

Roads left unrepaired

Neither money nor interest available

DHAKA city's 2200 km road network lies in despair generating extremely negative experiences for those who have to travel on them. It appears to have been constructed for providing people with as much discouragement as possible to dare the streets of Dhaka. Except for a few VIP roads, which have been repaired under special projects, Dhaka's travel ways are lying free from the touch of the maintenance team partly because there simply isn't enough money in the Corporation's coffers to pay for such activities. So city roads have been pauperized beyond use. They seem to have become symbols of decrepitude.

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One could ask why such a situation was not foreseen beforehand and adequate steps taken to manage them. That would probably be a question asked by the sane and the sensible but then are we dealing with a sector that has over the years displayed signs of common sense not to speak of accountability? It so happens that we have always seen roads being dug up and redone and this cycle going on and on without really explaining why to anyone, least of all to the user.

Dhaka City Corporation's main tasks as understood widely is to dispose of garbage, control mosquitoes and sadly enough, in all cases, the performance is not really worth praise at all. We are however not talking of high quality tasks done but that will barely allow people to travel through the roads and that too not comfortably.

But urban governance is no longer a matter of mercy but a specialized area which it's possible our city leaders aren't particularly familiar with. Municipalities no longer are identified as garbage collectors or road cleaners but agencies that are responsible for keeping the cities moving. And that's why there is concern that the business as usual approach towards the road sector needs a face lift.

This can't be managed with funds from the urban taxes alone. The national government exchequer will have to lend a hand and immediate placing of special funds are direly necessary. Without a financial fall back position, we can't expect the municipalities to function properly again. But the problems will certainly not go away simply by waiting for a miracle to arrive. The city is dying and it needs desperate surgery if people want to feel comfortable about services they have a right to get but are regularly denied.

Musharraf fashioning his perpetuation in power

Real test of his durability begins now

PAKISTAN President Pervez Musharraf is writing out a new handbook on perpetuation of power. By a decree he has of late effectively barred former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif from participation in the parliamentary elections due in October. The pronouncement has a retroactive effect in that those who held the office of premier or that of chief minister twice before shall stand disqualified for the assembly elections. The reason cited for this extraordinary move, somewhat unprecedented even by the standards of Pakistan's military rule legacies, is ironically a value judgement by the beneficiary himself: "They (Bhutto and Sharif) plundered national resources and ruined the economy during their rule (thereby forfeiting their right to contest in the elections)." Instant reactions to such 'damning' remarks about two former prime ministers who might present a threat to the incumbent's political power or existence could be put together in the form of a question: Why not leave the matter to the voters to decide? That is not merely what elections are really about after all autocratic polls are a misnomer for the term 'election' -- but also the only way, in our view, whereby true legitimisation in power can be attained. As for their alleged misappropriation of state resources, leave that to the court to decide.

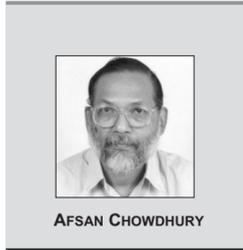
The political disqualification of those who were prime ministers or chief ministers twice before only means rendering the Pakistan People's Party and the Muslim League devoid of leadership at the top, both at the national and provincial levels. So, the decree betraying a ploy of deliberate mischief allows the two major political parties in Pakistan to participate in the polls alright but that without the benefit of their crowd-pooling leading lights. The other inference one can draw from this is that Musharraf might be aiming for spawning new leadership in the PPP and PML.

Even in terms of Pakistan's exclusionary and retaliatory politics where winner not merely takes it all but also tries to keep it all, Musharraf is clearly testing a critical threshold here in his relentless pursuit of clinging to power. He has announced his plans to bring amendments to the 1973 constitution whereby, among other things, the president will have powers to sack an elected prime minister, his cabinet and even dissolve an elected parliament. The Council of Ministers and the National Security Council are to finalise these by July 25. In other words, while Bhutto and Benazir are kept at bay, any one else who might be elected as prime minister would be at the mercy of presidential prerogatives.

