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# Funeral fare for the final farewell

By Ekram Kabir

There are some unnoticed store-owners in town. They sell fragrances, scented-sticks, shroud and coffins for the dead. Dying may not actually be the aim of the majority of the living, but for these store-keepers, it has two interpretations — to eke out a living and "to serve a divine cause."

"We do not really receive death in our living consciousness, but our destiny is death and its aftermath. And this was the dominant thought when I got involved in this profession fifteen years ago at my Chankharpu residence," says Mohammad Amir Hossain, wearing a prudent smile.

This bearded middle-aged man may sound philosophically committed to what he is doing, but it's been seven years since Hossain shifted his outlet Chiro Bidaiy Store from Chankharpu to Katabon for better dividend.

"This area is habitat for more people than the old part of the city and have village-homes outside Dhaka, and thus they need to come and get funeral kits or coffins," says a comparatively well-off Hossain.

Why do people visit these stores?

"Well, it basically comes from a need: suppose your father or mother dies here in Dhaka city, and his/her last wish was to be buried at his/her village-home in Rangpur or Chittagong, then you become emotionally obliged to take the body of the deceased quite a long way. It may take — which usually is — a long time to reach there; and nobody wants the soul-less body to get putrefied before burial; so for this purpose, you need a coffin," explains Mohammad Manik Munshi sitting in his Shesh Bidaiy Store, adjacent to Mirpur-10 graveyard.

For the too-pious Munshi, this way of making a living is slow-moving and unpredictable, but he doesn't have any dejection. "Because a human's death is Allah's wish," he says, adding, "I must not regret saying that I don't have many customers for funeral kits; on the other hand, I cannot pray to Allah to send customers here. That will be against the will of Allah making Him angry towards me...I cannot afford to commit such a sin."

Munshi sells four funeral kits per month which cost Taka 350 each and on average five coffins each at Taka 500. Also, there are times, commerce is zero for him. "So, to meet my day-to-day living, I keep other sellable items that are everyday requirement of the dwellers in this neighbourhood."

But on the contrary, a couple of kilometres away from Mirpur, in Katabon, a good number of 25 coffins on an average are sold out to both Muslims and Christians, their price ranging from Taka 350 to 400.

"If anybody wants a decorous coffin, then the price goes up to at least 800 taka, but such buyer comes once in a blue moon," says Amir Hossain, adding with a sigh: "Nobody wants to spend much on a dead body, no matter how close the clan-members were to the expired one, you know; and to me, that's a sad part of my awareness."

Apart from this, Hossain is quite happy and doesn't need to do anything else other than



Merchants of doom: One of the funeral parlours in the city, specialising in merchandise that nobody wants to buy, but all have to use one day. Star Photo: Zahedul I Khan

this. But Mohammad Jasim and Abdul Karim at their Sheorapara Al-Bidayi Store do. They cannot live only on selling coffins and other items for a decent living, they have a metals-fusing shop alongside their store.

Selling only four coffins in November, they also don't have any regrets. Because they think they are serving the humanity. "We take business as it comes," says Jasim, supplementing: "Actually, we don't hang on to this trade for a living at all; to me, it's a satisfaction of my own soul. I am happy that I can help near ones of the departed one so that they don't have to go through any hassle in finding commodities that usually go with the dead."

Twenty per cent of Jasim's funeral kits get distributed free among those who cannot afford Taka 400 to 500.

None of these shop-keepers has the correct statistics as to how many of such stores are there in Dhaka, and it is apparent from their guess-computation that they don't have any correlation among them, for they differ on the numbers. According to Mohammad Amir Hossain in Katabon, there are about 50 shops, and on the other hand Manik Munshi in Mirpur says, "It would be 15 to 20."

As far as these people's death-related philosophy and commerce are concerned, the living may be inclined to think about the Nature's great doctrine of immortality that seeks to teach that there's no radical difference between sleep and death, and that the latter endangers one's being as little as the former.

# Health misses the boat

By Naimul Haq

The Fourth Population and Health Project (FPHP) that took six and a half years for implementation instead of originally planned five had areas of missed opportunities.

