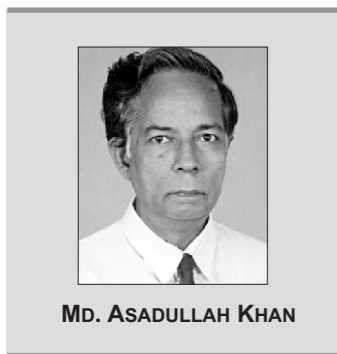


AIDS crisis looming: A disaster waiting to happen?



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE 13th International AIDS Conference held in Durban, South Africa focused on the suffering and devastation the disease is exacting in Africa. The UN predicts that half of Africa's teens will die of the disease. Fortunately, till now AIDS may not have ravaged Asia on a comparable scale, but it is spreading at an alarming rate. Statistics reveal that so far the global AIDS epidemic is thought to have killed 22 million people. That is almost twice as many as died in the First World War. It has infected another 34 million. When they die, as most will in the next few years, AIDS will have killed as many as the Second World War. UNAIDS reckons that 5 million people are being infected every year with the human immune deficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS. If these people were dying from bullets or bombs, the news would never be out of the headlines.

According to UN estimates, 25 million of the 34 million infected people in the world live in Africa. In absolute terms South Africa has the most cases; 4 million or about 20 percent of its adult population is now HIV positive. Thirteen million Afri-

cans have already died of AIDS and 10 million more are expected to die within five years. In Botswana, the rate of infection is 1 in 3, in Zimbabwe, it is 1 in 4. According to the US Census Bureau, AIDS related deaths will slow population growth in some of these nations to zero, and the population in Botswana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa will actually start to decline. Life expectancy by the end of the decade would normally have been 70 in this part of Africa; as a result of AIDS it will plummet to 30.

The Census Bureau's Karen Stanek said at the 13th International AIDS Conference: "It is hard to comprehend the mortality we will see in these countries." People talk rhetorically of waging war on diseases. But in the case of AIDS, the rhetoric could hardly match with the measures taken, and the effects of AIDS-illness on human populations are similar to those of war. Most infectious diseases tend to kill infants and the old, but AIDS, like war, kills those in the prime of life. Indeed, in one way it is worse than war. When armies fight, it is predominantly young men who are killed. AIDS kills young women, too.

The destruction of young adults means that AIDS is creating orphans on an unprecedented scale. There are 11.2 million of them, of whom 10.7 million live in Africa. On top of that, vast numbers are infected as they are born. True, children are rarely infected in the womb, but they may acquire the virus from their mother's bodily fluids when they are born or from breast milk. It is now known that more than 5 million children have been infected in this way and almost 4 million of them are already dead.

Leaving aside Africa, Asians now risk an unprecedented pandemic. In India, already some 3.7 million people are living with HIV, and the disease has a significant grip on the urban population in the south and the west. But in the northeast, infection takes a specific pattern, spreading from drug users to their wives and wider community. "It is not just a medical problem but a social and developmental problem," says P. L. Joshi of the National AIDS Control organization. Large migrant

act early, or you will be sorry. The lesson: it is, even so, never too late to act.

Senegal began its anti-AIDS programme in 1986, before the virus had got a proper grip. It has managed to keep its infection rate below 2 percent. Uganda began its programme in the early 1990s, when 14 percent of the adult population was already infected. Now the figure is down to 8 percent and gradually falling. Thailand's rare success story in its fight against

country considered AIDS a scourge of the libertine west that posed no threat to a conservative society like ours based on monogamous marriages. But Bangladesh also has hundreds of thousands of sailors, construction labourers, and other professional groups who work abroad for a time, and a continual tide of students and businessmen returning from overseas. Villages in Bangladesh, to say nothing of the cities and towns, are not, in fact, the bastions of sexual probity they are

parents. In some African countries, more than 20 per cent of the 15-49 years old population is infected with HIV: 20 per cent in South Africa, a mind-numbing 36 per cent in Botswana. As one estimate by UNAIDS says: within 10 years there will be 40 million AIDS orphans in Africa.

