

Clearing Rots before Ensuring Rights

by Mir A Zaman

In a country like ours where the majority of the population are extremely poor, where survival is often mistaken for living, where dogs, cats and street children together sift through garbage for something to eat, insurance of child's rights is just another distant dream. We cannot simply afford to talk about the rights of the children, when we cannot ensure the rights of an individual.

THE boy ran across the road, ignoring the vehicles that sped along. One car screeched to a halt and the driver heaved a sigh of relief. A fatal accident had narrowly been averted. The boy appeared indifferent. He couldn't have been more than five. We would not let loose our kids on the busy streets of the capital. But his parents did. Maybe, he was an orphan. Maybe, he had no body to tell him he should not cross the road like that. Maybe. The on-lookers were happy that there hadn't been an accident. Little did they care that the boy might do the same thing again and luck might desert him next time.

Another day, another time and another place. A little girl, hardly two years of age, was almost run down by a car. She suddenly took a sprint across the road. The driver pressed down the brake as hard as possible but the car hit the girl anyway. But fortunately, apart from a few cuts and bruises, there was no serious damage. The shock was enough to leave her and the others around dumb-founded. But what followed was more stupefying. The girl's father came out of nowhere, dragged her on to her feet and started beating her mercilessly. In his violent rage, he might have forgot that he was about to lose his daughter for his own fault. He shouldn't have let the girl alone on the busy street in the first place. The on-lookers were only happy that the girl was alive and in the safe hands of her parent. But how safe the hands that let her alone on the busy streets are?

Cruel, heartless and so on, some termed the girl's father but they knew what the man did was out of frustration. He was angry not to his daughter. He was angry at life, angry at what it has to offer for poor people like him. Fight, fight and fight, just to earn living for the family. It takes so much out of him that he doesn't even have the time to pay attention to the tiny tot. Everyone knew that the

man would later regret, perhaps cry, for being so cruel to her. Like any parent, the man certainly wished the best things in life for his daughter. When an expensive car races by, with the happy face of a school girl in the company of an affluent father framed in the side screen, the man surely heaves a sigh. He would never be able to give his daughter such a secured life.

The man is just another face in the familiar lot.

In this land of the poor, food and clothes are the basic needs. There are lots of open spaces to spend the night on. Sleep for a few hours under the open sky is enough. Throughout the day, the fight is on for something to eat. Healthcare and education, they couldn't care much about. Majority of the country's population, more than 80 per cent, fight everyday for survival. Two meals a day is part of a sweet dream for many. In the land of foodless, shelterless mass, children's rights seem just another topic in academic discussion.

Education and healthcare "is not for my children," said Monu Mian of Gazipur, when asked if he ever thought of sending his three sons to school. "We are poor. Education is for rich people, not us."

Mian used to be a hand for hire. Extreme hard work over the years has taken its toll. Tuberculosis has been diagnosed. He can't work anymore. "They take care of me, now."

His wife works as a maid. The eldest of their three sons has followed in his father's steps. Their earnings together were not enough. So when a 'generous' family wanted their second son to help them in domestic chores, the parents were more than grateful. Concerns that their little boy, aged about seven, might be asked to do heavy household works like washing and mopping the floors, took a back seat. They were relieved. At least the boy would not starve.

When the primary concern for people like Monu Mian is

ensuring food and clothes for the family, Monu Mian's children and many others don't even dream of education and health care. The moment they are able to walk and do things on their own, they are out there on the streets, exponents in the economics of existence. Poor parents have little choice. Poverty has their hands tied. Reservation to fate is complete.

