

Dhaka, Tuesday, October 1, 1991

For a Bureaucracy after Our Heart

An honest, efficient and responsible bureaucracy is vital for the new government to effectively administer the country. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia knows it and that is what she underlined in her meeting with the senior members of our civil administration last Saturday. The PM's appeal, as reported in the press, was impressive in its purpose and sincerity. What, however, was missing was a clear indication as to the steps she was planning to take to establish a 'people oriented' administration. Mere calling upon our seasoned administrators to desist from corruption, to become efficient overnight and to develop a feelings for the down-trodden, and expecting it to work, is nothing more than letting our wishful thinking to get the better of us. The Prime Minister is too much of a practical politician not to realise that.

Our civil servants — according to many, they are hardly civil and far from being servants — have for long become alienated from our people. For some it is a machinery for exploitation and control, coming down from the colonial days. For many others, it is a part of a civil-military bureaucratic alliance that is mainly responsible for perverting our political process ever since the Pakistani days. All these are facts. However, underneath them all, there is perhaps another fact — that the bureaucracy does not have to be what it has come to be. Meaning that a patriotic leadership and representative government can mould it after its own image. It may not be ideal, but it can definitely be made functional. Herein lies a big challenge for our new leadership.

The examples set by the political leadership — ministers, MPs, stalwarts of political parties from both sides — can have a tremendous demonstrative effect. If they remain above reproach, how far can the civil servants deviate? There was a lot of talk about public declaration of personal wealth of ministers and MPs at the time of assuming office. Immediate action in this regard would give our drive against corruption a serious boost. In time, and through stages, the same could be made to apply on our bureaucracies, both civil and others.

The most important corrective measure that needs to be adopted for our public service is to free it from corruption. For that we need to restore accountability and transparency in our administration. The veil of secrecy and mystery — which is both a source of undue power and corruption and a means of hoodwinking our people — must be lifted. Administrative procedures must be made open and the decision making process, known to all. This can be done by restoring the well established rules that all public servants are duty bound to abide by. If the existing rules are cumbersome and time consuming — and so they are — let us simplify them. But under no circumstances should we throw them by the wayside either on any populist pretext or to suit any coterie interest.

We must also take steps to free our administration from all sorts of interference — especially political. This is a tall order for any government to fulfil. There are local MPs, party big shots, campaign contributors, and of course the opposition stalwarts to keep in good humor. To what extent the BNP government will succeed, only time will tell. But the public expects them to give it a serious try. During the nine years of Ershad's rule, when bureaucracy was reduced from being public servant to that of 'private' servant, the general public developed a tremendous distrust about our civil servants. This distrust needs to be replaced by confidence which our bureaucracy will have to earn through dedicated service. There is also the need to restore dignity and raise the morale of our civil servants, many of whom can be compared to best among their peers anywhere in the world. There are many among them who are patriotic and full of zeal to serve the people. The challenge is to weed out the dead woods and enthuse the rest with the task of development.

One Thing the Towns Must Shun

One thought that Dhaka as a city was very special, in that every drizzle transforms it into a Venice of sorts. Although the city seems to have been spared a repeat performance of the 1988 visitation — which is unfortunately not the case with our northern districts — a week hardly passes here without its being deluged by millimetres of rain.

By now every intelligent and informed citizen knows about the factors contributing to this dubious distinction of our capital city. Dhaka has grown exponentially since 1947 when it became the capital of this part of Pakistan. And in spite of there being such organisations as the Dhaka Improvement Trust or the present-day Rajuk for controlling and guiding this growth — the one inescapable fact of the matter is that this has happened without any plan whatsoever. We are now paying the price of filling up all the waterways and water reservoirs. The suicidal game still goes on in the name of a multi-billion taka protection embankment or in the form of leaving no space for the city to breathe.

Dhaka's growth hasn't been matched by any other town in the land. Chittagong or Khulna has spread but not on Dhaka's scale. As almost all our towns lag far behind Dhaka in building activity, it was thought that the price of unplanned growth as paid by Dhaka needn't have to be paid by the other towns. This is being proved wrong. The Daily Star printed on Monday a four-column picture of a submerged city road — the caption says the place is Station Road, Mymensingh.

Why must the Mymensingh roads drown after a shower? There is no precedent of such occurrence in the town's history. And in September alone the town has been inundated at least twice by rainwater.