We are aghast at the thought of a sinister design at play for a new burial of democracy in Pakistan. Musharraf better beware of being isolated in his own country.

A limousine parked at the graveyard

What does extreme wealth and extreme poverty living together mean?



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

HAVE you ever held a dead child? A child dead, stiff, strangely cold, unable to cry or plead for the air that gets less and less till the lungs can breathe no more? I have. Once, twice, thrice, four... Like the numbers on a roulette wheel of death they go on and on. I remember their emaciated faces, shrunk of life and full of diseases and hunger, lips swollen from sarcoma or just the terrible instinct to stay alive.

I have hidden hearses carrying tiny coffins to cemeteries running out of space. In one such time in Uganda, as we sat huddled against the dead and the living, I was struck by the car that was running the 'body mail' as it was called and realised that it was a Mercedes Benz.

We had to stop for a driver to pee on the road. Through the window I saw a few women huddled over rusty sewing machines, weaving magnificent crochet on the dresses.

"HAVE you heard that they had opened a Mercedes Benz shop in the city?"

The friend was excited. He was a high rolling businessman. I don't know if he has an MB but I know the measure of his joy. He can ride a cut price Mercedes free from the rigors of taxes.

"It will be for the really rich, the wealth creators."

The man has made money making invisible deals.

"I once had a friend who had an MB but he only drove it in his

neighbourhood."
"An MB is a brahmin. It can't run on namashudra roads like where you live."

Such a great joke.

THE floods had been bad in 1998. So bad that when we reached the village in Jamalpur where they were running a grel feeding programme it was my lunchtime. My ailing body shakes and shivers unless regularly fed and it's a bother on long journeys. We had

HOW much does a family eat? Depends on the family. Many eat within control but most have to control hunger. While some of us control how much we eat, most don't have to control. They just don't have enough to eat.

In the Kishoreganj haor area, a man will walk through a swamp trying to catch a fish that he can take home for others to be eaten. Most days he will not catch anything by using his makeshift net

other Muktis had recovered and started to fire. For some reason, for the rains had come down in a fury and the boys were carrying automatics and one never knew how many Indian soldiers were in such parties who were much better fighters than the Mukti irregulars, they decided to go away. When the Muktis recovered his body there was more blood and pulp than flesh.

They carried his body back, resting in a mosque on the way,

shirt and bring his face near to mine.

"Push me and let me ride like a king while I smoke."

Suleman the Magnificent monarch riding down the streets of the capital, a land he had helped sire. When he saw the dead and the dying he wondered why there were so many cars and so many unfed people around him.

Later, it just amused him. Aren't we all laughing?
Like it's a *namashudra* joke told

and symbols. You 'read' meanings in various events and images. Like Umberto Eco has analysed that consumerist obsession with "More". More is better, not quality, not good.

Now suppose we did an analysis of Dhaka and said that this city has just experienced a closure of a factory sending thousands of workers home and children away from school because it was losing money. But we have collected enough rich to buy the swankiest car.

Loan defaulters are allowed to go free and be nominated by political parties without having any trouble and everyone get together and have fun when more than half of the people are unfed.

We can afford to buy such fancy cars in a country where the Finance Ministry don says that we are too poor to afford medical services?

What do we read from the presence of the rich and powerful who are obviously endorsing the presence of extreme conspicuous consumption while children are born brain damaged because their mothers are too malnourished when they were growing in the belly?

What does the semiotics of hunger and sleek limousines living together say?

OUR hears moved on and reached the cemetery. We all scrambled down and saw that every part of the graveyard was busy with people digging graves. Adults, young, men, women... graves are wonderful levellers. As the shadows of the limos fell on the sun kissed reddish earth, we too began to dig and sing dirges as we carved holes to bury the dead as the limousines stood silently waiting to carry more.

Death is always good business.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

Our hears moved on and reached the cemetery. We all scrambled down and saw that every part of the graveyard was busy with people digging graves. Adults, young, men, women... graves are wonderful levellers. As the shadows of the limos fell on the sun kissed reddish earth, we too began to dig and sing dirges as we carved holes to bury the dead as the limousines stood silently waiting to carry more. Death is always good business.

gone on request to see that NGO effort.

