

A New Strategy on Health

Given the crucial importance of the health sector to the development and general well-being of the people, the prime minister's announcement last Tuesday that new drug and health policies will soon be introduced, comes as a highly positive indication of some badly needed activity to formulate a strategy. With the announcement made, we now await the modalities through which the policies are to be formulated and, of course, the contents of the policies themselves.

Here, we would do well to remember that the health policy of former president Hussain Muhammad Ershad's government suffered from a number of serious deficiencies which made it unacceptable to the medical community as a whole and the doctors in particular. In the first instance, the objections dealt with the modality of policy formulation. The previous government followed a path well-trodden by itself on virtually every other issue. That is, the government used a small coterie of people, professionals as well as otherwise, to draw up the policy without ever bothering to consult the wider bodies of people directly involved, namely the doctors' associations and other medical bodies. This is not to say that Ershad's health policy did not contain anything of merit, because no such policy can ever be totally devoid of positive aspects.

However, due to the simple fact that inputs did not reflect the views and opinions of a cross section, the output naturally became the object of intense suspicion and was therefore eventually ditched outright. We may recall that doctors went on strike over the health policy which is an indication of how strongly such a vital group of professionals felt about it.

The present government has the invaluable benefit of hindsight and can be expected to avoid the folly of the past regime. To begin with, it has to acknowledge that certain decisions may have to be taken which would not be immediately attractive to the professionals in the field. But in order to avoid any misunderstanding and any repetition of the face-off that characterised Ershad's relations with the doctors, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Minister of Health Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf must make sure that there is a process of continuous consultation with the greatest number of people at every stage of the formulation of the health policy. The government should keep the interest of the people, meaning the end-users of the product of the policy, as the number one priority, and not that of any group interest.

For instance, if the government feels that professors and lecturers at government colleges should be barred from engaging in private practice, then it must convince the medical community of its necessity; likewise, if it thinks, in order to put substance into the slogan "Health For All", that doctors on state payroll ought to be given rural posting, then that too must be forcefully explained to medical associations.

For their part, the doctors are undoubtedly aware of the high regard in which they are held by the people. But such a position of esteem also thrusts a great deal of moral responsibility on them. There is no escaping the fact that people do see the profession as an altruistic one, and expect doctors to put interests of patients above their own financial ones. Such a high expectation may well be unfair, but doctors ought to think seriously about what society expects of them and try to help the government in formulating a health policy that will be able to bring the benefits of medicine to the greatest number of people across the widest possible area.

What Should the Children Do?

The Victory Day celebrations in the city were an unmitigated joy to see and to be a part of it and to remember for long. Spontaneity was at the heart of it and that more than made up the cancellation this year of the Victory Day Parade. However, that was a genuine lapse on the part of the government.

Of all the non-spontaneous functions only the children's rally comes out wonderfully breaking free of the official straightjacket. And this year's rally was no exception to that. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was at hand to exhort the children with appropriately elevating words and sentiments. A newspaper tried to sum up her good works with a headline: Children asked to get ready for future leadership. Children haven't any power, or even right, to prepare for anything all by themselves. It is the wishes of the parents — most times unenlightened, illogical and downright selfish — which shape the children's vanity to be this or that. It is regularly a tragedy if not quite a shame, to read about the ambitions of our star students harbour and disgorge everytime the results are out.

It will, however, be as futile to address the well-intentioned words to the parents. Not one among a million parents would wish his or her sons and daughters to go for the nation's leadership, which exclusively means political leadership. In present array of political leadership, we shall hardly find a dozen who had been heirs to political leaders. And are there many among present political leaders who, instead of sending their sons and daughters abroad for education in mostly technical things, are grooming them for future political leadership?

Her exhortation of children to love the country is a shining advice and reminds us very pointedly that none of our scholar girls and boys ever say that their ambition is to love the country and to serve it truly.

