

Health Policy on Unhealthy Note

THE draft national health policy was okayed by the Cabinet on Monday when the latter was assured by the Minister for Health that a mere approval of it would not entail any expenditure. This sounds stranger than fiction. Not only in the essence does it make light of the people's constitutional right to healthcare but also sends a poor signal about the government's going about the business in earnest. The vibe seems to be: well, approve it now, and then we will see how much of it can be implemented.

This word-play may well have given a new twist to the purpose of policy formulation. Is the health policy meant to be a bundle of papers only?

The initial diffidence of the cabinet to okay it apparently stemmed from the fact that the Finance Ministry had objections to some provisions in the draft that entailed an expenditure the government could ill-afford at the moment. Besides, the Establishment Ministry thought the draft policy involved hiring new manpower, a prospect that could break the current moratorium on recruitment. These may be the technical nitty-gritties alright; but what we fail to understand is: why these were not sorted out before the draft policy was presented for an approval by the cabinet? In conventional wisdom, the right approach to go about it would have been to have the budgetary provisions ready in the first place and then set a time-table for the implementation of the policy. For all practical purposes, it would take the life-time of a few budgets to be in the mainstream of the implementation work. In that perspective it has to be treated as an on-going process and the sooner we made a start the better for us.

That is one way of looking at it, the other way of seeing it is this: it is after all a draft policy and why assume that it would not undergo any changes during its passage through the parliament when it comes to that?

Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, who headed one of the five sub-committees that were involved in the policy-making exercise, has complaints that his views were not embodied in the draft. In public interest Dr. Chowdhury should perhaps make a recital of his ideas alleged to have been left out of the draft.

Since the national health policy will become the property of the people there ought to be public discussion on it as well.

An Avoidable Tragedy

THE tragic death of a still unknown number of passengers in the launch capsized on the Meghna estuary near Bhola could have been avoided. It has now come to light that passengers had forewarned the 'Sareng' of the ill-fated MV Dweep Kanya of the impending storm with requests to anchor at a nearby island, but the Master of the boat thought otherwise and the craft headed for disaster. Many of the passengers were locked in the lower deck to avoid rush to the rooftop, as alleged by the survivors and this increased the number of casualties.

Launch disasters in this riverine country is no new phenomenon. Every year droves of people lose their lives in such accidents, specially during the season of norwesters. Lot of heat is generated each year after the mishaps are reported in the papers but in the end it turns out to be a cry in the wilderness.

Nothing worthwhile is achieved and no sincere efforts are made to remove the causes of such accidents. In most cases the launches are made of junk material with faulty designs. The authorities have had no control over all these. Then there is the big question about the fitness of the vessels that are allowed to carry thousands of passengers every year. There is absolutely no supervision of the number of passengers each vessel is licenced to carry. As a result, all of them carry three or four times more than their capacity. There is hardly any safety equipment or proper manning of the vessels. In the case of MV Dweep Kanya it was alleged that the assistant to the Master was on the driver's seat at the time of the accident. These things have to be seriously investigated into with the culprits brought to book.

The authorities need to enforce the existing laws stringently, specially those relating to overloading and minimum safety precautions. They should also go for longer term structural measures to upgrade the conditions of vessels.

Welcome End to RC Deadlock

PCJSS leader Shantu Larma's decision to finally take charge of the Regional Council for the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) certainly comes as a big booster for implementation of the peace accord signed more than one and a half years back. Larma's consent follows the government's assurance of a review and revision of certain 'inconsistencies' in the three hill district council (amended) acts, thereby ending a seven-month impasse between the two sides and burying lingering doubts, over peace in the region.

Ever since the Regional Council Act, 1998 and the hill district council (amended) acts were passed by the parliament, the PCJSS has voiced its reservations against certain provisions it felt were in contradiction with the peace accord. The delay in implementation of the peace accord, caused by the government-PCJSS gridlock, not only suspended a crucial land commission survey but also gave a group of tribesmen the leeway to engineer an awkward law and order situation, which led to several deaths. Besides, the promised European Union aid for infrastructure development was also held up. The EU has attached fulfilment of stipulations incorporated in the peace accord as a precondition to release of the fund. On the whole, the scenario looked inauspicious for the accord.

Thankfully, both the government and the PCJSS have developed the right rapport to carry forward the task. Belated though, their realisation that peace and development are intertwined augurs well for the region ravaged by years of bloody conflict. We congratulate both sides on reaching an agreement to give the peace process a much-needed boost.

