

## Is G8 a parallel UN Security Council?

In recent years, the G8 summit has become notorious for attracting a lot of publicity for the vocal assembly of various groups opposed to these meetings. The clashes between the police and these groups were more widely publicised in the media than the proceedings of the meetings. All credit must be given to Yasuo Fukuda, prime minister of Japan (where the 34th G8 summit was held), for choosing a remote highland resort at Toyako in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island.

K. Z. ISLAM

WHAT is the yardstick and rationale for forming an international organisation? Is it military might? Is it financial strength? Is it the level of GDP? Or is it population? There can be various combinations for forming an international organisation.

At the end of World War II, the victors decided to take measures to avoid the possibility of repetition of a global conflict and formed the UN. At the pinnacle of the world political management, but looking increasingly anachronistic, is the UN Security Council. Of its 15 members, 10 can rotate at the whim of the various UN regional groupings. The other 5, which wield vetoes and are permanent, are US, Russia, China, Britain and France, roughly speaking the victors of the last, long ago, world war.

Since the location of the UN Headquarters is in New York, the US has taken it for granted that it is an offshoot of the US government. Also the absurd system of veto has put 200 odd members of the UN at

the mercy of the one veto. This very veto has rendered the UN a most ineffective organisation for solving international problems relating to politics, food, genocides, climate change, financial crisis, fuel and many others.

Because of the ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council there has been a tendency for various groups of countries to form associations. We have seen the group of non-aligned nations, the G77 (now 130), G8, etc. None of these have worked democratically, or have any formal constitution or permanent offices. The regional organisations have fared much better, e.g. Asean, Apec, Saarc, etc. In the early 1970s, developed countries faced with various problems, such as the devaluation of the dollar and the first oil crisis, began to realise the need for a top-level forum to discuss, in a comprehensive manner, policy coordination for global economic issues such as macro-economy, currencies, trade and energy.

Against these backdrops the first summit meeting was held as proposed by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, then president of

France, among 6 countries -- France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the US and the UK -- in Paris in November 1975. Subsequently, Canada (since 1976) and Russia (since 1992) were added to the list, which became known as G8 (Group of 8). The president of the European Commission has also been attending the summit from 1981.

On the positive side, it may be mentioned that, without any formal constitution or permanent secretariat, this forum gives the leaders of the top industrialised countries an opportunity to get together informally and possibly sort out some differences. If one sees the proceedings of the various summits, they have repeatedly supported the UN and other international organisations like World Bank, IMF, UNFCCC, IPCC, etc. One wonders if, over the 34 years of the existence of G8, they can claim any substantial contribution to the resolution of any international problem.

In recent years, the G8 summit has become notorious for attracting a lot of publicity for the vocal assembly of various groups

opposed to these meetings. The clashes between the police and these groups were more widely publicised in the media than the proceedings of the meetings.

All credit must be given to Yasuo Fukuda, prime minister of Japan (where the 34th G8 summit was held), for choosing a remote highland resort at Toyako in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. I couldn't locate Toyako in a large map of Japan. Many foreign activists were turned away at the border, and such demonstrations were kept to distant cities where riot police outnumbered malcontents.

Even the media horde and those NGOs deemed semi-respectable were interned in a holiday camp about 20 miles from the 8 great leaders. Fukuda showed statesmanship in answer to the perennial criticism of the G8, a self-appointed steering group for global problems but hardly representative of the world, by inviting 7 national leaders from Africa to join the G8. Also invited were leaders of Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Australia and Indonesia.

About the leaders of the G8 participating in the summit; Mr. Fukuda is weak domestically, Mr. Brown looks slightly better, Mr. Bush is a lame, unpopular duck. Sarkozy of France struggles to comprehend how and why the voters' enthusiasm has evaporated. Medvedev of Russia is a sidekick of Vladimir Putin while Harper of Canada was a strong



BRIC nations are yet to sit at the big table.

opponent of the Kyoto protocol before he became prime minister of Canada and, finally, Berlusconi of Italy is a well known wheeler and dealer. Perhaps that leaves only Merkel of Germany with a clean slate. What the world can expect from these dubious leaders without any delegation of authority from their electorates is anybody's guess.

Generally, people do not see any importance of the G8, which is only a sort of parallel of the Security Council of the UN. Even if there has to be a periodic review of the working of the UN, might the world be better managed by a G12 or G16 including certainly all the BRIC countries and Turkey?

The 34th G8 summit will certainly go down in history as the most expensive ever held.

