

Bird flu threat

Maximum preparedness called for

THE latest reports indicate that bird flu, a potentially life-threatening affliction, may assume epidemic proportions in Southeast and South Asian regions. It can jump species. That's where the danger lies. At least 10 countries have been identified as highly vulnerable.

Experts have pointed out that the country is not prepared to face a quick spread of the disease. We can test whether a suspect is bird flu-positive or negative, but we have no way of detecting the virus. The international agencies working in this area, especially the World Health Organisation, have made it known that development of a vaccine to combat the disease may take a long time. So the task of coping with it has to be basically accomplished by the national governments at this stage.

Obviously, we have to take as many preventive measures as possible. First, attempts must be made to determine the extent and nature of the danger. The country does not import chicks, but that alone hardly guarantees our safety since the infected broilers may enter the country through different points. So strict surveillance is needed to keep things under control.

The health authorities have not yet been able to say anything to allay the growing fear over the likely outbreak of bird flu. They have to interact with the livestock authorities and owners of poultry farms to closely monitor the situation. Poultry deaths or any unusual turn of events must be reported quickly so that the coordinating bodies remain abreast of the latest situation.

The challenges that the health sector is facing from time to time are quite formidable. However, there is no doubt that better preparedness will take the sting out of the onslaught of any disease that might spread quickly and cause havoc if nothing is done to contain it. In this case, we are not getting much help from the international organisations, except the warning that Bangladesh is among the vulnerable countries. So we have to face the danger by coordinating the efforts of the agencies which can play a direct or indirect role in tackling the problem.

Businessmen living in fear

Give them adequate protection

EXTORTION-RELATED violence is frightfully on the rise at the old Dhaka business hub. Just within five days two traders have been brutally murdered, one of them dealing in agricultural machine parts and the other a paper dealer. It is illegal toll collection tyranny that snuffed them out and threatens to engulf the whole area.

The businessmen are in a dire strait. For fear of reprisals from the known criminals, they cannot name names and lodge cases with the police authorities. Already, the hooligans have held out threats with the result that the businessmen have felt insulated. What they find more scary is that the police and the professional extortionists are allegedly hand-in-gloves with each other. This is a serious matter that must be urgently gone into and remedial measures taken.

Illegal toll collection has been a routine affair in old Dhaka. But during festival times, the rogery exacerbates. It takes a terrible form centring around sacrificial animal markets. The greed for money equals the gluttony in prospect. Petty crimes like snatching and mugging are abandoned for the sake of hefty takings. The old Dhaka businessmen irate and panicky by the constant flow of extortionist demands for what might be termed as 'protection money' have expressed their disgust over the administration's handling of the situation.

The businessmen are plagued not merely by the risks to their lives but also by threats to their bread-earning avocations and trades. Unimpeded monetary transactions are the life-blood of an economy. Under no circumstances these should be allowed to be disrupted. We urge the authorities to step up vigil in old Dhaka and adequately beef up security there.

DR. M. ATAUR RAHMAN

POLITICAL life in contemporary Bangladesh suffers from a deep and inescapable element of tragedy. Political leaders act mostly for personal and party interests. The actions they undertake in the name of people or country often violate our most valued moral principles. No wonder, people are increasingly questioning the political leader's motivations and moral integrity. Men and women of high moral calibre find politics messy and compromising. They do not seek positions of political leadership, because they are unwilling to do the wrong thing in order to achieve the right thing. Hence, in practice, politics is left to morally questionable people, further degrading political participation, and leading to the kind of distrust and abstention we see in contemporary democratic societies, in general and Bangladesh in particular.

The dilemma of political leadership shows up clearly in party politics. For instance, what is the correct response to politically motivated killings? In many countries around the world including Bangladesh, party activists murder political opponents. This happens in dictatorships and in weakly consolidated democracies. Colombia, for instance, has held elections, but political violence is extreme. What should fellow party members of the victims of political violence do? Should they respond in kind? They often do, especially where they believe that the normal channels of law enforcement are unlikely to punish the killers. But such retaliation only invites more violence from the other side, leading to more retaliation, and so on. Party politics becomes open warfare between highly armed factions

rather than an essential element of deliberative democracy.

Parties that are frustrated with the institutions in their country may turn to street-level agitation and disruption. Is this ethically acceptable? Such actions can cost the nation considerable income, as businesses shut down and transportation halts. A party must weigh the cost to the nation against its own desire to advance its cause. Yet, when ruling parties close off channels of dissent by muzzling the press, disabling parliament, or rigging elections, opposition parties feel they have

in many diverse countries. In particular, they are typical of the challenges political leaders face in Bangladesh. Political violence has not risen to the level of civil war. Yet, frequent politically motivated killings continue to plague Bangladesh politics.

