

Writing on the wall: What does it mean?

A M M SHAWKAT ALI

ON the face of it, the expression 'writing on the wall' means anything that is written on the wall. There is no dearth of such writings on the walls at least in Bangladesh or elsewhere in the countries of South Asia. In Bangladesh, most of such writings are from the so-called political activists or political underlings. The writings on the wall increase in intensity, if not in depth, prior to elections whether local or national. The intensity, albeit in varying degrees, can be seen when the nature of confrontational politics gains in momentum. Except perhaps in case of some political parties with leftist leanings, such writings on the wall relate mostly to individual political figures or figures in embryonic stage aspiring to join the main stage of politics, drawing on, in some cases, familial or dynastic connections.

Municipal laws probably prohibit such writings on the wall, as sometimes one can see signs that read writing on the wall is prohibited! This type of warning, as in case of other types of laws, is honoured more in breach than in observance. Political underlings or advertisers indulge in this type of activity in gay abandon, which in a civilised society offends what is known as civic sense. However, such writings are not uncommon in the so-called developed or industrialised countries. Someone who lived nearly two decades in a European country recalls that he once read writing on the wall, which said "Prime Ministero Bastardo!" But that would be in bad taste and this type of writing is not perhaps seen in Bangladesh.

Writing on the wall acquired, from the viewpoint of civic sense, a new meaning during the martial law regime. It is said that during the martial law regime of 1969, then Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) Yahya Khan, as was generally the convention, a meeting was convened for CMLA to address the Secretaries to the government (the lousy civilians as

is the jargons used by the Army to describe the officers in civil employ). The CMLA addressed the Secretaries to make home the point that martial law was imperative to save Pakistan's integrity as a nation and all that. The CMLA then posed a question: "What do you think will be the impact?"

It is said that at least one 'lousy civilian' spoke in a forthright manner. He was Qudrutullah Shahab. He replied by saying that "we have seen martial law in the past. The immediate impact is face lifting of walls by removing the writings on

house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace, next to the lampstand. The king was watching the hand as it wrote. Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. The king cried aloud to

writing on the wall in another form. The Prime Minister rejected the proposal to declare them non-Muslims as reported in some leading dailies. Immediately after this, it was declared that the persons interested in anti-Qadiani movement would go for further agitation on Friday, the 16th January 2004. As a prelude to this, as part of the preparations for the movement, a huge procession was brought out on January 15 at around 5 P.M in Dhanmondi. The procession almost covered the entire length of Old Road No. 27 of

religious intolerance. The latest one of such violent incidents was in the Holy shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet followed by the bomb blast in a bus load of persons who were coming to attend a religious function in Dhaka. It is too early to say whether all of such violent incidents are part of the same ideological movement. The signals, however, are loud and clear. Bangladesh may be forced to face such 'music' unless these efforts are nipped in the bud as they run counter

tional institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or to take part in or to attend any religious ceremony or worship, if that instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own.

In the present day context, we do not need any wiseman like Daniel to interpret the safeguard clauses of the constitution in respect of freedom of religion. The words are very clear and specific. However, periodic organised violence against some religious communities, attacks on their lives and properties not to speak of bomb blasts in innocent cultural functions and holy shrines tend to make a mockery of the words that adorn the chapter on fundamental rights. It is this aspect that needs objective and unbiased interpretation.

It is unfortunate that, as reported in the press (Janakantha, January 18, 2004), one of the senior Ministers has given his opinion that anyone who supports Qadianis is an infidel (Kafir). If this is true, it only points out to Daniel's interpretation of the word "Peres" which means "Your Kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians". This is so because the Prime Minister had already turned down the request of some quarters that Qadianis be declared non-Muslims.

to all the values, which led to the birth of Bangladesh.

Indeed, based on such values, the original constitution included 'secularism' as one of the fundamental principles of state policy. The word secularism was, however, deleted by Proclamation Order I of 1977. The said order also deleted article 12 which contained the words 'secularism and freedom of religion'. No research has as yet been carried out about the circumstances that led to this type of amendments.

