

A Diseased Nation?

Can it be true that every one in two of us is tubercular? That is what a report by a visiting World Health Organisation team says. If this is true — why should they circulate such a shocker if not properly based in fact? — this should in no time constitute the first of our national top priorities. If this by any means is not quite the right figure and the reality is ten rather than 50 per cent of population is infected — some 12 million — government should curtail, if need be, many activities to throw its full weight behind TB control. This nation cannot plod on with more than a crore of TB patients and some four lakh joining the fold every year.

The first thing, however, would be for the government to clarify the situation by issuing a formal statement. It must not repeat its performance in the matter of arsenic pollution. The statement must come very soon, preferably before the week is out. This is necessary to ward off panic. That is to hope the government's idea of the TB situation would not be as fearsome as the WHO report.

TB was supposed to be well-controlled at the fag-end of our Pakistan purgatory. Thanks to the problem being taken up then with true seriousness. The results were so good as to take TB as an affliction totally eliminated. The same thing happened with malaria. Recently cases of widespread but short of endemic incidence of malaria has been reported from different areas. Now Tubercle Bacillus is making such a strong comeback. Why? The disease is known to cohabit with poverty, malnutrition and in sanitary living condition. Has our society fallen so badly from the seventies perch on these accounts?

But there is also hope in the WHO report. It says the Directly Observed Treatment, Short Course or DOTS regimen of therapy responds wonderfully to TB, curing about 80 per cent of cases and in a most inexpensive manner. It reassures us that things are moving in the task of grappling with the threat. But if 60 million are infected with TB, as the report says, the present attempts would be no more than child's play.

Welcome Kettle of Fish

We are not total strangers to domiciliary medical facilities funded and run by foreign missionaries, voluntary organisations and specialist philanthropic groups. A small sprinkling of them in this country has carved a niche in public esteem for the exemplary dedication, professional finesse and curative modernity they have brought to bear on their services. Then we have had a rarefied access to the roving skylab-type treatment in the ophthalmological or cardiovascular fields.

The bottom-line is this: the standard they have set is simply not erasable from the public mind. And their craving for the same has only been multiplied by two other factors: the local success story like the BIRDEM, through a little faulted lately for internal squabble, and the tested professionalism of hospitals in neighbouring India and not too far out Thailand and Singapore.

In a compelling background like this we can not but welcome the cabinet decision allowing direct foreign investment and joint venture projects to establish hospitals in the country. As a necessary part of this, the government is willing to let such hospitals recruit foreign specialists in a stipulated proportion to local specialists.

Agreed that modern hospitals being highly capital-and technology-intensive undertakings a recourse to massive foreign investment is unavoidable. Of course, we cannot get the state-of-the-art equipment just for the asking. But we must also realise that mere outpourings of FDIs will not kick off any radical alteration in the quality of service. What must go hand in hand with these is a set of policy guidelines, a core of philosophies, if you like, designed to ensure that our interests will not be sidelined by over commercialism. The medical bills for specialized treatment should be truly reflective of the savings made by avoidance of air trips to other countries. These must also bear a relation to the Purchasing Power Parity, meaning what Taka can buy locally compared to what other currencies fetch in other markets. Furthermore, the foreign-run or collaborative hospitals are expected to stimulate local pharmaceutical industries.

We are looking for a huge foreign exchange retention with a crying halt pronounced to exodus of patients to hospitals in Calcutta, Bangkok, Delhi, Madras, London and Singapore.

Let Live & Live

There can be arguments over why they got their name associated with Pallas Athene, the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom but there is no doubt that we are showing little wisdom in allowing people to destroy their retreats.

Pallas's Eagle, a rare variety among these majestic monogamous birds that has already carved a niche in the (IUCN) International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red Data Book for its sheer rarity and a few of which come to the vast wetland at a remote village in the north eastern district of Sunamganj every year for breeding may no longer be welcome. The tall trees of this area like hijal on whose top these rare birds perch their nests are being felled relentlessly by greedy businessmen's axes.

