

Bridge the communication gap

The prospect for dialogue welcome

THE talk of an Indo-Bangladesh foreign secretary level meet which is likely to be held in New Delhi in June, marks a significant development in an otherwise rather murky current ambience of Dhaka-Delhi relationship. The postponement of Saarc summit twice and the spate in border skirmishes have brought the bilateral relations to what has been termed by the parliamentary standing committee on the foreign ministry here as the "lowest ever point". The committee has suggested that initiative be taken by the government to come out of the bad patch, an idea we wholeheartedly endorse.

Veteran Communist leader and former chief minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, has significantly advised the government of India to follow the same path of dialogue with Bangladesh that it did with Pakistan to defuse tensions with that country. Although the situation between the two pairs of countries is not exactly similar; yet Jyoti Basu's emphasis on dialogue with Bangladesh is significant on two counts: first there has been a surge in bilateral consultations lately in the region; and second, Indo-Bangladesh contacts have been fewer by comparison. Only a comprehensive dialogue can remove the misgivings and misunderstanding that have crept into the relations between the two countries. The foreign secretary level meeting was supposed to be held once a year, but it is regrettable that no such meeting was held in the last two years.

Border tension and other problems with India have cropped up at a time when the winds of change are blowing across the subcontinent. We hope the meeting of the foreign secretaries will take stock of the latest situation, find out the reasons behind border tension, and put forward suggestions for quick resolution of the problems. The postponement of the Saarc summit had put the bilateral relations under strain, too. However, the prospective FS level meeting is good augury and an indication of thaw in the relations that ought to be taken forward through an engaging dialogue between the two next-door neighbour countries.

An inspiring day

The labour deserves better

THE supreme sacrifice made by the workers of Chicago in 1886 in the shape of martyrdom courted for the sake of establishing fixed labour hours for the industrial wage earners remains a historic reference-point in terms of recognising workers' rights in general. The labour's linchpin role in the creation of wealth was first recognised that many years ago -- 119 years to be precise -- and yet many of their rights remain unfulfilled to this day.

The challenges of high-tech automation and globalisation in trade and commerce have put the labour-intensive developing countries on more of an unequal footing with the developed world than before. The growing trend in privatisation has created job insecurity for the traditional labour force whose co-option into modern enterprises is critically dependent on retraining. The need for social safety-net is well-recognised for the retrenched labour, but where is the wherewithal with the poorer developing countries to foot the bill?

Privatisation has set its own standards for management efficiency and demand for output from the workers. These are not bad in itself but the compensation package must be commensurate with the demands being made on workers and the wealth being created by their sweat of their brow. At the same time, the labour unrest must be curbed of their own volition as work ethics take a firm hold on the minds of workers.

This year's May Day is set against the horrendous backdrop of the house-of-cards collapse of the nine-storied garments factory laden with heavy machinery at Savar that, while killing the workers in droves, highlighted the fatal construction culture thoroughly blindfolded to lives of poor workers. The most profitable garment sector had earned a blemish of having multi-storied factories with narrow, mostly single-passage exit as a deadly trap in case of emergencies. The issue of compensation has also been brought to sharp relief by the tragedy.

The rights of workers in the agriculture sphere and those in the broader unorganised sector including the rights of domestic aides, and the whole range of daily wage earners still remain unrecognised. The exploitation of the women and child labour has often been debated; but we have a long way to go before eradicating child labour and providing the female workers with salaries equal to those of men.

Culture divide and value politics

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

JONATHAN Rauch of the Brookings Institution is not unduly worried that America seems deeply divided over moral and political values. Party polarization, Rauch surmises, may have been caused by mainstream political parties having been taken over by polarized political activists but party polarization helps domesticate fanatics on the left and the right. Though more than one third of the Americans live in the so-called "lopsided counties" (defined as those counties which vote for one party or the other by lopsided margin) such voting pattern reflects the historical range for Presidential elections since 1840. After all, argues Rauch, America is no stranger to cultural fission if one considers Jeffersonian versus Hamiltonians, Jacobins vs. the Establishment, the Civil War, the Civil Rights, and the Vietnam upheavals.

