

Can change come to Bangladesh?

Following on the heels of this historic election in the US, Bangladesh also made a bold comeback to democracy with a ringing victory for a party that also promised a change from the old system that had brought the country almost to a grinding halt. We felt that we could almost hear an echo of Obama, "Change has come to Bangladesh." But will it actually come?

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

SHORTLY after his arrival in Washington DC, about two weeks prior to his inauguration, Obama visited places in the city that would be home to him and his family for the next four years. Escorted by the Mayor of Washington DC, he went to Ben's Chili Bowl, a place frequented by the locals for hot dogs, burgers, and its famous Chili.

At the end of the meal Obama gave a twenty-dollar bill to the waiter. When asked if he wanted to get change, Obama replied: "No, we are straight." In African-American slang, it means no change is required. A delighted waiter, himself an African-American, commented later to a reporter that Obama's response showed that "he is a brother," that is he was one of them.

The irony of the remark is that during

his campaign, especially in the early stages, Obama critics portrayed him as an "elitist," because of his education in a private school and Ivy League Universities. Obama would soon dispel this false notion through his ability to commiserate with a wide audience, reading their minds, articulating their hopes, sharing their dreams, and committing to work with all of them.

He addressed audiences of all colours and all shades of opinion, not all of whom agreed with him politically, or perhaps even liked the thought of his being president. But he impressed them, nonetheless, with a remarkable ability to listen, appreciate another's point of view, and seek some common ground.

Obama's ability to seek a common ground, even with his ideological and political opponents, is yet another illustration of his approach in solving issues by

involving all who matter. Prior to his inauguration, Obama attended a private dinner at the house of George Will, an arch-conservative political columnist. There were other luminaries of the conservative platform, including the *Weekly Standard's* William Kristol, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, and Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post*.

The event was touted in the press as "a charm offensive" by Obama. But this was in perfect accord with his pledge to be a "uniter," and his willingness to take policy suggestions from any source, regardless of ideological affiliation, as long as they worked.

Following on the heels of this historic election in the US, Bangladesh also made a bold comeback to democracy with a ringing victory for a party that also promised a change from the old system that had brought the country almost to a grinding halt. We felt that we could almost hear an echo of Obama, "Change has come to Bangladesh." But will it actually come?

Much hope rides on the political change that has come to Bangladesh. It may not have brought a new face, but it has brought back a leadership that hopefully has gained from the tribulations of several decades, been enriched by global experience, and humbled by personal adversity and reposition of trust by the

country.

Miracles need not happen, nor do big changes need to come overnight to meet the expectations, but they need to begin in a way that is transparent. Obama often remarked in his campaign that "change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time." For the new government in Bangladesh the time is now, and it is ticking away.

Formation of the cabinet with new faces gives us hope that the old order will gradually yield to the new. But fundamental changes need to be made in the way we work, conduct ourselves to resolve issues, and involve all who matter.

The euphoria of victory will soon wane, and the government will have to yield to the harsh realities of running the country. There will be hundreds of problems, and as many ways to address them. Some will have to be undertaken at great cost, both financial and political. But from my perspective, there are a few measures that could be undertaken at the least cost, but to everyone's satisfaction. These would be the following.

- Take advice from all, including the opposition. Have committees that draw membership from a variety of professions and political parties.
- Engage the opposition constructively by allowing them to sit in parliamentary committees; allow it to chair some.



Will the wind of change touch them?

- Maintain the independence of the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Election Commission; and the Public Service Commission.
- Let all current cases of corruption be decided by the courts.
- Depoliticise the bureaucracy and the educational institutions.

Obama had said: "If the people cannot

trust their government to do the job for which it exists -- to protect them and to promote their common welfare -- all else is lost." I fervently hope that our government will do the right thing, and change will come to Bangladesh.

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Ending needless tragedy

There are bright sparks of hope stretching across South Asia from Kathmandu, Karachi to Colombo. Across the globe too there's an exciting momentum as governments and donors see the value in supporting maternal and newborn health initiatives beginning at minus nine months and continuing until the child is five years old.

DAN TOOLE

THERE can be nothing quite as brutal as when a birth brings death, instead of life. Yet this is exactly what happens across South Asia. Every hour of every day in South Asia, 22 mothers die in child birth -- lives that matter, deaths that matter, leaving orphaned babies who in turn face a much greater risk of death themselves.

This is a region bursting with potential but held back by cruel contradictions -- where despite the global financial crisis that has bruised the region's economy, growth continues and there are world-class medical institutions. Yet every minute three newborn babies die across the region -- the highest neonatal mortality in the world.

