

## Health sector reeling in politicisation

*A major cause for concern that needs attending to*

THE health sector whose staple is specialisation is reported to have been politicised to an worrisome extent in the last four months, with most of the important posts in big public sector hospitals going to ruling party loyalists working under the banner of "Swadhinata Chikitshak Parishad (SCP)." Medics identified with the opposition camp, including those said to be maintaining neutrality, have been sent to remote areas, or given unattractive postings.

It seems the pro-AL SCP is calling the shots in health sector where a doctor's professional excellence and skills should have weighed more heavily than anything else in matters like promotion or appointment to a particular position. When political affiliation of a specialist is considered the sole criterion for placing him in a top position, merit is most likely to be a casualty. And, more importantly, the quality of service will be badly compromised. For instance, it is learned that a diploma holder in cardiology has been appointed a resident physician at the NICVD, though in the past all resident physicians had FCPS or MD degrees. A politically biased decision is so squinted that it glosses over the basic requirement of a candidate's ability to deliver in a certain post.

True, the situation was more or less the same under the BNP-led government, when the DAB wreaked havoc through their partisan activities. But it is also true that they are not believed to have left any worthwhile example to follow. After all, one wrong cannot be righted by another. Doctors, like any other citizen, can have political opinion, but to allow such a view to cloud their professional judgement and vision is bound to prove harmful to their noble call of duty for which people would like to put them on a pedestal of honour that they must strive to protect and live up to in their enlightened self-interest.

It so happens that the health minister is president of the SCP. So the issue of the SCP becoming too demanding and meddlesome is something that the minister himself will have to address and resolve. He needs to do it for the sake of enhancing his credibility and protecting the good name of the government which has come to power on a mandate for change. And where do the people look for change the most but in the domain of public health service.

The quality of medical services cannot be allowed to be compromised either through a lack of congenial working atmosphere, exacerbating rift in any organisation or through a failure to put right men and women in the right places in pursuit of a policy for optimal utilisation of the expertise and skill available to the health sector, irrespective of political labels of the doctors.

## Another victim of lashing

*The self-appointed arbiters must be punished*

WITHIN less than two weeks of a Daudkandi woman having suffered 39 lashes by a so-called salish decree, here is now a rape victim in Sirajganj whipped a hundred times with irreparable harm and trauma inflicted on her. To add insult to injury, she was fined Tk 7,000 on a seven-day notice and asked to withdraw the case she had filed, or face expulsion from her village.

The quick succession in which the incidents took place is indicative of a recurrence after a relative lull in *fatwabaji*, although nobody can be too sure it didn't play out in some form or the other in the perceived interregnum.

All this is multiple victimisation, once by rape, the other by transfer guilt on to the victim, another by physical brutalisation through an unlawful decree and yet another by ruining the future of the girl. The acts of savagery were perpetrated taking full advantage of the vulnerabilities of women. These got exploited by the rural influential finding it expedient to use the services of village zealots to hide their crime. This is no less a pointer, however, to what should have been the role of the local administration, police and lower judiciary to be quickly cognizant of the offences and preempting them.

In the Daudkandi case, the woman appealed for a DNA test to establish paternity of the child she bore, but this was ignored. But in the Sirajganj instance, the victim had filed a case in the court whereupon the judge ordered investigation. The police officer who investigated the case submitted charges against the accused before the court after ascertaining facts from the local people. Then, apparently, a village influential who sheltered the offender taking the plea for socially settling the dispute held a *salish* at his residence under his chairmanship. That is how the atrocious ex-parte judgement got delivered.

The matter should be fully gone into and the perpetrators appropriately punished so that others are deterred from following in their footsteps.

In this context, it is worthwhile to recall a High Court ruling to the effect that in cases of sexual crimes there is no legal bar to accepting the victim's testimony before the court, when no other evidence is available, as the basis for prosecuting the accused.

## Land reclamation: Can we do it?

Our population is going bonkers. We are in a precarious situation. On one hand, we have small land area, on the other; a great portion of it will go into the sea!

