

Tetanus vaccine plant

Its recommissioning brooks no delay

THE fate of the country's lone tetanus toxoid vaccine producing plant has become uncertain, according to a report published in this newspaper yesterday. Production at the plant was suspended in 1997. It is apparently yet to be salvaged from bureaucratic red-tapism, procedural complications and a rather inexplicable lack of understanding between the government and the WHO.

The WHO-supported plant which was set up in 1982 had withstood scrutiny by international experts twice in the past and was certified as having the international standards. Its importance to the National Immunisation Programme can hardly be exaggerated as around 16,000 newborns die of tetanus in the country each year. The plant used to produce 1,20,000 vials at a much cheaper cost (Tk 15 per vial) than what we are now paying for the imported vaccines.

A government official has been quoted in our report as saying, "international pressure and conspiracy are leading to the closure of the plant." While "conspiracy" is too subjective a surmise, it is our belief that the government and the WHO would be able to arrive at a mutually acceptable arrangement for restarting the plant. The WHO proposition that the government set up a national laboratory, which would act as the National Regulatory Authority, did not sound convincing to the decision-makers as the Drug Administration has been declared by the latter as NRA.

What's, however, obvious from the latest round of correspondence beginning in February is that the issue is very much alive. The government and the WHO should not find it difficult to work out a plan that would remove any misgiving that might be there and pave the way for the plant to resume production. We believe all-out efforts should be made to reactivate the plant which was performing a crucially important role in the health sector, particularly when the country has achieved great success in the EPI.

The plant was set up with a view to solving a major health problem and now it must not be allowed to go waste when the need for it has only increased. Could we urge the WHO and the government to expedite the process of re-starting the project?

Father kills newborn daughters

Tragedy of female infanticide

SOME stories are almost too heart-breaking to write about. It was only four days ago that Nazma Begum, a young pregnant woman of Ikry village in Pirojpur, was lying at home, happily anticipating childbirth. But the delivery of her two baby daughters late Wednesday night was not the joyous occasion that she had dreamed of, rather, their birth set in motion a human tragedy that Nazma can never fully recover from.

Shortly after the birth of the twin girls, Anwar left the house with the babies, ostensibly to take them to be blessed by a local imam. Waking up in the middle of the night, perhaps with a premonition of foreboding, Nazma started to cry for her daughters, setting in motion a search of the neighbourhood, which discovered them buried in the Anwar family graveyard. Anwar has not been heard from since.

There is no use asking what could possibly motivate someone to commit such a barbaric act on his own flesh and blood. The motive for the infanticide seems distressingly clear. Anwar had two daughters and had been hoping for a son. He did not feel equal to the task of raising four daughters.

There can be no words harsh enough to condemn a man who murders his own new-born children in cold blood. The callousness, cruelty, and inhumanity of the act are sickening and shocking. But the sin is not that of Anwar Hossain alone. We should take this opportunity to reflect on our own culpability as a society and examine our own cultural beliefs and values that might have, in even a small way, contributed to this appalling act.

The fact is that the status of women in Bangladesh remains unacceptably low. We have not done nearly enough to bring female education and opportunities up to the standard of men and women continue to remain oppressed, repressed and marginalised by society. In so many ways we reinforce the belief that women are of less value and importance than men. Parents routinely celebrate the birth of boys and are disappointed to have girls.

It is this attitude that must be changed if we are to avoid more tragedies like that of Nazma and her baby girls.

Constitutional amendment on local government

What is the rationale?

A M M SHAWKAT ALI

THE cabinet at a meeting recently approved, in principle, a bill seeking insertion of sub-article 59 (A) and 59 (B) into the Constitution after Article 59 (1). According to these sub-articles, no elected tiers, including city corporation, municipality and union parishad, will continue on expiry of its tenure and the authority of the body will be handed over to the district administration until another elected body takes over charge (The Independent, March 22, 2004).

The move is undemocratic

The proposed changes in local government evoked sharp reaction at a roundtable discussion meeting attended by the members of the National Union Parishad Forum (NUPF) and the Municipal Association of Bangladesh (MAB). Besides, a number of constitutional experts, others from abroad and NGO activists also participated in the discussion. They had asserted the move as undemocratic on more grounds than one.

First, non-consultation with the concerned stakeholders and political parties in and outside the parliament. Second, constitutional amendment was a matter of public interest that demanded debates, discussions and consensus. Third, not publishing or publicising any working paper or brief on the proposed amendments.