During last year's Presidential elections many analysts found the loyalty of American voters almost perfectly divided between the Democrats and the Republicans; red America and blue America: "red America is godly, moralistic, patriotic, predominantly white, masculine, less educated, heavily rural and suburban; blue America is secular, relativistic, internationalist, multi-cultural, feminine, college educated, heavily urban and cosmopolitan". People like Virginia University Professor James Hunter and political scientist John White see culture divide among Americans, one culture being "orthodox" and the other being "progressive". But in sociologist Alan Wolfe's eye Americans are moderate, reluctant to pass judgment, and "tolerant to a fault". Equally others find both conservative and progressive Americans sharing shocking level of agreement on many issues. Both red and blue state residents agree that religion is an important part of their life and favor stricter gun control placing them as centrists instead of being poles apart.

Many agree that the problem lies not with the voters but with the political parties and politicians. Yesterdays' political parties which used to be loose coalition of interests and regions have now become ideological clubs. If Northeastern Republicans of the past were more liberal than Southern

Democrats, today most Republicans are conservatives and Democrats are liberals. The ideological divide is sharper among politicians than among voters.

If this is the condition of the political system of the Zeus of the democratic world, why then are we so depressed about the "confrontational" politics in Bangladesh? Many would argue that in the US, indeed in the developed world, one does not see the kind of political terrorism perpetrated unabated by the party in power victimizing the opposition parties of the moment, contagion of corruption pushing the body politic of the country to terminal condition, distorting the market mechanism through political intervention inevitably leading to inefficiency in the economy, using money and muscle power affecting the

prescient understanding of the fact that the excesses of police apparatus had "fanned the potential opposition to the regime into something far greater and more dangerous than it could have been before those excesses began". Since the US could not expect in the foreseeable future to enjoy political intimacy with the Soviet regime, George Keenan argued, it must continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival in the political arena and adopt "a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point". One could reasonably translate the cold war prescription from international to domestic politics in order to fight a democratically elected government which turns itself into a despotic one in order to remain perpetually in power. As German philosopher and social theorist Jurgen Habermas

armed training camps. He observes that while the number of primary schools since liberation has doubled that of Dakkhil madrasas has increased eight fold. In this context the remarks of CINPAC Admiral William Fallon during his recent visit to Bangladesh gain relevance. Referring to radicals who look for areas of unrest and areas of weakness Admiral Fallon reportedly expressed concern "that there may be some movements that might try to take advantage of Bangladesh".

Our authorities by and large have been dismissive of Indian allegations leveled against Bangladesh. But Euro-American warnings relating to increased religious extremism in Bangladesh can only be disregarded at our own peril. A recent manifestation of religious intolerance has been the persecution of the Ahmadiyya sect by

defined territory. Thomas Hobbes thought that sovereign statehood was a necessary political arrangement for ensuring social peace. If a government can not ensure peace and deliver political goods to which it is committed then, Hobbes argues, there is no point in having a state. But since states do not dissolve by themselves many despotic rulers continued to exercise control over captive population often supported and assisted by the erstwhile super powers due to the logic dictated by the cold war. Consequently at various stages of the cold war, as theorized by George Keenan, the US sometimes by assisting despots presiding over failed states countered Soviet moves taking a long term, patient but firm and vigilant policy to contain Russia's expansive tendencies. The end of the cold war occa-

Doctrine of International Community containing explicit recognition that states now a days are mutually dependent and that national interest of states is "to a significant extent governed by international collaboration". Connectivity associated with globalization's progressive advance or denial of such connectivity has assumed great importance for Western assessment about a country's fulfillment of its international obligations to remain a member of the society of states. It has been argued that since civility can not be apportioned according to race, religion or color the comparatively less developed economies can not be allowed to remain disconnected from the international community on the pretext of their poverty or on grounds of so-called Asian values which is mistakenly defined as putting greater emphasis on collective welfare at the cost of individual liberty. On the contrary promotion of individual liberty ultimately contributes to peace and development by eliminating intra and intergroup friction.

For countries like Bangladesh transiting through perilous phase of political development, growth of her democratic personality stunted on several occasions by extra-constitutional forces, the authorities would be well advised to avoid Machiavelli's advice that it is better to be feared than loved. Authoritarian obstinacy, portrayed by courtiers as akin to leaders' refusal to compromise on matters of principles, to address reasonable concerns of the oppositional and neutral forces' demand for fine tuning the administrative and electoral process may result in massive politico-economic regression. It is not important who scores points over whom.

