

Down to Earth

Paucity of Children's Park in City

By A S M Nurunnabi

In both urban and rural areas, there is need for children's outdoor games for their physical and mental development. In the rural areas, such need is easily met by wide open spaces which are more or less available. In an urban area, particularly in a metropolis, such open spaces are hard to come by. With the rapid growth of the city, this paucity is on the increase. At present we have in the city a handful of parks and limited open areas in isolated pockets. Their number, however, is grossly inadequate, compared to the needs of the children population. In any modern city, provision of adequate open spaces and parks is made to serve as lungs of the city. The Dhaka city, however, lacks such provision.

In this respect, the old part of the city suffers the most. Here the paucity of open spaces is acute. There is only a handful of parks, namely, the Armanitola Maidan, the Bahadur Shah Park and the Strajuddoula Park. Here, however, encroachment in one form or other always goes on. Particularly in the Armanitola Maidan, loading of long-distance trucks, motor repair shops and piling of building materials on its periphery present an eyesore. In the Bahadur Shah and Strajuddoula Park, where some concrete benches shelter beggars and vagrants for long hours, there is no proper environment for children to play games. Even a simple stroll at these places with children is avoided because of presence of anti-social elements. The Buckland Bund along river Buriganga could have been a redeeming feature, but here the jostling crowds of hawkers, rickshaws and pedestrians create a suffocating atmosphere.

The situation in the new part of the city is a little better. This is mainly due, among other things, to the existence of the Osman Uddyan, Ramna Park, Suhrawardy Uddyan, Sishu Park and the vast open spaces in the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area. Most of these open spaces are hardly considered fit for the children's recreational use. The Ramna Park and the Suhrawardy Uddyan which were previously favourite haunts of fresh air seekers have lately lost much of their charm because of growing presence of anti-social elements. The Sishu Park is an attractive place for children. Lately its attraction has greatly eroded on account of presence of elders and non-function of some of its mechanical recreational facilities. In the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area, the wide open spaces are tempting, but they are also not free from the presence of dubious elements.

Because of the absence of sufficient open spaces in most areas, particularly in the old city, children are often seen playing in the open streets. This entails hazards, but children, being what they are, hardly listen to the counsel of caution. In many of the schools, there is no playground. Children of these schools naturally take to playing in whatever space is available nearby, however limited it may be.

In the metropolis we are now desperately short of open spaces where our children can spend free time playing games. Some people think that in the existing state of things, there may be limited scope for improvement even if the town planners many try for it. The old areas in Dhaka are in greater need for open spaces. There is a project for shifting

the Dhaka Centre Jail to a more spacious area near Kashimpur in Gazipur district. When that project is implemented, quite a big area in the heart of old Dhaka will be available. It is for the town planners to consider whether, instead of utilising the area for any commercial or residential complex, which will further add to the existing congestion, the area could be used for a properly laid-out public park with ancillary facilities. This may largely compensate for the loss suffered by the old part of the city in the matter of open spaces.

In some of the wards, the City Corporation maintains small parks for children. Most of these parks are now in a deplorable state. The equipment for the children's games, such as swings, see-saws which were initially installed are no longer in use. These places are now filled with weeds and litters and are now haunts of undesirable elements. It behoves the City Corporation not only to maintain properly the existing parks in the wards but also to find out open spaces for children's parks in such wards which lack them.

What is more important immediately, according to some people, is to ensure adoption of appropriate measures to keep the existing open spaces free from encroachments and also to remain vigilant that the atmosphere in these areas is not vitiated through the presence of anti-social elements. This can be possible if the law-enforcing agencies, the City Corporation and the RAJUK remain alert and active in their respective spheres. We owe this to our children.

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3 unresolved issues

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discussion during their afternoon retreat on the rivercraft Ostrich.

Earlier, on Thursday a meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers referred back all unresolved issues on the draft declaration to the Standing Committee.

Comprising of the Foreign Secretaries of member nations, Rahman said, the Standing Committee met Friday morning. The Council of Ministers could not meet on the day, as scheduled, due to other preoccupations.

"I am happy to say that there has been substantial progress at the meeting except on one or two points which would be submitted before the heads of state and government to be discussed during their retreat," Foreign Secretary Rahman said.

The South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA), he added, continues to be a sticking point, while there is also disagreement on how to project poverty alleviation on the draft declaration and on the date of the next summit.

The differences on SAPTA, Rahman pointed out, is on procedural stipulations for the implementation of the arrangement among the seven members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The tangle that obstructed drafting of the paragraph of the trade arrangement relates to the question whether the member countries would sign the broad-based umbrella accord on SAPTA along with a schedule for negotiating tariff concessions on a product by product basis or to sign them separately, Rahman added.

