

Remembering a Father and his Daughter

In memoriam of Zamiruddin Ahmed and Dr Shameem Ahmed
by Naseem Ahmed

PLEASE join us in prayers for the departed souls of Mr Zamiruddin Ahmed (deceased Aug 4, 1998) and his daughter Dr Shameem Ahmed (deceased Sept 5, 1999) on the occasion of their death anniversaries.

Mr Ahmed was a senior advocate of the Supreme Court and Bangladesh's diplomat to Malaysia, Libya and Tunisia during 1973 to 1979. He launched his career through political activism and newspaper reporting on social issues and served as the Political Secretary to the Chief Minister of East Pakistan in 1956. He dedicated his life to family and social service and in spreading goodwill among people.

Dr Shameem Ahmed, Associate Professor of Paediatrics at IPGMR, was a prominent health care professional of national and international repute. She did her Ph.D. at the Institute of Child Health, University of London, served World Health Organisation in Somalia and Egypt, and worked as a Senior Health Scientist with ICDDR, B. She represented the government forcefully at international conferences and was a fierce advocate of policy reforms to improve the health of women and children around the world. She pioneered an obstetric care package, which in-

cluded Safe Caesarean Section in primary healthcare centres in rural Bangladesh. Dr Shameem was the emblem of the highest standards of medical practice, community service and personal grace. Her life ended tragically in a plane crash in Nepal on September 5, 1999.

Family members, friends and colleagues have been deeply touched by the death of these two wonderful human beings whose lives were exemplary in generosity, kindness and professional integrity. Shameem's relationship with her father was extremely loving and full of care. She worried endlessly over his failing health and dedicated most of her free time in taking care of his health and spirits. His death, in 1998, crushed the whole family and left Shameem completely devastated. Ironically, she thought of her own immortality and put her thoughts down in her journal. Little did she know then that she would join her father at the gates of Heaven within just one short year. As we join together in our prayers, let us share two entries from Shameem's journal that portray a daughter's love and a woman's quest for peace within herself:

Gates of Heaven

I met an angel on my way
On a road far away
I told him of my confusion
About direction and destination
He held my hand
And led the way.
We passed through darkness
and through light
We walked over mountains
and on vales
There were windings
there were steeps
We crossed all these.
When at last
My confusion gone; my path even
I found myself at the gates of Heaven.

Dhaka, undated

Two poems by late Dr Shameem Ahmed



My Father's Letter

I stop in the middle of the letter —
My father's letter to me.
The lines are not straight anymore
The words not joyful but deep ...
... I imagine him at his desk
His eyes covered with heavy lenses
Was the light too dim for him?
Were his hands shaking with age?
Or was his heart trembling for us all
— his pen betraying his outer strength?

Mogadishu
26 November 1989

Magic Style of Reasoning

by Edward Said

SHORTLY after South Lebanon was liberated and Israeli troops evacuated the area they had occupied for 22 years, I had a discussion of the event with a good friend who works for the Palestinian Authority:

When I said that as Palestinians we had a lot to learn from the Lebanese resistance I was met with a flood of disclaimers and denials. Palestine and Lebanon are totally different. I was told, and to make comparisons is a serious error. When I said that I certainly agreed that the two situations were different, and that ours was indeed a more difficult one I nevertheless continued by arguing that Hizballah's discipline, its willingness to make sacrifices, and its extraordinary, relentless dedication to its objectives were things that applied to all situations, not just to South Lebanon.

The response was even more adamant. I was told that we had no alternative but to do what we did at Oslo, and when I said that I could partially understand that, but that I didn't feel that despotism and corruption were the only alternative after signing so disadvantageous an agreement with Israel, no, I was instructed definitively, you are taking a narrow view: we are passing through a transitional period, and these setbacks are part of that. When I remained unconvinced by all this, I was reminded by my friend that I had no experience in real politics, which were not the province of academics and intellectuals.

Precisely this argument was echoed in a June 18 column by Jim Hoagland of the Washington Post who when asking Abu Ala about my criticism of the Authority's behaviour could only get the following reply (rather a weak one, I must say): "It is not intellectuals who are going to make the deals needed for peace." This is like saying that only a chicken can tell a good egg from a rotten one. Besides, Abu Ala's expertise in peace-making derives neither from education nor prior work (he used to direct the PLO's factories in Beirut, all of which failed or went bankrupt). One supposes therefore that he was

Israelis built their rhetoric on equally sandy foundations. They looked forward to being welcomed all over the Arab world, marketing their goods from the Gulf to Morocco, doing business with everyone, and so on and on. Perhaps I should also add that all these effusions came from rulers, presidents, government functionaries, some journalists, in other words, all those people whose position of power allowed them VIP status, men and women who didn't have to queue up at four in the morning at Gaza's

born to make peace deals just as Louis XIV was born to rule France.

