

Dhaka, the Urban Jungle

by Tazeen Mahnaz Murshid

The traffic jams reflect a want of basic education and training on how to drive, indicate and negotiate turnings and crossings on the road. The rickshaws and trucks do not keep to their lanes. There are far too many vehicles for the narrow roads. For travellers, their discomfort is compounded by the emission of noxious fumes from baby taxis and motor cycles which consume leaded fuel with inadequate exhaust filters. Apparently, the inhabitants of Dhaka city are exposed to 50 tons of leaded octane a year.

THIS winter, like last winter and the winters before that, I made my annual pilgrimage from London to Dhaka ostensibly to carry out some research, but essentially to recharge my waning batteries for the year ahead. Each year, I am struck by numerous changes: some agreeable, some unappealing and some decisively worrying.

It is pleasant to find increasing numbers of women in the workforce and even heading their own enterprises. The bustle of economic activity no longer appears to be entirely donor-driven. The social and entertainment scene has increased more to offer: there is a theatre world and a world of painters and musicians, and it is possible to mingle with them socially at private parties and public gatherings. There is a thriving market for art and artefacts, indicative of a more prosperous middle class.

It is a less restless middle class than ten years ago. There is a greater sense of purpose and achievement. There is an awareness of potential and creativity. This finds expression in microcredit programmes, in individual and group initiatives to strengthen democracy, legal literacy, accountability and public awareness.

The society needed positive changes to fight out of the stagnating pall of historical wrongs. The trial of the killers of Bangabandhu will no doubt help to lay the national psyche at rest.

Despite my optimism about the national ability to mobilise in the hour of need, as recently reflected in the fight against the terrors of floods and prevent the diarrhoeal epidemics and mass starvation defying all

forecasts of doom and gloom, and as demonstrated during the mass struggle to restore democracy and the electoral process, it became clear during this visit that the country is like a tinderbox. A latent seething violence dominates the streets of Dhaka city. Travelling by rickshaw along the jammed streets of the old town like Bangsal Road or Nabadipura Road, piercing eyes tear down your shawl to have a glimpse of your bag or earrings. Hands reach out apparently clutching your rickshaw for support but ready to pounce on your handbag secured tightly between your ankles.

Compared to last year the drivers have learnt to wait patiently in the cue and not sound the horns and ring the bells as deafeningly. But the moment some space opens up in front there is a scramble for it and swearing at competitors. The rickshaws dash forward as if fleeing from the devil himself. The only rule in this realm of anarchy is not to hit anyone or be hit by someone. When rickshaw tires get entangled, as they frequently do, there is a shower of abuse that spares no mother or sister, and it is accompanied by the threat of a fist-fight or worse.

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The anarchy on the road reflects the disorder that has set in the body politic. The reckless permission granted for construction of multi-storied complexes without a cohesive planning structure for the city to allow for adequate facilities for parks, parking, shopping complexes, health and educational establishments in designated areas has turned Dhaka into a dangerous urban jungle. Residential areas have lost their character. Schools are housed in family homes in Dhanmondi and Gulshan, without adequate facilities for recreation and outdoor play. Even 'universities' have been allowed in such areas. Huge shops have encroached on to pedestrian zones and main streets, such as Satmasjid Road in front of Star Kabab.

These initiatives have given rise to additional parking problems, traffic jams and noise totally unsuitable in residential areas. These congested places pose a terrible fire hazard. For there are no open places where people can run to for shelter should there be a fire. These enterprises should be rehoused in new development sites of the expanding city where purpose built structures are established. Only a few selected complexes may be allowed to remain after due consultation with local inhabitants. The local inhabitants should set themselves up into committees to negotiate the safety and security of their environment with planners.

People have enterprise and initiative and have gone through great lengths to fork out a living for themselves. On

North South Road, I found that in the space between two concrete buildings, someone had put up two make-shift bamboo floors. He had a tea shop on the bottom floor and on the top, he tended to two goats, all visible from the road. While this shows some creativity at the art of survival, it also flouts safety and security regulations. Is there an official view on this? Do citizens feel differently? Perhaps local communities should have a say on how they should live and how much encroachment they can allow on their rights and privacy?

