Punjab.

This was a signal to militants that the Punjab Press can actually be controlled by threats of death and kidnaping. This resulted in a spate of press notes whose publication was mandatory. Criminal gangs also use the free media-ride.

As a senior editor tells *Depthnews*: "We often get visits by militants who look perfectly normal otherwise. Then

Terror Silences Punjab Media

Prakash Chandra writes from New Delhi

they suddenly come out with their demands. They usually leave with a warning: 'If you do not publish our version of killings and other incidents, we will deal with you.'

A well-defined code of conduct has been issued by the terrorists for newspapers and journalists. Official Press Notes, it was laid down, should be published only after the terrorists have approved them. Also, they should not be published in English but in the Punjabi language.

The Punjab press is divided and confused, and there is safety in keeping mum

It has spelt a financial disaster for local newspapers. Advertisements in the Urdu and Hindi press have dropped drastically. Government departments have stopped buying newspapers. Now 50 per cent of ads are given to Punjabi papers, 26 per cent to English, 14 and 10 per cent to Hindi and Urdu newspapers, respectively.

A well-known journalist, B.G. Verghese, former editor of the *Indian Express* and *Hindustan Times* newspapers and a Magsaysay Award winner, has now suggested a strategy to combat the tactics of terrorists.

Mr. Verghese has recommended that the numbers game on the killings in Punjab indulged by news agencies is

often exaggerated. This must be rationalised and authenticated.

Mr. Verghese, who headed a committee on the media situation in Punjab, has suggested that the government must verify the accuracy of reports of killings by terrorists and the police. Now, a media adviser has been appointed to the governor. He will act as a link between the government and the media.

Senior officials of the Home Ministry and the Punjab State

Police raided offices of the mass-circulating Punjab newspaper the *Tribune* and the Hindi newspaper *Jansatta*. Editors were ordered to submit copy to censors before publication.

This sparked a storm of protests by the Editors' Guild and journalists organisations. As a senior journalist pointed out, "Once you introduce censorship, there is no end to it." Censorship has now been withdrawn and the Verghese report is being implemented to give an edge to government media policy.

The Verghese report points out that the Punjab press is divided and confused, helpless and angry, polarised and partisan. Professional associations have been dormant and joint action does not have been seriously considered at any stage.

The report says there is safety in silence. The Punjab Press, like any other organisation in the state, has been infiltrated. Terrorists instantly know everything that happens in any newspaper office or at newsmen's gatherings. So most prefer to work alone or move in close circles.

Journalists fear for their lives. They are asking why they should act or react differently from civil servants, judges and other sections of society. The Verghese Committee has recommended group insurance for all media personnel in risk

rather than a communication policy to demolish the ideological basis of the terrorists and their masters." It says,

In a 23-page report, Mr. Verghese says that journalists are getting increasingly confused by security agencies resorting to undercover operations and tactics of setting a thief to catch a thief. "Fake encounters, plants and disinformation are the order of the day. The media has to tread warily. Exposure of excesses is unlikely to be popular."

In Punjab more than 4,000 people died last year from terrorist activities and clashes with police. The daily toll amounts to some 20 to 25, or even 50. Newspapers do not regard these deaths as a serious affair. They are published in the same way as traffic accidents.

Safety for some often lies in inaction or mute acceptance of the given version, official or terrorist. Investigation is at a discount in the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity. Instead, the news agencies in particular compete for higher body counts.

The report says that there are two perceptions of the press. Officials and members of the public complained that the press had become a mouth-piece of terrorists and secessionists. Threats and hit lists were being published, spreading fear.

But others believe that the press has also realised the terror, some paying for it dearly. — *Depthnews Asia*

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

An appreciation

Sir, One important thing which is endearing your newspaper to me, besides the quality of its writing and printing, is your sense of internationalism. Very few papers bother to concern themselves about the lives and deeds of internationally famous personalities to the extent they will sacrifice their editorial column space to eulogise them yet, within a matter of a very short period, you have devoted this page to the appreciation of the wondrous art of Dame Margot Fonteyn, whose consistently remarkable performance had won accolades spanning possibly four decades. Anyone fortunate enough to have seen her perform, if one can use that word, can never forget her beauty and her grace, not to speak of her technical perfection. In a country where appreciation of ballet is not common I marvel that you could remember her.

