

Doctors' Strike

One can write an epic on doctors' strikes and how the Health Ministry handled these as they occurred from time to time. This rather unusual brain-wave comes from the present abstention of work by 8,600 government doctors, now well past its excruciating 10 days, under the leadership of BMA, with little sign of abating.

The Bangladesh Medical Association claims it has met 25 times with the government in the last 30 months to secure implementation of an accord reached with the Health Ministry during a doctors' strike in last January. Their demands have escalated as these were bound to — in a state of confrontation with the Ministry. This becomes crystal clear from reading the list of demands as it stands today. From what had been a clamour for doubling the budgetary allocation to the health sector, more job opportunities, promotion of doctors and autonomy to the medical colleges, the new set of demands to spring up includes withdrawal of the vigilance system and of suspension orders against doctors of Tongi and Gazipur hospitals, and removal of the Health Secretary.

The fresh additions to the original charter of demands owe their origin to disciplinary actions the Health Ministry had taken against some doctors some time ago. Now these have become the sticking points with the doctors for any talks with the government. Unless the suspension orders were withdrawn and the vigilance team, on whose recommendations the orders were passed, is put out of picture completely, the BMA wouldn't simply sit for any further discussions with the government. Moreover, they are making their return to work conditional upon a written commitment by the government that it will implement the agreement with the BMA dating back to last January. The Health Ministry's position on the demands is that it can meet four of them in the short run — including those relating to promotion of doctors and regularisation of the services of the acting civil surgeons in particular.

The fall-out of such a bottled situation is clearly manifest in the almost total breakdown of the medicare system which, even when it ran normally, hardly ever evoked any confidence from the general public. As the government threatens the striking doctors with punitive legal actions under the Essential Services Act, the BMA is said to be thinking of boycotting private practice as a way of intensifying their strike.

Although the BMA claims that the indoor and emergency departments are exempted from the strike, emergency operations were being performed, and they would spring to action if plague should hit us, we are frankly confused as to what is actually meant by all these assurances. After all, the patients are filing out of the hospitals. Are we to understand that such an apology of a service is any substitute for what the people have a right to expect from the doctors?

Not a Housing Problem Alone

Thirty per cent of the rural population have no homestead of their own. The report carried in a Bangla daily however has not given the figure of homelessness for their urban counterparts, but one can assume that this percentage will be even higher. In cities and towns the problem of homelessness notably has many facets. Some people may not have their own homes to live in but can still live a decent life in rented houses, others live in shacks in a shanty town on lands from where they can be evicted any moment. Yet others cannot manage to build or rent any such shelters and have to sleep on footpaths, shop fronts, at bus terminals, bus sheds and even in pipes yet to be fixed underground.

World wide the number of homeless people has been estimated at 10 crore. Our share in the world's total is definitely going to be proportionately much higher. On the other hand, majority of the dwelling places in the country are of poor quality. The less said about the dirt and squalor of the city slums the better. We do not know if this wretched condition has been taken into account in making the estimate of the total houses needed all over the country. As the report says, there is a need for another 31 lakh houses — of which 21 lakh 50 thousand in villages and 9 lakh 50 thousand in cities and towns, the basis of this estimate is not clear to us.

We however understand that the poor quality of the dwelling places of our people is a fair reflection of their economic condition. The increasing pressure on the cities' physical facilities is a direct result of the growing migration of rural population to those places of opportunities. This makes us wary. If the process of rural exodus continues — signs are clear it will — we are surely heading for a catastrophe. This is not only because the cities will be unable to accommodate and provide for the excessive population but also because the villages — the heart of Bangladesh — will wither away.

The danger so lurks that the old relations in rural society will undergo an unwelcome change and the real farmers will be replaced by an idle zamindar-type class. A few people will own expansive area and more and more people will turn landless over the years. The stream of rural migration towards cities and towns will gain in size and pace. That only five per cent of houses in the country have been built with official patronage cannot be the only argument for the government to embark on a massive housing programme. Even the plan now under consideration for the construction of 11 night shelter for the floating people of Dhaka city will prove to be a drop of water in the desert. Indirectly, it might even encourage more people to come to town to avail of the facility.

