

### The Fight Against AIDS

It is hardly the first time and it is unlikely to be the last time that Bangladesh gets the warning that AIDS could become yet another catastrophe for the country, like natural disasters. However, there is still time to deny the virus HIV that causes this killer disease a foothold in this densely populated nation.

This time, the warning, with the plea to expedite preventive steps, come from none other than the Executive Director of WHO's Global Programme on AIDS (GPA), Dr Michael H Merson, now on a visit here for talks with officials and for participation in activities aimed at increasing the awareness among concerned circles about the danger of AIDS facing this country.

The statement by Merson is largely based on statistics of the World Health Organisation (WHO) released during a recently held international conference in Berlin on AIDS. The deliberation at the meeting, not to mention the statistics, went a long way in demolishing the myth that it is still very much a problem facing Africa, followed by parts of Europe and the United States, and that Asia may not yet be a major victim of this deadly threat. This mistaken notion has created complacency in many countries in the region, including Bangladesh, which the conference and now the visit of Merson to Dhaka may well help to remove.

According to a reporter of *The Daily Star* who attended the Berlin meeting, the HIV/AIDS "epidemic" in South and Southeast Asia is on the point of becoming "explosive", just as it did in parts of Africa, the hardest-hit in the world, ten years ago. At this moment, the worst affected countries in the region are said to be Thailand, Myanmar and India. However, there are clear indications that AIDS is spreading to other countries where drug abuse and prostitution are on the increase, like in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The unhealthy sanitary condition in public toilets, the unchecked blood transfusion and lack of use of the disposable syringe in rural areas also add to the problem. Again, recent studies show that some ten million children, mostly from developing countries, may fall victims to AIDS by the end of this decade, mainly as a result of mother-to-child transmission. What proportion of these victims among children will be in Asia is still unclear. But there is no room for complacency.

If the warning from Merson was firm, his plea to the government here for expediting steps against the spread of AIDS in Bangladesh carried a note of urgency. We sincerely hope that the message from the visiting GPA director got through. But on this score, we have some misgivings.

At the seminar which was addressed by WHO officials, the Health Minister, Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf announced that a "plan of action" would be adopted by the end of this month with the setting up of a separate directorate. At the same meeting, Deputy Leader of the Jatiya Sangsad, Badruddoza Chowdhury, himself a medical doctor, stressed the need for sex education, even at the school level.

While we commend these moves, one cannot help wondering if the authorities have not taken too much time in adopting the most basic steps against AIDS, knowing full well that the rampant drug abuse and rising prostitution had put the country in a vulnerable position. There is a wide-spread feeling that in treating sex as a sensitive issue for public discussion or as a subject for education, we have adopted a somewhat secretive attitude towards AIDS. It is high time we changed this attitude in favour of a pragmatic, scientific approach. Whatever may be the causes and implications of the challenge facing this country, we must look upon AIDS as a health hazard which must be fought in a totally uncompromising manner.

### Hope for Palestinians!

If the media report on secret meetings between top Palestinian leaders and Israeli government officials is correct, we have reasons to believe that not everything is lost for the world's largest number of people without a state. Although Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) Chairman Yasser Arafat has confirmed the holding of two such meetings in Washington during the US-mediated Arab-Israeli peace talks last month, Yitzhak Rabin's government has simply left us guessing about their veracity. Unconfirmed reports from other sources also suggest that the two sides may have secretly met several times in the past weeks.

No matter if such meetings have actually taken place or not, the fact remains that the trouble spot, one of the world's oldest, demands that the two sides sit together to exchange views across the table now. Indeed, direct talks — notwithstanding their animosity — could make more progress than the on-going rounds of negotiations between Israeli government and Arab representatives from the occupied territories. Without PLO's participation, no talks and agreements can bring about a lasting solution to the problem. The sooner the Tel-Aviv government recognises this the better. If the talks — even if they are secret — have been held, the realisation seems to have come at last.

After all the rancour and endless strifes between the Palestinians and the Israelis, there now seems to be a lull. Belying the earlier promises by the incumbent Israeli premier, for a more liberal attitude than his predecessor's to the Palestinian issue, Rabin went on the offensive and complicated it further by deporting Palestinians from Jerusalem into the no-man's land between Israel and Jordan. Rabin has however to his credit the good move in that he halted construction of Jewish settlements in the border area of the West Bank and Gaza. It certainly was a positive signal and that the subsequent attempts to resume a constructive dialogue with the PLO leadership were not simply forthcoming is most unfortunate.

