

Sticking to tough decisions

Whether it's providing clean drinking water or machine-readable passports without a 'religion column', the cabinet must abide by what was agreed in its meeting

Muhammad Nawaz

The cabinet last Thursday took some important decisions and deferred some others. It decided to fight hepatitis on war footing. Perhaps it was the new Health Secretary Anwar Mahmood who brought this deadly disease to the notice of the cabinet. The milder form of hepatitis - inflammation of liver in lay terms - is contracted through contaminated food and water, causing fever and jaundice. Its severe viral form is transmitted through infected blood, causing fever, debility and jaundice. Both forms are deadly if not treated promptly. Hepatitis in Pakistan has almost become an epidemic due to non-availability of potable water and shared syringes.

The official spokesman briefing the media said that in order to combat hepatitis the cabinet has decided that the poor would be provided with clean drinking water. He said that PM Shaukat Aziz has also directed the health ministry to put up a draft legislation to discourage the use of sub-standard medical devices, as these are the major cause of hepatitis. It is a tall order: providing clean water to the poor and ensuring the use of standard medical devices for injecting, and testing the donor's blood before it is transfused.

PM Shaukat Aziz's may have good intentions but does he have the means to turn them into realities? In Pakistan public healthcare is a very low priority. In fact, it enjoys no priority at all. We are at the tail end of the list of countries that spend the lowest percentage of their GDP on public healthcare.

If what Shaukat Aziz has directed were to take effect, we would be required to divert resources from other fields in massive quantities. Can we do that? It is most unlikely. We cannot weaken country's security just to provide clean drinking water to the poor. We cannot cause discomfort to our parliamentarians by withdrawing their VIP medical facilities just to provide



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hygienic syringes to hospitals. We should not expect our rich to give up their plush lifestyle so that the poor can have clean drinking water. So we must find some other ways to 'do the needful'.

Forty years ago, China was beset with similar health problems. It was just not possible financially and logistically to provide clean drinking water

with the result that Chinese usually sipped the boiled water like tea. They would not let the water cool after boiling because Chairman Mao had not said so. He had said drink boiled water, so be it.

The other source of diseases is the open sewerages common not only in villages but also in towns and cities. These sewers are often blocked, spreading germs and infections. Legislation is also required to eliminate these purveyors of diseases by replacing them with modern sewerage systems. The local governments should get involved in this very important civic activity.

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to all the people in urban as well as rural China. But China found a remedy. Chairman Mao issued an edict that henceforth people should only drink boiled water. The boiling took care of the contamination in the water. Mao's edict was religiously followed. Every household, every restaurant and hotel started boiling water. In a couple of years China got rid of the water-borne diseases. We can also try this method successfully. Tell the people to boil the water as a safeguard against hepatitis and other diseases, and keep on repeating this message. Schoolchildren should be taught this simple and inexpensive form of protection against diseases.

One important thing: tell the people that water may be cooled after boiling. Chairman Mao did not think of this

Pakistan is a country of extreme contrasts: We have the atom bomb and a pretty advanced missile system, but we have yet to discover a system of collecting and disposing of household garbage. No city, big or small, is immune from the ugly sight of garbage heaps in the streets. Even Islamabad, the most modern city in Pakistan, has so far failed to find a solution to its garbage problem. Is the problem so complicated that the bigwigs of CDA cannot comprehend it and solve it? Open garbage scattered in the streets is not only a health hazard but is an environmental disaster too. Perhaps a directive from the Prime Minister is needed for tackling this mundane but important problem.

The cabinet also discussed the issue of the religion column in passports.

The MMA has threatened agitation if religion column is not restored in this travel document. Religious Affairs Minister Ijazul Haq argued that Pakistan is an Islamic country and we should allow the religion column. Does he mean to say that Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia are not Islamic countries because their passports do not have the religion column?

The Interior Ministry has explained that the new machine-readable passport has been designed in line with the International Civil Aviation Organisation's decision, to which Pakistan along with other 172 countries is a signatory. The cabinet has deferred the matter and appointed a ministerial committee to show the light. The media has reported that there was rift in the cabinet on this issue.

This is a farcical situation: The cabinet is not supposed to work like a Board of Directors of a company with Prime Minister as its chairman. It does not decide issues by a majority vote nor is consensus needed. The members of the cabinet may discuss an issue to their heart's delight, but the final decision rests with the Prime Minister. Traditionally and constitutionally, once the Prime Minister gives his decision, it becomes the decision of the cabinet under the principle of collective responsibility. Any minister who does not agree with the decision has only two options: fall in the line or resign. The National Security Council has also been structured on the same pattern. Members of the NSC may argue in favour or against an issue but the final decision, irrespective of discussion, rests with the President.

If the government were to reverse its decision on the religion column, it would reap a bitter harvest. The government took the decision to meet an international obligation. By restoring the religion column, it will attract international ridicule, besides politically weakening the position of the Prime Minister.