

Health in Grave Danger

DISPOSABLE syringes, good for one-time use, are otherwise getting pushed into patients' times without number. One has reasons to believe that in view of their omnipresence in medicine shops, hospitals and clinics across the country, hundreds and thousands of people are buying these and subjecting themselves to the administration of various injections completely unaware of the deadly infections they might be taking into their blood-streams. They are at a very high risk of contracting HIV, Hepatitis 'B' (jaundice), sexual diseases, to name some obvious maladies.

From what had been a manageable problem of some hospital employees and traders showing used syringes on the sly into the injectors' hands this has now become an epidemic of an intractable problem — thanks to lack of timely attention to the aberration.

The errant business with the locally available used syringes was not considered enough to whet their profiteering appetite. They were to soon fall for importing the same from abroad with the facade of recycling it into something else — so-called plain plastic products they touted. They would polypack those syringes they had imported at dirt-cheap prices and sell them off with a margin of profit. Only a few months ago the government woke up to the dangerous malpractice and declared a ban post-haste on the import of used syringes from abroad. This has not put a stop to their marketing, however; in fact, a new device has been contrived to hoodwink the people. The death dealing employees at different hospitals and clinics in cohort with the wholesalers have formed a country-wide network to make the most of the used variety. So long as the syringes do not look completely worn out they can be recycled.

Given the magnitude of the problem, nothing short of a well-publicised deterrent punishment meted out to the culprits at the hospitals, clinics and wholesalers' levels will help curb it. All the wrong syringes must first be mopped from the medicare chain and incinerated forthwith. The matter having gone beyond the pale of hospital authorities or public health officials, we want law enforcement people to be in charge. They should conduct raids wherever necessary to stamp out the thoroughly unethical business.

What seems imperative for the health ministry at the moment is that they issue an advisory note to the general public how best they can read the difference between a genuine syringe and a used one.

Chittagong in Melting Pot

THE situation at Chittagong University has certainly shown no sign of improvement. In fact, recent developments, meaning formation of a four-party students alliance and its subsequent expression of intent towards transforming the indefinite 'siege' programme into non-stop hartal from Tuesday, suggest that it would get worse in the coming days. What started off with a clash between Islami Chhatra Shibir and the Bangladesh Chhatra League looks set to paralyse the whole of the port city.

We understand and appreciate the grievance of the Shibir activists. Indeed, killing of two of their comrades during the skirmish should be investigated; and the killers should be tried and punished. However, the path they have taken to press home their demands, predictable though it is in the context of our political culture, is bound for further violence, more bloodshed and eventually academic inertia at the university. The general students, as a result, would pay the price, with their tenure at the university further prolonged and graduation into working life delayed.

Why take the failure of the law enforcement people out on the general students? Besides, violence on the campus would certainly have a spill-over effect on the socio-economic life of the port city. Activities at the port city had been heavily hampered throughout last year due to political and labour unrest. Yet another round of political violence would mean yet another round of impeded port activities. The economy certainly cannot afford that. We wholeheartedly denounce the stance taken by Shibir and other opposition student wings. Also, mindless talks of making the country 'another Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, Bosnia' etc. speak of insanity of the highest order.

By any means, the deadlock at Chittagong University would have to put to an end. We would request the agitators to take a peaceful course to have their demands met, instead of jeopardising the future of thousands of general students.

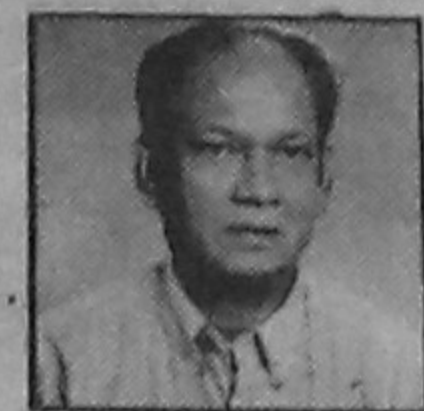
Lake Scheme Deadlocked

THE Tk 16.62-crore Dhanmondi Lake project is deadlocked — thanks to the 'untrifling efforts' of various ministries and organisations, including the Dhaka City Corporation, to ensure it that way. The finance ministry has also chipped in by sitting pretty on the file released by the ECNEC on revised estimates. Here is another case of non-performance and compliance by the ministries of LGRD and Works and the DCC despite the directives of the Prime Minister herself to speed up things. The recovery of almost five bighas (98 kathas) of lakeside land from 42 influential encroachers is still a far cry as the LGRD Ministry and the Public Works Ministry seem hypnotised by the flurry of lobbying from the illegal occupants of lakeside lands. This is a vivid picture of how the government agencies go about their jobs in matters of public interest. But they are very alert when it comes to their own benefit as the DCC people are alleged to have lost interest in the lake project because the '17 new commercial structures' may slip out of their hands thereby 'depriving' them of an income opportunity. And once again the story of putting the cart before the horse is back on roll as the management policy for the lake's renovation is yet to be prepared and accepted.

