

## Secretariate revisited

Our correspondent spends four hours in the hub of administration

TAWFIQUE ALI

The Bangladesh Secretariat looked deserted with most of the officials out of station and absence of visitors' rush on Monday, the second working day after Eid holidays followed by two-day weekend and turbulent political situation.

There were hardly any official activities at different ministries and divisions at the secretariat. Attendance of the officials was between 20 to 30 percent at different ministries. Only a few secretaries were found attending office.

The handful of officials present at the ministries were found passing idle time or gossiping with others with most of the sections lying empty or kept under lock and key.

Members of the police and armed police battalion were guarding the gates and offices at the secretariat but they too were found relaxing, as there were very

few visitors.

"We are free from tacking the rush of visitors over the past two-three days but more alert in keeping watch," said one of the on-duty security personnel at the main gate.

Visiting a good number of ministries and divisions from 11:00am to 3:00pm Monday this correspondent found an uneasy calmness and carefree mood of the officials.

"I was reading newspaper in another room, as I have no work today," said a senior assistant secretary of the Finance Division seeking not to be named. "Very few officials have turned up at the office today, as transport is not available in the streets."

He said he too would leave the office soon. No urgent work is left undone, he added.

"This is an usual scene particularly after the Eid holiday," he said. "But this year the

situation has prolonged further with millions of people stranded outside Dhaka and all modes of transportation staying out of operations because of political volatility."

Most of the sections were without officials and a number of rooms under lock and key at the shipping ministry at 12:20pm. Secretary Md Rafiqul Islam was found busy inspecting the sections to prepare the offices for the new adviser.

A deputy secretary of the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education said he came to office by rickshaw as he was confused about availability of the government transport. He had left the office quite earlier on Sunday.

"Today I attended a monthly coordination meeting and will leave early," he said. "I have instructed my driver not to take the transport out today as well."

Secretary AKM Shamsuddin was in the office.

According to on-duty police personnel, Cabinet Secretary Md Abu Solaiman Chowdhury came to office at 10:00am and left for Bangabhaban at 11:00am.

Muhammad Mohsin Chowdhury, personal secretary (PS) to the cabinet secretary, was found very busy coordinating communication with the cabinet secretary every moment.

The third and fourth-class employees of the establishment and home ministries were observing the situation cautiously as these two ministries become centre of attention during the caretaker government period.

Few staff were seen at the establishment ministry at 2:00pm with both the secretary and his PS out of office.

An administrative officer of establishment ministry said he said he could not turn up for office on Sunday as there was no public transport from Mirpur.

Sheikh Momena Moni, a senior assistant secretary of the home ministry, was passing time reading newspaper at 2:30 pm with no other staff in sight in the Law Section.

Though attendance of the officials of Environment and Forest ministry was noticeably thin, Secretary Barrister Muhammad Haider Ali was in the office at 11:15am.

"The reason behind thin attendance of the officials is severe disruption in transport operations in the face of ongoing violent political situation," said personal officer of the Cultural Affairs Ministry Abdul Mannan Hawladar.

Secretary ABM Abdul Huq Chowdhury is in Colombo to attend a Saarc senior officials' meeting.

Most of the sections at Science and Information & Communication Technology (SICT) remained empty at 12:00 noon.

Kutub-ul-Alam, personal officer to the secretary to the ICT ministry said, "I reached office on foot from Green Road on Sunday and today (Monday)."

Secretary Khan Muhammad Ibrahim Hossain is abroad to attend a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Note: Our correspondent was in the secretariate on Monday. Some of the officials quoted in the story were transferred to other departments Monday night.

## Future gutted in the flame of politics



Salahuddin scavenges through the charred merchandise of his shop.

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

Many innocent people lost their only means of livelihood in the recent political confrontation in the city, crippling their survival.

"The flames of politics shattered my only hope for survival in this cruel world," lamented Salahuddin, a victim of the recent political unrest in the Stadium area.

On Saturday political activists burnt his little shop on the footpath near National Stadium along with his fight against poverty.

