

## IN MEMORIAM

## Remembering my father, three years later

NAZLI KIBRIA

**B**EFORE retiring to Bangladesh from his post as UN Under-Secretary General in Bangkok, my father Shah AMS Kibria, purchased a computer for himself. Determined to master a technology that was new to him, he spent hours and hours trying to familiarise himself with it. He sent me a letter, one that I still have with me: "Dear Ammu: I am typing this letter to you on the computer that I am taking to Bangladesh. I am practicing every day. It is still difficult for me but I am improving every day..."

In the years to come, the computer became an essential part of my father's life. Waking up in the early hours of the morning during my visits to Dhaka, I would often find him at the computer, at work on the English language essays that he wrote for the newspapers.

I marveled then, as I continue to do now, at his determination. This was a quality of his that extended across matters both small and large, from learning how to use a computer to ensuring that the price of essentials remained affordable to the poor of the country during his tenure as finance minister of Bangladesh.

My father had many admirable qualities. And what he achieved over his lifetime was considerable, more than what many of us, myself included, could imagine for ourselves. But, of course, as a daughter the memories that stand out for me are of a different kind. In the end, for those closest to him, it is the daily memories that are the most vivid.

I remember his love of the ocean, the sheer delight and excitement that crossed his face when he came across the sights and sounds of rolling waves and

sandy beaches. I remember his love of Tagore songs and poetry, but also the pleasure he took with the stories of the British humorist PG Woodhouse, which inevitably left him chuckling with mirth.

I remember his love of shutti

my son, a fussy baby, for several hours in the middle of the night so that I could get some rest as a new mother.

I remember the anxiety in his voice whenever he heard that I was ill, even if it was just a common

If I am blessed with many memories that comfort me as I grieve and mourn the loss of my father, there is one that haunts me with overwhelming pain. Like the rest of the world, I watched, on December 27, 2007, the sickening news of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan. As I watched the unfolding story, all of my senses flooded with pain, I could literally feel the grief of her family. And I could feel their rage, as they demanded an independent international investigation into her murder.

I remember a meeting that I had, soon after my father was killed, with a politician who had experienced the assassination of his family members. I remember him telling me that the family of the assassinated has a special, unspoken bond, of shared trauma as well as a need for justice, a need to see that those behind the assassination are correctly identified and tried in a fair court of law.

It has now been three years since my father's assassination on January 27, 2005 by grenade attack in Sylhet. I am sad to say that there has been no visible progress towards a complete and unbiased investigation into the crime; indeed, there is little apparent interest in this matter. It is difficult for me to understand how unresolved political killings can help the country in its quest to rid itself of corruption and to move towards democracy through free and fair elections.

I do know that however futile it may seem, I will continue, in whatever way that I can, our family's campaign for justice. After all, it was my father who taught me to keep on trying, to not give up.

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FAMILY PHOTO

(dried fish) and also of French bread and cheese. I remember him playing "school" with my young niece Madhuri, happily taking on the role of the student and being drilled on the alphabet by her. I remember him carrying and walking up and down the house with

cold. I remember his admiration for the skills of golfer Tiger Woods. And his deep-seated respect and love for Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who in the words of my father, gave us Bangalis our rights to full citizenship and thus to our humanity.

## Economic reforms

NIZAM AHMAD and SHEIKH ASHRAFUDDIN ANARUL

**A**LL the government needs to do is to get out of the way," Dr. Ron Paul, US libertarian presidential candidate.

The government is failing on two counts. The first is their failure to bring in economic reforms. The second is their overemphasis on corruption and the tough means they have adopted to eliminate it.

In any democracy, widespread corruption would undeniably mean that economic rules are horribly wrong and not people friendly. Overregulation and complex rules rob individual freedom and induce people to dodge rules as a way of survival with the help of those who implement such rules. To change national economic behaviour and to cut corruption levels, a pro-reform government should first repeal bad laws, and slash and simplify taxes.

Without substantial deregulation and liberalisation of the economy, corruption cannot wither away simply on moral grounds or through the fear of imprisonment. It will only take different routes.

Surely, in the past, the heavy hand of the government, its authoritative role in development, its command and control of economic ventures from production of electricity to FDI in mining, and its downbeat attitude towards private enterprise, had impoverished Bangladesh and made corruption a part of our lives.

