

# In diseases and crimes

Living in a slum is no fun. The poor migrants from the country's rural areas invariably land up in slums and get trapped in diseases and crimes, writes Eyerin Perven

**S**ITTING outside a polythene roof hut Zakia Begum covers the face of her small boy with the corner of a torn sari to protect him from buzzing flies. The one-year-old kid has been suffering from cold and pneumonia for the past one week. She has not been able to take him to a doctor nor buy any medicine for him.

"My child is going to die, but I've no money to take him to a doctor," says Zakia, tears rolling down her pale face. She herself is afflicted with cold and fever, which is widespread at the filthy slum she lives in.

"I worry more about my child than myself," says Zakia looking at two stray dogs foraging for food through a heap of garbage.

Zakia's plight began when her husband, a rickshaw puller, left her two years ago to marry a widow in Jamalpur district. The man did not formally divorce her. Zakia returned to her father's home with her months-old boy hoping her husband would come back to her. He didn't. To make matters worse, Zakia's father refused to look after his daughter. Still in her 20s, Zakia came to Dhaka in search of a job with a neighbour. She landed up in the slum and began doing housecleaning errands in the neighbourhood.

Even though government and non-government organisations are providing the rural poor with jobs and education, thousands of poor villagers still migrate to the towns and cities in search of jobs. Women, who are abandoned by their husbands, are the worst victims. The slum population continues to swell because of the rural migrants.

The migrants such as Zakia find new homes at the city's slums, which are breeding grounds of all kinds of disease.

According to Nagar Gabe-shana Kendra, a non-government organisation working on slums, there are over 3,000 slums in the city, including 679 on government and 2,328 on private lands.

Their statistics show that these slums have occupied over 1,038 acres of important lands of this metropolis, where some 30 lakh people of 22,900 families have long been living a subhuman life with five to seven people huddling in one room.

Professor Nazrul Islam of Dhaka University, who is also an urbanisation expert, says the biggest concern in slums is sanitation. Diseases, especially the water-born ones, spread here very rapidly due to filthy and unhygienic living condition.

Many slum-dwellers, women and children in particular, are malnourished, as they don't have enough food to take.

Most of the city slums have no sanitary latrines. The latrines that some slums have don't always offer privacy and unfit for women.

According to a recent survey, many women at slums do toilet in polythene bags inside their dwelling houses while the men do it in drains, polluting the environment.

The slums are sources of other social problems than poor sanitation.

