

FOCUS

International Day of the Girl Child

Short-changed from Birth

by Raffat Bint-e Rashid

SHARMIN and Shabab are fraternal twins. Even though they look different they've shared almost everything in life. Starting from their mother's womb to all that is good or bad in their lives of seven years.

Yet what Sharmin, the sister, does not have in common with her twin was the same fate that many girl children are born with — a life of constant discrimination. She was not treated equally even by her mother. "My daughter is not as intel-

ligent as my son," she says beaming at her son and ignoring her daughter as if she doesn't exist.

And true, Sharmin apparently seems a bit withdrawn, uninterested in things around her, she doesn't even remember her school lessons properly, while Shabab is the second boy in his class of 20 students.

But what is the reason? Is it really because Sharmin is less intelligent than her smart sibling? Is she mentally deficient? Again apparently, she seems a normal

child, just a bit skinny with a distant look in her eyes.

"There is nothing wrong with Sharmin, she is just an average student and can cope with the class if she is properly looked after at home," comments her class teacher.

Sharmin's only handicap is her sex, she is a female and therefore a burden to her parents. Her mother always talks to her brother about what happened in class, what test he has the next day, answers to all his queries and Sharmin simply follows his steps and is not helped with her problems.

"It might sound a bit weird but Shabab always brings the food he desires like, chips, cookies even tiffin money to buy icecream or coke, but I've never seen Sharmin doing so," their teacher reflects.

This phenomenon is not weird it is in fact very common. It is not surprising that the cultural proverb from all over the world stress the joy of giving birth to a boy versus the misfortune of having a girl — a value judgement that is passed on from one generation to the next.

Nurture discrimination is the greatest cause of sickness and death among females between birth and age five. According to the World Health Organization, girls in many developing countries receive less nourishment than boys. They are breast-fed for shorter periods of time, receive fewer calories, and suffer from malnutrition, leading to death or to mental or physical disability; and all at higher rates than boys.

In rural Bangladesh malnutrition has been found to be almost three times more common among girls than boys.

Discrimination begins with the lack of enthusiasm greeting the girl baby, the mother's early abandonment of breastfeeding to attempt another pregnancy and her relative lack of food and clothing. Unicef estimates that more than a million children die each year simply because they are born female. Those that live face a host of other obstacles. Some 60 million girl children are denied access to primary school.

Besides these she shoulders a heavier share of household duties and is expected to help care for her siblings. In many parts of the developing world a significant number of brides are younger

than fifteen. The very young mother is by definition a girl — woman whose educational chances were eclipsed by marriage and pregnancy. She is also therefore a mother where children experience severe disadvantages at the outset of life.

To postpone such child marriage requires poverty alleviation. As a girl must have a dowry to be married, they are seen as economic liabilities by parents. Moreover if parents cannot afford the price for a 'good' husband they give their daughters off

per class in the developing world. But such discrimination that place girls in peril is so routine that it is virtually invisible.

A mother with good financial status would unconsciously place the big piece of meat in her son's plate or like Sharmin's family totally ignore her existence or treat her as a subordinate. Shabab sometimes comments quizzically "My sister is different."

But it is her being different and 'inferior' that has been injected in his system as it has in his family's.



Photo courtesy Tony Arzuza/CARE

Girlhood: A perilous path

▲ PREBIRTH
Tests that tell the gender of the foetus may be used to de-select girls and abort them.

▲ BIRTH
An unwanted girl baby may be killed at birth in parts of Asia, or allowed to die when she falls ill.

▲ INFANCY
Girls are more resilient than boys, but shorter breastfeeding and less nurture reduce their chances.

▲ EARLY CHILDHOOD (AGE 1-5)
Less food and fewer visits to the health clinic make a girl more susceptible to sickness and stunted growth.

▲ CHILDHOOD (AGE 6-12)
A heavy load of domestic duties — sibling care, cleaning, cooking, water-carrying, minding the house — robs girls of childhood and education.

▲ ADOLESCENCE
Girls who are unschooled and an economic burden are married off at an early age, by arrangement and sometimes for cash.

▲ TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD
Babies born to girls under 18 are often born too early and are too small. A quarter of the 500,000 women who die annually from maternity are teenage girls.

