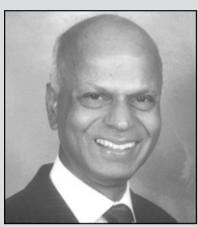


Ageing -- a quiet demographic revolution is under way



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

old (over 80) is expected to increase by five times the current number. This scenario, although can be considered as an historic achievement, poses problems (social, economic and political) of enormous magnitude. This will inevitably lead to an increase in medical and pharmaceutical expenses, higher social security contributions or lower retirement pays to the old. The age of retirement may have to be changed. All this will also eventually cause social tensions and

THANKS largely to unprecedented scientific and medical advances during the last fifty years, a quiet demographic revolution of enormous significance has quietly taken place in the industrialised nations and in a way is still in progress in almost every country of the world. Let us take the example of Spain as an industrialised nation. According to the National Institute of Statistics (INE), in 1971, the percentage of population over 65 years was 9.7 and today it stands at 17.1 per cent. That means to say that the percentage of the older people (more women than men) has nearly doubled in thirty years. Again in 1971, the percentage of the population under 15 years was 27.8 per cent, but today it has fallen to almost half, i.e. 14.57 per cent. At the present moment, the ratio between the active population is 4 to 1, but according to reliable forecasts, by the year 2050, this ratio will reach the dangerous level of 2 to 1. This demographic crisis now besetting most countries of the industrialised North -- as life-spans increase, birth-rates drop and fewer workers must support more retirees -- can be ameliorated by immigration of young workers from the so-called under-developed South. But how conscious are the European governments of the fact that under current circumstances, failure to put in place an adequate immigration policy will eventually lead to a collapse of the economic system together with social and political chaos? Are they aware of the consequences of the rising tides of racism and xenophobia in Europe?

The demographic change is also affecting the South as well. According to the United Nations estimates, the pace of ageing is expected to be even more rapid in the poorer countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America where the older population is expected to quadruple during the next fifty years. This will inevitably increase the number of older people living in extreme poverty in these countries. Lack of any social security system will further increase their misery and suffering.

Taking the world as a whole, it is estimated that by the year 2050, there will be more people over the age of 60 than youngsters under the age of 15. The number of the very

structural changes in the economy. The consumption pattern of the household economies will inevitably undergo great changes. Older people, in particular older women, usually have lower income. On top of that, because of a growing sense of insecurity, they will tend to save more than the younger people. So in the end a larger segment of the population will not only have lower income but also spend less. How will this gradual change in the consumption pattern affect the national economies? Will this fall in overall private spending be compensated by higher public spending on health and care services? How to cope with these global problems which will ultimately affect the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people all across the world?

Luckily, the United Nations has been acutely conscious of this ongoing demographic revolution and its far-reaching consequences. But it is one thing for a few experts at the UN level without any real powers to be aware of a social problem, it is quite another to create a sense of awareness of the problem all across the world, particularly at the governmental level, where the real power to solve a problem lies. For the last twenty years, the UN has been busy doing just that, i.e. building a sense of awareness in the governments of the participating countries, who control and administer the resources. It has also been recommending guidelines for policy formulations to address all these issues.

In 1982, the first World Assembly on Ageing was held in Vienna, Austria under the auspices of the United Nations, which after long discussions approved an International Plan of Action on

Ageing. This Action Plan was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly (Resolution 37/51) in the same year as a part of the international community's agreed standards and strategies in the areas of human rights, advancement of women, families, population, youth, disabled persons, sustainable development, welfare, health, housing, income security, employment and education. The objectives of the Plan were "to strengthen the capacities of govern-

ments and civil society to deal effectively with the ageing of populations and to address the development potential and dependency needs of older persons". It made 62 recommendations covering a broad spectrum of areas such as, data collection and analysis, training and education, health and nutrition, protection of elderly consumers, housing and environment, family, social welfare, income security, employment and education. Since the Plan was not legally binding, it intended to provide guidelines to the governments for policy formulations.

