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## Rebuilding Bangladesh

A nation long plagued by natural disasters, poverty, corruption and violence may finally be on the verge of a happier future. Its 144 million people are crammed into a country the size of New York State, with 70 million of them living on less than \$1 a day. As the world's biggest delta, Bangladesh is also plagued by floods and cyclones, and by the steady poisoning of tens of millions of people who drink water contaminated by naturally occurring arsenic.

Bangladesh's courts, police and bureaucracy are so weak that the country has come last in Transparency International's world corruption index five years in a row. The government's most popular initiative has been formation of Rab, a police force that draws support in part for its willingness to kill. "It's been a crazy few years since I've been here," says Larry Maramis, the UN Development Programme's deputy resident representative.

Bangladesh, dubbed in the 1970s by Henry Kissinger as a "bottomless basket", is making surprising progress on other fronts, too. According to the UNDP, the country now scores higher than neighbour India on several key barometers of social development, such as infant mortality, child vaccination, and employment of women striking turnaround over the past decade or so. The country's much-praised micro credit scheme, operated by the Grameen Bank, has lent an average of \$120 each to 5.8 million people. And the government claims that 100% of young children are now enrolled in primary school, and that girls at last have equal access to education goals that the PM, as a woman leading a Muslim majority nation, had made a priority. "If we want to progress as a country, to remove poverty and spread awareness on family planning, we have to give [girls] equal rights," she explains. The economy is looking up, too. GDP has grown by at least 5% for three years running, and the Asian Development Bank predicts that growth will hit 6.5% in 2006. Foreign Direct Investment rose from \$138 million to \$454 million in the first six months of last year compared to the same period the previous year. The number of cell-phone users rose by 144% in a year. And Goldman Sachs has rated Bangladesh as one of 11 developing nations that, in the long term, could emulate the success of China, India, Brazil and Russia.

Alan Rosling, a prime mover behind Tata's investment in Bangladesh, said, "There is poverty, but there's also a fast-developing middle class, who makes it an attractive market." Bangladesh may never truly leave behind this legacy of bloodshed, corruption and mistrust. But in what was once one of the saddest places on earth, there is new hope.

Bangladesh has achieved progress that few outsiders, or even Bangladeshis, believed possible a few years ago. "All we need," says University of Dhaka Professor of Economics Abul Barakat, "is five years of good governance, and we'd be away." Surely no nation ever deserved it more.

Why is Bangladeshi politics so intense? It seems that parties are either in power or trying to overthrow the government.

When both parties expend all their energy fighting each other, there's a danger that governance can take second place. Is that what is happening in Bangladesh?

A reader, On e-mail

## City of lakes

Dhaka may be declared a city of lakes. For this we have to develop, beautify and maintain the lakes. I don't know if any other city is lucky to have so many lakes. I name the lakes-- Ramna Lake, Dhamnondi Lake, Crescent Lake, Gulshan Lake, Uttara Lake, Mirpur Lake,

Khilgaon Lake, Mugdapara Lake.

There may be more, which I am not aware of. All these lakes should be developed as beauty spots and recreation places for the citizens.

Tarun Ali, Dhaka



### Death of sweepers

I was shocked to read a news item published in The Daily Star on April 2, 1906.

Two sweepers while cleaning up an underground sewerage line at Lalbagh died of asphyxia immediately after they entered a manhole. How come it happens that these poor persons taking the risk of life enter these death traps without taking adequate oxygen supplying arrangements with them? Is it because they are poor and there is nobody to speak for them that they will have to accept such suffocating deaths year after year?

I want to know who is going to make compensations for the deaths of these brave stalwarts of cleanliness of our society.

Adequate oxygen supplying arrangement is a must for these risky jobs and such precautions must be taken in future.

If our conscience is not sensitive to such cases, morally we are doomed forever.

Ayesha Sultana  
Professor of Philosophy,  
Dhaka University

### NSU graduates

Please accept my sincere appreciation for your consistent efforts in publishing constructive and informative articles/news reports on the private universities of Bangladesh. As one of the early graduates of North South University, I am pleased to see these reports projecting a comprehensive picture of how a top tier private university like NSU has made its mark in ushering a new era in the higher education system in Bangladesh.

However, I do not believe that a recent Star Weekend Magazine (March 31, 2006) article titled "Doorway to a Brighter Future" portrayed the unqualified truth when it quoted a certain NSU graduate (unfortunately I have no recollection of him from my NSU days) saying "Back then, those who were unable to get a seat in the public institutions, made their way towards NSU. ... The curriculum was still developing and most of the kids just wanted to transfer their credits abroad to complete a foreign degree and for a better life there."