Public health officials in India warn of a six-fold increase in infections in the next three years -- about 20 million adults. In other words it means that India is teetering on the brink of becoming another sub-

continent where the virus has either spread or is likely to spread from the returnees carrying this insidious infection because they were not tested on their arrival. Most people in the country and the government prefer to ignore it. So when the first AIDS case surfaced in the country in 1989 -- the carrier being a returnee from abroad -- the officials in government circles argued that AIDS was a western disease that would not affect our uniquely moral society. Out of 219 people diagnosed to be carriers of HIV virus till 2002 at BSMMUH at Dhaka, 111 were returnees from abroad, 26 of them later developed full blown AIDS, and 20 of them died.

It was a big mistake, and complacency of this sort will make us pay a heavy toll in the future. Insidiously the disease has spread and continues to spread into high risk populations -- floating sex workers, IV drug users, patients with sexually transmitted diseases, and through blood supply and shared needles to the countryside even. Protection and extreme precaution are badly needed at every stage. Say, for example, in southern Tamil Nadu province, tests revealed in 1992 that only one quarter of the blood supplies were tested for the virus and that 15 per cent of the cases reported were caused by contaminated blood. Since then, with financial and equipment help from abroad, NACO (National AIDS Control Organization) has started providing kits to donate blood. The popular practice of professional blood selling was banned and hundreds of unregulated privately run blood banks were shut down.

In our countryside, where more than half of the people live, many still have not heard of AIDS. Part of the reason is Bangladesh's culture of denial. Many people still downplay the existence or significance of AIDS.

Even today, some officials argue that measles, TB, diarrhea, or hunger are more pressing problems to be tackled. Understandably, the growing number of HIV cases in India and Myanmar, our closest neighbours, calls for stepping up efforts to halt the spread of the disease in our country through cross-border transmissions. The most worrying aspect is the trafficking of teenage girls to India, who, after being coerced into sex trade in the cities of India, eventually come back to Bangladesh carrying with them HIV infection, and spread the disease without their knowledge.

Perhaps the most disturbing fact is growing evidence either in India or in Bangladesh of what HIV experts call "transmission chains" in which the virus percolates insidiously through social substrata and afflicts low risk individuals like housewives and children, mostly belonging to middle class poor families. A report carried by The Daily Star on March 20 that 38 construction workers in Khulna have been found to be carriers of HIV is most alarming. Most worrisome, as the report indicates that women workers in the adjoining fish processing factories are also suspected of being infected by HIV. This should serve as a wake up call for the government that is still apathetic about this dreaded disease. What is needed other than viral testing of the vulnerable group is a campaign that reaches every corner of Bangladesh.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

AIDS is now the fourth leading cause of death globally and the leading cause of death in Africa. In most of the countries of the world, the AIDS virus has spread beyond the most vulnerable groups and into the society's mainstream. It robs economies of their workers, families of their support, and children of their parents.

populations, grinding poverty, low literacy rates, and repressive attitudes toward women hamper the fight to curb the spread of HIV. The most poignant revelation has come from Dr. Rohto Sob, a consultant for the WHO in Delhi, who disclosed that a majority of infected Indians are between the ages of 17 and 25. "This is your working population," he says. "In the long run, industrial population will be hit as it has been in Africa."

AIDS experts urge officials in developing countries where till now the infection rate is low to take cue from some African countries like Uganda and Senegal and a single Asian country, Thailand. Their strategies seem to have worked. Their contrasting experiences serve both as a warning and lesson to other countries in the world, particularly those in Asia that now have low infection rates, and may be feeling complacent about them. The warn-

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The burden of my memories

ASMA KIBRIA

I am sitting here today trying to write a few lines in memory of my husband. I am not a poet or a writer -- I do not know if I have the right words to express what is in my heart. Since I am by profession an artist -- a painter -- I am used to expressing myself on a canvas, using a brush and paints to give form to my thoughts and feelings. But today I put aside my brush to take up a pen; if I make mistakes, please forgive me. I would like to tell you all about some of my memories of living with my husband for 50 years.

