

DOWN TO EARTH

Mess Life in the City

By A S M Nurunnabi

Mess is an English word meaning a company of persons who stay in the same living quarters and take meals out of a common kitchen. It is a popular style of living of some individuals in all urban areas. No definite information is available about the time of inception of this system in this country. It is, however, speculated by some sources that from the year 1610 till 1703 when the capital Subha Bengal was shifted to Dhaka from Rajmahal, under the direction of Islam Khan Chisti and the new capital at Dhaka rose to the pinnacle of economic prosperity, the mess system may be traced to that period. This story may appear to be far-fetched to some, but the important thing seems to be that the system had its roots in the hoary past.

In the days gone by, the mess system had a different character. Sometimes a big house was used wholly as a mess. The ways of life there were almost similar to those which exist in a bit students' hostel. With the passage of time, such atmosphere has largely changed. Nowadays, normally old and poorly maintained buildings with inconvenient locations are let out by their owners for use as mess. The system has evolved mainly on account of acute dearth of housing in urban areas. This does not allow living with families who are left behind in villages.

It is difficult to estimate the total number of messes existing in the city, but a fair guess is that it may be around five thousand, big and small. It is

undeniable that the large number of messes existing in South Kamalapur, Muggdpara, Katal Bagan, Mirpur, Arambagh, Rampura, Jatrabari, Fakrapul, Malibagh and in some areas of old Dhaka go a long way in meeting the accommodation needs of a large number of low-income group people.

The majority of population comprise low-grade service holders with a sprinkling of young men in search of jobs or pursuing studies in colleges and universities. There are different kinds of living arrangements in a mess. Sometimes four or five persons live in a single room. In some instances, mess members financially better off, live in separate rooms.

Depending on accommodation facilities available in suitable locations, the mess system may be classified as follows:

1. Messes located near railway or bus stations.
2. Messes located near commercial areas.
3. Messes located near educational institutions.
4. Messes located near industrial areas.

All inmates of a mess, married, unmarried, young and old are involved in a particular life style. No special identity for any individual mess member can develop in such corporate existence.

The rent of a seat in a mess is generally determined by considerations of locations and other facilities. It is understood that the rent of a seat in the Arambagh area varies from Tk. 500 to Tk. 600; in Shantinagar area from Tk. 400

to Tk. 500; in Dhanmondi and Elephant Road area from Tk. 400 to Tk. 500. At Mirpur, Sayedabad, Jatrabari, Muggdpara, Rampura, and Kalyanpur areas, the rates are comparatively less, say within Tk. 300 per seat.

From a recent survey conducted of 100 mess members, it was learnt that of them 45 per cent were from low middle class families, 35 per cent students and 20 per cent were student-cum-employees. The number of unmarried mess members were 70 per cent, whereas elderly married ones were 5 per cent.

No mess system has developed for women in our country except for some government hostels for them. Under unofficial management, there are two messes for Christian women in the city.

Life in a mess can be full of variety. It is a mixture of sorrows and happy moments, trials, tribulations and sometimes compensating unity. It also conveys an impression of poverty in varying degrees. There is no end to their suffering especially when the toilet problem, irregular water supply and electricity vagaries make for miserable existence.

In spite of these inconveniences, the struggle for existence for such people continues in the cage-like system called messes. It is, however, a legitimate living style, and as such it is felt that more attention needs to be paid both at official and unofficial levels to undertake projects for development of housing especially designed for mess system in increasing numbers.



The Awami League brought out a procession in the city yesterday protesting an alleged attack on party chief Sheikh Hasina in Natore earlier yesterday. — Star photo

Dhaka asks US investors to utilise opportunity

WASHINGTON, Sept 23: Special envoy of Bangladesh Prime Minister M Morshed Khan has urged businessmen and entrepreneurs of the United States to utilise the new opportunities that have been created in Bangladesh due to its liberalised and re-structured economy, reports BSS.

Speaking at an international symposium on the "South Asia and the United States after the cold war" here Thursday the envoy said that the restructured and liberalised economy in Bangladesh and in other South Asian countries provided the United States and other western countries the opportunities to establish mutually beneficial commercial and trade relations.