The schedule of concessions, which remains to be prepared, would require separate negotiations.

On the paragraph on poverty alleviation in the draft declaration, the Foreign Secretary said, the only point of difference is how to project it.

"There is no dispute on the paragraph on poverty alleviation as substantive elements have been agreed upon," he noted, adding "the difference is on how to present it and whether it should be given prominence."

He said that India has already offered to host the next SAARC summit at the Council of Ministers meeting.

However, Rahman noted that as the 7th summit is being held in April, the problem is when to hold the next summit. As the SAARC Charter calls for

a summit at least once a year, he added.

"The heads of state and government are now going to discuss on how to adjust to this," Rahman pointed out, adding that fixing of the date for the next summit would be governed by "pragmatic factors".

Replying to a question, he said that no specific proposal has been table yet to amend the SAARC Charter but added that the issue of holding the summit every two years may be discussed by the leaders.

The Foreign Secretary also noted that although it was Bhutan's turn to host the next summit, Thimpu declined because of inadequate facilities and other practical difficulties.

Replying to another question, he said that there was a consensus on the main elements relating to setting up of the South Asian Development Fund.

When asked, he noted that as all member nations are signatories to the Anti-Terrorism Convention the factor now is signing enabling clauses to bring about legislations in the respective countries.

Sharif

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They demanded that Rao should come to Bangladesh after rebuilding the demolished Babri Mosque and for an honourable solution to water sharing issue.

The second police action came after Asar prayers when supporters of Islami Shashantana Andolon took to the street on similar demands defying the ban on meetings and processions because of the SAARC summit.

Several hundred supporters of the group climbed over the high boundary wall of Baitul Mukarram Mosque and marched towards the Press Club breaking a police barricade.

Police baton-charged the processionists when they reached Purana Paltan Square and detained at least 10 of them.

At least 25 people were injured in the police action, one of them was treated at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

When contacted over telephone Ramna Thana sources told The Daily Star last night that 12 to 14 people including Maulana Azizul Huq were in their custody but did not say whether they were formally arrested.

"Senior officials are dealing the case," one officer on duty said.

200 shops gutted in Sherpur; 10 injured

SHERPUR, Apr 9: Ten people were injured and about 200 shops were gutted as a devastating fire raged through Jhenigati Bazar in Jhenigati Thana tonight (Friday), witnesses said, reports UNB.

Of the injured, five people were admitted to Jhenigati Hospital with serious burn injuries.

Shopowners said the blaze that originated from a diesel shop at about 8 pm burned to ashes goods worth about one crore taka.

Gen Joshi new Indian army chief

NEW DELHI, Apr 9: India named Lieutenant General Bipin Chandra Joshi, a highly-decorated officer, as the chief of its million-plus army today, reports AFP.

Joshi, who presently heads the western command, takes over as chief of army staff on July 1 after the retirement of incumbent Sunith Rodrigues, the Defence Ministry announced.

Joshi, 57, will serve a full term of three years as army chief, a Defence Ministry spokesman said.

Chowdhury said that the news involving him in the murder published in a section of the press was fabricated and ill motivated.

Implicating his name in the crime by the family of late Zahir was to tarnish his name and reputation, said Chowdhury in the statement.

Editor: S. M. Ali
Executive Editor: Mahfuz Anam
Published by the Editor on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd., 52 Motijheel C/A, Dhaka-1000 and printed by him at The Sangbad Ltd., 36 Purana Paltan, Dhaka. Editorial, News & Commercial Offices: House No. 11, Road No. 3, Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka-1205. PABX: 50092-4. Advertisement: 500991 (Direct) Fax No. 88-02-863035. GPO Box No. 3257. GRAM: DAILY STAR DHAKA.



Police picking up a demonstrator into a jeep after foiling a rally jointly organised by Babri Masjid Action Committee and Islami Shashantana Andolon near the south gate of Baitul Mukarram Mosque yesterday. — Star photo

Azizul Huq held Demonstrators baton-charged: 30 injured

By Staff Correspondent

At least 30 people were injured when police used batons to disperse two groups of demonstrators who took to the street defying a government ban, to protest arrival of Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to attend the seventh SAARC summit.

Police detained at least 15 people including Babri Mosque Action Committee leader Maulana Azizul Huq.

The first rally was planned by the Babri Mosque Action Committee at the South Gate of Baitul Mukarram Mosque after Jumma prayers, but foiled when plain clothed police picked up its leader Shaikul Hadis Maulana Azizul Huq and baton-charged some 1,000 supporters.

