

Confronting AIDS in Asia

Listening is important. But beyond that we must engage with people living with HIV as we develop policies and carry out programs to address the epidemic. Women and girls are the main caregivers -- and they are also disproportionately vulnerable to HIV infection. They need special attention. We must tackle social norms that prevent women from protecting themselves, including through better legislation, or better enforcement of existing laws.

BAN KI-MOON

As a Korean, and the first UN Secretary-General from Asia in more than 30 years, it's no surprise that I often speak of my home continent as a model for economic development. Yet, when it comes to the AIDS epidemic, I am more disheartened than proud.

Across Asia, AIDS remains the most likely cause of death of people in their most productive years. At the rate we are going, the current 5 million Asians infected with HIV will grow to 13 million by 2020. Meanwhile, the death toll mounts, with some 440,000 people succumbing to AIDS each

year.

Asia's flourishing economic prosperity does not help groups that are most vulnerable to the disease. People living with HIV -- including many in low-risk groups -- are denied their basic rights to health.

This is deplorable, considering how little is required to contain the epidemic and help those in need. A new report, "Redefining AIDS in Asia: Crafting an effective response," by the Commission on AIDS in Asia, an independent body initiated by UNAIDS, finds that annual investment of just thirty cents per capita can reverse the epidemic through prevention. That would translate into saving

the lives of more than 200,000 people each year.

I know my continent has the resources, the technology and the ability to undertake this ambitious and life-saving mission. Asia's fast-growing economies have emancipated millions of poor people. Most countries on the continent are on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, our common vision for building a better world in the 21st century.

But if we fail to act, we could threaten the very prosperity that places Asia in a position to respond effectively now. We are in danger of spinning into a vicious circle where the AIDS epidemic

grows so serious as to undermine economic growth and social resilience, leading to more and more infections at ever-greater cost.

Experience shows Asia's ability to act in the face of grave threats. We saw this in the response to SARS five years ago. Beyond the immeasurable good of saving lives, action will bring a tangible economic boost. For every dollar we spend on preventing HIV today, the report notes, we will save eight dollars on treatment in the future.

Our response to AIDS is not only about money. It is, above all, about people. The stigma associated with AIDS can be worse than the disease -- robbing people of access to basic human rights and health care, preventing them from living a dignified life, and deterring them from getting tested for HIV.

Some of my most inspiring experiences as Secretary-General have been my meetings with UN+, the group of our staff members living with HIV. Their courage and

expertise have given me new and invaluable insights into the epidemic. Hearing from these people, who speak with such directness about their lives, I felt ashamed of the discrimination that people living with HIV often face around the world, and perhaps especially in Asia.

Painful as these lessons may be, I value them and intend, on my next visit, to visit a facility or organisation addressing the needs of those living with HIV and AIDS.

Listening is important. But beyond that we must engage with people living with HIV as we develop policies and carry out programs to address the epidemic.

Women and girls are the main caregivers -- and they are also disproportionately vulnerable to HIV infection. They need special attention. We must tackle social norms that prevent women from protecting themselves, including through better legislation, or better enforcement of existing



laws.

And we must guard against legislation that blocks universal access by criminalising the lifestyles of vulnerable groups. We have to find ways to reach out to sex workers, men who have sex with men and drug users, ensuring that they have what they need to protect themselves.

It starts with Asian Governments showing leadership to invest more substantially in the fight against AIDS and move resolutely to stamp out stigma and discrimination.

This June, the UN General Assembly will hold a high-level meeting offering an opportunity to take stock and advance the global response to AIDS. I personally will do all I can -- as a Secretary-General and an Asian -- to be at the vanguard of this effort. I look to the leaders of Asia to do the same.

Ban Ki-moon is Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Reversing brain-drain

The time has come to reverse this devastating phenomenon, before grave, irreversible damage is done to resource starved poor nations. To begin with, we need to think about why we are failing to keep our brains within our own heads. We need to focus on addressing rationally the push and pull factors responsible for brain-drain to augment brain-gain instead.

ZULFIQUER AHMED AMIN

In a recent get-together of all my friends who passed from Jhenidah Cadet College, it was like a bolt from the blue when we discovered that only 23 out of 48 of us are now staying in Bangladesh, while the rest have gone abroad. It was the same distressing revelation when we found that 69 out of 136 friends who passed from Dhaka Medical College have committed their services to another nation.

Trained and skilled people constitute a very scarce resource for poor countries. Losing them sets development back in these countries. In fact, many countries, having lost their best brains to the industrial world, have had to import expensive consultants from abroad.

