

To a sleeping poet

by Neeman A Sobhan

He used to talk about the hills he had traversed... he used to speak of the need to speak out the truth with the ease of a dream... he used to speak of the wondrous reach of ancient melodies... he used to speak of the fields lit by the stars of a plentiful harvest... he used to speak of poets and poetry... Legend is what I speak about, I speak about a sleeping poet, temporarily lost to us in a physical coma, who yet speaks to us through his poetry. Ami Kingdonotir kotha boichhi. I speak about AZM Obaidullah Khan.

But I speak not about Abu Zafar Mohammad Obaidullah the bureaucrat who served as Minister of Agriculture and also of Communications, nor of his erstwhile Excellency the Ambassador of Bangladesh to the United States, nor even about that much respected scholar of rural development who served as Assistant Director General to the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations. The person I speak about - in spite of his protean gifts and public roles - is not even that eminent and widely published poet, the recipient of the Bangla Academy Award for poetry in 1979 and the National Award for poetry in 1985, nor he who, till recently, authored the column in The Daily Star, Do I Dare. The man I write about is the simple Bengali, an intellectually vibrant mind, a charming and polished gentleman, a private human being, and an avuncular friend whom my husband and I fondly think of only as Shentu Bhai.

Iqbal knew him from much before, but I first met him in Washington in the 1970s while he was a consultant to the World Bank. My husband Iqbal and I were still students, and we took him to one of our favourite French restaurants - an affordable one in Georgetown, where we found we could make an entire meal of the crusty bread and the quite generous portions of Pate de fois gras, if we ate slowly while talking with our mouths full. And we talked a lot, as all Bengalis are wont to, till the waiter was ready to throw us out. 'Sir' was how Iqbal always addressed Shentu Bhai, but in spite of the implicit respect, Iqbal interacted with him as if there was no generation gap, mainly because of Shentu Bhai's ability to relate to people of all ages and every persuasion; and the two never stopped arguing about academic and intellectual issues, always taking up polarised positions. Being ever the listener rather than the talker, I loved to hear the two banter on with eloquence and wit, and observed the twinkle in Shentu Bhai's eyes whenever he managed to rile up Iqbal with a provocative statement. There was never a dull moment.

But, it was not until Shentu Bhai married Iqbal's beautiful and feisty college friend - Moni Apa to me and to many, also Mahjabeen Khan - that we became closer as friends. Long after Iqbal and I had left the United States for Italy and FAO, Ambassador Obaidullah Khan and his elegant wife arrived in Washington. What with her talents as an accomplished singer of Rabindra Sangeet and his

reputation as a poet, they were vibrant members of the diplomatic and expatriate society, holding cultural court.

I have before me a pamphlet bearing some selected poems of Shentu Bhai in English translation, obviously circulated for a poetry reading session at their home. It bears this legend: ASIA IN WASHINGTON. The Washington Center of the Asia Society Arts at the Embassy, at the residence of the Ambassador of Bangladesh and Mrs. Obaidullah Khan. Bethesda, Maryland.

I am re-reading a poem from this selection, OF TREE AND BIRDS AND THE STREETS I HAVE SO OFTEN WALKED, and a particular line haunts me: 'Birds like rivers, come back home, but some birds lose their way, leaving no forward address... They fly too far away, do not come back.' I fervently try to distract my mind

sated by the regular visits Shentu Bhai made to Rome during this period, when he always stayed with us, giving us the privilege of knowing him closely. Those were the halcyon days of our friendship, when he became more than a friend, almost a family member. And for my sons, Shentu Uncle was a delight since he would laughingly undo all my discipline, sowing seeds of rebellion by instigating them against 'Hitler's sister', his sobriquet for me! 'Listen boys, just say 'yes' to please that tyrant of a mother of yours and then do exactly as you wish', was his naughty preaching. But of course, we saw him only in a holiday mood. It is most likely that as a father he himself was not unlike Iqbal and I, loving yet disciplining. What was quite apparent was that he adored his own children, his grown up sons, and

ponds and 'shalik' birds of his childhood, the vanished Bengal of his beloved mother. Still, sometimes he also enjoyed the general and genial Roman ambience and scenic charms of the Italian countryside. A special memory is when we once took him to a Sunday lunch at the country home of a friend, out in a village in Tuscany.