Ibrahim Memorial Diabetes Centre

Today is the 6th Anniversary of Death of the Founder

by Dr Arup Ratan Choudhury

FROM his professional experience of about two decades in India and Pakistan, Professor Mohammad Ibrahim observed that consequent upon gradual eradication and control of communicable diseases, there was significant increase in life expectancy and prevalence of chronic degenerative non-communicable diseases like diabetes mellitus. Yet these diseases did not receive due importance in the national health planning system or by the World Health Organisation (WHO) while formulating regional health priority.

Dr. Ibrahim took it as a challenging therapeutic dilemma and formulated a diabetic health care policy with the goal of "a full life despite diabetes" or in other words "to ensure near normal, socially useful, productive and respectful of social, educational and economic status." The unique feature of this policy was that comprehensive diabetes health care including clinical, biochemical and therapeutic facilities were given free of charge to all diabetics attending the clinic. This was too radical a concept. But Dr M Ibrahim from his long professional experience could foresee that life long control of diabetes could not be ensured with fee-related system of diabetes care, in view of meagre health consciousness in Bangladesh.

In February, 1956 the Diabetic Association was created with a group of enlightened citizens and friends. A diabetic clinic was established in 1957 in a semi permanent small building with nine full time staff including three medical officer, one biochemist and one social welfare officer. The salary

of the staff was partly supported by the Pakistan Medical Council through research projects of Prof. Ibrahim on diabetes and related disease. Comprehensive diabetes care was started free of charge for all patients attending the clinic.

From its inception in 1956, comprehensive case records for each patient were prepared and preserved. They were later put under computerization. Dr Ibrahim himself used to check all these case records every day and render advice for diabetes control. He retired from government services in late 1971 and devoted his entire time with undeviating energy to the cause of diabetes and extended his untiring efforts both in dimension and depth for therapy and research.

Number of patients, increased by thousands to have the benefit of Dr Ibrahim's counsel directly. He used to attend the patients from 7 am and would leave the clinic at 9 pm. He prepared a plan for a multi-disciplinary institute with a greater emphasis on research, rehabilitation and prevention considering it as a social problem rather than only medical. It is with this consideration that the project BIRDEM was established. A Rehabilitation and Vocational Training Centre (PVTTC) was established in 1966 in Jurain.

In 1982 BIRDEM was recognised as a centre with WHO's collaboration for developing community-oriented service, education, training and research for prevention and control of diabetes. The world authorities on diabetes health care had been pleased to visit this monumental institution on various occasions. They were also kind to make

some generous observations on working of BIRDEM. Their observations greatly promoted the prestige of the country in the realm of the health care all over the world.

All these facts and performances go beyond any shadow of doubt to suggest and confirm that Dr. Ibrahim's model in the field of diabetes health care is internationally acknowledged and perhaps, is the only model of Diabetic Health Care for the third world countries, which cannot certainly afford the National Health Services like those of Sweden and UK or the affluent social security as is enjoyed in the USA. Diabetes is a disease in which the blood sugar level goes up and sugar passes in the urine. It affects one to two per cent of the adult population in Bangladesh. The treatment of diabetes in Bangladesh has been revolutionized at the Ibrahim Memorial Diabetes Centre, named after the late Dr. M Ibrahim, the pioneer of anti-diabetes movement in the country.

The BIRDEM Founded by Dr M Ibrahim, the late national professor in 1956, has to its credit 36 years of dedicated service. The number of registered patients swelled from on 39 in 1956 to about 1,50,000 in 1995. The BIRDEM maintains a 150-bed modern hospital where 30 per cent of the beds are reserved for poor patients who are treated free of cost. Dr. Ibrahim is no more. But the dedication of the staff, medical and non-medical, at BIRDEM points to the shining devotion that he injected in the organization. Today his brain-child is a hope for patients who can lead near normal lives.

Anti-Nuclear Chain Reaction

Even before the French decision to resume nuclear tests in the Pacific, the region has been allergic to nukes. Johanna Son of Inter Press Service reports from Manila.

NO nuke is a good nuke. That is the message from the Asia-Pacific to bomb testers, reactor contractors, plutonium shippers and radioactive waste dumpers.

The current wave of angry protests sweeping the Asia-Pacific was set off by France's decision to resume nuclear tests, but the region has been allergic to radioactivity of any kind. After all, it is the only region where nuclear bombs have been used in war.

energy and nuclear weapons, that have direct bearing on Asia-Pacific security," says Corazon Fabros, secretary general of the Nuclear-Free Philippines Coalition.

