

Importing Diseases?

THE revelation is as startling as it has been mind-boggling. Thanks to the diminishing self-esteem, Bangladesh is turning out to be a dumping ground, not so much by any outside peddling but by her own choice. Just when the idea was gaining ground that something must be done to eradicate the re-use of disposable plastic syringes comes the appalling news of validating that very offence under a legal cover. An investigative report in The Daily Star uncovered yesterday that local traders have been importing plastic syringes used in South Korea, Malaysia and China with the ostensible purpose of manufacturing other plastic items out of them but these are being actually sold in Bangladesh as syringes. Imported at poisha 40 apiece it is retailed at Tk 3 each — the margin of profit speaking of no plain robbery but a veritable act of treason against national health. The risk-factor on a low intensity basis is itself serious, to say nothing of the high intensity risk involved in the reuse of the imported plastic syringes. "The micro-organism that is pushed into the vein of a patient may cause deadly reaction and may even lead to death," says an expert. To top it off if HIV or hepatitis virus get pushed, then what? That which is 'garbage material' in the exporting countries' parlance has been formally imported by traders here by opening LCs! What an abominable account of ourselves we are giving to those friendly countries!

So, it is highly imperative, in the first place, that the government put an immediate ban on the import of used disposable syringes from abroad. Secondly, there cannot be any compromise on the mandatory requirement for every hospital or clinic to possess devices to crush and destroy the syringes once used. Thirdly, the importers and officials in the Commerce Ministry who participated in the hazardous recycling process have to answer for their deeds. What we have observed about the vetch scandal better not be replicated anymore. When something puts health at high risk under public scrutiny and offenders are caught red-handed, in a manner of speaking, the government declares a ban on it stopping short of demanding accountability from the persons who committed the criminal offence.

Our further suggestion would be for the health ministry to home in on other hazardous materials coming into the country and do something about them. There is also a need for joining the issue with exporting countries under the auspices of WHO.

Gibberish to Garbage

IN a scenario which is already so full of acrimony and saddled with an overdose of tit-for-tat political culture, a ruling party boss of Chittagong has purportedly added a new dimension to local politics. This can only be termed as 'filthy', rooted in utterly bad taste.

Until Saturday this was only a threat the Mayor of the port city ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury apparently held out to his predecessor Mir Nasir, a BNP leader, as alleged by the latter. Now the incumbent mayor is actually alleged to have 'masterminded' the delivery and dumping of filth and garbage on the entrance to the house of the former Mayor of the town and president of the Chittagong BNP committee Mir Mohammad Nasir Uddin.

Mayor Mohiuddin's reaction is self-explanatory: "It is a tit-for-tat act as I warned opposition leaders twice earlier that garbage would be dumped in front of their houses if garbage carrying trucks and employees were attacked during hartal period".

The mayor obviously looks at it as reprisal by the truck operators and municipal employees. But the danger is that this may trigger a chain of unhappy events in the days to come which may not be palatable for any party. This has opened a new front of intimidation in the already disturbed milieu of Chittagong, not to speak of the social and political atmosphere of the country. We expect decency from people in the leadership in the greater interest of healthy political culture in Bangladesh.

Examination Dilemma

THE two-day strike that recently turned the Dhaka University campus into a veritable battlefield following the administration's foolhardy decision not to reschedule clashing examination programmes has left more than one thousand students in the wilderness. While nearly 400 of the 1400 examinees actually took the exams under heavy police protection, the rest stayed away either by choice or under compulsion. Now, with the university authorities, including the vice-chancellor and the controller of exams, apparently reticent about discussing their fate, the 'defaulters' appear to be in deep waters halfway through their academic life.