It is far more important if the changes sought would guarantee emergence of a system for true reflection of people's will. One hopes good sense will prevail upon our leaders to provide the people with an opportunity to acquire a better quality of life than the one they are living at present.

The author is a former Secretary and ambassador.

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entire political process, human security becoming not only elusive but mythical. But then one should not disregard the historical changes brought about through peoples' power in the Philippines, velvet revolution in the former Czechoslovakia, changes forced by the people on corrupt and despotic rulers in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Ecuador and the current popular discontent over the election in Togo allegedly manipulated by the state machinery.

One could take the essence of George Keenan's 1947 article on "The sources of Soviet conduct" as a prescription for containing and then destroying "democratic despotism" (albeit oxymoronic in phraseology) through implacable opposition to its continuance. Keenan spoke of Stalin's retention of the "organs of suppression" on the ground of capitalist encirclement resulting in "all internal opposition forces in Russia consistently (being) portrayed as agents of foreign forces of reaction antagonistic to Soviet power". The brilliance of George Keenan lay in his

observes the state's raison d'être does not lie primarily in the protection of equal individual rights but in the guarantee of an inclusive process of opinion-and-will formation in which free and equal citizens reach an understanding on which goals and norms lie in the equal interest of all. He, therefore, puts emphasis on freedom of assembly and freedom of choice. If the political community is fragmented into opposed religious, ethnic, racial, and ideological groups, more familiarly known as "identity politics", then democratic structure is threatened.

While ethnic and racial tension in Bangladesh is minimal, religious and ideological divides remain. One is, therefore, alarmed at the revelation by an eminent Bangladeshi economist that corporations run by religious fundamentalists make an annual net profit of twelve billion taka of which ten percent is used by fundamentalists for organizational purposes like carrying out regular party activities, providing remuneration and allowances to about half a million party cadres and running

religious bigots. Analyzing the state of sectarianism in Pakistan Brussels based International Crisis Group has remarked that sectarian conflict in Pakistan is the direct consequence of state policies of Islamisation and marginalisation of secular democratic forces. Cooption and patronage of religious parties by successive military governments have brought Pakistan to a point where religious extremism threatens to erode the foundation of the state and society. The choice that Pakistan faces, the crisis group warns, is not between the military and the mullahs, as is generally believed in the West, it is between genuine democracy and a military-mullah alliance that is responsible for producing and sustaining religious extremism. Bangladesh historically endowed with secular and liberal traits should take lessons from history and contemporaneous experiences of others.

Questions may be asked as to why the international community should be interested as to how different state institutions function in a juridically

sioned by the collapse of the Soviet empire has brought about a fundamental change in the western attitude towards the rest of the world.

The West is no longer willing to overlook "democracy deficit" for its strategic interests. Source of threat to global stability has moved from nuclear war to regional rogue states to transnational or non-state actors. Effectively American definition of the threat has de-escalated from "evil empire" to "axis of evil" to "evil actors". The international community, therefore, demands that democracy should be not only an international norm but a domestic norm as well. If a state were to disenfranchise entire or part of its population then democratic states may justify foreign intervention to enfranchise the people of the non-democratic states; they may intervene to install a democratic government through internationally supervised elections.

Such interventions are justifiable, says Tony Blair, referring to NATO's actions in Kosovo advocating his

Secularism and democracy: A religious response

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

INDIA is a secular democracy constitutionally, though there are several problems in practice. On the whole, India has given not so bad account of itself. Despite onslaught from communalist and fundamentalist forces, India has not swerved from its secular democratic course in terms of its legal and political structure. Though India has been witnessing communal violence ever since the early sixties, the communal situation worsened when the BJP launched Rammandir drive and polarised the country along communal lines as on the eve of partition.