The World Bank Review Mission that studied implementation of the FPHP from June 2-15 further this year said, "The key among these missed opportunities are maternal health and services programme efficiency and human resource development." It further said, "The progress in the programmes has been modest. Most systems improvement sub-components have little achievement to show. Others did not take off fully."

The WB in a letter to the health ministry said, "Routine administrative weaknesses constrained many project performances."

In its report, titled the Status of FPHP Individual Sub-components, the mission said, the "National Institute of Population and Research and Training (NIPORT) could not utilise funds because NIPORT project paper for 1997-98 has not yet been approved by the government. A review of NIPORT's training programmes shows achievement of only 32 per cent of the target at the headquarters and an average of 51 per cent at all levels."

On the research side, the review report said, "No new training-related study was undertaken during the same period due to lack of funds."

Reviewing the Traditional Birth Attendant (TBAs) sub-component the mission said, "There has been significant delay in carrying out the orientation programme of the community leaders, trained TBAs and family planning workers due to lengthy selection of NGOs... Only 7.5 per cent births are being attended by TBAs despite providing training to 40,000 TBAs, one-month refresher training to about 3000 family planning workers."

About the Warehouse and Distribution System for MCH and FP Programme sub-component, the report said, "The quarterly co-ordination meetings chaired by the director, logistics and supplies, have become irregular. The last meeting was held in April 1998 after six months. Monthly reports on stock positions at various levels, projected consumption, planned shipment for all major items under MCH/FP programme are available. But the reports are hardly ever used for purpose e.g. timely initiation of procurement or placing of orders."

As regards the performance of 'Family Planning Services Delivery' sub-component, the mission said, "Between 1992 and 1997 average monthly performance sterilisation declined from 20,000 to 3,500 and in IUD insertions from 30,000 to 15,000."

It also said, "Discontinuation rates among the contraceptive users remain high with nearly half of them discontinuing in the first 12 months of use. Discontinuation rates for the pill, injectable, condom and IUD are 44 per cent, 51 per cent, 65 per cent and 41 per cent respectively."

On the 'Population Cell in Bangladesh Television' sub-component it said, "The potential of this cell as an important channel in the sector has not been fully exploited. The project has been a slow moving one, which is obvious from the slow disbursement rate. The original FPHP allocation had to be reduced. There seems to be a lack of full commitment on the part of ministry of information. Frequent change in project directors has also been hampering the implementation. There were provisions for procuring modern studio equipment since 1992 but due to non-utilisation, the fund was diverted."

Reviewing the 'Establishment of HFWCs & Upgradation of RDs', the WB mission said, "The quality of construction, repair and maintenance has been less than satisfactory. This has been due to weak contract management and supervision by the consultants."

About the 'Development of NIPSON and RUD' the report said, "The main objective of the project was to improve quality of teaching and research... To what extent that has been achieved is not yet clear."

On the occasion, President Shahabuddin and Begum Shahabuddin hosted a reception for freedom fighters, political leaders, country's leading personalities, journalists and diplomats at Bangabhaban in the afternoon.

After the National Mausoleum offerings, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina laid bouquet on the portrait of father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Bangabandhu Museum in the capital in the morning.

She also inaugurated the Independence Monument at historic Suhrawardy Uddyan from where Bangabandhu had proclaimed country's independence in his historic speech on March 7, 1971.

Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar put up special programmes highlighting the significance of the day. Newspapers brought out special supplements.

Special prayers were offered in Mosques across the country seeking divine blessing for temporal and eternal good. Prayers also took place at other places of worship, including temples, churches and pagodas.

Inmates of jails, hospitals, orphanages and vagrant homes were served special diets. Some under-trial prisoners were freed on the occasion with a hope that they would engage themselves in nation-building activities.

On the Victory Day, Bangladesh Army, Bangladesh Navy, Bangladesh Air Force, Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), Police, Ansar and Village Defence Party (VDP) performed at different points in the city.

Training planes of Bangladesh Air Force flew low spraying coloured smokes over the cities like Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Barisal.

