

Facing arsenic disaster

Too much time has already been wasted

Organising and attending conferences is any indication of the seriousness of this government in facing the arsenic disaster then we are into happy times. In the last few days no less than three international conferences have been held in the city, the last two being addressed by the President and the Prime Minister. There could not be a firmer public expression of political will by a government than this. Now the challenge is to turn this official commitment into, to quote the President, "widespread and affordable action".

To start with we must immediately formulate a comprehensive national policy, both short and long term, to address this disaster. We also must create a structure within the government that will have a singular focus to tackle the arsenic problem. So far the location of all government activities in the LGRD ministry has been a mistake. This ministry already has its hands full and cannot be expected to address this disaster. We propose the formation of an inter-ministerial body -- perhaps a Task Force -- located at the PMO and headed by the PM herself with a very high level secretariat empowered to take quick and decisive action. Along with it we need an expert group, taken from all those who are active both within and outside the government to form the brains trust for all government policies. At the same time we must request all donors to act in a coordinated manner and with the Task Force. At present too many donors are spending a lot of money without really knowing if the resources are being effectively spent.

The biggest challenge before the nation is to provide alternative source of safe water for our people other than tube-wells. The alternative, as we see it, is only one -- going back to the consumption of surface water and water collected from rain. We realise that we are talking of a massive change of a habit that has grown over the last two decades of using tube-well water. It is also extremely easy to use requiring virtually no effort in storing and preserving. However the task is not as difficult as it may seem at first. Bangladesh ranks No.2 in the world in terms of possessing fresh water reserve, most of it in our rivers and ponds, which require to be made germ free. Simple and affordable water purifying methods will have to be popularised. As for rainwater, affordable method of collecting and preserving it will have to be introduced.

As is evident from above the tasks before us are enormous, urgent and multifaceted. We are heartened by the interest the PM and the President have shown in this matter. We hope that the official conference, which will end tomorrow, will respond to most of the suggestions we have given above. The most important is that we need to act collectively and urgently.

India praises Pakistani terrorist clamp down

Both need to back down from long held positions to find peace

India has welcomed Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's declaration to halt cross border terrorism. Following up on his words, he has also taken action against a number of groups and individuals. India has said that it would also like to give him enough time to act that would prove Musharraf means business. Applauding the steps promised by Musharraf and the accommodative position taken by India, we add our relief as tension between the two countries shows sign of declining.

What much of the world calls "terrorists" and some call "freedom fighters" in Kashmir are products of a deep rooted conflict resulting from a poor exit policy of the colonial powers. Having left Kashmir as a festering sore it has now turned deeply gangrenous and threatens the body and soul of the region.

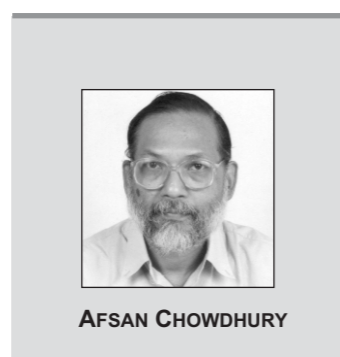
If Pervez Musharraf can rein in the Islamists as he has promised to, much will have been done. It's basically a question of following a diplomatic rather than an armed path in pursuing its Kashmir policy. Knowing Pakistan's history of linking religion, patriotism and power brokering within its own boundaries and elsewhere as well, one will have to admit that he has acted courageously to clamp down on the most violent socio-political forces in South Asia. This is the best time to act against them as they are hard pressed by the Taliban defeat in Afghanistan and this has opened a window of opportunity to clamp down on extremist forces.

India on the other hand must also start reconsidering its unbending position on Kashmir. It simply can't go on using the same argument that is almost a half century old nor continue to ignore the UN resolutions which will not go away simply by wishing they would. It will have to back down from long held positions. Now that Pakistan has and one hopes will follow it through, the time for Indian moderation is also here.

