

Building Further on Our Image

However, if we do not rest on our oars, not bask in the shine of our past glories, but target our vision to the newer horizons of the globe, we shall some day reach our (destination). Fleeting clouds can never hide a shining moon for long.

by Q M Karamat Ali

US President Bill Clinton's visit to Bangladesh, though brief, heralded a new era of partnership with US and, to a certain extent, boosted our image abroad. It is known to our best efforts to woo foreign investment has been dogged by a negative image. This first such official visit by an American President has ushered us past that disgrace — now introducing us to the world as a country with a very big future.

Clinton's choice of Bangladesh as a destination in his sojourn in South Asia which he himself highlighted as the most dangerous region for obvious reasons marked Bangladesh as a peaceful island devoted to endeavours for teaming millions. South Asia used to be overshadowed by giant India and her haughty neighbour Pakistan. The visit recognised Bangladesh as a notable and distinct constituent of the South Asian subcontinent and elevated her in the eyes of the world. The visit put her in the centre stage of the world attention even for a day and underlining the socio-economic development that prompted the leader of the lone superpower of the world to undertake the visit.

Bangladesh is no more a begonia bowl — a hapless sport of the freakish nature. The resilience of the people to survive all odds, natural and man-made, their steely determination to sustain and improve the quality of life are ultimately paying off. After the decline of our principal export item — jute, a new sector which sprang up in the early eighties now constitutes more than 75 per cent of our export earnings. Her total exports have nearly doubled between 1993-1998. She has been witnessing a GDP growth of more than 5 per cent for the last several years. Her sound macroeconomic management has steered her unperurbed in the turbulence of the Asian financial crises. Her agriculture poised to thrive further, has been reaping almost bumper harvest for the last three consecutive years. Timely government intervention and agility enabled her to ward off the most dreadful deluge of the century in 1998.

Mother nature which had been dreaded and feared long for her whims and cruelty, can also be adored for her bountiful generosity. The Gangetic delta constituting Bangladesh now reportedly floats on a reservoir of gas and mineral resources, attracting a host of multinationals from across the globe. SHELL, ENRON, ROYAL DUTCH SHELL, and many others are magnifying us by their presence and participation in the gas and oil sector of the country. UN investment which had been a 'peanut' of USD 20 million the year 1975 has now grown into a hefty \$750 million and is set to soar to a fabulous \$3 billion mark in the near future.

Bangladesh's geographical location has now the advantage of serving as a vital bridge between sleeping South with roaring South East Asia. It has now assumed a new strategic importance in the changed global scenario where China is grooming up as the potential challenger of US supremacy in Asia.

Bangladesh is a sprawling nation of 120 million homogeneous people, the majority of which are Muslims, the rest being Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. But the numerical superiority of a community has never fanned religious fanaticism nor communalism as is regrettably observed in the neighbouring countries. This communal harmony may well be called the hallmark of the Bangladesh society today.

The country after its liberation adopted a constitution having secularism as one of her guiding principles. Embracing a democratic dispensation, the constitution guarantees fundamental human rights for the citizens. Despite occasional military autocratic interventions, she has been persistently pursuing the path of democracy. A powerful and vibrant opposition is active in the political scene of the country to grill the government on all possible deviations. In the words of the distinguished guest who honoured us with his gracious visit — it is a nation making great strides, lifting citizens out of poverty, raising the status of women and strengthening democracy.

Besides, maintaining communal harmony and having democratic traditions, she firmly believes in and relentlessly pursues a policy of national regional and global peace and prosperity. The historic CHT Agreement, the Ganges Water Treaty and the signing of the CTBT by the present government amply testify to the avowed policies of the country.

As an active member of the UN, Bangladesh continues to contribute her humble mite to the establishment of global peace and stability. She had been participating in the peace-keeping operations whenever so demanded by the world body. A leader of the LDCs, the host of the forthcoming NAM Summit, a proponent and founder of SAARC, BIMSTEC, D-8 Commission, Bangladesh has been pursuing her dream of peace and prosperity of the region. As a member of the WTO, Bangladesh vouchsafes the new economic order of free economy and free enterprise emphasizing on market reforms, deregulation of the economy and encouragement of foreign investment.

