

Diarrhoea vaccine developed

A million lives could be saved, more protected

The deluge of bad news falling on our lives, we hear a good news in the development of a diarrhoea vaccine by ICDDR,B in collaboration with some US based scientists. It's expected to save lives of over 20,000 young children every year in Bangladesh alone and globally that figure may be as high as one million. For families and caregivers everywhere this is a great news. It's just that the news is tempered by the fact that this will be available in the market after a long phase of trials which may take as long as five years.

But it's better to be safe than otherwise because a vaccine which has side effects and is not tolerated well by children can increase the damage even more. Plus vaccine trials have a very bad smell about them and one must be as cautious as possible. The virus which causes diarrhoea -- Rota Virus -- and the existing vaccine -- Rota Shield -- which has been withdrawn because of negative side effects are both bad news and one wishes that more care had been exercised before introducing that drug to the market after it was developed. The trial therefore is essential and welcome. In a country where consumer rights awareness is so low, this is all the more necessary.

The new vaccine which is stated to have few or low negative side effects will be a real miracle drug and the claim as a 'medical breakthrough' is justified. Diarrhoea is a deadly and silent killer, especially of children, and the attacks are less dramatic but more devastating when one considers that prolonged and regular episodes of diarrhoeal attacks destroy child health and one may not die but lose health and future together.

Dr David Sack and two of his associates, among others, who have developed the vaccine are to be congratulated. It could make a big difference to the lives of many in more ways than one. They have done a work the reward for which shall be perpetual and can't be measured by awards and honours but the gratitude of families where lives are saved and rescued. That is what which makes this anti-diarrhoea vaccine so important.

At the same time, we urge that all the ethical aspects of the trial be strictly maintained so that many previous charges which have surfaced earlier regarding such trials don't resurface. This vaccine is very special especially for children of the developing world. They need it desperately.

Proposed customs duty on PC a blow to IT

Withdrawal benefits will overwhelm immediate returns

THE imposition of 7.5 per cent customs duty on import of hardware and software for PC simply is inexplicable in view of the government's purported commitment to the development of Information Technology (IT). IT for us is not just a sector but the proverbial economic raft of life. The short term gains to the government exchequer will mean little when compared to the overall loss of the national future.

PC prices are expected to rise as much as Taka 7,500 per unit and that will make it unaffordable for many. The argument that smugglers are using this low duty regime to import TV spares or smuggling spares to India is unacceptable. Why on earth should the consumer and user be punished for official corruption and inefficiency?

The BNP itself had promised in its election manifesto to facilitate development of the IT sector but is now doing its best, it appears, to choke it. The amount it's expected to gather -- a mere Tk 9 crore -- can be earned by a little more vigilance and transparent duty and tax gathering, and one wished the authorities understood that this critical price rise could make all the difference between low and high access that encourages a sector as a whole. Bangladesh has missed the IT boat many times before while both India and other SA countries have surged ahead because of low appreciation of price on the long term and anticipation of economic trends.

One hopes that the government will see sense in this and recognize that the measly Tk 9 crore isn't worth destroying a large part of our future. As our most well known optimist Prof. Yunus has said, "IT alone can double our income". Let's pay heed to this obvious wisdom that needs to be heard most in our policy making world.

Bangladesh and the new Asian initiative



M ANWARUL HAQ

QAMA Rahim, the new Secretary General of SAARC is an unassuming person. But as a diplomat he is possessed with remarkable qualities to turn adversity into strength. In fact when the SAARC initiative was launched by Bangladesh at the behest of late president Ziaur Rahman in 1980, Rahim along with several other top diplomats played a pivotal role in convincing some capitals in the region that South Asia's future lay in unity despite the diversity. Ultimately after some initial hiccups, some hesitations and muted reservations, all seven nations of South Asia tuned in to launch the new regional forum.

QAMA Rahim speaking in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star last Wednesday did not reflect any despair for SAARC that was launched some 17 years ago and which according to many possesses a slow progress report card. He said the member-states are gradually recognising that the cost of non-cooperation far outweighed that of co-operation. What he said, however, is not anything new. This premise is now generally accepted by the political, business and civil society leaders of the SAARC countries.

What however struck me is that his views were in direct contrast to many who feel that the inclusion of the clause that bilateral issues cannot be discussed in SAARC is a hindrance to the growth of the organisation.

He said, "Given the situation in South Asia, I feel this is a wise provision, because of the (political) situation in the region otherwise there would have been more bickering among the nations. But I believe gradually this will change."

