

CNG Debacle

The CNG Company was founded by the government with a capital of one crore taka. This opened the prospect of having a Dhaka free of atmospheric pollution through automobile emissions. And this would also accrue to owners of CNG-fied cars etc., a huge saving on fuel cost and to the government a sizeable cut on fossil fuel import bill. We hailed the launching of the company with unreserved enthusiasm and strongly recommended that the automobile owners, including the government, switch over to CNG. The government or the company did not, however, go for any big campaign to motivate people to CNG-fy their cars and buses and trucks.

Soon after the launching the company started showing signs of bad health. Sneezes and hiccups ran a terror into the minds of the owners of converted cars. The gas filling stations were all breaking down all the time for very many reasons. The converted cars would at times log a hundred kilometres before it would land a filling station that had CNG in its pumps.

The height of it is the closure of the car-conversion workshop for the last six months. There isn't any need really to re-open it. The number of CNG cars has plummeted from eight hundred to three hundred and the performance of the company is forcing a switch on the remaining loyalists.

How has all this come to such a pass? The control lies with the Petrobangla. What is it doing? Possibly an all top and little middle or bottom administration and their alleged way of through and through unaccountable company-paid luxury has already eaten up the capital.

A national Bangla daily, in an expose on the company's prodigality compounded duly by profligacy, cites a case of the provision of two assistant engineers being filled up by an army of 32 such, the recruitment done without any competition. The company is small by any measure — capital, operation, turnover. But manpowerwise and by the number of non-technical desk-bound officers it could beat any huge turnover company.

It is not the question of a one-crore taka government company going bust. It has already affected cars worth several crore taka. And its flunking has sabotaged the cause of a smoke-free city. It has hurt both national and personal economy. No penalty can make up for the harm it has done.

The government must immediately wake up to the bad goings on at CNG Company and the energy state minister must act to prove his worth. Or the government will stand to lose people's confidence heavily.

A Job Well-done

The fact-finding committee commissioned by the Jahangirnagar University authorities to probe the alleged rape of some female students on the campus has submitted its report. It is a stunning account of barbarity the inquest has furnished us with. Over 20 students raped and another 300 sexually harassed! This means whatever we have been hearing in the form of hearsay in the press reports is true. In fact, the ferreted fact seems to be far worse than what was imagined. One wonders if ever a seat of learning was found to have lived so long with so much dirty linen.

Barbarity of the perpetrators apart, what is really appalling is the attitude of the administrative officials of the university. Had they not placed social repercussion ahead of gross insult of the mind and body of a victim, this incomparably sordid saga would have never progressed this far. Perhaps it won't be too much to say in the hindsight that had the press not gone for the kill ever since the news of the rape of three students was broken, the truth would have never come to light. It is only after the press in tandem with the agitating students tightened the noose that the university authorities went for a thorough probe.

Having said that, one must commend the fact-finding committee for its work. Though this was exactly what was expected from it, it must be observed in all fairness that the enquiry committee did an excellent job in a complicated and dicey situation.

The enquiry committee has spilled the beans. Now it is up to the authorities to take action against the culprits and redeem the utterly vitiated atmosphere of the university. Any kind of pressure from any quarter to show the red herring would be disastrous not only for the effort to salvage JU's lost prestige but also for the future of other educational institutions of the country.

With all the accused purportedly belonging to the student front of the party in power, one can hardly overestimate the moral responsibility of the Awami League to make sure that the offenders got their deserts. The government would be well advised to give exemplary punishment to the criminals to make sure that educational centres at least do not turn into sanctuaries for criminals.

Learning by Experience

Pitfalls of previous agri-lending operations were pinpointed at a high level brainstorming session chaired on Thursday by Finance Minister SAMS Kibria. Recommendations made by the participants about safeguarding the Tk 32.7 billion farm loan declared by the government from the lapses committed earlier on can be put together as a strategy to ensure success of the massive agricultural rehab programme.

