

Flood and Famine: Belated Reaction

It appears as if the government had to be told by NGOs, most of them foreign, about the near-famine condition now prevailing in all of the northern districts. There hasn't been to date any sign of government knowing about that. However, in a remarkable departure from established norms of government response to such suggestions and claims of the nation being in a bad shape, the government accepted the grim picture to be true and entreated the NGOs to go out to help the victims with renewed support from their principles.

That the nation remained uninformed of the magnitude of the September flood in the northern districts as also about the havoc it has already been playing with the life of the affected people and their life-supporting systems such as agriculture and health, there is not an iota of doubt. And the national Press have also their share in the guilt. The government's open and rather eager acceptance of the bleak realities of and bleaker outlook for the 30 devastated districts should underline the importance of keeping the nation posted with particularly the worrisome developments on the national scene. With the general public duly informed in right time of such challenges, government would not afford to be unmindful of the need to act as it has apparently been in the present case.

In a meeting on Saturday the Finance Minister appealed to the NGOs to gear up their activities in the affected areas and "through them" appealed to their respective donor-governments and agencies for assistance. Although one very well understands his feeling a little squeamish about a possible scenario of his cry of help failing to fall on generous receptive ears in an apparently aid-fatigued world and as such refraining from issuing such calls, it is all the same ludicrous that a government should want help from other governments and yet solicit it not. Worse still that the request be routed through intermediaries of no state-level standing.

The touch of unreality in the drama might well have been but by the uneasy possibility of the NGOs running mad to get the government to say something in recognition of the grim northern realities so that they can move their principals abroad for sending in succour — and the government benignly yielding to that. This is possibly true and it makes the whole case still worse.

Of government's own admission 73.14 lakh people in 1,046 unions under 175 upazilas of 30 northern districts have been affected and 1783 bridges and culverts and 146 embankments have been damaged and standing crop on 72.66 lakh acres have been fully destroyed and on 73.15 lakh acres partly, and fully damaged houses number 2.29 lakh and partly damaged ones 3.67 lakh and 782 education institutions have been fully lost and 1199 partly.... But these are only figures and not real persons and their houses and their crops. Where are they staying, what are they eating, how are they buying things? People are dying of hunger and hardship, diarrhoea and despair. As also cattle are dying in droves. The receding waters are leaving behind eroding rivers eating up land by the thousand of acres. Lack of national awareness of the horrible 'near-famine' situation is allowing the government to treat the whole thing on a less than national emergency footing.

The non-flood-prone Barendra highland area had never had it so bad in perhaps all of its history. Most areas have been visited by waters worse than it happened in even 1988. If this is not a nation-sized challenge, what is?

Mere making up for the failure to react in time may not prove sufficient. Government must commit all if its resources and, more important, its true will to come to grips with the challenge.

For a Real Children's Day

Today Bangladesh celebrates the Universal Children's Day, being the first Monday of October, which has been designated for observance here. Without commentary on the day's programme it is possible to say what is likely to happen. Ministers will inaugurate something. The big names in society will host this or that function and there will be a lot of speeches — oh yes, lots of them. We will talk about the importance of having healthy children, express deep regret — as we in this journal will also do — that so many of our kids are out of school, deprived of proper health care and having nowhere to stay. And after having had our fill of pious pontification, from the day following we will go about our business, till of course the next 'Children's Day'. By then of course we will have our next speech ready.

Society's hypocrisy in all this is sickening. Time has come to take some action — for a change. The problems of children — starting from health care, education, skill development to providing them a decent home — are enormous. But they are definitely not insurmountable as the commendable work of many NGO's and of UNICEF has shown us again and again. One study after another repeatedly tells us that the worst victim of poverty, ignorance, disease and what have you, are the children. They being young and vulnerable, are defenseless. They fall prey to all kinds of social evils. They are exploited, neglected and abused. They are denied all the rights and protections that every decent society is committed to ensure.

Let our conscience be touched by the sorry state in which our poor children live. Let their plight gear us into massive social action where the community takes upon itself the task of finding solution to the problem, where the authorities have so far failed. It is true that it is only the government that has the resources and the organisation to undertake action at a national level. But what it lacks are community level leaders and sincere workers who can deliver at the grassroots level. Let us put together the virtues of the two sides — government and the private activists — and chalk out a programme in which each complements the other to help our children. When we say that children of today are the leaders of tomorrow, we must realise that there is more truth in that statement than we think. So if we neglect them, we are in fact jeopardising our future.

