

Health for Whom?

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's observation, she made at a function in observance of the "Diabetic Awareness Day" on Sunday, that the health policy should be devoted to reaching medical facilities to the common people of the country deserves careful considerations. This is not because there is anything new in it, rather because of the inherent simple truth marred or undermined by repetition. Add to this the absurd pretension the international bodies and the governments have been heir to by declaring the year 2000 as the target period for achieving health for all. It seems the governments of the Third World feel inflated by joining in such choruses sponsored by the international bodies and rich nations. Never do they take stock of their obtaining realities. The prime minister's speech was mercifully not all rhetoric; at least she cared to inform her audience that her government has actually been serious enough to reshape the health policy and the process is very much underway.

Sounds quite encouraging. The autocratic regime made medical service costly and thus un-reachable for the poor. Any government pledged to bring about improvement on the existing facilities will surely be most welcomed by the common people who have genuine reasons to be disillusioned by this time. But then the government committed to reform the health care system in the country will find before it an uphill task. Nobody denies the fact that the infrastructure in the health sector can be considered reasonably expanded if not adequate. But it is equally true that health services reach the people only in trickles. With per capita government expenditure on health and family planning amounting to as paltry as Tk 53 and the lion's share going to family planning and the big urban hospitals, the task of improving the health care delivery system — particularly to the poor — proves all the more daunting. The other figure of doctor-patient ratio of 1:6169 looks simply frightening.

Yet not everything is lost for us. If the government is serious, it can surely bring about the expected change in the system. But first of all the loose ends have to be brought together. What really went wrong so that the delivery system could not click is to be the important question. About one thing there is no doubt that we live with paradoxes and many of our woes in the health sector, as in other areas, owe to them. A huge army of our physicians with MBBS degree are looking for employment and those already employed, almost without exception, hardly do justice to their profession and the very initiation into it starts with a mighty hypocrisy at the time of the oath taking in the name of the great Greek physician Hippocrates. Otherwise it is difficult to explain the mess created at the thana medical complexes. When doctors absent themselves from the places of their posting for years together and do thriving clinic business in one of the metropolitan cities drawing their salaries all the same, it is useless asking the system to run properly. Irregularities of all descriptions are there to undermine or ditch the system.

It is against such insurmountable odds that any future health policy must be pitted. In a country where the majority of the population live below the poverty line, the health care system cannot be forbiddingly expensive, nor is there any reason that it should be as welfare-oriented as it is or were in some countries. The policy ought to be categorical in helping the poorest of the poor with free medicare. At the same time, it will be reasonably costly for the affluent class of society. Such a mixture of the free market economy and welfare service, seems to hold the key for the success of the health care system here. But the men who are charged with the responsibility of successful implementation of the policy at the grassroots level should take a careful look at our national priorities. A profession such as physicians can reap the benefits expected of it if they discipline themselves without so much caring for the government policy.

For a Caring Society

We felt sad, even a little angry, reading a letter in our correspondence column on Sunday about a disabled visitor to the "Ekushey" book fair being subjected to taunts and insults by a few thoughtless uncaring individuals. We would like to think that those who used uncharitable terms against the particular visitor were few. Here, the number is of little consequence. No disabled person should face any humiliating situation.

The writer of the letter, Md Shahidul Haque, has rightly called for a change in the attitude of our people towards the unfortunate minority who suffer from one form of physical handicap or another. He has also made a case about public buildings, like the Bangla Academy, being made accessible to users of wheel chairs. Indeed, a lot can be done to make life easier than they are today for our handicapped people.

It all boils down to our overall attitude towards disabled individuals. Our cultural heritage and even our religions teach us to be a caring society which, in the past, practised philanthropy and charity. It is said that with the increasing brutalisation of our sensitivities, we have lost much and given up many of our traditional values, standards and concerns. Yet, we like to think, the losses we mourn are far from permanent. Mr Haque whose sad letter was published in this paper on Sunday should not throw up his hands in despair. Like our own heritage, our caring society may well be reborn one day, hopefully sooner than we expect, much to the delight and surprise of all concerned.