However, all was not milk and honey in Bangladesh. An eminent US journalist Mr Barry Bearak in his article 'Shards of Misery. Not Far From Clinton Stop in Bangladesh' published in the New York Times discovered misery in the very shadow of the hotel where the distinguished guest stayed. The article as usual was a story of poverty, bulging bustees and ever-engulfing arsenic contamination, corruption, endless political squabbles and the vendetta of the leading ladies of the country — the incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the former Prime Minister and now leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia.

Catching glimpses of poverty cannot be a stunning discovery in a country where a significant number of her population still live below the poverty line. It

growing assertion and strength of the civil society comprising the business community, the intellectuals, professionals and others who are highly critical and ever watchful of the activities of both the government as well as the Opposition. The members of the business community comprising quite a good number of the beneficiaries of AL and BNP governments in the last Businessmen's Conference participated by both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition did not hesitate to advise them about their obligations. They urged the MP to be more generous and grant as much concessions as required to induce the opposition to a dialogue to resolve their differences and asked the leader of the opposition to shun the path of destructive politics and hartal. Again the growth of a committed, fearless vocal and vibrant press represents a very positive development for democracy and the greater interest of the people of the nation. People now have a powerful voice and a profound source of guidance and wisdom in the press. Even the other day he civil society scored a laudable victory through peaceful means when they forced the government to revise and rethink its plan of constructing NAM Conference Centre in the heart of the city by demolishing a green spot.

However, what can we do to sustain and further improve upon the national image bolstered by the historic visit of US President Bill Clinton? After all what is image? It is what we did, we do and will be doing in the future. Our words and actions, our achievements, our plans and programmes, our faiths and beliefs, ideas and imagination combine to construct our image abroad.

The writer in his article 'Making the most of Clinton's visit' published in The Daily Star on March 16, amongst others mentioned three hurdles (i.e. 1) the law and order situation,

2) the politics of hartal (work stoppage) and oborodh (blockade) and 3) the intractable traffic situation in the metropolis which do not make Dhaka a very pleasant destination for foreigners. These things tarnish our image.

The law and order situation was supposed to register some improvement with the enactment of the PSA. But there remains a lot to be desired. The allegations of the opposition that the act is being utilised to punish the opposition and restrict its movement has to be looked into by the concerned agencies. Exploitation of the act for partisan interests could be counter productive in the long run. The silent majority of the electorate are growing more conscious and watchful and the time for their verdict is approaching fast. The government must remember that mere enactment of stringent laws will not solve the problem. Increased economic activities have to be facilitated leading to generation of more employment opportunities thereby weaning away many of our unemployed youth from the tortuous paths of terrorism, hijacking and mactanism.

The destructive politics of hartal and oborodh is suicide for us. It prolongs the misery of the people, hinders economic progress and frightens away private local and foreign investments. Another way it is practiced in Bangladesh, instead of encouraging democracy, it destroys the very spirit of it. It is no longer acceptable to people as an instrument for effecting change of power. A new sense of realism seems to have dawned on the opposition leadership. Recently they called for a day's hartal signaling restraint and a change of their political strategy. This is a positive development. Establishing more contacts with people, educating them on various issues of local and national importance, unveiling imaginative programmes for socio-political re-

forms, reorganising and revitalizing the party for the forthcoming elections appear far more pragmatic and prized.

Unauthorized occupation of footpaths, wanton parking of vehicles along the roads and pavements seriously restrict the traffic flow in the city. It is heartening to note that the government was hardening its attitude to illegal occupation of pavements and public land. Let the recent drive of the government agencies to recover public property in Dhanmondi Residential Area be the August beginning of a much more orchestrated and sustained measure. Let it send appropriate signals to all illegal squatters in the metropolis and in the country as a whole. Surprisingly, the drive betrayed a saddening and shocking fact of life — the temptation of a few highly placed in life and respected in the society to grab public land for personal advantage and their brazen efforts to sustain that illegal occupation. Let the drive continue relentlessly for greater public interest.

