

OBSERVANCE

# The Tragedy of Karbala

by Kalimur Rahman

It is with Muharram that the Muslim New Year begins. Unlike the Christian New Year, it brings in days of mourning instead of merry-making for, at the sight of the new moon of Muharram, we are reminded of the tragedy of Karbala and a wave of melancholy overwhelms the mind of every Muslim.

An unthinking observer may ask: if it is the month of mourning for Muslims then what do the beating of drums, organising of processions, carrying of teatons, demonstration of clubs, and mockfighting mean? If examined from a realistic point of view it will be clear that these are only the ways of the common people (Sunni) to commemorate the incident of Karbala in its recreation. But the sensible Muslims solemnise it in a befitting manner by passing the first ten days of Muharram in fasting and distributing food and drink to the poor in memory of the martyrdom of magnanimous and brave Imam Hussain which took place on the 10th Muharram 61 A H on the plain of Karbala.

flame of clanish enmity which resulted in this martyrdom.

After the murder of Ali Murtaza (Ra.) the road became clear for Bani Omaiah to carry out their plot. But in respect of holiness and knowledge, sanctity and morality, still Bani Hashim were superior to them in consequence of which Imam Hasan, the elder son of the deceased, was accepted as the succeeding Caliph of Arabia.

Amir Mavia, the Governor of Syria and a prominent descendant from Bani Omaiah, perceived through his hereditary and personal experience that it was quite fruitless to use sword against Bani Hashim. He sent a message of peace to Imam Hasan who accepted it readily as the terms of peace were reasonable. But Imam Hasan was poisoned to death by one of his enemies. Thereafter Amir Mavia, appointing his ill-natured son Yazid as his successor and religious head of the Muslims, began to take the oath of allegiance from the people of Arabia in defiance of the covenant. He wished allegiance also from Imam Hussain, but the embodiment of sanctity and purity did not submit to the symbol of vice and immorality.

Imam Hussain, by dint of his clear foresight, knew the future which was awaiting him and prepared to offer a unique sacrifice on the altar of his faith in order to defend Islam.

After the death of Amir Mavia, Yazid ascended the throne and claimed the dictatorship of both the realms, temporal as well as spiritual, but in spite of this he indulged in evil and immoral acts. On the other hand, the inhabitants of Kufa were repeatedly requesting Imam Hussain to come to their province and guide them in the path of truth. This made Yazid suspicious and he sent a mandate to the Governor of Medina to take the oath of allegiance from the Imam by hook or by crook.

Seeing that his life and honour were at stake Hazrat Hussain left Medina for Mecca but at last he made up his mind to start for Kufa for the inhabitants of that province insisted on his arrival by writing

innumerable letters and sent his cousin Muslim Ibn Aquil beforehand in order to ascertain their real intention and apprise him of the actual state of affairs. Muslim was accorded a cordial reception by a mammoth crowd at Kufa and people began to take the oath of allegiance at his hands, in favour of Imam Hussain with great zeal and fervour. But jealous Yazid could not bear this popularity of his rival and sent cruel-hearted Abdullah Ibn Ziad, then Governor of Syria who immediately after reaching there had Ibn Aquil murdered. Moreover, creating panic and horror throughout Kufa he prevented further taking of oath of allegiance to Imam Hussain.

Tired and exhausted the caravan of Imam Hussain arrived at the plain of Karbala on the 2nd day of Muharram after three days' journey and pitched its camp near the river Euphrates. Next day an army was sent by Ibn Ziad under Omar Ibn Sa'ad, which was followed by files of huge army that surrounded Hazrat Hussain from all sides and forced him to accept the oath of allegiance to Yazid. When he did not yield to their threats they posted thousands of sentinels at the river Euphrates on the 7th day of Muharram, stopped water to his family members and companions. Despite all persuasions and oppressions the Imam did not admit the vicious and immoral king as his religious head, in consequence of which Ibn Ziad sent forthwith reinforcement of a huge army to coerce him to surrender or to bring his head.