The harmful effects of corruption on Bangladesh politics, delivery of public services, and economic efficiency are regularly discussed in the daily newspapers, at academic conferences, in policy seminars, and in the streets. Rooting out corruption is ostensibly everyone's goal, but doing so has

opposition party carries almost no weight, and so the Parliament serves as little more than a rubber stamp for the decisions of the majority party leadership. The opposition does not add to Parliament's effectiveness by walking out and disrupting normal processes, and continuous boycott. The signs are very clear that the parliamentary government is not working in Bangladesh contributing to the practice of taking politics to the streets and resolving power struggle there. Lacking effective voice in Parliament, the opposition organises agitation

an extraordinary level of party discipline. In most legislative bodies, members can vote according to their conscience. In the U.S. Congress, no explicit sanctions exist for a member who votes against the party, even on most issues. In Great Britain's parliament, a party member can be ejected from the party, but he or she will not lose the seat in Parliament. For Bangladesh's MPs the problem of what to do when a vote would violate the member's most strongly held convictions is acute. Voting one's conscience means losing all future influence. Voting

steps would lead political parties away from hartals and strikes and toward normal channels of political competition? How can political leaders find room to act according to their vision of the public interest rather than simply follow rules of acquisition or consolidation of personal gains and political power? What measures might remove the perceived need for another 'Operation Clean Heart', and alleviate the human rights abuses such operations produce? Will the government and the opposition address these critical issues at this 'turning point' of Bangladesh's democratic politics rather than spending time and energy on less productive issue of enhancing representatives in the Parliament, and on negative politics of hartal?

We have examples before us of leaders who have transcended difficulties to transform society toward the good. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela show that even in societies suffering from racism, imperialism, and severe human rights abuses, it is possible for politics to be a noble and inspiring vocation. These leaders have shown us that statesmanship is about adjusting means to conditions so as to achieve a peaceful and humane society. Political leaders around the world, including those in Bangladesh, should follow the example set by such statesmen. This means engaging in the deep moral reflection required to ensure that one's actions do respond to the public interest and do aim at creating a peaceful and just society.

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Ethics of political leadership: What the leaders need to do

Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela show that even in societies suffering from racism, imperialism, and severe human rights abuses, it is possible for politics to be a noble and inspiring vocation. These leaders have shown us that statesmanship is about adjusting means to conditions so as to achieve a peaceful and humane society. Political leaders around the world, including those in Bangladesh, should follow the example set by such statesmen.

no choice.

Party discipline creates yet more ethical challenges. Presumably, a morally aware political leader will vote according to conscience, not expediency. Yet, in many systems, party discipline is the norm. Members of parliament are required to vote with the party, especially MPs in the majority party. What about cases when a bill goes against the member's deep convictions? Failing to go along could mean the loss of position, in which case the member will have no influence over future legislation.

On critical issues, pressure from higher-ups might be intense. At what point do the member's own convictions properly give way to the demands of the party? All of these problems are present

proven a daunting task. Bangladesh has not yet been able to establish an effective Anti-corruption Commission, despite the pressure coming from inside and outside actors. No wonder, political leaders are increasingly resorting to corruption. It is widely known, for instance, that obtaining a nomination to run for Parliament requires a certain cash contribution to the party. Individuals who make the contribution tend to look upon it as an investment. It is a widespread belief that winning a seat in Parliament or securing a ministerial position offers substantial monetary returns.

Bangladesh's parliament has become almost irrelevant as a forum for political discourse and decision-making. The high level of partisanship means that the

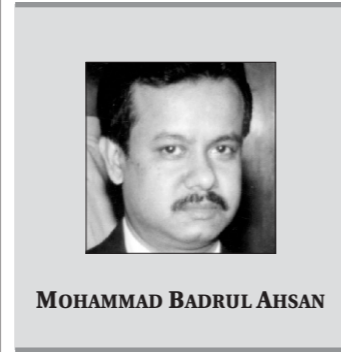
aimed at bringing down the government. Hartals and strikes disrupt normal commerce, and as the street agitation increases, the government responds by trying to break the strikes. Party activists and the police attack opposition processions and meetings. The opposition responds with more agitation and more mobilisation. Left unchecked, this can result in severe governing crisis and economic costs to the country in the coming days. The use of street action is deeply embedded in Bangladesh political culture, but the costs require both government and opposition to rethink the ethical implications.

Article 70 of Bangladesh's constitution requires that Members of Parliament vote with their party. If they fail to do so, they are ejected from Parliament. This is

with the party could compromise one's deepest beliefs. In practice, very few members vote against the party. This means that policy is almost entirely decided at the top levels, and most party members simply go along most of the time without questioning those decisions.