Our image is not only what we do, but we do it and when we do it. The opposition in a democratic set-up must be always on their guard to complain, criticize, castigate the government for their failures and foibles, omissions and commissions. The principal opposition party is a major political player in the political arena of the country having had the opportunity of twice running the government. The leader of the opposition was the leader of the House in the last parliament. Despite these high credentials the way she was appraising the distinguished visitor about the internal affairs of the country which could be better thrashed out in the Parliament, pursued with the people of the country, was neither desirable nor becoming of a self respecting leader of the country. We have instances of how the leaders of the opposition of celebrated democracies of the world conduct themselves on such occasions. We wish the opposition leaderships conduct themselves much more responsibly enhancing national self-respect and our image abroad. The people had not only elected the government, they had elected the opposition too. And the opposition have obligations to the nation.

This piece can not be satisfactorily concluded without a few lines about the role of the private sector — the civil society and each and every Bangladeshi expatriate working abroad in shaping and enhancing our image. In the changed global perspective, the government alone cannot shoulder this great responsibility. The members of the business community transacting every kind of foreign business, having contacts with the outside world, must standardize their dealings, services and products. Competitiveness coupled with quality of goods and services will embellish our image in the international marketplace. Bangladeshi working abroad who have already earned good name and reputation and lend us an invaluable financial support have a significant role to play in this regard. Their loyalty to their employers, commitment to jobs, obedience to laws and regulations, respect for the customs and traditions of their countries of residence and employment can give a better account of Bangladesh and earn greater respect a reputation for the country than many volun-

Not by Weather Alone — Poverty Worsens African Famine

Images of starving Ethiopian children are once again on the world's TV screens — yet experts have known for months that the country was creeping toward disaster. A Gemini News Service correspondent who travelled to drought-stricken parts of Ethiopia reports on one of the key reasons behind the hunger.

Mike Crawley writes from Gode, Ethiopia

IT is a scene the world has witnessed many times before — one unmistakably of famine. And it is one that is making many people around the globe ask: why are we seeing it again?

Much has changed in Ethiopia since 1984-85, when a million people died in one of 20th century's worst famines. The ruling party is considered to be far more open than the former Mengistu regime, sophisticated famine early-warning systems are now in place and far more international aid agencies are operating in the country.

Despite all this, the current food shortage was still allowed to reach the point where emaciated children are once again appearing on nightly television news bulletins.

