

NGOs doing business with HIV and arsenic?

Can't the Finance Minister make his point without insulting people?

S AIFUR Rahman enjoys a formidable reputation for being a plain speaking person. He says things that most politicians would never dare to say. Over the years he has developed a following among all sections of the people who admire him for his capacity to speak the unpleasant truth. This made him an exceptional politician. We saw this during his first term in office and also during his tenure in the opposition. However this time around what was his extraordinary capacity is fast becoming a liability. He is developing a habit of making unthinking and reckless statements without realising their implications. What is more regrettable is that he is insulting a whole range of people while making those remarks.

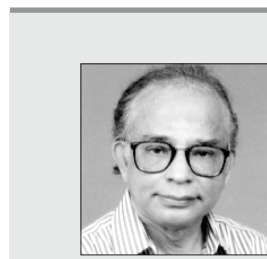
His latest remarks deal with NGOs who are dealing with the arsenic and the HIV AIDS issues. He has accused them of exaggerating two small problems and of trying to destroy the existing safe drinking water system that had been out into place at great cost. Let us examine the two 'small' problems with HIV AIDS being addressed first. The finance minister is right in saying that AIDS has not yet taken an epidemic form. But isn't that the best time to start preventing it? He said, as more people died of dengue than HIV AIDS therefore focusing on the latter is 'harming' the country's image. According to Saifur Rahman we should act only when dead body count becomes large enough. What sort of a statement is this? That is precisely what South Africa and other African countries did -- keep mum as the disease spread -- and look what is happening to them.

About arsenic, here are some facts that our finance minister should have considered before making his remarks. Latest findings of global research shows that arsenic is widely present in most deltaic regions of Asia starting from Vietnam to Pakistan via Burma, Bangladesh, West Bengal and other places in the Gangetic delta. The reason is geological. In South Asia arsenic was first discovered in West Bengal in mid 1980s. In Bangladesh the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) first found arsenic in our tubewells in 1993. The issue became better known with the involvement of the Dhaka Community Hospital (DCH) when patients with arsenicosis started being seen more and more. A 16-district investigation by DCH set alarm bell ringing when tubewells with high arsenic concentration were discovered. Then government took up the case in earnest and started testing the water of all tubewells in affected areas. As more and more tubewells were tested, the presence of arsenic became confirmed in more and more districts of the country. Following the outcry in the national media and in a section of the international media, the World Bank sent a fact finding team in 1998 which confirmed the seriousness of the arsenic threat. Later that year WHO, following its own investigation, declared the arsenic threat in Bangladesh as a major emergency. Several international conferences -- the latest of which was held by the present government in February 2002 -- confirmed the emergency. According to the latest figures of Bangladesh Arsenic Mitigation and Water Supply Project (BAMWSP), a government project set up in 1998, out of 61 districts 59 have been found to be contaminated with arsenic and a total of 34 million people are under threat of developing arsenicosis.

If we understand Mr. Saifur Rahman correctly arsenic threat is less important than dengue because not too many have yet died from it. What a disgusting remark to make. Have our people become so cheap, so trivial and so meaningless that they count only as dead bodies and NOT AS LIVING BEINGS deserving a healthy life? Doesn't the minister know that people afflicted with arsenicosis suffer for years before they succumb to death? If we wait for the body count to start preparing to fight the threat of arsenic then it will already be too late.

Our humble request to our venerable finance minister is -- please don't make light of these grievous problems and please don't question the integrity of people who are fighting the scourge. It is good to be outspoken but it is even better to base the remarks on facts.

Rescuing an agenda



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

SUSTAINABLE development has come a long way since the idea was mooted more than a decade ago. This long journey however, has only been measured by time and not by landmark developments. As a result the Summit just concluded in Johannesburg did not have many tangible progress to recount or celebrate. On the contrary, it became embroiled in acrimonious debates and controversies right from the beginning. Derided as an international jamboree for rhetorical speeches, it drew protesters and campaigners of every persuasion to the venue to put up the usual spectacle of public demonstration. The only redeeming feature was that owing to the populist gesture of the South African Government, the demonstrators did not turn nasty and the protesters remained within the bounds of propriety. At the end the Summit concluded with a declaration that reeked of compromises and political expediency, except in one respect.