Linked to this tragedy is another. South Asia has more child marriages than anywhere else in the world -- nearly half of all women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before they turned 18. Early marriage leads to early motherhood and which can lead to early death of baby and mother.

When children themselves have chil-

dren, their babies' risk of dying in the first year of life shoots up by 60% compared to an infant born to a mother older than 19 years. If that baby does survive, he or she is more likely to be undernourished and uneducated.

Mothers die in childbirth -- slowly, painfully bleeding to death -- because they do not get help when they need it. Women often have no say. In Bangladesh and Nepal about half of all women reported their husbands make all decisions about their healthcare.

In Afghanistan, astonishingly one in eight women risk death by having a baby, the second highest rate in the world. Women there will not see a male health worker, yet due to the country's recent history, there is only 28% female literacy and a massive scarcity of female trained birth attendants, or midwives.

To end this horrible pattern, there is no need to wait for a scientific breakthrough, or for the economic crisis to pass. We know now what needs to be done and we know it needs to be done now. Waiting is not an option.

A shining example in South Asia comes from Sri Lanka. In spite of three

decades of ongoing civil conflict and the devastating effects of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the country has slashed the number of women dying in childbirth from 340 per 100,000 live births in 1960, one of the world's highest at the time, to 44 per 100,000 in 2005. Latest figures show just 8 newborns dying per 1,000 live births -- similar to a developed country.

It was that magic tipping point that made Sri Lanka a model for health care delivery in developing nations -- since the 60s the country invested in educating girls who were then in no hurry to get married early; critically education was free for all. Training of midwives was a priority; midwives started to go out to where it mattered, got women to plan the births of their babies, go to health centers and hospitals to give birth, told them how to eat well and significantly, to breastfeed exclusively and right away.

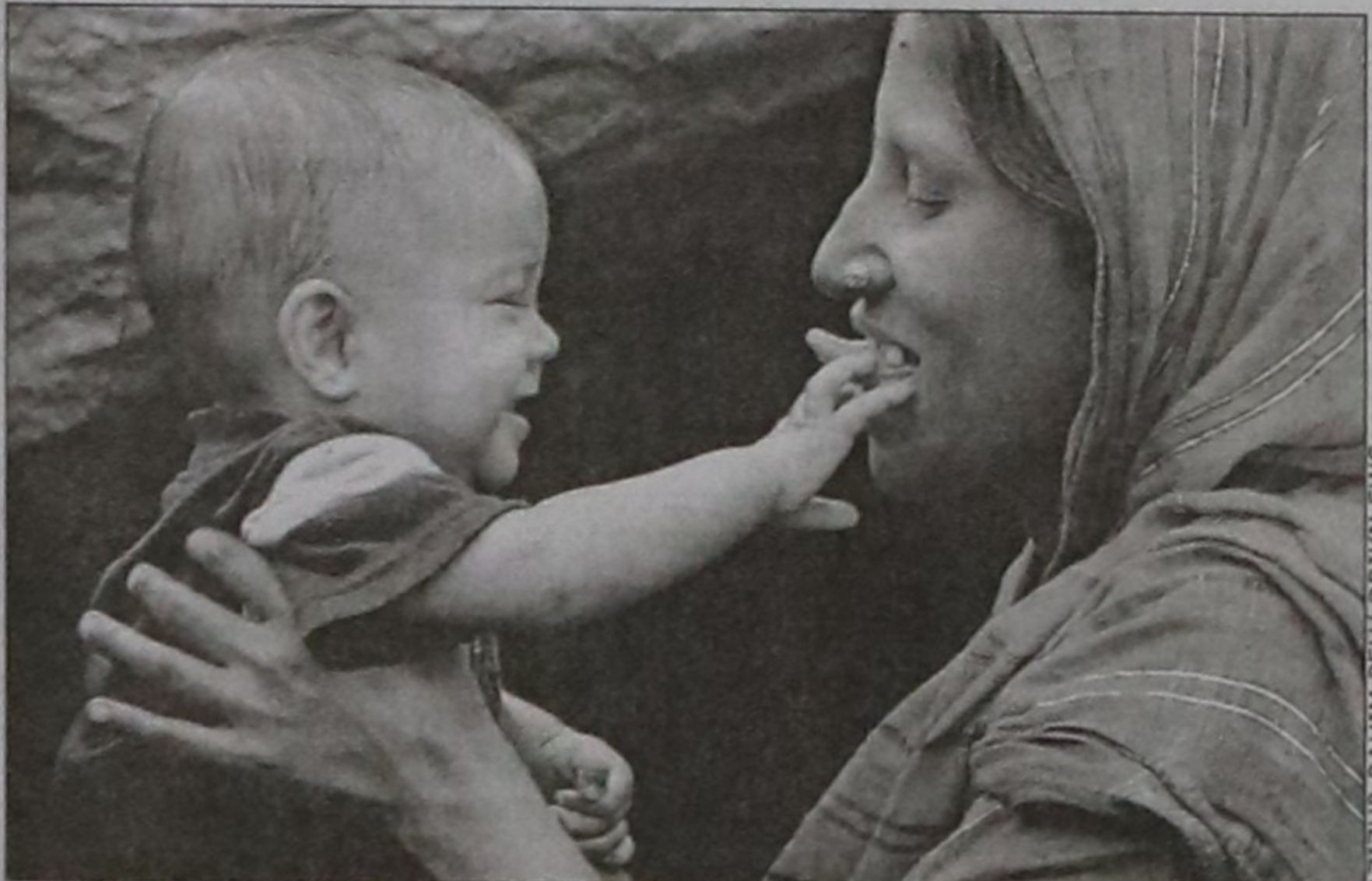
Today, remarkably 95% of births in Sri Lanka take place in hospitals with a skilled nurse, midwife or doctor attending and immunization coverage is almost universal.

There are bright sparks of hope stretching across South Asia from Kathmandu, Karachi to Colombo. Across the globe too there's an exciting momentum as governments and donors see the value in supporting maternal and newborn health initiatives beginning at minus nine months and continuing until the child is five years old.

Nepal has done some great things by making health services free for mothers and has cut child mortality by two thirds; India gives cash transfers to mothers to give birth in institutions; Bangladesh has cut deaths of its newborns from tetanus down to just one death in 1000. And in Pakistan 'Lady Health Workers' map and monitor mothers-to-be and their babies in their communities.

Unicef and its partners in government are behind many of these initiatives and we pledge to make even greater strides for mothers and their babies. South Asia will rise or fall on investing and caring for mothers -- minus 9 months -- and their newborns. This is the bedrock of any society. Making mothers and their newborns count, adds up to a society that matters, a nation that flourishes, and a region that starts to reap the rewards of its labour.

Dan Toole is UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia.



Every life matters.

An unclenched fist

With two wars already on his plate, Obama would do well to quell a rising storm in Africa's Horn, and the sooner the radicals are tamed, the less likely it is that they'll continue to splinter into the kinds of factions that could eventually return Somalia to the days when warlords ruled the streets.



SCOTT JOHNSON

AS a state, Somalia has racked up more failures than any other on the planet. So said Susan Rice, soon to be Barack Obama's UN ambassador, in a Brookings Institution report she coauthored last year. Since then, Somalia's troubles have only worsened: 1.3 million internally displaced people roam the country scavenging for food; the president quit last month; and hard-line Islamist militias, having already taken control of Somalia's south and central regions, now stand poised to tighten their grip on the capital, Mogadishu.

Some 10,000 innocent civilians have been killed since January 2007, pirates are terrorising the coasts, and last month Somalia entered its 19th year without a functioning government. In many ways, Somalia is hardly a state.

But as a foreign-policy initiative, Somalia's problems offer Obama a unique chance to sketch a bold path forward in the region. After the Bush administration backed the Ethiopian invasion in 2006, helping to overthrow the moderate Islamic Courts Union, Somalia descended into war, and the Bush policy radicalised an ever-larger portion of the population.

Obama, whose world view embraces the idea of talking to one's enemies, could shift course on this policy failure and increase stability by re-engaging with the Islamists, and in particular with the young fighters who make up the ranks of al-Shabab, the Islamists who have been gaining strength over the last two years and continue to drag Somalia further into chaos.

The window of opportunity for Obama is small and fragile. But two things have happened in Somalia that could make the task easier. First, the hated Ethiopian occupation of Somalia that fueled the growth of al-Shabab is over. Second, Abdullah Yusuf resigned in December as president, paving the way for more moderate and inclusive figures to have greater say.

Still, Obama's policy prescriptions would have to be specific, but not overstated. He could temporarily suspend U.S. military C-130 flights over Somalia, now a near-constant presence, thereby sending a message that a future policy will not have as its central piece a military component that alienates the very people America needs to bring to the table.

Obama could also consider suspending al-Shabab from the terror list temporarily to prove that, as he said in his inaugural speech, America will hold out its hand if its

enemies "unclench their fists."

A third path would be to open back-channel negotiations with as many hard-line factions as necessary to bring them into talks. Key to any strategy would be a quiet outreach effort to Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys, considered the father of Somalia's Islamist movement and likely sufficiently powerful to bring enough radicals to heel to make any diplomacy worthwhile.