He said that the SAARC charter may not be amended to exclude bilateral issues, but the clause in the

long run may fall into disuse.

He also said that 17 years is not a long time to achieve cooperation at all levels, meaning in a diversely divided region like South Asia.

In this regard he pointed out that the aspect of economic cooperation formally entered the SAARC agenda as an agreed area of cooperation in 1995, after SAPTA came into operation.

"Progress has been made in many areas. However a lot more needs to be done. But critics of the 'slow pace' need to bear in mind that six years, by any standard, is a short period to carry out any critical assessments."

New initiative
Bangladesh in the middle of this

Parties held in Manila on September 17-20, 2000. It was further elaborated at the 34th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Hanoi on July 23-24 last year.

At the ASEAN meet, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who is due to visit Bangladesh from July 9, and Thai foreign minister Dr Surakiart Sathirathai made further elaboration of the concept.

Bangladesh was among 17 nations that were invited at the launching of the new Asian initiative. Bangladesh, in fact, actually received a special invitation for its unique diplomatic profile to be present at the launching of the ACD as is described later.

Deliberations were made by the

It was agreed by the participants at the ACD dialogue that Asia has the potential, "to turn diversity into mutual benefit" and to move up the value chain by together creating a win-win environment.

The Thai Premier Thaksin Shinawatra in his inaugural remarks said, "This (Asia) should be by drawing upon and combining its diverse strengths and assets, and by seeing one another more as customers and partners instead of competitors."

"Forging strategic partnerships to tap into Asia's potential would be more beneficial than relying on foreign aid."

It was said at the meet that ACD belongs to all of Asia. It includes and

principal value of ACD was its "dialogue" component. However it decided to strike a balance between "dialogue" and "project" components.

Borrowing a leaf from SAARC, the organisers of the ACD said that the intention of the ACD is "not to resolve any bilateral conflict." During its conclusion, the Dialogue was of the view that participation in the ACD should be on an exclusive basis. Other nations could join in later. The future of ACD perhaps lies in the realization not to bring in bilateral issues but that it should proceed incrementally, beginning with "easier" issues before moving on to more difficult ones.

Bangladesh proposed that Thailand, the host of the formal initiative

(CHOGM) in Australia and also during the process of election of the WTO Director General. These commendable diplomatic activities played in the international arena, observers believe, have earned a ringside seat for Bangladesh at the inaugural of the new Asian initiative.

Bangladesh enjoys an enviable strategic position in the Asian region. It is located at the western flank of the ASEAN with the Bay of Bengal washing the vast coastline across India, Myanmar and Thailand. It can play a vital role in acting as a bridge between ASEAN and non-ASEAN countries.

Bangladesh is trying to interface with the ASEAN as a possible dialogue partner and is likely to be invited to the next meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The ARF deals significantly with security concerns. Even the United States interfaces with ARF through its Pacific Command based in Hawaii.

Bangladesh in any future dialogue on an Asian canvas could become a formidable player in the broader security context with three nuclear powers in the neighbourhood, viz China, India and Pakistan. It is in a unique position both by its profile and location and as a signatory to the CTBT to act as a mediator. However, it has to join forces with many others to raise its voice in the context of security and stability.

It was laudable that Bangladesh could foresee the usefulness of a regional forum (SAARC) which should set aside the numerous bilateral disputes and conflicts and yet could go ahead with the commonalities of the South Asian countries.

Thailand and most of its ASEAN partners and Bangladesh again deserve credit for launching a meaningful initiative that could in the long run lead to translating Asia's vast diversity into a splendid mosaic of opportunity and unity through meaningful engagement.

The formal launch of Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) provides every Asian nation, big or small, rich or poor to take advantage of participating in a shared future of prosperity. The time for Asia to bond together seems to have finally arrived.

M Anwarul Haq is Diplomatic and Defence Correspondent of The Daily Star

ACCORD AND DISCORD

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month was again able to be an active participant and a prime mover during the launching of a new Asian initiative.

Launched at Cha-Am, Petchuburi, a sea-side town close to the Thai capital of Bangkok on June 19, the day-long exercise was named as the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD).

While the SAARC represents one-fifth of the world's mankind, the new initiative -- the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) -- is expected to emerge as an important forum to connect not only the existing organisational linkages in the Asian region but also connect the missing links in Asia. The Asian region alone contains almost half of the population of the world. Asia together represents some of the most rich and dynamic nations and also houses some of the world's poorest. Asia, perhaps, not only presents a diverse mosaic of politics, culture and history but also contains the potentials for being the Continent of the Century.