The greatest set-back suffered by sustainable development has been in terms of focus. Originally it meant economic development that could be sustained by use of natural resources and changes in environment without irreversible damages suffered by nature and the upper atmosphere. By implication, violation of this principle meant development that could not be sustained for long. In that event the quality of life of the present generation would become poor and of future generation even poorer. Continued unabated, mindless exploitation of nature and damages to environment would one day threaten the life supporting capacity of the ecosystem. This was the original focus

of sustainable development. The concept had implications for both developed and developing countries. But as the major user of natural resources and polluters of air and water the burden of responsible behaviour was more on the former group of countries. The unequal development among countries, on the other hand, made out a case for giving the developing countries a greater latitude and more time in the use of natural resources and a lower standard in respect of pollution, particularly of air, through use of non-renewable energy. The implica-

tion is now being used to include not only less environmental degradation and less pollution but also less poverty, less illiteracy, less disease, less war, less corruption, less gender equality, in short less of everything that is socially, economically and politically undesirable. Overtly, it is also made to stand for more democracy, good governance, rule of law, civil liberty, etc. As if all these additions factored in were not enough, more recently, sustainable development has been interpreted as being the vehicle of globalization with liberalization of

of natural resources and of polluting because of their lower level of industrialization but they will also require greater use of natural resources (e.g. oil, coal for energy) than in the past if they are to free themselves from poverty trap. To that extent they may add more to the existing greenhouse gas which should be regarded as a right they are entitled to being late comers. Mere globalization through liberalization will not do the trick here. In Summits with a broad agenda (including globalization) the relevant environmental issues can

game plan. It was not, therefore, surprising that energy use was sought to be downplayed and poverty reduction was emphasized as a sop to the poor countries. Developing countries become happy every time developed countries and UN agencies fall over each other in committing themselves for poverty alleviation. It is forgotten that a Millennium Summit was held in 2000 setting targets with timetable for reduction of poverty, child mortality, illiteracy, access to water and sanitation etc.

support. Kyoto Protocol is the most important environment treaty ever attempted. It requires industrialized countries to make specific cuts in their output of carbon-based gases from 1990 levels by a deadline of 2008-2012. The developing countries were exempted, being lesser contributors of greenhouse gas. The framework of Kyoto Protocol was agreed in 1997 but it took four years to agree on its rule. The Protocol can take effect after it has been ratified by at least 55 countries accounting for at least 55 per cent of carbon-dioxide emissions in 1990. Before the Summit 87 countries accounting for 37 per cent of emissions by industrialized countries had ratified. Ratification by Russia, the last major industrial signatory, was vital because this will push the emission numbers beyond 55 per cent. Under the pact, industrialized signatories can trade pollution under a planned market in carbon dioxide emissions. A country that is under its quota target can sell some of that surplus to another signatory that is over its target.

President Bush in one of his first acts of office last year announced that he would not put Kyoto protocol to the Senate for its endorsement. President Bush contended that it would be too costly for the US economy to meet the emission cutting targets set down in the accord. President Bush also complained that the pact did not include fast-emerging populous countries like China and India, in its specific commitments about cutting pollution. The US administration under President Clinton had agreed to the pact when it was under negotiation.

