

Asian Crisis and the Fate of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers

by Dr. Khalilur Rahman

One of the important and immediate tasks for the Government and our Mission in Kuala Lumpur would perhaps be to initiate bilateral dialogue with the Malaysian authority to convert so-called undocumented Bangladeshi migrants, if there is any, into documented or legal migrants.

THE financial crisis in Asia has taken a considerable toll in the affected countries. As fall-outs of the crisis, GDP growth rate of some countries of the region would be even negative while for others, it would be less than 2 per cent compared to their unprecedented high growth over the past decades. Their currencies have depreciated significantly, stock markets have plunged and banks and financial institutions have failed on a large scale. These are mainly external signs of the crisis and are more or less clear. The social implications of the crisis, however, are not that clear as its outward signs are.

The crisis has raised high unemployment levels in the crisis-torn countries. A huge number of people have lost their jobs. Most of the economies of the region were labour-deficit and they had to depend to a considerable extent on migrant workers from other countries. Bangladesh was one of the countries who exported manpower to this region. In order to tackle this unprecedented unemployment problem, the ready-made solution for these countries, perhaps would be to send back the migrant workers and replace them with those domestic workers who have lost their jobs due to crisis.

It is alleged that a large number of migrant workers in these economies are undocumented and for that matter so-called illegal. The thrust of the so-called push-back drive by the authorities of the affected countries is mainly directed on them. Reportedly, Bangladeshi legal and so-called illegal migrant workers, if there is any, are also severely affected by this drive.

Another related problem that might crop up as ancillary to the crisis is the increasing exploitation of these migrant workers because of their vulnerable positions. According to a calculation in the world employment market, these foreign

migrants may suffer from exploitative wages and may be forced to work at a comparatively lower salary than what they were getting before the crisis. One of the reasons for this is that these labourers are reluctant to go back to their respective countries because of economic insecurity and high unemployment rate in their own countries. Trafficking of young women and children can also be increased. Given this situation, the migrant workers need more protection in their destination countries and their sending countries need to act accordingly to ensure their protection under the existing bilateral and international legal frameworks on migration.

The other day I was going through the write-up published recently in The Daily Star by Mr. Shahzada M Akram on the plight of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. The story he has narrated is pathetic and unfortunate not only for those helpless victims, but also for us as a whole. We need to protect our migrants abroad who are earning precious foreign currency for the country, some time even at the cost of their own priceless lives.

In May this year, a seminar on the impact of the Asian crisis on population migration in the region was held in Manila. One of the policy recommendations of the seminar was that appropriate policies should be evolved to improve migrant welfare in destination countries. With regard to protection of migrants in the destination countries, the seminar recommended the need for the migrants sending and receiving governments to become signatories to existing international conventions relating to the protection of migrants. Information dissemination programmes in countries of origin to explain potential migrants of the risk of irregular migration; incorporation of foreign labour into domestic labour force; introduction of effective monitor-

ing of existing programmes in order to prevent abuse, excessive fees and unscrupulous practices; importance to gender perspectives to protect women migrants and due attention to the welfare of illegal migrants when detained and repatriated with supplementary assistance of international organisations like IOM, ILO can, perhaps, also play a useful role in protecting the rights of migrant workers in the destination countries.

The Manila seminar also made recommendation on reintegration of migrants after their repatriation. This is an important area that merits due attention of our Government. The Government of the Philippines has recently introduced an act entitled 'The Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act' for successful, effective and more importantly, for the productive and beneficial integration of the returnee migrants.

Under this Act, a Re-Placement and Monitoring Centre has been created in the Department of Labour and Employment of that country which, among other things, will develop livelihood programmes and projects for the returnee workers, coordinate with appropriate private and government agencies in the promotion, development, re-employment and the full utilisation of their potentials, institute a computer-based information system on skilled migrant workers that shall be accessible to all local recruitment agencies and employers. The Manila seminar made a recommendation to create a sort of Provident Fund for the migrant workers. This recommendation could be a very useful one for our Government. A portion of the remittances sent by the migrant

workers could be put into an investment fund that would be used for migrant welfare upon their return to the country.

