Building Rules, Planning Rules and the Environment

by S. Zarina Hossain

Let not one development, by one individual, to maximise profit, endanger the environment of any area and, in turn, of the city.

TO control land and building development for orderly growth of settlements, some form of Development Control mechanism must exist within the Planning and Development process. Within our urban planning system, one form of control is the Master Plan, prepared for the cities of Dhaka and Chittagong in 1961, (Khulna has a more recent Plan – other towns do not have any). These plans, control (or try to control) the type of building in an area — according to usefulness. The other mechanism of control is the Building Rules, under the provisions of the Building Construction Act.

That the current Master Plans for Dhaka and Chittagong are obsolete and the whole process needs revolutionary change is evident. The process for change, after long many years, is on but slow and shrouded with uncertainty. This article, however, deals with the second mechanism for Development Control — the Building Rules — and its impact on the environment, due to its inadequacy.

Essentially, Building Rules should deal with the structural safety of a building and the provision of services/amenities such as lighting, electrical installation, water, gas, drainage, sanitation, and ventilation. The concern of Building Rules, should relate to all factors within the envelope of a building. This includes, provision of adequate foundation and superstructure, appropriate use of materials, safe and adequate vertical movement within a building, such as specification; location; adequacy of stairs or elevators/ramps; fire, earthquake, lightening, protection and dampness control. It also includes sewer, sanitation, and power requirements, as the case may be.

Planning Rules as opposed to Building Rules should deal with the effects of any development — not only building development — on its surrounding environment. It is concerned with all aspects of any development outside the envelope of the building. Amongst other issues it deals with density control, Floor Area Ratio (FAR) or the Floor Space Index (FSI), mandatory open space (setback) requirement, and building height. Matters relating to the nature and volume of traffic a development generates, means of access to the site, landscaping and tree planting may also be considered. Besides control on building development, planning rules attempts to guide/control other actions on land (currently absent) such as land subdivision, land filling, hill cutting/razing, mining/quarrying and excavation, laying and altering roads etc.

In our system the Building and Planning Rules are one and the same, though the criteria by which these should be judged are completely different. As mentioned, one relates to the safety and services/amenities of/within the building, the other deals with the effect of any development on its surrounding environment.

The administration of the Building Rules rests with an Authorisation Committee appointed by the government. This Authorisation Committee is within the Development Authorities for the four cities and the Municipal Corporations for the towns. All proposed building development both private and public, must be approved by the Authorisation Committee, prior to construction. The application for a permit is accompanied by architectural plans, sections, elevations of the proposed building including its foundation details.

Other than some variation in the allocation of parking spaces, the Building Rules are uniform for the same type of building all over the country, whether it is in the inner city of Dhaka or for some peripheral development in some small towns. For residential buildings the mandatory building set- back space (mandatory open space) rule, around a building is the same for all sizes of plots over 4 kathas (2880 sq ft), irrespective of the density and building type (multi-unit multi-storied, or single/double occupancy residences).

This uniformity of rules fails to adequately safeguard the adverse environmental effects of large and complex, building development on its surroundings. One building such as Eastern Plaza on Sonargoan Road, can create havoc for the whole surrounding environment, even when built within the remits of the current law. Building Rules cannot be made very elaborate so as to overcome this situation.

Again the Building Rules do not control all actions on land. Thus roads are laid, altered with no imposition of any standards, large water bodies are filled, land is subdivided at will, leading to unplanned growth and causing adverse effects on the environment.

In the latest revision of the Building Rules in July 1996, attempts had been made to elaborate the Rules so as to include some planning controls. Due to the universality of its application and also as the effects of a proposed development it would vary according to the nature of development or locational factors; it would still be inadequate to achieve the desirable goals. It is not possible to include all the desired options in a Building code. Parking, dropping and collection area will also vary according to the nature of occupancy and business conducted even within similar building types. A universal standard cannot necessarily take care of all these variation.

A very elaborate Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) was prepared in 1993. It contained both building and many planning issues. It did not come under the remits of law (probably being too elaborate to administer). Ideally all aspects of the effects of a building on its surrounding must be separated and administrated under a separate set of planning rules requiring permission prior to a building permit.

