

US Scene

Presidency Diminished, Clinton Devastated, Starr Exceeded All Limits

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

The word "private" has universal acceptance and bears special significance and therefore deserves due respect. Though President's private life is hardly distinguishable from the official life, he is still entitled to it when it comes to his own existence as a human being.

There is a limit to everything, but independent Councillor for Kenneth Starr who looked no more independent exceeded limits while investigating the private life of President Clinton. True, President Clinton also, as it appears, exceeded all limits in one area of his life — that however, being his private life. Of course, President should have behaved like the President as Chinese foreign policy expert Yan Xuetong citing Confucius said, "An emperor should behave like an emperor and a father should behave like a father."

True, but when temptation abounds, people with weaknesses do fall pray to such temptations. There are innumerable number of such people around the world. There is no reason to believe that the number in any way small in the US. There is a proverb in Bangladesh — if you continue to pick hairs from the blanket nothing will remain.

That, however, would not justify what Bill Clinton did because of his apparent weakness in the matter that led him to "wrong judgment". Anyway, the Americans knew what happened though Bill Clinton first said — I did not have any sexual relation with this woman.

Clinton is the President of the United States. He said this and he took responsibility for his statement though it differed greatly with the statement of Monica Lewinsky who reportedly lied before on many occasions. If Ken Starr stopped there by saying that he trusted the President of the United States he could have saved the Presidency, the whole nation and indeed the whole world from this terrible embarrassment.

Understandably, he was appointed to investigate the matter but he could always argue that there is certainly a limit going into one's private life — The word "private" has universal acceptance and bears special significance and therefore deserves due respect. Though President's private life is hardly distinguishable from the official life, he is still entitled to it when it comes to his own existence as a human being.

In any case, to do justice to his appointment Ken Starr had some other allegations to investigate into as thoroughly as possible. One gets the impression that even the Americans would have felt relief if K Starr stopped at some stage before it took a disastrous turn.

Telling lie? Who doesn't to it? Under oath? It was obviously because of compulsion. Bill Clinton probably put worldly prestige over the heavenly wrath with the hope that Almighty being always merciful might forgive him, but Ken Starr would not. Nobody would like to admit publicly such an intensely private matter.

But lie is lie and it is sinful whether under oath or not. However, Bill Clinton knew his confession of such an ugly private matter would damage his family relations (Hillary deserves praise for putting up a bold face), dwarf him and the US Presidency and above all embarrass him infinitely before the nation. Hence he continued to defend his position but Ken Starr remained adamant and pursued the matter. Ken Starr should have given the President the benefit of doubt and spared him and all that goes with him and his office. Bill Clinton, as a man who is not an ordinary man, would have suffered any way for his wrong judgement but the rest would have been spared.

Today, President Clinton appears visibly devastated. Just think of President Clinton's state of mind when the entire

gathering gave a standing ovation to Bill Clinton personally for his "contributions towards possible peace in Northern Ireland. At the back of his mind, however, he had Monica affair — the fear of facing the media outside. This is exactly what happened when he met the press.

Despite all the praises that were showered on him, there was a question from the reporter about Monica affair. President Clinton, "I made a bad mistake. It's indefensible, and I'm sorry about it."

Monica affair did not have any direct political implications nor was the nation adversely affected. But apparently Ken Starr pursued it for reasons best known to him and made it political and the interested politicians may now reap benefit out of it at the cost Bill Clinton.

However, Senator Lieberman's comments seem to be out of frustration and long delay on the part of the President to come out with facts. As he is reportedly a long-time ally of the President his remarks may have considerable implications on future handling of this matter. He said President's "behaviour is not only inappropriate, it is immoral and it is harmful." He, however, said the talk of impeachment and resignation is "premature". He only referred to "some measure of public rebuke and accountability."

His remarks may lead to rift in the Democratic party on this issue. It seems that majority of the Democrats still support President Clinton. While reacting to the remarks of senator Lieberman, one senior politician of Democratic party reportedly went to the extent of indicating that if adultery is the standard for impeachment and if the same standard is applied to all Congressmen and Senators, then only God knows what will happen!

There seems to be a general feeling that President should not have spoken to the nation on August 17 immediately after his testimony to the Grand Jury, but in any case when he spoke he should have been more forthcoming with a straight apology to the American people. As the Americans are generally forgiving people, that could have taken wind out of Ken Starr's sail and practically buried the issue. But the President only admitted his wrongdoing and regretted it. Though regret means sorry many felt that a straight apology would have been more appropriate and meaningful.

