

Health Alert

AVAILABLE explanations on the basis of clinical manifestations of the mysterious deaths of Shamim Sultana, Sabib and Jolly in the span of three weeks — viral encephalitis or, in simple terms, viral attack of the brain and parasitic cerebral malaria — have, for obvious reasons, caused concern among the citizenry; more so for the very fact that the deadly diseases can be caused by mosquito bites. Detection of encephalitis requires a series of complicated test procedures. Unfortunately, the only virology department of the country, at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Medical University Hospital, by its head's own submission, lacks facilities for such tests. Therefore, there is no way of knowing whether we are faced with the bleak prospect of an epidemic before it actually strikes. The situation, ominous as it is, definitely demands a pro-active role from the government, especially the health ministry and agencies under its wings, on two levels: first, disseminating available details on the diseases including possible symptoms through mass media and other channels; and secondly, seeking assistance from the international research system on virology for preventive and curative medicine.

To start with, the health ministry should immediately convene a meeting of the leading virologists, get their views on the issue, find out whether there is the need for a health alert and map action plans accordingly. If need be, WHO's assistance should be sought, not only to plan the next step but also to get connected to the international research community engaged in scientific endeavours on both encephalitis and cerebral malaria. All the while, it should take people into confidence and inform them of the development on a regular basis. Moreover, there should be ample circulation of do's and don'ts among the public so that they can keep off the harm's way.

Threateningly, the situation is just a warning. There is a world-wide concern over the return of malaria, stronger than ever before. The implications are even more ominous for a developing country like ours where majority remain vulnerable to newer afflictions. So far it appears that the health ministry has shown an inexplicable indifference to the mysterious deaths. We urge them to pull up the socks to meet the menace.

Our Ties with the UN

WE have had the best of relations with the UN since our entry into it twenty-five years ago. Starting in our hour of need, and also through our baptism in the fire of an independence struggle, our association with the world body has only grown from strength to strength over the last most eventful quarter of a disappearing Century. We gratefully remember UNHCR's crucial assistance to Bangladeshi refugees in India during our Liberation War against the Pakistanis. Also we are indebted to the UN for having stood by us in the immediate aftermath of the country's birth to help us rebuild our war-ravaged life. Beyond those testing times we have been the beneficiary of multilateral cooperation extended under the UN system to our different sectors. These ranged from education to sanitation, women empowerment and rights of the child to healthcare, human rights to poverty alleviation.

In return for what we have got from the UN we have given the latter what we could in a steadily growing reciprocal relationship. We can be modestly proud of our contributions to the UN by way of massively participating in its peace-keeping operations and taking a leadership role for the LDCs.

We fully acknowledge the UN's valiant role in international affairs in a multipolar world under the leadership of its Secretary-General Kofi Annan. While celebrating the silver jubilee of Bangladesh's admission to UN we renew our support and commitments to the UN system and the principles it stands for. We endorse Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's call for restructuring the UN to make it 'more effective' in the present-day international scenario. It is the demand of the time that the UN became fully democratised with member-nations having mutual respect for each other's equality, sovereignty and culture.

Is Anybody Listening?

A small piece of news, published on the front page of The Daily Star yesterday, had more to it than met the eye. The news from Kathmandu said, The Nepali government is waging war on smoke-belching three wheel taxis blamed for rising pollution levels in Kathmandu, keeping tourists away and causing increasing health problems.

The harmful effects of two-stroke engines using fuel and oil mixture on public health, specially the health of children, have been pinpointed over and over again by us but to no avail. We have endorsed the idea of import of lead-free fuel and that of 4-stroke engines to minimise the dangers of lead poisoning of the air in Dhaka. Kathmandu has introduced 225 smoke-free battery-operated three-wheelers and has 128 running on liquefied petroleum gas. They have comparatively lesser number of three-wheelers playing the streets of Kathmandu valley than we have but that does not guarantee any lack of resistance from the operators of smoke-belching three-wheelers which have been ordered off the streets from last Saturday. The administration could face a tough battle for this justified decision; and what is important to note is that they are bracing themselves to it.