As a matter of fact, many of the students who enrolled in the three semesters of 1993, including myself, had already secured admission in prestigious and highly competitive public university programmes. Many had outstanding SSC/HSC or O Level/A Level results. For example, in the very first semester of North South University, there were at least three students who had places within the top ten in the HSC exams. What motivated us to be part of NSU was a dream; a dream to spend perhaps the most significantly defining years of our lives in a well designed, adequately resourced, aptly modernised, strongly directional and true equal opportunities university education system that was free of petty politics, corruption, and counterproductive bureaucracies that had plagued the public universities.

I can say without any hesitation that NSU stood up well beyond our expectation.

Although a few did successfully transfer their credits to reputable overseas universities (and proved the credibility of NSU programmes even more), majority of the 93 enrolled students completed their degree from NSU. A large number of these graduates pursued postgraduate studies in numerous top standard universities of countries like US, UK, Canada, and Australia and many secured scholarships and on-campus academic jobs to support their higher education. But what fills up my heart with great pride is that many of our classmates have positioned themselves at highly responsible and influential places in many large organisations at home and abroad.

Masrur Rishad Khan  
(On behalf of NSU-93, an alumni association of North South University graduates)

### Demolition of slums

From DS of 17 March, I came to know about the demolition of slums at Demra in the capital. I am not among the kiths of those slum dwellers, but I am a citizen of Bangladesh.

My question is what have the authorities concerned done to rehabilitate the affected people?

S.M.Shaikat  
East Nakhhalpara, Tejgaon, Dhaka

### Candle light shower, bubble bath

"Candle Light Shower" - you are probably thinking of something similar to a romantic candle light dinner with air conditioner. Well, I wish you were right. In Dhaka, Bangladesh, it means electric power outage. It is dark, hot and you need to take shower with a candle in the bathroom.

"Bubble Bath" - how relaxing, especially with the drink of your choice, doesn't it! Over here, it means while you are taking a shower with soap all over you, and the water supply stops on you, due to shortage of supply.

Let us rebuild it. Because it is our country and we want to stay here in Bangladesh and contribute.

A reader  
Dhaka

### Contain campus violence

It seems the colleges and universities have become mini armouries full of lethal weapons and ammunition, the educational campuses have turned into grounds of violent confrontations and terrorism. The students, instead of concentrating on their studies, take pleasure in brandishing arms. Many innocent and brilliant students fall easy prey to terrorism. Campus violence not only ruins the academic environment but also spoils the lives of the general students.

However, the students alone should not be blamed. They have become puppets in the hands of the

self-seeking so called politicians. So, for the greater interest of the students as well as the nation everybody including the genuine political leaders should come forward to stop this suicidal game of student politics.

Zeenat Ara Khanam  
Mohammadpur Preparatory School, Dhaka

### NGOs and development

As a journalist every day you are carrying hundreds of news reports for me. Some are positive, encouraging and some are frustrating. Today I will provide you some news and you will decide whether the news is positive or negative.

We have a feeling that NGOs are doing an extremely good work in our country. Sometimes they are treated as the Parallel of the government. A common feeling has developed that NGOs, especially the donors, are second to God and the white people are the Angels to us. They are very honest, have a strong principle, hard working, committed towards work, do not compromise with ethics etc. But my experience (I worked for more than 17 years in the development sector of Bangladesh as an expert) has been different.

I would like to request you to investigate the matter. Hope you would be able to bring the truths regarding the role of the donor agencies and NGOs to full public glare.

A Bangladeshi development worker & journalist  
Toronto, Canada

### Governance at stake

As a senior citizen, I am disillusioned at the PR policy followed by the regime. The PM appears to be wrongly advised. She is, as usual, attacking the opposition, and playing up on 'achievements' of projects.

She has to give more time to current problems of the society at different levels and locations. The ministers do not touch upon topics we like to hear about.

They are crazy about winning the coming general elections. I won't be surprised if the election could not be held, due to "circumstances beyond control".

Public faith in local political standards and mores has eroded. Think outwardly!

A Abdali, Dhaka

### Magazine programmes

Like everybody else, I also enjoyed watching the last episode of Ittyadi on Friday.

It's a pity that other than Ittyadi, we have no more quality magazine programme to mention. We have quite a lot of channels these days, but when it comes to quality, there are very few programmes to mention. Especially, the shortage of quality magazine programmes is very acute.

Shamima, Dhaka

### We are at fault



## Political DIALOGUE

The very high degree of mistrust and animosity that exists between the two major political parties of the country do not augur well for the future of democracy. Most of our political leaders are irresponsible. When they open their mouth they remain oblivious of engaging the brain beforehand. They are not even sure about the ill effects that their irresponsible utterances can have on the country.

When mutual respect among the political leadership is absent and the degree of mistrust is so high it is just not possible that there can be any meaningful dialogue. The concept of caretaker government is contrary to the spirit of democracy. By adopting this system we have institutionalised mistrust among political parties. To ensure a free and fair election we have to bring reform in our political parties, improve political culture and reform the Election Commission.

