

Guaranteeing rights of children

MIR LUTFUL KABIR SAADI

THE Children Rights Convention (CRC) week is being observed in Bangladesh and rest of the world (29 September 5 October) with the theme "Health Grooming Up - Development Ensures Golden Future". On 29-30 September 1990 the biggest congregation of the world leaders in history at the United Nations attended the World Summit for Children. There were 71 heads of state and government and 88 ministers. The World Summit adopted a Declaration on the 'Survival, Protection and Development' of Children and a 'Plan of Action' for implementation. The world leaders agreed to be guided by the lofty principle of 'first call for children' - pledging that the principle of meeting the indispensable requirements of children should be given preference in the distribution of resources at all times, good or bad and at all levels, family, national and international.

The Declaration and Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children and the Convention on the Rights of the Child constituted a motivated and practicable agenda for the welfare of children. The Declaration noted: "We have gathered at the Summit for Children to undertake a joint commitment and to make an urgent universal appeal - to give every child a better future. The children of the world are innocent, vulnerable and dependent. They are also curious, active and full of hope. Their time should be one of joy and peace, of playing, learning and growing. Their future should be shaped in harmony and co-operation. Their lives should mature, as they broaden their perspectives and gain new experiences. But for many children, the reality of childhood is altogether different."

The Plan of Action is intended to be a guide for Governments, International Organizations, Agencies, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and all other segments of society in formulating their programmes of action for ensuring the implementation of the Declaration of the Summit. The needs and problems of children vary from country to country, and indeed from community to community. Parents, elders and leaders at all levels throughout the world however have certain common aspirations for the well being of the children.

The progress for children should be a key goal of overall national development, the Plan of Action pointed out. The Declaration calls on all governments for the earliest ratification and implementation of the Convention. The rights of the child contain a comprehensive set of international legal norms for the protection and welfare of children. Measles, polio, tetanus, tuberculosis, whooping cough, diphtheria and diarrhoeal diseases, pneumonia and other acute respiratory

infections can be prevented or effectively treated by relatively low-cost vaccines and medicine. These diseases are however responsible for the world's 14 million children's deaths under five years and disability of millions more every year. Hunger and malnutrition are responsible for fifty percent of the deaths of young children. More than 20 million children suffer from severe malnutrition, 150 million are underweight and 350 million women suffer from nutritional anaemia, according to UNICEF statistics. Maternal health, nutrition and education are important elements for the survival and well being of women and key determi-

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nants of health and welfare of the child in its early infancy. The causes of the high rates of infant mortality, especially neonatal mortality, are linked to untimely pregnancies, low birth weight and pre-term births, unsafe delivery, neonatal tetanus, high fertility rates etc.

Extensive opportunities exist for eradicating or virtually eliminating age-old diseases that have afflicted millions of children and for improving the quality of life for generations to come. Achievements in this arena would greatly contribute in lowering the rate of growth of population. Sustained decline of the child death rate will make parents confident and contribute greatly in reduction of birthrate.

Millions of children around the world live under difficult situation - as orphans and street children, as refugees or displaced persons, as victims of war and natural and man-made disasters. Migrant child workers and other disadvantaged groups are exposed to dangerous chemicals and radiation. Female child is most often trapped in prostitution and other forms of exploitation. Disabled children sometimes become victim of indifference and exploitation. Children deserve special attention, protection and assistance from families and communities as part of national and international endeavours, the Declaration pointed out.

More than 100 million children are employed, in contravention to international conventions, in unsafe and hazardous jobs detrimental to the health and education of the children and are obstacle for their physical and mental development. The world community is committed

to stop the economic exploitation of the children.

The UN General Assembly's Special Session on Children held on 8-10 May 2002 was attended by 69 heads of state and government and 190 national delegates. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, five Nobel Laureates for peace, leading world business magnets, prominent religious leaders, academicians and members of the civil societies and more than 1700 NGO delegates from 117 countries. Art, cultural and sports celebrities met for the first time in the history of UN in which more than 400 children also participated.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda

Secretary Ministry of Women and Child Affairs Mahfuzul Islam pointed out.