We have not so much an explanation of this but a sneaking suspicion. When government started felling trees in Dhaka on a mass scale in the later half of Seventies, making way for neon-sign juggleries may be, all of the towns followed suit without exception. The towns have an irrepressible way of copying Dhaka — look at the sodium lights even at Bhola — rather than developing on their own peculiar charms and good points. Mymensingh and many other towns must have copied Dhaka's rape of hydrological dictats exactly as they have done in the matter undermining environment.

This is one thing the towns must shun.

For Health and Welfare of the Elderly

by Dr K M Rashid

PHC Workers: Assessment

The PHC workers will also be required to assess the state of physical, mental and socio-economic status of the elderly people in the community in addition to their capacity for self-care. The primary health care workers, social service workers and community leaders — should all work as a team to plan and implement appropriate programmes for the elderly. This should take into consideration provision of visual and hearing aids, prostheses as well as necessary drugs and nutrients. The elderly people should be helped, supported and encouraged with regard to self-care practices. The NGOs in the country may direct their efforts to this hitherto neglected area.

It is important that the peripheral health and social workers make the elderly people understand that many conditions and impairments can be reversed or rectified at an early stage by prompt treatment or simple aids. This self-care practice can often change the quality of life. Most important service should be support for those with whom old persons live. In turn, the members of the PHC team must also be assured of necessary support and advice from higher echelons of health care services.

A great deal of burden of mental disability in the elderly is carried by the relatives and often by the spouses of a similar age. Their ability can be enhanced if the load is shared through day-care services and home visits by Public Health Nursing Services. The role of Public Health Nurses as a member of primary health care team is vital in the development of PHC concept for the care of the aged. It is essential that the members of PHC team know their goal and fully understand their role. Activities proposed for PHC team should have the strongest support of

the specialist services. In order to shoulder this new responsibility, necessary training of PHC workers is essential to develop their sensitivity towards the needs of the aged.

The Department of Social Welfare has a much wider and meaningful role to play, particularly for those elderly people who are no longer capable of looking after themselves or have nobody to look after them. Like many developed countries in Bangladesh also the elderly people (i.e. those above 60 years of age) may be granted the status of 'Senior Citizen' of the country. It would be a good gesture on the part of the drug stores to give the senior citizens some discount on the prescriptions they serve or the drugs and medical equipment they sell to them.

To define the extent and the nature of the elderly in Bangladesh, well-designed and properly conducted survey/studies need to be undertaken. In addition, field operational research projects to test some of the approaches mentioned here and which are sustainable with the scarce resources available should be conducted under the guidance of the Bangladesh Research Council and the Institute of Geriatric Medicine. For these activities the international and bilateral agencies should come forward with generous assistance.

Like freedom of speech, the attainment of the highest possible level of health is the fundamental right of every citizen of a democratic and welfare state. The elderly people, being an important segment of the total population have, therefore, every right to seek proper care like any other high risk group. This right is guaranteed by the Constitution of the republic.

The author is a former medical officer of the World Health Organisation.

THE United Nations General Assembly has designated October 1 as the International Day for the Elderly to focus the attention of the people of the world on the growing problem of the aged. We in Bangladesh have joined hands with the world community in observing this day in a befitting manner. The Bangladesh Association for the Aged in collaboration with the government of Bangladesh and the concerned UN Agencies in Bangladesh has planned a day-long programme on this occasion.

Old age is a normal biological process which is a slow, imperceptible, progressive degenerative process advancing with age leading to functional deterioration, vulnerability and ultimately culminating to extinction of life. Aging process is often accompanied by impairment of physiological and mental functions and chronic diseases that prevent a person to play the role of normal person in the family and in the community. However, all the old people do not lead a vegetable life. There are innumerable examples of great contributions made by the elderly people in science, literature, leadership, humanitarian service and in many other fields which may serve as a source of inspiration and a guide to the younger generation of the modern society which is at the present time passing through a very difficult transition.

So, instead of trying to ignore entirely the elderly people from the nation building activities their expertise and experience may be utilized in an appropriate manner in the national planning and management process at different levels.

Apart from health problems, elderly people have other problems as well. The care to meet their basic needs, such as food and nutrition, shelter and clothing and recreational requirements also deserves attention. A study

conducted by the Bangladesh Association for the Aged has amply demonstrated that a significant proportion (about three-fourths) of old people suffer from financial hardship.

Magnitude of the Problem

Due to phenomenal development of science and technology over the last few decades, the age structure of the people has been showing a change; this is more so in the developed countries. In Bangladesh, although the proportion of the people aged 60 years and above to the total population is comparatively low, nevertheless this proportion has been showing a gradual and steady increase from 4.2 per cent in 1951 to 4.9 per cent in 1961 and 5.1 per cent in 1981.