INDIA'S biggest post-independence scandal of bank securities scam has crossed the figure of Rs 5,500 crore, nearly 80 times more than the Bofors gun kickbacks, which cost the Congress (I) power in 1989. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had initially estimated the scam at Rs 3,500 crore; it has raised the amount by Rs 2,000 crore after subsequent disclosures. Income-tax authorities, also trying to trace where the money is parked, still believe that their original calculation of Rs 8,000 crore would come true.

Both of them, however, agree on the way adopted to transact dubious deals. They believe — one committee has endorsed their findings — that the ball was set rolling by the public sector undertakings, which passed on deposits running into thousands of crores of rupees to certain banks. They, in turn, made the money available to the selected brokers, who channelised it to the stock market.

The finance ministry, which came to know what was happening quite early, preferred to keep quiet. Stung by the criticism of economic reforms, it considered the boom in shares a public rebuff to those who were picking holes in the policy. No remedial action was taken. Even S Venkataraman, then the Reserve Bank governor, who was not above suspicion, was retained lest his removal should in any way create doubts in the minds of investing countries or the investors from abroad. "We did not want to take any further beating," says a top finance ministry official. Indeed, India's stock had sagged at that time due to the disclosures of dishonest deals.

Who to Blame: Ministers or Officials?

No law can be foolproof, nor can rules cover every eventuality. All those engaged in high business or placed at top positions have to realise that certain things are not done. This is not the question of morality but of norms that the people of an organised society have to follow for their common good.

It was not only the finance ministry which was atrophied. The entire government, more so the ruling Congress party, did not know which part of disclosures it should own and which part it should reject. Practically all economic ministries were involved in one way or the other. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao preferred to await the report of the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), appointed to probe the scandal.

Ram Niwas Mirdha, a Congress (I) member, who heads the JPC, says that the scam is "much more than a mere crime. Strange no action was taken even when the complicity of a union cabinet minister was apparent, he continues to be a minister. Similarly, one minister was let off by mere resignation, although there was little doubt that he had purchased certain shares at par, Rs 10 each, when the market price was 15 times more. A few bureaucrats have resigned but only after the disclosures at the JPC sittings. Others, who had no convincing defence for not acting when they should have or for acting in a particular manner, continue to occupy key positions.

It is the same nonchalant attitude when it comes to the bureaucrats who have their near relations in foreign banks, which account for two per cent business in the country and which handled 50 per cent of transactions in the

scam. There is no proposal to even question the officers concerned, much less to put them on the mat. Even the half-hearted measures, discussed to dilute the practice, have been abandoned.

"We are a soft state," says a JPC member. He was referring to Gunnar Myrdal's observation in his *Asian Drama*, that western theories, models and concepts have distorted the study of economic development in India by separating economic

benefit. There is practically no realisation of what is wrong. Therefore, those in the government or outside never hesitate to plunder when they see the opportunity.

Many years ago, it was proved — Mundra was then the businessman — that anyone who was conscious of loopholes can reap a harvest. Many amendments were made to the insurance and other relevant laws to stop unscrupulous from taking an advantage of def-

public gaze, he resigns. Our much-vaunted oriental morality stops at blaming *kismet* (fate) or god. The bigger the racketeer the more regular he is on saying prayers or visiting religious places. Sole motivation of our actions is personal benefit. That is the reason why the ethical considerations inherent in public behaviour were beyond the mental grasp of the bureaucrats when they played havoc with public money in the scam.

Some JPC members suspect that at least one top industrialist, whose hands are dripping with guilt, substantially financed the destruction at Ayodhya to divert attention from the scandal. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is said to have become disinterested in the scam. It is sad because the party was, till recently, vociferous in punishing the guilty.

One fallout of the probe is the exposure of CBI's functioning. It has been seen again and again that the organisation wilts under pressure. This was true during the emergency (1975-77). So much so that the Shah Commission, looking into the excesses, proposed a regular scrutiny of such organisations. Things obviously did not improve because the CBI was once again marginalised during the Bofors gun kickbacks probe. The story has been repeating itself since the beginning of scam. Several officials have been changed under one pretext or another.