Significant reduction of infant mortality attained during 1990-2000 period from 94 to 57 per thousand almost materialized the government target to bring the death rate to fifty against each thousand. Malnutrition came down from 26.7 percent in 1990 to 13 percent in 2000. Severe malnutrition also came down from 35 percent to 18 percent during the same period. Iodine consumption has increased from 19 percent in 1990 to 70 percent in 2000 contributing in the reduction of goitre. As far as safe drinking water is concerned, Bangladesh achieved 97 percent success by the end of the year 2000. This high achievement has however come down to 70 percent currently due to arsenic contamination, Mahfuzul Islam said. The Secretary mentioned that significant progress has been made in the enrolment of children in the primary education. The net enrolment in 1990 was 69 percent that rose to 81 percent in 2000. The enrolment of girls is 82 percent as against 80 percent among the boys.

Dr. Begum Jahan Ara, Director, Bangladesh Shishu Academy said: Bangladesh will observe Children Rights Convention (CRC) week to uphold its commitments in fulfilling the basic rights of the children. The government has chalked out an elaborate programme in this connection ... nearly 100 juvenile organisations will take part in this festival. It is essential to develop the mental faculties of the children at their early stage, Dr. Begum Jahan Ara maintained. The Shishu Academy in this connection has taken up 'Early Childhood Development' (ECD) programme in collaboration with UNICEF and the government of Bangladesh. Advocacy, social mobilization and communications are the focal elements of the programme. The Academy is also implementing cultural rights programme of CRC. Iqbal Hossain, Programme Officer of the Academy said: "We are also providing non-formal pre-primary education in all 64 district towns and six upazila headquarters in six divisions in addition to three centres at the capital Dhaka."

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Low point of powerlessness

EDWARD SAID

SIXTY years ago, the Jews of Europe were at the lowest point of their collective existence. Herded like cattle into trains, they were transported from the rest of Europe by Nazi soldiers into death camps where they were systematically exterminated in gas ovens. They had offered some resistance in Poland, but in most places they first lost their civil status, then they were removed from their jobs, then they were designated official enemies to be destroyed, and then they were. In every significant instance they were the most powerless of people, treated as insidious, potentially overpowering enemies by leaders and armies whose own power was far, far greater; indeed, even the idea of Jews representing a danger to the might of countries like Germany, France, and Italy was preposterous. But it was an accepted idea, since with few exceptions most of Europe turned its back on them during their slaughter. It is only one of the ironies of history that the word used most frequently to describe them in the hideous official jargon of fascism was the word "terrorists", just as Algerians and Vietnamese were later called "terrorists" by their enemies.

Every human calamity is different, so there is no point in trying to look for equivalence between one and the other. But it is certainly true that one universal truth about the Holocaust is not only that it should never again happen to Jews, but that as a cruel and tragic collective punishment, it should not happen to any people at all. But if there is no point in looking for equivalence, there is a value in seeing analogies and perhaps hidden similarities, even as we preserve a sense of proportion. Quite apart from his actual history of mistakes and misrule, Yasser Arafat is now being made to feel like a hunted Jew by the state of the Jews.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the greatest irony of his siege by the Israeli army in his ruined Ramallah compound, is that his ordeal has been planned and carried out by a psychopathic leader who claims to represent the Jewish people. I do not want to press the analogy too far, but it is true to say that Palestinians under Israeli occupation today are as powerless as Jews were in the 1940s. Israel's army, air force and navy, heavily subsidised by the United States, have been wreaking havoc on the totally defenceless civilian population of the occupied West Bank and Gaza strip. For the past half century the Palestinians have been a dispossessed people, millions of them refugees, most of the rest under a 35 year old military occupation, at the mercy of armed settlers who systematically have been stealing their land and an army that has killed Palestinians by the thousands. Thousands more have been impris-

oned, thousands have lost their livelihood, made refugees for the second or third time, all of them without civil or human rights.

And still Sharon makes the case that Israel is struggling to survive against Palestinian terrorism. Is there anything more grotesque than this claim, even as this deranged killer of Arabs sends his F-16s, his attack helicopters and hundreds of tanks against unarmed people without any defences at all. They are terrorists, he says, and their leader, humiliatingly imprisoned in a

shares in American firms selling military equipment to Israel - was anti-Semitic. A Jewish president of the country's oldest and richest university complains of anti-semitism! Criticism of Israeli policy is now routinely equated with anti-semitism of the kind that brought about the Holocaust, even though in the United States there is no anti-semitism to speak of. In the US, a group of Israeli and American academics are organising a McCarthy-style campaign against professors who have spoken up about Israeli

the Palestinians. This is an exercise short of complete genocide to see how far Israeli power can go in sadistic brutality without being stopped or apprehended. Today Sharon has said that in the event of a war with Iraq, which is definitely coming, he will retaliate against Iraq, thus no doubt causing Bush and Rumsfeld the nightmares they rightly deserve. Sharon's last attempt at regime change was in Lebanon during 1982. He put Bashir Jemayel in as president, then was summarily told by Jemayel that Lebanon would never be an Israeli vassal, then Jemayel was assassinated, then the Sabra and Shatila massacres took place, then after 20 bloody and ignominious years the Israelis sullenly withdrew from Lebanon.

