

Dengue Danger

THE sudden rise in Dengue infection has alarmed us all. We urge the health ministry to take immediate action to prevent its spread before it goes beyond our control. The sudden re-emergence of this deadly viral fever must receive our full attention and preventive action. The disease is spread by mosquito bite, and we know that mosquito breeds in stagnant water. During the rainy season pools of stagnant water rises partly for the natural topography of our land in the countryside but also because of the absence of an effective drainage system in most of our cities. Whenever it rains, pools of stagnant water is retained in countless low lands around the cities and within the cities as well which soon turn into breeding grounds for mosquito.

Over the years an effective disinfecting programme was developed. But now that system appears to have collapsed which may partly explain the rise of mosquito-borne diseases including malaria, and not to mention dengue. Therefore immediate steps must be taken to restore that programme of disinfecting stagnant water bodies. Simultaneous with the above steps we must prepare our hospitals to deal with the rising crisis. What is most disconcerting is the fact that we do not have the testing facilities for instantly diagnosing dengue infection. What we have are more traditional facilities that take time to detect the infection, which results in the loss of crucial time in preliminary stages of the infection. We urge the health ministry to procure the special microscope that is necessary for dengue detection and to make them available wherever the outbreak occurs.

There should also be massive public awareness campaigns launched about this comparatively unknown infection. As the disease is relatively new most people have no knowledge about it, leave alone take preventive measures against it. As it has been proven over and over again, a good public awareness effort is far more cost effective than any curative effort. We must ensure both a curative campaign for the already infected group and a preventive campaign to stop the disease from spreading. But most importantly we must launch a massive mosquito eradication programme. Obviously, gradual deterioration of the overall hygienic living condition of the city is the most important cause of the spread of infectious diseases like the dengue. We urge all the official bodies concerned especially the DCC and the health ministry to pay serious attention to restoring hygienic conditions in our cities. If not, other infectious diseases will follow soon.

Murders Galore

A city of death is what Dhaka seems to have turned into. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) records show there have been 158 murders in the capital city over the first six months of the current year, 19 more than last year's figures of the corresponding period. There is no reason to feel that the situation elsewhere in the country, especially in the major cities, is any different. Last Wednesday's massacre near Bahaddarhat in Chittagong that left five activists of the ruling party-backed Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) dead is poignant indicator in this regard. Put together with the figures on other criminal acts like rape, abduction, extortion, mugging, etc., we have a grim picture of an overall law and order breakdown. Evidently, despite a much-publicised series of countrywide police operations, the government has not made much ground in its battle against crime. Worse still, if one takes a close look at the DMP figures on murders over the last six months, one would find that the trend has been progressively upward. From 19 in January, the number has risen to 30 in June and in between there hasn't been a dip in the curve. It is indeed bad augury for the citizenry.

This paper has persistently been trying to attract the government's attention to the alarming law and order downside. We have expressed our grave concern that unless dealt with iron fists the situation would only aggravate. As much as we have castigated the police for indulgence in corruption and highhandedness, so have we stressed the need for its modernisation. The police admittedly is inadequately equipped, both on personnel and logistic counts, to cope with increasing challenges of the present-day crime world. While the criminal elements have highly-sophisticated arms and ammunition, and communication devices, our police have been perennially stuck with the 303s of World War II vintage. More money should be invested for its qualitative and quantitative enhancement.

Political support, however, is of essence here. Unless our politicians start actively co-operating with the police instead of interfering in their work, the crime curve would never come down.

Safe Groundwater

IF experts' predictions are any indicator, Dhaka City is at the risk of having highly contaminated ground water due to massive industrial pollution on the surface. A Department of Environment estimate says that each day more than 16,000 cubic metres of highly toxic waste from Hazaribagh tanneries first flows to low-lying areas and then to Buriganga river. Another 3,500 cubic metres of toxic waste from Tejgaon industrial area pollutes the land surface before falling into rivers. As these toxic wastes accumulate on vast stretches of land, the groundwater gets charged with contaminated seepage. The height of the problem seems similar to that of arsenic contamination and we are living on the verge of a looming disaster. It's time we did something about it. It would be the height of folly if measures are not taken in due course.