Ratification by Russia will mean that the climate change pact will take effect despite American opposition. This would not only be a victory for the Kyoto Protocol but a tangible achievement of the Johannesburg meet. If not for anything the Summit will be remembered for this historic break-through. It can now be said that at long last sustainable development came into its own and took a momentous step forward.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

The Summit at Johannesburg was almost heading to a victory for America's industrial lobby with a tame draw. It was miraculously salvaged by agreement on UN convention on global warming that has been languishing for lack of adequate support. Russia followed Canada in promising that it would ratify the Kyoto Protocol soon while Japan and China spelt out their support. Kyoto Protocol is the most important environment treaty ever attempted. It requires industrialized countries to make specific cuts in their output of carbon-based gases from 1990 levels by a deadline of 2008-2012.

tion of this was that more time was to be allowed for growth in developing countries to catch up with the developed ones and slower growth in the latter. The developed countries were particularly required to whittle down their use of non-renewable energy sources. Of course, there was no unanimity on this prescription for growth and most of the developed countries demurred while a few openly contested the idea. The crux of disagreements about what is required to be done in accordance with this growth scenario has continued to plague global negotiation over environmental issues.

Be that as it may, sustainable development in its original incarnation and with the explicit implications focussed on nature, including upper atmosphere 'the spaceship earth' as described by economist Kenneth Boulding. This has now been submerged under an over-arching and ever widening agenda. As the weekly Economist pointed out recently, "it now risks being about everything and therefore in the end about nothing". Sustainable devel-

opment is now being used to include not only less environmental degradation and less pollution but also less poverty, less illiteracy, less disease, less war, less corruption, less gender equality, in short less of everything that is socially, economically and politically undesirable. Overtly, it is also made to stand for more democracy, good governance, rule of law, civil liberty, etc. As if all these additions factored in were not enough, more recently, sustainable development has been interpreted as being the vehicle of globalization with liberalization of

economies and international trade as preconditions. Ironically, even the Economist, after concluding that grand meetings like the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 and its follow up in Johannesburg can breed confusion because of the cacophony of different voices and objectives, has fallen victim to the danger of inflating the concept. It has found lot of progress in countries that decided to liberalize their economies and to open their borders to more trade and investment. Such globalization is seen by the weekly as having narrowed the gap between North and South. Even if this controversial observation is accepted as being true, the silence over growing inequality in the developing countries make it of dubious value. Enabling poor countries to grow and be healthier is expected by the weekly to go a long way towards protecting environment. This presupposes poor countries are greater polluters and cause more damage to environment. This is a very biased view and contrary to what is true. Poor countries are not only less guilty of over exploitation

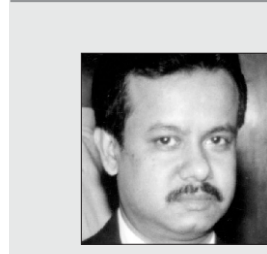
of natural resources and of polluting because of their lower level of industrialization but they will also require greater use of natural resources (e.g. oil, coal for energy) than in the past if they are to free themselves from poverty trap. To that extent they may add more to the existing greenhouse gas which should be regarded as a right they are entitled to being late comers. Mere globalization through liberalization will not do the trick here. In Summits with a broad agenda (including globalization) the relevant environmental issues can

be confused if they are considered together. If the summit on sustainable development was meant to focus on development and environment the relationship between the two should have been seen narrowly with specific reference to their interactions. It is not that the big players, particularly America, was not aware of this need to zero in on specific issues. But she was anxious to divert attention from environmental issues that impinge on sustainable development, particularly where the country feels vulnerable. The outcome was a strategy to have an agenda for the Summit that diverts attention from the major environmental issues and channel the discussion to run-off-the-mill issues like poverty, access to water and sanitation by poor, governance, corruption etc. These are important issues but a Summit on environment is not the occasion to highlight them. The US President may not have attended the Summit but his officials working behind the scene with UN bureaucrats ensured that the agenda would not upset his

the same subjects that were drowned up at the Summit. It was followed up by the International Conference on Financing this programme in March this year in Mexico. The Summit for sustainable Development could make reference to it but should not have gone for lengthy discussions and enunciating overlapping programmes for the umpteenth time. The Summit should have confined itself to the issues of sustainable use of natural resources and pollution, delineating the roles and responsibilities of developed and developing countries in these respects. All other issues, however important and inter related, were nothing more than red herrings.

