

## Malnourished children

### Long-term impact must be considered

UNICEF and the WFP deserve our thanks for highlighting a matter that has a grave long-term impact on national human resource development.

The concerns of UNICEF as well as the WFP, articulated in their statement regarding the prospect of more than a million children facing undernourishment as a consequence of recent floods, should be a cause of concern for all.

As it is, more than fifty per cent of our population is undernourished. In this category is a high percentage of children under five.

Where malnutrition is an endemic phenomenon, the spectre of another million indigent children going without proper sustenance has serious long-term consequences for our country. It calls for urgently gearing up government programmes to ensure that the ominous prospect does not eventuate.

What is often lost sight of is the vulnerable period of its early years that a child is exposed to, to the adverse effect of malnourishment. The most vulnerable time of its life, when the child must have the required input of nourishment without which its mental faculty is likely to be stunted, is upto the age of two. If it can be provided for adequately till then, the child can grow up into a mentally sound individual subsequently.

It is an irony that while all focus is placed on restoring the physical damage of floods, and most funding is towards making up the infrastructural losses, the human aspect of the impact is all too often overlooked. The most vulnerable section, that is the newly born and its mother and the under-two years, are left in the lurch, unaccounted for in the plan of rehabilitation.

A stunted child grows into a mentally unsound boy or a girl and eventually a mentally frail person. One wonders whether we have ever done the mathematics of lost productivity and the opportunity cost of malnourishment which accretes overtime on lost national productivity.

While there is more than one contributive factor of malnutrition in Bangladesh the immediate need for balanced diet to the vulnerable groups over a sustained period of time would require the government's intervention alongside other international agencies', on top priority basis.

## Case of English-medium schools

*Registration should not lead to overregulation*

LET us not make any sweeping generalisation about private English-medium schools. Stereotyping them as nothing more than business concerns devoid of commitment to imparting quality education would be a highly myopic characterisation of the schools, almost a travesty of truth. Yes, it is an apple-and-orange, or chalk-and-cheese assortment, but that cannot detract from the signal contribution they are making to English-medium education in the country thereby opening windows of opportunity for our boys and girls on higher pursuits abroad and being a part and parcel of the globalisation process as such.

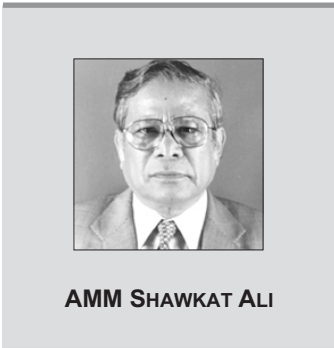
In essence, the institution has grown in response to a need, an active market demand, to be precise. Parents always crave for the best education of their wards, a type that will give them access to fruitful higher learning at home and abroad and make them competent world citizens. By and large, they have served a good purpose. Indeed, the fact that a large number of students get very high grades in the internationally instituted O and A Levels examinations and do well further up the ladder has earned accolade and prestige for the country. All this is testimony to the high water-mark in excellence reached by a competitive bunch of schools.

Obviously, there are questions about a variety of schools that have neither the essential infrastructure comprising library, laboratory, playground, lighting, ventilation and toilet facilities nor qualified teaching staff and curricula conforming to the world standard. Such school owners are not so much in the business of imparting education as they are in making money. These virtually signboard outfits cry out for standardisation which is better achieved by having management committees insisting on adherence to prescribed rules.

Now, we come to the high tuition fees charged by some schools which have lately exercised the public mind a good deal. The monthly fees; the annual components, some of which are linked to purchase of books, uniform and stationery; the charges for facilities make for a huge total, not affordable for most parents. We share the concerns of a section of the parents and consider the issue of fees to be something that must be looked into.

Yes, registration of the proliferating English-medium schools is an imperative necessity, and there is need for some regulation to ensure uniformity of standards. But the exercise undertaken by the education ministry should not degenerate into stifling the productivity, creativity and vision of the schools. Their contributions to the process of modern learning will have to be acknowledged for what these are worth.

# Custodial death, ministerial warning and police reforms



AMM SHAWKAT ALI

DURING the past few years, the deaths in police or other forms of custody have attracted the attention of the press, human rights groups, and international agencies. The most recent one, involving the death of Suman, a key witness in the Ahsanullah murder case, has also led to reactions in the press. In the past, some Bangladesh-based rights group published statistical data relating to custodial deaths of various forms. Odhikar, a rights group, has provided information that 56 were killed by law-enforcement and 61 more died in police and jail custody during the first nine months of the last year. During "Operation Clean Heart" in October 2002 as many as 40 people were reportedly killed "in police custody."