Bangladesh's breed of economists, engaged in the business of collecting data, is least liberal in ideas and fails to provide viable solutions, other than their weak textbook expositions, to stimu-

**As a solution to inflating prices, people must have their liberty to transact and save any currency of the world. The people and businesses will choose their currency; acquire those that are steady in value (like the Swiss franc) and reject those that are falling, like the Dollar or the Taka. Economic reforms should mean greater monetary and financial freedom at the individual level. Money should not remain the monopoly of the government nor the Taka the only official medium of exchange. The Taka should be denationalised and flowing in competition with other issuers of money as Austrian economists have been stressing ever since USA nationalised its Dollar in 1913.**

late the economy. Unpardonably, they see the government as a deity holding the power to fulfil national wants and bring down prices too.

No one, not even the Bangladesh Bank, categorically blames inflation -- the increase in the stock of money -- as the principal cause of mad price hikes. The last few years of high remittances of around \$4 billion annually, and the pumping-in of equivalent amount of Taka, have space-rocked market prices of rice, and maybe of share prices also. Commodity shortages, or clogged supplies, do increase prices, but so does increased stock of circulating money.

To stabilise prices, Bangladesh must rethink its standard practice of printing Taka against incoming Dollar, Yuan, or Yen.

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Our economists blame the international price hike, as they did in the 1970s when consumer prices also rose sharply, but these are excuses and do not conceal the failure of a government to reform the economy, as it did not in the 1970s when oppressive government policies devastated the economy.

Economic reforms should mean the decriminalisation of our energetic informal economy, which would stop the migration of people to cities in search of bare livelihood. Economic reforms would mean that laws will penalise only those who hoard or trade in stolen and fraudulent products and fake currencies, but nothing more.

What is a black market or an informal economy? Is it where the anti-state elements engage in profitable economic activities that a government does not authorise, or is it rudimentary economic actions that fulfil the demands of the people, which a government fails to provide or procure?

Reforms would mean free trade and an open economy on a unilateral basis, not multilateralism as envisioned by

WTO and member governments. Reform is about establishing a free export and import regime, not corridor and transit arrangements. Only increased economic activities between people of all nations (not governments) will eliminate threats to national security and enable peaceful coexistence.

Reforms would mean that private investors are the major importers and stockists of fertilisers and producers of electricity, not the resurrected BADC, TCB, or the highly inefficient PDB. The SOEs need not be privatised or scrapped, but freed to operate in competition with the private sector. Reforms would mean that security forces do not seize goods, search warehouses, and shops on suspected black market or anti-hoarding laws unless on grounds of theft, forgery, or security matters. Would security forces raid the Bangladesh Bank for holding huge Dollar reserves when the economy could benefit with a lower stock in their vault?

Reforms would also unquestionably mean the commercialisation and modernisation of agriculture, and the abandonment of subsidised subsistence farming of today. Only reforms as these would purge corruption, sustain democracy, and boost Bangladesh's economy.

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## WORLD LEPROSY DAY

## Advocacy for the rights of leprosy-affected people

MARTIN ADHIKARY

**J**ANUARY 27 this year is the 55th World Leprosy Day. Leprosy still remains a stigmatising disease and, as such, is a sociological and developmental issue. We don't need to write much about this. There is a need for a transformation of the awareness that is already there about leprosy, and to address the stigma causing alienation of the affected people from the society. What I would like to deal with is the societal and, for that matter, an integrated approach to this public health problem urging for advocacy for the human rights of the people affected by the disease.

From the remote past the stigma of leprosy used to be legitimised. Still today in countries like Bangladesh leprosy remains as a stigmatising disease, although we can say this is decreasing gradually. People affected by it cannot marry, and married ones are easily divorced. They don't have the right to vote. Their children are not easily admitted at schools, and are looked down upon by others as ones cursed by God! They lose jobs and do not have access to society. Life is rather miserable for them.

In history, people with leprosy were so mistreated that they were not considered as full human beings and were considered cursed by God for their supposed sin. The presence of any disease, deformity or disability -- whether physical, mental or spiritual -- reveals certain deplorable facts about our world as a whole. We are all bound up in a hydra-headed network of personal and structural sins, and all that negates life and robs it of its happiness.

There are several organisations working in our country to address the leprosy problem under the government's National Leprosy Elimination Program (NLEP). The Leprosy Mission is one such organisation operating in this crucially important area since the eighties of the last century with programs for holistic care in an integrated manner.

