

Please don't play with our health

SHEGUFTA YASMIN

EVERY year, World Health Day is celebrated on April 7 to mark the anniversary of the founding of World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948. The topic of World Health Day in 2012 is ageing and health with the theme "Good health adds life to years." The focus is on how good health throughout life can help older men and women lead full and productive lives and be a resource for their families and communities. Ageing concerns each and every one of us -- whether young or old, male or female, rich or poor -- no matter where we live. Life expectancy is going up in most countries, meaning more and more people live longer and enter an age when they may need health care. Meanwhile, birth rates are generally falling.

Nearly eight percent of South-East Asia's population are above the age of 60 years. The day will draw global attention to ageing to highlight it as a rapidly emerging priority that most countries in the region have yet to address adequately. The number of aged people will double by 2025 and triple by 2050, the global health body said.

"Older women outnumber and outlive older men. Gender discrimination and widowhood has a considerable impact on the health of elderly women," said Samlee Plianbangchang, WHO's Regional Director for South-East Asia. "Poor nutrition in the womb leads to disease in adulthood. Preventing diseases through immunisation, good nutrition, and healthy lifestyles will result in an elderly population that is a rich resource for families, communities and nations," she added.

The WHO expresses concern over changing social patterns where nuclear families are replacing joint families and the old and the infirm are often left at home. "These changing patterns of society are now affecting the care of the old and very old persons at home. Healthy ageing requires a significant paradigm shift in providing care to the elderly," the WHO said.

In Bangladesh, it's very hard to maintain one's health in every stage of life. When a mother is pregnant she is advised to eat healthy food, such as egg, fish, meat, milk, fruits, vegetables etc. But who will guarantee that these foods are really healthy and safe? We always find news of adulterated fruits, vegetables. One can't take seasonal fruits and vegetables because they are artificially ripened, and the same fruits are again adulterated in the off-season, then what is the right time to eat them? It is often heard that there is no milk in milk! Then what do we drink in the name of milk? Contaminated water makes our lives hell. Water

scarcity is a hot issue nowadays. Wasa cannot meet the city dwellers' demand for water. Every day, Dhaka city needs 240 crore litre water while Wasa can produce 205 to 210 crore litre.

Cholera and diarrhea are spreading. ICDDRB can't give space to patients, so they have to set up tents outside. Almost 25% of diarrhea patients bear cholera virus. Every year almost 23 to 26 lacs people are affected by diarrhea and 4.5 lacs people are affected by cholera.



Everyone is playing with our health. In this unhealthy situation how can we try to live a healthy life? Our ageing comes in our youth. At the end of day we are happy that we are still alive.

River water is now highly contaminated, which affects our environment, fish, and vegetables grown along the riverside. Many people of 43 districts fell sick after eating *boro* rice, because underground water which is arsenic laden is used extensively in cultivating *boro* rice. Research says 61 districts of Bangladesh are marked as seriously arsenic prone areas, among them northern areas are more vulnerable. 65% people of Bangladesh are in danger of arsenic poisoning.

Now comes the point of health care at any age. Walking is a must for most people -- young or old.

But where is the place to walk? In the parks? No way, they are under control of hijackers, illegal businessmen, anti-social activities, prostitutes, drug dealers etc. Many parks and playgrounds in Dhaka have vanished. Children can't play because there are no playgrounds in their schools or homes.

Because we have to eat adulterated food and tolerate unhealthy environment, we go to a doctor for treatment. Here we again fall in the trap of groups and syndicates. We choose a doctor because of the degrees after his name. He is a government doctor but we visit him in his private chamber. After waiting for hours we get that auspicious two minutes to tell our problem to the doctor. He gives us medicine which is basically imposed by medical representatives, and sends us to those diagnostic centres from where he gets commission or percentage. Well, we listen to him, but what happen next? We buy medicine which is expired or adulterate -- we can't do anything. They give us unnecessary medical tests -- we can't do anything.

We are living with the curse of industrial waste. Hazaribagh and other localities of Dhaka city are contaminated by chemical waste from tanneries. There, almost 20 lacs people are in danger of health hazard. 89.3 % of tannery workers suffer from various diseases.