Suman's death in custody evoked criticism in the press in various forms. Deaths in police or in other forms of custody are looked upon as blatant violations of human rights. Pointing an accusing finger at the newly constituted Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an editorial made some important comments. This was followed by another news of custodial death titled "Man arrested by RAB dies in Kushtia."

The major parts of the editorial comments include (a) Suman was handed over to Tongi Thana police after he fell grievously sick, (b) he was taken to the Thana Health Complex where he succumbed to

his injuries, (c) RAB denied their involvement in torture, and (d) there is no shred of doubt that Suman died in custody. A columnist also referred to the need for police reforms on which successive governments have dragged their feet.

**Reactions from State Minister for Home Affairs**

The reactions from the State Minister for Home Affairs have also been published in the press. The state minister at a law and order review

treatment is made, the IO shall then and there examine the prisoner's body and with his consent see the marks of injury and shall record the results of the examination. If the IO has reasons to believe the allegation of ill-treatment, he is required, under the PRB, to forward the prisoner with his complaint, the record of corporal examination and any other available evidence, to the nearest Magistrate having jurisdiction to try the case.

PRB also lays down that before

cause of death in addition to any police investigation. In conducting the inquiry, the magistrate shall have all the powers for an inquiry into offence.

**Constitutional safeguards**

One of the fundamental rights guaranteed by our Constitution is (a) every person who is arrested and detained in custody shall be produced before the nearest magistrate within a period of twenty-four hours

the orders of the High Court. The orders read as follows:

"The attention of all Magistrates is invited to the provision of section 167 of the Code of Criminal Procedure and to the importance of exercising a sound judicial discretion in the matter of granting or refusing remands thereunder. Orders under this section, it is to be observed, should be made in the presence of the prisoner and after hearing any objection he may have to make to the proposed order.

High Commissioner also made statements indicating his government's interest in police reforms. The question is how more reforms would protect the citizens from custodial deaths when the existing constitutional, legal, and regulatory safeguards appear to have failed to provide the protection. Is it then a question of further reforms or enforcement of the protection granted by existing laws and rules?

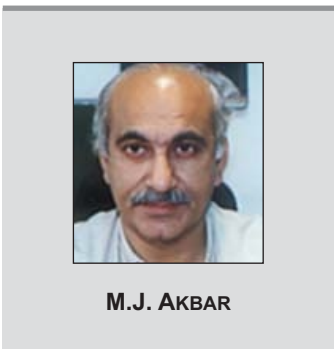
It is felt, however, that there may still be some areas where interventions in the form of reforms are necessary. One such area, as identified in a discussion session in an electronic media on July 23 relates to capacity building of the police in conducting investigation based on scientific methods. This, in the view of two former Inspectors General of Police, will minimise custodial deaths. It does not necessarily mean that existing legal protection to which an accused person is entitled should be overlooked or totally sacrificed.

### The locus of responsibility

As already stated there are set rules and procedures in CrPC and in PRB to deal with custodial deaths. The locus of responsibility for enforcement evidently lies with the government in the ministry of Home Affairs. The reported death in custody in Kushtia came immediately after the state minister had expressed the embarrassment of government. Since then the media have continued to report incidents of custodial deaths, in particular those in RAB custody. Whether aberrant behaviour of the police or of RAB will continue to embarrass the government or whether the government will act to chasten such behaviour in accordance with law remains the key question.

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## A chess game



M.J. AKBAR

AFTER deep rumination I have reached the considered conclusion that, starting with the Assembly elections in Maharashtra, I shall make predictions only after the results have been declared. That is clearly the only way to ensure that we, whether low caste pundits like journalists, or high caste oracles like opinion pollsters, get the whole thing skewed.

My friend Mike Khanna, now chairman emeritus of Hindustan Thompson, reacted to this proposition with the alacrity of an adman. He coined a term: postdiction. Having slept over the name I really do think he ought to suggest something better for such a clever idea. Postdiction sounds too much like the state of a successful graduate from Alcoholics Anonymous.

Even a sophisticated, much-researched, heavily-pollled prediction is becoming about as scientific as launching an Inter Continental Ballistic Missile. All you have to do is get the trajectory wrong by 1 per cent and a missile headed from Washington to Moscow could end up destroying innocent little Burma. Most of the predictions in the general elections went wrong by about 30 or 40 seats out of over 550, but that was sufficient to overturn the message. Power and wilderness, government and impotence are now determined by the fate of a single

digit percentage of seats. This is why elections are no longer a race between sprinters. They have a chess game where the alliance of a pawn or the misplacement of a castle can gift victory to the other side.

