

Fighting Malaria

With a large proportion of cases of malaria found in such countries in this region as India, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, it is only appropriate that a regional meeting of some 125 international experts on the control of this disease be held in this region, in New Delhi from 3-7 February. It is also appropriate that Bangladesh should be taking part in it in all seriousness. True, the organisers of the meeting, the World Health Organisation (WHO), has not put this country in the category of countries in this region widely affected by malaria. Whether it is an oversight or a lapse due to the non-availability of reliable statistics, Bangladesh is most certainly either already a major victim of this disease or vulnerable to one more health problem.

It is sad, almost tragic, that a number of diseases, after being partially or wholly eradicated from most countries of the world, make a gigantic come-back. Malaria seems to be a case in point. Back in the fifties, thanks to the vigorous efforts of the then Minister for Health, the late Habibullah Bahar, malaria was driven out of the erstwhile East Pakistan. Other Bahars, in other parts of the world, achieved the same feat and thus saved the lives of millions of people in the Third World.

The return of malaria which caused the death of a million people last year, in more than 100 countries, may well be due to different factors which will be examined in the inter-sectoral regional meeting in New Delhi. Among these factors, the most important one would surely be the deterioration in living conditions in most developing countries and the creation of breeding grounds for malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Again, the deterioration of living condition cannot be de-linked from environmental pollution, decline in sanitation facilities, increase in number of slums and a dwindling public awareness of health-related issues. As recently reported in the media, in Dhaka, it is not just the poor slum-dwellers who are to be blamed for the dismal situation that exists in their surroundings. Even the affluent class has been showing a deplorable callousness towards sanitation or, to put it bluntly, towards garbage collection in its own neighbourhood.

Whatever may be the outcome of the regional meeting in New Delhi, which is to be followed by a global meeting in October, the responsibility for fighting malaria and eradicating it again lies with civic bodies in each country and, indeed, with organisations which spread health education. It is said that fighting malaria involves financial costs "which the developing countries are the least equipped to bear", to quote from a WHO handout for the press. This may well be partly true. However, there are a lot of countries, including Bangladesh, which should be able to do on their own to control this disease. On the other hand, if substantial funds are available, they should be used in implementing an integrated plan that focuses on the health sector as a whole.

National Theatre Now

Newspapers have a way of giving black and bold headlines to words of pledge and promise depending less upon the true worth of those words and more upon the person who those are coming from and the supposed readers' interest in the subjects of the wordy commitment. And newspapers do well know that most of such promises are just playing to the gallery directed at getting ready ovations on the spot and loud headlines in the press the next morning — and nothing more. Still, the newspapers go out zealously to print the same every day of the week. This could, of course, have a value of its own by way of making the promise-makers a little obliged to keeping them for fear of being caught out at a game of bluffing. But the memory of people are short and one thing the journalists are averse to is to follow up their own stories. Hollow promises are as such rarely found out for what they are.

When Prime Minister Khaleda Zia said at the end of December last that a national drama theatre would be built at Eskaton and land was being allotted for the job, there was no reason why one should treat these reassuring words as belonging to the category noted above. And there isn't any even now. Right from 1955 the nation, specially its culturally active important minority, has been struggling to get the government build such a thing. And for long 36 years this has been stonewalled this way or that. What could be the best words coming from the Prime Minister on the occasion of her opening the month-long drama festival other than those that pledged the building of a national theatre.

On Wednesday the Jatiya Sangsad was told by the state minister for culture that a '500-seat drama stage would be set up in Dhaka within the current Five-Year Plan.' Once bitten twice shy. This kind of confirmation of the Prime Minister's pledge has lent a contrary effect. It practically tells the eager enthusiast not to put much expectations in the matter being realised any too soon. The Prime Minister, in fact, was more specific a month ago. The relevant ministry seems to have worked backward on the project rather than going forward with it. The state minister should have come with the information of the Eskaton plot already being allotted in the mean time — and other specific low-down on the progress made in the matter.

Our request to the PM's colleagues and the ministries would be: please do not undercut our Prime Minister. Let us all join hands in contributing to the growth of the institution of Prime Ministership. The culture-conscious Bangalee people are terribly interested in having a national theatre without even a day's delay. Help the PM's promise come true while you have both the mind and the power to do so. Please.

S AUDI Arabia says it will announce rules and regulations for a new consultative council in February. Oman has just held the first formal session of its reconstituted council and Kuwait says it will lift censorship in preparation for elections set for October. Is the oil-rich Gulf opening a new page of liberalisation?