The rot in the body politic that manifests itself in every public place probably began in the social anarchy that had set in the early eighties when all social rules and values appeared to break down. I recall my sense of surprise, when in 1980, during one of my trips home from college in Oxford, I found evidence of cheating among virtually every service provider I encountered in Dhaka, whether it was the plumber, the electrician, the mail, the meter reader for water or electricity. And for the first time I wondered what values these people imparted to their children. I shuddered at how close to home this corruption had come, and felt the nausea that I had experienced in Calcutta earlier when every encounter involved a middle man asking for bribe whether to find a taxi or buy a cinema ticket and where even the bank cashier would refuse to give the full exchange value of foreign currency claiming he did not have change.

Today this social anarchy has given way to total anarchy and lawlessness. There is no social or political contract that



is operational or clearly defined and enforced. The political uncertainties of the independence period has certainly been a contributory factor.

Politically, there are various issues of concern. Our political leadership is out of touch with their constituency. People want good government, amicable dialogue between the government and opposition, restoration of the rule of law, security on the streets, imposition of traffic regulations, a healthy educational atmosphere, financial stability, etc.

Instead, we are threatened with hartal, street violence and disruption to the economy in the days ahead, despite the fact that the government has announced early elections in the year 2000! The strategy is likely to be suicidal, for apart

from toppling the government there appears to be no clear agenda. No wonder, the common man is fed up. This was not the democracy he struggled to establish.

Bangladesh is a fledgling democracy. In a democracy, changes in government are effected through the political process via elections. Constitutions are strengthened by grassroots development initiatives where people's needs are identified and articulated by political parties. Street agitation and non-cooperation movements are reserved for use against autocratic or colonial regimes which do not serve the interests of the people.

We, the citizens of Bangladesh have a right to demand good governance both from the opposition and the

ruling party. This cannot be unless the two sides agree to abide by a set of acceptable and negotiable rules. The whole country is sitting on the precipice of lawlessness and anarchy, the root of which lies in politically initiated agitation over decades. It is time to turn the tide, but the initiative must come from the political leadership.

Let there be debate on television, newspapers seminar rooms. Let the opposition give us policies, tell us how it would do a better job of government than the sitting government. Tell us why we should vote for them. Show us your strengths. Don't sacrifice your cadre on the streets for intangible gains. Don't hark back to the past. Give us your vision of our future. Win our trust. Don't steal

our hard-earned freedom, our right to live.

Let the ruling party do the same. Build up public opinion, especially over controversial issues before acting on them. Take the country with you when you initiate change. Let people know why certain decisions were inevitable. Set up think-tanks for every ministry so that all alternatives are clear to you before you act on any. Let your record of achievements speak for you.

The age of the politics of rhetorics and personalities should be discarded for issues will be the key to future negotiations between the politicians and the electorate. Our politicians would be wise to listen to the mood of the people. It is time to return to the age of contract.

Apocalypse Now!

What does the year 2000 hold for the world? Mark Sommer from Berkeley, California, in this Inter Press Service commentary, says it may have no real significance, but it is causing pre-millennial tension.

THE year 2000 may be just another transition, without any real importance, but the attention it is receiving around the world could have a massive effect.

The roots of apocalyptic myth run deep in human experience. Nearly every culture and religion embraces the notion of an end-time (or repeated cycles of life-and-death), a story foretelling the destruction of the world as we know it and the emergence of a new and better one in its place.