Towards the end of the last century, the demolition of Babri Masjid was a major blow to Indian secularism. Babri Masjid became, the symbol of Indian secularism. Secularism in India is nothing if not pluralism. India has been religiously, culturally, and linguistically pluralist for several thousands of years. This religious and cultural pluralism survived thanks to the tolerance of our people. It is remarkable that we did not have communal conflict throughout medieval period. Communalism and communal violence is a modern phenomenon, which is product of the colonial period. Feudal polity was basically non-competitive, and communal phenomenon is product of modern competitive politics.

The colonial period saw competition for power between the elites of two communities and they invoked religion for mobilising masses from respective communities. Religious identity thus became a powerful tool for political elites of the two communities to exploit, and exploit they did with maximum intensity possible. Thus, though communal strife is not religious strife, it does appear to be.

The leaders of Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League in pre-independence India used religious rhetoric and created sharp perceptions of "religious strife" among people

of their respective communities. Jinnah was modern liberal constitutionalist, but when he failed to arrive at a satisfactory political arrangement with the Indian National Congress, he began to use religious rhetoric to mobilise Indian Muslims behind him.

After independence The Jansangh (formed in 1951), which was renamed as the BJP in 1980, used Hindu religious rhetoric to grab Hindu votes in state and parliamentary elections. When ordinary religious rhetoric did not help much, it discovered the utility

of religion appears to be main culprit in the eyes of many people. These politicians deliberately provoke religious fanaticism to make political gains.

This impression easily gains ground because either many religious leaders actively cooperate with communalists or keep silent about the gross misuse of religion for political ends. Thus, in the eyes of people, religion, not politicians, come to be blamed. Religion per se, cannot be responsible for the communal malaise. It is like a tool which can be used

those belonging to various religious traditions became either active collaborators or kept silent. During the Gujarat carnage, too, it was nothing different. With a few honourable exceptions all other religious leaders kept quiet, and politicians like Narendra Modi and his henchmen cynically exploited Hindu religious sentiments for their political ends. In fact Narendra Modi came back to power by getting thousands massacred.

India, as pointed out, is a multi-

Indian culture is essentially a composite culture. We have to further strengthen and enrich this composite culture and our religious traditions, seen in the light of values mentioned above, do not come in our way in doing so. We have shared much in common for centuries and people of religion should not allow few politicians to undo all our shared values and traditions and promote intolerance and hatred.

The people of religion should make it clear to their followers that those who promote hatred and intolerance cannot

and spiritual traditions hold many values in common, and that these shared values can serve as an authentic basis for mutual esteem, cooperation, and free common living throughout the territory of Albania."

The statement also further proceeds: "We, the Muslim Community, the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and the Bektash Community are proud of our history of multi-religious co-existence. We proclaim that the dignity of the human person and human value is a gift of God. Our faiths, each in their own way, call us to respect each person's fundamental human rights. Discrimination and violence against persons or the violation of their basic rights, for us, breaks not only man-made laws, but also God's law."

I have quoted only a few excerpts from this statement, which was issued by religious leaders of the communities mentioned therein on March 18, 2005 from Tirana, the capital of Albania. This statement greatly applies to our Indian situation too and its high time our Indian religious leaders too should come forward and take similar bold step. India, in fact, is more pluralistic than Albania and our plurality and shared values can be traced to much longer period. Also, we are facing acute crisis today on communal front. It is therefore, high time that our religious leaders should morally intervene in this strife-torn situation and see to it that Gujarat-like situation does not repeat and our multi-religiosity remains our asset and does not become a liability. We can meet challenges to secularism and democracy and steer clear of fascist politics only if our religious leaders intervene firmly to cut unscrupulous politicians to size.

The author is associated with the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, Mumbai, India.

The people of religion should make it clear to their followers that those who promote hatred and intolerance cannot champion the cause of religious community but their own. All religious people, particularly religious leaders who do not have narrow sectarian interests at heart should come forward and boldly take stand against violence and untruth being promoted in the name of religion by politicians and their cohorts who might pretend to be religious leaders.

of Ram Mandir for sharper political appeal to Hindus of all castes. Mr.L.K. Advani led the Ramjanmabhoomi movement with great verve and intensity in late eighties of last century. It paid rich political dividends and he rode to power in the Toyota-built Ramrath.