It seems too many cooks are around to spoil the broth. Everyone is shouting and no one is listening. The inhabitants of this posh and old residential area must also voice their concern for the stalemate in the execution of a project that, among other things, promises to greatly improve the sanitary conditions in the area and provide a healthy atmosphere to their children. The government, for its part, should get a move on rightaway.

The Middle East Conflict: Reaching Homestretch

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The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

THE signs are galore that the Palestine-Israel conflict is well on its way to a final settlement. That leaves only Syria and Israel, who have to settle their problems. If winter comes can spring be far behind?

The Palestinian and the Israeli negotiators appear to have engaged in a last ditch negotiation to meet the deadline of 13 February 2000. That deadline, according to a Palestinian source, was set by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Premier Barak had set a deadline during his election campaign that he would pull out his forces from South Lebanon by Autumn of 2000. Indications are that Barak is determined to meet those deadlines.

By 13 February the Palestinians and the Israelis are to formalize a status agreement, which will lead them to a final settlement this Autumn. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had two tete-a-tete with President Bill Clinton of the USA, one in Washington, DC and the other in Davos in Switzerland. It would appear that Chairman Arafat wants from President Bill Clinton of the USA all the guarantees before he takes the final plunge.

There are tough issues that the Palestinians and the Israelis are handling. Right now they are to decide on the framework. Among the issues are the question of the borders of the new state of Palestine, the return of the refugees uprooted from their homes by successive Israeli invasions. But by far the most difficult is the status of Jerusalem. Israel has declared Jerusalem as the eternal capital of her country and has set up her capital in a part of Jerusalem. Virtually no state has recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, most notably not the USA. Chairman Arafat wants to have his capital of the new state of Palestine on the other part of Jerusalem. Above all this is the spiritual claim of Christianity and Islam. For Jerusalem is the spiritual centre of three monotheistic faiths — namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

And on top of all this Jerusalem used to be the first Holy city of Islam and Muslims throughout the world used to

turn their head towards Jerusalem before they shifted to the Holy Kaaba. Thus it is clear that Jerusalem arouses great passion among the monotheistic faiths. It is difficult to visualize a final settlement of Jerusalem without the involvement of representatives of the three faiths.

By the 13th February 2000, should the two parties succeed in settling other outstanding disputes, it would be a very major achievement. Truly swords would be turned into ploughshares. The indications are that the matter is coming to a head as the negotiators meet in almost non-stop sessions in a secret location away from the glare of publicity. These current negotiations are to be followed by a meeting between Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Ehud Barak in the presence of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Hopefully they will succeed in putting the seal to a framework agreement, which will set a time table. Interestingly Barak appears to enjoy working within a time frame, which is very helpful in the present juncture.

A successful negotiation between Palestine and Israel will clear the deck for attacking vigorously the other problem — Golan Heights of Syria. Very serious negotiations have taken place outside Washington DC between Premier Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara in the presence of US President Bill Clinton. It is evident that the negotiators have not allowed protocol to stand in the way as the representative in the case of Israel was the Prime Minister and Syria was represented by her Foreign Minister. Not much has filtered about those meetings but the parties are conscious that the stakes are high and there is no time for petty haggling.

A deal between Syria and Israel would automatically settle the problem of withdrawal of Israeli forces from South Lebanon. As is well known Syria has an overwhelming presence in Lebanon and whatever Syria decides is expected to be accepted by Lebanon. That would settle the problem of Barak's promise to his electorate regarding the withdrawal of forces from South Lebanon.

The problem between Syria and Israel resembles greatly the situation that existed between Egypt and Israel prior to the Camp David Accord of 1979. Israel has to vacate from Golan Heights like she did from the vast Sinai desert. Israel had received in return recognition from Egypt, the largest Arab state and the most important one as well. From Syria Israel would expect iron clad guarantees regarding her security. Golan Heights overlooks Israeli territory, hence Israeli sensitivity. Israel, however, has to recognise that security cannot be achieved through a piece of paper it resides in the hearts and minds of people. By their sustained contact the ice between the Arabs and Israel has considerably melted and time is bound to take care of the rest.

This is homestretch for President Bill Clinton. During his two terms of presidency he has toiled ceaselessly and given every ounce of his energy particularly in pushing the Peace Process forward in the Middle East. President Clinton has achieved spectacular result like the famous handshake on the terrace of the White House between long-time foes — the Palestinian leader and his Israeli counterpart.

