

HIV awareness building imperative

Speakers call for open dialoguing

A roundtable discussion on prevention of HIV/AIDS is a must, speakers have called for open dialoguing at all levels of the society for sensitising people about HIV and its dreadful consequences. An atmosphere should be created so that open discussion can take place at all tiers of society, including at the family level.

The discussion meeting participated by a cross section of the people including sex workers and representatives from various international organisations operating in the country stressed the need for shunning the tendency of treating the subject as something of a taboo. At the forum no less than the Adviser in Charge of Health and Family Planning pointed out that most people in the country often get panicked when they hear of HIV/AIDS and consider it as an evil omen.

Those who have already contracted HIV often tend to hide the fact and hence it is difficult to assess the actual number of people afflicted in the country and the overall prevailing scenario.

We are in full agreement with the observations made by speakers that there is no reason for complacency despite the fact that only minuscule percentage of the population lives under the looming threat of the disease. Bangladesh is a risk-prone area surrounded as it is by countries which have a rather high incidence of HIV/AIDS. We can also learn from them the ways they are grappling with the problem.

There is no alternative to building extensive social awareness about the disease more so amongst the vulnerable groups like slum dwellers, floating destitute people, truck drivers, sex workers, etc. It is high time too that the media campaign on the preventive and curative aspects of the disease is also further geared up. Periodic monitoring of the schools and colleges should also take place to ensure that the teachers regularly teach the students the prescribed text on the subject. Allegedly, teachers themselves have often been found reluctant to teach the subject.

There is yet another aspect government should pay urgent attention to. More and more easily accessible diagnostic centres should be opened for diagnosing people suspected of having contracted the HIV, free of cost.

Parvez Musharraf's civilian facade

Political uncertainty looms over Pakistan

PARVEZ Musharraf has finally hung his military uniform to add a civilian touch to his second term in office as the president of an embattled Pakistan. Discernibly it was a move to appease his opponents at home and abroad, while he maintained his political power. Musharraf gave an emotion-charged speech after taking oath when he vowed general elections on January 8 and lifting of emergency on December 16. But the international community did not perhaps fail to notice that underneath his civilian clothes he remained as rhetorical as before, all the time refusing to acknowledge the slogans and clashes on the streets of Pakistan. In a brazen show of self-importance, he called his standing down from the army top post and taking oath as the civilian president as a "milestone in Pakistan's transition to democracy." He went on to boast that the January elections would go ahead "come hell or high water."

We feel that such oratory has come too early in the day, because he may have to fight many more battles in the days to come. But the pertinent question is - will the civilian rule of Musharraf solve the deep-rooted socio-political problems that have been mounting in the country since he had seized power in a coup in 1999? Most likely it will not. His government lacked transparency and credibility from the very beginning and the way he dealt with the political party leaders made it clear that he wanted to have his way in running the country like a classic dictator, and to attain his goal he cared little what he trampled under his feet. We watched with great uneasiness how he played around with many of the institutions that play a role in ensuring people's rights and good governance. It is still fresh in memory how he maltreated the highest judiciary of the country and the Chief Justice himself. It was perhaps misdeemeanor of the worst kind.

In the perilous game of politics in a developing country like Pakistan it is the common people who pay the highest price, in terms of life and property, hence our sympathy lies with them. They deserve to have a democratically elected government that would devote more time in listening to and solving their basic problems. So far President Musharraf has shown that he can go to any length, destroy any institution and take any step to keep himself in power. He is under the illusion that forcing himself as president on Pakistan under a legal cover, however flimsy, will automatically give him power to rule. He lacks the vital moral authority of a leader elected freely and fairly.

We are worried that in the tussle for power between various forces in the coming years the obscurantist elements in Pakistan will get space to proliferate and come out the ultimate victors. That surely would upset peace and tranquility in the entire region. Pakistan, regrettably, is entering another period of political uncertainty.



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

In the Bangla calendar, 'Aghrayan' is a month we wait for. It heralds the season of harvesting. Optimism and happiness is reflected in the many rituals associated with the festival of 'Nabanno'. It is a time of joy not only in the villages but also in the urban areas.

This time round 'Aghrayan' arrived accompanied by super-cyclone 'Sidr'. The laughter associated with 'Nabanno' was drowned in the pangs of sorrow and devastation unleashed by the brutal force of the storm.

