

Swine flu preparedness needs updating

More cases reported as a quicker spread predicted

WITH a hundred and sixty-three reported cases of Swine flu in the country since the affliction in Mexico made international news almost over quarter of a year ago, the rate of incidence in Bangladesh may not have been scary. Yet, what needs to be noted is that in the recent days there has been a sharp increase in the number of identified cases. An added concern could be the possible number of unreported cases that has evaded screening. According to experts therefore, all this is a cause for worry for a country that is densely populated and having plenty of open crowded places where people mingle or come in close contact with each other making them vulnerable to contagion.

There is a marked change in the trend of detection as well. Whereas initially it was detected in individuals arriving in the country from abroad now more and more people have tested positive for H1N1 virus inside the country. So, the fear of Swine flu cases increasing is well founded.

The afflicted are being treated on two levels: those with mild symptoms -- and luckily they are still in a majority -- are being treated at home while the complicated cases are receiving treatment at hospitals. In any case, monitoring and follow-up must be part and parcel of the flu management. Our much publicised strong point is that we have sufficient quantities of H1N1 anti-viral vaccine. The director, Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research has advised that people with Swine flu symptoms can be given anti-viral drug Oseltamivir before lab test as recommended by the WHO.

About treatment in hospitals, one major weakness has come to light. It appears that while government and public hospitals are equipped to handle swine flu cases, the private hospitals seem unprepared and ill-equipped to admit swine flu patients; some have even refused them. This is a contingency situation requiring of both public and private sector hospitals including the country-wide health centres to be fully motivated and prepared to treat swine flu patients. The private hospitals are saying that they do not simply have facilities for such patients. They should have a share in the supply of the anti-viral drug but basically they will have to speedily set up swine flu outfits with trained health professionals.

At the mass level, an awareness building exercise will have to be extensively conducted with following messages: symptoms with which they should report to a doctor, refraining from sneezing publicly or spitting callously, covering the mouth while coughing or sneezing and washing hands thereafter. Add to these, the WHO advice: keep over one arm-length distance from an infected person, eat nutritious food, drink plenty of water and get plenty of sleep and rest. The media, both electronic and print, can greatly help spread the messages along with the government.

Merkel's call for freeze on Jewish settlements

Netanyahu would do well to heed the warning

GERMAN Chancellor Angela Merkel's call for Israel to freeze its settlements in Palestinian territory is a powerful indication of the pressure which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is under. It is just as well that Netanyahu be under such pressure because of the particular reason that he has so far given no indication of his willingness to go for accommodation with the Palestinians. And the pressure is not just Ms. Merkel's. The Obama administration too has been trying to convince Israel's leader that progress in the Middle East is eventually dependent on whether or not his government is ready and willing to put an end to its settlements in the region. Unfortunately, and in defiance of objective reality, Mr. Netanyahu has chosen to look away from the issue.

The difficulty with the Middle East today is not just that there was little progress toward peace in the eight years of the Bush administration in Washington. It is also rooted in the fact that Israeli voters, at the last election, gave Netanyahu and his rightwing party an edge over Tzipi Livni's Kadima party and so propelled them into office on the strength of a coalition government. Ms. Livni's argument that Israel needed to talk to the Palestinians through clearing all the roadblocks before such a process could begin did not work. Now that Netanyahu, known for his hawkishness, is in power, it is hard to see where the peace process goes from here. In his journey to the United States and Europe, he has been speaking vaguely of meaningful negotiations with the Palestinians. There has been no real commitment coming from his government, although he has been hinting at preventing the growth of settlements in future. That does not, however, obviate the reality of what damage the existing on-going settlements are doing to the region.

Against such a background, Chancellor Merkel's unambiguous assertion of German policy on Palestine is deserving of appreciation. More than any other western leader, she has made it clear to the Israelis that they ought not to expect any forward movement toward peace in the Middle East unless they step back on the settlements issue. Israel and its friends would do well to heed the warning.