To do bad things is obviously bad but even to talk about bad things is also bad. But the whole world has gone through this unbearable talks and discussions over and over again, thanks to a free media. One wonders how the media and particularly electronic media in the US could talk so much for so many months and in so much detail about one thing — President's sex with a woman. Total wastage of people's time as well of media. If one talks even of good things over and over again it becomes irritating and often bitter — if about bad things it is infinitely worse. Such media coverage embarrassed everyone — men, women and children — indeed the nation and a large part of the world.

The fall-out effect in the international area of this unfortunate episode appears considerable. The immediate result is the loss of moral authority of the US President to deal effectively with the international issues. His visit to Moscow could have been really meaningful despite Boris Yeltsin's precarious political position if the awe of the US Presidency and the moral authority of the President remained intact. Yeltsin needed western and US assurances of full financial support which was not there as President Clinton could not take the lead because of the problem at home.

Just before the sad turn of events in Washington, one could detect some positive move on the part of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu with regard to Israeli pullout from another 13 per cent of West Bank keeping some area as reserve. Now Netanyahu is taking advantage of the weak position of President Clinton. He may continue to delay the pullout. President Arafat has already expressed his frustration over this and situation may turn worse. Netanyahu may now feel encouraged to move ahead with the construction of new Israeli settlements as President Clinton may not be in a position to assert any more against the Israeli supporters in the Congress. This may lead to turmoil in the area.

Indeed, the entire US position in the Middle-East may suffer some setback as Arabs will certainly reassess their position on the basis of developments in Washington. The window of opportunity in Iran may not be available anymore for possible rapprochement.

President Saddam Hussein's faint support for President Clinton appears based on his own assessment of the US administration. He knows and said so that in the event of Al Gore taking over, Netanyahu would be able to go ahead with his expansion activities. In terms of his own country he would probably have to put up a bigger light in case there is such a change in the administration. Despite denials some feel that the bombing of the alleged terrorist bases in Sudan and Afghanistan by the US was an attempt to divert attention from this sad incident. Many also fear that President Clinton might be tempted for the same reason to be reckless in future. It is expected that he would not be but still people's fear appears to have some basis. It is not only the US Russia is also in total turmoil both politically and economically. Both the "heavyweights" who are now only in their under-wears in terms political and moral strengths (Yeltsin has no sex scandal) have their fingers on the nuclear buttons.

One may now doubt whether the nuclear buttons are really in the safe hands — the reason why Saddam is being pursued regardless of what has been happening to Iraqi people. Also the reason why the nuclear powers have been denying the others the right of having nuclear bomb at least as a deterrent. The argument is: if all have nuclear bombs, nobody will use it for the fear of being attacked by others.

For the above reasons, it is high time for the politicians of the United States — a country which is still robust economically — credit goes to Clinton Administration for managing it well — and also politically — credit goes to the US politicians — to try to put behind this very unfortunate and terribly sad personal matter and allow the President to regain his political strength to lead the country. This is needed at a time when the economic turmoil of Russia, Japan and major part of South Asia is about to engulf the major economies around the world.

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Life in Dhaka Floating Indeed

by A Husnain

"Tell me, how abnormal rainfall could be created using your imaginative laser beams..."

YEARS ago, I read the translation of a Chinese classic which described in lyrical detail *A Floating Life* of an ideal couple. It was the age of leisure centuries ago, and the pace of life was in tune with that of Nature (the capital N means that nature dominated life, and not technology). The couple had a hut by the lakeside, and the moonlight on the hanging porch was more than enough for small doses of bliss.

The Dhakaites of today are in different predicament: water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink (the name of the poet is obvious). A science student, dabbling in physics, was roused by the floating misery, and his brain was working fast and furious on all sorts of hypotheses on this abnormal floods which is simply refusing to go away. He suspects whether some secret hi-tech techniques were being experimented upon by the advanced nations to try to control the volume of discharge by the rivers, as also secret means to control the rainfall. The latter has already been tried by using carbon dioxide spray into the cloud formations.

Adel, the science undergraduate and science-fiction bug, was wondering whether the latest classified versions of powerful laser beams could be used as conjectured above.

"Tell me about your crazy sci-fi ideas", I prompted him.

"Not so purely crazy. It could be an offshoot of the Star Wars weaponry."

"How? Give some examples of probable applications."