Israeli insistence that the PLO is a terrorist organisation and hence any negotiations with it is out of question appears to be a wrong notion at this stage of the organisation's political transformation. Israeli position must be softened if the country now passing through one of its economic crisis-periods is desirous to get rid of it. The question of devolving power for autonomy to the Palestinians for an interim period has to be considered in a dispassionate manner. Sooner or later such an arrangement will have to be agreed upon for a free Palestinian state. As for the sharing of Jerusalem, each side will have to be flexible in view of maintaining a common but sovereign status for the disputed holy city.

## Vienna Conference on Human Rights — in Retrospect

# How India and Pakistan Stumbled over Kashmir

*Politicians and officials should realise that those who protest against tyranny are not unpatriotic, but simply dissidents, wanting to focus attention on exploited masses. Unfortunately, the delegation from New Delhi adopted an attitude of hostility towards Indian NGOs from the very first day.*

WITHOUT much ado, activists and non-government organisations (NGOs), working at the grassroots, have come together on one platform. Their conference in Vienna the other day was a riot, a lava of sufferings, an array of anguished faces which had seen death and worse. But they were able to send a warning to brutal administrations all over the world that human rights were not a matter of bargaining; they should be beyond debate.

The number of NGOs was around 2,000 and they were from all the continents and climes. Some of them had brought with them exhibitions, photos and video films to show repression they go through in their countries. Some were agitating for homelands, some only pointing out the enormous burden of human rights abuses which is borne by millions. Together they made a formidable force. For the first time, they galvanised moral rights into political agenda.

An Israeli's objection to a Palestinian woman's narration of atrocities in the Tel Aviv occupied areas got the ball rolling. The NGOs were in no mood to make their conference a goody-goody affair. The chairperson was shouted down when she asked the speaker not to mention any country by name. The whole house was on its feet.

The Israeli, member of the management committee, had to withdraw and the speaker continued amidst applause. For the NGOs, mostly a suppressed lot in their own countries, it was not so much the political aspect of Palestine that mattered as the right to speak.

Again, there was furore when an invitation to the Dalai Lama to address the NGOs was withdrawn under the pressure of

China. He must have his say was the refrain of demonstrations which continued till the Austrian government, the hosts of the conference, announced his arrival in Vienna. Party, it was Tibet but mostly it was the Dalai Lama's right to say that astrung the NGOs. He spoke in heavy downpour to emphasise how the question of "particularising" human rights had become a central issue in the universe. His message went down well and there was a renewed resolve against authoritarianism.

Sadly, the NGOs violated the right to say when it came to former US president Jimmy Carter. Some of us — I was representing the Citizens for Democracy (CFD) — argued in a pre-conference meeting that free expression was an integral part of human rights. But the NGOs from Latin America were vehemently opposed to him for the excesses he had committed in their region when he was president.

They hooted him down. Some Pakistanis also joined them on the ground that he had strongly supported General Zia-ul-Haq's martial law regime. Asma Jahangir, a distinguished woman activist from Lahore, earned the wrath of many Pakistani NGOs for advocating Carter's right to say.

The tendency not to tolerate an opponent or a critic scares me. My plea that Carter should be heard was brushed aside as a bourgeois reaction. Whatever that meant, the right of free expression to a speaker, when the

management had invited him, was denied. Just as we expect governments to recognise dissent, we should have patience and tolerance to hear others, however abominable they may be.

As days go by, I hope that the NGOs and the governments will develop some norms to deal with one another. While the NGOs cannot supplant the elected governments, they represent a movement against brutal

official delegations have sent even reports against a few anti-establishment NGOs.

But ultimately political bosses and officials will come to realise that those who protest against tyranny are not anti-patriotic but dissidents, wanting to focus attention to the plight of the exploited masses. Only through their help will the alienated and the distant be retrieved one day because they enjoy credibility. Sheikh Hasina

Separately, they passed a resolution to say all that; the government delegation did not like it. It seems that the mere mention of violation of human rights scares New Delhi and it continues to shut its eyes to the brutalities as if they do not exist.