Thousands of used bottles and tubes are washed in the dirty water of rivers for reuse in hospitals, even though they are one-time use bottles or tubes. Dangerous diseases which can kill a person are spread by them. But who bothers about? We can only say to them, please don't play with our lives.

Everyone is playing with our health. In this unhealthy situation how can we try to live a healthy life? Our ageing comes in our youth. At the end of day we are happy that we are still alive. Long live our dream of a healthy life in a healthy environment of a healthy country! We are very sorry to say that our polluted surroundings don't allow us to keep good health, instead they deduct years from our lives.

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CORRECTION

In the article "Suu Kyi's power of powerlessness" by Shah Husain Imam, which appeared on Friday April 6, it was mentioned that Suu Kyi has one son. In fact she has two. We regret the inadvertent error.

SHIFTING IMAGES

Sound and fury, signifying something!



MILIA ALI

HAVE your friends or acquaintances ever chided you for being too emotional? Well, on many occasions I have been labelled as tactless and emotional because I have taken a strong position on issues that I believe in passionately or I protested against a scurrilous attack on a friend who was not around to

defend herself. Actually, there is something enigmatic about social discourse. While most people acknowledge that standing up for one's principles is the right thing to do, in practice, they would rather not "rock the boat." The norm is to keep social contacts frictionless, neutral and free from emotions.

To an extent, I agree that not all social relationships should be dictated by beliefs or ideologies. However, is it not true that human interaction, social or otherwise, is guided by certain norms, albeit unwritten? For instance, there is an invisible line, pertaining to race, religion or even an individual, that should never be crossed in public. If someone chooses to flout this unspoken rule, should we not react and make our voices heard? Even at the risk of being told that we are "too emotional?"

A couple of months ago, I was at a dinner in Washington where a woman declared petulantly: "Let's admit that most Muslims are bigots and terrorists!" Needless to say, I protested vehemently, and not because I happen to be a Muslim. I would have reacted the same way if a similar derogatory comment were made about Christians or Hindus or Jews or Buddhists. I agree that the actions of the self-proclaimed "Muslim" terrorists need to be condemned. But, to make a blanket statement that everyone belonging to a certain faith is responsible for the despicable conduct of a few is not only prejudicial but also lacks rational basis. Unfortunately, the charged exchange with the lady concerned caused discomfort around the dinner table and sullied the otherwise convivial party atmosphere!

The next day as I was mulling over the unpleasant incident, my friend, the hostess, called. In the course of the conversation, she observed that I should have let the remark pass instead of making an issue of it. "After all, you cannot change people's beliefs by sim-

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ply contesting a point. Why get emotional about such trivial matters?" she said. I apologised for being a "party spoiler" but told her plainly that her guest was out of line and I did not regret voicing my protest against her extremist views. Many people would, perhaps, agree with my hostess since the etiquette seems to be to treat harsh judgements lightly in a social set-up.

I have often wondered why I am wired the way I am. Is it because, like so many of my generation, I have grown up struggling for my rights? The right to sing in my mother tongue, the right to have the same opportunities as men and the right to live in a democratic, secular and free country! However, I have learnt to distinguish between petty disputes and protesting for a cause. A protest need not be combative and yet it can be effective in initiating change. What would the world be today if great leaders, thinkers and even common people never protested against injustice and oppression? Buddha, too, rebelled against the greed and tyranny of the ruling class. And he changed the world. Bangladesh would not be a free country had we, the Bengalis, not protested against oppression!

On the other hand one needs to guard against being impetuous in voicing dissent. It's important to choose our causes and not expend energy in fighting the small battles we encounter in our daily lives. However, when certain opinions and actions are bound to harm others, how can we, as conscientious human beings, let that happen without protesting? Some may prefer to let sleeping dogs lie -- there is always the risk that the dog may sleep but the tiger may arrive at our door because of our inaction and indifference.

