Dhaka, Sunday, August 30, 1998

## Keep Prices in Check

A deep sense of catastrophe has seemingly pushed many of our otherwise speculation-happily traders into burrows of morality, ethics and social responsibility. Amidst a generally depressive outlook the price-line has not quite bulged out even after two months of gradient flooding dubbed as the longest-standing in a century. The prices of staple cereals and a few other daily essentials have not soared to a point many had expected they would; but this hardly gives any cause for complacence because the crunch is only unfolding.

The daily wage earners have been hit below their belts by the flood so that with their sharply lessened purchasing power there has been a drop in the active demand of goods. People are making do with relief hand-outs, reeds as vegetables and the freaky fish-catching in the engulfing flood waters. And, with the urban and rural markets going under water, a fundamental alteration has taken place in the general pattern of demands as such. There are now small isolated islands of supplies dotting the remaining dry lands which constitute one-third of our landmass at the present moment. The road and railway communication having been disrupted, it is the country-boats which are helping to maintain the minimum supplies to the markets.

With the production, procurement and supply lines coming under serious threats we are very much skating on thin ice as far as containing the prices within bearable limits goes.

It is time the government took a good look at the supply-demand-price triangle and dyked any imminent rupture in the basic fabric of day-to-day living under circumstances we have not known be-

Our specific suggestion is, the government should immediately open a series of dialogues with industry and trade leaders including representatives of the importers, suppliers, wholesalers and retailers to see what they and the government can together do to keep the prices of essential commodities within the purchasing power of the common man. This would ensure a constant flow of information to enable timely corrective actions, and give a sense of participation to the business community in the national mitigation efforts which they have unfortunately missed out on heretofore. We need a certain networking to facilitate a continuing process of interaction, beginning with a dynamic nucleus at an appropriate national level and then working down to the district or thana levels for comprehensive alleviation effects.

### Speed is the Key

This year's prolonged and pervasive flood has brought country's communication system on the verge of collapse. The heavy rush of flood waters has rendered the arterial roads across the land virtually off limits to traffic. Now the railway is also under threat. That is bad news. Because railway is not the only remaining overland communication medium for public transport but also a vital conveyor of market goods. Under not-too-adverse circumstances this could be the most effective transport to ferry relief materials across the country for the flood stricken millions. Understandably, its going out of service will spell a kind of disaster which we can't probably even imagine at this stage. Reassuringly, railway employees and officials are working at their hardest to ensure uninterrupted communication. We are thankful to them. It would be to their immense benefit if the railway people can have the members of the army by their side in their efforts to keep the tracks out of the reach of devouring flood waters.

So far the services men in tandem with the people and civil administration have done a highly commendable job in firming up the major city protection embankments in the country. One wishes the government had pressed the army into the service of the flood-ravaged suffering people much earlier than it did.

A lot remains to be done by way of disaster management. And the most urgent challenge is to speed up the relief operations. The pace of relief operations has been pathetically slow and ridiculously inadequate at most places. Press reports show that even the crucially needed water purifying tablets have not reached many areas. You can escape death by water but how will you escape the ailments brought by waterborne diseases? Unless this lapse is addressed with due urgency we are certainly in for a major disaster in the health sector. We suggest the government immediately go for creating a functional fleet of powered vessels, preferably speed boats. With the 65 per cent of the country under water, automated vessels should be of great use in reaching succour to the flood-affected people.

### Alarming

Quizzical it may sound but country's medical facilities are one of the biggest sources of threat to public health. A report published in The Daily Star yesterday informed us that Dhaka Medical College Hospital dumps all its medical wastes in the roadside bins. There is no system of burning or treating these wastes. It should be remembered here that medical waste is a hellish concoction of things ranging from toxic chemical matters to lethal pathogens. It is an alarming news not only because the authorities of a government hospital have made candid confession about it but also because of the extent to which this has gone on for years. If the premier government hospital does not have a waste management system one shudders to think what the situation is with other facilities both in the public and private sectors. No wonder the city has seen such a rapid rise in the incidence of diseases like meningitis, pneumonia, jaundice, typhoid and dysentery.

calamities like the ongoing floods and the way some of the pathogens procreate, the threat of mass health hazard becomes very real. For example, a typhoid bacteria that grows from blood or stool specimen cultured in a laboratory multiplies into billions. So, if extreme caution is not taken in disposing of the discarded cultures great risks loom large on public health. For a country grappling with the problems at such basic level it is unlikely that there are adequate laws to deal with such a flagrant violation of public health norms. Government has to ensure two things immediately: setting up waste treatment facility in its own facilities immediately and make it legally mandatory upon the clinics at the private sector to abide by the guidelines in managing medical waste.

