

Miserable State of Our Medical Colleges

Afraid of losing support among so-called students — for those who turn educational institutions into virtual battlefields can hardly be termed as genuine students — the ruling party has followed a disastrous policy of 'laissez-faire' resulting into the prevailing chaos in every branch of our education.

The latest account of the damage caused by the government's policy comes from no less a person than the health minister, Kamal Ibne Yusuf, himself. In replying to a question from an opposition member, he informed the Parliament yesterday, that from November '92 to June '93, over a period of seven months, our six medical colleges put together, were closed for a period of eight months. The reasons? Recurrent violence and political unrest. What lies behind this violence and so-called political violence? Rivalry, conflict and factionalism of the students' wings of the different political parties. To put it bluntly, medical colleges in question are, literally, hostages in the hands of these student wings of political parties. The worst hit were the Chittagong and Sylhet Medical Colleges which were closed for more than 35 per cent of the time, while the average for the six makes for 20 per cent of the time, that the colleges were supposed to have been open.

If for a period of seven months, the government is obliged to keep these institutions closed for anything between 20 and 36 per cent of the time, then it does not need much of an imagination to understand what sort of doctors these institutions are going to produce. Is there any guarantee that for the next seven months, the record is likely to be better? The minister gave a one sentence answer in the House. "We are taking all necessary steps". This standard reply, without bothering to elaborate a single step that the health ministry has taken to prevent further disruption of classes, is perhaps an evidence that future may be just as bad as the past. What will happen in these medical colleges will be determined by the student parties concerned, and not by what the authorities will do or not do. That is the bottom line. Again when the minister was asked as to whether or not any of the miscreants were caught, or any disciplinary action taken against anyone, he promptly replied that it was not the job of his ministry.

The public is not interested in such glib and technical replies. We want our future doctors to be able to study peacefully and uninterruptedly for the period that is specified for the course. We hold the government responsible, and especially the relevant ministry, to ensure that. What we published under the heading "Grim statistics", has the potential of leading to long term national disaster. In an environment of such indiscipline and lack of accountability, it is obvious that rigorous pursuit of medical science is hardly possible. There was a time when students from Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Nepal would come to our medical colleges, especially the one at Dhaka, for studies. All these countries, save perhaps one, have long surpassed us in medical education, and have turned their medical colleges into renowned institutions, and their medical services, into foreign exchange earning business. We had the potential, perhaps still do, of doing the same.

To go in that direction, we need a government that does not pander to the wishes of hooligans and terrorists for short term political gain. A determined drive to clean our medical colleges of all anti-social elements, and restoring academic atmosphere in all these institutions, is the legal and moral responsibility of the government. They cannot shirk this basic responsibility.

The faster this government learns that 'performance' is a far greater guarantee of public support, than harbouring terrorists and anti-social elements, the better we all will be.

No Polythene Bag, Please

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Jute Ministry, at a meeting on Saturday, has come up with a courageous and laudable decision in that it has sought to ban the production of polythene bags in the country. The committee decision, still in a recommended form, must receive the affirmative nod from other concerned ministries and go through several formalities as required in the parliamentary system, before becoming a law. Whether lobbies favouring continuation of polythene bag production will be able to reverse the decision or not is an outcome eagerly to be awaited in the meantime. But there is no doubt that the committee has shown its pragmatism and environmental consciousness by arriving at a conclusion we have for long been urging the authority to move towards.

Once again we take this opportunity to lend our strong support for the Parliamentary Committee's move and earnestly hope that the recommendation will be well received by other concerned authorities for its early implementation. Certainly the move will not be without some complications, chief among them being the reallocation of roles for the closed-down factories now manufacturing polythene bags. But one hopes the settlement of these claims will not be very difficult. Even if all these prove quite costly, in the ultimate analysis it's not as costly as could be due to the environmental damage wrought by the continuation of production and use of the innocuous looking substance called polythene.