If Nepal can take such a bold decision in the greater interest of public health and health of the children why can't we follow suit? If the three-wheelers can be driven by liquefied petroleum gas in Kathmandu or are battery-operated why can't this happen in Dhaka? This will solve the problem to a great extent and add to this the use of lead-free fuel and you have come on top of lead poisoning.

Please do something immediately before it is too late. Is anybody listening?

EARLY last month when Boris Yeltsin, the mercurial President of Russian Federation made his fourth Prime Ministerial shuffle in 17 months, the people accustomed to many bizarre actions during his eight years of quixotic rule were hardly surprised. The president's latest political gambit was looked upon more as a mark of lunacy or caprice of an old decrepit despot worn down by chronic alcoholism. Yet the inquisitive observers seeking justifications were indeed non-plussed. The frequent replacement of the prime minister, the federation's second most powerful man was earlier attributed to the president's disdain for anyone who pulled public weight. But this could be said of Primakov or even Chernomyrdin but certainly not Stepashin, the last to fall from the grace of the president. In Russia's internal politics, though Yeltsin's actions were wildly irrational, there has always been a method in his madness. The present shuffle lacks even that method.

Because Stepashin, being a light weight in politics does not fall in the category to be envied by the president. Moreover in his four months of prime ministerial office he hardly had a chance to display his ambition or public weight even if he had any. On the other hand he was blindly loyal to Yeltsin who, he knew, was his maker. He did not have any serious disagreement on any issue with the president; neither did he by himself have any weight to throw about. Stepashin was plain security man enjoying, however, a measure of presiden-

tial patronisation. His successor, Vladimir Putin is equally a lacklustre man with a poor credential. Putin had been in the KGB before the Soviet disintegration and later the Deputy Chief of St. Petersburg administration. In 1996 he was picked up by Chubais, the architect of Russia's privatisation and an Yeltsin crony to be brought on to the Presidential Staff. Since then he has been with Boris Yeltsin — being appointed the Security Services Chief last year.

Given these profiles of the both there is no convincing reason for exchanging Stepashin with Putin. Some, of course, attribute the change to incipient intrigues in the 'family' which refers to the cluster of influential surrounding the president. It centres on Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana Diachenko and includes power brokers like president's Chief Adviser, Valentin Lomashov, Chief of Staff Alexander Voloshin, Anatoly Chubais and media tycoon Berezovsky. They have been constantly playing for presidential favour and patronisation but at the same time clashing with each other's interest. In some estimate the switch is associated with an waning influence of Diachenko and Berezovsky in the Kremlin's power-play.

However the observers dismiss it as an oversimplification and refers to a wider crisis

engulfing the presidency. In the twilight of his rule Yeltsin should have otherwise been preoccupied with the thoughts of how his legacy would be evaluated by the posterity. Instead he seems to be haunted by issues of more immediate concern. It is feared that the political forces hostile to him will capture power both in the Duma and Kremlin in next 10 months when the elections for parliament and presidency are due. Prevented by the constitution

by the master's frown, Russia of Tolstoy, Sputnik and invincible Red Army is no more awe or admired. It is now only a pallid shadow of its former self. It is now the poverty and crimes that stake the country's vast expanse. Will Russians forgive Yeltsin after all these ignominies to them? It's free market economy in hands of bandits and thieves who in turn finance the retailing of political power. In the name of democracy the influence peddling is institu-

period of so-called privatisation, to Swiss banks. As the authorities in Geneva made it clear, serious probe is afoot as regards major Kremlin links with Swiss accounts. Even if Russia's relatively poor legal system is allowed to come into play, Yeltsin will have to have powerful friends in the establishment to rescue him as well as the members of his family from looming disgrace.

Hence is an overwhelming urge for Yeltsin to fix the safety wires in places before it is too late. Although the senility of the despot largely account for taking some of his grotesque decisions, Boris Yeltsin's skill in his self-preservation cannot however be denied. And he amply demonstrated it in the past. In spite of an awkward mix of skill and whim he always knew what precisely was to be done to preserve his position and authority. Whether his latest gambit will work or not is a different matter.