The most interesting part of the debate was the point made by the representatives of different local bodies. They had affirmed that they did not intend to continue in their offices for a single day after the expiry of their term and the govern-

ment could undertake any legislative measures to ensure it.

What does the law say

Aside from the local councils in the hill districts, there are two specific laws that govern the point at issue. One relates to the Union Parishad (UP) and the other to the Zila

Parishad (ZP). The local councils in the hill districts are governed by a separate law.

The governing law, other than those UPs of hill districts, is the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance, 1983 as amended. Until 1987, the tenure of office of elected chairman and members of a UP was five years. By an amendment made in 1987, it was reduced to three years. A further amendment made in December 1991, the tenure was fixed at five years. In 1990, an amendment was made that enabled a UP to continue to function until the first meeting of UP constituted to succeed it or until the expiry of ninety days from the date of expiration of its term, whichever was earlier. A further amendment made during the same year enabled the government to appoint an administrator until the first meeting of the succeeding UP. This was probably the reason why the proposed move had been termed

the tenure of ZP is five years. The law does not contemplate a public servant taken over the functions until a succeeding ZP is in place.

The provision in this regard is similar to the law applicable to a UP (Section 5). An elected ZP can continue to function until the succeeding ZP holds its first meeting.

The concept of supercession

Both of the above laws, however, contemplate appointment of a person or authority by the government in the event of supercession of a local body. A local body can be superseded on specific grounds mentioned in the relevant law. However, before superseding a local body, the government is required to provide an opportunity of showing cause why such action should not be taken. It is only in such cases that enables the government to appoint any person or authority to take over the functions of a local body. The law relating to the municipalities and the city corporations also does not contemplate appointment of any outsider to take over the functions until the succeeding body takes over.

The rationale of government initiative

The rationale of government initiative remains unclear. This is because, as the debate has pointed out, there has not been any prior discussion with other political parties in and outside the Parliament.

Upazila and Zila Parishad would be reconstituted to make them the centres of all development activities. The priority in this regard has been given to the constitution of Gram Sarker which has become a controversial issue.

The policy planners within the ruling party appear to have forgotten that

sions that have already been taken". In Britain, more openness in the process of governmental decision-making is achieved by preparing 'Green Paper' and 'White Paper'. The traditional 'White Paper' is a statement by the government of the policy it intends to follow. A 'Green Paper' is a discussion document in which the government outlines a problem, makes proposals for dealing with it, and invites public comments on the proposals (Stacey, 1975).

The democratic tradition in Bangladesh is just the opposite. White Papers are produced on alleged corruption cases about ministers of an outgoing government. The substance of democracy is vastly different from that in Britain whose democratic form we have adopted and vowed to practise. The processing of constitutional amendment relating to local government should be seen in this light.

During the nineties and onward, a large number of civil society organisations (CSOs) have sprung up in Bangladesh. These organizations are providing alternate policy options covering various aspects of governance. The classical typology of the State encapsulated into three organs responsible for governance is now out of tune with reality. There is now a fourth organ consisting of the CSOs and also the news media. The voices of dissent articulated by these institutions need to be heard for the sake of ushering in a process of consensual tradition of decision-making. The public face of government needs to recognise this rather than either ignoring or silencing such voices of dissent.

A M M Shawkat Ali is a former Agriculture Secretary

The classical typology of the State encapsulated into three organs responsible for governance is now out of tune with reality. There is now a fourth organ consisting of the CSOs and also the news media. The voices of dissent articulated by these institutions need to be heard for the sake of ushering in a process of consensual tradition of decision-making.

Kosovo calls for a permanent solution

AMM SHAHABUDDIN

WHENEVER might have put the match-stick first on the hay-stack, the hard truth is that it had again re-kindled the brewing fire with all its destructive potentialities. This is now the case with the latest ethnic outbursts in Kosovo, a province of Serbia (former Yugoslavia), now being administered by the UN with the protective assistance of NATO led by America. After a lull for several years, the dormant volcano had suddenly started spewing ethnic lava, causing anxiety in all concerned circles. So Kosovo is now in deep uncertainty of peace and stability with clashes between the majority Kosovo Muslims (formerly known as Albanian Muslims who had migrated to Kosovo centuries back) and the minority Serbians living there. There are reports of killing each other, burning of mosques in Serbian capital Belgrade and in another city Nis by the Serbian demonstrators and burning of churches, UN vehicles and killing of UN policemen in Kosovo, putting thousands of Kosovo Serbians on the streets as refugees.