Salahuddin had grown up on the streets in the Gulistan area and had witnessed many violent political movements, but never for a moment thought it could ruin him some day, he told Star City on Sunday.

He said he toiled hard to arrange his daily meals, as he had nothing except his physical worth. He worked as a labourer in a shop, and yet with a dream of getting out of his destitute life, he had borrowed Tk 15,000 from a leaseholder on an interest rate of 240 percent, just five month ago.

After his shop was gutted, the moneylender keeps on pressuring Salahuddin to return the money. Salahuddin's efforts to sustain himself and repay the loan have been shattered.

"I don't know how I could make up the loss, but I know for certain that I have to work doubly hard," he said.

He married on September 30, and started living with his in-laws and as the only earning member he has to bear the expenses of eight members of the family.

The street shop brought him the few takas to maintain his family, the only one he ever experienced, as he had been sleeping along the footpaths all his life.

"This is where I experienced touch of family life and respect as housemaster," he said. "But I wonder how I will be able to pay the house rent," he added.

Salahuddin sold different type plastic goods including toys. On Saturday, he did not open the shop because of the political unrest and stayed back home in the slum in Demra.

A phone call from the neighbouring shopkeeper Anisur told him that political activists had burnt his shop -- the last means of getting out of a life of a destitute. He rushed to the spot, but it was too late -- most of his goods lay burnt to ashes or as melted plastic.

Police on the duty there could douse the fire and save the other shops but not his goods, Salahuddin said adding: "I don't know the necessity of political parties, but know they are a disaster to the masses."

On October 28 political activists across the city displayed their ferocity, which cost at least four lives, disabled hundreds, while an uncountable number of shops were burnt and looted.

"Political leaders will capitalise on the clash, they will enjoy power, they will be elected as prime minister or members of parliament, but why they burnt my shop, I do not understand," Salahuddin said. "I am just a simple man, who just lost all I had. I am neither involved in politics, nor have I committed any crime. Unfortunately I had to pay heavily and no one seems to care," he said.

Salahuddin is lost, not knowing what to do and how to repay the loan. One thing he realised was that the flame of politics burnt down all he owned.

His plea to the political parties: "Please do something towards peace and stop showing how ferocious you are to innocent people."



Less crowded entrance of the Bangladesh Secretariat after Eid holidays.

## Dhaka: Home away from home



The British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, HE Anwar Choudhury, who has been living in Dhaka for the last two years, shared his feelings about the city with Durdana Ghias of Star City.

"When I first came to Dhaka in 2004 as High Commissioner, I expected Dhaka to be richer, cleaner and more advanced. The reason may be that I was used to Western cities and when I first arrived, I was in areas like Gulshan and Baridhara, which have a more international feel.

My first impression changed when I noticed shabby dwellings by the roadside. And I was surprised at the speed with which the city was growing.

I went for a helicopter ride to have a bird's eye view of Dhaka from a height of 500 feet approaching the city from all sides. The view was quite breathtaking and I was gripped by the extent of the vastness of this city.

There were thousands of buildings. Sometimes it looked like a city in England and sometimes like Bangkok of ten years ago. It encouraged me to think that Dhaka could be one of the best cities in the world.

I left Bangladesh when I was a

boy and I lived in a village so I had no idea what Dhaka really looked like other than the airport.

I came to Dhaka in 2001 for a very short period - of eight hours on my way to Sylhet. At that time I was an adult but not High Commissioner. I was visiting Bangladesh for a holiday. I remember going to Malibagh in a car and I could not breathe, as the air was full of smoke. But I notice now that the air was much cleaner.

I like small shopping outlets and the river - whatever is left of it. My favorite places are little boutiques selling handicrafts and antique shops hidden away in

**I need at least two months holiday to discover the city. I have a plan to do that in disguise maybe in lungi and gamchha with long hair and beard**

corners which are nice little discoveries.

I love gamchhas. Do you know what a gamchha is? I look for nice checks in them. I cannot buy those often because of the security but if I spot an eye-catching one I get down from the car to buy that. I wear those as scarves in England. Those help in keeping out the cold and are very fashionable to me. The colours are quite vibrant and go nicely with informal suits, plain shirts, jackets and khakis.