This cannot be a solution. People must be given the opportunities to have a source of reasonable income by virtue of which they can think of a decent living. And to live a decent life, a house with reasonable amenities is a must. Creation of job in villages through the establishment of small-scale agro-industrial ventures will perhaps make people economically strong enough to face the new challenge.

How Tiny Haiti Fits into the Grand US Game

Daya Kishan Thussu writes from London

The United States "friendly invasion" of Haiti has set a precedent. For the first time Washington has sent troops into a developing country ostensibly to restore a popularly elected leader. But, argues this Gemini News Service report, Haiti is merely a pawn in a bigger, global game.

THE occupation of one of the smallest and poorest countries by the world's remaining superpower has set a precedent — for the first time the United States has intervened in a developing country to "restore" democracy.

But Haiti has little experience of political pluralism and the US has a less than honourable record of promoting democracy in the developing world.

"Operation Uphold Democracy," ostensibly designed to restore Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's first democratically elected president, has been only reluctantly endorsed by the "left-wing" priest after arm-twisting from the Pentagon.

Although this is supposed to be a United Nations operation, enforcing Security Council resolutions, the UN special envoy to Haiti, Dante Caputo, has resigned because of what he said was the US "decision to act unilaterally."

Not everyone is happy in Washington either. Influential voices there are saying that they do not want American troops to be involved in "nation building."

Fostering democracy in the developing world is a role in which the US has had little experience. During the Cold War, dictators and juntas were seen to provide a more stable climate for business and investment. From the Middle East, to Latin America to southern Africa, not forgetting the Vietnam War, the US has played a key role in suppressing popular governments.

For Washington, the post-Cold War era began with an invasion of Panama to save young Americans from "Latino drug gangs." In fact the action was designed to ensure US control over the economically important Panama Canal.

This was followed by the Gulf war of 1991 when more than 100,000 Iraqis perished,

to ensure an uninterrupted supply of cheap oil to Western corporations. A year later, the Marines were in Somalia "restoring hope" for the television cameras, emphasising the mercy mission in another "failed state."

Why the US interest in democracy now for Haiti after so many years of supporting the brutal regimes of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, president from 1957-71, and of his son and successor "Baby Doc" Duvalier?

A timely new study *The Haiti Files: Decoding the Crisis* puts the question in perspective. The study, a collection of articles and documents edited

by American journalist James Ridgeway, shows how US policies have sustained the drug-running mafia which has ruled Haiti.

Since the early 1970s, it says, US firms have established more than 200 assembly plants, exploiting the super-cheap labour. But investment in Haiti is extremely insignificant in comparison to US economic interests in many other developing countries.

Why does Haiti matter then?

In the short-term, apart from ensuring smooth sailing for Democrats in the Senate elections, in October, the oc-

cupation, without firing a shot, also promotes what Americans characteristically call the "feelgood" factor.

In the long-term, Washington's game is more subtle. The internal situation in Haiti did not warrant UN action as it did not threaten international peace and security. No US interests were at stake. But the action fits in with its wider strategy — to commandeer the UN as a rubber stamp for US operations and strengthen the argument that only the US, with its military might, can be counted on to bring peace to the world's hotspots.

The idea of a permanent

UN peacekeeping force has no appeal for the US, which refuses to send American troops under non-American command. Instead Washington seems happy to hand out "spheres of influence" to other major powers.

Russia, with which the US now organises joint peacekeeping exercises, has been given the green light to lord over, what Moscow calls "near abroad" — outlying parts of the former Soviet Empire.

It is an interesting coincidence that the day US forces landed in Haiti, Russian troops intensified their attack on Chechnya in the Caucasus, where Moscow-backed rebels are fighting the government of the breakaway oil-rich republic.

Similarly, France's action in sending troops into Rwanda after the massacres attracted little criticism in Washington, despite French involvement in arming and sustaining the brutal Hutu-dominated regime in Kigali. Worried that it may lose its permanent seat at the UN Security Council, France wanted to show that it was still the arbiter in French-speaking Africa.

In these interventions it does not seem to matter if the big powers violate the UN Charter, which is supposed to guarantee the sovereignty of poor countries, a concept looking less and less relevant in the post-Cold War world.

Already developing countries have lost much of their economic sovereignty. International lending organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are making them open up their economies to the

benefit of Northern-based transnational corporations.