The reduction in mandatory open space, in the Building Rule 1996, for residential plots has created undesirable environmental effects in our cities particularly Dhaka, as it is having to face the brunt of building activity. Take the case of our planned residential areas with large plots sizes such as Dhanmandi or Gulshan. Reduction in the mandatory open space from 33 per cent to less than half the amount, will have far reaching, adverse environmental effects. In the absence of neighborhood play lots and parks, children would have no space to run and play. They would remain cramped in their rooms throughout the day.

The narrow corridors left as mandatory open spaces between boundary walls are being paved, this would result in 100 per cent • paved surfaces. If large areas are developed in such fashion it would lead to severe environmental problems. Flash flooding and stagnation of water would be more common after a heavy rainfall. Due to lack of absorbing surface all surface water would have to be removed through drainage channels which would perhaps be unable to carry this kind of load if not designed likewise. Large areas would be devoid of trees, air would always be laden with dust, as dust particles would have little or no soft surface to settle.

Recommendations:

• Government should take appropriate steps to separate building construction functions from planning functions and establish a planning set-up within the existing institutions or otherwise to administer the rules.

• For simplification of planning applications all proposed development may be categorised under a simple and a standard procedure to be followed. Simple application may undergo none or nominal control and may consist of buildings of say two stories, consisting of say below 1000sq.m, located in general urban development areas. Standard applications may consist of buildings that are larger in scale and more complex in nature or development located in special areas as designated in any Master Plans. (Procedure is detailed in the Metropolitan Master Plans 1995).

• The word 'Development', must be defined so as to include all actions on, under, above land so that it comes under planning purview. Laying out of roads, filling and cutting of earth, quarrying and mining operations may thus be submitted to planning guidelines and standards.

Control on action on land would reduce the ill effects of large-scale speculation on land in our urban fringes and rural areas. Hundreds of hectares of good agricultural land is continually being subdivided (as soon as a road is planned and laid) into plots for residential and other uses prior to its actual need. These subdivisions are devoid of any planning guidance or standard. This practice blocks all avenues for future planned urban expansion. This must be stopped immediately. Where it has taken place, it must be put under planning control prior to building development.

• To make development more effective, the mechanism for seeking permission and enforcing control must be decentralised. One Rajuk or one CDA, or KDA cannot enforce control over wide areas and vast number of applications. Certain types of control may rest with the Central Body such as an industrial permit or large multi use development etc. Other types of developments may be controlled at a more local level, say at the ward level. Vigilance and supervision would be more easily achieved thus.

• While urgent steps should be taken to set up a planning mechanism, immediate steps should be taken to impose density control, re-establish the mandatory open space for residential buildings for larger sized plots, say 8 kathas and above to 33 per cent of the total plot area.

• Large and complex building developments must be put under elaborate scrutiny in the approval process so as to overcome the current inadequacies in the Building Rules.

The responsibility of professionals should not be confined to the limits of the Building Rules, particularly when it is deemed to be inadequate for large and complex developments. Planners, architects involved in the approval process could negotiate with developers in the interest of the city. After all the adverse effects harm us all, including the developers and policy makers. Let not one development, by one individual, to maximise profit, endanger the environment of any area and, in turn, of the city.

The writer is an urban planner architect

Neutral Polarisation!

by A Husnain

In this country it is possible to have philosophy without principle, and principle without philosophy. There is not much local difference between opportunism and entrepreneurship; one is visible, while the other is not.

THE Bengalees are fond of social satire. It is a by-product of the gift of the gab, in this land of running waters, flowing tongues, and addictive *addas* (gathering together for chatting). In the colder climates there were the autocrats at the breakfast tables, and the Johnsonian sessions in the tea rooms. Oscar Wilde was a product of the *adda-khana*. Lack of social mobility encourages *adda*. Now multiple job holders cannot sit even with all the members of the family. Those who frequented the *addas* have now peripathetic preoccupations.

The distilled outputs of these simulation exercises adorned the famed Bengali magazines and books. But the Bengalees Muslim was side-tracked; and he is still carrying his grievances right upon his sleeves.