In his attempt to perpetuate his authority during the transition period of next 10 months and even beyond he needs someone to be used as a pawn on the chessboard of power game. Putin fits in well exactly for that purpose. Mr Putin will be the most appropriate person to provide a quick safety net for the family in a transitional period when he would assume presidential authority pending elections. Obviously implicit in

Putin's appointment is Yeltsin's attempt to survive the struggle for authority in the Russian Federation that must be unfolding during the coming months. Just now Putin and other men of the security establishment are expected to grate of the presidency a citadel of power to make the dangerous experiments. If required, with Russia's fragile constitutionalism.

By all reckoning, Putin will be a useful tool in the hand of Yeltsin as the latter attempts to curb and direct the country's 89 governors and republican heads of state who can influence the country's electoral process in a decisive manner. The Fatherland-All Russia alliance formed by Moscow mayor and a raft of regional satraps together with the nationalists and communists are today well placed to capitalise on Russian voters' hatred for Yeltsin. If the alliance can rope in former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov as its presidential candidate Putin will however face a formidable opponent. It is not thus surprising that Yeltsin has already projected Putin as his successor presumably to lionise him before he is fielded as presidential candidate.

But before that Yeltsin will have to consider how valuable Mr Putin will be in the first round of the battle due in December to preserve the Yeltsin system as he seeks to handle new parliament. Depending a lot on that, Vladimir Putin may not be the last one to come and go as Boris Yeltsin with then instinctively replan his own future and the future of the system he has created.

Yeltsin Era at Its Twilight

The Fatherland-All Russia alliance formed by Moscow mayor and a raft of regional satraps together with the nationalists and communists are today well placed to capitalise on Russian voters' hatred for Yeltsin. If the alliance can rope in former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov as its presidential candidate Putin will however face a formidable opponent.



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

from running for the third term the power addict Yeltsin who ruled Russia more like a Czar is genuinely worried of a future bereft of any authority for him. After what he has wrought to Russia the departing despot cannot also be ensured of a safe passage back to private life.

Because, Boris Yeltsin is not only responsible for the disintegration of Soviet Union he also presided over the liquidation of Russia as a great nation. Like a giant bear in a circus Russia today has been totally tamed by the West. Even if it growls and shows anger at times it is immediately silenced

tionalised and the rentiers like Berezovsky have a free run of Kremlin. Under Yeltsin Russia has abdicated the claims to its traditional spheres of influence like the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Perpetually at the mercy of international financial institution it is hardly left with much freedom in the handling of its foreign policies.

While his legacy is not going to be kindly viewed during the coming days the investigations were already rife to associate him and his family with the pillage of country's wealth and siphoning of fund during the

Solidarity against the Sangh

Deconstructing the BJP Campaign

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The choice the voter faces is stark: either a politics based on paranoia, calumny and half-truths; OR an inclusive, pluralist, secular-democratic politics that believes in social healing and building a humane future.

to everybody's taste. But few would deny the campaign has bite. It reminds us that the RSS defended Gandhi-assassin Godse. Mr Vajpayee compromised with the colonial government by declaring he did not participate in the Quit India Movement. *Combat* documents the sangh's attachment to sati, wife-beating and dowry.

Rather than disprove *Combat*'s charges, the *parivar* has, characteristically, launched a personal attack on the magazine's editors and Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat who, it claims, is on its directors' board.

RSS mouthpiece, *Panchajanya* (Sept 12) devotes two pages to this, with sanghi nationalists such as Chandan Mitra and Kanchan Gupta levelling tendentious charges. *Panchajanya* fails to answer even one of *Combat*'s 20-odd allegations.