Ramjanmabhoomi movement resulted in sharp polarisation of Hindus and Muslims in late twentieth century, which continues until today. It was basically the communal rhetoric of the BJP which resulted in the Gujarat carnage of 2002 in which more than 2,000 innocent citizens lost their lives and hundreds of women were raped and killed most barbarically. The Hindutva in Gujarat was transformed into "Moditva" as Narendra Modi was mainly responsible for the carnage.

Here in this article we are not mainly concerned with the politics of BJP, which are well known to any student of Indian politics. We are more concerned here with the response or otherwise by the religious people in India in general, and in Gujarat, in particular. It is because of dubious role played by religious leaders that reli-

either way. Basically religion is for spiritual guidance of the people and hence can be a major resource for peace and social justice. It can become, as liberation theology indicates, a powerful option for the weaker sections of society. Instead religion has more often been used by powerful vested interests of which religious functionaries become a part. Worse, religious functionaries and priests themselves create powerful establishments and join hands with politicians to protect their establishments.

A truly religious person should always be anti-establishment. Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, Gurananak, Kabir and others all fought against establishments in their own times and transcended their period. Their followers, on the other hand, created huge establishments in their names and became cause of conflict rather than resource for peace. To create true religious spirit one has to shed all vested interests. One should shun all temptations of power and pelf.

It was very painful to note that during most of the communal riots,

religious and multi-cultural country and modern secular democratic polity can survive only if religious people are determined to promote religious and spiritual values. This globalised world cannot escape being religiously plural, secular, and democratic. Globalisation is creating pressures of its own which disrupt our religious values and culture. In this period of globalisation we have to be firmly rooted in our religious values.

Indian plurality alone can be our valuable asset and religious response has to be based on tolerance, respect and compassion for others. Religious leaders of India must come together and resolve to promote common religious values. If we reflect sincerely there are many values, which are common to our respective religious traditions. One can easily identify eight values which are central to all religious traditions. These values are: 1) justice; 2) peace; 3) equality; 4) love; 5) compassion; 6) non-violence; 7) truth; and 8) human dignity.

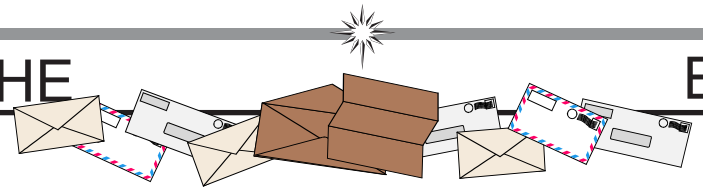
Also, we have had glorious tradition of living together and made rich contribution to Indian culture and hence

cannot champion the cause of religious community but their own. All religious people, particularly religious leaders who do not have narrow sectarian interests at heart should come forward and boldly take stand against violence and untruth being promoted in the name of religion by politicians and their cohorts who might pretend to be religious leaders.

There is inspiring example of religious leaders of Albania who recently came together and issued a statement of what they called "Shared moral commitment." The statement issued says among other things: "We, the traditional religious communities in Albania: the Muslim community, the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania (Orthodox Church), the Catholic Church, and the Bektash Community, feel called upon to point the way to the future and we recognise and accept that our religious communities differ from each other, and that each of us feels called to observe their own faith."

"At the same time," the statement says, "We recognise that our religious

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.

Building Code

Thanks for the investigative report "Rajuk unsure of faulty building numbers" and "Decides to start collecting information".

I am sure that Rajuk does not have any official list of building code violators; but the officials responsible for inspection might have a list for their own good!

However, I would like to draw your attention to the communication and education part of it. I am looking for the Building Code but there is no easy way to get it.

I believe if information is easily available then it will create public awareness and eventually help to enforce the code easily. I would request the Rajuk authorities to post the Building Code on the web as well as various local libraries, including colleges and universities, where people can have access to the information on different aspects of the issue. The telecommunication revolu-

tion or more specifically the wireless network boom, that is continuing in Bangladesh, will set up the base of our step towards global citizenship.

Looking forward to finding Rajuk's building code in the web soon. Hope that more and more service agencies of the Bangladesh government and NGOs will utilise the media to be benefited from technology and to achieve better productivity and information sharing.