Pallas's Eagle is one of those varieties of eagle that has already carved a niche in the (IUCN) International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red Data Book for its rarity. Bangladesh is neither too sprawling nor too inaccessible a land for the authorities to map its areas known for being the habitat of migratory birds or pockets of rare fish and fauna. What they can do then is formulate a policy to save these areas from human intrusion for any purpose, commercial or otherwise. Even if these areas have to be given to individual ownership the government should make sure they do not lead to the unscrupulous pillaging of nature as is going on now in Rangchil. Certain conditions in consultation with the local and international experts can be set and close vigil kept on their strict observation. So far environmental protection has been a phrase confined only to seminar and symposia. But we must remember we are the most helpless in the face of nature's retribution. We had better wake up before it is too late.

BAKULDESH is not a land of highways or freeways. It's not a motorised society either — most people here haven't seen anything like that. But when it comes to road accidents, this country seems to be competing for world records. According to some authoritative reports, the death toll of road accidents in the country is fifty times more than that in Japan or Britain. What is more shocking is that while in the developed world only two persons get injured or killed per 10,000 registered automobiles, in this sparsely motorised country the rate is at least 29 times higher.

In average 3,000 road accidents took place in the country between 1987 and 1996, that killed 17,311 people and injured 292,555 others. Obviously, besides killing thousands of people and breaking hearts of millions, these accidents cost the nation billions of taka each year. The problem is, the policy makers seem to be as helpless as the victims of such a mindless slaughtering of human beings.

Reports suggest that in just 11 months — between June 1996 to April 1997 — a total of 4,721 road accidents took place in the country killing 2,607 and injuring 4,554 people. In this and the last month alone, several hundred people were killed in road accidents. The biggest one at Kalihati literally shocked the entire nation. Many people just shudder when the occasion comes to visit near and dear ones in rural areas, as more than 80 per cent of all these accidents take place in the rural sections of the country's main highway system.

And there are good reasons to be worried about it. In fact,

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astronomical rates of road accidents remain a characteristic phenomenon in this country, especially since 1990. In that year alone, a total of 3,167 road accidents took place in the country that killed 1,844 people and injured 2,687 others. Over the years, since 1990, in average 3,375 road accidents took place in the country that killed 1,703 people and injured 2,922 others each year. The problem is, while in the developed world, rates of accidents and associated deaths and injuries are falling, here, in this country, it is on the rise.

In England, for example, the number of people killed or seriously injured in 1995 fell by two per cent compared with 1994, and by 38 per cent compared with the 1981-85 average. In the United States, where automobiles remain the single greatest cause of accidents, death rate stood at 34.9 per 100,000 people in 1991, compared to 85.9 per 100,000 people in 1936. The number keeps falling.

Given world records, the magnitude of road accidents as well as associated killings and injuries in Bangladesh is undoubtedly astounding, but it is by no way mind boggling or puzzling. Bangladesh does pose a fertile land for such a crying game. All the players — the administrative authorities, the passengers, the bus-truck owners and drivers, the police force — everybody seem to be enthusiastic partners in this astrous game. The problem is, when the ultimate penalty of death strikes, all of them do not refrain on the same boat. Only

the fateful face the death and deadly injuries, the others remain alive to play the games over and over again.

Of course, there are hundreds of reasons that may be responsible in some way or other for the astronomical rates of road accidents and related deaths and injuries in the country. But does it take a genius, or an inquiry committee of geniuses for that matter, to figure out that dangerous road conditions, defective buses and trucks, ill-

two-lane paved roads, except perhaps in the metropolitan areas, have road dividers, so that chances for collisions of vehicles from opposite directions could be reduced. Although about 50 per cent of these roads are in poor condition, they carry most of road traffic load because road densities, especially in terms of paved roads, is still very poor in the country. While road densities per 1,000 population is 1 km in China, 1.5 km in India, 2.5 km in Ko-

And then there are non-mechanised fleet of cycle-rickshaws, rickshaw-vans, push-carts, bullock carts — besides orchestrating one of the most panoramic jigsaw puzzles of traffic systems in the world, together they make up about 85 per cent of traffic in the country. One advantage of this, however, is that in the city areas rates of accident and related fatalities is very low, because they serve as the most effective speed-breakers one can ever imagine.

