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Urban Poverty on the Rise Around the World

by Aprodicio Laquian

Poverty Alleviation in Asia

Asia is a land of paradox in more than just one sense. In terms of economy too, the same axiom persists. The fact that the region has the enviable record of sustaining the highest growth rate in the world, on the one hand, and being the home to the largest number of the most poor, on the other, is an ample proof to such a paradox.

Geographical conditions of diverse nature often related to economic as well as environmental issues prove — more often than not — the rule rather than the exception. On this count also, Asia stands out to be a puzzle. Land-locked countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan with their special problems, sharply differ from plain lands like Bangladesh. But the essential truth is that poverty is quite widespread not just in a few countries but in some pockets of the most prosperous of the nations in the region.

The four golden dragons — South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan — along with the aspiring ones — Malaysia and Thailand — are well set on course for an industrial showdown with the industrial heavyweights of today. That economic boom has, however, not been matched by comparable rise in the quality of life and social security in those countries. As for the countries at the bottom of the list, the situation can only be qualified with the epithet—abject. So the task of poverty alleviation remains to be a big challenge for the entire region. The only difference between them is that some are better placed to take up that challenge and the rest are not.

The question of infusing massive doses of foreign aid does not simply arise. The important point is how best to use the available aid. Notably, Bangladesh has received aid amounting to a little over \$ 25 billion over the past 20 years without ever achieving the target growth. Discreet and rational aid utilisation is therefore the most desired object in the whole process of development.

Bangladesh's economic performance has been dismal during the last financial year, to say the least. A decline of Gross National Product (GDP) growth from 6.6 per cent to 3.3 per cent in a year points to the fact that the country cannot afford to be indiscriminate in its financial management. Its liberal industrial policy has been lavishly praised abroad but the fact remains that foreign entrepreneurs are yet to be highly interested in investment here.

Deceleration of agricultural growth coupled with environmental degradation is the most alarming symptom for the policy-makers and planners of the country. This makes it incumbent upon Bangladesh and other countries to look at the region's environmental problem and other related issues from a close quarter and bring about a solution to them. Collectively, they can fight the environmental degradation more effectively. Man, evidently is at the centre of all development efforts and still his environment has with him an inseparable relationship. So there is the need for striking a balance between economic growth and preservation of environment.

One silver-lining in the overall dismal situation is that the number of the poor in Asia will decrease by the year 2000. This gain, however, will provide little comfort unless the size of the population can be restricted within a certain limit. In countries like Bangladesh, the population growth is far outpacing the economic growth threatening to burst at the seam of the land borders. This eventually poses to be a potential threat of regional and even global order. Collective effort, therefore, can be the only answer to the problem.

Frustration—Red Army Style

Suicide rate among Russian army personnel has suddenly shot to the level it was during the infernal Stalinist purges in and around 1937. Whereas in '89 cases of suicide in the Russian forces accounted for a meagre 1.9 per cent of all deaths there, in '91 it jumped to 21.9 per cent. The incredible was yet to happen. For the first three months of '92 the percentage of suicide among all kinds of deaths in the Russian army hit 38 per cent — similar to that of the Great Purple proportion. Why? What can be the reason of this great leap into self-inflicted death? Certainly Russia is not passing through another purge after the Stalinist fashion! Any suggestion of communistic remnants being harassed and pushed over to such death can be dismissed outright. In today's Russia no one quarter, nor even Yeltsin himself, has the ways to push anyone to anywhere.

Leaving out other contributing factors many of which will be rather beyond our understanding, we perhaps can agree in seeing in the sad phenomenon a far too lugubrious expression of a collective — specially national — frustration. A frustration very patently out of the collapse of the Soviet Union which, in spite of a myriad of non-Russian contribution and in spite of the German immortals Marx and Engels working as a fountainhead of it all — was the greatest achievement of the Russian mind and the Russian sacrifices and was an unrivalled flowering of their national genius started by Peter the great, rather than by the great Lenin.

After the Communist Party, or is it even before the party, the Red Army stood for the massive social heave aimed at ushering in a new dawn for mankind — and that fantastic undertaking took so much in blood and tear to realise and make the Union not only stick for over seven decades but to become world leader on so many counts. In the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Red Army, most of which forms the present Russian army, can very rightly see a personal defeat beyond any conceivable proportion, a damning of all that it has stood up to and built.