# 15 drown in launch tragedy

From Ehsanul Haque

NARAYANGANJ, Dec 17: At least 15 people including two women drowned when a passenger launch partially sank in the Buriganga near Panchabati Gudaraghat under Fatullah thana at around 8:45 a.m. today.

Many others are feared trapped in the launch. The district administration, however, did not confirm it.

One of the survivors, Zakir Hossain, 26, said that his four-year-old daughter Chhanda was missing.

Local people, police and divers recovered the 15 dead bodies and handed over those to the victims' relatives without any autopsy, officials said.

Eleven of the victims were identified as Abdul Motalab (35), Gopal Nath Banik (40), Abdurrahman Mollah (65), Malek Molla (40), Narayan Rishi (45), Mariani (40), Mariani's husband Sajedul Haq (48), Abdul Matin (50), Shahabuddin (40) and Babul (12) from Munshiganj and Ali Ashraf (35) from Fatullah. Four others including a woman could not be identified till the filing of this report at around 10 pm.

The overloaded launch - Green Arrow - owned by a private company was on its way to Dhaka from Munshiganj. It was carrying around 200 passengers.

The launch sank as its roof collapsed when it hit a partly submerged pile of bricks near the river bank.

All the victims were trapped under the collapsed roof and could not come out though the launch sank near the bank. The driver and other staff of the launch fled the scene.

A BIWTA official requesting anonymity said the roof of the launch collapsed as it was defective. "Most of the launches are given licence without examining fitness and these do not even have necessary support materials including life jackets and furniture. These vessels operate in the absence of checking as per rules."

Zakir Hossain told this correspondent that the passengers had earlier requested the launch staff not to take any

# Who is correct?

By Nurul Kabir

Results of how many centres of the Ramna-Tejgaon parliamentary constituency (Dhaka-10) have been declared void? Fifty-one, some 40, 37 or 31?

On November 30, the local press reported that an election tribunal had declared results of 51 centres, out of a total 78, null and void.

Most of the newspapers quoted a statement issued by Abdul Mannan, the BNP candidate who lost to Dr. H M Iqbal in the June 1996 vote.

The Election Commission has a different story to tell. EC secretary Abdullah Harun Pasha said yesterday that the number of polling centres was 31.

"Results of 31 centres - not 51 - were cancelled by the tribunal. I have seen the verdict myself," the Secretary told The Daily Star.

The candidate who will suffer if the verdict eventually takes effect has his own numbers. "Well, actually the number is some 40," Dr. Iqbal told The Daily Star over telephone.

Explaining, the ALP who has already challenged the verdict in the High Court and got a stay order on December 10 said: "There are cases where the tribunal has mentioned about male and female polling centres, but counted them as one centre. So there is scope to count them separately, and in that case the number could be raised to some 40 - not 51 as claimed by the BNP candidate."

Meanwhile, Iqbal's lawyer Brister Shamshuddin Chowdhury found the number of the controversial polling centres to be 37. "The verdict, in this regard, is vague. It's true that the judge concerned has mentioned about 31 centres. But if you count the male and female centres separately, we have seen, the results of 37 centres have been declared null and void."

# Fresh vow to materialise spirit of Liberation War

The nation celebrated 28th Victory Day on Wednesday with a fresh vow to materialise the spirit of Liberation War, reports UNB.

On this day in 1971, Bangladesh came into being when Pakistani occupation forces surrendered to the Joint Command of Forces of Bangladesh and India after a nine-month bloody war that cost 30 lakh lives and chastity of two lakh women.

Thousands of people thronged the National Mausoleum to pay tributes to the valiant sons of the soil who laid down their lives for country's independence.

President Shahabuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleida Zia issued separate messages on the occasion urging the countrymen to work together for national development.

The day was a public holiday. National flag was hoisted atop government offices, private buildings. The day was heralded with a 31-gun salute.

The government as well as different political parties, socio-cultural organisations and professional bodies chalked out elaborate programmes to celebrate the day.

