

Malnutrition: The creeping killer

A successful pilot project may hold the answer

A.F.M. IQBAL KABIR

BANGLADESH'S greatest development crisis is invisible, yet it is everywhere you look. Malnutrition is taking a devastating toll on the country's population through hunger, sickness and loss of life and represents a major barrier to the country's economic and social development. Although some progress has been made in the past decade, malnutrition levels in Bangladesh remain among the highest in the world. Nearly 700 children die of malnutrition-related causes in Bangladesh every day. Among those surviving, nearly 60 percent under five years old are underweight and more than half are stunted.

On the economic front, malnutrition costs the country around US \$1 billion per year in treatment costs and loss of productivity. Recommended actions to alleviate malnutrition would cost around one quarter of this amount.

In 1995, the government took a significant step towards combating this crisis through the launching of the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project. The pilot project successfully reduced malnutrition in a limited area, and the government is now expanding it into a nation-wide National Nutrition Programme (NNP). The new programme is modeled on the community-based, preventative approach used in the initial pilot project and, with NGO assistance, supports communities in maintaining their own nutrition centers and offering local nutrition services.

The World Bank, the Canadian International Development Agency, the government of the Netherlands, UNICEF, the World Food Programme are supporting the government's programme through funding and technical assistance for a National Nutrition Project. The project is the first phase of the government's planned expansion of nutrition services to all rural areas of the country and eliminating malnutrition as a public health issue in Bangladesh.

For the project to meet its stated objectives, significant political will and continued funding beyond the four years encompassed by the first phase will be required. In addition, increased attention is needed to

address more fundamental causes of malnutrition: poverty and food insecurity due to the high numbers of landless poor and a lack of non-agricultural employment in rural areas; and unequal opportunities, education and rights for women.

A successful pilot project
In 1995, the government launched the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (BINP), with support from UNICEF and the World Bank. The project, one of the major large-scale nutrition programmes operating in developing countries worldwide, has reached more than three million households in Bangladesh. It is best known for its community-based approach and provides nutrition services child growth monitoring, nutrition counseling and food

level through community nutrition centers donated and managed by village committees. Food supplements are purchased, prepared, and sold in the centers by women's group members, thus supplementing household incomes.

In 1998, a project review noted that severe malnutrition among children under two years old in the project area had declined from the baseline figure of 13 percent to 2 percent. Also, the number of low birth weight babies had decreased by 30 percent, and there had been an improvement in weight gain by at least half of pregnant women in project areas.

Nation-wide approach
The expansion of the pilot project into a nation-wide programme is

with the skills, knowledge and resources to undertake agricultural activities which ensure a more continuous supply of nutritional food. There will also be increased emphasis on assuring that such services are provided on a community-demand basis, based on local needs and priorities, rather than from the top down.

The NNP will allow more women from "ultra-poor" households to attend group session to obtain income-generating skills. Through Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) Program food will be provided to the nutritionally at risk women who, without such an incentive, would be unable to attend such activities due to a daily struggle for food and survival.

girls and is setting up forums where they will meet regularly to have their weights and heights measured, learn about nutrition, personal hygiene and reproductive health and receive micro-nutrient supplements and de-worming.

The programme is also providing income opportunities for poor women. Women's groups are responsible for village-level preparation of nutrition supplements from locally purchased ingredients. They are able to sell the supplements at a small profit. The program also includes household food security activities such as providing micro-credits and training for women to undertake poultry rearing and nutrition gardening. During the program's training activities,

rural employment generation, with poultry, homestead gardens and fisheries projects located, where possible, to complement the delivery of nutrition services;

• a dynamic policy of commercial food diversification-driven rural growth;

• a shift in agricultural and food planning away from national food-grain availability and replaced with a more holistic approach which includes explicit attention to consumption through increased rural employment, rural savings, increased purchasing power and increased productivity of foods disproportionately consumed by lower income populations.

Understanding and prevention of moderate malnutrition is critical. The largest proportion of young children who die of malnutrition-related causes are those with moderate rather than severe malnutrition. However more attention has been given to date to the treatment of those with visible signs of severe malnutrition. Education aimed at behaviour change is required to prevent the debilitating effects of moderate malnutrition.

