

For a Planned City

The growth of urban population far outstrips the newly-constructed housing facilities in our cities and towns. The problem is the acutest in Dhaka city. While this accommodation crunch in the metropolis is well known, what is often less focused and therefore the authority concerned feels no urgency to act for a redress is the lack of proper planning in the construction of residential houses. Residential areas are expanding in a haphazard manner with no consideration for physical environment. A report published in an English daily has drawn the attention to various anomalies of the housing sector.

Both individual owners and real estate companies, according to the report, have been found guilty of violating the Construction Act. The defiance of the Act has been further helped by the delay in revising the city master plan. The way residential-cum-shopping complexes are coming up is enough to give clue to a nightmarish scenario of the city in the near future. Housing complexes in particular have little or no space around in contravention of rules; and due to the inclusion of shopping arcades, the pressure on parking lots and road spaces is staggeringly intensified.

Now the new city master plan envisages a dispersal of residential and shopping facilities so that the pressure of vehicles and people at the centre of the city can be significantly lessened. The best way to do so is to set up a number of satellite towns on the outskirts of the city. Now the question is, why instead of taking such a step, permission is being given to build sky-scrapers in the heart of the city with so little space around? The Rajuk should know better. The plan for setting up satellite towns should be taken up immediately. Already we are confronting a rapidly deteriorating city environment owing to our failure to see beyond our noses. If we continue to foul up the city environment by not setting aside the breathing spaces such as parks and playgrounds, and lakes and canals, the latter acting as a natural drainage system besides their usual role as beautifiers, we are surely doomed to suffer heavily in the long run.

Time is fast running out for us to address the city's congestion problems and the environmental threats through an integrated package of actions.

Lift the Ban

The May 1 US embargo on shrimp imports from Bangladesh sounds arbitrary despite being courtesy-coated. This has been handed prematurely, too. While a minor adaptation has been suggested to overcome the ban after taking due note of the favourable side to our shrimp culture, one wonders why the desired modification was not allowed time before slapping the embargo.

There cannot be any second opinion about the dire need to protect sea turtles where these are endangered by a wasteful and environmentally unfriendly by-catch to the hauling of shrimp. But to delist Bangladesh in a global application of a US standard requiring its trawlers to employ the turtle-extruder devices (TEDs) is a shock administered to the country at a time of its severe export distress. Even the argument that a global approach has to be unchoosy between countries is no justification for its being applied in such a blanket fashion.

Bangladesh's 'aquaculture' is a specialised kind of shrimp-farming — with 'ghers' or enclosures — in which the sea turtles can be kept at bay. Where we have admittedly a real advantage is, however, this: We do not as a rule harvest shrimp in the wild so that the by-catch of sea turtles is essentially averted.

While we urge the US government, in view of the counter-vailing factors mentioned above, to withdraw the shrimp export ban forthwith, our basic advice, nonetheless, is directed homewards: let unplanned shrimp-farming, import of diseased fries and indiscriminate catching of them locally be stopped once and for all. We should be friendly to environment and ecology by our own volition rather than being told by others. The shrimp culture in general should be bailed out from the excessive lure of money to which most men in the business are currently falling prey.

Dhaka's Call

The UNCTAD IX conference in Midrand, South Africa, has very rightly voiced concern over the unmitigated plight of the LDCs. As a group they remain on the lowest rung of the development ladder despite the progress made so obviously in the economic reform and trade liberalisation processes since the mid-1980s.

It is against this backdrop that Bangladesh's Commerce Secretary A H Mofazzal Karim has reiterated the collective call of the LDCs at the conference for a substantial improvement in the flow of ODA to them as part of the long-existing programme of action.

The old trade preferences are gone, the import prices of foodgrains are up much the same way that those of pharmaceuticals and essential capital goods have soared. While the aftermath of the Uruguay Round is marked by an intensive series of adjustments in the world trade regime the whole process is only beginning to unfold with so much left of it to bear fruit. We are passing through the gestation period of the overall reform process. At this stage we are having to pay the heavy administrative costs for compliance with the Uruguay Round stipulations without any immediately corresponding improvement in the rates of savings, investment, job-creation and per capita income. While the global trade regime is restructured, the critical financing of development in the LDCs has to come from ODA whose growth as percentage of GNP has been ironically negative.

