

Towards Cleaner Water and Personal Practices

A very big event participated by 350 experts from home and abroad concluded in Dhaka on Sunday. The Third Annual Scientific Conference of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease and Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B), in a two-day meeting, addressed a very important area of our national life — environmental health — and formulated a 44-point recommendation which can be supremely suitable to form the base of an action plan.

Health Minister Kamal Yusuf opened the conference by calling upon the ICDDR,B to particularly develop simple, affordable and acceptable technologies to combat diarrhoeal diseases. He cited as the sources of our environmental problems the three areas of over-population, burning of fossil fuel and wanton felling of trees. While some headway may indeed be claimed in the first, the situation in the two other cases has constantly been worsening with no sign of an early reversal in the dangerous trend yet in sight. If government's correct comprehension of a problem is not followed by actions yielding effective solutions thereto, what may indeed the 60 scientific papers presented in the conference and the lengthy recommendations come up to in both policy formulation and brass-tack terms?

The conference was told of Bangladesh's remarkable progress in "delivering water supply and sanitation services to its citizens within a very short time," by way of a kindly pat. But the paradox of a shameful infant mortality rate persisting in spite of the two happy developments was left unexplained. National health was something that corresponded with national wealth, said an international expert. The role that culture played in determining a nation's health was left unrecognized. And what is national health after all if it corresponded with national wealth which hardly ever stands for the well-being of all in a society? But Professor Feachem did well to underline the fact of parts going to make a whole, environmentally too — "the domestic environment helping save the universal environment."

Revolutionary improvement in the health profiles of the industrially developed societies of the west in the Twentieth Century was almost wholly caused, not by fantastic advances in the curative aspects of medicine but by great strides in two simple and very ancient ways to health — reaching germ-free water and proper sanitation to all in a society. As expected the conference's recommendations laid stress on preservation, protection and proper and economic use of surface water, hand washing and such other practices of personal hygiene and sanitation, specially latrines with covered pits.

Personal hygiene including doing the mornings has more to do with culture than with the doctor's admonitions. And Bengalees historically were a people particularly clean of the body. It is a testament to their unremitting cultural decline, caused, no doubt, in large measure by a centuries-long economic plunge, that they are now needing costly and persistent prodding to repair back to clean personal practices. Cultural progress and a return of some measure of self-esteem may be very helpful in raking in striking results in this important area of our national life.

Homes for Middle Class

The HBFC proposal at the Finance Ministry to make its apartment loan programme client-oriented reopens the entire question of financing housing projects for the middle class city-dwellers.

The HBFC lending scheme, as it stands now, offers Tk 7.8 lakh on condition that the client has Tk 5.2 lakh in equity to buy an under-construction flat measuring an inner area of 900 to 13,000 square feet. The loan is to be repaid with interests over a period of 18 years at the rate of Tk 8000 per month. Response to the programme since September last when it was launched has been poor with only 17 applications having been made for the loan.

The revised proposal seeks to extend the repayment period up to 25 years with monthly instalment coming down to Tk 5,500. This is all very good within the limited purview of what is attempted to be done by way of giving a fillip to middle class housing, apart from the strategic importance of boosting construction to effect a breakthrough from the persistent economic stagnation.

But this obviously will not be enough. The banks too must come forward, given the additional stake of stimulating the economy, to offer housing loans along similar lines. One noticeable positive aspect to this type of lending for apartments is that it recognises the inability of the middle class to buy plots these days. As an extension of the same principle, we are expecting that the HBFC and the private and public sector banks will have a programme to finance house-building on roof-tops. For all we know, in land-short Dhaka, if not in other metropolitan cities, floors are getting offered for sale these days.

The house building loans do not only carry high interests, most of them are obtainable upon attachment of land, the last named being no less of a disincentive than the first one for nursing hopes for having houses of one's own. More important, the ownership requirements entitling one to finances, in regard to both floors and apartments, are cumbersome, even grossly inadequate so that one is at one's wit's end as to how to go about it all — in the first place. The laws of ownership and transference of rights being out of date need to be amended forthwith to give a real boost to construction. The government can sit down with the private sector construction companies to sort some of these problems out before going in for suitably amending the laws.

