

FOCUS

Reflections on the Brain Drain

"On the Value of Time and of Character"

by Dr Omar Rahman

THE brain drain is a grim reality for developing countries such as Bangladesh who lose many of their best and brightest to the developed world. Platitudes abound as to why this happens and much is made of the lack of resources, the inadequacy of infrastructure, the unfairness of history, and the lack of individual commitment to nation building. While there is a lot of truth in these explanations, there is another more fundamental aspect, which we in the developing world are less keen to face — the inadequacies of our own social structures, reflected most tellingly in our educational systems. Metaphorically speaking, we cannibalize our own. We destroy their enthusiasm, their spark of creativity, their desire to rebel.

From a very early age, conformity is stressed, as is deference to authority. Children are taught to be passive recipients of knowledge passed on to them by their teachers. Independent inquiry is not encouraged. This conformity is expressed in rote memorization, often taken to a ridiculous extent. I vividly remember having to memorize the same essay (from a prescribed anthology of essays) in Bangla class on the Value of Time, and The Importance of Character, every year, without fail, from class three to class ten. Any deviation from this 'party line' would result in significantly lower marks. I have

often wondered about this obsession with such weighty Victorian topics such as the value of time and of character. I doubt whether in any other society, so many have pondered for so long and done so little about these 'national failings'.

Much of the damage to creativity and independent thinking is a result of catering to a system of national examinations rooted in the sensibilities of a late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial world, where joining government service was the ultimate in achievement. In matter of fact our children don't go to school to be educated, but to prepare themselves to overcome the hurdle of archaic examinations, which are more of an obstacle course than any attempt to determine their ability to learn and explore ideas. While there have been some attempts towards curricular reform, with the view of introducing modern concepts and thinking, the emphasis of these examinations is still largely on regurgitating arbitrary sets of facts, with very little scope for creative thinking.

The other major failing of this system of national examinations is the segregation of students into different

niches, i.e. science, arts, commerce etc. Children (and I use this term deliberately) are asked to decide what they want to do or be at, a stage of their lives, where they have neither the exposure nor the experience to make such an important decision. Many a creative artist or scientist has been lost, for not having the foresight of knowing what they wanted to do at the age of fourteen or sixteen. This overspecialization at such an early age is not only inefficient, but also leads to a society, where there is very little common ground amongst the educated. C.P. Snow (a noted English scientist/humanist) lamented about this situation in the now well known phrase 'the two cultures', wherein scientists don't understand or appreciate the world view of non-scientists and in turn are not understood or appreciated by those outside their narrow circle.

It is also worth noting that despite the seeming egalitarianism of standardized national examinations, a disproportionately large number of successful university entrants in developing countries come from a relatively small pool of urban schools. This raises uncomfortable questions about efficiency and equity in terms of the distribution of educational

resources in society. Having overcome the hurdle of multiple separate national examinations (with many a bright but not quite organized young person falling by the wayside), if one is fortunate enough to get into university in a developing country, one's troubles are still not over.

Although university education is considerably less centralized than primary/high school education. It is still bogged down with the weight of conforming to standardized syllabi, many of which have not changed in years. One important factor in maintaining this state of affairs is the lack of input from junior faculty members. The rigid hierarchical structure of most university departments in developing countries results in there being usually one or two all important 'HERR PROFESSORS', mostly male, as very few women seem to make it to this exalted state. These professors have usually done their best work two to three decades earlier and are now so busy with multifarious committees that teaching/research are at best very peripheral endeavors. These fossils however have very definite ideas (usually outdated) of what constitutes a good curriculum (usually very similar to what they were ex-

posed to many decades earlier). Most university departments are throwbacks to a feudal era, ruled with an iron fist — the last refuge of absolute dictators/oligarchs. Their power over their subjects (both junior faculty and students) stems from their absolute control over the routes of advancement — promotions, referrals to consultancies, scholarships and examination marks.

In this scenario where seniority is prized over merit, all the goodies go to a select few, who then distribute some of the spoils to a privileged circle — a sort of trickle down economics. Both junior faculty and students quickly learn, that the only game in town is to please the 'big man' — he who controls all future advancement — whether it be scholarships, lucrative foreign consultancies, or success in examinations.

The problem is of course not just limited to academia — in fact one might argue, that compared to the workplace (whether it be private corporations or government departments), the situation in developing country universities is still rather benign. These institutional failings are to some extent a reflection of social priorities. After all, institutional cultures are mirrors of society.

As a friend of mine (an acute observer of the developing world) put it, in rigidly hierarchical societies such as ours, flattery will get you everywhere, and the crude calculus of power is absorbed with mother's milk. In this structure, there is no place for rebels, no independent thinkers may apply. There is no acceptance of those who rock the boat, or ask uncomfortable questions in seminars or meetings, which may be interpreted as disrespect by some out-of-date/data senior person.

This system breeds a certain kind of cynicism, a hypocrisy which expresses itself in public piety, respect and conciliation coupled with private rage and frustration. Those in the developing world who can handle this schizophrenic existence are supremely well suited for life in academia, the corporate world and government. Those who cannot play the game, or choose not to, are forced to opt out, usually by going abroad. Here are some of our best and brightest.

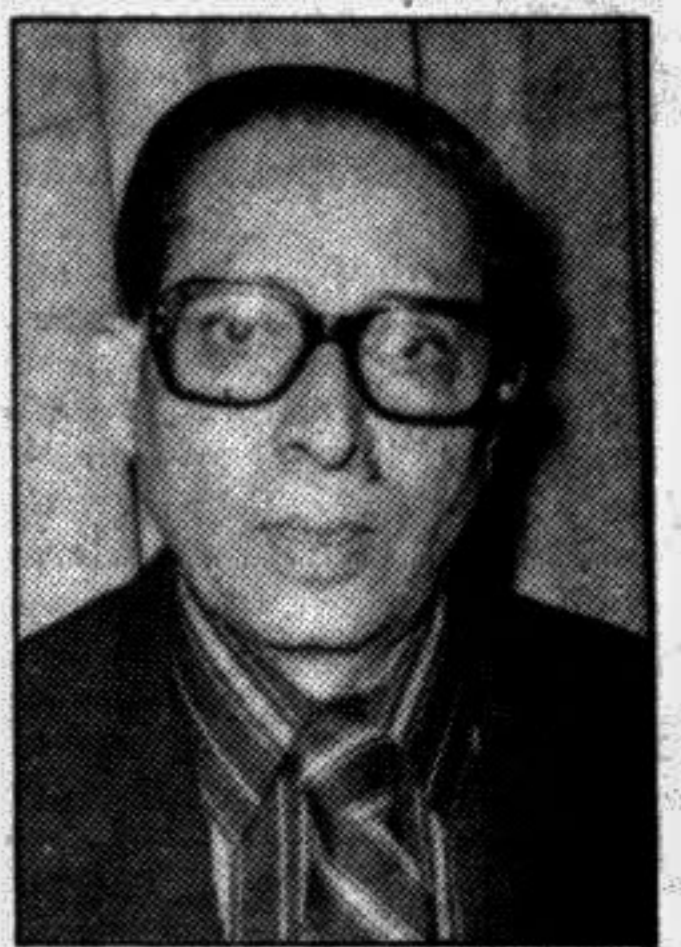
Despite these hurdles, the fact that Bangladesh has produced a range of extraordinary thinkers, writers and scholars, who have more often than not flowered on foreign shores, is a testament to the untapped and often wasted reservoir of talent amongst us.

The writer is Assistant Professor of Demography at Harvard University.

CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS In Search of a Way Out 'Needed Politics of Reconciliation and Power-sharing'

An Interview with National Professor Muhammad Shamsul Huq by Parveen Ahmed

NATIONAL Professor Muhammad Shamsul Huq, who has held several important political offices, including that of the foreign minister from 1977-82, advocates the formation of a coalition-cabinet, based on an agreement between the leaders of the major political parties during the election period.



According to him, this may be a possible solution to the current political and constitutional crisis created over the opposition's demand for holding elections under a caretaker government.

"With the leader of the majority party as the Prime Minister, a cabinet composed of parliament members from both the ruling party and the opposition could be formed during the interim period," Prof Huq, who is currently the president of the Foundation for Research on Educational Planning and Development (FREPD), told The Daily Star in an interview.

As to the validity of such a cabinet, he observed: "There is nothing in our Constitution that prohibits the PM from inducting members of the opposition into the Cabinet. Alternatively, the PM can always take on a number of opposition nominees, as advisors during the interim period."

The key to the solution, Prof Huq strongly believes, is held by the chairpersons of the two major parties (BNP and Awami League).

"They have demonstrated outstanding leadership qualities...in intra-party organisation. The present crisis has highlighted the need for enlarging the horizon of those qualities to include politics of reconciliation and power-sharing," he said, citing examples of South Africa and Malaysia, where the benefits of such a policy were amply demonstrated.

For the implementation of such a policy in the Bangladesh situation an understanding between the two leaders is imperative, Prof Huq said.

"Consultation and sincere dialogue with the supreme objective of reaching a mutually acceptable agreement, are vital instruments in achieving such an understanding and in overcoming mutual mistrust," he suggested.

According to Prof Huq, the present crisis is but a transitional phenomenon. He said, "In my view the present political and constitutional crisis is a transitional phenomenon. It is placed in perspective when viewed in light of the traumatic history of the country. Violence and instability have bedevilled Bangladesh ever since independence, eroding the growth of the democratic process and impeding overall nation building. The present

crisis is an inevitable outcome of the polarization, divisiveness and unresolved conflicts among the major interest groups, in particular between the BNP and the Awami League."

Elaborating the point, Prof Huq continued, "In a very real sense the present crisis is part of the growth pangs and of the continuing struggle for the establishment of stable democratic institutions. The longer this struggle (or the state of transition) continues, the greater is the social cost to the nation in terms of social and economic development. The much avowed empowerment of the people and their participation in the democratic process is delayed and the country remains highly vulnerable domestically and also externally."

Power sharing would not only solve the present crisis, but it would also lead towards a stable democracy and expedite the political and development process, Prof Huq remarked.

"The concept can be a guideline for the formation of future cabinets and local governments," he suggested.

Prof Huq, however, strongly believes that the best solution lies in an agreement between the two leaders. "As I perceive the problem and the options available for its solution, the best solution appears to lie in agreement between the two top leaders of BNP and AL," he repeated.

He ruled out any solution that might necessitate an amendment to the Constitution, since the present Parliament without the opposition members cannot produce the two-thirds majority as required in Article 142(1) (a) proviso (ii) of the Constitution.

"Other options, including a referendum not supported by the two major parties, are unlikely to be viable," he added.

However, Prof Huq believes that nothing can adversely affect the solution to the present impasse if it is based on the agreement between the ruling party and the opposition and worked out with due care and proper attention to the Constitution.

ROBERT MacNamara, former President of World Bank warned, "Take care of the urban poor; or else they will take care of you." So there can be no two opinions about this recommendation.

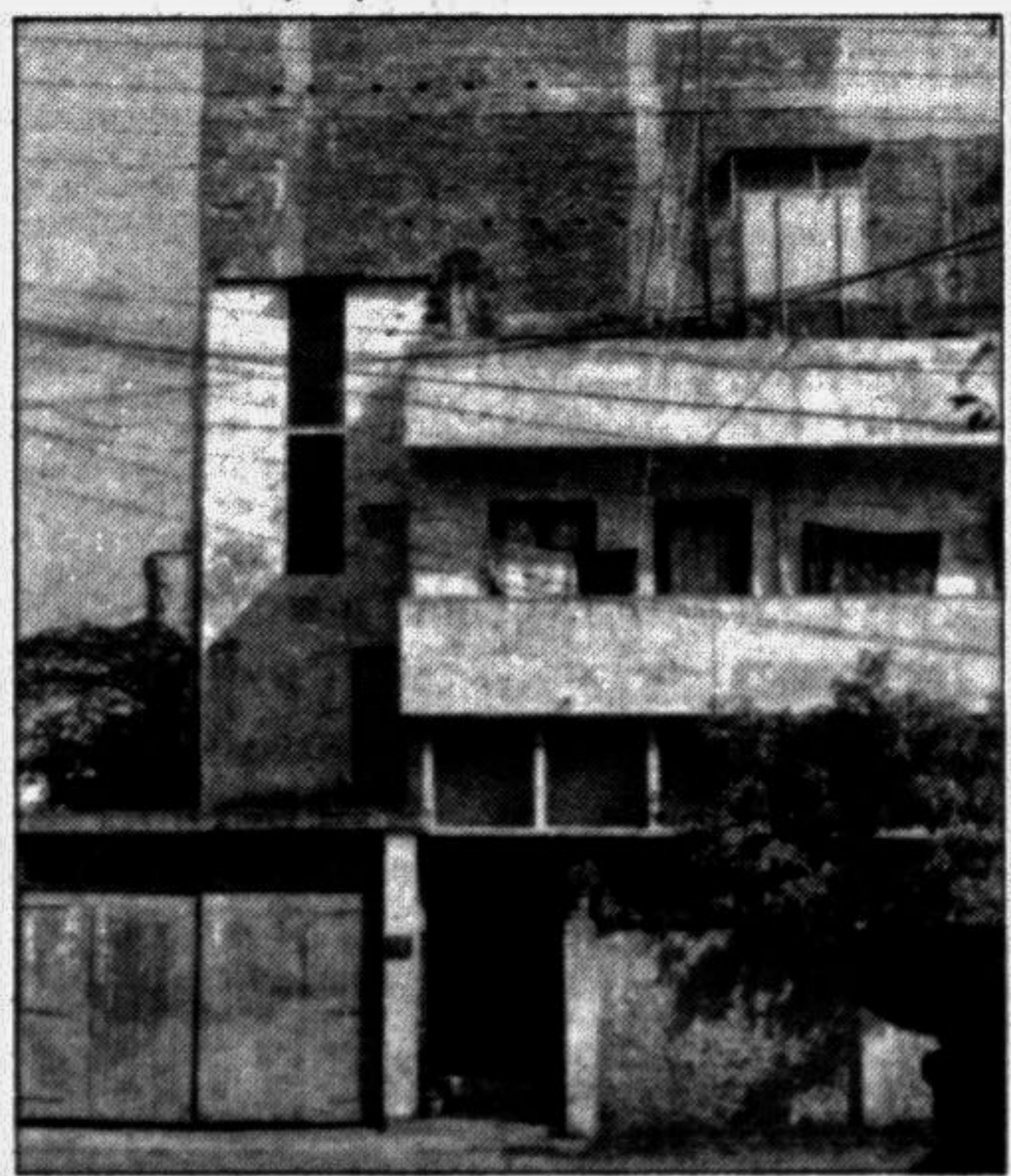
Making Urban Planning Pro-poor

by Nurul Islam

Problem of squatters
A participant at The Daily Star's Save Dhaka Roundtable described how mercilessly squatters were evicted from the road on the abandoned rail line near University. Another participant deplored that a park in Gulshan was being occupied by squatters. Outright eviction of squatters or their resettlement in another area is equally inhumane.

ing a truck with her belongings, exclaimed "Oh Shekher Pol! Tomar ki Amago Vote Aar Lagbo Na?" We must admit that our original mistake was not to make provision for poor man's housing in Gulshan and Dhanmondi! The rich, after all, cannot survive without the service of the poor.

Evils of zoning system
A participant stated that hawkers were occupying not



Mohammadpur, Dhaka. One of the many 3/4 storeyed houses. Originally this was a one-roomed house on a plot of 25x5 an accommodation for refugees in the 60s.

In my opinion, it is the zoning system that is the root of all evil. Dividing a town into watertight compartments of industrial, commercial, official, educational, etc. is unnatural. It creates traffic congestion — one way traffic in the morning and reverse in the evening. Taking advantage of the large number of people who throng in commercial, official and big markets, hawkers display their wares on the footpath and the corridor of big markets.

In the name of zoning, industries are placed as far away as possible from residential areas. Unable to spare the money and time for commuting from residential areas, the workers opt to squat near the industries. 'Bustees' on both sides of railway track near Tejgaon is one such instance.

Mixed zoning system
So what we should follow now is a mixed zoning system. If a shop, a restaurant, a school, a clinic, or a factory does not commit pollution, why should not it be allowed to function in Gulshan or any other area? In Dhanmondi Residential area many non-residential uses like offices, schools, clinics, shops, etc have sprung up. Authorities issue notices occasionally to remove the non-residential uses. Instead they should compel the owners to add upper floors for residential uses. Our housing stock would increase thereby. In

name we call it. This will put an end to the squatting problem also.

Integrated urban development and housing
Similarly in urban land development and public housing we should follow an integrated approach. All land development with civic services shall be done by a government agency and not by real estate companies. The latter has no right to acquire



Urban poor: Poverty is the main enemy of children

A portion of the developed land will be allotted to real estate companies for constructing high rise flats for the middle and high income people. High income people who want to build their own houses will be allotted plots. No plots will be allotted to the low income people. There is a danger that they may be bought out by higher income people. Even if they don't sell their plots, they would have to take loans for constructing the house and

tary unit, plots with one room without doors and windows, plots with a complete room etc. The idea is that they will live in their plots from the very beginning and gradually add to it. The size of the plots should be about 150 sq. yards so that scope for ultimate expansion of the house, both horizontally and vertically is not blocked.

The writer is a former Chief Engineer of Housing and Settlements.

land and invariably go for low marshy land which they fill up adding to the drainage problem. A participant commented on this phenomenon.

For the people government agencies will build incomplete houses of various degrees depending on their paying capacity; such as, — plots with side walks only; plots with walls and a sani-

THE international community is "still groping to determine how best to respond in the complex areas surrounding women and HIV," says Elizabeth Reid of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

"We've seen some excellent initiatives in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa that have certainly begun to empower women financially, economically, and politically and in terms of self-esteem and dignity — personal empowerment. But to do that on a large scale... I think those solutions have to involve men as well as women, and indeed all social institutions," Reid added in a US Information Worldnet program broadcast April 19 to Dakar, Kampala, and Johannesburg.

For most women "there is no individual solution" to coping with the HIV virus, which is devastating the African continent, said Reid, director of HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) programs for the UNDP.

"We don't have a technology that is accessible to us, that protects us, that we can use without the consent or knowledge of our sexual partners," Reid said, adding that "means all of our solutions are going to [have to] be social rather than individual."

Appearing with Reid to discuss the legal complexities involved in preventing the spread of the HIV virus

Complex Legal Issues Surround Women in Combating HIV Virus

by Robert Fullerton

"It's very evident to anyone who deals with HIV that we need to pay special attention to the vulnerability of women," she said. "And once you scratch the surface as to why women are vulnerable, you come to questions about legal practices, traditional practices, and customary practices."

While a perception exists that AIDS is a problem that largely affects men, Reid pointed to WHO figures revealing that some three million women have died from AIDS. Their deaths, she said, often have left children and other dependents "in circumstances of destitution and neglect." The direness of the situation is magnified in Africa, where many "girls and young women under age 20" are infected, many infected by older men.

In Uganda, Akwi-Ogojo said, where there is a "high level of awareness about HIV," strategies to combat the virus have focused "on awareness and on educational programs targeting personal change."

Unfortunately, she said, the country's laws regarding

domestic relations (including marriage, divorce, custody and maintenance of children, inheritance, and access to property rights) favor males, as do criminal laws involving rape and domestic violence. This "makes it nearly impossible for women to insist on success strategies that are part of the information that is given out in the AIDS education programs," she explained.

Further hampering efforts to fight the disease in Uganda, she said — as is the case elsewhere on the continent — are such customary social practices as polygamy, bride price, widow inheritance, and other traditions that leave Ugandan married women and teenage girls "especially vulnerable."

"We have not used the law to insure that women are able to protect themselves from infection from HIV," Akwi-Ogojo said. "And the law has a lot to contribute if it would look at the discriminatory provisions of our law... as well as the customs."

Reid cautioned that experience has shown a "very complex interaction" exists between law and culture in Africa and elsewhere and that

new laws will not be enforced unless society "accepts the changes" sought. By seeking formal legal assistance to maintain property rights and family assets after a husband's death, a woman "may alienate herself from traditional support groups" in the society.

Still, Akwi-Ogojo told a questioner from South Africa that she is optimistic about negotiating "a culture of change" to combat the disease — for one reason because AIDS is such a life-and-death issue in Africa — but also because there is "a lot of good will in the continent for change."

Change will, of course, depend on individual circumstances and how people view an issue. In a case in Uganda, which involved pre-marital circumcision, she recalled how, by discussing "how dangerous this process is" and by showing how it could help spread AIDS, "we were able to slowly convince the community to end the practice. I think the ways, the means, and the hows depend on your own local circumstances — but it is something that can and does happen."

Reid told another questioner that it is essential "to get people talking about these issues" and to build "consensus broadly within villages and nations" about what needs to be changed in the way children are raised and how people interact with each other.



Abudhabi residential area. The ground floors are used for commercial offices. Making optimum use of space.

man. I supervised resettlement of squatters from Dhanmondi and Lalmitia parks in 1972. The families were carried with their shacks and belongings by trucks to Mohammadpur and Mirpur where each family was given a plot and common water taps and latrines. The irony is that within a month all the families left their plots. We failed to reckon with the fact that they needed jobs not plots! The women were working as domestic help in Dhanmondi and Lalmitia houses. Opportunity for such jobs were scarce in Mohammadpur and Mirpur. And MacNamara is right. A woman while board-

only the footpaths but a part of the road as well. The Mayor replied that he would construct a hawkers' market. Another participant complained that Municipality was granting trading licenses in Gulshan area in violation of the zoning system. The Mayor agreed not to issue any more trading license in Gulshan. The Mayor need not have made either of the responses. In 1957 I was in charge of widening the Johnson road and as a sequel established a hawkers' corner. Since then, many hawkers markets had been constructed but the problem persists. So obviously the solution lies somewhere else.

Abu Dhabi and Dubai of United Arab Emirates, even in internal lanes, about two floors are occupied by shops, offices, banks, schools etc., while the upper floors of high rise buildings are residential. In main thoroughfares commercial uses go up to 6th/7th floor and residences above. Since there is no concentration of commercial, official activities in any particular area, hawking on footpaths becomes redundant. Necessity for vehicular traffic is also minimized since most transactions can be conducted within walking distance. So let us follow this example. Integration and not separation should be our

goal. We don't have a technology that is accessible to us, that protects us, that we can use without the consent or knowledge of our sexual partners," Reid said, adding that "means all of our solutions are going to [have to] be social rather than individual."

Appearing with Reid to discuss the legal complexities involved in preventing the spread of the HIV virus