Addressing the problem of maternal malnutrition in Bangladesh is a task far broader than can be encompassed in a nutrition strategy. Such malnutrition (along with the country's high maternal mortality rate) represents the cumulative effects of societal problems which must continue to be tackled by the government and all of its development partners. Among the most serious are: a) the absence of equal legal rights for women; b) early age of marriage (the percentage of low birth weight infants born to mothers under the age of 15 is 72 percent higher than among mothers aged 20-24); c) remaining inadequate educational opportunities for girls; and d) the need for further improvements in child spacing and delayed first pregnancies. Equally serious is the overriding problem of household food insecurity, the consequences of which are born most heavily by women.

A.F.M. Iqbal Kabir is a nutrition specialist.

women receive supplemental training in various income-generating skills.

Challenges ahead

The first phase of the NNP will expand community-based nutrition services and activities aimed at improving household food security from 12 percent of the total population under BINP to nearly one-third of the population over a period of four years. However expanding the programme to reach the remaining two-thirds of the population will require sustained political will, substantially increased institutional capacity, and sustained investment of a minimum of 0.3 per cent-0.5 per cent of Gross National Product which is only 0.03 per cent at present. In addition, and extension of nutrition service delivery to urban slums will be piloted under the NNP and must be further increased since nearly half the country's population is expected to be urban by the year 2010.

In addition, major additional efforts in addressing food security are needed, including:
• continued increases in targeted

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supplementation for those nutritionally at risk directed primarily at children under the age of two and pregnant lactating women.

The programme is managed by a unit in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare with support from other related line ministries. However the heart of the programme is community mobilization. The government contracts NGOs to assist with community mobilization, field level training, supervision of field implementation and management of nutrition centers. Nutrition services are offered at the local

expected to take nutrition services to all rural areas of Bangladesh over a 15-year period. The program builds on the successful model of the pilot with increased emphasis on micro-nutrient supplementation, referral of severely malnourished children for treatment, and an increased focus on adolescent girls.

The new nation-wide programme will also increase the emphasis on improving communities' food security, providing communities

Features of the National Nutrition Programme:

Village nutrition management committees: Who represent the community, assess need and monitor progress of the programme locally.

Community nutrition services: Locally provided services targeted at nutritionally vulnerable groups: children under two, adolescent girls, and pregnant and lactating women.

Female community nutrition promoters: Local women who monitor growth of children and provide nutritional counseling.

Progress so far...

Since 1986, Bangladesh has reduced the proportion of underweight children in the country by 20 percent, and stunting in children under five by 25 percent. During this period, infant mortality decreased from 94 to an estimated 77 deaths per 1,000 live births (the rate in 1974 was 140).

Despite such notable progress, the loss of life and productivity due to malnutrition remains one of the country's most critical development challenges.

Excerpts from the main report of Hamoodur Rahman Commission of Inquiry as declassified by Government of Pakistan

POLITICAL BACKGROUND: IX

It is convenient to consider at this stage whether the Six Point programme meant secession or, at least, such a loose connection between the two wings of Pakistan as would inevitably sooner or later result in the secession of East Pakistan and closely interlinked with this is the question whether those in authority at that time thought that it was in conflict with the integrity of Pakistan. Did they ever carefully consider whether it was so? It would be convenient at this stage to set out the Six Points as amended:

The character of the government shall be federal and parliamentary, in which the election to the federal legislature and to the legislatures of the federating units shall be direct and on the basis of universal adult franchise. The representation in the federal legislature shall be on the basis of population.

The federal government shall be responsible only for defence and foreign affairs and, subject to the conditions provided in (3) below, currency.

There shall be two separate currencies mutually or freely convertible in each wing for each region, or in the alternative a single currency, subject to the establishment of a federal reserves system in which there will be regional federal reserve banks which shall devise measures to prevent the transfer of resources and flight of capital from one region to another. Fiscal Policy shall be the responsibility of the federating units. The federal government shall be provided with requisite revenue resources for meeting the requirements of defence and foreign affairs, which revenue resources would be automatically appropriate by the federal government in the manner provided and on the basis of the ratio to be determined by the procedure laid down in the Constitution. Such constitutional provisions would ensure that the federal government's

revenue requirements are met consistently with the objective of ensuring control over the fiscal policy by the government of the federating units. Constitutional provisions shall be made to enable separate accounts to be maintained of the foreign exchange earnings of each of the federating units, under the control of the respective governments of the federating units. The foreign exchange requirements of the federating units on the basis of a ratio to be determined in accordance with the procedure laid down in the Constitution. The regional governments shall have power under the Constitution to negotiate foreign trade and aid within the framework of the foreign policy of country, which shall be the responsibility of the federal government. The governments of the federating units shall be empowered to maintain a militia or paramilitary force in order to contribute effectively towards national security.

