

Fight against air pollution

Let the two-stroke ban be the beginning

THE total ban on two-stroke autorickshaws and autotempos, which takes effect today in the capital, promises a new order in the public transport and, more importantly, relatively less polluted air for the city-dwellers. The change would be perceptible within the next few days or weeks, with the smog blanket hovering over the city getting thinner and the air smelling fresher. Beyond visibility, the carbon monoxide and lead count per cubic metre will markedly go down.

The government deserves a round of praise for making this happen. Our appreciation also goes to the specific stakeholders who relented before the imperative necessity for keeping the environment safe for greater public good. This bears an eloquent testimony to how a daunting task can be achieved by the combined weight of governmental will and public support for a legitimate cause.

The air quality, however, may not improve to a level marked standard by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The reason: the two-stroke three-wheelers were not the lone source of air pollution in the transport sector. Therefore, we would like to view the ban as just the beginning. That means the Traffic Department of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) and the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) ought to intensify its lookout for flawed and black smoke-spewing vehicles. Ironically, a sizeable percentage of vehicles attached to different government establishments belong to this group. These are poorly maintained and hardly monitored but still manage to get fitness certificate from the authorities. The same is true for the DMP fleet and the buses run by the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC). It is true that the BRTC has lately commissioned a number of new single- and double-decker buses. However, it does not seem the old ones in the fleet get as much attention as they should. On the other hand private-ownership buses, trucks and other vehicles, though flawed, more often than not receive clean chit through corruption.

There are other sources of air pollution than just vehicular emission. And one must realise that their contribution to air pollution is no less problematic. The brick kilns could be a case in point. As winter sets in, some 5,000 brick kilns on the outskirts of the capital will go into full swing, burning fossil fuel to bake bricks and spewing sulphur among other toxic elements into the air. The Department of Environment has made air-filters and 120-foot-high chimneys mandatory for the kilns; however, the regulation is hardly enforced. Similar violation could also be detected in other industrial units.

Therefore, the government has to expand its focus beyond the transport sector. Otherwise, the bane posed by other polluters might overshadow the boon the ban on two-stroke three-wheelers would bring about.

Scrap the SPA now

The pernicious law smears our democratic face

THE Special Powers Act is the blackest of black laws this country has had the misfortune of living with during the last nearly three decades. Since its insertion into the statute book back in 1974 till today almost 70,000 cases have been instituted under this draconian law. And, in a ringing indictment on the abuse of this law, 99 per cent of the SPA charges were rejected out of hand by the court. Whenever the cases went to the High Court, almost in all instances, as the statistics above suggest, the court found the application of the SPA outside the scope of the law and in breach of the fundamental rights of citizens. That it has been used by successive governments as an instrument of harassment and exaction of vendetta on political opponents has hardly ever been in doubt. But the abuse of the law boomeranged on governments following the higher court's forceful adjudication of the writs and appeals arising out of the wanton acts of prosecution under the law.

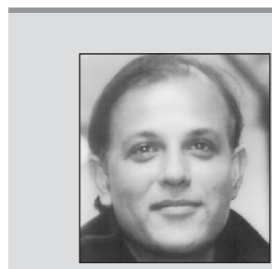
Even misuse of a good law is itself reprehensible and how much more pernicious must be the abuse of a law that has been inherently black in content and character. How could successive elected governments, especially since the restoration of democracy in 1991, allow the SPA, born of the tumult in 1974, to continue. Did they not know it fully well that it's blot on democracy and an impingement on constitutional rights of citizens? They seemed to exult over the fact that they could give the taste of their own medicine to each other in alternating circumstances entirely blind-folded to the resultant erosion of the credibility of a democratic and constitutional government at home and abroad.

So, we fully endorse the good counsel Dr Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International has given to Law Minister Moudud Ahmed to scrap the SPA which is 'an anti-human rights law.'