Panchajanya's profile of *Combat* is that of a semi-secret, 'anti-national' organisation. But *Combat* editors Javed Anand and Teesta Setalvad are seasoned journalists. Anand was long with *The Observer* group, and Setalvad broke a major story about the 1993 Bombay riots with tape transcripts which a police officer instructs his men not to rescue Muslims from a devastating fire. They deny Adm Bhagwat a *Combat* director. *Combat*'s motto is 'Hate Hurts, Harmony Works'.

Vilification of secular people is a well-rehearsed *parivar* tactic. *Organiser* launched a campaign against me in 1991, at the height of the *Ranjana Mahabhoj* movement when I was *The Times* of India's Senior Editor.

On February 9, I participated in a discussion with a cultural organisation, *Jana Sanskriti*, in Delhi, along with Professors K.N. Panikkar and Gyanendra Pandey, and Justice Subramaniam Poti. I sharply criticised the anti-Babri agitation as majoritarian, hate-driven and anti-secular. I said its leaders must be dealt with firmly in accordance with the law.

Many newspapers reported my remarks. *Patriot* distorted them to say *parivar* leaders must be 'disciplined to the point of being killed'. *Organiser* seized on this, and, without cross-checking, flashed the front-page headline: 'Times editor's fatwa to kill BJP men.'

The story alleged that I was 'goaded' by the *Times* proprietors' business interests in the Gujarat, and Pakistan. It accused me of demanding the BJP should be 'prevented' from contesting elections. This was pure fabrication.

I published a clarification in *Patriot* without rebuttal. *Times* editor Padgaonkar sent a denial to *Organiser*, which it carried along with a vile editorial. It refused to publish clarifications

from Prof Panikkar and Justice Poti.

Many scholars and writers launched a signature drive calling *Organiser*'s attacks on me 'irresponsible and odious', and reminiscent of 'witch-hunts'. 'No one who claims to believe in democracy and freedom... can condone such intimidation.'

This was signed by eminent persons such as Professors Romila Thapar, Rajni Kothari, Prabhat Patnaik, Justice V R Krishna Iyer, Swami Agnivesh, Anil Agarwal, and artists such as G M Shaikh and Vivan Sundaram. Instead of apologising, *Organiser* declared the letter 'a forgery'. This would put to shame even Goebbels and Beria!

Against the sangh school of falsification, there is no defence. There is a special edge to the sangh slander against *Combat* today. The BJP is no longer sure of its electoral victory. Its tactics of exploiting Kargil and attacking Ms Sonia Gandhi have not worked. The party is only left with Mr Vajpayee's shopworn 'image'. Campaigns like *Combat*'s undermine even that.

The BJP has a huge stake in the election. If it loses 20-plus seats, its claim to lead the NDA decisively will be weakened. This would make it a declining force, no longer unstoppable. Parties like the BJP need the 'bandwagon' effect: many people vote for extreme right-

wingers because they are in the ascendant.

No wonder the BJP's campaign is full-throttle, maximalist, no-holds-barred. Unlike its opponents, who made tactical mistakes, the BJP has conducted itself in a planned, organised, manner. It can accept

failure only with the greatest difficulty and the least grace. On test is its will to power. So the BJP has polarised the situation and pursued a political scorched-earth policy.

The BJP's legacy will be a terrible burden for its successor, who will be called upon to undo the damage. This culture of confrontation is not what we need, but there may be no alternative to it.

The choice the voter faces is stark: either a politics based on paranoia, calumny and half-truths; OR an inclusive, pluralist, secular-democratic politics that believes in social healing and building a humane future.

OPINION

Addition of New Laws is No Solution

Md Shah Jahan

We are having another wave of controversy in respect of the government's reported step to pass Public Security (Special Provision) Act, 1999 to deal with crimes.

The government's perception in respect of the law enforcing agencies' failure to contain crime appears to be that the law enforcers don't enjoy the support of sufficient stringent laws to eradicate crimes from the society.