We like the emphasis being put on 'real farmers and sharecroppers' who had been largely deprived of the benefit of agri-lending operations, going by earlier disbursement records. It is a pity that the overall disbursement rate never crossed the 46-47 per cent mark. The NCBs seemingly accounted for such a low distribution rate with the specialised Krishi banks faring much better by comparison. The NCB managers at the rural branches accorded a low priority to agri-loans because of lack of motivation perhaps. This has to be set right. Then we have it on the authority of the Agriculture Minister Motia Chowdhury herself: "helplessness of the people who did not take loans but their names are in the books of the banks." Sharecropper must have been the most deprived lot because few stood guarantors for them as required under the conventional rules. This has to change now.

We fully agree there has to be close supervision and monitoring of the lending process with complaints centres opened at the thana headquarters to attend to farmers' grievances expeditiously.

Disaster Preparedness, Information and Education

How much will it cost to rehabilitate these uprooted people? What needs to be done and how long will it take to rehabilitate the severely damaged agriculture, industry and infrastructure so as to restore the normal level of economic activities of the country?

ALTHOUGH the flood water has gone below the danger marks at various critical points, one is not sure how long it will take for it to reach the normal level that prevails at this time of the year. Nevertheless, the nation's two major concerns at this moment are (i) giving relief to the flood victims with supplies of food, medicines and drinking water as well as (ii) rehabilitation of the economy. The immediate questions that come to mind are: How many people have to be fed and for how long? How much will it cost? How much will it cost to rehabilitate these uprooted people? What needs to be done and how long will it take to rehabilitate the severely damaged agriculture, industry and infrastructure so as to restore the normal level of economic activities of the country?

Government departments, donor agencies, Egos and the business community are busy in collecting the relevant data in order to arrive at some tentative answers. As far as feeding the flood victims are concerned, the situation seems to be under control.

According to the World Food Programme (WFP), it looks like there is a need for feeding about 20 million affected people through Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme supplying 16 Kgs of rice and/or wheat per family per month for three months or more which may require about 4.3 million metric tons of foodgrains. This is a huge undertaking.

Reports have it that the government has a stock of about 0.7 million tons and is importing another 1.0 million tons while the private sector is importing 1.5 million tons leaving a gap of about 1.1 million tons. From the pledges received so far, it seems it is going to be met by donors' contributions. The pledges of 6,00,000 tons by US, 1,75,000 tons by EU, and 3,55,000 tons by WFP bring the total to 1.13 million tons.

The problem seems to be the arrival time, clearance through the ports and proper distribution to the deserving groups of people. One hopes that nothing untoward happens at the time of distributions which may put the country to shame. Therefore, the problem seems more with the supplies of medicines, medical facilities and clean water than with the supplies of foodgrains. The reports of increasing number of deaths occurring due to water-borne dis-

eases is disconcerting. One hopes that the government health facilities across the country, ICDDR,B and other health institutions can cope with the situation and that it doesn't develop into an epidemic.

However, for the correct estimates of rehabilitation costs, one has to wait for another month or so until reliable data are collected and estimates are prepared both by the government and other foreign agencies. Although on the basis of some tentative estimates, government has appealed to the outside world for assistance of \$820 million only a fraction of it has been pledged so far.

However, from the way this year's as well as 1988 floods have been faced by the government, one observation becomes immediate. These national disasters have been faced as and when they occurred without any preparedness in advance, let alone any comprehensive Disaster Management Plan. This is not the professional way of managing a crisis of such a gigantic proportion. The purpose of this short article, however, is to draw attention to some essential features of advanced preparedness for facing such disasters.

Role of Information
Everyone knows that Bangladesh belongs to a natural disaster zone where floods, cyclones and tidal waves occur quite often. A Disaster Management Plan (DMP) has to be prepared and put in place ready for implementation as and when the country is struck by a disaster. How would one know whether a mild flood or blowing of more than moderate wind or, sea tide will develop into a disaster?