I saw India and Pakistan officials sending hints to the sponsored NGOs at various meetings to say things which would embarrass the other. Still, the NGOs conference passed off quietly. Fireworks were at the official conference. "We could have made a joint front on Bosnia if we had not decided to raise Kashmir at the conference," said a Pakistani delegate. The attack by Nusrat Bhutto, head of the Pakistan delegation, on India for the conditions prevailing in Kashmir was not surprising. The harshness was India's defence was poor and it did well not to exercise the second right to reply because it would have made a hash of things further.

However, I have not been able to appreciate Pakistan's rationale behind raising Kashmir at yet another international forum. It has been doing so for the last four decades, with no concrete results. I recall when I met Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then Pakistan's president, before the Shimla conference in 1972, he said he was "sick of going round" the chanceries of the world and had realised that the question had to be solved between India and Pakistan. The Shimla agreement reflected that reality, a bilateral approach.

True, Nusarat Bhutto's words attracted headlines in the subcontinent and some impressionable commentators in Pakistan hailed her speech as "a diplomatic victory." If this is victory, Islamabad has achieved it many a time. The real problem is now to make India and Pakistan sit across the table to discuss Kashmir. Vitrifical speeches by Pakistan at international forums only harden opinion in India. "Now no talks for another six months," was an unnecessary remark by the peeved Indian foreign secretary Mani Dixit. But that should indicate how New Delhi's mind works.

Nusarat Bhutto's speech or the exhortation by the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) on Kashmir at its Karachi meeting could not have possibly influenced India to abstain on the OIC-sponsored resolution, calling upon the Security Council to take "forceful and decisive steps" for effective peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina. New Delhi has committed the same blunder as it did during Nehru's time when it abstained on the resolution condemning Soviet forces' march into Hungary. Then the USSR influenced us; this time it is the West. And we have chosen to be a mute witness to the killing of people whose only fault is that they are Muslims.

The argument that we were against naming a country — a matter of principle as the Indian delegation put it — is not convincing. India would have made some sense if its delegation had walked out of the conference when Nusarat Bhutto mentioned it by name while referring to Kashmir. The principle of not naming a country was jettisoned by the NGOs on day one. Why did we have to cut a sorry figure?

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

It is going to be a long-drawn battle. The NGOs will be further exposed to ridicule and calumny, as is happening in the third world. India and Pakistan, followed by Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, had financed the trip of some NGOs of dubious credentials to shout down those who dared to criticise their governments. Some from among the

from Bangladesh, who addressed the plenary session, can bridge differences far better than Dhaka's most leaders. Instead, as she told me, she and her party, Awami League, were being persecuted.

For some reasons, the Indian delegation had adopted a posture of hostility towards the Indian NGOs from the first day. The ice was broken after some time when Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, leader of the delegation, met the NGOs and admitted the excesses committed. He tried to appreciate the NGOs' point of view. On their part, they told him they were not wanting to raise Kashmir, Punjab or Assam, which they could do back home. But they pointed out how the TADA was misused to detain dissidents and how the government only listened to the language of vio-

GENERAL Ibrahim Babangida, the military ruler of Nigeria, has painted himself into a corner. He has promised that new elections to return the country to civilian rule will go ahead to produce a president, according to the original schedule, by August 27.

At the same time he has disqualified the two presidential candidates who were generally recognised as having fought a free and fair election.

He now faces massive popular disillusionment and an impossible dilemma. How is he to keep his frequently repeated promise to deliver civilian government in time for the deadline? Last time it took him 10 months to organise fresh elections.

And where can he find the right kind of person to become president under his own new set of complicated rules? Maybe he is intending to stand himself as a "last chance, save the nation" candidate.

Babangida originally annulled the June 12 elections, repealed all the electoral decrees which guaranteed the transition programme and suspended the National Electoral Commission (NEC) which had wanted to publish the results.