The private sector involvement in construction has been heavily tilted towards the well-to-do. This slant can only be changed to benefit the middle and low-income groups if the government comes forward in reclaiming and developing lands and then make these over to the private sector at reasonable costs for their construction projects. There are so many things that can be done to boost construction for and among the middle and low-income groups. And, the realistic approach lies in dividing responsibilities between the private and the public sectors within an integrated operational framework.

THE coming mayoral elections are going to be a political event of utmost significance. This is my perception, as a layman. I do not know how the political activists are looking at it, but from the signs all around us, they too must be of the same opinion. Virtually all the political parties who matter have fielded their candidates. Elections are going to be fought under party banners. If there ever was a thought that local bodies elections are better conducted on a non-political basis, that thought has been totally rejected by everybody. It never had a chance of gaining acceptance. The influence of national politics has been all-pervasive, penetrating into every nook and corner of our lines.

The mayoral elections, inclusive of elections of the ward commissioners of our four cities — Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi — have come to be seen as something like mid-term elections. The timing has something to do with it, falling as the elections do, roughly midway between two parliamentary elections. This appears to be a ripe moment for an assessment of the performance of the ruling party. This view of the whole thing seems to be inevitable, and this is confirmed by the propaganda line of the contesting parties. The ruling party's message to the voters is its achievements since it came to power. Others are highlighting its failures — on all fronts. There is exaggeration on both the sides. The so-called achievements are being in-

The Mayoral Elections: On a Hopeful Note

flated, taxing the credulity of the common man. The failures, too, suffer from the same defect — a rather sweeping denial of the claims; an absence of specific statements of particular failures, sector-wise, and supported by figures and graphs. The appeal is not so much to the voter's intelligence as to his emotion. There is no serious effort to inform and to educate. Both money and energy are wasted on a display of the party-strength.

As the election day approaches, and as the scene unfolds itself, a few observations will be relevant. First, the coming elections will test the progress, if any, of our democratic culture. Second, these may well determine the direction of our national politics for the next couple of years, that is till the next parliamentary elections. Third, this may well be the beginning of a hopeful chapter of local government. I will deal with these three aspects of the ensuing mayoral elections, in that order.

The Chief Election Commissioner has said that we had earned a unique honour through the successful holding of the 1991 elections, and the honour must be preserved. He is fully entitled to the claim and only partly to the expectations. He cannot have forgotten what happened in the Mirpur by-election, and he must be aware of the circumstances leading to the suspension of municipal elections at several places, including Savar. Opti-

mism is all right, so long it is balanced by a recognition of the forces working against it. No body doubts the integrity of the Election Commission, but a real doubt has entered our minds in respect of its effectiveness in ensuring a perfect election, its ability to frustrate the efforts of those determined to force a result in their favour. In 1991 elections, the EC was invested with extraordinary powers, ensuring its authority over all officials connected with elections. Some of our recent ex-

perience would show that, divested of those extra-ordinary powers, the EC cannot deliver as perfect an election as it did in 1991. The coming mayoral election will be yet another test, and an acid test at that, if the EC can fly as freely with clipped wings as it did in 1991 with wings power-charged and extended to the fullest.

There will be a test of a few more things, equally important in an election: the ability of the EC to keep election expenses within the prescribed limits being one of them. The do's and don'ts issued by the EC on the eve of the elections are an expression of its desire to see that the game is played strictly according to rules. Already, about a few things violative of the rules of discipline, the writings on the walls among

them; some contesting parties have indicated their willingness to abide by the rules, and this is an encouraging sign. A general adherence to rules by all the contesting candidates will add to the prestige and authority of the EC.

The city corporation elections provide an opportunity for political parties to decide upon their future course of action, to rethink their policy and to revamp their party machinery. For the ruling party, the occasion comes as a reminder that there is no scope to relax; for the main opposition, it comes as a challenge to show that the voters have enough confidence in their ability to form a government; for Jamaat, the Jatiya Party and the Combined Left to test their individual strength. It is not clear to what extent the average voter will cast his vote in favour of a party, which he usually does in a parliamentary election, and to what extent his choice will be swayed by individual consideration. The voter's behaviour in this case may be slightly different from that in a national election, but only the results will show.