The maintenance of public order is a higher good, one that sometimes requires extreme measures under the worsening conditions in Bangladesh. On the other hand, there are genuine concerns of human rights and legal implications. How are these dilemmas to be alleviated? What can be done to deter the level of political violence in Bangladesh? How to reduce, if not eliminate, the amount of corruption plaguing the political and administrative system at various levels? What

Truth is caught in a vise



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

dream. We have emotion not vision. We have knowledge not wisdom. We have education not learning.

Talk to anybody, and he will remind you of Tennyson's famous quote in *Idylls of the King: The Passing of Arthur*. "And the days darken round me, and the years/ Among new men, strange faces, other minds." Faces recede as forces proceed, animals roar inside rational shells, while every man hunts every other man, and turns society into a respective

himself, because he will criticise others for his mistakes. He never does anything wrong, the other man never does anything right.

Everybody refuses to take blame and everybody refuses to take responsibility, and truth falls through the crack. The criminals blame the police, the police blame the lawyers, the lawyers blame the judges, the judges blame the politicians and the politicians blame each other. There are many more circuits of blame. Students

So everybody lives in himself and he dies in others. Truth is caught in that vise, because every man is as good as the other man is bad. Everybody wishes to be affirmed in his denial of others in a bizarre twist of what is comparable to the Archimidean Law. Ask anybody, he will tell you in so many ways that he would be as well off as the wellbeing of the person he liked to displace.

The society, therefore, is a contradiction, the collective pursuit of the individual. Every-

pretending to be good and being wicked all the time. There is terrible erosion of trust in this country. Everybody doubts everybody else, each thinks the other is not what he appears.

It's doubt not trust that holds this society. Nobody is interested in the next man because he is trustworthy, but because it is interesting to know what he is up to. That is how government runs in this country. You vote it into power not because you know it will be good, but because you

them. Hence, everybody behaves in the politically correct way; right and wrong being not so important. And, politically correct politics offends people, their power diminished by their own stratum. Everybody claims to be right and nobody claims to be wrong. People are indistinguishable from their politicians.

The outcome is not unexpected, everywhere truth is missing, somewhat fabricated. Truth is sheltered in falsehood, right is rolled into wrong, and moral is molded into immoral, while vices are vaulted in virtues. Everywhere you turn, you see many epiphanies of truth, but the real truth is absent.

Greek philosopher Parmenides claimed that reality was a single, unchanging thing and change was only an illusion. Talk to anybody you like, and you will find him deluded from illusion to illusion. Everything he speaks, thinks, sees, and believes, everything he contends, pretends and attends, everything he preaches, teaches, and breaches, he only touches truth through a membrane of illusion.

Truth is caught in a vise between reality and illusion, between people and politics, between right and wrong. Ask anybody, you will find that in his doubts, misgivings and apprehensions. Everybody is an illusion to everybody else, and the society is a Magic Lantern Show.

Sort that out, and you will have sorted out half of your confusions.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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bargain for collective ruin. Everybody pretends innocence and everybody portends guilt.

Heraclitus wrote in 500 B.C., "One cannot step twice into the same river", because it is endlessly flowing, changing, moving with fresh waters. People change here all the time and you will never catch them saying the same thing twice. They shift all the time like moving targets. They elude truth before truth eludes them.

Ask anyone, he will claim to be honest. It is always the other man who is dishonest. He spends more than he earns, he buys more than he sells and he owes more than he owns. He is a contradiction unto

blame teachers, patients blame doctors, subordinates blame supervisors, husbands blame wives, and the list goes on.

"Everything which may be said of me in my relations with the Other applies to him as well", said Marquis de Sade. In Being and Nothingness, he described all human relations as conflict relations in which one seeks to enslave or possess another's freedom. Ask anybody in this country, and he will tell you about his conflict. He wants to belong and possess at the same time, he wants recognition and revenge, and he needs others for his glory but wishes to erase them for his galore.

body is right in that pursuit and everybody is wrong, depending on whose perspective you take, depending on whose side of the story hits you first. It's somewhat the vindication of Thrasymachus's famous doctrine that "might makes right". Everybody believes in might, because that makes everything right.

Talk to anybody you like, and you will never know who is right and who is wrong in this country. Oscar Wilde defines hypocrisy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "I hope you haven't been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being good all the time." Talk to anybody and that double life is other way around, he

want to take a chance with it. You want to see how it does even though you know it will not do well.

That is also how you elect your member of parliament, your ward commissioner, your union council, your school committee, labour unions, everything and everybody needing your votes. You are not looking for the highest relief, but the lowest mischief and you have to play dice with your vote. Truth is caught in a vise, because none of the candidates must be trusted, and one of them must be voted.