The NEC leaked the results. Chief Moshod Abiola, the flamboyant Southerner and media tycoon, had won comfortably, securing 8.4 million votes and 58 per cent of the electorate against his northern opponent Bashir Tofa's 41 per cent. And, the elections had

# Babangida Paints Himself in a Corner

by Alan Rake

*Even for Nigeria the political events of the last few days have been extraordinary. After years of planning and elections at many levels the key presidential election stands annulled and new ones are promised in time for a handover to civilian rule on August 27. The military ruler, Ibrahim Babangida, has put himself into an impossible position and it is difficult to see how he can extricate himself.*

### Winding road to civilian rule

- 1986 Feb Babangida promises handover by October 1 1990. Sets up bureau to arrange transition
- 1989 May Ban on political parties lifted. National Electoral Commission recommends 5 political parties. Babangida insists on two parties only — NRC, SDP. Delays power transfer to Jan 2 1993
- 1991 Dec Successful elections for governors, state assemblies
- 1992 July National Assembly and Senate elections. Presidential primaries twice suspended
- Oct Babangida cancels primaries, postpones civilian rule to August 27 1993
- 1993 June 12 Moshod Abiola wins Presidential election
- June 23 Election annulled
- June 25 New elections promised



The editor of the government-owned New Nigerian newspaper resigned over an editorial justifying the suspension of the elections that had been imposed on him by Babangida's office.

Babangida then changed his mind. He said that he still intended to hand over to a civilian president on August 27, but he disqualified both the presidential candidates.

By doing so he defied the painstaking system that he had personally set up over the last seven years since he first promised civilian rule in 1986. It was he who had set up the two-party system, written the party manifestos, financed the parties and had ensured that they would be free of religious or ethnic bias and representative of the nation as a whole.

In order to ensure fair, unrigged elections he had postponed the return to civilian rule on three previous occasions. He had repeatedly promised that he had no hidden agenda and

that he had no intention to cling to power. And he had been finally presented with an election that appeared to be fair. So why did Babangida fall at the last fence and plunge the country yet again into a state of confusion?

Much of the blame probably lies within the supreme military body, the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC), where a major group of northern officers would not countenance a flamboyant Southerner like Abiola as the next president.

One was Brigadier Hailu Akilu who was on record some time before the results became known, saying "Abiola will only become president over my dead body."

And behind the NDSC, the northern political power brokers, who have chosen every president except one — Obasanjo, from 1976 to 1979 — since Nigeria's independence in 1960, also wanted none of Abiola, though he was a fellow Muslim.

So Babangida, disqualified

been generally recognised as free and fair and devoid of major malpractice.

Babangida's move provoked an international outcry. Externally the western powers, particularly the United States and Britain, showed themselves surprisingly resolute in their desire to defend democracy by

threatening sanctions.

Inside Nigeria, protest was raised by two ex-heads of state, Olusegun Obasanjo and General Muhammadu Buhari, by the Nobel Prize winning Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka and by human rights organisations. Students demonstrated and workers threatened strikes.

## 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.*

### "Bosnia Continues to Burn"

Sir, Just a quick note to express my gratitude to you for your courageous and principled editorial in *The Daily Star* 13-7-93 on the situation in Bosnia.

People like us whose conscience and all senses of decency have been outrageously violated by the events in Bosnia — find some solace in the thought that there is still a voice left which cares to speak out in protest.

Keep it up.  
Jamil Azher  
Dhaka  
(Letter received by Fax)

### Whither USA?

Sir, The colossus image and the profound goodwill the USA built world over during the last two hundred years appear to have been shattered all of a sudden due to Washington's dramatic missile attack on Baghdad on June 27.

The US President Bill Clinton alleged that Iraq had made a plot to assassinate former President George Bush and so the USA retaliated. "I did my job" boasted Bill Clinton and vowed to do everything to stamp out terrorism. Incredible!

Only a few months back on

20th January on being sworn in as the 42nd President Bill Clinton proudly proclaimed the USA as the most civilised country on earth.

Today the world is stunned and shocked at the abuse of power, violation of international law, outrage of human rights and attack on the independence and sovereignty of Iraq by the USA. Washington never lodged any protest with Iraq or with the UNO against the alleged assassination plot nor did issue any warning to Baghdad. Above all the trial of fourteen suspected persons was going on in Kuwait. Why did USA kill innocent civilians in Baghdad?

Why should Iraq plot to kill former President George Bush who has been defeated in the Presidential election by the present President Bill Clinton? What benefit, political or military gain Iraq could get out of it? It is a story of a wolf and a lamb. We always hear US plotting to kill and overthrow President Saddam Hussain of Iraq.