The Time is Right for an Asian Fund

The creation of an Asian Monetary Fund (or an Asian Fund) would play a significant role in achieving objectives for Bangladesh and other countries in this region. . . It could also provide financial resources to supplement IMF programme in the region and play the same complementary role as the Asian Development Bank plays to the World Bank.

IT was a pleasant surprise to see that Finance Minister S. A. M. Kibria, while addressing the ESCAP meetings at Bangkok last week, has called for the creation of an Asian Fund in order to complement the assistance provided by the IMF. In recent months, officials in Hong Kong and Thailand have also expressed their interest in establishing a regional organisation similar to the IMF. It is time that the policy makers in different countries in the region seriously consider the prospects of creating such a Fund in order to avoid financial crises similar to the one that has engulfed the entire region since 1997.

In an earlier article on this page, I had also suggested the need for such a Fund (The Need for an Asian Monetary Fund, DS, January 16). Today I would like to reiterate my position and explain why an Asian Fund would be in the best interest of all the countries in the region, including Bangladesh.

In the past two years, the financial crisis that began in Thailand has adversely affected a large number of nations and peoples around the world. This crisis has heightened the broad based awareness of the risks and opportunities of a global economy. While Bangladesh has remained relatively unaffected, the crisis has created additional risks to the economy. That is why Bangladesh has a critical stake in an effective response to this crisis, as well as in building a stronger, more stable international financial system for the future.

Our overall approach to international financial reform

should be to build a system that best promotes both global and regional growth, that best contributes to broadly sharing that growth, that is less prone to crisis, and that is better able to manage crises when they occur. Achieving these objectives means both working with other developing countries in the region to identify the policies they need to realise most effectively the benefits of global finance and integration while limiting its potential risks, and creating stronger incentives for these countries to put those policies in place.

The creation of an Asian Monetary Fund (or an Asian Fund) would play a significant role in achieving these objectives for Bangladesh and other countries in this region. It would help to prevent liquidity crisis. It could also provide financial resources to supplement IMF programme in the region and play the same complementary role as the Asian Development Bank plays to the World Bank.

The idea of an Asian Monetary Fund was initially floated by Japan in late 1997. Japan's generous offer, reportedly reaching about \$50 billion, could have ended the new institution with significant resources from the outset. But the trial balloon never received much attention as it was immediately rejected by the G-7 countries due to fears that it could undermine the leadership role of the IMF and lead to a split between Asia and North America. Several Asian countries, most notably China, also expressed their initial opposition to such a Fund. But China's opposition

advantages of creating such an institution. The major structural weakness as revealed by the Asian financial crisis is the absence of effective early warning and early action systems. No one predicted the regional spread of the economic downturn that

started with the collapse of the baht in Thailand. Given the current surge of globalisation, the world desperately needs effective early warning systems. Once developed, such warning systems can probably be applied most effectively at the regional level, as countries in the neighbourhood are much more likely than those farther away to detect emerging problems. An Asian Monetary Fund could provide the institutional locus of such an effort.

Experience from the recent crisis in Thailand shows that even when the problem was correctly identified, no preventive actions were taken. Consequently, Thailand's neighbours

were badly-burned by its failure to head off a crisis. Regional peer pressure is therefore the most promising route to induce anticipatory policy measures. The Thai experience shows that neighbouring countries have a legitimate right to apply such pressure.

The Manila Framework signed by the APEC countries in 1997 sought to start such a process on macroeconomic and monetary issues. The ASEAN countries are also following a similar track. But these processes have no formal status, secretariat or other institutional foundation and would be much more effective if rolled into one organisation as the Asian Monetary Fund.

The ability to provide financial resources to supplement IMF lending would obviously strengthen the Asian Monetary Fund's clout in pursuing its primary responsibilities for early warning and early action.

The proposed Fund needs to broaden its participation beyond the initial Asia only concept. It is clear that no single Asian country could effectively lead the effort. Any hint of Japanese domination will be rejected by many other countries in the region, and Japan's continued economic problems preclude its early leadership. China, despite its praiseworthy performance during the recent financial crisis, is not yet ready

for such a role. Hence countries from outside Asia should be encouraged in participating in the formation of the Asian Monetary Fund. Such a Fund would play an important role in the 'new international financial architecture' that will hopefully emerge from the current crisis engulfing the international financial markets.

Our Finance Minister deserves credit for raising the issue at the ESCAP meetings. He now needs to follow up with his counterparts in the region in order to lay the initial groundwork for creating such an organisation. There will be some resistance from vested quarters including the international bureaucracy. But we have to be persistent in what we feel is the right course of action for this region.