The main significance, as I see it, of the city corporation elections lies in emphasising the importance of local bodies, starting from the union level

through thana and district levels, and incorporating the municipalities and city corporations. Hitherto, the concept of local self-government failed to receive the attention it deserved. Whatever infrastructure of local government was there in Bengal under the British was allowed to decline and die under Pakistan. Both the District Board and the District Education Board were institutions which could be further strengthened. Today, we are still in two minds about how much power the District Council could be trusted with; and we have no equivalent body to perform the function of the District Education Board. Current opinion seems to be veering in favour of local bodies managing primary education. With the abolishing of the upazila system, and with the thana and district councils still in limbo, there is now a complete vacuum in the area of local government. When the city corporation elections are over, the public would wish to see other local bodies formed and functioning. And when these come into existence, they should collectively play a meaningful role in the nation's life.

The mayoral elections have revealed the extent of mismanagement and neglect prevailing in our cities, in almost every sphere. Dhaka, for example, far from becoming a Tlootama Nagori (Ershad's pet phrase), is fast becoming a nightmare city. It has perhaps

the worst public transport system in the world of any city of its size. Its streets are choked with rickshaws, and its air is thick with smoke. Its sanitation is a serious threat to healthy living, and its crime-record is getting worse with every passing year. No body knows how many thousands of children of school-going age are roaming its streets in a struggle for mere existence. In terms of quality of life, its place should be at the bottom of the scale among cities with a population of over 4 millions.

The DIT turned RAJUK has failed singularly in giving us a planned city with basic amenities. No wonder, all the mayoral candidates, in Dhaka, and in three other cities, are making promises so big that it is doubtful whether they themselves believe in what they are saying. But the promises are such that they bring out vividly what is lacking in our largest cities.

The average voter will not be impressed by tall talks. Many of them have not made up their minds yet. The Gallup poll idea is gaining favour, and the first one held on the mayoral elections indicates this. The intensity of the campaign, so long everything is smooth and orderly, should help create a sense of the value, the practical importance, of the ensuing elections. Also, parties, candidates and their workers, should learn, through experience, how to keep their energies within bounds. The conduct of the law-enforcing agencies will be closely watched.

THE boy lay across the lap of the man crouched on the pavement outside the elegant Algiers hotel. Beside them sat a woman, holding another, younger child to her chest. None of them looked directly at the people in the busy street throughout the morning, the family remained there, the two children as silent as their parents. All the time, the man kept one hand covering his eyes; the other he extended, begging passers-by for a few francs.

Beggars are a common sight in the streets of the Algerian capital today. Old women sit all day against a wall, on a stairway, to collect a few coins. Boys with uncut hair and torn trousers loiter at the airports. But none moved onlookers like this young man begging for his family outside the hotel in downtown Algiers.

Perhaps it was the image of an entire family that made people reach into their pockets so frequently. Perhaps it was the way the father hid his eyes. Perhaps it was his suit, or his wife by his side, the lower part of her face covered by a traditional lace veil.

These street beggars are not a few unlucky individuals. They are part of a condition that pervades Algeria. In a society where the links in a chain of economic deterioration and corruption are all too evident, it is a short transition from unemployment to unchecked black-markets to threats from extremists.

"We don't feel like going out," said a man who once enjoyed taking his family into town for a meal, or to the beach for a day. "It's not the same anymore," he

Searching for Self-respect on the Boulevards

Barbara Nimri Aziz writes from Algiers

A wave of killings of foreigners, judges and police in Algeria has produced sweeping police round-ups of suspects, mostly supporters of the Islamic party who feel cheated of victory in the last election. In this personal view for Gemini News Service, a reporter gives her street-level impression of the mood of bleakness in Algiers.

Algeria: Vote of no confidence



volunteers as he sits embarrassed and nervous at a military roadblock, waiting for the armed soldiers to check his ID. Some sources report that up to 12,000 men are now held in desert detention centres, all picked up in military sweeps for "terrorists". No-one can say how many of those arrested have been tortured and killed.

Algerians fought hard for independence, then for democracy. Only in 1988, did the monopoly party, the AFLN, release its grip on the press and allow free expression. Today, after only four years of real democracy, Algerians' long-sought dream of liberty seems to have vanished. A state of

Second round

CANCELLED
ELECTION
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emergency rule, meant to thwart the Islamists, is now entering its third year. And there is neither a major government plan to reverse the economic decline, nor a strategy to openly dialogue with the demands of the Islamists.