Poverty the yet untamed horse

It is very intriguing that notwithstanding all the endeavours to contain it, poverty has been stubbornly pushing its borders. The number of agencies including the international and the national ones employed in poverty alleviation is in a word impressive.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

POVERTY alleviation being an area of major policy thrust of the successive governments this year's Asian Development Bank (ADB) poverty figures for Bangladesh have come as a shocker. The figures show that more than 50 percent of the population are now living below the extreme poverty level. To measure extreme poverty, the amount of income of a person that the poverty researchers in the UN have agreed upon is equivalent to \$1.25 per day. So, if one is to go by the ADB-supplied figures, then the progress the country has made so far is very poor given the amount of emphasis laid on the issue by the different governments and the concern expressed by the donor communities.

But it is not only the government that has been fighting poverty, the worst curse of humanity. We have also thousands of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who are engaged in the war against poverty for decades. Where have then all the money and efforts devoted for the purpose gone?

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standing all the endeavours to contain it, poverty has been stubbornly pushing its borders.

The number of agencies including the international and the national ones employed in poverty alleviation is in a word impressive. Strangely though, they appear to be losing the fight. At this stage a layman might be tempted to question the very perception of the problem among the poverty-fighters and the method they are using to mitigate it.

In most of the literatures concerned about the issue, poverty is looked upon as a kind of ailment, which, as it were, afflicts the people in question. Poverty, according to such perception, is a problem in isolation from other social conditions within which the affected ones live. Unsurprisingly, the poverty mitigating agencies take the affected people individually and try to help them out through creating job opportunities for them in a piecemeal fashion. Undoubtedly, such measures have helped some individual families to come out of poverty. But that such intervention could hardly make much difference in the lives of

the people is clearly demonstrated by the poverty figures provided by ADB.

Most countries of South and Southeast Asia that are now bracketed with the rich nations did not always have such a glamorous status. Poverty was not a stranger to those societies even a few decades back. Their success is rather recent. How did these countries overcome their respective statuses of backwardness and poverty so quickly? What were the roles of the anti-poverty agencies in the countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, to name but a few of the East Asian tigers? International agencies and the donor countries were certainly active in those countries to lift them out the curse of backwardness and poverty. But one can hardly claim that their rise to current prominence has been due mainly to the efforts of these agencies.

In the ADB release, it has been further shown that of the 39 countries ranked according to the purchasing power of the people in the Asia-Pacific region with Singapore topping list, Bangladesh lies at the fourth position from the bottom, with only three other countries -- Afghanistan, Nepal and Timor-Leste -- trailing behind. And in terms of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per head, Bangladesh's position is abysmal compared to that of Singapore at one sixtieth of the latter's status in this respect. Why this big difference so far as the purchasing power of the two peoples are concerned?

If one looks at the history of development of these countries, it would be found that

Bangladesh's status vis-à-vis the more successful countries of South-East Asia was not always like this. True, since its birth, Bangladesh has been handicapped by its huge population packed within a small geographical area with few resources tucked away within Mother Nature's womb. But in spite of its high population density, the poverty was never so acute as it is now, especially in comparison to the newly rich nations like Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and so on.

Oddly though, not in the remote past, this part of the world known as Bangladesh was envied by many of its South Asian neighbours for its better status in the international arena. It is, in fact, during the last three to four decades that Bangladesh's position has deteriorated in a gradual fashion. Interestingly, during this entire period, various poverty alleviation agencies had been very actively pursuing their models to rid the nation of its socio-economic woes. Unfortunately, we are still moving at a snail's pace, while our eastern neighbours have beaten us one by one in the race for economic development.

It is, therefore, time the political leaders and the development thinkers rethought their entire approach to fighting poverty and achieving overall economic development of the people. In that case, they will be required also to think of effecting a change in the overall social and economic conditions within which the "individual poor" lives.

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Miseries of price hikes

The prices of things are increasing daily, violating all market regulations, and there is no relief in sight. People like us are afraid to go grocery shopping because of the uncertainty of price hikes. People like us are helpless and see no future to look to. I hope you got some idea of what you asked for."

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

IN reply to my email inquiry about how price hikes are affecting his life and living, a reader of my column -- a former Vice-Chancellor and now a professor wrote:

"Dear Prof. Dewan: Thank you for the email. Actually, it is surprising how we are surviving. I have a small family of five -- including a maid-servant. At the end of the month, I get Tk. 50,000. My wife is a teacher, whose paycheck is about Tk.15,000. My son, who had been working for Siemens until recently, lost his job along with most other engineers of the company. My youngest daughter is a student at Holy Cross College. We have a car and a driver that cost on average Tk. 20,000 to 25,000/per month. With just Tk. 7000/month salary, it is hard to describe how the driver manages his family of three.