No deliberate or forced dose of chauvinistic big-brotherhood posture can at the moment shove up the Russian spirit. We do not accept the western branding of the Soviet Union as the Russian Empire — it was far different than that from the very outset and till the very last. Nevertheless, the Russians are surely going to pass through the excruciating national pain that Spaniards suffered after reaching the Philip V height of glory and then losing it in a way to become a European pariah — the process that the British have been trying to cope with ever since the abdication of the Raj. The Russian army suicide figures are one good — indeed very tragic — sign of the Russian people entering that process of transforming the present situation of humiliation into a state of humililty.

In the meantime what will happen to the Great Human Dream that was inspired on to dizzying heights by the October Revolution and the many successes and achievements carved by the Soviet Union — more than it was ever done by Platoes and Irmuses and Thomas Mores?

In the mega-cities of both industrialised and developing countries, the gap between the very rich and the very poor seems to be widening. In 1980, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated that 40 million urban households were living in poverty. This was projected to grow to 72 million by the year 2000—a 76% increase.

The polarisation of affluence and poverty is seen in more developed countries as well. US Senator Patrick Moynihan of New York has estimated that more than half of the babies born in New York City by the year 2000 will be to parents who are on welfare (that is, government assistance). He blames government policies that cut back welfare assistance for the further impoverishment of the already poor.

In developing countries, the global recession and economic difficulties in the 1980s have significantly weakened the capacity of central governments to respond to urban needs. Hyper-inflation, the debt burden and the structural adjustments imposed on many developing countries have combined to make national survival a more pressing problem than that of the cities.

Urban infrastructures in most developing country mega-cities have not been able to keep up with expanding need. In Nairobi, for example, the per capita spending for water and sewerage fell from \$28.00 to \$2.50 in 1987. In Calcutta, about 3 million people live in shanty towns without potable water. In Karachi, only a third of urban households have a pipe water connection. In Bangkok, less than a third of the people have access to piped water; so many households have dug wells that

the water table has been causing the land to subside.

The Homeless: From New York to Bombay

Pavement dwellers and the homeless used to be found mainly in Third World cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Now, an estimated 600,000 to 3 million people in America are homeless, with about 35,000-70,000 in New York, and 6,000 in San Francisco.

The conservative ideology and fiscal policies of the Reagan administration severely cut back federal grants for social and welfare programmes. Appropriations for subsidised housing were cut from \$33 billion in 1981 to \$8 billion in 1988. The effects of such policies have been hardest on the mega-city poor. In Los Angeles, welfare payments have gone down by 33%.

In New York, programmes for the homeless have increasingly relied more on community philanthropy, providing shelters and soup kitchens for the homeless, transitional housing, and health and counselling. While these efforts have been able to help a few, authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are finding that quite a proportion of the homeless are beyond their reach.

It was estimated, for example, that about half of women in transitional housing in New York have a drug problem. The problem of the

homeless in America has reached a point where President Bush himself has called it 'a national shame'. The problem seems to be intractable as it involves too many sectors.

In the mid-1960s, the metropolitan solution was hailed as the cure to mega-city problems. In such experiments as Greater Miami, Metropolitan Toronto, Greater London, the Bangkok Metropolitan and Metro Manila, metropolitan government provided the comprehensive planning, wider and stronger tax base, area-wide services, broad-scale representation and participation along with administrative efficiency that promised to cope with the problems of the mega-city.

Barely two decades later, however, this solution is in retreat. In 1980, the Greater London Council was abolished. The Metropolitan Manila Commission was also abandoned (although here the reasons were due more to national politics than metropolitan disaffection).

What brought about the weakening of the metropolitan approach is a complex of factors rooted in ideology, economic recession and civic reactions. The past two decades have seen the rapid growth of a conservative ideology that railed against big government, bureaucracies and higher taxes, while at the same time hailing popular participation, private enterprise and voluntarism. The increasing

costs of providing metro-wide services, the growing assertiveness of local units, and the general ineffectiveness of some area-wide solutions further eroded the capacities of metropolitan governments.

The Pathology of the City

There are few areas where traditional religions and Communist ideology agree totally; the city as the source of evil is one of them. Recent developments in urban pathology seem to bear out their dire prophecies about urban living as dehumanising, corrupting and degrading.

Even a cursory reading of recent headlines leaves one with the impression that mega-cities are falling apart. Inner city schools in New York City are braced for the entry into kindergarten of a generation of five-year-olds prenatally exposed to the drug, crack — 'little monsters' with neurological, emotional and learning problems put under the charge of poorly paid and ill-trained teachers.

