

Rayerbazaar Inferno

We are not sure what actually led to Wednesday afternoon's blaze that gutted a number of slums at Rayerbazaar and left three killed including a three-year old kid. Section of the press has attributed it to the bursting of gas line though. If that is true then Titas gas, the company concerned, is morally obligated to own the responsibility of the accident. How and when does a gas transmission line go bust? Definitely, when the idea of maintenance is reduced to nothing. We hope the government would make sure the company pays, more importantly, mends its ways immediately should a proper probe proves that poor maintenance was indeed the root cause of the accident.

While we wait for the authorities to find out with whom the buck really stops, the point that needs to be addressed urgently is, if one may say, the 'slumming' of Dhaka at an alarming place. So congested the whole area was that the firemen were reportedly delayed in their bid to get to the spot. Despite having reached on time they just could not swing into action. How desirably different things could have been if the extinguishers would have got a move on straightway!

This is not a reality typical of the Rayerbazaar slums. All bustees are like that. Simply because there is no plan behind them. Human necessity leads to their mushroom growth. With the gap between land and people ratio yawning day by day and rootless rural population on the move in an inexorable march to cities like Dhaka, urban migration has become the potent cause behind rapid growth of bustees. Devoid of the basic amenities these are travesty of dwelling-places. Not only that, more often than not, these are the 'armoury' and 'refuge' of the antisocials.

We counsel the government to take care of this aspect of our urban reality seriously and immediately. Eviction of the poor people who live in these slums is no answer. You just cannot stow them away to another place. They will be back in no time. The permanent deterrents to urban migration have to be found out and put in place. It is an economic challenge that calls for the employment of the poor, rootless rural people. While managing that aspect the authorities will have to do something solid and sustainable to contain the urban poor from spilling into slums all around the city.

BSCIC Industrial Zone

The wetlands of Gazipur are fast becoming graveyards for all forms of life recognisable by the human eye, courtesy the Small and Cottage Industries Corporation. The situation as it exists there now is horrid enough. What it will become if the rot is not stemmed forthwith is difficult to imagine. In God's hell creatures do live on whatever the severity of punishment. In the Gazipur hell nothing will live — and the fishes and birds, insects and water fruits are no sinners to be so punished with death. The whole picture is there in a study done by the government's own Department of Environment.

The BSCIC industrial zone set up at Konabari, Gazipur in 1987 has now 86 industrial units and together they release 370 cubic metres of liquid waste every day, besides causing considerable atmospheric pollution. Chemical analysis by DOE scientists has shown horrible contamination of the surrounding water bodies.

The DOE report very obviously knows the answer and lays it down clearly, very clearly indeed. The effluent water must first be treated before it is let out. The treatment, cleaning the waste water of all toxic elements and impurities and turning it into nearly potable condition could be done either by clusters of units when four treatment plants would be necessary or centrally through one big plant. The point is, there is a practicable and standard way out of this systematic murder of the environment. And the industrial units must pay for these treatment plants and their running and maintenance. Indeed, how can an industry be established without any provision for taking care of its wastes?

In view of the spurt in the industrial fouling up of the environment it is imperative that DOE be given power to prosecute parties falling foul of law, and to prevail on police in the matter of taking out warrants. DOE should also be empowered to suspend operation of any industrial unit in the country for a set time-limit. To guard as complex and social and physical a thing as environment, the DOE must have not only enough muscle power but also sharp and strong teeth and nails.

Nice Prospects

Agronomists at the BARC seminar on oilseeds a few days ago took a belated vow to evolve a technology to extract oil from rice bran. The obvious prospect that has been overlooked so far was brought up by none other than the well-informed Agriculture and Food Minister Matia Chowdhury. Much to the rather embarrassed Eureka-type nodding from the scientists present, so it seemed. Previous findings on the subject must have gathered dust through topsided prioritisation and funding with the plausible option going unceremoniously into oblivion. If these were followed up with further research backed by credit or allocational support from the governments we might well have hit the huge import-saver jackpot by now.

There is plenty of untapped resources with us, not quite the geological mines nor the unexplored sea-bed food reservoir capable of feeding the world many times over, but the wasteland in our mental backyard that holds a potential bonanza for us. Green jute for paper, bio-gas as a massively cheap alternative source of energy, manure from excreta and the environment-friendly recycled products from the ubiquitous plastic bags are all there for the taking. Regrettably, we have been slothfully negligent of such already known indigenous products processes. And, with new path-breaking prospects appearing as a rainbow, we want a declared government commitment to them.

Agriculture Research Revisited

"Plants also speak. But they speak only in whispers. Unless you go near them you cannot hear."

THE other day, I read a notification in the newspaper issued by Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council. The Council has invited applications from interested non-government organisations for facilitating the interaction of research community with the farmers. The objective is the testing, adaptation or rejection of available technologies by the farmers and the evolution of new technology from such positive interaction. The complexity of many of the decisions that farmers make and the subtlety of constraints to which they must adjust, argues for very close attention to and interaction with the farming community rather than a prescriptive approach. Here as elsewhere, there is room to test an open-ended 'menu' approach under which various possibilities and combination of possibilities are explained to the farmer and submitted to him/her to select, improvise and apply as appropriate.

The rationale is obvious. "Plants," as Nobel laureate Borlugh says, "do speak. But they speak only in whispers. Unless you go near them you cannot hear." Farmers listen to them day after day. Scientists, sequestered as they are, often may not.

I recall a statement made by Professor or Yunus and I quote: "Scientists have their own language which is different from the language of the people. The entire network of research institutions and scientists who work there have formed themselves into a single tribe (with sub-tribal villages, tribal chiefs and their hierarchy) with their tribal language and culture. When I questioned this, I was told: scientists needed their seclusion to concentrate on their research; but communication with the ultimate user of their research is very much in their mind. Communication works this way — national research institutions learn from the elite international research institutions. National institutions in their turn pass on this knowledge to another group

called extension agents. Finally, extension agents bring the "knowledge" to the farmer. I am told that it is not a strictly one-way communication as I have described. The national system interact with farmers directly and through many other agencies, and national and international systems also interact between them.

Given the tribal culture as it is, my guess is that the relationship is more one-way than two-way. This is particularly so because the national system is totally under the control of the government and its bureaucracy.

A sweeping generalization perhaps. Yet my experience, as a dilettante involved in both international and national research system tells me that the elite international centers involve the sub-elite national system scientists in field trials without any say in research priority or design. And the national scientists go down to the farmer's fields not to learn from them nor to work with them as partners, but to use them as free labour in very often, a condescending manner. In fact, we the national and international bureaucrats and technocrats rarely take our role as servants of the people with any grace at all. Not to speak of good grace.

I am reminded of a statement made by President Abraham Lincoln in September 1899 that I have quoted much too often. He asked, "How can labour and education be most satisfactorily combined?" He reflected further that "no other human occupation opens so wide a field for the profitable labour with cultivated thought, as agriculture." The mind already trained to thought in the country school, or higher school cannot fail to find there an exhaustless source of profitable enjoyment.

Somehow, over the years, the informal knowledge system of country schools and farmer's fields have been disjointed

from the formal cultivated thoughts of higher schools like national or international research systems.

Sustainable agriculture demands a new covenant for research under which farmers who cultivate several soil-types in varying associations and different seasons and scientists who integrate rather than fragment or reduce the complex reality can work together as partners without violating the rights and capacities of each other. Scientists have access to exotic materials and specialized knowledge. Farmers have the edge in culture specific experiential wisdom and in much that is indigenous in diverse production systems and niches.



Do or Dare!
A Z M Obaidullah Khan

The bottom line is: farmers fields are research laboratories and farmers are researchers.

The founding fathers of Consultative Group on International Agricultural research were very single-minded in establishing international centres of excellence in agricultural research to respond to the specter of hunger particularly in Asia. In the 1960s, 1970s, Asia witnessed spectacular increases in the yield and outputs of cereals like rice, wheat and maize. But the green revolution technologies altered the environment to fit the high-yielding genotypes. The focus has been on commodities rather than the systems. The second generation problems that are surfacing today due to agricultural intensification include:

- water-logging and salinization.
- soil erosion.
- surface and ground water contamination from agricul-

tural chemicals, resistance of insects, weeds, pathogens, due to present methods of control with pesticides, plateauing of yields, and — and the irreversible loss of land races and habitats.

What could be more disturbing is that in some cases, the process has led to defacto centralism and homogenization and consequent dis-empowerment of resource-poor farmers and dismantling of both biodiversity and cultural diversity. Also recognized is a new and dangerous dimension to hunger, the dismantling of natural resources base.

The crisis of poverty in Bangladesh is concentrated in the stressed and diverse areas of

rainfed agriculture which comprise about 60 per cent. of the farm land. This is further compounded by the fact that inequalities among households are made worse by the uncertainties facing communities in rainfed environments. Unlike the green revolution technology, the heterogeneity of production niches and the differing resource endowments of the farmers pose a major hurdle to homogenized breeding. In Rawanda, when Dr. Spang of CIAT involved women bean farmers in breeding process.

They selected a much larger range of cultivars for locally specific eco-systems and cultural matrices. This is because they are well aware of genotype and environment interaction in relation to physical biotic factors as well as the cultural preferences. The result has been much wider and more stable acceptance of selected cultivars. Unfortunately the distinc-

tive knowledge of women in seed selection and preservation is a discount. As Rochelleux puts it, "half or more indigenous ecological science has been obscured by the prevailing invisibility of women, their work, their interests and especially their knowledge." The challenge for the scientists is to develop research strategies that support men and women farmers in their roles as research curators.

Establishment of decentralized research efforts and, if I may say, of an uncentralized network is perhaps a pre-requisite for reconstructing research procedures and the decision-making protocol of public and private sector research agencies so that the farmers can truly participate at every stage of the research and development process. Scientific issues relevant to the aspirations of resource-poor farmers and communities, which cannot be addressed at the farmers' field level can constitute research agenda for Central Research Stations, National Research Systems, including local experiment stations can thus become skilled in helping set the agenda for strategic research by International Centres. The products of global research are then mobilized, modified, and incorporated into locally specific knowledge and circumstances through the interface of national systems. The increasing demands for natural resources sustainability on national research systems paralleled by the scarcity of funds for research require a stock taking of the roles and complementarities of local, national and global research.

The basic imperative, I believe, is technology relevance or reconciling the perceptions and local knowledge of women and men in heterogeneous rural communities with the need for increasing productivity and sustainability of both the livelihood and the natural resources base. Instead of asking "will this fit?" let the re-

searchers ask a more frightening question "will this innovation make things worse?"

For that we have to join the research process of the farmers themselves as they seek to understand natural variations. The knowledgeable outsiders will and should bring experiences from other locations and conceptual underpinnings from global efforts to discuss, debate, test or reject with the farmers in the host communities.

Institutional complementarities and collaboration flow from the two above. The institutions — local, national, international have the same mission but different roles and skills. Each researcher and informal or formal organization have different answers to offer to solve common problems. Differences must be recognized not as constraints but as potential for a dynamic learning cycle.

As our science and technology into visible resource for sustainable agriculture, let us not forget that it cannot be achieved through introduction of new crop-varieties or new breeds of animals imposed from the top. It is achieved by farmers working in specific farming systems, based on their ecological and economic resources and the constraints they face both on-farm and from beyond, namely the socio-political and cultural milieu. Respect for their indigenous practices is a prerequisite for their participation in the truest sense, and not as dependent clients. And that is also linked to the identification, management and control of resources in a given community. Sustainability for me is the principle of beginning from where the people are and what they have.

In the end, I shall plagiarize from Einstein, changing the word 'general public' to 'farmers'. "It is of great importance that the farmers be given an opportunity to experience consciously and intelligently, the efforts and results of scientific research. Restricting the body of knowledge to a small group deadens the philosophical spirit of the people and leads to spiritual poverty."

To the Editor...

Should we laugh at fat people?

Sir, Undoubtedly *Ittadi* is a nice recreational programme of Bangladesh Television. To a large extent it is the only programme that is entertaining. But I didn't like the *Ittadi* of this Eid. The producer brought and used a fat boy to make us laugh. In fact, he had a biological problem and did not have proper physical growth.

The question is: should we laugh at him?

Maeen Uddin Sabuj
416, Zia Hall
Dhaka University.

Tsk, Tsk, Biman!

Sir, Dogs are my favorite animals. Which is the reason why I'd rather rephrase your editorial printed on the 18th from "Going to Dogs" to "Going to Drains" instead. As drains are the appropriate place to dispose Biman. After successfully killing all its domestic flights they are still not satisfied and wants to do the same for the international ones.



It is shameful that the authorities managed to sell the ticket to passengers but had the nerve to postpone the flight because of shortage of staff. How ludicrous is this! Biman is lucky that this is not a western country, or else they would be settling compensation claims and many other things from now till eternity.

Masroor Ahmed Deepak
Dhaka

Where have all the employers gone?

Sir, I have read with great interest the letter "We are concerned" printed on the 3rd of February '98.

After our graduation, a friend of mine and I are looking for jobs — and if our industries like printing or advertising are employing Indian citizens, then how or where on earth will we get jobs?

We are really concerned. We do not think we would be allowed to work in India!

Montruzzaman Khan
North Bashabo, Dhaka

Taking a back seat?

Sir, As parents of children who are appearing in this year's Architecture admission test, we have been following the controversy concerning it with anxiety. After having gone through the articles published in the opinion column and having read BUET authorities official explanation, we have ventured to gather more information regarding the existing and proposed admission test systems. We have also talked to a number of teachers and students of different departments at BUET and with some recent graduates. We do not believe that the

main point of controversy is whether or not there should be separate admission tests for Engineering and Architecture courses. The authorities have, knowingly or unknowingly, admitted the need for a separate system by proposing the option to choose Drawing in place of Chemistry for those who seek admission in Architecture course. The question is whether this is good enough to achieve the intended goal. When we are looking at ways to judge a student's aptitude for Engineering or Architecture education, we are dealing with two clearly different precincts — each unique from the other in its system of education, pedagogy and the creative approach. While an engineer's strength is scientific creativity, an architect is more an artistic creator, with firm scientific basis nevertheless.

It is common sense, therefore, that a person more artistically inclined will make a better architect than someone more technical and scientific in approach. The format of last year's Architecture admission test shows 70 per cent of all questions aimed at judging the artistic and creative abilities of someone aspiring to take up a creative profession. In the proposed new format, however, the total emphasis has been shifted to Mathematics and Physics. The BUET advertisement goes to great lengths to explain the reason why the changes are being brought, but fails to mention the simple information that the artistic aptitude part has now been reduced to a meagre 30 per cent.

What we fail to comprehend is why someone who wants to be an architect and who has already proven his scientific knowledge base by obtaining 60 per cent marks in the HSC level, should have to be tested on that same terms with those who want to be engineers. Graduate architects do not design the structural, electrical and mechanical components of a building. So why are we putting them on the same level with engineers, who by definition, are supposed to do the engineering job?

BUET authorities are right when they insist that only students having science background should be eligible and that Physics should be a compulsory subject in the admission test. But here too they seem not have applied a sense of proportion. The engineer's world of physics is far more broad than that of architect, who only deals with some aspects of the subject such as light, acoustics, etc. The specially designed Physics course of undergraduate Architecture classes goes to prove this point. It is only reasonable, therefore, to expect that in the admission test also there should be separate Physics questionnaire for Architecture and Engineering. The same argument goes for Mathematics. Again, it is also common sense that mathematics proficiency requirement for computer science should be different from that of Architecture.

While talking to teachers in Architecture and Engineering departments, it was clearly seen that not only the courses but also the overall educational environment vary between departments at BUET. In fact, it would not be an unreasonable idea to have separate admission systems for different engineering departments.

Doing away with two separate tests may mean easier management and less adminis-

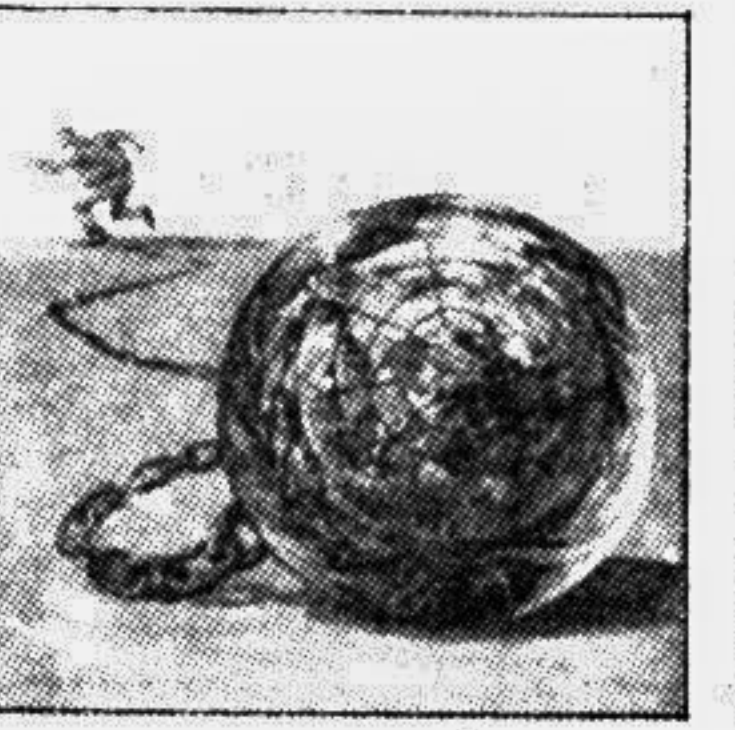
trative hassle, but BUET authorities must have the courage to admit that, rather than trying to justify the change in the name of producing better results. What we have sensed from our visit to the BUET campus is that this move has little to do with the efforts to find more scientific and appropriate method of selecting students. On the contrary, it may only be a physical manifestation of the tension and rivalry that exists between teachers of Architecture and Engineering departments and a simple move by the majority to impose a decision in an issue that concerns minorities. Logic, as everywhere else in our country, has taken a back seat here.

Mohammad Mahbubuzzaman
F-3, Road 4,
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka
Arshia Hamid Chowdhury
6-C Segunbagicha, Dhaka
A S M Anwar Hossain
79, Road 9A,
Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka

Congratulations to Kofi Annan

Sir, While the great superpower USA was making a huge hue and cry, building up all-out military preparations, insisting on bombing suspected and hidden sites for alleged nuclear and biological weapons of mass destruction of Iraq and instigating a nuclear holocaust, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's visit to Baghdad has been very successful, monumental and historic.

Kofi Annan has not only defused a live nuclear bomb diplomatically and peacefully but he has also saved the human civilisation from the brink of a



great catastrophe. We heartily and warmly congratulate him on his great accomplishment and accolade.

We would now request all the world leaders to sit together, give up their belligerent attitudes, destroy all nuclear and biological weapons, do away with UN economic sanctions and help flourish human rights, freedom, market economy and peace in this world without any distinction of race, colour, language, religion and geographical nationalities.

Let us all unite under the ingenious, talented and charismatic leadership of Kofi Annan to reach our common goal.

O H Kabir
6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

Would some members in JS be kind?

Sir, During each cyclone and tidal-bore season, scores, especially children and aged men/women get washed away in absence of a proper bridge over a *khal* close to coastal belt. A ramshackle bridge over a *khal* that divides Charpath-

ghata union of West Patiya, Chittagong, took a heavy toll in all such previous catastrophes for said reason. Though this union is just opposite the side of Fringe Bazar (Chittagong City Corporation) on the other bank of the Karnafull and under police control of Port PS of Chittagong Metropolitan Police, yet the union is under district administration of Patiya Thana (UZ). Peculiarly, this union has been tied with a part of Anowara Thana to form Chittagong-11 constituency. The literacy rate, since '47 here is too poor to produce an MP.

As such, to get any development project for such a union of West Patiya is very complex. The area being an undeveloped part of Patiya, party tickets always went to candidates of Anowara. So, elected MPs are previous Mr Akhtaruzzaman Babu (AL), who absconded for whole term because of a murder charge against him. During that time, Mr Shahnewaz-Mantu (BNP MP of East Patiya) acted as MP in-charge of Chittagong-11, merely performed the routine jobs. During BNP period (1993), due to relentless persuasion of a social worker, the then Fishery and Livestock Minister directed district authority concerned to do needful. Thana and Zilla Parishad passed the bill to the LGED Ministry in 1994. (Memo/1035/1920 dtd 6 Feb '94). LGED placed it in the second position on the priority list of LGED PL-480 Title-3. But due to political upheaval, the bridge file did not see light, but probably got washed away in that upheaval, before bridge plan brought on the drawing board.

The present MP, also from Anowara, pledged to get this bridge constructed if he won the seat. He got the seat. He raised this point before the House and the related minister, but people are yet to find anything in that direction. Late, Mr A B M Mohiuddin Chowdhury (Mayor City Corporation) has practical knowledge about the human sufferings, death toll and property loss occurred during cyclones, got moved and sent a letter to Mr Anwar Hossain Manju, a year back, for providing a permanent bridge and the connecting road. (Semi formal letter # 42/97 dtd 19 Feb '97) in place of present dilapidated perilous infrastructure. But more than a year elapsed and cyclone season ahead, nothing concrete is visible.

If democracy really has taken some shape, then would some members of the Jatiya Sangsad bring this point before the minister concerned as the Parliament is in session now.

A R Chowdhury
Uttara, Dhaka

Match sticks and greenery

Sir, A match-box is a household necessity in every home — from billionaire to slum-dweller. Given a population of 12 crore, rule of thumb indicates about a crore households of varying denomination in the country. A match stick is used to inflame gas burner, oven in urban, fuel-wood in rural areas, and to light up cigarettes etc., everywhere else.