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Mad for marriage



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HE gnashed his teeth, clenched his fists and then with a contorted face gave it a push in the name of the Almighty. The slippery, slimy substance finally dislodged from its place and raced down the coils of his bowels for disposal at the end. While feeling open like an unclogged tube, he was relieved once more in life that everything was possible with a little push.

That morning he decided to get married again. At the age of fifty, he was living with two daughters, and rest of the world had forgotten that he was still a full-blooded man. He often thought of marriage but always lacked in the conviction to turn his thought into action. After ten years, that miracle happened on the seat of his commode.

His grandfather was a homeopath, who used to say that the iron law of good health was to start a successful day from the toilet. Man couldn't be comfortable at one end if he was clogged at another. He was convinced that if his mind was open today, it was because his bowels were clear for the first time in many years.

At the breakfast table, he discussed it with his daughters and both of them cried like their mother who was in heaven. He told them that he was suffering from constipation ever since their mother died, that he didn't need a doctor to explain how all his repressed emotions were blocking his bowels. The daughters said in one voice that it would be a shame for them if he remarried at his age and asked if he could at least postpone his wish until they were given away in marriage.

consorting with a brand-new wife with his one leg in the grave. His mother-in-law went berserk, and threatened all day that she was going to take away her grand daughters if their deluded father ever dared going as far as he wished. She confided in neighbours that her son-in-law should have been castrated as soon as her daughter had died. Then she hoped that her daughter's soul would return from grave to strangle this man having his cloudbursts in the

couldn't hatch another man's eggs. The matchmakers talked like actuaries, asking questions about his health. They wanted to know if he had any heart problem, when was the last time he had seen a doctor and whether he was hospitalized in recent times as if to calculate the premium for an insurance policy he was going to buy. These questions embarrassed him, and he wished he hadn't waited ten years to make up his mind.

And he resented how he suffered

waited for the mercy of his own bowels.

By now he had short listed some of the candidates and wished to meet them one by one. It was after a long time that he was going to intimately sit with one single woman at a time. The night before the first meeting he wavered in his mind whether to dye his hair or go with their original colour. His business instinct eventually convinced him to dye the hairs next morning, because in his long life he had learned that

Her first husband died in a car crash and the second one drowned in the sea. A chirpy soul, she desperately needed another husband to prove that she wasn't a witch. Another woman insisted that he prepared a will before they got married so that his daughters couldn't deprive her in case something happened to him. The last widow he met had a wry sense of humour. She said he looked phony with the dyed hairs, much like a coat of fresh paint on old and chipped furniture.

What was wrong with those women, he asked the matchmakers and blamed them for wasting his money and time. He explained that at the age of fifty, he wanted to marry only because he needed a companion more than anything else. None of the women looked interested in marriage, he said, although each wanted to have a man in her life. Women could be pretentious even in death! he exclaimed.

One of the matchmakers retorted that how could one expect to find everything if one came late to the market. There was a strange smirk on the doorman's face and the maid tried to hide her face in the veil. The daughters sat with their heads down, and the mother-in-law talked into the air that the Lord was merciful to save a disillusioned man from perdition.

He gnashed his teeth, clenched his fists and closed his eyes. As he sank into himself, it seemed to him that he was clogged again, this time in his mind. In the name of the Almighty, he decided to give it a push again.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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When he returned home in the evening, the doorman greeted him with a smirk on the face. At the dinner table, the maid sipped between serving food, while daughters ate with their heads down. The phone rang at night and calls poured in from friends and relatives who wanted to know if he was seriously thinking to get married again. He realized that his intention to marry had become public knowledge by the end of the day.