The idea that Asia as a continent should have its own forum to discuss Asia-wide cooperative efforts was first raised during the first international Conference of Asian Political

high ranking ministers of 17 nations who participated in the launching meet which included 11 foreign ministers including that of Bangladesh. Host Thailand prepared the list of invitees so that the meeting could establish a missing link between West Asia, the Gulf countries, South Asia and the East Asian countries.

All the participants at the launch were included as the members of the core group of the new initiative. However, it is also a fact that the core group within the core during the ACD launch consisted ten of the ASEAN countries. These included: Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Other invitees were from what is known as the ASEAN +3 countries which are China, Japan and Korea, the SAARC, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) represented by Bahrain and Qatar.

That SAARC has become a significant organisation in Asia and that it is the only representative body of the region was implied by the inclusion of three of its members: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in the ACD meet.

complements already existing regional frameworks such as ASEAN, ASEAN+3, SAARC, GCC.

The leaders at the ACD launch recognised the historic significance of the initiative as the "missing link" to bring together the disparate regional groupings for the benefit of Asia and the world. Asia, it was felt, should emerge from being a combination of sub regions to being a cohesive region in its own right.

The ministers who were present at a retreat on the same day came out with the view that Asia could enhance regional stability and prosperity by fostering more dialogues.

The ministers present identified key areas that may lead to such cooperation, including poverty alleviation, human resource development, bridging the digital divide, science and technology, promotion of Asian culture and tourism, development of SMEs, resource management, energy security, transportation and communication linkages, non-traditional security issues, enhancing the role of the business and academic sectors, and infrastructure development.

The ministers felt that the core or

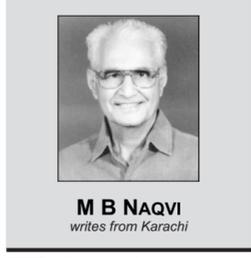
act as the Coordinator of the ACD for the next one year. The next ministerial level meet will again take place in Thailand on June 20-21 in 2003.

Bangladesh's special position

At the launching of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) Bangladesh in fact was a special invitee. While two countries were invited from GCC, SAARC also was due to be represented by two nations, namely India and Pakistan but Bangladesh was consciously invited by the organisers. While Bangladesh was represented by its foreign minister, India sent its finance minister and Pakistan, its minority affairs minister. Their foreign ministers perhaps could not participate because of the nuclear stand-off at that time.

Dhaka's special invitation that came, one is prone to believe, is a recognition of the important, moderate and mediatory roles played by it in various regional and international fora. Bangladesh works as the moderator of the 48-LDC countries. In this regard it can be mentioned that Bangladesh also played a very important role in the last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meet-

The issue of issues



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

THE issue of issues today is whether the Army high command -- which overthrew the Constitution, constitutional government and all elected bodies on October 12, 1999 and asked its controversially-removed Chief to take over -- is ready to transfer power to the elected representatives of the people after the hopefully scheduled October election. Curiously, the CEC has not yet notified what CE Gen. Pervez Musharraf has informed that polling will take place on Oct 7 and 11, which dates are required by the mandate given by the Supreme Court judgement while validating the Oct. 12, '99 takeover as a temporary 'state necessity'. However, the main question is not so much about when they are held as what is to be expected from the polls.

Let us first of all be clear about the priorities in coming days for popular attention. Given the Pakistani assurances to India through the US about permanently stopping all cross-border infiltration into Indian-held Kashmir and India's acceptance, as shown by its de-escalation steps and verbal avowals, the imminence of the threat of an all-out India-Pakistan war has receded. Residual threat of accidental escalation and some tensions remain due to India's own reasons for keeping the troops, and pressure, on the border for

some more time. But the earlier doomsday scenarios no longer apply. That makes India, its actions and talk of war irrelevant. Issues of domestic politics have come centre stage and they have the priority.

In this country rumours are an accepted method of gauging the likely popular reactions to various likely moves that may be under contemplation.

Three trial balloons have been released the other day: first, is about the postponement of the polls, reportedly to March-April. The

likely to make President Musharraf able to dismiss all elected governments and Assemblies at his pleasure, probably on the advice of the military-dominated National Security Council. Musharraf himself has asserted that he wants to have the power to sack his PM and the Parliament.

This is a dismal and dismaying intention. The democrats who are not interested in jobs are sure to retort: if this is so, why bother with so much expenditure on holding elections, having a Parliament and an elected government if true power is

new system seems to be designed to be corrupt from the word go and will survive only by promoting more of it.

