

WORLD LEPROSY DAY

De-stigmatisation and restoration of dignity to those who suffer



REV. MARTIN ADHIKARY

No other disease causes as much stigma -- no other disease is used to describe the person that is attacked by it -- as leprosy. People called, and still many call, a person affected by leprosy "a leper." In Bangla, they are termed as *kushthi*. Nothing can be more derogatory like this! Do we call a man suffering from *jokkha* (Tuberculosis) a *jokkhi* or something as offensive? No other disease renders a man suffering from any illness, stigmatising them even after he or she has been cured of leprosy.

Today in World Leprosy Day, people and concerned organisations in different countries are observing this day with various programmes with the purpose of enhancing public awareness about the truth on this still-stigmatised health hazard.

In Bangladesh we can celebrate the fact that our parliament repealed the century-old prejudicial Lepers Act 1898 on November, 24, 2011. There should be officially nothing against the human rights of people affected by leprosy. Those affected continue to get deprived of their basic rights and the letters of the repealing law do not ensure the removal of the social stigma from the minds of the man on the street overnight.

The spirit that lies behind the repeal needs to be internalised by all concerned for the desired positive change. Stigma of leprosy continues to produce fear in the popular minds. Stigma is a hydra-headed monster and it creates a sense of shame, a sense of guilt and self-stigma in the minds and hearts of those very affected people.

All these, in turn, push those who are affected to often hide their disease, which lie behind all poor consequences in the form of disfigure and deformity in the absence of right treatment in time. The said obsolete Act was useful when there was no scientific medication for leprosy, which came to be available only during the 80s of the 20th century when WHO invented the only scientific cure, the Multi Drug Therapy (MDT).

MDT has revolutionised the leprosy scenario all over the world by a dramatic reduction in the number of cases of people affected by the disease in thousands. Community attitudes are part of a

cultural belief and value system. Attitudes are powerful determinant of stigma. Both the government and non-government organisations need to continue to dispel the wrong notions about leprosy and publish the latest truth about the disease: that leprosy is not a curse, it is not a result of sin, and it is curable with modern medicine which is feely available, and that there is no place



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for social exclusion because of leprosy.

These truth needs to be continually published by mass media.

Leprosy is a human development issue. Poverty, malnutrition and lack of adequate sanitation serve as a cause of leprosy. The WHO target of 1 per 10,000 to being the normal situation needed to be achieved by the year 2000 was accomplished in Bangladesh on the national scale by 1998.

However, there have been several pockets of leprosy prevalent in the country where the target is yet to be achieved. These areas are primarily some

of the districts in the north-west in the country, in slums of Chittagong and Dhaka metropolitan cities, tea gardens in greater Sylhet areas, etc.

Public awareness and sensitising the policy makers will help in the process of advocating for and the promotion of the human rights and dignity of the leprosy affected people. So awareness should lead to accessibility.

Building awareness about the disease is carried out by organisations working with and for the affected people in Bangladesh among the community people, who need to be educated that leprosy is a physical disease like other diseases.

In the entire process, community participation is important for the cause of the rehabilitation of the leprosy victims into their community. All people, government agencies or non-government organisations should own the goal of a leprosy-free Bangladesh.

The following are important in order that the causes and consequences of leprosy is eradicated from Bangladesh and a leprosy-free Bangladesh is achieved:

- Continued intensive and both vertical and horizontal leprosy care is ensured;
- Integration of leprosy treatment at general or government health institutions ensured; and
- Adequate education on leprosy and its medical care should be included in the MBBS and Nursing training curricula.

The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 recognises "the inherent dignity" and "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" as the foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world.

When we want to advocate for the rights of the people with leprosy, we need to seriously speak up and draw the attention of the society to this important issue with the ultimate objective of directing decision-makers toward a measureable solution.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Second Wind



MILIA ALI

THERE is nothing exceptional about a US Presidential Inauguration Ceremony -- at least in terms of pageantry. It is a formal, somber occasion where the newly elected president is sworn in.