Personnel Minister Margret Alva told parliament that K Madhavan, who was the first inquiry officer, had sought premature retirement on personal grounds. His statement before the JPC shows that he was ignored on two points and hence he quit. One, he wanted the CBI to approach George Fernandes, a JPC member, for evidence he had claimed to possess on the involvement of certain ministers. Madhavan repeated the same thing when he and his director, S K Dutta, met Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. (Strange, even Manmohan Singh did not pursue the matter.)

The second point that Madhavan made was that the foreign account of Harshad Mehta, the key broker in the scam, be frozen. This was not done. A few days ago, the CBI said that certain accounts were first frozen and then unfrozen. But the authorities in Switzerland have said that no bank account linked to Harshad Mehta was ever frozen. The CBI was understandably handicapped in the Bofors gun scandal because the late Rajiv Gandhi and subsequently his men were exerting pressure. But why in the scam?

The obvious explanation is that too many influential people at the ministerial, official and other levels are involved. How much money they have made and how much of it has gone to the coffers of certain political parties may never be ascertained. At least some people should be held responsible, if they are not sensitive enough to leave on their own. For some reasons, the word 'accountability' does not exist in the dictionary of public servants or ministers.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

theories from the radically different environment in attitudes, cultures and institutions. I do not think the statement made in the context of sluggish economic growth can be stretched to cover corruption or fraud. In any case, they are not part of our culture. Institutions have got devalued, thanks to the type of Indira Gandhi's governance and they are, indeed, too politicised to check the scandal of the scam type.

But the real malady is the lack of sensitivity. For many a public functionary, minister or government servant, the dividing line between right and wrong, moral and immoral, has ceased to exist. There is no compunction in breaking laws or bending rules for personal

benefits. After nearly 30 years, Harshad Mehta, a deft stock broker, comes to the scene and exploits the system.

No law can be foolproof, nor can rules cover every eventuality. All those engaged in high business or placed at top positions have to realise that certain things are not done. This is not the question of morality but of norms that the people of an organised society have to follow for their common good. This is part of the value system which we in the east claim to espouse.

On grounds lesser than the ones involved in scandals like the scam, ministers and officials abroad have quit. Scandals are no scarce in the west but once the needle of suspicion is directed against a person in