Although a full account has not been announced the estimated total cost is likely to exceed half a billion dollars, dwarfing the meagre \$2.5 million spent at Gleneagles 3 years ago.

Now for the actual negotiation in Hokkaido. The G8 documents are voluminous and would run into hundreds of pages. It is doubtful that many people will read them, and whether their recommendations are useful and relevant. Mr. Fukuda's summary on July 9 covered the following points:

### World economy

On substance, the summit was a let down. A year ago, when the summit took place in Germany, oil and food were at half of today's prices, while Northern Rock was an unknown little bank. At the

Hokkaido summit, the G8 leaders rose to the challenges posed by the "three Fs" -- food, fuel and financial credit crunch -- with platitudes, and little effort was made to resolve the contradiction between calls for larger oil supplies and the promise of a low-carbon future.

### Environment and climate change

G8 sought to share with all parties to the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) the goal of achieving at least 50% reduction of global emissions by 2050, recognising that this global challenge could only be met by a global response. Last year, Germany's chancellor Merkel overcame the reluctance of George Bush and got the G8 to promise to "consider seriously" cutting greenhouse emission by at least half by 2050. This time, the G8 vowed to "consider and adopt."

Yet, the G8 commitments start to crumble under scrutiny, as a diplomat pointed out how absurd it was for today's politicians to take responsibility for meeting goals 4 decades from now.

### Development and Africa

After discussions, the G8 leaders announced new measures for improving education, health, water supplies and sanitation, and increasing the number of doctors and nurses in Africa. However, the Times says that it will be by the presence, or absence, of a head-

line African figure that their talks will be judged a success or failure. Fukuda and Brown are reported to be pressing for the fulfillment of pledges made at the 2005 Gleneagles summit, but Sarkozy and Berlusconi are seen to be pulling back from those commitments.

The G8 leaders set a five-year deadline to commit \$60 billion in funding to help Africa fight disease, including pledging 100 million mosquito nets by 2010, which will prevent thousands of deaths from malaria. They also renewed a commitment made three years ago to double aid for Africa to \$25 billion by 2010 and to consider pledging further assistance after 2010.

### Political issues

The G8 discussed DPRK, Iran, Afghanistan, Middle East, Sudan, Myanmar, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and civilian nuclear cooperation with India.

The bottom line is that the G8 discussion is hardly going to have any influence whatsoever in all the matters discussed in the agenda. The main discussion should have been to bring G8, which is really an anachronism, in line with the contemporary situation. They should have concentrated on how to make UN more effective in resolving the various problems confronting the world today.

K. Z. Islam is a businessman.

## In search of safe water

Each day of continued exposure to contaminated water increases the risk of morbidity and death. Unlike other major health problems experienced in Bangladesh, arsenic-caused diseases can be eradicated at relatively low cost.

KHALID MD. BAHAUDDIN

PEOPLE need clean water and sanitation to maintain their health. Water also sustains ecological systems and provides an input into the production systems that maintain livelihoods. Water security is an integral part of a broader conception of human security.

In broad terms, water security means ensuring that every person has access to enough safe water to lead a healthy life, while maintaining the ecological systems that provide water and also depend on water.

When water security is absent, people suffer from poor health and the disruption of livelihoods. Some 2.6 billion people -- half the developing world's population -- do not have access to basic sanitation, and underreporting means that these figures understate the problem. "Not having access" to water and sanitation is a polite euphemism for a form of deprivation that threatens life, destroys opportunity and undermines human dignity.

Deprivation of water and sanitation has many bad effects. Some of those are:

- Some 1.8 million child deaths each year are a result of diarrhoea -- 4,900 deaths every day, or an under-five population equal to that of London and New York combined. Deaths from diarrhoea in 2004 were some six times greater than the average annual deaths in armed conflicts for the 1990s. Together, unclean water and poor sanitation are the second biggest killers of children.

- The loss of 443 million school days each year from water-related illness.
- Close to half of all people in developing countries suffering at any given time from a health problem caused by water and sanitation deficits.
- Millions of women spending several hours a day collecting water.
- Water insecurity inflicts millions of people with illness, and lost educational opportunities in childhood leading to poverty in adulthood.

At the beginning of the "Water for Life" decade, 1.1 billion people did not have access to clean drinking water, 84% of who lived in rural areas. 2.6 billion people, more than 40% of the world population, do not use a toilet.