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE other day, I was watching on television European and American scientists applying their collective knowledge to claim land from the ocean for the land-hungry kingdom of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Already huge land has been reclaimed there and mega structures have been built to expand and beautify the city.

Interestingly, billionaires from across the world, including the owner of Virgin Air, have shown interest in buying some of the artificially created islands. Singapore had done so years ago.

Wikipedia says: "The East Coast is a beach park located on the southeastern coast of Singapore. It was opened in the 1970s. The 1.85 square kilometre East Coast Park is the largest park in Singapore, and is built entirely on reclaimed land. The beach is protected by breakwaters. A cycling and inline skating track runs along the perimeter of the park, which measures at least 20 km long."

What is land reclamation? Well, I am not an expert; so let's see what Wikipedia has to say about this. "Land reclamation can be the creation of new land where there was once water. Notable examples in the West include parts of New Orleans; Washington, D.C. (which is partially built on land that was once a swamp); Mexico City (which is situated at the former site of Lake Texcoco); Helsinki (of which the major part of the city centre is built on reclaimed land); the Cape Town foreshore; the Chicago shoreline; the Manila Bay shoreline; Back Bay, Boston, Massachusetts; Battery Park City, Manhattan; the port of Zeebrugge in Belgium; the southwestern residential area

in Brest, Belarus, the polders of the Netherlands; and the Toronto Islands, Leslie Street Spit, and the waterfront in Toronto.

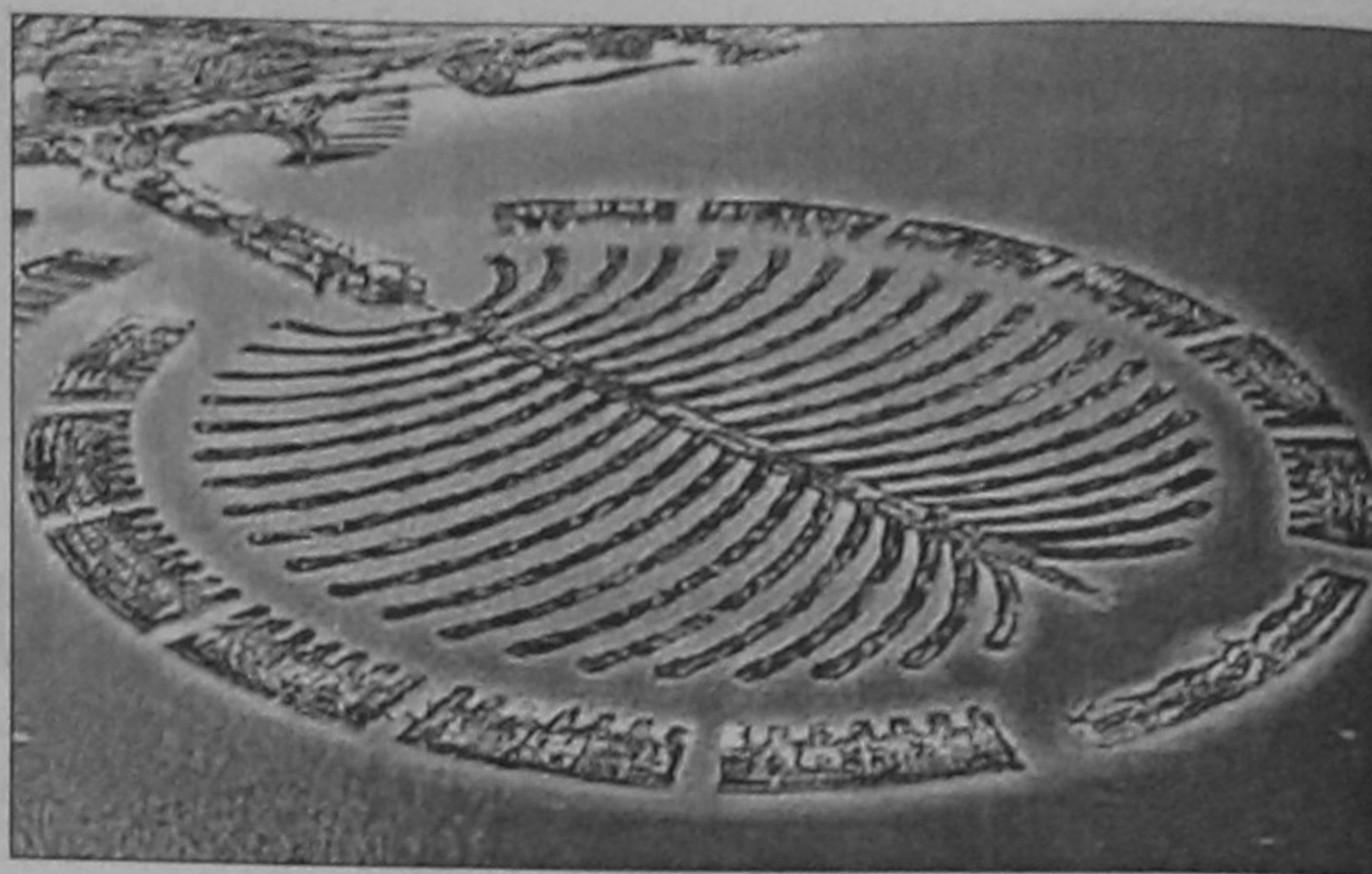
In the Far East, Japan, the southern Chinese cities of Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Macau, and the city-state of Singapore, where land is in short supply, are also famous for their efforts in land reclamation. One of the earliest and famous projects was the Praya Reclamation Scheme, which added 50 to 60 acres (240,000 m<sup>2</sup>) of land in 1890 during the second phase of construction.