That could be one of the reasons the Bengalee mind had always been anti-Establishment; and the mindset continues today, with little erosion in this polarised outlook on life. A distinguished member at one of the *addas* was inclined to believe that this attitude was due to the domination of the majority by the minority community during the 200 years of the British Raj (coming so soon after 500 years of Moghul rule), which thrived on the divide-and-rule policy, so well exposed by Hunter and others.

Hence the psyche's fondness to adopt the *zamindari* stance (the longing for the deprived goodies of life), and the leisure class snobbishness. 'A *zamindar* can do no wrong' is an attitude of life which can be easily detected in many niches of our present society. The changing society and the bulging wallets produce attractive chameleons.

There is another factor: the lavish gifts of indolent Nature spoiled not only the lazy, but also the industrious. The vertical layers of the society are nowadays more marked than unmarked. To turn these thick walls into thin partitions is the main goal of official 'development': first economic, followed by social osmosis. But still the leisure hours are sharply segregated.

Several types of social changes are easily noticeable. The urge to move to seek one's fortune started several decades ago in greener pastures due to the global economic boom in the North and the NICs countries after two decades of the end of World War II. The coinciding oil boom in the ME attracted millions of Asians since the mid-'70s (a shift from UK and Europe).

At home, the urban migration boom has hit Dhaka under the belly — the population rose from two lakhs to ninety lakhs in less than half a century. Familiarity breeds contempt; therefore thy neighbour is stranger to you. Vertical living bestows the personal freedom of anonymity, and eggs the ego into individualism (this virus is travelling East from the West).

The slow but steady emancipation of women is a sign at once gladdening and attractive, producing a much-needed healthy balance in social intercourse. The social impact of the thousands of NGOs have been tremendous, and it has filtered down to the humblest villages; thanks to the development of the transport and communication sectors (one-third literacy has also helped). Now we have the world's biggest NGO, and also the biggest microcredit network. In the garment sector, the sight of thousands of female garment workers was inconceivable even a few decades earlier.

But it must be conceded that the most glamourous sector is politics. This science(?) and art(?) has been turned from a passive pastime into a frenzied passion. How and why? Because it is big business, with less sweating of the brow. The high systems loss has been diverted to the other sectors. Ever spotted an inefficient politician or political worker? He is always busy — doing others' work, voluntarily. What about toll collection, terrorism and nepotism, and godfathership? Separate the technique from the philosophy, and practise tolerance (of the negative kind), and your blood pressure would come down (the heartless have no heart attacks).

In this country it is possible to have philosophy without principle, and principle without philosophy. There is not much local difference between opportunism and entrepreneurship; one is visible, while the other is not. So long neutrality is maintained in 'public interest', what is the gripe?

River Bank Protection Project Saves Many Villages From Destruction

by Sazzad Hossain Titas

LIVING near a river in Bangladesh is a risky business. Rivers like Jamuna not only are sources of floods, but also can wipe out village after village.

As Jamuna has remained untamed, residents of Gaibandha, Sirajganj, Bogra and some other neighbouring districts live in constant threat of losing their homes.

Jamuna, one of three largest rivers of the country, has been a headache for the government as it devours huge arable lands, rural infrastructures and other establishments, including villages and towns, every year.

In a bid to control the country's rivers, including the Jamuna, the government launched a gigantic programme, "Riverbank Protection Project", in 1995-96 fiscal year.

To implement the ambitious project, the government sought financial assistance from the International Development Agency (IDA), an window of the World Bank.

The Bank responded quickly. It agreed to help the government implement the Tk 708.08 crore project, promising to provide Tk 471.32 crore, officials told the News Network.

Earlier in 1963-65, the government with help from USAID constructed a 220-km flood protection embankment from Kawnia to Bera as a vast track of land in northern districts, especially Gaibandha, Sirajganj and Bogra, used to be flooded every year in rainy season.

With the construction of the embankment, some 2,30,000 hectares of lands in greater Rangpur, Bogra and Pabna districts got protection from flood waters. But it was not enough to protect the people from the fury of the mighty Jamuna. It always ran towards west, washing out its bank.

The Embankment was built to protect the banks from erosion during 1978-85 period with help from USAID and WB. So far, some 180 km areas of the embankment has been repaired. In some places reconstruction works had been done one to seven times.