Just as the causes of the Asian financial crises were complex, so too are the issues faced in reforming the international financial 'architecture'. There are no simple answers or magic wands. There are often powerful competing considerations that need to be reconciled. The consequence is that the reform of the 'architecture' of the global financial markets is not going to involve a single dramatic announcement but a collection of actions over time. Some of these have already been taken or are in the process of happening. Others will take shape in the future. The creation of an Asian Monetary Fund is one of those issues that need to be seriously considered in the coming months.



Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Jesse Jackson's Free Lance Diplomacy and the Impending Doom for the Kosovars

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

With the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade last week, the move towards a negotiated settlement has accelerated. China must have realized that the missile technology it had been stealing from America is not perfect! Actually, the missile did hit its target; there was an intelligence failure. The building was thought to be a military installation, not the Chinese embassy. China is opposed to NATO bombing; it calls Kosovo crisis 'internal affair of Yugoslavia.'

Milosevic for freeing the captured American soldiers! Just when NATO bombing is beginning to bite, Mr. Jackson, who sounds more and more like a spokesman for Mr. Milosevic, wants NATO to give Milosevic some relief.

Jackson's visit was a propaganda bonanza for Milosevic. Jackson held Milosevic's hand and led him into a prayer meeting. Anyone watching on television must have wondered, why is the US and NATO so hard on this dog-shaven, neatly suited, religious gentleman. The devil must have been laughing his head off!

Jesse Jackson likes to be a hero. Now that he has managed to free the three US prisoners, and has become some sort of a hero in his own mind, he wants the US and NATO to adopt his friendly disposition towards Milosevic. He wants the US to negotiate with Milosevic (what have they been doing unsuccessfully for the last ten years, Jesse?) and stop bombing (how else do you pay Milosevic back for ethnic cleansing, Jesse?)

It is a pity that Mr. Jackson did not visit the refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania, as the British Prime Minister Tony Blair did. Had he witnessed the suffering of the ethnic Albanians first hand at the hands of his friend Milosevic's forces, as a member of the historically-persecuted minority

African-American community in America, he would not have asked President Clinton for a bombing pause; instead, he would have begged Slobodan Milosevic for an ethnic cleansing pause!

The first 400 of the estimated 20,000 Kosovar refugees the US has agreed to accept, arrived in the US last week. They landed at Fort Dix, New Jersey, about 15 miles from where the writer lives. The Islamic community of New Jersey have made arrangements to host and help as many as they can. Last Friday, the Imam of our local mosque, led the Kosovars in the Friday Ju'ma prayers. Those Kosovars who arrive in the US, will be safe, will have a roof over their head and will not die of hunger. But what about those in refugee camps and inside Kosovo?

With bombs falling all over Belgrade, Russian envoy Chernomyrdin has intensified his 'peace' efforts. Chernomyrdin knows that for NATO winning the war is not an option. NATO's fervent desire is to find a compromise that ceases expulsions and bombing, moves some displaced refugees back to southern Kosovo, and allow both NATO and Milosevic to declare victory. Already Jesse Jackson has declared ethnic cleansing and NATO bombing morally equivalent!

"By urging that Russia be the broker, NATO knows that they

can do no better than compromise with criminality. NATO is not fighting to win, but is merely punishing to settle." The central question that remains unanswered is: can a nation drive out an unwanted minority?

Take the case of Apache helicopters. The Apache helicopters are designed for close support of ground troops. Spotters give the pilots their assignments; pilots dart behind enemy lines, fire their rockets at targets they can eyeball, and then race back to safety. They are too vulnerable to roam looking for targets. With two Apaches already lost in training, it is very unlikely that President Clinton will authorize their use soon — a victory for Milosevic's thugs roaming the countryside in Kosovo.

President Clinton has so few followers in Congress, which refused to back his war efforts, because he himself is the world's leading follower, according to William Safire of the New York Times. "He steers not by compass, but by telltale, driven by polls that dictate both how far he can go and how little he can get away with."

Here is another example of NATO giving in to Russia and Yugoslavia. At first the returning Kosovars were to be protected by a "NATO force," rather than UN peace keepers. The fall back was a "NATO-led force,"

including the Russians. Now it is a force with "NATO at its core," with Russians, Ukrainians and Argentines; and with Hungarians and the Czechs to give the illusion of a fig-leaf "NATO core."

"If you were an ethnic-Albanian woman whose husband has been murdered, sister raped, children scattered and house burned down on orders from Belgrade — would you go back home under such feather-weight protection?", asks Safire. "Only a fool would trust an observer group so rotten to its core," Safire answers his own question. Whatever happened to the principle of no reward for internal aggression? This looks more and more like a triumph for mass murderers everywhere.

