

Reaching out for the heavens

Dhaka has grown at a phenomenal rate over the last two decades. With an influx of immigrants at roughly 200,000 per year, the capital city has become a human sea that moves in massive tidal surges. Every inch of available space has been gobbled up for housing, legally or illegally. Parks and pavements have been occupied. Even the river Buriganga, the city's lifeline, hasn't been spared. Laterally restricted, the city now grows upward, writes **Md Asadullah Khan** as he describes an urban jungle of slums and skyscrapers.

OVER the last two decades the country has experienced phenomenal urban growth. With rapid growth compounded by high concentration of population, the capital has now become an epitome of urban squalor, poverty and environmental abyss. Despite every day trauma, exhaustion and rigours, people are helplessly attracted to the city; for it seems to have work, livelihood and even prosperity on offer. During the last one decade, the pace of urbanisation in Dhaka has only resulted in proliferation of population, poverty and pollution. At the same time, quality of housing, health and hygiene has gone down.

Viewed in such a prospective, the national seminar on Urbanisation: Emerging Challenges, held recently at the BUET, jointly organised by the Department of URP, BUET and POROSH and attended by experts from home and abroad, could not have been more timely. The speakers voiced their concern over the way urbanisation was taking place in and around the city. In absence of clear-cut policies, they complained, shopping plaza, hospitals and clinics have mushroomed in the residential area in total disregard for healthy living. Obviously still, they said, unscrupulous and greedy people have even encroached on the river Buriganga to perpetuate their business interest. LGRD Minister Zillur Rahman, chief guest at the seminar, candidly admitted to the charges and said that efforts were underway to save the river from such encroachment.

After 30 years of independence, the country's rural areas look as bad as it could be. Nearly 70 per cent of the rural people live on almost a pittance, more than half are completely illiterate, have no access to sanitation and health care or even clean water. Things are so bad in the country side that hundreds of thousands of people of all categories pour into the metropolitan cities, especially Dhaka everyday because life on the pavements of Dhaka city is somewhat better than it is in those villages that we once admitted so much. Dhaka is now a human sea that moves in massive tidal surges. Now there are that many vehicles on the streets of Dhaka, choking the city in the black exhaust fumes and human population has swollen to an estimated 11 million. The city as such is suffering serious growing pains. Not a single decent footpath, sidewalk or plaza is there for people to walk. The pedestrians, so to say, are the hunted animals.