The strongest reason we have in favour of a total ban on the substance is that we boast the best replacement one could ever think of. The advantages also are many. On whatever counts, the natural fibre of jute is superior to polythene — except perhaps in terms of carrying. But this is one disadvantage we must bear with to save us from pains in a number of other areas. Not only will our jute receive a boost through its use as bags but the environment-friendly fibre will spare us of a catastrophe we are now heading towards for our mindless littering of the imperishable polythene bags. What however will be in demand is more research for coming up with thinner and more durable jute bags at a competitive price, not only for the domestic market but also for the foreign markets.

WRITING in these columns last week about currency convertibility, I made a passing reference to the nexus between gold smuggling and illicit drug trafficking. Roughly about a week earlier, about 130 grams of smuggled gold valued at around one crore Taka, had been seized in Chittagong from two members of the crew of a foreign flag vessel. At about the same time, two consignments of heroin, each valued at roughly one crore Taka, were seized in separate raids on two passenger buses — also in Chittagong. These could be just isolated events or one could read a connection, however tenuous it is, between the two cases. What deserves notice is that both hard drugs and gold are being smuggled in.

When internationally traded currency is not available freely, gold usually serves as the only acceptable medium of exchange for transactions in hard drugs or for payments on account of goods smuggled. Gold can be sold for clean money too. It's all seen as a part of money laundering process. Payment in gold for drug transactions could be a more important requirement when the stuff is meant for consumption at home. Considered in this perspective, reports of increase in the number of drug addicts in the country are indeed disturbing.

Seizure of illicit drugs by the law enforcing agencies is not exactly a new phenomenon in this country. However, it used to be thought earlier that this country was mainly serving as a transit route for hard drugs. Recent developments tend to take away this consolation too.

The number of drug addicts in the country is said to have increased four times in the last five years. As for hard drug addiction, the findings of a survey conducted by the World Health Organisation on heroin addiction in this country, suggest

Of Drug Trafficking, Smuggling, Money Laundering and the Golden Connection

that no less than ten per cent of the addicts are hooked to hard drugs. Heroin is said to have been first detected in this country in 1983 and since then, over 55 kilograms of this hard drug were seized by the law enforcing agencies. Later, cocaine also has joined the stream of hard drugs being smuggled into the country. Over the past three years, more than seven kilograms of cocaine were seized. And, as is well known, seizures usually represent only a fraction of the total quantity being smuggled.

Proximity to drug producing areas, particularly the borders along Myanmar-Thailand-Laos, the so-called Golden Triangle, is cited as the immediate reason for rendering this country vulnerable to drug trafficking. Drugs from the so-called Golden Crescent, especially the north-western region of Pakistan, is also considered as another source. With addition on the rise, drugs will continue to flow in through clandestine channels from these sources until production is stamped out in the areas where these are grown. And, this is easier said than done! Thailand is said to have come down heavily on drug trafficking. Now, foreign media reports say, alternate routes for smuggling heroin produced in the Golden Triangle have already been established, further to the north and east. Last year, seizure of heroin in China is said to have increased nearly eight-fold to a quantity exceeding 2,000 kilograms. However, most of the heroin is reportedly being routed through Laos to Cambodia and also Vietnam from where the drug is being shipped out. The virtual closure of the traditional Thai conduit has not stopped the

flow of heroin to addicts all over the world.

Drug trafficking and money laundering were the topics for discussion at a regional symposium held in Singapore last April. The Commonwealth Secretariat was a cosponsor of the meet, attended by experts from 23 countries including Bangladesh. Representatives of international organisations like the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) and Interpol, were also present. The three-day symposium analysed the connection between narcotics trafficking and money laundering with particular emphasis on the Asia region. The meeting noted that

include requiring financial institutions to report suspicious and large cash transactions, effective and identical supervision of both bank and non-bank financial institutions, monitoring cross border flow of funds and developing legal framework and efficient methodology to trace, freeze and confiscate the proceeds of crime.

In this country, drug trafficking is perhaps yet to assume the serious proportions that smuggling has. The number of drug addicts is still said to be below one million. The volume of transactions also perhaps is not quite staggering. However, all these do not make the phenomenon less alarming.