When one takes into consideration natural

## Caught in a Cyclical Pattern of Flood?

The victims of the annual floods may have developed some capabilities to cope with these regular occurrences,

of course with the assistance of Flood Information and Disaster Management departments, but not the more

severe floods that recur at 10-15 year intervals. There is a need for much better planning to prepare

LOOD recurs in Bangladesh every year causing heavy A devastation on life, property, infrastructure and economic activities. According to both domestic and foreign observers somewhere between one-fourth and one-third of the

country come under water every vear. This year the scale has been far wider bringing, according to official estimates, about 39 out of 64 districts under water which is at the same level as was experienced in 1988. These two years' flood levels seem to indicate a phenomenon quite different from the annual occurrences of flood. It looks like a ten- or fifteen-year cycle of flood with greater scale and intensity of devastations than those inflicted by the annual floods is developing in

Bangladesh.

One may of course ask the question whether only two observations can give the phenomenon the characteristics of regularity to call it a cycle. Certainly it doesn't, but there were floods of similar or nearly similar scale and intensity in the past also. Even if one doesn't want to go back to the occurrences in the previous centuries, the famous study by Mohalonobis in 1927 relating to the devastating flood in northern Bengal, the 1954-55 flood (during our undergraduate days in Dacca University when we were out to do relief work) and the 1974 flood in the early period of Bangladesh provide sufficient number of occurrences to indicate the existence of a long cycle in addition to the

annual floods. However, its periodicity may not be exact. That is, the interval between these recurrences may not be exactly ten or

N every society, a child is

Instruction: "Tell the truth".

Yet, as children grow up to be

men and women, truth or the

complete version of it, is the

first casualty. An imperfect

species trying to pretend to be

perfect, humans do not always

measure up favourably against

the absolute demands of

cheating — with spoken words.

or in actions. People prefer to go

for the convenience of the short

term relief, via a lie, rather

than the long term cure, the

truth. The more sophisticated a

Truth sometimes hurts. According to TIME magazine, lit-

erature is full of characters

(Meursault in Albert Camu's

Mishkin in Dostoevsky's "The

Idiot") who cause all sorts of

problems to others, even get

themselves killed, because of

the Nazis for the sake of not

having to lie! Sooner or later,

prevaricate, gets him or her. A

lie cannot outrun the truth. Just

ask Bill Clinton! It's not that

every question has to be an-

swered truthfully. There are

questions that are inherently

unfair. If someone inquires

about how much one makes, the

price of his/her residence, or a

woman's (or a man's) age —

questions Bangladeshis are

fond of asking — such inquiries

**▼**OW long will Vajpayee go

on like this? He struck a

▲ Lbrave and forthright role

German philosopher Im-

excessive truthfulness.

person, the smoother the lie.

They frequently resort to

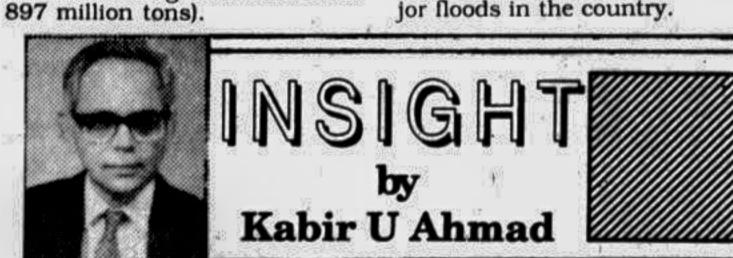
honesty and integrity.

badgered with the

the victims as well as the government to face this most disastrous kind of flood.. fifteen years, it may be someposited on the floodplains and what longer or shorter but the some parts on the riverbeds and interval between the 1988 flood the backwater flow of the sea

> during the high tide. (The Report of River Survey Project by Delft Hydraulics Consultants of Netherlands (1995) says that the yearly sediments transported by Jamuna and Ganges come to about

rainfall more frequently and also brings even a centimetre rise in the world sea level in 10-15 years, as the international experts claim, there is a major disaster-type situation to be reckoned with. All these factors will contribute to shortening the time intervals between major floods in the country.