Colleagues taunted him for being lucky, that his wife had died to give him the excuse to take another wife. Friends jeered that he was going to add a new position to Kamasutra by

arm of another woman. But all of these only hardened his resolve. The search for a suitable bride went on, while his constipation was fully cured. The tightness in his belly was gone, and he no longer belched like a wounded dog to release the gas that filled his stomach. Gone was the headache that pounded in his head and once again, he would be overflowing with lust for life.

Most of the proposals came for girls as young as his daughters, but he made his preference known. He was looking for a childless widow, because while he didn't mind nesting in another man's memory he

from constipation for these ten years, his body wasted by an obscene ailment that, like a menacing hoodlum, constricted his bowel movements. He spent hours in the toilet, a good chunk of ten years lost to a fond wish that he could clear his bowels again. He sat on the commode like a bird alighted on a crowbar, looking like a dressed chicken hanging from the hook at the grill counter of a restaurant. The husband of a dead wife, proud father of two beautiful daughters, a would-be father-in-law, the mighty master of his house and the successful businessman who could turn into gold everything he touched, helplessly

presentation always made half of the sales pitch.

The first candidate was a woman who talked about her god-like husband and then wept for him as tears dredged through the cakes of make-up on her face. He handed out tissue papers to her one after another, invoking his patience with constipation for ten years, until the embarrassed woman stood up and left in the middle of the conversation. He couldn't marry a woman, he thought, who was still so deeply in love with the memories of her deceased husband.

Next day he met a woman who had already become a widow twice.

OPINION

Reforming the education system

DR. SHAHIDUR RAHMAN

THE traditional Knowledge and mindset development within the ambit of the current Bangladesh educational system need to be reviewed and reformed to achieve millenium class generation who can deal with changing future with networking, new learning skills and continuous adaptation. Through these reform plans Bangladesh could achieve dedicated young generation who will be responsive to the changing needs, committed to reject violence, combat all kinds of evil and confront all kinds of future challenges. Students could learn grassroots level problems continuously, help to implement and execute government plans and could transform all possible national weaknesses into strength. Among others, the reform plans could consider the following points:

1. Introducing a National Discussion Forum for setting up structure, strategies and overall educational reform involving qualified experts from both national and international think tanks, qualified teachers' representatives, parents' representatives and Bangladesh govern-

ment representatives; 2. During High School education from class VII to Class IX there could be a compulsory subject named "Fundamentals of Bangladesh Development Studies". Progressively at different levels the course curriculum should include materials related with (1) Basic Citizen's Needs, Rights and Duties Awareness; (2) Village and City Development; (3) Birth and Flood Control; (4) Fighting Illiteracy; (5) Clean and Green Bangladesh; (6) Health Care Development; (7) How to Save One in Crisis; (8) Drugs and Anti Terrorism Counseling; (10) Bangladesh Government's Basic Rules, Laws and other Social Challenges Awareness; 3. Prior to entrance to University one year could be spent in compulsory volunteer cadre for national development training. This training will include: Career Development; Information Technology Basics; ABC of Business Communications; Basics of Bangladesh Economic Development; Basics of Civil Defence; Bribery and Crime Control; Drugs and Anti Terrorism Counseling; Government's Basic Rules and Laws Awareness; Practical Attachment Programme to train

grassroots level people etc; 4. Restructuring and reengineering both undergraduate and graduate subjects, syllabus in different Universities and their course curriculums related with emerging employment opportunities, national economic and social change and international needs; 5. Where necessary introducing open book examinations; 6. To develop creativity introducing a compulsory subject for thesis/project writing in undergraduate level named as, "Bangladesh Development Studies and Research"; 7. Introducing feedback on teaching and research subject; 8. Introducing Student Counseling for perception building and career development; 9. Introducing Staff Development Training Programme; 10. Engaging qualified administrators in the Departments, Student Halls and overall University administration; not just depending on only Departmental Heads, Deans and Vice Chancellors; 11. Reengineering the National Assessment Board for monitoring and assessing the overall educational achievement in the international perspective.