Let's examine each of these Musharraf options. What is the reason for postponement of the polls? A lot can technically be argued. It is a lot of crap about laid down procedures. If a lot of work remains to be done, the military government renders itself liable to the charge of inefficiency or inability to make up its mind on crucial issues in over two and a half years. All these could be attended to, or may still be

ist, for example, with Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto or even a PPP stalwart loyal to her. The same applies to Nawaz Sharif. The trouble is that the luminaries who pretend to love Musharraf and are permanently loyal to the Army will be hard put to it to get into the NA themselves, let alone their ability to dominate the parliament. Gen. Musharraf, and the Army behind him, have to make the constitutional reforms ratified by the next NA; the Army also expects the next Assembly, and the government responsible to it, to go on making policies vis-a-vis key issues that it

Army must obtain. And that is how corruption in scolded democracies is promoted.

Stakes are certainly high for all. Those in Pakistan who want simple democracy, unsullied by any adjective or someone's design to control or guide it, in the sense of restoring the sovereignty of the state, such of it as remains, to the people, should now be desperate. For far too long the Army has managed -- in fact mismanaged -- the country, depriving the people of their basic right to rule over themselves. For the Army, the stakes are obvious: it does not want to lose what it has had since Ayub Khan's Martial Law, if not earlier. Hence its preference for a return to 1988-99 days again when the President's office provided the cover for the Army to backseat drive the country's security and foreign policies. Hence the new Constitutional amendments are meant to keep the Parliament effectively under Army's control. It is as if nothing has changed in 40 or even 50 years. The new amendments are a throwback to 1985 which (Eighth Amendment) in its turn was meant to be a variant of Ayub Khan's Basic Democracy.

Such profound distrust of the people of Pakistan on the part of the Army is a radical source of weakness for the state, indeed it is a wasting disease. To suppose that you can go on trying to garner "positive results" indefinitely, as if nothing can change is a dangerous delusion. After all the unenviable results of the military's extended ministrations, it is a time for change. Let democracy be released from the wrongful confinement and it should be allowed to run the country well -- or badly. It is none of Army's business.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

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second is about the formation of a caretaker government comprising pro-Musharraf -- or rather habitually obedient to the Army -- politicians. The third is that going by the supposedly successful experiment of Gen. Ziaul Haq, in the next polls, political parties with their manifestoes will not be allowed to take part at all. It is a familiar response to familiar problems.

These are all dismaying moves; they strongly reek of Army high command's resolve to hang on to power permanently and to fob off the people with an imitation democracy after the polls. The new system will have the Parliament, elected governments and various other appointments of a democracy. But the Army will keep the powers of life and death over the whole electoral system through extraordinary constitutional amendments that are

going to stay with Gen. Musharraf? Let him go on ruling as hitherto on the basis of Army's rifles. There is no cognisable compulsion from the populace even if it is a bit frustrated and maybe even somewhat alienated.

As for foreign pressures, the Anglo-Americans are sure to see the point when President Musharraf comes round to explaining to them why safe continuation of his (IMF's) reforms requires his own continued presence in high office with total powers for at least two next five years and maybe beyond. Other foreigners do not matter. As for parties and press, well, they might cry and say a few hard things that break no bones. He should let them. As for the SC, it too is quite likely to see the "state necessity" of continuity. An honest military rule with no frills is better than bogus democracy where deputies have to be kept in line through what are bribes. The

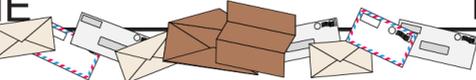
improvisable, if there is a will to hold them in time. Is there the will to stick to Oct. 7 schedule? Who knows? The real reason appears to be the uncertainty regarding the outcome of the polls in terms of the party or parties that are likely to dominate the new Assemblies, especially the National Assembly. So far we have the word of NRB chief that the polls will allow all parties to participate and that they will not be postponed.

The point, at all events, is that not only the COAS-President wants to remain in power virtually indefinitely, but through him, the Army as an institution wants to keep the control of the government in its major manifestations. Therefore it wont do to have those individuals and parties emerge as the dominant force in the new Parliament who do not enjoy the trust of the Army high command. How can resident Musharraf coex-

approves. Thus Musharraf and his true constituency cannot countenance an NA that will comprise those who may wish to curtail Army's powers and privileges. He thus must have "positive results" from the polls.