In the chapter dealing with fundamental rights, the constitution prohibits discrimination on ground of religion (Articles 28 and 29). But these are more in the nature of public rights. However, freedom of religion forms part of the fundamental rights in article 41, which reads:

- Subject to law, public order and morality
- Every citizen has the right to profess, practise or propagate any religion.
- Every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions.

& No person attending any educa-

Our poisoned future

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN, back from Mumbai

AFTER two weeks in Mumbai, I developed a nasty set of ailments. A combination of itchy, hoarse throat, sinus pain and blocked nose knocked me flat. Meeting with a group of World Social Forum (WSF) delegates for dinner, I described my symptoms. "You've got dust sickness, that's what we all call it," explained Trishala, a delegate from America. Sure enough, a few of them had started developing bronchitis-like symptoms from Mumbai's foul air. The location of the WSF event, two hours from the centre of Mumbai, aggravated the situation. From dawn to dusk, we were enveloped in a haze of smoke, dust, diesel fume and germs as we shuttled from location to location via auto rickshaw, bus and train. The only person in our group who seemed immune was Zafar Sobhan, The Daily Star's correspondent from Bangladesh. Used to Dhaka air, Zafar seemed to have developed a high level of immunity -- his system was not

animals, the village's cats and dogs were early victims. Within the week, eight dogs and several cats had died and one pregnant dog miscarried her litter. Children were also brought in with intense respiratory problems.

Investigations revealed that the silica dust was used by HPCL to break down hydrocarbons. It is not soluble in water, so even rain cannot easily wash it away. There was an instrument malfunction during daily start-up and a huge amount of silica, or "catalyst powder," spewed into the open air. According to residents, this was the fourth time it had happened in one month. Angry villagers staged a 1,000 strong march to the refinery gates recently, but no representative came out to meet them. HPCL is a government-run enterprise, and one of the nation's largest corporations. In 2003, it earned Rs 1,537 crore in profit. But so far, they have shown little interest in financially compensating the affected villagers. Speaking to Newslite, HPCL's chairman Mahesh Lal said, "I don't think it (the white powder) is harmful at

SHOBAK.ORG

If we care about businesses being run on humane, people-centric, and environmentally sound principles -- we may sometimes find a foreign TNC to be more responsive to environmental complaints. Therefore, should we welcome foreign TNCs to South Asia in the hope that it will raise national environmental standards?

going into shock from the air pollution.

The horrendous levels of pollution in Mumbai are directly related to its intense and rapid industrialisation. In an earlier column, I asked whether Mumbai was an appropriate or welcoming location for the WSF. While the city may not be a good showcase for alternate models of development and trade, it is certainly a good place to highlight some of the side-effects of unregulated, excessively rapid industrialisation. One such case is that of Coca-Cola's depletion of natural ground water. But Coca-Cola is only one such case, and truthfully, has received more attention because it is an American corporation. While the "Campaign To Hold Coke Accountable" is focused on environmental destruction, many campaigners are also using it to play out larger debates over US business power and TNCs' rapid expansion into the developing world. But anyone who has studied the issues in depth knows that local Indian companies can be just as big environmental offenders.

One such local disaster involves Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd. (HPCL), which is located next to Gavanpada village in Chembur. In fact, like many remote villages in India, Gavanpada has been "blessed" with the nearby presence of four factories: HPCL, BPCL, IOCL and Tata Power. Smoke and gasoline fumes have permanently poisoned the air. On a recent night, a cricket game was suddenly interrupted by mysterious white powder showering down from the sky. The game was quickly abandoned and villagers fled to the safety of their house, but it was already too late. The next morning, the village was coated with a white dust, which was revealed to be silica dust accidentally discharged from the HPCL factory. Within 24 hours, residents were experiencing intense burning sensations in their eyes, scarring on their faces and respiratory problems. As with laboratory

all." This optimistic, non-scientific interpretation was contradicted by Gavanpada local leader Vinayak Mahatre: "Some-day, we will all die."