A witness who was associated with constitution-making almost throughout the period - and a gentleman of great experience in the legal and constitutional field being no less a person than a retired Chief Justice of Pakistan - was Mr Justice A.R. Cornelius. When he was asked whether the Six Points were ever shown to General Yahya Khan during the election campaign he answered: "He was familiar with them and he used to talk about them from time to time but he never asked for an analysis. In my own mind I think that about 4 of them were quite easily acceptable and I think I said in a meeting of the cabinet that it would be easily possible to amend the Constitution so as to give effect to most of the Six Points and that would perhaps ease the political situation."

With all respect to the witness we can only regard this as a very light way of dealing with the matter. Col Hassan who was posted as

representative of the JAG Department in CMLA Headquarters on the 26th of March, 1969, and continued to function as such throughout the Martial Law period, intimately concerned at all times with the question of Constitution making, stated that the Six Points 'apparently' did not mean secession. By this he meant that upon the face of it the Six Points do not necessarily mean secession.

There have been other witnesses before us, some of whom were intimately concerned with East Pakistan on behalf of the government during the crucial election campaign days, as for instance Admiral Ahsan, Governor of East Pakistan and Lt-Gen S M Yaqoob, Martial Law Administrator. Their periods of tenure being almost co-extensive, both these gentlemen said that at no time within their knowledge had there been any careful analysis made of the meanings and all the implications of the Six Points.

It is difficult to see how a Central government which could deal only with defence and foreign affairs, without any power of taxation could be a government with any real power at all. In modern conditions, the foreign policy of a developing country is closely limited with foreign trade and if the Centre could not control the latter we are unable to see how it could deal effectively with the former. Unable to control foreign policy how would the Centre undertake the defence of the Country?

The amended Six Points spelt out the programme of the Awami League somewhat more fully than the original but in substance we cannot see that that makes so much difference that one could take the view that while the amended Six Points generally stood for secession the original ones did not. We cannot but feel that Colonel Hassan's view was too technical, even superficial, and it is remarkable that he followed

up this statement immediately by stating that they (the Six Points) could be changed. Was it the thinking of the ruling party that the Six Points did not mean secession? If it was, then surely there was nothing wrong about them, and the wishes of the majority even though coming only from one region could have been acceptable, without any severe opposition from West Pakistan. The only reason why they should not be acceptable is because they were against the solidarity and integrity of the country. Therefore, except for this General Yahya should have had no hesitation in accepting whatever the view of the majority was. He had himself stated that he had finalized only such matters upon which he found unanimity and since he was in the nature of a caretaker any constitutional pattern which did not conflict with the five principles which he had set out should have been equally acceptable.

The failure or refusal of the government to interfere with the campaign may, we think, be ascribed to two causes. The first of these is that, consistent with the policy of not interfering with the Awami League the government went on to the other extreme of refusing to protect the campaigning of other parties from interference by Awami League. For instance a meeting of the Jamaati-Islami was broken up by the Awami League and government agencies stood by silent and uninterfering. A meeting of the Pakistan Democratic Party also met with the same fate.

The other factor was the attitude of the East Pakistani civil servants. There is no doubt of course that the government of Pakistan was under General Yahya Khan and that, by reason of Martial Law prevailing throughout the country, the province of East Pakistan was being administered by the army or, to put it a little more accurately by the Martial Law

authorities, but the majority of civil servants serving in East Pakistan were themselves East Pakistanis. Although an intellectual class, they could not emotionally be left unstirred by the same feelings which were rapidly spreading over the entire people of East Pakistan. It was only to be expected that being East Pakistanis they would, at least on the emotional plane, share the feelings of the entire public and, even where emotion was counteracted by the calmer reflection which education might be presumed to induce, it cannot be denied that the charge of exploitation had at least some basis. The civil servants moreover, saw that the rising sun was the Awami League, in whose hands their future prospects would now lie. Even if it be assumed that at the earlier stages of the campaign it was not clear that Mujibur Rahman would emerge the undisputed victor, the centre of power was visibly shifting at least from the army and it is but natural that the civil servants would look to the incoming master rather than the one who was about to abdicate. Even the Six Points programme had its own special charm for the East Pakistani bureaucracy which saw in it the prospect of their own advancement. In these circumstances it is not surprising that the East Pakistani civil servants threw their weight wherever they could in favour of the party which stood for the East Wing rather than parties whose approach was national. The fact, therefore, that the Awami League would emerge victorious should have been fairly clear from the beginning even though it might not then have been anticipated that it could win so sweeping a victory as it ultimately achieved.