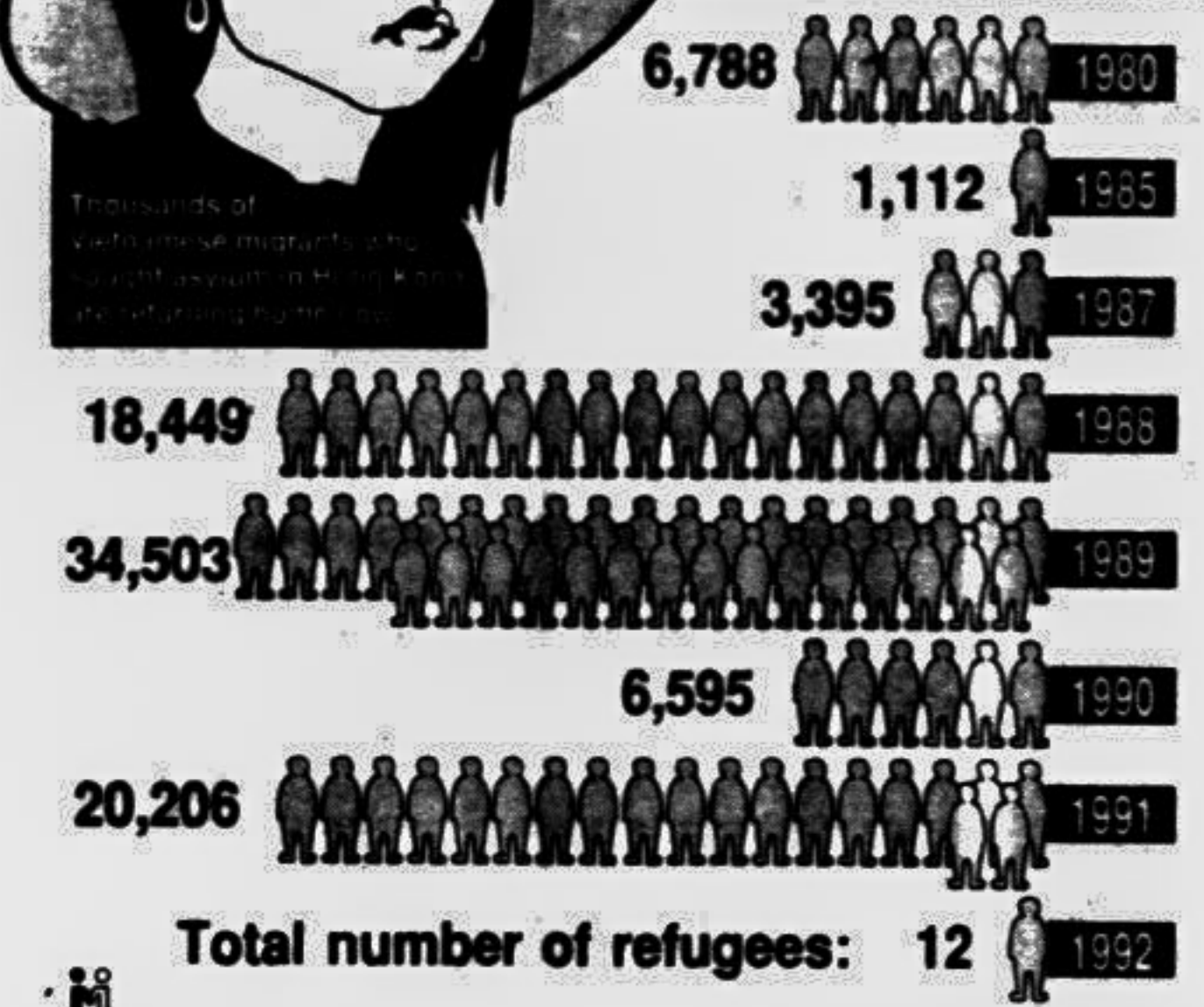
Boat People Go Home—in Hope and Despair

Frances Kelly writes from Hong Kong

In the wake of French President Francois Mitterrand's visit to Vietnam—the first by a Western leader since the war there ended in 1975—comes news that more and more refugees are volunteering to return home. After the war hundreds of thousands went abroad in search of a better life. More than 200,000 sought asylum in Hong Kong. There they were denied refugee status and had to live in appalling conditions. Now, as Vietnam opens up to the West, the so-called boat people are returning to their homes.



Homeless in Hong Kong



Vietnam war ended in 1975. It signals the end of an era. As more and more Vietnamese return, Hong Kong officials believe the crisis may eventually be resolved.

Refugee co-ordinator Brian Bresnihan said: "If the present rate of voluntary returns is maintained, we hope to see

some camp closures before the end of the year. We hope to close all the camps in three years' time."

Those who do not volunteer to go home will eventually be forced back to Vietnam under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) orderly repatriation programme, which has so far seen the return of almost 350 boat people.

Meantime, life for the 42,000 men, women and children who remain in Hong Kong camps is bleak. Housed in cage-like compounds, inside barracks surrounded by mountains of barbed wire, they are often terrorised by Vietnamese gangs who rape, beat and rob their victims and even demand money before allowing mothers to take their sick children to Red Cross clinics.

The tension can sometimes be deadly. Rioting in Sek Kong detention centre last year left 23 people dead and more than 100 injured on the eve of Tet, the Vietnamese celebration of the lunar New Year.

In that incident, a dispute over illegal alcohol turned into a riot that saw south Vietnamese pushing burning blankets through the windows of a tin hut packed with 200 screaming northerners. It took

rescuers days to recover the charred remains of the dead.