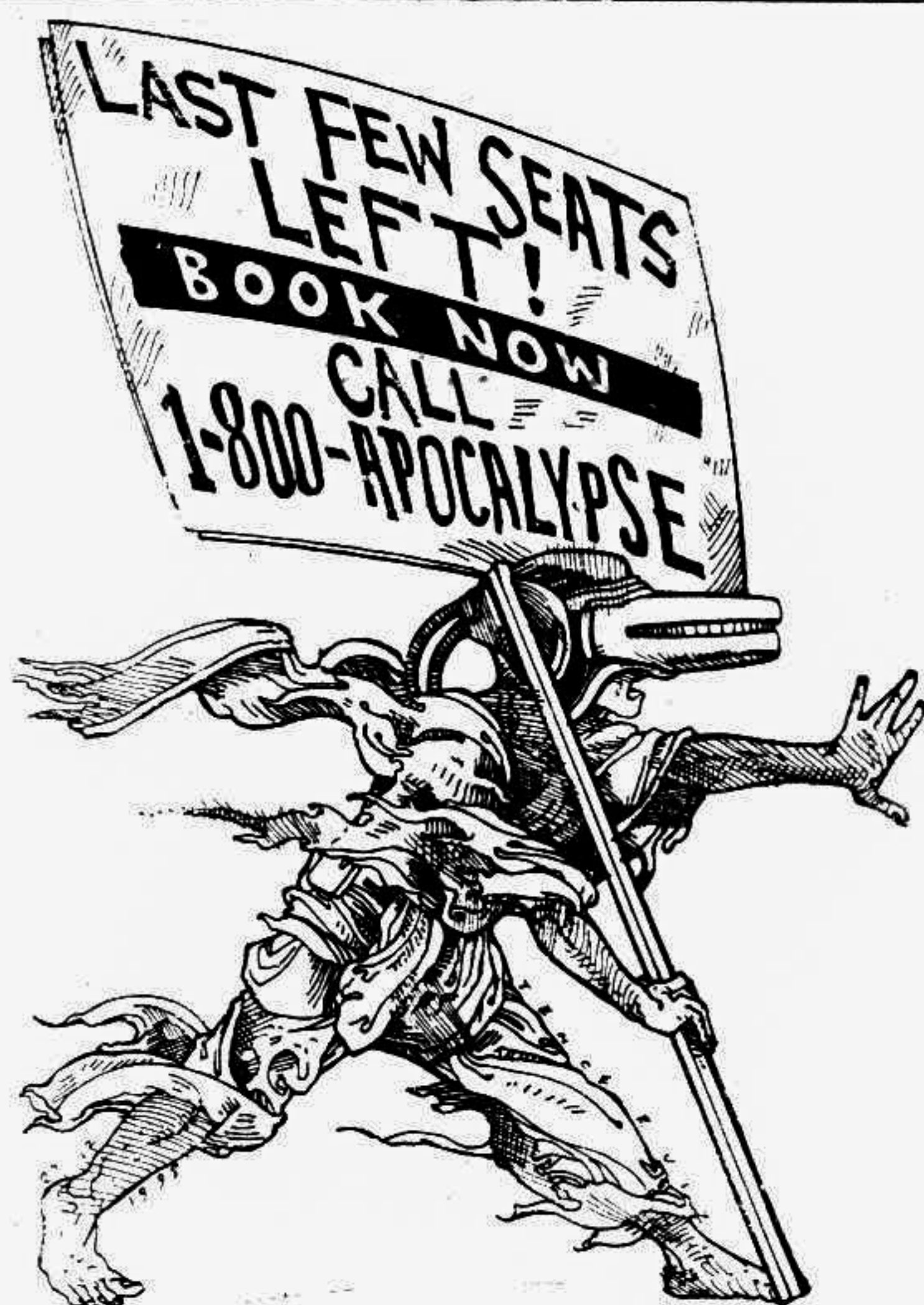
In earlier times, these myths circulated in parallel universes, their adherents largely unaware of one another and unsynchronised in their celebrations of an end of an era. But all that has changed with the advent of global communications and entertainment.

Prophecies that "the end is nigh" are becoming ever more profitable. Played out in big-screen disasters of Biblical dimensions — hurricanes, tornadoes, asteroids, plagues, shipwrecks — they also surge through the Internet, where hundreds of websites trumpet predictions of imminent catastrophe.

Images of the apocalypse first appeared in Jewish and Christian writings of 200 BC to 150 AD and have been still more widely disseminated through rapidly expanding congregations of evangelical Christians in recent decades. The prime source of the appeal of the apocalypse is that it goes beyond imminent death in promising the faithful a rapacious elevation into heaven.