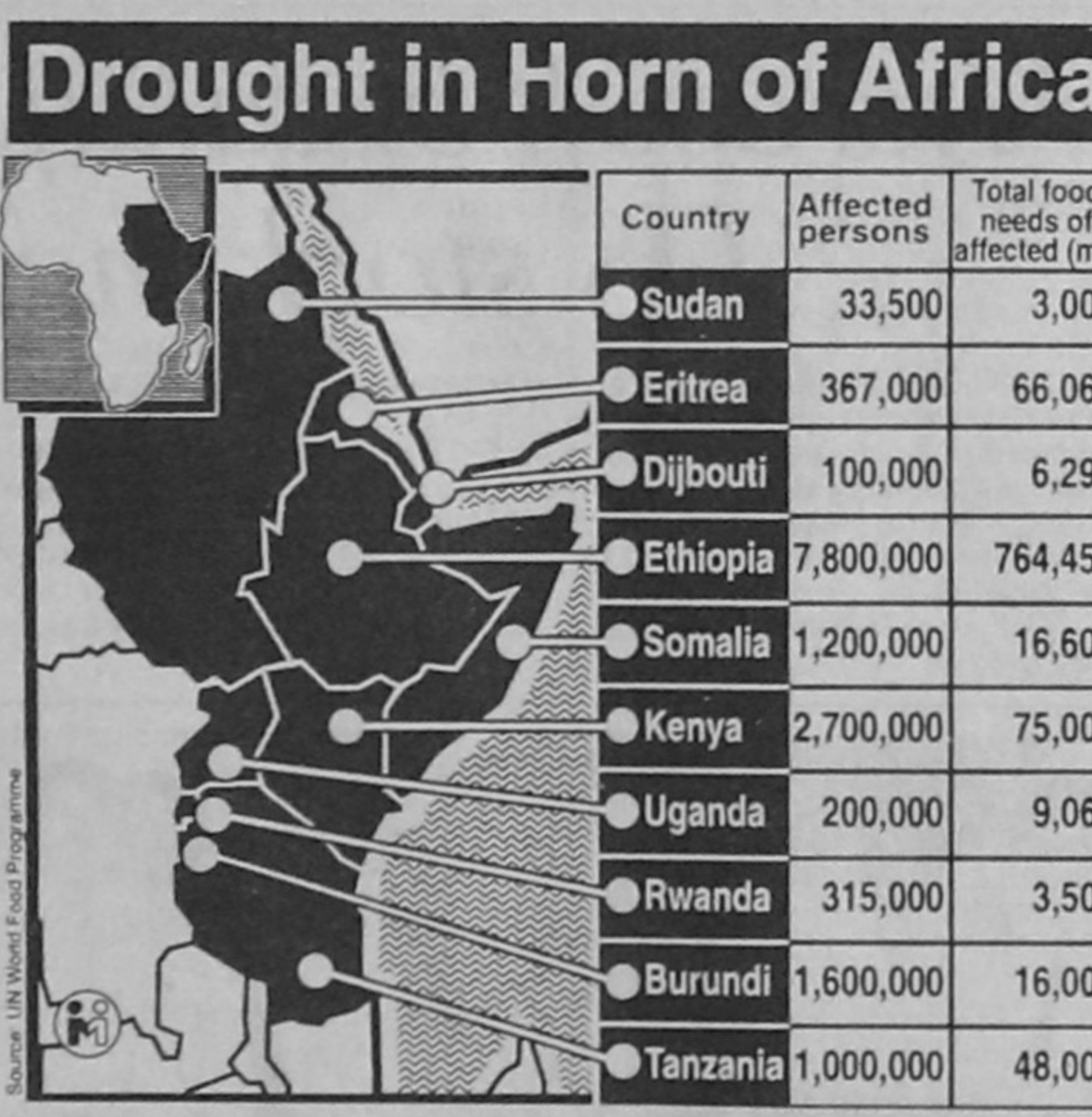
Three years of drought is undoubtedly the immediate cause of the food crisis, but as experts have pointed out repeatedly, famine never happens solely because of the weather.

Blame is being dished out in various directions, particularly the governments of rich nations for delaying aid donations and the Ethiopian government for its two-year-long war with Eritrea. But many analysts are trying to draw more attention to what they say is the main underlying reason: poverty.

"Most people in Ethiopia are weakened and aching with poverty, they have nothing to fall back on and the loss of one or two harvests because of drought can push millions to the brink of starvation," says Nick Rosevear, Horn of Africa emergency co-ordinator for the international aid agency Oxfam.

"It's very difficult for Ethiopia to cope with these natural disasters because it's stuck in a poverty trap," adds Oxfam spokeswoman Rachel Stabb.

A report issued by the aid agency on 14 April says: "Annual relief distributions cannot address the root causes of food shortage. The poverty underpinning Ethiopia's recurrent crises can only be tackled effec-



tively by greater international support for development after Eritrea and Ethiopia are at peace." Donor nations such as Britain and the Netherlands cut aid in response to the war.

Ethiopia is immensely poor. Its total Gross Domestic Product is \$6.6 billion — far less than some well-known multinational companies' annual revenues (General Motors, the world's richest, has a revenue of \$190 billion a year).

Spread across a population of 60 million, this GDP amounts to just \$110 a year per person, on a par with war-torn Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Life expectancy at birth is 45 years. Every day sees the death of 1,300 Ethiopian children under age of five. Only one in four primary-school age children attends class, 67 per cent of the people are non-literate.

These figures combine to put Ethiopia third from the bottom in the United Nation's human development index. The country's external debt is more than \$10 billion and the food short-

age has already prompted calls for debt relief.

Aid agencies are reluctant to criticise the government directly for fear of being expelled from the country. Medecins Sans Frontieres went the furthest when it said: "This nutritional crisis is not happening in a political vacuum."

Ethiopian voters in parliamentary elections on May 14, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi says his government's handling of the food crisis is not an issue in the campaign, telling a news conference: "The criticism is coming primarily from outside sources."