This is where adequately trained professionals will have to keep a careful watch on such events during the months of the year (April-June, and July-September) when they are likely to occur. Weather/flood/tidal wave forecasters have to be alert by observing the global and regional weather/flood/wave patterns and their directions like one sees in BBC and CNN weather presentations.

These generate the most valuable information about the probable onset of severe weather/flood/wave pattern in

the country at different times affecting different parts of the country. Such information with warning signals have to be disseminated frequently during those danger-prone months so that people can take adequate precautions for the safety of their lives and assets.

One is pleased to note that Bangladesh's weather/flood forecasters have done an excellent job this time by providing substantially accurate weather/flood forecasts during the months of July-September. They certainly have a good model and its quality has to be maintained and improved over time by continuous research and by adopting new technologies.

However, what wasn't heard was a set of instructions to the

country at different times affecting different parts of the country. Such information with warning signals have to be disseminated frequently during those danger-prone months so that people can take adequate precautions for the safety of their lives and assets.

Whatever is feasible and optimal should be done and maintained for the protection of the people and the society. Every alert nation has to continue doing research on these issues and use its results for improving protective devices because in a changing geo-physical and climatic world nothing remains static. Second, flood shelters and food storage facilities, like cyclone shelters, have to be built on raised grounds in the flood prone areas for the poten-

risk of any event of devastating nature whether flood or cyclone or tidal wave. This I have advocated in my article of September 14, 1998, in this column. Such a fund didn't exist either this year or during and after 1988 flood.

As a result, the government had to beg for assistance from donor agencies which doesn't promote a country's self-respect, to say the least. Sixth, as has already been discussed above, there should be a Manual containing instructions for the potential flood victims as to how to prepare oneself against the danger, where to take shelter, and how to protect one's life and assets during floods/cyclones/tidal waves.

Seventh, putting army and volunteers on alert to protect the flood embankments and helpless people whenever needed. The army was called in to prevent the DND embankment from collapsing no doubt, but there was no organized and trained voluntary force in the country to be called upon in such a situation. Such a volunteer force should be organized. Eighth, permanent channels of relief distribution should exist and be made more efficient and corruption free.

Ninth, local communities should be given the responsibility to contribute to the community relief funds as well as to distribute the relief goods among the members under the supervision of elected community leaders and government officials.

Tenth, soon after the disaster, the reconstruction programme with FFW and other resources made available should start to engage the unemployed workers in order to rehabilitate the infrastructure and to generate income among the flood affected families.

Public Education

There is a need for widespread dissemination of information about all aspects of disasters among the people through all channels of the media. A team of disaster experts should travel around the disaster prone areas to hold seminars and workshops during the disaster-free period of the year so that ordinary people learn the techniques and value of protective measures.

They will also learn how people have survived the disas-

ters and what extra measures the government and the community have to adopt in future. It should be teaching and learning process for the disaster experts.

However, what is more important is to introduce a subject on Disaster Management in the school curriculum so that school leavers learn some basics of the kind and nature of disasters that the country faces in every few years' intervals and the technical knowledge that people have to know to protect themselves against such disasters.

Just as lessons on history and geography are essential to familiarise the new generation with their past background and geo-environment, a course on disasters which have become a regular and most difficult feature of life in Bangladesh is essential to train the future generation to cope with such devastating events.