What conclusion is one to draw from all this? That Israeli policy has been a disaster for the entire region. The more powerful it becomes, the more ruin it sows in the countries around it, to say nothing of the catastrophes it has executed against the Palestinian people, and the more hated it becomes. It is power used for evil purposes, not self-defence at all. The Zionist dream of a Jewish state being a normal state like all others has come to the vision of the leader of Palestine's indigenous people hanging on to his life by a thread, while Israeli tanks and bulldozers continue to wreck everything around him. Is this the Zionist goal for which hundreds of thousands have died? Isn't it clear what logic of resentment and violence is at work in all this, and what power will come from the powerlessness that can now only witness but will certainly develop later? Sharon is proud to have defied the entire world, not because the world is anti-Semitic but because what he does in the name of the Jewish people is so outrageous. Isn't it time for those who feel that his appalling actions do not represent them to call a halt to his behaviour?

Courtesy: The Al-Ahram Weekly

crumbling building with Israeli destruction all round him, is characterised as the arch-terrorist of all time. Arafat has the courage and defiance to resist, and he has his people with him on that score. Every Palestinian feels the deliberate humiliation inflicted on him as a cruelty without political or military purpose except punishment, pure and simple. What right does Israel have to do this?

The symbolism is truly awful to register, and is made even more so by the knowledge that Sharon and his supporters, to say nothing of his criminal army, intend what the symbolism so starkly illustrates. Israeli Jews are the powerful ones. Palestinians their hunted and despised Others. Luckily for Sharon, he has Shimon Peres, perhaps the greatest coward and hypocrite in world politics today, going round everywhere saying that Israel understands the difficulties of the Palestinian people, and "we" are willing to make the closures slightly less onerous. After which not only does nothing improve, but the curfews, demolitions, and killings intensify. And of course, the Israeli position is to call for massive international humanitarian aid which, as Terje-Rod Larsen correctly says, is in effect to cajole international donors into actually underwriting the Israeli occupation.

Sharon must surely feel that he can do anything and not only get away with it completely but somehow even to manage a campaign whose purpose is to give Israel the role of victim. As popular protests grow worldwide, the organised Zionist counter-response has been to complain that anti-semitism is on the rise. Only a few days ago Harvard University President Lawrence Summers issued a statement to the effect that an anti-divestment campaign led by professors - an attempt to pressure the university into divesting itself of

Deathtrap current net

Md. SIRAJUL ISLAM MOLLA

THE tragic death of four hundred people in a launch capsized in Meghna was a talk-about for a week or so when it occurred in May this year. But everyone, by now, might have forgotten the heartbreaking scene of the deceased showed in the TV and newspapers. But what is the aftermath of the accident? Have the culprits responsible been brought under custody? Has there been a case, and the trial started? We do not know anything but the news of one of the launch owners being arrested. It was also learnt at the same time that the owners of the launch MV Salahuddin 2 and its captain were held responsible for the accident. However, the enquiry committee seemed to have overlooked the reason for which the death toll raised to a great extent, and the reason was definitely the so called Current Net under the water where the poor launch had capsized. The whole launch was surrounded by current net and many bodies were found trapped in it, although some had lifebuoy in their hands. We watched these tragic scenes in different channels of televisions and also saw the photographs in newspapers.

One would like to make the persons engaged in the business of current net equally responsible for the tragedy. In a wider sense, the persons who are engaged in manufacturing marketing and using current nets cannot escape dealing in the deathtrap. Only because of the current net, the catch of the most popular and national fish Hilsha has reduced to such a great extent that it is hardly possible for even a middle income person to buy a Hilsha at an awfully exorbitant cost. The Hilsha has now become a dish of the rich, whereas the common people of the country were very much dependent on Hilsha to fulfill their nutritional demand for the whole year. But those days are gone. Now the availability is quite insufficient in comparison with the rapidly increasing population. Let us have a look at the following chart to see the reduction in Hilsha catch from the major rivers of the country.