While war may have a strong political lobby within each country, neither can pursue that option at this moment. However the domestic audience long used to war-mongering may need some persuasion to lend support to peace policies.

Let peace win the argument in South Asia today.

Arsenic: How some gained, and others lost



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

In 1995, it was in the air that something horrible had happened to the tubewell supplied drinking water system. There were rumours but that's all. By 1996, it began to look like a crisis. The organization that took a lead in this was called Disaster Forum (DF). It was supported by OXFAM of the UK and led by Gowher Nayeem Wahra. He had been looking for evidence to link the rumours with the facts for sometime. On behalf of DF, he commissioned Dhaka Community Hospital to run a health camp in Pabna. Patients with strange ailments began to be noted there. It soon transpired that these were victims of arsenicosis. Till then the government had maintained a face of near total denial. They never even informed the people drinking arsenic contaminated tubewell water about the danger. This was a criminal omission. But this was done. It was a conspiracy of self protection created over many years of practice by those who knew. The secret became public.

THE NIPSOM doctor was explaining the history of the crisis. He was uncomfortable because the evidence that a cover up had happened was obvious. UNICEF was supporting its feeble efforts to do practically nothing.

"The first arsenic carrying tubewells were detected in 1993 in Chapainawabganj. We sealed them and prepared a project for the government. But the project was never approved. We have got some money from Unicef to do some work

but no programme exists." "But why didn't you inform the people. Don't they have a right to know?"

"We thought it was a local problem. We didn't want to cause panic." Then he stopped. A government officer doesn't know the idea of public rights. He had no answer about rights.

WHAT became obvious was the extreme contempt in which the official technocrats and bureaucrats held ordinary people. The entire

very smug lot. "It's a very bad scene. Nobody here knows what is going on. We have got the facts". One of them looked happy in saying. Nobody had detected it before then.

I have recently learnt that BGS have been sued in a British court for failing to carry out tests including on arsenic when under contract to DFID and working in Bangladesh. These are the people whom we hand over our fate and wait to be taken care of. The World Bank team was smarter,

asked questions. We were considered so impudent that no discussion was possible. They hurriedly left not sure that this was a proper welcome for the Japanese, Bangladesh's largest donor.

THE government never took the matter seriously but they were always concerned that the crisis never became a political embarrassment. Because the BNP government had rejected arsenic mitigation proposal in 1993, and never taken the problem seriously,

collaborative links to the Government and the World Bank. In fact, the WB had even given a room to the NIPSOM experts to write the programme which was duly welcomed. After all the accommodations at Parbagh are much better than that at Mahakhali.

I have nothing against the Bank. This is what they do. They have served their historical purpose and are on the wane as WTO swings up. They are now the most radical sounding outfit in town. There is so

raised from the consumers. The NGOs were called SOB -- Support Organizations of Bangladesh -- though I understand that SOB also means something else. I wonder if this was a Macnamarasque slip or not?

THE last government spent more than \$150 million buying MIG jets and a frigate to protect our national security and the borders. At a protest meeting held at the Press Club we compared the crises -- India versus arsenic, India versus global warming, environmental versus military treat. People have made fun of our position when we say that the environmental security is a serious one, certainly bigger than the border issue. But face the fact, who would be insane enough to grab us?

So when the crisis gets even worse, I hope the MIG planes will attack the arsenic sources to oblivion, the frigates will threaten away the waves of the rising water level from our shores and the army jaws will bayonet all the tubewells to death. That will be a security activity everyone will cheer. In fact, more may be spent to protect the Indian border from us by India than our entire national budget.

I ONCE attended a meeting at UNICEF. When I mentioned the need to look at all water sources including surface water use and mentioned that we had successfully carried out experiments to show that, a lady who represented the British NGO Water Aid sniggered and said, "I don't understand the local people. At the first excuse they want to jump back to the pond." There was approving laughter all around. It has remained for me the defining description of our problem.