Sohel Abdullah
Intel Corporation
Portland, US

Oil price hike

The price of oil is on the rise. The sharp rise in its demand in countries such as China and India is putting pressure on the oil reserves. There seems to be an oil depletion fear. Experts who met at Edinburgh recently believe that oil depletion will begin in 2008, as opposed to the earlier projection of

2030.

Now in this situation where the supply of oil is less compared to the demand, it is expected that the price of oil and substitutes will rise. The leader of the opposition claimed that "the government raised the prices of kerosene, diesel, and petrol several times in the last three years without considering the sufferings of the people". Such a comment is quite surprising because it sheds a negative light on a situation that makes the entire world of oil consumers worried.

Other countries are thinking of the substitutes of oil. I think if the opposition wants to hold the government accountable it should do so for the failure of the government to find substitutes to deal with the rising oil prices, and the possible depletion in its supply in the years to come.

Zeenat Z. Syed
UPS eDepartment
Zia International

Airport

This refers to a letter published on April 15, 2005 by Angela Robinson on her experience at ZIA. After going through likewise miserable plight myself on two recent occasions, I could not agree more with the views expressed. The current system deprives an arriving passenger from shaking hands with visitors, even after checking out from immigration and customs. Payment of Tk 50 entrance fee by a visitor for entering the concourse hall is no guarantee for meeting his or her loved ones across the 'Tiger cages' built all around. The current practice of jumping up and down behind the glass panes, and peering through two layers of glass is exactly the option you are left with.

My suggestion on receiving an international passenger at ZIA is - don't do it, unless you want to make a fool of yourself. There is no way to coordinate a visual contact, shake hands and arrange planned trans-

portation away from the area. The difficulties are compounded if you do not personally know the passenger. People holding printed signs for welcoming unknown business associates are required to do even more jumping.

Don't count on the international departure area of ZIA to be any better. It is even worse with another stroke of genius by the authorities in planning the layout. I would advise Ms. Angela to see-off her UK friend right at home. Don't bother driving to the so-called modern airport, where you will find no departure lounge, or area, that could be used in conformity with tradition and social custom all over the world, to say good-bye to the departing passengers. All you could do, is drop your friend at the curb, as quickly as possible, and speed away. The stone-faced guards will allow you no more than a minute for accommodating the next passenger's vehicle.

You are not welcome there to see

your friend off.

C. J. Kabir
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Bangladesh, unforgettable

After spending two months and a half in Bangladesh, we are back recently to Canada. There are a couple of things in my memory that are worth sharing with DS readers. We had a wonderful time indeed, visited tons of friends and well wishers. We also visited several places of attraction, including countryside that is home to our extended family members. We were given a warm welcome and enjoyed delicious food everywhere we went. Each of us gained at least 2-3 kilos, is not it scary? Now that physically we are here in Vancouver; our mind is elsewhere recollecting the memories; what a wonderful country and people we left behind!

We are proud of so many good

things happening in Bangladesh. We lived partly in Uttara, and in transit while travelling outside Dhaka. Considering the distance, Uttara may seem remote; but communication has made everything easy for the population here. Bus service, oh my goodness - you would be surprised. Without a minute wasted, you can travel to almost any direction at any given time; direct bus, taxi, rickshaws and what else you need; they are found in hundreds if not thousands, thanks to private entrepreneurs, drivers and others involved in this sector. This is really one of the large employers in Bangladesh.

There are shopping malls with updated facilities there are many; easily comparable with those here in Vancouver. Retail chains like PSP, WestTec, Cat's Eye and of course Aarong - they have incredible selection at their disposal. We find a good similarity with Super Store, Wal-Mart, and London Drug and so on and so forth. The trip to Calcutta was a disas-

ter. Since the opening of the direct Dhaka-Calcutta bus service, this was my first trip. We were four travelling together. Night travel by a luxury bus from Kamalapur was enjoyable. But the immigration officials' behaviour at the border points was frustrating. In my opinion, immigration and border check posts are dens of corruption. Neither you can leave Bangladesh part nor enter into the Indian side without paying bribe. The same dirty thing you have to go through when you are coming back. I talked to several travellers about this. They told me that those corrupt officials would not even spare a dying patient travelling across the border for treatment.

Is there anything we can do about this?
Md. Sahed Ali
603 East 56th Avenue
Vancouver