There are more than six million people in Bangladesh over the age of 60. So, ours being a welfare state, it is simply beyond anybody's comprehension not to include specific programme for the welfare of this high risk group of the population in national socio-economic development plan.

Possible Approaches to Address the Issue

The primary health care approach to reach the goal of Health for All (HFA/2000), set jointly by the World Health Organisation and the member countries, including Bangladesh, emphasises amongst other things the paramount importance of active involvement of the community in solving their own health problems on a partnership basis with the local health authorities. Although the essential elements of the primary health care (PHC) services do not include any specific service for the elderly, nevertheless the existing components of PHC, if mobilized properly, can go a long way in ameliorating most of the problems of the elderly

people.

Majority of the health care needs of the community, including those of the older section, can be met at the PHC level which is closest to the people. In Bangladesh, the Upazila Health Complex and Union Health Centres constitute this level, and are responsible for providing health care to all segments of the people. Of course the district hospitals, teaching hospitals and specialized hospitals serve as referral institutions for those conditions which can not be tackled at the PHC level.

In the industrialized and developed countries provisions, such as providing home-care, meals-on-wheels, day-care centres and residential homes for the elderly are provided by the Social Service Department. Long-stay hospitals are also run by the geriatric and psychiatric services for those who are too disabled to live in homes. However, this approach has not been able to tackle the problem adequately, because of the increasing number of people entering the old age and the phenomenal increase in health care costs. Moreover, only a relatively small fraction of the health problems of the elderly can be tackled by curative medicine.

Bangladesh Case

In a poor country like Bangladesh, it is futile to think of such ambitious and expensive system because of severe resource constraints. So, the answer lies with the establishment of community oriented health care system. In Bangladesh, where the traditional joint family system still operates, one needs to develop a system which would encourage and support the members of the family to look after the old members. But unfortunately due to change in the value system and complexities of modern civilization, the age-

old system of joint-family may not last long; it has already started showing cracks, particularly in the urban centres of the country.

PHC system, when fully developed, can offer means of effective disability prevention, early detection and rehabilitation, as well as providing an effective link with specialists and institutional facilities, social services and all other relevant sectors.

At primary level the attention of the PHC workers should be directed to health promotional activities and for mobilizing the community in support of programmes aimed at educating the elderly in daily self-care activities, early detection and reporting of any impairment of physiological functions. This early detection can often prevent an impairment from becoming a disability.

The family and the community have responsibilities and moral obligation towards helping the disabled elderly people cope with the problems of daily living. Similarly, elderly people too have responsibilities towards their own selves and towards the family and community at large. All of them should, therefore, participate in this programme. Apart from investment on the children and other family members, everybody in the community should make adequate provision for their journey through the old age.

Elderly people, like all other age groups and high-risk groups, have the rights to health services that can support their own efforts to maintain their health and prevent disability. Help can take many forms, from giving advice to devising strategies to reduce feelings of worthlessness. Family and friends also require guidance about what to do and how to do to remove/reduce sufferings of the elderly in the family.

China — a Trusted Friend

by Dr Moosa Bin Shamsher

THE relations between Bangladesh and China are rooted in history. The two Asian countries are bound by special ties dating back to thousands of years. Since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between them in October 1976, bilateral co-operation between the two countries has grown steadily over the years covering such diverse fields as trade and commerce, science and technology, education and news and cultural exchanges. Both China and Bangladesh have common and shared perception on almost all global regional issues. All heads of government in Bangladesh since 1977 have visited China, some among them more than once.

Former Chinese President Li Xien Nien and Premier Li Peng paid return visits to Bangladesh thereby strengthening amity and cordiality between the two countries. Since Bangladesh ties present a shining example of South-South Cooperation. On

November 2, 1983 a Joint Commission between the two countries came into being to promote co-operation between the two nations in economic, trade, commerce, science, technical, transport, education and cultural fields. So far the Commission held six meetings alternately in Beijing and Dhaka. Over the last 15 years China has accorded Bangladesh an interest-free loan of 363 million Yuan equivalent to 3,630 million Taka under seven agreements for implementing several development projects.

Of the amount, 58 million Yuan was spent for the construction of the Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge over the river Buriganga while 42 million Yuan was spent towards the construction of the Shambhuganj Bridge. During Prime Minister Begum Khaleda

Zia's first official visit to Beijing in June this year, China offered an additional amount of 400 million taka interest-free loan. China also offered two hundred small tractors for use in the country's agricultural modernisation programme. China is also to build a modern hospital complex and a bicycle chain manufacturing plant for Bangladesh.