Large swathes of territory in the south and southwestern coastal regions were subjected to apocalyptic fury of extreme proportions. This included the districts of Bagherhat, Barguna, Patuakhali, Pirojpur, Barisal, Jhalakathi, Madaripur, Gopalganj and Bhola and the outlying 'chars' (islands) within their administrative areas.

Weeks after the disaster, the death toll from unofficial sources (based on reports received by NGOs and social community organisations) have crossed 4000. More than a thousand are still missing and unaccounted for according to grief-stricken relatives. Total damage has been assessed at nearly US dollar 2.31 billion.

Preliminary investigations have suggested that nearly 60,000 persons have been injured and will require medical attention for some time. It is also apparent that more than a million rural households have been seriously affected. Exact figures pertaining to destruction of infrastructure is still being worked out. Standing crops on 1.6 million acres have been fully or partially ruined. Translated into anticipated quantity, it will mean a loss of nearly 1 million tonnes. Over 8,000 educational institutions, at different tiers, have been fully or par-

tially destroyed. This will hamper educational activities of nearly 750,000 students.

This enumeration does not include losses sustained by the fishermen and the deep-sea fishing industry (to their sea fishing fleet and nets), by the pisciculture sector (shrimp 'gher' farmers) or by those entrepreneurs involved in 'shutki' (dried fish) processing (an important ingredient and source of protein for most rural households). It will also take some time before a

assisting civilian official associated with disaster management. Initially, the task was extremely difficult given the many hurdles created by the storm -- the breakdown in connectivity (roads and telecommunication) and absence of already stored food and clean water capacity. This exacerbated the already existing situation created by the storm. Every day we witnessed heart-rending desperation and misery in the media.

Gradually, conditions have

should have their own fleet of water transporters as well as helicopters for emergency situations. This government should carefully weigh such a possibility.

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We have now entered the next phase. Ferries, road and rail links have been partially restored and this is facilitating relief and rehabilitation operations in a more extensive manner. There is greater constructive engagement than before in the devastated areas. The most critical phase has passed and is slowly giving way to revival and normalcy.

The success of the next phase -- medium and long-term -- will however depend on the implementation of several measures that will require political commitment, dedication and breadth of vision. Some among them have claimed that their relief efforts could have been more widespread had the state emergency been lifted from the affected areas. This appears to be a lame excuse. They could have tried a little harder and associated themselves with the operations being carried out by civil society. Nevertheless, the situation has slowly recovered thanks to better coordination amongst those providing relief and Medicare and those charged with restoring power and inter-connectivity.

The international response to this disaster has also helped to alleviate distress through capacity building. The brighter side of international cooperation that was seen after the Tsunami and Cyclone Katrina has been replicated once again after Cyclone Sidr.

The first few days of emergency relief measures have been completed. This has included supply of bottled drinking water, water purification tablets, essential food items, medicines and temporary shelter. Helicopters have played a pivotal role with regard to the distribution process and underlined once again my belief that our Disaster Management authorities

started to improve. Unfortunately however there has little evidence of political parties taking any particular initiative regarding relief operations.

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Some of the important steps that should be focused upon include the following:

(a) Supplying big sized plastic containers to the worst affected areas (where water sources have been contaminated and there is little scope for accessing to ground water due to arsenic contamination) so that purified (through tablets) or boiled or filtered water can be stored for subsequent use;

(b) Arranging 500 large temporary shelters, particularly for the children, women and the elderly (with community feeding facilities based on vulnerable group feeding principles) who have become homeless or are without the essential support of earning members from their families (who have

fully work better and will lead to a bigger boro crop, so necessary for reducing the food deficit gap for this fiscal year. This is vital given the fact that the international market in recent weeks has seen extraordinary rise in cereal prices.

(c) Remission and re-scheduling of outstanding interest payments arising out of loans received under agricultural credit and micro-credit. At the same time, consistent with policy decisions taken by the government, financial institutions should be encouraged to lend a helping hand by extending less stringent credit, particularly to those involved in horticulture and pisciculture. It has been decided that PKSF will extend micro-credit loans of Taka 130 crore. This is not enough. Greater flexible institutional credit arrangement is required to restore confidence in these sectors. Frozen fish export in particular, is now an important item in our export list with nearly 90 per cent indigenous content. It provides employment to tens of thousands of people and deserves support. The European Commission has already suggested that they are willing to help. We should use this opportunity to enhance our capacity in this sector and also improve on its technology base regarding forward and backward linkages.