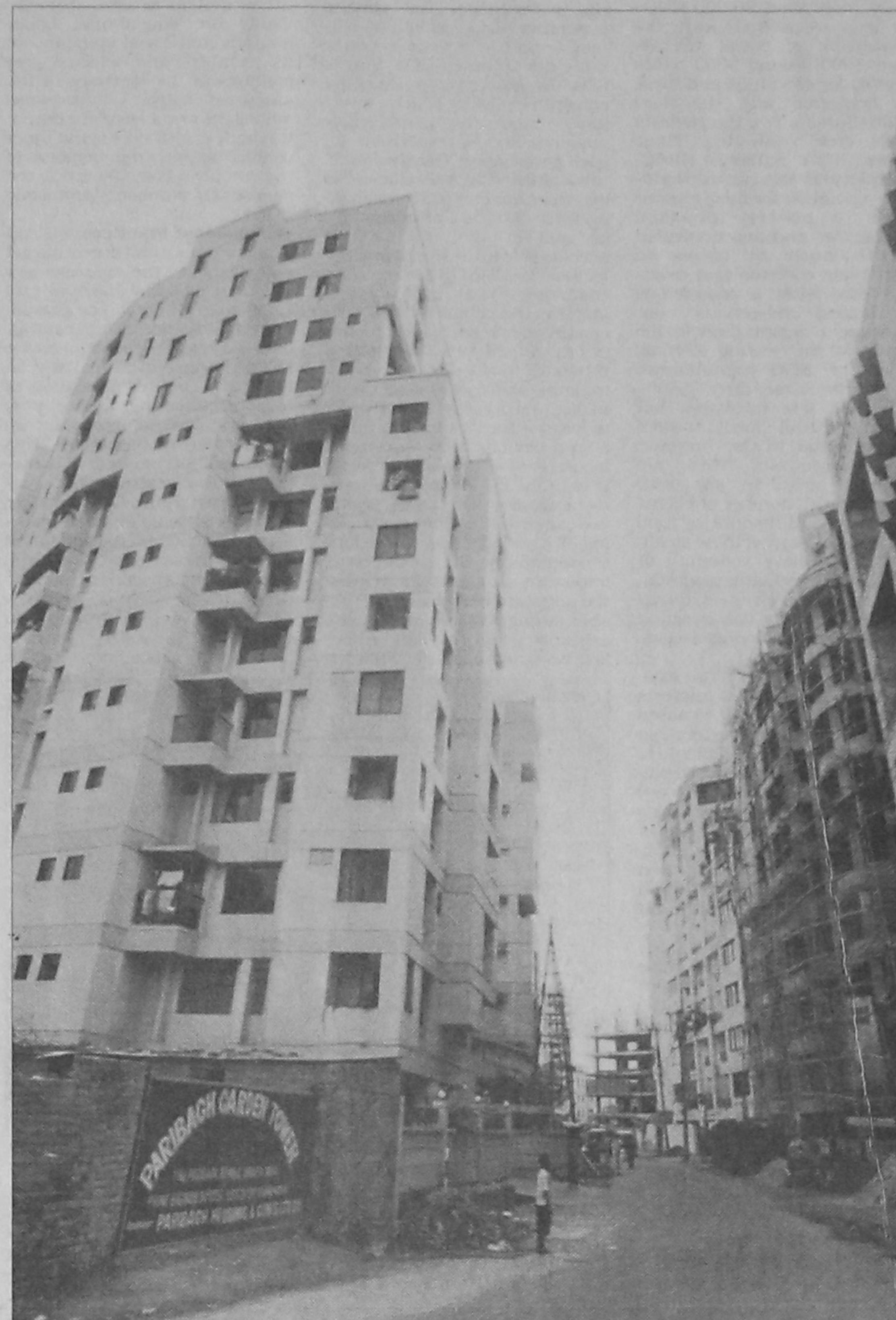
To meet the mounting pressure of population, the city's skyline now thrusts aggressively towards the heavens seemingly in a bid to pull down the clouds. The city now embodies the idea of innovation and achievement in a dazzling range of human endeavours. People of all categories from around the country are streaming into this only city of activity and business to test themselves against the toughest competition and to reinvent lives that seem so hard, so stale and unrewarding in any other setting.

Dhaka is fast becoming a city of the future through building of skyscrapers all around its limits. In the Gulshan area, there are about

350 apartments and in Dhamondi there are about 250 apartment blocks ready for sale. In Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara and Dhamondi, real estate companies that in the meantime have grown to a staggering number of 200 with only 73 registered under REHAB, apartment blocks have been built mostly to attract the affluent class and prospective foreign investors in Bangladesh. A good number of these flats measuring about 2,000 to 5,000 square feet each were sold in the post-1990s at an unusually high price of Tk one crore per flat. But principally due to constraint in resource mobilisation, absence of development activities, and investment failure in the country during the last one decade, there has been a sudden lull in the sale of apartment blocks, especially those meant for the affluent class. Most of these now do not sell at prices more than 30-35 lakh taka per flat.

Reports from population census council says that population density in the country is now on average 2000 persons per sq. mile whereas in Dhaka it would shoot up to a staggering number of 8000 per sq. mile. In view of the land space limitation coupled with great rush of people to the city, construction of multi-storied apartment blocks in an eco-friendly environment with provision for recreation, schooling, market and games facilities for children close to these apartment blocks is a call of the hour. But apartment blocks have sprung up in different locations of the city not accessible to motorised transports or even ambulances for fire brigade vans during a fire hazard or serious illness of any resident in the apartment block needing urgent medical attention. Some of these apartment blocks in different locations of the old town area or even in the posh area have been raised on hidden sewer lines or gas pipelines. Neither RAJUK nor WASA nor Titas Gas Company nor Dhaka City Corporation intervened or made any mandatory checks when these apartment blocks were raised in flagrant violation of building codes. Such flouting of rules and regulations and mandatory safety provisions sometimes invites disasters of unimaginable proportions as it did in the recent past during a gas leakage underneath a building complex in the Rampura area near TV centre.

The need for construction of such multi-storied flats in the Dhaka city is now a historical necessity because the same space, say five kathas of land that could create living facilities for just one family comprising six members can now accommodate 80 or 150 families comprising 1000 members at least. Because of population explosion all around the country land price has skyrocketed and people are left with little choice but to go for multi-storied apartment blocks. The price of five kathas of land in the prime residential area of Dhaka city was just 1 lakh taka in the early 70s rose to 20 lakh in 1990 and paradoxically that land now sells at 100 lakh taka. In the country even a relatively prosperous life on the farm and a somewhat half-hearted government effort to keep people



To meet the mounting pressure of population, the city's skyline now thrusts aggressively towards the heavens seemingly in a bid to pull down the clouds.