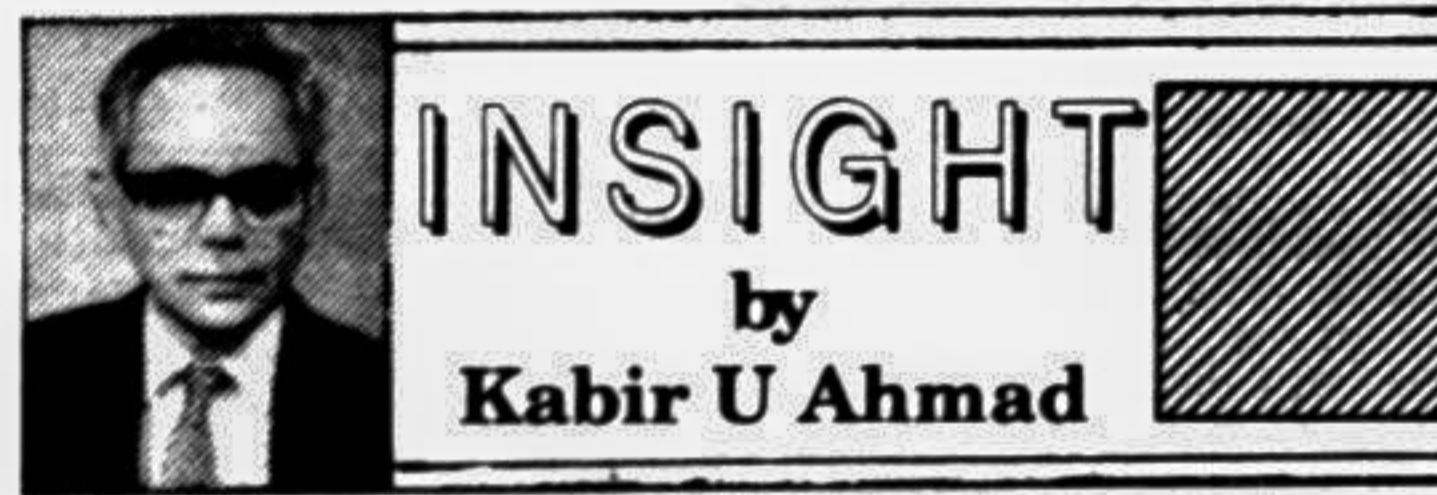
Conclusions

While the flood water is receding, the daunting tasks of relief distribution and economic rehabilitation are starting at the face of the nation. The crisis management approach of the present and past governments looks like nonchalant and unprofessional. Although a lot of development has taken place in weather and flood forecasting techniques, there is still a need for widespread dissemination of information before, during and after the disasters so that people can take correct decisions on protecting and rehabilitating themselves.

In addition, there is a need for developing a Disaster Management Plan to guide the experts, government officials and the victims of disasters at the right time. Some essential ingredients of such a Plan have been suggested above.

In a world of rapidly changing dynamics, continuous research is needed to upgrade the information (or data) base of the disasters, techniques of adopting precautionary measures, risk taking, correcting past mistakes and financial requirements to meet the challenge. What is equally important is to improve the level of awareness of the people about disasters.

For this, it would be most appropriate to introduce a course in the school curriculum on Disaster Management so that future generations of young people will be better aware, skilled and imaginative in facing the disasters.



people in the flood plane areas about what to do and what not to do. Such a set of instructions are crucial for their survival and welfare. One gathers that such instructions were contained in a Manual prepared by foreign consultants after the 1988 flood which was buried somewhere in the ministry. When experts were looking for this Manual, it took them days to locate one. This should have been circulated among potential flood victims in hundreds of thousands of copies rather than having been buried under the heaps of consultants' reports. This doesn't speak of advanced preparedness for facing the disaster. In any case, it might need updating in new situations.

Components of a DMP

What are the components of such a plan? First, the causes of the disaster must be understood clearly so that some controlling, mitigating or precautionary measures can be developed and implemented well in advance to minimize its impact on the country. Experts tell us that like cyclone or tidal wave, major floods in Bangladesh

tial victims. Here, government money can be used in conjunction with voluntary services of the local communities. Instead of misusing these grounds, local communities through their elected bodies should be responsible for their upkeep and improvement.

Incidentally, there is hardly any sense of maintenance in the country which becomes immediately visible when one sees the conditions of government buildings, transports, roads and railways etc. A strong sense of maintenance has to be inculcated among the people in general. Third, flood/cyclone/tidal wave forecasting, which has been discussed above, should be continuously updated and widely publicised through radio, television and newspapers before, during and after the months and days of their occurrences.