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

profits from illicit drug trafficking were being funnelled into the financial system by using the legitimate financial institutions, as also through the informal money markets. In order to prevent the use of the banking system for laundering drug money, experts called upon the financial institutions to play a key role in the detection of flow of illicit funds. They stressed the need for effective customer identification and updating record keeping practices within the financial institutions.

The symposium made several recommendations for limiting the use of the banking system for legitimisation of illegal earnings from drug trafficking, smuggling and similar other serious economic crimes. These

Apart from the other evils that it generates, drug addiction also leads to serious and vicious crimes. Besides, drug trafficking functions as part of a global chain. As a financial expert of the UNDCP suggested at the Singapore symposium, profits from illicit drug trafficking generated anywhere between 300 billion and 500 billion US dollars a year globally. That, indeed, is big business.

In the context of the upcoming currency convertibility, ideas for deterring use of the legitimate financial system for purposes of money laundering, as emerging from the discussions and suggestions made at the Singapore symposium, merit consideration. Money laundering forms a nexus with drug trafficking, smuggling of

gold and merchandise. Freeing movement of currency from exchange controls could stimulate such activity in the initial phase of convertibility. Effective monitoring ought to be set in place. Measures adopted should also take the existence of the vibrant informal money market into cognizance. Rather aptly designated in local business parlance as *dul nambori taka*, literally, the secondary quality Taka, this money generated outside the formal financial system, is generally thought to be financing a fairly wide range of transactions on our market place.

THE situation of remittance by the workers abroad is perhaps another area which might call for more intensive monitoring during the initial phases of currency convertibility. Through the medium of the so-called hundi business, funds generated by the earnings of our workers abroad, are also used to finance smuggling and probably the traffic in drugs too.

Under the hundi mechanism being practiced now, the worker's foreign currency earnings remain abroad while his nominee at home receives payment in Taka, usually at a rate more favourable than the official conversion rate. The service is reliable and more prompt than the bank's.

According to official figures, the number of Bangladeshi workers who went abroad with legal permission from the government during the last financial year (1992-93) was 28 per cent higher than that of the preceding year. Total amount of remittances through official

channels by workers abroad during 1992-93 came to \$943 million which is about 11 per cent higher in dollar terms as compared to the preceding year. Changes in the number of people working abroad and the level of their remittances through official channels, thus, do not match. There were 28 per cent more people working abroad but remittances rose by 11 per cent only. Factors such as a possible higher proportion of unskilled and low-paid workers among the new entrants to jobs, employment in countries where the level of wages is relatively low as also the number of people returning home, probably can account for some of the difference. However, the gap is too wide to be explained this way. Obviously, a large chunk of the workers earnings abroad is being funnelled into illicit trade.

Taka on a free float, reflecting its market value, could actually encourage workers abroad to remit their funds through official channels. However, channels for remittance of funds by workers abroad through banks and other officially approved intermediaries, would have to be expanded substantially. Otherwise, the reverse could happen. Even more of an immediate need is to tone up the existing facilities for remitting funds through official channels. It is reassuring to note that the newly formed cabinet committee on overseas employment has already identified the methods of workers abroad remitting their earnings home through legal means, as an area requiring improvement. Proximity of the date set for currency convertibility, calls for expediting action on this front.