They stood there silently as our hired car stopped and we walked out to see the faces that never seemed to end.

"Adults are eating once in two days. They are doing this for the last one-month. Children are starving too because now our supply has totally run out. We are also leaving this place in a month."

Before I could fully understand what was on a woman broke free from the crowd and ran towards us. Then she held up a child and shoved it towards me.

"Take him, take him, take him." She was pleading and thrusting, pushing the child towards my obvious arms of deliverance.

The NGO workers came forward and dragged the woman away obviously embarrassed that the senior journalist from Dhaka was put into trouble by a hungry villager.

"Very sorry Sir. Mad woman Sir. Completely mad, Sir. She won't let go of the child. You see the child is dead. Dead since this morning. But she won't let anyone bury him."

Most days he will not eat anything when the water swarms around him like a deadly snake.

Most days he will believe tomorrow will be better. Some days the truth will hit him hard.

Most days he will not long for death because he is afraid that life after death for a man like him is full of even more hunger.

We can't even describe his life and its language, so far from the dreams of a limousine.

THEY had crossed over from India past the Kasbah border. There were five in team and despite the signal from the Razakar, bought with one taka bribe, were caught unaware. The Pakistani truck surprised them. They ran back and then jumped to the ground without even thinking but the army had started to return fire. But one of them didn't hide. From a very close distance, he started firing at them without taking cover.

The Pak army men were surprised and took shelter behind the trucks. And then they opened up again with their fine automatics. Suleman was shot and he crumbled to the ground. By that time the

terrified that they were carrying a corpse and not a wounded fighter till they reached a makeshift hospital. They left him there and returned back without asking how he was.

He was not to be *shaheed*. He was cursed.

HE would travel in what he called his "limousine". It was one of those self-propelled cars that paraplegics run on Dhaka streets. He would go around looking, dark, unshaved, ugly, unwashed and angry. Children I hear would be scared when they saw him. He liked that.

They had tried to repair him but failed and even East German doctors couldn't pump life into his bullet-ridden limbs. He didn't like that. He became bitter. He was abusive. For a long time he was stuck in his rehab centre. Finally, they threw him out and some kind *NGOwallah* gave him shelter. And they also gave him this car.

If he found me, he would harass me for cigarettes. "You are a coward, I am brave. Give me smokes." With his enormously powerful hands he would grab my

by my friend.

Last year Suleman died, his body like a bunch of crumpled rotten bananas.

THE young child -- almost ten -- looked small in her tiny shrivelled body. She told me that she came to the Karwan Bazaar centre to cook a meal and watch some telly and disappear into the night.

"We children sleep together in one bed because at night they come to take children away."

"Why do they take children? What are you talking about?"

"They take children at night and kill them. They have killed two of my friends."

I really didn't believe the story but I keep hearing more and more about these disappearing street kids, who are free game for some strange forces. Others have too. They live on 30 takas a day if they are not on drugs. That's 900 per month, 10,800 per year, 108,000 per decade, 108,000 for 100 years of a street kid's life and you wouldn't still be able to buy one of those fancy cars.

SEMOTICS is a study of signs

FDI in print media : Future of press freedom

PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

THE decision to allow 26 percent foreign direct investment in India's print media has proved highly divisive. The entire Opposition has condemned the move.

More tellingly, so have many components of the NDA, including Telegu Desam, Samata and Shiv Sena. Ms Jayalalitha too has joined them. The FDI decision is thus largely the BJP's baby.

The move had two elements of surprise. It was made in violation of the February 2002 report of a Parliamentary Standing Committee. In good democratic tradition, the government should have deferred to that more representative body. Instead, it ignored the majority report.

Second, even the pro-*swadeshi* Mr Murlu Manohar Joshi, and conservatives like Messrs L.K. Advani and Arun Shourie, supported the proposal in the Cabinet. This suggests that the *Sangh* has diluted even its nominal opposition to foreign capital.