Some 60,000 hectares of cultivable land, houses and other infrastructures have so far disappeared into the gorge of Jamuna.

Besides, continued erosion could be a cause of concern for Bangabandhu Bridge over Jamuna. Officials feared that the unification of the rivers would also put the bridge at stake, snapping road communication during the rainy season.

In a bid to avert the possible disaster, the government has undertaken a master plan. As per the contract with the World Bank, Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) recruited an international Adviser for Brahmaputra River Training Studies (BRTS).

The adviser has been entrusted with some responsibilities, including formation of a long-term master plan and identifying the erosion-hit areas on priority basis, protective measures and preparing a design of the River Bank Protection Project.

A view of the "River Bank Project" at Shariakandi.

The adviser submitted the Master Plan in 1994 identifying 17 severe erosion-hit areas with a recommendation that 10 of 17 erosion-hit areas should be brought under the RBPP immediately. He also prepared a design for priority construction of groyne in six places.

The 10 areas recommended for bringing under RBPP are Kamarjani, Fulchhari, Hatserpur-Hasnarpar, Sariakandi, Mothurapara, Chandanbaisa, Kazipur, Simla-Soilabari, Sirajganj and Betil-Jalalpur.

The six places suggested for construction of groyne are: Fulchhari, Sariakandi, Mothurapara, Kazipur, Sirajganj and Betil-Jalalpur.

As per suggestions and recommendations of the foreign adviser, the government with help from IDA embarked on a two-phase programme to construct hard points at Sariakandi, Mothurapara and Sirajganj.

The project works under phase-A include construction of hard points at Sariakandi and Mothurapara, rehabilitation of Kalitola Groyne, construction of a link road between Kalitola and Mothurapara via Sariakandi.

Total cost of the project was fixed at Tk 708.08 crore, of which the government was supposed to contribute Tk 236.76 crore while the IDA Tk 471.32 crore. Finally, the project works kicked off in 1995-96 fiscal, stipulating the time to complete the project by 1999-2000 fiscal.

Bangladesh Water development Board (BWDB) is implementing the project under the supervision of Sir William Halcrow and Partners Ltd, UK and local Engineering and Planning Construction Ltd. Major civil works of the project have been handed over to Hyundai-Jan-De-Nul JV of South Korea and Belgium.

Main objectives of the project are to prevent non-stop erosion along western bank of the rivers Brahmaputra-Jamuna and protect some important areas like Sirajganj, Sariakandi and Mothurapara, and infrastructure, roads and highways and arable lands and building up habitats by protecting the riverbank.

The salient features of the project are given in the table.

Project description: Phase-A — The major components of the project are Kalitola Groyne and Sariakandi and Mothurapara hard points; all three comprise revetment of concrete blocks laid over a layer of geotextile on prepared river bank slope. Cutter suction dredger was used to prepare the underwater slope, which was excavated at a slope of 1:3.5 to a maximum depth of 13.0 metre below the low water level.

	Unit	Sariakandi	Mothurapara	Kalitola
Length of revetment	m	661	679	311
Length of crossbar	m	935	420	134
Filling in revetment	m3	386,798	211,927	76,500
Filling in crossbar	m3	126,373	61,333	13,100
Dredging/Excavation	m3	268,000	360,860	53,300
CC block production/ Laying 450 mm3		268,000	275,000	125,400
550 mm3		128,000	128,000	—
650 mm3		—	—	78,500
Geotextile laying	m2	70,800	63,600	29,200
HBB road and footpath	m	2,150	1,180	320
Brick mattressing	m2	1,710	15,200	3,800

The project work on Phase-A has, in fact, been completed, except the connecting road between Mothurapara and Kalitala. Construction work of the link road has started and is expected to be finished soon.

Construction of hard point under Phase-B at Sirajganj is going on while that of the remaining 10 places will be carried out in phases.

Jabbar Pramanik (35), a vanpuller, once had acres of cultivable land and a sprawling house just four years back. But the hungry Jamuna has devoured all his property, leaving him homeless. Now he resides alongside the Flood Protection Embankment on the bank Jamuna.

When asked about the impact of the project, a beaming Jabbar told the News Network Correspondent, "It has come as blessings of Allah."