If I am not mistaken, Mr. Akram in his article also raised question on the role of the Bangladesh Mission in Kuala Lumpur in protecting the Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia. There is a general misperception in our country that the officers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), who are posted in Bangladesh Missions abroad, are often engaged in looking into their own personal interests and welfare rather than protecting the interest of the country and the Bangladeshi communities living there. This type of allegation is more in the countries where there are large communities of Bangladeshi migrant workers. Even not delimiting any person or any institution, we should agree that the bureaucrats have to work within certain set rules and regulations. It is not possible for them to go beyond the ambit of those rules and regulations despite one's good intention to help some body out from any problem. There are also some related administrative aspects of the problem.

Most of the people in our country perhaps are not fully aware that the welfare of the Bangladeshi migrant workers abroad are mainly looked after by the representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Manpower. Though they work under the Heads of Mission, the Ministry of Labour and Manpower is their administrative and controlling authority. This is also applicable for other non-career diplomats who represent other Missions in our Missions. They are not under the full control of the Head of Missions. There starts the problem.

If some body is not under full control of the Head of the Mission, how he can ensure his subordinate to perform his or her duty properly in order to protect the interest of the country and how his or her accountability can be ensured.

The MOFA officers are recruited through a competitive process that is open to all. After joining the MOFA they are trained at both home and abroad before they are posted out in Missions. In addition to national and international issues, they are trained and taught with equal emphasis the behavioural aspects of a professional diplomat's career. They are specially taught as to how to make contacts with key people in the host countries and as to how to culture and maintain these contacts and to utilise them in the interest of the country. This is a very important part of a professional diplomat's career and the success of his career depends to a great extent on how best he can accomplish the above mentioned responsibilities. These are the aspects that make the difference between a career and a non-career diplomat.

A system should immediately be introduced in our country to train the non-career diplomats who represent other Missions in Missions, before they proceed on posting. One of the objectives of the Bangladesh Foreign Service Academy (FSA), which was closed down in 1988 and re-established in 1996 under the astute decision of the present Government, is to train officers of the MOFA including imparting necessary behavioural training to the career diplomats. The decision of the present Government to re-establish the FSA should be considered a visionary step in

the country's history of diplomacy. It was ridiculous that a sovereign country did not have any separate training institute for the officers who would represent her abroad. The one-time non-career diplomats should be given orientation training in the FSA before they are posted out in Missions. Moreover, it would be most effective in protecting the interest of the country if they are deputed to the MOFA to look after the issues of their parent Ministries. Such system of deputation would ensure better coordination of works and improved performance of the Missions resulting in the increased protection of the interest of the country. Another important issue is the selection process of these one-time non-career diplomats. We need to send able, competent and honest people to Missions who could properly and effectively look after the interest of the country and the welfare of the Bangladeshi communities living there.

Good performance and adequate protection of the interest of the country by an officer are directly related to his knowledge on the issue, efficiency, honesty, sincerity and dedication to work. Almost on a regular basis, newspapers publish reports on corruption and misappropriation of public money in Missions and in Government Offices in the country. Statistics show that the allegations of corruption and misappropriation of public money in Bangladesh Missions are mostly against the non-career diplomats who usually serve in Missions only for once. There are a number of advantages and disadvantages of one-time posting in Missions. We need to develop effective legal mechanism to realise the money taken ille-

gally or through corruption. Suspension of pension for the time being is not a solution at all. This is, however, applicable only for the bureaucrats.

Public money misappropriated or taken illegally by non-bureaucrat diplomats/one-time bureaucrats/part time bureaucrats both in the Bangladesh Missions abroad and in the country, was hardly realised because of non-existent of any effective legal mechanism. Law is equal for everybody. No body should be beyond the jurisdiction of the law of the soil. We need strict financial regulation. We do need to spend public money with adequate care, honesty and austerity. To move forward our dear poor country, we have to develop the culture of honesty and sincerity and to religiously practice it. Most of us advocate for probity in public life. If we do not practice the culture of maintaining probity in our private life, it is not possible to ensure such probity in our public life. The reality speaks for the other side of the story. Those who plead most for maintaining probity, the same suffers most by them.

Back to the issue of the migrant workers in Malaysia. There is an indication that the Malaysian authority is unlikely to send back any Bangladeshi migrants mainly for two reasons. First, our Government has taken appropriate action by initiating timely dialogue with the Malaysian authority not only to ensure that our migrants stay back there; but also to protect them from unnecessary harassment and detention. Our Mission in Kuala Lumpur has also working very hard in this line. Secondly, foreign migrants in Malaysia are now more needed than ever to make their products more competitive in the world market since these workers could be employed at a cheaper salary.

