

We Empathise

How must it have felt to go in a dark stormy night down a sea of icecold water, stuck up in a vessel tossing like the rider in a rodeo show! The eight hundred men and women now accepted as lost in Thursday's ferry capsiz in the Baltic did not find time to call up heroic sentiments and actions that made the sinking of the Titanic or, earlier still, the HMS Birkenhead supremely memorable. One moment they were all there in a ferry, not unlike a pleasure cruise ship, half of them headed home, and the next they were no more. It all took only minutes, something very unusual for a vessel of that size.

Many were the factors that seemingly conspired to keep the rescue figure pressed to below 150. The Baltic is not an open sea and is enclosed on all sides by some of the most prosperous and best managed states of the world with enviable technological prowess. And the ferry Estonia was on the shortest of trips that are made in that sea — from Tallin to Stockholm. Elements were in their hostile worst not only in sending the vessel down but more so in rendering all rescue attempts little better than futile. The vaunted attainments of the western industrial civilisation manifesting itself in revolutionary progress in movement as well as communication making it possible to stop unnecessary deaths by the bulk anywhere on the globe and at anytime — stood aside as if abandoning the Estonia and its passengers and crew. The vessel and the victims were pushed to the condition so familiar to us in Bangladesh. And this is why we in all of this wide world can appreciate the most the helplessness that reigns over such a disaster. And from that feeling we sympathise — in fact empathise, with those that have lost their near ones in the Baltic tragedy. There is no difference between the thousands on the recent weeklong vigil on the shores of Meghna-Dakota and those that now will do the same on the Finnish shores, nearest to the spot of tragedy.

If the proud Swedes and the punctilious Finnish and the efficient Estonians can fail in maritime voyaging, their technological achievements notwithstanding, what must we be doing to make our river voyagings safe. One early guess as to what caused the Estonia's undoing suggests heavy loads of motor vehicle cargo shifting to dip the tossing vessel into taking water. Is it not what happened to our Dinar-2 in which more 200 perished similarly in a matter of minutes? The seal making the rump on Estonia watertight was found to be unsatisfactory. The Dinar was similarly reported to have lost engine power — due to a technical defect — when it went down.

The world must wake up from the Baltic tragedy to a new awareness of the necessity of safer water-surface journey. And we hope we have a fair share in that, if only in the interest of sheer physical survival of us. How must it be hard for the bereaved families on the Baltic to bear their loss being so very unused to such unnecessary and avoidable and unscheduled deaths and living in so very predictable a world of stability and opulence, unlike us who have the biggest supply of such deaths in the world stalking our every living moment. It perhaps hurts the same. In one case there is care everywhere to register the hurt, in the other there is a pervasive unease that obviates the hurt and makes a repetition of disaster a matter of course.

US-Russia Summity

The Clinton-Yeltsin summit, fifth between them since their Vancouver meet in April 1993, ended in Washington on an upbeat note, specially on the global security issue. Harking back to "bonds forged at the crucible of battle", in an obvious reference to their fighting as allies against Nazism in the Second Great War, they came warming up to accelerate the pace of dismantling their nuclear arsenals. This is reflective of their common desire to live up to the potentially promising environment for peace created against the back-drop of an end to the cold war era. Full three years have passed since detente and it was time for tangible progress on the security front.

The Presidents of the United States and Russia have decided that pending ratification of the SALT-II which envisaged disposal of the nuclear warheads in nine years they would advance the process of dismantling as far as practicable. With the implementation of SALT-I and-II, the intermediate and long range ballistic missiles might well be dispensed with sooner than was projected beforehand. Russian President Boris Yeltsin thinks it could be done within seven years. Added to the cut-backs on conventional troops and armoured, the reduction in the mutual possession of nuclear warheads can improve the European security situation dramatically. The structured poises and counter-poises in the shape of WARSAW and NATO have all but vanished. WARSAW is gone; and NATO is grappling with the question of how far eastward its frontier should move in Europe.

The summiteers also resolved to exercise tighter control over nuclear material which seems to get to third parties somehow. Putting a cap on this is important because of much-less-than ideal coverage of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The other aspect to global insecurity consists in arms trafficking and the free flow of small weapons into the hands of terrorists.

Yeltsin and Clinton who could differ on the question of lifting the UN arms embargo on the embattled government of Bosnia perhaps treated the matter as academic now. The US President was ready to carry out his commitment on the subject if the recalcitrant Bosnian Serbs failed to make peace in accord with the latest formula of the international contact group by October 15. But the Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic himself wants the withdrawal of embargo on the Muslims deferred for six months, until Spring. His go-slow, in an apparent retraction from an earlier stand to get the arms embargo lifted as quickly as possible to bolster Muslim defences against the well-armed Serbs, has been prompted by the possibility that the UN forces might disengage in the event of a wider conflict. France and Britain are not going along with the American perception of providing the Bosnian government with an equal chance to fight the Serbs.

What however is intriguing is that trade and economic sanctions on Serbia and Montenegro have been lifted apparently on dubious satisfaction that they have earned it by stopping their own supplies to the Bosnian Serbs.

I missed the spotlight part. But I was there after the great parades for Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao had come to an end in Hyderabad and Bangalore. I was on the trail of Rao, one day later. By then, all the leaders, bureaucrats and others who mattered had marched off to join the shadows. Everything looked haunted.