Urging the American entrepreneurs and businessmen to rediscover the South Asia, Khan said that a realistic change in the US policies could help the American businessmen to avail the new opportunities in South Asia.

Dwelling at length on Bangladesh, the special envoy said that the liberalised trade policies and deregulation had

created an atmosphere for unfettered trade and investment in Bangladesh.

The financial sector, he said, had been reformed to provide access to foreign entrepreneurs in Bangladesh on the basis of competition.

The Bangladesh government, Khan said, was encouraging foreign investments in all areas including oil and gas exploration, power generation, telecommunication.

The special envoy said the Bangladesh government had received 129 investment proposals from foreign investors till August this year.

Sponsored by the Asia Society the symposium was addressed among others by ambassador Carla A Hills, Isher J-Ahuwalia of India and Khurshid Hadi of Pakistan. Ambassador Julia Chang Bloch presided over the symposium.

The special envoy said the government of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia had successfully addressed the country's macro-economic and structural problems, making room for faster economic growth.

Hasina

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admitted to the Pabna Police Hospital.

Awami League sources claimed BNP men, armed with weapons and bombs, attacked its supporters to prevent them from joining Hasina's rally at the station premises this afternoon. They exchanged gunfire and exploded bombs in and around the station.

Dulal, a local AL worker who suffered bullet wounds in his head, was sent to the Rajshahi Medical College Hospital in a critical condition.

Six others were admitted to the Ishurdi Health Complex. Among them, Babu, 27, Mansur Ali, 26, and Masud, 26, were injured by gunshots.

Pro-BNP activists allegedly fired at the train carrying Hasina when it reached Natore station at about 8:15 pm. A series of bombs also exploded in and around Natore station, apparently in a bid to stop Awami League workers from joining a rally addressed by her.

In today's train march, Hasina addressed gatherings at 15 stations, from Khulna to Natore. As a consequence the train was delayed by nearly seven hours.

People who came to see and hear Hasina were seen cheering and clapping as the Opposition leader projected the government's corruption and failure in running the country and sought their support for the campaign for a caretaker government for ensuring people's right to vote and food.

Meanwhile, the Dhaka City Awami League brought out a procession from Gabangbandu Avenue Friday evening. The processionists shouted anti-government slogans.

It's a planned attack, says Samad Azad

Awami League presidium member Abdus Samad Azad yesterday condemned the firing at the train's compartment of opposition leader Sheikh Hasina when she reached Ishurdi and Natore and widespread violence by pro-BNP activists, reports UNB.

In a statement, Azad alleged that BNP armed terrorists fired at Sheikh Hasina's compartment and said it was a planned attack.

He said BNP attackers created reign of terror in presence of police at different places, including in Ishurdi and Natore, resulting in injuries to scores of Awami League workers.

DU student

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Some resident students of FH Hall said, they heard at least a dozen gunshots around midnight on Thursday night.

The hall authorities and police recovered the fatally wounded Mithu and sent him to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

Mithu was a non-resident student of the hall, but used to live there. He was a member of the Ilias group of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, some students said. Mithu was also reportedly arrested once with arms from the university area, but was released on bail later, they claimed.

The autopsy was done at the DMCH yesterday and the body sent to his village home at Simua in Kulaura thana of Moulvibazar district for burial yesterday afternoon.

Meanwhile the Dhaka University authorities, in a statement last night, expressed profound shock at the death of Mithu and conveyed sympathies to the bereaved family.

A meeting of the Vice Chancellor with the provosts and house tutors of FH Hall and Shaheedullah Hall urged the law enforcing agencies to investigate into the incident and punish those responsible for the murder. The pro-Vice Chancellor and the Proctor of the university also attended the meeting, held at the VC's residence in the evening.

The Midnight File

Strike paralyses Kashmir

SRINAGAR (India), Sept 23: A general strike paralysed life in the troubled state of Kashmir today as angry crowds protested the alleged murder of six Muslim rebels by Indian troops, police said here. Thousands of people took to the streets to denounce the alleged killing of the six activists of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) on Thursday, witnesses said, reports PTI.