I would call this the first kind of magic thinking, a style of reasoning that blurs the distinction between truth and fiction so as to make a man-made, deliberately constructed disaster seem like a necessary or at least an acceptable thing. Members of the Authority follow their leader in assigning credit for Israel's shabby withdrawal from South Lebanon to Mr Barak's desire for peace, not to military defeat, and by the same token they conclude that corruption and anti-democratic rule are necessary stages of history rather than actual choices made by them to be anti-democratic and corrupt. I suppose the main question is: who do they think they are fooling by this logic? No sane person would fail to mark its dreadful lapses or its patent weaknesses. So then we must conclude that they are its victims, very few others.

A second type of magical thought is common to those whose position of great power allows them to be insulated from the facts, to impose on those facts a reading that is at total odds with what anyone else using common sense would see there. For the past seven years I have heard every American policy-maker from President Bill Clinton on down sing the praises of the peace process, extol the new world that was coming into being, waxing ecstatic about the promise of peace and the age of prosperity that was dawning. Palestinians made brave noises about being like Singapore, an island of prosperity in a sea of poverty.

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Erez border, or who had to keep their families alive at three hundred dollars a month, or those whose passports and identity cards in Lebanon, for example, designated them as aliens without rights, or those whose houses had just been demolished. Free of that kind of annoyance then these people of privilege could indulge in magical thought and wishful thinking to their heart's content.

This isn't just a matter of saying things that have no real connection to ordinary reality, but also imposing a logic on the past that simply spirits it away altogether. I first heard this kind of magical thought when young King Abdullah of Jordan made his first visit to the US last year. While acknowledging all of Jordan's political and economic difficulties the king then shifted gears immediately after saluting Ehud Barak's recent election victory in Israel. Once the peace process is back on track, he said, we can gain the kind of stability that will bring us prosperity and make Jordan a very attractive place for major foreign investment. This is an argument that American policy-makers like to use: once we have "peace" everyone will be happy and we go on to prosper, invest freely and make money, live happily ever after.

I call this magic because it denies the weight of the past any role at all in the future, as if all the years of dislocation, suffering, dispossession and distortion imposed on those millions of Arab citizens who lost their families, homes, means of livelihood, who have lived under military occupation, who have been forced to endure states of emergency in Arab countries with scarcely any democracy or social and economic equality — as if all this with its burden of anger, sorrow, frustration, humiliation and sheer human fatigue would suddenly disappear the moment a peace agreement would be signed on Mr Clinton's

These grotesque, not to say bizarre inequities and distortions suggest something far graver, more mutilating and wounding to the spirit than can be rectified by an imperfect peace treaty between a nuclear power like Israel and a poorly led, destitute people like the Palestinians. Only a miracle of thought — a sort of magic trick — can quickly set things straight, bring back tranquility and peace of mind, restore Arabs to state of redemptive hope.

Unfortunately, the real world affords no such magic and only an occasional miracle. In the meantime, those who suffer must continue to do so. But is there any hope at all that magic and reality can ever be reconciled?

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan.

Dengue, a Dread of our Own Creation

by Md. Asadullah Khan

Climate change threatens more than mega-storms, floods and droughts. The real peril is the disease it causes. Inevitably questions arise: are all the bizarre weather extremes we've been having lately normal fluctuations in the planet's atmospheric system? Or are these precursors to the kind of climatic upheavals that can be expected from the global warming caused by continued build-up of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and the other so-called greenhouse gases? Scientists are still not sure. But one of the effects of the unusual stretch of weather over the last few years has been to alert people around the globe to a new and perhaps even more immediate threat of the warming trend: the rapid spread of disease-bearing bugs and pests.

Climate change, whether natural or manmade, is already spreading disease and pestilence, according to a host of new studies including a major report prepared by the World Health Organisation. Malaria, for example, has been flourishing in recent years owing to unusually hot weather. Similarly, climate disruptions may be giving new life to such ancient scourges as yellow fever, meningitis and cholera while fostering the spread of emerging diseases like dengue and Hantavirus or even plague. In analysing the causes of such outbreaks, one would find the same Darwinian mechanism: unusual weather such as dry spells in wet areas or torrential rains in normally dry spots tends to favour so-called opportunistic pests as rodents, insects, bacteria, protozoa, virus & while making life more difficult for the predators that usually control them. Episodes of extreme weather are routinely followed by outbreaks of deadly diseases both old and new.