BNP is the party on whom the onus now rests to take the SPA out of the statute book. It had promised to do so from a position of power between 1991 and 1996 but reneged on it. Thereafter, when in the opposition, BNP put pressure on the AL government to scrap it. And the BNP coming to power on the back of AL's electoral defeat in 2001 caused largely by its abuse of power, should be obliged all the more to annul the SPA.

So, as a proof of its commitment to democracy and to go by its party manifesto, the BNP should scrap the SPA immediately. Let it be the ruling party's new-year's gift to the nation.

What do I tell you?



K.A.S. MURSHID

MY daughter: I should explain that my daughter expects to graduate in May this year from a North American university (BBA, Economics). I imagine there are many, many other Bangladeshi boys and girls who too face this rather dim prospect -- for in the post 9/11 USA, jobs are hard to come by, internships are rare and the only option to returning home is washing dishes or filling up cars in a petrol station. As I say this I am trying to work out the rate of return on an US education, and am forced to conclude, that at least in the short-run, this rate is pretty much the same as that of a similar education in Bangladesh, i.e. not particularly spectacular. There is always the possibility that the US (world) economy will get back on track 'soon' to reverse a trend that in fact began well before 9/11 -- I am talking about the recession of course. That however, will require a miracle -- which for the time being seems

unlikely. That need not prevent us from praying for one though.

As we continue to utter our prayers in silence, we should bear in mind that the most likely medium term scenario is one of deepening recession as the world plunges into further uncertainty as the result of an oil shock set off by the invasion of

dirty dishes for a change.

To our sons out there I would say: Tread carefully, wear your beard 'correctly' and have an occasional drink (and be seen to having that drink!) -- just to prove that you are a moderate, liberated, Muslim (under the circumstances, I think God would understand). Oh, and DO consider coming back before the

this is going to help target the hard-core poor, or even the moderate poor for whom you shed a daily tear? I am certain you have the answer -- DO let us know at some stage.

In the meantime, I have this sudden vision of a domino effect emanating from the ADAB fiasco, resulting in similar polarisation

near it, all hell breaks loose. There is no justice anymore. Oh for THOSE days when life was simple and fun; when no one dared to ask us questions; when there was no Wetland Law nor any irritating High Court order! Tell you what though -- why don't you chaps remove the Raj for Rajdhani and try to transfer your considerable expertise in wetland

strong signals to all those potential trouble makers out there, while at the same time, managing to keep the opposition at bay. Oh yes, this 'image' thing we always talk about -- don't worry -- it wasn't really that bright to start with so how much worse could it get? After all, we continue to remain the ONLY democratic Muslim country in the world, right -- so let's just keep flogging that horse for what it's worth, or until it drops dead. By the way, am I imagining this or have the number of heart attacks suddenly declined? I DO hope it's the latter.

The right wing press: Watch out for false prophets! The day of reckoning is nigh. By the way, why don't your guys have you own 'independent' commission to identify, try and execute the Mymensingh bombers? Doesn't it sound like fun? For one thing, you can then bring out the REAL hatchets that you never remembered to bury.

The moderate press: Carefully consider terminating columns like this one before WE get accused of being subversive.

Sheikh Hasina: I seem to remember vaguely that you wanted to retire at 55? You must be almost there by now? Or perhaps you have changed your mind?

Madam: I would prefer to talk to you when you are back in the opposition sometime this century.

The boss: Please bear with me a little longer -- thanks.

Dr K A S Murshid is an economist and Research Director, BIDS.

BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

Through Priscilla, Saleem Samad, Mamun and Kabir, you have managed to send out very strong signals to all those potential trouble makers out there, while at the same time, managing to keep the opposition at bay. Oh yes, this 'image' thing we always talk about -- don't worry -- it wasn't really that bright to start with so how much worse could it get? After all, we continue to remain the ONLY democratic Muslim country in the world, right -- so let's just keep flogging that horse for what it's worth, or until it drops dead. By the way, am I imagining this or have the number of heart attacks suddenly declined? I DO hope it's the latter.