Finally, as Rice hinted in her confirmation hearings, America needs to begin to fashion a regional approach that would address the longstanding border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea as part of any move to end Somalia's isolation.

It won't be easy. Al-Shabab poses urgent security concerns to the United States and many of Somalia's neighbors. Some of the group's hard-line leaders have connections to Al Qaeda. More worryingly, Somalia has started to attract American jihadists, including several from Minnesota who traveled there recently to fight.

An unknown number may still be training in Shabab training camps in the south, and it's unclear whether their long-term goals lie in Somalia or back in Minnesota. Yet Obama, already beset by doubts about his Muslim heritage, isn't likely to make conciliatory talks with Islamists in Africa his first move. "He would be walking into a trap if he did anything that could lead to charges of being soft on terror," says Sally Healy, a Somalia expert at Chatham House.

But the potential rewards of such a strategy are tantalizing. The Bush administration made a policy out of talking to its enemies in Iraq, including many who had killed American soldiers, and as a result Iraq is calmer and more stable.

With two wars already on his plate, Obama would do well to quell a rising storm in Africa's Horn, and the sooner the radicals are tamed, the less likely it is that they'll continue to splinter into the kinds of factions that could eventually return Somalia to the days when warlords ruled the streets.

The alternative to engagement, says Rashid Abdi of the International Crisis Group's Somalia team, is that "by the end of the year, we could be talking about over 100 armed groups in Somalia."

A further descent into warlordism is likely only to help the spread of radical Islam in the region. So while few doubt that a strategy of engaging with the Islamists could be risky, for Somalia and the rest of the Horn the riskiest option may also be the best.

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Truth in personal ads



LOOKING over a friend's shoulder recently, I read a personal ad on a Hong Kong dating website: "Tall Guy, Age 36. Are there any nice guys left? After me, I'm not sure."

"How arrogant," I said. "There are three billion men on this planet, so there MUST be a few other nice unmarried guys."

My friend considered this point. "There aren't," she said. "I checked."

I had a look at the women's page of the same website. Female ads seemed more honest, such as this one: "Hong Kong female, age 38, seriously looking for a good and sincere man for marriage. I am fun to be with sometimes." The presence of "sometimes" on the end of that sentence means that's a girl you can trust.

But the most blisteringly honest personal ads in the world come from Ireland. Here are three: "Bitter, disillusioned Dublin man, lately rejected by longtime fiancée, seeks decent, honest, reliable woman, if such a thing still exists in this cruel world of hatchet-faced women."

"Devil-worshiper, Offaly area, seeks like-minded lady, for wine and dining, good conversation, dancing, romantic walks, and slaughtering cats in cemeteries at midnight under the flinty light of a pale moon."

"Limerick man, 26, medium build, brown hair, blue eyes, seeks alibi for the night of February 24 between 8 pm and 11:30 pm."

You occasionally get honest ads from Asia, such as this recent one from Bangladesh: "Male, 34, Dhaka. I am a fighter looking for someone who will fight with me. Interests: Chess, cricket, cooking something special, jokes, singing, fighting with someone special."

Here's an honest one I saw last week in an Indian newspaper: "Female, 22, non-veg. I am very emotional as 70 per cent of Indians are."

For me, ads in US publications are a little bit TOO honest, as this real example shows: "Desperate lonely loser, SWM, 32, miserable, apathetic, tired of watching TV and my roommate's hair fall out. Seeks depressed, unattractive SWF, 25-32, no sense of humor, for long talks about the macabre." (SWM is single white male and SWF is single white female.)

Some advertisers ask for too much. This is from a personal ad I saw recently on a Sri Lankan dating website: "Male, 20,

from Ettampitiya area. I'm looking for a girlfriend who should be a friend, a sister, a mother and a lover to me. That's all."

The first personal ad ever appeared in the UK's *Manchester Weekly Journal* in 1727. Helen Morrison wrote a tiny note indicating that she wished to make the acquaintance of a pleasant gentleman with whom to pass the time. She was arrested and committed to an insane asylum for four weeks.

Meanwhile, a friend of mine who regularly answers personal ads, gave me lessons on how to read them.

"I am 40-ish" means "I am 49." "Average-looking" means "I am hideous."

"I am feminist" means "I am fat." "I am cuddly" means "I am very fat." "I am voluptuous" means "I am a human whale." "I am fun" means "I am really annoying and I talk all the time." "I am gentle" means "I am incredibly boring." "I am young at heart" means "I am an ancient, wizened crone." "I am good-looking" means "I am arrogant."

You know what's really scary? Out of all the ads quoted above, "Devil-worshiper" sounds the most appealing.

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