

Dhaka, Sunday, January 26, 1992

Housing the Capital People

Reduction of population pressure on our capital city is as urgent a job as it is a difficult one. The Prime Minister has sought a very logical way of achieving it by developing the suburbs into more habitable residential areas, with more amenities than now. We feel that the good idea nevertheless needs to be given a little more thought than it has received until now. If the government thinks only in terms of improving the amenities — such as supplying power and water — that would probably create more problems than solve them. The result would be a slum-like development, the possibility of crores going into each unit of housing being largely immaterial then. There is no end of justified complaints from the residents of the 'palaces' in Uttara and Baridhara to the making of which the government has been as much helpful as it can be. Needless to say, unsparing government support notwithstanding, this type of building suburbia is in no way relevant to the job of dissipating population pressure on the capital.

In fact, we do have suburbs well inside the metropolitan area, literally housing countless people. These need to be properly urbanised before any related programme is undertaken. And this would probably add to the problem we have proposed to address. Proper development of late accretions to the city like the so many 'baghs' like Shantibagh and Sabujbagh would no doubt thin out the population there and create new problems of housing for those now enjoying some kind of housing.

An effective way to make people not to rush the city should invariably involve staggering the places of work for the persons manning the many kind of services and establishments. After that the most urgent task would be to see that districts of low-cost housing are built along the three sides of the city — one side is taken by the Buriganga — in no way not very far from the city. People essential for running the city and indeed the whole state are, as things are, low-income people. They must not be made to commute from far off places.

Where shall we find such areas — near and big and a lot of them and yet not occupied already? There are three very ready answers to that. One, what are you going to do with the land you will get after the removal of the central jail from its present site? Don't build shopping arcades for the benefit of the graft-looters; build multi-storied accommodation for low to middle income people whose place of work is somewhere around. Two, remove the cantonment to some newer site and put the area with its well laid out roads and the greenery to use by the middle-income intellectual workers and professionals — all living in blocks of high-rise buildings.

Way-out number three is the most promising of all — but one that has already been almost lost to us. Cross the river, and you have a world of space for urbanisation — well up to the Dhaleswari. It is strange as well as very mysterious why successive governments kept their eyes averted from what was straight before their nose — the Jinjira-Kaliganj-Konda flatland river front, well-served by river inlets and going deep into the interior — leading to strips of high land lacing the low-lying areas up to Syedpur-Phalhar on the Dhaleswari. Any government could, with some imagination, make a Venice out of this side of the Buriganga. Instead, very evidently all the governments played, with a will, into the hands of slumlords of the type exposed by the great GBS in Widower's House.

The problem needs urgent action. The first requisite for that is the right idea and the right will. About the right will we do not have suspicions. The Prime Minister has some right ideas too. Wanted now is a lot of imagination and generous helpings of audacious daring.

Medical Malpractice

Spurious medicines and foreign substances in distilled or saline water have often made newspaper headlines. Now comes another distressing piece of news that outdated X-ray films are being clandestinely used by none other than Suhrawardy Hospital. The issue raised quite a furore in the parliament the other day but no follow-up of the same is however known. That unmistakably brings us to some fundamental questions. Our hospitals are not specially known for outstanding services nor is our health care system as a whole anything enviable. If a leading hospital of the country can go on with practices not medically approved, what happens elsewhere in 'catering for patients' with the sole motive of profit needs no elaboration.

The issue of date-expired X-ray films, in this case, came up for heated discussion only briefly before Deputy Leader of the House Professor Badruddoza Chowdhury, himself a renowned medical practitioner, assured the House that the use of such X-ray films did not cause harm to the patients. He however admitted that diagnosis of diseases on the basis of pictures on outdated X-ray films is delayed. Nowhere did he say explicitly if such films can as well lead to wrong diagnosis. Even if the Deputy Leader of the House is cent per cent correct, it should not confuse that this is representative of our general attitude towards almost all serious business.

The fact that every civilised society keeps at least some of its systems immune from the general rot has sadly been missed right from the beginning. The messy medicare system has undergone changes over the past decades, so has its profit-mongering business. That exactly explains the cases of adulterated life saving drugs, foreign substances in distilled and saline water. But limitless profit-mongering pushes some to criminal practices. No doubt, the use of date-expired X-ray films has just given a new twist to our already deplorable hospital services. But one would surely like to know what actions are taken for the offence, for the Deputy Leader of the House has told that punishment would be meted out to the wrong-doers.

