

World AIDS Day 1991 — Sharing the Challenge

Long Journey Ahead

This week's meeting between the South African government and representatives of black nationalist movements including the African National Congress (ANC) led by Nelson Mandela, is a step that promises to lead to greater things, bringing equality and democracy to that rich country of 35 million, nearly 70 per cent of whom are blacks.

However, there is no euphoria in South Africa or the world outside over the talks, and for good reasons too. For one thing, this is merely the beginning of a long journey. For another, sections of South African press recently revealed that the country's security forces had kept up their underhand funding of the anti-ANC Inkatha Freedom Party of Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthezi, despite President Frederik W. de Klerk's assertions that such payments were stopped in March last year. The revelations suggest that powerful people in the Republic's security apparatus and administration were still pursuing a policy of fomenting violence among blacks, which could threaten the broader process of reconciliation itself. Finally, a strong warning signal was given last week by the country's white community — de Klerk's power base — that they had serious doubts about the president's reformist policies, by voting into parliament an extremist candidate in last Thursday's by-election in the Orange Free State.

Given such a situation, de Klerk has obviously a lot of cleaning up to do in his own backyard before being able to convince the black majority that he has the will and the ability to implement the sort of constitutional reforms that are required to give South Africa a semblance of civilisation.

But despite all his troubles, de Klerk is not totally bereft of allies. For starters, Nelson Mandela, who commands widespread respect, if not allegiance, among blacks, has made it quite clear he will back de Klerk so long as the president can prove his sincerity about the reform process. Secondly, by lifting a wide range of sanctions previously imposed on the white-dominated country, the international community has already extended a helping hand. More recently, Commonwealth states offered to help with the process by sending experts and mediators. Total withdrawal of economic and financial sanctions have also been pencilled in to take place once the mechanisms for transition, namely an interim government and schedules for multi-racial elections, are in place. This gives de Klerk a lot of leverage over wavering members of the white community, and he should be able to use the carrot of total elimination of sanctions and the stick of a renewal of economic pressure by the international community, to guide the negotiations to a successful conclusion.

The ball now lies squarely in the court of the white community in general and the government of de Klerk in particular. The white leadership is no doubt aware that this process is the last chance they will have in establishing racial peace in the country for a long time. Majority blacks are also conscious of the fact that any extreme demands on their part could easily erode white confidence, which could either lead to a backlash or an exodus. Either of those latter two outcomes would be disastrous for the future of South Africa. The need of the hour is for both the whites and the blacks to show restraint and move gradually but irreversibly towards a united, prosperous and democratic state.

Educate the Public About AIDS

We would be foolish to treat the threat of AIDS lightly. Yes, Bangladesh is not yet a high-risk country, in the sense that instances of HIV infected cases are not numerous yet to make it a public threat. But that is precisely why now is the right time to take adequate action against the spread of this disease. Unlike the developed countries, or even countries of Southeast Asia, we in Bangladesh do not have the medical facilities to deal with the patients infected with the virus. Except in a few places, we do not even have adequate facilities to make the requisite tests to determine whether anyone is a carrier or not.

So our course of action is clear. We must do everything possible to prevent the disease from entering our country — if it has not already entered — and, failing that, to prevent this deadly virus from spreading. This we can do, through widespread education about AIDS.

Ignorance about the disease is perhaps the next most deadly thing to the disease itself. And because the infection deals with the personal habits of the individual, there is an all pervasive reluctance to talk about it in public. This is more true for societies like ours where sexual behaviour is a taboo subject for any meaningful discussion. We will have to start talking public about AIDS and what causes it to spread. We will have to educate our people about the risks of indiscreet behaviour. We will have to teach individuals as to what are available to him or her to take preventive measures against risks. Given the strict sexual codes that we live under, we may think that the types of behaviour that cause AIDS to spread do not exist in our society. But this could very well be a false complacency. Absence of any reliable data on our sexual behaviour makes any judgement on this issue a suspect. Therefore we have no choice but to opt for caution — which, in this case, means massive preventive measures, mainly through public education.

Like so many other things, let us not make our drive against AIDS another more-show-than-substance affair. If we do so we will be putting our future at risk and we will have no one else but ourselves to blame.

WORLD AIDS Day like World No-Tobacco Day and World Health Day is an annual event. The idea for the observance of the Day emerged from London Declaration in January, 1988 when the World Summit of Ministers of Health involving delegates from 148 countries took place in London. Bangladesh fortunately was an active participant.