Sitting under the trees, after a hearty lunch, all the guests were in an expansive mood. Quite spontaneously we drifted to poetry, and I pulled out a book of Shentu Bhai's poems which he had just presented us and started to recite from it. I remember that as everyone broke into applause he seemed almost to awaken from a reverie, coming back from a long way. His self-deprecating smile seemed to say what he wrote elsewhere: Poetry is only my means to privacy, my excuse for solitude - Kabita amar eka thakar uppar.

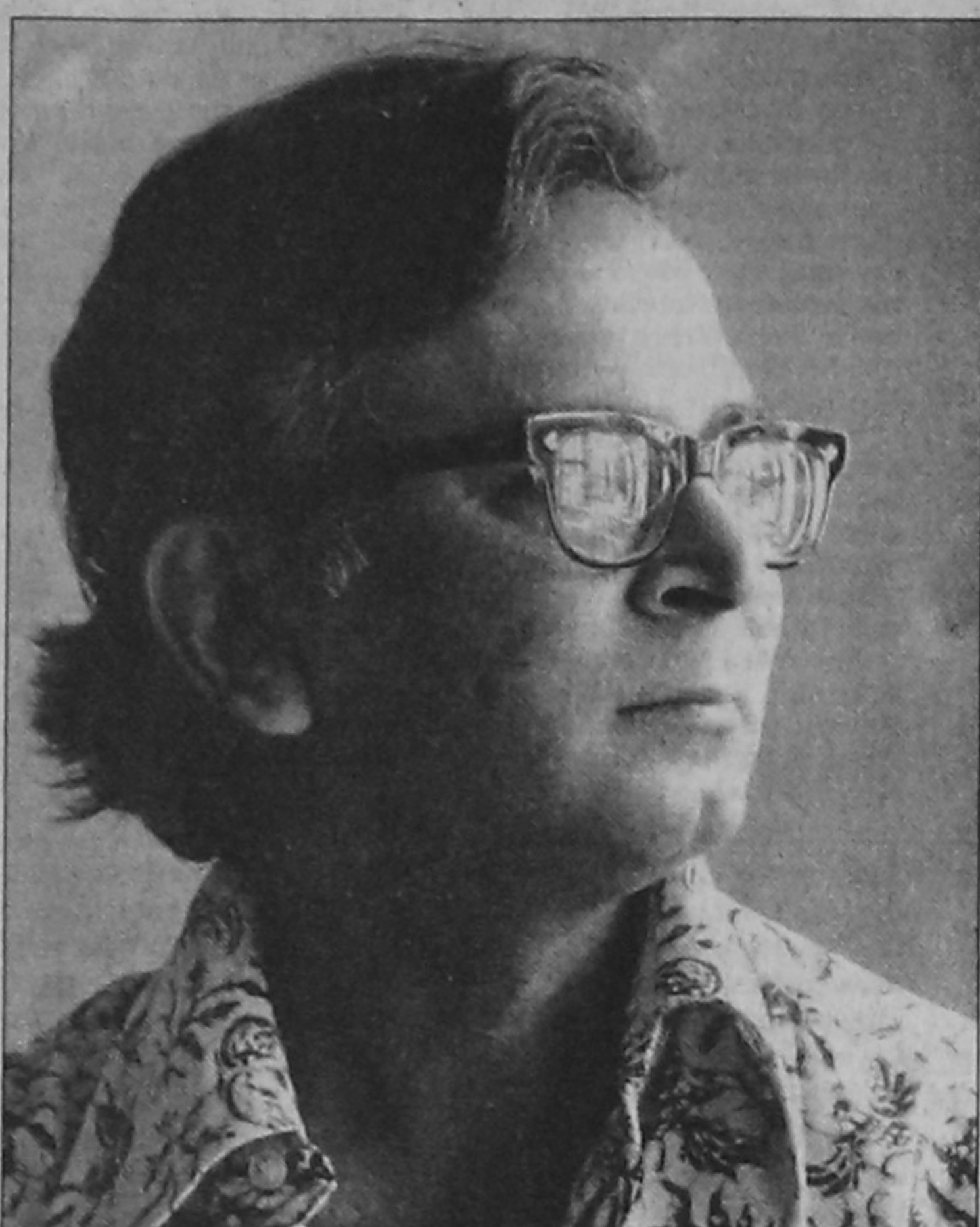
Today, he seems to have discovered other means to be alone, found other worlds to dream in, which we who sit at vigil, praying over his sleeping form are not privy to. Nothing is whole except for dreams. I wanted to dream abundantly, but now I wake and do not remember. I am now ready to leave. But we are not ready to let him leave, yet.