"The idea is simple, but I can't guess about the possible effects. Keep in mind two of our great rivers, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, which start high up in the Himalayan mountain range, and fall into the Bay of Bengal. There is a third river, the Meghna, but let us ignore it for the moment. The ice glaciers

melt naturally and form the rivers. Suppose some powerful laser beams are directed at the glaciers from several satellites. The tremendous heat of the laser beams would melt large quantities of the ice formations. There you have it, abnormal floods, controlled by man."

"Tell me, how abnormal rainfall could be created using your imaginative laser beams." I was trying amateurish psychological therapy, to get it out of his system.

"CO₂ is old technology. Nowadays electromagnetic effects could perhaps be created artificially to act as a catalyst, to trigger more rain from the cloud formations. I would like to get some opportunity to do some research on this topic as my post-graduate thesis."

"You also imagine that the recent undersea earthquake in the Bay of Bengal was man-made?"

"Could be. No options are excluded. When stealth bombers have been actually used; man could land on the moon, and the number plate of your car can be read by a spy satellite hundreds of miles above. Never use the cellular telephone for confidential talks; it can be monitored, and your physical movement traced. But one question baffles me: why man has not yet been able to penetrate even 100 miles below the earth's surface, and has never seen the bottom of the sea at the deepest depth, which can draw Mt Everest (29,000ft), whereas the deepest seabed is 35,000ft?"

"Well, science could not detect North Korea's missile launch in September, and missed the Indian nuclear test."

"That is a bureaucratic lapse, not scientific."

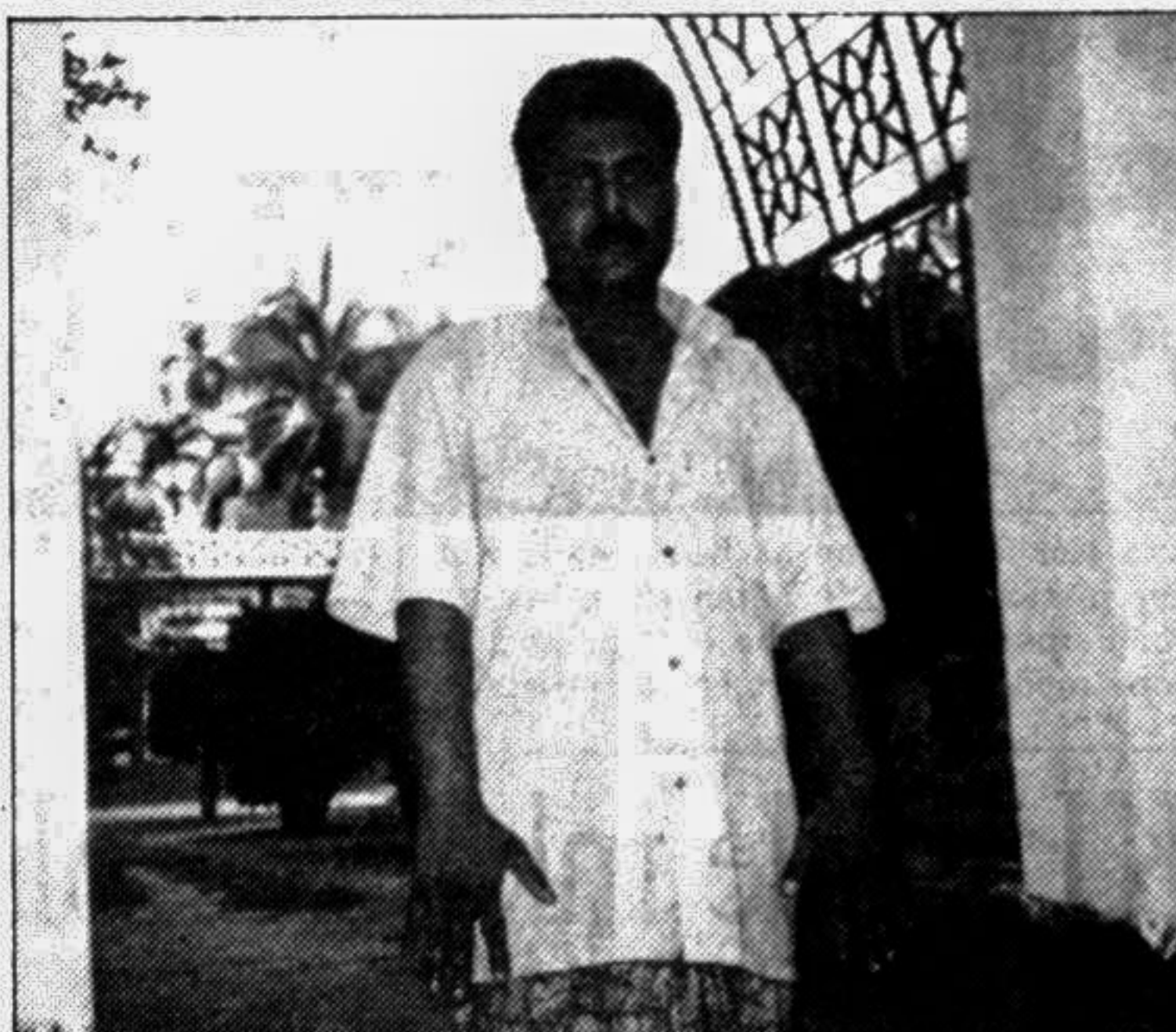
"Well, I wish you all success. We are still waiting for Bangladesh's first Nobel Prize nomination."