As for the X-raying, there are other ways of putting lives to dangers. Reports published several times before in different dailies have revealed that the X-ray machines installed in different clinics, have no protective mechanism for the strong radiation signals transmitted during their operation. Nor are the operators adept in arresting the radiation within allowable limits. These are less known but certainly sensitive issues. When the attitude manifestly smacks of callousness, somewhere somebody should have a strong commitment to fight the medical mismanagement. If the government agency concerned takes the leading role, it is better for all.

RE-ENTRY OF GOLAM AZAM INTO POLITICS

Is the Stage Set for New Polarisation?

by Sabir Mustafa

THE 'election' of Professor Golam Azam as the Ameer or president of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) last month came as a shock to many, but it surprised perhaps only a few.

Although the ceremonial re-entry of Prof. Azam, a Pakistani citizen and one of the best-known collaborators of the genocidal army of Pakistan in 1971, into the politics of Bangladesh hits at the sensitivity of millions of people, and may also be in gross violation of the laws of the land, it appears to have stirred little reaction among government circles.

The home ministry has not talked about deportation, even though the participation of this particular foreigner in the country's politics cannot be in the national interest; the ministry of law and justice has not threatened any legal action against the JI; members of parliament of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have not even bothered to voice any moral indignation.

What the sequence of events leading to, and following Golam Azam's rehabilitation shows is that it ought not to be seen in isolation; rather, it should be viewed as a part, as a major component, of a wider process.

Far from Dhaka in Rangpur, a small event took place on January 14 which seemed in perfect harmony with the process, a vital link in the chain, but which was far removed from what Bangladesh was envisaged to become by its founding fathers.

Fourteen student organisations had drawn up a plan to place a sculpture by Anik Reza in the premises of the Carmichael College. Entitled 'Projonmo' and dedicated to the memory of the War of Liberation, the sculpture depicts a freedom-fighter carrying a child on his shoulders. Any objection? Certainly not.

said the college authorities and the ministries of education and public works.

But not Jamaat. The JI formed a front organisation, named it the Un-Islamic Activities Resistance Committee which declared the sculpture 'un-Islamic' and launched a street agitation against it. The threat of violence forced the Rangpur administration to ban public meetings in the town, and the issue is still hanging in the balance.

This attempt by Jamaat to whip up public hysteria in the name of 'saving' Islam is reminiscent of the way Pakistani rulers tried to stamp out every

organising the Peace Committees, the Razakars, the Al-Shams and the Al-Badr.

The process, set in motion in the late 1970s under Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rahman, and given a tremendous boost during the nine-year, one-man show of Lt. Gen. Hussain Muhammad Ershad, proceeded along two parallel lines: political rehabilitation of those forces which actively collaborated with the Pakistani army of occupation, and the growth of religious fundamentalism often patronised by the state itself.

The two events in recent

process, Bangladesh has become a far less tolerant place than it was 20 years ago. The rise of fundamentalism has touched many aspects of society, particularly the media and the education system. Their assertiveness in the field of media reached a high point under the patronage of Ershad, but their influence has increased even after the fall of the dictator.

They have made deep inroads into the education sector

aggressive forces find themselves squeezed.

As a result of the 16-year process, Bangladesh has become a far less tolerant place than it was 20 years ago. The rise of fundamentalism has touched many aspects of society, particularly the media and the education system. Their assertiveness in the field of media reached a high point under the patronage of Ershad, but their influence has increased even after the fall of the dictator.

Even before its victory in the Battle for Chittagong University, the JI notched up a series of significant gains during 1991. It captured 12 per cent of the popular votes and 18 seats in the Feb. 27 general elections, followed by a deal with BNP which gave it two more seats in the House; in parliament it was able to project a perfectly legitimate and democratic image of itself as both the ruling and main opposition parties carried its favour.

But its biggest coup came in September when both the candidates in the presidential election, Abdur Rahman Biswas and Badrul Haider Chowdhury, paid secret visits to Golam Azam to seek assurances about the JI's 20 votes.