When the question of risk-taking and sacrificing one's life arose, a few timid companions left him and only those who were capable of sharing the momentous sacrifice of Imam Hussain, remained with him. As far as history tells us, their number was between 72 and 110 consisting of a few old men, young men, women and children who contributed their quota to the supreme sacrifice of the Imam. On the other hand, Yazid's soldiers were at least twenty thousand in number who put themselves in battle array on the plain of

Karbala to smash the mountain of firmness and endurance by the storm of outrage and violence.

When the formidable army of Yazid drew up in flanks, Imam Hussain delivered a soul-stirring speech with his hereditary eloquence, in reply to which bunches of shafts and arrows began to fall from the opposite side, which created such havoc and horror as beggars description. According to the old custom of the Arabs, each hero came forward one by one and sacrificed his life heroically for the cause of truth. Kasim, Abbas, Ali Akbar, Aun, Mohammad, Ali Asgar, friends and companions and relatives all fell victim one by one till Imam Hussain remained alone to exhibit unparalleled valour and heroism. He waged such a heroic battle against the whole army of Yazid that was unprecedented in the history of the world. At last being exhausted, as soon as he stopped his sword, the enemies surrounded him from all sides and thrust their spears and swords into his sacred body, till he became mortally wounded and fell from his horse. At that moment Shimar beheaded him with his sword within the twinkling of an eye. Then followed looting of property, burning of camps, trampling upon the corpses, taking of noble ladies as captives and carrying of the heads of the martyrs on the points of swords and spears.

Numerous sacrifices have been offered in support of truth and in defence of principle, but the sacrifice of Imam Hussain is of such a unique nature that it has stirred the imagination of millions all over the world for over a thousand years. So tremendous was the effect of the tragedy of Karbala that hearts of the people turned from Yazid within a short time of the incident and his powerful kingdom vanished from the surface of the world.

Qatle Hussain asimein marte Yazid hai  
Islam zinda hota hai har Karbala ke ba'd

(The assassination of Hussain is the decline of Yazid in reality, Islam gets rejuvenated after every Karbala.)

## Asian diary BY ARJUNA

### Kei Besar's "Green" King

WITH full conviction, the King read from old manuscripts to his subjects gathered in the lounge of his palace.

His majesty JP Rahaal or Bapak Raja, as he is fondly referred to, had gathered 30 headmen and representatives from different villages in his constituency to discuss their right to the land. The King oversees 46 villages on the eastern coast of Kei Besar Island, in the southeastern Moluccas province of eastern Indonesia.

Quoting from the papers in his hands, the 67-year-old King and customary leader of the *Maur Ohat-Wut* area was stressing to his people their right to the land as guaranteed by the historical documents.

Leader of about 14,500 people, Bapak Raja has been given the title *Bohirir Borav* for defending and upholding the integrity and cultural identity of the *Eva* people of Kei.

The elderly ruler, who has reigned for 31 years, continues to visit his people to dialogue with them and hear their problems. Sometimes, he would travel for days by foot from Watlar (it means "a burning rock") in the local language, the kingdom's capital, to villages to be in touch with his subjects.

The Kei Besar people are steeped in tradition and culture, the basic elements which have helped them maintain their sense of dignity and identity. Culture and tradition have also helped protect the island's rich resources, most

of which come from the sea, and its bountiful forests.

Kei Besar is one of the three main islands of the Moluccas region, accessible by motorized longboats. Land transportation is almost nonexistent. Water is collected from the hills and mountain streams by a simple water piping system. Electricity is mostly unavailable in most parts of the island. In some villages, foreign assistance enabled the setting up of a generator system to provide power supply to the villages mainly at night.

Bapak Raja's opposition to Jakarta initiatives to exploit the island's resources has resulted in very little attention from national authorities for the Watlar region the past several decades.

But the ruler appears unfazed by Jakarta's indifference relying instead on his own people's initiative. Recently, he helped organize the village's first people's organization with a committee to oversee village development. The organization's coordinator said one of the first steps they will take to achieve their objectives was to develop the people's skills and awareness.