By loving our country what — which items and entities — are we expecting our children to love? Are we sure about that? Are we all agreed on this? From Tagore's Gora and Sarat Chandra's Shesh Prasad to our contemporary Mahmudul Haq's Jibon Amar Bone there are much thought-provoking passages — full of logic and feeling, imagination and sense of history and belonging — that touch the heart. But they do not say the same thing.

We would, in that case, do well to imbue our children with spirit of caring for the collective weal — the fellow man's well-being, rather personal aggrandisement which is often a synonym for hankering after power.

BEFORE the government and political parties sit down to thrash out the plans for a new South Africa the main players are trying to rope in those parties that have opted to stay out of the negotiations.

The Convention for a Democratic South Africa, as it has been named, holds its first meeting on December 20-21. The agenda for those two days is a full one: the creation of a conducive climate, the nature of transitional arrangements, the role of the international community, the future of the independent homelands and the time frame for negotiations.

The big worry is those key organisations which say they will not take part in the talks. Of particular concern are the right-wing parties.

The Conservative Party (CP) and the Afrikaner Beweging (AWB) are virulently opposed to any talks that may compromise the position of white South Africans.

The AWB takes this a step further and even threatened civil war if negotiation resulted in an African National Congress (ANC) government taking power. Both the government of President FW de Klerk and the ANC are aware of the rights' potential for disruption.

An array of private white armies is already training under the guise of self-defence preparedness and they are well armed. Furthermore, the

Extermists Wooed to Get Them into South Africa Talks

Mondli Makhanya writes from Johannesburg

Political groups in South Africa are about to sit down with the government to begin detailed negotiations on a post-apartheid South Africa. This follows the first historic meeting in Johannesburg between 20 groups on November 29. That preliminary curtain-raiser went smoothly. From now on the going will get tougher.

army and the police force includes a significant proportion of right-wing sympathisers. They may well be the elusive "third force" behind the continuing township violence.

It would greatly help the negotiation process if they could be reined in to take part. On the left is the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and a vast array of fringe socialist-oriented left-wing movements. AZAPO says it will take part in talks only if they are held within a constituent assembly. It refuses to have anything to do with "talks about talks."

The PAC, which along with the ANC forged a Patriotic Front alliance in October, has also toughened its stance. The reason is that its membership insists on clinging to the rhetoric which the leadership

was preaching a few months back.

While the ANC talked with the government in 1990 last year the PAC leadership said it would not take part in talks about talks and made a lot of capital out of the fact that the ANC had abandoned the armed struggle.

Then the PAC became fearful that it would marginalise itself by staying outside negotiations so it announced after the Patriotic Front conference that it would attend the all-party conference on November 29. For semantic reasons it called it the pre-constituent assembly conference.

Hence a PAC revelation that the ANC and the government had entered into a secret pact to form an interim government on their own next February and a PAC walkout from the first preliminary meeting.

The PAC quit to preserve unity in its own ranks and at the same time not lose face. The ANC wants the PAC at the talks not least because it will strengthen the liberation movements' side of the table against the government.

It also wants the PAC to be party to any binding decisions taken to prevent the Africanist movement being able to shout "sell-out" accusations at it.

The ANC did not therefore respond angrily to the PAC tirade against it and thus kept the shaky Patriotic Front alliance on track.

A major concern of the ANC and the government is that the parties rejecting negotiations are not signatories to the National Peace Accord drawn up some weeks ago to reduce violence and are therefore not bound by it.

Whatever these parties do,

the Convention will go ahead. Everyone has started jockeying for position. The government has persuaded a number of conservative organisations and its potential allies to attend the talks, but the table seems tilted in favour of the ANC.

By bringing various homeland governments and the relatively conservative mixed-race Labour Party within the Patriotic Front, the ANC has secured a majority for its position at the talks.