In the late 1950s or early 1960s, when my generation was at the university, very few of us thought of going abroad to live and work for the best part of our lives and return home only for holidays. Now practically everybody is in search of green pastures elsewhere in the world. Millions of Bengalis work abroad. My grandfather never went beyond Calcutta. Now over 100 individuals from my own village alone live permanently beyond the Suez Canal in New York, practically every fifth taxi driver is from Bangladesh. Thirty years back, there was none. I have found my countrymen working in Bolivian gas stations or as farmhands in Australia. We are everywhere today. The mobility of Bangladeshi workers have gone up beyond any imagination during the last twenty years. This is the most significant aspect of globalisation which we often assume to be the inevitable result of enormous population pressure. Like overflowing monsoon rivers, people must reach beyond the shores of the land in search of income and employment.

However, this is not the entire story of present day international labour migration. The technology origin of not only labour migration but the whole process of globalisation is often overlooked. Globalisation is basically a late 20th century phenomenon. In the first decade of this century, the maximum speed at which man could move was in a train at 60 miles per hour. Today, the journey to the moon by rockets takes place at 25,000 miles per hour. The first voice communication by telephone involved a distance of 6 miles. Today through electronic mails, both audio and video communications take place within less than a second. Technology has conquered distance. The world is like a village today. So people will move and distance is no constraint.

With the coming of Gramen telephone, our villages will no longer be remote. Without any loss of time, from Times Square, New York, Abdul Hakim will be able to speak to his father at Dasha. Pat uakhal district who may request his son for 500 dollars since he found out the day before, again through the telephone, that the exchange rate is quite favourable these days. Although even today, it takes at least two days to reach Dasha from Dhaka and within Bangladesh, we are still in early decades of 20th century, particularly in terms of technology, yet globalisation has already touched the remote corners of the country.

And it is not only money transfer — voice, pictures, images and graphics — all can be transmitted without fixed cable connections and without any loss of time. Communication today is total and complete and if it is organised appropriately, the entire population can be drawn into the mainstream of development within the shortest possible time. What is necessary is a well-designed distance education programme to transfer technology — including its effective utilisation in 65,000 villages of the country.

Technology is the basis of development and the vital component of the technology-based development, is energy. In a recent seminar at BUET, it was revealed that 2,000 mw of electricity can be generated from available wind energy in coastal Bangladesh. Solar photo-voltaic cells can be the basis of domestic electricity — separately for each homestead. It has become fairly inexpensive now and further reduction of costs are expected in the future.

After energy comes promotion of integrated farming combining crop, livestock and fishery, intensification of irrigated agriculture, introduction of new high value crops, sericulture, agro-forestry etc. Such opportunities are numerous and at the micro-level, particular agro-ecological conditions would determine exact design

that assumes power following the election. Free and Fair Election There is a marked and rapid development in international standards for holding free and fair elections. This development is arguably the product of convergence of state views concerning the importance of democracy. Elaboration of standards is pronounced in various documents of the United Nations, and inter-regional organisations. Many states' willingness to accept these standards, is evidenced through their practice.

In order for the elections to be fair it is important to examine whether the population could freely exercise their rights, adequately informed to do so, and have confidence that the electoral process will accurately reflect their choice. The examination of whether elections are genuine includes not only whether the election administration is acting impartially and effectively, but whether political contestants have the opportunity to campaign freely for popular support. The examination must also include determining whether the government resources are properly utilised in the electoral process, and whether the law enforcing authorities like police and public prosecutors are acting to maintain order and are protecting those seeking to exercise their civil and political rights.

It is also important to assess whether the judiciary is conducting itself impartially and effectively, whether the news media are free to act as conveyors of accurate information and to act as watchdogs over government and processes as well as whether they are providing access to political contestants and objective coverage of those contestants and events of national importance. Public Confidence in Election A consistent lesson in international as well as national electoral experience is that elections are not simply a technical process. Elections are part of a political process that, to be successful, requires public confidence. Sound electoral laws and procedures are of course necessary but are not enough to build public confidence in an election, especially in a situation that now exist in Bangladesh. It is very important that the public including the political contestants, must believe that the electoral process will be effectively and impartially implemented.