Utilizing Land on a Crowded Planet

In an increasingly urbanized world it is sad, but not surprising, that for millions of children consumer items such as cartoon milk, cotton T-shirts and breakfast cereals are the closest link to the countryside they will ever experience. Indeed, it is easy for any of us that live and work in an environment dominated by houses, shops, offices and factories to forget how fundamentally our well-being is linked to the land.

Food and fibres are only two of the most obvious links between an urbanized population and the land. Wood is another important link. The poorest half of humanity requires wood for cooking, heating and construction, and wood remains a crucial raw material of modern industrial societies. Less apparent are the critical ecological

services provided by forests, plants and wildlife. From the cycling of chemical elements to the moderation of microclimates and purifying water to renewing soils, biological systems make Earth habitable for humanity.

Properly managed the Earth's more fertile lands and forests could meet everyone's food and wood needs abundantly and indefinitely. The persistent undernourishment of some 500 million people today does not stem from a global scarcity of resources. While millions of babies and children die each year from diseases exacerbated by malnutrition, one third of the world's grain harvest is fed to livestock to supplement the meat-rich diet of the affluent.

The social and economic failings that permit hunger to persist are also indirectly un-

dermining the land's ability to support human activity. Millions in the poorest countries are caught in a tragic cycle of poverty and land degradation. Lacking either fertile land or decent-paying jobs, they are forced to scratch a living from marginal lands where soils cannot sustain intensive cultivation. As populations soar in semi-arid zones, cultivators shorten traditional fallow cycles, transforming ancestral lands into deserts. In other cases the promise of new agricultural land proves illusory, as evidenced by the failure of an estimated 20 per cent of new ranches in the Amazon within a few years.

Worldwide, rising populations, poor management and increasing urban and industrial pollution are taking their toll on both cropland and freshwater resources. Soil erosion, de-

sertification and the salting and waterlogging of irrigated lands are slowly undermining the productivity of much of the world's cropland.

Each year millions of hectares of tropical rainforests, the world's richest biological storehouses, are logged to pay national debts and provide affluent consumers with parquet floors, fine furniture, fancy paneling and high-grade coffins. Deforested slopes lead to increased rainfall runoff and crop-destroying floods. Water reservoirs and hydro-electric dams are rendered obsolete by premature silting, coral reefs are smothered and low-lying settlements flooded. Damage to crops, forests and buildings from air pollution and acid rain is evident in industrialized and developing countries alike.