By and large, because of this, riverbeds are rising which remain undredged and cannot carry the flood waters. Further, a lot of earlier flood control interventions like building embankments here and there have created barriers to water flows

in some other regions. However, the point here is that if sediment contents in flood waters increases over time, riverbeds rise gradually and the seabed gets heavy deposits of sediments every year, the capacity of the rivers to flush out flood waters gets reduced over time. A flood of marginally larger scale and intensity than the scale of annual ones will cause much greater havoc than what is experienced

On top of this, if the global

**Implications of Frequent** 

climate change brings heavy

Occurrences It goes without saying that more frequent 1988-type floods will inflict heavier damages not only on the life of the victims directly but also on the economy and the society in general. The daily newspapers are reporting what has been happening to the suffering people of these 39 districts in terms of loss of lives, suffering from diseases, loss of hearths and homes, facing starvation, loss of cattle and other assets, and above all facing an uncertain

From the point of view of the economy and the society, there is an equal scale of devastation. In terms of infrastructure, roads and highways, local

bridges and culverts, ferry ghats, buildings of local schools, colleges and other public and private institutions are damaged which will need urgent repairs costing large amounts of money.

From the point of view of the economy, agriculture, industry, commerce and foreign trade have been facing severe setbacks. But to answer the question raised above about the implications of increased frequency of 1988-type flood is a heavy blow to the stability and growth prospects of the economy. It would be useful to have a look at some of the economic data of the years, 1986-87 to 1988-89 to see how 1988 flood affected the economy.

#### Some Economic Effects of 1988 Flood

The value of agricultural output was Tk 17625 crore in 1986-87, which went down to Tk. 17490 crore in 1987-88 and to 17304 crore in 1988-89 showing a decline of 0.8 per cent in 1987-88 and 1.1 per cent in 1988-89. Total imports of food went up from 342,000 metric tons in 1986-87 to 1130,000 metric tons in 1987-88, and food aid went up from 1425,000 MT in 1986-87 to 1787,000 MT in 1987-88 to 1356,000 MT in 1888-89. Year-to-year export earnings growth went down from 31.1 per cent in 1986-87 to 14.6 per cent in 1987-88 to 4.9

per cent in 1988-89. The total year-to-year GDP growth rate went down from 4.2

per cent in 1986-87 to 2.9 per cent in 1987-88 to 2.5 per cent in 1988-89. (Bangladesh Economic Assessment, 1998, Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh). These data show the effects of 1988-flood on some of the major economic indicators of the country. It is easy to see that the ef-

fects of one year's major flood carry over to more than the subsequent year's level of activities. How long and what amount of resources will the economy need to recover from

devastation of 1998 flood

#### Some Concluding Observations

cannot be assessed right now.

The purpose of this short article was to indicate that quite apart from the regular annual floods, the country is also going through a longer cycle of much severe flood at 10-15 years intervals. These intervals are getting shorter over time with serious implications on the life of the people as well as on the handling capacity of

the government. Technically, these two types of floods can be separated in terms of their scale and intensity or magnitude of devastation that they inflict on the people and the economy. The victims of the annual floods may have developed some capabilities to cope with these regular occurrences, of course with the assistance of Flood Information and Disaster Management departments, but not the more severe floods that recur at 10-15 year intervals. There is a need for much better planning to prepare the victims as well as the government to face this most disastrous kind of flood...

### LETTER FROM AMERICA

future.

# To Tell You the Truth, Most People Lie

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

A lie cannot outrun the truth. Just ask Bill Clinton! It's not that every question has to be answered truthfully. There are questions that are inherently unfair. If someone inquires about how much one makes, the price of his/her residence, or a woman's (or a man's) age — questions Bangladeshis are fond of asking such inquiries ought to be met with contempt at worst, or reticence at best.

ought to be met with contempt at worst, or reticence at best. On January 26, 1998, on the advice of his public relations handlers. President Clinton set his jaw, shook his finger, clenched his teeth and literally lied through his teeth: "I did not have sexual relationship with that woman, Miss Lewinsky." Mr. Clinton committed two blunders in that one sentence television denial

and this year's one is exactly

Shorter Intervals

of periodicity raises another

interesting issue. If one looks at

the events of the last fifty years

or so, one finds that the

intervals between these severe

floods have been getting shorter

and shorter. There was a gap of

about 20 years between the

1954-55 flood and that of 1974,

14 years between 1974 and

1988, and exactly 10 years

these intervals have been get-

ting shorter. Two questions are

important here. First, why is it

getting shorter? And second,

what are the implications of

frequent occurrences of such

severe floods on the socio-eco-

nomic structure of the country?

one has to look at the changing

pattern of weather but one also

has to look at why the rivers

cannot flush out the onrush of

waters due to heavy rainfall.