To maintain the groundwater at the consumption level, prospects of artificial recharge may be considered as an option, keeping in mind that over-extraction of groundwater may end up in land subsidence. As far as pollution of the low-lying areas and rivers around the city is concerned, the sources of waste have to be capped. Setting up proper water retention ponds is another way out, but unfortunately, the selected retention zones in the city are fast disappearing in the hands of land grabbers. Since there is no alternative to groundwater for city-dwellers, it is very important that we urgently develop a better, scientifically-managed, system for its safe sustenance. Other countries have done it in the face of similar problems; there's no reason why we cannot.

Gas : A Question of Prioritisation

by Syed Muhammad Hussain

On the basis of a rosy picture, we might be in a great hurry, for reasons anyone can guess, to start the process of a draw-down of our existing reserves, which as we earlier noted, on no account is considered adequate for even the short term requirements of our own. It is probable that we land up in a situation to buy back the finished product i.e., power, across the border, at the monopolistic supplier's price for a captive market.

2001-02. Compared to this peak demand data, average demand is expected to rise from 328 BCF in 1996-97 to 437 BCF and 495 BCF during the same period. Taking annual production capacity and gas supply data into account, these show 292 and 285 BCF (96-97 benchmark) and 506 and 438 BCF in 1999-00 and 500 and 495 BCF in 2001-02 respectively. The whole scenario above exhibits a precarious balance between peak and average demand and annual production and supply capacities, even under the Plan option (all data computed from Fifth FYP document). Any increase in demand, which is more than probable due to massive domestic and industrial expansion over the coming years and any shortfall in production and supply, which again would be more likely than not, would create a most undesirable instability in the gas-based sector, having an adverse multiplier effect throughout the economy. Already Plan forecast of augmentation in the reserve "very shortly" has not come to pass. The Fifth-FYP document stated that "with a success ratio of 3:1 (in gas exploration), it will not be a surprise if we experience a doubling or tripling of the existing reserve very shortly". Prepared in March 1998, this should have happened by now — some 27 months later. Unless, of course, Plan authorities put only a philosophic interpretation of the phrase "very shortly". Even if we ignore this time reference due to misperceived enthusiasm, the moot question still remains by how much, and when, the projected increase in reserve shall take place!

It is to be noted that the peak and average demand as estimated moved up by 55 per cent over a 5-year period. With a much more intensive and extensive gas utilisation in power, fertiliser, domestic, industrial and commercial sectors beyond 2002, the consumption rate annually could logically be more than 15-16 per cent. Keeping that in view and estimating our own internal consumption requirements of gas plus leaving a comfortable margin in reserve for this non-renewable source of energy (only one to speak apart from some encouraging indications on probable coal deposits in the country), shall

we have enough surplus to make any significant export commitment at this stage? As a layman and as a concerned citizen, I, along with most of my compatriots, have the right to ask this question and the authorities concerned have the obligation to respond to the same. Last 2/3 years have shown a frenzied demand albeit in the shape of friendly advice from some of our important donors, the World Bank, and the neighbour, that we start export of gas — it will ease our balance of payments position, foreign private investment will stream in and so on and so forth. In a classical set up, this apparently non-motivated technical advice was soon followed by the International Oil Companies (IOCs) demands "to allow them access to bigger gas market in India" arguing that the "Bangladesh's own gas market is not expanding fast enough to allow them to invest more in exploring oil and gas." (quoted from The Daily Star report "USGS to train local experts to assess gas reserves", 08 July 2000). The report goes on to add that "the country's proven gas reserve of

10 trillion cubic feet (TCF) was too inadequate to meet its own needs...." A clear clarification to the query raised earlier in this article is, hence, all the more necessary and urgent in this crucial matter. We may further enquire, as to a) how IOCs are demanding export facilities when they have not come up with a firm estimate of proven reserves that should ensure meeting the country's prime responsibility to her own citizens and thereafter, allow a significant commitment of a substantial proven surplus for exports; b) whether it would be possible for us to obtain participation in exploration from other, more sympathetic, less aggressively commercial sources; and c) the reasons for our inability to keep the decision on export of gas on hold till independent, non subjective studies and assessment are completed. We also feel that those countries, whose obvious commercial interests have been expressed, should not be the ones who assess the gas reserve. One could in all certainty forecast here and now that their reports would not, to put it in the