I am not with the Disaster Forum, which was an outfit of volunteers. But the problem has remained. But that experience has taught me that development without accountability is a lie. And we live by that.

Afsan Chowdhury is Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

I once attended a meeting at UNICEF. When I mentioned the need to look at all water sources including surface water use and mentioned that we had successfully carried out experiments to show that, a lady who represented the British NGO Water Aid sniggered and said, "I don't understand the local people. At the first excuse they want to jump back to the pond." There was approving laughter all around. It has remained for me the defining description of our problem.

idea of development in Bangladesh is based on the GO-NGO co-operation model and the people have little role to play in this. NGOs are generically fund seekers and now provider of employment. Most of them have almost no reality beyond this. And this generally groveling bunch conveniently represents the public face in the eyes of the donors who ultimately decide policies. Not because they want to but because they have to. The ability of the national counterparts is so low that they would not be able to formulate a policy without donor support. They are unable to disagree either because that might mean fund cuts. So it all ends up in the same basket.

WHEN the arsenic crisis finally hit the national media, there was some action and of course the World Bank came in. That means an appraisal mission and all that. As DF was part of the scene at that time, they came to see DF fellows amongst others. I remember the members of the British Geological Society (BGS), a

more sophisticated and certainly more duplicitous. They promised to brief everyone about their findings and of course never did. The World Bank has years of experience in "facts management" -- though some call it -- and of course did that. The report was given only to the Government's Directorate of Public Health Engineering (DPHE), those responsible for digging tubewells and feeling a bit of the heat then.

SUDDENLY the number of NGOs and foreign experts began to increase dramatically. The Japanese took over a village and started their own experiments. They came to see us and were a bit surprised that we didn't welcome them as others did. At the DF office, Nayeem Wahra said, "In our language, there is a proverb. A poor man's wife is everyone's sister-in-law. Would you allow us to go to any Japanese village and do such experiments?"

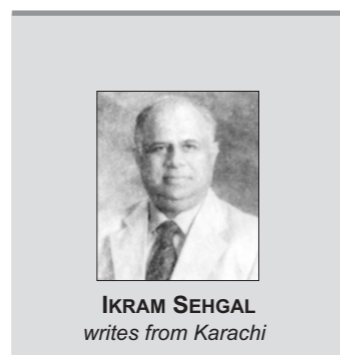
They had no answer. They never thought that in servile Bangladesh, citizens of donor countries are even

the then AL government was willing to criticize the past. Minister Matia Chowdhury spoke about use of surface water but Matia Chowdhury's goodwill was overwhelmed by the technocrats and the donors. The World Bank in consultation with a selected few outfits and individuals made the plan and then placed it and it was accepted by the senior bureaucracy. I remember all the promises made about "participation and consultation" but I suppose that's the only way the World Bank can operate. Their best friend in keeping secrets away from the people is always the government. When a committee was formed by the then Health Secretary -- a donor friendly Secretary who later also steered the Health and Population Sector Programme (HPSP) -- the DF found that they had attended the meet to form the group but had been left out. It's at this point that the caucus took over in which records would show that the informal "arsenic beneficiary group" was born. I will not independently name them but they can be traced through their

much evidence of their global failure that nobody talks much about it anymore. We do because we are so much behind the world and we still suck up to them. Plus, this is where senior bureaucrats go for their cushy jobs. The WB functions best in countries like ours because we have no performance audits, no accountability, extreme crony corruption and, to be honest, inadequate mental faculties to challenge them. Those who have chase them for assignments. And so everyone has a stake in the World Bank. What irritates is their pontification. It's plain bad taste. But then who will hand out consularities to keep our brains well fed if they don't?

