

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 Mujib Rahman Medical University Hospital, by its head's own admission, 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 plying 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 merciful 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 quoit 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 nonplussed. 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 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-

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.

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, Valentine Lumashov, 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.

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 grows and shows anger at times it is immediately silenced

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 awed 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 retelling 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 probes are 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. Inspite 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 grapple of the presidency as 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.

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 replace his own future and the future of the system he has created.

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 easily be ensured of a safe passage back to private life.

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nationalised 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 ripe 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.

be 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 *satti*, wife-beating and dowry.

Whether called 'cultural nationalism', or plain Hindutva obscurantism, this vision is incompatible with our Constitution. It provokes fears about the BJP's ultra-conservative *sanatan* attitudes to *dalits*, *adivasis*, women, the family, education, science, morality and culture.

That's why social activists have felt compelled to warn the public against Hindutva. The latest example is the campaign launched through 10 newspaper advertisements by a Mumbai-based magazine, *Communalism Combat*, with its scathing critique of the BJP's claim to be "normal" or tolerant.

The campaign demolishes many myths about Mr Vajpayee, the RSS and the BJP. Citing unimpeachable facts, it ruthlessly exposes the BJP as a party of bigots, male chauvinists, supremely indifferent to the masses.

Combat has fought the BJP in the mainstream media, with its predilection (for the most part) for soft Hindutva. *Combat* makes no bones that the space bought is sponsored by political and business interests.

Such sponsorship may not be 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 *satti*, 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 *Panchayati Janya* (Sept 12) devotes two pages to this, with *sanghi* journalists such as Chaitan Mitra and Kanchan Gupta levelling tendentious charges. *Panchayati Janya* fails to answer even one of *Combat*'s 20 odd allegations.

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

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

The story alleged that I was "goaded" by the *Times* proprietors' business interests in the Gulf, 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 vilful editorial. It refused to publish clarifications

from Prof Panikkar and Justice Potti.

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 artistes such as G M Shaikh and Vivian 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 shop-worn "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

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 new 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 skeptic.

Failing Dreams from the Failed Leadership

Alif Zabir

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 of the paucity of its own leadership. If it is 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 risk, 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 goddes hoarded through godfathers or the knights of the back doors. The Western type of shooting 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-

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 Bangladesh Awami League and the LGRD 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.

A bewildered observer Chittagong.

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