

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

In the Whirlwind of Poverty and Prosperity

by Ekram Kabir

Bangladesh is choked with a multitude of environmental problems like, population and poverty, degradation of resources, conflict of development with environment bracketed into illiteracy versus ignorance, water, air and soil pollution, destruction of mangroves and forestry, loss of fisheries, unplanned human settlement

THE planet's biosphere is threatened by both 'human' poverty and prosperity, say the worried activists around the globe. And governments need to act urgently to save and conserve what is left of it.

In 1992, world leaders from 172 nations met in Rio de Janeiro to sign a Plan of Action for a healthy, sustainable planet and the talks resulted in what is known as 'Agenda 21'. Now after five years of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), popularly known as Earth Summit, the promises then made seem a big hype. The spirit surrounding the Plan apparently has long gone, and the world has become weary and wary of global conferences, where millions of dollars are spent, but the outlook on major issues still remains bleak.

The Earth Council — whose chairman, Maurice Strong, was the Secretary-General at Rio — the non-governmental body created soon after the UNCED to promote and advance the agreements taken at the Summit, is equally critical of the lack of progress on decisions that were taken to cap carbon dioxide emissions and preserve species and forests. At the final session in '92, the same Maurice Strong said in his speech: 'This process has been a profoundly human experience from which we cannot emerge unchanged. The world will not be the same, international diplomacy and the United Nations will not be the same and the prospects for the Earth's future cannot be the same.'

But it is what it was, for the Earth Council in its report, *From Agenda to Action*, released in February last in advance of a 13-19 March forum in Brazil this year, says: 'No group of governments ever made such a singular commitment to improving the quality of life of their citizenry; till today, it appears that nothing has changed for the better since 1992.'

Well, considering this backdrop, there can be a critical conclusion given to Rio that the euphoria of having participated in what was regarded as a historic conference that would change, if not save, the world, is only balanced by a nagging sense that not much in substance and political commitment for action has been achieved.

However, on the positive side, a Rio Declaration with 27 finely balanced principles on environmental obligations and development rights was approved and serves as guidelines for relations between states, especially North and South, as well as for national economic and environment policies. A

700-page, 40-chapter action plan, Agenda 21, for Earth-saving issues, including soil erosion, deforestation, desertification, atmospheric change and toxic wastes, and development issues such as poverty, consumption patterns, habitat and health was passed.

Yet this huge volume did have some weaknesses. The chapter on biotechnology, for example, according to experts, exaggerates the potential benefits while downplaying the need for safety measures, and the chapter on deforestation puts strong emphasis on planting new trees, but says a little about conserving forests.

Although majority of the environmentalists hold the North responsible for spoiling the Earth's ecosystem and dishonouring the themes of Rio, yet according to US-based Worldwatch Institute, both developed and developing countries are equally guilty for environmental degradation. In its *State of the World Report 1997*, the Institute identified eight countries as environmental heavyweights terming them as E-8. These countries — China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Brazil, Russia, Japan and Germany — together have 56 per cent of world's population, 53 per cent of its forests, and account for 58 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions, the main artificial cause of global warming.

Here also, the Northerners are playing their cards well, because they seem to read the South like a book: The Worldwatch report tends to denote that 'he who develops economically pollutes the environment.' This is true to a great extent, because the victims of the nuclear use are future generations. But on the other hand, the North has created a field of environmental politics. Like 'human rights', the richer nations are using 'environment' in their foreign policy. Here comes the question of 'ethics', a relatively unheard term in the environmental affairs.

The ethical question comes up in global environmental affairs when one realises that 'environmentalism' is not simply about Nature, but essentially involves human beings at every step of its way. In almost all the examples of environmental degradation, 'some' human beings become victims while others perpetrators, for it is a matter of privilege and power. Take the reluctance of the US at the UNCED for example. The lone superpower did hesitate to address the link between consumption patterns

and environmental stress, as the former US President George Bush said: 'Our lifestyle is not up for negotiation.'

Where survival is the name of the game, John Dryzek in his *Rational Ecology* says: 'We tend to address environmental problems by displacing them instead of resolving them. Displacement refers to transferring of hazardous effects of environmental degradation across space, time and media.' This seems appropriate both for the poor and the rich nations. He further elaborates that when communities generate an overabundance of solid waste and export it to other communities, they are displacing them across space. When people fail to address environmental problems and leave them for future generations, they are displacing them across time. And when people convert hazardous materials from one form of pollution to another — for example, incineration of household waste and turning it to ashes — they are displacing it across medium. Well, all these factors are very much present in today's world even after the global leaders' grappling with environmental threats.

Now as a developing country, how does Bangladesh perform both at national and international levels? Apart from the regional and global issues, Bangladesh is choked with a multitude of environmental problems like, population and poverty, degradation of resources, conflict of development with environment bracketed into illiteracy versus ignorance, water, air and soil pollution, destruction of mangroves and forestry, loss of fisheries, unplanned human settlement, urbanisation and industrialisation, loss of wildlife, and natural hazards.

To a large extent, these problems result from inappropriate and absence of long-term, farsighted policies. Experience suggests that the country is full of policy makers — not implementers — who are in the land of Nod living to see the day while the masses fight a losing battle by risking their necks in every sector.

The people of this country depend heavily on the natural resource base for their basic needs such as food, energy, wa-



Unplanned human settlements: Encroachment on friendly nature.

ter and housing. They quite often lack sufficient incomes or access to credit in purchasing appropriate tools, materials and technologies to practice environmentally sustainable

agriculture, protect natural resources and check degradation, and even rehabilitate degraded resources. They are displaced by population pressure that reduces their access to land by

misappropriation of common resources. However, if the already surfaced and in-the-offing environmental threats which directly hit the people are not addressed to with obvi-

ous honesty and jerk-starts, both at the government and non-government levels, the situation will go out of hands of concerned quarters. It will be very unwise to churn out only rhetoric and taking unusually long time for decisions about the upcoming environmental scourges.

Bangladesh has religiously signed and endorsed a number of international treaties and conventions — the Framework Convention of Climate Change, the Montreal Protocol, the Basle Convention, the Biodiversity Convention and the like. But the country is not diplomatically brave enough — as the Maldives is — to talk across the table. The law makers (or leaders) seem to wait for the rich foreigners to volunteer and solve Bangladesh's problems on behalf of them. (The only exception in this regard is possibly the National Environment Management Action Plan, NEMAP, which recently has gone to its first phase of implementation at the grass-roots).

The country has a National Environment Policy adopted in '92, the Environment Act of '96 and about 182 laws. These are more than enough to curb (and stop) pollution of any sort in the country. The question is: who will enforce these laws? And the answer is quite simple: the law enforcing agencies. But the 'enforcers' are busy other-

wise and they don't seem to have the slightest idea about 'environment'.

Coming closer to the capital city of Dhaka from the grass-roots — the Department of Environment (DoE), the technical wing of the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF), says the air of the city is filled with poisonous gases which are seriously injurious to health; the Atomic Energy Commission says automobiles (1.42 lac) in Dhaka emit one of the highest density of lead in the world; the environmentalists attribute the pollution to vanishing trees making way for concrete structures, unabated growth of industries like tanneries and brickfields in city area and dumping of garbage on roadsides; and yesterday's newspapers revealed that the DoE has identified 'noise' as a new emerging pollution.

And on the top of everything, the political hierarchy says that 'steps' must be taken to curb all this. Good news, no doubt. But there's a triple-W question mark on it: *what steps? when are those going to be taken? and who are the translators of those?* No, there is no clear-cut answers to these simple questions.

Now what? Well, the only option left, for the time being, is to attend the Earth Summit-5, a special session of the UN General Assembly, scheduled to be held at the UN Headquarters in New York from June 23 to 27 next, to review and appraise the implementation of 'Agenda 21'.

Air, Water and Land

by Abu Imran

It is an irony that the West tries to maintain its greeneries to the required level of 25 per cent of its area, while the people in the Third World countries either for reasons of ignorance or necessity opt out for irresponsible felling of trees which in many cases is used in kitchens, kilns to create further smoke and add to the degradation of environment instead of checking it.

PEOPLE the world over, and the environmentalists in particular, now seem to be much worried about the environment since it is degrading fast. They think that if this situation is not arrested, then it won't be too far that life on the earth would be seriously threatened.

Let's first see as a layman what 'environment' means. The *Environment Encyclopedia* defines it — 'Environment suggests different things to different people... To environmental engineers, it usually means that the atmosphere in an enclosed space such as factory, office block or hospital, which the engineer has to maintain in a safe, healthy and comfortable state.'