The committee's junior leaders started the meeting outside the main gate and reiterated their plan to seize the airport on Saturday during Rao's arrival.

150 foreign journalists to cover 7th summit

Star Report

Some 150 foreign journalists, including those from the six South Asian nations, join their Bangladeshi colleagues today (Saturday) to cover the Seventh SAARC Summit in Dhaka.

Officials said that 95 mediamen from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives have been assigned to cover the two-day meet.

Most of them had reached Dhaka Friday evening while the others are expected this morning, they said.

Besides, 19 journalists representing different western newspapers, news agencies, televisions and radios have converged in the capital on the occasion.

The largest team of 42 journalists from both print and broadcasting media are expected from India, Press Information Department officials said Friday.

Twelve of them will accompany the Indian Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao who arrives in Dhaka from Bangkok this morning, they said.

A total of 20 journalists have arrived from Pakistan, 16 from Sri Lanka, 12 from Nepal and three each from Bhutan and the Maldives.

Japanese NHK TV, the Yomiuri Shimbun, the Mainichi Daily newspaper have sent their representatives to cover the Dhaka summit.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has sent three of its journalists including Mark Tully to Dhaka.

The Voice of America (VOA) has assigned its Delhi-based correspondent Frances Heintler.

The Mexican TV has sent a three-man team to cover the SAARC summit.

Tom Wagner, the South Asia Bureau chief of the Associated Press (AP) news agency, has joined his two colleagues in Dhaka.

Sudip Chakravorty, K T R Menon of The Times of India,

Wangchuk

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arrival here for attending the seventh SAARC Summit here.

Foreign Minister A S M Mostafizur Rahman received the Bhutanese King at the tarmac of the VIP Terminal.

A tiny tot presented bouquets to the Bhutanese monarch.

Bhutan's Foreign Minister Dawa Tsering, who is already in the capital, the kingdom's Ambassador in Dhaka Karma Dorjee and senior officials of the foreign ministry were present.

King Wangchuk expressed his optimism that the South Asian leaders during the summit would also be able to reach consensus on the proposal for South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA). The people of the region would be largely benefited by SAPTA, he added.

The Bhutanese King hoped that the seventh SAARC summit under the leadership of host Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia would be a great success.

King Wangchuk said he was carrying the good wishes of the people of Bhutan for the people of Bangladesh.

Later, the king drove in a ceremonial motorcade to Sheraton Hotel where he will be staying.

Second cycle

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Rahman dreamt the regional forum but did not live to see it launched, will formally open the summit at 10 am at the International Conference Centre, specially spruced up for the region's most important gathering.

With flags of the seven member nations fluttering outside, the International Conference Centre is ready to welcome the summiters. The summit's concluding session where the leaders will adopt the Dhaka Declaration will also take place at the centre.

King Jigme Singe Wangchuk of Bhutan, President Ranasinghe Premadasa of Sri Lanka, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives, Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala of Nepal are already in Dhaka for the summit. Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao of India will arrive this morning from a visit to Thailand hours before the summit is due to begin.

The day's programmes begin at 9 in the morning. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia will receive the six leaders at the International Conference Centre (ICC) at Tejgaon.

The SAARC leaders will be given separate guard of honour at the ICC, the venue for inaugural and concluding sessions.

Inauguration ceremony of the summit begins at 10 am and the leaders will later plant saplings in the ICC premises.

The leaders will start a three-hour river cruise on the Ostrich' at 2-15 pm and have their lunch on board. In case of bad weather alternative arrangements will be made in the city.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia in the evening will host a banquet in honour of the heads of state and government at Hotel Sonargaon.

Gayoom

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Foreign Minister of Maldives Pathulla Jameel and the island's envoy to Dhaka, Ahmed Abdullah, were present.

Gayoom said the 7th summit of SAARC is very significant as the forum was born in Dhaka.

The issues to be discussed at the summit are important and SAARC will continue with its efforts in promoting various fields of cooperation already identified, he added.

President Gayoom and members of his entourage drove in a ceremonial motorcade to Hotel Sheraton where the SAARC leaders will be staying during the summit.

Khaleeda

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Minister and the outgoing SAARC Chairman Shri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa during their talks discussed matters related to the seven national regional forum and mutual issues.

Shri Lankan Foreign Minister Harold Hetat accompanied the Shri Lankan President.

Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and Bhutanese King Jigme Singhe Wangchuk also discussed matters of mutual interest with the Bangladesh Prime Minister during their informal discussions.

Wife of the Maldives President Nasrina Gayoom accompanied President Gayoom while the daughter of Nepalese Premier, Sujata Kairala, accompanied her father.