Soon after our marriage, I discovered that my husband was an extremely knowledgeable and talented man. I was astonished by the breadth and depth of his knowledge. He was always reading, constantly exploring the world of philosophy, economics, history, and Bangla and English literature. He was a lifelong student, always interested in enhancing his knowledge of the world. He used to encourage me to read along with him so that I too would gain entry into the world of ideas which he held so dear. Whenever he read a good book he would say to me enthusiastically: "Why don't you read this book so that we can discuss it?" He was always very generous, anxious to share all that was available to him.

Our diplomatic life together was a very hectic one. Despite our busy schedule, my husband would make

time on the weekends to teach Bangla to my son and daughter. Every year we would obtain textbooks from Bangladesh for our children to use during these study sessions. He would tell our children: "Even if one is highly educated abroad, it is still shameful to not know one's mother tongue." And so it is that even though my children received their education abroad, they do know how to speak, read, and write Bangla. This is one of the many gifts that he gave as a father to my children.

As a diplomat he had many achievements. I saw how hard he worked in 1974, when he was Bangladesh High Commissioner to Australia, to arrange wheat shipments that would help address food shortages in Bangladesh. All his life I saw him think only about the welfare of this country. When he was Bangladesh High Commissioner to the UN in Geneva, Switzerland, he worked to obtain many advantages for Bangladesh.

By losing him I have lost everything. It was he who encouraged me to become an artist. It was my husband who helped me to enroll in art schools in Washington and New York, enabling me to obtain the training to become a painter. Just a couple of days before he was killed he had called an art gallery in Dhaka and said: "This is Asma Kibria's husband speaking. I'd like to reserve your gallery for an exhibition of her paintings." Just from this small statement one can see the generosity of his spirit. He never

beprudged my achievements and successes. Today he is no longer with me, the life partner who gave me encouragement and confidence. I don't know whether I will be able to lift up a brush to paint again.

The question I keep asking myself today is, how is it that such a man, so honest and principled, a man who was a true patriot, could be so brutally murdered? How long will the people of this country sit in silence, tolerating the senseless violence that now surrounds us?

I am quite sure that the people of

remaining abroad. But for my husband this was never a serious option. He wanted to serve Bangladesh. So we came back to the country in April 1992. Soon after returning, he began to write articles for Bangla and English newspapers on a variety of topics, ranging from international politics to social issues in Bangladesh. He quickly developed a reputation as a powerful and insightful newspaper columnist. After that he gradually began moving into the political arena. I used to object and say: "Why go into poli-

not rise for the 5 years of his tenure is evidence of his commitment. Many know of his successful policies to deal with the floods of 1998. I remember him telling me of how international groups were predicting that 20 million Bangalis would die from starvation. He said: "As finance minister, I want to make sure that not a single person dies from lack from food." He kept his word. For seven months he ensured that food and provisions were provided (free of cost) to 42 lakh families to ensure their survival. At that time, when I

district. Of his own initiative, he obtained relief supplies and went by boat in Lakhai area to deliver the supplies. He was a man who was guided by a deep sense of duty and responsibility. He was prepared to fulfill these responsibilities even at great personal risk.

My husband's only crime was his idealism, honesty and complete dedication to Bangladesh. I ask everyone, how is that such a great statesman and patriot of internationally recognized stature, a man of 73 years, could be killed in such a

BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami government is now playing games, making it quite clear that they have no real intent to capture the killers. From the very beginning they have shown no desire to allow the FBI to come and investigate the murder of my husband. They refuse to accept the terms of agreement by which the FBI would like to come and investigate the matter. Do they really want the FBI to come?