Just when Serbia is begging for a stop to bombing, NATO is eager to "diplomatically involve Russia." What this really means is: full Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo and repair of bombing damage. For the raped and ruined Kosovars, the right, not the incentive to return unarmed (without KLA), under the ostensible protection of UN observers wearing only side arms, and led by Russians. For NATO the withdrawal of Serbian regular forces, but not "police" who can be soldiers in

disguise. War crime trials will be balanced between low level Serbian paramilitary and KLA members — Saint Milosevic cannot be touched. This sell out is being dressed up as "autonomy for the Kosovars."

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It may be recalled that during Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971, China's official policy was that the genocide in East Pakistan was "an internal affair of Pakistan." If after all that has happened, Milosevic remains the President of Yugoslavia, Kosovo remains a part of Yugoslavia with Russian soldiers protecting the Serb criminals, the KLA is disarmed, and no Serb is punished for the destruction of life and property in Kosovo, what have we achieved? In this "peace," there is dividend only for Russia, who have spent not a penny to resolve the crisis, and their client, Yugoslavia. If President Clinton is not careful, he may go down with British Prime Minister Chamberlain (of "peace in our time" fame, with Hitler) as the two greatest appeasers of tyranny in the twentieth century!

For once, NATO and the West have the cat for the Muslims. The question is: are they trying to hit a ton, or are they throwing their wicket away?

OPINION

Hybrid Rice

Dr Abdul Aziz

The report on hybrid rice in daily newspapers on 8 May 1999 has drawn my attention. We would expect a report that is based on facts or scientific data/explanations. The report, on the contrary, is based on expectations by the importers of the hybrid seeds and by farmers as quoted below. "The total performance evaluation could be ascertained after the harvest and threshing of rice" said Siraj A Chowdhury, Executive Director of MacDonald, the importer. "I am expecting my maunds of hybrid rice in my 10-acre plot of land" said Anwar Hossain, a farmer of Narsingdi. It is also reported that impressed by the grain quality the demonstration farmers and their neighbours in Narsingdi and Kishoreganj are expecting a yield of about 10 tonnes/ha as against the national average yield of 1.84 ton/ha. In this regard, I would like to mention a few points here:

1) It would be a nice report if the reporter would wait till harvesting and analysis of result.

2) Assessment by the demonstration farmers and neighbours is not acceptable. There is Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE). They are eligible to do the research in different AEZs of Bangladesh, and after at least three years of testing they can say about the status of imported hybrid rice seeds. Evaluation by an NGO (Agricultural Advisory Society), perhaps assigned by the importer, would be doubtful to public minds.

3) Quoting national average yield of 1.84 ton/ha (for all types of rice, including deepwater rice) is irrelevant here. High yielding varieties released by BRRI which covers about 92 per cent of boro season can yield 6.0-6.6 ton/ha (could be up to 9.0 ton/ha) if properly managed as against expected 10 ton/ha by the hybrid seeds.

4) The management cost

(fertilizers, pesticides etc.) of hybrid rice cultivation is high, a critical factor for our farmers. Grain quality is also important and it depends on the seed quality, stickiness, protein content etc. Availability and cost of hybrid seeds (farmer will not be able to collect seeds for the next crop from his field) should have been considered. Moreover, there is chance of introducing new pests and diseases in our rice field ecosystem (because plant quarantine would be impossible for huge quantity of seeds, in fact it was not done this time).

In a recent scientific seminar vice-chancellor of a university mentioned that this year bumper boro harvest had been achieved because of imported hybrid rice seeds! It seems to be a highly exaggerated comment because, (a) compared to the vast requirement, only 2200 tonnes of seeds were supposed to be imported (again, perhaps not all seeds were sold), (b) the Executive Director of the MacDonald has mentioned that the total performance evaluation is yet to be ascertained (published in a section of press on 8 May), and (c) the percentage sterility is 30 per cent compared to 10 per cent in our HYV. Considering all these facts, I would like to reiterate my earlier suggestions published in a section of press in November last year for high yield goal:

a) Strengthen and improve the management skill of farmers, including timely supply of fertilizers and this can easily increase rice yield by 10 per cent.

b) Establish hybrid rice seed development cell, at BARI, Gazipur, and train scientists to meet the demand in 21st century, instead of importing hybrid rice seeds.

c) Government should immediately abandon the programme of importing the hybrid rice seeds.

The writer is a Professor of Botany, Dhaka University.

To the Editor...

It's a pity

Sir, I am shocked to learn that trees are about to be cut down in the many Uddyan of Dhaka. There are only a few trees in Dhaka city which has become extremely polluted in recent years. The air quality of the city is really dreadful.