The children of these hapless and helpless parents, on the other hand, have accepted what life has on offer for them. Those who have found a working place — at a restaurant, at an automobile garage or at a house to do domestic chores — deem themselves fortunate; at least they have a place to stay, two decent meals a day and even some used clothes once in a while. Despite the professional hazards like a slap or even severe beating from the employer for not 'delivering' inadequate care for even minimum medical needs, etc., life is 'secured' for these child workers. But for those who don't have a 'permanent' job, life is more difficult a proposition. They do whatever job they get. Most of them take to begging; although uncertain, it requires less exertion. Others sell newspapers, cigarettes, cheap chocolates, flowers, even water at parks, malls and on streetsides. Stop your car at a traffic light, they will rush to you. "Sir, please take some flowers... sir, do you need cigarette?... sir, please buy two chocolates from me. I haven't eaten anything since morning... need newspapers, Janakantha... Janakantha, Inqilab... Inqilab, Ittefaq... Ittefaq..."

They are not welcome by fellow 'professionals'. The adults regard them as an impediment to 'good income'. Last month, some registered porters at the Kamalapur Railway Station bundled some 40 children into a wagon on a Mymensingh-bound local train. These children were eating into their daily income.

More often than not we fail to differentiate between rites

and rights and thus, we restrict our efforts towards ensuring the child's rights to some rituals. We hold rallies, arrange seminar and symposia to observe the Child's Rights Week every year, but then for the rest of the year conveniently become indifferent. Whenever there is an incident of a child abuse, we raise storm in the cup and then simply forget it.

States Parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognised in the convention. With regard to economic, social and cultural rights, States Parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resource and, where needed, within the framework of international cooperation.

says Article 4 of the UN convention on child's rights. In a country like ours where the majority of the population are extremely poor, where survival is often mistaken for living, where dogs, cats and street children together sift through garbage for something to eat, insurance of child's rights is just another distant dream. We cannot simply afford to talk about the rights of the children, when we cannot ensure the rights of an individual.

The focus should not only be on one particular aspect of human rights, at least not in the context of a poor nation like ours; "appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures" should be directed towards eradication of poverty. When the adults have jobs to earn living for the family, our children won't have to come outdoors to work. Otherwise, the child's rights will only be applicable to the children of the solvent class and poor parents would only regret their inability to protect their child from "economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous... to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development."

THE voters in the French-speaking Quebec province (7.4 million people) in Canada have re-elected on 1st December the separatist leader Mr. Lucien Bouchard as the Premier and sent a strong message that they were not yet prepared to abandon the option of breaking away from the rest of Canada. The Liberal Party leader and anti-separatist Mr. Jean Charest lost the election. Mr. Bouchard has pledged to hold another referendum on separation as soon as "the winning conditions" would exist for the separatists in Quebec.

The people in Quebec nurtured the dream of its independence for a long time. It was re-activated when French President Charles de Gaulle during his visit to the province raised a French toast. Thereafter the push for independence was acted upon through referendums but the separatists lost previous two referendums on the issue in 1980 and 1995. The last one was lost with a narrow margin.

Only seven weeks ago when the election was called, it was predicted that Mr. Charest would win the election and the issue of separation would be put

Will Quebec Province Break Away from Canada?

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

The election victory of the separatist party in Quebec has introduced an element of political distrust as Canada enters into the 21st century.

It is interesting that although the voters supported Mr. Bouchard, they do not want separation from Canada. One voter was heard saying "I voted for Bouchard... I do not want Quebec to separate. I am keeping my Canadian passport. I want to work for the UN. I want to be Canadian." This means that those who voted for Mr. Bouchard were not necessarily the supporters of separation. Many voters supported Mr. Bouchard not because he wanted to make Quebec a separate country but because he was perceived as a better economic manager and a smart campaigner compared to his political opponent Mr. Charest.

The election result demonstrates that the majority of the people in Quebec do not want another referendum just yet. What they want is a better deal

for Quebec within Canada. The Canadian Federal government in Ottawa will be relieved, the Liberal Party did well enough to dampen Mr. Bouchard of having a referendum immediately. The "winning condition" for the referendum appears to be far away. Mr. Bouchard may use the separation issue as a lever to win more financial concessions from Ottawa. This tactic may not be successful as the English-speaking Canada seems to be tired of Quebec's flirtation with separation.