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Naval ships remained open for the public at the ports of Chittagong, Khulna, Mongla as well as at Dhaka Sadarghat, Narayanganj, Chandpur and Barisal.

Ruling Awami League, opposition BNP, Jatiya Party, JSD, Left Democratic Front and other political parties as well as various socio-cultural organisations, student and professional bodies laid wreath at Savar National Mausoleum.

Thousands of people thronged Dhaka University campus to enjoy the most attractive Victory Day function organised by Sammilita Sangskritik Jote.

# Cop's tragic own goal

By Staff Correspondent

A policeman shot and killed a fellow cop at the residence of the deputy commissioner (traffic) at Babar Road, Mohammadpur, yesterday morning.

Police identified the victim as Naik Mohammad Shahidur Rahman, 35, (Naik No 8882) of Nilphamari and the alleged killer as Sheikh Bakul Hossain (Constable No. 16354).

The incident took place at about 11:10 in the morning yesterday.

The two were part of a four-man security team for the DC's residence and were on duty Wednesday night. The Naik, the team leader, was not happy with Bakul for his negligence to duty and threatened action against him, police sources said.

As the Naik was drafting a formal complaint against the constable, the latter got angry and allegedly shot him from behind, the sources said. The bullet pierced through the victim's chest. The Naik died on the spot and the constable ran away.

Meanwhile, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police has said it will reward anybody who can help his arrest.

# Pretext for US blitz on Baghdad

From Page 1

technological arm."

Dr Hazim el-Nasri, head of the Al-Yarmouk Hospital in Baghdad, said two people were killed and more than 30 were wounded, suffering mostly burns to the face, hands and legs. But the full casualty toll was not known, and there was no official word.

"Where is this Clinton? I wish I could get my hands on him," mumbled Salam Mohammed, 34, as he moaned on his hospital bed, his face bandaged and his body trembling.

Unlike a previous US attack on the city in 1993, there was no blackout this time. The streets were brightly lit, as were many homes when the attack began.

The total damage from the attack could not be immediately assessed. Iraqi officials took reporters to Karada, a mixed commercial and residential neighborhood, where a missile had landed, bursting water mains in a street.

A two kilometer (one mile) stretch of the street was flooded.

Karada is across the Tigris River from the Old Presidential Complex, but it was not clear if the palace was damaged.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called the events a "sad day for the world," saying he did everything in his power to seek peace. But he didn't say whether the attacks were justified.

In his speech, Clinton said the campaign against Iraq will be a "strong sustained series of airstrikes," indicating that more strikes are likely in the next few days.

There are 24,100 US troops, 22 warships, including eight equipped to fire cruise missiles, 210 aircraft and the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise in the Gulf off the coast of southern Iraq. The forces are bolstered with 15 B-52 heavy bombers.

In the attacks, the warships fired hundreds of Tomahawk cruise missiles, and Navy EA-6B attack planes struck against Iraqi air defense radars. Pentagon officials said.

The United States hopes the attacks will achieve what the UN Security Commission, or UNSC, says it has not been able to achieve in seven years of work: destroy Iraq's ability to produce weapons of mass destruction, specifically chemical and biological arms.

"Instead of the inspectors disarming Saddam, Saddam is disarming the inspectors," Clinton said.

The UN Security Council will not lift economic sanctions

imposed on Iraq for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait until the inspectors certify that Iraq is free of chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles and programmes to build them.

Iraq accuses the chief inspector, Richard Butler, of being a US puppet who is deliberately prolonging the sanctions.

Butler withdrew all his weapons inspectors from Baghdad on Wednesday, accusing Iraq of going back on its promise last month to cooperate fully with UNSC. That promise had saved Iraq from an imminent US attack on Nov 14.

Butler cited Iraq's recent refusal to allow a team of inspectors into a headquarters of the ruling Baath Party. He also said Iraq was obstructing and evading the inspectors.

Many of the UN humanitarian staff remained in Iraq, and the spokesman, George Somerville, said they had received no instructions to evacuate. He said 133 UN staff had stayed in Baghdad, and 233 staff remained in northern Iraq.