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Biman: Time to take off steadily

FLT ENGR ABDULLAH MOHIBUDDIN (RETIRED)

SEPTEMBER 11 was also the anniversary of the start of a year of struggle for the airlines all over the world.

But unlike SWISS Air and SABENA and many more prominent airlines in the USA which have collapsed completely, BIMAN Bangladesh Airlines still survives. Rather, it carried more than 1.5 million passengers plus cargo (a substantial growth over the last year). BIMAN earned Tk 1,816 crore and spent Tk 1,836 crore in the 2001-2002 fiscal year, making a loss of Tk 20 crore only. Loss and profit are part of the game in any corporation. Compared to other airlines this loss is quite insignificant.

When people compare BIMAN with Adamjee Jute Mills, it really irritates me, as these people don't know the history of BIMAN and where all the problems lie.

Adamjee Jute Mills was making money in the '50s and '60s but not afterwards. On the other hand,

BIMAN established in 1972 with almost zero fund. It did not inherit from PIA any asset, any aircraft but only 2000 employees. However, BIMAN has now 5000 employees and over 1 billion taka worth of immovable property besides BIMAN's own acquired aircraft.

BIMAN owed the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) more than Tk 500 crore in fuel price. BPC was making a high profit, whereas BIMAN could not raise the domestic fare due to political and social reason.

From the inception of BIMAN, the Ministry concerned was always in upper hand to dictate the BIMAN management what to do and what not to do. In this way 30 years have passed. At present, BIMAN is run by the Executive Directors including Managing Director, External Board of Directors, the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism and the Minister himself. But if you further investigate you will find out that the Executive Directors including the Managing Director have in fact no executive power or decision making power.

Some people might say that privatisation of BIMAN is the only solution for its growth and an efficient CEO to run the organisation could make BIMAN profitable. But I would disagree to this, as there are many points to ponder on before taking such decision.

Just look at the fate of SABENA. When it was merged with SWISS AIR and converted to a private airline, it dived quickly and crashed completely after spending huge money in modernising the fleet.

Besides selling tickets for passenger and carrying cargo, BIMAN can also earn or make money (already earning in some sectors) by --

a) Providing ground handling to other airlines at Dhaka and Chittagong Airports (average 50 crore taka earned yearly by BIMAN.)

b) Providing transit/maintenance handling to other airlines at Dhaka and Chittagong Airports.

c) By catering (selling food) to other airlines from its modern Inflight Catering Centre.

d) Providing ground and engineering handling at out-stations for BIMAN's own aircraft and other airlines' aircraft.

e) Airline code-sharing which is another new chapter for marketing and sales department.

Without government help, an international airline like ours, particularly in a third world country, cannot survive.

Whenever a new minister takes over, he blames the previous minister for all the loss. But I would say that BIMAN was doing fine rather excellent during late President Ziaur Rahman's time. Mr K M Obaidur Rahman Khan was then the Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism. He was quick in decision-making, and never interfered in day to day operations of BIMAN.

In spite of many wrong decisions like selecting ATP aircraft and buying brand new DC-10 aircraft (last one in the production) and buying second hand B707 aircraft at almost the price of a new one, BIMAN will still survive and this organisation can be made profit-

able provided a little bit of change in the policy making sector.

Often the union leaders are blamed for BIMAN's slow progress. It is not true. Unlike many other union leaders, BIMAN's union leaders are more constructive in their thought and they do try to protect the interest of their organisation. During the last 30 years, BIMAN lost a huge amount of money for selecting GSA (General Sales Agency), sales agents in Tokyo, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Baghdad, Tripoli, Kuwait and London. All were not due to union people, rather often because of political pressure.

I'd like to request the highest decision making authority to bring the administration under one umbrella. There must be a distinct wall between the policy makers and the executive bodies. Once this is sorted out, BIMAN will take off steadily.

Flight Engineer Abdullah Mohibuddin (retired) is former President of Ft Engrs & Navigators Association (FENA)