Shentu Bhai's intense absence, as alive as his presence, hangs between worlds, exactly as his persona once hung between the harsh reality of a political and bureaucratic world of machinations, compromises, corruptions and disillusionments on the one hand, and on the other, the dreaminess and idealism of the passionate poetry of his youth.

Today, the memory of a summer afternoon in Tuscany has taken on for me the dimensions of an enchanted place where I remember the noisy peace of cicadas, the drowsy scent of grass, the tinkling of glasses and the hush as everyone listened in appreciation to his lines which I recited in a dream: I was afraid to turn the bend, now I am not afraid. To be out of sight is not death.

Shentu Bhai, who have your poetry and your friendship, are not afraid either. You may have turned a mysterious bend in your life, but as long as your well-wishers have eyes in their hearts and poetry in their souls, you will never be out of sight. Wasn't it you who said that 'one who has no ear for poetry shall only hear the moaning of the storm/ one who has no ear for poetry shall lose the inheritance of the horizons/ one who has no ear for poetry will ever remain deaf and mute/ one who has no ear for poetry cannot resist the mounting terror'?

As long as we have an ear for your poetry, nothing of you will ever be lost. Your birds will return safely to their nest and the rivers will flow home. You once wrote *He who departs is - gone*. But I disagree. No one who departs is gone. After all, every death is not a departure, and in your particular case, nor is every departure a death. And anyway it is mere human beings who live or die, or lie comatose, while poets are deathless, as are legends. And it is legend that I speak about.



from this disturbing image. But the tiny, twinkling-eyed man always hid within his love of society a complex psyche that was intrinsically lonely and inclined to the morose, the mark, perhaps, of the artist. The man with the ready laugh also retained within him unexplored areas of anguish, anxiety and brooding darkness, which started to leak into his later poetry. Almost prophetically, he would write: *I am now ready to leave. My father smiled to himself before his death. I am lucid as he was. Except for departure, I have no connection with anything or anybody... I have severed all connections with things.*

But this was not the Shentu Bhai we knew in those early times. When in the 80's he joined FAO as the chief of its Regional Headquarters for Asia in Bangkok, Moni Apa invited us countless times to visit with them. Although I have been to Thailand often, I regret that while they were there, we were unable to go to Bangkok. However, this lacking was compensated

specially his daughter Kakon/Kakoli/Kakutia.

His visits to Rome would mean late night *adda* sessions with ashtrays over flowing with his cigarettes and friends and acquaintances dropping by our apartment at all hours to meet him. All this never prevented him from waking up at the crack of dawn, ready for another day.

Only twice did Moni Apa accompany him, and at both times she proved to be the ideal visitor to Rome. Wearing comfortable shoes, holding a guide book in hand, and armed with her native insouciance she would take off on her own for the day, coming back to regale us with her adventures and encounters with Italians and other tourists on the bus or a side-walk cafe, or about a satisfying day just basking in the sun on the ruins of the Roman Forum or the Spanish Steps. But Shentu Bhai was adamantly a non-tourist. The landscape in his mind thronged with the shady trees, quiet

The dengue danger

by Dr Yasmin Jahan and Prof AKM Kafiluddin

THE people of Bangladesh have been panic-stricken by the emergence of sporadic dengue cases. Many cases have been suspected, but at least a few have been confirmed by laboratory investigations. Nowadays several people are suffering from fever that is similar to dengue in symptoms. However, inadequate laboratory facilities have stood as a barrier to the confirmation of the disease. At present, dengue diagnosis facility is only available at Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) and BIRDEM. At this crucial moment awareness for its prevention and control among community people and health service providers is urgently required before it turns into an epidemic. There is no regular dengue surveillance programme in Bangladesh as it is not yet identified as a common health problem.

But Bangladesh cannot remain complacent as in its neighbouring countries like Thailand, India and Myanmar the disease has taken both endemic as well as epidemic proportion. Spread of this disease from these countries to Bangladesh seems inevitable. Therefore, Bangladesh health authority (Primary Health Care, Communicable Disease Control Programme) should be more concerned and take necessary steps to prevent and control any outbreak of this fatal disease. Early diagnosis, prompt treatment and vector control can prevent the spread of dengue.