Hence the outward calm is not only misleading, but also dangerous in the long run. Those who pretend not to see any danger under the umbrella of UN and NATO are often dangerous for showing a wrong face. Hence it is better to take the cue from the people than outsiders. The Serbian demonstrators in Belgrade had already raised the slogan: "We will go to Kosovo", "Serbia rise again". Therefore, the political climate in Kosovo is not just foggy. There is gathering clouds of distrust between the two communities.

They are beating about the bush, perhaps thinking that time would

ultimately heal the wound. But, in some cases unfortunately, time is not always the proverbial greatest healer. Rather prolongation or procrastination may sometimes worsen the situation. As they say, 'fish always stinks from head downwards'. So it is better to catch it by the 'head' before the 'stink' spreads all over the body, perhaps, making it another pain in the neck of Europe after Bosnia. However, peace had

ultimately healed the wound. But, in some cases unfortunately, time is not always the proverbial greatest healer. Rather prolongation or procrastination may sometimes worsen the situation. As they say, 'fish always stinks from head downwards'. So it is better to catch it by the 'head' before the 'stink' spreads all over the body, perhaps, making it another pain in the neck of Europe after Bosnia. However, peace had

ultimately granted to the people of the territory, freeing it from the rule of Indonesia.

Kosovo Liberation Army on the rise

Kosovo Muslims, being in majority with 90 per cent of a total population of about two million, have every right to decide whether to stay under Serbian rule or have an independent status. It is a clear case where

The big question is: how long Kosovo should be left in such uncertainties, under a make-shift arrangement by the UN? The only way out, therefore, seems to be holding old a referendum in Kosovo, under UN supervision, if the world leaders want to avoid a big catastrophe.

that the Kosovo problem has not yet been solved. It is just lying there dormant, crying for a permanent solution. It has been pushed under the carpet. But it shouldn't be taken so lightly. A desperate disease needs a desperate remedy. It would, therefore, be sheer foolishness to leave a burning question like Kosovo unresolved *ad infinitum*. The UN Security Council members, particularly the permanent members, cannot leave Kosovo under the UN protection as a protege and wash off their hands. That would rather prolong the disease with fatal consequences. And the UN administration of Kosovo, with NATO assistance, during the last five years or so has at last shown weakness of the policy, exposing UN's inability to go to the roots of the problem and deal with it under UN principles applicable in such situations. Such dilly-dallying is bound to have backlash, and that is what the recent Kosovo commotion has proved. The writings on the wall are clear for those who want to read it.

They are beating about the bush, perhaps thinking that time would

return to Bosnia after the Dayton agreement signed in 1995 by the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims are known as such), the Serbs and the Croats. Under the 1995 agreement, Bosnia divided into two main parts, each having its own capital and administration, but bound by a weak central government, the two federating parts being 'Croat-Bosniak Federation' and 'Serb Republic'. Whether this 'formula' of power-sharing between the Muslims, Serbs and the Croats would ultimately succeed in maintaining the balance, or it would prove another Western device to keep the Kosovo Muslims under threatening posture of the Serbs and Croats, only time will show.

Kosovo and Bosnia: Parallel case

Kosovo has a parallel case with Bosnia so far as the central problem is concerned. The question in the case of Bosnia was whether Bosnia would remain a single country or unit, with proportionate representation in an elected Parliament with (Muslims being in majority). After

destination.

Another Muslim state in Europe?

The question now haunting the UN and NATO, perhaps is whether Kosovo should be given a sovereign status leaving the Muslims in majority, freeing it from the rule of Serbia for good, thereby creating another Muslim state in Europe. But on the part of the UN the disgusting lack of decisiveness on a particular issue, mainly manipulated by one or more veto-fielding powers, creates more problems than solve. The question of Cyprus, a bone of contention between Turkey and Greece, is lying unresolved for three decades, with UN sitting there helpless. But where the big powers are interested they would use the UN as an umbrella to solve any problem as with a magic-wand. Take the case of East Timor. It did not become a big problem for UN to adopt a resolution favouring a referendum to decide its future. The referendum was held under the supervision of the UN in which the majority of the population opted for independence which was

UN should hold a referendum to ascertain which way the people of Kosovo want to go. But instead of doing that the problem has been kept hanging, under a ridiculous UN Administration. The Kosovo turmoil is not a new phenomenon. It has been there for the last one decade or so, during which Kosovo Muslims have been fighting for independence from Serbia under the leadership of KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army).