Unnecessarily cutting of trees is morally debased. The authorities promise to plant several trees to replace those cut down is rather hollow since the authorities have done little in the past to plant more trees in the city. There is little reason to believe that the authorities will follow up on such promises. Besides it takes several years for trees to grow.

It would be a great pity if trees in one of the major remaining green areas of the city was replaced with some architectural monstrosity designed to serve the interest of a tiny self-indulgent elite.

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BUET baffles us

Sir, It is really a matter of shame that the "Best institution of Bangladesh" (probably self-declared but regarded to be so by many citizens) BUET had this type of experience. It is really a reflection of the students way of thinking and the demonstration of their ability to solve any problem. It is very true that when few people work together (especially when the action of one party affects the other and the later party does not have much to do about that) then there will be some dissatisfaction. Probably there are very few students who like their professors during their study period. But none of these facts validate the reason behind this type of occurrence.

But probably this can be thought as a continuation of

'unruly and arrogant' behaviour that they have demonstrated in the past. From one of the letters that was published in this column I came to know that one of the motif behind this type of action was to create a reason to close the university so that the students can watch the world cup cricket. And it seems quite plausible to me also. As a former student of this prestigious university when I hear this type of news from abroad I remember that during our 4th year 1st semester exam we had this type of problem. We had another world cup at that time. So the students started doing wrong things so that the authority closes the university. Among the very few, I was one who those who didn't listen to them and joined in the classes. But unfortunately we did not get any support from our professors. They seem to be quite happy with this type of unexpected vacation. We had a very tough time then.

A. F. M. Ataur Rahman
Class of '95

Please, don't blame others

Sir, How can the Opposition leader blame the ruling party for the murder of Yasmin in Dinajpur? My hometown being in the same district I am well aware of the people's sentiments and attitude. The people of Dinajpur are extremely civilized and down-to-earth. They are very easily misled and they tend to believe anything and everything. No matter how financially troubled they are, they prefer not to leave their birthplace and venture into other districts for a better future.

After the Yasmin murder the people simply flared up beyond expectation. And the BNP Government quite shamelessly tried to cover up the incident, and failed miserably. Because of the people's movement BNP was compelled to take action.

Then pray please tell Madame Xia, how can the present ruling government be in any way responsible for that murder? Please don't try to blame others to cover up your failure.

Masroor Ahmed Deepak
Dhaka

Buddhist heritage

Sir, The article on 29th April, 1999 by D K Barua on Buddhist cultural heritage in Bangladesh provides many of information which are important to researchers, pilgrims, tourists etc. Any student of South Asian history knows that Bengal was the core area where Buddhism in India came to its zenith between 6th and 12th century and that was the golden era of Buddhism in India after the great Emperor Asoka.

However, Buddhism virtually disappeared from among the people except in few localities. But the places of worship and many places holy to Buddhists were over and over there in ruins in many parts of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Bangladesh's majority of people professes Islam. Therefore, anybody outside the country commonly hold the view that government and people of Bangladesh (except the tiny Buddhist minority) are not interested in preserving someone else's heritage. Mr. Barua's article confirms this view.

Bangladesh has many priorities to get in order before moving into these areas. However, indifference towards Buddhist monuments exhibited by Archeology Department, according to Barua, is something which could not happen among researchers and scientists. The cultural heritage but places of worship holy to many Buddhists world over.

Therefore, fair-minded policymakers and those who implement such policies towards the Buddhist heritage and

places of worship in Bangladesh need to pay rightful attention to long over-due needs spelt out by Mr D K Barua without further delay.

R H S Samaratinga
Melbourne, Australia.

BCS Viva-Voce

Sir, PSC and the Secretariat Committee have been developing an updated and upgraded BCS examination system. It is definitely a good news and we hope PSC will be able to appoint the right persons to the right positions for the civil service.

It is true that when there is a chance of partiality there is a partiality. In the existing viva-voce system, worth 200 marks, there is a great chance to be partial to any particular candidate as no record of performance of the candidate is kept. As a result after being unsuccessful, candidates used to blame that they did well but failed due to malpractice of the Board. On the other hand, it is common to hear that the successful one that even though they did not do well in the exam but due to otherwise connection with the Board, they have passed. Such allegation however cannot be proved right or wrong.

But PSC can easily implement the tape recording system in the viva-voce session like TSE (Test of Spoken English) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System). If there is a record like this, the possibility of malpractice will become narrower. PSC takes about 300 tk per candidate as application fee. Very small amount of this will be needed for buying the tape equipments. PSC can also experiment the system with the foreign experts. More transparency in the system, will be able to rectify all the malpractice.

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