Iraq (to be launched some time soon). If the instability in Iraq spills over into neighbouring countries (no reason why it would not), we could well be in for a long and hot summer of discontent. A nuclear North Korea will not help matters much while noisy South Asians will continue to rant and rave at each other using fairly identical idiomatic expressions, as it were. Under the circumstances, dear daughter, I would strongly advise you to return to your dear motherland post haste, as they say -- but WITH your degree please! Let the Americans wash their own

American dream turns into a nightmare.

ADAB: Yes, that's right! Drag it down into the mire (level playing field?) and get even. That's what it's all about right? Or am I missing something here? Ah, I see. So it is really about PRINCIPLES and IDEOLOGY you say? Yes, we know exactly what you mean. These look like the same PRINCIPLES that were so helpful in bringing down GSS, for example; or those that led to the arrest of Professor Mamun and Shahriar Kabir. Just one question though: How do you suppose

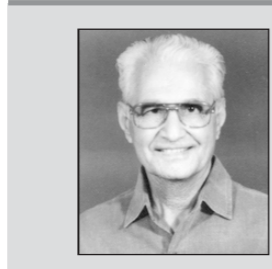
across the board, in e.g. the various chambers of commerce, the Chittagong or Noakhali Association, the St. Joseph's Old Boys Association or even the NGO credit groups and *samitis* -- and all because of a few bloated egos!

RAJUK: Don't WORRY so! I know times are a little difficult -- what with all these nosy civil society bodies mushrooming all over the place. I mean here is this luscious real estate buried under the Gulshan Lake and desperately needing OUR unmitigated attention. But the moment that we so much as even go

development, e.g. to the Mekong Basin?

The ruling party: You guys must be SO happy. You have survived the bombs of Mymensingh as well as the brickbats thrown at you by the world media. Admittedly, there were a few anxious moments, but after all is said and done, the dust seems to have settled and things are almost back to normal: the two foreign journalists were able to celebrate Christmas with their family and friends; through Priscilla, Saleem Samad, Mamun and Kabir, you have managed to send out very

Looking back: World in 2002



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

THE world in 2002 was unipolar *par excellence*. George W. Bush has relentlessly and with brutal efficiency been imposing his will to extend what is a new Holy Roman Empire's frontiers in Asia. The US has scarcely concerned itself with consolidating the Hamid Karzai regime in Afghanistan; leaving Kabul to the care of ISAF while US forces and bases there will do whatever may be required by the New Rome, otherwise known as White House. Neither people of Afghanistan, or indeed of anywhere else, nor peace in Afghanistan merit attention. Stage of consolidation is not yet.

Pakistanis have watched with fascinated horror the way the US has treated its major European allies over questions of Afghanistan and Iraq. European public opinion remains opposed to American adventurism and continues to show it. Herr Gerhard Schroeder won a general election by taking a brave stand that his Germany would not be bamboozled into supporting Americans' war in Iraq. But then look how sheepishly the German government returning to the fold albeit with halting steps: it would participate should the UN pass another Resolution authorising it.

Many Pakistanis, and not supporters of religious parties alone, are agitated and unhappy that the FBI and CIA having acquired freedom to pursue and arrest al-Qaeda suspects; it stinks of extra-territoriality rights of yore. Although Pakistan as a commandeered ally has rendered valuable services in the unending War against Terror, the ordinary Pakistanis are major suspects in America.

The INS and FBI are profiling the hapless Pakistanis in a country that

was once known as the land of liberty: Pakistani visitors are segregated, interviewed, finger-printed, photographed and told to report to INS centres. Thousands of them were arrested and hundreds were deported in chartered aircraft. All Pakistanis in America -- a few millions -- are living in fear of being arrested as soon as they report to INS centres, as some Iranians and Arabs were. Some have talked of 'concentration camps next.'