WITHIN a year our NGOs, the private sector arm of the government had enough plans and projects to get the sector up and running. I remember reading in a World Bank document that \$150 million could lead to a sustainable solution for the problem. Ultimately, they came up with 50-60 million dollars plus another few million dollars to be

Lessons from history



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

11, Pakistan has reasons to be apprehensive about its own sovereignty. Some ethnic Quislings could well be set up by the enemy as a government-in-exile. While one must not be carried away by "conspiracy theories", the third world is full of puppet governments given legitimacy by the force of arms at the expense of complacent great silent majority. India has taken no time since Dec 13, 2001 to build up forces multiple times more than the quantum of troops deployed in 1971 on the same front. Very deliberately

experience acquired in 1965. Besides General Pervez Musharraf (both 1965 and 1971) there are a handful of Lt Gens of 1971 vintage. The sound of a bullet is a great equalizer, it separates the men from the boys. Rotating officers through the Siachen grinder has filled this critical deficiency with respect to combat experience (and character) for a whole lot of young officers upto the rank of Brigadier, and now rising to the rank of Major Generals with the recent promotions. Without getting into specifics, and

link-up on a non-traditional axis. There is minimum security, let us doubly ensure safety with deploying a Corps HQs dedicated to giving local battle here. The enemy's primary intention would well be the narrow neck of Pakistan opposite Rahimyar Khan (where it is a must that a separate ad hoc Corps HQ should assume responsibility), his XI Strike Corps is parked opposite in offensive posture, his XXI Corps is not there to take in the fresh desert air in South Rajasthan. Since the enemy knows that we know and that

very credible proof of corruption against her, has Ms Benazir concluded that Pakistan holds no future for her? While giving strong anti-Pakistan statements coincidentally just prior to Dec 13, her strange silence about the massive Indian threat unfortunately points to collusion. This cannot (and should not) be so, she is late Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's daughter, she would never sell us out to the Indians, therefore it is important that she stands up and is counted for Pakistan. While Altaf Hussain may have reasons to be

India is clearly the aggressor, the world recognizes we are clearly the underdogs, we have clearly shown who are the ones being persecuted. The world loves underdogs, particularly Americans. The military regime cannot disseminate such facts to the world at large by themselves. The government may already be about to send Ambassadors-at-large to foreign capitals, they must be chosen with care, keeping in mind world perceptions. As prime political spokesperson only Imran Khan presently fits this description completely, he should immediately be tasked to present the human face of Pakistan's problems, in particular Kashmir, to the world. A known face internationally, his full potential must be tapped.

The President must be sincerely commended for having the battle instinct to post combat experienced officers to what is perceived as "vital ground". Pragmatism has generally evaded our military hierarchy for over 50 years. Some are great "warriors" during times of peace (a booming loud voice helps), very few choose to be in harm's way once war is imminent. Pervez Musharraf has made very calculated moves cold-bloodedly in the supreme interests of the nation, he must ensure that only the best fill critical civil and military positions as force-multiplier assets to Pakistan. As a man who does not wait for hell to freeze before taking decisions, Pervez Musharraf has now to take some very important ones in a great hurry. On his correct instincts will depend the future existence of Pakistan, by now we know that Pervez Musharraf will not shirk his duties to the nation whatever it takes.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

AS I SEE IT

An Advisory Council of politicians and eminent elders could be instituted for the duration of the present crisis. The burden of battle must be shared by all Pakistanis, Armed Forces by themselves cannot win wars, the whole country has to be motivated and mobilized. Those politicians who are articulate, charismatic, credible and popular must take up cudgels to present Pakistan's point of view to the world and motivate the masses domestically.