(d) Confessional rehabilitation schemes also need to be taken at government initiative. Diverting funds from the annual development budget can do this. This will help the dairy and poultry sectors to regain their economic agility.

(e) Restoration of healthcare services with facilities for specialised care in orthopedics in every Upazila headquarters.

(f) Training community leaders to better understand the implications of early warning forecasts related to hurricanes and storm surges.

(g) Making community radio and mobile telephone connectivity more comprehensive by creating alternative power support, e.g. through greater use of solar panels (to be made available through government subsidy at all community centres at the village level).

(h) Establishing afforestation all along the coast to minimise the effect of storm surges as has been done in certain coastal storm-prone areas in China.

(i) Constructing at least five thousand more elevated concrete cyclone shelters (which can also at normal times be used as schools for informal education or vocational training or as family planning or Medicare centers and also as storage space for emergency provisions) on stilts with adequate enclosed space at the base level for temporary corralling of domestic livestock during times of emergency weather conditions. Building these shelters will require massive resources. This can be raised by levying a special tax of 10 percent for the next five years on all interest earned through savings instruments and fixed deposits as was done during the time of the construction of the Jamuna bridge.

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Problems related to the future well-being of our people will have to be solved by us. Our development partners can assist only up to a point and not beyond. Bangladesh has grown a reputation of being able to tackle natural disasters and then rise again as the Sphinx. We can do it again this time round.

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Reaching fast relief goods and services to remote areas

DR. SARDAR QUAMRUL HASSAN

WE always find that international communities, including Bangladeshis living abroad, donate generously whenever a mega-disaster hits Bangladesh. According to recent reports, around \$550 million have been pledged by donor nations, World Bank and Asian Development Bank. However, even after one week since the cyclone Sidr hit Bangladesh, millions of people in the remote areas had received little or no relief at all. Roads and ferry ghats were damaged by the cyclone. The only mode of immediate and fast relief delivery to these remote areas is helicopters. Bangladesh Armed Forces do an excellent job as first responders to this kind of disasters. Our soldiers and officers are a dedicated and competent lot, but their mission is often hobbled by lack of sufficient logistical support -- most importantly an adequate number of helicopters for fast delivery of relief goods to the remote and disconnected areas.

It is unrealistic to expect that roads and ferry ghats will remain undamaged in the event of this kind of natural disasters. Even if they were undamaged, transportation of goods by road to river ports, and subsequently to remote areas by water vessels takes too long a time to provide immediate aid to the victims. In the mean time, they suffer painfully from lack of food, safe drinking water and medical treatment. All these heighten the risk of widespread disease and even death from starvation.

Now the question is: "can we do something to overcome this obstacle?" Can the government make prior arrangements with either neighbouring nations or large private helicopter rental companies to arrange for short-term rental of the required number of helicopters along with the necessary pilots and mechanics for round the clock operation? By

short-term, I mean the first three to five days after the disaster or the time it takes for the US Navy to reach Bangladesh with its helicopters. Is it unrealistic, or had we been just shying away from thinking about these steps?

Yes, it will cost a big sum. A very preliminary estimate shows that to rent one helicopter with a payload capacity of 10,000 pounds for one day we may need to spend around \$0.1 million (one lakh US dollars). The actual costs may vary significantly, depending on timing of negotiations and the interest of the vendor. Also, this estimate does not include the mobilisation cost (staging at the nearest safe airport/heliport before the disaster -- may or may not be inside Bangladesh), delivery cost (delivering the helicopters after the disaster to the airports/heliports in Bangladesh, where relief goods are stocked for loading), mechanics costs, insurance costs, and other numerous items that the Bangladesh Air Force and the vendor will have to negotiate.

We will also need to answer a number of major logistics questions in order to decide on the maximum number of helicopters that can be leased:

(a) How many helicopters can be safely operated from Dhaka and other cities, with relief goods, using the current airport/heliport support infrastructure? Will some modifications result in a significant increase in the number?

(b) How many helicopters can be simultaneously deployed to the disaster-ravaged areas without creating a flight safety hazard?