A country spends its precious resources to educate and train its people. Losing them to developed

countries is a form of reverse foreign assistance, from resource-poor to resource-rich countries.

Brain drain -- the emigration of skilled workers that takes away this human ingenuity -- is pervasive in most least developed countries (LDCs), and is a serious barrier to using technology to help such nations expand their economies and raise living standards.

The work of skilled professionals is a precondition for upgrading the productive structures, and for improving the sophistication of domestic businesses -- not to mention improving domestic health and education, which benefits the entire population.

Without enough trained agronomists, biologists, engineers, scientists, doctors, nurses and information and communication technology (ICT) professionals, it is impossible for the LDCs to use technology to promote their products and efficiency -- and that

makes it difficult for them to face foreign competitors. Lost human capital, thus, cripples a nation.

Some of the poorest nations on earth, including Haiti, Samoa, Gambia and Somalia, are among those, which have lost more than half of their university-educated professionals, who took jobs abroad. A report in 2004 noted that a million skilled people emigrated from less developed countries out of a total pool of 6.6 million -- which is a loss of 15 per cent.

In a country like Bangladesh, where most of the people are illiterate, advancement in development is at stake. On the other hand, the ones who are educated and capable of contributing towards the growth of the nation prefer to live abroad.

Statistics show that, in Bangladesh, 65 per cent of all newly graduated doctors seek jobs abroad and the country loses 200

doctors from the government sector each year, while there are millions of children suffering from malnutrition and childhood diseases. Moreover, every year thousands of people die due to untreated diseases.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recently reported that in 2005 between a quarter to a third of all practising doctors in countries such as the UK, US, Canada and Australia were trained in another country. Rwanda and Burundi lost 19 per cent of their skilled people in 2000, while Tanzania saw 15.8 per cent of its intellectuals move abroad.

Gambia tops the list in Africa: 64.7 per cent of its educated people left in 2000, followed by Somalia (58.6 per cent), Eritrea (45.8 per cent), Mozambique (42 per cent) and Sierra Leone (41 per cent). India is the world's biggest exporter of doctors. The impact of the brain-drain can be seen in this disturbing statistic: there is one Indian doctor in the United States for every 1,325 Americans. However, there is only one Indian doctor in India for over 2,400 Indians.

The causes are often seen in a bi-polar model of "pulls" exerted

by the foreign countries and the "push" exerted factors operating in the home countries, in which the differentials between the two determine the decision of the individual who migrates. The push factors are depressing characteristics in the country of origin. On the other hand, pull factors are the attracting features in the destination.

A significant factor is the professional milieu within which an individual has to operate. The political control of professional associations, corruption, and outmoded attitudes and procedures often repeatedly discourage the young and aspiring reformer.

The system of higher education is not rooted in local problems, issues and values. Quality and relevance have not yet turned into the criteria for educational planning and development, thus facilitating the upsetting brain-drain.

It is characteristic of brain-drain that the more underdeveloped a country is economically, the more it loses by brain-drain, while only developed countries profit from the process. It is stimulated by the lack of an educational system, as well as the absence of a manpower policy in most of the

under-developed countries.

These deficiencies normally hinder the efficient use of those who are qualified, as well as those having talent. As against this, there are the higher living standards and better research and working opportunities of the more developed countries, which provide thousands of possibilities for developing human potential. In addition to these objective economic factors, brain-drain is also kindled by the actually realised intention of the developed countries to acquire intellectual capital free, and as quickly as possible.

The only positive outcome of brain-drain is inflow of remittances. But, in the true sense, the remittances fail to add to development because they are not spent on investment goods but mostly on unproductive purposes -- housing, land purchase, transport, repayment of debt -- or wasted on conspicuous consumption, or simply saved as insurance and old age pension funds. Thus, they do not contribute effectively to long-term, substantial development of the nation.

The time has come to reverse this devastating phenomenon, before grave, irreversible damage is done to

resource starved poor nations. To begin with, we need to think about why we are failing to keep our brains within our own heads.

We need to focus on addressing rationally the push and pull factors responsible for brain-drain to augment brain-gain instead.

China has adopted an official policy and introduced industry incentives, which are friendly to the expatriates who want to return. The Chinese encouraged their best to acquire valuable expertise abroad, and then wooed them back to set up businesses or work in top government posts.

They have succeeded in creating a professionally stimulating environment to attract students back. In a business friendly environment, returnees have founded most of the country's high-tech companies.