The purpose of the programme is to open channels of communication, strengthening the exchanges of information and experience and forge a spirit of social tolerance.

The problem: By October 1991, 418,404 adult AIDS cases had been reported to WHO from 183 countries of the world. The pandemic is now growing at the rate of 5000 new infections every day. The number of men, women and children expected to be infected with HIV by 2000 is 30-40 million with a cumulative total of 10 to 15 million AIDS cases. It is estimated that during the current year around 15 million children all over the world will be orphaned by maternal AIDS.

The poorer countries: The brunt of the pandemic heavily falls on the poorer countries. Nearly three fourths of the HIV infected people come from the developing countries.

As the number of victims increases in huge proportions without any demarcation or barrier for cast, creed, age or sex, it is estimable that the society will lose many members who can contribute to the

economy of the country. These include teachers, workers, doctors, nurses, builders, political leaders and the like.

It has been found in some parts of Africa that productive activities come to a standstill when the communities mourn and bury their dead. What is more, farmlands have returned to bush and homes have been abandoned in some African villages. In Zambia copper mining is the main source of economy. This has been threatened with collapse. At the other end of the scale, children infected with HIV have been grossly abandoned due to fear about contamination.

The Ignorance and Confusion

It is distressing to note that even after about a decade of discovery of the virus, many people around the world have confusion or ignorance about

by Prof Nurul Islam

HIV infection and AIDS. Many would not believe that in the USA National AIDS Hot Line, the world's largest health information telephone service, receives some 3000 telephone calls a day asking whether AIDS can be acquired through shaking hands, from using toilets or from being served by a HIV infected person in a restaurant or hotel.

A survey conducted among 1,00,000 adults in the United States by the National Center for Health Statistics revealed that as many as 45% did not know that HIV positive cook was no threat to the customers, 53% were not sure whether the virus could be transmitted through cough or sneeze.

How HIV is NOT transmitted: Many of our people, even

today have serious confusion about the mode of transmission of AIDS.

It is vital to know how HIV is not transmitted:

1. The virus does not survive outside the body.
2. It does not spread through casual contact like shaking hands, touching or hugging; (ii) food or drink, sharing cups and glasses; (iii) coughing and sneezing; (iv) swimming pools or toilets; (v) bites of mosquito or other insects.

THREE WAYS of Transmission: It can be transmitted only in three ways: (i) through unprotected sexual intercourse with an infected partner; (ii) through infected blood or blood products; (iii) from infected mother to her baby.

Isolation — No Solution

Isolation of people with HIV/AIDS is therefore, not the answer. This is in fact a reflection of our ignorance. Fear or rejection as a consequence drives the AIDS problem underground. Experience in several countries show how the society re-acts and rejects the victims who consequently either hide the disease or themselves thereby threatening an effective control programme.

Contagious disease like one time small pox, plague and influenza are spread through casual contacts and isolation in these cases is essential for the prevention of spread. AIDS, on the other hand, as has been

stated, **SPREAD NOT THROUGH ORDINARY SOCIAL CONTACT BUT BY DELIBERATE HUMAN BEHAVIOUR.**

Discrimination — Detestable: World AIDS Day Newsletter, July 1991 is worth quoting here. This offers right direction for all those who are involved, PWA (persons with AIDS) not excluded: "Discrimination against people with HIV infection or AIDS encourages defensiveness and secrecy in those who are, or suspect they might be, infected, making them afraid of contact with the health and social services. And it drives underground those with personal experience of HIV/AIDS, thus silencing the pandemic's most powerful, credible and sensitive spokespersons who could otherwise be invaluable allies in the fight against AIDS."

AIDS — A Threat to All

"Seeing or meeting a PWA (person with AIDS) humanizes the whole situation," says Richard Rector, himself a PWA and health educator living in Denmark. "That PWA could be your son, your brother, your sister or your friend. It makes it harder to argue that AIDS victims and seropositive people should be locked up somewhere out of sight. Because of the still-strong tendency to discriminate, many people remain blind to the fact that AIDS threatens us all; that as it picks away relentlessly at the fabric of society, no one will be spared its effects, even if they and their loved ones are

never directly affected by the disease. It is to bring home this truth and to encourage wider participation as well as greater cooperation in the fight against AIDS, that WHO has chosen the theme 'Sharing the challenge' for World AIDS Day 1991. "For anyone who may doubt the need for the true partnerships in our fight against AIDS," said Dr Michael Merson, Director of WHO's Global Programme on AIDS, "I challenge them to look at how the pandemic continues to spread rapidly to new areas."