Fifth, funds in foreign currency reserves must be built to purchase foodgrains, medicines and other needs on an emergency basis during and after the floods/cyclones/tidal waves. This is the most important protective measure against the

Prospects for Indo-Pak Ties after Vajpayee-Sharif Meeting

Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Sharif have described their meeting as useful and stressed the need for creating a congenial atmosphere in the South Asian region, which they said, important for durable peace and stability for the two countries as well as for the region.

FINALLY, the prime ministers of India and Pakistan have met at New York during the current United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) session in an effort to inject some positive elements in the traditionally hostile relationship between the two neighbours.

The two leaders were to meet in South Africa on the sidelines of the NAM summit there but it could not be held as the prime minister of Pakistan did not travel to South Africa due to changes in his itinerary. Relations between India and Pakistan took a new dimension for the worse when both nations exploded nuclear devices in May, this year, and Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Mr. Nawaz Sharif presided over the important developments in the two countries as their heads of governments.

New Delhi-Islamabad ties further exacerbated due to the nuclearisation of the region and tensions mounted further in the bilateral ties with both countries sparing no scope to hurl accusations to the other for the new alarm in South Asia. It is in this context, they met for the first time after the atomic blasts in Colombo, capital of Sri Lanka, once again on the fringes of a seven-nation SAARC summit.

It was this contact that brought two countries at the highest level in the aftermath of a deteriorating political climate in the region and both leaders had spoken of their willingness to arrest the situation even though the meetings as such had not produced anything tangible.

The Colombo meeting at least had helped create a restraint on the provocative and jingoistic utterances on both countries particularly when some key figures in both governments like the home minister in India and former foreign minister in Pakistan were at the lead of such remarks and

comments. The second meeting scheduled in South Africa did not come off in New York, where both flew to address the UNGA session.

Admittedly, the meeting between the prime ministers of India and Pakistan cannot produce anything very positive all of a sudden given the complexity involved in the relationship and the difficulty in finding ways to reduce the tensions. Nonetheless, Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Sharif have described their meeting as useful and stressed the need for creating a congenial atmosphere in the South Asian region, which they said, important for durable peace and stability for the two countries as well as for the region.

The Indian prime minister exuded the hope that the meeting may lead to beginning of a "new chapter" in the ties while his Pakistani counterpart reciprocated in the sentiment, hoping that the core issue of the belligerence will be addressed to meaningfully.

Now, it remains to be seen how far the two countries can go ahead improving their relationship when the talks are resumed next month after a long pause. Will they live up to their optimism although none really expects that the crux of the problem will be resolved soon? Will the two sides revert to rhetorical allegations against each other much before than many expect them to do it and in the process queer the pitch of negotiations that has been given a positive environment by the New York meeting in the given circumstances? Will the outcome of the recent talks remain restricted with the broad parameters of fundamentals like only creating a positive

ambiance or really touch upon the core issues in a serious bid to improve ties?

Watchers of the Indo-Pakistan scene cannot offer much optimism for a breakthrough in the coming talks because the central issue is "Kashmir", the beautiful area in the lap of the Himalayas — two-thirds of which are controlled by India and rest one-third by Pakistan. Two sides fought three wars since their creation as independent nations in 1947 and two of them were on "Kashmir".

Both the leaders are under domestic pressure that they must score over the other on the "Kashmir" issue and that no improvement can take place by compromising on the matter. However, there are also sane and realistic section of people in both countries who believe accommodation is necessary on this issue for securing real peace in the region.

Pakistan says that people in the India-held Kashmir are allowed to exercise their right of self-determination and condemns the Indian actions there on the "freedom-loving people".