It is no use to talk about welcome arches, life-size cutouts or the profusion of flags and bunting. Such wasteful expenditure has become a perk of the office of prime minister. None can also probably object to high profile security apparatus, long stoppages of traffic and suspension of normal work in government secretariats. After all, it is not every day that the emperor from Delhi goes down south to visit his subjects.

But why should Rao, otherwise amiable and simple, throw his weight about when everyone knows that he is only one in the Congress who has any weight? It was understandable in the case of Mrs Indira Gandhi because she had contempt for the party leaders and had eyes fixed on her own dynasty. Rajiv Gandhi inherited a party in which no tall leader had escaped his mother's machinations. Rao had to face some challenge in the beginning but not now. There is no reason why he should cut the party leaders to size, especially when he is past 77 and when he is not grooming his children.

The case in point is his recent visit to Andhra Pradesh. The talk of Hyderabad town, when I reached after PM's de-

parture, was why did he have to insult chief minister Vijayabaskara Reddy, who is totally loyal to him? Prime minister went to Cuddapah, not far from Hyderabad, despite CM's opposition, apparently to placate Y. S. Rajasekhar, a Congress MP, who is Vijayabaskara's inveterate opponent. Still worse was PM's deliberate silence when abuses and chappals were hurled at the CM, meticulously planned earlier. Even privately Rao had no word of regret, much less condemnation. He in fact rationalised the incident by arguing at the Congress workers' meeting held subsequently, that politicians had to face a rough-and-tumble life.

Rao was so overwhelmed by the large gathering, dined and wined in desultory fashion for several days, that he did not bother about CM's sensitivity. So humiliated did Vijayabaskara Reddy feel that he had his intention to resign communicated to Rao there and then. Still he did not react.

Both Rao and Vijayabaskara Reddy have been friends for a long time. Even when Reddy quitted the lower portfolio to the centre to become Andhra Pradesh chief minister, Rao would consult him on ticklish legal and constitutional problems. Vijayabaskara Reddy, on his part, went all out to get Rao elected to the Lok Sabha from Andhra Pradesh, needlessly rigging the polls in certain areas.

The question that still remains unanswered is why Rao

supposed to fumigate each and every aircraft that leave an airport. Similarly the fruits and vegetables are supposed to be checked to ensure quality before they are allowed to enter. These are normal and routine duties of the duty officers who are to be again impressed to do their job properly. In case these officers have any problems these are to be looked into.

Medical check-up often might be interpreted as a kind of harassment. The passengers might get fed-up and try to escape. Hence care and attention may be given so that the check-up does not seem to be disgusting. It is taken time it has to be politely explained to the passengers that the process is in their interest.

Then, issuance of visa. Visa means restrictions. Moreover, an Indian national infected with plague does not have any reason to come to Bangladesh. Hence the reason for suspension of visa to Indian nationals does not seem a reasonable decision, particularly when all the incoming passengers are being thoroughly checked at the entry points.

Assurance and Hope

What is needed is assurance of hope and confidence. Nothing is lost. The deadly disease may be there. But then every disease is deadly if not treated timely and promptly. The Surat authorities failed to give this message to their people and the result was mass desperation. The following measures may, therefore, be taken. A layman's guide may be printed and published in the media.

How a layman on duty at the entry point can spot a plague victim by looking at him. Visible symptoms are to be spotted before making the thorough medical check-up by especially trained staff.

Moreover, the staff on duty, the police on duty, have also to be reassured that no harm would be caused to them in the course of the checking.

Above all, the passengers in particular and the people in general have to be told that there is no reason to get panicky. The people have also to be informed about the Infectious Diseases Hospital. Where this hospital is located. How to get to the hospital or hospitals. Is it located only in

the sub-continent we have to immediately fill-up the gaps. Mere checking the passengers at the entry points will not do. There are innumerable slums in Dhaka and also in the rural areas. These slums are full of rats and, who knows, fleas too are there. How these slums are to be improved and the carriers eliminated? Even the buses and rickshaws that ply in the cities need to be fumigated periodically. The innumerable grocery stores that cater to the need of innumerable people are also not free from the threat of infested rats and fleas.

Training and Orientation

Moreover, are our doctors, nurses, and other technical staff trained and oriented to receive and treat plague patients? These are the issues which need to be handled by the professionals in a concerted way. There is no reason to panic although there is no reason to be complacent. After all, the disease which played havoc in the 14th century is no more than dangerous in the face of modern science, technology and professionalism. It is the failure of the administrators and professionals of Surat who became complacent for a moment. We are to take lessons from Surat. The Surat

is to remind us that there is no room for complacency. The Dhaka Airport Health Authority has got to be reorganised which is long over-due. Similarly the health units of other airports, seaports, rivers ports have to be strengthened and reorganised giving them adequate logistics and authority. Similarly, the City Corporations' health units

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have to be strengthened with more logistics and authority to regularly visit the slums where rats may abound and shops where groceries are stored.

The people have to be assured and re-assured time and again that the disease can be treated and death prevented if treatment is given at the hospital just after the appearance or feeling of the first symptoms.

There are 800 million people in India. Against this, 100 deaths are not a case of alarm and "red alert". The road accidents, diarrhoea, TB, cancer, and other diseases and incidents are taking their toll every day. What is evident in India? That for the lack of timely action the Surat situation has escalated. What timely action? The timely actions are:

How the disease and why the disease had occurred in Surat in the first place? And, then why did the people get panicky? There must have been lapses somewhere.

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