Christopher to visit ME in Oct

WASHINGTON, Sept 23: Secretary of State Warren Christopher said on Friday he would make one and possibly two trips to the Middle East in October because Syria and Israel are serious about concluding a peace accord. The two sides are deadlocked on how much territory Israel would relinquish on the strategic Golan Heights and what kind of peace Syria would provide in return. But Christopher registered optimism in an exchange with reporters, reports AP.

Pak opposition calls for fresh agitation

ISLAMABAD, Sept 23: Pakistan's main opposition alliance today called for fresh rallies and marches next week to press campaign to force Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to step down and call for new elections, reports AFP.

Party officials said the supreme council of former Premier Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and allied groups decided to call for a day of protest next Thursday.

The decision was taken after two-day meeting of the council, which denounced "uncivilised tactics" adopted by the government during Tuesday's general strike against Benazir's administration.

Sharif launched his movement to force Benazir's resignation by holding a cross-country train journey on September 11, culminating in the general strike during which scores of people were injured in clashes with police.

The PML claimed thousands of its supporters were arrested.

According to opposition sources, Sharif will lead a rally in southern Karachi and a vocal PML leader Sheikh Rashid Ahmad, will lead a similar rally in Sharif's hometown Lahore.

Other top opposition leader

Cedras' exile

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the country and establish a secure environment, said Burton Wides, a lawyer for Aristide.

"The question is, will the US force them to leave?" he said.

Cedras in a television interview with CBS Tuesday said the issue never was raised in the negotiations that led to Sunday's 11th-hour agreement that turned a pending US invasion into a peaceful military intervention.

But Aristide's advisers threatened to block approval of an amnesty for Cedras and other military leaders and linked the exiled leader's return to Cedras' departure.

Aristide had said he would return next month.

Another report says Brigadier General Philippe Biamby, a member of Haiti's ruling military junta, threatened to commit suicide if he were forced out of his country, former President Jimmy Carter revealed Thursday.

Carter, retired general Colin Powell and Democratic Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, negotiated the deal with Biamby and General Raoul Cedras that averted a US invasion of Haiti.

Jimmy Carter said Thursday that from his contacts with Haiti's military leaders he did not hold out much hope they would leave Haiti even after they step down October 15.

Doctors' strike

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Other related issues.

Our SSMC correspondent reports: Heart patients are the worst victims of the doctors' strike at the Sir Sallimullah Medical College Hospital (SSMCH).

"I am not aware of any strike, but I hope the doctors would save me," said 65-year-old Abdul Gani from Bikrampur. "I am here for the last five days. Initially, they took X-ray of my chest and also took my blood for test twice. But they did not give any report."

Gani is one of the many patients at the coronary care unit (CCU) of the hospital. He is suffering from chest and back pain and is unable to sit or sleep properly.

Twenty patients were discharged and two left the hospital yesterday. Three emergency operations were conducted but no scheduled operations. The number of patients at the hospital was 543 on the day.

Our DMCH correspondent reports: At least 23 patients left the Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday and seven died. Three emergency operations were conducted and 90 patients were admitted to the hospital on the day.

24 hurt in clash over job quota in Allahabad

NEW DELHI, Sept 23: At least 24 people were injured in the northern city of Allahabad today when opponents of a move to hike job quotas for low-caste Hindus turned violent while enforcing a general strike, reports AFP.

Security was beefed up in the key city of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, as angry students took to the streets to enforce a complete shutdown and stalled railway traffic, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

The agitators threw bombs at patrolling police vehicles, injuring a senior official, the news agency said. Twenty-three people were injured in other clashes.

Businesses, private firms and schools were closed, but government offices and public utilities were functioning in the city despite stray violence.

Plague

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death toll at 24. The exodus of people headed out of the city, mainly for Bombay, sparked fears of the disease spreading beyond Surat and prompted a government health alert in the region.

Hundreds of families poured into the metropolis by trains, buses and cars, carrying tales of chaotic conditions in Surat.

A rumour that its water supply system had been poisoned fuelled the flight from the city, located in the western coastal state of Gujarat.