But on the very day he spoke, an editorial appeared in the privately-owned *Sun* newspaper saying: "The government's agricultural policy has clearly failed to live up to the present challenge of drought and food shortage."

At the centre of Ethiopia's agricultural policy is government ownership of land. Oxfam says the system of leasing land to farmers acts as a disincentive to caring for the land on a

long-term basis.

The lack of infrastructure is a further problem: even if the agriculturally-rich central and western parts of the country produce a surplus, as they often do, the road network to the east is so poor that it is prohibitively expensive and time-consuming for farmers to send their produce there. And the prices they would fetch are abysmally low.

In effect, Ethiopia is facing two distinct food crises. The current one — the one generating the TV images — is in the southeast, a pastoral region called Somali. Aid agencies say about 1.3 million people there need food aid.

The second crisis has not happened yet, but it's the one everyone is worried about, poised to affect six million Ethiopians in the populous northern highlands, where people try to survive by cultivating on precipitous slopes at altitudes as high as 3000 metres. The short rainy season there should have started in February. It is now too late for them to plant anything before the cold arrives in July.

"That's the emergency we have to get ready to handle," said Doug Sheridan of the US Agency for International Development. "Their peak need will be July to September."

The government and aid agencies have assessed Ethiopia's emergency food aid needs at 836,000 tonnes, but that was before the short rains failed. It will undoubtedly be revised up ward, according to Catherine Bertini of the World Food Programme. The special envoy sent to the Horn of Africa by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Although Ethiopia is getting all the attention, its food crisis is just the tip of what the UN fears is a looming humanitarian disaster across the region. Already drought, with respect for no borders, is affecting some 12 million people in Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan and Ethiopia.

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Mozambique Faces Disaster by Deluge

The worst floods in living memory have lately hit parts of South Africa, Zimbabwe and especially Mozambique. Cyclone Elma and heavy rain-swamped countless villages and left about 1m people homeless. The usually placid Limpopo and Zambezi rivers swelled to rushing torrents upto 80 miles wide, sweeping away buildings and hurling livestock into the Indian Ocean.

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Mozambique, the poorest country in the region, is the worst affected. This was a cruel reward for all the efforts which had helped to turn this underdeveloped country into one of the world's fastest-growing economies, at last giving hope to a people who had been reduced, many of them, by two decades of civil war to wearing tree bark and eating wild berries.

The floods pushed back into poverty large numbers of Mozambicans who had recently begun to lift themselves out of it. Just as bad, the flooding was thought to have dislodged thousands of landmines and carried them into places previously considered safe. Mozambican peasants normally used to plant some of their crops on low ground, which was damper and more fertile, and some higher up so that nearby rivers might flood them. But this year's floods were so much heavier than usual that not only the low fields were turned into muddy porridge but much of the hillside crop had also been destroyed.

Medicins san Frontiere, a French charity, has estimated that 220,000 Mozambicans would need food aid in the next three months, a figure that might rise if the waters did not recede sufficiently before the planting season, due this month. The Mozambican government has estimated that 900,000 of its citizens would need assistance of some sort, and asked donors for \$65m. Only about \$13m had been pledged. The flood situation in Mozambique was exacerbated as South Africa, Zimbabwe and neighbouring Zambia had all opened some of the floodgates on their dams to lower the water level upstream. Unfortunately this had released more water into Mozambique, making the rescue work there even harder.

Efforts to fly food and vaccines to the needy are hampered because the victims are scattered in small groups around a vast area, and are constantly on

the move to escape the shifting waters. Water was not the only peril they faced. The floods brought disease with them. Stretches of vast swampland are a breeding ground for malarial mosquitoes. Torrents of filthy water spread Cholera in some areas. Hunger and exhaustion among those clinging to trees or bridges lowered their resistance to disease. And, since between an eighth and a quarter of adults in the flooded country were HIV-affected, that resistance was not very great to start with.

Extensive damages were wrought by the flood to some of the country's important industries. Coca-cola's factory outside Maputo, Mozambique's capital, was submerged beneath two metres of dirty water, and its staff had to throw away millions of bottles, most of their computers, and thousands of tonnes of contaminated sugar. Luckily, Mozambique's largest aluminium smelter which operated under foreign investment, suffered minimum damage.