-- Star photo by Zahedul Khan

in villages have not muted the siren lure of the cities. Thousands affluent or non-affluent, boys and girls scarcely in their teens trudge into Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong everyday to take twelve to 18-hour-a-day jobs in garment factories and hotels and other private organisation. Some of them even eke out a living through running a small business and trading jobs.

Like the newcomers who descended on the 19th century America, many new immigrants to Dhaka city strongly believe that their children would succeed even if they themselves could not. Karimul Haq, an affluent land owner in the remote area of Khulna has now purchased flats in the Shantinagar area of Dhaka city after disposing of some of his landed property in the village simply for his youngsters' schooling. It is true that Dhaka city can still provide better schooling and

ultimately put them in better jobs and a secure future. Ahmed Ali hailing from the remotest area of Satkhira is now the owner of four apartment blocks in different parts of Dhaka. Ahmed Ali tired of family feeds over land ownership in his village decided to dispose of his share of land and settle in Dhaka. He is now living in one such flat and the rest he has rented. Nazimuddin, an affluent land owner in the remotest part of Barisal, has bought several flats in Dhaka city to have a better schooling for his children and for a life free from the hazards of terrorist attack and power crisis. Nazimuddin's dream of hazard-free life in Dhaka has proved to be a frustrating experience now. That means Dhaka city is now a self-feeding monster perpetuating its own growth by devouring the country's resources.

This unprecedented boom in high-rise building since 1990,

some of them even nine to 20 storied through the entrepreneurial activities of the real estate owners reflect other than awesome development, the economic power, urbanisation and fast life style in the country. Tall buildings, designed and built by a new breed of architects and structural engineers of the country with provision of space and facilities in a unique setting is no longer a luxury in a riverine country with limited land space but faced with the problem of population explosion. No doubt, the changes within cities in Bangladesh have come with an awesome swiftness that has often caught the government unaware. It is worth mentioning that construction of 22-storied Shilpa Bank Head Office in the Motijheel area of the Dhaka city in the post-independence days sparked the confidence of people in tall building structures in Dhaka and other cities. Added

to these Sena Kalyan Bhaban, BCIC Bhaban and last of all the 30-storied Bangladesh Bank Bhaban, currently the tallest office building in Bangladesh, are examples of this trend and manifest the maturity of a dream long harboured.

Despite the phenomenal growth in tall building structures in the city areas namely Shantinagar, Paribagh, Bailey Road, Eskaton, Shyamoli, Dhamondi, Green Road and Mirpur there is much that leaves to be desired in respect of meeting the environmental needs, management of electricity, water, gas and sewerage problem and lift services. Shockingly, most of the apartment blocks built these days in different locations of the city ignore the safety regulations to be met in different aspects. Experts in Environmental and Geo-technical engineering apprehend that in absence of proper sewerage line with manageable discharge capacity of the household effluents -- toxic and hazardous sometimes, the existing sewer line might crumble down after a few years posing a serious threat to health and sanitation of the people at large. RAJUK and city corporation authorities have been totally oblivious about meeting the needs of a fast growing city with expanding population. People in the city are not aware if RAJUK has any 'Master Plan' for this fast growing city. Land being scarce, the traditional system of distributing lands to some lucky and affluent groups of people should be done away with. Instead, RAJUK should now build different nature of high-rise buildings at different areas of the city with provision of market hospitals, schools and green spaces around and sell those to the needy. RAJUK has to create more satellite towns and growth centres at places extending from Narayanganj to Savar to Joydehpur to cope with the needs of the expanding population all desperately trudging to Dhaka.

In Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka, till now we haven't seen any concrete action to check the pollution menace, especially by the smoke-belching vehicles. It is probably cheaper and easier to institute pollution controls either from the vehicles or industries while the country is still in developmental flux. Once everything is rigidly in place, it will be much harder to effect changes. So long, authorities or administration in the country have tended to focus on the making of money at the expense of most other things. This is understandable, given the poverty that has long dogged our country. But the ultimate goal of any government should be not just for the nation to become rich, glorious though that may be, but to build societies that address all human needs justice, civility, culture, health and yes livelihood. To focus on short-term monetary profits and ignore longer-term, if less tangible, issues would be shortsighted indeed. Precisely speaking, sustained progress requires motivation -- from within. The entire community -- from municipal employees to business leaders to the ordinary citizen -- must be convinced of the need for improvement.