Is it really possible that the investigation team, which is composed of employees of the government, would be able to conduct a full and independent investigation? Will they be able to catch not just the loyal servants who carried out the orders but also the powerful persons who gave the orders? I am confident that the investigation team contains competent professionals. Unfortunately, there is no reason to think that they will be able to fulfill their professional responsibilities in a complete manner. It makes no sense for us, the family, to accept the government investigation and we will not do so.

It is not just the matter of the grenade attack which concerns us. Why is it that after the attack, he received no medical treatment? Why was he sent in a broken ambulance, without saline or blood? Why was a helicopter not sent? In a statement that is beyond belief, the Speaker of the House has said that he learned of the attack the day after it occurred.

I ask my fellow countrymen to

think about these questions. We must identify those who deliberately worked to ensure that my husband did not receive medical treatment. It hurts me that the man who, as a former high-ranking UN official was entitled to free medical treatment anywhere in the world, died without medical care.

Finally, I would like to say that what my family and I will never regain what we have lost. No one will be able to repair the damage that has happened. We, the family, demand a full and impartial investigation into my husband's killing and a trial of all those who were involved in it.

You, the people of Bangladesh, can make sure that our demands are met. I ask you, as citizens of this great country, to rise up and protest the government's refusal to accede to our demands. I want your support. I ask you all to participate in the peaceful programmes that I have called for in order to build a mass movement of protest.

Please do not forget that it is ultimately we, the people, who are the strongest force in this country. Please make sure that the blood of my husband and that of all the other victims of grenade and bomb attacks in Bangladesh has not been spilled in vain. I know that the blood of the victims and the tears of their families will not dry until there is justice.

Asma Kibria is a painter and the widow of assassinated ex-Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria.

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this country appreciate my husband's fervent devotion to Bangladesh and the welfare of its people. In 1971 when the War of Liberation began, we were in Washington. My husband was posted to the Pakistan embassy at the time. He did not hesitate to leave the comfort and security of that post to join in the liberation struggle, despite the great uncertainty of that struggle and its outcome at the time. When he left the embassy, I took a job at an art supply store in order to financially support the family.

For most of my husband's working life, we lived overseas and after his retirement, we had the option of

tics? There are other ways to serve the country." His reply was that "Politics is a good way to be close to the people." I would also often tell him, "Politics in our country is not for you, there is too much viciousness and conflict."

Then in 1996 the Awami League won the elections and came into power. My husband had played a key role in organizing the Awami League's election bid in 1996. He took up the post of Finance Minister in the newly formed government. When he was Finance Minister I saw him work day and night to successfully fulfill his duties. He was constantly thinking about how to improve the lives of ordinary people in Bangladesh. He was always concerned that the price of basic goods should remain stable so as to minimize the economic hardships of ordinary people. The fact that the price of basic goods did

went to the market myself, I would see that the price of basic foods had not gone up. I would breath a sigh of relief, knowing that my husband's goal of minimizing the suffering of ordinary people was being realized.

In 2001 my husband decided to participate in the national elections. I was not so keen for him to do so, but in the face of his enthusiasm I relented. He wanted to serve the people as their representative. After being elected, he undertook regular visits to his district, usually twice a month. Even with the spiraling law and order crisis of the country, as grenade and bomb explosions proliferated, he continued to visit his district. In fact, he often deliberately went to the most remote areas, anxious to meet and hear from all of his constituents. When there was a flood last year in 2004, he quickly went to see the people of the flood-stricken areas of his

brutal and senseless manner? Do my fellow citizens know the answer to this question? He wrote against the rise of corruption, violence and militant religious extremism in the country -- was this his crime?

Perhaps he was killed because he was a beloved leader in Habiganj, widely respected for his honesty, compassion, and gentle manner. It is said that it was because of his popularity that the Awami League captured all 4 seats in Habiganj in the last election. Is this why he was killed -- to vacate a seat?

In the name of "investigation" the

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