

SAVE DHAKA

By Masud Hasan Khan

One fateful night, on return from the garments factory he works for, Shahidul Islam found that he and his three-member family had no shelter for the chilling winter night.

Caused by an electric short circuit, a devastating blaze engulfed all the 300 shacks and thatched huts in the Katchukhet slum in Dhaka and rendered all its residents shelterless.

For the citizens of Dhaka, slum fires are, perhaps, not engaging enough to see an emerging pattern that multi-storied buildings crop up on the squatters cleared by mysterious fires during the winter season.

Scores of people, including children, have died and hundreds were injured in fires in the slums over the past five years.

In a devastating fire at the Fearabagh slum at Maghbazar in 1993 alone, six children were killed and 200 shacks gutted.

As if birds with nests ravaged, the squatter-dwellers with all their scanty belongings set out on the streets of Dhaka to find a new home — and set up a new slum elsewhere.

Going back to their villages — a place they had left due to poverty, natural disasters or man-made causes — is an extended illusion that continue to delude the slum people.

An estimated 20 lakh residents of some 1400 slums in the capital have virtually become citizens without rights, with their needs for better living ignored, according to sources in different government agencies and NGOs.

Most of them shifted from districts like Faridpur, Jamalpur, Barisal, Noakhali, Comilla, Serajganj, Rangpur and Bogra districts.

They suffer from threats of eviction, lack of clean water, sanitation, sewerage, power and gas, loss of belongings in the "winter-time" fires, and are forced to share a portion of their meagre income with local hoodlums.

Yet, city fathers, ignoring the existence of the slums and the people, tend to forget that they comprise one fourth of the total population of Dhaka and are an integral part of urban economy.

A victim to "rural push and urban pull factors", Dhaka slums are the only providers of cheap labour.

The growth of the city needs labour at a cheaper price but the planning of urbanisation tends to overlook the vital human resources living in slums.

Located on the shifting bank of the river Buriganga, off the Lalbagh area, Islambagh is considered to be one of the largest slums in Dhaka City.

A veritable town made of shacks, thatched huts with tin



Such shanties on vacant plots in residential areas dotting the capital pose serious health and fire hazards and threats to law and order. — Staff photo

For them, home is often a tinder-box

roofs, half of the Islambagh slum is situated on a peculiar bend of the Buriganga.

Houses, shops, schools and mosques — all standing on their "bamboo legs" above the river waters.

People of Islambagh slum are mostly vendors and workers in small industrial units. Shahjahan Mia is one such resident who makes his living by vending.

Talking to The Daily Star, the 44-year-old vendor said, he has been at Islambagh for the last seven years and does not have any plan to move elsewhere.

"Shifting is very difficult nowadays," he says. "Earlier, other slums used to welcome the newcomers. Now, all are crammed," he says.

Belying the popular notion that slum-dwellers shift too frequently, a recent study found that an average number of residents moved from one place to another.

"This particular slum is a victim of often-repeated fires that have so far claimed many of lives including children. Nobody for sure can say what were the reasons behind the fires."

A section of Islambagh residents alleged that some local moneyed men were trying to get a bite on the piece of land where the slum is located.

However, on enquiry by The Daily Star, Lalbagh police said they have no information whatsoever on the allegation.

Some of the Islambagh slum residents said that the conflict over ownership often resulted in bloody brawls.

The slum-dwellers usually became the casualty, they said.

often losing their tenancy.

Slum-dwellers are decent people like others who earn their bread through hard work.

A BIDS study conducted on the huge Agargaon slum revealed that 77 per cent of the men were engaged in some kind of profession.

Their average income was Taka 70 a day and most of them were rickshaw-pullers, vendors, retailers and small traders, it said.

The study found that 25 per cent of all women were employed, with a majority of them working as housemaid.

The Slum Improvement Project (SIP), Unicef and the Dhaka City Corporation have been working on improving the quality of slum life with supply of water, sanitation and drainage.

The Unicef-supported projects which are underway at some of the biggest slums in the city plan to improve the quality of life through community mobilisation.

Besides, the Unicef is also assisting the government in improving the condition of the slums located at urban centres elsewhere.

The SIP projects at Wari, Ganakultly, Hazaribagh, Mohammadpur, IG Gate, Bagichabari and Baumia provide for income generation of women, physical improvement of the slums and primary health care.

Particular attention has been given to their health and the family planning programme.

However, the government programme is too inadequate

while involvement of the private sector in the slum improvement is also poor.

A number of NGOs and legal aid organisations are supporting some programmes in the Dhaka slums.

They say that the owners collect thousands of Taka from the slum-dwellers, but they do not discharge their responsibility in maintaining the amenities for their tenants.

The NGOs involved in slum improvement say that eviction of the slum-dwellers, caused both by the private owners and city managers, is against the spirit of the National Housing Policy.

They say that the slum-dwellers cannot be displaced forcibly without ensuring their rehabilitation elsewhere.

One of the most burning issues involving the rights of the slum people of Dhaka is their voting rights.

A voters' list prepared by the Election Commission in September 1992 left out the slum dwellers although they had exercised their franchise in earlier polls.

Because of this they could not take part in the last Dhaka City Corporation elections.

Human rights activists point out that Article 112 of the Constitution guarantees voting rights to all Bangladeshis.

NGOs and human rights organisations, like the Ain O Salish Kendro and the Coalition for the Urban Poor, observe that the condition of the Dhaka slums would never improve until the civic rights of the slum-dwellers were established.

Speaker's house attacked

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deployed to bring the situation under control as indiscriminate bombing and firing were continuing in various areas of the city till late tonight.

Many shops were looted and gutted.

A full-day hartal was observed here today at the call of the Jatiya Party, protesting the killing of its city unit general secretary.

Kashem and his driver Mikhail Hossain were gunned down on Tuesday afternoon.

The Jatiya Party has also given a call for a half-day general strike in the city tomorrow demanding arrest of the killers.

Meanwhile, the JP brought out a procession carrying the body of Kashem this afternoon and held a protest rally in front of the party office at the Dakshinaw intersection.

Addressing the rally, JP leader Kazi Zafar Ahmad demanded of the government to arrest Kashem's killers within 48 hours, otherwise, he said

the government would face serious consequences.

Local leaders of the Awami League and the Jamaat-e-Islami also addressed the protest rally and warned Speaker Shaikh Razzak Ali against visiting Khulna before the arrest of the killers.

Deputy Commissioner of Khulna Kazi Reazul Haq told The Daily Star that the Speaker had cancelled his scheduled visit to Khulna today because of the law and order situation.

Bill on judicial training instt placed

A Bill seeking establishment of a training institute for the people involved in judicial system was introduced in Parliament yesterday, reports UNB.

Law, Justice and Parliament Affairs Minister Mirza Golam Hafez introduced the Judicial Administration Training Institute Bill 1995.

More police camps to check highway robberies soon

By Staff Correspondent

Twenty three police camps and 11 police patrol cars are now engaged round the clock in controlling highway robberies. Home Minister Abdul Matin Chowdhury told the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday.

Replying to a notice by the treasury bench member KJ Hamida Khanam on the rise of robberies on different highways, the minister said the government would soon set up more police camps and increase the number of police patrol cars to deal with such incidents.

NAM FM's want UN to make SC more accountable

BANDUNG, Indonesia, Apr 26: Foreign ministers and officials of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) agreed today that the United Nations should make the Security Council more transparent and accountable, reports Reuter.

Hasina

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better crop," she alleged. "Now people are forced to buy rice at Taka 16 to 18 per kg, though BNP had pledged earlier to ensure rice price

Taka 10 per kg," she said. Hasina said, "though we are not in power, we were able to force the government to introduce parliamentary system in the country."

She called upon the people to remove the "autocratic government" and resist terrorism unflinchingly.

The public meetings were also addressed by, among others, party leaders Sajeda Chowdhury, Ataur Rahman Kaiser, M A Mannan, Abdullah Al Harun Chowdhury, Pulin Dey, Mosle Uddin and Alhaj Jahir Ahmed Chowdhury.

At Rangunia, 500 members of CPB, NAP, Ganatantri Party and NDP joined Awami League today.

Meanwhile, some activists of the Awami League's student front BCL agitated inside the newly-built Circuit House this noon when its staff and caretaker declined to allot VVIP room for Sheikh Hasina, sources said.

When contacted over telephone, a staff of the Circuit House confirmed the incident but declined to give details.

When asked, Kotwali police said they did not know anything about it.

Cockpit crew

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They had an altercation and co-pilot Capt Nasim gave up control of the F-28 aircraft without informing the pilot, which was a violation of flight rules.

After landing, Captain Shahadat lodged a complaint against the co-pilot. He was immediately suspended and an investigation was ordered.

The state minister said the Ministry had already received the investigation report and would take action accordingly.

The Biman authorities always wanted to ensure passengers' safety and security and most of its staff were experienced and efficient, he said.

Abdul Mannan regretted that the press report regarding the incident was exaggerated and not true.

Khaliur Rahman quoted the report published Monday.

The state minister replied in the negative to a supplementary question whether an air hostess was behind the incident. In reply to another question regarding a Biman flight to Karachi, he said "the fact was that a mentally un-sound passenger attacked a crew in flight, the crew did not assault any passenger."

Aid Club

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commodity aid is slightly higher and the food aid is lower than the 150 million dollar sought.

Noting that the foodgrain production has sharply fallen due to the drought, the Finance Minister sought increased food aid at the meeting.

"As part of food security, it has become imperative for my government to request for increased food aid for FY 96."

It was agreed at the meeting the further discussions would take place between the government and the donors on the short and medium-term food situation for taking measures to increase food security in the country.

The highlight of this year's meeting was a policy dialogue on poverty alleviation, private sector development and improvement in public administration.

The government's poverty alleviation efforts were appreciated at the meeting, but given the pervasiveness of poverty it was agreed to strengthen the efforts. The donors welcomed the increased allocation for the social sectors and underlined the importance of moving ahead with the reform measures in the financial sector, fiscal policy, trade, industrial and exchange regimes.

Biman abandons plan

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The cancellation of bids but said that the management planned to have two Airbus on lease to operate the current haj flights. But, now the haj flights are being operated with the DC-10s by readjusting the normal schedule.

He said that Biman reduced its frequency of flights to London from five to four because of haj flights which began on April 13. But another source said that Biman's once-a-week Dhaka-Dubai-Athens flight has also been suspended.

Biman would operate 13 flights for ballotee pilgrims and 18 others for non-ballotees.

A senior official of the Marketing and Sales Department said the Biman started losing its international market to other carriers because the latter are using modern aircraft.

Just a year ago, Biman's market share in terms of passenger carrying was more than 50 per cent which reduced to 40 to 45 per cent, the source said adding that the cargo transportation share has also reduced to nearly 40 per cent from about 50 per cent.

The annual passenger movement in the routes Biman operate is estimated at 1.5

million and cargo is about 55,000 tons.

An aviation expert said travellers "always prefer safe, timely and comfortable journey."

"If you cannot ensure these primary requirements for a passenger, you will lose the market which is now highly competitive," he said.

Another source, who is regularly monitoring the market said, Saudia, Thai Airways, Emirates, Singapore Airlines and the new comer KLM are the main competitors for Biman.

All these airlines are using modern Boeing-747-400, and Airbus 310-300 aircraft.

KLM, which started operations several months ago with twice-a-week flights, has already announced its third frequency, now stalled for reasons unknown. Other airlines are also doing good business in European and American markets. Biman still dominates the Middle-east market, a Biman official claimed.

"Biman urgently needs to expand its fleet for the sake of its existence," the official said.

Regarding the load factor, Biman's public relations official said the passenger load of all the carriers have declined.

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Khaleda, Hasina greet Mahathir

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina yesterday congratulated Dr Mahathir Mohammad, Prime Minister of Malaysia, on his victory in the general election, reports UNB.

Medicines seized

By Staff Correspondent
Customs officials at Zia International Airport seized contraband medicines worth Tk 9.12 lakh yesterday from a Pakistani national.

The Pakistani passenger identified as Fazl Mahmud, 28, came from Karachi by a morning flight of the Emirates airlines.

He was challenged at the green channel. Customs intelligence recovered Isoprotin, Gynaecoidin, Primulit N, Mathergin from the baggage.

The Customs however, released the Pakistani citizen.

Drastic action needed

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(new banks) are starting with a clean slate, we will urge them to lower their interest rates and respond to the market," he said.

To a suggestion made by the MCCI President on setting up a deposit insurance scheme, Alam said "I have no hesitation in accepting the concept of a scheme like that of The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) in the United States."

Responding to criticisms about restrictions under current account convertibility, he said that as long as "undesirable" transfers does not take place the Bank maintains restraints on imposing restrictions. He, however, added "as long as capital account convertibility is not on, some restrictions will remain."

To another suggestion for allowing banks to place foreign exchange funds abroad, he said the banks are not prepared for it yet as they are not used to the foreign exchange market.

"But that will come, we have to have patience so that the market is prepared to deal with

IU postpones admission test

JHENIDAH, Apr 26: Examination of 'Gha' unit admission test of the Islamic University scheduled to be held today (Wednesday) has been postponed due to leakage of question paper, reports UNB.

The examination will now be held at 3 pm on Friday, campus sources said.

Sher-e-Bangla

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democracy an institutional shape.

In her message, Begum Zia recalled with gratitude the uncompromising role of the great leader for the welfare of the nation.

The Prime Minister said, the life and ideals of Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazul Haid will remain a source of inspiration for us in attaining economic uplift and building up a self-reliant nation.

In a separate message on the eve of the 33rd death anniversary of Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazul Haid, Awami League Chief Sheikh Hasina paid rich tributes to the great leader and said Bengalee nation will recall the contributions of A K Fazul Haid with gratitude for ever.

The Sher-e-Bangla National Memorial Council will place wreaths at the mazar at 7 am and hold Quran Khwani and Milad Mahfil at 8 am. It will also organise a discussion on the life and works of the great leader at 8:30 pm.

Top JP leaders

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some advice about party matter. He also patted some of his younger partymen assembled there.

When asked, Mizan Chowdhury said it is after more than two years that so many senior leaders of the party could see their Chairman. "We hope to have a lengthy meeting with him as per the law on May 24," he said.

Ershad waited a while before boarding the police jeep.

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Printed & Published by A. S. Mahmud, Managing Director, on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd, 52, Motijheel C/A, Dhaka-1000, from City Publishing House Ltd, 90 Kakrail, Dhaka-1000. Editorial, News & Commercial Offices: House No: 11, Road No: 3, Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka-1205. PABX: 5000924, Commercial: 500091 (Direct), Fax No: 88-02-863036, GPO Box No: 324, Dhaka. DAILYSTAR, DHAKA.