Admittedly, the atmosphere on the campus was not conducive to holding examinations on the designated date. With the administration taking an unprecedented decision to go ahead with the examination schedule despite the strike call made two weeks beforehand, confrontation was inevitable. Deployment of extra law enforcers made it quite clear that the authorities wouldn't back out. Whether its stance was justified or not is not an issue we would labour at this point of time. Our concern is for the students who failed to appear at the examinations. Certainly, they don't deserve to be punished for something they had no control over. We would urge the academic council to convene an emergency meeting to work out modalities to dispel the uncertainty that looms large over their future.

TOMORROW noon at the residence," Shakti informed me about my meeting with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. "But that is Sunday," he said in reply. "We work seven days a week," it must be so because I found Brijesh Mishra, Prime Minister's secretary, also present at the residence.

"It was a long campaign, too long," Vajpayee said. "I must have addressed more than 100 meetings in different parts of the country." But he had no doubt about the outcome from the day he initiated the election campaign. I reminded him of his forecast in 1980 when he said it would be difficult even for him to win. He scraped through the New Delhi seat at that time. The Prime Minister, wearing a maroon jacket over the well-starched kurta and dhoti, looked relaxed and confident. It was the same room, with M F Hussain's painting beaming from one of the walls, where I met him last in the midst of the anti-Pakistan intrusion in Kargil. It was as if I was picking up from where I had left off. Then he had a hurried look on his face.

"Will the government last five years?" I asked. He had little doubt about it. The National Democratic Alliance had a comfortable majority and he did not think that even if one or two parties left, it would make much difference. The parties which really mattered were part and parcel of the NDA, he said. He was too modest to admit that people had voted for him, not the BJP. But he did concede that when it came to a contest between him and Sonia Gandhi,

he found the balance amply tilting in his favour. He could fathom the diffidence of voters because of her foreign birth. Asked if Sonia Gandhi had congratulated him after the NDA victory, he said, "No."

On the cabinet formation, he admitted he was under pressure. He had to accommodate several parties. That was the reason, he explained, why the council of ministers had become 'large'. He, however, added: "I have still to find a Muslim and a Sikh for the cabinet." He was disappointed over the Rama Krishna Hegde episode. He sounded as if he could not help it. The parties had to nominate their representative. "You could have retained me even though my party had not included me in the list it submitted," Vajpayee recalled Hegde's complaint.

The Prime Minister tended to agree with the thesis that the debacle of the Janata Dal (United) in Karnataka was the reason for Hegde's undoing. Vajpayee thought that the BJP would have done better if it had gone it alone. The record of the J H Patel government was 'not good'. It affected the BJP as well, he said. Vajpayee was equally disturbed over the results in UP. None in the BJP anticipated such a disaster. In fact, when the party did well in other parts of the country, "we thought we would cross the figure of 200," he said. "Something will be done in UP." But he did not say what. He believed the BJP vote

went to the Congress. He did not rule out sabotage from within. Vajpayee said twice that he faced no pressure from his own party. Once it was in reply to the query whether the BJP members wanted more representation in the government. The second was when I asked him if the extremists were breathing down his neck. He, however, mentioned "some people" were trying to hold demonstration against the Pope's visit. They should be spoken to, I suggested. The way in which he reacted to

be more or less accepted. Kashmir would itself want the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, etc., to be extended to the state. The problem with the state, he said, was the administration. The better it was, the greater would be the people's support. The Prime Minister had received complaints of rigging in elections in Kashmir.

"The states are wanting more and more autonomy," Vajpayee said. "We are determined to implement the Sarkaria Commission report on Centre-State re-

felt, might have paid the price for the withdrawal from Kargil. Asked if Sharif knew beforehand about the intrusion in Kargil, Vajpayee said he did not think so. Sharif might have been told about a limited action in a general way. Sharif himself admitted it in the context of a speech on the situation in Kashmir. Sharif was never fully informed about the details or their implications.