The result provides a message that the people of Quebec do not want to separate from Canada but they kept the option available. Political analysts believe that in doing so, the Quebecois can and may use the threat of separation to their own advantage. However, the election victory of the separatist party in Quebec has introduced an element of political distrust as Canada enters into the 21st century. It appears that the people of Canada are likely to be the losers in maintaining this political uncertainty.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the United Nations in Europe.

Exploring the Red Planet

by Radhakrishna Rao

Both the Pathfinder and Sojourner sent back excellent pictures on the dynamics of Martian atmosphere. More than 16,000 pictures transmitted by Pathfinder have shown signs of water and heat — two critical elements of life — on Mars.

FOR more than a decade now, planetary researchers in the US have been speculating about the existence of primitive life forms on Mars whose seasonal cycle is very similar to that on earth.

Against this backdrop, the 890-kg Pathfinder probe, launched in December 1996 and which landed on Martian surface in July this year, has opened up the way for exploring the planet in greater depth in the years ahead. In fact, the Mars Pathfinder became the first spacecraft to land on the red planet in more than 20 years.

Essentially, Pathfinder was intended to demonstrate that a low cost entry descent and landing system can be used to deliver a science payload and robotic rover to the surface of Mars on future missions.

In late September this year, scientists and engineers of the American space outfit National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) bid a reluctant farewell to the highly successful Pathfinder after it went out of control.

The 266 million US dollar mission has been described as "an unqualified success". Scientifically, we have received more information than anyone could have hoped or programmed," said Mathew Golabek, the project scientist associated with the mission.

The most significant feature of Pathfinder was that it arrived on Mars with a tiny six-wheeled microwave oven sized boggy Sojourner which became the first ever man-made mobile explorer on another planet.

Using infrared lasers to avoid hazards, the rover crawled at a steady pace of one centimeter per second to analyse Martian soil.

Sojourner's analysis of

Martian rocks have showed it to be rich in quartz.

Both the Pathfinder and Sojourner sent back excellent pictures on the dynamics of Martian atmosphere. More than 16,000 pictures transmitted by Pathfinder have shown signs of water and heat — two critical elements of life — on Mars.

Although two Viking space-craft orbited Mars for several years in 1976, they were not equipped to produce maps of the planet's mineralogy. Nor were the cameras designed to reveal the texture of the Martian landscape in sufficient details for planning landing for future spacecraft. And this drawback has been efficiently made good by the Pathfinder - Sojourner mission.

Indeed, the remarkably smart and dirt cheap Pathfinder and Sojourner have rekindled America's enthusiasm for space exploration that had somewhat dimmed after the space shuttle Challenger catastrophe that claimed the lives of seven astronauts in 1986.

According to NASA administrator Daniel Goldin, the Johnson space Centre in Houston is close to designing a manned probe to Mars that could cost less than 20 billion US dollar. As things stand now, the first manned mission to Mars could take off as early as in 2011.

All said and done, it is too early to hazard a guess whether the arid barren surface of Mars, which is nearly double the size of Earth, conceals a watery interior. The Martian atmosphere is made up of carbon dioxide, nitrogen, oxygen, water vapour and carbon monoxide. The average pressure is less than one hundredth of that on Earth.

This robotic mission will detect mineral deposits, create global weather charts and map Martian topography. Thus from May 1998 to January

2000, a period of one Martian year of 687 earth days, the Surveyor's cameras will take pictures of the entire planet in great detail.

Instrumentation packages onboard the spacecraft will measure the height of mountains and depths of valleys and establish the nature of planet's magnetic field. In particular, the mineral survey should lead to comprehensive map of the planet's resources for future human explorers and the regions where minerals suggest conditions that were once warmer and wet possibly conducive to some forms of life.

Mars presents the challenge of a new frontier, a place we can plant a new branch of human civilisation," says Robert Zubrin, President of Pioneer Astronautics, an aerospace consultancy in Indian Hills.

Launched on board Delta-2 rocket from Kennedy Space Centre in November, 1996 the Global Surveyor Mission will gather scientific data and wait for Mars to move into correct alignment with the sun for the mapping mission.