For the very poor, which meant most of the flood's victims, it would take longer to mend the damage. Some managed to save a few of their possessions — pots, blankets, bags of maize, flour — by hauling them up on tree. Others lost everything. The damage to roads made it harder to get food to them. Much of Mozambique was close to chaos. Prisoners

were released from jail lest they drowned in their cells. Many families having been evacuated from their homes, in separate helicopters, found themselves in different refugee camps.

With admirable determination people strove to rebuild their lives. In Palmera, north of Maputo, one of several places where Mozambique's main north-south highway had been broken by the deluge, trucks and earth-movers strained to reconnect the severed parts.

While they laboured, hundreds of petty traders risked the arrival of another torrent by wading, up to their necks, in brown water and balancing bulging packages of goods on their heads, towards the villages on the distant shore.

CAN YOU FEEL THE HEAT ?

HEATWAVES CAN KILL

Heatwaves are perhaps our most under-rated natural hazard. In Bangladesh heatwaves caused more deaths than any other hazard and seriously affected many thousands. Heatwaves also cause expensive livestock/crop losses and damage roads, electrical equipment, railways, bridges etc.

HEAT STRESS AND THOSE MOST AT RISK

Every summer people suffer from stress when the body absorbs more heat than it can dispel (see treatment - below). Prompt action will avoid the potentially fatal effects of fully-developed heat stroke. At most risk are young children; the elderly; people with alcohol, weight, or health problems; or those on medication/drugs with a dehydrating effect. **Seek medical advice in such cases.**

AVOIDING HEAT STRESS

- Wear lightweight, light-colored, loose, porous natural fibre clothes. Avoid strenuous activities.
- Drink 2 to 3 litres of water per day, even if not thirsty.
- Avoid alcoholic, caffeinated or carbonated (soft) drinks.
- Don't take salt tablets unless prescribed by a doctor.
- Avoid heavy protein foods (eg, meat, dairy products) which increase body heat and fluid loss.
- Keep your home cool with curtains, shutters, or awnings on the sunny sides and open windows at night.
- If you don't have air conditioning, use fans, damp clothing and have frequent cool showers.
- Spend as much time as possible in air conditioned buildings (eg shopping centres, galleries, museums).
- Avoid direct sunlight. Wear a hat and sunscreen as sunburn limits your ability to cope with heat.
- If you work outside, keep hat and clothing damp.
- Don't leave children in parked vehicles.
- If you suffer chronic illness or feel ill, see a doctor.
- Keep animals in the shade with plenty of water.

HEATWAVE ACTION GUIDE

HEAT STRESS SYMPTOMS AND FIRST AID TREATMENT

DISORDER	SYMPTOMS	TREATMENT (First Aid)
UNUSUAL DISCOMFORT AND HEAT CRAMPS	Heavy sweating, tired and thirsty. Irritability, loss of appetite. Prickly heat rash, nausea. Muscle spasms/twitching, moist cool skin. Painful muscle cramps (limbs and abdomen).	Drink more water. Have a cold shower/bath. Lie in a cool place with legs supported and slightly elevated. Massage muscles gently to ease spasms, or firmly if cramped, then apply ice packs and drink glucose. Don't have salt.
HEAT EXHAUSTION	Profuse sweating. Cold, clammy, pale skin. Fatigue, weakness and restlessness. Headache and vomiting. Weak but rapid pulse. Poor co-ordination. Normal temperature, but faintness.	Lay victim down in a cool place as above, loosen clothing and apply wet cloths to head and body. Fan or move victim to an air conditioned area. Give sips of cold water. If vomiting continues, seek medical assistance immediately.
HEAT STROKE (Hyperthermia)	Confusion, headache, nausea, dizziness. Skin flushed, hot and unusually dry. Dry swollen tongue. High body temperature (40°C+). Rapid strong pulse at first, then weaker. Deep unconsciousness may develop rapidly.	Seek medical assistance urgently. In the meantime: Lay victim in a cool place as above and remove outer clothing. If unconscious, check airway and breathing. Cool victim quickly, applying cold water, or wrap in a wet sheet and fan them (keep wet). When conscious give sips of water.

Safety 2000