The Malaysian authority reportedly want to send back foreign migrants from their services sector by middle of August

this year. They are, however, of the view that the foreign migrants working in the construction sector can continue for another five or six years. It should also be borne in mind that the Malaysian domestic workers are not keen to take the low-paid hard jobs so far being occupied by the foreign migrant workers.

The Malaysian authority is reportedly rigid on the stay of so-called undocumented foreign migrant workers. According to an unofficial statistics, the number of Indonesian workers who have so far been sent back by the Malaysian authority has been superseded by the new intake of migrant workers from Indonesia. The reason is that those who were sent back were mainly undocumented labourers. They went back and again have come as documented labourers. For the Malaysian authority, it is easier and economically cost effective to send back migrant workers of their neighbouring countries than those of countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. From that point of view, it is unlikely that there would be a large scale return of Bangladeshi migrant workers from Malaysia.

One of the important and immediate tasks for the Government and our Mission in Kuala Lumpur would perhaps be to initiate bilateral dialogue with the Malaysian authority to convert so-called undocumented Bangladeshi migrants, if there is any, into documented or legal migrants. Another task, of course, should be to protect our migrant workers there from unnecessary harassment and from any rigorous punishment and inhuman behaviour while they are in detention camps. The Mission should also be vigilant in order to save our workers from exploitative wages.

Views expressed in this article do not reflect any Government's position.

Public Administration: The Changing Needs

by ABMS Zahur

It is clear that much greater emphasis has to be placed on efficiency and on systems that fully and effectively utilise the talents and enterprise of the people. Innovative approaches have to be evolved to reconcile the demands of efficiency and equity.

AS Bangladesh inherited a colonial-type of bureaucracy from Pakistan its emphasis was on establishing administrative institutions, providing extensive capabilities, furthering law and order and presenting an impersonal concern for administration of justice. Like other developing countries needs for its administrative capabilities are changing constantly. While the time and resources available are limited the demands for public administration system will continue to grow in parallel with its economic and social needs and developments. The strengthening of public administration systems can lead to greater effectiveness in resource utilisation and substantially higher rewards in development efforts.

For a realistic approach to improving administrative capabilities the role of public administration in national development is to be clarified. Different approaches to development are used by different developing countries. As such they need a different mix of public administration capabilities. In a mixed economy like Bangladesh, Public Administration requires more facilitative and regulatory capabilities.

To create public administration capabilities commensurate with their present and future needs it appears to be necessary for Bangladesh to adopt more specific national objective. Focusing on following objects seems to be appropriate at the moment:

(a) formulation and implementation of national policies and measures for development;

(b) improvement of quality of over-all and operational policies;

(c) achievement of greater efficiency, effectiveness and productivity in the implementation of national plans and programmes;

(d) increase of mobilisation and fuller use of human, financial and social resources and

(e) strengthening of economic sovereignty over national resources and participation in International Economic Cooperation.

For establishment of objectives the adoption of the following programmes may be considered necessary:

(i) to institutionalise planning at different levels of government and administration;

(ii) to restructure the machinery of government, particu-

larly the organisation of major departments and central administrative institutions;

(iii) to streamline regulatory administration;

(iv) to devise and implement new schemes for decentralisation of appropriate development functions and strengthen local government capabilities;

(v) to improve public budgeting, taxation and public finance administrations;

(vi) to foster financial institutions, infrastructures and management; and

(vii) to increase managerial capabilities of public organisation and enterprises.

Like many other developing countries Bangladesh is suffering from lack of managerial, technical and professional personnel. A desirable way of solving this problem is through long-range personnel planning for the public services in the context of national development. Such planning has to include provisions for the broad

categories of professional, technical, managerial and supervisory personnel required for the public services and an indication of the educational and professional standards necessary for various categories and for different levels of staff.

Systematic personnel planning in line with the needs of national development will improve the prospects of the development to a great extent. Once an adequate supply of trained staff for public service is assured, public intake systems should adequately be designed to recruit different categories of personnel required. Excessive delays in the recruitment process for the public services should be avoided because such delays drive better qualified candidates to other employment. Once recruited the candidates are expected to learn their public service jobs in situ. However, on-the-job training may be adequate in leisurely times. Today it is important that all new entrants be given

pre-service training so that they can start functioning effectively quickly.