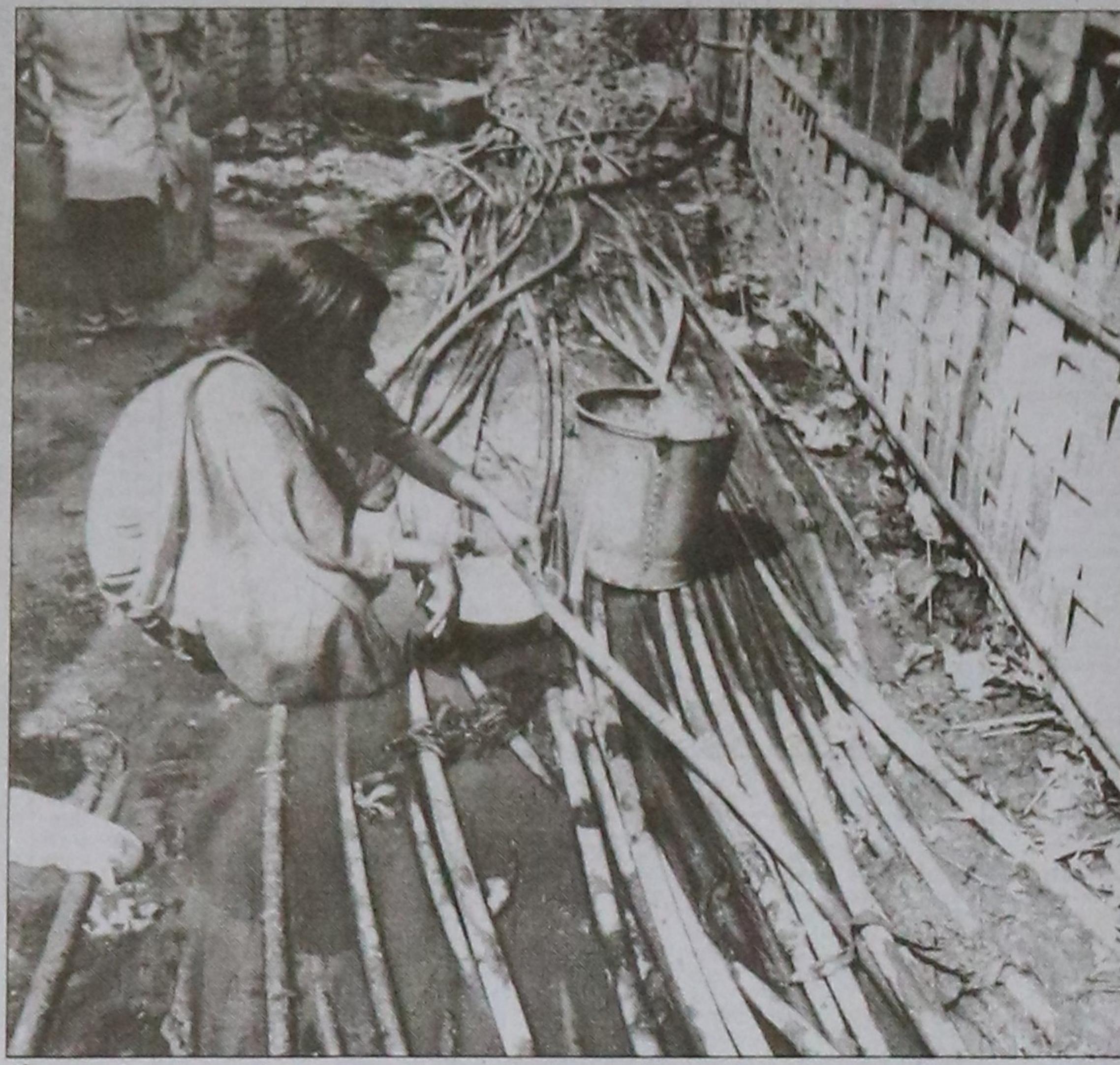
There are complaints that slums are hotbeds of sordid activities. Slums, according to many, breed crimes and offer sanctuary to criminals.

The rate of drug addiction is high among slum people and many are allegedly involved in drug trafficking.

Women, the majority of whom earn their livelihood working as housemaids, are most vulnerable to violence such as sexual harassment. Theft and mugging are regular features there. Some of the women work alongside men in construction sites while many others are engaged in stone breaking.

Married women, widows, women abandoned or divorced by their husbands are among the female tenement-dwellers.

The common image of these people is highly pejorative; they are marginal to the city, usually unemployed and often crimi-



Slums and sanitation do not go together...

nals, unmotivated and dysfunctional to urban life and characterised by a culture of poverty.

Many NGOs, meanwhile, have come forward in aid of these squatters. Action Aid is one of them. It has been working in the city's Tikkapara Slum since 1984.

The Action Aid mainly organises the female slum-dwellers by forming groups and then provides them with small loans for their self-employment. It also has an education programme for the slum kids in addition to a day-care centre for the children of poor working women.

Yet, nothing much has improved for the poor slum residents.

"There is only one filthy toilet for about 50 people of 10 families in our slum. We have to stand in a long queue," says Jahanara Begum, 35, a resident of the Tikkapara slum.

Pointing to the troubles created by the men, she said, the slum has grown on a government land. "Even then we have to pay the terrorists house rent every month and it ranges from 400 to 600 taka."

More worrying is the water supply. The dwellers have to buy water from the men who use two taka per pitcher.

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30,000-40,000 a month."

He estimates that price of 1,000 litres of water, according to WASA's present rate, is supposed to be Tk 4.75 and accordingly the rate of one pitcher of water should be Tk 0.05 or 0.07. But they sell it at Tk 2-3 per pitcher.

As there is no legal provision to supply water in slums, water is supplied to tenements through illegal water connections by a section of people in alleged connivance with WASA employees and officials, affecting the city's water supply system and thus causing huge loss to the government exchequer.

"Slums are unavoidable phenomenon of urbanisation and they can grow for many reasons, including influx of rural poor into a city due to rapid fall of poverty line. But the government should come up with effective plans to deal with the mounting problem," says Professor Islam.