What can be expected from such unfortunate conditions of roadways and overall traffic systems in Bangladesh, except perhaps frequent accidents, deaths and destructions? The government that currently spends about 5.5 per cent of its development budget (both foreign and local funds) on rural roads and relevant works, keeps on increasing its dependence on donor agencies for new road constructions. According to a recent remark of the communications minister, it is difficult to convince the donors about the economics of new constructions. The question is: why must the nation continue to depend on donors for all its needs? Why a nation that can spend 500 million US dollars each year to protect jobs of 1 per cent of its labor force employed in the state-sector enterprises can't spend even half of it for the welfare of the whole population?

Besides road conditions, perhaps the single most factor that can be held responsible for reckless road accidents would

be the mind-boggling levels of corruption in transport authorities and the police administration. Reports suggest that most drivers do not have valid driving licenses, most vehicles don't have valid fitness certificates, and most buses and trucks don't care about traffic rules or passenger or cargo limits. All these can happen, day after day, month after month, year after year, because some unscrupulous officials of transport authorities and a section of police force routinely patronage this system. There are hundreds and thousands of evidences available — people are writing in newspapers, speaking out in state-run television, and voicing concerns in opinion polls. Only problem is, the people in authority don't seem to hear or believe those voices, concerns or questions. Otherwise, how come police officials dare to say in television, in front of millions of people, that they never heard that trucks and buses must pay a toll every month to the police?

Of course, neither police force alone nor inadequate and ill-maintained roads alone are responsible for the mess in transport sector. They alone can't be held responsible for all the deaths, injuries and destructions. The country's entire infrastructure is awfully inadequate to provide opportunities for a decent life for its 114.4 million people. Obviously, all the problems cannot be solved overnight. But with a little sense of honesty, sincerity, and with a little patriotism in heart, perhaps the nation can check the crying game of road accidents that every year take away numerous souls from their near and dear ones throughout the country.

CROSSCURRENTS

by CAF Dowlah



trained and unskilled drivers, inefficient and dishonest transport authorities and police officials are primarily responsible for recurrence of such fateful accidents day after day, month after month, year after year?

Currently Bangladesh has a total of 2,539 kilometre of national highways — that connect the capital city with divisional and district headquarters and international highways and 2,670 kilometre of regional highways — that connect different regions of the country with each other. But only 75 per cent of these highways and 52 per cent of regional roads are two-lane paved roads. None of the

rea, 27 km in USA, Bangladesh has a density of 0.2 km only per 1,000 population.

The situation is further aggravated by a phenomenal increase of motorised and non-motorised vehicles on the streets. The mechanised vehicle fleet of the country increased from 250,000 in 1989 to 350,000 in 1994, reflecting an annual increase of 7 per cent. During the same period, the bus/minibus and truck fleet registered an average annual increase of 4 per cent and 5 per cent respectively. The most phenomenal growth has been, however, in the fleet of auto-rickshaws and motorcycles, which grew by 15 per cent and 7 per cent respectively.

OPINION

A Passionate Call, but Who is Listening?

Dr M Zakir Husain

This piece is written with anguish and frustration. I endorse and indeed was deeply moved by what has been written by the editor of The Daily Star in his 'Commentary' (November 6, 1997).

The need for a new political culture in Bangladesh continues to agitate many minds in the citizenry, and these comments, though not new, are extremely appropriate. Even as the cry is getting louder and is echoed from quarters at home and abroad, the ground realities sadly become bleaker with little or no evidence of change for the better. So far, this appears to be a cry in the wilderness falling on very deaf ears. It might indeed be yet another sordid and lamentable chapter in the political history of Bangladesh.