Villagers have already been

trained in the mapping of their land and seas and taught simple methods to conserve their coral reefs.

As income-generation is another priority of the King, he is currently exploring ways to market the island's bountiful resources like canary nuts and different varieties of preserved fruits and fishes.

Bapak Raja's wisdom as a ruler and a strong advocate for his people and the environment continue to earn him the admiration of both local leaders and those from other islands making him the most respected and progressive ruler among the six kings of the Kei Besar Island.

"A ruler in Kei Island is not defined by his wealth or strength or other usual characteristics of a King but only by his personality and lifestyle, setting an example to the others," Bapak Raja said. "The importance of his people is always above his own. He is a King to the people and also in their hearts."

"As a King, when I hear about certain matters, I usually have to assess it carefully before acting," Bapak Raja said in describing his style of leadership. "But when I witness a certain incident with my own

eyes, then I must respond to it immediately."

The King added, "A serious problem or obstacle and be minimized and ultimately resolved. But the important point is to ensure that it does not happen again."

Bapak Raja said his kingdom's capital is aptly named because the burning rock if undisturbed remains calm, but when it is agitated, it would start a fire. The name is also a fitting description of the people's character, he added.

The modern-day King and his council of rulers are sensitive to the environment and their people. Over the years, the island's traditional "Sasi" conservation laws, which is based on the natural cycle of the environment, have helped protect and manage its resources.

Bapak Raja also zealously documents his people's history. He has already published two books about his people's cultural traditions and laws. His second book when compared to the first one is said to be a sharper analysis "very clearly pointing out the problems of indigenous peoples in their struggle against the modern system of knowledge and formal laws."

The wise King explained that his awareness about his own indigenous peoples' problems has been enhanced by his "cultural journey" when he encountered many similar problems and struggles of many indigenous peoples in Malaysia, the Philippines and other countries.

Dephneusa Asia

## The Big Zoology Gallery: A New Beginning for Noah's Ark

The elephants start the procession, the rhinoceroses follow in their steps, the gazelles gently sniff the air, the antelopes are ready to leap, the hyena is looking for some carrion to eat, the buffaloes and gnus move peacefully forward, the hippopotamuses saunter off towards a welcoming pool and the zebras end the parade.

by Pascale Teinac

It is a big procession of animals from the African savannah, one of the highlights of the Zoology Gallery at the Natural History Museum in Paris, which recently reopened after twenty-nine years of dusty slumber. It has been entirely re-thought in its old setting which has been renovated and the presentation of the animals is now staged in a modern way. It is a major event and it was worthily celebrated like the opening night of a magic show.

The Museum's Zoology Gallery, which was built by the architect Jules Andre to house and present the millions of specimens collected by traveller-naturalists over the centuries, was opened in 1889 after twelve years of work. It had been closed to the public since 1965. Indeed, there was a risk of its collapsing after damage from air battery-fire during the Second World War.

Thousands of stuffed animals then sank into oblivion and dust, until it was decided, in 1986, to renovate this "Louvre of Natural History" and it was included in the state's "Big Building Projects", just like the "Grand Louvre", for a total budget of 400 million francs.

An architectural competition was held and it was won by two architects together, the