Obviously the traffic situation is something I do not like about Dhaka. The struggle for space is quite visible. Unless there is some serious compliance in planning and maintaining the existing

water bodies those may turn into sewage depots and dumping grounds. This wastage upsets me because these are assets of Dhaka being destroyed by the greed of some people.

I think there should be a better approach towards managing the infrastructure of the city. We have a wonderful civil society in Baridhara that took charge of their neighborhood. They removed the mud from the lakeside and made nice walkways.

Sometimes the best way to protect your environment is through civic pride. If citizens take charge of their respective neighborhoods it will not need much money otherwise it is quite impossible for the government.

If I am back to Dhaka in 20 years time, I will remember it as a growing city. In the near future it might be the most populated city in the world.

There are different bits of Dhaka each area is different and of course Old Dhaka is quite special.

Dhaka is a happening city where you can find work, explore your potential and meet people. Sometimes it is a city of contrast between extreme rich and poor. It is a city that needs molding. It should not be left to develop in a haphazard way. It needs protection, vegetation, lakes and water bodies. Dhaka is looking after millions of people but who is looking after Dhaka?

I am yet to see many parts of Dhaka because of my busy schedule and tight security. I need at least two months holiday to discover the city. I have a plan to do that in disguise maybe in lungi and gamchha with long hair and beard. I am not joking! If I can do that, I will not tell anyone - but I will let you know.

## Dhaka zoo affected too

Number of visitors dropped drastically at the peak season but now it is gradually picking up

WAHIDA MITU

The turbulence caused by the present political situation and continuous blocking of roads has seen a reduced number of visitors to the Dhaka Zoo.

This has also hindered the supply of food for the zoo animals.

The Zoo usually wears a festive look as it had a large number of visitors during the Eid holidays. This outlook lasted for about 10 days, but unfortunately it did not last for more than two days, said Dr NC Banik, deputy curator, Dhaka Zoo.

"This year there was a large number of visitors on the day of Eid and the day after, but unfortunately began to gradually decrease after that as people sensed a strain in the political situation," said one of the leaseholders of the Zoo gate.

The Zoo is usually buzzing with people four to five days after the festival. The number of visitors on Eid was around 35,000 while the day after Eid the number totalled to 65,000.

But on Friday, the third day of Eid the numbers saw a gradual downslide with the deteriorating political situation, with around 22,000 while Saturday, Sunday and Monday recorded 3,000, 1,500 and 2,000 respectively, said the deputy curator.

The leaseholders said they have to pay the government around Tk 60 lakh once in three months including value added tax (VAT) and other charges, the authority added.

"Eid is the season where we earn much from thousands of visitors. During the month of Ramadan the number of visitors decreased, but usually the gap is bridged during the holidays for Eid," said the other gate leaseholder. "Unfortunately, it did not happen this year," he said. When this correspondent visited the zoo last morning around 9.00, the entire compound and its surroundings were unusually clean. Cleaners were just busy cleaning the animal cages and walkways.

While five monkeys were idly nibbling bananas and bread, the tiger was pacing up and down in the open space in front of its cage.

Suppliers were waiting patiently with their wares including leafy vegetables, banana trees, grass and jackfruit leaves for the officer of the zoo to weigh their goods, where a certain quantity would be stored for later use.

Envisaging a breakdown in the routine of supplies, the authorities decided to store six cows for carnivorous animal last Friday, Banik said. Grass that was usually transported daily by truck from Savar were brought in by three pushcarts.

The chaotic period brought much anxiety to fish and leafy vegetables suppliers, because of the non-availability of these items in the local market.

However, with the withdrawal of the siege and normalcy in the political situation returning countrywide, visitors have gradually begun their visits from yesterday.

The zoo is open from Monday through Saturday from 7:00am to 5:00pm and is closed on Sundays and government holidays. The entry fee is Tk 10 each.



A Royal Bengal Tiger on a stroll at the poolside of the Dhaka Zoo yesterday.