It is not unusual for national budgets in these countries to be vetted by World Bank officials even before they are presented to parliament. In such circumstances, the talk about strengthening democracy sounds hollow.

But it is the media images of US soldiers as the good Samaritans that stick in the public's mind in the West, prompting them to ask why not go and sort out other problems like Nigeria, where the military has ruthlessly annulled elections or Burma, ruled by a junta?

With only a ragtag army of 7,000, Haiti was a walkover for the world's most powerful army. It is more risky to intervene in Bosnia. Hence the involvement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the US-dominated defence alliance.

The precedent for using NATO for offensive action was created in February when US planes bombed Serbian positions, enforcing a UN resolution. Effectively, NATO had become a military wing of the UN. Since then more bombing raids have taken place.

As military interventions become all too regular, they also become biased. The cover of the UN flaglet makes them look "normal."


With Western investment growing in developing world, increased US military interventions are possible. If its interests are threatened in strategically significant areas such as the Middle East, the US will justify, with the help of a largely pliant Western media, the deployment of Marines.

Viewed against this background, Haiti is just one more episode in the US military drama, based on the old principle — might is right.

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Samspeak in the nineties

How a recent book saw the American way with words



Aggression: Invasion of another country by someone other than ourselves without our approval

Independent: Allied with us

Free Enterprise: The use of privately or publicly-owned property for private profit

Self-determination: The right of a people to select a government acceptable to us

Self-defence: Our and our closest allies' right to attack anybody at discretion for any reason satisfactory to ourselves

Aid: Help selling our goods abroad

National Interest: The demands and needs of the corporate community

Democracy: Rule by an elite that understands our interests and needs

* Beyond Hypocrisy (South End Press, Boston)

Ageing Process : Problems and Hope for Solutions

October 1st, declared by the United Nations as International Day for the Elderly, was observed also in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, in co-operation with Bangladesh Association for the Aged.

The government earlier constituted a National Committee on Ageing to devise ways and means to improve the lot of the senior citizens. And a study financed by World Health Organisation found that the elderly in this country, in majority of the cases, suffer from some economic, social, cultural and psychological problems. Hence the association for the Aged thought of setting up an Institute of Gerontology for conducting research so that the society gets an opportunity to know the ageing process.

This write-up is a desk study based on available information compiled by Dr Md Habibullah who is a member of the National Committee on Ageing.

WE may define gerontology as the study of the ageing process in its biological, psychological and social aspects. It is a process with continuous economic, psychological and other losses causing an increased degree of individual dependence on other people. Some scholars regard gerontology as a process by which experience and knowledge on life are accumulated and opportunities can be created to release intellectual and technological resources for the benefits of elderly people. Our perception about ageing may guide us in solving the problems to which our senior citizens are being exposed as they grow older.

Quality of Life

Researchers on gerontology stress on the quality of life of elderly people, the concept being viewed as synonymous with preventing diseases, tensions, anxieties and pattern of life that result in social isolation, unhygienic living condition and astray style of thinking. Researchers also suggest measures for promoting tension-free undisturbed living and welfare measures designed to reduce factors that produce restlessness and disturb sound sleep of the elderly people. There is a growing realisation that individuals should have access to resources which may help in moulding conditions of living. There is also a feeling that socio-political environment should be conducive to living in an atmosphere of stable law and order situation. This is a connotation of life style. This is based on normative definition of human beings and environment of living where people govern themselves by own means in relation to other people and the society at large.

Three major factors are as-

sumed to influence human actions and human behavior in social context. These are: (a) The situation covering the structure of possibilities and probabilities such an improvement of environmental conditions, resources of individual members to face vagaries of nature etc; (b) Perception of the reality of the people covering individual's own awareness of self about what is feasible and desirable for elderly people in the backdrop of general economic situation and (c) Individual's own value system and expectation, as also his idea about other people's welfare, rights, obligations, accountability as well as responsiveness to the needs and requirements of the societal groups.

Liberation of resources for the betterment of economic, social and cultural aspects of elderly people's life takes into account to what extent elderly people are willing to use own skills and experience in the labour market to earn own bread by shunning inclination of being dependent on others and the desire to share the hard-earned resources of children and relatives. There is feeling that some elderly people are reluctant to take up paid jobs or self-employment in places away from the younger generations. Some of the elderly people do not like their sons going to towns or to other countries where better

economic prospects prevail: feel bitter if sons want to take own wives and children with them. New cultural values or trends are being picked up by the younger generation. And many elderly people cannot easily accommodate musical performances, dancing, dramatic performances, new dress styles, free mixing of males and females, democratic way of living, freedom of choice of near and dear ones.