The UN did not sit on its laurels after the endorsement of the 1982 Action Plan. In 1991, it adopted the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, which contained 18 principles. Again in 1999, during the International Year of Older Persons, the United Nations developed the Conceptual Framework for the International Year of Older Persons, 1999, which focused on the need for the creation of "a society for all ages" taking into consideration factors such as longevity, structural changes in the economy, and technological globalisation and technological revolution etc.

As a continuation of "a society for all ages" programme, experts from the United Nations, with the support of an NGO called HelpAge International, organised another one-week conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in May 2000. The main objective of the meeting was to examine the changing role and capacity of the community and in particular the family and kin arrangements to give help and support to the elderly in the context of greater longevity. Due consideration was given to the differences

that existed between the family structures in the industrialised societies, where more old people live alone and developing countries, where many traditional family units are still composed of several generations and live under the same roof. Luckily, in the poorer parts of the world the dependency needs -- both physical and emotional -- of the older people are still taken care of by the families. At the end of the conference, the experts recommended a set of guidelines for policy formulations.

The second World Assembly on Ageing was recently held in Madrid to review the social, economic changes and demographic transformation (in particular, the demographic changes in the poorer countries of the world) that have taken place during the last twenty years and the progress made in these areas during the same period and then recommend further measures to advance in our march towards the creation of "a society for all ages". Delegates from 160 countries -- many of them of ministerial rank -- attended the meeting. Bangladesh was ably represented by Ambassador Shahid Akhtar and a member of the Bangladeshi mission to the United Nations. A lot of preparatory work had already been done by the relevant United Nations agencies before the start of the meeting. Two documents -- an International Plan of Action (an update of the previous Plan) and a Political Declaration -- were approved by the Assembly after long discussions.

But the delegates could not agree on one important issue: How will the governments, particularly those of the developing countries finance these projects? The plan recommended international cooperation but did not include any provision for financial support. Venezuela, which headed the poorest countries of the world (the Group of 77 plus China) recommended a 10 per cent debt relief and proposed the creation of a special fund for the protection of the older people with this money. Venezuela also proposed the creation of a special UN agency like the UNICEF, for this purpose. None of these proposals were approved by the Assembly, which in effect meant that individual governments will have to set aside part of the international development aid for the protection of their senior citizens and will be wholly responsible for the pace and degree of the implementation of the Plan. The Political Declaration, which can be considered as a declaration of political, economic and social rights of the older people, urged the society to change its attitude towards the elderly in every aspect of human life, in particular to look at them as resources not as liabilities.

On top of all these the Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, who is a retired Air Vice Marshal of Bangladesh Air Force -- a disciplined cadre force of the country -- had made a religious sermon at the death of the child Naushin by saying "Life or death is in the hands of Allah and none can do anything about it. Allah has taken back his creature." It would have been more appropriate had this sermon been delivered by a religious leader (kullu natsin almaut). Being the Minister for

Where the country is heading to?

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE four-party alliance led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was voted to power by the people to get rid of corruption, lawlessness, terrorism, nepotism and extortion. The people, by and large, were desperate to do away with immediate past Awami League regime because the country was beset with the vices. The people turned out in large numbers to cast their votes to register their anger and indignation against the Awami League leadership to have a new government which could deliver goods.

But they got nothing. The leaders of the BNP in their election projection meetings declared in categorical terms to stop corruption, eliminate terrorism and ensure security for the lives of the country's citizens.

The article 27 of the Constitution stipulated that all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. Therefore, the government should ensure security for the citizens. If the executive branch of the government fails to ensure minimum security and safety to the people, one wonders whether the government has moral justification to remain in power. From a glance through the columns of the newspapers for a period of one week beginning 1st of May, one gets the impression that killings, rape, snatching, dacoity in broad day light have increased manifold. Since the present coalition government assumed power the law and order situation coupled with price hike of essential commodities, and general maladministration have brought the country on the verge of ruination. Load shedding in energy sector every day has added further misery to the city dwellers in particular.

The people have become so upset at the spate of crimes that city petrol pump owners shut down their business on 11 May in protest against killing of Shahed Newaz Babla, a filling station proprietor and threatened to go for an indefinite strike if the killer was not caught within 72 hours.