Such conviction is not limited to those who identify themselves as evangelicals. Although one-in-five Americans call themselves *born-again* Christians, a 1995 Gallup Poll found that half the population believes that the second coming of Christ either will (20 per cent) or may (30 per cent) occur at the moment of the millennium.

At the opposite end of the spiritual spectrum, devotees of New Age spirituality cite an eclectic assemblage of prophecies from many ages and cul-



tures to predict a "great turning" on or around the year 2000.

Nor is this apocalyptic expectation confined to those of religious or spiritual inclinations. An intellectually sophisticated strain of quasi-millennial thinking has emerged in recent years from highly-educated and well-informed individuals in the advanced industrial West.

Surveying a wide range of downward-spiralling economic, environmental, political and social trends, these individuals and organizations assert that the human species has reached an inescapable moment of truth when, barring de-

cisive and immediate action, it faces unparalleled catastrophe.

While their timetable is not of the literal moment of the millennium, many sober analysts see the few decades surrounding the year 2000 as perhaps the most pivotal passage in human history.

The fact that the year 2000 computer problem known as Y2K, which experts predict could cause a disastrous disruption of the global industrial infrastructure, is set to go on January 1, 2000 adds irony and intensity to the "Pre-Millennial Tension."

To a degree seldom recognised, apocalyptic myths an-

swer deep yearnings in the human psyche. Millennial movements emerge not just on particular anniversaries, say historians, but during most eras of extreme uncertainty and social upheaval when economic or emotional distress drives many to seek relief in the promise of death and deliverance.

Even among the less afflicted, many years for a dramatic structure to give meaning to lives that so often seem to lack a defining direction. As a moment of truth, apocalypse (whose root meaning is "to uncover or unveil") promises a final revelation of life's mysteries and a vindication of one's life long faith.

While these yearnings are understandable, they can also be dangerous, for our beliefs in form our behaviour. While many millennial movements have been benign and even beneficial, some have inflicted substantial damage on themselves and others.

There were, of course, the monstrously betrayed millennial promises of Hitler and Stalin. And in more recent years, the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo along with David Koresh and his US.

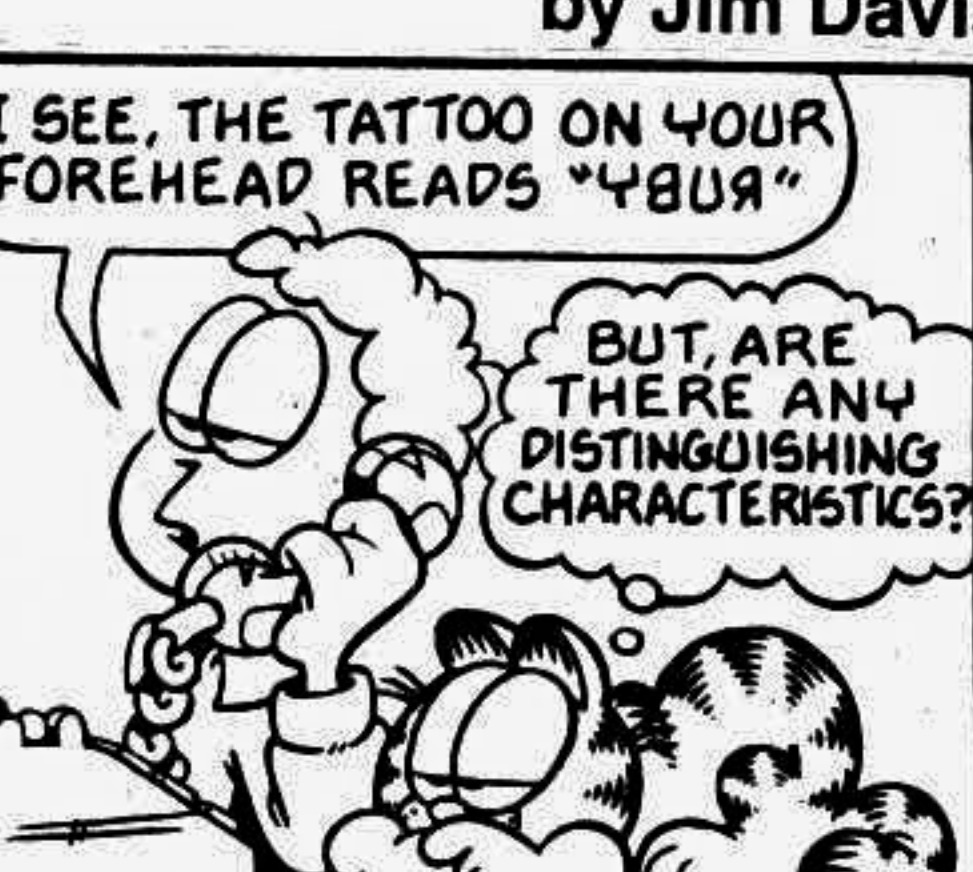
Branch Davidian followers, and the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building were driven by a leader's feverish faith in an approaching apocalypse.