In August 1999, the government suddenly evicted many slum-dwellers of the city two days after a police constable was killed in Dhaka slum allegedly by terrorists who use slums as their hideouts.

Until August 11, over 50,000 slum people were evicted and dozens of slums demolished with bulldozers.

During the demolition of the slums, the Home Minister denounced the slums as the dens of criminals, drug dealers and

armed terrorists while Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said people in the slums led a sub-human life, so the government has undertaken plans for rehabilitation of these helpless people.

But some NGOs and political groups opposed the way the slum-dwellers were evicted. A High Court bench in response to a writ petition by some human rights organisations observed that the slums should be evicted only after developing facilities to rehabilitate them. Since then, the eviction has remained suspended.

Describing the reasons behind rapid growth of slums in Dhaka, Professor Islam says the growth rate of tenements here is three to four per cent and attributed it to increasing poverty and lack of agricultural works in rural areas.

About the overall ill effects of slums on the environment, he says the tenements, which are located along the lakes and rivers, are polluting the environment more compared to those located in other parts of the city.

"The public health will be at stake, if slums continue to develop in the city," Professor Islam says hoping the government and NGOs would come up with more programmes to rehabilitate the slum-dwellers and thus save the city.

— News Network

# Kosovo one year later

The situation in Kosovo is vastly improved over what it was a year back. Nato's mission to stop the large-scale ethnic cleansing engineered by the Belgrade regime was achieved. Now is the time to stop hand-wringing and to support the difficult but concrete work of rebuilding Kosovo, supporting democratic forces and assisting the economic recovery of all Balkan countries, writes John Shattuck

**O**NE year after NATO's intervention in Kosovo, it is time for a sober assessment of what has been accomplished and a hard look at what lies ahead. The assessment should be based on the stark reality about what was happening in Kosovo long before NATO intervened, and the clear evidence of how the situation today, while fraught with difficulty, is a vast improvement over what it was in March 1999. Many critics of NATO's action simply refuse to take these facts into account. A typical example is my friend Jiri Dienstbier, who has over the past year relentlessly criticized NATO. Dienstbier's inaccurate public statements about Kosovo do a disservice to the cause of human rights that he has so effectively championed in the past. Here are three examples of Dienstbier's latest astonishing misstatements, followed by the facts that he chooses to ignore:

"Now, a year after the beginning of the air strikes, the situation is worse than before." (Hospodarske Noviny, March 24, 2000).

This assertion is totally at odds with reality. What was the situation in Kosovo one year ago? NATO launched its air strikes because 40,000 Serb troops and more than 400 tanks were being deployed by Belgrade to carry out the final stages of a year-long campaign to expel 1.5 million Kosovars from the province. In the months before NATO intervened, hundreds of thousands of unarmed civilians had been forced out from their homes by Belgrade-directed armed forces and paramilitary groups, thousands had been murdered, hundreds of villages shelled and burned, and the entire Kosovar Albanian population victimized by a policy of ethnic expulsion planned and executed by the regime of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic.

As early as September 1998, when I went on a U.S. fact-finding mission to Kosovo, 400,000 people had already been expelled from their homes and more than 100,000 had sought refuge across the border. In October 1998, five months before NATO's intervention, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe called this ethnic expulsion campaign "one of the worst crimes against humanity in Europe since World War II."

Today, the situation in Kosovo has dramatically improved. The number of refugees, including both Serb and Albanian Kosovars, is less than one-quarter the number before NATO's intervention. By confronting Milosevic, NATO made it possible for more than 800,000 refugees to return to rebuild their homes and their shattered lives. 42,500 international peacekeepers and 2,000

police have been deployed to stop the killing, creating substantial stability where a year ago there was a climate of terror. The number of killings in Kosovo has been drastically reduced from hundreds per week in March 1999 to five per week today. Since last summer international organizations have created temporary housing for more than 400,000 former refugees whose houses were destroyed, and these organizations have supplied and fed more than 600,000 people, assuring that not a single person would die last winter from starvation or exposure. More than one million square meters of land mines, including the removal of more than 15,000 mines from 80 per cent of the schools, more than 1,000 of which have now reopened. Most of the hospitals and health centers that were destroyed or shut down a year ago have been reopened, and many of Kosovo's roads, bridges, power stations and communications systems have been substantially repaired. Dienstbier cites the problem of the 100,000 Serb Kosovar refugees residing in Southern Serbia. It is precisely the goal of the international community, acting through KFOR and UNMIK, to create the conditions that will make their return to Kosovo possible.