Factors Enhancing the Process

Social conflicts are reportedly quickening the ageing process. Rising tide of expectation has been producing mental tortures in the poor classes because of demonstration effects of provocative life of middle class people who are sometimes engaged in social vanity and snobbishness. They are even indulging in envy-generating consumptions even in the matter of food habits. Reportedly they are taking more such rich foods as have been producing killer diseases like diabetes, heart troubles and blood pressure. Majority of the poor are living below the poverty line. They can hardly meet basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, educational and medical facilities. Unequal and inequitable distribution of national income, galloping inflation etc are believed to facilitate the ageing process. Criminality is another

aspect of the value system. Instances of teasing young girls in schools, offices, shopping centres and buses; torturing wives by greedy husbands often at the instance of their guardians; discrimination against elderly people in the job market are producing mental agony, making them prematurely aged.

Gerontologists may think how individuals or groups or institutions are participating in social processes. Effects of pension scheme of state service holders, death benefits of bank employees, group insurance scheme of organisations, changing attitudes towards parents and elderly people of the local elites, loosening of family ties in the wave of individualism and western cultural infiltration, settlement of grown up and earning children in foreign lands, exploitation of the poor and disadvantaged group by touts and some irresponsible social leaders, misappropriation of organisational funds and material resources, nepotism, favouritism, trafficking in women, adulteration essential drugs, drug addiction of youths, emergence of slums and insanitary living, presence of fleets of beggars along side the fleets of modern cars, fighting among workers' groups in mills and factories, adoption of unfair means in examination halls, negligence of duty, illiteracy, free use of arms on the campus, length-

ened academic years resulting in postponed marriage of daughters, use of religion as a tool of earning money by taking advantage of ignorance, rigidity of thinking and intolerance, river erosion rendering people homeless and jobless, fear of accident on roads by killer trucks, supply of rotten foods in the market, prospect of pick-pockets and hijackers and similar other social evils may be observed and examined by gerontologists. These are reportedly making people restless and emotionally upset. And these are supposed to quicken the process of ageing.

Ways and Means

Gerontologists may devise ways and means to promote social amity and that allow people to live in peace free from fear of theft, robbery, hijacking and forced donation, blackmailing, ransom, kidnapping, dispossession of property, humiliation and pollution of air and water. Campus violence has assumed a cancerous proportion, members are examples. Keeping employed persons in fear of intimidation and termination by the boss produce a state of sturred condition and also gherao of offices, factories, schools and other institutions create grave situations. All these need to be probed by gerontologists.

Choice Priority

A realistic and action-oriented gerontological institute is one which is dynamic in its perspective. We need research on problems created by geographic distribution of population and the impact of isolation and resulting loneliness. How people's age status adversely affects interpersonal interaction and exchange of ideas, promotion of fellow feeling and group solidarity? Research is also needed on individual greed and self-centeredness as well as departure from religious attachment which wounds the feelings and sentiments of traditional-bound people.

We may also analyse and assess ageing process on time perspectives such as individual ageing process, process of new generation being born and reared particularly in the context of rising cost of living, education and medical care. In the context of hitherto unknown diseases, and processes of historical development of social norms and expectations.

Change and Conflict

Bangladesh is committed to rapid industrialisation in an attempt to withdraw surplus labour from agricultural sector. This is likely to promote urbanisation and further migration to towns. This may bring

about changes in myths and dogmas and infuse western ideas and technology. There are people who hate pornography. There are also people who dislike hanging of photos of even dead children in the walls while new generations favour hanging of photos of sportsmen and cinema stars. Youths take these as fun but these are often nerve-breaking for the elderly. Daring TV advertisement and indecent behaviour in public places do the same. Elderly people may wish their children going to mosques while the latter may like to avoid this. New generation may go in for small families and may adopt family planning to the dismay of their elders. Parents may wish all sons living together which may be disliked by grown up individuals. These produce emotions, commotions, tensions and mental agony in the people and have impact on the ageing process. Scarcity resulting from rapid increase in population vis-a-vis stagnant level of production of goods and services, political instability, bitter fighting among interest groups also add to the agonising process. The attitude of the government towards parents of government employees may also be an area of interest to gerontologists. During the previous regime, Pay Commission considered pay for a family of husband, wife and two children, no provision being made for parents and dependents like minor brothers and sisters. Parents in many cases perceive it to have outlived their utility to the society.