mildest of expressions, be objective. On the basis of a rosy picture, we might be in a great hurry, for reasons anyone can guess, to start the process of a draw-down of our existing reserves, which as we earlier noted, on no account is considered adequate for even the short term requirements of our own. It is probable that we land up in a situation to buy back the finished product i.e., power, across the border, at the monopolistic supplier's price for a captive market. Nepal's experience in the trade, energy, water and other sectors need to be closely studied in our own interest. The energy consumption requirements in neighbouring area in the 21st century is so enormous that a small country like ours will be trampled all over to have that additional source of raw materials delivered as per their need. Even if we are extremely careful in framing the right policy in preserving the country's own interest, the possibility of being overwhelmed is very much there. And if we are not, the resultant political and economic scenario can very well be imagined! Our future generations shall in all probability be a hostage to an imposed poverty and dependence trap, with the water and gas resources disappearing fast across our borders. The writer is a retired Secretary to the Government and former Ambassador to Morocco, Nepal and Zimbabwe.

Money, Muscle and the Electoral Process

Mahmud Farooque writes from Virginia, USA

Given that ours is a tree that is rotting at the top, the organic outgrowth in our case has to emerge from the very bottom. It is not simply a matter of providing education because a 99 per cent literate Russia is facing political problems far more severe than ours. It is also not a matter of simply aspiring for democratic representation because the present power structure will quash any efforts to undermine it. It thus involves a long drawn out process of raising a new generation that takes democratic principles to heart and equipping them with the power of grassroots level civic institutions.

the election commissioner but would remain remarkably silent about making the commissioner truly independent with power and authority to bring fundamental changes to the electoral process. The current system is the one that very much keeps the opposition in the game even when they are not in power. Changing it could put them out of politics, or more appropriately the business politics has become in Bangladesh. In a nutshell, the last sentence summarizes what the Bangladeshis Americans heard when they went to listen to Workers Party General Secretary Rashed Khan Menon speak in an Association for Economic Development Studies on Bangladesh (AEDSB) seminar held at the World Bank on July 6, 2000.

Menon's portrayal of Bangladesh Politics was in sharp contrast with the earlier accounts expressed above. He contends that unhappiness looms large among those who are now being forced into the outer edges of the political game in Bangladesh. The Workers Party General Secretary had to really struggle to find glimmers of hope in the quagmire of Bangladesh politics. The few that he found were basically out of the mainstream and more of potential than actual developments, leading some to question whether or not the congratulatory gestures from the western governments and international agencies are fair or a bit premature.

The Caretaker Government

Question thus arises, why does the minority view of Bangladesh Politics appears so much in contrast with the majority opinion? Why does vet-

erans in the likes of Rashed Khan have to struggle to cite something positive about the developments in Bangladesh politics? Is this a question of simply sour grapes or is there really something fundamental that warrants attention? To get some insights into the problems, why not take a closer look at the darling of UNDP report card, the caretaker government, something it identifies as an "important advance in a new democracy." Objectively speaking, and notwithstanding the high accolades of the UNDP report, the caretaker government could be termed as a negative-institutional innovation because of several fundamental reasons:

- The basic premise is that political party when in position of power cannot be trusted to place the national interest ahead of its individual interest;
- Instead of trying to overcome the lack of trust between the political parties through political means, by entering the notion of an interim regime into the constitution, it institutionalizes mistrust almost permanently.
- The measure provides central importance on the relationship between the two dominant political parties instead of between the people and the political parties;
- National elections become the only focus of the political process allowing the party in power to be autocratic and the party in opposition to be complacent in their actions in between elections;
- Critical measures to curtail the unfair political advantage of the party in power during its scheduled tenure, such as administrative reform and relinquishing control of state owned media, are made into

non-issues; • In a country where the international donor funded Non-Governmental sector acts as a substitute to both government and market institutions, the interim administration is yet another form of relinquishing public accountability; • Once the formula for the caretaker government is known in advance, in four and half years in which an elected party stays in power, the system can be manipulated to the extent where the neutrality of the interim administration could be very easily compromised. Rashed Khan Menon, when presented with similar arguments, pointed out that he personally did not agree that the provision of interim regime be entered into the constitution. He provided the legislative history behind the idea of an interim government as it was originally conceived after the fall of the Ershad administration. The proposal at that point was that since democratic institutions will need time to form and authenticate themselves, it was necessary that the next three national elections be held under interim governments so as to establish fairness for all the participating political parties. Menon agreed that the expectation of neutrality from the caretaker government was no longer a working assumption. Giving up on that idea, he argued for the need of an independent election commission with powers and funds to bring true electoral reforms. Citing the case of Tongi Pourashava Elections, he pointed to the possibility of how a strong election commission could place a spending cap and force the contesting parties to play by the same rules.