That puts other options in perspective. Appointing a new caretaker government is likely to be seen as a means of ensuring "positive results". And if it is also combined with non-party polls, such arrangement will enable the MNAs to turn their coats relatively easily; the Prime Ministerial nominee, especially one who is from outside the MNAs, may have to resort to bribing the other MNAs more easily because they will not be bound to any party, manifesto or discipline. Such non-party MNAs can also be coerced more easily. It is all about making sure of "positive results" that

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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AL in Parliament
It's so refreshing to have an opposition again in parliament. And it was wonderful to see the government discomfited by AL's melodrama. Although Khaleda Zia has pointed out the future behaviour of BNP's pet Speaker by tapping her watch when Suranjit was speaking, sort of Pavlovian signals, tap tap, switch off microphone.

Bastiat Dhaka

B. Chowdhury's exit purified BNP

During the last few days a lot of words have been spoken in your Letters to the Editor section regarding Prof. B. Chowdhury's resignation from the presidency.

I would like to add one more thing that B. Chowdhury's exit purified BNP like Dr. Kamal's exit purified AL. The both parties are now free from intellectuals and illustrious personalities, which are needless for our present political system. AL

or BNP may need more Illias, Hazari, Shamim Osman, Pintu, Anne and Abu Tahir like politicians. There are enough room in these parties for *bosonter kokil* politicians but not for Mr. Chowdhury-like self-respectful ideologist.

Now our country politics is just one person's show that means what Khaleda or Hasina says is the final. So this is not the 'Young Turks' who made Mr. Chowdhury's exit possible, but the smiling chairperson. Only the future can say whether Mr. Chowdhury was a nagging element for the maintenance of chairperson's dynasty.

Ratan Nagoya, Japan

Open letter to Dr. Chowdhury

I do not agree with your politics; nor do I agree with that of AL's. Regard-

less, I have always respected you as one of the nation's most prominent physicians. When you were elected to the post of the President of the People's Republic, I was happy at the choice of your party. You are a rare breed among politicians indeed.

Firstly, you are a gentleman, a respected physician and an accomplished professional. Secondly, you are a well-bred and cultured individual. As the President you made your mark as a compassionate individual committed to serving our nation. This does not mean that you are not at fault. You chose to be with a political entity that was entrenched in military dictatorship. Doubtless the nation is not without fault. Siding with any of these makes your politics that of subservient to tyranny. Nonetheless, when all is said and done, you were our beloved President. This factional *coup de etat* demeans your party

yet elevates your status. They accuse you of neutrality. I say well-done Mr. President! You have made this nation proud indeed.

Yahya USA

Fate of B. Chowdhury

What happened with AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury is shocking. But his attitude was of a true democratic person. Political and constitutional experts like Dr Kamal and Barrister Istiaque Ahmed should throw some light on this issue i.e. whether the resignation is undemocratic and unconstitutional act.

Suraiya Pervin Chameli Dhaka

Politics of the politicians

During its last regime AL had eminently proven that it is a party still

very much the inheritor of the BAKSAL legacy and quite intent on pursuing it. During AL's regime law and order deteriorated, corruption increased to greater heights than ever while minister's sons were involved in crime.

Sheikh Hasina also behaved as if she and her family was above accountability. It was the result of complete public revulsion among all strata of society that she was unceremoniously ousted.

Now BNP is intent on proving that AL does not have the monopoly on despotism. Khaleda Zia also acts as if she and her family own Bangladesh and just like Hasina with her father, anyone who fails to pay homage to the announcer of our independence is a traitor.

Under these circumstances with these two women and their families having a stranglehold on our politics I see no difference or any point in supporting one or the other.

Unless we have a third front in the fast deteriorating democratic system in Bangladesh people will naturally tire of this democracy and ask for the return of a strongman. Although that may not be the solution either, at least we don't have to watch these two families becoming rich while the rest of us suffer.

MA Dhaka

Woe of the pension holders

I want to attract the attention of the Prime Minister to the grievances of the pension holders who had retired prior to the two pay revisions of the JP and BNP governments. Even the first class officers among them have been getting less pension than the 4th class employees and that clearly shows wide ranging disparity between the earlier and the latter pension holders. Numerous repre-

sentation and appeals were made over the years calling for the repeal of these anomalies. And after long years of waiting the National Pay Commission of the present government showed a pragmatic, judicious and humanitarian attitude to the pension holders.

The committee proposed for a rightful and fresh fixation. But the implementation committee without assigning any reason turned down the just proposal of the commission providing only the pittance of 15 PC increment of the basic pension quite like the two earlier pay revisions. This naturally created frustration and helplessness among the distressed pensioners.

In this context I appeal to the PM of Bangladesh to consider the matter and act accordingly.

AAMir Ali Mymensingh