Scientists who have emigrated for whatever reason are recoverable, and can play a part in developing opportunities at home. However, this requires the opening of diverse and creative conduits.

Today's policy makers, scientists, and economists were yesterday's students. By understanding the situation now, we can shape the future for millions. Tackling

the issue requires efforts at all levels of professionalism. Innovative graduate opportunities and programs can be developed with the help of foreign professionals. This requires political decisions, funding, infrastructure, technical support and knowledge sharing among the international community.

Subsidised education is taking away many opportunities from our poor farmers, hoping to change the face of the nation, but has ended up in dust because of the distressing brain-drain.

This trend can be ended, largely by creating conditions that make pursuit of excellence possible, and by making it promising for an engineer, a doctor, scientist or other professional to find personal and professional fulfillment. We desperately need our brains to be contained in our own heads to maintain a momentum of development.

(I thankfully acknowledge Dr. Zahir A Bhuiyan, M.D., Ph.D., Staff Scientist & Geneticist, Department of Clinical Genetics, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, for sharing his brilliant ideas by e-mail.)

Dr. Zulfiqer Ahmed Amin is a physician, and specialist in Public Health Administration and Health Economics.

Trial of war criminals

The trial of war criminals of 1971 will be held in this country, either today or tomorrow, no matter how one may try to side-track the issue. This is what truth and justice demand. This is what we as a nation owe to our martyrs who gave us freedom. Should we fail now to put the war criminals on trial, posterity will try and punish them some other day, if need be posthumously. But tried and punished they will be.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

THAT a very tiny segment of the population which had not only opposed our glorious liberation war and our independence in 1971 but also collaborated with the Pakistan occupation army in committing crimes against humanity has not been indicted for the anti-people role it had played, and has remained free all these years to enjoy full freedom and rights to be elected leaders of this country is a gross historical aberration and incongruity. But sadly enough, this is the legacy handed down to us by our rulers following the August 15 tragedy of 1975.

Even Sheikh Hasina said or did nothing to put an end to this shameful legacy while she was the prime minister of this country. Needless to say, the trial of the war criminals of 1971 is an inescapable necessity warranted by the norms of international justice.

It is not about killing of men fighting in the battlefield. It is about killing of innocent and unarmed people in cold blood in a spirit of ethnic cleansing. It is about deliberate and selective killing of our educated and learned people, and dumping them in mass graves. It is about dishonouring of our women folk.

All credit to late Jahanara Imam, that frail lady and proud mother of a valiant freedom fighter, who epitomised the Bangladesh we had dreamt of in 1971. It was she who led the movement for raising the voice and conscience of the people against the

killings, and demanded their trial and punishment.

For this role of hers, she was formally accused by the then government of Bangladesh of being involved in anti-state activities. But she remained undaunted, and committed to her ideals and role until she died broken hearted with the accusation of treason dangling over her. What an irony of fate!

Now, once again, the demand for trial of war criminals of 1971 has surfaced. This time the surviving sector commanders of the Liberation War, together with other freedom fighters who as junior officers had taken up arms and organised the fledgling Bangladesh Liberation Army and the Mukti Bahini, are in the forefront.

Their demand for trial of the Razakars, the collaborators and the war criminals is getting louder and gaining ground as each day progresses into another day. No doubt this demand sends a chill down the spines of those collaborators and their supporters who have reaped rich political harvest so far.

One may wonder why, after so many years, freedom fighters have got together and are demanding of this caretaker government to initiate action to indict the war criminals, knowing full well that this is an interim government, which may not last beyond this year. The reason is the ambience this government has created for many a genuine issue of national concern to be addressed.

No matter what the detractors may say to malign this government, it is a fact that this 10 man interim

advisory council headed by Dr. Fakhrudin Ahmed has accomplished many a laudable work in a year's time, which a 60 man jumbo cabinet of an elected government backed up by a parliament of 300 elected peoples representatives could not do in 5 years.

Who will deny that maintaining a jumbo cabinet and 300 members of parliament with their enhanced salaries and many perks and privileges, including fully furnished NAM flats allocated at a token rent of Taka 400-500 a month, and the corruption reigning supreme both inside and outside the corridors of power over a period of 5 years, have bled this poor country white?

No, we do not intend to continue with this pro-people but un-elected government for an indefinite period. But before they go, we would like this government to finish the tasks it has embarked upon. The tasks include:

- Preparing a flawless and credible voter list with photographs,
- Drawing up and putting in place democratic reforms aimed at strengthening all democratic national institutions,
- Freeing our national politics from the clutches of people who have tainted themselves with ill-gotten money, who have their names listed with police stations as common criminals, robbers, murderers, rapists, toll collectors, land grabbers etc., who have amassed huge wealth and property disproportionate to their legitimate source of income, and who have been either convicted in a court of law or

may not initiate any action to try the war criminals, although there is ample documentary evidence to begin the legal process of indictment.

