

WHO Takes New Initiatives

Seemingly somewhat out of context, but quite unique, this year's slogan — "Handle life with care: prevent violence and negligence" — as propounded by the World Health Organisation (WHO), looks to be tailor-made for Bangladesh. Indeed, when the basic health problems are yet to be sufficiently addressed, accidental and violent deaths are least expected to figure in health concerns. So it has taken a lot of insight and courage to coin this innovative slogan. But no doubt it has hit the right chord and now we will be waiting for the right kind of programmes and the policy for their implementation.

The issue that has come to the fore in a wider light, thanks to the WHO concern, hopefully will reinforce the awareness of those people in Bangladesh whose involvement can really make a difference in the situation. But it is not just a problem facing this country alone. Every year 3.5 million people die of injury caused by violence — accidental and intentional — throughout the world. Then natural calamities claim a huge toll in disaster-prone countries like ours.

One consequence of such accidents and physical violence is most prominent, which is that injuries of all kinds cost the world today almost US \$500 thousand million a year in medical care and lost productivity. What a difference in the global health service it could make if only a major portion of this amount were released from the area by reducing violent deaths! Clearly, the risks of injuries to people, particularly in our part of the world, have been ignored far too long. Neither the message has been driven home forcefully enough as the situation demands. Not that all the violent deaths can be prevented but surely a lot of them are preventable.

It is exactly at this point that the WHO initiative can bring about a real change in the global loss of life and health due to accident. Bangladesh, over the past decades, has become a home to all sorts of tragedies ranging from road accidents, robberies, factional feuds and campus violence to unprecedented natural disasters. Even without the WHO urging we have been asking the government and other concerned agencies to seriously look into our accident and violence records for evolving an appropriate set of safety measures for their deterrence. The WHO nonetheless will redirect the focus on the issue and even come up with new ideas and financial helps for curbing the incidence of accidents. As for the intentional violence, however, society will have to record a qualitative improvement — both economically and democratically.

The WHO's task will prove all the more daunting if it focuses its attention from the conventional way of distributing succour. But at the same time it cannot help giving people a lesson on what a havoc, in matters of health, is caused by man-made injuries to his fellow beings. Carelessness is yet another factor where both the WHO and the individual governments can work together to bring about a noticeable improvement. Rules are already there, the problem is with their implementation. On this count, two factors have to be taken into cognizance: first the motivational aspect and second the responsibility of the law enforcers. Neither of which is complete alone nor can they together be a substitute for material inadequacy and lack of physical facilities. But still if given a fair play of both of them, they can reduce incidence of accidents and certain type of violence. Certainly, improvement in the quality of life is not a guarantee for making society violence-free. But basically, an imported element in our culture, intentional violence, can be done away with through various programmes, with media taking a leading role.

Some More Fires yet?

Sunday's slum fire at Pearabagh in the city took six lives. On Monday another two succumbed to their burn injuries. All but one of the eight were children who could not make it to safety on their own. The remaining one was a lady of sixty. Eight burnt to death in one single fire incident should have caused a ghastly scar on the psyche of the nation, particularly of the residents of the capital city. It should have prompted many questions to be asked. But Dhaka is taking it, as it does everything else, in its stride.

The reason is not far to seek. Although the Pearabagh fire consumed about 300 houses and made about 1200 people homeless — it was home to most of the residents for over thirty years — the whole tragedy would be a forgotten story by the end of the week. Now they may at the best get some help to start it all over again. How many of them can do it again? And yet the society at large, unfortunately even the government, would not stand by them for more than a few days.

Why? Chaitra is the month of fire incidents, traditionally. The frequency of these tend to blunt the sharp reactions it could evoke. Although material loss due to the five incidents in the first quarter of the current year amounts to about half of what was sustained over long six years of burning cases all over Bangladesh, the number of incidents, 143, was cited by fire officials as being the least for any quarter over the same six years. They fear some more fires to balance the bill. It is very obvious that village fires are not included in the official figures. Virtually all of these 143 fires have taken place in the bigger towns — and most of them came crowding in the month of Chaitra.

The question is why should it be so. The bustees or slums are ideal feed for conflagration of the kind of the Pearabagh one. Pucca buildings and better living districts are not subject to fire breakouts. That should make the job easy for the fire department. They should be specially mindful of making bustees safe against any fire breaking out. All the slums of a city should be on their map and special arrangements to reach them quickly should be there long before a fire engulfs any of these.