There could be other definitions or explanations but the one above if extended to land, water and air, i.e. the surroundings we live in, perhaps would serve our purpose to throw some light on the subject.

As said environment means the surrounding we live in, so the need is to keep it clean and safe by keeping it free from pollution and degradation. So it is necessary to see how 'pollution' takes place. It does so mostly on land, water and air.

Mostly people live on land. They build houses, farms and factories on it. May be some keep their houses and premises clean but most people have the habit of not keeping the surrounding clean. They do not even throw away the sweepings and left-overs, garbage etc., in proper places like the dustbins, the garbage centres etc. Further the poor, not by option but by compulsion, have to live in congested places when hardly any civic facilities like toilets and baths are available. This necessitates them to meet their nature's need anywhere or everywhere.

Once a foreign doctor involved in health and sanitation programme was visiting a nearby slum area. He was looking for sanitary latrines, toilets etc. He was then informed that the drains and gutters were such places which operated from dawn to dusk as toilets for the children while for the adults those did so from dusk to dawn (during night). This might have been satirically told, but it was very near to the truth.

The situation in villages are not much different. There, people use farms and field, a little away from the habitation, for such purposes or build unhygienic make-shift latrines giving a little bit of privacy but ignoring where the human waste would be dumped.

Thus the helter-skelter dumping and spreading of human waste and other garbage and dirty things on land are great pollutant factors that make the environment unsafe and unhealthy.

There are normally two types of water — the still and the flowing. Ponds, small water reservoirs are the examples of the former while streams, rivers are the examples of the latter. The ponds and rivers are abused individually, collectively and even nationally.

For instance, in towns and cities, as indicated earlier, people are forced to meet their pressing needs almost everywhere if they can. For absence of public bath, people are forced to wade in ponds and wherever water is available. Too many people bathing in small ponds

most of industrial units are located in the West and most of the automobiles ply there. In Britain, for instance, they have been able to reduce its (smoke) impact since it fell from 2 (two) million metric tons in 1953 to half a million metric tons in 1976 (Ref as above). This more or less confirms the speedy gradual reduction in smoking in the West. Smokes contain CO₂ (carbon dioxide) which is injurious for health. But then it is just Allah's mercy that He has kindly created plants and trees, natural forest which inhale this poisonous gas and exhale O₂ (oxygen) which is lifeblood for the living being like man and animals (all species).

But it is an irony that the West tries to maintain its greeneries to the required level of 25 per cent of its area, while the people in the Third World countries either for reasons of ignorance or necessity opt out for irresponsible felling of trees which in many cases is used in kitchens, kilns to create further smoke and add to the degradation of environment instead of checking it. In some cases even people enjoy felling trees and encourage it with catchy local slogans like — 'Kato gachh, Bhajo maachh' (fell trees, fry fishes).

Thus, we generally see that the greenery reserves here are far short of the standard ones. Their effects have now been felt in the form of less rain, desertification, warm weather etc.

From the general observation, the need and necessity for preservation of the environment can hardly be overemphasised. Nationally and internationally attempts have been made to address the problem. Internationally, UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) an affiliated UN specialised body was formed 25 years ago with its Headquarters in Nairobi to exclusively deal with the issue. And every year June 5 is observed as the 'World Environment Day' to create greater awareness among people to keep the environment clean and safe.

Nationally, the government in appreciation of the issue have framed a policy called — 'Environment Policy 1992 and its implement action Programme', with specific objectives: 1) attaining the goal of environment preservation. 2) take appropriate plans and pro-

grammes and 3) cooperating with international efforts in this regard.

To make the international and national efforts and the observance of World Environment Day a success, the following steps may be helpful and complementary to the international, regional and national efforts:

- 1) Create greater awareness among the masses through individual/group efforts about the importance of clean and safe environment and take local action programme in this behalf.
- 2) Keep houses/premises/surroundings clean. Religion also encourages cleanliness.
- 3) Throw garbage/waste materials in dustbins and proper disposal places.
- 4) Build public toilets/baths/latrines in cities and towns and safe latrines in villages and encourage people to use them rather than the open spaces/drains and gutters.
- 5) Arrange for safe disposal of human waste far from residential places and regular upkeep of service latrines.
- 6) Discourage people to use ponds for bathing and washing purposes.
- 7) Unpolluted rivers should be developed by disallowing or at least restricting throwing in of factory waste, human waste and other pollutants and increase unpolluted river mileage in line with action programme taken in the West. Such waste could find their way in, in manners considered fit by the environmental experts.
- 8) Air pollution can be reduced by checking the emission of smoke from mills/factories, kilns, automobiles etc.
- 9) Billions of people smoke trillions of sticks of cigarettes/bidis and use other forms of tobacco creating millions of tons of smoke. Smoking if reduced, can have positive impact in checking air pollution. This can be done by moral persuasion and banning all forms of promotional 'ads' of cigarettes/tobacco.
- 10) Trees help preservation and conservation of environment besides giving food, fruits and flowers. Tree plantation should be encouraged and helter-skelter felling of trees checked.
- 11) Turn this into a social movement by integrating it with other programmes like education, health and sanitation etc.
- 12) Take other appropriate steps that may be easily implemented almost at no cost at individual and group levels.

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James Bond



by Jim Davis



DRAWN BY JOHN MCLUSKY

Metropolitan

Govt urged to accept 4-pt demand of Zoology students

The action committee, formed by the students of Zoology to remove discrimination in appointments in the Bangladesh Civil Service (Fisheries) cadre and other services requiring knowledge in Zoology, yesterday urged the government to accept its four-point demand. At a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club, the Convener of the action committee, Dewan Ali Ahsan, urged the government to take steps to enable the degree holders in Zoology (Fisheries) and Marine Biology to compete in the BCS (Fisheries) cadre service, reports BSS.

He demanded stoppage of all appointments in the fisheries sector till the final decision was taken to remove the discrimination in the case of appointments.

The representatives of the action committee called for reinstating the chairman or representatives of Zoology departments of different universities who were excluded from various decision-making committees related to the fisheries sector.



A procession of gas-operated vehicles was brought out in the city yesterday on the occasion of World Environment Day. — Star photo

Jamaat rally today

Jamaat-e-Islami will hold a rally at the north gate of Baitul Mokarram Mosque at 4:30 pm today to press its 17-point demand, reports UNB.

Dutch envoy calls on Razzag

The Ambassador of Netherlands to Bangladesh Robert A Varnis called on Water Resources Minister Abdur Razzag at the latter's residence in the city yesterday, reports UNB.

BGMEA team meets Kibria

Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria has said the government will extend all support to the export-led industries to achieve higher rate of economic growth, reports UNB.

Turkmenistan envoy presents credentials

The newly appointed Ambassador of Turkmenistan to Bangladesh Ashir Ataev presented his credentials to President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed at Bangabhaban yesterday, reports UNB.

The President hoped that the existing bonds of friendship and cooperation, particularly in the fields of trade, tourism and culture, between Bangladesh and Turkmenistan will be strengthened in the years ahead for mutual benefit of the two brotherly people.

He observed that official and high level visits between the two countries would promote greater understanding and cooperation.

President Shahabuddin conveyed, through the Ambassador, his warm greetings and best wishes to the President of Turkmenistan Saparmurot Niyazov.

Hasina calls for evolving alternative building materials

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday called for evolving alternative building materials to get rid of the adverse effect of brick burning on the environment, reports UNB.

'Alternative environment-friendly building materials will help protect the environment,' she told leaders of the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB), who called on her at her Secretariat office.

The Prime Minister stressed the importance of attaining technological development to lead the country to the path of progress and prosperity.

The IEB leaders demanded that engineers should be chartered to make building designs as bad designing increase the chance for buildings to collapse. They cited some examples of building collapse in the capital.

The IEB leaders included its President Prof Anwarul Azim and Ruhul Matin, Abul Kasem and Nurul Huda.



Members of the Parbattya Zilla Bangalee Chhatra Andolon Parishad staged a sit-in in front of the Jatiya Press Club yesterday protesting what they said eviction of Bangalee settlers from CHT in the name of rehabilitation. — Star photo

Bangladesh envoy to UAE presents credentials

The newly appointed Ambassador of Bangladesh to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Osman Sarwar Alam Chowdhury has presented his credentials to the President Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan at the presidential court in Abu Dhabi, an official handout said yesterday, reports BSS.

Ambassador of Turkmenistan meets Hasan Chowdhury

Ashir Ataev, Ambassador of Turkmenistan based in New Delhi called on State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury at the latter's office yesterday, reports BSS.

They discussed matters relating to mutual interest of the two countries with special reference to cooperation in trade and economic sector.