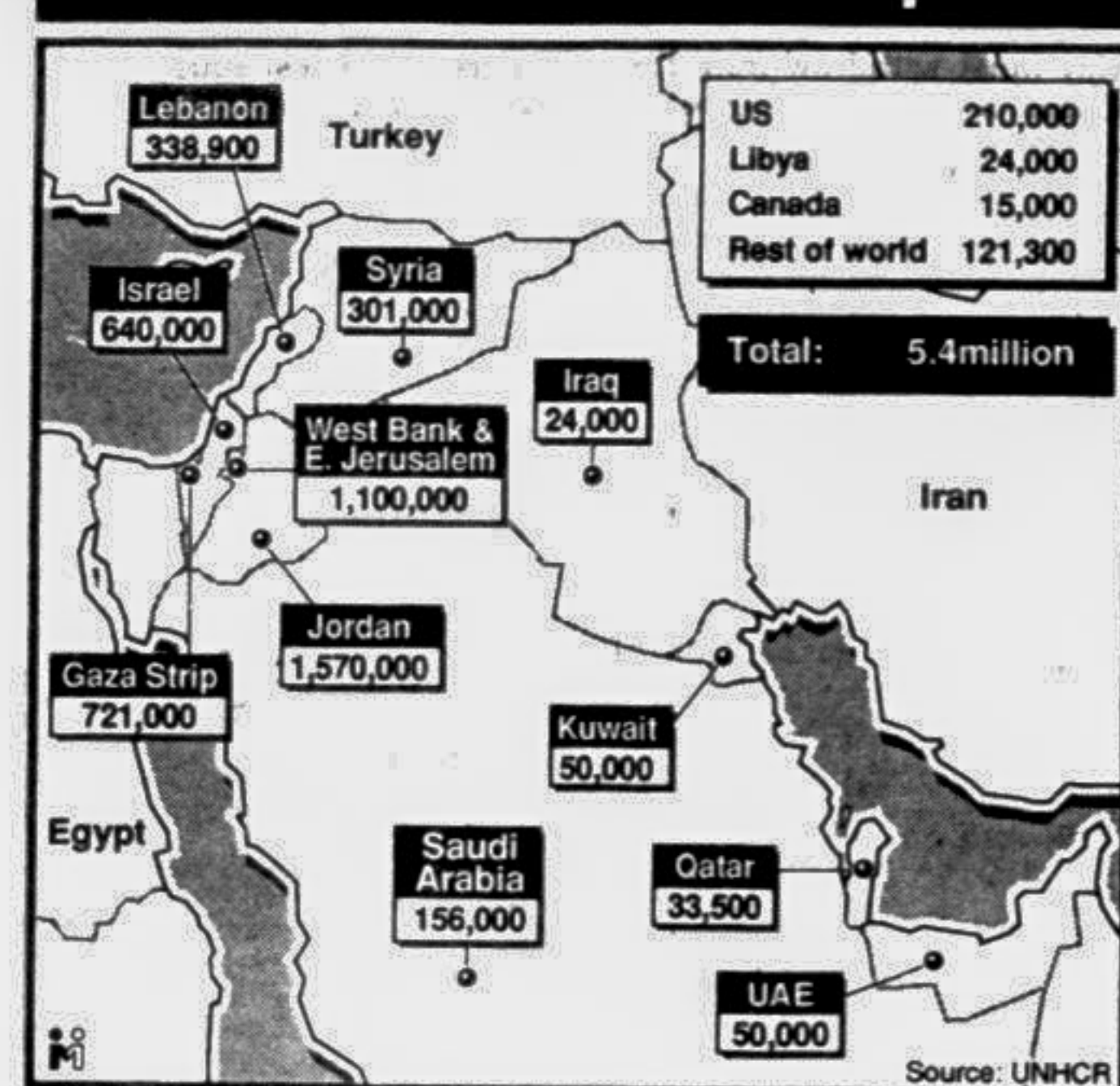
To accommodate a topical article on PLO-Israeli accord, we had to hold over 'Along My Way' which normally appears every Monday, for a day. We regret this unannounced change.

Why the PLO Opted for Peace

Michael Jansen writes from Tunis

PLO leader Yasser Arafat has attracted storms of controversy over the "Oslo Accords," the secret deals reached between his organisation and Israel. Caught between Palestinian opposition to the agreements on one side, and traditional Israeli suspicion of Palestinians on the other, he must tread very carefully if he is to make something of this unprecedented breakthrough. A Gemini News Service correspondent who met the PLO Chairman reports on the state of play.

The Palestinian diaspora



ministration of health, education, welfare, culture and justice, and the levying of taxes.

Discussions on the "sovereignty authorities," control of water, natural resources, land, electricity and communications, are underway and are expected to result in an agreement for joint administration. Talks on the "final status of the territories and East Jerusalem," which the Palestinians insist must become the capital of their state, are supposed to begin two years after the interim authority takes office.

However, a Palestinian source who took part in the Oslo talks said permanent status and full transfer of author-

ity could not be separated from the interim arrangements and an enormous amount had already been discussed, and even settled.

The source outlined the PLO's major gains. Israel, for the first time, has recognised the Palestinians as a distinct "people" with national rights. The PLO has also been recognised as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," a step taken by the Arab governments 1974.

Israel has, also for the first time, committed itself to the implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 calling for Israel's withdrawal from the territories oc-

cupied in 1967. Palestinians interpret this as Israeli evacuation of virtually all these territories because the preamble to 242 affirms the principle of the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force."

The West Bank and Gaza are two separate territories. But the "Gaza-Jericho first" withdrawal makes it clear that the two are to be seen as "one territorial unit" which should not be split up and shared out either in the "interim period" or in the final settlement.

The participation by Jerusalemites in the Palestinians' "electoral process," in which they are to vote and, perhaps, stand for office, links Arab East Jerusalem firmly to the Palestinian self-government arrangements and an eventual Israeli withdrawal from the Arab portions of the city. Yossi Belin, Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister, has suggested that a sector of East Jerusalem should be given limited autonomy — the first time that a member of the Israeli government has made such a suggestion.

The US, its allies in the Gulf, the European Community and international lending institutions have all pledged financial assistance to build up the infrastructure in Gaza and the West Bank, and to provide for long-term economic development. The US has promised \$50 million, the EC \$100 million, Scandinavian countries \$125 million and Japan \$100 million. The World Bank has pledged a soft loan, at one per cent interest, of \$4.5 billion over five years.

The PLO also seeks to free hundreds of millions of dollars in taxes collected from expatriate Palestinian workers by Gulf governments and frozen in their

banks because of PLO opposition to the US-led war against Iraq.

PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat said that urgent, massive financial assistance was essential if the peace process was to take root in the territories, particularly Gaza where, he told this correspondent, "Our people are suffering from kidney and liver sickness because of the salinity of the water." Rapid progress on the economic front, he asserted, would defuse political opposition.

Both proponents and opponents of the "Oslo Accords" agree that what Israel is offering the Palestinians is too little, too late. It comes after 100 years of suffering and struggle and the exile of half the Palestinian people.

The two sides also agree that Israel cannot be relied upon to implement either the letter of the accords or their intent.

Proponents argue that the Palestinians have no choice but to make peace because the armed struggle they have waged for so long simply has not won them one inch of territory. Therefore, the PLO must accept what it can get in negotiations.

All PLO officials, those in favour of the proposals and those against, insist that there must be absolutely firm international guarantees on the implementation of the "Accords" because it is true that Israel cannot be trusted to abide by its signature.

Arafat told this correspondent that he was satisfied with the "linkages" between the various phases of implementation: "full autonomy" in Gaza and Jericho would lead to "full autonomy" in the West Bank and

the creation of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. The Palestinian flag will soon fly over the mosques and churches in Jerusalem... Palestinian claims in Jerusalem will never diminish," he said.

Radical Palestinian groupings based in Damascus, which oppose the deal, and the Islamic resistance groups in the territories (Hamas and Islamic Jihad) say they will fight implementation of the "Oslo Accords" in the same way that they have fought the occupation.

They claim that the "Accords legitimise the Israeli occupation" because they do not call for an immediate Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Palestinian land and the transfer of authority to a Palestinian administration. Furthermore, the opposition says it is not certain that Israel will ever withdraw from the territories. And PLO supporters of the "Accords" agree with them but say that the Palestinians must act quickly if they are to prevent Israeli colonisation of all the land in the occupied territories.

So far Arafat has secured the support of the governments of Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan and the Gulf states while Syria and Lebanon, two of the PLO's partners in the peace process, remain coolly neutral. Iraq and Iran have voiced opposition and could lend their support to Palestinian opponents determined to use violence to wreck a settlement.

There is also a wrecking coalition on the Israeli side, of settlers, Jewish religious fundamentalists and members of right-wing parties all violently opposed to the ceding of any of "the Land of Greater Israel" to the Palestinians.

The major problem with the "Oslo Accords" is precisely this, that they propose to repartition the "Land" between Israelis — who have the power to hold on to it — and Palestinians, who do not have the power to take it by force. The Palestinians will be at as great a disadvantage in winning the peace as they were when waging the armed struggle they lost.

MICHAEL JANSEN was born in the US, lives in Cyprus, and has covered the Middle East for many years.

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.

Stock Exchange

Sir, Nearly two columns are devoted regularly in indicating the transactions of Dhaka Stock Exchange, current selling price against issue price, index of all shares, comments etc, in your esteemed daily. But analytical reports against performances of previous years are also essential so that small investors can understand about their investment and possibilities of return on investment in future.

The current index of all shares involving 142 public limited companies exceeds 400 and thus in case one investor

desires to purchase shares worth Tk 1000/- in each of the 142 companies, he or she is to pay at least 142x1000x4 i.e. Tk 568,000/- for an issued value of Tk 142,000/- only. Under the above backdrop if he or she did purchase in June '92 and sold in July '93 what is the real rate of return on investment through income of dividends, sale of right shares and sale of bonus shares during one year period as above? Let your concerned correspondents also report performances group wise i.e. bank, textile, jute, engineering, pharmaceuticals etc, for the benefit of small investors. It is

worth mentioning that a number of banks and others. Companies could not pay dividend four to seven years at a stretch!

Sadiq Alee
Maghbazar Dhaka

Re-conditioned cars

Sir, Every year we import hundreds of secondhand vehicles popularly known as 're-conditioned cars' at the cost of our hard-earned foreign exchange.

The engine, body, nuts and bolts of those old and dilapidated vehicles give in no time and we are required to repair and replace those either with imported new spare parts or with our home made 'Dholai Khal' products.

Most of those vehicles are earlier discarded and sold out by the original owners to the secondhand automobile dealers-cum-exporters believably at throw away prices. The body

repainting and the overhauling of engine of those pretty vehicles do not last long. Soon they lose their longevity and become unserviceable and unusable.

But these reconditioned vehicles abound in our country. It appears that Bangladesh has become an international graveyard for the re-conditioned cars, mini-buses and trucks. We fail to understand the economic viability and commercial utility of these vehicles.

Fortunately, our public sector does not traffic in the import of the vehicles directly. But our private sector does it and sells out most of the cars to public sector and mini-buses to the private entrepreneurs. It is indeed a very lucrative and profitable business at the cost of our public exchequer.

We feel that the import of old and secondhand motor vehicles may be banned in our country. We may, however, import chassis and spare parts of the vehi-

cles and assemble those in our country. This would help us develop automobile industry like we have raised transistor radio and TV industry of different brands in our country.

We hope the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Industries and Small and Cottage Industries Corporation may kindly examine and consider the matter.

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Lalmatia roads

Sir, Lalmatia is a 'posh' residential as well as commercial area. It is the only area where roads have no footpaths. Whereas just opposite it is the Dhanmondi residential area that boasts of both good roads and footpaths. The Lalmatia roads are in a most deplorable condition. Yet, when our Dhaka City Mayor visits the area and finds ponds and such bodies

being left neglected, he warns the owners of dire consequences if those are not cleaned and made into "hatcheries" for fish cultivation.

However, the uncleaned drains of this area perhaps boast of 'fish cultivation' which is why small boys and girls are found to be engaged in catching quite a number of small fish by getting down into them.

Who shall clean the drains and repair the roads is a million dollar question that the Mayor needs to answer and solve the problems facing the dwellers as well as others who have to use the roads for going to and returning from schools and colleges, markets and workplaces. If the Mayor really means improvement, he please have the roads repaired and footpaths constructed first. The miseries are too much to be ignored.

A resident,
Lalmatia, Dhaka