Questions continue to ring loud and clear: Are we in Bangladesh set on a course of self-destruction driven by a fatal flaw? Are we oblivious of a world around us that is literally hurtling towards the new millennium? A brave new world is dawning; has already plunged into an entirely different playing field — a field of human development that is steeped in a scientific and rational culture of work, ethics, and endeavour, of rights and obligations, of fiercely competitive enterprises that reward efficiency. It certainly is not a world that has any respect or tolerance for outdated polemics and self-serving rhetoric.

Indeed, the people of Bangladesh have already made monumental sacrifices, demonstrated exceptional valour and

grit; the farmers and workers toil hard and long, and a vast majority of citizens respond admirably and rationally to fair incentives and opportunities. Surely, the people deserve much better dispensation from those who represent them in a popular democracy. People have the right to demand peace and progress and good fair governance — not as a charitable gift or as an incidental benefit but as a right.

In our own region, Vietnam which went through manifold more sacrifices and destruction than Bangladesh did during the War of Liberation seems to have held a steady course in their political and economic development and is making good progress. Why are we still wallowing in such chaos and confusion? Why our politics is tied more to the narrow parochial and trivial interests rather than to the priorities of the present and possibilities of the future?

The world will go by with or without us — surely without us if we chose to remain preoccupied with matters no more important and binding than futile bickering over who we are and who did what for the country in the past.

As it is we are geographically situated in a part of the world known for its ungainly capacity to breed and nurture mutual suspicion and animosity — an unending regime of convoluted logic of correcting the past and seeking revenge for historical wrongs. Why else the SAARC of our region is so grandiose in rhetoric and so short in prag-

matic hard headed business like deeds? Quite a contrast with the ASEAN and little wonder why.

The world of tomorrow will reward enterprise and creativity, and resolve differences of views and beliefs in a tolerant, civil and decent society. Keeping that imperative in mind the nation should perhaps raise the stakes in politics and its conduct. The political system could create openings for professionals and practitioners on the sciences and the arts: lawyers, doctors, engineers, teachers, writers, artists, farmers, traders, entrepreneurs; for those who are motivated to do public service but do not have to make a living out of it; and for those who have a stake in their work, security, and productivity that contribute to the prosperity and progress of the nation as much of themselves.

These people are likely to have a healthy respect for information, knowledge and skills, and generally a scientific culture of logic and reason. Such a constituency and culture will surely make a sea change in the polity and political conduct. Does this look like an exciting alternative? Can this emerge within a system of representative democracy? Does it hold the key to the end of suffering of the silent majority in this land with a huge backlog of unfinished agenda of human development? The editor of The Daily Star in his commentary could not have been more passionate, forthright and convincing. Yet is anyone listening?

The US and Iraq

A Husnain

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's new stance on UN weapon inspection is unfolding a new drama in the Middle East, and perhaps ultimately in the biggest world — the second biggest on earth, of which the Christian West is naturally worried about in the race for world domination later in the next century, and, of course, in the 22nd century (for Africa).

Why mention religion, when it is taboo? We must look behind the screen, taking a tip from the Palestine situation. It is an open secret that the powerful minority, the Jews, control USA.

The Palestine issue has to provide an ultimate scenario, if not solution; for two basic reasons: the Muslim world cannot be ignored in the 21st century, and religion is replacing secularism. The reason is simple — Man has distanced himself from God, and the one-way communication will be Man's ruin (can't ignore your Maker by any means, fair or fishy — recall Tagore).

More than 60 foreign tourists were killed and hundreds injured in Egypt, Kuwait is not in favour of use of force in Iran; as also the Arab nations. The anti-US wave in Pakistan cannot be seen in isolation. CIS and Turkey are seeking the lost roots; Algeria is not a delusion; and India's communal political parties are not flashes in the pan.

The overall picture about the US foreign policy through the late decades as seen by the world outside the USA is that it is not understood clearly, and it is unpopular where applied. Malevolence is driving out universal brotherhood. Might is right, and small rights are wrong! Forget Schumacher's Small-is-beautiful theme. What

rules the world today? The WTO, the global monopolies, ruthless competition dominated by the Big Blues, and mergers, buy-offs, and takeovers. None dare to take over the Poor, the world's largest and only majority group.