Dengue (pronounced 'Dhen Gey') is a serious viral infection common throughout the tropical region of the world. It is spread by certain species of day biting *Aedes* mosquitoes, particularly *Aedes aegypti*. Dengue occurs in two forms: Dengue Fever (DF) and Dengue Haemorrhagic Fever (DHF). The incubation period for DF/DHF can be as short as three days and as long as 14 days. The average incubation period is four to six days. Dengue haemorrhagic fever is a deadly disease but early diagnosis and treatment can save lives. Unless proper treatment

is given promptly, the patient may go into shock and die.

Dengue Prevalence in Bangladesh:

Some studies in Dhaka and Chittagong noticed that dengue is endemic in Bangladesh. A study conducted at the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control & Research (IEDCR), Mohakhali, Dhaka, in the year 1997-1998, found 11 per cent sero-positive cases among children below 10 years of age in Chittagong Medical Hospital. In the year 1999, suspected 44 samples from a different Institute in Dhaka (e.g. BIRDEM) were also examined in the same Institute, of which 22 per cent was found positive for dengue fever.

Guidelines for management of dengue as recommended by WHO

1. Characteristics of Dengue (Fever (DF)/ Dengue Haemorrhagic Fever (DHF) and Dengue Shock Syndrome (DSS): DF: Dengue fever is an acute febrile illness of 2-7 days duration (sometimes with two peaks) with two or more of the following manifestations: Severe frontal headache, pain behind the eyes (retro-orbital pain), which worsens with eye movement, deep muscle and joint pains (the disease is nicknamed 'break bone fever' for these two symptoms), rash, haemorrhagic manifestation (Petechiae and positive tourniquet test) and leucopenia.

DHF: During the acute phase of illness, it is difficult to distinguish DHF from dengue fever. DHF is a probable case of dengue and haemorrhagic tendency evidenced by one or more of the following:

Severe and continuous pain in abdomen, bleeding from the nose/mouth/gums, frequent vomiting with or without blood, black stools like coal tar, thrombocytopenia (Platelets 100,000/cumm or less), positive tourniquet test.

Evidence of plasma leakage due to increased capillary permeability manifested by one or more of the following:

A 20% rise in haematocrit for age and sex; a > 20% drop in haematocrit following treatment with fluids as compared to baseline; signs of plasma leakage (pleural effusion, ascites or hypoproteinaemia).

DSS: All of the above symptoms of DHF plus signs of circulatory failure manifested by rapid weak pulse, hypotension for age, cold and clammy skin, sleepiness and restlessness, deep breathing.

2. Treatment: There is no vaccine and there is no cure, so if one contacts dengue, the treatment is 'supportive' which means rest, plenty of fluids, paracetamol and hospitalisation if the hemorrhagic fever or shock developed. Rapid and appropriate treatment can relieve the symptoms and prevent complications and death. Severe abdominal pain, black stool, bleeding from skin or nose or gums, sweating and cold skin, etc. are danger signs. If any one of them is noticed, take the patient to a hospital immediately. Give the patient fluids or drink while transferring him/her to the hospital.

3. Prevention of Dengue: Prevention is really the only choice. There are two key measures that can be applied to prevent the spread of dengue.

Prevent mosquito bites: Dengue mosquito bites during day time; protect yourself from such mosquito bite. Wear full sleeve long loss-fitting dresses to cover the limbs.

Repellents can be applied to exposed parts of the body. Use mosquito coils and electric vapour mats during the daytime.

Use mosquito nets to protect babies, old people and others who may rest during the day. The effectiveness of such things can be improved by treating them with permethrin (pyrethroid insecticide). Curtains, screens can also be treated with insecticide and hung at windows or doorways, to repel or kill mosquitoes.

Break the cycle of mosquito-human-mosquito infection. Mosquitoes become infected

when they bite people who are sick with dengue. Mosquito nets and coils will effectively prevent more mosquitoes from biting sick people and help stop the spread of dengue.

Prevent multiplication of mosquitoes:

Mosquitoes which spread dengue, live and breed in stagnant water in and around houses.

Drain out the water from air coolers (when not in use), tanks, barrels, drums, buckets, jars, pots etc.

Remove all objects containing water (eg plant saucers, etc). All stored water containers should be kept covered all the times. Collect and destroy discarded containers where rain water collects or is stored, eg, bottles, plastic bags, tins, tyres, coconut shells, etc.