Iranian President visited Paki-

waited as long as it has because its NATO allies feel they cannot assist what is clearly a Bush campaign -- until there is a fig leaf of UN sanction. The Europeans have pushed Bush into a diplomatic quagmire because the UN needs "proof" from its arms inspectors that Saddam does have any of MDWs. That is taking time; Bush is annoyed although this delay is useful because it gives him an excuse not to move before his deployments are complete and weather is suitable for

are not quite as ready to prick the American enthusiasm's bubble. Secondly there is no known oil under North Korean soil and no Israel to be benefitted by its destruction. So diplomacy will do in the case of North Korea's truculence which itself may be a diplomatic ploy to force the US to resume oil supplies and stop dictating. Which is why China and Russia have chosen to stand behind North Korea to remind the Americans of the earlier campaign.

- has to be buried under patriotic rhetoric. By whipping up a hysteria of fear for Americans' safety Bush has reduced the opposition into incoherence and sheepish defensiveness.

The clay feet of this new god are however a significant circumstance. It concerns the soundness or otherwise of the American economy. Trade cycles are normal. But the kind of structural weakness revealed by the collapse of a number of blue chip transnational corpo-

or those in overalls. Disparities of income have increased in all societies, with rich becoming richer and poor becoming poorer still across the globe.

What has happened inside OECD economies has been replicated at the international level. To most of the third world this paradigm called globalisation has meant underdeveloped nations lowering their tariffs to nothing; they are forbidden to subsidise -- either their exporters, consumers or agricultural producers. Most of them have ended up as failed states by becoming debt-ridden and quite unviable. The new contradiction is not so much between the rich industrial democracies and poverty stricken countries, ruled mostly by dictators. Its place has been taken by the impoverished hungry masses in the third world versus the ever richer MNCs, for common people in the rich developed world are not being benefitted much by the exploitation of what are former colonies.

There is economic uproar in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and so many other countries. Fundamentally rich and viable countries have gone bust thanks to what amounted to US advice via IMF. Europe's continued sluggishness and recession of recent years and months have led to destructive losses on bourses. War diverts everyone's attention. Although, the need is for hefty public sector investment, it is against the globalisation paradigm which hugely benefits mainly Anglo-American MNCs. This perception has led to two overlapping movements throughout Europe and Americas: One is against this crassly cruel capitalism and the second is to oppose American wars for oil and strategic advantage among other, reasons, for propping up Israel, its deadily unreasonableness notwithstanding.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

There is economic uproar in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and so many other countries. Fundamentally rich and viable countries have gone bust thanks to what amounted to US advice via IMF. Europe's continued sluggishness and recession of recent years and months have led to destructive losses on bourses. War diverts everyone's attention. Although, the need is for hefty public sector investment, it is against the globalisation paradigm which hugely benefits mainly Anglo-American MNCs.

stan ostensibly to sell more oil and gas to India and Pakistan. But anyone could hear the undertone of Iranian worry over American intentions chiefly vis-a-vis oil-rich Iran, an important member of the 'Axis of Evil'. This may extend to Pakistan itself for other (nuclear) reasons. American think tanks have been volubly wondering whether Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are friends or are foes. And Russian President Vladimir Putin has feared that Pakistani atomic weapons are not in safe hands while Bush stood beside him. In short, the worry is that services already rendered in the war on Afghanistan are no guarantee against America turning on Pakistan on the issue of MDW's proliferation, if it becomes necessary for US strategic interests.

The year 2002 saw the last hope of the poor and weak states, the UN, demonstratively becoming the chambermaid of the US. Never before was its powerlessness on such a display than during the on-going Iraq Crisis. For whatever reason, the US Administration is obsessed with Iraq's suspected MDWs. It wants to have a go at Iraqi regime change and has massed enough military wherewithal to finish off Iraq quickly. The US has

invasion (Jan-Feb).

Before the year closed, another crisis concerning MDWs broke out. This time North Koreans declared they were at one stage secretly working on a military nuclear programme and that since the US' coercive diplomacy cut off oil supplies to them, they would now restart their nuclear reactor for generating electricity and threw out for good measure UN inspectors and dismantled the equipment monitoring its nuclear installations.