(c) How many helicopters are really necessary to provide immediate (within 24 hours) relief to all remote areas?

(d) How many helicopter-days we can afford with our reasonable

budget, say 10 percent of expected total international aid. The contract should have the flexibility to revise the budget and actual number of helicopters rented if our needs and/or amount of international aid vary significantly from the expected amount.

The maximum number of helicopters rented should be no more than the lowest of the answers to the above questions. In addition, we will need flexibility in the contract -- tiered and phased approach and unit costs for each phase (mobilisation, delivery, and actual duration of rental etc.).

Let's look at total cost figures. If we rent 100 helicopter-days (50 helicopters for two days or 25 helicopters for four days, or a different optimum combination) then the rental cost will be around \$10 million. On top of that, we will need to add mobilisation costs, delivery costs, mechanics costs etc.

Let's assume that the total cost is around \$20 million. Is it unreasonable to spend around \$20 million out of the pledged \$550 million (less than 5% of the total aid) to provide immediate rescue and relief to disaster-stricken areas that can not be reached otherwise? I think it is fully reasonable and necessary.

From our experience, we know that donations will pour in -- so why not go ahead and prepare lease agreements ahead of time? Of course, we can make it a multilateral effort, bringing in other international relief organisations, each of them committing, up-front, a certain amount to the helicopter leasing cost.

This concept does not replace other short-term and long-term relief and rehabilitation strategies, and long-term prevention methods proposed by other experts. It is proposed as an additional tool to address one aspect of the tragedy that we have so far failed to address.

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cynicism and doubt have haunted the national psyche at intervals since our independence. Lack of sustained determination to confront the reality in the round and adjust was much too evident. And the obvious fall-out has been our failure to engineer a benign cycle of economic growth and social easement. Surely, the debates that centre our constitution and other issues of national importance will continue.

Because of this inherent weakness our civil society had to weather a spell of extra-constitutional ambitions, albeit intermittently, in the space of the last thirty-six years of independence. More than a cathartic relief, constitutional rule, however, proved its resilience by its triumphant return and flourished on the basis of people's consent. In a landscape like ours where constitution awareness is wafer-thin with a vast number of illiterates and immature political democracy, the Constitution Day in its exclusivity, should be an eminent occasion to inform the citizens of the supremacy of the constitution in regard to their

governance along with their rights and obligations to the state. We, however, should not be amiss to appreciate that the Day is also endowed to contribute to broadening the political horizon of the citizenry in general. The message of the Day shall have to be highlighted not only on the date of its observance, instead it should be a continuous campaign till such time the citizens became familiar with them. Obviously in this task, the prime responsibility shall rest with both the print and electronic media. On a broader perspective, the Day's consciousness constructed on a strong basis of constitutional values should inspire the

civil society not to bow to those who reject freedom and democracy. In explaining the national flag, our constitution says: 'The national flag of the Republic shall consist of a circle, coloured red throughout its area, resting on a green background.' (Vide Part 1 Page 4 at 4.(2) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh). What is critically missing in the above is the interpretation of the circle -- which is the main focus of the national flag - in regard to nation's aspiration. As is obvious, it makes the interpretation of the national flag complete, an authoritative version inclusive

of the circle needs to be incorporated in the constitution without delay.

Hartal (shutdown) a veritable nightmare since independence plagues the nation to this day. The opposition parties find it a convenient and handy tool to dislodge the ruling party from power which they in their myopic political wisdom believed could not be attained through accepted political norms. The paradoxical upshot of this syndrome is that the mainstream political party when in opposition legitimise it as a 'democratic right,' but when in power they unfailingly seize the high moral ground and go on a denial binge. What is worse,

the opposition party in its impatience to wait for another five years for general election try to destabilise the government in every possible manner which more than often lands the hapless nation in utter chaos and disorder. The one-eleven mayhem is still vivid in our memory. In the power game between the two mainstream political parties it is a tricky often a violent, interface -- ironically all the name of people's right. In the event the present caretaker government declares hartal illegal that certainly would remove a major gridlock on our way to progress, and uphold common man's right to earn livelihood without hindrance.

Recently with the induction of the caretaker government, the nation breaks a new ground in our worn-out political culture that was long focused on personality syndrome rather than nation-building

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We should commemorate the constitution day