While people are the main

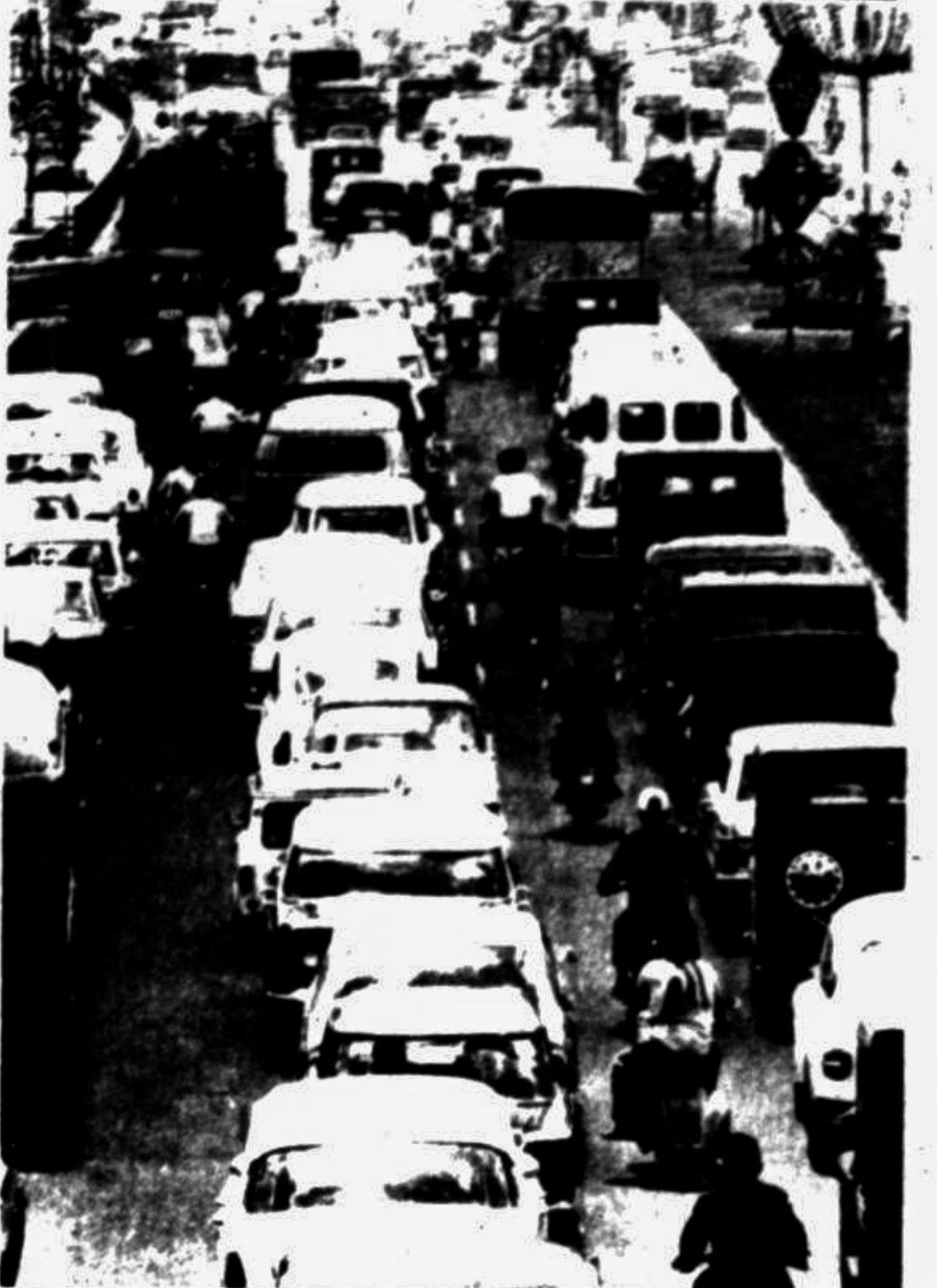
agents of land degradation, they are also its victims. The most important aspect of depleted land resources lies in its impact on people — on the individual, the family, the community, the nation and even the global family. The environmental degradation and the biological and physical stress of a damaged countryside have their direct counterparts in economic and social consequences for humanity.

In developing countries unskilled peasants unable to make a living from family land have little option but to pile up on the fringes of the cities. Unable to purchase or rent, they build shacks on any pe-

ace, rapidly industrializing countries of East Asia, non-farm uses claim roughly half a million hectares of cropland each year, while in the United States about a million hectares of cropland is lost annually to industrial expansion, highways, satellite shopping centres and urban sprawl.

Clearly, it is unrealistic to imagine that we can begin to achieve sustainable development until countries recognise the necessity to prepare and implement national land-resource utilization plans. It is only with planning that effective protection and optimum use of environmentally sensitive land resources could be-

In many cases valuable land — and genetic — resources would be better managed by encouraging high-density urban settlements while consolidating smaller settlements in rural areas.



As the world's cities, towns and industrial areas continue to grow unplanned, millions of hectares of valuable land are lost to new housing, factories and roads.

OPINION

Two Candidates and One Foreign Citizen

Sabir Mustafa

In 1971 was hardly clean — to put it in the most charitable way possible — we still have no choice but to treat him as an equal among MPs. So, any consultations or prayers for votes should rightly have been made to him.

Now, Jamaat being a highly regimented monolithic party, Nizami probably would not have been able to give any assurance without his party's Majlis-e-Shura's decision. But that is an internal party matter. The two candidates should have put their cases to Nizami and other JI MPs, and let them convey it to their Majlis.