Some boat people, like the Dang family made their decision to return to Vietnam, in part, to escape the violence of the camps.

"We worried about our safety in Whitehead," Dang said through an interpreter. "There were many fights there. We feared there would be more so we decided to leave."

After watching for three years hopes fade of finding a new home for his family, Dang and his wife reluctantly decided staying behind was no longer worth the risk. The Dangs were interviewed while waiting for their flight home to Hanoi with about 140 other volunteers housed at Lo Wu detention centre near Hong Kong's border with China.

Hong Kong Police Commandant Charles Mitchell acknowledged that the atmosphere is much calmer in a camp like Lo Wu where all the inmates have decided to return to Vietnam. Other detention centres are often more volatile.

"When a population that has been living in hope suddenly has that hope dashed, what happens then?" Mitchell asked.

Since the late 1980s, most

boat people leaving Vietnam have been labelled economic migrants and denied refugee status by Hong Kong Immigration officers in a screening process monitored by the UNHCR. Those granted refugee status are slowly being resettled in countries like Canada, the United States and Australia.

When woodcarver Dang Thanh Hung, 30, fled the fishing village of Quang Ninh in north Vietnam on a boat with 66 other people in 1989, he too dreamed of finding wealth and freedom in the West. Those dreams have vanished.

Now Dang hopes he will be taking his wife and two young sons home. "Vietnam is going to change," said Dang. "We feel more confident going."

There is much bitterness in Dong Thanh Hung's voice as he talks about the three-and-a-half wasted years in detention in Hong Kong and the schooling his ten-year-old and six-year-old sons have missed.

"When we left Vietnam, we had nothing and now when we go back we'll still have nothing," he said. "We came hoping to get a chance to go somewhere where we could better ourselves and make money. But we have no hope here for so long and no signs of resettlement, we just decided to leave."

Dang's wife, Le Thikim Cuc, 30, added: "We know that if we stay we will be forced back. So it's better to go now."

— GEMINI NEWS

FRANCES KELLY is a Canadian freelance reporter/photographer based in Hong Kong.

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.

Thank you, The Daily Star

Sir, Perhaps there could not be a greater gift to your esteemed readers than the 'Round Table' discourses on the occasion of The Daily Star's second anniversary (DS 28.2.93). I share your optimism about the future of our country as well as The Daily Star, for that matter non-partisan journalism, despite painful lack of 'consensus' and unfortunate polarisation on narrow, political and personal considerations.

The admirers of your esteemed daily who can read 'between lines' will certainly agree that The Daily Star has been playing the role of a true 'Fourth Estate'. It is, however, misunderstood by certain quarters for obvious reasons.

For instance, when S M Ali gave sincere advice to the leader of the Opposition to show more political wisdom, the General Secretary of her party rushed with a 'rejoinder' which was tactfully punished by publishing an 'unedited' version of it. Likewise, the paper is also perhaps disliked by the ruling party for the daily's

occasional bitter doses. By now it is amply clear that "The Daily Star" is a newspaper with a difference and the persons who manned it are not to be daunted by official red-eyes.

The 'Round Table' discourses spotlighted on some burning issues faced by the print media. The points raised by some of the top professionals may help the concerned quarters to sort out some of the vexing problems. One thing has been clear from the discourses that despite machinations of the 'vested quarters', who are always ready to wedge a nail into the coffin of 'consensus', a bold journalist can always find ways and means to ventilate the feelings of the people. Mahfuz Anam has pointed to "the new and rising public mood" which should apply not only to the professionals but also to the concerned official quarters.

Incidentally, the presence of Kuldip Nayar, whom I am inclined to describe as one of the boldest 'patriarch' of the Fourth Estate in the sub-continent, has enormously augmented the prestige of the 'Round Table'. It would be sheer bad luck, if, like the past, this time also the concerned quarters miss the true

spirit of the Round Table's feed-back, and, in their usual official rashness, ignore the remedial measures suggested, no doubt at greater future cost!