Bangkok and Manila admit that AIDS cases are badly underestimated even as tourism officials warn against alarmist statements that may scare tourists away. Tokyo's rapidly aging work force worries about future security at the same time that younger couples are faced with the counter-pressure of caring for elderly parents in cramped, overpriced housing or evading their responsibilities and pursuing a consumer-oriented way

of life. Drug-related bombings and assassinations plague Bogota while gangs battle each other for turf in Miami, Boston and Toronto. Riots break out in Berlin, Amsterdam and London as squatters are evicted from dilapidated buildings, or as ethnic conflicts erupt between Asians and Caucasians.

Recent urban pathologies include rising incidents of 'hate crimes' or bias-related random violence. New York tabloids have sensationalised gang rape, assault on strangers, and random terrorism of innocent citizens. So-called 'thrill killings' have been known in Bangkok and Manila. Ethnic and religious tensions in mega-cities are indicated by assaults and boycotts.

Live television coverage has given urgency to urban violence, be it the shooting down of demonstrators in Beijing, tear gas attacks in Seoul, artillery duels in Beirut or coup attempts in Manila. While there may be some positive images of mega-cities in some areas, in general they have been depicted in recent times as violent, decadent and falling apart.

Mega-City Victims:

Women, Young, Elderly
Some of the most disadvantaged groups in the mega-cities are women, youth and the elderly. Women who head urban households are particularly vulnerable as they try to fulfil the twin roles of income-

earner and home-maker. The young, particularly those living outside the traditional support net of the family, present enormous problems. The elderly are also victims of the weakening of family ties; where they do not have sufficient savings, assets of social security, they find it difficult to survive in the mega-city.

The social and welfare needs in the mega-cities — in both the developed and developing world — have not received the attention they demand. Popular imaginings of the mega-city of the future dwell primarily on technological marvels: anti-gravity trains, greenhouse agriculture, computerised home shopping, solar-power cars, etc. In contrast, research and thinking on the social and welfare aspects of mega-city life harks back to nostalgic ideals of the small community, the traditional family, reliance on civic conscience, charity.

It is only natural for a time lag between technology and social change and sometimes urban societies seem to be reverting to old norms instead of adapting to new technologies. But what cannot be ignored is the increasing deterioration of social life in the mega-cities of this world.

There seems to be an inability to apply some of the marvel and promise of scientific and technological innovation to the human condition. But if this incapacity persists, the future of the mega-city — and indeed the future of the human species — may not be so bright.

— Third World Network Features/Work in Progress (United Nations University)

Dr Aprodicio Laquian is with the United Nations Population Fund. The above article is excerpted from his paper to the Tokyo Mega-City Symposium.

At the Hotel Cambodian, Phnom Penh's newly affluent mingle with Western diplomats, United Nations officials, foreign investors and tourists. They will spend more in one night what high-ranking civil servants would earn in a month.

Across from Phnom Penh's only luxury hotel, Foreign Ministry official Sieng Kimhoun lives in a house at the back of his wife's bamboo coffee-shop and restaurant. Sieng's earnings of US\$21 a month would be eaten up immediately if he spent a night out at the Hotel Cambodian.

The economic liberalisation that accompanied Cambodia's fragile peace has produced overnight millionaires — and triggered high prices and a crisis in the public sector. Like most government employees, Sieng cannot live on his state salary.

Decades of war have left this traumatised South-east Asian nation on the brink of social breakdown.

Privatisation and market reforms have created an estimated 50 millionaires in Phnom Penh. But the gap between the new Phnom Penh elite and the dirt-poor has grown wider and resentments are surfacing.

In December, violent protests erupted over wholesale disposal of government buildings and businesses by corrupt officials. At least seven people were killed by soldiers sent to restore order.

Tens of thousands of government employees have not

Cambodia

Instant Riches, Difficult Peace

been paid since last year. Unpaid soldiers have turned to banditry in the countryside, adding to Cambodia's worsening crime situation.

Up to two years ago, aid from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe helped to subsidise salaries of government workers.

But with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, that critical aid to Phnom Penh has dried up.

The average family in Phnom Penh needs a monthly income of at least US\$133. Clearly, Sieng Kimhoun's family would starve if the income from his wife's restaurant didn't make up the difference.

Teachers, doctors and nurses have all become victims of the new social order, forced to look for ways to supplement their meagre state salaries. Almost every government official has a wife making money in the private sector.

Some ministers like Hun Sen adviser Uch Kiman have vacated their own villas to rent them out to foreigners, in order to secure a reasonable income.