But that is not what happened. According to reports, Nizami suggested a meeting with the real leader of the party, Golam Azam. Of course, Nizami is perfectly within his rights to ask. This was the biggest chance the JI had had in 20 years to project its Ameer-in-all-but-name to national prominence. So why should they pass it up? Indeed, they would have been fools had they not even tried to get the two candidates to kill at birth.

It is open to question as to whether the JI's 20 votes would really have made the difference, especially considering Jamaat's previous support for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) at crucial moments.

Even accepting the argument that, as candidates, both had a duty to try to broaden their respective base of support, the two men's knocking on Golam Azam's door was legally suspect and morally reprehensible.

For the purpose of this election and matters relating to parliamentary affairs such as debates on issues, laws etc. there is no question that Jamaat's 20 members should be viewed at a par with the other 310. After all, whether we like it or not, they too were elected by the people of their respective constituencies. But that called for a direct approach to the leader of the JI's parliamentary party, Maulana Matur Rahman Nizami.

Although Nizami's own role

Jamaat played its part skillfully and with maximum impact. By their management of the whole affair, they succeeded in killing several birds with one stone. First, by keeping Biswas's Sept. 29 visit secret at the time, they spared the BNP any possible embarrassment at a delicate moment; then by revealing to the press Justice Chowdhury's visit the day it occurred, they managed to inflict tremendous damage to the opposition candidate's reputation. But most important, by successfully compelling the candidates to call on Azam, they made a well-known collaborator of 1971 look like an indispensable national figure.

But why did the two candidates have to fall into that trap? Did they not realise that there were serious legal and political implications in giving Golam Azam *de facto* recognition as head of the JI

one were to accuse Golam Azam of committing the highest treason against the nation? It is not a legal question, because as far as the law is concerned all collaborators and accomplices to genocide were pardoned through a general

and a major player in our national politics?

To begin with, Prof. Azam is a Pakistani citizen, which makes it totally illegal for him to play any role in the politics of this country. But by seeking votes from him, the two candidates not only condoned his blatant violation of the law of the land, but in effect took direct part in that illegal activity. Is this the sort of concern for the legal process we expect from a Chief Justice of the Supreme Court? Or a Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad? Or the future President of the country?

Whether Golam Azam has a right to Bangladeshi citizenship or not is a different issue. The point is that, at this precise moment in time, he is emphatically the citizen of a foreign country.

Secondly, Golam Azam's role during 1971 — only 20 years back! — should have made the idea of treating him with respect repulsive to any Bengalee with a sense of dignity (unless he actually sympathised with Azam's role in '71).

From the moment Golam Azam met General Tikka "The Butcher of Bengal" Khan on April 3, 1971, till the days in December when his Al-Badr and Al-Shams men were hurriedly completing the Pakistani blueprint for genocide by murdering some of the finest sons of the soil, the Jamaat leader had been the then Pakistan's most active and trusted collaborator. Through speeches and statements, he spread venom and hate against those liberation warriors fighting to free this country; he actively organised and led Peace Committees and Razakar forces to act as loyal fighters for Pakistan against the Mukti Bahini.

How wrong would one be if one were to accuse Golam Azam of committing the highest treason against the nation? It is not a legal question, because as far as the law is concerned all collaborators and accomplices to genocide were pardoned through a general

amnesty in 1973. But it is a moral question. There are no charges pending against Golam Azam in any court of law, but how about the court of the nation's collective conscience?

There cannot be any amnesty in that court, because the immorality of '71 does not have any redemption.

In the court of the conscience, the likes of Golam Azam will remain forever guilty, forever condemned.

Under the parliamentary system, the president may be bereft of any executive power, but he is expected to carry a monumental moral responsibility. He will symbolise this nation, and will have to act as the country's conscience. But both Biswas and Chowdhury proved that in their world of politics, moral questions have little or no place at all. The whole nation will be poorer because of that.

Badrul Haider Chowdhury projected himself as a candidate of national consensus and many were prepared to accept that and cheer his courageous decision to take on what amounted to insurmountable odds.

But now, with the honourable justice covered in Golam Azam's "blessings", the word "consensus" has become more of a confidence trick than anything else.

Abdur Rahman Biswas never

did manage to make himself universally acceptable, in or out of parliament. His role in '71 has also not been satisfactorily explained.