However, as I watched the Inauguration on television, sitting in my home only a few miles from the actual event, I became increasingly aware of the fact that democracy is not only about the peoples' right to elect a leader of their choice; an important part of the process is the peaceful and smooth transition of power.

The January 21st Inauguration coincided with the day that Americans honour Martin Luther King Jr. The overlap conveyed a poignant message: that the reelection of the first black president is in a way the realisation of the civil rights leader's prophetic "dream!"

However, the perpetuity of Dr. King's legacy is not the only reason I was inspired to write this piece. What resonated with me most about the Inauguration Ceremony was that it was a "celebration of democracy." An event where the elected representative of the people took his oath in a peaceful and transparent manner, in full public view.

In his inaugural speech, Obama stated his future vision and agenda with conviction and the confidence of a second term president. The remarkable thing is that there were no accusatory comments and no attempts at taking credit for the success stories of the past four years.

On the contrary, the president spoke with a measured degree of humility. He addressed issues affecting all segments of the population -- women, gays, gun-control activists, climate change proponents. His reference to the Proclamation of Independence that all men are created "equal with inalienable rights" aptly captured the diverse composition of the country.

However, while asserting that these rights are "self evident," the president pointed out that they are not "self executing" since citizens must continuously strive to preserve them.

What was truly amazing was the absence of acrimony on both sides -- partisan politics was masked by a degree of civility and tolerance. In giving the president his moment of victory, the 48% who did not vote for him actually paid their tribute to the democratic system.

The bipartisan mood of the ceremony was a testimony to the fact that, while there may be ideological differences, the democratic process must be allowed to thrive, no matter what.

Some may consider this to be hypocritical because the political battles will continue to rattle the country once again when Congress reconvenes. However, I would term it as "hypocrisy for a greater purpose," since it is a reminder that politics needs to be played out in the House of Representatives and not in the streets.

The message assumes greater significance for many of us who have been exposed to the politics of disruption in other parts of the world.

Lest I give the impression that the US is an idyllic country without any problems, let me clarify that I do not suffer from any illusions that this is a Utopian State. With two wars weighing on her shoulders, the economy still fragile, employment figures falling short of expectations, gun violence and racial tensions fracturing social cohesion, the country has much to reckon with in the next four years.

In addition, the president is faced with a somewhat hostile world; seething with instability. He has been criticised, by both liberals and conservatives, for not delivering on his first term promises. A second term provides him with the opportunities to tie up the loose ends and confront new challenges with more determination and resoluteness.

Other than exceptional situations, second terms are about a president's "legacy" and his place in history. Barack Obama does not have to worry about history since he will always be known as the first African American President. As for his "legacy" only time will deliver a verdict.

In terms of pointers about the future, the president's inaugural address was both pragmatic and idealistic. With characteristic deftness, he linked his vision to the ideals of the founding fathers and the civil rights movement.

At the practical level he touched upon some controversial, hard-core issues that he is willing to tackle in his second term. Whether the rhetoric will be followed by actions remains to be seen.

For me, personally, the inauguration brought a closure to the negative campaign rhetoric leading up to the presidential elections. As an ordinary citizen, I felt the inclusiveness of the system when the president affirmed, that "freedom is (not) reserved for the lucky, or happiness for the few."

And at the risk of seeming gullible, I wish to believe that President Obama will try to balance economic growth and social justice on the domestic front and the show of force and judicious negotiations in dealing with foreign powers.

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

Blowback effect on Algeria from Mali intervention

MUAMMAD ARIF IQBAL KHAN

THE fact that Algeria didn't inform the US before launching the raid should come as no surprise. Since 9/11, both the Bush and Obama administrations have tried to cultivate a relationship with Algeria's military, intelligence, and security ministries. There have been occasional successes.

Algerian officers have trained with the US military; US intelligence agencies shared overhead imagery of Algeria's vast border; and the two sides at times cooperated against a common enemy, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the group's North African affiliate.

But in general, distrust has been a hallmark of the strained relationship between the US and Algeria.

Under President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the Algerian military has never agreed to the large kinds of defence-aid packages which other North African allies like Morocco and Egypt accepted. Known as foreign military financing, these kinds of grants can theoretically give the US leverage over -- and insight into -- foreign militaries.