Three Chinese aided notable completed projects are — the Sunderban Textile Mills, Rugganj Water Conservancy Plant and the Palash Urea Fertilizer Factory. China also assisted in the renovation and modernisation of the Bangladesh Ordnance Factory. The 200-MW Chittagong Thermal Power Station which is being assisted by China is also nearing completion. Beijing has also expressed its readiness to take part in the

development of Boropukuria coal mining project in Dinajpur.

Both-way trade rose from 13.75 million dollars in 1975-76 to 147.21 million dollars in 1989-90. Bangladesh finances 79 per cent of its total import from China under cash foreign exchange with barter amounting for the remaining 21 per cent. Barter comprises 89 per cent of Bangladesh's exports to China. The Third Five-Year term accord for 1990-95, now in operation, was signed in November 1989. The balance of payment is slightly against Bangladesh.

China is a time tested friend of Bangladesh. During the catastrophic floods of 1987 and 1988 as well as during the devastating and tidal upsurge this year China came forward in a big way to assist Bangladesh. Beijing also shared

Dhaka's tireless efforts to evolve a permanent solution of the Bangladesh perennial flood problem. Chinese hydrologists provided consultancy services for flood control and river management projects. China and Bangladesh signed direct air link and shipping between the two countries back in 1988. The two countries have

also agreements on education and cultural exchanges. Bangladesh built a primary school in Beijing and Bangladeshi students are receiving higher education in different branches of learning in China.

There is however, still ample scope of further expanding bilateral cooperation between the two countries. It is expected that with the passage of time stronger bridges of friendship between Bangladesh and China will be built in every field.

OPINION

Jamuna Bridge : Broad Gauge Railway

"Bangladesh can build one Jamuna Bridge every four years if it can stop the enormous system loss in the power sector" said the World Bank Vice President during his recent visit here. Whether it is a reality is a different matter. But it is true that now a days phenomenal and revolutionary development has taken place in construction-technology and river-training. So a bridge can smoothly be constructed anywhere at half the cost than that of in the past, in real value term.

Traffic in Bangladesh specially across the Jamuna is likely to increase and cargo traffic is expected to change its pattern to a heavier nature. But throughout the year there is no road for movement of heavier transports in the country. In dry season there is abrupt fall of water level in the Jamuna and due to silt a good number of shoals emerge impeding movement of ferries, while in wet season heavy rains and floods erode the roads.

The linked railways are required over the bridge. Unfortunately the proposed bridge provides for metre gauge railway tracks. It should be replaced by broad gauge ones. Without giving much weight to the pater of traffic particularly for near future, deciding the gauge of railway track is not scientific. In our country 60 wagons of a goods train cost only one gallon of oil for one mile. For the same weight of goods as carried by 60 wagons, 240 trucks are needed, which need 21 gallons of oil as fuel for one mile only. So the use of railway not only minimises the heavy pressure on the bridge but also saves time tremendously and makes the transportation of goods cheaper. For more speedy and heavy traffic, both the World Bank and the Railway authorities know the preference of broad gauge railway over the metre gauge in respect of carrying capacity and speed. In future, the oil stock may vanish and the coal perhaps will be the generator of power and the railways may be the only means of transportation to cover the longest route.

Our country is connected by the broad gauge tracks with the neighbouring countries.

Only broad gauge will serve international cross traffic in future. Besides, broad gauge is a must to connect Dhaka directly with 85% of Western region consisting of Rajshahi and Khulna divisions and the country's single natural port Mongla without any interruption and change over. In western region, jute, sugar, newspaper mills, all the majority large scale industries and the unexplored massive deposit sites of mineral resources are connected by broad gauge railway tracks. For marketing, the whole Western region is dependent on Dhaka and vice versa. It may be noted that in 1969 United Kingdom's "Free man fox and Partners" and in 1973 Japan's "International Co-operation Agency" in their survey reports recommended for broad gauge railway tracks on the proposed bridge.

The installation of broad gauge railway now needs to be thought over with the provisions for turning it into the mixed gauge railway tracks. In future, within the same breadth of broad gauge track, one additional rail with the breadth of metre gauge needs to be installed. Thus, with the use of the three rails within the breadth of broad gauge, the mixed gauge tracks i.e. the broad and metre gauge will be created.

At present, mixed gauge railway tracks exist, since the British reign, between Parbatpur and Saidpur to facilitate the transportation of rolling stocks, engines of both broad and metre gauges to Saidpur Railway Workshop.