But Justice Chowdhury is not a tainted man. His standing in society is — or should I say was — higher than most.

He was not beholden to any political party for his stature in society.

His nomination was moved by members of two, not one, party — the Awami League and the Gontonatri Party. It was indeed essential that he talked to JI MPs about his candidature. But his presence in Golam Azam's drawing room conferred upon the latter more respect than he ever deserved.

For 20 votes, the future president of Bangladesh not only jeopardised the law of the land (can all foreigners now engage in political activity?), but unforgivably, dishonoured the memory of the martyrs of 1971, the martyrs of whom

made the existence of this country — this presidency! — possible in the first place.

Thirty lakh restless souls covered their faces in shame the moment these two men claiming to represent the nation knocked on Golam Azam's door for blessings.

peripheral vacant land, private or public, from which they hope they will not be expelled by force. That land is usually the most undesirable from the sanitary and transportation point of view. There are shanty towns in practically all the cities of the non-industrialized countries of the world.

Yet in many cases squatter residents can be housed to the benefit of all. In a UNCHS (Habitat) designed project in Bangkok the concept of land-sharing is successfully resolving land conflicts.

This strategy not only allows the owner to benefit from an unimpeded ability to profit from the most commercially profitable land, but also provides poor residents with affordable housing and a secure title on the remainder.

All too often, as our cities, towns and industrial areas continue to grow unplanned, millions of hectares of the world's cropland are lost each year to new housing, factories and roads. In the densely popu-

lated land, private or public, from which they hope they will not be expelled by force. That land is usually the most undesirable from the sanitary and transportation point of view. There are shanty towns in practically all the cities of the non-industrialized countries of the world.

In the same context, it is impossible to sustainably develop fragile ecological systems, and neither human settlements nor other developments should be permitted in such areas. Indeed, in many cases valuable land resources would be better managed by encouraging high-density urban settlements while consolidating smaller settlements in rural areas.

An efficient land-management policy would also address the rationalization of land-tenure systems, improving the conditions of the poor in both rural and urban areas. Without access to land the need to house rising populations in developing countries encourages chaotic development, land speculation, occupation of marginal and ecologically fragile lands and the worsening of the environmental conditions of disadvantaged and economically vulnerable groups.

— UNCIS Feature

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Biman clarifies

Sir, Our attention has been drawn to a news item published in your October 4 issue headlined as "Biman's 'Rajangandha' to wither" which needs to be clarified.

Biman's Executive class was named 'Rajangandha' about three years ago. Since its inception complaints have been pouring in from the foreign travellers who find it difficult to pronounce the word and also do not understand the meaning or significance of the term.

Moreover, in some countries of the East, the flower 'Rajangandha' is used in funeral services and as such the passengers are taken by awe when they are greeted with this flower.

In the backdrop of the above, it is considered necessary to change the name of the Executive class of Biman and also to discontinue use of 'Rajangandha' flower in the flights. It is purely from commercial considerations that most of the overseas Biman Managers attending the Eleventh System Marketing Conference held recently in

alised by DESA. Same should be applicable to Rural Electric Board.

The rate at which power supplied and the rate they will charge the customers will show the benefit the customer would get and the difference between the units supplied to DESA and REB and the units billed by them will correctly show the system loss. Similarly the PDB should declare the units it is generating and the cost of units it is recovering will indicate the total system loss as well as the system loss in transmission.

It is time accountability and transparency start for every act of all Government Departments.

A. Ilat
Banani, Dhaka

'Can DESA deliver?'

Sir, Your leader captioned as above (Oct 4) is thought provoking and gives general indications about those who are indulging in under-billing through meter-reversing. Government's success in persuading the PDB employees to start DESA is praiseworthy.

But the question is if it is a correct solution when same persons who will be in touch with same people, firms and industries combination of which allegedly caused reversing and theft of electricity!

There should be a declaration in the newspapers on the quantity of power supplied by PDB to DESA and the power consumption billed and re-

airplane could operate from Sylhet where F-28s have been operating regularly and where a terminal building was already built along with a parking apron to handle Boeing 707 airplane.

He told me if the runway was sufficiently long for F-28 then it