With so much disparity in economic fortunes and in the standard of living in different parts of the world, the universal platform sought for one global way of doing things is not only impractical, but appears unjust to many smaller nations. The North-South dialogue will never end, as the terms of reference, the specifications, and the rules of the game are quite different and incompatible. Reminder: the sun rises in the East — Tonybee was right with his cycles.

The world's lone superpower cannot be handled or confronted face-to-face. It is quite apparent that the world-wide Terrorist Movement (getting more and more desperate or sophisticated) is one of the alternatives. It appears these mosquito bites will become a regular feature of expressing dissent against the US global foreign policy. Europe reveals in unity-in-adversity; Japan knows only goods, not people; and the Russians are still sorting out what hit them! The policy of the North is deliberately planned to look after the American global interest with the changing times.

Global domination today is spearheaded through the capture of markets, not territories. Some international regulatory bodies have been set up under the UN umbrella for coordination and interfacing, and to generate cordial 2-way communication. However, the

communication is one-way, and the Third World 'emerging economies' are not at all happy about the manipulations and interpretations by the industrialised countries.

The forest issue is also foggy or smoky, as suspected (now Agarwal has confirmed it, Pin Exp, Nov 20). The Greenhouse Effect has to be garbled with a grain of iodised salt. The recent raids in the Asean, HK, and S Korea money markets have added fuel to the fires of capitalistic unrest on theories and practices. Japan and Wall Street are affected by these rumblings (more coming, just watch). S Korea has practically collapsed and burnt out, bemused by the antics of the other Asian tigers. Lion Japan is licking its wounds — self-inflicted: the ego of isolation and ignoring in the 20th century that there was a market in Asia.

In this Age of Transparency (I), there should no scope for hide-and-seek stances. It is open cold war now between the North and the South, and amongst the Christians, Muslims and the Jews. The regional groups should infuse inward strength and resist the raids of the probing dollars. There are many Soroses and few Mahathirs. Bipolarism is out of date, inviting naked aggression. Sell the body or the soul?

The US policy on Iraq is a clever ruse to apply the divide-and-rule policy in the Islamic world. The Arab world have to get out of the clutches of the dirty embraces of Uncle Sam, as Iran did.

Micro Bangladesh is a dot in the global map. Why create further dissension? The time to act is now. The poor micro must in the world (the Third World) must unite against the big wild cat!

Remembering Yusuf Ali Chowdhury

by Yousuf Jamil

comment on Mohan Mia during the Pakistan Movement: "If there were 28 Mohan Mias in 28 districts, we would have reached our goal much before." Formerly a Muslim League and an activist in Pakistan Movement for historical reasons, Mohan Mia was first dismayed and then in 1952 could not ideologically agree with the Muslim League high-command on the point of state language. He



wanted Bangla to be the language for the Bengalis.

In 1953, he joined Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haque's Krishak-Sramik party and became a Jukto Front member of the National Assembly. In regard to his political spin, Professor Humayun Kabir, a celebrated educationist and litterateur of Asia, and former Indian Cabinet Minister is quoted as saying: "In the political arena, Mohan Mia is a practical student of reality as his methods are scientific and experimental." For example, although he

played a leading role in framing the 1956 Constitution, he then Pakistan's first, yet he was the only MNA who refused to sign it on reasons that the constitution did not reflect the rights, hopes and aspirations of the then East Pakistan properly.

In charity, he was one of the best followers of Pundit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. Yusuf Ali Chowdhury made large donations for the society's advancement without thinking about his own materialistic interests. As the chairman (for long 17 years) of Faridpur District Board, he had taken the initiative of sinking 20,000 tubewells which was unthinkable in the backdrop of '40s and '50s. In the '1930s, he founded Khademul Ihsan, a philanthropic and missionary organisation for the needy (who were the majority). Mohan Mia understood what 'education' really meant for the majority; and that was the reason why he established a couple of educational institutions of repute in (greater) Faridpur like Moezuddin High School, Halima Girls' School etc.