Dengue, it is known, is a disease of urbanisation and human travel, coming in the wake of warming trend. In the words of Dr. Suchitra Nimantran, a Thai specialist on the disease, the infected *Aedes aegypti*, is a manmade mosquito. It breeds in the water that gathers in the plastic, rubber and metal containers that litter the places where people live, and is spread by footloose humans.

Malaria is now returning to other countries that thought they had seen the back of it. It is

spreading from the countryside to the cities and borne by migrant workers and other travellers, is cropping up in the rich world. Cases now occur in the United States as far north as New York, New Jersey and Michigan. Climate change may bring it back to West Europe. But it is in Africa that malaria is the commonest and the deadliest. Most of the 2.5m or so people killed each year are Africans and most of them are children.

More than 15 people including three well-known doctors in posh localities of the Dhaka city have perished to dengue fever in less than two weeks. There is no vaccine against the dengue virus & no cure for the haemorrhagic form. Work on a vaccine, as experts suggest, is complicated by dengue's different forms, and it is thought unlikely that one will be available for at least five years. Because reports have it that research into malaria or such related

diseases receive only 60 million US dollars a year, compared with 140 million for asthma, 300 million for Alzheimer's diseases, 950 million for AIDS. Certainly, in such a situation, no vaccine seems to be in sight & malaria or dengue parasites are structurally more complex than viruses and bacteria and & even if one were found, it would probably offer immunity to only one of the disease's several forms. In the meantime, specialists say people should protect themselves against bites and stop helping mosquitoes breed. A manmade disease should be susceptible to a manmade solution. But humans as we see it in our country and some other countries mentioned are kind to the dengue mosquito, and have not as yet, made its eradication a priority.

Dhaka City Corporation's failure to clear the breeding ground of mosquito has created despondency in citizenry and has helped mount infection rates. Preventive measures are most needed now. Schools should be urging children not to play outside in shorts or short sleeves. Residents should be asked to have mosquito nets and other repellent to thwart the black-and-white striped *Aedes aegypti* which can infect

multiple victims and pursue humans more aggressively and persistently than other mosquitoes. People wonder why electronic media like TV and radio are keeping mum over such a serious scourge gripping the country for which there is apparently no specific medication.

Even though dengue fever first appeared in the late 18th century, the World Health Organisation has only recently begun to count it as one of the most dangerous tropical diseases. The number of countries fatally hit by the dengue fever has risen since 1970 from about nine to more than 40 and reports from the World Health Organisation sources now say that more than 20,000 people now die from the disease each year. Deadly outbreaks erupted in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines and India in the last five years. While the advent of air travel has scattered *Aedes aegypti* across the globe, increased urbanisation has helped the mosquito reproduce. Metropolises like Dhaka where open sewers criss-cross vast areas and rainwater collects in discarded barrels, plastic containers and tires, furnish a wealth of potential breeding grounds. In case of Indonesia nearly a third of Indonesia's infections occurred in the capital Jakarta. Researchers also note that epidemic typically flare every five years, before subsiding once populations develop immunity to one of dengue's four strains. Sure enough, combination of circumstances has struck this region at the worst possible time.

The El Nino weather system that has disrupted the annual monsoon rains may have altered the mosquitoes' breeding patterns," say doctors studying the disease trend in CDC, Atlanta, USA. Stagnant waters that might normally have been washed away have sat undisturbed in the unusually long intervals between showers. More so, economic conditions have crippled the region's defences against a pandemic.

DCC, CCC and KCC must take note what New Delhi and other stricken cities did at that time to halt the spread of the disease. They literally awakened the citizens bellowing the alarm through loudspeakers. They ex-

pected with low-grade dengue fever, which reduces the body's defences against the deadly variety. That means thousands of people in the country who avoid or survive the current outbreak may not survive the next one. In just about two weeks, at least 14 died in the deadliest attack. People are concerned all the more because the disease has no vaccine and no cure. Virologists fear there is more than one strain involved in the recent Dhaka outbreak. Four are known: Dengue 1, 2, 3, 4. If type 2 infects you after type 1 infection, the body's immunity to the first type acts like a catalyst for the second-called immune-enhancement. This causes hemorrhages all over the body, a shock syndrome, and death. Annually, several crores of taka are spent on national programmes to control diseases like Malaria and TB, yet the diseases only grow stronger each year. Not surprisingly, a deep sense of frustration and helplessness is spreading among doctors, health workers and suffering public as well.