It does not appear, however, that government anticipated such results. Even when with succeeding events like the cyclone the prospects of Awami League grew brighter and

brighter, the government intelligence agencies were estimating the chances of victory for Mujib as about 60 per cent of the East Pakistani seats which would of course, by no means be an overall majority. This seems all the more remarkable, for despite protestations to the contrary, Government certainly did not stand by as a disinterested spectator in the elections but made many manoeuvres behind the curtain to influence the results. General Yahya had appointed one of his trusted lieutenants, Major-General Mohammad Umar as Secretary of the National Security Council in circumstances that leave little doubt that it was only a cover job for other activities. It is true of course that this council had been created earlier during President Ayub Khan's time but all the officers of this council, whom we have examined, including General Umar himself have stated that the Council was ineffective for the purpose for which it apparently existed and that it did not have the necessary powers and machinery to make it effective. Yet we find that soon after General Yahya assumed power he put a person who had worked as one of his staff officers earlier as the Secretary, General Umar had direct access to the President and yet never complained that he was ineffective nor were any steps taken to make his ostensible job a reality. Large sums of money in cash lay in a safe the keys of which were in General Umar's custody and some rupees six lakh had to be deposited when six denomination notes were demonetized. Even as late as 4-12-1972 rupees three lakh were withdrawn in cash by General Umar and no accounting of these money was ever made. And at the same time General Umar was meeting politicians with remarkable frequency. The inference seems fairly clear.

Tomorrow: POLITICAL BACKGROUND-IX



All health information to keep you up to date

Facts about AIDS

Not so long ago, people wanting sex were often willing to take a chance without making sure they were protected against unwanted pregnancy.

The trouble was none knew who was responsible for taking precautions. Today there's no doubt both partners. And there's no question about the safest way of making sure you are both protected with a condom.

Used properly, a good quality condom available today is not only effective for birth control, it helps to prevent you catching several sexually transmitted diseases (called STD's for short) like: Herpes Gonorrhoea NSU (Non Specific Urethritis), Syphilis, Chlamydia, Trichomoniasis, Genital Warts. These can, however, be treated with modern drugs.

Today we know there are other dangers that are connected with unprotected sex. Cervical Cancer, and HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS, for which there is no known cure. Doctors and Health Organisations dealing with the increasing world problem of AIDS say that the dangerous disease is transmitted in the majority of cases by an infected partner passing on the virus through intercourse without protection. One of the worst things about AIDS is that someone can become infected with the HIV virus and live with it for many years whilst still looking and feeling perfectly healthy. With any STD, it's possible to be infected without knowing it. The HIV virus will not pass through condom rubber.

Tomorrow: Crying and Depression

All is not quiet in Chechnya

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE recent series of ambushes by Chechen rebels in and around Grozny, killing Russian soldiers appears to belie the latter's claim that all is quiet in Chechnya. According to a report released by a United States Human Rights group, Russian forces in Chechnya are reportedly engaged 'in torture, killing, looting, extortion and other abuses.' Arbitrary arrests, illegal detention, beating, disappearance of civilians suspected of links with the rebel, which have become daily routine affairs, remind of the atrocities perpetrated by the Red Army and security forces during the long 70 years rule of monolithic communist party of the USSR.

Identical situation existed in Kosovo where Yugoslavia's former president Slobodan Milosevic drove out ethnic Albanian-Kosovans from their hearth and home and continued to allow expulsion, rape, robbery and massacre by his military, police and paramilitary forces. This ruthless campaign had been conducted by Milosevic to stop autonomy demand by the Kosovans.

Russia's Caucasus republic Chechnya declared independence in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the three years that followed, Kremlin was unable to take any action against the secessionist Republic. In 1994, President Boris Yeltsin decided to go for massive military action against Chechnya. After a massive military offensive and wanton destruction and heavy loss of civilian lives the Chechen capital Grozny was cleared of the rebel forces and an interim administration was installed there by Moscow. The rebels, however, fled to surrounding hills and suburbs of Grozny and continued to resist Russian forces. During the two-week long unilateral ceasefire declared by Russia in an effort to avoid embarrassing the foreign leaders, who assembled in Moscow to participate in the VE day festivities, the Chechen rebel fighters infiltrated Grozny and mounted attack on Russian positions causing heavy casualties Russian side.