Arsenic Poisoning

God's Curse or Human Failing?

by Naimul Haq

"The peculiar behaviour of the aquifer is puzzling to us. There are locations where there is no trace of the poisonous metal whereas high concentration of arsenic can be found at the same level nearby," said a hydrogeologist.



Victim Belayet Hossain in Faridpur (swollen hands).



A victim of severe arsenicosis in 24-parganas (West Bengal).

EVEN three decades ago villagers in Bangladesh had to be persuaded to drink water from underground sources using, to them, a strange new device — tubewell. But since last year when arsenic contamination in groundwater posed a serious health concern the government started to seal off many of these devices.

Deadly arsenic poisoning as a result of contamination has put millions of lives at risk. Already over 2,500 persons in the country have been known to have developed arsenicosis. Many of them have already died.

In the Indian state of West Bengal, where this poisoning was identified much earlier, more than 1,000 people have died having been afflicted with this malady but unofficial estimates suggest at least 250,000 people have been suffering from various arsenic-related ailments.

When tested for arsenic concentration, human tissue specimen from West Bengal's Burdwan, Maldah, 24 Parganas and Murshidabad and at least 25 districts of Bangladesh showed alarming results.

On an average, 97 per cent of the samples showed very high level of concentration. While water samples from a limited number of tubewells of varying depths tested by traditional atomic absorption spectrophotometry (AAS) method show that 45 per cent of the tubewells had arsenic concentration of more than the officially recommended value of 0.05 milligram per litre.

An estimated four million tubewells in Bangladesh provide water for drinking and cooking to over 96 per cent of the rural people. Almost an equal number of tubewells have been installed in West Bengal at public and private initiatives.

In West Bengal, where the incidence of arsenic poisoning is less widespread, the people are yet to be adequately aware of the reality largely due to the failure of the government and non-government organisations to make the risk better known.

According to an official estimate, of the 64 districts of Bangladesh, 41 are badly affected. Water samples tested from these districts show presence of arsenic at more than the WHO-recommended value of 0.01 milligram per litre.

In West Bengal, one of the 25 states of India, people in six

districts with a population of over 34 million are known to have been drinking such contaminated water.

The Dhaka Community Hospital (DCH) following an inside information from the central character that uncovered the calamity of the region — Dr Dipankar Chakraborti of Jadavpur University, Calcutta, made the first estimate of the affected people as a private initiative.

"Dr Dipankar was the first to warn us about the presence of toxic arsenic in groundwater," said Dr Quazi Quamruzzaman, Chairman of DCH Trust, in great admiration.

"We then tried to make the Health Ministry aware of the situation but they showed little concern", he added.

DCH, however, went ahead with its own fact-finding in collaboration with Jadavpur University and apparently was able to confirm that arsenic in groundwater was the cause of innumerable ailments in the affected areas.

The government then recognised the biggest-ever environmental disaster in the country and called for action. The donor agencies like Unicef, the largest provider of aid for installing tubewells to improve the health of children and mothers, the World Bank and a number of other partners like UNDP, SDC and DANIDA also showed grave concern at the scale of this disaster.

What they never revealed was the reality of poisoning millions of human beings through their aid and support. Even the government failed to identify the calamity until an alarm came from the other side of the border.

The most puzzling thing about the whole issue is that till now no one knows precisely what causes the contamination. According to experts, arsenic contamination is prominent at a depth of 150 to 400 feet. However, tubewells drawing water from layers beneath 400 feet and more also showed presence of arsenic at varying concentration. "The peculiar behaviour of the aquifer is puzzling to us. There are locations where there is no trace of the poisonous metal whereas high concentration of arsenic can be found at the same level nearby," said a hydrogeologist.