Local people expect that upon completion of the proposed hard points in Sariakandi and Mothurapara areas, and rehabilitation of Kalitala groyne river erosion would come to an end.

Jabbar gets a nod from his neighbours Shah Jamal, 30, Soibar Molla, 50, Tamij Uddin, 35, and his wife Sobeda Begum, 25, who said: "We all are illiterates, even then we can realise that it will help check bank-erosion in the places where hard points and groynes have been constructed."

They continued: "We all had lands and dwelling houses, but the mighty river has rendered us homeless. Now we are happy ... may be we won't have to leave this place."

Executive Engineers of the Project Phase-A Shamsul Alam Talukder and Abdur Noor of Phase-B said construction of hard points in Sariakandi and Mothurapara area, and rehabilitation of Kalitola groyne have protected the entire Bogra district from the prolonged flood in 1998.

"Had not the project been completed in time, Jamuna and Bangali rivers would have emerged into a single flow engulfing the entire district," the two engineers said.

— News Network

Adverts Fight the Anti-refugee Tide

In Britain and across much of Europe, public opinion has swung against refugee claimants. Growing numbers of asylum-seekers and antagonistic press coverage have fuelled the change. A project is now under way to try to reverse the tide, but as Gemini News Service reports, it may not be enough. **Mike Crawley** writes from London

IT'S a blissful suburban scene on the television screen, one that could be found in any western country: a girl rides a bicycle, a boy watches cartoons, a couple makes a pot of tea.

Suddenly, explosions shatter the neighbourhood calm. Tanks prowl outside the suburban homes, firing on them. Soldiers kick in doors and rattle of rounds from machine-guns.

"This kind of thing happens every day," says the voice-over, "turning people like you into refugees."

It's a TV advertisement produced by the European Commission and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), part of a campaign to try to improve public opinion about asylum -seekers.

By showing white middle-class people going about their daily lives, the commercial tries to make its target audience empathise with refugees and say: "They're no different from us."

A similar theme runs through the other ads in the campaign. A second television ad depicts a band of armed thugs bursting into a church and abducting a woman from the congregation.

In a radio advert, a teacher is leading a history class when soldiers arrive to confiscate their books. "They're not our kind of history books," barks an officer.

A print advertisement shows a man putting a wedding ring on the pale, thin finger of a woman under the heading," With this ring I thee condemn,," the text explains that people sometimes become refugees because they marry someone from the "wrong" ethnic group and incur the anger of authorities.

All the ads conclude: "Now you know where refugees are coming from, you can make them feel a bit more welcome."

Many in the British public are not particularly welcoming towards the growing number of asylum-seekers coming to the country's shores. A new poll showed 53 per cent of respondents want the country's asylum laws tightened. When asked if people who have genuinely suffered political persecution abroad should be allowed to stay in Britain, one in three said No.

Similar sentiment is gaining ground around Europe, prompting the ad campaign.

"Too many people are turning their backs on refugees," says Hope Hanlan, the UNHCR representative in Britain.

"Those who manage to reach this country were victims who should now be welcomed as survivors. Surely they deserve help and acceptance instead of mistrust."

Hanlan blames elements of the press — what she calls "the literary equivalent of 1970s skinheads" — for worsening public opinion of asylum-seekers. She says the advertising campaign is "a challenge to the rampant sensationalism, the distortion that is the public's daily diet as far as refugees are concerned."

In one local paper, a writer wanted to "flush refugees down the sewer like the rest of the garbage," a comment that is now the subject of a Press Complaints Commission investigation.

"Brutal crimes of the asylum-seekers," roared a front-page headline in the *Daily Mail*, a widely read tabloid. Other papers have complained in both news and editorial pages that refugees are flocking to Britain to cash in on state benefits.

In the publics mind, the distinction between refugees and illegal economic migrants has become so blurred that the word "refugee" is now a playground slur hurled by children.

Refugees" don't come to look for charity," says Hanlan. "The genuine refugee is so grateful to be safe here that they will do anything. They don't want charity. They don't want food vouchers. They want to live a normal life."