In 2004, more than three out of every five rural people did not have access to basic sanitation facility. If the current trend persists, nearly 1.7 billion rural dwellers will still not have access to improved sanitation by 2015.

Bangladesh has a population of about 144 million, of whom 40% are under the poverty line. An estimate puts the total population at 181 million by 2025, with 41% living in the urban areas -- nearly half of them will be poor and without services.

In Bangladesh, up to 40% of overall morbidity is due to water and sanitation related disease in some communities. In the year 2000, 12.1% DALYs were lost due to diarrhoeal diseases, and 90% of these were attributable to environmental causes of which 65% could be averted through improvement in water



I see it's dirty, but I have no alternative.

supply, sanitation (latrines, drainage, rubbish disposal) and hygiene awareness. Diarrhoeal diseases, due to water pollution, lack of hygiene, and poor sanitation account for 11% of total deaths in Bangladesh.

The most alarming fact is that hygiene-related diseases costs the country, Tk. 500 crore per year for treatment alone. According to the Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authorities, the groundwater table -- the source of drinking water for one-third of this city's 10 million people -- has become contaminated with harmful bacteria.

Bangladesh is grappling with the largest mass poisoning of a population in history because groundwater used for drinking has been contaminated with naturally occurring inorganic arsenic. It is estimated that of the 125 million inhabitants of Bangladesh between 35 million and 77 million are at risk of drinking contaminated water.

Arsenic in groundwater poses a great challenge to the water supply in the country. Since its detection in 1993, various organisations have been screening tube wells for arsenic contamination. The most contaminated areas lie in the districts of Chandpur, Comilla,

Noakhali, Munshiganj, Faridpur, Madaripur, Gopalganj, Shariatpur and Satkhira.

Excessive levels have also been found in other regions. Arsenic-contaminated drinking water is a public health emergency. Exposure to arsenic from drinking water increases the risk of skin, lung and bladder cancer.

WHO has predicted that in most of the southern part of Bangladesh almost 1 in every 10 adult deaths in the next decade will be a result of cancer triggered by arsenic poisoning. From the experience of Taiwan it has been forecasted that almost two million of people are at risk of developing cancer in the coming decades.

Each day of continued exposure increases the risk of morbidity and death. Unlike other major health problems experienced in Bangladesh, arsenic-caused diseases can be eradicated at relatively low cost.

Safe water and sanitation are basic necessities, so we must ensure their availability, not only for the present but also for the future.

Khalid Md. Bahauddin is Member, Bangladesh Society of Environmental Scientists, Jahangirnagar University, and Member, LIFE -- a UN associated NGO.

## The traffic commentary

But, instead of focusing on only the "billion dollar metro system," why don't we also consider the numerous water bodies within the city? With a little collaboration between the city officials and various affluent entrepreneurs, there are many lakes, not to mention the Buriganga river, that may provide a meaningful substitute for cars and buses.

NIHAD CHOUDHURY

My article is in response to the recently published column "Spinning our wheels" by Mr. Nasim Manzur. Instead of simply agreeing with all the facts and figures given by the aforementioned writer, I would also like to reiterate some of the problems and possible solutions to solve this "metro-crisis." Although, I am an expatriate residing in New Jersey, I spent my entire childhood in Dhaka and, therefore, my article will be biased towards the capital.

Mr. Manzur has pointed out Beijing's \$28.1 billion injection to reduce traffic congestion during the Olympic Games. I would like to add that there are various driving restrictions in place for the games as well. For example, according to The New York Times, almost 70% of the estimated 300,000 cars registered to the Chinese government in the city will be off the roads.

Along with that, trucks will be forbidden to enter the city for two months during the Olympics and the Paralympics soon after. That is a drop of almost 45% of total traffic according to Mr. Zhou Zhengyu, a spokesman for the city's traffic committee. In Dhaka's case, such a drop in vehicular transportation would be impracticable (unless we get the next Olympics!).

According to a survey carried out by Democracy Watch, a majority of respondents identified worsening roads and unplanned repairs as the main causes of traffic jams. It is the respondents' belief that the software behind the package (i.e. legal framework, planning, management, etc) rather than the hardware (i.e. brick and mortar stuff), needs expansion.

From my perspective, the other

reasons behind these gridlocks are the simultaneous presence of motorised and non-motorised vehicles on the same roads and traffic mismanagement. To handle the first situation, the government has definitely been on the dot by banning rickshaws on several important roads. But, for the traffic mismanagement part, I believe there is room for improvement, especially in hotspots such as the intersections in Motijheel and Gulshan. But, the alteration of the Bengali temper and the education of a traffic sergeant, that's another matter altogether.