It appears to me that our politics is stuck in 1971 and it has not matured since. Even 35 years after the liberation war we want to be guided by a political party's role in 1971. Political parties have to accept that we are not living in 1971 but in 2006. Realities of the day are more important to what happened 35 years ago. I do not see this happening as long as present old guards are in the political leadership.

Time has come for these old guards to retire and hand over the leadership to the younger generation. These new leaders will be able to face the future based on the realities of today and will be able to push the country forward, rather than pulling it backward as is being done by the old guards.

Salahuddin Ayubi, On e-mail

I suspect that our "leaders" do not take the media seriously and care a hoot for voter-feedback.

Money cannot buy many virtues of life. How long this illusion, delusion/ perversion will remain? We voters decide.

We voters are at fault, we asked for it!

Alif Zabr  
Dhaka

### Tribal handicraft centre

One-stop Tribal Handicraft centres will encourage these communities' wider publicity.

A pilot project may be started in Chittagong, followed by a centre in

metro Dhaka; which would also provide outlets for cultural shows.

Our society is rich in traditional diversities, and this is the time to unite and present a single national image.

A little sacrifice and accommodation from each one of the 130 million would work wonders.

A Mahasen

Dhaka

## Politics: aggravating public life?



It is well established that in Bangladesh politics is a dirty game. By convention, whenever the opposition brings out any rally to conduct its political programme, police attack it turning that area into a battlefield. Police's attitude towards the opposition is very clear. For example, during the tenure of the immediate past government the police had beaten up many BNP leaders.

On March 12, the main opposition Awami League and its allies were scheduled to lay siege to the Election Commission. The rallies met at Russel Square and Police pounced on them at Dhanmondi 27 intersection. At that time I was in Dhanmondi area and experienced unprecedented traffic jam and insecurity. The clash occurred at around 12:00 noon, the busiest hour in an area like Dhanmondi where there are so many schools, offices, hospitals and other installations. All of a sudden everyone was astonished. Many innocent people who are not involved with any political activity ( housewife Shanta) were also beaten mercilessly. Many vehicles were damaged along with shops and other installations. Who will pay for the loss and sufferings of the innocents? Is it the government or the Awami League? Although the opposition termed the rally as peaceful but we know how furious their activists (specially women) become on the hartal days. Police justified its action claiming that it acted to save public life and property. But what is the truth? Is not it the tradition of the government wreaking its wrath on the opposition? The opposition, whichever party it might be, must act reasonably and sensibly while declaring its programmes. As it is very much foreseeable that there would be police action, is it justified to declare any programme at the expense of public's safety?

Following the incident of March 12, the opposition declared a programme to gherao WASA Bhaban but fortunately nothing happened there.

Moinul Alam, Eskaton Garden Road, Dhaka



## and Dhaka streets

The WASA has been a silent watcher of miseries, stagnation of life and water, filth all around, causes for diseases and so on! The drains are the least cared for, because in their maintenance and ensuring of easy flow of storm water no money can be made. This can be seen all around Dhaka! No area is spared from the indifference of the authorities.

Particularly mention worthy is Shantinagar, Rajarbagh, Motijheel and the surrounding areas, including some areas in Gulshan.

And even if the jammed waste is manually emptied (perhaps only 60%), putting life of cleaners at high risk, the filth is right there, only inches away from the open drain.

After some time the same heap slowly takes refuge where it came from! No service people of solid waste is coordinating and removing the same. So, money, time, effort all go in vain! We keep on suffering in spite of this eyewash.

The government announces from time to time its plan for 'Beautification' of city areas. Actual beauty will be in efforts to keep the city clean in its existing form and shape. No new arches, towers or memorials are to be built to make 'development' more visible. Let us try to look down, right next to our feet, if city streets

are beautiful enough. The miseries are too much, too large to be talked about!

As the Capital city of a country, Dhaka city is not at all cared for and the bare civic necessities are far away from our imagination. Very little is spent on cleaning, in spite of the rapid growth of Dhaka.

Our planners and engineers should visit some other developing and dense cities to study the measures taken to keep life functioning through proper maintenance of the drainage system. But for now, please flush the drains. There are equipments available to do this job.

If election is a fear-factor, let the government think seriously about 'properly and totally' removing the jammed filth in the drains, so that people (students, office goers, business people) can move in the rainy season. No quick fix is necessary for election by making 'visible monuments'. But the WASA should clean drains and remove the contents immediately by coordinating with the waste removers through making prior arrangements.

There is absolutely no coordination, no accountability, and no audit check on job done. Because the 'cake is there for everyone'!

Syed Imtiaz Ali, Shiddeswari Lane, Dhaka