Based on the success of Pathfinder and Global Surveyor mission, NASA and its international collaborators plan to launch a series of low-cost spacecraft to Mars over two years. This will find its ground culmination in a sample return mission slated for a launch in 2005.

As things stand now towards the close of 1998, NASA hopes to launch Mars survey mission involving Orbiter and Lander mission. While the Orbiter is designed to measure atmospheric water content during seasonal cycles, the Lander will probe past and present day water reserves on the Red Planet.

— APB / PTI Feature

by Jim Davis

SHE HAD A GOOD REASON FOR NOT GOING OUT WITH ME.

SHE'S ALLERGIC TO GEEKS!

ACHOO!

IN THE MEANTIME, MAKE YOU AND THAT LEE BOND OUGHTA GET ACQUAINTED, HUH?

OK - WE'LL CHECK 'EM OUT

DON'T ASK ME... THE REST LOOK LIKE ORDINARY TOURISTS BUT I GOT NAMES AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF ALL THE NEW ARRIVALS

ANYBODY ELSE NEED SCREENING BESIDES BOND?

SHE HAD A GOOD REASON FOR NOT GOING OUT WITH ME.

SHE'S ALLERGIC TO GEEKS!

ACHOO!

IN THE MEANTIME, MAKE YOU AND THAT LEE BOND OUGHTA GET ACQUAINTED, HUH?

OK - WE'LL CHECK 'EM OUT

DON'T ASK ME... THE REST LOOK LIKE ORDINARY TOURISTS BUT I GOT NAMES AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF ALL THE NEW ARRIVALS

ANYBODY ELSE NEED SCREENING BESIDES BOND?

SHE HAD A GOOD REASON FOR NOT GOING OUT WITH ME.

SHE'S ALLERGIC TO GEEKS!

ACHOO!

IN THE MEANTIME, MAKE YOU AND THAT LEE BOND OUGHTA GET ACQUAINTED, HUH?

OK - WE'LL CHECK 'EM OUT

DON'T ASK ME... THE REST LOOK LIKE ORDINARY TOURISTS BUT I GOT NAMES AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF ALL THE NEW ARRIVALS

ANYBODY ELSE NEED SCREENING BESIDES BOND?

SHE HAD A GOOD REASON FOR NOT GOING OUT WITH ME.

SHE'S ALLERGIC TO GEEKS!

ACHOO!

IN THE MEANTIME, MAKE YOU AND THAT LEE BOND OUGHTA GET ACQUAINTED, HUH?

OK - WE'LL CHECK 'EM OUT

DON'T ASK ME... THE REST LOOK LIKE ORDINARY TOURISTS BUT I GOT NAMES AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF ALL THE NEW ARRIVALS

ANYBODY ELSE NEED SCREENING BESIDES BOND?

SHE HAD A GOOD REASON FOR NOT GOING OUT WITH ME.

SHE'S ALLERGIC TO GEEKS!

ACHOO!

IN THE MEANTIME, MAKE YOU AND THAT LEE BOND OUGHTA GET ACQUAINTED, HUH?

OK - WE'LL CHECK 'EM OUT

DON'T ASK ME... THE REST LOOK LIKE ORDINARY TOURISTS BUT I GOT NAMES AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF ALL THE NEW ARRIVALS

ANYBODY ELSE NEED SCREENING BESIDES BOND?

SHE HAD A GOOD REASON FOR NOT GOING OUT WITH ME.

SHE'S ALLERGIC TO GEEKS!

ACHOO!

IN THE MEANTIME, MAKE YOU AND THAT LEE BOND OUGHTA GET ACQUAINTED, HUH?

OK - WE'LL CHECK 'EM OUT

DON'T ASK ME... THE REST LOOK LIKE ORDINARY TOURISTS BUT I GOT NAMES AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF ALL THE NEW ARRIVALS

ANYBODY ELSE NEED SCREENING BESIDES BOND?

SHE HAD A GOOD REASON FOR NOT GOING OUT WITH ME.

SHE'S ALLERGIC TO GEEKS!

ACHOO!