That was the hope of many leaders and commentators in the wake of the crisis created by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. But the expectation was more in relation to Kuwait, where plans for a Majlis-i-Shoora (consultative council) were in the offing, than any other Gulf state.

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia has been guided by strict application of the Shariah (Islamic laws) in its administration. The other states have followed religion-based governing systems with a sprinkling of liberalism. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia have had appointed advisory bodies and until 1986 Kuwait had a directly elected parliament, albeit only a tiny minority was entitled to vote.

Apart from Kuwait, these councils were largely confined to loyalists and only in recent years in the post-oil boom period were they expanded, with leading businessmen and prominent citizens nominated by the rulers. Their role remained advisory, although increasing contact with foreigners and greater exposure to Western education and political systems injected a critical approach into debates in the Shoora councils.

King Fahd of Saudi Arabia had proposed a reformed council in early 1980, but the 1980-88 war between Iran and Iraq, with the attendant tension and uncertainty in the whole region, and then the Gulf crisis in 1990 held up action on his plans. Disruption caused by the Iran-Iraq war was also a factor behind the dissolution of the Kuwait parliament in 1986.

The transformation of the regional scene following the Gulf war and the collapse of

FALLOUT FROM DESERT STORM

How the Political Winds of Change are Blowing in the Gulf

Mohammed Aslam writes from Dubai

In the wake of the war, the Gulf states are all being affected by the changes sweeping the globe. Most have no political parties. Several have advisory bodies and Kuwait had an elected parliament, but none has had much power. Now Oman plans a more representative council and Kuwait has promised elections in October. Gemini News Service assesses the political changes in the Sheikdoms.

communism in the Soviet Union has encouraged the drive for greater participation in state affairs.

Even as Kuwait was occupied with its government in exile in Saudi Arabia and the stand-off between the US-led

coalition and Iraq worsening, the Emir, Sheikh Jaber Al Ahmed Al Sabah, and his ministers pledged to usher in democracy one Kuwait was free again.

King Fahd renewed his Shoora scheme in a more con-

ceive way and with greater urgency, promising to put it in place in a short time but after consideration of all aspects involved.

In Oman, Sultan Qaboos announced, in November 1990 at the height of the Gulf crisis, plans to replace the existing wholly nominated council with more representative one. And Kuwait, after liberation in February 1991, promised elections in October 1992.

Oman's new Majlis was constituted two months ago and held its first session on January 4-6. Its 59 members represent the Wilayats (provinces); they were nominated by the public and chosen after consultation with community elders.

Considering that the previous State Consultative Council, set up in 1981, was wholly appointed, the new Majlis is an advance towards a democratic experiment.

It is described by Omani observers as a "curtain-raiser to a new era of national participation." It falls far short of direct polls, but is closer to that goal because it enjoys legislative and certain other powers not available to the defunct council. Moreover, the members will now be elected (indirectly) every three years, and the Majlis will normally meet four times a year.

In a path-breaking move, the Sultan has authorised the Majlis to review draft economic and social legislation.

present policy proposals, question the work of ministers and prepare environmental and development plans. It can also make recommendations for government action, especially in the socio-economic field.

The new members still vow total allegiance to the Sultan. Majlis president Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali Al Gatabi sent a cable to him saying that "the march of democracy is now heading towards a wider horizon to keep up with country's rapid growth under Your Majesty's wise leadership."

In Saudi Arabia, King Fahd told his cabinet on January 6 that the reformed format of the proposed council would be announced in February, outlining the basic system of government and a provincial structure.

The King was quoted by the official Saudi news agency as saying that the new system would "benefit the public interests and assist the government in carrying out its duties within the framework of Islam."

The new council will replace the existing advisory body, which was nominated or approved by the King. Saudi Arabia has no written constitution and, as elsewhere in the Gulf, no political parties. In March 1990 a committee was formed to prepare a 20-0-article basic system of rule based entirely on Islamic laws (Shariah).

It was also asked to draw up



Famine Stalks Laos : FAO Airs Food Aid Plea

by a Special Correspondent from Rome

THE monsoon rains came only last June to usher in a late planting season in Laos. By August, when the ricefields were already green, the successive waves of typhoons devastated the crops and left the prospect of a huge rice shortfall in the country in 1992.

The grim possibility has prompted no less than the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to issue an urgent appeal for assistance from the international community to avert hunger in Laos.