Golam Azam had guided the JI from behind the scenes ever since Jamaat began open political activities in Bangladesh in May, 1979. His election last month as the official Ameer showed that the JI had crossed one crucial threshold — it no longer felt that the sensitivity of the people was a factor anymore.

Jamaat's action in Rangpur is not the first of its kind, nor likely to be the last. It is only a microcosm of what would happen in a wider scale if Jamaat's political influence and social acceptability continued to increase.

The country is now set for a new polarisation. The ques-

BNP which can reap the greater benefit from the use of religion as a political tool.

If the BNP wishes to establish a democratic, tolerant and liberal society, then it ought to re-think its current strategy, and shift the centre of gravity of its politics to the centre or even to the left of it. That would mean taking an unequivocally anti-fundamentalist, anti-collaborator stance, and preaching values of unity on the basis of the nation's Bengali identity, rather than division along religious lines.

For some, that idea is unthinkable because, they contend, the very foundation of BNP's philosophy, Bangladeshi nationalism, is a non-secular one.

But back in Rangpur, the challenge of fundamentalism is not being faced by the Awami League or anyone else alone. In fact, all the components of the erstwhile Three Alliances have got together against the Jamaat onslaught.

They have their differences, some of which are serious ideological ones, but as in 1990, they have united against what is essentially an assault on democracy, freedom of expression, and the heritage of the War of Liberation.

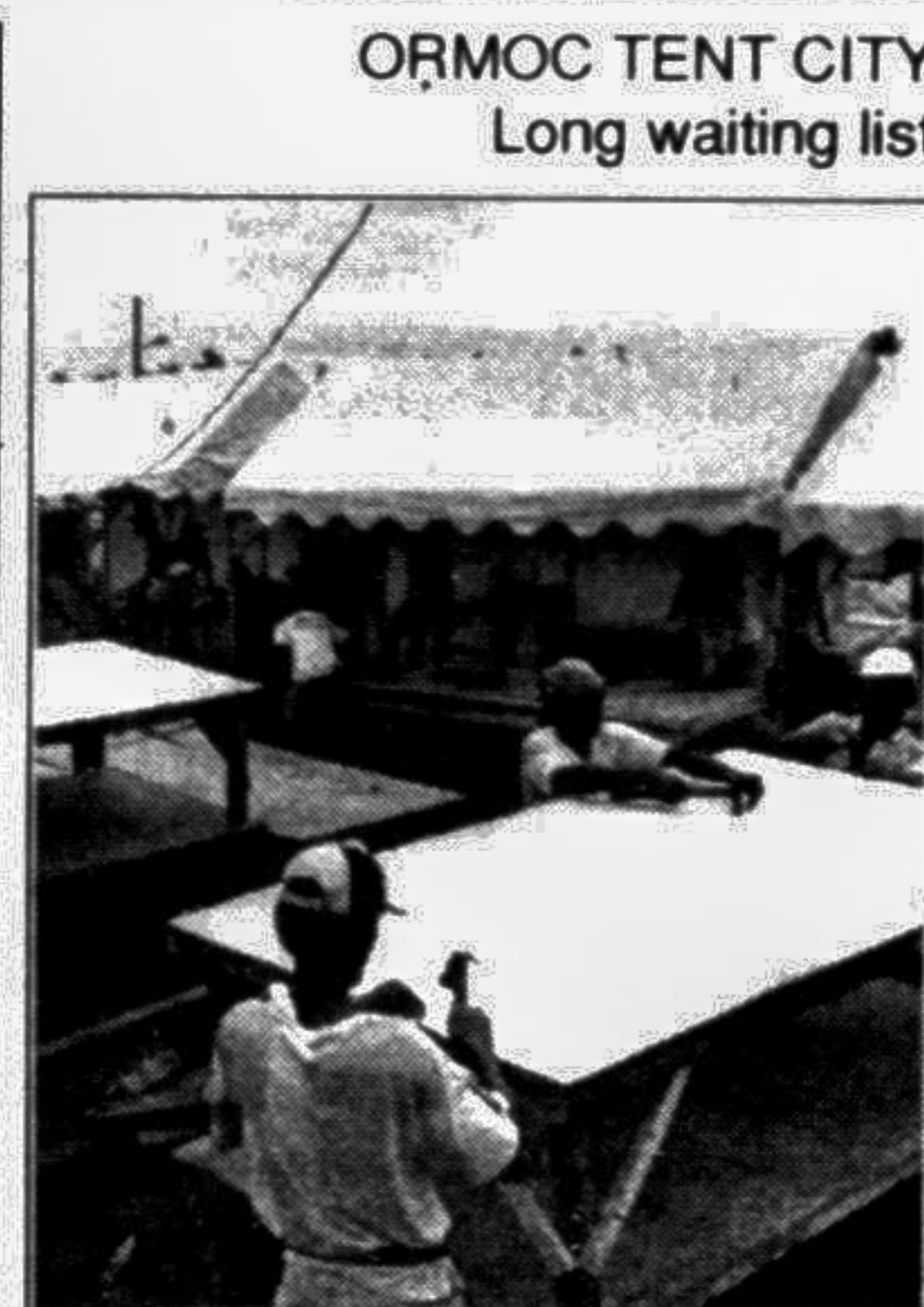
The question is whether the national political polarisation will be along the lines laid down in Rangpur, or along those laid down during the Feb. polls, with the BNP aggressively exploiting Islam for political purposes and identifying itself with fundamentalist parties as 'nationalists'.

The Awami League too faces a stark choice. It can go on in its indecisive, often hypocritical and opportunistic path, blasting Jamaat as 'anti-liberation' in the street while treating it as a partner in democracy in parliament. Or it can take an unequivocal stance, and isolate the JI in the House as well as the street.

Tent City Helps Families Stricken by Flash Flood

Ian Gill writes from Ormoc City, Philippines

The Philippines has suffered several natural disasters in the last 18 months, including earthquakes in central Luzon and the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. Late last year a flash flood killed an estimated 7,000 people in the southern island of Leyte. In newly-opened Ormoc Tent City people are being given shelter.



PET BALIBALOS
'We want more tents'

climbing on top of the concrete house next door. She cradled her six-month-old son Archibald in her arms while the rapids roared around them.

The water rose one meter every five minutes. We were terrified. We didn't think we would survive.

Despite the experience, she wants to stay on Isla Verde. "I don't feel it will happen again. Besides, no place has been assigned to us and we don't want to wait."

Less fortunate was her neighbour, 45-year-old Eduarda Matugas, dressed in widow's black. When the river

came tumbling into her home, she, her husband and their three children scattered in different directions. Daughter Grace, 21, was on a neighbour's roof, calling to her father to join them.

"One second he was on the ground, then he disappeared," says Grace.

The Matugas family is living with their father's boss. "We don't want to leave the neighborhood," says Eduarda Matugas. "It's near the schools and handy when we look for jobs." The family plans to build a new home "when we have money."

As in many squatter areas,

ORMOC TENT CITY Long waiting list

eruptions. Lessons from the experience could be useful for other countries prone to natural calamities.

The authorities learned from experience and made sure water and light, medical and Social Welfare personnel were all on hand when refugees arrived at Ormoc. When I visited the camp, children at the tent city had begun attending school in town — travelling by shuttle buses provided by authorities — and two day-care nurseries had opened in the camp.

Social workers were also ready to conduct group therapy sessions to help people cope with the grief of losing their loved ones. The Department of Social Welfare was starting a programme to help families begin to earn a living again.

Said Balibalos: "Most families here engage in vending, but they need capital assistance to start up again. The department has a programme of self-employment assistance."

Emil Tingson, camp officer-in-charge from the mayor's office, said: "Altogether, we are targeting units for 1,000 families. But the problem is that we urgently need more tents and materials such as lumber for the frames."

In the worst-hit area, Isla Verde, where 3,000 squatters beside the Anila river were believed swept to death by 20-foot-high torrents, makeshift blue-and-white tents are dotted among the debris of fallen and uprooted coconut trees.

Like the grass once more poking through the mud, new shanties are going up despite a government ordinance against living in high-risk areas.

As 38-year-old Paz Malinao wipes a damp lock of hair from her face, she watches two neighbours put together the

wooden frame for a house to replace the one swept away by the flood. The wood was eventually swept off a roof by the water.

"I grabbed my mother, but then I was knocked out by a log. I regained consciousness about 250 meters down the river."

The brothers lost their mother and their sister's family of seven.

In this once-picturesque town, life is slowly returning to normal, although signs of the turbulence remain. The streets are clear for traffic, but lined with heaps of mud. The railings of a churchyard are twisted like a giant corkscrew. The brand new pink-and-white 38-classroom Ormoc Elementary School, a cause for civic pride when it opened in October, escaped structural damage but stands in a sea of mud.

Business is struggling to recover. A shoe shop on the main street advertises a "water damage sale." Ironically for a port town, fishermen are suffering from a widespread revulsion against eating fish. In the wake of the tragedy, hundreds of bodies were washed up with missing limbs.

"People are not eating fish because they fear the fish might have cannibalised their loved ones," says Vic Sano, consultant project manager working for the Department of Public Works and Highway (DPWH).

As for the damaged infrastructure in and around Ormoc, the department is preparing a list of sub-projects that will include roads and bridges, ports and wharves, erosion and flood control structures, hospitals and health centres, schools and colleges, and water supply systems.

The Asian Development Bank is releasing up to \$5 million for use in and around Ormoc from uncommitted funds of an earlier restoration project for typhoon damage.

— GEMINI NEWS
IAN GILL is the Information Officer at the Asian Development Bank.

To the Editor...

Vacant posts

Sir, While replying to a question from Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim MP, the Minister of State for Establishment M. Nurul Huda stated in the "Jatiya Sangsad" on January 15 that sixty two thousand and seventy-seven posts are lying vacant in government offices. He also said that there is no government restriction in filling the vacant posts.

It is known to us that a huge number of educated persons unemployed in the country. Hence, on the basis of the above-mentioned fact, we would sincerely request the concerned authority to arrange

to fill-up the vacant posts immediately.
M. Zahidul Haque,
Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka.

'Qawali' and atmosphere

Sir, A Qawali is a type of vocal recital sung in praise of Allah, prophets, the saints and mystiques. This culture has been extended to this Sub-Continent from early days of Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti Rahmatullah Alaihi. It is rendered in full throated voice with pronounced beat

and rhythm. The words are very meaningful. The more one understands the words (kalam) the more one enjoys it. As this culture was born in shrines and durbars of saints, certain rituals, etiquette (thahzeeb) and manners (adale) are to be followed where Qawali recitals are taken place. In Ajmer, Qawalis are rendered at the Shrine of Khawaja Sahib in "Bara Dar" where people usually sit in position of Tashahud (with folded knees). There, even squatting on the floor is discouraged. Both singers, while rendering Qawalis, and listeners go into ecstasy when the rhythm touches the inner cord of the heart — it comes

spontaneously with kalam, dhun and tal.

In the recent past we in Dhaka, got Sabri Brothers — the famous "qawals" from Pakistan who gave quite a few recitals at private 'gharwas' in the city. In most of them the rendition was excellent. People not only behaved well but were wise, and sober listeners. The crowd was disciplined. Even the non-Muslims were tolerant enough not to display their aversion when they did not understand. No one was found smoking or talking while the rendition was on. Quite a few of them were seen stealthily walking out of the room for cigarettes. They

were not insolent as to bring out their cigarettes with light it up there. Many of our listeners are acquainted with the Qawalis adopted for Hindi films — where alcohol flows and the villain and his henchmen smoke viciously. The lyrics are in praise of the hero/heroine in the movie and likewise.

On one occasion, precisely on the night of 6th January, the rendering of the maestros were mostly attended by such a crowd — where alcohol flowed, smoke filled the air and people got drunk and misbehaved. At one point the Sabri brothers were agast by such

atrocious behaviour and looked askance — perhaps their commitment to the host left them with no choice but to continue amidst milieu. I wouldn't be surprised if they walked out, instead, the serious listeners who could not enjoy any longer in this atmosphere left in utter disgust during the interval. Alcohol is not a stimulant required for true listeners of music. In future our hosts, sponsors of such performances should resist from serving alcohol at such performance — private or otherwise.

A mystique
Dhaka