HPCL is similar to other industrial giants, government-owned and private, that are carrying out environmentally destructive policies without any checks and balances. In fact, government-owned companies are sometimes even less accountable than private firms. This brings up a dilemma for environmental activists. There is a lot of attention being paid, quite naturally, to the actions of Transnational Companies (TNCs). This attention is justified and hopefully the campaigns will bring positive reforms of the TNC business practices. Paradoxically, TNCs are sometimes more vulnerable to pressures from environmental activists -- because their headquarters are in America or Europe and negative media attention from far-away India could wreak havoc on the company's stock prices.

This brings up an interesting question for globalisation activists (I have deliberately avoided the misleading "anti" descriptor). If we care about businesses being run on humane, people-centric, and environmentally sound principles -- we may sometimes find a foreign TNC to be more responsive to environmental complaints. Therefore, should we welcome foreign TNCs to South Asia in the hope that it will raise national environmental standards? This argument is anathema to those who are pushing for local control over all industries. Then again, there are cases like Union Carbide's Bhopal disaster which contradicts this argument.

A thorny dilemma with no clear answer in sight -- but one which the WSF will have to grapple with if they want nuanced solutions that fit a complex real world.

Naeem Mohaiemen is New York Correspondent of The Daily Star.

Avian Influenza: The risk and the need for government policy

ABDUR RAHMAN

IN recent weeks we have all witnessed the destruction of millions of chickens in South-East Asia. This is an attempt to stamp out bird flu (avian influenza). As of 3 February, four people in Thailand and nine in Vietnam are confirmed as having died of bird flu, which is also spreading through Indonesia and China.

The governments of some of these countries have come under heavy criticism for failing to take the correct measures in time to prevent human deaths. Concerned citizens should ask themselves: what would happen if there was a bird flu outbreak here? What measures should the government take to detect it and stop its spread?

If there were an outbreak in Bangladesh, who would be at risk?

It is important to realise that the people at risk from avian influenza are those who have direct contact with chickens or ducks:

- & poultry farmers
- & people who work in markets where live poultry is sold
- & people who own domestic ("back-yard") poultry.

The virus is not transmitted by eating cooked chicken meat. As a health issue, this disease primarily concerns the safety of farm workers.

The primary host for the bird flu virus is chickens. The virus is excreted in chicken manure; humans are thought to be infected by inhaling dust from dried manure.

If the virus is not easily transmitted to people, why is it such a big problem?

During the 1997 bird flu outbreak in Hong Kong, 18 people were infected, out of whom six died (33% mortality). As a basis for comparison, we should note that SARS infected about 8,000 people last year out of whom 800 died (only 10% mortality). The fact that bird flu infections in humans causes a high mortality rate is mitigated only by the fact that it does not spread between humans very easily.

The real concern is that if outbreaks are not stamped out in time, the disease may gain the ability to spread quickly between humans.

to Bangladesh from thousands of miles away.

2. Commercial chicks are smuggled from India to Bangladesh whenever there is an oversupply in India. (It is not legal to import commercial chicks into Bangladesh). If these are from an infected farm in India, they will carry the infection.

3. Poultry breeding companies import parent stock chicks (birds whose offspring are broiler or layer chicks). If any of these come from an infected source, they will spread the infection to Bangladesh.

The government has currently

any outbreak as soon as it is detected.

3. To compensate farmers who will be made to incur huge losses in order to stamp out the outbreak.

How should outbreaks be detected and stamped out?

An outbreak can be detected by testing serum (from chicken blood) for avian influenza antibodies. (Antibodies are proteins produced by the immune system to fight against viruses; different antibodies are produced to fight different viruses). There is an ELISA test kit manufactured (by BioChek in

At present about 150 million commercial chicks are sold in Bangladesh every year. The government should put a tax of 1 Taka on each chick. This will raise 150 million Taka every year. This money should be put in an Avian Influenza Fund.