The Middle East conflict appears to have reached homestretch. What better gift to President Bill Clinton from the leaders of the Middle East than a Comprehensive Peace Treaty?

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Why Did the Business Conference Fail?

by Dr. M. Masum

It would not however be proper to blame the political leadership alone for failure of the business conference in delivering its expected results. Did the business leaders, as opposed to the business community in general, sincerely desire a political settlement for saving the business community and the economy?

Given the spectre of impending hartals, frequent and prolonged, in the wake of polarization of all forces opposed to the government, none can question the relevance of holding of a conference of this kind in protecting the interest of the business community in particular and the economy in general. The attempt however did not succeed, as it failed to evoke appropriate responses from both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition.

Sheikh Hasina expressed her willingness for talks, but the way she did so exposed her lack of sincerity as she wanted it to be broadcast and telecast as if she was going to participate in a public debate with Begum Zia who on the other hand just brushed it aside stating that the initiative came too late, and also because, while she was in power, when Sheikh Hasina, then in opposition, waged relentless war against her elected government by calling 173 days of hartal including blockade of Chittagong port, the life-line of the economy, the business leaders did not come forward with a similar move.

For enforcing nation-wide hartals, and also for resisting them on the streets, both the opposition and the government require huge resources which come primarily from big business houses (unless funded by foreign governments/agencies) either through contributions made to the opposition as investment to be recouped when the opposition returns to power, or through sharing of booty with the government made out of big commercial deals struck by bypassing transparent standard procedures. By providing resources this way to both the opposition and the government to finance their respective political programmes, be it nation-wide hartals, or resisting

the same through mobilization of necessary muscle power, the business leaders essentially encourage the political leaders to go the way they like unrestrained, and in the process cement their mutual bondage of serving each other's interests when in power often at the cost of the nation. The political leaders are therefore observed to take little cognizance of the public utterances of business leaders made often to shed crocodile tears for those whom they represent.

Until and unless the business community elect such leaders representing their genuine interests, as would place the community and national interests above their personal ones, and avoid forging any kind of alliances with political leaders whether in power or in opposition with a view to making personal gains by channeling resources to finance their respective political programmes whether for resisting or for enforcing nation-wide hartals through use of muscle power either to hang on to power or to acquire it, such business conferences are destined to fail in achieving their objectives in compelling the political leaders to listen to them and to address their grievances.

The author is Professor of Economics, Jahangirnagar University

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LAST week a national conference of businessmen was held in Dhaka. It was sponsored by the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), the apex body of the business community of the country. The Conference had two sessions. In the first session, held on Jan. 22, Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh was the chief guest while in the second session, held on Jan. 24, the Chief Guest was Begum Khaleda Zia, the Leader of the Opposition and former prime minister of the country. That no technical session was held clearly reflected the special nature of the conference. It was not to discuss specific problems arising out of existing government policies affecting the country's commerce and industry. The two top political leaders of the country were invited to the conference with a view to apprising them of the sufferings of the business community arising out of inadequacies of governance and political programmes of the opposition.

In both the sessions, the top business leaders of the various chambers of commerce and industry of the country freely discussed the failures of the government in ensuring a business-friendly environment particularly in terms of providing security of life and property, the pre-requisite for investment and growth in any economy. One business leader categorically stated that due to growing incidence of hijacking of trucks on the national highways, it was no longer certain that the imported raw materials to be used for production purposes would reach the factory, and the exportable finished products destined for distant shores would reach the ports at all. The workers, after putting in hard labour for a month, while returning home with their salaries no longer felt assured that they would reach home safe with their money in tact. The speakers pointed out that it was impossible to conduct any kind of business in Bangladesh without paying extortion money, and failure or refusal to pay quite often resulted in loss of lives and damages to property. All these reflected total failure of the government in carrying out their prime responsibility i.e. ensuring protection to life and property, and providing a secure environment to pursue any kind of economic activity.

The opposition was also bitterly criticized for pursuing political programmes featuring frequent hartals which had a crippling effect on the economy. It was mentioned that hartals not only caused immense sufferings to the people affecting their right to move freely, there was also considerable loss of current and future output and employment as well, as hartals scared away potential investment, both domestic and foreign. It was stated that the business community was particularly hurt because, during hartals, even when productive activities remained suspended, the labour had to be paid their wages and interest had to be paid on borrowed funds. Frequent and prolonged hartals thus adversely affected the business community in particular besides causing severe damages to the economy and should, therefore, be avoided at all costs.

The whole purpose of the business conference was to impress upon the top leaders of the country the need for a negotiated settlement so that the opposition no longer felt compelled to call for crippling hartals as the government addressed issues raised by the opposition to its satisfaction.

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To the Editor...