"This has been matched with growing organising efforts by anti-nuclear activists," she says, adding that moves are underway to link East Asian and South Pacific concerns into a regional network.

Then in June, France announced it would carry out

John Rolland as saying that as of 1993, 26 of the 53 nuclear reactors being built in the world are in South-east and eastern Asia.

Japan gets one-third of its power from 45 nuclear plants and plans 35 more by the year 2000. South Korea, China and Taiwan also plan to expand nuclear power supplies. Indonesian plans to build nuclear plants has run into opposition from greens. The Philippines has never used its lone nuclear plant.

Living with the In-laws

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

IF Romeo and Juliet were alive today and living in Bangladesh their life style would be a little different than Shakespeare would have imagined it to be. had he intended to write a comedy instead. For one thing, Juliet after all her yearnings and dreams of finally being with her lover, would find, behind her dewy eyed spouse, a retinue of others mama-in-law papa-in-law, sis-in-law, bro-in-law, their spouses and so on. Being brought up in a society where joint families are the norm, our Bangladeshi Juliet would perhaps be quite prepared to start out her maimed life adjusting to so many people. Even so, to be suddenly uprooted from familiar surroundings to live with a whole new set of strangers could prove to be quite trying. Whether such joint living will work out or not depends on how much each side is willing to compromise and sacrifice. Usually, however, it is the daughter-in-law or 'bou' who ultimately has to make the most adjustments in order to 'fit in'.

While there are enough instances of happy joint families to conclude that they can work out if both sides try, there are many disgruntled daughters-in-law who have a whole list of grievances which they often have to keep to themselves. It may be mentioned that the primary actors who find themselves at odds with each other are the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law.

One of the common complaints against the mother-in-law (who to many women takes the form of the proverbial cruel stepmother) is a tendency to find fault with the daughter-in-law at every little opportunity. Shaheen, a newly married woman says that her life has

become hell because of her mother-in-law's constant criticism of her. "Nothing I do is right," says Shaheen who is also a school teacher, "the way I dress the things I cook the things I say; I am always being compared to some niece or the other who is the perfect bou."

Such open disapproval finds its way even when it comes to child rearing. "It is very hard to discipline my eight year old son because his paternal grandmother keeps spoiling him and rebuking me in front of him whenever I scold him," says Kanta a housewife. "It's very frustrating when you can't bring your kids the way you want to. I don't want my son to have too many sweets or sodas but my mother-in-law thinks nothing of buying him these things and giving them to him while I'm not there, thus making me out to be a monster in his eyes". Kanta continues, Sharmin, a young mother who lives with her in-laws in a small house in Kalabagan, says that she has to constantly bear the brunt of snide remarks and insults from her in-laws. "My mother-in-law and sister-in-law keep saying things like — 'in our family we don't bring up children this way' or 'in our family women do not behave like this', implying that my family is somehow inferior", says a much annoyed Sharmin.

Interference and lack of privacy rank high among the list of complaints against living in a joint family. "Even if it is a question of where my daughter is going, it is not enough if I or my husband gives permission", says Husna, a 41 year old housewife. "her dada, dadi, chacha everybody has to approve. Tani, a young secretary, who

has been married for two years says that she has had no privacy at all since she got married. "There is no place where I am left alone" says Tani. — "my bhashur's (brother-in-law's) two children come into my room when I am not there rummage through my drawers, misplacing things, throwing my make up all over the place, and nobody says anything. Infact when I protest my mother-in-law has the nerve to say 'why shouldn't they go through your things, they have every right to'."

Living with in-laws who think on a totally different wave length leave many daughters-in-law feeling left out and alienated. "I always feel like an outsider, remarks Yasmin, a young woman working for a local NGO. "I am never included in family discussions, I am always the last to be informed when any major decision is made. Sometimes my husband is called to try out some dish my sister-in-law has made, but nobody calls me. It is as if I am not there."

Instances such as the ones mentioned so far, may seem trivial, but to the woman who has to constantly face them, it can lead to growing resentment against the in-laws. Sometimes such discontent leads to separation from the family with the couple moving out to live by themselves. While the daughter-in-law heaves a huge sigh of relief at her new found freedom, her husband may not be so ecstatic. For him it is extremely difficult for it means letting his family down and failing his duty as a son. This may actually make him resentful of his wife, leading to further marital discord. In many cases, the hus-

bands try to palliate their wives by showing their sympathy but not doing anything more than that. "At least my husband realizes what I'm going through" is the consolation that helps some women to bear the frustration of never being able to have a home of their own and always having to swallow the hurts and irritations caused by insensitive, indifferent in-laws.