All Must Share the Challenge

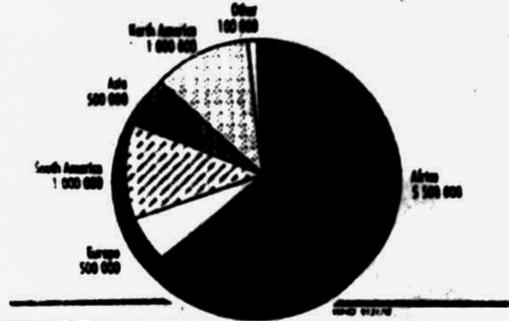
In the words of Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General, WHO, "No country can consider itself immune, and no country can combat the disease in isolation. Preventing the spread of HIV, caring for those affected and minimizing the social and economic repercussions of the AIDS pandemic all require the strength that comes from partnership."

He therefore says, "We all need to join forces and share the challenge. We need to commit time, resources and effort in a way that draws on the strengths of each of us for maximum collective impact. Only partnership gives us a chance of prevailing against the AIDS pandemic."

We must accept that we are not immune and we have a responsibility to share the challenge.

The author is a National Professor

Estimated adult HIV infections — 1991



RESTRUCTURING LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT—II

Bodies Should Function for Rural Development

by Dr. Ali Ahmed

UPAZILA Parishad: The Upazila Parishad must be a fully elective body. All members the number of whom will be decided on the basis of size and population must be directly elected by voters of the Upazila. The Chairman of an Upazila Parishad should be elected in accordance with the principle adopted in electing the President at the national level, i. e. either indirectly by elected members or directly by voters.

As the Zila Parishad is suggested to be abolished under the new scheme, its functions should be assigned to the Upazila Parishads. Here also there is a long list of compulsory and additional functions some of which are necessary and others, decorative. A committee of experts should examine them and keep only those which are essential for rural development. At any rate, priority must be given to agriculture, health, education, communication, small scale industries, family planning and engineering which are absolutely necessary for meeting the basic needs of the rural people. The Courts, both civil and criminal, should be shifted to Zila headquarters because of the absence of the congenial atmosphere for judicial functions as disturbed by the easy access of the local touts, village litigants and want of adequate number of expert lawyers.

As regards the financing of the Upazila Parishads, the as-

sets and sources of income of Zila Parishads should be handed over to the Upazila Parishads. In their cases also, after realising the income from the assigned sources, the deficit part of the budget, if any, must be met by the government.

The administrative machinery should be simple but adequate. The Secretary of the Upazila Parishad must have the pay equal to the starting pay of a Class I Officer serving under the government and 80% of the posts of Secretary should be filled by promoting the Secretaries of the Union Parishads and 20% through open competition. Such a provision will provide the career opportunity for the Secretaries of the Union Parishads and the entry into the service of new and more qualified persons. The Secretary will be assisted by one Upper Division Assistant, two Lower Division, one Typist, one Cashier and a few fourth class employees.

Other specialised services e. g. health, agriculture, education, engineering, family planning, may be given higher salary and facilities in accordance with the incumbents' qualifications and experiences as these are actually required for rural development. Other terms and conditions of services e. g. promotion opportunity, Pension, Provident Fund, Benevolent Fund, Group Insurance, leave facility etc. of both the Upazila and Union Parishads must be so

favourable that they will not generally try to leave the Parishads' services considering them as less prestigious.

Selection of officers and employees of both the Union and Upazila Parishads must be made fair and impartial with a Selection Board and after proper selection they must be imparted both foundation and in-service training. All officers and employees should be those of the Parishads. The existing system of sending the Government servants on deputation, unless wanted by any Parishad, should be done away with. The Parishads will be the sole authorities for appointing, promoting, transferring, hiring and firing their officers and employees subject, of course, to the condition that they will have the normal right to appeal to the court in case of gross injustice done to them.

The physical facilities have been provided partially in many of the Upazila Parishads for their officers and employees. Full facilities should be provided for them in near future.

The administrative machinery has already been set up as a mini-secretariat. It will now function under the fully elected political body the Chairman of which will act, as if, as the Chief Minister and each member remaining in charge of one or more subjects will act, as if, as a Minister.