The issue of the appropriate compensation system for public service has many facets. At one level the problem is analysed in terms of the lowness of the rates of compensation for the staff in the highest echelons in the public services relative to those prevailing in the private sector. In other cases the issue has generated industrial disputes due to the inequities in the levels of pay within the same organisation of functional area. This is said to cause not only dissatisfaction among personnel but also the exodus from public service of highly trained staff to the private sector and the holding of the multiple jobs by public functionaries. There is a need to study carefully the problem of compensation in the total context of the economy.

Ever since independence in 1971 there appears to be a growing tendency for senior management personnel to be expected to belong to or at least to subscribe to the political philosophy of the party in power. Thus the traditional concept of

civil service neutrality is no longer fully valid in Bangladesh. Under the circumstances it may be appropriate to develop new principles that promote political commitment and responsiveness of public services but at the same time assure the optimal use of the expertise available in them.

There is a growing feeling that in-service training programmes and in-service training ought to be derived from manpower plans because in-service training programmes necessitate instituting more specialised courses in the place of generalised and undifferentiated ones, raising the relevance of course content to specific national and cultural requirements and making the administrative milieu more receptive to the newly acquired skills and capabilities. More importance may be given to the in-service training among the managers who should not only be exposed to but also to be convinced of the utility of in-service training. Such training would have beneficial effects on the lower echelon staff to participate in the in-service training programmes.

Economic, social and cultural factors combined have created a situation in which most development efforts have tended to discount the potential social and economic contributions of women and so fail to mobilise and benefit from this vital human resource. There is a persistent misconception that the value of women's contribution to the economy and to the society is adequately recognised and their needs are satisfied, if they are made beneficiaries of certain welfare programmes. Participation of women in development has become a major concern in Bangladesh. A significant avenue for women's participation in national development is their employment in Public Administration and of meeting their special needs require special attention.

No country developed or developing is immune from corruption. In Bangladesh it has become a serious obstacle to development. Overregulation and the absence of public accountability make it tempting to resort to corrupt practices. Over centralisation, limited administrative capabilities, laxity of Tax Administration, and authoritarian tendencies have combined to provide fertile condition for corruption. Effective mechanisms must be found out to keep the public servants

free from corruption as far as possible.

Modernisation of administration should be appropriate to the local culture. Adequate attention should be given to the training of qualified administrative and professional personnel inspired by an ethic of public service. There is also inadequate appreciation of need for clear and predictable procedures for public action and intervention for forms of disclosure and accountability to the people, and for an independent judiciary competent to settle disputes and provide redress in the event of administrative efforts or arbitration. Reforms on these lines could help reconcile the need for decisive action. Such reforms cannot be carried out without the necessary human and financial resources nor, above all, without a democratic commitment and an understanding of its implications. The fact is that we shall have to pursue improved domestic policies. It is clear that much greater emphasis has to be placed on efficiency and on systems that fully and effectively utilise the talents and enterprise of the people. Innovative approaches have to be evolved to reconcile the demands of efficiency and equity.

The writer is a retired Joint Secretary, Govt of Bangladesh.

Eritrea and Ethiopia Locked in Conflict, Why?

by ASM Nurunnabi

The Eritreans say that the problems had been festering for a long time. They claim to have offered Ethiopia co-operation, even integration, leading to the ending of all barriers between the two countries.

A few lines about the recent history of the two countries — Eritrea and Ethiopia — may be helpful in understanding the present stand-off between the two countries. In 1950 the United Nations, without ascertaining the wishes of the Eritrean people through proper survey, handed over the country to Ethiopia. Thus Eritrea became a province within the Ethiopian Empire since November 14, 1962. The same year a guerrilla group known as the Eritrean Liberation Front was formed and later several off-shoots representing the different political ideologies came into being. They led a movement for independence from Ethiopia, fighting an inconclusive, rather sporadic guerrilla war against Emperor Haile Selassie's forces. After the Emperor was deposed by a military coup in 1974, active warfare between the secularists and the new regime erupted in early 1975.

In Ethiopia, the military coup d'état and the monarchy was abolished, and Socialist Ethiopia proclaimed. By 1977, Lt Col Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as head of state then the military government was faced with the civil war in Eritrea.

Eritrea became independent after waging an armed struggle for 31 years. Eritrea, with its population of 4 million, inhabits a territory having an area of 45 thousand three hundred sq miles took its place on the map of the world in 1993.