There is a widely held belief among the more informed people that slum fires are mostly the handiwork of men deliberately embarking on a case of arson. Tenancy quarrels, rivalry among extortionist gangs, landholders wanting to get rid of slum-dwellers as a way of real estate development are some of the more frequent reasons for slum fire. This arson aspect has more to do with social and administrative management. The fire people are a curative bunch, their work beginning when the fireworks have already started. At Pearabagh they showed will and skill and courage. But that couldn't stop so many deaths and the razing of the whole 300-house settlement. We evidently need something more from them.

A TAL Behari Vajpayee has not yet become part of the RSS furniture. Once in a while he says things which make him look different, much to the embarrassment of the saffron-dyed Hindus. Of similar genre is his renewed plea for the beginning of negotiations on the demolished Babri Masjid site from where they were left before the advent of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao.

True, the dispute is far from settled. The RSS and its allied organisations like the BJP and the Vishva Hindu Parishad remain unflinched in their determination to build the temple, and the known leadership of Muslims has not abandoned the demand to raise the mosque at the same site.

Had it been a vacant place the resumption of negotiations would have been probably easier. But there is already a make-shift temple standing and pilgrims are visiting it.

The prime minister promised at a meeting of editors and senior journalists on December 9 that the make-shift structure would be removed before long. But it has turned out to be as unrealistic as his broadcast statement that the mosque would be rebuilt. He, like leaders of other political parties, must have realised that the demolition has tangled the matter still further.

It has not only strengthened communal and fundamentalist forces in and around India but has sent tremors of intolerance to the farthest country. No doubt, what has

The Ball is in BJP's Court

happened at Ayodhya is our domestic problem but over the years it has assumed subcontinental, if not international, proportion. Even otherwise, it cannot be pushed beneath the carpet. The effort of some unthinking Muslim leaders to organise the pressure of Islamic countries on New Delhi will put up the back of Hindu zealots. That does not mean that the matter be left as it is.

The Rao government's announcement that it will build a temple and a mosque is of little consequence. The dispute is over the site, not whether the temple or the mosque as such be constructed. If that were so, the BJP would not have announced that it had no objection to the construction of a mosque outside the precincts of Ayodhya. This offer has been rejected by the Muslim leadership.

The reference by the Centre to the Supreme Court of India to determine whether there was originally a temple or a mosque does not help either. The Babri Masjid Action Committee, which once accepted this procedure, has denounced the government move after the demolition. On the other hand, the BJP or, for that matter, the RSS, has said that it prefers faith to law. Both Kalyan Singh, former BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, and L K Advani, the party's chief in parliament, have said that the call of god is

more important than the obligation of law.

It would be a chaotic world if everyone were to interpret and follow what his or her god wished because all dastardly acts are done in his name. In India, nowhere has the constitution said that when it is the question of Hindu sentiments (which can be whipped up) the law will take a back seat.

I respect Vajpayee's words but I am not sure whether the rest of the BJP, the VIIP and

been introduced. They are not being projected fiercely at present because the BJP leaders have themselves said that the two mosques are "not yet on their agenda." There has never been an unequivocal statement to deny such proposition.

If only the Babri Masjid is what the RSS family wants and bury the communal demon once and for all it looks possible. I have gone round the country in the last two months

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

other such organisations want a settlement. Their entire strategy is to polarise the country and ride the wave of Hindu chauvinism to see if it can come to power at the Centre. Stirring up primitive sentiments on the masjid is the means, not the end. Even if the Babri Masjid were handed over to the BJP on a platter it would find some other reason to play the anti-Muslim card because that provides it with its ethos.

The party will go from one mosque to another because it feels that it pays dividends. That is the reason why the Mathura and the Varanasi mosques, which share the premises with temples, have

and I have come back with the impression that the Muslims may be willing to withdraw their claim on the Babri Masjid provided there are no further demands on other religious buildings. Some leaders of the banned Jamaat-i-Islami have met me, making the same point. One of them said: "If our country can be saved from bloodshed, we will persuade our Muslim brethren to offer the Babri Masjid to our Hindu brethren."

I am not sure of the RSS family. I went over a similar exercise five years ago. The meeting, where some Hindu and Muslim leaders were present, broke up when Mahant Vaidya Nath, now a BJP mem-

ber of the Lok Sabha, said the Babri Masjid would not suffice, the mosques at Mathura and Varanasi should also be handed over.

It is possible to pick up the thread from where it was left off. But what is the guarantee that the BJP will abide by what it says. Its credibility is rather low because it demolished the Babri Masjid structure after giving an undertaking to the Supreme Court that it will protect it. The initial remorse among the BJP leaders has also gone; nearly all of them have been gloating over the destruction.