But the speed and ease with which the meeting reached consensus on November 29 is not likely to be repeated on December 20. There will be areas of serious disagreement — for instance, the issue of an elected constituent assembly, which the ANC insists should draw up the new constitution.

The government totally opposes such a procedure. It says

constituent assembly elections would be held on platforms which would be difficult for parties to back down from once the bargaining starts.

The fear of one party winning an absolute majority and steamrolling its own constitutional proposal through the assembly is also raised by the government. They would prefer the Convention to draw up the constitution.

Then there is the tricky issue of an interim government. Government opponents insist the government cannot fairly manage the transition — given its access to public funds, broadcasting and the security force.

Following the embarrassing Inkathathathu scandal, which revealed government funding to the Inkatha Movement of chief Gatsha Buthezi, government has conceded the need for some form of "transitional arrangement."

Another potentially tough question will be the future of the "independent" homelands. Only the Bophuthaswana homeland leaders, Lucas Mangope, is steadfastly against re-incorporation, but if he cannot be convinced diplomatically to reverse his position — sentiment on the left is that he should be compelled to do so. — GEMINI NEWS

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NOMADIC jungle dwellers of the Malaysian state of Sarawak blame their government for plundering the rainforests in their ancestral land, but also say headline-grabbing protests by international green activists harms their cause.

Recent spectacular protests by international activists in which some have chained themselves to logging barges, have given the government an excuse to punish them for being "anti-development" they say.

The government's definition of "development" appears to be different from the way the indigenous people of Northern Borneo see their future.

"Development has to be something that benefits us. We must have a say in its pace and direction," said a member of the Penan tribe which lives in Sarawak's interior.

"We want development which takes into account our rights to land and appropriate to our cultural heritage," said a statement by the Coalition on the Protection of Native Customary Rights, a group of 10 semi-settled Penan communities.

Half of Sarawak's population of 1.7 million is composed of

tribal groups such as the Penans, who are collectively known as Dayaks.

About 600 of the state's 6,000 or so Penans are still nomadic. Many of the others have been displaced by logging or mining operations.

The Penan coalition said that in the name of "development" many government officials in collaboration with greedy logging contractors have destroyed much of Sarawak's rainforests, stripped the land for minerals with no regard for the environment and flooded rich river valleys for hydro-electricity.

Moved by what they saw as the injustice suffered by Sarawak's indigenous people, international environmental activists hung themselves with climbing ropes from logging barges in July to draw attention to the destruction of rainforests in Sarawak.

The nine protesters included activists from Earth First in the United States, Robin Wood of West Germany and Society for Threatened People from Switzerland. They were later arrested and two of them deported by Malaysian

The government's definition of development does not seem to coincide with the way the indigenous people of the Malaysian state of Sarawak see their future, reports Han Jai of IPS from Kuching, Malaysia.



authorities.

Some Penans say this kind of protest distracts attention from the real issue of appropriate development of the tribal communities. It also opens them to official criticism of being foreign-backed at a time when Malaysia faces a

boycott of tropical products in the West.

Last year, the Penans themselves set up human blockades across logging trails to draw the government's attention to the loss of their livelihood. Hundreds were arrested. Sarawak is one of the few

areas of South-east Asia from where uncut logs are still exported. Sarawak and the neighbouring state of Sabah supply up to 60 percent of the world's hardwood, most of it to Japan.

Log exports brought the state government in Kuching over 230 million dollars last year. Sarawak also exported natural gas, petroleum and other minerals, but many of the state's citizens say they are not benefiting from its vast riches.

Sarawak is still the least-developed part of the Malaysian federation, and dependent on federal largesse.

The Sarawak timber industry has a high level of local ownership and labour-intensive technology. The industry employs more than 55,000 people — among them Penans and the largest ethnic group here, the Iban.

But the industry is controlled by local government officials and their favoured contractors, usually from the Chinese Fookchow group in Sarawak. Environmental guidelines are not always followed, and logging is indiscriminate.

critics say.