The prices of things are increasing daily, violating all market regulations, and there is no relief in sight. People like us are afraid to go grocery shopping because of the uncertainty of price hikes. People like us are helpless and see no future to look to. I hope you got some idea of what you asked for."

The above narrative of the hardships of

an upper income citizen is nothing compared to the 90% or more Bangladeshis whose gross household income is much less than Tk. 65,000/month. Some might suggest that the professor would be somewhat better off without the driver and the maid. But such arguments ignore the fact that the professor is providing employment to two people who are supporting two or more family members of their own.

In such a market condition, it is imperative that the authority correctly identifies the sources of the price hikes, and then take remedial measures.

A few days ago, food minister Abdur Razzaque blamed escalating food prices on widespread extortion. Breaking a common taboo, he left no soupcon of doubt that extortion had become a way of transporting goods; people involved in the crime have social and political clout; and that law enforcers have essentially failed in combating extortions or taking strong steps to counteract the menace.

On August 19, Parliament's Commerce Committee chairman Abdul Jalil claimed: "Extortion is a constant process. It has always been there. It's very difficult to break the market syndicate. We cannot always implement what we want."

More recently, finance minister Abdul

Muhith accused the media of hyping concerns over price hikes because he had found that consumers were content with the price situation. On the same day, at Jatiya Press Club, commerce minister Faruk Khan also found a role of the media in price increase of commodities in the domestic market.

Has anyone ever heard of such a claim of causality running from media to price increases? This was the claim during BNP's rule nearly three years ago, when an accountant was the country's finance minister.

Just because people aren't protesting on the streets doesn't mean that price instabilities aren't imposing unbearable hardships on "non-ministers" and "non-politicians."

The media's role is to track market conditions and price discrepancies of commodities from all locations of the country and publish them for all concerned, including the government. That way, imbalances in supply and demand are mediated to restore a properly functioning market.

In a market economy prices depend on demand for and supply of goods. Demand of a good is a function of consumer income, prices of other goods (substitutes and complements), population (that is, number of consumers), consumers' expectations and taste and usefulness of the good. Supply of the same good is a function of technology of production, cost of resources, number of suppliers, prices of other goods, and suppliers' expectations.

If one cannot identify the demand and supply factors from the above list of factors, attributable to the price hikes of specific

goods, then non-economic factors such as price gouging syndicates or extortion may be in play, but not the media for sure. That means the country is experiencing market failure -- free market conditions are violated -- and negative externalities are ruling the market process. In that case, only law enforcement and rule of law can restore a smoothly functioning market (see my article on "Market failure and price spirals," March 25, 2007).

Consumers have no control over supply but can exercise control over demand. However, effectively doing so means reducing demand countrywide. The reduction in demand must be significant and long-lasting, at least until prices take a nose-dive. Alternatively, consumers can practice some austerity -- buy only the amount needed for a day, and stick to shops that are consumer-friendly.

What I'm recommending above is a kind of buyers' boycott of the edibles. There are copious examples of such boycotts in the West in recent times. There are also journal articles on buyers' boycott to combat price hikes. The problem is organising and coordinating such a boycott countrywide to produce the desired outcome.

What to produce and how much; for whom to produce; and what price to charge are the decisions of the private sector embodied in the paradigm of laissez-faire economics. Business communities must comprehend this archetype and restore market discipline by rooting out all non-market forces and frictions to their own long-term benefits.

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Death at Harrods

Helenora's tragic appointment with her hair-dresser took place in 1909. Five years later the First World War began. It was after this Great War, with its millions upon millions of wasted lives, that the pomposity of the British aristocracy began to dribble away, in my estimation.