Studies are under way by the British Geological Survey to find out the cause but their sci-

entists say, "We have to wait for an answer till we accomplish all necessary investigations by the year end."

In 1996 Bangladesh government formed the National Steering Committee headed by the Health Minister to conduct investigations into the crisis.

Similar was the early reaction of the West Bengal government when Dr Dipankar Chakraborti's findings about the crisis were brought to their notice.

"I had warned the government but they did not pay heed to my findings. They are still sleeping over them. They do not realise how big is the problem," said Dr Chakraborti.

According to studies, about 30 per cent of the deep tubewells in WB pump out contaminated water. Surprisingly, most users are still unaware of the truth of arsenic contamination. A villager in Biswanathpur block of West Bengal's 24 Parganas district said, "I heard people talking about the problem but I re-

ally don't know the exact nature of the problem."

Estimates say that there are over 250,000 patients suffering from various symptoms of arsenic poisoning, including cancer. Research confirmed that arsenic poisoning causes chronic diseases as a result of prolonged use of contaminated water. It can attack liver, kidney, bladder, stomach, digestive tract, pancreas, lungs, brain, spinal cord and skin with deadly consequences.

"There could be countless side-effects from continued intake of contaminated water," a leading Bangladeshi physician said.

So far epidemiological surveys in Bangladesh and West Bengal have revealed that arsenic commonly attacks a victim's skin.

"There is no scientific explanation why arsenic poisoning is predominant in skin but studies show that it is due to lack of certain vitamins," said Dr D N Guha Maumdar of Cal-

cutta P G Hospital. Dr Majumdar, who is also an advisor to the All India Public Task Force and a member of the team formed to monitor the clinical aspects of the disease and oriented research, said, "The severity of the disease depends basically on the patient's nutritional status and the amount of his body's arsenic intake."

Dr A Z M Iftikhar Hussain, Project Director of an UNDP-funded emergency Rapid Action Programme, however, said, "Arsenic poisoning starts to affect various organs of the human body well before it is actually visible on the skin."

Experts studying arsenic patients, however, believe that not all patients are likely to develop cancer from arsenic poisoning. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew that Belayet Hossain, a serious patient of arsenicosis, would be dead in a couple of months. His condition, however, started improving following his visit to a Calcutta hospital in 1996. "I knew I would be passing away soon, so I wished to give myself a last try — to go to India for a check-up. My doctors in Dhaka could not diagnose my disease. Traditional village khabira (untrained village physician) also failed to find any remedy."

The whole thing is embarrassing for western experts. The international donor agencies spent tens of millions of dollars trying to safeguard the lives of the villagers from cholera and other deadly intestinal diseases. What they failed to understand is that there were cheaper options for providing safe drinking water to the villagers.

As Dr Mahmud Rahman of DCH pointed out, "We have plenty of surface water. It's the best gift of nature. We ignored nature's gift and opted for sinking tubewells. And look, what we have done to ourselves!" he wondered.

Saving India's Sal Trees

Pushp K Jain writes from New Delhi

search institutions, but this latest epidemic shows that foresters and scientists have failed, according to A P Dwivedi, a senior official of the state's forest conservation service.

The state government decided that the only way to control the infestation was to fell most of the affected trees, and it was supported by an expert committee for sal borer affected areas appointed by the national Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF).

But the committee's approval in December 1997 caused an outcry from conservationists, especially when it became clear that there was a plan to fell

affected sal trees in protected areas such as the Kanha Tiger Reserve. WWF-India, the national organisation of the World Wide Fund For Nature, strongly advised against felling in the wildlife reserves.

Such criticism brought a halt to felling in mid-January this year and a special task force, with a wildlife subcommittee, was established to review the situation. The task force, however, could not reach a consensus over cutting down trees that may still be alive. The wildlife group felt there should be no felling or large-scale salvaging of infested and dead sal trees in the reserves, fearing that such action might lead to

ecological disturbances.

Yet in February the MoEF, without consulting the steering committee, issued a notification virtually allowing the state government to continue felling. On the crucial issue of stocking the infested timber far away from the sal forests, the notification left loopholes stating "felled material should preferably be located at least five kilometres away from the sal forest."

This served merely to inflame the controversy, and the Indian Supreme Court stepped in to order a halt to the felling. It later permitted the cutting down of dead trees only and ordered proper re-marking of affected trees. WWF Features

ing to come forward to marry my daughters", a mother of two young girls explained.