"The decision to launch air strikes was simply a manifestation of despair because nobody knew what to do." (Pravo, March 23, 2000).

It is clear what must be done now in Kosovo, and that is precisely what NATO, the UN and the OSCE are doing. First and foremost, the international community is working to assure that the killing is stopped. Over the past year there has been great progress toward peace, but now more must be done to protect the 100,000 Serbs who remain in Kosovo and all people who return to

Kosovo. Aggressive peacekeeping through an extended international presence to protect all civilians is crucial. The KLA must be prevented from organizing in southern Serbia, and the process of demilitarizing and confiscating KLA weapons must continue. Institutions of law and justice must be established, especially local police forces and an effective judiciary. Murderers must be arrested and prosecuted. The Milosevic regime in Belgrade must be isolated and prevented from further destabilizing Kosovo and the region. Democratic forces must be supported throughout the former Yugoslavia, especially in Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia, as well as Serbia, so that the Milosevic era in the Balkans will be brought to an end. Finally, economic recovery in Southeast Europe must be fostered through international assistance programmes like the Stability Pact so that European integration can include the troubled Balkan region.

The situation in Kosovo is vastly improved over what it was a year ago. NATO's mission, which was to stop the large-scale ethnic cleansing directed by the Belgrade regime, was achieved. It is now time to stop the hand-wringing and to support the difficult but concrete work of rebuilding Kosovo, supporting democratic forces, and assisting the economic recovery of all Balkan countries.

"Nobody knows what to do next." (Pravo, March 23, 2000). It is clear what must be done now in Kosovo, and that is precisely what NATO, the UN and the OSCE are doing. First and foremost, the international community is working to assure that the killing is stopped. Over the past year there has been great progress toward peace, but now more must be done to protect the 100,000 Serbs who remain in Kosovo and all people who return to

is outdated). What's wrong with exporting the fruits of labour? This is the bug now itching the prospectors and the proprietors.

Now that Uncle Sam is interested in South Asia on long-term basis, there is hardly any one to challenge this patronization of the foreign partners in progress' (what is the purpose of language?). Better to cooperate or be left out. The latter option is hard to implement, noticing the mass and pressure of the powers that be. So we're in it, boys, like it or not; take it or leave it.

Clinton is coming back for that elephant ride he missed in India, as he is reported to have remarked. Perhaps our Sunderbans cannot offer a spotted deer for the White House scenario, under the Equal Rights clause of the UN agencies. He must visit Bangladesh and stroll outside Dhaka, as he did in India; because Bangladesh outdoors is much more beautiful than air-conditioned Bangladesh indoors. Come with Chelsea and Hillary, for providing that feminine touch.

Pipe dreams are translated into pipes and transmission lines, whether for oil, gas, or electricity; and the Asian Highway is going to be a reality sooner than later. The borders in South Asia have to be seamless as in the EU region, for democratic investments to take root and bear fruit (capitalism

# Reality and euphoria

by A Husain

**T**HE visit of the US president to South Asia is a signal to other partners in business (and democracy) to start pre-planning of strategies for this potentially rich area for the next few decades.

Bangladesh has also been noticed, but the main US target is vast India, and thereafter Pakistan, as the two neighbours are negatively linked for half a century of discord, which is not allowing SAARC concepts to take off, and provide one-stop-centre coordination for prosperity of the one-third of the world's population.

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two). The foreign passivities may disappear once the operating bases have been established in South Asia and the logistic structures completed. There are more than enough energy and power sources in Bangladesh and Nepal (hydroelectric). What is more elevated than doing business with power?

Northeastern India needs a sea outlet, and the nearest one available is through Bangladesh (the goods take too long to reach Calcutta via terrorist-infested highway up north; and this port is said to be drying up and unable to take additional load). Bangladesh is claimed to be floating on gas, and oil might not be far below (the fault line from Assam penetrates into the Bangladesh borders).

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