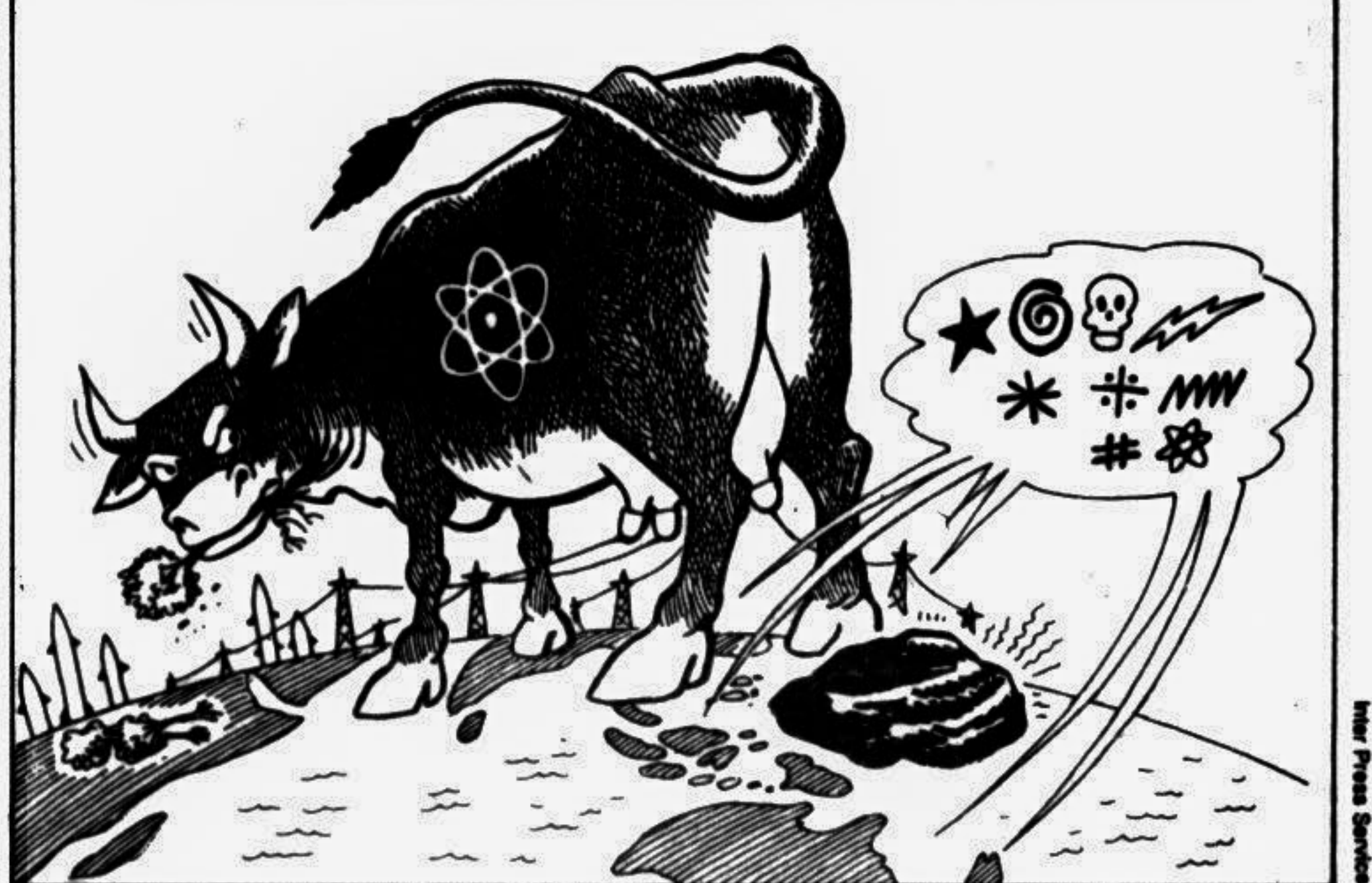
But there are advantages in living jointly. A couple who has decided to move out may be overwhelmed by many expenses they took for granted while living with the family. In a joint family, usually things like rent, food, utilities, salaries of domestic help, are taken care of by family funds, with the couple making little or no contribution. Those who have small children cannot deny the relief they feel knowing that their children are being looked after by grandparents or aunts and uncles instead of strangers. With a full house, couples also do not have to worry about housekeeping and security of the house, something that would be a source of constant anxiety if they lived alone.