The results of the Maharashtra elections on October 13 are being widely advertised as both portentous and momentous. That is as it may be. For the moment, the voter in Maharashtra is swinging on a turbulent seasaw. Whenever he

the upswing. He is not, let us admit, a Gandhian. He can be as cynical as anyone else. He is not above swishing a magic wand over the voters' heads although he knows that the treasury is empty and the Reserve Bank of India will not print notes to bail him out. The pre-poll decision to give farmers free electricity is an instance of electoral cynicism. Maharashtra does not have the money to pay for this electricity, not now and not in the foreseeable future. And so the government has

the underprivileged, born at least partly out of his personal struggles in life, create high levels of sympathy and trust.

The worst disease among the powerful is to believe that power is a natural right. So many governments cannot see seepage under them because their eyes are focused on power for the next ten or twenty years. Shinde is one politician who has lost power often enough to know that it is at best transitory. When you are mentally prepared to

region. The traditional demographic dynamic has been further complicated by regional demands, ambitions, and anger. In such a calculus, every marginal player can change equations.

One reason for Congress' success in the Mumbai region in the Lok Sabha polls was the en bloc support of immigrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. But this is also why political leaders from the two Gangetic states, like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati, are

system, the President of India, swore in his ministers. But the government began to walk only recently, with the first press conference of the Prime Minister. Before that there was a sense of much ado about nothing; or, worse, malfunctioning remote control. A nation wants its chief executive to be both a chief and an executive. The press conference reassured the country that authority was in the hands of someone who was willing to exercise it. The Prime Minister will now find an audience when he goes to campaign in Maharashtra.

In western democracy, as defined by the revolutionaries of France, there should be separation of powers between the church and the state. In the UP government we are witnessing a separation of powers between government and politics, with Dr Manmohan Singh in charge of the first and Mrs Sonia Gandhi in control of the second, but with the final decision in critical matters in the hands of the party rather than government. The paradox is that if the government does well, then the party will be seriously tempted to cash in on the goodwill through another election. And if the government only muddles along, then common sense will ensure that the government remains in power for its full term. Better the bird in hand than a flock in the bush.

But Maharashtra alone will not determine the future. Equally crucial will be the results of Bihar, where two allies in the government are on divergent paths and the Congress sits in ambush. If you want my guess, the decisions of 2004 are over. Nothing much should change. But the decisions of 2005 are being thought through already. If 2004 was a year of upheaval then 2005 could be a year of turbulence.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

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sees the government and thinks of the last five years (drought mismanagement, profligate waste, hollow promises, moon-surface roads and no answers) he runs to the Opposition. Then, whenever he sees the Opposition and thinks of the next five years (weekly pay-offs to buy peace with bullies, partisan rhetoric, flirtation with fire instead of governance) he rushes back towards the ruling alliance. So the results may depend on whose face the voter has seen last. If it is that of the government, the Opposition could win. If it is that of the Opposition, the government could sail back for another five years in Mantralaya.

Some of the recovery of Congress-NCP confidence owes therefore to the behaviour of the Shiv Sena-BJP campaign. But the ruling alliance is perhaps unwilling to appreciate how much the persona of the present chief minister Sushil Kumar Shinde has contributed to

lose power it tends to stay with you. When you grasp it too hard, it slips away from your clutches. The unassuming Shinde has done more for his side than those who consider themselves indispensable. He may add thereby only one or two per cent to the vote, but in an election such as this that vote can be crucial.

Of course the opera ain't over till the Election Commission sings. This year's general elections were not a single election but the sum total of about thirty parallel elections, each spinning on its own set of springs (hence the analogy to chess rather than a sprint). An Assembly election in a state as large as Maharashtra (it takes a day's train journey to travel from east to west) is also not a single election. There will be perhaps four or five simultaneous elections taking place on October 13 in Vidarbha, Marathwada, Konkan, western Maharashtra and the Mumbai

putting up their own candidates. While the former can slice off a part of the Muslim vote, the latter threatens a chunk of the Dalit vote. The Shiv Sena has to worry about serious dissidence. Even the dominant voice of Bal Thackeray cannot prevent a squabble for succession between his son Uddhav and his nephew Raj. Age is a merciless fact.