Since January 1992, when the Islamic party was poised to win democratically-run elections, the government suspended the outcome and banned the Islamic Front Party (IFS) that would have come to power. With that, Algeria entered a troubled state of terror and counter-terror from which no-one can see a solution. Algerians, like many Arabs, lack a political and economic frame-

Jan 14 '92

High Security Council assumes presidential powers

work on which to build their aspirations.

Under a tree sit two cigarette vendors. On the crate in front of each man are cigarettes: a pack of Marlboro is 230 francs — nearly \$5. Contraband is sold openly everywhere, distributed through syndicates. The vendors, I am assured, earn a good living.

Closer to the hotel gate are two regulars — men who first identify themselves, in English, Italian or French as taxi drivers but anxiously offer to sell you Algerian money cheap, 500 francs for a \$ 100 bill, double the bank rate.

Across the street from the black-market and the fam-

ily of beggars, is a pavement cafe, one of many along Algiers' boulevards. The young men who sit at the tables do not speak to other men idling there; few have even 5 francs to buy a small cup of coffee. None has work, and they have nowhere to go.

The city seems calm in this way but not far below the surface of life is fear. Anyone entering the hotel courtyard is stopped for a security check. The guards mumble apologies as they ask visitors to open their luggage, briefcase or handbag. This is necessary, they explain, because of the "trouble."

Inside the lobby, one feels the uncomfortable eyes of plain-clothes security police, still watching for "trouble". But an Algerian dissident says he welcomes the attentive security since he was forced underground when the Islamists announced him as an enemy of their cause.

In these few square metres in the heart of Algiers are all the symptoms of one of the key problems facing the nation: lack of economic growth. Algerians saw the socialist party which won independence from France become inept and corrupt. It left

the country in economic shambles; the promised prosperity from oil and industrialisation never came.

On top of this ideological vacuum and economic failure came the Gulf war. The utter defeat of Iraq and the alliance of Arab leaders with the US and European states left people angry and disillusioned with the West.

From the despairing ranks of the poor, the disappointed and those who have given up hope of improvement, the Islamic Party draws its support. Some say the recruits are unemployed men who will kill for a few dollars but have no Islamic conviction. Others say the Islamists are compassionate and able to convince the poor that they can really help them. The FIS promised solutions, however vague, and it spoke to peoples' search for esteem.

But no-one has given them a chance to prove themselves. Their democratic drive ended in their banning and the imposition of martial law. Their response is guerrilla war against government and police. The brutal repressive tactics against their extremism and the jailing of their leadership may well cut off possibilities for a dialogue.

More aid is promised to address the nation's economic woes but the father begging for his family has to lift his hand from his face as well. Relevant ideology and a feeling of self-respect are important.

BARBARA NIMRI AZIZ is an American freelance journalist and radio producer with 'the Pacifica Network'. She was recently in Algeria.

Western Culture — and Crime — Invades Bhutan

Prakash Chandra writes from New Delhi

'We have lost our innocence,' academics say, as the government advises Bhutanese to lock their houses

modern culture from the society.

As one Bhutan watcher says, "You cannot keep the foreign devil away from your door for a long time. Already the pollution and destruction of nature is a direct result of progress. The number of trucks, motorcycles and cars is going up steadily, so is pollution."

In its anxiety to maintain a pollution-free society the Bhutanese government has deliberately resisted the media onslaught. But despite their efforts they cannot keep out other symbols of modern culture such as videos and films. These cannot be banned. Every Bhutanese family, which goes

abroad or visits India, buys video sets, films and cassettes.

A Bhutanese court recently heard the evidence of an alleged rapist who claimed that he was inspired to commit his crime because of a scene he saw on an American TV film. Bhutanese officials regard such a threat as formidable.

Bhutanese academics say, "We have lost our innocence. The only choice before the Bhutanese society is to accept this and be better prepared. Bhutanese institutions must be aware of such a negative growth and play a key role in resisting such social diseases which have taken root."