So Theary, a foreign-educated interpreter at the Foreign Ministry, helps her sister squeeze fruit juices at a roadside cafe, in between monitoring all foreign radio broadcasts for the ministry.

Diplomats say these problems will be exacerbated

Economic liberalisation produces a wide gap between instant millionaires and the dirt poor in the country best known for its killing fields. Tom Fauthrop of IPS reports from Phnom Penh

when an estimated 350,000 Cambodian refugees are repatriated from camps in Thailand. Their journey back has to be prepared for with a massive de-mining operation to de-activate thousands of mines planted in fields by the four warring factions during 12 years of civil war.

Beset by factional infighting and corruption, the Hun Sen government is barely coping.

Said Uch Kiman: "When we were socialists all western governments were hostile to us. Now the West has forced us to adopt market forces. We are criticised for allowing the gap between the rich and the poor to get wider. It seems we can't win."

Khieu Khanarith, a former journalist who is now adviser to the Hun Sen regime, is a strong critic of the government's recent privatisation binge, selling off nearly all government assets.

Khanarith said people wrongly see economic liberalisation as "some kind of wonder drug that you can take one pill and cure everything. I try to make people understand that

the market economy needs far more expertise to operate than a centrally planned economy. And we lack the trained economists to run it."

Many Cambodians are pinning their hopes on the arrival of the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC), the

peacekeeping force mandated by the peace accords signed last year.

But the sudden influx of 22,000 UN forces may only aggravate this social and economic crisis, according to Brian Veal, director of CIDSE, a non-government organisation providing development aid from various Catholic countries.

"We are worried that the UN presence will further distort the local economy with UN salaries tempting all the best qualified Cambodians to

abandon their jobs in the ministries," Veal said.

While the UN presence will bring a boom to shops, restaurants and hotels, it has already led to skyrocketing rents and land prices. A few land speculators — mostly Chinese businessmen, overseas Khmers and some high-ranking officials — are making a killing while everyone else is losing out in this uncontrolled reign of the market.

Diplomats and relief workers are worried that if this massive two billion dollar UN operation runs aground between the bandits, the minefields and the corrupt government, waiting in the wings at their second chance for power will be the dreaded Khmer Rouge.

OPINION

Domestic Help: Charity, Compassion and Understanding Needed

This is in response to the two letters published in your esteemed journal earlier on Jan 2 and 23 by Ms Ismat Ara and Ms Nazma Naser, respectively. Both the letters were quite revealing and no doubt reflective of the feelings of a large section of the middle and upper income group women and may be even men. If one talks to just about any housewife here, perhaps obviously she will appear to be grousing about her domestic help. The implication may be that just because of circumstances, someone, who has been reduced to work as a domestic help has lost all the qualities of a decent human being.

The writers of both the letters are school teachers of some sort, possibly, in some fancy school in some posh area. Well, I really have no complaints about how the language was used. But, what is objected to here is that the teachers who have so little regard or respect for other human beings and their feelings — how can they be good examples to their students, who look upon them as their model and guide? Although, this is a bit removed from the subject of our discussion, but, some years ago in a conversation with a Western educator, who had many years of experience in the sub-continent, mentioned to me that the high rate of school drop outs in these countries is not only because of poverty but also because of the cruelty of the teachers (also of the parents) meted out to the students.

After reading Ms Ara's letter carefully, the following points and complaints can be distilled: a) she can not keep her servants, b) the servants do not have proper credentials or are fabricated, c) she is running a training center for servants, presumably, meaning that she is not getting paid for offering this valued training, d) after she has taught them everything she knows, which I assume is a lot and of high quality, they leave for greener pastures — O, poor Ms Ara! I really feel sorry for her. e)

also, after she has "medicated" them, though, she claims she is a teacher and not a physician and offered them "tranquillities" — whatever that is and whichever manner she dispenses these services remains a mystery — a curiosity and an alluring possibility for me — they become so ungrateful and shameless that they cast their eyes and traps (I suppose) for the men folk in the household — what a shame and poor taste and may be even poor choice for the house maids?

Since both the ladies had sought advice in your column for a solution for their "significant" problem, which may also be of national interest — I will attempt to offer some solutions to these and other ladies in distress.

One very important way would be to seek solutions and guidance from our great religion, our Prophet (SM) and some of his disciples. In Islam, there is no caste system, no distinction is made between social classes — the rich and the poor or on the basis of skin colour. During prayer in a mosque, a king or a prince sits right next to a peasant or a day labourer — there is no distinction. Even in warfare during the Prophet's time, there was no distinction between a general and a foot soldier. Even today, in modern Saudi Arabia — the rich and the poor — the king and the common man wear the same simple long robe so that there is no distinction and division amongst them. Even a most ordinary man can and does address the king simply by his first name with impunity and this does not diminish the respect, position or the legal stature of the king. There is a very beautiful story on Hazrat Omar (R), how he treated his servant; I believe we can learn something from his example.

Islam spread very quickly throughout the world and was adopted by many nationalities, races and people of different languages because of its humanity, nobility, spiritual quality and egalitarian principles and not because of the

strength of its armies as is believed by many.

There are many amongst us who only follow the rituals and ceremonies of Islam without understanding its true spirit — the deep humanity, love and respect for fellow men. Only parroting and mimicking the instructions and teachings of Islam does not make a good Muslim — but following its true spirit does. I have talked to many fellow Muslims, who have travelled in the Western and Christian countries. It is ironic, they tell me, that Christians are 'better Muslims' than we are and the 'true spirit' of Islam is practiced more ardently by them than most Muslims in our country.

It is truly sad that Islam with all its glory and nobility of spirit has not produced a Florence Nightingale or a Mother Teresa — but has produced bombers and hijackers. In contemporary Bangladesh, there are 3 leper hospitals run by Christian organizations. They work quietly, without any publicity and seek no special privilege or honour — but only think that they are doing God's work. Also, there are many Christian organizations who are doing similar good and humanitarian work without seeking any reward or honour. I salute them and think we can learn from their examples.

In conclusion, I want to say that we should search in our hearts and look for charity, compassion and understanding for our fellow men, the less privileged ones, and treat them with respect and dignity. We should not forget, in Bangladesh, we all come from a modest peasant background. Some of us have been fortunate enough to acquire some degree of economic security and social position, but even then the hold on this is tenuous in a fast changing world.

Finally, I pray for the day when there are no domestics in our society — and everyone has the opportunity to earn a livelihood with dignity and respect.

Omar Osman Ali Khan Motijheel C/A, Dhaka

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.

"Rajonigondha"

Sir, This refers to one of my previous letters captioned "Change and Expense" published in the month of February in your journal.

The issue was related to the changing of the name of Biman's executive class 'Rajonigondha'. I was against the change on the plea that the name Rajonigondha is innocent and such change would incur huge expenditure. It was argued by some of your correspondents that Rajonigondha is being considered as an emblem of grief in some Southeast Asian countries. In order to get this matter confirmed I personally wrote to some of my Southeast Asian friends.

Now, on the basis of the information received from all my contacts, I would safely conclude that Rajonigondha is not exclusively considered as an emblem of grief in the Southeast Asian countries. Rather it is considered as it is — one of the lovely flowers. Interestingly, some personali-

ties representing Southeast Asian countries were not found even familiar with tube-rose!

Whatever the pros and cons, there still stands one vital fact, that is, Rajonigondha is a part of our culture. Hence we'll greet people according to our culture and norms. Culture varies from country to country, society to society.

Again, for instance, Agarbatti is usually used in our country during religious functions. We light 'Agarbatti' when someone dies. Agarbatti is also used in many shops in our country as freshness. So, there are varied uses of agarbatti. We cannot denote agarbatti as an emblem of grief because people used to put them on the graves.

So, Biman, may re-consider our proposal not to banish the name of 'Rajonigondha' from its executive class.

M. Zahidul Haque
Assistant Professor,
Bangladesh Agricultural
Institute,
Dhaka

Labour Law Commission

Sir, We are happy to note the formation of 'Labour Law Commission', which appeared as a news item in the media.

According to the report this commission has been formed with representatives of various Govt. and non-Govt. organisations. Provision has also been kept for inclusion of woman representatives.

The 'Probashi-O-Prottyagato Bangladeshhi Kallyan Shangho' feels inclusion of a couple of representatives of this association in the commission will be appropriate for covering the whole range of concerned people. That will make it a fully representative body. Representatives of the Shangho will be in a better position to project the problems of laes of expatriates and repatriates, out of their practical experience.

Obviously they can also advise for solution of various problems in a better and effective way which will be a help to the government in making this important commission fully meaningful. Thus the Shangho draws the attention of the concerned authority.

S A Hussain,
Secretary General,
Probashi-O-Prottyagato
Bangladeshhi Kallyan Shangho,
Bara Maghbaraz, Dhaka