Since in this theatre even an extra can interfere with the drama, the politics of Delhi will also leave its mark. The bounce has shifted from the BJP to the Congress, as is evident from both the body language and the rhetoric. Sonia Gandhi's appeal to voters has gone up. But surely the mystery question is how much positive impact Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will have on voters. His personal integrity and decency was never in question. But how much does that translate into political weight?

The Singh government was born when the institutional midwife of our

## OPINION

## 'In the name of Allah'?

BRIG GEN JAHANGIR KABIR, ndc, psc

WHEN a heinous criminal was caught following the brazen slaughter of hundreds of innocent children at a school in Beslan, he said he did it "in the name of Allah." Killing children in the name of Allah? Which Allah is he talking about? In which holy book has He demanded the blood of innocent children? I have read the Koran many times in its original language and later the translation of the Holy Book in English and Bengali.

Nowhere in the Book has Allah demanded the blood of innocent children. In quest of truth, I have gone through many holy books; including the Bible of Christians and the holy book of Jews, that Islam accepts as the revealed Books of Allah. I found many things – stories and dictates of Allah, the source of the entire universe, common and binding on humanity, not on Mus-

lims alone -- but not blood of children for Allah. There is however a story of a child common in all the three Revealed Books. Here is the story.

When Allah demanded the sacrifice of the dearest possession of Abraham (Hazrat Ibrahim RA) he interpreted it to be his son Ishmael. As Ishmael wasn't born through his wife Sara, Jews interpret this to mean Isaac as the dearest and the demand of Allah to be for a son later born through Abraham's wife Sara. It does not matter whether it was Ishmael or Isaac.

After some hesitation, when Abraham was about to sacrifice his dearest possession, Allah did not stand it, instead he sent a sheep or camel for sacrifice. We Muslims still celebrate that occasion befittingly on 10th of Jilhaj all over the world on the culmination Hajj.

As the Koranic story goes when Bibi Hajra the mother was running around for water to save her son

Ishmael, Allah could not bear it anymore, thus creating the flowing spring of Zam-Zam in the scorching desert, which we Muslims still revere as the holiest water near K a b a - - t h e

p u r - pose of versatile creation. If Allah could not stand the slaughter of Ishmael or thirst of the child in the desert how is He asking blood of such innocent children in Beslan

**Time is running out for the religious forces and parties in the Islamic countries to declare their position unambiguously. Either they are with the terrorists or against them. As terrorism is hurting Muslims most, silence can no longer continue. On the contrary, silence will go down as tacit approval of innocent killings. It is time to choose sides before the option is finally closed. Let me conclude in the spirit of Koran -- "Allah will not help those who do not help themselves." History is full of such stories.**

House of Allah. If one still does not have faith in Allah's love of children, he has either a doubtful faith or no faith at all.

Whatever may be the cause, a true believer can't kill children -- be that in Beslan or anywhere in the world. Those who kill children in the name of Allah are, in fact, enemies of Allah, for they deny Him the grand

those who have witnessed the gruesome murder on TV?

Arguments will be made that many Muslim children have been killed in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan. But one crime does not justify another in revenge. Islam has not made the son responsible for his father's crime even if he is a beneficiary. How can anyone justify taking

aggravated Beslan father got hold of your child to do the unthinkable, just because his dearest child perished in that slaughterhouse, what would be your reaction? Surely that man and you would not like to share this Earth anymore. It is time to salvage Islam from the madness of the misguided few. Islam has not sanctioned innocent killing as means of

protecting or spreading faith or redressing grievances. It is the simple provision of self defense which has been misused and abused in all ages for personal gain or gratification.

9/11 has hurt Muslims more than anybody else. Afghanistan and Iraq have plummeted as sovereign states. Palestine is further down. Theory of preemptive strike is increasingly gaining ground at the cost of Muslims and their shanty states. The Russian Bear is already ominously growling for revenge. And when she goes for revenge, there will hardly be any outcry in the backdrop of Beslan massacre, as there was virtually none for Afghanistan following 9/11. I think Beslan should work as a final wake-up call for Muslims -- salvage and resurgence is still possible.

OIC, the so called voice of the Ummah, must immediately and unequivocally condemn the slaughter of children in Beslan and

all terrorist activities; and should go for a summit meeting to declare its distance from such nefarious activities. It should also play a proactive role of moderation in Palestine, Chechnya, and other places of discord. The failure of OIC to respond in the crisis is making it redundant and increasingly pushing hapless Muslims to desperation.

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