While Vajpayee is cooling peace, the BJP chief, Murli Manohar Joshi, is on the war path. Sometimes I feel that both are the two sides of the coin. But presuming there is a liberal element in the RSS family, how will it implement a settlement which gives the Babri Masjid to the Hindus and some assurance to the Muslims in return? The suggestion by an intellectual Muslim to amend to constitution to incorporate the undertaking that no other religious building would be touched goes only to some extent. Ultimately, it is the trust that the RSS family can instil in others.

So far its moves are aimed at consolidating Hindu vote bank for the next election. The ballyhoo over the temples is for the same purpose. It in-

creased its strength to 120 seats in the Lok Sabha by leading the rath in the name of Ram in 1990.

The BJP is playing a gruesome game of creating fear in the minds of the Hindu majority against the Muslim minority. The party is not bothered what happens to the polity of the country. It has already created enough tension to consign India to uncertainties.

The issue is not that of the Babri Masjid but of power politics. The BJP and its reincarnations failed to make impact till the Congress party obliterated the ethical considerations inherent in the public behaviour and till the secular forces grew weak. Communalism did not have much appeal because imaginary fears had not been aroused. The Hindus were not worried up since they saw no danger to their faith. The RSS family has been systematically plugging the line of calling wolf. The foolish policies of Muslim fundamentalists have helped it. Now its eyes are fixed on New Delhi and it will go to any length to make it.

There may be no problem in convincing the Muslims to hand over the Babri Masjid to the Hindus, who have been forced to believe that Ram was born at the same place. But there will be a problem in making the BJP renounce its communal brand of politics. Is it willing to give up mixing religion with politics and the state? That is what secularism is about. The ball is in the court of the BJP.

ALTHOUGH the thought about the community that it has responsibility towards those who struggle under physical impairment is not generally accepted, but hope is that the community is slowly awaking to work for the persons with disability. The attitude that persons with disabilities were to be shut away from institutions or cared for privately by their families and the public was not expected to be embarrassed or harassed by being exposed to their plight, has changed.

Not only is there an awareness about the problems faced by the physically disabled to cater to the needs of such citizens, at the same time there is a new consciousness among the persons with disability of their rights to function as integral members of the community.

It is estimated that nearly 500 million people in the world are struggling with the case of one sort of disability or another. Out of these, the figure in Bangladesh is surmised to be about five million.

Who can be termed as a person with disability? Anyone whose condition limits him/her substantially in activities. The persons with disability, like the able-bodied people, come in all shapes and sizes. Out unlike the able-bodied

Let Not the Disabled Feel Discouraged

by Md Shahidul Haque

ied people, they are psychologically injured, because they fell dependent not only for moral support, but for their very mobility as well.

They, however, do not want pity or they want to be accepted as capable where they fit, they do not want their disability to be made an issue or barrier. All they demand is some re-adjustment to allow them to qualify for their position in the employment sector, and they obviously deserve it.

The official International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) has given more emphasis on two major objectives — solidarity and support for equality. The principle objective of the UN is to foresee all national and international efforts to provide disabled persons with proper assistance, training, care and guidance to make available to them opportunities for suitable work and, most importantly, to promote effective measures for prevention of disability. Educating and informing the public of the right of the disabled persons to participate and contribute in the economic and social life, is another important objective. To attain these objectives, the following steps may be considered:

i) First and foremost, there

should be adequate consultation and coordination among agencies. A national body should be formed to control and coordinate activities.

ii) Secondly, there is necessity to formulate a national plan and policy for development of the persons with disabilities.

There is a need for a broad programme of public education and widespread dissemination of information on this subject. There should be an inter-exchange of information, advice, research and public education to bridge the present communication gap. An information channel must be made available on experience, research, case-studies and other relevant data, success stories of personnel through different media.

Barriers to be Removed

As long as we continue to use the term "DISABLED" for the persons with disability, we continue to make ourselves disabled too. We must, therefore, break various barriers, such as the blatant one; architectural and transportation obstacle. The unnecessary one; unrelated medical criteria

used in job requirements; the subtle one: attitudinal barriers — hardest one to topple. We should remember that unless we integrate the persons with disability into every aspect of community life, ours cannot be considered as a full community.

Many developed countries have enacted legislation and taken further steps to have equal rights and opportunities for the persons with disability as they have resources and opportunities to establish a favourable environment for them. However, in case of ours, we should take the initiative from now, result may come later to set up a favourable environment for them. The major role needs to be played by the communication media like newspaper, radio, TV etc. As much as possible this message should be circulated to the general masses that disability is not the main problem to hinder participation in any community function. Main problem is the attitudinal one where major role can be played by the media groups through publishing different articles focusing on the ability, not disability, of the

persons with disability and demonstrating different success stories through radio, TV programmes.