In actuality, as well as peoples' views, Dhaka seriously lacks alternative modes of transportation for its burgeoning populace. As Prof. Nabi mentioned in his article in The Daily Star, and to voice the opinion of thousands of belligerent commuters, a Mass Rapid Transit system is definitely needed. But, instead of focusing on only the "billion dollar metro system," why don't we also consider the numerous water bodies within the city?

With a little collaboration between the city officials and various affluent entrepreneurs, there are many lakes, not to mention the Buriganga river, that may provide a meaningful substitute for cars and buses. For example, in Amsterdam the city provides boats such as The Canal Bus and the Museumboot (The Museum Boat) to commute in and around the city. If geographers' predictions are correct, both Dhaka and Amsterdam will be underwater within the next 40 odd years. Well, I suppose the Dutch seem to be quite prepared for the catastrophe already.

Finally, from the perspective of a resident of New Jersey, the state with the famous Turnpike and the Garden

State Parkway, I believe the construction of a super-highway is a very viable solution. Although this may seem contradictory to the previous mentioned views regarding more roads, I believe that traffic and the masses should be directed not only around the city, but also out of it!

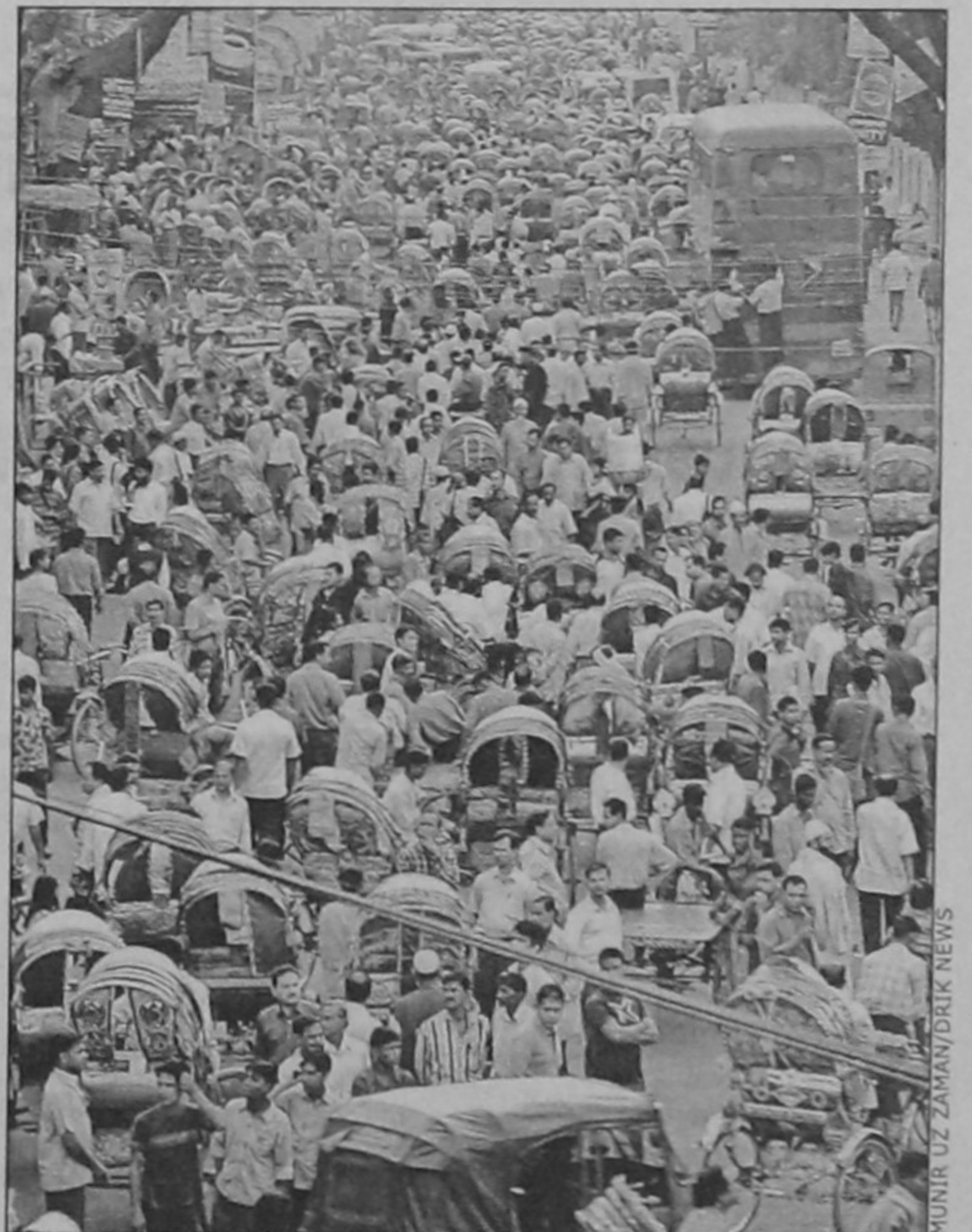
Just envision a miniature Asian Highway within Bangladesh itself, running from the way from Lalmonirhat to Cox's Bazar. Even though a mammoth creation as such would be expensive, if toll-booths are placed in every exit to a district the returns would be an annuity of sorts. The main purpose would be to allow people to live outside Dhaka and yet have access to all the conveniences of the city.