Growth of urban centres and breakdown of sanitation facilities also lead to outbreaks of dengue and cholera. Rodents and insects carrying disease flourish in festering garbage dumps and teeming slums. The city in recent times has become one of the world's truly hopeless cases. Fleeing droughts, floods and starvation people arrived steadily from the countryside, making Dhaka

Bangladesh's Mecca of poverty. Filthy slums and shanties sprang up in open spaces and side walks. Gutters overflowing with rotten garbage have made sanitation a big problem and a fertile breeding ground for all varieties of mosquitoes and disease carrying bugs. In recent times dengue's strike at the rich and in posh localities & three of the victims in the capital city were doctors & has left the citizenry shaken. In such a delicate and critical situation, the Mayor can work as a spark plug for Dhaka's reforms, which could be a model for others to follow. The Mayor might have brought back ideas for change from visits to developed cities like London, New York, Singapore and Japan and to be sure, this is the most appropriate

time for him to put those ideas into action. Like Ashim Burman, the intrepid commissioner of the Calcutta City Corporation in 1997, the Dhaka Mayor must put his teeth to fight this deadly menace. Like Burman, he has to find out a foreign firm and sign an agreement to burn some of Dhaka's almost 4,000 tons daily refuse to generate electricity. As it was done in Calcutta, some other companies could be found out to process this garbage into fertiliser. Given the will and motivation, it can be done. It was done in Surat, a filthy town in Gujarat till 1996 by an unassuming quiet IAS officer SR Rao who was transferred there as Municipal Commissioner after the city faced the grisly black death known as plague mainly caused by rodents. Soon after a grisly brush with the "Black Death", Surat saw a sanitary revolution through the dedicated works of S.R. Rao. He cleaned up slums, pulled down illegal buildings and ran a sanitation department that functioned like clockwork. Rao inherited a daunting legacy: 14,000 demoralised municipal workers, streets clogged with garbage and a medieval sewage system. If people lacked civic sense, the corporation would set the standard," Rao declared.

Citizens were surprised to see the municipal top-brass ankle-deep in garbage dump, helping sanitation workers shovel the filth. "I believe if you cannot bring yourself to do a job, you can't expect others to do it," said Rao. Nobody asks the DCC Mayor to send squads to each house of the city to monitor the cleanliness campaign but he must not fail to clean the roads, clear the rotting garbage from the street corners and dumps just over flowing and disinfecting the stagnant pool of water full of disease carrying germs and bugs. If public servant could do so much in a neighbouring country, an elected Mayor could work miracles because he did not have to fear about public opposition and wrath for the good works he would be doing to free them of the scourges. After all, the Mayor must agree that a city is dead unless it has a soul.

Disposal of garbage and clearing the clogged drains should now be high on the agenda of city administration.

The sewer lines lead to drains which take the sewage — almost all of it untreated — directly into rivers and ultimately into the sea killing virtually all marine life. Dhaka's Buriganga and Narayanganj's Shitalakha have turned into giant sewers. At the same time, with the failure to reprocess waste, cities are running out of space to dump the growing mountains of garbage. Most places in the Dhaka city now have no any bins near homes; consequently hundreds of unofficial dumps occupy at least 3 percent of the city's area. Worse, landfills in the city are hotbeds of disease and innumerable poisons leaking into their surroundings. Wastes putrefy in the open, inviting disease carrying flies and rats and a filthy poisonous liquid, called leachate, which leaks out from below, contaminating ground water. It all boils down to this: It is virtually impossible for a city corporation to shoulder the entire onus of city management without developing an effective response system from the citizens. On the other hand DCC must see that every city area is clearly identified for cleaning, work norms fixed for workers and vehicles and equipment must be in stand-by mode every day. Finally punishment is necessary for non-compliance of duties.

Supervisors must be on the round and levy spot fines and force people to keep the city clear. In the neighbouring country in cities such as Calcutta, Surat and Ahmedabad such discipline has been enforced. Garbage collectors now make their rounds before 9 AM and authorities impose thirty taka fines on households that throw refuse into the streets after the morning pick up. Movie stars have made public-service ads urging people to keep city clean and school children fan out to urge pedestrians not to litter, spit, urinate or jaywalk. Neighbourhood committees have been formed to catch offenders and impose punitive measures. Fear of public humiliation has helped promote overall cleanliness. Given motivation and will, Dhaka can also be a model city.

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TOM & JERRY

