

Investing in the children of the Islamic world



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

INCE the fall of Baghdad (1258) and the Battle of Lepanto (1571) there has been a lot of soul searching among the Muslims of the world for their backwardness, and several thought provoking suggestions were put forward for improving their conditions.

It has been held that we should give up the sedentary urban life and return to the invigorating *asabiyah* comradeship. It has also been suggested that every Muslim should have four wives and desire forty children, ten sons should be dedicated to the cause of jihad. A Muslim can fulfil his jihad duty by the heart, by the tongue, by the hand, and by the sword. The final suggestion is that the Muslims should go nuclear and produce Islamic bomb, the ultimate symbol of political power, security and supremacy.

These half serious and light-hearted descriptions of Muslims do not amuse us.

Bangladesh is a country of lush green and roaring rivers that may not generate the sense of desert *asabiyah*. Unlike the wise Chinese we are a little argumentative people. We have restricted polygamy forty-five years ago. In 1972 our country was described as one of the twelve potential nuclear powers. We have, however, long ago ratified the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. As a poor country our aims are rather modest.

I shall dwell on and say a few words on the children's education. On the strength of my middle class background, I have some partisan views on the dissemination of education. I agree wholeheartedly with Horace Mann (1848) that "Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin is a great equaliser of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery".

In article 17 of our Constitution it has been laid down that "The State shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of (a) establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law; (b) relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs; (c) removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law."

In article 25(2) of the Constitution it has, amongst other objectives in its international relations, been provided that, "(2) The State shall endeavour to

consolidate and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity."

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the growth of human capital. In the developing countries where adequate attention is not placed on education and training, there is little or no chance for economic development.

It is considered by well-meaning people all over the world that education must be responsive to the specific requirements of the nation, must have relevance to future work and life, and must provide adequate preparation for productive employment.

Let us insist less on uniqueness and distinctiveness when Allah has himself said that He could have made the whole mankind as one single nation, but he has created several nations so that they can interact and learn from each other. No one nation has been given the absolute supremacy to destroy the balance of power among peoples. This tolerant, humane and universal approach will be of great help in keeping peace for future investment for the children in the Islamic countries.

Share of expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP is rather inadequate. The dropout rate in primary school is as high as 56 per cent. Only 2.2 per cent of GNP is spent on education and 39 per cent of it is spent on primary education. There exists an ever-widening rural-urban difference. For the current expenditure on education, the ultra-poor group constituting about 40 per cent of population receive only 4.3 per cent of benefit in terms of expenditure. The situation is almost same in case of development expenditure on education also.

Market mechanism cannot achieve an adequate allocation of resources in favour of education. Growth in the education sector largely depends upon public investment. Our educational planning is probably the most difficult challenge in our country.

The resources available are limited,

from HIV. To do my part, I created a youth branch of my local Portland Parish AIDS Committee. The members of the group use drama, song and dance to educate their peers and adults about AIDS. We've even hosted a workshop with some of the nurses at the hospital where my father was treated. And every third Saturday, we choose a particular community to visit, walking to houses, parks and bars to talk honestly about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

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When adults decide how to tackle the world's AIDS crisis, the way it affects children must become part of their thinking. Children need medicine, health care and psychological support. They need help caring for their sick parents so they can continue to go to school. They need the care and stability of a strong family. And they need the education and services that will enable them to protect themselves from HIV.

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was going to die, but after so many years of keeping his condition a secret, I was completely unprepared when he reached his final days. All the questions I never asked, all the pain I felt, were bottled up inside. I couldn't bear the thought of watching him die or even hearing about his death. So I decided to kill myself first.

Despondent, I called a woman at the nonprofit Jamaica AIDS Support who had helped get my father into a caring hospice. That bleak day, she kept me on the phone for hours, and she left me with a sense of hope.

I was so lucky to find someone who cared. She saved my life. The most important thing I learned from her was this: I am not alone. In

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It is my considered view that all students should be given the first lesson in their mother tongue and they at first to know their own country, and then their neighbours, then their Muslim brothers and lastly, though not of the least importance, the rest of the world. It may be inadvisable to inculcate the ideas of *darul Islam* and *darul harb* at the formative stage. We should rather try to foster ideas of *darulaman*, *darulahad* and *taqwa*.

When for fostering international cooperation and effective implementation of the Convention several bodies like the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the local or international bodies representing various religions are working together we should try to work on the basis of *darulahad* and/or *urasul*.

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Bangladesh is the first Asian country to ratify the Convention. In 1994 a Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs was established for giving effect to the objectives of the Convention. In August 1995 a National Policy for Children was adopted and the National Children's Council was established. An interministerial committee has been established to regularly monitor the process of fulfilling children's rights. The mass media has given priority to 'Facts for Life' and messages on children's and women's right.

In the area of legislative reform, it was planned to create task forces on law reforms, juvenile justice and the girl child. Judges and police officers are being trained in protecting juveniles in conflict with the law and improving the conditions of juveniles under detention.

Yet, because of poverty and ignorance, many of Bangladesh's children were trafficked outside the country after falling into the hands of traffickers. Some of them have been brought home through diplomatic efforts. It is hoped that mechanical or robot camel-jockeys will soon be used to amuse the playful owners of racing camels.

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