His achievement, among others, was that he along with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ataur Rahman, Shah Azizur Rahman, Hussein Suhraward arranged refuge for some people who were sure-targets of the sequel of Calcutta riot.

Yusuf Ali Chowdhury foresaw that Bangladesh was bound to be a reality; and that was why he tried to advise the erstwhile West Pakistan to be democratic and thereby hand over the state power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who won the election in 1970 with people's mandate.

To the Editor...

CHT peace agreement

Sir, I welcome the signing of Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Agreement. I am certain that it is going to be within the framework of the Constitution and that our national interest will be protected.

I would like to know as to what would happen to Shanti Bahini Armed Cadre; whether or not they are going to be disbanded. Are they going to surrender their arms? This point requires clarification and inclusion in the peace agreement.

I would like to draw attention of the government to the fact that unless Shanti Bahini is disbanded and their arms surrendered, the treaty would not bring peace to the territory.

Maj-Gen Quazi Golam Dastgir, House 36 (New), Road 11 (New), Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka

Why hartal?

Sir, It refers to the article "Bangladesh Politics: Manifestation of Revenge, Whim and Caprice" appeared in the DS on 12.11.97 written by TMA Samad.

The write-up is indeed a total picture of political situation of our country and which, though tilted, to some extent, to the political party forming the government on the way to maintain neutrality.

One think I can't but mention that the writer has very rightly said that renaming culture of Jumsna Bridge (JMB) or any medical college for historical existence of the father of the nation is never required.

However, in respect of hartal and barricade, it can be very strongly said that hartal could never be observed by any political party when it is not supported by the people and when it is detrimental to the country's

economy if hartal would not bring blessing instead of hatred to political party. And if we could punish the hartal-doers of 1994-96, no political party would have courage to observe hartal after 12.6.96.

It is not unlikely that those who are now enchanting slogans against hartal will again term hartal as the strongest instrument for expressing people's say and toppling power.

Nur Hossain, 151, Bangshal Road, Dhaka-1100

Is the government asleep?

Sir, In the media, concrete suggestions are being made to hand over flats that are already allocated to the occupants. But there has been no response from the government. They can only see the many bureaucratic pitfalls, not the immediate benefits to the public servants and the elected government. Is the ruling party in a Rip Van Winkle slumber? Or like that of Kumbhokorno? Will only Archangel Gabriel's horn awaken them? But then it will be too late.

Monira Zaman, 5/1, Mogultoli, Dhaka

Flats for sale

Sir, What have computer operators, telephone operators and such educated technical hands done in the private sector to be deprived of government-built flats? Or for that matter, others in the private sector — and all over the country from villages to towns? Why should government service be the only criterion?

The government could fund such building projects by letting

private firms or developers to do the job. Or they can create a fund as suggested by some in the newspapers, namely, sanction flats on a 99-year lease basis to current occupants of government, semi-government, etc., flats. Deduct a percentage from their salary 2 to 5% and every month there will be money in the public exchequer.

Sultan Wares, 5, Free School Street, Dhaka

'Missing' trend!

Sir, Oh! You unlucky Bengalis! You missed US Secretary of State and now within days missed the Third Nation Business Summit! May be the government should claim compensation for the cost incurred towards preparation of these visits and meetings.

Dr Thomas Chuck, (By e-mail) Washington DC, USA

No immediate flats

Sir, The government employees continue to suffer. Yet the government could allocate the flats already occupied on a permanent basis deducting a reasonable amount which even if it is a minimum of Taka 100 per month and a maximum of Taka 2,000 would bring the government enough money to build more flats now that the dry season has set in, thus allowing the pay scale agony to be somewhat minimised.

Sub-letting should be official with the government or the organisation receiving Taka 130 to maximum of Taka 567. Again both sides benefit. Yes, the practice is not new. Some Asian practices follow it!

Nishat Sumona, 13/6, Karail, Dhaka