Meanwhile, donors at Bangladesh development forum held in Paris on 13-15 March, 2002 called upon Bangladesh government for improving law and order

Home Affairs whose duties and

responsibilities are to ensure security of the people by curbing crimes,

his comments at such tragic event would certainly encourage the criminals to conduct themselves at their whim as they did during Awami League regime. The Home Minister also reportedly further commented that "the baby was not the target. Bullets were fired from other side of the street. None thought the bullet would hit in such a way." How can a Home Minister make such a remark which in a way would defend the criminals? The way he has conducted himself at the recent tragic events at Rajshahi and Dhaka is unbecoming of the Minister for Home Affairs. It is a disgrace for a

disciplined cadre force, too.

The electorate in this country never voted to allow criminals to have a free hand. The political manifesto of the BNP in particular made it clear that BNP was pledge bound to eradicate terrorism and corruption in order to build a prosperous Bangladesh. It also vowed to establish constitutional democratic system and rule of law. In a society where criminalisation process has been going on with the blessings of both the ruling and opposition political parties which resulted with withdrawal of US \$45 million from the shipping sector earmarked for next five years, are unfortunate and uncalled for, but seem to bear relevance. Hansen is on record by saying that the parentless situation in governance halted the economic growth and there is hardly any action so far though six months already passed since the government took over.

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and governance and curbing corruption. Economic assistance has been linked with the implementation of decisive reform programmes. This is how foreign donor countries are looking at the problems of Bangladesh. The government in power should identify the reasons of law and order situation and corruption immediately and ruthless steps should be taken ruthlessly to eradicate the menace for the sake of the image of the country and to bring about confidence of the people in the government. The people are frustrated. They demonstrated their anger by not participating in large numbers in the elections of the city corporation in Dhaka and Khulna. The government should realize the gravity of the situation. If necessary, the army should be called in to assist civilian administration to recover illegal arms and arrest listed criminals. The administration should also cancel the licences issued for arms and direct the owners to deposit their arms to the nearest police stations within 72 hours, till the drive of recovery of illegal arms and arrest of criminals are completed.

The great enemy of our political leaders are sycophants who are in most cases corrupt, dishonest and inefficient. If a national leader is encircled with these people, it pollutes administration, helps breed corruption and retards promotion of social welfare.

Love and affection has no place in politics. This should not be an exception in the context of Bangladesh. For a handful of corrupt politicians and terrorists, this should not be allowed to come to a pass which will bring about only weal and woes for the entire nation in the long run.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain is a former diplomat.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Individual governments will have to set aside part of the international development aid for the protection of their senior citizens and will be wholly responsible for the pace and degree of the implementation of the Plan. The Political Declaration, which can be considered as a declaration of political, economic and social rights of the older people, urged the society to change its attitude towards the elderly in every aspect of human life, in particular to look at them as resources not as liabilities.

It is an irony that while the Prime Minister of the country was seen addressing world leaders at a special session of the United Nations on children wherein she urged upon all nations to join forces for creating an environment where children could live peacefully removing perils like child abuse, exploitation and violence against them, major newspapers of the country ran a story relating to gruesome killing of a 20-month old baby, Marisha Islam Naushin, in Dhaka city in broad day light. This is a slur on the administration. According to a letter writer to The Daily Star (dated 13 May 2002) only in April 2002 there have been 168 cases involving children. Where does government stand in view of such criminal acts on children? The same day the newspapers carried stories of murder of the newly elected ward commissioner Saidur Rahman Newton. This is not the end of the agony the people are passing through. Another minor girl of 12 years Shamsunnahar -- at Laximpur, who escaped rapist, was murdered.

On top of all these the Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, who is a retired Air Vice Marshal of Bangladesh Air Force -- a disciplined cadre force of the country -- had made a religious sermon at the death of the child Naushin by saying "Life or death is in the hands of Allah and none can do anything about it. Allah has taken back his creature." It would have been more appropriate had this sermon been delivered by a religious leader (kullu natsin almaut). Being the Minister for

Improving the health services

DR. LAILUN NAHAR

Minister on TV, showing the actual picture of services at public health facilities; and a full newspaper article on how and why people are running to foreign hospitals for health care, and references to occasions of doctors' negligence and patients' death.