Political Workers versus Others

It is indeed unfortunate that this veteran of Bangladesh politics will give up on an idea for which he himself joined the opposition's walkout of the parliament seven years ago. But why does he feel that appointment of a neutral election commission is not enough and that it needs to be given the power and authority to bring electoral reforms? Why is it important for the election commission to put spending caps to ensure fairness? It would appear that topping Menon's list of concerns is the issue of lateral entry into the power structure of the two major political parties by people who did everything but politics in their earlier lives: wealthy civil servants, military personnel, businessmen and influential members of crime syndicates. According to Menon, these entrants were undermining and to some extent replacing the political workers who steadfastly have been working their way up through the political hierarchy all their lives. It is possible to understand

Menon's concern by recognizing a subtle but important distinction between choosing a profession and choosing a career. In general, professionalism is associated with specialized knowledge acquired through lifetime of work and commitment to a cause larger than one's own self interest. Career does not call for such attributes. In fact, it is often driven by opportunities of personal gains at the expense of everything else.

There are many that choose politics as a profession. They are not the ones who "entered politics" having done something else all their life; politics is their life. One may not agree with the particular ideological stand they take, but one can seldom fault them for abandoning the high ideals they set for themselves for quick personal gains. Many of them actually have long prison sentences in their records as proof of their convictions.

Politicians fitting such descriptions are becoming an endangered species of Bangladesh politics. They are becoming extinct by the lateral entries into politics by people of other profession, for whom money and not ideology is the governing motivation.

Infusion of people of different background usually provides value addition to a given professional activity. Politics can benefit from the administrative skills of an ex-bureaucrat, the leadership and discipline of an ex-military and the entrepreneurial skills of a businessman. However, they can never replace the role and function of a dedicated political worker.

Rashed Khan believed that this is precisely what has been happening to Bangladesh politics. People who spent a lifetime rising through the party ranks are now being outstripped and outmaneuvered by the financial prowess of non-politicians unshackling their way into the political hierarchy. So instead of adding value to the process, they are taking away essential ingredients of the process. Most importantly, they are converting politics into another big business.

Politics as a Business

When politics is accepted as a business proposition, it immediately establishes high corruption as an accepted behavioral norm. Why else would anyone spend one crore Taka for a single constituency in Chittagong or one and half

times that in Dhaka if he or she did not expect to double or triple the investment upon winning? But there could be only one winner in a given political contest. This means that the loser has to make up for the loss in the consequent elections. So cost of doing elections continue to spiral upwards through each iteration.

As the cost of political competition continues to skyrocket, only one kind of individuals, those with means for raising money continue to gain prominence. This means that a political worker who does not have the means and connection to raise millions is forced out of the game. However, the ability to raise money rests not only with the independently wealthy bureaucrat, militaryman or businessman, but also with musclemen, terrorist and extortionist. In a high stake political game, this latter group also becomes an important factor and ends up on the payroll of all the major political parties.

When money becomes the element that binds a political party, the obvious casualty of the political process is ideology. So party affiliations become as tradable as stock options in a publicly held company. This in turn also makes the parties indistinguishable in political terms, if not in rhetoric. Once the ideology of a political party is compromised, parties become conservative and similar in terms of policy and action. As a result, political competition becomes a contest of symbols and not substance.

The Way Out

One does not have to subscribe to the Workers Party's ideology to accept the above prognosis of Bangladesh's politics. Money, muscle, crime, corruption, and violence have become the mainstay of the two major political parties. Ideology and national interests are taking a back seat. Symbols and personal rivalries are taking centre stage. Communalism is showing its ugly teeth. Democracy is turning into an autocracy.

Is there a way out of this or is the process to continue indefinitely? Can further institutional tinkering like an independent and powerful election commission provide what the interim neutral government was supposed to provide? Is there any guarantee, that if the elections were fair then the outcomes would be any different?