Voluntary agencies as well as government and semi-government bodies should assist in the administration of organisation for the persons with disability. The main and major function should be to identify the dormant talents, quality of the persons with disability and to train them accordingly to develop their skill for gainful employment.

A methodical approach may be developed to improve the condition of the persons with disability abiding by the following guide-lines:

i) Identification and detection of the persons with disability (PWD).

ii) Sorting of the PWDs on the basis of their age, nature, qualification.

iii) Development of a centre for registration for counselling, treatment and employment.

iv) Development of a central assessment centre for referral service for education, training, treatment, employment and distribution of mobility and supportive aids etc.

v) Wide-spread dissemination of information about services, facilities according to needs.

vi) Publication of at least quarterly bulletin of persons with disabilities informing all necessary messages like where, what is available for the PWDs.

vii) A mobile group may be developed to exhibit arts and crafts which will play a vital role to motivate local people about disability, which will fulfil the purpose of awareness raising on disability.

At the end, we can say that at the beginning of the 2nd decade of the disabled for Asia and Pacific and while SAARC countries are observing this year for the development of the PWDs, we should give more attention to focus this issue more publicly. The momentum generated should not be allowed to die down. It is the depth of the feeling of each one of us which may bring a success or failure of the organisation and administration of the persons with disability. Here it is necessary to create an environment, to let the PWDs inflame and continue their fight for equal rights and participation. We should only encourage and make them understand — **FIRST TO DESERVE, THEN TO DESIRE.**

The writer is Executive Director, SARPV, Mohamudpur, Dhaka.

China's One-child Norm Gains Wider Acceptance

THE young couple admitted having had reservations about limiting themselves to just one child, a girl at that.

There were times, the father said, when he felt disappointed and wished for a son. But as his daughter grew up, he realised there was not much difference between having a son and a daughter, and his desire for a son passed.

Seven years of having just one child to care for have also shown him just how much better off he and his wife are compared to his parents who had to bring up six children on their meagre income.

For one thing, the couple is able to devote more time to working for a living. Both are employed in a cooperative electronics factory in Touge village, a farming community in Xiasha township, Yuhang county in Zhejiang Province.

The father's only complaint at the moment is that his daughter, now in kinder-

garten, has been so used to getting her own way that she has a lot to learn about becoming less self-centred.

In another farming village in Shaoxing county, between the cities of Hangzhou and Ningbo in Zhejiang Province, a newly married couple has already gotten used to the idea of having only one child, even if help with child care is assured by the husband's mother living in the same house.

The newlyweds, teased about being capitalists because they own an ironworks factory, are also not very particular about the child's sex although the woman prefers a daughter "because a girl is cute." Her preference is shared by the mother-in-law, who looks forward to babysitting a "playful" child.

Like the Touge village couple, their decision to have just one child is prompted largely by the prospect of living a more comfortable life, by being able to devote more time to

Erlinda Bolido writes from Hangzhou, China

More Chinese families are embracing the idea of having only one child not because the state says so, but because it makes sense to do so

their enterprise.

Neither is having a daughter a bad idea, considering the increasing opportunities open to women. The only thing the parents expect to work hard at is ensuring that their daughter gets a good education so she can make her own choices.

These two couples are among the growing number of Chinese families who have embraced the idea of having only one child not because the state says so, but because it makes sense to do so.

As family planning workers at all levels have found out, economic well-being is a very strong incentive for couples to opt for small families. Also, couples are more likely to hew to the one-child policy if informed about the social and

economic benefits of family planning than if merely told that they are required by state edict to do so.

Outsiders may still believe that Chinese leaders simply lay down policies and get blind obedience. But recently family planning officials have recognised the need for people to be informed and make the right decisions on contraception.

Thus, there is a frenetic drive in China — which has a population of 1.17 billion — to bring the family planning message to every part of the huge nation. No medium is overlooked and no opportunity is missed to spread the family planning gospel.

In Zhejiang province, radio and television broadcasts,

video productions, newspaper features, leaflets and handbills, stage presentations, plays and Chinese operas, as well as interpersonal communication, are all being harnessed in support of family planning. Zhejiang even has a monthly population newspaper, the Hangzhou Renkoubao, which is distributed free to village family planning centres.

Family planning slogans are also set in concrete, literally. Yuhang county, for one, intends to put up 2,145 cement structures carrying family planning messages.

All villages and townships will each have five slogans.