Yet some women are just so led up with trying to adjust and compromise with their in-laws, that such advantages are not enough. They just want out. In such cases the choice is clear and cruel — either live separately or face a tortuous marriage. Funny enough, our society is such that although a woman resigns herself to leaving the security of her home and family for her husband, men find it extremely difficult or even impossible to do the same. For the mother-in-law her worst fears have been re-

alized and the age old 'she's trying to take away my son from me' feeling could not be more acute.

So what then is the solution to this not so happy set up of unhappy daughters-in-law, dissatisfied mothers-in-law and husbands/sons who are caught in between? If moving out seems too impractical or too traumatic there must be another way to live together in harmony. The ideal situation seems to be one in which the couple has enough privacy to feel independent and free. This could be in the form of a separate floor or part of the house where the couple can entertain or spend time alone together. For many people even this arrangement may not be possible due to say financial constraints or when the mother-in-law or father-in-law needs to be taken care of. In such cases the couple's bedroom is the only sanctuary and should be treated as such by all the family members.

Ultimately, however, it is the willingness and effort of both sides that will ensure that things work out. While mothers-in-law must learn to let go of their sons even though this is a very painful process, daughters in law must be a little more lenient and should not let their own differences come between mother and son. Husbands should realize that while they have a duty to their parents and siblings they must give enough, perhaps more time to their new families. More than anything, in laws should realize that for the most part, it is their acceptance and approval that will make the new bride, who has left all her loved ones behind, welcome and a part of the family. Love, when it is given generously and sincerely, will always win over.



For groups like the No nukes Asia Forum, which meets in Taipei in September, nuclear testing is but one concern. They warn of the descent into Asia of nuclear firms, which hope to build here at a time when construction has virtually halted in the North.

The lack of orders for new reactors in North America and Western Europe has forced the industry to look elsewhere for a substitute market — that market is Asia. Greenpeace International also said in a primer on the nuclear offensive in Asia.

Activists take comfort in the growing awareness of anti-nuclear issues in the Asia-Pacific as more nations in the region encounter problems linked to nuclear technology, such as environment and health hazards of nuclear testing and nuclear power, the issue of accidents and safe waste disposal.

Various campaigns now run the gamut from anti-nuclear testing of weapons to construction of nuclear power plants to reprocessing of radioactive waste and its shipment on the high seas. There have been a lot of developments in the nuclear situation, both in nuclear en-

eight final nuclear tests at Mururoa atoll in the South Pacific, starting in September, before winding up its testing programme.

That decision prompted Australia, New Zealand and most of the South Pacific to close ranks, even as Paris sent officials on damage-control trips amid political fallout from the decision.

New Zealand, which bans nuclear ships from its ports, froze defense cooperation with France. French arms sales to the South Pacific are now in limbo and moves are afoot to exclude France from the South Pacific Forum.

Protests have also swept through East Asia, where local movements have been working against Japan's plutonium policy and lobbying governments to shun nuclear power generation. In May, China detonated a nuclear device in an underground test.

Indications are that the protests against the planned French nuclear tests have only provided more momentum for anti-nuclear campaigns in the region. This is good news for groups including media-savvy Greenpeace, which quotes Australian nuclear expert

but activists say the government still wants to build reactors.

South Korea is stepping up exports of nuclear power plants 20 years after it learned the technology from the West. With a reputation from nuclear expertise, it is eyeing contracts in China where up to 30 nuclear plants are planned by the year 2010.

In contrast, the United States has cancelled all reactor orders over the past 20 years and many European nations have suspended new construction or scuttled plans after the 1986 Chernobyl accident.

But just as Western countries began facing problems toward the end of their nuclear plants' lifespans, the same problem may well occur in Asia's younger plants. Activists say the region should learn from richer nations' experiences.

Asia-Pacific nations also worry about being on the path of ships ferrying plutonium and nuclear waste to Japan from France or Britain, where Tokyo's used nuclear fuel is reprocessed because of its need for new fuel and problems with waste storage.