Experts tell us that there is

heavy deforestation going on in

the upper regions of the rivers

(thanks to the development el-

forts of the people in the hilly

and mountainous regions with-

out considerations for the peo-

ple of the lower river basins).

heavy sediment contents car-

ried by flood waters large parts

of which is transported to the

sea, some parts of which is de-

To answer the first question.

Therefore, over the decades,

between 1988 and 1998

However, the above question

"The Stranger", and Prince "That woman" was not in the original script; his freelancing and reference to Lewinsky with those two words, offended women. The President's emphatic denial, disastrously, manuel Kant, who preached the convinced a lot of people - invirtue of absolute truth, would cluding Democratic Congresshave turned in Anne Frank to men and Senators - who went out and vigorously defended him against Republican and though, a person's propensity to right-wing smear tactics. So did Hillary Rodham Clinton. Now all these people feel betrayed and have turned on the Presi-

In their Martha's Vineyard "vacation". Hillary was demonstrating more Rodham than Clinton! According to the New York Times, in politics there is what is known as "rules of required hypocrisy", and here's how it works. "A politician pro-

fesses innocence of wrongdoing. Other people who owe him their loyalty, or livelihood, or love, may also know him well enough to doubt him deeply. But they doubt the motives of their adversaries even more, so they close ranks. As time passes, the demands of the defense grow greater, and the defenders' own credibility is at stake. Positions

The President is owed deference by his supporters, says Letitia Baldridge, Jacqueline Kennedy's chief of staff. "People expect you to be loyal. When you are in a place of trust, even if those above you abrogate that trust, you should remain loyal." One of President Bill Clinton's loyal defenders, Senator Robert Torricelli of New Jersey recently commented on Bill Clinton's about face: "At a point when a friend has a problem, you let them come to an admission on their own terms." The NY Times concludes: "The problem is that President Clinton has always been a politician who plays by his own rules: Never give people any more information than they know, never use active words when

passive words will do, accept re-

sponsibility but place blame elsewhere, excuse yourself within any admission. So people who abide by the more conventional rules of required hypocrisy when they deal with him almost always get burned. For Clinton, being a politician means never having to say you're sorry.

A law Professor before he entered politics, legally "Slick Willie" was not incorrect in his denial. The prosecution in the Paula Jones deposition, had explicitly defined what constitutes "sexual relations." For example, if Monica Lewinsky had touched certain areas of the Presidential torso, it was not 'sexual relations" as far as the President was concerned; however, if the President initiated the contact on Monica's private parts, it was! The President chose to hide behind such hairsplitting distinctions, which were "legally accurate", when he issued his vigorous denial. President Clinton now regrets his attempt to capture the moral high ground, when he should have lied low and admitted.

Having been branded a "liar" by his critics, now free of doubts, all his actions — such as

bombing Afghanistan and Sudan — are now suspect, and wil remain so for the duration of his term, however long or short that may be. (According to US sources, Pakistan was informed of the cruise missiles flying over its air space, in case they thought the missiles were Indian! Also, the US now says that the factory in Khartoum may not have been producing forbidden chemicals...after/all! To save his Presidency, sooner or later, the President will have to address the nation one more time. This time, he will really have to apologize and promise

not to do it again. (Hillary remains opposed to another speech.) TIME magazine continues: "All lies are not made equal. St. Augustine enumerated nine categories of lying, several of which would go into the category we call white lies. Such benign falsehoods make the world go round. No. 6, for example, is a lie that harms no one but helps someone. This is when you tell your friend who is getting chemotherapy for breast cancer that she looks marvelous." Clinton was guilty of lie No. 5: "That lie which is told from a desire to please oth-

ers in smooth discourse." Quoting Friedrich Nietzsche in "Beyond Good and Evil" the magazine concludes that Clinton fied because he had to: " 'I have done that,' says my memory. 'I cannot have done that,' says my pride and remains inexorable.