The Chechen conflict divided Yeltsin supporters and many important pro-Yeltsin politicians withdrew their support in protest of his Chechnya policy. Ultimately Russian Government was forced to sign an agreement with Chechens led by nationalist leader General Dzhokhar Dudaev, a former Soviet bomber pilot.

The agreement signed by the Russian Government and Dudaev delegation led by Usman Imaev on 30 July 1995 in Grozny, stipulated withdrawal of Russian military from the region, the gradual disarmament of Chechen rebels and the release of all prisoners.

This was a victory for Chechen rebels, which Russia did not swallow in a sporting spirit.

Immediately after signing the agreement Russian Government initiated action to install puppet administration and in the meantime

military avenues were explored to kill General Dudaev, who was stubborn and defiant. After the killing of General Dudaev in an encounter Russian President made an abortive move to establish puppet regional administration in Chechnya. In an effort to reach an agreement with Chechens President Yeltsin signed another peace agreement this time with Aslan Maskhadov, President of Chechnya on 12 May 1997. Through this agreement Russia virtually acknowledged the independence of Chechnya.

On assuming the responsibility of the Presidency of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, a former KGB Chief of the Soviet Union, launched aggressive attacks and bombardment on Chechens on the pretext of stopping terrorist attacks on different cities of Russia by 'Chechen terrorists.'

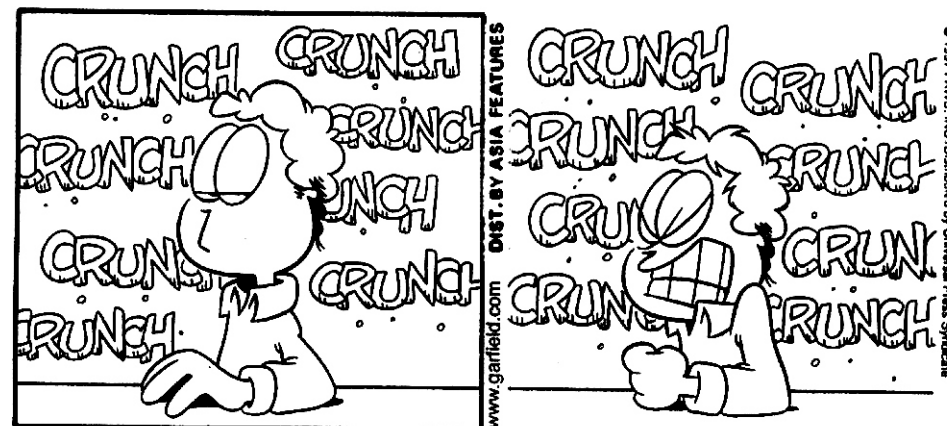
Instead of reducing its troops in Chechnya as agreed upon Russian Government increasingly massed troops in Chechnya and continues to violate human rights there. As a result, the European Council would take a decision on whether Russia's voting rights at the assembly should continue to remain suspended.

Enough is enough. Chechens are under constant pressure militarily, economically and politically by the successive Russian governments. The world community, particularly NATO countries should raise their voice to stop genocide in Chechnya. Russia should leave the region to allow Chechens determine their fate by themselves. The present US Republican government may even consider taking joint action in Chechnya as done by the immediate past Democrat Government in Washington in Kosovo.

After NATO's six-week air attacks on Kosovo and Belgrade the foreign ministers of the seven leading industrial nations and Russia signed a declaration which aimed at immediate and proven end to the violence and persecution in Kosovo. The main purpose to refer to the declaration is to draw attention of the diplomats of the western countries in particular to avoid double standard in international politics. The situation in Chechnya is identical to that of Kosovo. It is equally important to note that the Russian Federation acknowledged the fact of independent character of Chechnya following signing of an agreement with Chechen leader in 1997.

In view of the past experiences it can be said that there is no cogent reason for Russian troops to remain on the soil of Chechnya. It may be recalled that in the last century Kremlin tried to conquer the tribes of the northern Caucasus. It took Kremlin practically 30 years and the sacrifice of 300,000 troops and a huge chunk of national exchequer to conquer them. Let not history repeat itself. Let Chechens themselves decide their fate. And in this regard, the international community has responsibility to resolve the crisis as they did elsewhere.

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by Jim Davis