It was one of the most ambitious projects ever taken during the Colonial Hong Kong era. Some 20% of land in the Tokyo Bay area has been reclaimed. Monaco and the British territory of Gibraltar are also expanding due to land reclamation. Rio de Janeiro was largely built on reclaimed land.

Artificial islands are an example of land reclamation. Kansai International Airport (in Osaka) and Hong Kong International Airport are examples where this process was deemed necessary. The Palm Islands, The World and Hotel Burj al-Arab off Dubai in the United Arab Emirates are other examples of artificial islands.

Well, from that TV program last week I came to know how necessity provoked ingenuity to work up to its finest finale. It's brilliant...bit by bit the land coming up, taking shape, solidifying and then settling down to allow construction of buildings and roads. I marvelled as I watched! What can't the human brain conceptualise! What can't the human brain accomplish! As I was watching, I began to think of my own country and began to contemplate in solitude.

Our population is going bonkers. We'll



Water into land!

be left with no land to accommodate nearly 25 crore people in 2050 and beyond. We, therefore, will need more land. Then again, some of our land is being gobbled up by the sea! With ocean water level rising because of polar ice meltdown, some parts of Bangladesh will go into the sea in another fifty to hundred years. So, we are in a precarious situation. On one hand, we have small land area, on the other; a great portion of it will go into the sea! Whew!

Then what I thought of next would be termed as the dream of a troubled mind. I thought, we have world-class scientists and we have generous donors to give us billions of dollars to pour into our gutters and sewers.

Why don't we dig out some of that money from the gutters and then engage our scientists with the task of reclaiming land from the sea? I know it's a brilliant idea, but do our politician brothers ever think of such things? Shouldn't they actually think about such things instead of exhausting five months in quarrelling about who will sit where in parliament?

Shouldn't they talk with the scientists of

the country to take pre-emptive measures to face the imminent threat that is coming in the wake of global warming? What will they do when our islands, like Kutubdia, and parts of the main land in the southern part slowly begin to go into the sea? Will they look for answers then? I know their next generations will live in comfort in the US or Australia but what about the 30 crore people of this country?