The second international personage to receive such

accolades is David Lean whose artistic masterpieces, on cellulose, became epics to be seen over and over again without ever once being bored by the repetition. This is surely the test of great craftsmanship, to be able to sit through a screening, more than once, and still marvel at the presentation and to find with each showing something new, something perhaps which was missed on first screening. These outstanding artists seem to be a dying race (no pun intended) as few are there to seemingly take their place, (moans the pity), for perhaps the new materialism which has gripped most of the world also eclipses great talent and artistry?

Sylvia Mortozza, Dhaka.

Foreign Service cadre

Sir, I was greatly impressed to read your editorial of the 24th March. A lot has to be written to undo affairs that was prevalent during the Ershad era.

He once commented that "nobody in Bangladesh works except him. He even has to look into the foreign office pouch". Does this saying have any significance?

During the last few years the foreign office has been filled with trash. The new foreign minister has to work very hard with a sincere objectivity to revitalize and reactivate the foreign office.

The foreign service cadre should be protected from lateral entrants. Those who came from non foreign service cadre were, allegedly, encadred without any examination whereas the cadre officers had excellent academic performance and went through rigorous examinations.

The present gradation list was prepared at the wishes of President Ershad that needs a quick review. Presently, the foreign service cadre is the most preferred cadre amongst all services. Promotions and postings should be based on merit and professionalism.

To put back the office to its heels—merit should be the top priority. Foreign policy cannot be made on whims it has to have direction and objectivity.

Bureaucracy which is the govt. machinery to run a

country cannot work smoothly if the cadre system is disturbed and unhealthy. Let the Ershad regime believe that everyone can do anything given the way to professionalism.

Keya Chowdhury
Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Cancer research

Sir, A recent news item says, that doctors at the University of Boston have discovered a method of early detection of a number of different types of cancer. This, if actually possible, will be a major victory for mankind.

It is not unknown to us that cancer is killing thousands all over the world, be it in developed or underdeveloped countries. Man has yet been unable to win his war against cancer. He silently watches his near and dear ones suddenly in the grips of this disease and embracing death eventually.

Therefore, we sincerely hope that the doctors crusading against this disease become successful. Our prayers and all our wishes will be for them. For, their victory is the victory of entire mankind.

Wahid Ahmed,
War, Dhaka.

OPINION

Dhaka Traffic

It is understandable that any new administration would prepare a list of priorities of work; not including, of course, the daily routine level of work. Top on such a list are the promises made during the electioneering period. Other items are revised national policies; preferably prepared with consensus. Last on the list are the unpleasant issues, which have to be faced eventually, and cannot be kept pending or hidden for long.

One such issue is the easing of the traffic problem in Dhaka city. Many proposals, schemes, plans, and master plans had been prepared in the past. It is not a new subject; but an old disease which calls for a new prescription, by the new regime, now backed by the verdict of the people. The shyness in decision-making in this area is the moribund fear of unpopularity at the dismal prospect of trying to reduce the number of cycle rickshaws plying in the city.

Before details are touched upon, it is necessary to dwell on the philosophy of approach to the problem, and the mass psychology involved. We must admit that our society has a great weakness for what may be called "misplaced kindness"; a potent, dangerous, and utterly unpredictable weapon, which could backfire with fatal consequences. To remain popular, certain issues are considered taboo. No administration can run on misplaced kindness; and no opposition can exploit this weapon time and again or indefinitely. Under such circumstances, the question faced is: to go for a firm decision based on 'public interest', or be cowed

down by possible exploitation of the situation by vested groups. It is not implied here that the present Opposition would not co-operate in helping to solve a traffic problem. In fact, on a sensitive issue such as measures to reduce the number of cycle rickshaws, a national consensus would be necessary, and the Opposition have to play a vital role in co-operating with the authorities; otherwise there could be strikes and violence, leading to law and order situations.

The whole operation has to be carried out slowly, subtly and quietly, in low-key, without antagonizing pressure and opportunist groups. The operation could be made "painless" by first removing the unlicensed rickshaws and the unauthorised drivers. This would immediately remove at least one rickshaw out of every three — making a visible effect on the road.

Next, the detection of faked and forged documents have to be carried out by officials who are supposed to be honest. How to ensure that? Thus, 30 to 35 per cent rickshaws would be off the road; greatly relieving the traffic congestion.

The educational programme is a different issue; as are the traffic engineering and operational procedures. There are many loopholes, and it is not necessary to enumerate these here.

Where there is a will, there is a way, we learnt in school. The whole thrust of the above comments is only one: face the unpleasant issues; and not push it under the 'madur' (we have no carpets).

A. Mawaz,
Dhaka