"We are still waiting for instructions from New York," he said.

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), based in the Saudi Arabian Red Sea city of Jeddah, said its secretary-general Azzeddine Laraki issued an urgent appeal for an immediate halt to military action against Iraq, and a return to dialogue to spare the Iraqi people more suffering.

The OIC groups 55 Muslim countries from across the world.

"Iraq is target again to military strikes carried out in vague circumstances and unknown intentions," said an OIC statement sent to Reuters.

"The secretary-general has expressed his condemnation of these strikes and his concern over these dangerous developments and their repercussions on Iraq and the region," it said.

"He asserted that the solution to this current crisis is not through military action, but through positive dialogue that guarantees an implementation of Security Council resolutions and preserves Iraq's sovereignty, unity and safety of its people."

In Cairo, Arab League Secretary-General Esmat Abdel-Meguid today denounced the US led attack on Iraq as aggression against an Arab country that would not solve Baghdad's dispute with the United Nations over arms inspections, reports Reuters.

"This strike is considered to be an act of aggression against an Arab country that was trying to implement and comply with UN Security Council resolutions, Abdel-Meguid said.

Meanwhile, further reports from Dubai say that Middle East states condemned Thursday's US and British military strikes against Iraq and Palestinians called for an emergency Arab summit.

The Palestinian authority urged Arab states to convene an emergency summit that would call for an immediate end to the missile strikes.

"We condemn this unjustifiable attack on Iraq and appeal for Arab countries to convene an urgent summit... to call without delay for a halt to the attacks," Ahmed Abdel-Rahman, general secretary of the Palestinian cabinet, told Reuters.

Lebanon's new prime minister, Selim al-Hoss, denounced the attacks and urged Washington to stop the raids to demonstrate even-handed policy in the Middle East.

"We are asking the United States to stop this aggression and lift sanctions off the Iraqi people and show commitment to a fair position or the region's issues," he said.

Iraq said the strikes were willful, unacceptable would worsen the suffering of the Iraqi people and increased instability in the region. It called for United Nations action to halt the operation.

At the same time, it urged Baghdad - its foe in an eight-year war that ended in 1988 - to cooperate with the world body to implement Security Council resolutions.

In the first official reaction by a Gulf Arab state, the Omani foreign ministry expressed the Sultanate's deep sorrow over the renewed confrontation with Iraq.

A foreign ministry spokesman quoted by the officials news agency ONA urged Iraq to show more readiness to cooperate with the United Nations and called on the international community to exert immediate and comprehensive efforts to ensure a resumption of cooperation between Iraq and the United Nations. US and British forces in the Gulf launched the raids as the Muslim world awaited the start of the holy month of Ramadan, which begins tomorrow or Saturday.

In Saudi Arabia, a key US ally, Al-Riyadh daily said the political aims of the big powers were not pure and did not adhere to human rights where their interests were concerned.

Saudi newspapers voiced strong support for the suffering of the Iraqi people but blamed the strikes on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein for dragging his country into another conflict.

# Sen on Health

From Page 1

They spend all their savings or sell their assets in times of such devastating illness, she noted with regret, saying health problem, therefore, means much more to the poor.

The Prime Minister said to Prof Sen: "We have learnt from your writings and analysis that just having adequate food stock is not enough to avert a famine, the question of 'entitlement' or purchasing power is crucial."

Bangladesh, she pointed out, just had the worst flood in living memory. Even after such an unprecedented deluge and loss of property and crops, there were no reports of death from hunger or shortage of food.

"This has been possible through the firm institution of, in your own words, public action," she said, adding that the government faced this calamity with firm determination, courage and resources.

She said like many other developing countries, spread of education, access to healthcare or status of women are still at a relatively low level in Bangladesh.

"Your research and its recognition once again reminds us of the importance of these in our development efforts. We wish to assure you that we'll take the human development agenda forward with a renewed zeal and commitment," she told the Noble laureate.

In this task, she said, "we look forward to your advice. Professor Amartya Sen, please accept our warm felicitations once again. We are indeed proud of you."

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