We agree that most commuters do spend half their journey complaining about the gridlock and road

conditions. But, to be quite honest, the same conversations are carried on in most other metropolises as well. The only advantage that Dhaka residents may have over other cities would mainly be the saturation levels of the city planners.

Dhaka is fairly young in comparison to many other metropolitan cities. Thus, it still has time to reallocate resources to solve this problem. But, gargantuan funds are required to initiate all these beautiful ideas. But, an optimist would agree that with a little help from local businessmen, and foreign investments (psst The World Bank and ADB), that too could solved.

Nihad Choudhury is a student at Rutgers University and welcomes all feedback at nihadchy@gmail.com.



How long will it take to cross the street?

## The men-only shrinking disease that is spread by phone



by Nury Vittachi

NOW I had better warn you before we start that today's column focuses on an extremely serious topic of a highly delicate and mature nature. It should therefore be read with your hand over your mouth, sniggering quietly to yourself.

The subject is koro, or male organ theft. I can hear a sharp intake of breath from older male readers all over Asia. No one who has experienced koro can ever forget it.

This is the scary bit -- there are numerous records of people catching koro by speaking to a sufferer on a telephone.

And this is the even scarier bit: we are overdue for another epidemic of it.

Koro (*suo yang* in Mandarin, *suk yeong* in Cantonese) is a male-only disease.

This is how it works. Men wake up to discover that a widely popular organ has shrunk dramatically. They panic. This causes it to shrink further, disappearing before their very eyes. They leap out of bed and tie things to it, in a bid to stop it withdrawing completely.

This causes it to become so small it can only be seen with an electron microscope. Running out of the house with one hand in their trou-

sers and one on their electron microscope, they go to warn their friends. Or they hide in the house and telephone their friends.

Either way, these unfortunate acquaintances are promptly hit by the same disease. They tell others and so on, until thousands of males have the problem.

When doctors realised it was spread not by germs but by whispers, they worked out that it was a form of mass hysteria, which fed on a sense of genital inadequacy felt by most males (present columnist excepted).

There was a huge epidemic of koro in Asia in 1967-1968 (centred

in Singapore) and another in 1984-1987 (centred in Guangdong, China). We are overdue for another one.

Now my suggestion is this. Instead of waiting for it to break out by itself, let's keep it in control by doing a bit of social engineering. All you have to do is approach a male anywhere in Asia who has not read this column (there may be a few). Explain to him what koro is and tell him that an outbreak is expected in Asia any day now.

If you do your job well, he will race to the men's room to "wash his hands." He will then emerge two minutes later, white-faced, looking

for string and heavy objects.

Do not laugh. This is serious business.

Hand him a length of twine and a small anvil that you have conveniently placed beforehand in your handbag.

When he explains that he is having a little "man trouble," advise him to talk to his friends about it, and hand him your mobile phone.

Before you know it, we will have set in train a massive experiment in viral marketing.

Talking of psychosomatic diseases, I was intrigued to hear that

earlier this month because of what doctors call "outbreaks of hysterical behaviour" among schoolgirls. They were observed to be falling around, laughing and weeping and fainting. These episodes dramatically interrupted schoolgirls' normal daytime activity, which was behaving hysterically and falling around, laughing, weeping and fainting.

Or maybe they'd heard about koro? It only affects men, but most women show their deep sympathy by laughing hysterically.

You may catch it from our columnist's website: www.vittachi.com.