To the Editor

Call for national consensus Sir, It is a matter of deep regret that in Bangladesh, leaders of the former ruling party and the opposition parties maintain strange relations between themselves. They have completely forgotten the fact that the ultimate aim of all political activities is the welfare of the nation. The relationship between the political parties has gone to such a low level that to a common voter like me, it appears like personal enmity between the leaders of the former ruling party and the opposition parties.

Globalisation — What it Means for Us

Information superhighway is the modern growth path of development. Information can be secured from all over the world in matters of seconds. This is the essence of globalisation.



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

of development. Take for example the most low-lying floodplains where even one crop per annum is so uncertain, but through raft-based vegetable cultivation, combined with fishery and duck, dramatic changes of the production structure are quite feasible. Distance education through instant audio-visual communication, computer graphics, computer aided design and management can open a new dimension towards modernisation of our rural economy. The problem is the inherent block in our mind to relate to the most modern technology vis-a-vis primitive technologies prevailing in rural Bangladesh. We tend to be skeptical — can the immense gap be covered overnight? Shouldn't we follow a step by step approach in the introduction of technologies to our villages which are so far behind? No, this is where we are very wrong.

Globalisation has enabled free movement of labour, goods and services on a worldwide scale. At the same time, instant total communication has created conditions to bypass centuries of development and proceed straight to the computer age of modern times. The quantum leap is possible and it was best depicted by the advertisement appearing in Indian newspapers of computers as the headload on a vendor's basket — usually meant for bananas.

The most pronounced globalisation of Bangladesh through labour migration can be ideally combined with technology

based rural development and information technology (infotech) playing the lead role. Bangladeshis working abroad result in multi-million dollar remittance income back home — using both formal and informal channels. The exposure of the country to possibilities of rural technology development will create an expanding awareness. Remittance income can be usefully channelled into actual technology utilisation on a fairly extensive scale. The remitters can be the investors since they are already exposed to technological opportunities abroad in many instances. The domestic awareness is the missing link to be established through dissemination of infotech.

The world wide spread of liberal free market economies combined with removal of barriers to free trade is the vivid manifestation of globalisation but to exploit it further to our advantage, the global spread of information superhighway itself should be able to traverse the length and breadth of the country, in spite of being poor and backward.

This must be understood well. No doubt, due to large scale migration of labour, global exposure to a limited extent have already been realised. But it is an uneven, informal development. Large scale introduction of computers as the essential hardware of the globalisation process would not only magnify the limited exposure, it would also initiate application of science and technology to rural production in ways which

are unorthodox as well as unprecedented. Education and health are two limiting factors retarding our economic progress. Without waiting for all the school buildings to be constructed and teachers training completed, a well spread out distance education system can create a largely educated population within the span of a very short period. Health for all should not call for a health centre at every location. With computer aided instructions, paramedics' capacity could be substantially expanded in order to handle 80 per cent of health related problems at the village level.

Information superhighway is the modern growth path of development. Information can be secured from all over the world in matters of seconds. This is the essence of globalisation which we must appreciate in full and in right earnest.

Children First A Joint Appeal for Placing Children on the National Agenda

As our country enters an important phase of national dialogue on the vital issues that will shape the Bangladesh of the twenty-first century, we find it our duty to call the attention of our people, and that of the various political parties and leaders, to the pressing issues of women and children, and to formulate clear commitments to our national goals, in measurable and accountable terms.

We recall that our Constitution asks for taking special measures to address the needs of women and children (Part 3, Article 28) and that Bangladesh has been striving to accelerate the progress of women and children's development, through a National Plan of Action to achieve the goals set by the World Summit for Children for the year 2000. The recent National Immunization Day, of 16 April, has generated welcome support from most sections of our society, including political parties. Now further action is needed to build on this momentum towards anchoring in the nation's conscience the primacy of human development concerns, particularly those related to women and children.

Such action would address the special needs of women and children, constituting the great majority of our people, seeking to mobilize through them the potential for advancement and bringing it to the centre of our existence as a viable nation. This will also serve to release powerful forces to shape the Bangladesh of tomorrow. By taking this initiative, we will be seizing a historical opportunity to narrow the gap between the people of Bangladesh and other rapidly transforming nations. These reasons compel us to speak up.

But, even more important, the question we raise today is a matter of rights, the right of our own children to receive the very best possible from us, not only as individuals or families, but also as a society, and the right of women to contribute and benefit, on an equal footing, to and from the process of development. Our obligation is all the more imperative when we consider that children do not have the means to defend, let alone promote, their rights. Thus our action is at the very heart of the democratic process and the essence of social justice. It is also in line with our Constitution's emphasis on basic human rights and the respect of human dignity and values (Part 2, Article 11).

The international consensus on child rights is embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child two which Bangladesh is one of the first signatories. It is vital that our political parties commit themselves to the energetic fulfilment of the promise given to the children in this convention.

Taking the above into consideration, we call upon our political parties and leaders:

(1) To pledge themselves to keep child rights on a common national agenda, thus avoiding possible negative effects on children's interests caused by controversies or conflicts. Children must remain above party politics.

(2) To rededicate our political system to giving 'First Call to Children' by providing the maximum possible allocations from national resources, as well as cooperating with development partners to optimize their support towards the same end.

(3) To dedicate all necessary efforts to the elimination of disparities and discrimination that affect the girl child and women.

(4) To specify their commitments to women and children, with reference to achieving the goals for the year 2000, namely:

\* Reducing infant and under-five child mortality to 50 and 70 per 1000 live births, respectively.

\* Reducing the maternal mortality ratio to 300 per 100,000 live births.

\* Reducing severe and moderate malnutrition among under-fives by half, compared to 1990 levels.

\* Providing universal access to sanitation.

\* Universal access to primary education and completion of primary education by at least 90% of primary school-age children.

\* Reducing adult illiteracy rate by at least half its 1990 level, with emphasis on female literacy.

\* Providing improved protection for children in especially difficult circumstances, such as working, street and other disadvantaged children.

(5) To include in the Code of Conduct for Elections a reference to ensuring that services for women and children are not disrupted by political action.

While the children of Bangladesh, the voters of tomorrow, have a legitimate right and hope that these minimal and achievable goals will be incorporated into the national agenda, and expressed in party manifestos and declarations, it is important that the people remain vigilant as to their implementation. This would be in line with our Constitution's emphasis on basic human rights and the respect of human dignity and values (Part 2, Article 11).

All sectors of civil society, including the media, have a role to play in making this appeal come into reality.

- Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum
Khan Foundation
Association for Realization
Human Rights First the Child
Maitree Parishad
Ain O Salish Kendra
Village Development Center
Assistance for Slum Dwellers
Bangladesh Jatiyo Mohila Ain-jibi Samity
Gono Shajajaya Sangstha
Plan International-Bangladesh
Center for Rural Child Development
Red Barnet
Social and Economic Enhancement Program (SEEP)
Human Rights Development Project-Sakhra (HRDP)
Voluntary Health Services Society (VHSS)
Development Feature
Manobik Sahajaya Sangstha (MSS)
Bangladesh Inter-religious Council for Peace and Justice
Save the Children Fund
Save the Children (USA)
Desh Unnayan Samaj Bangladesh (DUS-Bangladesh)
Forum for Cultural and Human Development (FCHD)
Human Rights Journalist Forum of Bangladesh (HRJFB)
Society for Underprivileged Families (SUF)
Prattibha
Shishu Kalyan Trust (SKT)
Under Privileged Children's Education Program (UCEP)
Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM)
Nari Maitree
Center for Training and Rehabilitation for Destitute Women
Enfants du monde (EDM)
Bangladesh Council for Child Welfare (BCCW)
Bangladesh Shishu Protipalan O Punarbasan Kendra
Center for Alternative Information and Analysis
Shobambi Unnayan Samity (SUS)
Shobab Bangladesh
Radda Barnen
SHAKTI-Foundation
PHULKI
Human Rights Association for Children
VERC
Integrated Village Development Center (IVDC)
Jagoroni Chakra
Center for Development Communication (CDC)
Dardra Nabaran Kendra (DNK)
Save the Children Fund (Australia)
Center for Media Research (CMR)
Terre des hommes (Suis)-Tah's
Society for Social Service (SSS)
Bangladesh Organization for Development Cooperation (BODC)
Chinnamul Shishu Kishore Sangstha (CSKS)
Unnayan Shojogi Team (US)

Therefore, appropriate steps must be taken to ensure that the electoral process, is not only administratively correct, but free from the perception of partisanship. It is therefore, necessary for the government and the Election Commission to take measures beyond the minimum legal requirements to create an expectation that fairness will prevail.