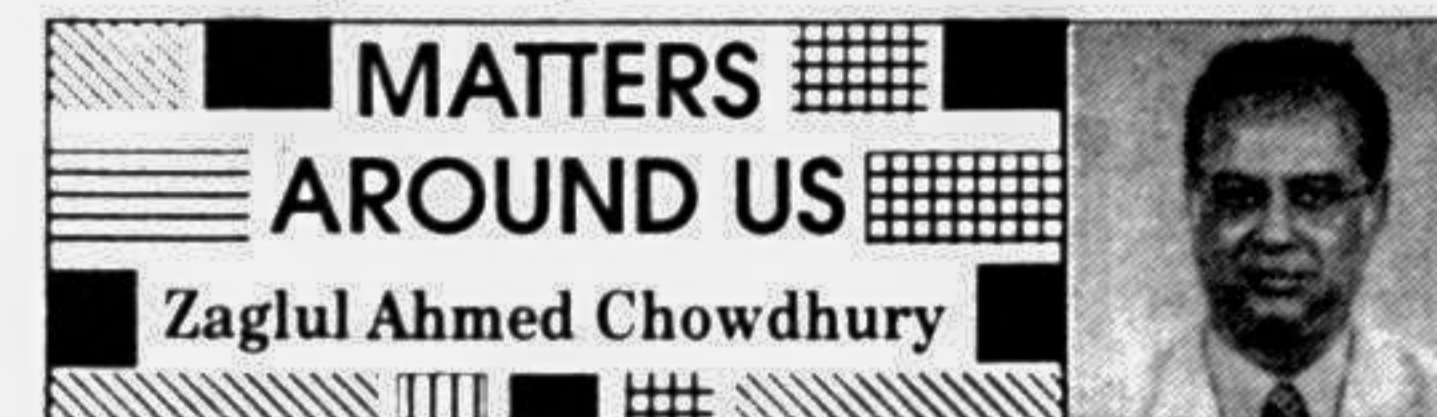
India says the movement in Kashmir is engineered by Pak-

chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee, feels that this recognition of the international pressure for a resolution of the "Kashmir" dispute.

Former Indian foreign secretary and a leading analyst of the foreign policy matters in India Mr. Muckund Dubey foresees no tangible progress in furthering the ties by resolving the disputes but agrees that resumption of the dialogue in itself is a progress. Foreign secretaries of the two countries earlier held several rounds of talks alternatively in India and Pakistan on their differences but the outcome was virtually fruitless and two sides went back to square one with talks getting bogged down.

The coming talks will be the resumption of the dialogue after a long gap although the foreign secretaries did discuss bilateral issues both in Colombo and New York as instructed by their prime ministers. The formal foreign secretary level talks will once again bring the two countries on negotiating table in the third week of October in Pakistan.

Understandably, international community wants that



istan and also claims one-third that Pakistan controls. Indeed, a solution is very difficult.

The Indian side agreed to discuss all issues responsible for the bad ties including that of Kashmir. The Pakistanis feel that this is a forward movement. Senator Akram Zaki,

two neighbours resolve their differences and diminish the risks of using the nuclear bombs by either side. Two prime ministers met world leaders at the United Nations including United States President Bill Clinton, who is keen to see a reduction of the ten-

each other with nuclear weapons. Both India and Pakistan solicit, covet and seek friendship, cooperation and support of Bangladesh. We strongly believe that as a balance of power in South East Asia Bangladesh can play an outstanding and vital role in removing misunderstanding and discord between India and Pakistan, and also saving war and tragedy between the two countries.

Prevention is better than cure. We strongly suggest that Delhi-Dhaka-Islamabad should have a hotline telephone to contact each other during emergency as a precautionary measure for safety and security of the people and maintenance of peace in the region.

O.H. Kabir
6, Hare Street
Wari, Dhaka-1203

To the Editor...

Puzzling abbreviations

Sir, Nowadays, the tendency of using abbreviation is in its climax. The objective of abbreviation is to shorten the sentence both in writing and in speaking.

But there are some abbreviations which stand for more than one elaboration — and even three, four or five — which is very puzzling, and very often misleading. For instance, if it is asked what is the elaboration of BMA then one can write (1) British Medical Association, (2) Bangladesh Medical Association and (3) Bangladesh Military Academy and many more (if any). Similarly ACC may stand for Asian Cultural Centre, American Cricket Council, AEC may signify Army Education Corps, Atomic Energy Commission etc. WB stands for

World Bank, West Bengal etc. Abbreviation puzzle is really a troublesome matter.