Moreover, the Health and Population Sector Programme (HPSP) is in the process of effective implementation. Our health policy has been based on this HPSP. We have come across contradictory opinions and news about HPSP under the past government regime. One report entitled Government Gets Donors Flak for Progress of HPSP said that a review showed poor progress in the health sector. Another was titled Donors Irked by Whimsical HPSP Expenditure and said that the development partners co-financing the ongoing HPSP have warned the government that they may significantly reduce the financing of the health ministry, which continued to violate agreed termed planned expenditure.

It is my conception that there are three major facts behind this situation. One is the lack of any transparency and accountability of the sector. The second is that our government places more emphasis on family planning and almost no attention toward health sector in general. A third reason is that our health system's main focus is always on technical aspects of health care which consistently underestimates the importance of organizational and institutional factors.

Considering the success of the family planning service we are happy with the emphasis. But the proliferation of private medical institutes and health facilities should cause us to question whether enough attention is being given toward the health sector. Our government should take measures to develop standards and norms for improving the skill of doctors.

In my article "Health Policy: Essential and Remedial Measures" published in The Daily Star of 3-5-2002, my objective was to highlight

the existing potential for improvement of health services in our country, with emphasis on the development of doctors intellectually, spiritually and technically. From my overall knowledge, experience and understanding I would like to include the following suggestions:

Newsletter: I mentioned this in my earlier article. Our MOHFW in conjunction with the Ministry of Information should commence the publication of this monthly or quarterly newsletter. Half of the newsletter should include descriptive information on the existing infrastructure of the sector, both private and public; a picture of manpower in the sector; information about diagnostic centers and pharmaceutical companies. There should be some explanation of licensing policies. The newsletter should include all the relevant material about the health sector which is significant for national interest.

Major content of the newsletter should include the following:

* It should record the establishment of new health service facilities, including diagnostic centers. There should be news from and about the activities of the major pharmaceutical companies. Human resource issues within the sector should be covered in detail. It should note what is going on in the sector -- who is going abroad for what purpose and, on their return, an account of what they have learnt for our country's benefit.

* All scholars educated abroad in health service disciplines would write an assignment about what he/she should like to do now for our country! They should submit this assignment within three months of qualification, so that the material is fresh and relevant.

* Doctors post graduate in biomedical science would submit an assignment on their subject of study. What is the national condition in that problem, how it can be reduced, what our country lacks etc.

Utilization of scholars on Health Service discipline: There is a need to assure the effective transfer of knowledge across the interface between biomedical science and the health care community. But in our country, a good number of doctors educated abroad in health care disciplines are not utilized properly at all. Doctors educated in such disciplines are posted as Medical Officer (M/O) and those from the administration cadre go to their field of administration. A good number of officers have been qualified in health service disciplines in the fourth five-year plan. Doctors qualified in Health Service discipline posted as Medical Officer, usually go to work in international organizations on loan. Some of them, usually the ladies, even quit their job. We should ensure their utilization. The government should scrutinize those qualified in health service discipline and ensure their posting to the post of maximum relevance to their qualification.

Health service management: Poor management in the health sector is a well-known problem. Lack of vision of Directors has resulted in a lot of problems in hospitals -- systems problems, problems due to providers, problems created by the attendants of patients, and problems created by other people within the community. I know the problems are multi-sectoral, that some arise from necessary financial constraints and from the overall political situation of our country. Government's autonomy policy is quite a positive one.

It is my firm view that the Directors of all Medical Colleges and Divisional Directors under DGHS should attend a Health Services Management course at international institutes. This would lead to a dynamic broadening of their vision since they will definitely gain a new perspective on health sector from their experience abroad. In this connection I feel it would be advisable if the health services management course in NIPORT invited teachers from our national management institutes like ICMA and those from the Management Department of universities, in order to strengthen the faculty.

In conclusion it may be said that, if the present state continued longer, the poor would be affected more, in the days ahead. Let us induce transparency, accountability and brain storming of human resource in the health sector, to provide for the poor more.

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