The brunt of the world's refugee crisis has long been borne by developing countries and that's still the case today, with nations like Pakistan, Tanzania and Ethiopia playing host to large numbers of people fleeing persecution. Of the 12 million people currently classified as refugees worldwide, 4.7 million are in Asia and 3.4 million are in Africa.

Britain meanwhile is home to just over 100,000, a mere 0.85 per cent of the world's refugees and 3.5 per cent of Europe's refugees. Yet listen to much of the press coverage in Britain and you would think the island was being swarmed.

It is true that despite the small percentages, the number of asylum-seekers coming to Britain is growing. Last year, some 46,000 asylum claims were field in Britain, against 26,200 in 1990.

The increase was prompted in part by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ensuing violent break-up of Yugoslavia, and the release of pent-up intolerance toward ethnic minorities in the former eastern bloc. The nasty civil wars plaguing places like Somalia, Afghanistan, Algeria and central Africa have also played a role.

The numbers are still small enough that they could easily be absorbed without a hiccup amid London's population of seven million. But many of the asylum-seekers wait for a decision on their claims in smaller towns in coastal countries like Kent and Essex, and their numbers are proportionately large enough to have a visible impact on social services.

The recent news that dozens of Romanian asylum-seekers were being housed in a senior citizens' care ward that had just been closed down did not go over well in the town of Dartford. A disproportionate amount of media coverage did not help the matter.

The outcry over asylum-seekers has proved a touchy issue for Britain's Labour government sensitive as it is to public opinion yet conscious of its humanitarian roots. When it introduced its new asylum policy on 9 February, it leaned toward public opinion, taking away cash benefits from refugee claimants and embarking on plans to cluster asylum seekers in empty public housing estates.

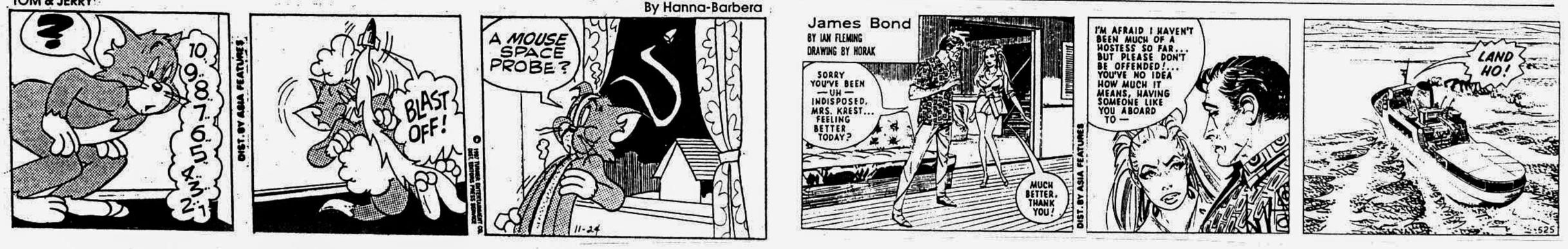
A major obstacle facing the EU/UNHCR advertising campaign is that it needs to rely on the generosity of media outlets, even the ones that have run nasty stories about refugees. The £400,000 budget for the campaign does not include enough to pay for advertising time or space, so they are asking for freebies.

As government-owned media, the BBC will run the ads and it is possible that some of the more progressive newspapers like *The Guardian* will donate space. But its readers are already sympathetic: the bloke who is angry at "bogus" asylum-seekers typically reads a tabloid.

"We're unfortunately not very optimistic that certain tabloids will run this campaign," acknowledges Lyndall Sachs, UNHCR's London information officer and the person who has to try to persuade media outlets to run the ads free.

Hanlan admits: "If people refuse to accept the ads, we will have a big problem."

An expert in political communication says £400,000 is not much money in the world of advertising. Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, a Cambridge University lecturer in marketing, also analysed the adverts and is sceptical that the campaign will make much of a dent in public opinion.

"It's a competent and smooth campaign, but I think it could have made far more out of the material," says O'Shaughnessy. "I don't think these advertisements are going to be remembered by people. We're not left with anything smouldering in the mind."

He says the ads are too bland and conservative. He argues that a far more effective advertising campaign is one that generates a lot of controversy and becomes a news event in itself, commanding coverage, comment and publicity.