Md Gias Uddin
Dept of Pharmacy
Dhaka University

Disposal of polythene bags

Sir, I like to bring to the notice of our government and non-government organisations as to how to get rid of polythene bags which have blocked most of drainage systems. Polythene bags are dangerous, as polythene never gets mixed up with soil or it does not get rotten. As such they remain a hazard and contribute a great extent to pollution.

The government/NGOs can do one thing — they can buy the used polythene bags at a given rate and then they can be burned or recycled in the fac-

tory. If such incentives (say Tk 5/- for depositing 100 or 200 used polythene bags) is declared and wide publicity made through TV/radio/posters then the poor people and street urchins will also get a way of earning some money.

Rifat Sharfuddin
Bhattachary, Chittagong

Delhi-Dhaka-Islamabad hotline

Sir, Since the two arch-rivals India and Pakistan carried out demonic nuclear tests and boasted of their weapons of mass destruction millions of people in India-Pakistan-Bangladesh subcontinent are living in fretfulness, tension and uneasiness.

Everyone is afraid and worried as to when Delhi or Islamabad would go berserk over Kashmir dispute and attack

OPINION
Health Policy: Yet to Come

by Fedai Mawla

It is not surprising if one wonders how we could come a long way without a health policy. No doubt, health is one of the basic human rights or needs and it is a constitutional obligation of the nation to ensure good health to its people.

The obligation cannot be met without proper guidelines. Unless we serve the people in the rural level where most of our people live, the situation is not going to improve. The total population of our country stands at about 12 crore 70 lac with about 800 people living in one sq km.

The population is supposed to be double by twenty years with the annual growth rate of 1.76 per cent. The per capita income is about 12,400 taka and more than 60 per cent of the population live below poverty level. The yearly expenditure for a person in government healthcare services is only 140 taka, an amount too small for a person to get healthcare.

Though there are about 26000 registered doctors and 14000 registered nurses in the country, only 9500 doctors and 6930 nurses are directly linked with the health care services. For every 4572 persons there is one doctor and for 9530 persons there is one nurse.

The situation is even worse in the rural areas where only 23 per cent get health care services before their death. To salvage from this grim situation, efforts have been made in the past to have a health policy for the country.

In 1990, a draft health policy was prepared and sent to the Bangladesh Medical Association for review and opinion. The Association protested many of its aspects. Soon after, the government fell and there was no further development regarding the health policy. The next government formed a 29-member committee with Dr Badruddoza as its chairman. Seven sub-committees were also formed. They held several meetings. The Bangladesh Medical Association sent a draft health policy to the committee but nothing ultimately came out.

The present government formed a 26-member committee on December 12, 1996 with the Health Minister as its chairperson. Five sub-committees were formed. On the basis of a report of the sub-committee, six workshops were held in six divisions. Later, based on the report of the sub-committee, and the recommendations of the workshops the Draft Health Policy '98 was prepared. The draft health policy was submitted to the Prime Minister on the 23rd of July '98. It is hoped that it will be placed in the next session of the Jatiya Sangsad after having the approval of the Cabinet.

The main objectives of the National Health Policy are to reach the people of all strata with necessary health services, to ensure easily available health care system to all, particularly the rural and poor urban population, to reduce the malnutrition in children and mothers and provide coordinated programme to increase nutrition for all, to reduce mortality rate of children and mothers and bring it to an acceptable level in the next five years.

The other objectives are to ensure the presence of doctors, nurses and other employees in the hospitals and to ensure availability of necessary equipments and supply of medicines and to keep the standard health care services to satisfactory level. Formulation of a definite policy regarding the medical colleges and private clinics and introduction of rules and procedure for running those institutions effectively are suggested in the policy. A special focus of the policy is to provide services to maximum number of people (about 85 per cent of the rural population). Details of the draft health policy can only be known after it is made public.

A national health policy was a long-awaited demand of the health professionals and also of the common people of the country. We all should strive hard towards having a people-oriented health policy. It is something yet to be achieved.