Algeria's primary weapons supplier is Moscow, a relationship that goes back to the Cold War, when the Russians trained Algeria's intelligence service and military.

Since 2008, the US has spent money from the International Military Education and Training Program to bring Algerian military officers to the United States for advanced military education. These exchanges are meant to give US military officers a personal relationship with the future leaders of foreign militaries.

Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, the chief of staff for Pakistan's military, for example, studied at the US Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. When he was there, he got to know a young officer named David Petraeus, who would go on to lead the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Algerian government also participated in military exchanges with the US, yet it wasn't entirely convinced that the US could teach it military and police about how to fight terrorists, according to current and former US officials who worked on the program. In the 1990s, the Algerian government led a brutal campaign against the Islamist insurgency that eventually morphed into AQIM.

Ali Tounsi, who was the director general of Algeria's national police until he was murdered in 2010, said the US "keeps extending invitations to visit Quantico or Paris Island, but they have nothing to offer that we don't already know." Porter added,

"The view was Algeria had an extremely bloody counter-insurgency, and then after September 11, the US launches its war on terror and comes parading all these goodies like counterterrorism cooperation."

In the last six months, the Obama administration has intensified its diplomacy with Algeria in light of the deteriorating situation in Mali. Outgoing secretary of state Hillary Clinton has spearheaded an effort with the Algerian government to form a new strategic dialogue to broaden the relationship beyond counter-terrorism. But the emphasis has been on closing Algeria's border with Mali and targeting the mix of ethnic rebels and jihadists who are threatening to turn Mali into the next major al Qaeda safe haven.

To some extent, these efforts have been successful. Algeria allowed France, its former colonial master, to use its airspace for the new military initiative in Mali. The Algerians also moved troops to the Mali border after initially resisting the recommendation, according to three current US officials. But the wariness nonetheless remains.

What happened in Algeria was a blowback from the French unilateral intervention in Mali. French re-colonisation of Mali triggered militant fighters in Algeria to exact blood for what they see as Algerian government's betrayal of Mali. Much like in the past when Arab militants' dissatisfied with the Saud family's loyalty to US began operations attacking western targets in other countries.

Newton's third law of motion says that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Invasion of Kuwait led to Desert Storm. That was a blowback. 9/11, 7/7 and Madrid train attack can be connected by a series of events surrounding the Middle East conflict. The greatest of which is the Palestinian struggle against Israel.

Blowbacks are an extension of an ideological fight. Post colonialism independent countries were fuelled by the passion of nationalism and experimentation with different types of government models. Dysfunctional governments of many countries in South Asia and Africa gave birth to movements of anarchy, destruction, hatred and militancy.

Autocratic dictatorships were common outcomes

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in newly liberated and independent states. The argument went that military dictators were better equipped to keep law and order and to force mass people into accepting new rules for social and political setup. Democratic governments of poor countries were more likely to fail if they asserted their independence in a post colonial world.

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Mali's Tuareg rebels fell into the arms of Libya's former strongman Ghaddafi. With their paymaster now gone Tuareg rebels teamed up with armed militants to seize power. For few months militants ruled over a territory equal to the size of France itself.

In time they could have mustered enough power to change the rules of the game in regional strategy. That would have had a shocking blowback effect on the North African region where France wants to remain as the dominant player. The intervention is meant to stop that from happening amongst other strategic possibilities.

Sovereign state concept is as important a concept as chess board is to the game of chess itself. In the post World War II era republics must perform on the international chess board of "strategy and control" as designed by world powers.

International strategy as per the new world order will malfunction if sovereign states and republics begin to evolve and transform themselves into unified blocks and alliances. That would mean a new chess board to be required introducing new rules and new players.

Mali intervention is not over yet. First blowback from this invasion was the kidnapping and killing of 32 people or more. Blowbacks sadly don't die so easily. Therein hangs the danger of something horrible waiting to happen. We must hope another destructive ideology will not be born in those unfortunate blowbacks.

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