Vaccines: There is no therapeutic cure or vaccine currently available. The vaccine is currently undergoing clinical trials, but it is uncertain when it will be available for general use.

4. Role of community and municipal leaders: Introduce reliable rubbish collection, health education campaigns, garbage cleaning campaigns, invite the municipality to be involved and to provide trucks and personnel, hold a community meeting to focus attention on clean-up day and its purpose, advertise the clean-up day on radio, television and through posters.

Invite the community group to participate. School students can be involved; they will carry the message home to their parents and neighbours. Students can begin by cleaning up their school compound, then take action around their homes.

And now attention of the Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation is solicited in order to implement the dengue prevention strategy as per WHO guidelines.

The writer is Assistant Professor (ec), Microbiology Department (NIPSOM) and Professor Emeritus, NIPSOM, respectively.

Chagossians want to go home

Some 30 years after they were forcibly deported to Mauritius by the British to make way for a military base, the people of the Chagos Archipelago are taking the British government to court, saying they want to go home. Nasseem Ackbarally writes from Port Louis on the plight of the Chagossians - the victims of the military manoeuvres.

"IN the Chagos we lived, worked and died," says Fernand Mandarini, native of the archipelago of some 65 small islets, lying about 1,900 km north of Mauritius on the Indian ocean.

Once a British colony along with Mauritius, Britain retained the territory in 1965 during negotiations on the independence of Mauritius.

It turned out to be a straight swap - Mauritius became independent on March 12, 1968 and some time later, the United States began building a military base on the archipelago's largest island, Diego Garcia, leased to the US by Britain.

Where once the island supported the simple lifestyle of the Chagossians, it assumed a giant military significance in the Cold War years. Located half way between Asia and Africa, it is still used to support US forces in the Middle East.

To make way for the Americans, however, some 1,500 Chagossians, scattered over the archipelago were moved to Mauritius and the Seychelles.

According to Chagossians, the British organised raids to assemble those who resisted the deportation plans. There were rumours that the Americans would bomb the islands to snuff out any resistance.

Some, who had gone to Mauritius to buy essentials were forced to stay behind, rounded up by police who said there were no boats going back to the Chagos.

Today, there are some 5,000 Chagossians in Mauritius, mostly living in abject poverty at Pointe-aux-Sables on the western coast and Baie-du-Tombeau, near Port Louis, the capital.

Theirs is a classic tale of dispossession and poverty. Twice - in 1973 and 1979 - the British government paid compensation of £650,000 and £1.25 million while the Mauritian government gave land. But neither was enough to help them integrate and prosper in Mauritian society.

Some bought more land with the money, others houses and furniture - only to sell for a pittance later during hard times. Still others squandered their money in amusement and parties. A handful made a success of their lives; others are still struggling for such basics as food, clothing and a home.

The Chagos Archipelago and Mauritius were 'discovered' by Arab navigators in the 14th century, then visited by Portuguese explorer Pedro Mascarenhas. In the 18th century, the French used the island as a base for a navigation company, and brought in African slaves.

When the British took possession of the island in the 19th century, they found a native population - descendants of the slaves - according to comments made by British Governor Robert Scott in a book written in 1950.

Over several generations, life for the Chagossians had followed a peaceful course. People from one island would visit others by boat. The post came by boat from Mauritius, bearing news of weddings, births, deaths - and gossip.

Their main activity was to produce copra, for which they received a salary. They also farmed, fished and cultivated vegetables. "We lived happily," says Anse Gregoire, a carpenter. The islands were managed by British officers or their repre-



sentatives who also took care of the education and health of the Chagossians. The archipelago is said to be full of fish, coconut and fruits.

The Chagossians came to Mauritius with very few possessions. Some committed suicide, others suffered from psychological problems. Today they are among the poorest people in Mauritius. Only one young boy, Ricardo Mouza, secured high marks in school leaving examinations in 1998.

In early June this year, Bancourt - accompanied by fellow-Chagossians Rosemont Saminaden and Raphael Louis - paid a four-day visit to the islands after being granted special

permission by Britain.

The visit was widely reported in the Mauritian media.

Bancourt is being helped financially by the British legal aid system, the London-based nongovernmental, Minority Rights Group, the Swiss Comité Soutien Aux Chagossians, Anti-slavery International and Mauritians living in Britain.