Here is a first-rate cause for the US action, if a military-oriented nuclear programme makes Uncle Sam squish it. In the case of Iraq, there is only suspicion. Here there is clear admission of past sin and current declared intent to do it again. The world regards the US military action on Iraq all but certain whether or not the UN provides its fig leaf. But in the case of North Korea, the US is content with diplomatic huffing and puffing; it chooses to deal with this crisis politically.

Why this discrimination? First, there are memories of 1949-50, which was the first major setback to a US, the victor of the Second World War having nuclear bombed Japan. Today the line up in Asia's northeast is similar to 1949-50, though they

Behind the likely Iraqi campaign stands Israel, as noted. Israel regards two Middle Eastern powers as a radical threat to its security. Iraq in the first instance and Iran later. So, both these states became members of the 'Axis of Evil' while Israel's murderous shenanigans in Palestine are totally evil *per se*. No amount of slick propaganda of terrorism of Palestinians can wash. Why? because Israelis are, all said and done, aggressive trespassers, indeed pure colonial occupiers on a par with French *colons* in Algeria. Their military occupation of West Bank and Gaza areas is now 35 years old and Israelis refuse to hear of ending their occupation. Instead, they want the destruction of those whose sympathies for Palestinians may go beyond words. The US dutifully rants against them as 'Axis of Evil'.

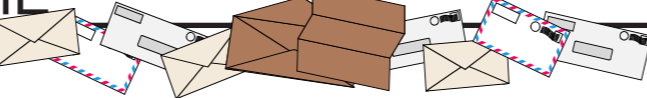
But the US may have other motives. A lot of political criticisms of his Administration's policies is being drowned out in war rhetoric. Embarrassment from senior Administration members in fishy business of oil -- from Dick Cheney, Rumsfeld, oil's linkage with the two Bushs, father and son, Condeleeza Rice down to recipient of fees from oil giants by Zalme Khalilzad and Hamid Karzai -

rations through fraud and theft, such as in Enron and WorldCom cases, has unnerved and unsettled many Americans. The kind of unemployment being witnessed in Europe, Japan -- above its unusual level for it -- and elsewhere is something of a revelation.

It was the US, on a lead from Margaret Thatcher, that reversed the Keynesian paradigm which had given Europe, Britain and America more than a quarter of a century of unparalleled prosperity and near full employment. The beginning of 1980s marked the beginning of virtually a new capitalist faith. What has this neo-classical capitalism done for the world in these 20 years is the question.

There is no doubt that the top 1500 MNCs have become richer -- more rich than even they dreamed of. But the economy as a whole has not prospered by anything like that. Indeed the normal trade cycles in their down swings have been biting ever deeper. Hidden unemployment has grown as has poverty; by now 15 per cent of Americans live below poverty line. The near crash of stock markets in the US, Japan and EU nations has impoverished millions of investors. The future looks uncertain to all workers, both white collar

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

"Wishful thinking"

I am with Munia Mamoon (January 1, 2003) and desperately hope her wish to be fulfilled. But if I had only one thing to ask for I would have wanted the enmity between Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina to be resolved. Because this is the mother of all problems.

If they had a friendly relation there would probably haven't been any bomb blast in the country. Even if there had been any such incident, the criminals would have immediately been brought to justice.

If they had good relationship, they would both be concerned about upholding the image of our country. AL then wouldn't be shouting about the presence of Al-Qaeda elements in Bangladesh. And BNP wouldn't hesitate to investigate such allegations raised by any quarter.

Sheikh Hasina wouldn't have to complain to the foreigners and BNP wouldn't raise a hue and cry over

Sheikh Hasina trying to ruin the image of the nation.

Most importantly, the law and order situation wouldn't have deteriorated to such an extent, the army didn't have to be called out, there wouldn't have been so many deaths in custody and the police force wouldn't have certainly been politicised.

If only my one wish had come true, we would probably have lived in a true 'Sonar Bangla'.