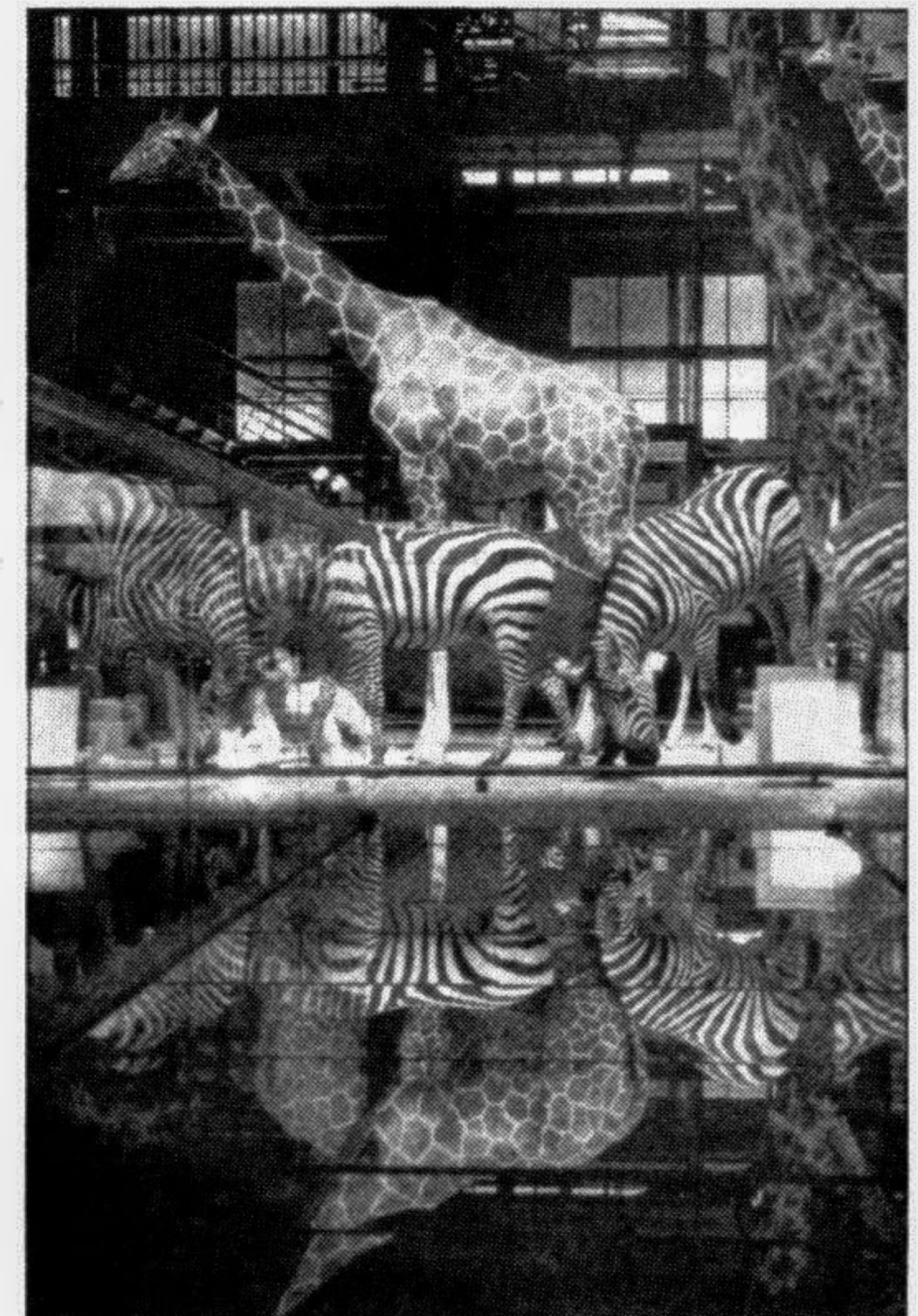
Frenchman Paul Chemetov and the Chilean Borja Huidobro, who had already designed the new ministry of finance, built in order to free the Louvre from the presence of these administrative offices.

A painter, Rene Allio, who was a theatre stage-designer and film-maker, was also appointed to stage the inside presentation. Work began in 1991 and lasted three years. On 24th June 1994, President Mitterrand was finally able to inaugurate the fabulous new Big Gallery, a temple of life on earth.

The original building, which is a fine example of the metal architecture of the late 19th century, with a huge glass roof, has been maintained, but completely renovated to enable the Museum's collections (which are among the richest in the world) to be presented in a worthy way, around the major theme of evolution.

In the central nave (55 metres long, 25 metres wide and 30 metres high, with a permanent exhibition area of 6,000m<sup>2</sup> and 300 display cases), the show unfolds in three acts, marked with discoveries all along its three-storey itinerary.

Act I: the origins of life, which the visitor begins with the sea, where life appeared some 3.5 billion years ago, and



he continues with the discovery of life on the land. Act II: the evolution of life since the appearance of single-cell creatures, which provided man with food for thought. Act III: man as an agent in the evolution process through his activities: over-exploitation of species, domestication, the transfer of species, pollution, and the transformation of the landscape.

The circuit of the discovery of life is magnificent. The visitor is received in the sea-life area by the skeleton of a whale, on the ground, and two others hanging in the air in the nave. He is led through a series of fish where sea mammals, turtles and sea-birds also appear and hundreds of sea invertebrates can be seen in the display cases.

A long access ramp to the next level leads to life on the land and that is where he discovers the sumptuous tour of the African Savannah, completed by a visit of the animals of the Sahara desert. The discovery takes place in a musical atmosphere in which one can hear 500 animal noises, in harmony with a gradual modification of the lighting, evoking the passing of a day from dawn to dusk.

The light in question comes from the 10,000 points of optical fibres for, although the glass roof of the nave has been preserved, no sunlight is allowed to enter as this is harmful for the preservation of the rare species.

A striking fact is that the animals are within reach of the visitor, the pedestals on which they have been placed have been concealed in the ground. Will children be able to resist the temptation to stroke them? The question obsesses the three taxidermists, who are the real heroes of the Museum and who did some extraordinary restoration work on the specimens which are

presented, many of which were badly damaged. With every step, visitors can admire this great art.

The Seychelles Tortoise and the Poorly Striped Zebra

A special room (in the historical setting of the former Bird Gallery of the Museum, with its original wood-paneled and display cases that are protected as historical monuments) is devoted to extinct or threatened species. This is the Museum's Treasure where 120 very rare specimens are presented. The temperature and humidity levels are continuously controlled there and the number of visitors admitted is limited.

The room contains the skeleton of a black emu which is unique in the world. It comes from Kangaroo Island, near Australia, and the species, which was sought for its flesh, became extinct before 1840. Only three stuffed specimens are known, including the one in the museum, of the Seychelles tortoise, exterminated by the island's inhabitants before the middle of the 19th century. Another extinct species is the kuaga, a poorly striped zebra exterminated at the time when South Africa was colonized, and also the American passenger pigeon which became extinct because the species only reproduced when they were numerous and their numbers gradually dwindled.

The rhinoceros still exists, but the one lying in its glass cage is the oldest stuffed specimen in the Museum and the first stuffed rhinoceros in the world. It arrived in France at the time of Louis XV in 1770, from Chandernagor in India and died during the French Revolution in 1793. Its tanned hide was placed on a kind of large wooden dummy whose limbs were made of table-legal

L'Actualite En France

## The Mayor's Pending List

### The Passing Show

by Alif Zabr

THE Mayor of the Dhaka City Corporation or DCC is too busy trying to clean up the metropolis, and at the same time reduce the congestion, authorised or unauthorised. As a senior citizen of the city I volunteer to help him draft his pending list. These are my recommended priorities; his priorities might be different.

1. He may personally visit and use (not merely inspect) one of the few public toilets officially leased by DCC to the contractors in the private sector. As per report published in The Daily Star, he is strongly advised to take with him a bottle of distilled water (tap water not available even outside the toilet, thanks to WASA); also a torch light, hurricane lantern, or candle (can't trust DESA also). The candle is risky as the match stick might not light up, and it may bend due to its own heat, and he might not find a dry place to

put it, as the floor might be wet or flooded. He might go in disguise as Khalifa Harun-ur-Rashid used to do. The Press will be waiting for him outside — for the scoop of the year.

DCC may undertake to set up 20 model toilets throughout the city, to be operated and maintained by its staff. Technical expertise from some foreign NGOs might be sought for the design and maintenance. Foreign investment tie-up with DCC may also be considered; later to be transferred to the private sector through the Stock Exchange.

Why not spend some of our huge foreign exchange reserve for better toilet practice and training (all groups)? On the other hand, why do we have to

spend foreign currency to attend to the call of nature? What is "foreign" about this native practice?

The Mayor might announce an annual prize of taka one lakh for the first two years for the best-maintained toilet in the city by the contractor. Second Prize: DCC sponsored trip to Singapore to study the public toilet system. The response might be fantastic; and within five years Dhaka might have the distinction of having the best urinals in the Third World.

2. Ban the plying of all taxis in the city without a metre within six months of the public notice (arrange import and installation in cooperation with the road/transport authority).

Incentive for metered vehicles: pay 50 per cent less road tax for two years. If necessary he may fight the authority if the latter be non-cooperative. The passengers will support the Mayor, and boycott all taxis for a week (define "taxi" to avoid evasion). No unmetered taxis may be allowed parking at or near the airport and hotels. All taxis and hired vehicles must have distinctive body colour scheme, and the drivers must be in uniform, displaying the serial number of the driver. These two services can be enforced even before installation of the fare metre.

3. All pedal rickshaws must use light after sunset. This is not a big problem, because the lamp can be used at home at other times, if not provided by the owner. Why the owner cannot provide a lamp, costing less than one per cent of the investment on one rickshaw?

4. [The remaining points are being drafted.]

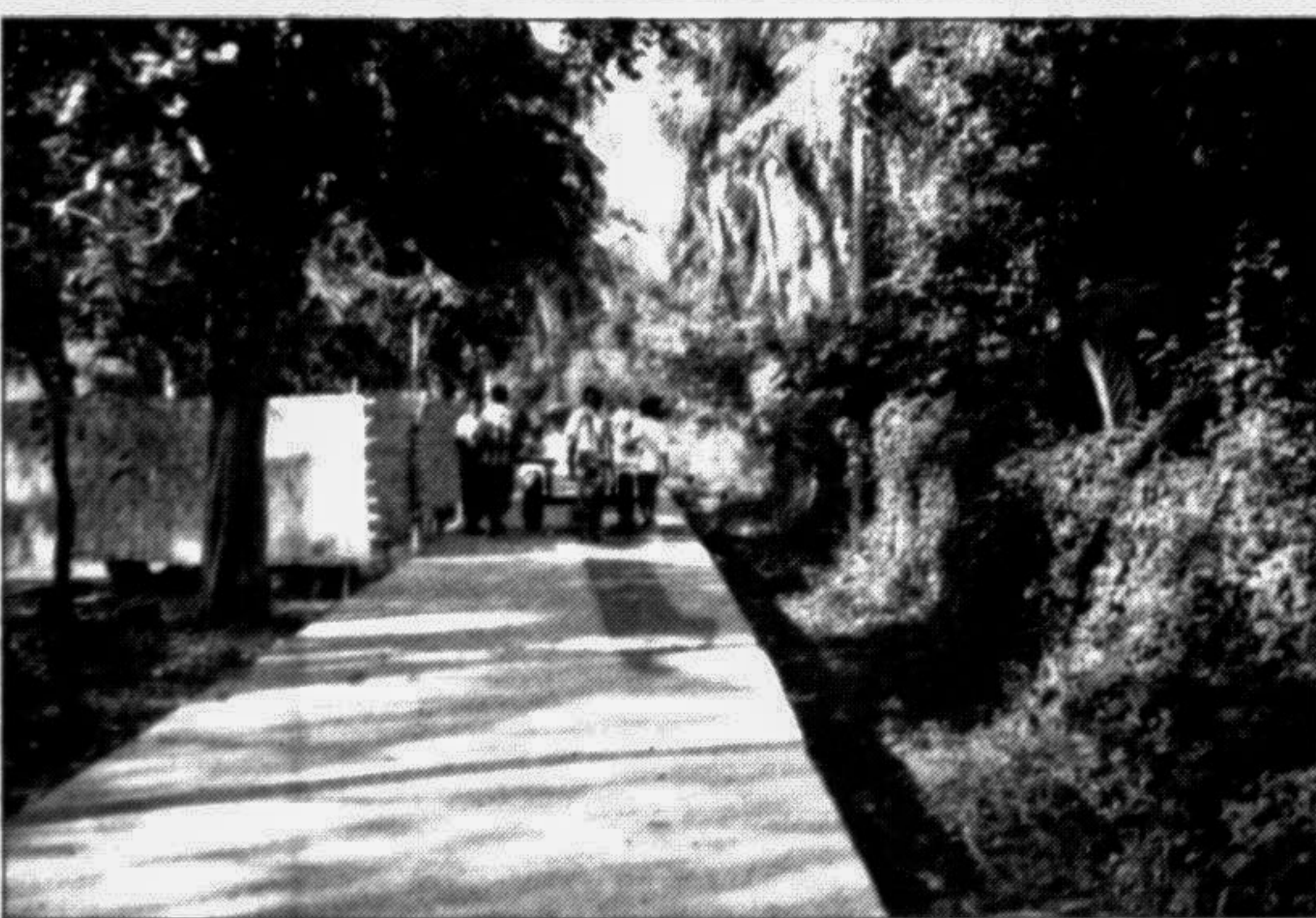
## St Martin's

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I have started visiting the island from February 1980 when three dozen scientists from zoology, botany, geology and soil science departments conducted an expedition. Till date I am continuing the visits almost bi-yearly. Some years I paid even two visits. The population in 1980 was hardly 3000. It has almost doubled. At that time there were only two persons with high school diploma and Kasim Master was the lone educationist when a primary school was established. Most non-islanders who

have visited the island either stayed with him or at least taken his guidance for the tour. Last December, at the age of 75, he walked with us for more than 10km in a round trip of the island with less sign of exhaustion than ours. He is the living memory of the island.

The *Narikel Jinjira* is an ideal spot for the tourists, divers and snorkelers and for those who want to have peace of mind. Famous writer Humayun Ahmed has already built a hut on the island and we have followed the suit. Many



The only metalled road in St Martin's

Cyclone shelter

are on the line to grab a plot of land on the island thinking that government will soon transform it into a tourist village or so.

The weather is superb. Usually it never soars above 30 degrees Celsius or below 20 degrees. Summer temperature is usually around 28 degrees. Winter is mild but monsoon is very heavy. There is no poisonous snake on the island, no wild cats or other carnivores. Generally there are no

mosquitoes in winter. After the monsoon there may be some but the density is in no way like in the mainland. On the beach you get no insects at all.

For a foreign tourist — one should get the visa and other relevant papers from the respective Bangladesh mission. Travel is simple from Dhaka.

Any one of the tri-weekly flights will reach you to Cox's Bazaar. Rest there for the night and next morning get a taxi or bus to Teknaf, about 70km

south of Cox's Bazaar, and then board a St. Martin's bound trawler. Usually two trawlers ply between the island and Teknaf. But in monsoon there may be only one and if the weather is not favourable none may leave Teknaf. There are resthouses in this small township.

Generally it takes little over two hours to reach the St. Martin's. The boat will pass through the river Naaf, Mungdu town of Burma and

several fishing villages on either sides of the river and some mangrove vegetation. Hundreds of boats may be seen busy fishing and trawlers ferrying fish or shells. From the mouth of the river, if the sky is clear, you may get a glimpse of the *Narikel Jinjira* dotted with coconut trees and the lighthouse as the most projected object out of the tiny island.

As you alight out of the trawler the local people will welcome you and may ask: Are you going to Kasim Master's house? This is mainly because most of the islanders have a local cultural heritage and speak a dialect similar to the one used by others of the district and they consider both non-nationals and nationals who do not belong to Chittagong district as foreigners. Kasim Master can speak the sophisticated Bengali spoken by non-Chittagonians and English as well. So you can stay in his house, which he has turned into a 'Bay of Bengal Lodge'. Even his family will serve you with food in return for some money. You can expect tea at anytime whether you stay in his house or not. He and his family are too generous. And to keep his generosity on we need to provide him something in either cash or kind as he is just a retired primary school teacher.

The writer, a former Associate Professor Deptt of Zoology, DU, is Head of Zoo Section, Dhaka Municipality, UAE and Advisor, Nature Conservation Movement (NACOM).