Family planning associations are now as common as youth, women and other clubs. Offices in charge of family planning have been set up in almost every agency and institution, including universities.

The massive campaign is getting the endorsement and support of international organisations, particularly the

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Asia and Pacific Programme for Development Training and Communication Planning of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Office for Project Services.

The work remains overwhelming and difficult, however. Family planning workers admit having a tough time with many parents who have only a daughter, especially in the rural areas where sons have traditionally been preferred. Also resistant to family planning are people for whom a birth control method has failed, particularly the intra-uterine device (IUD) which is the most widely used contraceptive in China.

But they are heartened that, through their and other people's efforts, an increasing number of people are adjusting to the idea of having only one child, even if that one child is a girl.

— *Depthnews Asia*

To the Editor...

Asian pop invasion

Sir, With reference to the article "Thwarting a US Pop Invasion" published in your daily on March 12, I would like to write the following on 'Asian pop invasion'.

How long we shall have to wait to see our homegrown stars Performing in MTV? A regular viewer of MTV must have observed how Indian artists like other Asian artists are appearing on screen more frequently.

As Asian popular music with western flavour rather than mainstream music is represented in MTV, so appearance on it does not certify the cultural superiority. But non-appearance of our local performers maybe labeled as lack of interest or inability to produce popular music beyond boundary. It is learnt from the article that "the channel's main problem now is the supply of Asian music videos falls short of the demand."

So, why don't we take chance? Don't we have enough

musical talent, choreographer, video photographer who can produce music video with creativity for local and international market? If we don't react positively, one of our numerous newspapers within few days or weeks will report on Asian or Indian pop invasion.

Hassanul Zahed Siddeswari Road, Dhaka

Letter writer's rights

Sir, This is in response to Mr Zahidul Haque's letter of 24 Feb 93 seeking opinion and as he says "judgement" about letter writers' rights to send their letters to more than one paper. I must say this is quite a "noble" gesture on the part of Mr Haque to seek public opinion about letter writer's rights.

I say Mr Haque's gesture is noble and commendable because in this country hardly anybody — whether they are bureaucrats in authority, labour unions in positions of power to disrupt public life or political

parties to do more of the same — bother to seek public opinion or consensus to carry out any of their activities. This knowing full well the devastating effect their actions will have on the public life including the unthinkable pain and sorrow caused to families who cannot even bury their dead during political or labour strikes.

We, all the members in our family, read the ed-op pages of "The Daily Star" scrupulously as this gives us a picture of what the average people of our country are thinking and what the problems are in the society. A daily newspaper is no longer the sole repository of news and information anymore and anyone with access to radio and TV can get most news almost instantly. Many problems of the society are reflected in letters, opinions and editorials of a paper. In this respect I believe Mr Haque and other letter writers provide a very valuable service to the community in general. A letter does not have to be written in

a very high class and chaste language to make the point as long as it presents the grievances of even the humblest of citizens.

But, as it is said there is discord even in paradise and one member of our family always has some criticism for most things here and sadly he does not spare even the noble effort of Mr Haque. He is my elder brother and he says Mr Haque makes sane and unnecessary comments about anything and everything to make his presence known. And he says Mr Haque is like someone who owns a few shares of large corporations and always shows up in the share holders meetings. My brother is of the opinion that Mr Haque, Asst Prof BAU, should stick to his agricultural undertakings and endeavours and not bother his head too much with other matters and his effort will literally bear more fruit and will be of greater national service. I must apologize for my brother's crude comments but thought it

is only fair that I should present another reader's views as Mr Haque has sought and invited.

I should give my brother's background so that there would be some understanding of his opinions and where it comes from and if there is any merit or validity in his statement. He is a particle physicist teaching and doing research at MIT, Brookhaven National Laboratory and Lawrence Livermore Laboratory in the US.

He is here for an extended stay on Sabbatical. To me it appears that he does not have any feelings, sensitivity or understanding beyond the "quarks", "muons" or "leptons" and such other invisible and weird sounding things in which most people have very little understanding, appreciation or interest. However, I would like other readers opinion, comments about this important issue.

Nazla Choudhury Dhannondi, Dhaka

Water sharing

Sir, Calling for rational sharing of water with Bangladesh by India is no more worth than crying in the wilderness. We wonder when India would sincerely come forward to reach to a practical solution to the existing water sharing problem? Sharing of water from the natural sources is a human right of the Bangladeshis India should not deprive us from enjoying the right.

Due to irrational water sharing policy maintained by India, Bangladesh has been facing tremendous problem for the last several years.

We draw the attention of the international forums to the water sharing issue and expect their active initiative and co-operation in resolving the problem.

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