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Dr. Paul Brand, pioneer of reconstructive surgery, deeply felt the anguish of the leprosy-affected people because of the stigma attached to the disease. He observed: "The person with leprosy loses touch in more than one way. Not only does this horrible disease get into the nerves of his arms and destroys them and strangles them so that he can never again feel with his fingers, but somehow, and for some reason I cannot understand, this same germ gets between him and his friends, gets between him and his employer, gets between him and his community and builds a barrier so that a man who had experienced the loving warm greetings of his friends before, who had a job and could earn his living, finds that people turn away, that the children will run from him because they have been told by their parents they mustn't associate with this man who has leprosy. He is treated with a superstitious kind of fear. And so it is said that leprosy is a lonely disease."

From awareness to accessibility: Awareness about the disease is carried on among the community people, who need to be educated that leprosy is a physical disease like other diseases. In the entire process, community participation is vitally important for the cause of

the rehabilitation of the leprosy sufferers into their communities.

The Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, recognises "the inherent dignity" and "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" as the foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world. When we want to advocate for the rights of the people with leprosy, we need to seriously speak up, draw the attention of the society to this important issue with the ultimate objective to direct decision-makers towards a solution.

Advocacy is working with other people and organisations to make a difference. The root of the word "advocacy" is "voc" or "voz," meaning voice. As such, "advocacy" means giving voice to someone, or a group or population that is voiceless and helpless.

An ancient Hebrew sage said: "Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all who are left desolate; Open your mouth, judge righteously, maintain the rights of the poor and needy (Bible: Proverbs 31:8-9)." So advocacy would mean working as intermediary between the voiceless or the weak ones and the ones who have power, who make policy or who yield authority over them.

It requires the intermediate steps for raising the awareness and motivates the people, who influence and make decisions for society. It is not merely making people aware of a problem. Awareness is a step in the process, which should move the decision makers to take a prescribed policy action, and policy change for new actions that aims at transformation of lives and communities overcoming their specific prob-

lem(s).

Advocacy for the rights of the leprosy-affected people can involve a series of planned interventions for effecting a positive change in response to stigma, alienation and deprivation. We need to prevent this alienation and deprivation by means of the interventions, or mobilise people to undertake actions to overcome these problems.

Eradication of stigma relating to leprosy cannot be achieved so easily. Along with treatment, it needs continuous health education and social mobilisation for community support to sufferers and their families. The issues surrounding leprosy cause overall sufferings and loss. This is especially true of those with physical disability. It leads to an identity crisis of the person in question. It is a total suffering. Therefore, it has to be addressed holistically, i.e. the integration should include all these: physical, economical, societal, psychological, spiritual and environmental.

Self-advocacy: The best possible way to advocate for people affected by leprosy is to ensure a sense of self-advocacy on the part of the suffering person. To quote Paulo Freire: "The finest struggles with the best results are those fought by the oppressed people themselves." The Leprosy Mission plays a role in ensuring social inclusion and access to equal rights for all services and resources for leprosy sufferers.

This is being done through the self-help groups for promoting income generating activities, health education and community awareness through social mobilisation, all adding to the protection

of the human rights of the affected people. All these are essential parts of community based rehabilitation, the goal of which is the total empowerment of the patients at societal level. Patients' self-help groups are an infrastructure in advocacy.

To ensure efficacy in this, there is a need of a political commitment both on part of the government and the public. One of the most important areas is legislation to stop exclusion and discrimination, and in favour of integration.

Discrimination is markedly decreased in many countries. But in Bangladesh this still remains a big problem. Often the person (specially female) affected has marital problems and faces divorce; they are excluded from the voters list, denied entrance to religious places and even businesses and shops, faces dismissal from work, some times public transports are denied of them, and has trouble in finding job.

Recently, our government has made special provision for the transport of disabled people. However, we need to see how this is put into practice, though, in case of people with handicaps due to leprosy.

The issue of advocacy for leprosy-affected people cannot be isolated from the concept of human development. It is verily a development issue and needs to be integrated into the mainstream developmental philosophy and practice involving the entire community and its political will, going beyond the administration of MDT and reconstructive surgery, but also more comprehensive services of socio-economic rehabilitation of the affected, advocacy



Emulate her!

for their genuine human rights. Until the people in question are empowered and socio-economically rehabilitated, giving them the dignity of human life, the

issue of leprosy will continue to linger. Let us join hands with one another to ensure that people who are marginalised and excluded are mainstreamed and included for

accessibility for every possible opportunity in life.

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