However, it must be admitted that no country would be freely willing to allow secession of a part of its territory occupied or otherwise unless forced to do so by the people who want freedom. There could be no better example of such struggle for independence between an well-armed ambitious colonial power, on one hand, and an almost ill-armed or bared-handed freedom fighters, on the other, than our own struggle for independence which ultimately resulted in the emergency of Bangladesh as a sovereign state in the comity of nations.

As the struggle by KLA against Serbian forces to win freedom had

gained momentum during the passage of time, the former consolidated its strength and position in Bosnia as a fighting forces. Being scared by the growing strength of the Kosovar fighters, Melosic, then President of Yugoslavia, let loose hell on them in 1999. However, at that critical moment of 'ethnic-cleansing' NATO came forward with its air forces to teach Melosic a lesson. But the NATO air-strikes on Belgrade and Pristina, capital of Bosnia, for several weeks back-fired, resulting in the mounting of the miseries of the fleeing Muslim refugees. It could happen because of NATO's unplanned or half-planned air strikes without deployment of matching ground forces.

Referendum: Only Way Out

During such an uncertain period, came on offer from the US sources of a temporary truce, with a proposal of giving 'autonomy' to Kosovo, but was rejected by KLA leadership as they wanted freedom from Serbia. And the rejection of the offer again opened the floodgates of violence. So the Kosovo Muslims are living under the shadow of death and destruction, although the province is now being administered by the UN. But the new slogans, recently raised by the Serbian demonstrators in Belgrade rings the alarm bell again. Do the coming events always cast their shadows before? Or, they sometimes come stealthily? The big question is: how long Kosovo should be left in such uncertainties, under a make-shift arrangement by the UN? The only way out, therefore, seems to be holding old a referendum in Kosovo, under UN supervision, if the world leaders want to avoid a big catastrophe.

AMM Shahabuddin is a retired UN official

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Our future

It is with great sorrow that I write this letter for all of you to see. I have been following this section for a few years now and have been hoping against hope that the socio-political scene in Bangladesh will change with time. I am fairly confident now to state that this will never happen as long as the politicians do not change themselves.

I think the nation is sick and tired of the AL's claim that the nation wants "hartial". The BNP said the same when the AL was in power. The two parties are two sides of the same coin. I see no end to this "hartial" culture that is crippling our nation.

I hope a new leader will emerge from the ashes of petty politicking, take charge of our nation and lead us to a peaceful and prosperous future.

Tahsin A
Boston, MA

Politicising the police

The country is facing an extreme

deterioration of law and order. Every day the newspapers are full of news of extortions, killings, smuggling and violence. Crime rate is increasing day by day. The people are living in a state of insecurity and fear. We have witnessed that police often act in favour of the criminals for monetary benefits. Innocent people are either threatened or implicated in criminal cases instead of the real criminals, as there is a nexus between the police and the criminals.

Corruption is widespread in the police department. In the most recent case, smugglers were unloading the largest ever arms cache on the Karnaphuli coast in Chittagong with the direct help from local police! However, our government is always blaming the opposition for every kind of crime. The people gave their verdict in favour of the ruling alliance for eradication of crime and corruption and to let them live in peace. So, I think it is the prime responsibility of the government to arrest the criminals and bring them to justice, irrespective of

party affiliations, for the greater benefit of the nation without blaming the opposition. Police always investigate police crimes; as a result the truth remains in darkness. An independent ombudsman is a must. Where are we heading for? More than thirty years have passed since we became independent; however, we are still fighting for our minimum basic needs.

I urge the government to stop politicisation of the police department and take stern punitive actions against police officials who are involved in criminal activities. Please let people live in peace.

MS Uddin
Kyoto, Japan

When would they wake up?

There are 55 Muslim countries all over the world. Some of the Muslim countries are contiguous having common borders, some are separated from each other but located closely and others are situated far away from each other.

We have observed and found that most of the Muslim countries are living in isolation and separation from each other having no link or contact with one another, no help and cooperation, give and take and no or paltry trade and commerce with each other. They have only accorded diplomatic recognition and posted highly paid ambassadors to each other's country.

The Muslim countries mainly maintain their relations and connection among themselves with news and reports of western and American press, BBC and CNN telecasts. The USA and western countries divide and rule the Muslim countries and the sufferings of the Muslims know no bounds. They depend on foreign aid and assistance, IMF and World Bank directions for all sorts of financial, economic, industrial, development and political activities. The Muslim countries purchase billions and billions dollars of arms and ammunition from the USA and western countries in the name of safeguarding their countries from foreign aggression.