It's the same story in the worst affected villages of Chandpur, Comilla, Chudanga, Noakhali, Jessore, Chuadanga, Kushtia, Sathkha and a few other districts in mostly southern Bangladesh where the parents are forced by social circumstances to conceal truth about the disease.

"Oh Allah! Why punish us this way?" cried an old father wearing his traditional Islamic outfit.

Several patients in some villages narrated how their kins had died of the dreadful disease. A villager in Chandpur's Hajiganj thana recalls how they were in panic when they heard a patient dying of arsenicosis. "We stopped drinking from wells until district officials told us that there was nothing to be frightened about," said a village headman.

Arsenic, well known among the villagers as 'king of poison', has not been detected in deep tubewells in the municipal areas. "People in the municipal areas are safe from this problem," said an official of the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED), a Bangladesh government organisation responsible for sinking all categories of tubewells.

The Chief Engineer of Calcutta's Department of Public Health Engineering, Aushesh Roy also confirmed that water from the deep tubewells of his metropolis was free from arsenic contamination.

So, tens of millions of people of this thickly-populated region, barring those living within the municipal limits, were exposed to the risk of arsenic poisoning.

"Till we have a complete investigation report we cannot say exactly how many people are exposed to the hazard," said Dr Iftikhar Hussain.

However, Dr Quamruzzaman of DCH, the man who deserves to be singled out for his outstanding contribution to patient identification in Bangladesh, says, "There are millions of people exposed to contaminated water. Wherever you go, out of ten tests more than half show arsenic at more than the permissible level. What does it tell us then?" he asked.

The magnitude of the problem is yet to be determined by either government. Professor K J Nath, Director, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, said, "Assessment on the affected patients is not yet known. Toxicological studies in all six badly affected districts of West Bengal are in progress."

Many experts say, watershed management is the best option for a long-term solution of the problem. "If we have to save the future generations we must act now or it will be too late," said a Dhaka University teacher.

Till now, there seems to be no coordination among the government agencies responsible for supplying 'safe' drinking water.

Bangladesh government has very recently approved a Unicef-supported plan for sinking and re-sinking another one thousand tubewells across the country despite doubts among experts about further use of tubewells.

"You cannot guarantee that the new ones will not show ar-

senic in the future. Why then go for a costly technology when we can easily and safely use the everlasting source of surface water?" said the leader of a non-government organisation in Dhaka.

By way of mitigation, both governments have taken up various programmes assisted by the World Bank, UNDP, Unicef, WHO and a number of NGOs. But experts working towards addressing the crisis take a negative view of the authorities' plan to sink even more tubewells.

Afsan Chowdhury, advisor at Disaster Forum, one of the biggest organisations addressing environmental pollution, said, "People must know what are the options in respect of any water source. Unless interventions based on an ethical guideline acceptable to all is put in place, we may fall victim to a new disaster."

Various filters to arrest arsenic have been designed ignoring the possibility of even worse consequences.

Afsan Chowdhury warned: "Since nobody has yet found a safe method of disposing arsenic sludge, it might become a nightmare beyond anyone's capacity to manage if sludge from the filters has to be collected for disposal at the consumer level. Millions could unknowingly be signing their death warrants if they decide to install such filters."

As part of its efforts to address the problem on an emergency basis, Unicef has provided DPHE with portable 'field kits' to test presence of arsenic. But there are disputes among experts over standardisation of the kits.

The kits are not certified by any competent authority. So, the quality of their data is not statistically sound," said M A Quaiyum, former chairman of Bangladesh Planning Commission.

A senior World Bank official in Dhaka said, "Duplication and overlapping of programmes largely due to uncoordinated efforts in some regions will jeopardise the goal of the arsenic mitigation plans now being implemented by the government."

One thing is clear that the governments of Bangladesh and West Bengal have so far failed to inform the people about the scale of the crisis in terms of the size of the population at risk and the extent of damage caused by arsenic poisoning. "Isolated surveys tell us now give vague pictures," a reviewer said. "Enough has been learnt from emergency programmes. The proposed patient and groundwater studies in 4,300 villages in Bangladesh would not be much of a help. What we now need is launching of immediate mitigation programmes," Dr Mahmud Rahman said.

Except for a few temporary steps to ensure supply of 'safe' drinking water, the vast population awaits a durable solution to the problem. "Drink arsenic-free water, it's the only solution for now," said a scientist.

This was prepared by The Daily Star correspondent exclusively for the Panos Institute of London and The Daily Star following visits to parts of Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh — the most severely affected regions facing the disaster.