The government can ill-afford to deny space to the surviving war heroes and millions and millions of men and women across the country who want to see these criminals put on trial and punished, thus ending the ignominy of having to see them as political and social elites.

By not allowing the SCF to hold a planned national convention at Bangladesh-China Friendship Convention Centre on March 15, the government may have damaged its pro-people image and neutral credentials.

Some clerics in various mosques seize every opportunity to denounce our secular Bengali culture and women's liberty as anti-Islamic. They have systematically let loose tirades against our traditional celebration of Language Martyrs' Day on February 21, and of Pahela Boishakh.

Of late, they have been severely critical of the national women development policy of 2008. Let us not forget that those who oppose the trial of war criminals are also closely linked with Islamist militancy, which raised its ugly head during the last BNP-Jamaat alliance government.

The trial of war criminals of 1971 will be held in this country, either today or tomorrow, no matter how one may try to side-track the issue. This is what truth and justice demand. This is what we as a nation owe to our martyrs who gave us freedom. Should we fail now to put the war criminals on trial, posterity will try and punish them some other day, if need be posthumously. But tried and punished they will be.

The government can hardly afford to open another front at this time by brushing aside the just demand of the Sector Commanders Forum (SCF) for trial of war criminals of 1971. The government may

or may not initiate any action to try the war criminals, although there is ample documentary evidence to begin the legal process of indictment.

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Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed is a former Military Secretary to the President of Bangladesh.

New Drugs For Women (by men)

Tirelynol: Prevents tiredness and headaches at bedtime.

Shoppiproofen: Two five ml doses taken at breakfast will enable a woman to walk straight past stores without entering.

Moodifix: Fifteen mls of this doubles the length of time a woman stays in one mood before changing to another, i.e., from about two minutes to four, if you're lucky.

Canotassium: Reacts with the left side of the brain to alleviate the intrinsic female fear of math.

Vaniticillin: Enables women to walk past reflective surfaces without checking make-up.

Irrationalicet: Helps women maintain a logical argument without drifting off into side issues, such as, "But do you love me?"

Pricetagia: Alleviates female blindness to pricetags.

Clarium: Enables women to hold and compare two separate thoughts, such as "Why is my diet not working?" and "I think I'll have some more chocolate."

Slatewypia: A five c.c. dose of this prevents women from remembering anything their male partner said more than a year ago.

Naggicease: Disables the vocal chords for up to five hours.

A doctor at the party said that some of the drugs postulated above may even be in production already. That's interesting, because I've just remembered it's my wife's birthday soon, and I feel this bizarre urge to head to the jewellery shop...

Say yes to drugs

TODAY, medical researchers all over the world pause for a moment to acknowledge the birthday of the most successful drug of the modern era. Viagra was launched ten years ago today. At a dinner party recently, I was surprised to hear women name it as a breakthrough, which had improved the lives of women in Asia.

But isn't it for men?

"Men take it for women," a 40-something woman explained. She and her friends then went on to brainstorm 10 other drugs that needed to be developed and "force-fed" to males.

New Drugs For Men (by women)

Anniversia: Triggers memories of birthdays and wedding anniversaries while simultaneously loosening spending inhibitions at jewelry shops.

Verbilose: One 10 ml spoon of this before dinner will make a man willing to talk about his feelings for 20 minutes.

Slendavis: Widens and flattens the male cornea, making wives appear slim and willowy.

Belchex: Adds foul taste to stomach gas making men scared to burp etcetera.

Aspirude: Small white tablet that prevents men from telling off-colour jokes at dinner parties.

Combobox: Shortens hair at the sides of the head, so men cannot make themselves look silly by combing locks over their bald spot.

Sportobind: Reacts with the optic nerve to prevent men recognizing the word "sports" on the TV schedule.

Gadjesterol: Deadens the area of the brain that makes men buy overpriced gadgets.

Chorocet: Two spoons at breakfast and your man will have an insatiable desire to do household chores.

Storophobex: After 10 c.c. of this a day for two weeks, men are able to go shopping with their wives and wait patiently in stores -- even boutiques and underwear shops -- for an astonishing four hours.

The men at that particular dinner party were not going to take that lying down. They drew up their own list.

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