We believe that the public confidence in the electoral process can be built by: a) setting up an effective and impartial election apparatus that is open and also transparent; b) involving the political contestants in all basic elements of the election process; c) opening the election process to the observation of citizens and civic organisations; d) convincing the electorate of the importance of the elections, that their personal safety and ballot security will be secured.

Transparency in electoral process was a phrase not used frequently a decade ago. 'Transparency' is a now by-word in election vocabulary and is very important in building public confidence. Transparency builds public confidence under the adage that if you are acting properly you have nothing to hide. Transparency, in its electoral sense, has numerous aspects and can be applied to a range of activities.

The political parties, and candidates play a crucial role in developing public confidence in the electoral process. If the political contestants are involved in meaningful way in all stages of the process, they will be more trustful of the actions of the election officials. Steps so far taken by the Election Commission is commendable.

Election Commission should encourage and involve political contestants not only to view all aspects of electoral preparations, but be involved in the total process from the drafting of election laws and selection of election officials all the way through the tabulation of results and resolution of electoral complaints.

In addition to being impartial, the Election Commission must be able to take independent and effective actions to protect the integrity of the electoral process. It is essential that the election laws must guarantee equal treatment and practical procedural due process in order to ensure a credible election. Such precautions really help ensure the satisfaction of voters and political contestants in situations where they perceive, rightly or wrongly, that they have been

Democratic Elections and Citizens' Confidence

by Feroz M. Hassan

unfairly treated. Appropriate due process includes legislative, regulatory and judicial procedures.

Another important recent development in international electoral trends, is the widespread acceptance of the contribution of domestic non-partisan election observers. During the last decade, for example, domestic nonpartisan monitors played very important roles from countries A-Z, Albania to Zambia, in the 1991 parliamentary elections in Bangladesh, nonpartisan citizens together with the international election observers played a significant role in ensuring free and fair elections.

In fact the role of the election monitors (domestic and international) is incorporated and elaborated in Article 7 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Participation of citizens groups like FEMA in the election process is central to public confidence. The public confidence can be enhanced, by opening up and making the electoral process transparent to public by allowing citizens to monitor all aspects of the elections. Election observation by impartial domestic NGOs and civic bodies adds significantly to public confidence to election process, besides guaranteeing the integrity of an election it can also provide an excellent opportunity to citizens in governmental accountability.

It is learnt that many international election observation groups, both governmental and non-governmental will come to monitor the upcoming elections from various countries. Impartial international election observers can play a constructive role in enhancing public confidence in the electoral process. But according to current experience they are more effective when there is a well established network of domestic observers in place who are more accustomed with language and culture.

It is equally important to recognise that a voter and civic education are critical to genuine elections. The principal that 'the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government' and that 'will' can genuinely be expressed if the voters are adequately informed of the political choices and contestants through civic-voter education. The civic voter education must cover the basics of why, it is important to vote and that vote will be secret, secure and respected.

The writer is Secretary General of FEMA

Approved in a recent pre-EC-NEC inter-ministerial meeting.

It may be mentioned here that I had made an appeal to the concerned authority through the columns for approving our new project proposal with a view to solving the related problems of BAI. I take this opportunity to express our profound thanks and gratitude to the concerned authority and also to you, Mr Editor and your colleagues for providing us the opportunity to ventilate our grievances.

M Zahidul Haque
General Secretary
BAI Teachers' Association
Dhaka

An appreciation Sir, I have great pleasure to record here that the Planning Ministry has finally passed the proposal for sanctioning some new teaching and administrative posts for Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), Dhaka. The PCP of BAI has also been

Since better late than never, I would appeal to all political parties to arrange a grand gathering in the greater interest of the nation, to show to the common voters that for a national cause all the political parties can unite, irrespective of their political views.

D A K Choudhury
136/Housing Estate, Sylhet

6th columnists? Sir, Mr Zakhmia appears to have been hurt by columnist Kibria's misplaced shafts. I also could never penetrate the j-lap-twist of the arguments in

the column, politically planned as propaganda for one party against another. Khaleda Zia is being painted as a super-human evil force.
Analysis: yes, but withhold the opinion. Let us see a new Bangladesh after '90 days'.
A Husnain
Dhaka