"The conditions are pathetic," said Chabildas Bagaria, a businessman who arrived in Bombay with his wife and son. "We gathered whatever little we could and just fled."

The Surat outbreak followed 69 cases of suspected bubonic plague in Maharashtra state, of which Bombay is the capital. Newspapers said today two persons died of the disease, but officials could not confirm the report.

GATT accord

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that to Parliament for discussion. The Article is not, however, specific about whether the agreement needs approval of Parliament or not.

According to an official of the Commerce Ministry, members of Parliament, under the said Article, can only discuss the accord. The Article does not allow them the right to vote against it.

The source, preferring anonymity, said that before signing the agreement, the Commerce Ministry had taken approval from the Cabinet and this fact should be enough to make the accord valid for the country.

However, Attorney General Amnol Haq, talking to The Daily Star last night, said that ratification is a must for any international agreement signed by the country.

Quoting the same Article of the Constitution, he questioned what would be the fate of the accord if a majority of Parliament members opposed it during discussion on the matter?

Officials of the Law Ministry, however, refrained from commenting on the issue before examining the accord in detail.

The countries which have already ratified the accord, include Austria, Bahrain, Barbados, Belize, the Central African Republic, the Dominican Republic, Gabon, Germany, Greece, Guinea Bissau, Guyana, Kuwait, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Morocco, Namibia, Qatar, Sri Lanka, Surinam, Tanzania, Uganda, the UK and Zambia.

Sanjay Dutt's bail prayer rejected

NEW DELHI, Sept 23: The Supreme Court rejected a bail petition Friday by Sanjay Dutt, one of India's most popular movie actors. Who has been linked to the serial bombing in Bombay last year that killed more than 300 people, reports AP.

Dutt is among 192 suspects linked to the 13 explosions that destroyed the city's stock exchange and damaged several skyscrapers in March 1993. Forty-five of the accused are fugitives.

The trial started in Bombay in July.

Dutt's detention is causing enormous losses to Indian film-makers. They have invested nearly Rupees 40 crores (13 million dollars) in films featuring him. These are lying unfinished.

While declining the appeal without comment, the three-judge court said Dutt could again seek bail from the Bombay court trying the case. That court has turned down previous pleas for bail.

The Hindi film actor has been accused of possessing an illegal AK-56 assault rifle and conspiring to blow up the city.

The prosecution says that Dutt "rendered active assistance" to the terrorists by storing some of the arms, ammunition and explosives in his house.

Fair polls not possible under BNP gov't: Nizami

SYLHET, Sept 23: Jamaat-Islami leader Maulana Matur Rahman Nizami today said elections under caretaker government is the "demand of the people, not of any political party," reports UNB.

Addressing a party meeting in the town, he said the Opposition were forced to continue the agitation outside Parliament to establish people's voting rights as free and fair election was not possible under the present government.

Organised by district Jamaat, the meeting was presided over by its Ameer Dr Shafiqur Rahman and addressed by party leaders Maulana Fariduddin Chowdhury, Prof Fazur Rahman and Maulana Habibur Rahman.

Nizami, leader of the Jamaat parliamentary party, said parliament cannot be effective under this government and it cannot fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the people.

He alleged that the government party considers the Opposition in Parliament as a "hazard" and wants to cling to power through an election without the participation of major opposition parties.

People have voted opposition MPs not to go to the streets: Kamal

NARAYANGANJ, Sept 23: Gono Forum leader Dr Kamal Hossain today called upon the people to exert pressure on the government and the opposition to sit in a dialogue for resolving the present political crisis, reports UNB.

"There is no need for a middle man to arrange a dialogue, their good intention is enough for this," he said addressing a public meeting a DIT square in the town this afternoon.

Dr Kamal said people are the real source of power and only they could force the government and the opposition to come to a dialogue to end the present stalemate.

The Gono Forum president was critical of the boycotting opposition, saying people had elected them to take effective decisions in the House, not to go to the street.

Ataus Samad retires from BBC

By Staff Correspondent

Ataus Samad, the BBC's Bangladesh correspondent, has retired.

A faxed message received by The Daily Star last night said the BBC had accepted Samad's request for retiring, made earlier this month.

Samad, one of the senior journalists of the country, joined the BBC in 1982. In 1987 the then Ershad regime, irked by one of Samad's reports, had arrested him. But he was released soon after.

A recipient of the 1992 Ekushey Padak and several other honours, Samad earned a name for himself for his contribution to journalism. He held senior posts in some of the leading newspapers of the country including the Bangladesh Observer.

Although retiring, Samad intends to maintain his association with the BBC by contributing special reports for its programmes, he told this correspondent over telephone last night.

The BBC's News and Current Affairs Editor, Bob Jobbins, in a tribute to Ataus Samad, said that over the years he had played a major role in helping the BBC report on Bangladesh. "His depth of knowledge," Jobbins said, "has always been a tremendous asset to the BBC's News operations."

With the retirement of Samad, the BBC's Bangladesh coverage will be in the hands of Richard Galpin, who has worked closely with Samad since arriving here earlier this year after working as a senior news producer at BBC's Bush House in London.

Ctg-CU train service to resume Oct 16

From Staff Correspondent

CHITTAGONG, Sept 23: Bangladesh Railway (Eastern Zone) decided to resume train service between the city and Chittagong University on the Nazirhat line from October 16, according to official reports.

The decision came at a joint meeting Thursday evening at the Central Railway Building (CRB) attended by senior railway and university officials, leaders of railway employees organisations and leaders of different student bodies of Chittagong University.

The train service on the Nazirhat line remained snapped from September 17 following an attack by a group of unruly students on railway installations.

Suranjit clarifies position

By Staff Correspondent

Suranjit Sengupta, now leading a breakaway group of the Ganatantri Party (GP), yesterday clarified his position following press reports that he and eight others were expelled from the GP.

In a statement he said that he considered the expulsion order issued by Ahmedul Kabir-led GP contrary to political norms. The GP was floated in 1992 with the aim of organising the supporters of liberation war and Bengali nationalism. But a section of party leaders sidelined the main objective and tried to maintain its existence as a political party which created dissatisfaction within the party.

He said that finally, at a meeting of the party central committee in August, the party split into two factions on the question of greater national unity. Since then, the two factions have been conducting their activities on their own and both announced the date of 'national conference', he added.

"When we are going to hold our national conference October 20, such expulsion order is ridiculous."

Romania

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Marculescu, the director of the Cernavoda Nuclear Power Plant, told Reuters.

Romania needs 500 tonnes of heavy water as a coolant for the first 700-megawatt reactor of the plant, which is being built with Canadian Candu Technology at Cernavoda on the river Danube some 170 km (105 miles) east of Bucharest.

Cernavoda has already received some 120 tonnes of heavy water from the Halinga plant, and expected a further 30-40 tonnes by the end of October, Marculescu said.

The director said a clause in the contract signed with the Indian authorities last week would allow Romania the possibility of either paying for the imports in cash or with locally produced heavy water



A Hercules cargo plane loaded with 33 boat people to be forcibly repatriated to Vietnam takes off from Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport early morning yesterday. The plane crashed on the runway yesterday on a subsequent take-off from Hong Kong with 12 people on board. — AFP photo

DPRK rejects demand for N-inspections again

SEOUL, Sept 23: North Korea warned Friday that Western demands for an inspection of two suspected nuclear sites could jeopardise efforts to resolve tensions over its nuclear programme, reports AP.

The warning came as the United States reopened high-level talks in Geneva with the communist North on its suspected development of nuclear weapons.

One goal of the talks is an agreement on replacing the North's current nuclear reactors with ones less adaptable to weapons development.

Under the proposed agreement, North Korea would also receive some form of diplomatic recognition from the United States, with which it currently has no formal ties.

The United States has offered to provide the North with modern light-water reactors costing billions of dollars in exchange for a halt to the North's construction of outdated graphite-moderated reactors. Graphite reactors produce greater amounts of plutonium, a ingredient of nuclear weapons.

US and South Korean officials have said the North will