Year	Metric Ton
1989-90	77325
1990-91	44672
1991-92	47296
1992-93	53943
1994-95	66755
1995-96	61289
1996-97	59968
1997-98	59676
1998-99	53401
1999-2000	49786

(Source: Book of Bangladesh Statistics and Fisheries Department)

The statistics shows that the availability of Hilsha fish from major rivers has been declining tremendously. Although after about 50 per cent fall in 1990-1991, it increased in a gradual manner up to 1995-

capita consumption would have fallen far down as the amount of export increased.

But the Hilsha production could be raised manifold had the huge quantity of Hilsha fry not been caught every year. It was learnt from the Department of Fisheries that one lac twenty five metric tons of Jatka is caught every year. If we assume the weight of a piece of Jatka as 100 grams (which is much less most of the time) and had it not been caught until it gained one kg weight, the total weight of this catch would have gone up to 12.5 lac tons. To my mind, because of the Current Net, the country is losing such a huge amount both in terms of fish and money every year and the

fertilizer in croplands, siltation, and ecological degradation are also responsible for decrease in fish production.

The very net is so dangerous that it attracts whatever fishes are nearby and hold them until their death. By using this current net, the fishermen are sucking the fish resource of our country. Believe it or not half of the total 7000 kilometers river-way from Dhaka to Khulna through Banisal-Pataukhali is filled with current net, and this is the major reason for the scarcity of Hilsha and other river fishes as not a single fishy can escape from the trap of current net. We came to know that a huge quantity of this net is produced in Mukhtarpur and its

adjoining areas of Manikganj where about 7000 people are working, and the daily production is 15000 kg.

Although the government seems to be aware of the aggravating situation for which the Minister for Fisheries and Livestock has already declared to root out the current net from the country, we should not be sitting idle, but do our best to aware people and continue to influence the government to implement such declaration, as we experienced from the previous government that nothing could be done against the vested quarter to eliminate the current net.

The government as well as the authorities concerned should immediately implement the following suggestions:

(1) The current net from everywhere of the country should immediately be seized and destroyed.

(2) A taskforce should be formed immediately, including

About 60 per cent children of our country are suffering from malnutrition. It is obvious that if we do not care meeting the nutritional demands of our children, the nation will have a heavy burden of malnourished people in the future and the already fragile economy will be bent to be broken. Alternatively, if we can meet the nutritional demand, we will get back 17 times more from our investment... So, why should not we take care of the fish resources of our country from where most of the national nutritional demand can be fulfilled? Only through elimination of current net we can raise our fish production to the level near our national demand.

1996. But thereafter it has been declining in a continuous process through the recent years. I could not collect data for the current year, but it can easily be guessed that the availability has further declined to a great extent for which the price of Hilsha fish is beyond the affordability of common people. I wonder it has crossed 40000 tons this year. If it happened so, let us estimate the per capita Hilsha consumption. If we estimate the population in 1989-1990 as 12 crore while the Hilsha production in major rivers was 77325 tons, then the per capita consumption was 0.64 kg. And if we estimate the present population as 13 crore, and distribute the Hilsha production amongst them, the per capita consumption stands at 0.30 kg which is 106 per cent less than the consumption rate 12 years ago. Not only that, if the amount of Hilsha exported in the comparative years was subtracted from the total production, the per

people of the country are being deprived of adequate nutrition. I think same is the case for various other fishes from the inland surface water.

About 54 varieties of fishes out of 266 varieties (source: IUCN) have already been extinct from the country, and they can never be produced again until their seeds are available. It is too difficult to catch sufficient fish for a family even after a whole day's effort from any canals or rivers now whereas even a decade ago anybody in a village could catch sufficient fish from his nearby water body.

The total fish production of the country may rise because of fish cultivation in ponds and confined reservoirs. But the production of fish from rivers, canals, haor, baor, bill, etc. will not. And a major cause responsible for this decline is, I think, the Current Net. Obviously there are other reasons, of which, increase of population, abuse of

current net we can raise our fish production to the level near our national demand. We therefore urge the government to take all necessary steps to eliminate the current net from the country forever. If the government takes bold steps to do so, it will be another milestone for the present government like eliminating polythene bags and two-stroke three-wheelers and will be hailed by people from all walks of life.

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