The Baily Star

Y being in Saudi Ara-bia during the Gulf War was a matter of choice. I had perfect reasons not to go back to Riyadh just then, as I had just come to Dhaka only three weeks back, and was thoroughly enjoying myself with family and friends. On top, history was taking place before my eyes. After 9 years, General Ershad's government was toppling under heavy popular pressure - and I was watching all these very comfortably from the second floor of my younger brother's residence. I did not want to go back to Riyadh not just then at least. That was

My initial reaction to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was very impersonal. I was taking interest, but not enough to force me into any action. But this attitude changed abruptly when US troops landed on Saudi Arabian soil. The real implications of this hit me with a force. My family - my husband and my daughter were in Riyadh and they could be in imminent danger. I flew back immediately.

December, 1990.

When I landed in Riyadh on 28th December, my husband was not at the airport to greet me. My daughter Ayesha informed that he was busy in a conference. I understood. Everywhere I could see signs of something unusual. Only three weeks back I had left this city. It had been a peaceful city with all its normal activities then. But now, the airport looked as if it had turned into a plane making factory overnight. Planes were everywhere small, big, this coloured, that coloured, all shapes - and they all had the distinct look of being military aircrafts. Looking at them I knew life was not going to be peaceful here any more. We were going to see one more war in our lifetime.

The drive to the house was very depressing. Ayesha was trying very hard to make me cheerful with her nonstop chatter, but I was not listening. My mind was preoccupied. All around me I could see ominous signs - few cars, even fewer people on the street - deserted look of Riyadh - all signs that Saudi Arabia was getting ready for conflict.

But once inside the house, and settled in the comfort of Ahad-Shafique run residence of the Bangladesh ambassador. I had to turn my attention elsewhere. I had to think of my daughter safely.

It was not easy to convince the father-daughter combination that it was not safe any more for Ayesha to stay with us and that she should leave before 15th January - the deadline. They were not convinced that Riyadh would not be safe - but I was. I wanted her out of Saudi Arabia in time. fought and finally won my battle. Ayesha agreed to leave for

But it was not easy to arrange her departure. For days the ever-resourceful Mr Saklayen of the Embassy, who I always thought never failed in any mission, could not manage

muscles against the non-white migrants in Australia, and the

sporadic display of rabid racial neo-Nazi type intolerance, Melbourne and her sister cities like Sydney and Brisbane, can be seen to be

the dark-skinned newcomers.

7 ITH Bruce Ruxton and

his over-enthusiastic followers flexing their

Witness to History

Gulf War — My Days under Siege

by Kohinoor Dastagir

Many people saw the Gulf War from different perspectives, from inside Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion and from parts of Saudi Arabia where the conflict cast its long shadow over lives of people, locals and foreigners. What was it like for the wife of the Bangladesh ambassador? Here is an account as she witnessed the making of history, with all the trauma and uncertainties which go with the process.



American troops participating in operation "Desert Shield"

even one seat for Ayesha, leave aside one extra for me to go to Jeddah. Those days international flights operated from Jeddah. At least twenty Saudia flights flew between Riyadh and Jeddah everyday those days, and yet it was so very difficult to get tickets. It looked as if the whole of Riyadh was leaving at the same time. In the end, luckily we did manage two seats. But what scene we saw at the airport!! Hundreds of people, some waiting for two/three days by now - all waiting to leave Riyadh!! It was so incredible.

Immediately on my return back to Riyadh on 15th morning, I had to start preparing to seal the house with plastic papers and adhesives.

No one knew exactly how to take precaution against chemiwarfare. No one had any idea or experience. But we all knew it was deadly, and therefore we could not take any chances. At least one room had to be scaled off completely, so that no particle of any chemical could penetrate.

My original plan was to seal off the entire house. But I soon abandoned the idea. It was not possible at all. Even the two wings, our own and the children's, would take hours of hard work and constant supervision on my part. I decided to concentrate only on

I must say Farid and Shafique (the two boys from the Embassy) did a superb job that evening. Our room looked so secure from all outside wind that I was very pleased. I even remember how I had dragged everything from my children's two rooms and had placed them inside cupboards so that no chemical would touch any of their things. As for us, we had to have a few things out for everyday use - but it did not matter now. The hose was se-

My vigil now started. Here I will let my diary take

17th January, 1991 - Who gave me the news first? Yes, I remember now. It was Mr Shafi (the First Secretary in the Embassy). It was two in the morning. His exact words were, "Operation has started. Attack has begun."