On the sudden eruption of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, one observer sarcastically commented, nothing the extreme poverty of the two countries: 'Two bald men fighting over a comb'. These two poor countries are fighting for a few square miles of barren mountain where a few thousand souls barely scratch living. After secession of Eritrea through a referendum in 1993, peaceful talks were going on about a 400 sq km of disputed border territory, which was included in Eritrea in the maps of

colonial administration under Italy, but merged with the Tigre province of Ethiopia under post-colonial administration of Haile Selassie.

As a border war broke out in May last, Eritrean forces repulsed an Ethiopian attack by a counter-attack that pushed at least 10 kilometres into Ethiopian territory at Zala Ambessa before declaring the operation nearly over and 'it could be time to leave.' But this was not the case. Each government accused the other of incursions across the poorly marked common border. A joint American and Rwandan peace-making team shuttled between the capitals, coming up with a four-point plan: both sides should withdraw their troops from the border, which would then be observed by international monitors, civilian authority would be restored to the disputed areas, and an investigation held into the root cause of the dispute.

Early last June, Ethiopian Prime Minister announced that he had accepted the plan. But, at the same time, he said that his defence forces had been instructed 'to take all steps needed to foil the Eritrean invasion,' and that the Eritreans must withdraw from areas they had occupied. Eritrea also agreed to the plan but said it would withdraw its troops only if the border area was demilitarised.

Then on June 5 last, Ethiopia sent four of its warplanes to bomb the airport at Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, hitting both the civilian and military parts of the complex. One Ethiopian plane was downed and its pilot captured.

Ethiopia claimed heavy damage had been inflicted on two planes and infrastructure of the Asmara military base and the raid was in retaliation of Eritrean air attack on Mekele airport in the Tigre state of Ethiopia. The raid took place after diplomats from the US and Rwanda left Asmara the same day for Burkina Faso to report on the crisis to a summit meeting of the Organisation of African Unity countries and obtain support for the four-point peace plan. The plan, however, was blown to pieces.

The USA protested that the attack on Asmara airport endangered foreign nationals trying to flee the unsafe capital. The OAU meeting had a stormy session finding it hard to reach consensus, but called on both the belligerents to co-operate with the facilitators, namely, USA and Rwanda.

The question has been raised as to why the two countries are fighting. Neither the Ethiopian Prime Minister and the Eritrean President are military buffoons in search of glory or empire. They hold similar views, face similar problems, have common allies and the same enemies. They were one brothers in arms in the struggle against the Soviet-backed dictatorship of Haile Mariam.

One theory in this context is that geography is reasserting itself. The Eritreans supported the Ethiopian rebels in the fight against the Mariam regime on condition that, when they come to power, Eritrea would be allowed to secede. This happened, and Eritrea's secession left Ethiopia landlocked, dependent on Eritrean goodwill for its trade. Various irritations may

have stirred Ethiopia's fear of being cut off from the sea, and Eritrea's fear its new independence might be infringed by a resetful Ethiopia. The border, according to this theory, was just a pretext for fighting over more serious issues.

But, even in private, neither side admits to any serious disagreement beyond the border dispute. The Ethiopians cite the agreements the two countries have signed on free trade, environmental protection and even military co-operation as evidence of how well they had been getting on. Their explanation for the conflict puts the blame on Eritrean president Afwerki; since he has reportedly failed to make life better for most of his people, he needs a war to distract and unify them.

The Eritreans say that the problems had been festering for a long time. They claim to have offered Ethiopia co-operation, even integration, leading to the ending of all barriers between the two countries. But, according to Eritrea, militiamen from the border province of Tigry persistently encroached on Eritrean territory, ignoring polite requests to withdraw. Furthermore, the Eritreans recently found a new map issued in Tigry which showed parts of Eritrea as Ethiopia. So they decided to hold on to disputed ground.

Lately Ethiopia and Eritrea have agreed to stop air strikes against each other in a de-escalation of their undeclared border war. This has been in response to a US proposal and Italian mediation efforts, under which the two countries have agreed to a moratorium on air strikes and the threat of air strikes for as long as they felt there were prospects for peace.

In this connection, it may be noted that Eritrea, in its five years of independence, has been quick to pick fights. It has had short wars with both Yemen and Djibouti and vows to overthrow the Sudan Government. Until recently, it had 1000,000 men under arms with only 4m people and demobilisation has been slow.