The state government has started plantations to generate employment for displaced forest dwellers. Lured by promises of free land, housing, health care and schooling for their children, many left their forest homes to live in government longhouses.

But longhouse life has been culturally alienating for the Dayaks, who say the government has not delivered on its promises.

Some Malaysian academics blame the country's constitution that gives state government wide-ranging powers to decide land use for the unsustainable development of rainforest areas.

About 300,000 hectares of virgin forests are being cleared every year in Sarawak alone.

"Political office allows politicians in Sarawak and Sabah to determine land use for commercial development, approve timber licences and allocate revenue from mineral exploitation," says one social scientist here, who did not want to be named.

Borneo's natural heritage is being destroyed because of this interplay of international economics and state politics, he said.

The Greens : France's Fourth Political Force

by Camille Herisson

The "Greens" won two million votes and sent nine deputies to the European Parliament in 1989. They hold 1,400 seats on local councils. With about 10% of the electorate, the Greens are France's fourth political force.

hostility to the right-wing parties. It is antimilitarist and in favour of nuclear disarmament. It rejects the twelve-member European in favour of Gorbachev's "common home".

As a believer in direct democracy, it is hard for a green to accept one of his peers emerging from among the ranks. He is quick to denounce careerism and is afraid that his movement might become a "traditional party." He is in favour of giving the vote to immigrants in local elections and, for its organisation, he has adopted the system of a

General Meeting at which anyone can speak.

The Greens come from all social and political groups. They include a former pilot in the army who resigned because he was against the nuclear strike force, an ex-revolutionary communist who lets out barges, a biological farmer and a youth-club organiser.

A Force to be Reckoned with

On the face of things, the Greens offer a unanimous front, but, in fact, they form a breeding-ground which fosters different trends. This mosaic

of currents, which combines realism and utopianism, has its traditionalists, its idealists, its old-time dreamers and its Don Quixotes. It extends from Christian-democrat moderation to extreme left radicalism and there are fights between rival clans and leaders.

There are opposite views on everything: economic industrial, agricultural and foreign policy, etc. Some advocate sharing wealth with the Third World. Others are concerned with alternative medicine. From a social point of view, many plead for a shorter working week which would lead to the creation of more jobs. Defenders of nature upset pigeon shoots and draw away packs of hounds in pursuit of a stag as well as freeing laboratory animals.

The Greens are determined to remain politically independent although they form a force to be reckoned with for the right and are courted by the left. They are a thorn in

the flesh for the majority party and intend to go on nibbling at its electorate, while, at the same time, drawing on the centre.

Although they may lack deputies at the National Assembly to make themselves heard, the local councillors and members of the European Parliament are among the most active at meetings. Yet they have little financial means as they refuse financial help from firms. That is a definite handicap.

For politicians, for the power in office and in local assemblies, the Greens act as a permanent itch. It is their way of making things move.

And they are moving. "When I see how quickly politicians turn green, I find myself 'light green' in contrast," an old, original ecologist notes. In a very short time, a lot of them have become "dark green."

Today's militants aim to prove that they are not only concerned with preserving chlorophyll and that they will not become "biodegradable in the sunshine of power."

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.

In praise of a school

Sir, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" a maxim which was very well understood by the authorities of Sunbeam School. Consequently the School authorities held their Annual School Sports and Prize Distribution recently at the Dhanmudi Sports Complex for Women. The school does not have any playground but in spite of this handicap, the overall performance was excellent.

Usually on such occasions the parents are invited. This year the school had shown a friendly gesture by extending invitation to grand-parents also. Earlier I thought my wife would represent me and attend the function. But the little grand daughter of ours was insisting that I should go and till the last minute I could not evade her. So I decided to go for half an hour or at best forty five minutes and then leave to

attend another discussion meeting around 10:30 am what I saw there kept me glued to the seat till the end of the function.

With the dong at 9:30 in the morning it started with the recitation from the Quran Majid by a small child with melodious voice. It was followed by translation into English by yet another child. It was remarkable to note, that children who are prone to be restless and noisy, were quite respectful and fixed their gazes to the ground and observed profound silence. So did the invited guests including ladies who had drawn the veil on their heads out of respect. This is a rare sight these days even at religious ceremonies where people continue to talk like a chatter box while the recitation is on. I marvel at the discipline the students maintained right through from the flag hoisting ceremony to the prize distribution and vote of thanks.

There must have been some dedication some where on the part of some one otherwise this discipline for a school which has no playground of its own, would not have been possible at all.

Discipline is the basic need for a student whether it is at school or at home. He needs it to establish and maintain wholesome condition for learning. It is also required for better management of class and study, because of its value as a habit in life. If he learns to toe the mark in his school it will be easier for him to meet standards when he grows into an adult.

Not only in the field of sports and games I have looked into the home work minutely observed day to day progress of the child (my grand daughter). It is quite satisfactory. Recently a friend of mine came from Calcutta, whose daughter is in La-Martinier School, while she was going thru' the text books and home works she remarked that the standard is as good as that of La-Martinier, if not higher. A Bangladeshi who lives in London came here on a month's holiday. He was also going thru' the text books of KG-1, home work and grading of Sunbeam School. He too

was of opinion that the standard of education was good and above average. Here a note of caution is mentioned to stretch on one point that we should not only improve the children's quality of Bangla alone, we should try to make their quality of English better and competitive. For improvement of English one has to read English, write English and speak English and since Bangla is our mother tongue one can dream in Bangla. None of the languages can we afford to neglect. If we read English we cannot neglect Bangla and vice versa. We cannot see the peril ahead because we still have amongst us persons, in various occupations, who can write and speak flawless English and Bangla. In matters of another 5-10 years their small numbers will run out.

Unless we improve the standard of English in our young ones they will fail to compete when it will come to international standard. It is indeed heartening to know that a boy — an ex-student of Sunbeam in 'O' level examinations had secured 'A' in all the eight subjects including English and Bangla. Bravo, well done Bangladeshi student! Lastly, I congratulate the school authorities for putting up such an excellent performance. It is high

time that the school authorities make honest effort to arrange a playground for its students so that in next year's performance the children can perform Calisthenics.

AMF Quadir
Dhaka

Aspirin preparations

Sir, Aspirin is important for its analgesic and antipyretic character, and is widely used for pain relief. Latest researches found aspirin as an effective agent for reducing blood cholesterol, heart patients are being advised by the physicians to take low dose of aspirin regularly.

At present the common preparation of aspirin available in our market is soluble 'Disprin' tablet which contains 300 mgs of aspirin. Since aspirin tablets are hygroscopic, it is difficult to keep half a tablet. Hence we feel that our pharmaceutical companies should prepare aspirin tablets of 150 mgs.

Aspirin, although suggestively a very good drug yet it is not so good with people having acidity or gastric problems. Certain medicine companies abroad are manufacturing more safer preparations of aspirin. For instance, Nicholas Australia's 'Aspro Clear' contains Aspirin 300 mg, sodium

bicarbonate 452 mg, citric acid anhydrous 207 mg. There are sugar coated aspirin too. Our local medicine companies can also make varied and safer preparations of aspirin which I am sure will be a boon for many patients.

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'Definite time frame for repatriation'

Sir, I fully endorse your views on the captioned subject (leader published on December 12). There has to be a definite time frame for repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis. The words and phrases like "gradually, as soon as possible, not too distant" now are very much regretting and disappointing. As suggested by you there has to be a definite time frame announced by the authorities in Pakistan so that the issue is settled once for all and the distressed people have some consolation. The time lost in the exercise (about two decades) is too much and the issue should no longer be allowed to linger. The sooner a definite time frame is given, the better for both the parties.

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