Eventually, memory yields. "It is suicidal for politicians to make categorical statements. President Clinton is not alone in regretting making sweeping remarks that came back to haunt him. Whereas it was Clinton's clenched teeth that got him into trouble, with President Bush it was his lips. In the 1988 Republican Convention, when Bush won his party's nomination for President, Bush had challenged the Democratic Congress: "Read my lips, NO NEW TAXES!" As President, reality struck and Bush had to enact the largest tax increase in US history!" (This month, in an interview with David Frost, Bush regretted making that promise.)

During the 1992 Presidential campaign, the Democrats paid repeated lip-service to Bush's ili-fated comment. Comedians invaded the no man's land between Bush's promise and action. They argued that the President was misheard. A fiercely loyal Texan, the President was pre-empting possible secessionist movement in his native state, the comedians stressed. What he really said was: "No new Texas." Others pointed out that the President was disturbed by the nation's falling morals. To rectify it, he had simply lashed out at pornography: "No nude excess!"

# Not by Jayalalitha's Pressure Alone

A N Dar writes from New Delhi

It is his colleagues whom Atal Behari Vajpayee should have made to work better. That has not happened. The blame should also fall on his party and his party allies. First the party. The BJP and the various branches of its parivar should have been a little more kind to their chosen leader who more than anybody else was responsible to turn the voting pattern in its favour.

in his address to the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort. He did not sound false. This is because the people have a higher regard for him than they have for most politicians. his straightforward political life during the last forty years is paying him a dividend when he is in power though weakened as the leader of the government because of indifferent allies and party and ministerial colleagues who often seem to pull

in different directions. Vajpayee surprised many of his listeners when he read out his speech at the Red Fort. The best public speaker in the country reading out from a prepared text? Perhaps Vajpayee must have thought that it was better to lose out on the flourish of his extempore speech than give a false impression and say something in the heat of the moment that would not be right. His ministerial colleagues could learn from him to be correct and measured than highflaunting. The speech therefore went on sober, right lines and in the references that he made to himself there was enough of Vajpayee that showed that as an

individual politician he would not do anything wrong. But then why is his government considered weak and about to fall almost every weekend?

Vajpayee knew that his listeners across the country were aware that the Prime Minister was not in a strong position. The coalition government's major ally, AIADMK, has not made him rule in peace. The AIADMK chief has won concession after concession though the party keeps on disputing this. the transfer of N K Singh, who was the Revenue Secretary, and a K M Bezbaruah, Director of Enforcement, were seen as meaning to appease allies like Jayalalitha. But Jayalalitha has demanded that Bezbaruah shoudl be brought back to his earlier posting. So this particular transfer was not brought about to appease her. It is understandable for Jayalalitha to have said so. She is fighting a battle for herself and her party She has on the contrary alleged that bribes were paid in the PMO to transfer Bezbaruah which has been denied by gov-

ernment sources. George Fernandes should have saved a bit of his honour in not joining the chorus of government apologists. Who is gong to believe that no demands are being made and no assurances given? Why throw dust into the people' eyes? And why don't you take your other allies to task, people like Mamta Banerjee, who said that the transfers had been made to satisfy others. This is what creates doubts in the people's minds.

People like George Fermandes who got the tirade going against China had no qualms about sheepishly saying that yes, this was the personal view that he was arising. This too after Vajpayee himself had said that what he was saying was not the government policy but George Fernandes' persona view. (Yes. Vajpayee's letter writer made it worse after the May 11 nuclear blast by saying in a communication to President Clinton that India felt threatened by China's nuclear policy). But does a defence Minister give his personal views on foreign policy? Whenever he speaks he is taken as giving out the government policy. When the Prime Minister has to correct him, it shows up a government that does not know its

It is also the people in his own government who have made things difficult for Vajpayee. A poor budget (thank yashwant Sinha) setting off high prices, which the Prime Minister had to acknowledge in his Red Fort speech and falling exports (thank Ramakrishna Hegdel are bad spots in a government which came into being in the countrywide expectation that the nation had seen various other parties in power and now it was the time to give a chance to the BJP to prove that it could do better. It was now the moment for the BJP to turn a new leaf and fortunately for it had a leader who was, for the first time to satisfy the BJP cadres, wholly non-Congress. High achievements wre not of course going to come about in a country as difficult to change as India is but there should have been some good points to talk

It is his colleagues whom Atal Behari Vajpayee should have made to work better. That has not happened. The blame should also fall on his party and his party allies. First the party. The BJP and the various branches of its parivar should have been a little more kind to their chosen leader who more than anybody else was responsible to turn the voting pattern in its favour. One section, the hard core, was quick to carry forwards its communal angels. which the President felt called upon to comment upon.