Paranoid splinter groups are not capable of overthrowing entire governments, but they can terrorise an entire society — especially when elements of their end-time beliefs are shared by more mainstream minds. With rapidly-growing, politically-mobilised constituencies in both the advanced and developing worlds, apocalypticists exert real influence over public policy and priorities.

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by Jim Davis

Garfield®



James Bond



A Uniform International Approach against Doping

Wendy Lubetkin writes from Lausanne, Switzerland

The core elements of the proposal presented by the United States include: an anti-drug and doping programme for Olympic athletes which should operate 365 days a year and be overseen by an independent drug testing and oversight agency; no statute of limitations on chemical cheating; and baseline standards of universal application.

TO combat the growing problem of drug-abuse in sports, the United States is pressing for the creation of an independent testing agency, uniform international testing of Olympic athletes, and year-round testing, not limited only to Olympic years.

Barry McCaffrey, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), presented a seven-point plan for eliminating drug-abuse by Olympic athletes at the World Conference on Doping in Sport February 2.

The February 2-4 conference organised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Lausanne, has examined the possibility of adopting a uniform international approach to the problem of drugs in sports.

McCaffrey also pressed the International Olympic Committee to undertake "real democratic reforms" following recent revelations of corruption.

"The IOC must operate as a democratic and accountable public institution. Its procedures must be based on open books and records, open and recorded votes on issues, and an elected membership that is accountable to the athletes and the community of nations," he

said. The effort to eliminate drugs in sport will be the "first and most dramatic test" of whether IOC institutions are capable of reform, McCaffrey said.

"No threat — not even corruption — has so fundamentally challenged the legitimacy of the Olympic movement."

Characterising doping as "chemical engineering of the human body," McCaffrey noted that the evidence suggests that in some cases performance enhancing drugs can improve an athlete's performance by as much as 25 per cent.

"As the specter of drug use grows, every new victory is greeted with skepticism and cynicism. Athletes grow increasingly doubtful that it is possible to compete fairly and win," he told assembled governments, athletes and Olympic officials at the conference.

"Performance enhancing drugs threaten to set the bar of human achievement so high that records will never be broken by even the best of world class athletes who compete fairly."

McCaffrey announced that the United States will fund \$1 million worth of research on a common agenda developed by

the IOC and the US Olympic Committee. Additionally the US will make available the expertise of the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA) which provides day-to-day oversight for Federal drug-free workplace programmes and oversees 72 drug testing laboratories that handle more than 25 million forensic tests every year.

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The United States believes the anti-drug programme should encompass not just performance-enhancing drugs, but also mind-altering drugs such as ecstasy, LSD, marijuana and opiates.

"These drugs impair an athlete's abilities and judgment," McCaffrey told the conference. "The risks to spectators as well as athletes to a marijuana-affected bobsled driver traveling

at speeds upwards of 120 kilometers per hour are self-evident."

At a press conference later the same day, McCaffrey said he had been pleased and surprised to hear many other delegations present proposals similar to those submitted by the United States.

He said international consensus is growing on the need for an independent agency that tests year-round, every year. "You can't go to the point of competition and expect to get at the problems associated with human growth hormone, synthetic testosterone, with EPO and these other emerging drugs."

US delegation member Frank Shorter, an Olympic marathon winner (gold in 1972, silver in '76), said an independent agency which tests year-round "is really the only way to go."