The above perception is absolutely wrong. The answer to the question whether we need more stringent laws than those our statute books hold would be a straight No. Because if mere draconian laws were sufficient to free a society from corruption, terrorism, women trafficking and other heinous crimes which are rampant and pervasive in our society of late, then we have enough of them: Special Powers Act, 1974, Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance, 1983, Prevention of Corruption Act, 1947 and Oppression of Women and Children (Special Enactment)

Act, 1995 so on and so forth. The basic characteristic of any draconian law is that it goes always against fundamental rights of the citizen guaranteed by the Constitution. It also infringes upon the personal liberty, freedom and privacy of citizens. It provides ample scope for unnecessary harassment, which in turn causes instability in the society. The history of humankind is replete with numerous examples that citizens' rights cannot be denied for an indefinite period.

What we need today is proper and impartial enforcement of laws instead of addition of more draconian laws to the statute books for containing crime because mere enactment of such laws is not sufficient means to contain crime.

The tendency of rulers for stringent laws is not new in history. But the process causes greatest harm to a nation by way of persistent frustration among its citizens which in turn causes loss of faith in the rulers and citizens become skeptical.

Failing Dreams from the Failed Leadership

Alif Zabr

It was a pleasant surprise, for us of the elder generation, to find that the new generation, who are going to run the country in the near future, have started grumbling, without fear or favour. Not only that, they are getting articulate, as Talat Kamal did in *DS* Magazine, Aug 20.

It is a good sign, that change for the better is round the corner, generated internally, by the people of the soil, as a judgement to the current paucity of its own leadership. If it is revolutionary statement, be it so, as the same is being encouraged, due to public frustration, it is a general statement, applicable to all political parties believing in the present style of political gamesmanship. Dozens of SPAs and supplementary auxiliary ordinances will not stem the tide of public resentment, even if the jails are overflowing. The internal enemy is the most elusive enemy, and the most dangerous. The risk level is high, and, the greater the rise, the greater will be the fall.

Weak leadership is surrounded by sycophants, known as *chanchas* (parasite) in Bangla. Such sycophants can only scoop up delicacies from goodies hoarded through godfathers or the knights of the back doors. The Western type of shearing from the hip is a new art for the local terrorists and hoodlums, hence this culture will puncture as soon as the gas pressure is deflated.

Political stability will not return to the country unless the political leaders are self-contained. The same yardstick ap-

plies for the leaders in the other professional fields, as the minimum terms of reference for a normal, peaceful, and stable society. The cumulative evil forces in a free society are in a majority, hence the state must be equipped with deterrent means to enforce law and order, supported by the leaders of the society (not simply the political leaders).

The sycophants cannot match the public wrath, when it comes, as it did in 1990. It looks like that another 1990 is going to be repeated, watching the isolation of the regime in power at the end of three years of 'consolidation', and the increasing convergence of the political opposition groups, in concurrence and numbers.

The fury will be greater this time, as the style of bankrupt leadership in both the camps is similar, judging from the styles of governance during this decade. The conclusion is clear: we are not yet ready for democracy; and the politicians are not yet ready to run it.

The first cause is evident from the fact that half of the voters live below the poverty level; and the same half are illiterate. An electorate deprived of holding and staying power is volatile. The Bengalees have another weakness: the sympathy for the under-dog; therefore it is anti-establishment. Stability in approach, or action, is a premium; therefore trying to cling to power is a loaded exercise. Like the earthquake in Turkey, there will be no EWS or early warning signal — the mood of the moment would be enough for the minnows.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Joke of the century

Sir, General Secretary of the Bangladesh Awami League and the LGED Minister, Zillur Rahman said that for her contribution towards peace and democracy (???) Sheikh Hasina's name should be written beside the names of Mother Teresa, Socrates, Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi.

It is not only a perfect example of sycophancy and flattery but also a joke of the century. Sorry to say that Bangladesh is yet to produce a leader who could be compared to these eminent personalities.