The fact is that, in life we are not always faced with rational and safe choices. Sometimes, we are compelled to take up causes for reasons like empathy and compassion or a strong belief. Hence, being emotional is not necessarily a negative thing. And, what is life without passion and fervour, anyway? Yes, negative emotions like hatred and envy can be destructive and we need to guard against them, zealously. But these can only be neutralised by love, compassion and empathy, which, by the way, are also emotions!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Good judgement of the ITLOS

M. SHAH ALAM

JUDGEMENT of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in Hamburg was manifestly in favour of Bangladesh, and we gained huge disputed sea zones. The victory was so clear that even the leader of the opposition Begum Khaleda Zia thanked the prime minister in the Parliament for this -- a rare event in our confrontational politics. Begum Zia also deserves thanks for her gesture.

Lt. General (Rtd.) Mahbubur Rahman, one of the policy makers of the opposition, also rejoiced over the victory in his writing in the *Prothom Alo* of March 21, but rightly warned against any complacency and advised not to accept India's proposal for negotiations at this stage, but rather pursue the case with India in the International Court of Arbitration with renewed vigour.

Our main argument in the Tribunal was that Bangladesh's concave coast and socio-economic and historical reasons merited the application of the principle of equity as against equidistance propounded by India and Myanmar, which have convex coastline. Application of equidistance principle would have reduced our 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone along with Continental Shelf by about 40%. We would be cut off from east and west by our coastal neighbours Myanmar and India rendering us zone-locked.

Our team, led by our foreign minister and technical expert Rear Admiral Khurshed Alam, mobilised some of the best internationally renowned legal and technical minds to plead our case in the Hamburg Tribunal. Referring to special circumstances for the application of the principle of equity as provided for in the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea, our counsels successfully proved that the concave nature of Bangladesh's coastline as against convex coast of Myanmar and India, accompanied by relevant

historical factors, was an appropriate case for the application of the principle of equity. Their contention was also supported by international case laws developed over the last several decades, especially by the North Sea Continental Shelf case between Germany, Denmark and Netherlands decided by International Court of Justice in 1969.

The verdict given by the ITLOS on the basis of the principle of equity extended our EEZ to 200 nautical miles from along our more than 400 km coastline. This gave us 110,000 square kilometres undisputed sea areas, both water

Bangladesh won the case on the basis of concavity of its coastlines and other special circumstances, which led the Tribunal to give verdict on the principle of equity. This has given Bangladesh legal entitlement to huge previously disputed sea areas.

and sea-bed. Here lies the victory in Hamburg. Yes, Myanmar will also have its own EEZ towards the west, but it will stop once it touches our eastern line, no matter whether it is below 200 miles. Theirs will also be undisputed sea areas.

All talk about winning or losing blocks are based on wrong premises. One or some of our previously declared blocks for exploration of gas and oil may now be found located in Myanmar's zones, as some of their declared zones may be found in ours. In fact, declaration of blocks before resolving delimitation

dispute was, maybe, tactically warranted but legally not correct.

It is not appropriate to argue who won or lost how many blocks. Maritime boundaries with our neighbours were never delimited. All claimed zones in their own ways, and they were disputing claims. Now, for the first time, our maritime boundaries have been settled with Myanmar on our terms, and we will undertake our own explorative measures in our areas free from disputes. The verdict will positively impact the outcome of the on-going proceedings of the Bangladesh-India case in the International Court of Arbitration in the Hague, judgement on which is expected to be given in 1914.

The mistake some writers make is caused by the fact that they are more concerned with the blocks we declared as tactical measures than with the international law of maritime delimitation. I take this opportunity to mention that while our case with Myanmar was decided by ITLOS in Hamburg, the case with India is being decided in the Permanent Court of International Arbitration in the Hague. The International Court of Justice, the UN judicial organ, is one of the five principal organs of the United Nations.

To sum up, Bangladesh won the case on the basis of concavity of its coastlines and other special circumstances, which led the Tribunal to give verdict on the principle of equity. This has given Bangladesh legal entitlement to huge previously disputed sea areas. Now Bangladesh can identify and earmark its own blocks, which are presumably rich in mineral resources. Bangladesh can also invite, if necessary, technologically capable companies to explore the possibilities of finding oil and gas in its zones.

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