History tells us that if we are putting into a democratic system an illiterate population, an underdeveloped civil society, and widespread poverty the outcomes are seldom favourable. The great political thinker Alexis Tocqueville showed years ago that democracy evolved in the West not through the kind of moral fiat we are trying to impose throughout the world but as an organic outgrowth of development.

Given that ours is a tree that is rotting at the top, the organic outgrowth in our case has to emerge from the very bottom. It is not simply a matter of providing education because a 99 per cent literate Russia is facing political problems far more severe than ours. It is also not a matter of simply aspiring for democratic representation because the present power structure will quash any efforts to undermine it. It thus involves a long drawn out process of raising a new generation that takes democratic principles to heart and equipping them with the power of grassroots level civic institutions. Anything short of that would be equivalent to buying another negative innovation like the caretaker government and the premature commendations like the ones being handed out by the authorities in Washington and New York.

The author is a doctoral candidate at the School of Public Policy, George Mason University and a co-founder of EB2000 (www.eb2000.org), a global network of Bangladeshis Expatriates committed to the development of Bangladesh.

To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Rejoice? How?

Sir, Though I am not trying to undermine the attainment-Test status but at the same time, I wonder how to rejoice this achievement. Our PM tells us to celebrate. But if we look around what do we see?

The whole country is facing acute power shortage but the government seems absolutely indifferent about it. Our PM doesn't care to speak about this important issue even though she has been holding the Energy/Power portfolio since long. Chittagong Port-the life-line of the country, is facing shutdown on trivial issues and the authority is absolutely apathetic towards it. There are so many problems all around but the ruling party is always trying to point out its "success" and is not at all interested in admitting their failures.

A Distressed Observer
Chittagong

"Naming Culture"

Sir, I had no option but to write on the subject 'Naming Culture' as Mr Uttam Das

broached it again in his letter published on July 8. It seems that he totally misunderstood my point. I have full respect and immense gratitude for the heroes of our liberation war. And paying homage to them should indeed be one of our sacred duties. A new establishment could have easily been named after M A Hannan. But why the name of an existing establishment has to be changed? We, the Chittagonians, are so attached to the name 'Patenga' which have been in use as long as I could remember. In accordance with the sea beach, the airport had also been called 'Patenga airport'. So when the proposal to change the name was raised, the news shocked us immensely. We requested not to change the name but the government did not relent.

In one place Mr Uttam Das wrote, "... I always salute our heroes who sacrificed their lives for a better tomorrow." Is Mr Das unaware of the present condition of our country? Where everything is falling apart? Is this what our valiant freedom fighters laid their lives for?

So, I think naming institutions after our war heroes is not the only way to show respect

towards them rather we should strive to make the country prosperous. And to do so we should forget our personal interests. Only then true respect will be shown to the sons of this soil who laid down their lives in order to give us an independent country. The sacrifice they had made should not go in vain. We must always remember and try to live up to their expectation.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Brown revolution

Sir, We should support the transition from the ready-made garment revolution to the 'brown revolution' of our glossy leather industry (DS, July 8). But the foundation of this brown revolution is at present in a leathery stage.

The garment industry mushroomed almost single-handedly during the incubation period, without initial notice of the official sources, thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit of those who set up this industry in Bangladesh. But finished leather technology is highly technical and needs local R&D and quality control using local professional human resources for value-added components; and also top-class marketing strategies (fashion, design, and finish).

With garment, shoes, and bag, we can now completely attire an individual client in any part of the world and our PR

pitch should be to stress to get the whole kit from one source/country.

A Citizen
Dhaka

Urdu complex

Sir, Local ghazal singer Mesbah Uddin's lament (DS, July 8) about the discouragement of geet and ghazal in the local official musical scene was food for thought. The situation may be reviewed at the highest policy level, instead of unnecessarily keeping it under wrap for decades. How is it still a live issue?

It appears we are still suffering from a sort of negative complex about Urdu. The Bangladesh liberation movement was related to the declaration in the then capital (in West Pakistan) that Urdu would be the national language of Pakistan, whereas the majority of the citizens spoke Bangla.

Why are we still 'scared' of Urdu (if that is the correct term to use)? We may treat Urdu as we treat English or any other foreign language, depending on the environmental need. Should we ban Urdu? Is the language the culprit, or its use, or the user?

This question has to be faced, as a national directive is necessary for public guidance. Is it not better to openly settle this issue once and for all, instead of dragging our feet for three decades?

A Z
Dhaka