In a parivar which was keen to strengthen the government, was it in order to stress the temple issue? Was it right for it to rasie the Bangladeshi issue at a time when the government was finding it hard to find its feet? The Maharashtra Government sent the Bangladeshis to be deported to Bangladesh and Muslims and secularists everywhere felt threatened as slogans were revived taht the BJP certainly hd its hidden agenda. This at a time when for the first time in the last election a large number of middlelevel Muslim Leaders had joined it. Leave the Muslims aside, its ally in West Bengal, Mamta Banerjee, also raised her voice against it. Should it

not have been known to the BJP that this will happen if the Maharashtra Government took such a step? Take the case of the individ-

uals in the Sangh parivar, the more ambitious and aggressive among them have tried with whatever help they could find to grab lucrative jobs for themselves. If they were keen to strengthen the party in power, was it necessary for them to grab assignments for themselves, no matter whether they deserved them or not. Whom do you strengthen by that - yourself or your parivar? This may have got soem of them good jobs but it lowered the public confidence in the government. On the question of allies the

debate will continue on whether the BJP should have been so hungry for pwoer as to put together a coalition that would be at the mercy of individuals and small parties. The coalition ahs been under great pressure from its allies. Everyone wants something for hismself. Is a coalition which sends Vajpayee's senior ministers rushign to Chennai almsot every week to placate one leader worth it? If Javalalitha is mollified, Mamta gets angry. Then from somewhere Ramakrishna Hegde speaks against Jayalalitha and displeases he. Why cannot he hold his breath if he wants to save the government that has given him a portfolio he covets?

In all this political turmoil the blame usually comes on Atal Behari Vajpayee. He is given the description of being a weak man. Is he weak or is he keen to carry forwrd with a politically weak back? As these lines are being written there is no knowing how long the Vajpayee government will last. He is trying to keep everything together. But other forces pull it asunder. What is his duty? Isn't it to tell his party and his allies that he must be given a solid backing to rule? If he falls, you cannot blame Jayalalitha alone.

— Mandira

The writer is a former editor of Indian Express

### Postal service

Sir, As a former Postmaster-General (a quarter of a century ago). I most sorrowfully admit that now-a-days I entirely depend on the courier service for all correspondence.

To the new generation of public servants, I ask whether they are going to do anything about it or not. Pro Bono Publico

HANA: a fishy treaty

Sir, I wonder why the government signed the HANA treaty so promptly without even bothering to notify the parliament or the citizens.

We, the tax-paying citizens,

have a\_right to know what our

massive outcry SOFA was killed immediately. Then HANA was born, which was signed without any clarification or notification. Fishy in-

SOFA or HANA — they sound as if it is one wolf under different skins.

elected government is up to reters first, draw up the pros and garding the welfare of our cons, and let us be the judge. country. We have been facing Shagar natural calamities every single Dhaka year. Suddenly we now see a Not enough nurses in wave of treaties claiming to help us during situations as

such. Something strikes as very Sir, I am a visitor from Scotunusual here. land spending two months as a Right after the May explosions in India and Pakistan we tourist while my wife works as a consultant, teaching nursing see the birth of SOFA. Due to a management in Rajshahi, Barisal and Mymensingh. In Scotland, the media often

overplay the role of nurses as "Angles of Mary" but, in Bangladesh, by contrast, we are astonished to learn how low is the status given to nurses. Of course, nurses, both male and female, are only human. But I would urge the authorities their professional skills are esconcerned to discuss these mat-

Bangladesh nary disparity? Could social attitudes and professional jeal-

ousies in this country be among the causes?

patients? Robin MacCormick

Mymensingh

sential for a nation's health service. We are told that in Bangladesh there are thousands of unemployed nurses and yet for every seven doctors there are only about four nurses. In Scotland the proportions are reversed. Why this extraordi-

Do the health authorities and the public not realise that, without good nursing by adequate numbers of qualified nurses, even the most skillful doctors in the world cannot ensure the best outcome for their