In its turn, Mauritius has a long-standing claim to the Chagos Archipelago - although Britain insists that the territory would only be handed back when it is no longer needed for strategic purposes.

Gemini News

The author works for Le Mauricien, a Mauritian daily

Flying penguins to safety

When the iron ore carrier, *Treasure* sank on June 23 this year, the fuel tanks ruptured and an estimated 400 tonnes of heavy fuel oil spewed out into the sea. Large slicks came ashore at Robben Island and Dassen Island. Thousands of penguins became oiled. Saving the birds became a massive co-operative venture involving experts in bird conservation, coastal management, oiled bird cleaning and diving. It was also an exercise in logistics with the co-ordination of volunteers, helicopters, boxes and even toothbrushes, writes Chris Harbard from Cape Town

HUDDLED together against a two-foot high wall stand a group of 100 African penguins, looking slightly bewildered as people holding large cardboard boxes walk towards them. All escape is blocked by a wire fence extending away from the wall and around, along the coastal edge, meeting the wall again 200 metres further on. This rather strange and pathetic scene was part of a rapid rescue plan to save one of the world's most threatened birds from what could be one of the last nails in its coffin. The people with the boxes are working for Western Cape Nature Conservation and they are trying to catch the penguins to stop them going out to sea where they might become polluted by oil.

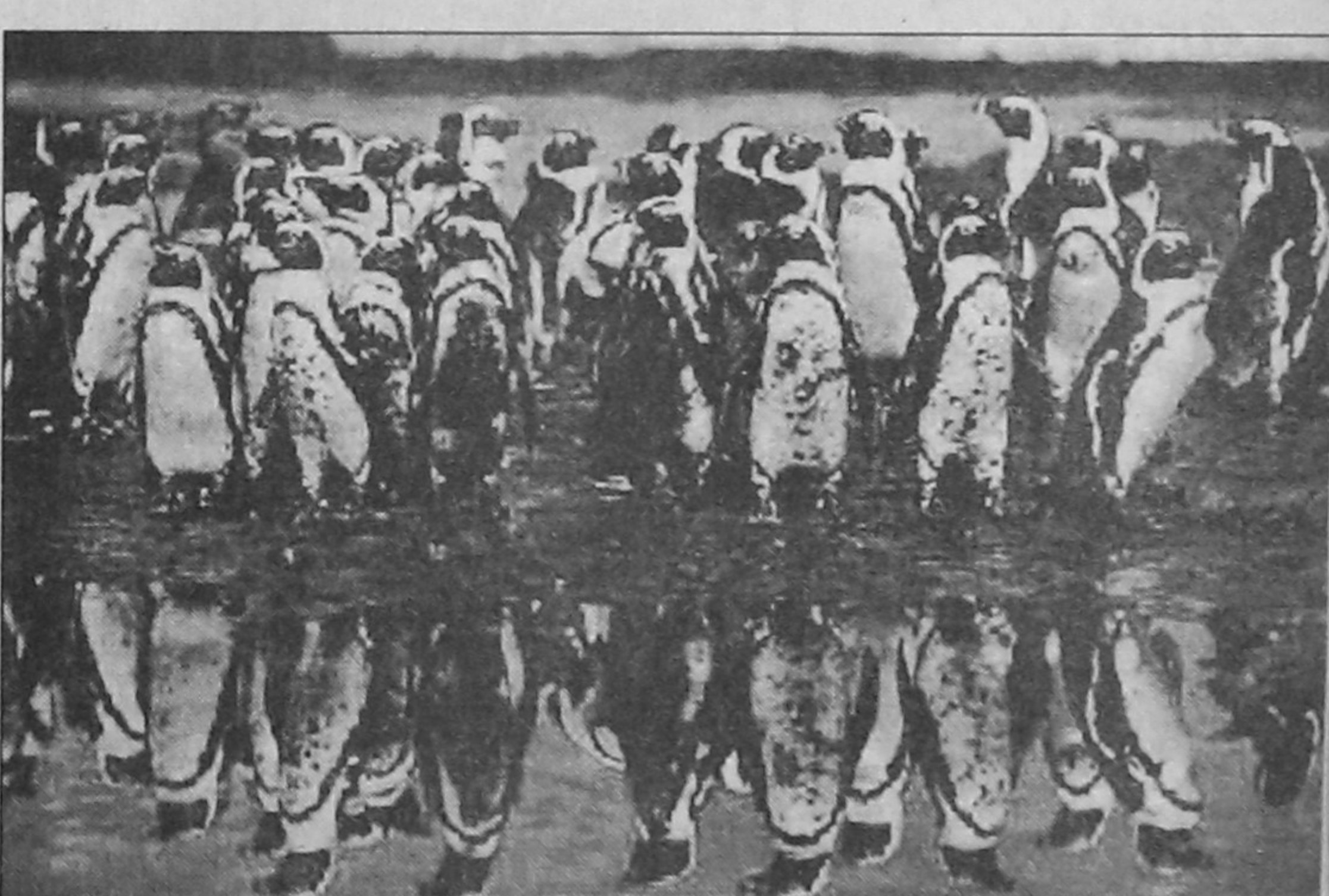
The story began when the iron ore carrier, *Treasure* found itself in difficulties and requested to enter port at Cape Town. The ship was considered unseaworthy and so the port authorities refused it entry. As a tug began to tow it back out to sea, the towrope broke and the boat foundered and sank between Robben and Dassen Islands - home to 40 per cent of the world's African penguin population. The breaking of the rope signalled the start of a furious struggle involving world experts on oil, salvage, penguin conservation, and bird welfare.