I sat bolt upright. No more apprehension. The real thing has started. My husband woke up. From then on it was only BBC, VOA, and CNN. On yes, Rumman (my son) telephoned from the United States around 4am. He told us to be calm and brave. Imagine, a son advising his parents to be calm!! But then he was nervous too.

18th January - My husband leaves for office with two flasks full of iced water, a towel, and

of course, his gas mask standard precaution against any possible chemical fallout.

19th January - The first Scud attack on Riyadh. At 11pm again Mr Shaft rang up - this time to inform us that air raid siren was going on. Imagine, we had not even heard — radio was that loud!!

in seconds the house started shaking violently - we heard big explosion. Must be bombs, but we are safe - because the house has not fallen and we can see each other!! Lights went off at one point but I had my torch. We turned the radio on again. This time much lower - in case another raid

20th January - Today we removed the small TV from Ayesha's room and placed it in ours. Now we can watch CNN from bed - no more getting up and going to the next room. But Riyadh has gone very quiet. No sound of any car whatsoever. All you hear are sounds of planes taking off and landing. From my favourite place in the small drawing room ! watch planes all the time. Whenever there is a different looking plane, I call my husband to identify and tell the name!!

I wonder why this war at all. SH was given so much of opportunity - why he did not take them? And now that the

war is on, why isn't he retaliating enough? From what we

hear, it is now a one way traffic - only the US and its allies are active. Iraqis are mostly quiet 21st January — Again Scud. This time we donned our gas masks!! But inspite of practice

Life as usual in the city of Riyadh

before, neither of us could keep them on for long. They are so very uncomfortable: Thank God, we are in sealed room. No chemical can reach us. But those poor soldiers, man and woman, out there in the open and fighting with these grotesque masks on la necessity for them) - my heart goes out to them. It's not easy for them - I know that.

23rd January - Can't understand what is going on. Nobody is giving correct account. But imagine Peter Arnold and Bernard Shaw, the two brave men sitting inside Baghdad and keeping us all informed from their hotel hideout. It must be dangerous for them with so much of heavy shelling going on.

24th January - I almost forced the Embassy ladies to come to my house for morning coffee. I am sure nobody liked it - but what can I do? I am so

These days we understand the pattern. First air raid siren - with minutes big explosion impact of Seud and Patriot - all clear signal.

25th January - Fatema (Sri Lankan Ambassador's wife) and decided to visit Nasima (Indian Ambassador's wife). We had lovely time. It was a break from our by-now-silent existence. Our husbands no longer had any time for us - they were far too occupied!! We decide to have more of these visits. Next time we meet at my house and call Nora (Canadian Ambassador's wifel too.

Ist February - My forced coffee morning has caught on. Now all the ladies want weekly meetings. Good for us - we are all so eager to exchange news/opinions. We tell each other what we heard - and so on. We also decide to prepare fór Oriental Bazaar. Since we would be sitting home mostly. why not do some work. We decide to go shopping tomor-

3rd February - In two cars we went shopping yesterday. But Riyadh did not look like Riyadh anymore. Everything was so quiet. But imagine our surprise - all the shops were open!! So, maybe we can spend our time visiting different shopping areas. We know by now Scuds don't come during daytime.

10th February - This country is incredible!

Officially Saudi Arabia is at war. Normally you would ex-

pect shortage of everything here - food, clothes, essential items, everything. But no, not here, every shelf of every supermarket is full of stuff. Don't know who buys them. On the face of it most people have gone into interiors trying to avoid the nightly Scud visits.

abundant supply of stuffs. So many US soldiers on Riyadh streets these days. even spotted two uniformed woman drivers today. They were driving military jeeps. Imagine on Riyadh streets where women are forbidden to

But they must be stocking up.

So these shops must have

11th February - Jane (American) and Margaret (British) and I decide to visit the antique souk in old Rtyadh

It was a big surprise for me to see Jane not wearing her abaya at all. These days you hear stories of overactive Muttawas - but maybe Jane being an American, things are different with her these days. Some friends told us not to be so adventurous with a war going on. But we decide to go anyway.

Nothing happened. We not only browsed through the entire antique market. We even had coffee at Jane's hotel. No incident. But boy, ain't I glad that nothing happened!! I would have hated to have had

any scandalous incident involving poor me - not me - no. 12th February - we had

lunch at Chinese Embassy. Lunch - because nights are not safe enough for dinners. A very welcome break from our monotonous existence. How long can one refrain from normal activities? Now that the Chinese have taken lead. we will all follow.

14th February — We have established a weekly bridge session by now. Every Thursday afternoon Mr Shaft and Mr Mohiuddin (from the embassy) come to our house and we play bridge. We, of course, break up before dusk. Nights are for Scuds.

15th February - By now Scuds don't frighten us any more. Also, we decide Iraqis are not going to use chemicals on us. So we feel bold, we go to see the ruins at Batha. Last night a Scud had hit a house there and a man died.

Scores of people these days get up on their roofs with video cameras when the stren sounds - ignoring possible danger, hoping to catch Scud and Patriot impact on video Some are quite successful, I hear. Even the Peruvian ambassador the other day informed us he was collecting his treasure, to pass on to his son and grandson in time. We do not possess video camera so my husband is saved from the exercise - lazy that he is!!

20th February - I still haven't seen an impact of Scud and Patriot. Mrs Mohiuddin sees everyday. Her house is east facing. Mine is east facing too - but my bedroom is on west side, and you have to cross a fairly big size room to come to the eastern wing and there is never enough time. I toyed with the idea of sleeping in the eastern wing but I knew it wouldn't worked out. I could never convince my husband to leave his own comfortable bed. But somehow I have to see - otherwise I'll al-

26th February - Jane turned up wearing a tortoise shaped locket. She claimed this was from a fallen Patriot. I must collect some pieces of Scuds and Patriots too.

ways regret.

28th February - At 3:30am Rumman again rings up from United States. The war is going to end. He being in the US gets to know all these things much before we do. I have a sigh of relief. At long last - the war is going be

Thus ended my days under siege, and the "Mother of All Battles". To me it meant hanging back my paintings on the walls, ridding the house of all the ugly plastic sheets, and generally being myself once again. By the way, I did get to see the impact of Scud and Patriot just the day before hostilities actually stopped.

The writer is the wife of Major General (Rtd) Kazi Gulam Dastagir who has just completed his tenure as the Bangladesh Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and returned home.

People and Places

Migrants Making it in Aussieland but Audrey admits to being

suspicion and contempt by the tolerant to the steady in flux of Anglo-Saxon settlers.

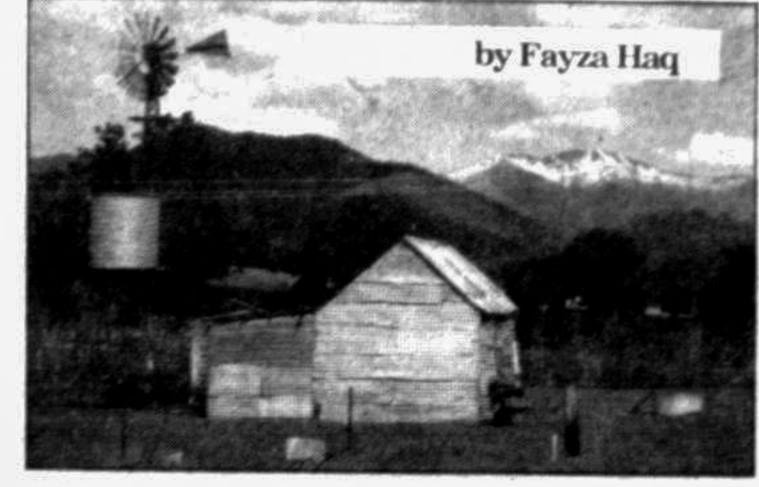
The new trend towards Hundreds of Chinese came in multi-culturalism, encouraged with the white settlers to help by the Labour Party has with the mining and the laying introduced eastern food like of railway tracks. Yet after 200 "samosa" in trade schools, the years, if a "white" Australian learning of second languages marries a Greek or Turk this is like Chinese and Japanese at secondary schools, and of just not accepted well by either side. A place like course the popularisation of Springfiled in Melbourne is "SBS", the national TV channel teeming with Vietnamese, geared to the migrants. Chinese, and Tamils. Similarly Similarly, there are ethnic the area between Cheltanham channels in the radio. The and Mentone has its groups of European and Asian films and Lebanese and Turks - with plays seen on "SBS" often excel



Andrey Tan, of Chinese-Malaysian origin, with her family at amusement park near Chelesa Heights, Melbourne.

unvaried bellydance restaurants, and the darkhaired Greeks and Italians, once treated with great

the Hollywood and local productions available in the other four popular channels of TV. Even its English news



readers, Mary Kostikedes and perience. She must bring the George Denikian are easily acknowledged as superior to the rest. Similarly Peta Topano and Carla Zampetti are great names in Australia.

Babar and Lucy Ahad, if they had stayed back in Bangladesh, would still have had considerable success behind them. Babar, today, in Melbourne, has flowing practice with an Indian doctor. He is loved, trusted and respected in his neighbourhood in Strathmoor, for the dedication he has put in as a general practitioner. His children go to good schools and there are three cars in the premises. Lucy, the wife, does not sit idle and simply play the easy-going contented housewife. She does private work with her architectural ex-

work home as her children are still very young. Babar's sister Corinne has finished her engineering course at Melbourne. Lucy's brother is there too. There is talk to Lucy's sister - who is a doctor - that she too will come out to Australia.

Not all Bangladeshis are as well adjusted as Babar and Lucy. But most manage to do well for themselves, like the "Telecom" worker who was once kind enough to give me a lift home with his wife and family, and gave me cooking tips all along the way. The Indian doctor and his wife. whom I met at an Iftar party at the Ahads', were bursting with confidence and joy of living. The wife flaunted her orange

souffle and spoke in a smug manner about her frequent trips to the local mosque. The Indian doctor, like many Muslims leaving India, put unusual emphasis on his interpretation of Islam, and was ready to dictate terms, as regards religious beliefs, to a total stranger like me.

Another successful migrant couple that I know are the Malaysian Chinese, Audrey and Eddy Tan, from Chelsea Heights. They once lived in the seedy side of Neville Street in Mentone, in a small unit, sharing their garden strip with four other tenants. Eddy has a bachelor's degree from New Zealand. Eddy's parents in Kuala Lumpur are well-to-do

middle-class. The husband does as many as three jobs a week, working in supermarkets and pizza huts after his nine-to-five white-collared job. Audrey had a regular weekend job teaching Chinese at a Nanawading school. She has also worked as a teacher's aid and at the Cole's chainstore before she had to stay home to have her second child.

Andre, the older Tan child, is as robust and intelligent as any other boy of his age in Melbourne. With his mother a trained teacher, he was goaded on with books and children's educational programme on TV since the time he landed as an infant in Australia. He has his



Some immigrants do enjoy good housing facility in Australia



parents' charm and wit. Valery was born with a defective heart and her parents have had to struggle and sacrifice a lot before she is the bundle of joy she is today. Despite his foreign qualifications, Eddy could not find a suitable job in Malaysia, and was sponsored by his sister, who also works in

Melbourne. Pat Heynsbuergh is a Burger from Sri Lanka, who migrated to Australia eighteen years ago. She has a beautiful home in Chelsea, with a husband and two delightful children to share her life. She is only too happy to have left the flaming scenes of racial turmoil behind in northern Sri Lanka and Colombo, although she misses her sister who is still there. Her children, light-haired and light-eyed, born in Melbourne look and behave like any other white Australians. Burgers are descendants from the Dutch settlers in Colombo; with occasional Portuguese streak in them, have always

been extremely Europeanised like the fair-skinned Anglo-Indians in the Subcontinent.

If Pat and her husband Tony

had stayed behind in Sri Lanka, they would have stood out like sore thumbs among the Tamils and Sinhalese, because of their appearance, and their lack of knowledge of the Sinhalese languages. They have been in Australia so long that they can hardly be distinguished from the rest of the other Aussie. Tony is a clerk for the Australian government, and is an amateur car mechanic in his spare time. He loves his golf and has numerous trophies to show for it. Unlike the Tans and Ahads, who take annual holidays to go home, the Heynsberghs rent a caravan of visit the sea-side in their private boat or escape in some bird sanctuary. Apart from working in the "Safeways" supermarket by daytime, Pat works with her husband after office hours at a cleaning

Continued on page 11