With 1992-94, it is a must to provide the Western region with additional electricity and for the first time with gas to stop massive deforestation and desertification. So there was the plan to complete the construction of Jamuna Bridge by 1994-96. It is undoubtedly a glaring test of the present democratic Government to collect funds for constructing Jamuna Bridge well in time.

Md. Anwarul Afzal, Ex Member, National Railway Consultative Committee, Raminagar, Mymensingh.

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.

Menacing problems

Sir, The whole of North Bengal is menacingly inundated by the onrush of flood waters coming from India causing irreparable loss to human lives, property, foodstuff, livestock etc. Thus inflicting heavy blows to the already shattered economy of the country and increasing sufferings of the affected people.

I admit that many might argue it to be a natural phenomenon over which we have no control except to party to the Almighty!

In the context of present viral fever again menacingly sweeping all over Bangladesh and so also the conjunctivitis, may we know what the Health Department has to say advise the suffering people at least?

Similarly, the waterlogged and drainage problem of many posh areas of Dhaka city including Santinagar, Malibagh should by now draw the attention of the concerned Department. Because all these continuous departmental failures and negligence to remedy these evils will ultimately discredit the present popular government which came to power through the direct mass support.

One hates to think that government machinery will only activate or function when the Prime Minister only detecting the situation orders for a quick remedy.

I think all will agree that the concerned departments

should carefully take a timely note of the writings on the wall — before they make mess by delaying solutions.

A U Mohsin
Jibcatola, Dhaka.

Giants won't be here!

Sir, So, the Goliaths of cricket are not coming to Bangladesh soon. Two one-day Internationals between the mightiest West Indies and the maturing Sri Lanka and one one-day match between Sri Lanka and test-aspirant Bangladesh scheduled for Dhaka this season have been "abandoned" because of the host's inability to prepare the "pitch and ground" on time. How awful it is to millions of cricket maniacs on earth!

The aspired occasion would have been the best one for the local cricket lovers since the last test at the same ground over 20 years ago, mainly because the best team in the world today would have been in action against an unpredictable side that just overrode the underestimators over in cricketland.

The official showdowns between the masterful Caribbeans and the youngest test team could have essentially been a demonstration class for the natives. Such a special session would be precious for Bangladeshi cricket enthusiasts to have mastered some caricatures from the giants in the arena and especially from the superb team

they had not seen on own soil in about three decades.

At any rate, a close-counter-of-the-rare-kind between the superior West Indians and the budding Bangladeshis would definitely be a lesson of life for many domestic cricketers and be a memorable event for the home fans as well. This once-in-a-blue-moon opportunity of such a daring game on her unique wickets with the greatest would have developed the latent test material in the Bangladesh cricketers.

M Rahman
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"Little Letter-writers"

Sir, The editorial captioned "Little letters-writers" published in four esteemed daily on Sept 16 attracted my attention for its inherent charm. Views on letter-writing, great letter writers, historical value of letters as well as our bright letter writers have been projected magnificently.

Now even, in the apex of scientific and technological development, none can ignore the importance of letter-writing. The volume of mail circulation has not decreased in the countries like the USA, Germany, UK where computer, telephone, telx, fax dominate the day-to-day life.

The Daily Star presents editorials on various issues everyday. But topic like "Little letters-writers" occasionally comes to help us think differently. Issues with diversity will certainly fulfill our aspirations and enrich the realm of our knowledge and pleasure.

Md. Moniruzzaman
Nakhalpara, Tejgaon,
Dhaka.

Postal services

Sir, In the good old days, the Postal Dept. used to publish a small pocket guide (booklet, costing less than the then one Rupee) containing useful information for quick reference; such as inland and foreign postage rates, etc. Such Pocket Guide (Bengali and English editions) may be issued at periodical intervals. It is a hassle to seek the information at the crowded counters, and the figures verbally quoted to not tally at all Post Offices.

On the other hand, newly designed postage stamps are issued at too frequent intervals. The printing is not cheap. Besides, the illustrations are too small; too much is included, and the impact is not dramatic. How much is earned through philately? One design was attractive, the embossed 2-taka stamp on the envelope sold by the Post Offices, showing the Shahid Minar. Higher art is sub-tractive: the less, the better.

Our Post Offices look like old historical government offices. These could be made to look brighter, with a dash of paint and colour, a little polish on the counters, and more cheerful faces behind the counters. They are under pressure, so are we.

A senior citizen
Dhaka.