Foreign Minister A S M Mostafizur Rahman, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary Reaz Rahman were among others present at the meetings.

Hasina

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"Above all, there must be goodwill, understanding and trust among the countries if we are to move from the peripheral to the core areas of economic cooperation."

The opposition leader said rapid changes are taking place in the international trade and world economy and we cannot afford to lose any time in strengthening SAARC in order to face the challenges of our time.

Expressing her concern over the recent events in this region, Hasina said by preaching hatred and intolerance the religious extremists have been eroding not only the internal cohesion and tranquility of the member countries but also the foundation of the regional co-operation.

She hoped that the SAARC leaders will address to the root cause of these current difficulties. SAARC will succeed only if there is mutual trust and goodwill among the member countries.

In the long term interest of the nations of this region these divisive communal forces must be restrained, she observed.

The Awami League chief expressed the hope that despite these recent developments the SAARC leaders will not deviate from the policy of cooperation, friendship and good neighbourly relations.

She said her party stands for strengthening regional co-operation and will support all constructive initiatives for promoting welfare of the people of the region.

The Midnight File

Husband, son in Yangon to visit Suu Kyi

YANGON, Apr 9: The husband and youngest son of detained Myanmar dissident Aung San Suu Kyi have arrived in Yangon to visit the Nobel Peace Prize winner, a news report said today. Her husband, British Academic Michael Aris, and their son Kim, 14, arrived in Yangon on Thursday, the report in the Daily Mirror newspaper quoted the state-run Myanmar news agency as saying, reports AFP.

Four US jets fired on over Iraq

WASHINGTON, Apr 9: Four US jets were fired on by Iraqi anti-aircraft Friday in the northern no-fly zone in Iraq, and dropped bombs on the sites, the US government said. A Clinton administration official, speaking only on condition of anonymity, said the incident, involving some F-16 fighter jets, happened "north of the 32nd parallel," which marks the no-fly zone, reports AP.

SPGRC urges Sharif to solve repatriation problems

Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC) yesterday urged the Pakistani Prime Minister Miah Muhammad Nawaz Sharif to solve the staggering repatriation problem, reports UNB.

Addressing a press conference at the National Press Club, chief patron of SPGRC M Nasim Khan sought an interview with the Pakistani Prime Minister and appealed to him to have a patient hearing of their plight and grievances.

He also requested Sharif, who is now in the capital to attend the 7th SAARC summit, to visit the nearest camp of Stranded Pakistanis to see their appalling condition.

He urged the Pakistani government to implement the Pakistan-Bangladesh joint declaration of August 12, 1992 for immediate repatriation of 3,000 families of stranded Pakistanis.

At a glance

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- other summits were extended over either two or three days.
 - The two-day seventh summit was originally scheduled in December but postponed twice as Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao failed to attend the summit because of communal disturbance in India.
 - The seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) faced a heavy jolt in 1989 when Colombo declined to host any summit with Indian troops present in the country and ultimately the summit could not be held that year.
 - Under a deal between Rajiv Gandhi and former Sri Lankan President R J Jayawardene Indian troops had been deployed to combat continued insurgency of the Tamil guerrillas.
 - However, Bhutan did not host any summit so far because of its domestic problem and the cycle completed with the seventh summit in Dhaka where the regional grouping was launched in 1985.
 - The summits at a glance:
 - 1st Summit Dhaka, Bangladesh, December 7-8, 1985
 - 2nd Summit, Bangalore, India, November 16-17, 1986
 - 3rd Summit, Kathmandu, Nepal, November 2-4, 1987
 - 4th Summit, Islamabad, Pakistan, December 29-31, 1988
 - 5th Summit, Male, the Maldives, November 21-23, 1990
 - 6th Summit, Colombo, Sri Lanka, December 21, 1991

Summit of hope

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It is this commitment from the Indian leader that must be revived, notwithstanding the failure of the official level talks recently held here.

Augmentation of water for India, Bangladesh and Nepal should be part of the region's long-range planning. The sharing of the available water to help this country face the threat of drought is of immediate concern.

While it is possible, even necessary, to delink bilateral problems from regional co-operation, they cannot be placed in separate compartments in nation-to-nation relationships.

This is where SAARC has much to learn from the success of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Over the years, ASEAN members have developed a viable technique of sorting out their bilateral problems, often privately during a summit, without letting them affect the momentum of regional co-operation.

If ASEAN did not reach this stage in a matter of years, there are no reasons why SAARC should despair over what some critics regard as its current failures. The capacity of the South Asian alliance to move forward is yet to be put on test. Herein lies the challenge facing the Summit in Dhaka — the Summit of Hope.