Iqbal Ahmed
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Chittagong port paralysed

Sir, To exemplify how things are in a total disarray, in almost every sector, let's have a look at the condition of Chittagong port. Years of labour politics, rent-seeking and indiscipline have culminated in a chaotic situation as a result of which the main seaport of the country is paralysed every now and then. On the 9th of this month, the port labourers suddenly refused to work demanding a change in their gang-book system. It is alleged that some outsiders were behind this. The work stoppage went on for 2/3 days followed by the opposition called 60-hour hartal from 13-15 September. Even after the hartal was over, there was no decision to resume work by the labourers. Not even our mayor, who had in the past

apparently used the port in agitation program against the then BNP government, made a single comment on the stalemate at the port. The mayor is one of the 'guardians' of the port and had proclaimed a few weeks back that there would be no more 'strike' at the Ctg port. Finally, on 16 September, some deliveries were made, when army personnel were called in to load the goods on to the trucks. Just one question: will this be the permanent solution for smooth functioning of Ctg port for imports and exports and for all time to come?

A bewildered observer
Chittagong.

Religious education

Sir, In the Seminar on 'Corruption in Public Administration' held in Dhaka on 2nd Sept. 1999 the Chief Justice recommended an education system with strong religious bias. Please allow me to freely express my views on this. People of Bangladesh specially Muslims are perhaps more religious than many in any other country. The number of mosques in the country will testify to this. In almost every government office and the ministries in the Secretariat, in spite of there being a big mosque inside, there is also a big space for people to say their prayers. Unfortunately the number of corrupt and dishonest people are no less in number.

Religion teaches morality but most of the people hardly care for these teachings. Time has come to analyse reasons for this. Apparently most people perform rituals and perhaps

think they can clear their way for heaven even if they resort to corruption. Under the circumstances religious teaching without emphasis on raising the level of morality may not bring any benefit. Morality should be taught for the sake of building a society worth living. We need honest, hardworking and humane people. It does not matter whether they are religious or not, but it matters whether they are corrupt or not. Education system should put emphasis on this. Students should not be burdened with additional religious education in schools; parents may impart the same at home. I only hope this letter would appeal to reason and free and open minds and would not be taken emotionally.

Ahmed Shah
3/32 Subhanbagh
Dhaka

At a doctor's chamber

Sir, On Thursday, September 16, I booked in advance at a famous eye clinic in Dhanmondi to consult renowned eye specialist. I was asked to report at 8:30 pm, as my serial was 34. After reporting there a few minutes earlier than the appointed time, I found the place in complete chaos. Serials were kept secret. The attendant was calling the patients by name rather than by the serial number. The waiting-room was crowded and noisy by the high volume of the TV. After waiting for an hour, I got my chance at 9:30 pm.

Our doctors are no less qualified and competent than those in India, Thailand or Singapore. But I think, they should take some lesson in 'management'. If the chambers are a little more organised, people would not feel like going abroad for treatment. Or do the good doctors like it the way it is now?

M. A. Haq
Dhaka

BBTT

Sir, It appears from press reports (*DS*, Sept 12) that the government may approve introduction of the Japanese Personal Handphone wireless limited-access telephone System (PHS) in Dhaka city (first phase 200,000), through a newly formed agency by the name of BBTT (Bangladesh Broadcasting Telephone Technology) in collaboration with a Japanese consortium. Thus a technical presentation was held in Dhaka for the VIPs; presumably to be followed by further field and evaluation tests, for long-term technical feasibility and seamless interfacing; remembering that capital wrongly invested is capital lost.

The PHS introduced in Japan some years ago is at present undergoing a generation of technical update, to maintain the competitive edge with the current enhanced cellular and digital telephone systems and networks. A large number of the Japanese PHS users were reported (in the trade magazines) to be replacing their PHS sets with the latest versions of mobile (cellular) telephones which now have several high-tech improvements in more compact size.

The point at issue is that the authorities should keep a close watch so that discarded and outdated technologies are not dumped into a developing country such as Bangladesh. Another question is: is this joint tie-up consortium in Dhaka open to private investment; because the government is committed not to indulge in business. It is a matter of concern that due to the poor and slow performance BBTT is unable to deliver the right services at the right time at popular prices. In this high-tech age, technical transparency has to be maintained — in addition!

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka.