



# Future of Dhaka

by Morshed Ali Khan

**Dhaka is at present one of the most polluted cities in the world. In the way number of vehicles is increasing, the city air will no longer be breathable if black smoke is not firmly dealt with. The Department of Environment (DoE) is occasionally carrying out checks on vehicles and are warning them with a sticker on the windshield. But is this enough?**

WHAT is the future of Dhaka? Nobody seems to know the answer for sure. Considering its present trend of growth, it is not easy to say what our beloved capital would look like in the future. Every sector of the metropolis is in fact gasping for air.

Its streets are crammed with traffic, its air is poisoned, lakes earth-filled with will for housing projects and parks and playgrounds converted into business houses. While its 22 canals have long disappeared, the poor Buriganga, Balu and the Turag rivers are now openly polluted by deadly industrial wastes.

Slightest rainfall creates massive water logging as Dhaka's drainage system has almost collapsed. Its horizon is expanding in an unbelievably haphazard way. Water, gas and electricity are in short supply. The facts may be distressing to the Dhaka lovers. But this is the cruel reality.

Believing our mayor Hanif, if we say there are nine million people in the city, within the next ten years the metropolis will have an estimated 18 million population. Now let's see how visionary our planners, engineers, architects and policy makers are about the future of Dhaka.

Years ago there was a TV ad

of a new bank on the popular Channel-4 in Britain. The ad started with a scene in a traditional British bank where a couple enters to avail some services. As they ask for details on a personal loan the bank clerk hands over a leaflet and asks them to read it. Next, when the couple asks for details on a joint account, again the clerk gives them a leaflet. After a while, the couple — looking pretty sickened now — emerges from the bank burdened with a huge pile of leaflets. The next scene shows the same couple entering the new bank and being counselled by a team of young professionals.

The reason I mentioned this story is that its first half goes well with the people who are being trusted with our resources to protect our capital from decadence. Be it the Dhaka City Corporation, Rajuk, Public Works Department or else, whenever the officials are approached for comments on any immediate city problems they bounce back,

"Here is a World Bank or ADB or GOB project for you."

Under close scrutiny many of these projects are often so ambitious and unrealistic that you keep having doubts about their sincerity. And many such projects I heard of few years ago, have either been abandoned or are lying idle halfway "because the money has run out."

Unplanned urbanisation will undoubtedly pose one of the city's biggest problems in the future. Townships or ghettos are being added to the capital in an alarming rate without any plan whatsoever. These townships will not only add to the chaos in terms of management but also breed crime. If we examine some city areas it won't be difficult to understand. Demra, for instance, is a new area of the city. It is one of the most crime prone areas of the city. None of the government or non-government agencies asked a question when this part was built in

the most unplanned way over the years. If you walk into inner Demra you will see the extent of irregularities. Extremely narrow lanes, badly constructed buildings and over-flowing drains are characteristics of these areas. The entire area looks so unhealthy that it makes you feel sorry — especially for our future generation. We are not talking about Madartek, Goran, Khilgaon, Badda, Joar Sahara, Bhashantek, Gabtali and Char Kamrang.

Since our independence Rajuk has acted as a mere 'real estate developer' despite being the sole authority to approve building plans, prepare plans for new city areas and ensure a healthy city development. But successive governments have only used Rajuk to extract valuable residential and commercial plots in the city and then sell them to influential individuals. Nobody has ever thought Rajuk should be reorganised. It must be given enough power and re-

sources to plan for our city and implement. Most importantly, the men who would run the show must possess academic vision for the city. It should be one of the prerequisites for setting up such an office.

At present most of Rajuk's top posts are filled by seasoned bureaucrats who show more skills in file saving than development of our city. The few technocrats who are working here have been tuned to the usual rhyme and rhythm of the office — not much bothered with the future of the city.

Both government officials and a wide range of professionals now agree that lack of coordination among different service organisations is the main obstacle to Dhaka's development. This problem can easily be overcome with government initiative.

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black smoke is not firmly dealt with. The Department of Environment (DoE) is occasionally carrying out checks on vehicles and is warning them with a sticker on the windshield. But is this enough? With limited resources the DoE cannot do what it should do to stop pollution. Isn't it time for all to stop?

About the worsening traffic congestion and Dhaka's bad drivers a popular joke goes this way. An American tourist rides through the city in a chauffeur driven car. As the driver overruns the red lights one after the other, the bewildered tourist, with his eyes wide open, asks the driver, "what does red light mean here?"

The driver replies without hesitation, "It means you may go."

"The amber?" asks the American.

"The amber means you can go. And the green means you must go," replies the driver.

"Where do you stop then?" enquired the foreigner.

"Only at the traffic jam, sir," replied the driver.

Well, the driver seems to know his destination. But what about our leaders who claim to be leading us to a bright future. Do they know where we are all heading?

# Why are Students Not Serious?

by Dr Amrik Singh

**The brain drain phenomenon has been a real problem all these decades. In the process, the proportion of competent and talented teachers came down sharply and standards began to decline. They have not picked up during the last 20-30 years even after the rate of student enrolment came down from 13-14 per cent to around 5 per cent per year. This happened in the early '70s and has continued since then.**

WHY do students choose to absent themselves from classes so consistently and so regularly? A number of teachers raise this question and do so quite often. Their answer, sad to say, is generally superficial. "They are not interested in study" is what is usually said. This is not fair. What they should do is to understand the issue in respect of its deeper implications.

What they need to understand is that the student is as much a victim of mis-governance and wrong economic policies of those in power as the rest of us are. To take a specific example, one has only to look at the rate of economic growth. For the first four decades after 1947, the average rate of growth was 3 per cent per year. The Hindu rate of growth, as one member of the Planning Commission, who is no longer alive, put it caustically. For the last decade or so, the rate of growth has somewhat picked up, though it cannot be said that there is an even curve of growth or that it is satisfactory.

This is for the simple reason that the rate of growth of population most of the time has been 2.5 per cent per year. If the rate of growth of the economy was 3 per cent and the growth of population was 2.5 per cent, they more or less cancelled out each other. In other words, poverty has continued to be as much a problem as it used to be before 1947. According to most estimates, 40 per cent of people lived below the poverty line before

1947. The proportion seems to have come down marginally but not by more than 5-10 per cent. This is loosely put for the reason that the estimates vary and economists keep on arguing with each other about what constitutes poverty.

The honest truth is that the population has increased almost 3 items and there is more and more pressure on everything, including air and water. As to those who live below the poverty line, the absolute number has grown substantially though the proportion continues to be the same approximately.

In contrast, soon after 1947, more and more schools and colleges came to be established. This was done to meet the unmet demand for more colleges which had been manifesting itself even when the British were around. With the change of government, the new rulers met this demand as well as they could. In the first quarter century after 1947, particularly in the '50s and '60s, the rate of student enrolment in colleges and universities was 13-14 per cent per day. Such a high rate of growth has never been known

in any part of the world.

So much of dilution of quality that we encounter today took place because a large number of new entrants into the teaching profession were sub-standard. At the same time, a large number of teachers, in addition to doctors and engineers, started migrating abroad. The brain drain phenomenon has been a real problem all these decades. In the process, the proportion of competent and talented teachers came down sharply and standards began to decline. They have not picked up during the last 20-30 years even after the rate of student enrolment came down from 13-14 per cent to around 5 per cent per year. This happened in the early '70s and has continued since then.

In a situation where the proportion of those who pass out from colleges was high, as evident from the high rate of growth of student enrolment, the rate of economic growth was never high and generally hovered around 3 per cent. Unemployment was bound to grow. Employment exchanges have a very large roster of persons who are qualified but are unable to get jobs. According to the cur-

rent figures, the number of those registered for jobs is between 30 and 40 million.

The details provided above make it clear that students who join college are not really interested in pursuing higher studies. They join largely because there is nothing else to do and the tuition fee is in any case exceedingly low. Except for Maharashtra which raised the fees marginally on two separate occasions, most other states have not chosen to do. The fee charged by most colleges is approximately the same as it was in 1947. Meanwhile, the cost of living has risen 30-40 times but there is no attempt to raise the tuition fee.

It needs to be recognised that even when students do not study seriously, they enjoy being in college. For a large number of them, a college is like a club. They get the opportunity to interact with their own peers. Therefore, if the family is able to support a student without his having to earn a living, there is never a problem. It was in this context that the phrase "baby sitting" came to be used for college education. At college, all students are not always educated. To quote an extent, they

are kept busy and given the illusion of academic activity. Linked to it is a related issue.

Standards of performance even at the school level are downright unsatisfactory. Those who join college do so partly in order to learn what they should have learnt at school and partly because they expect to acquire something more in college. It is difficult to say for definite what is the proportion of school syllabus at the college level. Generally it is believed that the proportion is 50-50. That is why college education is, not unoften, described as part school and part college education.

Can this situation be changed? In theory, there should be no difficulty about it. In practice, all kinds of difficulties will be encountered. A pre-condition for upgrading school education is that those who pass out should find employment in the organised sector. This means faster industrial growth, modernisation of agriculture and an efficient service sector. Everyone talks about these highly desirable things. In actual practice, so far we have been unable to break with

the tradition of low economic performance, lack of control over population and a focus on quality, both at the school and college level.

Whatever has been stated above should help most teachers to understand that the problems of education are partly educational and partly non-educational. In regard to the latter, they do not have a very significant role to play. It is only in regard to education that they can play a role, of course, within limits.

One thing that they can do and ought to do is to ensure that their curriculum is made both relevant to contemporary requirements and there should be a certain degree of alignment between what students learn in educational institutions and what they are required to do when they enter the world of work. This kind of alignment does not exist even in the case of polytechnics.

A large number of industrialists are critical of what is done in polytechnics. According to them, even after students have spent a few years in polytechnics, they are not fully trained to handle jobs in industry. This example is mentioned here so as to reinforce the point that contact with real life is not only vital but also indispensable.

— Mandira

The author is a former Vice Chancellor of Delhi University.

# Save Dhaka Dwellers

by M M Rahman

THE inhabitants of Dhaka city are facing an ominous immediate future. A large fraction of the inhabitants are going to suffer from cancer, bronchial diseases and heart diseases in the next few years, and many of them will die. And this is because of the polluted air they are forced to breathe, particularly during the dry season which lasts for about 3 to 4 months. There is no system of a SMOG alarm in our country. In western countries, the concentrations of pollutants reach values above certain levels considered harmful when SMOG formation occurs due to meteorological reasons whereby the formation of an inversion layer does not permit the pollutants to dissipate away, and SMOG alarm is given; people are advised not to go out of doors; activities (like driving automobiles) which lead to emission of pollutants are restricted.

Do we have a SMOG situation now in Dhaka? Probably not for 3 to 4 months. What pollutants do we have? NO<sub>x</sub>, CO, O<sub>3</sub>, peroxyacetyl nitrate, polycyclic hydrocarbons, organo-lead compounds, and dust particles. What are the concentrations? Who will tell us? Probably you don't need to wait for somebody to analyse the air samples; the concentrations reach such levels that you feel the presence of the pollutants yourself with your senses of perception. Most horrible are the dust particles. They offer a surface where all other gaseous pollutants accumulate through adsorption. This increases their density by more than 1000 fold. Further, the finer the particles, the more dangerous they are. Finer particles offer a higher surface area. And finer particles can pass through the nostrils and the trachea, when we breathe. People are using cloth masks for protection from dust particles. These dust masks are probably not very effective for the finer, more dangerous particles. Therefore, even if the concentration of the gaseous pollutants do not reach harmful levels, the presence of dust particles makes the ambient air in Dhaka dangerous. We in Dhaka are very unfortunate because it does not rain during the dry season. Raining out of pollutants, particularly the dust particles, does not therefore occur. In addition to air pollution, we have the menace of sound pollution caused particularly by indiscriminate use of deafening sound blasters in roadside shops and the hydraulic horns of trucks and buses.

What has made the situation so critical in Dhaka? The city

is overpopulated. It has grown without proper planning. It has too few major roads, and the minor roads are too narrow. Rajuk is permitting construction of buildings with no consideration for people's safety and health. Look at the Gausia market and the New Market, and the garment factories. This unplanned growth has led to overload of traffic on the roads during working hours.

Over and above this basic fault comes the inefficiency of the administrative sectors and lack of discipline everywhere. The city corporation is unable to clear the garbage regularly. WASA is unable to maintain a proper drainage and sewerage system. Various government agencies are digging up roads and leaving loose earth over the roads for months; this is one of the important sources of particulate emission. BRTA and the police are unable to ensure that only automobiles in good condition run on the streets. Auto-rickshaws with two-stroke engines, emitting particulates and carcinogenic hydrocarbons, are still increasing in number. Government is unable to ensure a rule of law. Illegal occupation of roads by hawkers and others, disobeying traffic rules while driving automobiles, throwing any kind of garbage (e.g. used mobile), etc. do not seem to be punishable offences. The result: among others, horrible traffic jam and air pollution.

One can go on writing about these, but do what? To save the inhabitants of Dhaka? No, one is safe as the pollutants, particularly the finer dust particles, travel and reach less densely populated areas of the city where well-to-do people live. We have to come up to agree to take drastic measures to save ourselves. Some measures must be taken urgently at least for the dry season: no more any construction work which leaves dust emitting earth by the roadside; no more auto-rickshaws; no more road-blocking by hawkers and others; no more automobiles emitting black smoke at least (remember that even clear automobile exhaust contains pollutants like CO, NO<sub>x</sub> and hydrocarbons!); no more leaded gasoline. Let Rajuk ponder over what has become of the Dhaka city, and let it have some mercy on its inhabitants; let it revise its rules for building up structures. Let there be no more high-rise buildings without making provision for wide roads. Finally, let all of us pay a little more respect to the laws of the country, and cooperate with the Government to establish the rule of law.

# A Broken Homeland

by Emily Wax

MOST teenagers see only on television what Amina Ashraf witnessed five years ago during a visit to her native Bangladesh: the broken bodies of her people killed by a furious cyclone that whipped through a village.

Although she had immigrated to Queens with her family in 1991, the devastation remained part of her consciousness, especially in recent months when news of floods and tornadoes in Bangladesh inspired her to start a fund-raising team with her Bengali Club at Long Island City High School. "I saw how people were dying. There were bodies everywhere," said Amina, a soft-spoken girl with dark brown hair who lives in Astoria.

"We here in the United States have a responsibility to do something. A dollar can save a person's life." Emotionally weakened by frequent reports of their country's natural disasters, some Bangladeshis in New York are even more distraught by recent findings that arsenic in their homeland's drinking water has inflicted a cancer on villagers, causing severe weight loss, skin spotting, warts, sore and ultimately death. The World Health Organization fears that the arsenic, which occurs naturally, infects millions.

"Every few years they go one step ahead and then three steps back," said Morshed Alam, a Jamaica Estates activist and president of the Astoria-based American-Bangladeshi Friendship Association. His group raised about \$200,000 in aid. "The whole country keeps suffering," said Alam, who emigrated in 1984. "All over the city, Bangladeshis say that sending donations home has helped soothe their despair, even if the amounts are modest. About 10,000 emigrants from Bangladesh settled in New York City between 1990 and 1994, about half of whom live in Queens, according to the Department of City Planning's most recent numbers. At the Bengali Club at Long Island City High School, Amina set up a committee of eight students to gather funds. The school has one of the largest numbers of Bangladeshi students in the city, about 200.

By making announcements and by collecting cash from

teachers and students, they raised about \$228, given by largely working-class families. Amina gave the money to her uncle, who was traveling to Bangladesh and who then donated it to a charity there.

"The first time you hear about it, you feel sorry," said Mohammed Hassan, 16, a member of the Bengali club. "Then you do something. You put flyers up. You talk to people." Amina Farukh, a 15-year-old student who covers her hair with a scarf in the Muslim tradition, said she went door to door collecting from neighbors and friends. "Anything people wanted to give, \$2 or \$10, was helpful," she said.

With the support of their teacher, Abdul Azad, and with the help of school administrators such as Joanne Epstein, coordinator of student activities, students said the entire school tried to help. "The villages are poor," said Ali Hassan, 15, who has family in Bangladesh. "It's not like they can just go to Sears and buy new furniture if their homes are flooded."

Far from the relative economic prosperity of New York, Bangladesh is a poor country where the life expectancy is 58, and 70 percent of the 126 million people are rice and sugar cane farmers. It is also one of the most riverine countries in the world, which causes flooding and environmental woes, said Kamrul Hasan Sheikh, Bangladesh's U.S. ambassador, who is based in New York City. The country has lost millions of lives to natural disasters, including a severe cyclone in 1970 in which an estimated 500,000 people died. In May, 1996, officials and rescue workers reported an estimated 600 people had died in a tornado. Last January, cold weather killed about 190 people.

During the summer, villagers found hope when the government received \$32.4 million from the World Bank to combat the arsenic problem. But the process has been slow.

"This is a very huge problem for Bangladesh," said Sheikh, who said he and other Bangladeshi professionals have raised about \$90,000 to send home. "We need international help."

The author is a freelance writer. Courtesy: Newsday

# Governments Refuse Ban on Child Soldiers

**A new report puts the number of children actively involved in combat around the world at 300,000, a phenomenon vigorously opposed by a growing number of international agencies. Gemini News Services reports on the reluctance of governments — both in the South and the North — to do anything about it.**

Mike Crawley writes from London

GOVERNMENTS have dealt a blow to the burgeoning international campaign against the use of children as soldiers by failing to agree to increase the minimum age for military service.

International negotiations on amending the Convention on the Rights of the Child were set to run for as long as two weeks this month in Geneva but ended abruptly after just one day.

Catherine von Heidenstam, the Swedish chairwoman of the negotiations, said there was no point holding the discussions because of lack of consensus on a proposal to ban the recruitment of soldiers under age 18. The current minimum age under the Convention on the Rights of the Child is 15.

The only thing that the nearly 50 government representatives could agree on was that informal discussions on the proposal — which agencies call the "straight 18s protocol" — should continue for another year.

But Stuart Maslen, co-ordinator of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, says it's unlikely that the negotiating countries will adopt the protocol even in a year "unless either the principle of consensus is overridden or a weak and unacceptable compromise is supported by governments". The governments have said they want to reach consensus on the child soldiers proposal rather than submit it to a majority

vote. "We will certainly continue our efforts to achieve a straight-18s protocol," says Maslen. This year will be crucial. We can judge at the end how much we have achieved."

He says the US Pakistan are the strongest opponents to the 18-year-old minimum while Britain and Iran are not far behind. Maslen was also disappointed at the low turnout of African nations to the Geneva meeting; only Angola, Egypt and Ethiopia were represented.

This development is a setback to the efforts of the coalition, which was created only last year when seven major agencies banded together to form an umbrella group. Concern about child soldiers is so high that several organisations — such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch — have made the issue a key campaign theme for 1999.

Their lobbying comes in response to the rapid growth in

the use of child soldiers: a new Amnesty report issued to coincide with the Geneva meeting says 300,000 under-18s are active combatants in conflicts around the globe.

Activists attribute the phenomenon to two key factors: The decreasing weight of automatic weapons, which have become light enough to be carried and fired by children as young as 10, and the shift away from war between states toward civil war and internal strife.

But a significant issue that cannot be ignored is the fact that the children who end up fighting come from the most disadvantaged sectors of some of the world's poorest countries. According to the new report from Amnesty International, called *The Firing Line: War and Children's Rights*, the most likely recruits are children separated from their families, the least educated and the poorest. They're not only the easiest to kidnap because they lack power, but also are the most likely to volunteer because en-

listing gives them food, clothing and shelter they might otherwise lack.

It's even believed that some army leaders prefer to recruit children because they're less likely to question authority and aren't afraid to fight, or because their small size and agility make them adept at such tasks as planting land mines.

A Congolese rebel officer told *Agence France Presse*: "The *kadogo* (boy soldiers) make every good soldier because they don't worry about anything. They obey orders, they are not concerned about getting back to their wife or family, and they don't know fear either."

One of the most notorious examples of using children as soldiers is in northern Uganda, where the Lord's Resistance Army led by Joseph Kony is fighting a guerrilla war against the Ugandan government. The LRA has systematically abducted as many as 8,000 boys and girls, according to Unicef, and forced them to fight. Other rebel forces that stand

accused of conscripting children include the Kurdish PKK in Turkey and the Taliban, which overran Afghanistan.

Burma's ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council has forcibly rounded up under-18s from schools for military service.

A selection of other countries where one or both sides in battle has recently used child soldiers reads like the list of the world's most stubborn conflicts: Sri Lanka, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan.

A change to the Convention on the Rights of the Child would not only affect the armies of developing countries, but also the West. For instance, Britain enlists volunteers at 16 and sends 17-year-olds into combat. More than 40 countries accept volunteers under age 18, and only a dozen of them make 18 the minimum age for active duty.

Dan Seymour, child rights adviser to the British government's Foreign Office and a co-

author of *The Firing Line*, says in the report that some developed countries are leading the opposition to the proposal.

"They wish to recruit those who will not go on to further education as they are essential for the lower ranks of their armed forces," says Seymour. "If these children leave school at 16, they are likely to find alternative careers if the armed forces cannot recruit them for another two years."

The Amnesty report goes on to discuss the impact on children of participating in battle. Even if child soldiers survive a conflict and aren't physically wounded — unlikely, as the odds are stacked against them because of their relative weakness and vulnerability compared with adult soldiers — they rarely emerge psychologically unscathed.

In training, the methods of instilling discipline are brutal. Both girls and boys are forced to kill, their victims often known to them, and are sometimes raped by adult "comrades-in-arms". Combined with the experience of combat, of seeing mass killings and participating in them, the emotional trauma is immense.

Afterwards, they're typically ill-suited for any work other than soldiering. When they should have been spending time in school, they spent it on the battlefield. It they fought on the "wrong" side, they might be rejected by their home community.