The Prime Minister confirmed that the trips of former foreign secretary Niaz Naik and editor R K Mishra between India and Pakistan had "the official blessing". There were some concrete proposals and "we were proceeding towards a solution." He did not indicate what the proposals were but he had no hesitation in saying that they were 'positive' and might have led to rapprochement between the two countries. He said Sharif was keen on settling matters with India. The Lahore process, Vajpayee said, had finished the anti-Pakistan lobby in India. But the Kargil intrusion had revived the same old attitude. And the attitude had hardened because of the sense of betrayal among the people.

Referring to the telephone call he got from President Clinton, Vajpayee said that America was insisting on starting negotiations with Pakistan immediately. He said he told Clinton that "proper atmosphere" had to be created so that there was confidence built in

the country. Vajpayee had the impression that Clinton had not appreciated India's stand. But he should realise, Vajpayee said, he had to take the Indian opinion into consideration. Asked about India's relations with China, the Prime Minister said that there were no problems. He had noted that Beijing too had expressed concern over the developments in Pakistan.

Vajpayee was conscious that his first 100 days were important. He had in mind several steps to improve the economy. "We want to catch up with the developed countries," he said. The two specific measures he would take up straightaway were electoral reforms and the Lokpal Bill to fight corruption at the top. He would like the disposal of cases by the government to be quicker and transparent but he blamed the bureaucracy for not changing its attitude. It was still lost in red tape and outdated rules and regulations.

Vajpayee was conscious of the enormous responsibility put on his shoulders. He wanted all political parties to sink their differences and work unitedly on this one-point programme: how to give a better deal to the people. "As for me, I want to assure all that I would seek cooperation of every political party and work for a consensus. There is no question of class, caste or creed differences coming in the way. We are all Indians and we have only our country to serve," Vajpayee said.

As I retraced my steps I saw many visitors waiting for their turn. Even Sunday was a long day for him.

How to Give a Better Deal

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

my remark indicated that the organisers were going ahead despite the attempts made to dissuade them.

"Why don't you drop the three contentious issues once and for all?" He said he would prefer to sort them out. It was possible to do so. "I have a solution to the Mandir issue," he said. But he did not spell it out. The application of common civil code, he said, could be on a voluntary basis. Those who did not want it could stay out and follow their own personal laws.

As for Article 370 on the special status to Jammu and Kashmir, he felt it had come to

lations." The Prime Minister said that the main problems with the states were their finances. "By adopting populist measures," most of them had frittered away their resources. They had no money. Every state was coming to the centre for assistance because it could not pay even the salary to the staff. "A state like Maharashtra is also facing trouble," said Vajpayee. He was worried about the fiscal situation in Punjab.

The Prime Minister was not happy over the developments in Pakistan. He seemed to have sympathy for the ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif who, he

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Ahmad Zewail, the Second Muslim to Win the Nobel Prize in Science

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Alfred Nobel stipulated that the recipient of the Prize named after him "shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." On many occasions, those lofty goals have not been met. Sometimes, the right person received the award for the wrong reason... No such blemish stains this year's winners. All prizes are very richly deserved.

femtosecond is a fraction of a second represented by 1 preceded by 14 zeros and a decimal point. It is the same fraction of a second as the proportion of one second to 32 million years. It is the time scale at which chemical reactions take place. Dr. Zewail's femtosecond experiments require two ultrafast laser pulses. The first — the "pump" pulse — excites the molecule to a higher state of energy. The second — the "probe" pulse — detects the molecule or its altered state at a suitable wavelength. By varying the time between the two pulses, it is possible to see how quickly the original molecule is transformed.

The breakthrough came in 1987. Zewail's group studied the unimolecular dissociation of iodine cyanide into an iodine atom and a cyano radical: ICN → I + CN. They observed a transition state in which the I-CN bond was on its way to breaking. The reaction was over in 200 femtoseconds. At least one scientist of Bangladeshi origin, Dr. Lutfur Rahman Khundkar, was involved in this seminal research. Femtosecond techniques are being applied to several branches of science. Two years ago, at the American Chemical Society's conference in San Francisco, the writer heard Dr. Zewail explain how his technique is being applied to gases, liquids, solids, clus-

ters, surfaces, catalysts, polymers, and biological systems such as proteins and DNA.

The Physics Nobel went to Dr. Martinus J. G. Veltman of the University of Michigan and his former student and collaborator Dr. Gerardus 't Hooft of the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. Without the calculational system they developed, no one would have taken Salam-Weinberg-Glashow's electro-weak theory seriously.

The electro-weak theory revealed a hidden unity underlying both electromagnetism and the weak nuclear force. For much of the 20th century physicist waged an unrelenting war to find a fundamental unifying relationship between the four known forces of nature: electromagnetism, gravity, the strong and weak nuclear forces.

There was a two pronged attack on the problem, experimental (with particle accelerators) and mathematical; the latter resulted in the Nobel work of Dr. Richard Feynman. Some results predicted by theory were out of line. In the late 1960s, Dr. Veltman devised a computer programme, "Schoonship", to perform the complex calculations needed to renormalize (transformation of equations into new variations to eliminate the meaningless infinite) non-Abelian gauge theory (a change in the sequence of oper-

ations performed on an equation to change its form changes its results).

Dr. Veltman was joined by his 22-year-old graduate student Dr. 't Hooft and together the two physicists devised a refined method of calculation that successfully predicted the existence of two previously unknown particles, the W and Z particles, and the properties of a then undiscovered particle called the top quark.

Alfred Nobel stipulated that the recipient of the Prize named after him "shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." On many occasions, those lofty goals have not been met. Sometimes, the right person received the award for the wrong reason. For instance, Albert Einstein's 1921 Physics Nobel was bestowed not for the theory of relativity but for his work on the photoelectric effect. The New York Times recently recounted Nobels that went amiss.

The most disputed science Nobel was the 1918 Chemistry Nobel awarded to Fritz Haber, who had helped develop poison gas for the Kaiser during World War I. Believing himself a potential war criminal, Haber grew a beard as a disguise and escaped to neutral Switzerland for several weeks. Frenchmen offered the Nobel that year declined the offer rather than be in the company of Haber whom they called "morally unfit for the honor and material benefits

of a Nobel Prize."

Egas Moniz of Portugal shared the 1949 Nobel in medicine for pioneering the lobotomy, which was supposed to cure certain mental illness. The psychological symptoms produced by the surgery were apathy, akinesia (retarded movement), loss of initiative, catatonic "attitude", negativism, disturbed orientation in space and time, puerility, abnormal hunger sensation and so on. Lobotomy, naturally, is largely discredited today.

Peace Nobels are often controversial. Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin, Dr. Clerk, Nelson Mandela and Yasir Arafat have been called terrorists by one side or another. They deserve their prizes for the simple reason that you make peace with your enemy, not with your friend. And only those who make war can make peace.

These days, academics have few kind words for the author of "Good Earth" — detailing Chinese peasant's life — and the 1938 literature laureate, American Pearl S. Buck. A day after the announcement, critic Norman Holmes Pearson grumbled that, "this woman, Pearl Buck, was given the Nobel Prize for literature. Do they intend to make it as hammy as the Pulitzer award? Thank heavens I have seen no one who

has taken it seriously and none of the great congratulatory articles, which followed a similar award (to Eugene) O'Neill last winter. Mrs. Buck's only comment seemed to be, "I was terribly surprised" — nuts to her say I. I think that was putting it mildly." Over the years, Pearl's selection has become a shorthand proof of the Swedish Academy's bad judgement.

The most "Ig-Nobel" literature winner was Knut Hamsun of Norway in 1920. He became a Nazi collaborator. A fanatic fan of Hitler's Minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, Hamsun actually gave Goebbels his Nobel medal as a mark of appreciation, with the following note: "Nobel founded the Award as a reward for the most 'idealistic' writing during the recent past. I know of no one, Minister, who has so idealistically and tirelessly written and preached the case of Europe, and for mankind, year in and year out, as yourself. Forgive me for sending you my medal. It is a quite useless thing for you, but I have nothing else to send."

No such blemish stains this year's winners. All prizes are very richly deserved.

Dr. Ahmed Zewail hails from Alexandria in northern Egypt. He carried out his Ph.D. under Professor Robin Hochstrasser at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in the mid-1970s. Dr. Zewail and his second wife, Dena, a Syrian by birth, live in Pasadena, California. Asked to comment on his award, Zewail said: "We were very fortunate to be at the right place at the right time," when femtosecond lasers were becoming available. A colleague put his achievement in perspective: "Well, I think it took some brilliance and insight too. Ahmed's being modest."

To the Editor...

Transshipment facilities to India

Sir, I think Sheikh Hasina is correct in allowing goods to be transported through Bangladesh. How can this be harmful to our nation? Instead, we would be gaining by forcing them to use our trucks and drivers. The only way Bangladesh could lose is if these goods are illegal goods of some sort.

Khaleda Zia is only making another attempt to degrade the trust of the people in Sheikh Hasina. It is sickening politics. Why can't the opposition oppose something real for a change instead of picking at obviously sound decisions?

Shondha Kormokar
Cedarville
OH 45314, USA

Sir, In my opinion Indian goods can be transported through Bangladesh but it should be under strict supervision of our customs and other officials. It will definitely increase the revenue. The conditions should be, absolutely no arms or ammunitions and Armed Forces should be allowed through Bangladesh.

Both countries should respect each other's customs and other rules and procedures. If the conditions cannot be met or maintained, then the transshipment should not be allowed.

Kamal Ahmed
1404 E. Hayes
Hazel Park, MI 48030, USA

Sir, Since our independence we never gained anything from India. By transshipment agreement I don't think we will gain anything from India. We will earn revenue, but that will not come as foreign exchange, which is important for our economy. They will trade their

goods against the revenue. We are already in negative balance of trade with India. We know about the land and water sharing agreements with India.

Only for this little amount of revenue, we should not accept this agreement.

Sarwar Hussain
711-30 Tuxedo Court
Scarborough, Ontario, M1G 3S6
Canada

Sir, I don't care about Sheikh Hasina or Khaleda Zia's personal comments but I don't think it is good idea to the transshipment facilities to India.

Mohammad Khan
15 Pleasant place
Cambridge, MASS - 02139
USA

Sir, I want to bring to the notice of the authorities concerned how a normal balloon filled with the deadly hydrogen gas with all its inflammable properties can become a fatal weapon in the hands of the innocent children.

I am studying in the 8th grade of Siddiqui's International School, Dhaka. I am due to appear in my final exam in November/December, 1999. Unfortunately, I have been seriously injured with burns in my hands, face and hair along with my brother-in-law who is with an NGO. Almighty Allah has saved us from losing our sight. Both of us are in a pretty bad shape. We are currently under expensive treatment of some good doctors. This is a slow long-drawn process. I shall miss my final exams. My experience has been traumatic. Now I shall relate to you what really happened on that fateful night.

There were 18 gas balloons brought for my 10 months old nephew. The balloons were tied with a string to my nephew's hands. My sister (baby's mother) realised that there was a funny smell in the room and she suspected a gas leak from the balloons. All the balloons were taken out from the bedroom to the adjacent veranda. After several hours my brother-in-law and myself went to the veranda where the balloons were kept. My brother-in-law wanted to smoke a cigarette and he decided to light a match. No sooner had he lit the match, there was a flash and a blast. The next moment we found that there was fire and my brother-in-law and myself was got badly injured in the arm, face and the hair.

I am really grateful to God that I am still alive after being practically killed in that explosion. Yes it is very hard for me to type with one hand in this very awkward manner with another hand in the sling. Many things have occurred during these last four days. I will never forget this experience of this horrifying adventure. Tomorrow, I am going to shave off my hair for much of my hair got burnt. My hand is paining now and it is also bleeding from within the bandage.

The purpose of writing this letter is to let all readers, both young and old, know that this life is very precious and it sometime takes the whole life to understand its values. For no fault of ours, we are victimised and made the scapegoats for some irresponsible behaviour on the part of some calous persons making the gas balloons.

Afeefuddin Ahmad
Student of class VIII,
Siddiqui's International School,
Dhaka.

Sir, If we give transshipment to India, India it will be more benefitted than Bangladesh. Look at, in the past, what India did with other agreements. Did it keep its promise? In my opinion, we should not come to any agreement with India.

Delwar Hossain Khan
390, Dawes Rd #418, Toronto
Canada

Women seats in the Jatiya Sangsad

Sir, The present nomination system of women's seats in the Jatiya Sangsad is going to be renewed for another 10 years — effective from 2001. On the other hand, the government of Kuwait will allow their women

to go for direct election for any seat in their assembly from 2001. Democracy is being practised in our country. Now how far it is fair to keep the system of nomination?

The leadership in women will never grow if they are not fully allowed to contest for the seat as per their desire. At present, any woman can seek election to any seat of the parliament. But in a male-dominated society, the male members may not be willing to spare a good number of seats to women. As a result under a party system, a few women can get the opportunity of nomination to contest any election. Again, the women elected on nomination basis may feel themselves inferior as they have not been elected by direct vote of the people.

Women all over the world

Deadly gas balloons!

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Women all over the world

are demanding for allowing them to participate in all affairs of the state without any gender discrimination.

We too should think over the matter.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury
153, Lake Circus
Kalabagan, Dhaka

Why the same day?

Sir, Just look at what happened in Chittagong on October 21. Was it absolutely necessary for the Chittagong City Mayor to embark on a public meeting on the same day, let alone the same venue, based on vague issues like attempt on the life of the PM, etc., which are still under investigation? Why did it have to be the same day? Was he not asking for trouble?

The Mayor belonging to the ruling AL and being an experienced politician should have been more considerate. The demands of the opposition parties are numerous and pointless at times. But, at least, they should be given the satisfaction of holding processions, meetings, etc., without any hindrance.

The AL was also in the opposition once and it may be their turn again.

A Bewildered Observer
Chittagong.

Laying foundation stones

Sir, Laying foundation stones is a popular pastime of the mighty (on the departing trip), as gifts of remembrance to the people, who (the latter) continue to stand and await the call, not for getting service, but for rendering various topical services to the masters, sometimes at short notice; not to strengthen the roots, but to reinforce the swaying branches, bereft of flowers and leaves

(especially during the out of season periods). The sons of the soil belong to the soil, plain and simple.

To be able to personally see one's name etched in stone is a solace to the living ego; as it is a matter of conjecture what happens to the mundane craving after the inevitable demise. The philosophy of such public ceremonies has to be studied and analysed, to enable all to maintain the proper perspective on public service. The latter has become a sarkari ritual, if and when the output in real time is computed. The latter is a taboo in the LDCs, while the post-regime post-mortem becomes a passion. So why not raise the issue now, and have a closer look at it? It is less pleasant to anticipate debacles than to confront in reality, face-to-face later.

A Husnain
Dhaka

Newspaper distribution

Sir, In 1960 when I lived in Karachi, I remember newspapers were then distributed early in the morning at around 0500 hrs. After 39 years, at the flag end of 1999, we find newspapers are being distributed here at around 0700 hrs in the morning and even later. During rainy days, it turns worse. Sometimes we don't even see any hawkers.

Obviously the subscribers want to see a change in this respect. Could we not expect newspapers at least before sunrise these days when sun rises at around 6 am.

Would the authorities concerned try to improve their distribution standard by using faster transports like other developed countries?

Mian
Dhaka