"Bangla Bhasar E-mail"

Sir, I have been following a discussion on 'Bangla Bhasar E-mail' on the Internet. It is a very important issue that involves our access to the international arena and the fruits of modern technological development. I cannot agree with a discussion's observation that Bangla, as it is derived from Sanskrit, is one of the most scientific one in the present world. How does any of these languages contain the largest or any considerable volume of scientific literature of the present - or past? Or does the largest number of modern scientific terms originate from these languages? Or do these languages have any specific advantage over the most popular language like English, say, computer users? I have very limited idea about anatomy of languages, but I can easily distinguish the practical strengths that the major languages bear in expressing the modern scientific developments. Sanskrit is both infamous and famous as 'the language of the elite' for centuries, but it is difficult to substantiate it as the 'most scientific' or a step further - the most modern scientific language. The fact that the most famous of the presently available Bangla fonts do not guarantee the consistency in all situations, shows that there are difficulties

in creating Bangla fonts to work consistently with other international fonts and symbols, even if it may not be impossible. Currently there are a few tricks in making e-mails in Bangla possible, but they are neither user-friendly, nor popular amongst the majority Bangladeshi computer users - not to speak about the additional costs involved in using them. This is because most of the computer works we do for our livings are based on universal English (Roman) alphabets. Unless someone has acquired the 'extra skill' for using Bangla keyboard or fonts, s/he will never feel comfortable in using them, especially alongside his/her usual standard (English) keyboard/fonts. As a result, most of the time, to an ordinary computer user, composing in Bangla is a sort of luxury (with an additional cost, complexity and time) or at least an involved task. Considering the undisputed popularity of English alphabets and its position as the de facto language of the computer, we cannot expect to develop Bangla as a competitive/viable script for computer programming, except its use in word processing for (mainly non-technical) internal uses. The most cost-effective, practical and viable solution to this is may be to write Bangla in English (Roman) alphabets. This will enable us to accept a computer as-it-is without need for any involved/difficult and non-standard modifications.

Confidence-building in South Asia: More than Difficult

by Ekram Kabir

Although Mr. Vajpayee stated that he did not see the postponement of the SAARC summit as a blow to the regional organisation, but the postponement is seen by many to harm the regional body's future activities enormously. Yet the 'goodwill', 'cultural' and 'social' confidence-building measures remain South Asia's only hope.

than one billion people. Looking for a silver lining, he questions whether CBMs are possible in the present situation. Indeed, they may not be in certain instances.

Given the global reality, the small countries of South Asia would like to see their glasses half full, but India and Pakistan, who occupy the powerful places in regional politics, look at theirs as half empty. And truly so, when it is seen in the backdrop of their relationship, a sense of hopelessness takes over the whole region. If it is important to have visionary leaders to ensure the success of CBMs, it is equally important to fail without a clear political resolve and commitment, then leaders of these two major powers, India and Pakistan, point to the fact that confidence-building in the region is not only difficult but may also be beyond reach.

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irritant between India and Bangladesh, has been amicably resolved in 1996.

There certainly are more like these. But more recently, when at a time, the two most combative countries are expected to show resilience and implement some conflict reduction measures, discord between them is on a dangerous rise, resulting in regional disharmony.

Earlier this month, when tensions rose to new heights along the line of control in Kashmir, Indo-Pak relationship also took newer dimension of animosity. In war of words, in one hand, the Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has said that India would be taught a 'lesson' if it tried to cross the line of control, but he did not want to throw a 'challenge' to India. And on the other hand, Indian premier Atal Be-

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hari Vajpayee described Pakistan as an 'enemy country' and said New Delhi was ready for war if necessary.

This situation proves all the elements of uncertainty as far as starting a Lahore-type new dialogue and an excellent confidence-building — between heads of state of these two countries. For his own sake, Pakistan's Chief Executive Pervez Musharraf however eagerly wants to resume the dialogue as he said: 'I am not saying that we need to immediately resolve Kashmir. I am saying that we start a dialogue, and simultaneously, let's discuss everything else'.

But his Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee seems settled on the point that India would not talk to a military ruler. As Indian Prime Minister said before the Commonwealth heads of state in Durban — and after he refused to join the SAARC summit in Kathmandu — that Pakistan must first take steps to restore confidence between New Delhi and Islamabad can start talking again. Vajpayee said even before the military coup in Pakistan, India had made it clear that Pakistan must stop trans-border terrorism and end its hostile propaganda against India. Pakistan also has to demonstrate its commitment to the Shimla Agreement and the Lahore Declaration. Indeed, history was made in Lahore when a beaming Vajpayee descended from the bus and then Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was waiting anxiously to greet his counterpart in the historic city.

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Annle Barua, Arkansas, USA