Human flu viruses spread very quickly between humans; they contain genes which allow them to do this. However, if a human happens to be infected with both human flu and bird flu, genes may be exchanged between the two viruses. Such exchange could create a new bird flu virus with the ability to spread rapidly between humans. That could be the start of a new flu pandemic like the 1918 pandemic which killed millions of people.

How could bird flu spread to Bangladesh?

There are three ways in which the virus spreads over long distances.

- 1. Migratory birds carry it and continuously excrete it over large distances. They can bring the virus

restricted the import of parent stock chicks from all countries which are suspected of harbouring avian influenza. However, it is not enough to restrict imports until the current outbreak in South East Asia is stamped out. Wild birds or smuggled chicks could bring the virus into Bangladesh at any time

What should be the objective of government policy?

The Government must accept that the bird flu virus may at any time spread to Bangladesh; restrictions on imports cannot guarantee safety. Once this has been accepted, the policy objectives are obvious:

- 1. To develop the capacity to identify an outbreak (in chickens) before the virus spreads to humans
- 2. To implement a policy which will make it possible to stamp out

Holland: www.biochek.com) for this purpose.

The government should take the following steps to ensure that outbreaks are quickly detected.

- 1. A central lab must be established solely for testing of avian influenza. This should be set up with foreign technical expertise as the quality of the testing must be reliable.
- 2. Whenever a government veterinarian sees high mortality in a poultry flock, he must collect blood samples, separate the serum and send them to the central lab (by courier in a cold pack).
- 3. If the samples are positive for avian influenza, the following emergency measures must be taken

& All the poultry farms within a 3km radius of the infected farms should

be destroyed (killed and buried on-farm).

& All farms within a 10km radius of the infected farm must be tested. If more positive farms are found, the process of destruction (within a 3km radius) and testing (within a 10km radius) must be repeated.

This strategy has successfully stamped out outbreaks of bird flu in Europe.

How can farmers be compensated for their losses?

Whenever a farmer's birds are destroyed to control bird flu, the

farmer must be compensated by the government. Otherwise farmers will not co-operate with this policy.

At the very least, the farmer should be compensated for:

- & the purchase price of the chicks
- & the cost of the feed and vaccines which they have consumed.

Stamping out any outbreak will cost crores of Taka. Suppose that bird flu is detected in a particular farm of 2,000 broilers. Within 3 km of the farm suppose there are 40 more farms, with 2,000 broilers each. So to stamp out the outbreak (assuming that only one farm tests positive) one would have to destroy 82,000 broilers. The cost of chicks, feed and vaccination will have been about 60 Taka per broiler. To compensate these 41 farmers, the government would have to pay them

about 49 lakh Taka. If more farms within a 10km radius test positive (in which case destruction will have to be done over a larger area) the cost will multiply accordingly.

How can the government pay the enormous compensation cost of controlling an outbreak?

At present about 150 million commercial chicks are sold in Bangladesh every year. The government should put a tax of 1 Taka on each chick. This will raise 150 million Taka every year. This money should be put in an Avian Influenza Fund which should not be used by the government for any purpose other than:

& running a central avian influenza testing lab

& compensating farmers whose flocks are destroyed in order to stamp out bird flu outbreaks.

Why not simply vaccinate all the chickens in Bangladesh to protect them from bird flu?

The problem with vaccination is that widespread vaccination would make it impossible to detect bird flu in chickens. All vaccinated birds will have avian influenza antibodies (just like infected birds). So if farmers start vaccinating their chickens, the ELISA test will no longer be able to detect bird flu outbreaks. In that case, the public will not even know that an outbreak is taking place until humans start dying of bird flu.

The policy implication is obvious: it should be illegal to vaccinate chickens against bird flu. The EU does in fact have a ban on vaccination of poultry against avian influenza; this policy has proven successful.

Abdur Rahman is a researcher and columnist.