We feel it is a sheer foolishness, a great irresponsibility and irregularity, lack of wisdom and morality on the part of USA to attack Iraq. It is a case thousand times worst than Watergate scandal. Why did not the USA attack

San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico when two Puerto Rico nationalists attempted to shoot US President Harry Truman in 1950?

The USA dropped Atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 but immediately rushed humanitarian aid and helped Japan to heal her wounds and stand on her own feet. But what the USA is doing now in Iraq? Washington is now violating her own Constitution and also flouting the principles, objectives and the Charter of the United Nations Organisation.

True the executive power of the USA is vested in the President of the United States of America but as a matter of fact it is the US Congress under Article I Section 8/10 and 8/11 to "Define and Punish Piracies and Felonies committed on the high seas, and offences against the Law of Nations" and to "Declare War, grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal and make Rules concerning Captures on Land and Water."

We would request the democratic and freedom loving people of the United States of America to kindly look into the serious relevant matters, help put the USA on the right track, resolve the US-Iraq differences in a civilised manner and save the USA from deluge.

O H Kabir  
Dhaka-1203

### "PWD and Dhanmondi R/A"

Sir, In response to Mr Zahurul Huq's letter captioned "PWD and Dhanmondi R/A" of 19 June 1993, I would like to

draw his kind attention to the fact that the mushroom growth of hospitals, clinics, government, semi-government and NGO offices in Dhanmondi residential area had not only disturbed the civic aesthetics in the said area, but the unplanned disposal of hospital wastes had immensely polluted its environment. The X-ray clinics are gradually spreading radiation which may cause health hazards in course of time. If one has closely observed the gathering of drivers and fourth class employees in front of their respective office entrances and makeshift tea stalls then one would also have heard some from there passing obtrusive and derogatory remarks at the young school going girls and passing by ladies. Hasn't one noticed as to how some unscrupulous people shamelessly urinate at the roadside even when our children or a lady is passing by?

I would humbly request Mr Z Huq to kindly observe these unhealthy and obnoxious activities and then deduce whether the location of government and other offices in Dhanmondi R/A over the last two decades had adversely effected civic peace and environment or not.

As a humble citizen, I earnestly request the concerned authority to take immediate steps for shifting these clinics, and offices to non-residential areas. Schools, departmental stores, flower shops and medicine shops may be spared from such eviction.

If PWD is doing something about it, then let's extend our hand of cooperation to them instead of creating hindrance.  
M Ferdouse Khan  
Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka

## OPINION

### Food for Education

Shahabuddin Mahtab

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia in her speech at Mymensingh on May 29th declared that the government would launch a special "Food for Education" programme for encouraging poor and underprivileged children to receive education. Nothing would have been more welcome.

Since the massive programme for Primary Education was taken up during the Third FYP period, the efforts to bring in all the children of school age to the primary schools, and their retention thereafter up to Class V, have not been successful. The special 44 thana UPE project, under IDA assistance, also did not achieve its expectations. With the present poverty scenario, the children of primary school age are put to work to earn their own living, or else there was no food available to them.

The provision of at least one nutritious mid-day meal for all underprivileged children in all our primary schools would be the most effective way of drawing the children to the school, and their further retention thereafter. To this we would like to add that two sets of clothes (of bare utility standard) may be provided to the female child.

For the implementation of the above projects, we would be requiring several hundred crores of Taka in a year. The harnessing of resources would not be an easy task, and we have to tackle it on a priority basis. Overpopulation is the number one problem facing the nation. But our successful im-

plementation of the Primary Education project would have a direct bearing in the rate of our population growth.

The Fourth FYP has this to say, "present and potential donors can consider formation of a consortium to introduce school lunch at the primary level in the rural areas. Food for Education of the hungry child will perhaps be a logical proposition for human resource development of the most down trodden."

In spite of the Government's general policy of decentralization, the primary education system is very much controlled by the government functionaries. Although it is laid down that the "responsibilities of supervision, control and management of primary education be in co-operation with the local government administration known as Union Parishad", in actual operation and practice, the Union Parishad hardly exerts any role of restraint and direction. Primary education to be turned into a social movement needs the full participation of the community and the local government bodies. The Union Parishads need to have controlling powers for the smooth and effective functioning of the primary schools. The Union Parishads may also be made responsible for the maintenance of the school building and the furnitures. The community in question where the school is situated must play an effective role, because it is their children who are being educated in those schools.

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