The African penguin, known also as the donkey-like braying noise it makes, was much more plentiful 100 years ago when the population numbered about 1.5 million birds. Now only 10 per cent of them remain, a mere 150,000 birds, concentrated on islands like Robben and Dassen and increasingly vulnerable to oil pollution incidents.

Seabirds always suffer when there are oil-spills but as penguins cannot fly and spend their time at sea on the surface, they will always get covered in oil when a spill happens near a colony. Occasional oiling is bad enough but with so many ships and tankers passing South Africa's coastline incidents like this are quite regular, but never before on this scale.

When *Treasure* sank on June 23, the fuel tanks ruptured and an estimated 400 tonnes of heavy fuel oil spewed out into the sea, forming large slicks. On June 25 the oil came ashore at Robben Island and by 27 June it surrounded Dassen Island. Thousands of penguins became oiled. Saving the birds and moving the threat of oil became a massive co-operative venture involving experts in bird conservation, coastal management, oiled bird cleaning and diving. It was also an exercise in logistics with the co-ordination of volunteers, helicopters, boxes, even toothbrushes. WWF South Africa geared up for action.

The South African National Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB) is the world expert



Oiled African penguins.

Photo: Shawn Benjamin WWF

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The next problem was how to stop more penguins getting oiled every time they went out to sea. With oil out there and more intact tanks on the wreck that could rupture at any time, the risk was high.

The answer was the biggest evacuation of wildlife since Operation Noah during the flooding of Lake Kariba. The penguins on Dassen Island are concentrated at the breeding colonies and these areas were fenced in to stop birds leaving to feed. Clean penguins were easily rounded up and placed into specially designed transportation boxes that were then carried to a central collection point. From there a helicopter, funded by WWF-SA could fly them, in a mere three minutes, to the mainland where trucks transported them on a 14-hour journey to a release site about 900 km (500 miles) away at Port Elizabeth. The clean waters at Algoa Bay, are an ideal place from which the released birds could swim back, a journey which should take them a couple of weeks, enough time, it was hoped, to enable the threat of further oiling to be removed. Three of the penguins that

were released in Algoa Bay have been tagged with small radio-like satellite transmitters. Data from penguins Peter, Pamela and Percy will reveal how rapidly the birds can be expected to swim back to their breeding colonies on South Africa's West Coast. Their movements have been continually updated by scientists on the website of the Avian Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town (<http://www.uct.ac.za>), enabling the public to follow the progress as they make their way to their island homes. Peter, the lead penguin released on June 30, covered the first 150 km in six days. Like the other seafarers, Peter and the others are facing perils such as Grei White sharks.

The rescue has only been made possible through the generosity of people who gave a time and offered resources. Twenty thousand penguins were released in Algoa Bay, each with a small radio tag. The total cost of the rescue was estimated at \$1.5 million. The final reckoning will run into millions of US dollars.

It is during emergencies like this that WWF can make a difference. There are no centric funds to draw on and no promises of compensation from the boat's insurers. It is through the volunteers and commercial sponsors who have generously supported this operation that the African penguin have a chance of a future.