Maldives is already looking for land to buy to accommodate its entire population of 3 lakh plus. Those tiny islands will surely go below the water once it rises by two meters or so. The Maldives government is thinking about it now and taking pro-active measures. We, too, will have to start our work now. Land reclamation and creation of a green belt around the coastline are two things that can be initiated to protect and increase our land area. Hope somebody important is reading this piece.

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## Preparedness is the key

It appears that local administration; concerned lawmakers and NGOs were all ill-prepared and did not show enough agility. Lack of food, medicine and drinking water caused immense suffering to the affected people. The concerned officers should be severely taken to task.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

BANGLADESH is a disaster-prone country. For centuries the people of Bangladesh have been living with natural disasters like floods and cyclones. They have the courage, fortitude and resilience to face these natural calamities. We hope that they will face the aftermath of cyclone Aila like they did after cyclone Sidr, which hit the southern part of Bangladesh 17 months back. We have confidence in our people.

We have made commendable progress in disaster management during the last few decades. Despite the good name it is unfortunate that concerned organisations and political leaders have left much to be desired from their services. Among the institutions that failed miserably the worst is the department of meteorology. The pre-

cyclone warnings were carelessly sent out by the department.

In Patuakhali, where around 11,50,752 people are reported to have been affected by the cyclone, the department kept on giving precautionary signal number 3 throughout the night of May 25. The signal number was suddenly raised from 3 to 7 the next morning. It warned the people that the cyclone might hit the area after 2pm, whereas it hit at 8am (6hrs earlier) on May 26. It even failed to warn the people about the 10 to 12 ft high tidal surge.

From the report of the weekly 2000, it appears that local administration; concerned lawmakers and NGOs were all ill-prepared and did not show enough agility. Lack of food, medicine and drinking water caused immense suffering to the affected people. The concerned officers should be severely taken to task. If necessary, the gov-

ernment may check whether the politicised officers were involved in this inaction.

Almost every year Bangladesh is hit by either cyclones or wind driven tidal surges, which cause heavy damage sometimes. If we see the record of the cyclones that hit Bangladesh we find that Barisal tops the list of cyclone-prone districts. Thus, Barisal deserves the highest attention for improving its condition.

The government has attempted to handle this crisis with dignity and courage, and in a democratic manner. It has not asked for international aid as such. The army has not been called. This approach may have created temporary difficulties, but will increase our self-confidence.

Though there has been good progress in facing natural calamities like cyclones and floods we have to further improve the quality of service. We have to take into account the fact that people in coastal areas are mainly poor. Their only means of livelihood is fishing. As a long-term measure the government may consider shifting some disaster affected people to countries like Myanmar. In fact, the government of Myanmar has asked for Bangladeshi tillers for cultivating in their fellow land. The government may take more interest in such proposals.

It is a matter of shame that some MPs of

the four-party alliance government did not hesitate to utilise the relief goods for their own benefit. We should try to realise that some people affected by cyclone Aila were also affected by cyclone Sidr hardly 17 months back. Thus, distribution of relief goods needs special attention.

The worst affected are the people of Khulna, Satkhira and Noakhali. Arrangements must be made for food, drinking water and medicine for them on priority basis. The damaged and destroyed embankments must be repaired or reconstructed at the earliest. The government should surely concentrate on rehabilitation of the affected people. Rehabilitation of agriculture must start immediately. The affected people have to be given agricultural inputs (such as fertiliser, seeds etc.) free of cost, or at least subsidised prices.

The government must be well prepared for facing another couple of cyclones soon. Thus, it may issue directives to all concerned departments and NGOs to remain alert about future predicaments. As the AL government had shown its ability to handle one of the longest floods in 1998 successfully, we hope that this government will tackle the challenge of cyclone Aila just as well.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.

## Meeting the energy crisis

The global melt- down or cyclones or floods are almost nothing compared to a country without primary energy. Honourable prime minister and energy minister, I urge you to kindly re-evaluate the extent of the energy crisis and the necessity for resolving it in the light of the new realities.