M.J. AKBAR

CAN this possibly be true? On August 25, 1909, the *New York Times* reported: "As a result of the death of Miss Helenora Catherine Horn-Elphinstone-Darlymple, sister of Sir Edward Graeme Elphinstone-Darlymple, during a dry shampoo with carbon tetrachloride at Harrods Stores, charges of manslaughter were yesterday preferred at Westminster Police court against Mr. William H. Eardly, the manager of the department, and Miss Beatrice Clarke, one of the assistants. Miss Horn-Elphinstone-Darlymple went to Harrods for a dry shampoo on July 12. She was warned she might feel faint..."

I am not doubting the fact of death (why isn't there an Agatha Christie novel called *Death at Harrods*?). Or that Sir Edward had enough clout with the local constabulary to send William and Beatrice up for trial. But could anyone really have had a surname like Horn-Elphinstone-Darlymple? The answer must be yes.

The London correspondent of *New York Times* might have been forgiven for getting a manslaughter mixed up with a mere tort. But no news editor would have used his conv again if he got a multi-barrelled name

from the British aristocracy wrong. And if his spelling is as accurate, then William the writer of many books has surely forgotten an "r" in his Darlymple.

Can you rule an Empire with short names? Roman emperors kept their names terse, but since they promoted themselves into gods, anything above three syllables became unwieldy on the common tongue. How do you worship a Fotheringay-Fotheringay Phipps? You don't. You just throw bread rolls at him at Drone's off Piccadilly.

The British ruling class was not alone in pulling on the appendices to a Helenora (itself an affected extension of the more working class Helen, I presume). If you wrote the full name of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, there would not be much space left over for this column. Reasons for longitude varied with culture. The Mughal dad could not stop praising his newborn prince; each additional word was an adjective. When the prince grew up, killed his siblings, and plunked himself on the throne, he could not stop exalting himself and added a few pearls of admiration to the already long-winded paragraph that was his name.

The British yardstick for yard-long names was different. It was advertisement

of the family tree. So Helenora was telling you that the family fortunes were established by old Darlymple, and further fattened by Elphinstone and Horn. I don't suppose they included the failures in-between the genealogical line.

There may have been a Barrington, for example, who sold the family castle to pay off his gambling debts at White's, but you could not keep him on par with Elphinstone, who slogged hard in the East India Company and bought back a country estate. And if Elphinstone turned out to be the chap who governed Bombay in the old days, then it was precisely the kind of family connection that would impress Scotland Yard when you wanted to file a case for manslaughter.

Logically, the lower down you go on the social order, the shorter your surname becomes. The John Carpenters, not to mention the John Smiths, must have been mere Johns until the era when labour was treated with dignity.

In India, Hindu caste names are a dead giveaway of origin. But those promoted to prominence by the British happily traded in the past for the present. "Chowdhury," or "Malik," are titles, and thus used across the religious divide. Indian Muslims, technically, did not have caste names, but if you were an Ansari from east Uttar Pradesh or Bihar, you could be more or less sure that there was artisan blood in your veins.

Helenora's tragic appointment with her hair-dresser took place in 1909. Five years later the First World War began. It was after this Great War, with its millions upon millions of wasted lives, that the pomposity of the British aristocracy began to dribble away, in my estimation. They had killed

working class boys on an unimaginable scale in order to preserve their class-ridden societies, and a reaction was inevitable. The English lords had ruled beyond their sell-by date, just like the Mughals a century earlier.

The barrels began to drop off the surnames, slowly, piecemeal, but surely. What could not be destroyed by war was surely erased by the floating notes of P.G. Wodehouse's laughter, although Wodehouse was also in love with the class he teased out of existence. Even a Tobias prefers to call himself a Toby these days. He probably would not get a restaurant booking in the name of "Tobias."

Harrods is still there, of course. But if parts of the great English store occasionally look like side lanes of a Cairo bazaar, there is a valid explanation. It is now owned by an Egyptian who is convinced that his son was bumped off by the British secret service because he was about to marry Diana, Princess of Wales and ruin the bloodline of the British ruling class for ever. Harrods customers are now more likely to be Asian tourists than the British gentry.

The only institutions with long names now are law firms. (There is much anguish in Yale at this moment because the American law firms, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher and Flom, and Milbank, Tweed, Hadley, and McCloy are not hiring. I would have used an ampersand in the law firm names, but I can't find one on my keyboard.)

The old order giveth way to the new.

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