The government is now ad-

vising people to lock their houses and cars and keep guard dogs and even build high walls around houses. The government was shocked recently by burglaries committed in several of United Nations personnel.

One indication of high-finance crime in Bhutan is the entry of counterfeit currencies especially US dollars.

In October, a specialist from the Republic National Bank of New York held a meeting to brief Bhutanese hoteliers, money changers, customs officials, bankers, and representatives of the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan about the trends in counterfeit money, and the clues to look for while detecting fake notes.

Penelope A Knutzen, a banker who is stationed in Singapore, pointed out that fake currencies, had infiltrated even

the most advanced and strongest economies of the world and cautioned that Bhutan which had no counterfeit specialists, must be careful.

While people normally tried to detect counterfeit by rubbing the bills to see if the colour came off, Ms Knutzen said that fake bills needed much more scrutiny to be detected.

Counterfeit money which usually comes in large denominations like US\$50 and US\$100 bills has entered Bhutan as dollars printed in 1977, 1981 and 1985.

Counterfeit money is one of the latest criminal developments in Bhutan, and the Bank of Bhutan already detected fake 500 rupee bills.

A large number of poor fake US dollars have also been detected by the bank a few years ago. But the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan has not faced any major problem with new counterfeiters so far.

— Dephne's Asia

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.

'Motorised rickshaw'

Sir, I was extremely happy to have read a letter, entitled 'Motorised rickshaw' in The Daily Star written by H Lechner, Directress, German Cultural Centre, Dhaka. She has expressed her valuable opinion and attracted our attention to the disadvantages of motorised rickshaw, which has resulted in a serious problem in Medan, North Sumatra, according to her personal experience. The

diesel motors are not only expensive but its smoke as well as sound are also very harmful to our health. On the other hand, Dhaka is an overpopulated city. Day by day, the environment is becoming polluted. After all, the atmosphere is almost being covered with carbon-dioxide. So, I would like to draw the attention of the concerned authority to take proper steps thinking duly the disadvantages of motorised rickshaw.

Md Tamiz Uddin
Indira Road, Farmgate, Dhaka

Price of essentials

Sir, It is pity to see that our parliament has become of no use to us. It is busy in discussing the matters related only to the interest of the MPs alone. While the price of onion has gone up high, edible oil is beyond the reach of poor people, powdered milk and baby food has become a luxury item, the members of the parliament are least bothered about the situation and are busy with trifling matters which are of no concern to the common man. None of the members has taken up the issue of present market price to discuss.

The market is burning and we are being burnt. It reminds us the story of Emperor Nero who was singing while Rome was burning. The activities of the MPs unfortunately arouse an inevitable question whether

this country has become a place only for those 330 people and not for the 12 crore! I would, therefore, like to appeal to the MPs to take up the matters of common interest of the poor people and try to solve them.

Shaful Hasan
Mirpur, Dhaka

Test tube babies

Sir, We are shocked to learn that a 59-year old British woman has been made to give birth to a twin after getting implanted into her womb a younger woman's eggs with 45-year old husband's sperms. It is also disquieting to note that another 62 year old farmer's wife is already going through her third month of pregnancy in the same manner. The old mothers are really unable to bear the burden of pregnancy. It is not understood as to how the old

ladies are being allowed to give birth on experimental basis. The western countries have also developed the system of euthanasia which is nothing but to kill life in a planned way.

The medical science has developed considerably. But it has not been developed to do any harm to human body or life. I would request the conscious people of the world to abhor the practice of test tube babies on the womb of any elderly woman and also the practice of euthanasia on any life.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury
Kalahagan, Dhaka

Set the birds free

Sir, Lately campaigns have been intensified to create awareness among the people about the importance of protec-

tion and conservation of the migratory guest birds. It is unfortunate that some people are catching and selling these birds while some are hunting them.

Although there are legal restrictions, the law seems ineffective. People are cheerfully dining on these guest birds!

May I request the bird and environmental protection groups and affluent members of the society to purchase these birds from the sellers and set them free publicly. I feel that this will create public awareness and will perpetuate the sense of responsibility in favour of protecting guest birds as well as other domestic birds.

M Zahidul Haque
Press and Publicity Secretary,
Bangladesh Society for
Conservation of Environment
(BSCCE)