mass war hysteria has been stoked within India. It is far too expensive a logistical exercise to be a bluff, failure to carry it through to war would mean death-knell for BJP's Hindu chauvinism in the impending elections in the Indian heartland of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in February. For the first 25 years of Pakistan's existence we lived with the strategic delusion that "defence of the east lay in the west", a convoluted logic that culminated logically in a catastrophic defeat for Pakistan in 1971. Now we cannot afford the illusion that "defence of the south lies in the north". The quality of our soldiering has always been of a high class at the junior leader level but our generalship has been wanting, both the tactical and at the strategic level. The quality has certainly improved since 1971, yet very few of today's senior leaders possess the combat

giving away vital information to the enemy, one must again repeat quite vehemently that the Defence of the South does NOT lie in the North. Given present Indian dispositions our troops in the Naya Chor Badin area will have more than their hands full. At least one more infantry division as well as an independent armour brigade must be moved in now, during war such movement can be interdicted by enemy air. The sight of a squadron of Guides Cavalry on MBFRs on fire at Daharki Railway station in early Dec 71 stays vividly in the mind, we got through despite incessant Indian air attacks, that delayed us by three days. The defending force must have inherent mobility and strength in place to react against any heliborne and para-dropped troops in conjunction with a possible amphibious landing, coupled with an enemy thrust for a

we can react quite devastatingly, this could well deter him from the obvious. We must cater for the enemy concentrating his resources for a short period on multiple axis in a combined multi-Service operation. We cannot afford to take chances, even though any encroachment in strength will leave us no option but that of a tactical nuclear strike, doomsday will come that much closer if the nuclear situation escalates.

Is it a mere coincidence that Ms Bhutto was dined in India just before Dec 13? And for her supper she sang an anti-Kashmir Mujahideen song? Their silence of both Ms Benazir and Altaf Hussain in this hour of crisis is deafening and giving wrong signals, may even be taken as a vote of support for the enemy. While one cannot believe it to be true, people murmur that given

aggrieved, MQM's flirtation with die-hard Sindh separatists, Altaf's sudden "religious necessity" to visit India and his lack of condemnation of Indian moves are cause for concern to his followers. The country is facing its gravest danger since 1971, Altaf Hussain needs to raise his voice and rectify this anomaly immediately.

An Advisory Council of politicians and eminent elders could be instituted for the duration of the present crisis. The burden of battle must be shared by all Pakistanis, Armed Forces by themselves cannot win wars, the whole country has to be motivated and mobilized. Those politicians who are articulate, charismatic, credible and popular must take up cudgels to present Pakistan's point of view to the world and motivate the masses domestically. The media battle is very important,

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

"A Pakistani's false allegation?"

I do not understand why the East Bengalis always think themselves as an angel as if they did not do anything to the non-Bengali population. Isn't it true that you people killed scores of non-Bengali population before the March 25th, 1971 and looted their properties?

You did the same thing to the Hindus leaving East Pakistan in 1947 to India and you are still killing, raping and looting the Hindu populations of your own country. We have an overwhelming number of Hindus living in Sindh who are the most affluent and well to do people in Pakistan and one would hardly hear about Hindu-Muslim conflict in this region ever.

Hasan, on e-mail

FIFA ban

FIFA has banned Bangladesh football due to BNP's blatant political manipulation of BFF.

Now once cricket is banned

maybe the government will see the folly in its ways and try to live up to some semblance of due procedure.

MA, on e-mail

The Khatib's remark

In the last few days, numerous letters were published in *The Daily Star* about the Khatib's derogatory remarks about Bengali New Year and USA. The writers of many of those letters defended the Khatib saying that his statements were in line with the Quran and Hadith's teaching.

Does Quran actually encourage its followers to destroy other countries if their beliefs are different than Quran's? Enlighten me please.

T Sengupta
New York, USA

Simi's death: Some questions?

Simi, an aspiring first year student of Bachelor of Fine Arts ended her life on December 23, 2001 in protesting

the so-called man-governed societies' injustice and parochial views to the women particularly. The events that led to her death are terrible and heart rendering. Mischievous behaviour of the wicked youths of the area made her life toilsome, distressing and vexatious. They taunted, teased and humiliated Simi till the most unwanted premature ending of her life. The role of the society and the law enforcing agencies in this regard were very much disappointing and disgraceful. They were nakedly defending the mischievous activities of the hoodlums. Simi in her last note before she committed suicide mentioned that 'The harassment she had undergone felt like worse than being raped. She liked to symbolise her protest against the harassment of women. She was choosing death so that other women would not have to experience what she had.'