Much-maligned, Mothers-in-law Can Finally Take Heart

She encouraged the widow of her first son to remarry and ensured her share of the property; she saved the marriage of an alcoholic son by making him undergo a detoxification programme; and she was always inspiring her daughters-in-law when it came to their careers.

IN the West they have special days and awards for everyone: fathers, mothers, spouses, lovers, teachers, children and pets. But in-laws?

In-laws have always made better subjects for ridicule than recognition. Mothers-in-law, in particular, have inspired a whole series of jokes.

But the much-maligned women can finally take heart. A non-governmental organisation (NGO) in India is trying to give mothers-in-law their due place under the sun. The Guild of Women Achievers (GOWA) has been awarding best mothers-in-law awards for three years now, a newspaper has reported.

Mothers-in-law are serious matter in India since, more often than not, a bride has to go and stay with her husband's family. Skirmishes between daughters-in-law and mothers-

in-law have been known to wreck the peace of many a household.

While GOWA is still screening entries for the 'Best mother-in-law '98' awards, among the past winners are a Delhi woman with six sons. She was recommended by her youngest daughter-in-law who is a police officer, the Times of India reported.

The mother-in-law had she won many awards; she encouraged the widow of her first son to remarry and ensured her share of the property; she saved the marriage of an alcoholic son by making him undergo a detoxification programme; and she was always inspiring her daughters-in-law when it came to their careers.

The idea is to encourage and reward positive behaviour among women, GOWA founder Chaya Srivatsa was quoted as saying. 'These are women who support other women rather than make it more difficult for them to live and work in what is clearly a patriarchal society,' she said.

The NGO, based in the southern city of Bangalore, invites daughters-in-law to nominate the women, explaining exactly why they deserve the award. This year, the finals will be held in the city of Hyderabad on September 1.

'We have many nominations from remote places,' Srivatsa said. 'The other interesting thing is that most nominees are older women in their 60s and 70s, who you would expect to be more conservative or oppressive.'

GOWA also awards companies which follow positive management policies relating to their women staff, the paper said.

God's Way of Punishing Sinners?

ADOLESCENT girls living in the shantytowns of India's capital believe that Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a form of divine retribution for acts of sin. Some of them feel it is spread by a worm that infects the body.

These were some of the findings of a survey conducted by the country's premier All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS) in New Delhi. Efforts by the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) towards raising awareness about HIV/AIDS in the country have clearly not had the desired reach or effect.

According to experts, about 138 million adolescents in India are at a greater risk of contracting AIDS because it is during this age that people experiment with drugs and sex. Teenaged girls living in

shantytowns are particularly vulnerable as they are uneducated and have no access to information on health care services. The study was undertaken by the institute's NGO-AIDS cell to assess the awareness among adolescents living in shantytowns of general health problems including sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) like HIV/AIDS. Only half the adolescent girls interviewed said they had heard of AIDS, and most of them believed that STDs were spread through sex with prostitutes. None of the girls knew that men could also spread it, a newspaper has reported.

Others felt that the disease could be contacted by sitting, eating or drinking alcohol with an HIV-positive person. Some were even found to believe that AIDS was caused by consuming spicy food or raw rice. The

knowledge of the symptoms and treatment of the disease was also found to be abysmally low. 'The study clearly brings out the poor knowledge of adolescent girls about STDs and AIDS,' Shankar Chowdhury of NGO-AIDS cell was quoted as saying by the 'Asian Age' newspaper. 'Counselling services must be an integral part of such studies with special emphasis on family life education and pre-marital counselling,' he added.

The capital has several AIDS awareness organisations that hold workshops to educate people about its symptoms, modes of transmission and methods of prevention. The government's National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) runs a 24-hour helpline for people to call for any information on the disease.

Most of the underprivileged adolescent girls interviewed were unlettered, while others were school dropouts entrusted with the task of looking after their siblings while their parents were away at work.

As many as 58 per cent of the girls were found to be mothers themselves, indicating the high level of teenage pregnancies in the capital's shantytowns. Another alarming fact to emerge from the study was that 60 per cent of the girls went to medical practitioners who were not professionally qualified.

After the first cases of AIDS which were discovered in 1986 in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India is now estimated to have two to five million people infected with HIV, mostly through unsafe sexual practices. By the end of this century, it is estimated that the disease would have claimed two million lives.

— India Abroad News Service