Mansoor Khan
Khilgaon, Dhaka

"Sheikh Hasina and our image abroad"

In reply to Shahin Samad's (January 1) query, I would like to say that it is indeed Sheikh Hasina's responsibility to maintain the image of our nation.

The post of the Opposition Leader is not an irrelevant one. She has huge responsibility on her

shoulder. And maintaining, if not upgrading, the image of the nation is the most important of them all. And I regretably say that Sheikh Hasina failed as a Prime Minister and she has failed as an Opposition Leader.

What was her output as a PM-- the worst law and order situation ever! And now when BNP has taken over they are up against the ruling party and their activities.

Akbar Chowdhury
Jigatola, Dhaka

It is both AL and BNP's responsibility to maintain our image abroad. And both failed miserably. And it is high time to give the responsibility to others. And my proposal is we give this responsibility to Jamaat-Islami. The way, BJP has prospered India, I'm sure Jamaat would be able to succeed in this task. And what's the harm in giving them a chance?

We should forget about the past

and move ahead with new vision.

Anjuman Akhtar
Banani, Dhaka

BNP is the ruling party and it is their duty to maintain the image of our country. But they failed in this sector.

They have a very poor knowledge about diplomacy and that is why they banned an FEER issue, arrested foreign journalists, local intellectuals and even brought army to handle the law and order situation. All these are undemocratic steps. And the worst part is the people seem to be ok with it. It is the people who have established democracy and it is their duty to maintain it. And I must say that we have failed miserably to do that.

As Einstein has said, 'World is dangerous place to live in'. Not because people do evil, but because we sit by and let them.

Taiyaan Tanvir
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Autorickshaw off the road

Everyone seems to be welcoming the decision of withdrawing 2-stroke auto-rickshaws from the road and least bothered about the plight of the general people.

How many people in our country have private cars? A very few and probably, these few lucky people are the main readers of *The Daily Star*.

But there others who have limited income and are terrified to think how exorbitant would be the fare hike as there would be less transport from January 1.

There would have been no harm in lingering this decision of withdrawing 2-stroke autorickshaws till there were enough alternatives introduced and meter installed on the remaining ones.

People should matter most to the Government than pollution.

Atahar Chowdhury
Lalmatia, Dhaka

I wholeheartedly welcome the decision of the Government in withdrawing 2-stroke 3-wheelers and banning plying of rickshaw on different part of the city.

Those who have private cars are the solvent people and they naturally pay more tax. The Government should be more cautious about looking after their interest than the others.

A number of times my car was scratched and dented by the reckless rickshaws and autorickshaws. The drivers of these automobiles were in no way capable to compensate me. Now that there would be lesser number of these peculiar automobiles on the road, I hope to have a smooth drive. I also hope that the Government would ultimately withdraw all such automobiles-- polluting and non-polluting and make room for private cars. And

for the general people there should be more bus service and taxi cab service. That should be sufficient, right?

Aran Khan Anjan
Baridhara, Dhaka

A couple of weeks ago a good friend of mine came back to Dallas from a short visit to Dhaka and when asked how the trip was, her first comment was that you can breathe again in Dhaka! She was very happy and enthusiastic about it - she had gone back there after only a year and she said the change was pleasantly noticeable.

I am pleased to hear that Dhaka has finally been freed from the smoke of two-stroke engines. My heartiest congratulations to the Government and to the citizens as well, for bringing about such a positive change. Let this be the beginning of environmentally sound trends in our country.

WT

Dallas, USA

"World cup crisis"

I am with Haji Mohammed Isam (January 1, 2003) and plead the participating countries to stay away from politicisation and present us a wonderful World Cup tournament.

There are unrest and discrimination everywhere, but there are other ways to protest it. Why ruin a much-waited tournament, which comes by every four years?

We are eagerly waiting for the World Cup 2003 to begin and look forward to an excellent and exciting tournament of cricket.

Sonia Salma
Dhanmondi, Dhaka