Abdul Kader
Purana Paltan, Dhaka

Card telephone

Sir, The Education Board office is one of the most important offices located in Dhaka. Many people use to come here for their own purposes. But it is very shocking that till now the office does not have any coin box or card telephone. Besides, many people live near the Board Office. If the Telephone Department fixed a card telephone at the Board Office premises, then many would be benefited.

Amlr
Board Office, Dhaka

Radio, TV

Sir, Radio and television are the two important media for the nation. But are they performing the 'job' or providing us with what they are supposed to?

Ershad occupied fifteen minutes for himself and ten minutes for his ministers in the news. And now, when the country is enjoying a full democracy, the BTV still seems the same to us.

It was one of a demand of BNP to the Ershad government

to make Television and Radio autonomous. Now the BNP is in power and they are using the BTV as it was used before except providing two or three minutes for the opposition. It is not necessary for the ministers to make the nation aware of what they are doing. If they are really doing something good, people will praise them and they can win their hearts.

A Z Saigal
Lalbagh, Dhaka

Let us forget

Sir, It is a bounden duty of all conscious citizens to honour their important leaders and make their activities known to the new generation. Very often we leave this thing at the hands of historians who ultimately put it up in their writings. But there are persons who did many good things but are not well remembered by the general public. Here in Bangladesh, some organisations and relatives of some of the important personalities observe their birth and death anniversaries.

But some important persons who also had contribution to the country's politics are not remembered at all either at family or organisational level. I like to quote the names of some of them: Mr Abdul Wahab Khan was Speaker of the then Pakistan Constituent Assembly; Mr Tamzuddin Khan was Speaker of former Pakistan. He filed case against the then Governor-General Mr Gholam Mohammad on constitutional point. Mr Mohammad Ali of

Bogra was Prime Minister of former Pakistan. His address at the United Nations was highly applauded. Mr Abu Hossain Sarker of Gaibandha was Chief Minister of former East Pakistan. His contributions towards the farmers were highly appreciated. Mr Khairat Hossain of Nilphamari who was Agriculture Minister of former East Pakistan was very much dearer to the farmers. Shah Abdul Hamid of Gaibandha was the first Speaker of Bangladesh parliament. There were many other personalities who contributed a lot in the field of politics. But unfortunately these people are not remembered by anybody.

We should discuss the life and activities of these people at least once a year so that our next generation get acquainted with the same. There should be an organisation which will arrange discussion meeting on the unsung heroes.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury
Sonali Bank, Head Office, Dhaka

Test scores

Sir, As a cricket lover I would congratulate Alan Border on his glorious attainment. Total runwise he is certainly on top now. Sunil Gavaskar trails behind. That is what we see. But, I for one, cannot ignore the mathematical jugglery that strips the little master of his position. Let us look at the picture this way: Alan Border has crossed

Sunil Gavaskar's record of 10122 runs which he built over the years playing 125 tests. Border's 10161 runs come of 139 Tests which means Sunil played 14 tests less. Now, if we intend to make a comparison between the two, the number of Tests should be brought at par, even though hypothetically. Here the number of Tests should be at 125.

Taking his total runs of 10161 in 139 Tests Border averaged 73.10 runs which, if multiplied with 125 Tests his total runs would have been 9175.58. In that event he would have been at least 984.42 runs behind Gavaskar.

Likewise, if Gavaskar could play 139 Tests like Alan Border and taking the average runs of his 125 Tests, i.e. 80.97 runs, he would have scored 11255.66 runs when too, he would have led Alan Border by 1084.66 runs. And in fact a batsman of Gavaskar's excellence would have needed an innings only to beat Border's figure of 10161. A paltry 39 runs would not have been a very big stake for the little master.

Instead of comparing the two with so many variables it would be better to keep one's glory and achievements tied to his own time. Alan Border has perhaps something like this in his mind. That's how he is not at all jubilant over his achievement. Both are indeed great but not at all comparable.

Kazi Alauddin Ahmed
Shantinagar, Dhaka