Choice Priority

Gerontologists may ascertain whether all elderly people are willing to life of dependency or like to live in isolation in rural setting. Society may like to know the kind of diseases associated with ageing process, whether in active life people live a regulated and ordered life, with carefully drawn out fund budget to generate surplus for meeting the needs in rainy days. Feasibility of a counselling programme may be examined. Benefits of having gerontology in school syllabus may also be considered. Use of mass media to generate social awareness also may be thought of. Attention of sociologists, psychologists, demographers and above all medical scientists and other relevant expert groups may be involved. Necessity of leading ordered life and taking balanced food may be highlighted. Factors which promote prematurely aged condition may be identified — which of them are controllable and how these may be indicated permitting remedial measures. What is being done in developed societies to slow down the ageing process may also be enumerated for the guidance of the gerontologists of Bangladesh. Gerontologists owe an obligation to the nation to bring to the attention of the Government the hard facts which influence the ageing process, for appropriate action which the issue deserves.

To the Editor...

Plague and precaution

Sir, Some internal precaution to avert any incidence of plague, together with the measures already taken, would be reassuring. All urban centres should take up cleanliness drive and burn the rubbish (instead of using as landfill materials). Installing localised incinerators for burning the debris may be considered. Use of volunteers raised locally for these efforts will be more effective. Creating local awareness is the only sure way.

According to government measures all Indian imports will be checked at the points of entry. The traders should remember that the consumption will go down automatically even if they succeed to get those through by influencing the examiners.

Private hoarding of medicines like tetracycline should be discouraged.

BMA may suspend its actions in view of the grave prospect and the authorities

should take it in the same spirit. M A Haq 25/E Green Road (B-8) Dhaka-1205

BTV drama serials

Sir, Apart from reading newspapers and periodicals, which provide us with necessary information, attractive articles, stories and features, we are prone to watch TV, which also furnishes us with a wide range of programmes including news, documentaries, live sports, particularly cricket, serials, weekly dramas etc. We enjoy TV programmes with the members of our family almost everyday. The telecasting of programmes on the mini-screen, however, does not permit and give licence to project any obscenity visually and pronounce any derogatory and abusive words, which might have adverse impact, damaging the morals and behavioural pattern, particularly of the youngsters and children.

In the recent past, we have had a string of glitzy and

sparkling drama series, in which no indecent or offensive scenes were telecast and no abusive and reviling words in the dialogues were used. Of course, in the drama series "Roopnagar", the catchword of the mastan was "chhi chhi toomey eto kharab", but was not offensive, rather it had a tinge of humour. As a sharp contrast to this, in the current drama series "Tothapi", the kingpin of smuggler, Lat Bhai, quite frequently hurls abuses at the Customs as "Haramis Bachcha" and "Suwarer Bachcha".

The impact and effect of such abusive words, perhaps chipped in to reinforce the degree of hatred which the smuggler had against the Customs, brought about a negative impression on the minds of the children to such an extent that my 4-year-old tiny tot grandson frequently utters these abusive words to us and also to visitors who just drop in. How embarrassing, just imagine! Will the BTV authorities delete such abuses from

the dialogues? N H Sufi Mohanmadpur, Dhaka

Requisition of private vehicles

Sir, Our Prime Minister visited Sylhet on 24 September to a befitting welcome by the people. But on the pretext of this visit, a few police sergeants rather scared private vehicle owners by virtually snatching the Blue Books of the vehicles to be requisitioned for the purpose.

I am a victim, I shall say, of such requisition and I tried to verify the claim of the police sergeant who seized my Blue Book and asked me to collect it from their office. But I failed to get my response from police officials as I was only told over phone that all were busy for the PM's visit.

May I draw the attention of our Home Ministry to such a sorry state of affairs. The suffering is undesired in a democratic administration. A sufferer Sylhet