For how long the legitimate rights of women for free movement will be ignored? How long will they continue to be the victims of such negligence

and disorder of society? The dubious roles of law enforcing agencies are quite pertinent in this respect.

M.H. Bari
Khulna

Disturbing

The photo you published on the back page of your January 9 issue disturbed me.

In the past I have followed with interest and admiration your assistance with Tipu who suffered injuries as a journalist. You were able to raise funds to send him to Bangkok etc. Yet when a poor man who needs assistance asks for your help even in a small way by taking a picture of him to solicit funds you fail him. You take the picture but only to portray him as an oddity. I saw no accompanying article or address where anyone could help him if they wanted to. The only thing that people can do when they see it is say, "ashchurjo" (strange) and then continue reading.

This individual was created by God and is unique. We make fun of

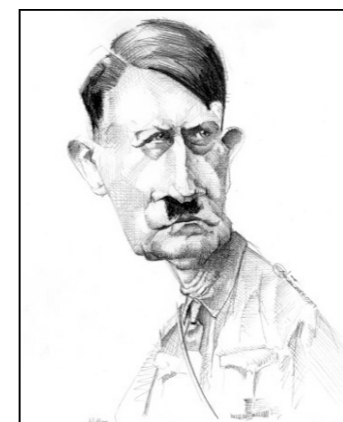
God when we make light of one of his creation. I am disappointed in your paper for trying to sensationalise at the expense of another human being. If possible I think it would be good to include an address where people could help this man in his difficult life circumstances. I hope that this was just an oversight on your part and that it was not intentional.

Austin Miller
Program Coordinator for
Dialogue English Training Center
Lalmatia

Patriot Hitler!

This refers to Mr. Mahmood Elahi's letter "Hitler and Laden: The two faces of the same evil" (December 24). In the letter the writer mentioned both Laden and Hitler as evil persons. Laden, as far as we know is a terrorist and he must be captured and punished if we want to eradicate terrorism.

What I did not like about the letter is that, the mentioned Hitler as an



A patriot?

evil person. Hitler was a patriotic leader. He loved Germany and considered the Germans as the master race.

Unfortunately, we really do not have a patriotic and charismatic leader like him. If we had we wouldn't have considered an underdeveloped country after 30 years of its independence.

Minhaj

Dhaka Enforcement of traffic rules

Reference your news item "Govt. to go for drastic move to streamline city traffic" in your January 8 issue. I was very happy to see that a move is underway to give 40 per cent of the money realised as fines for traffic offences to the traffic policemen as incentive.

If the police department can implement this innovative move, it will probably be considered a milestone in enforcing traffic rule in the streets of Dhaka and to tackle the menace of corrupt practices. We all know how little salary a traffic police gets for his tiresome task in the polluted streets of Dhaka.

If this incentive system works out successfully then I would request the government to implement such measures in other government agencies like income tax and customs department too. But it is also very important that with this incentive, provision for stern actions

against the wrongdoers should also be included.

Architect Jalap Ahmad
on e-mail

Indo-Pak search of 'peaceful solutions'

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has endorsed India's permanent membership of Security Council as a reward for its role in 'peaceful solutions' of world conflicts.

If in the eyes of Mr. Blair, the slaughter of over 80,000 Kashmiris since 1989 is a 'peaceful solution' of Kashmir dispute, I will not be surprised if he goes ahead and nominate Ariel Sharon the next Secretary General of United Nations.

I hope he will not attempt to perform the hat-trick by nominating Mullah Omar for Nobel Peace Prize for ordering the 'voluntary peaceful' retreat of Taliban.

Mohsin Meer
Lahore, Pakistan