Each stick, carved out of timber wood, is about 4 millimetre long capped by combustible powder of which a match box contains 40. Ignition is effected by burning the tip and a very small portion of the stick only. Major portion of the

stick remains a waste and later thrown away. The need of match boxes, considering 3 a month for each household works out 36 crores per annum, given the use of lighters restricted to a small segment of our society.

Needless to say, the stated calculus makes loss in sticks staggering. In other words, a large number of trees, which goes into making match sticks, enough to make a goodly chunk of forest is pitifully lost.

In many countries, match sticks are made of pressed hard paper produced by recycling and then are covered with wax to lend infamibility. A simple innovation like this might spare numerous trees fell axes of the woodcutter and help create a forest whose benign bounty is intertwined with the work and woof of our every-day existence.

Li Col (Rtd) M Gholam Mostafa
Dhaka

Jabar Kata

Sir, Regarding Mr. Alif Zabr's denture problems (DS February 20 issue), May I humbly suggest a possible remedy or relief — to some extent? Mr. AZ should try doing less "Jabar Kata". No pun intended!

A A Chowdhury
House # 8, Road 1213
Banani, Dhaka.

"Lost integrity"

Sir, Dr Sabrina Rashid's letter titled "Lost Integrity" was totally biased. By reading the letter one would think that all poor people have integrity and that rich men lack it. She exemplified this by stating the incident of the young girl who refused to take the money of two flower strings because the letter writer had only taken one.

She had also said that religion is not doing much to rectify this situation. Once I wanted to give a two-taka note to a beggar, but he tried to grab the ten-taka note which I had in my other hand. Certainly some rich men do have integrity and some do lack it, but it is not fair to say that only poor people are honest whereas the rich class only deceives others.

Arbab Quadri
House No 92A, Road No 7A,
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

"We are concerned"

Sir, The letter "We are concerned" (Daily Star, Feb 3) brought to my mind another worry.

A couple of months ago a friend of mine was telling me that she was interviewed along with a group of ten/twelve ladies about their washing habits. This research was undertaken for a multinational company operating here. I learnt from my friend that she was asked the same sort of questions and the research was conducted in the same manner as she had experienced earlier when a local research company interviewed her.

I wonder where then is the qualitative edge that the Indian researchers have over the Bangladeshi researchers? Obviously the Indians are not doing the research work free for us. We are not only paying research organisation outside our country but also not helping in providing employment to our own youths. This is really worrying.

Mrs Mahbuba Rahman
39 Lakshmi Bazar, Dhaka 1000.

Clean castle's control campaign



Sir, DCC as usual has started another campaign to free the city from mosquitoes. Let us hope for success of this campaign. As a man dealing with pest and pesticides, I would like to put forward my suggestions to DCC authorities.

Fogging operation is very expensive no doubt to kill the adult mosquitoes. It is not possible to kill them once they enter into houses, small drains and open spaces between houses after emergence from breeding places. Fogging has no residual action as such mosquito flocks can move freely after operation is finished. Besides if the dosage of insecticide is not uniformly released from fogging machine it will hardly kill mosquitoes. They may remain unconscious due to pressurised air blowing from machine.

The most effective way to control mosquitoes is to destroy the larvae at the breeding places by spraying larvicides at least twice a week. All the roadside drains are now filled with sewerage water which encourages and enhances quick breeding process of the mosquitoes. So adjustment of dosages of larvicide is very important depending on larvae population and drains' condition.

Sprays are seen to carry insecticide in PVC/plastic bottles. Solvents of insecticides react chemically with such containers and thus affect their efficacy. It should be carried in amber coloured glass bottles.

All exposed drains should be covered by concrete slabs so that mosquitoes could not enter the drains and lay eggs. This will also prevent throwing of garbage and other type of rubbish in the drains and thus save cleaning charges to a great extent.

Cleanliness is a precondition for mosquito control. So house owners are to be instructed to keep the inside drains of their premises clean.

Road side bushes, rubbish and garbage are to be collected by DCC everyday as these have become shelters for the adult mosquitoes.

City dwellers may be supplied with larvicide in small bottles free of charges which they could spray inside open spaces of their houses by portable hand spray.

Slum houses are sanctuaries of adult mosquitoes and so is the dirty railways which passes through the city. Railway authorities should keep their tracks clean and resist the slum dwellers not to use the railways as garbage pits.

Interior drains of all government officials' residential areas are not cleaned which are safe havens for mosquitoes.

Last but not the least, a legislation on mosquito control for Dhaka city should be promulgated envisaging the responsibilities of DCC and city dwellers.

M A Jalil
372/B, Khilgaon Dhaka