Hence, people don't percolate politics, rather politics percolates

OPINION

Let pharmaceutical industry be a thrust sector

ERSHAD KHANDKER

MANAGING the economy is to keep the macro economic indicators stable. With tight fiscal discipline i.e. controlling inflation, a convertible currency, healthy foreign currency reserve, good regulatory structure, the finance ministry and central bank keeping discipline and intervening to stabilise and keep the prescription on track. With the macro indicators stable, it is expected that the private sector, blessed with good regulations and an environment of support for business and entrepreneurship, will generate foreign and local investment that would create enough jobs to keep the majority employed. The prescription is approved by the donor agencies.

The public and the private

sector in Bangladesh need economic leadership that is beyond the mere administration of the economy. This is in no way to suggest that what has been done or being done is just that alone. The practice of planning an economy is more than meeting the demands of the different budget heads or increasing revenue budget to expedite infrastructural development. The annual ritual of coming up with a budget for the sake of it is just economics in the Adam Smith definition, to just try and utilise scarce resources for maximum gain. Calculate required resources against expenditure, lobby donor agencies and listen to their suggestions and preferences, prepare necessary response, and calculate deficit or surplus. Revenue budget is a given framework, with thrust sectors identified keeping in

mind the general well being of the people, as well as the preferences of the incumbent government, mentioned in the election manifesto as promises to the electorate. We know of the supplementary budget, Annual Development Fund (ADB), ECNEC, planning commission and inter-ministerial cooperation, the various ways development projects are mapped and then given approval for going ahead. All this with the good intention to stimulate and initiate economic growth. This is the way the machinery works. But economics has developed way beyond the old school of thought, which basically concentrated on allocating scarce resources to attain the best possible result. We need a Keynesian approach, where we need to look at the administration of resources and various factors related to income and

employment so that economic stability is promoted.

Detecting the thrust sectors of Bangladesh, the latent strength of the potentially lucrative sectors i.e. pharmaceutical or tourism, and exploring them for maximum benefit is urgently necessary. The keynote theme lately, has been the ramifications of the post MFA period i.e. effects on Ready Made Garments sector, and the massive loss of foreign exchange as a result of loosing quota preferences. Enough has been said about the RMG sector and the backward and forward linkage situation and frankly, more needs to be said! However, not enough is being said or done to look for export oriented thrust sectors, the need to urgently develop them and channel investment in a large but planned scale. In this context, we see the frustration of the pharmaceutical

sector.

We know that the pharmaceutical companies have raised their hand and asked for government support to make their sector more competitive. This sector has the potential to become a major money earner. The country earned approximately 10 million dollars by exporting pharmaceutical products in 2002-3. We know that Bangladeshi companies just like their Indian counterparts can copy very expensive western drugs and sell them to foreign buyers. India has recognised this potential and has set up an active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) plant in Hyderabad. The Bangladesh Association of Pharmaceutical Industries (BAPI) has included setting up of API in their 20-point proposal to the government. API plant will bring together the requirements of the

pharmaceutical companies under one roof. The backward and forward linkage needs of this industry will be met. We could see a rise in the capacity of the pharmaceutical companies to make good quality products and find export orders by beating competition from other countries.

The pharmaceutical industry is a highly specialised one, dealing with life and death. Therefore, it is a difficult and complicated field where experts with calibre and ability work. We know that Bangladeshi specialists have been able to take control of the entire production process of complicated drugs. This is a very significant achievement. The momentum is there; we need to keep the forward motion by declaring the pharmaceutical industry a thrust sector. Many scientists have left the country.

We would be able to bring them back. Many doctors and other scientists with ideas and potential would get employment to serve the country and help increase scientific research as well as earn valuable foreign currency.

How far can the government intervene to mobilise resources for any particular sector? That is a question that should be deliberated upon by the government and then a policy choice can be made. Direct involvement with resource and manpower is not practical or necessary. Stimulants or incentives like tax breaks or exemptions, temporary in nature, can jump-start a sector by giving the private entrepreneurs the incentive they need. Sincere government support may be needed because in Bangladesh, law and order itself can become a serious stumbling block.

Please discuss the 20-point demand of the Bangladesh Association of Pharmaceutical Industries (BAPI). Allocation of land for the Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient (API) plant can be made. Installing various modern facilities, dedicated to the API zone, would also need government support. Entrepreneurs are well aware of the long arm of the government. Sincere policing by regulators would weed out any chance of large scale corruption in the API zone. Pharmaceutical industry wants a chance. They should be given that chance. So should any other sector that needs it. Ready Made Garments industry has shown that Bangladesh can earn massive foreign exchange by exporting product from one particular sector. We must duplicate this belief in other sectors also.