The author is Controller of Exams, BUET

Paying through their noses for a roof over their heads

Lusaka's housing shortage has made landlords virtually impregnable in the absence of laws to protect tenants. Low-income earners survive uneasily only by sharing accommodation. Though authorities plan to build more houses, reports **Jane Shimwanse** of Gemini News Service, the gap is huge and landlords remain greedy.

EVERY evening shopkeeper Joseph Phiri heads back home from work wondering whether he will sleep that night in his one-room house.

Phiri, who lives in Lusaka's highly populated Matero area with more than 300,000 people, is scared of his landlord. If the latter perceives that Phiri is even fractionally better off financially than he was the previous week or more, the man jacks up the rent.

If Phiri refuses to pay or even questions the increase in rent, he will find himself without a roof over his head, if not that night certainly very soon.

"When he sees me wearing a new shirt the next thing he does is to increase the rent because he thinks I have lots of money," Phiri laments. "If you ask him any questions he will ask you to vacate. You are never safe."

An acute shortage of housing is the perennial plight of many thousands of lower-income working people in Lusaka, a problem made worse by the absence of laws governing rentals on private property.

Lusaka, with an estimated population of two million, needs at least 100,000 houses and flats every year to meet the shortage.

In the absence of any laws

says Musa Kasonka, director of the privately-owned Finance Building Society.

Currently there are only about 40,000 houses in the capital, including 20,000 municipal council houses recently sold to tenants under a presidential directive.

The average monthly rent of a two-room house in a heavily populated area is US\$50 while a similar house in a residential district would cost double that.

By comparison, low-income salaried people earn between US\$35-50 on average a month, according to the government's central statistical office. This group includes government clerks, school teachers, security guards and domestic helpers who are at the lower end of the scale.

"A lot of such poor tenants are being exploited by their landlords who are taking advantage of the shortage of accommodation in Lusaka," says Julius Sokon of the National Consumers Protection Association.

But these consumers associations seem as powerless as the tenants. With no laws to fall back on, they can, at most, appeal to the reasonableness of landlords.

In the absence of any laws

Home truths

Global shelter conditions

Region	Floor area per person (sq meters)	Dwellings with water to plot (%)	Illegal housing stock	Rent as % of income
Low-income countries	6.1	56	64	15
Low-middle income countries	15.1	74	36	16
Mid-income countries	22.0	94	20	21
Middle-high income countries	22.0	99	3	11
High income countries	35.0	100	0	15

Source: UN Center for Human Settlements

governing private housing -- unlike in the case of commercial property where some regulations exist -- landlords do as they please. They are free to demand any rent and several months' deposit advance.

"In some cases all it takes is for the landlord to see some groceries in your room and he thinks you can afford to pay high rents," complains Sokon.

But landlords defend themselves saying that some tenants deserve what they get.

"Tenants are tricky," counters Emmanuel Chilekwa who has four tenants in his four-room house. "When they haven't paid rent, you don't see them. They come home late in the night when everybody is asleep. They leave home early before I wake up. But I keep checking on them so that they don't cheat me."

Christine Namoonje, who has a two-room-house in Mtendere -- a congested, bottom-end township east of Lusaka -- heartily agrees.

"My source of income is the rentals I charge," she says. "If I don't eat because my tenants haven't paid me, they too must not eat."

Tenants believe some landlords go too far, invading their privacy.

Some of these houses had been built so haphazardly and in such haste that they collapsed during the rains.

Satisfying the massive demand for decent housing in Lusaka will require massive investments, Kasonka says.

"This is a mammoth problem which cannot be solved by the government or the private sector alone," he says.

The Lusaka City Council plans to construct 12,000 houses for sale in the next few years. The central government is building a further 1,000 under the Presidential Housing Initiative, a proposal of President Frederick Chiluba.

These measures, though welcomed by the public, are generally seen as far from adequate to meet the enormous housing shortfall.

"We need more houses to solve this crisis. Otherwise tenants will continue to be exploited by these greedy landlords," adds Sokon.

GEMINI NEWS

The author is a Zambian freelance feature writer contributing to The Star Bulletin and Africa News Bulletin in Belgium.