A mission from the FAO and the World Food Programme (WFP) has just completed a survey of the extent of damage and recommended external assistance of from 12,000 to 16,000 tons of rice, the staple food of Laotians.

Most severely hit was the southern region comprising what used to be the most important rice surplus-producing provinces of Savannakhet and Champasak, and Khammouan on the central part, affecting a total of 55,317 families or 332,000 people, mostly farmers.

Almost 900 buffaloes and 300 heads of cattle, important in agriculture and in the form of savings, were lost.

Laos lacks the foreign exchange to import the cereals needed to meet its consumption requirements. Due to this constraint, the government can do very little to assist the affected farmers other than encourage them to plant more dry season crops by utilising irrigated and flood recession cultivations.

The FAO underscored the

need for "rapid assistance" to poor farmers. The FAO-WFP mission has recommended the distribution to start this April or May for logistics reason and to avoid any disruption in the rice flow to domestic markets at harvest time.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation has issued an urgent appeal for assistance from the international community to avert hunger.

The government, however, has expressed desire to begin distribution as soon as possible.

A reassessment of the situation is scheduled this January. It was learned from the FAO, "The provision of additional emergency food aid could be warranted after a reassessment... when final data on the rainy

season crop will be gathered and the affected population revisited in order to evaluate the impact of the remedial measures traditionally taken by the farmers themselves," said a FAO report released here. "Additional donations could

then be easily channelled to the needy populations utilising the existing logistics network for the food aid distribution."

Remedial measures include the sale of animals, expansion of cultivation and irrigated dry-season cropping, and peddling and borrowing rice from relatives or friends. These steps are, however, considered in-

sufficient to tide Laotians over until the next early rice harvest in August or September, 1992.

The FAO-WFP mission has recommended that food-for-work programmes be laid down to correct food deficit. This programme would also contribute a maximum of 6,000 tons of rice without adversely affecting local market prices.

The mission called the attention of the international donor community to project proposals for rehabilitation of agriculture and livestock, as well as a preparatory plan for the establishment of an early warning and food information system in Laos. Specifically, these proposals are:

* The provision of equipment, vaccines and medicines to the Veterinary Department

ground rules for the Majlis, some of whose members would still be nominated, as is the case of the current partially-elected interim national council in Kuwait.

In previous published comments, King Fahd had elaborated that the Shoora Council would include people specialised in different fields and would have a say in all internal external matters.

It would be an improvement on the existing system of consultation with tribal and community elders and advice to the King by competent persons. The new version will somewhat reflect the winds of change being felt in the Gulf.

In Kuwait, the Prime Minister assured editors at a meeting in early January that the government was likely to lift press censorship once a code of conduct, suggested by a journalists' organisation, has been reviewed and approved. The code will oblige journalists to exercise self-censorship along state guidelines.

Although general elections are promised for October, the Kuwaiti government has disappointed many in the West and elsewhere by keeping mum on some other important opposition demands, such as restoration of the suspended constitution, the vote for women and permission for political activity on the line of democratic pluralism.

Shoora in Arabic means consultation with community representatives in matters of common concern. The Shoora council is based on principles prescribed by the Holy Koran to help rulers and governors manage affairs of state.

In the Gulf, the desert tribal system, which gives a decisive role to family elders, has combined with the Shariah to evolve an indigenous system of participatory governance. Its adherents insist that Western-style democracy is irrelevant to the peculiar conditions of Arabia and their own system has served them well.

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Angola : Warring Armies Merge

Following the peace agreement signed last year between government and rebel forces, Angola's warring factions begin the difficult process of uniting the two forces into a national army. Vicki Finkel of IPS reports from Lubango, Angola.

AFTER fighting the rebels half his life on the side of the Angola government, Alindo Ferreira has joined forces with his longtime enemies to restore peace to this war-battered nation.

"We are all Angolans now have to learn to work together," says the 33-year-old major in the armed forces based in Lubango, the provincial capital of the southern province of Huila.

Alongside fighters from Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the total Independence of Angola (Unita), Ferreira now prepares for a joint battle — to unify the warring factions into a national army.

"The process sounds simple, but it is very complex," says British colonel John Longman. Longman is one of a team of British, French and Portuguese advisers assisting the Angolan government in the formation of the new army.

"We are talking about two very different groups, a guer-

rilla army and a conventional one," he adds.

Under the ceasefire signed last May by President Jose Eduardo dos Santos and Savimbi, both sides and their weapons must be contained in 45 designated assembly points scattered throughout the vast country before the actual unification process can begin.