Decisions will be made in the Parishads, though there may be facts-finding standing committees, through debates and discussions as is done in the National Assembly and the Cabinet at the national level.

Central Control

There has always been a measure of conflict between the central and local self-governments. The main reasons for such conflicts appear to be that the local self-government seeks greater autonomy, freedom to create sources of revenue and minimum supervision and control by the national Government. On the other hand, the national Government tends towards greater control over the activities of local self-government on the plea of underpinning national unity, political immaturity, administrative inefficiency and unformed planning for economic development.

The spheres of the local self-governments, as said earlier, must be determined by Parliamentary Act and not by administrative orders and within the determined spheres, they must be independent in the discharge of their duties keeping, of course, in view the policy of the national government because after all they cannot be states within a State.

It may, however, be conceded that there may be circumstances e. g. serious mis-

management or deadlock, where the national government may intervene up to the extent of suspending or dissolving some local self-governments. But in case of suspension or dissolution there must be election within a stipulated period, say, three months so that there would be no sop to the continuity of the democratic process.

As far as possible, the government must not exercise this power of suspension or dissolution. Members of the Parishads must be allowed to learn the art of politics and administration through trial and error. If democracy is our cherished goal, then let the democratic institutions flourish at the lower levels. If something goes wrong, the local people will be the best judges to correct it. This was the point emphasised by late President Ziaur Rahman at the conference of the Chairmen of the Union Parishads held at Dhaka on April, 1977.

It may be remembered that at the national level, we advocate such a policy to develop democracy in the country. We say that representatives elected through free and fair election must govern the country. They may commit mistakes and by committing them they will learn the art of politics and administration. It is neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats some of whom act as sycophants who should come to teach the elected po-

litical leaders the art of politics, administration and democracy.

In fact, if we allow the local self-governments in both rural and urban areas to work independently but democratically, many of the young political leaders will have the training in politics and administration there and when they will come to the national level, they will commit less mistakes. This was proved in the past by many distinguished political leaders e. g. A. K. Fazlul Haq, H. S. Suhrawardi, Mohammad Ali, Nurul Amin who had their primary training in politics and administration under local self-governments.

Finally, one of the serious handicaps faced by the local self-governments in the past was that these were not fully used for the development of rural areas. These were used by the political authorities as the instruments for the achievement of their political goals. Under the present democratic set up established through long struggle and great sacrifices, it is expected that all political authorities must allow these local bodies to work for the development of the rural areas and thus of the nation and not for safeguarding the interests of themselves.

(Concluded)
The author is an educationist. He served as Principal of different Government Colleges including Dhaka College.

Problems at Rupsa ferry ghat

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.

Problems at Rupsa ferry ghat

Sir, I would like to draw the attention of the authorities concerned in respect of the above through your columns, so that some at least of the problems and difficulties faced by travellers using the ferry ghat could be ameliorated.

The Rupsa Ferry Ghat is the only connecting link between the Divisional head-quarter-cum-industrial and commercial metropolis of Khulna with the south-eastern districts of Bagerhat and Pirojpur as well as the nation's second seaport, Mongla. As regards the number of vehicles and pedestrians using this ghat is concerned, it is one of the busiest in Bangladesh. More than one lac people use it everyday. Actually, more pedestrians than vehicle passengers use this ghat, because the bus terminals for the routes to Mongla, Bagerhat, Pirojpur and other destinations are situated on the eastern bank. Passengers intending to travel to those places come to the ferry ghat by bus, rickshaw and autorickshaws, cross the river by ferry or country boat and then take the necessary convenience for their respective destinations; passengers coming from those places also do the same in reverse order. In

addition, an area equivalent to a semi-circle with a radius of about five miles with the centre at the ferry ghat has become almost a satellite or suburb of Khulna city. Thousands of persons either doing business in the city, or employed there live in that area and commute to and from their respective vocations every morning and evening.

Although the IWTA is maintaining five mechanised ferries at the ghat, not more than two could be seen operating at any given time; sometimes only one is used. As a result, there always is a long queue of various kinds of vehicles on either side of the ghat.

The eastern bank is so crowded and congested with scores of buses and other mechanised vehicles that create an atmosphere of ever-imminent danger of serious accident; in fact, accidents involving life and property are almost daily occurrences. This is a direct result of the absence of a bus and auto-rickshaw terminal on the eastern bank. In spite of the huge volume of passengers using such conveyances, the Road Transport Authority appears to be totally ignorant of the existence of such a place in the map of Bangladesh.

pletion of the Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga-to-Khulna/Mongla Road, there is apprehension in the minds of the public that the ferry ghat is likely to become busier still with all the traffic between Dhaka on the one hand and Khulna-Mongla on the other being diverted through that shorter route, as it is much shorter than the Khulna-Daulatdia-Archa-Dhaka route.

As such, it is imperative that the authorities concerned take appropriate action to establish order and discipline and also create physical facilities for the travelling public. The public, at least as far as the ferry ghat is concerned, are paying customers, and not free-loaders. In addition to the ferry crossing charges, they pay for their bus and/or to her vehicle fares, part of which the operators have to pay to the government in the form of licence fees and other levies.

The traffic across the Rupsa river at this point is so heavy that some economists have calculated that if the income from the ferry is properly collected and utilised, it will be able to meet the cost of a bridge over the Rupsa river within two or three years.

It is, therefore, prayed, will the authorities concerned do something towards alleviating the miseries and reducing the dangers faced by travellers using the ferry?
Md. Abed Ali
Babu Khat Road, Khulna.

Meet the PM

Sir, A particular system is always introduced to achieve certain objectives effectively. The ultimate purpose is to obtain maximum result with

minimum input. With the sincere and honest intention our Prime Minister has recently begun to meet members of general mass on every Thursday in order to know the living condition of the people. This definitely reflects the sincerity of the Head of the Government to help her people in their fight against the troubles and tribulations. This gesture sounds and looks wonderful, and first of its kind in my living memory. Doubtlessly the Prime Minister deserves compliments and appreciation. Of course, we are hopeful to have a positive outcome of this exercise.

However, may I suggest the following in light of the above idea of meeting the public to know and attempt to resolve their grievances —
a) Under the present Government press is enjoying freedom to a great extent and as a result hundreds of letters are appearing in the dailies, weeklies and monthlies concerning different problems as to personal, national, social, political, educational and financial nature. If these letters are read carefully and appropriate actions are taken by the concerned authorities, people's lot can be improved fast. The government should follow up the cases properly to fulfil the goals and surely the people will achieve maximum benefit, and problems will lessen progressively. Here it is pertinent to mention that most government departments have a section for dealing with complains from the people. They may be made fully operative to get the purported result.

b) Almost daily valuable editorials in the papers come out with constructive suggestions and clarifications concerning various sectors including forecasting. The Govt should accept them in good spirit and then take measures to correct the flaws.
c) Radio and TV can also play an efficient role and help the Government and the people in solving long standing problems. It will not be out of place to mention how people were benefitted from different magazine programmes in the past.
d) Letters concerning the harassment by different Govt Departments and also by the law enforcing agencies often appear narrating their misconduct towards the innocent people. These corrupt practices can be easily stopped if secrecy is assured and punishment for the guilty is ensured. Recently a photograph of police action on a garment worker on the front page of The Daily Star was published which is a clear evidence of the brutality of police on open street; then one can easily imagine of their conduct behind the walls of thanas and jail bars.
Efficient commands to the right persons at right place and at appropriate time by concerned authority can alone minimise the brutalities. Interviewing 100 persons in a week leaves behind hundreds and thousands on one hand and on the other, the visitors have to take the painful and often expensive journeys which is very much uneconomical and illogical.
In view of the above, beside personal meeting with the people, I call upon our honourable Prime Minister to direct

the relevant Departments to take note of the letters venting grievances and do the needful to build a better Bangladesh.

Jerome Sarkar
Singtola, Dhaka.

Industry and agriculture

Sir, Industrialization is of course essential for the ultimate development of any country. But in our country, performance in the industrial sector is not very encouraging. Unemployment problem is worsening day by day. Due to the withdrawal of large-scale subsidies in the agriculture sector, many poor and small farmers have been thrown out of their occupation. Farmers and villagers are now migrating to the capital and strict towns for cash employment. This migration trend has further deteriorated the city's slum problem.

Again farmers are not getting fair price of their products. Marketing of agricultural commodities remain one of the major agro-economical problems. The cost of cultivation is rising in relation to the return. Often farmers would not get back their investment in cultivation.
Under this crucial circumstance, I think it is important on the part of our policy makers to give a second thought to our national development policy; two questions: (i) have we reached to the appropriate stage for switching on to wide industrialization? (ii) Do we really want to achieve self-sufficiency in the food sector?
M. Zahidul Haque
Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka