

Feature

Hunting hedonists in healers

Child abuse scenario in the country is still a cause of concern. The primary step should be to bring cases to light and sensitise the people of this moral hazard, writes A Maher

CHILD abuse has become a widespread phenomenon over the last decade, especially in developing countries. Fortunately some respite has come for the beacons of the future generation in the form of NGOs, child-related charities and firms. UNICEF backing of this social issue, in Bangladesh the scenario appears to be an illusive one with scores of cases going unreported in apprehension of social backlashes. In a society which is, still reluctantly, advancing along with an insensitive family of taboos curbing this problem seems to be done mostly in a hush-hush manner. *Terre des hommes* (TDH) is an organisation trying to bring children out of reach of this malice. Recently, it organised a two-day workshop, with DFID funding through the British Council here, on *Recruitment Practices for Organisations Working with Children*. The workshop was facilitated by Paula Fitzgerald, Recruitment Trainer at End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking (ECPAT), an Australian-based advocacy organisation working with children. Begun in 1993, ECPAT is dedicated solely to combating sexual exploitation of children globally. It organises *Choose With Care* workshops based on the handbook *Choose With Care* meant for organisations working with children and outlining recruitment techniques to monitor entry of child abusers into these establishments.



Students of an NGO-run school ... extremely vulnerable to child abuse

the "Aware Culture". Many topics were based on this "Aware" theme which uses awareness as a powerful counter-tool. Suman Bhattacharya of Concern (Bangladesh) works with a lot of children. His job specifically involves the mass recruitment of teachers to teach children in the junior age groups. "This has come as quite a surprise for me," he said. "That child abuse can actually be affected by the people we are taking in is an altogether new concept by itself."

"Just think of a man working in an international child organisation in a managerial post," recalled Fitzgerald from a case study. "This man was supposed to be doing work fitting his job description but was found mingling with children a good deal of the time. He was very amicable to them and children in turn would become quite fond of him. Little did anyone suspect the heinous intentions of this man as he pursued his lustful pastime with victim after victim. Fortunately he was found out by the Interpol who had been searching for him and brought to the United States to face a barrage of charges of earlier child molestation and sexual abuse."

It seemed that awareness had a big part to play in the scenario of Bangladesh. Scores of cases of child abuse occur without being reported and the reasons for this secretive attitude was attributed to a family of myths. Fitzgerald warned of an easy mirage that could surface. "It is never easy getting concepts, and specially introducing newer ones, in a country where strict taboos still exist for sub-

jects such as these; only when the objectives of these workshops and seminars are materialised into reality will we see results."

Indeed complexities do entangle themselves into an administrative, social and cultural grapevine. Children are either too ashamed to tell of their experiences or are threatened into silence, as in many cases, by their abusers. Adults are also at fault, sometimes covering incidences to prevent social stigmatisations. And that could be a killer. But no; if awareness is spread in the right direction and pace the culprits can, in the end, be brought to book. It is such an issue that the environment of the abused (child) has to react and stimulate action against the abuser. The child cannot be alone in his/her agony and keep it suppressed at the cost of immense psychological pain. Stringent recruitment techniques alone may not be enough to stop an abuser.

There are several common methods which are followed for tightening recruitment procedures. Having access to a good information network or database of existing applicants was one of the ways to detect a probable abuser. Also there were different methods of testing and interview routines which help the organisation — this type of "screening" to such an issue, but there was a glaring conclusion — and that was for Bangladesh to accommodate and force itself to address this problem before it induces a shearing effect on the moral fabric of a susceptible society already squinting at such "side-issues" from its independence.

the problem — many were, naturally, a bit uneasy to play designated roles.

Maybe this was why even when a child had reported an incidence, his elders would have second thoughts on pursuing the offender, who would be further encouraged to continue harming the child.

A person requesting anonymity described how close friend, after twelve years and at age twenty-five, confided to him about childhood instances of abuse. The participant also observed that in cases like this it may well be the best performing employee that becomes the child abuser. He (the employee) enjoys the support of his colleagues, has a strong position within the workplace built over the years and in case of an inquiry can easily escape suspicion.

For Bangladesh the scenario is still one of concern. The primary step could be to bring cases to light and make the public more aware of this moral hazard. In a society balancing poverty, illiteracy and economic boom on precarious scales neglecting this kind of threat to its future generation can spell catastrophe for the nation. As Paula Fitzgerald of ECPAT fittingly maintained there was no "magic solution" to such an issue, but there was a glaring conclusion — and that was for Bangladesh to accommodate and force itself to address this problem before it induces a shearing effect on the moral fabric of a susceptible society already squinting at such "side-issues" from its independence.

Sweet taste of a bitter fruit

By Howard Youth, Washington DC

UNLESS you have spent a lot of time boating in Amazonian backwaters, the chances are that you have never heard of the camu-camu fruit. Soon, that may change. The deep-red and bitter-tasting, walnut-sized fruit — officially known as *Myrciaria dubia* HBK McVaugh — is now in demand on three continents, and businessmen in Peru and Brazil are planning to cultivate it.

The allure of this acidic little fruit is vitamin C, and lots of it. Camu-camu packs 65 times as much ascorbic acid as a lemon. The bush belongs to the fruity botanical family Myrtaceae, which includes subtropical and tropical fruits such as guava. Just as guava is now familiar to many consumers living outside the tropics, camu-camu may soon be tempting foreign palates.

But there is more to camu-camu than business profits and much-needed income for impoverished regions of its native Amazonia. Conservationists see cultivation of the fruit as a way to help save the plant's threatened habitat, the seasonally inundated, biologically rich floodplain of the Amazon flooded forest.

Camu-camu's flooded forest habitat embraces 116,000 square miles, an area about the size of Italy. Each year the river rises to inundate the surrounding forest and at that time, the region's rivers and tributaries contain 20 per cent of the earth's fresh water. In this realm of water and trees lives a dazzling array of wildlife. Along with the 15ft of 30ft camu-camu bushes there are pink freshwater dolphins,

Amazon manatees, numerous primates, giant river turtles, the world's largest scaled freshwater fish — the pirarucu or paiche — and giant kapok trees.

In the past few decades, human activities have threatened the flooded forest. Logging, cattle ranching, large-scale rice and soybean production and the construction of hydroelectric dams have transformed large areas, while over-fishing has also taken a toll. Since the mid-1970s the international conservation organization WWF, and its partners in the region, have been seeking ways to conserve the flooded forest while providing economic support for local residents. Promising initiatives include developing sustainable harvests of fish, timber and other natural resources, including camu-camu.

Mario Pinedo, a Peruvian scientist and executive director of the camu-camu project of the government research agency Instituto de Investigaciones de la Amazonia Peruana (IIAP), has spent much of the last 19 years researching and promoting camu-camu production. IIAP, which is WWF's main partner in Peru, is encouraging local farmers to grow camu-camu in 150 small towns on 11 basins in the flooded forests of the Peruvian Amazon. The project covers 4,200 acres and is part of a larger effort by the Peruvian government to cultivate camu-camu on almost 25,000 acres.

More than 40 per cent of the target acreage has been planted since 1997, benefiting 1,600 farmers. The Peruvian Ministry of agriculture provides seedlings, equipment, training, and assistance. Several years

ago, WWF and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs established some 250 acres of camu-camu in several towns lying within the Pacaya-Samiria Reserve in the Peruvian flooded forest. Also, experimental plots have been planted in Brazil.

"The interesting thing for us," says Mario Pinedo, "is that camu-camu, as an organic product, is not only important for flooded areas and sustainable biodiversity but also has a role to play in economic development." Camu-camu production is compatible to such staple crops as corn, cassava, rice, beans, tomatoes and watermelons. Cultivation will help ease the pressure on wild patches of camu-camu. Many areas have been over-harvested, and fruit collectors often rip off branches and leaves in their haste to shade the fruit they have just picked, damaging the plants. For example, in a lake within the buffer area for Pacaya-Samiria Reserve, conservationists believe such heavy harvesting helped cause a dramatic decline in an area once thick with camu-camu bushes, which dipped from 370 acres to about 120.

People shopping at Amazonia markets have long eaten camu-camu. River-dwelling people harvest the fruit by boat in the low grassy floodplains, and many fish also eat the fruit and disperse its seeds. In fact, locals also use camu-camu fruit as fish bait. But, like many of the plants and animals native to the flooded forest, camu-camu was unknown outside the region until fairly recently. In 1975, a researcher analysed some fruit he bought in an Iquitos market and by the 1980s,

the fruit's high vitamin C content had been established. Harvesters soon found themselves picking all the berries they could find for overseas buyers. Japan and France are the two largest markets for camu-camu pulp, used to enhance the flavour of juices, ice cream, liquors, jellies, sweets, cakes and other desserts. In Japan, camu-camu pulp is swirled into sports drinks and yoghurt, and also blended into hair-colouring cosmetics. Markets are also developing in the United States, where camu-camu is imported for use in vitamin C tablets called "Camuplus". Such demand cannot be met by wild bushes alone, which is why cultivation and pulp plants have been established.

Camu-camu cultivation is one way in which conservationists hope to help save the flooded forest, but they must also find others.

WWF's Senior Programme Officer in the region, Lou Ann Dietz, says, "What we are doing is trying to get an overall strategy to assess biological resources in the whole ecotone. We have had a meeting of scientists in the region and are defining the limits of the ecotone and what major processes we need to be preserving. We are also doing more detailed biological assessments that will allow us to set priorities."

An important facet of all this work is identifying and promoting regional products that can be grown sustainably. Camu-camu is a natural choice and this little fruit has already begun to play a role in saving the precious flooded forest.

— WWF Feature
The writer is an environmental journalist based in Washington DC

'Friendly Pens' fail to blot out the human rights message

The government did not really want her to come. And when she finally arrived, it tried to keep her away from probing reporters and human rights campaigners. But the cordon was breached, writes John Ross from Mexico City as he looks at a woman who is quietly breaking the UN mould for diplomatic niceties in a sensitive area.

IT is a sign of the powerful influence that Mary Robinson has brought to her job as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights that the Mexican government worked so hard to keep her away from the press and independent human rights groups during a recent visit.

The strenuous efforts to curtail Robinson's contacts were designed to prevent a repeat of the July visit by United Nations special rapporteur Asma Jahangir, who laid the groundwork for the Robinson trip. Jahangir, a sharp-tongued Pakistani woman, publicly chastised the human rights failings of President Ernesto Zedillo's government, drawing threats of a protest note from the Foreign Ministry.

The Robinson visit has been under negotiation since 1996. Mexico resents UN "intervention" in what it considers its domestic affairs, and refuses to recognise UN recommendations on torture, poverty among indigenous peoples, and military impunity.

After arriving by Mexican airforce jet (airforce units stand accused of human rights violations before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission), Robinson was swept up by VIP delegation, protected by phalanxes of military police to discourage unauthorised petitioners and pertinent press questioning.

Then it was on to closed-door meetings with Zedillo, Defence Minister Enrique Cervantes, the president of the Supreme Court, and the neophyte ombudsman of the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH).

"The government and the PRI (the Institutional Revolutionary Party that has ruled Mexico for 70 years) had kidnapped Mary Robinson," declared opposition deputy Benito Miron, who heads the Mexican Congress's human rights committee.

A plan drawn up by senior officials and leaked to the press plotted every step of the Robinson visit — before, during, and after — and described how to conceal the reality of the human rights situation from the High Commissioner. Robinson will always be accompanied by a functionary who will be prepared to intervene at any moment, said the draft plan. The Foreign Ministry would control media interviews and protect the Commissioner from off-the-cuff questioning. "Friendly pens" would be contacted to report the Zedillo administration's "progress in the area of human rights." Fake reporters would be sent to meet Robinson's flight to Quito, her next stop, to record her first impressions of Mexico so that the Zedillo administration could quickly formulate a response.

The government's efforts reaped some success. Although the ostensible reason for the visit was the signing of an agreement to put UN technical personnel on the ground, an agreement deferring the agreement was signed instead.

A smooth Robinson visit was considered vital to Mexico's future commercial interests, particularly in Europe. To become an associate member of the European Union, Mexico must sign a 'democracy' clause that obliges it to respect human

rights. Several European human rights groups oppose the Mexican application and a clean bill of health from the High Commissioner for Human Rights would help ward off their challenge.

In addition, her visit came in the midst of a row over the new CNDH head, Jose Luis Soberanes, who is seen as a government supporter (he describes himself as a mediator rather than a spokesperson for the people) and at a moment of deteriorating human rights conditions.

Hundreds of political prisoners languish in jail and the impoverished Indian south is under virtual military control. Human rights workers are regarded as subversives by the government and the military, and are often attacked.

Despite the government's precautions, umbrage at the PRI and the government runs so high that sanitising the visit proved impossible. The security

counterparts. Her most critical stop was Chiapas, where thousands of Tzeltal Indians had prepared a reception for her at the site of a 1997 massacre.

Protocol interviews with government and judicial officials took up so much time that Robinson was prevented from travelling to the community. Nevertheless, she subsequently managed to meet some massacre survivors. She condemned the paramilitary death squad responsible for the killings and called for a military stand-down in Chiapas.

Robinson further riled the generals by suggesting that Mexico try soldiers accused of violations against civilian populations in civil courts rather than military tribunals. And she rubbed salt into the army's wounds by calling for the establishment of a military ombudsman to protect the rights of the troops; a general who has repeatedly called for

Less transparent Windows

A M M A'abid looks at some philosophical aspects of American business

BILL Gates, the world's richest individual, and founder-boss of Microsoft company, better known for the MS Windows computer programme, appears to have become too business-minded and money-oriented, obscuring his technical genius. He does not have to get richer; but leave his richness behind to the society. But now it seems they may not be able to afford it, as the US judiciary are probing his business empire, on the suspicion that he is not affording due opportunity to his competitors to play on a level field. Why thwart other brilliant minds from commercialising their new products (if they dare to)?

The cause lies deeper. It is the American philosophy of life for cut-throat competition — to wipe out competitors, is there competition in Nature? The WTO (World Trade Organisation) has been created for harmonious business (as we find in natural ecological balance), with so much economic disparity around? There may be, but of a different kind. Here we are facing materialistic competition, excluding two-thirds of the earth's population — to compete economically to compete or participate. There is a distorted view about capitalism — the Western type — which thrives on monopolies and indirect control of commerce. The AT&T had to be broken up; now the Windows has perhaps to be broken down (not in Dhaka style).

The MS windows has perhaps reached its limit of manipulation inside the circuit, and in the outside world. It is not going to be bigger or richer. The windows software is already too complicated, for which special and more powerful hardware has to be designed and marketed, thereby providing business opportunities in that sector to thrive and make money (birds of feather flock together).

In the USA the goods and services are market and business oriented — just too much of it. There is no limit to the rise. This tendency reveals one philosophical trend — the Americans are fond of rising curves in the statistic chart. The horizontal line is not tolerated (relaxing watching). Push and hand of the water, and higher push to rise higher and higher into dizzying heights where

there is more ozone and less oxygen. There should be no status quo; there must be change ALL the time (of course better goods and services are provided). The sky is not the limit. The American goal is tough: better than the best!

The planetary system is also changing, but in an evanescent span of a person. The scales are different. The question arises, why man has to accelerate the scale (has anyone found the right scale of change in the man-made world)? Why crowd so much into a small life span of a few score of years (ponder on the so-called greenhouse effect)? Is it greed or benevolence?

The pace of life in the preceding centuries was slower, much slower, but it hardly affected the inner quality of life, and the God-man relationship. In the communist or socialist regimes life goes on; but what is that is ticking: divine discontent or something else? The politicians and the visionaries through the ages have been trying to find the answer to this seminal question since the very beginning of civilisation.

The same with the marvelous human body, a miracle of precise creation, self-programmed from the pre-birth stage, and lasting a lifetime, practically without maintenance (the nearest best zero-maintenance system available on Earth). For repair of damaged skin (due to burn or other causes) a skin transplant is still

necessary; and man has not been able to duplicate a hair or a nail (why nails and hair grow and have to be cut?). AI (artificial intelligence) is the rage in the laboratories, but even the reconstruction of part of the human brain's functions will need a large multi-storied building to house the man-made apparatus. So R&D is going on in neural computing concepts (solid-state versus chemical processing in the liquid medium, as in the human body). For seeking knowledge, go to China" is the classical proverb.

"Simple is beautiful" looks like a simple sentence of three ordinary words used so much in daily life. The situation starts getting complicated once we start trying to classify the two words, followed by the innumerable definitions, for particular applications. MS Windows needs a large operating table, besides a little mouse. Look into the very large number of temporary files created while working with Windows, and the complexities associated with outward simplicity could be vaguely guessed. If power and speed are the media of life, where are we going and why so much in a hurry?

proved specificity that accompanied this year's data compared to that of 1997, the audit maintained. "It is still significantly higher than more comparable 1996 data."

"Given this observation, there likely is a real increase in racial targeting of South Asians," the audit said. One example it cited was in South Ozone Park, New York City, where three white men wielding baseball bats shouted racial slurs at Rishi Maharaj, 20, an Indo-Caribbean man, and then nearly beat him to death. It noted that one of the suspects threatened to continue agitating the neighbourhood until all South Asians moved away.

The three attackers were charged with attempted murder, gang assault, weapons possession and aggravated harassment and are scheduled to be tried later this month.

Another case mentioned involved three South Asian immigrants — Mukesh Patel, Kanu Patel and Ashvin Patel — who were working at an all-night Dunkin' Donuts store in Camp Springs, Maryland, on October 1998 when a robber, Trone Tyrone Ashford, entered and assaulted them with his shotgun. He taunted them about their poor fluency in English

and then the three men were shot at point-blank range as they lay on the floor of the back room.

The gunman, together with two other alleged suspects, Alicia Holloway and John Lemon Epps, doused the shop with gasoline and left it in flames after taking less than one hundred US dollars. Only one of the victims survived after being rescued by fire-fighters.

Ashford was sentenced in June 1999 to two terms of life in prison without parole, plus 50 years. Holloway pleaded guilty to two counts of felony murder and testified against Ashford. She awaits sentencing. Epps faces trial.

Another case mentioned in the audit occurred in August 1998 in Artesia, California, when five South Asian men were sprayed with a stinging liquid while leaving a shop and subject to derogatory racial epithets. The men called the emergency number and while they were waiting on the street for police to arrive, the harassers returned with a second carload of individuals and repeated the assault. One of the harassers was brandishing a gun.

The audit said prior to the attack, business owners in the area, Los Angeles County's Little India, had regularly reported

Hated and haunted on sojourn

In the United States, there has been a surge of hate crimes against the South Asians in recent times, writes Aziz Haniffa from Washington

THERE was a disturbing rise in hate crimes against South Asians in spite of an 11 per cent drop in reported anti-Asian incidents in the United States in 1998, according to a report.

The sixth and latest annual audit of violence against Asian Americans, published by the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (NAPALC), said there were 429 anti-Asian incidents reported for 1998 compared to 481 in 1997. During the same period, it said, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) found the rate of violent crimes rates fall by 6.4 per cent.

However, the audit said, "In tracking bias motivated incidents against specific ethnic groups where the information is available, South Asians were targeted in significantly larger numbers than in 1997 or 1996."

While acknowledging that "some part of the increase from 1997 may be due to the im-

proved specificity that accompanied this year's data compared to that of 1997, the audit maintained. "It is still significantly higher than more comparable 1996 data."

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Mary Robinson, UN Commissioner for Human Rights: 'Different realities'

bubble was frequently punctured by human rights groups and the political opposition.

Robinson was started when, during a Congress session, deputies from the left-centre Party of the Democratic Revolution became so infuriated at the PRI's whitewash of abuses that they began pounding the tables. She was swiftly led away by security agents.

Similarly, barred from a news conference, striking students pushed their way into the room to present their case to the Commissioner in person. On Robinson's lightning visit to the northern border in Tijuana, where more than 450 Mexican migrant workers have been killed since the US Border Patrol initiated "Operation Guardian" five years ago, two top Mexican officials were forcibly thrown out of a meeting with migrant rights' advocates, who read a long list of complaints against both the Border Patrol and its Mexican

such an ombudsman is currently serving 28 years in prison.

Throughout Robinson's four hectic days, she was relentlessly pursued by women's groups, students, teachers, farmers, Indians, opposition politicians, and even aggrieved taxi drivers, who nearly drowned her entourage with letters of protest, petitions, and testimony.

"Oh dear, I hope I haven't raised expectations too high," she confided. "I need to buy two more suitcases just to get all these documents home."

"What the government told me and what I saw here are two very different realities," she commented at a parting press conference. — Gemini News

The author is a journalist-poet-author who has covered Mexican affairs for 30 years. His latest book is *Blood On The Corn* — the Zapatista Chronicles 1994-2000.