The mobilisation proceedings, however, have dragged behind the schedule drafted in the peace agreement, which also calls for internationally monitored elections to be held this year.

The peace accord, ending a bitter 16-year civil war which broke out shortly after Angola achieved its independence from Portugal in 1975, mandated the containment of all troops, to be verified by United Nations observers by Aug. 1. But so far, only about 65 per cent of the total forces have

been counted in the assembly points.

While military observers acknowledge the probable inflation of projected figures, acute food shortages plaguing the assembly points have been largely responsible for low turnout, as well as probable desertion from the areas.

"Soldiers will not stay in the camps if they have nothing to eat," says Ramiro da Silva, director of the World Food Programme (WFP). "Without guaranteed food, they will form banditry groups," he adds.

Saying critical food shortages were threatening the peace process, the United Nations launched in October a US\$27.3 million emergency appeal for the demobilising troops.

But even when supplies are available, they do not always reach the assembly areas, many of which have been randomly selected and are inaccessible by road in the country, whose infrastructure have been damaged to the tune of US\$30 billion.

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.

Natural gas

Sir, The two news in the paper on Friday, Jan 17 can be combined together to raise a few questions. One is in your esteemed paper where we learn that the last administration contracted to sell the gas at 75c per 1000 cft. The other is the reconfirmation of the quantum of gas reserve, which is about 26 trillion cft.

In 1988 a domestic consumer of gas in Tokyo was paying about \$3.50 for a million btu which is nearly a thousand cft (1000 btu per btu per cft). To-days price may be more. If

KAPCO was willing to pay for the gas at well-head (i.e., bearing the cost of drying and transportation to the factory site) even than the 75c price is low.

At the price at consumers' end I mentioned above the value of our reserve is over \$ 8000 crore. Developing this wealth to bring the cash in the pocket requires a very big investment. We can not do this on our own. Here comes in the donors and their learned consultants. Now we had been using the natural gas for last 25 years with the help and assistance from various donors and

organizations. Haven't we become poorer in all these years? And now a forward extrapolation will only predict that when in future the gas will be exhausted we will be still poorer and no reserve of natural gas to make the life a little easier. Or are we fooling ourselves that there will be some magic, and nightmare will be over when we wish so.

There are plenty of experts to say what can be done to avert a sure disaster and I am sure they are going to do something. But ordinary people like me can not understand why we are not simply accepting the reality and do what is good for us. That is, trade our wealth and face the inevitable ultimate disaster now?

Some European countries are not as blessed but we are regularly receiving grants and loans from them. Visibly at least, they are only superior to us in the sectors of technology

and better trained manpower. Can not we set a strategy to undertake crash projects to achieve 100% literacy and 0% population growth from our own resources?

It may not be very difficult to forward sell the gas at a lower price which may free us from the advisors thrust upon by donors. Selling gas by piping in gas form is said to bring best returns. If that serves our national interest should any other factor come in? A Reader, Dhaka

Politics and Islam

Sir, When a Muslim community forms and operates an Islamic front or political party, certain quarters would brand them as fundamentalists. In reality, not only the Muslims, but people belonging to other religious beliefs also have their respective religious political fronts, eg. The Christian Democrats.

If we go through the history of our country, we would find that the birth of erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, actually took place on the basis of religion. When the British India was divided, the Muslim majority areas were given to form Pakistan, while Hindu majority areas constituted Bharat. But West Pakistan took control over every thing. They even tried to snatch away our mother tongue, Bangla. Being Muslims, they failed to uphold the spirit of Islam while dealing with the Bangalee East Pakistani Muslims. There were deprivation in every field of the national life. Then the Bangalees decided to get them selves free.

The majority of Bangladeshis remained Muslims. Hence, it is quite natural that there can be some Islamic political parties in Bangladesh. Islam is virtually based on democratic principles. Islam protects the rights of every

citizen. Islam also teaches Patriotism and peaceful co-existence with other nations. Unfortunately certain Islamic parties, instead of intensifying their activities for establishing Islamic values in the country, have entangled themselves in debatable issues, which is seriously affecting the Islamic political system in Bangladesh.

In my opinion, Islamic political fronts should make a fresh start of their politics under a new banner, say, Islamic Democratic Party, compatible with the sentiments of the independent Bangladesh. At the same time, people doing politics of other philosophies should not undermine the feelings of those who do the politics of Islamic socialism. After all the majority of the people representing various political parties are Muslims. M. Zahidul Haque, Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka.