



# 15 Years of Sonargaon Pan Pacific Hotel

by R. Ahmad

**T**HE Sonargaon Pan Pacific Hotel celebrates its fifteenth year in the hospitality industry on Saturday.

To mark the occasion, the five star hotel will be holding a reception for over 1000 guests in its Grand Ball Room. It will be a function that, no doubt, is as smoothly run as have been the countless receptions, conferences, meetings, weddings, banquets, and the like, held at the Sonargaon since its in-



ception. But what untold efforts lie behind the efficient management and operation of this now successfully established hotel?

The very first grand event in the Sonargaon's history, a banquet honouring the birthday of Emperor Hirohito of Japan, was held on April 29 1981, just one day after the

hotel's 'soft' opening. Needless to say, there must have been a few moments fraught with tension as 650 recently-recruited, newly-trained staff performed their duties for the first time! No-one from the Dhaka Sheraton was permitted to become an employee of the Sonargaon, thus the staff, with no previous experience, were expected to learn everything about the running of a five star hotel absolutely from scratch. (There are doubtless one or

positions, there are now only two as the transfer of skills and information to Bangladeshi staff took place.

How has the hotel's character changed over the past decade and a half? In 1982, the Food and Beverage outlets served 1,300 people. The number of covers now is in excess of 3,200,000 per year. There were extensive renovations made over three years, starting from the tenth anniversary in 1991. Guest rooms and the lobby were refurbished, operating equipment was overhauled, the swimming pool was given a new look by replacing furniture, etc, and the Health Club was re-equipped. Bathrooms not only provide toiletries and 'essentials' like hair-driers, but even an IDD phone for whatever urgent business guests may be carrying out while utilising 'the facilities'. Guests are now driven from Zia International Airport by limousines, cellular phones on hand. Catering to the increasing number of business travellers is the Pacific Floor, the specially designed top-floor executive area, with private lounge and butler service. The Khayyam Bar was changed to the Jet Set Club, a disco that is open to the public every evening. Food is served 24 hours a day.

These improvements are welcomed and appreciated by visitors and guests, of course. But keeping in mind that perfection is near impossible to achieve, there is always room for improvement. However, the Sonargaon Pan Pacific Hotel must be congratulated on attaining international standards of service and comfort. We wish it well on its anniversary.

The name Sonargaon was chosen from a competition in a national daily.

The name has come to signify five star service of a high standard in the hospitality industry of Bangladesh.

But how did Sonargaon come into being? The idea of building a second five star hotel first originated in 1973, from Takashi Hayakawa, who came to Dhaka on behalf of the Japanese government who were wishing to invest in Bangladesh after the War of Independence. It was obvious that the growing number of visitors and investors from the international community were too many for the Sheraton alone to cope with.

So through the joint collaboration of the Bangladeshi and Japanese governments, and a project loan from the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF) of Japan, Mr Hayakawa's idea became potential.

The Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation carried out the feasibility study and implemented the project. After 4 years of preparatory work, a contract was signed in 1977 between the two governments. A separate company, Hotels International Limited, placed under the control of the Ministry of Civil Aviation, was responsible for the construction and operation, and was given ownership of, the entire hotel project.

The Sonargaon Pan Pacific was to be a 26-storey hotel. However these plans had to be rehailed due to the proximity of the airport. The hotel was completed ahead of time and for less than the projected cost.

The management contract of the hotel was given Tokyo Hotels International of Japan in 1979, who passed it on to the subsidiary group, Pan Pacific Hotels and Resorts.



# How Many Tigers Are There in 'The Sundarbans' — II

by Khasru Choudhury

**I** was sure that honourable minister did not go to the Sundarbans to count them. It is not his duty to count the prized creatures — probably he was briefed by the forest department. Now the question is did they count it? So far as my knowledge with forest department, I never heard that they had made any scientific survey to determine the tiger population status. Then where did this concrete figure come from?

For a while I was really in dilemma. Then I made some enquiries which brought some light to get the clues. Only lower employees of Sundarban division of forest department steps in the deep areas, and high officials confine themselves mostly in boats and both parties have very little interest in tigers. Some of them has never even seen a tiger in the wild. So their information about tiger population cannot be considered as being correct.

As far as my I know, Guy Mountfort, the British ecologist; who lead the survey team financed by WWF to make a checklist of fauna of the then Pakistan, visited Sundarbans in 1968. He was the first person to assume the size of the tiger population in his report he mentioned the tiger population to be three hundred.

I have had the opportunity to interrogate some of the people who worked for Mr. Mountfort's expedition team. They told me that Mr Mountfort and his team studied only seafaring areas of Sundarbans where tiger population is very high. They didn't investigate all the areas, even some northern areas were left out.

that the German biologist, Hubert Hendrich who studied Sundarban tigers scientifically to determine its breeding biology took the number announced by the forest department as he was not appointed to census the tigers (Hendrich worked in 1971-75). Later on, Mr Sidensticker an expert of 'Cats food habit', worked in Sundarban and did not differ much with this number.

In 1981, Mr N M Sarker a teacher of the Zoological Department of Dhaka Uni-

the rest of the area, to give the total tiger population. This number was announced to be 460. And forest department took it gladly.

So this is the story behind the tiger population being 460, which has remained static since 1982 and various honourable ministers, at different times, announced the number standing before the national assembly. They know that conducting a census on tigers needs vast arrangement knowledge and expertise; and no one is go-



versity along with his some few of his students made two trips to Sundarbans in 1981 and in 1982. This trip was in collaboration with the Forest Department and was meant to conduct a survey to estimate the tiger population. They surveyed 12 sq miles in '81 and 69 sq miles in '82 of Nilkamal area of Sundarbans and estimated that there were 15 tigers in 69 sq miles and 8 in 12 sq miles. They used pugmark tracing method followed by Kairi fame Saraj Raj Chowdhury — a tiger expert of the Bihar area. After surveying only one-thirty-eighth of the total area of the Sundarban they simply multiplied these numbers by

ing to raise any questions about the hypothetical number. Optimistic figures may sound sweet but it is only deceiving us.

Population of Sundarban tiger may not be a national issue but being the key predator of our only true jungle and being a member of the world's largest single population of tigers, our tigers demand special attention. As I did not conduct any survey on tigers population, I will not state any contradictory numbers, but I must say that I am the last person to believe that the number of tigers in our Sundarbans is 460.

## Memorable Days of My Life

# A Pleasant Surprise at 35,000 feet!

by Khashruzzaman Choudhury

**U**NITED Airlines announces the departure of its flight UA 387 to Washington, DC, non-stop service to Washington's National Airport.

I grabbed my hand baggage and dashed towards gate number 7.

June 23, 1973. Los Angeles International Airport. We were flying back to Washington, DC after a four day visit to California's disaster-prone areas and disaster preparedness agencies and centres.

Everybody was on board, all nineteen of us from seventeen different countries of Asia and Latin America and our USAID guide, Mr Karl L. Mahler, Chief, Training Division, Office of Foreign Disaster Relief Coordinator.

We had been in the United States for a little more than two weeks, participating in USAID's Fourth Disaster Planning and Preparedness Seminar. We had arrived in Washington, DC in the last week of May, 1973.

Nineteen plus three was a real big number! We were occupying a big non-smoking area of the United's Boeing 747, on its way to Washington, DC. There was no ban on smoking in domestic flights in airplanes in those days.

In my row of three seats, I was sitting in the aisle seat, with Colonel Lopez de Leon from the Philippines next to me and Isabel Tezanos from the Dominican Republic at the window.

South Americans are gregarious by nature and they love to talk like we Bangladeshis. The entire area was alive with loud talk and laughter.

The plane had reached its cruising altitude of 35,000

feet. Captain James Ford had explained that it would be a smooth flight. He didn't expect any turbulence on our way and hence no bumping. "But for your own safety, we request you to keep your seat belts loosely fastened while seated."

Sure, good advice. Lopez and Isabel were arguing a point, I was butting in from time to time, but my mind was elsewhere. I was looking out from my aisle seat, I could see a blue canvas outside, a clear sky with no clouds.

I had left my wife Tahmina back home in Dhaka. She was pregnant and I hadn't heard from her for seven days. Before I set out for the journey on the 29th May, we debated on whether it was going to be a boy or a girl. In those days, there were no sonograms. Even if there had been we wouldn't have robbed ourselves of the excitement and strange pleasure of uncertainty!

Air Hostess, Terry had just served the drinks; Col Lopez was sipping his raw Scotch, and Isabel had settled for a Heineken beer. I drank my coke and glanced outside once more. Tahmina and I had debated — now that we had our three year old son, Sayeed, we wanted a daughter, we decided. A cute little daughter, fresh as a budding morning rose. We'd fondle her, love her, caress her, see her wink, cry and smile.

I daydreamed on. The Captain's voice was heard again. I was surprised. Didn't he say he expected a smooth flight?

I kept listening. "Once again, this is James Ford, your Captain, folks. We have a pleasant surprise for

everyone. We don't have this happening everyday. We have a lucky passenger. He has been blessed with a daughter.

**A former civil servant, now a Professor of Economics and Finance in Louisiana, USA. This is a real story of a father's joy as he received a pleasant news in uncommon circumstances!**

Congratulations, Mr Choudhury. We share your joy.

I was startled! I didn't know yet. How did the Captain know?

My travel-mates started exulting and screaming. All of them sprang up from their seats and ran to congratulate

"Congratulations, Mr Choudhury. We are so glad." He sounded sincere and affectionate.

Before I was about to ask him how he knew, I saw Carl Mahler approaching me with a piece of paper. His deep voice was ecstatic, but naughty.

"They read this out to me from Washington, this morning. I confess I received it before we boarded the



me. I shook hands with everyone. Even the Captain came down. He was a middle-aged man with a straight body and a smiling face. Patches of his grey hair confirmed his age and experience. He shook hands.

plane. But I thought you'd like to hear it when you're up in the sky. I am sorry if I didn't tell you right away." I had become very friendly with Carl Mahler in the past two weeks. I knew he wanted to dramatize the entire inci-

dent. I picked up the paper containing the telegram's message and thanked him.

Then I said in a pretended tone: "I am furious, Carl. You shouldn't have done this to me!"

He knew I was not serious. He only smiled and returned to his seat, three rows ahead of mine.

I was still shaking hands with other passengers, who were passing by and congratulating me. The Captain had made me a sort of VIP. I seemed to be the one everyone wanted to see and wish. The air hostesses too took their turns. They all looked cheerful, much beyond the courtesy smiles they usually bestow on passengers.

When I got a chance, I quickly glanced over the message. It was from my father-in-law in Dhaka informing me that "Rahmanur Rahim" (kind and merciful) Allah had blessed me with a daughter. They named her Samina, an Arabic word meaning plump or rich.

What did she look like? Me? Tahmina? Both?

My thoughts were interrupted. Hostess Terry was back with Champagne! The Captain had ordered it served free on the house! I felt gratified and honoured! Yes, the Captain was right: "We don't have this happening everyday."

Everybody in my group enjoyed that afternoon immensely, up in the sky at 35,000 feet. There were drinks, food, gossip and laughter. A bright moment when your ever-present unknown worries about life temporarily fade, like a headache after Tylenol. When the storm subsided,

I pushed back my seat as far as I could and stretched out. It was not much, yet much more comfortable. I closed my eyes and travelled to Dhaka, Bangladesh.

I reached Fatema Nursing Home in Green road in Dhaka. Yes, I could see Gynecologist Dr Nurul Islam and his assistant, that short petite lady, Dr Islam was talking to my father in law. His glasses were down his nose.

I now walked inside. I could see Tahmina. She was lying down with her head raised with two pillows. Yes I could see her my daughter, Samina! She was sweet and soft. Her eyes were closed and her fingers fisted. She had a roundish face and a Roman nose like mine. I could see it all.

I could see, but I couldn't touch. If I could, I'd fly away right this moment. I was yearning to see her. If I could

Little did I know that day that Samina would turn out to be a poet one day, bubbling with hope and joy. She'd write a poem titled, "If I could!"

**IF I COULD**

With a rhyme, you can do all

Fly to the sky or break a fall

Live in a world with no concerns

Where nothing freezes or burns

Create a lake or a heaven

Flock yourself around with men

Have donkeys fly and birds crawl

Lives of loves, mice great and small

Denounce the dead, glorify the land

Grasp the world with your bare hand.

## EMIRATES' Destination and Leisure Management Department has ended Financial Year 1994/1995 on a successful note, with 39 per cent increase in revenue and 40 per cent increase in net income.

The department comprises two major divisions: Arabian Adventures, the Destination Management Company, and Emirates Holidays, the leisure management division. Together, both divisions account for an impressive 62 per cent increase in volumes of passengers handled in 1994/1995 over 1993/1994.

The result of its international drive has shifted market share beyond the home

## Growth of Emirate's Leisure Dept.

base of the UAE. In 1993/1994, residents in the UAE using Emirates Holidays programmes accounted for almost 84 per cent of total; the rest of the Gulf and Middle East grew to 33 per cent while Asia's share increased to 3.5 per cent.

Mr Haensel said: "This indicates that Emirates Holidays' products have international appeal and that we have struck the right chord by emphasising on customised holidays to give today's traveller more options."

Popular destinations chosen by Emirate Holidays clients are Dubai, London, Male, Bombay, Bangkok, Cairo, Istanbul and Paris.

## A MEMORABLE JOURNEY BY BIMAN

by Anwarul Karim

**I**t was in 1979 when I, along with my wife and 3-year old daughter had a memorable journey by air from Dhaka to Chittagong. I had bought three confirm tickets from Biman. The plane was scheduled to leave Dhaka at 11 AM from Tejgaon Airport (ZIA had not started operation then).

My daughter was very happy as it was her first journey by plane. We reached Tejgaon Airport at 10 AM. On enquiry from the information counter I was informed that the flight was delayed and the scheduled flight timing was 1 PM. Since my resi-

dence was at Green Road which was only 10 minutes ride by Car, we decided to go back home to have lunch and come back before the new departure time.

We returned to the airport after lunch at 12:00 clock. The officer at the enquiry counter told me that the plane had left at 11:45 AM. I told him the urgency of my travel to Chittagong and that I went home after confirming the timing from him. I decided to report the matter to higher authorities and told him so. At this he consoled me and promised to arrange seats at the next

flight which was at 2 PM. When the check-in counter was opened for the passengers for the 2 PM flight, he tried to persuade the counter personnel to arrange 3 seats for me and my family.

At last he came to me and said that he has arranged 1 seat in which my wife could be accommodated along with my daughter (on lap). As for me, I was given one of the crew seats used by the attendants. I thanked him for his services and boarded the plane. My wife was seated with our daughter on lap. The attendant directed me near the cockpit and advised

me to sit on a folding chair. I asked the attendant whether I could use the seat all through out the 40 minute journey. To my utter surprise she told me that I was to stand through out the journey and use the seat only during take-off and landing.

Believe it or not I stood on the ally (path way) holding on to the two luggage racks as if I was on an over crowded bus for all the 40 minutes of my journey to Chittagong. However, I thanked god after we reached Chittagong without any other mishap.

## Travel Briefs

**Air passenger in Asia to grow:** Airbus industry in its latest market forecast for the region said that Asia-Pacific airlines would become the world's largest region group in terms of seat capacity by 2014. Total traffic in this region will be roughly equal to that of the world by that time. The expert forecast air passenger traffic in the region to rise at an average annual rate of 6.5 per cent. — *BD Shipping Times*

**Turkey cheapest for EU tourists:** British travel agencies, competing against tough travel prices, have pronounced Turkey as the "cheapest holiday centre." Among the 12 countries, the British tourists are mostly interested in Hong Kong, ranked the most expensive and Turkey the cheapest. — *Monitor*

**Asian Giants set up container depot:** Sembawang corp and China Ocean Shipping Co (COSCO), the two Asian Marine Giants have teamed up to build and run a container depot and freight station near Shanghai. The partners in the project are COSCO Shanghai and Cosem plc Ltd — a 50-50 joint venture between listed Sembawang Maritime Ltd, and COSCO's Investment. Their joint venture company will be called Shanghai Cosem Container Transport. — *BD Shipping Times*

**New Sales Manager:** Sonargaon Pan Pacific Hotel has appointed Mrs. Roseta Haque Mahmood as the new Sales Manager. Mrs Mahmood joined Sonargaon as Public Relations Manager last December. Prior to her appointment at Sonargaon Mrs. Mahmood worked in Social Marketing company for three and a half years. — *Monitor*

**Financial restructuring of Air India:** Mounting losses have forced the state owned carrier Air India to undertake a massive financial restructuring programme. Air India is facing losses of 1.2 million rupees (37.5 million US) and a falling passenger load factor, reports The Financial Express. The carrier has invited various foreign merchant bankers to submit proposals to the management to shore up its bottom line. — *Monitor*

**SIA, world' most profitable airline:** Once again, Singapore Airlines (SIA) has been rated the most profitable airline in a global ranking of the top 50 airlines by a weekly British Industry publication, Flight International. Basing its rank on the airlines' profits in the most recent financial year and in US dollar terms, the latest issue of publication noted that SIA recorded net profits of US\$601 million in its last financial year. — *Singapore Airlines*.