"The cheaters have to always be dreading that knock on the door," he said.

Speaking at the press conference with McCaffrey, Shorter said there is currently "too much pressure on athletes to make the wrong choice."

-- USIA Feature

INTERNET

Caught between Desire and Concern

Thalif Deen writes from Beijing

China is determined to forge ahead with information technology and is preparing for its first international exhibition of Internet-related products and technology in June.

CHINESE leaders are caught between the desire to pull the country to the forefront of information technology, and caution dictated by concern about security breaches and political activity on the Internet.

Indeed, while China advocates the desire to be a high-technology country, it has had to grapple with the problems that come with freeing up technology as well as trying to regulate it across this vast country.

According to China's public security departments, illegal activities involving computers and the Internet have gone up by 30 per cent annually in recent years.

A recent report says 95 per cent of China's network management centres with Internet access have been attacked by hackers from both home and abroad. As in the other places, banking, financial, and securities institutions are the main targets.

Also as in other countries, many hackers are youngsters. Recently, a 13-year-old middle school student in China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region was arrested for hacking. However, he was immune from legal action because he was below the age of 14.

Such cases are no longer new these days in China, where almost every day the newspapers report similar incidents.

A few months ago, two people were sentenced to death in

east China's Jiangsu province for transferring 2.6 million yuan to their own account from a local bank via a computer network.

But by far most alarming problem for the Chinese government is the fact that dissidents have been using computers and the Internet for their cause.

A Shanghai software entrepreneur was tried in December for providing 30,000 e-mail addresses to "VIP Reference," an electronic magazine based in Washington DC that circulates material on democracy movements and issues.

It is e-mailed into China everyday, finding its way to dissidents, ordinary citizens as well as senior Chinese officials.

Dissident groups, especially overseas, say they are able to get through Internet firewalls and barriers put up to prevent Chinese from accessing on-line news and opinions that may conflict with official views.

In short, China has had to temper its aims of becoming a modern technology power with the risks inherent in this campaign, even as Internet use continues to grow.

The China Internet Network Information Centre, which surveys network users, reports that people aged from 21 to 35 form the largest group of users. This is almost 80 per cent of some two million Chinese users, but the centre had no estimate for the number of hackers.

Internet use in China has surged from 10,000 five years ago to 17 million last year, and could reach 5 million by 2000. "The growth rate has exceeded the world average," said Mao Wei, director of the China Internet Network Information Centre.

The Internet was introduced by China's scientific institutions in 1986 through long-distance dialling but Internet service entered its second stage in 1994 when Chinese Academy of Sciences established a Computer Network Information Centre.

So far China has four public servers that have been approved by the state, and through which individual servers can directly connect to the Internet.

China's first Internet cafe appeared in Shekou, Shenzhen in 1993. Beijing now has nearly 200, but Shanghai is still the leader with more than 400 since 1996.

In 1996 the State Council introduced interim provisions for the management of the Computer Information Network.

These provisions say: "No unit or individual, who subscribes to the Internet, may engage in criminal activities endangering national security through its use" and provide penalty clauses for offenders. They also ban hacking, spreading computer viruses and disseminating "vicious information."

Some groups have resorted to e-mailing material from different addresses, to dodge detection. But this remains a tricky endeavour, not least because distribution of "subversive" material could mean legal trouble.

But Zhu Lin, a student from China's prestigious Qinghua University, says: "In an attempt to stop 'unnecessary elements' coming into the country, the government keeps on blocking the websites of different organisations from abroad. But it is not so far able to cope with the problems inside."

To safeguard national security and penalise hackers, China's latest criminal law has added new provisions to combat computer-related crimes.

Glitches or not however, China is determined to forge ahead with information technology and is preparing for its first international exhibition of Internet-related products and technology in June.

Its huge market continues to woo some of the world's biggest software companies.

Microsoft established its office in China last year and had already spread its links to various sectors including education.

In late November, Microsoft offered 12 million US dollars in software to 50 Chinese universities and pledged to help train Chinese computer professionals, and started its authorised academic training programme.

-- IPS/APB