MUHAMMED AZIZ KHAN

IN Bangladesh, 110 million people live without electricity while only 50 million have access to poor quality electricity. Yet, Bangladesh has been competitive in garments, textiles manufacturing and agricultural production. Bangladesh's competitiveness stems from 2 principal reasons:

- Cheap labour
  - Cheap energy, i.e. natural gas.
- Today, energy is not cheap. This is the most challenging threat faced by the country. One can assess the challenge comparing the developments that took place in eastern Bangladesh, where gas is available, with western Bangladesh. Even though the western region has fewer and less damaging floods and cyclones, and connection with India, it does not have a manufacturing base. The cost of irrigation and agriculture is also higher in western Bangladesh.

Presently, it seems that all of Bangladesh faces conditions similar to the western side. It is now being said that Bangladesh has very limited reserves of natural gas. The government must take immediate steps to meet this huge challenge, which can only be done by creating a suitable energy mix.

Among the steps necessary are:

- Investing in natural gas exploration, production and transmission;
- Increasing the price of gas to discourage inefficient use and encourage more production;
- Allowing use of natural gas as feed stock only on combined cycle power plants with at least 53 percent efficiency;
- Allowing use of natural gas only on distributed power with minimum 40 percent efficiency at 33 kva.
- Allowing captive power plants to run only on liquid fuel or coal;
- Allowing all heavy energy needs to be met with liquid fuel;
- All future manufacturing on liquid fuel;
- No more conversion to CNG.
- All future domestic cooking or other requirements by LPG;
- Keeping and using all natural gas for generation of electricity.

To achieve these, Bangladesh will need to increase its imports of fuel. At this time Bangladesh does not have the physical infrastructure required to import the necessary liquid fuel and coal, which are replacements for natural gas. Therefore, creating such an infrastructure is necessary. These would include among others:

- Petroleum depots with many times more capacity than presently available;
- Distribution network for oil, including depots in river ports;
- Ship tankers to transport oil from Chittagong to river port depots;
- Tank lorries to transport oil to the industries.

Similarly, to support coal-based power generation and manufacturing, huge coal yards in Chittagong and Mongla will be necessary. Bangladesh's import volume will increase by many folds. To accommodate this, Mongla port will have to be a comprehensive and enabled port, connected by rail, road and river to the rest of the country. For this, a new bridge with rail tracks will have to be built over the Rupsa river.

In order to achieve these the government will need to provide fiscal incentives and allowances, such as:

- Allowing the private sector, public sector and public-private partnerships to be involved in each of the activities;
- To encourage a shift to energy sources other than natural gas all energy imports must be tax free; (It is unreasonable to tax petroleum and coal imports while subsidising natural gas, when natural gas is in short supply.)
- Energy is the main input of a country's GDP, therefore all earnings connected with energy imports and infrastructure may be exempted from tax;
- While we are required to move towards expensive energy, the manufacturing sector must move forward with value addition and move up in the value chain.

- Further, the power system master plan built on the basis of abundant gas would have to be amended, keeping in mind the following:

- Future generation of electricity with coal as feed stock;
- Planning for coal mining as well as imports. This will determine the new load centre, generation centre and the transmission and distribution networks;
- Nuclear powered electricity and its viability. One of the options that may be kept in mind is to negotiate with India to set up the power plants in India on a purpose built basis to buy/import electricity from these plants. This would hasten the process and remove the apprehensions the world may have about safety and security. After all Bangladesh needs electricity not nuclear power.

Renewable energy is challenging for Bangladesh as a whole but has substantial potential in the off-grid locations. The NGOs may pursue this very good cause to provide electricity to the underprivileged.

The danger zone that Bangladesh is entering is not seen and comprehended by most. The global melt- down or cyclones or floods are almost nothing compared to a country without primary energy. Honourable prime minister and energy minister, I urge you to kindly re-evaluate the extent of the energy crisis and the necessity for resolving it in the light of the new realities.

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