One motive behind the Cabinet decision is the BJP's *pique* over the highly critical stand that some of the biggest English-language newspapers have taken towards its policies and actions, e.g. Gujarat, terrorism and border brinkmanship. It rewards those who are not strongly opposed to the BJP, and punished those who

are. There were lobbies at work from both sides. The timing of the decision seems related to the government's growing intolerance of dissent (discussed in the last Column), itself related to the BJP's credibility crisis and declining performance.

Motives are a minor part of the issue. Merits are not. *The FDI*

capital in the other three Estates--the political executive, bureaucracy, and middle class. Similarly, it is wrong to demand the Fourth Estate's "internationalisation".

India's newspaper industry has shown enough initiative to modernise itself technologically. FDI is not really necessary for this...The media must recover its relevance and credibility in all its roles, from informing to whistle-blowing, with a clear focus on this society's ills, achievements, the challenges it faces and the opportunities it has. Naïve fascination with FDI will distract attention from such self-correction.

decision is flawed on merits. The press is not a commodity like toothpaste. Nor can the FDI issue be reduced to an indigenous-vs-foreign conflict.

The press is a very special institution of society, which chronicles, informs and educates. It also plays two special worthy roles: as watchdog or whistle-blower, and as forum of debate.

These functions make the Fourth Estate an integral, valuable part of democracy. Like democratic politics, the Fourth Estate too has a national expression. It's hard to find a newspaper, other than financial dailies, which is transnational.

No one advocates foreign

channels. There is a special, close, organic relationship between the democratic process and the print media because print allows more analytical journalism and a better forum of debate.

India's 242 million print-media readers outnumber the 40 million cable TV homes. Besides, as TV gets progressively "dumbed

down", viewers tend to spend less time watching it. In India, there has been a seven percent decrease over three years. Newspaper readership has grown by 20 percent. The Internet is growing, but it only has six million Indian subscribers.

We must protect the core values and indigenous roots of the print media for another reason: diversity. There is a tendency in the Western media towards erosion of diversity of views and editorial independence. Just 12 giant corporations own 60 percent of TV, newspapers and book publishing. All but three are American. Such concentration is inherently bad.

language publications like *Dainik Jagran*. Many are strongly pro-BJP (e.g. *The Pioneer*). They are the likeliest candidates for investment by pro-*Hindutva* NRIs.

In the short run, FDI flows might help shore up the sinking *Indian Express*. But in the long run, FDI will further distort the already skewed structure of the newspaper industry, promote frivolous journalism, exert unhealthy influence on politics (e.g. lobbying for Enron or arms dealers), reduce diversity of views, and mess up the democratic process.

This is not to argue that the existing state of our print media is perfect. There are flaws and weaknesses, including monopolistic

tendencies. But the print media has on the whole contributed to the democratic agenda responsibly --because it is owned, operated and edited by Indians.

In recent years, many things have gone wrong. The worst of them is predatory pricing -- selling papers at Rs. 1.50-2 a copy, when the cost is Rs. 5 to 8. This has made many good newspapers simply unviable. This needs to be remedied through laws. Similarly, the use of unethical promotional methods must be curtailed.

Logically, such remedies should be administered domestically. They don't need a foreign input. Aggressive Murdoch-type marketing methods will aggravate the problem.

India's newspaper industry has shown enough initiative to modernise itself technologically. FDI is not really necessary for this.

Sections of the Indian media must shed their one-sided commercial orientation which treats news like any other commodity. The media must recover its relevance and credibility in all its roles from informing to whistle-blowing, with a clear focus on this society's ills, achievements, the challenges it faces and the opportunities it has.

Naïve fascination with FDI will distract attention from such self-correction.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Book bungling

Our semi-literate bureaucracy has done it again. More officials will get rich while the students continue to graduate without even the ability to write English far less speak it. Rather than letting our own fools waste our money and resources, why not outsource the language teaching function? Float international tender inviting companies to take up this task. Rest assured they will do a better job and the equipment and books will last for far longer. Even better give the whole job to the British Council.

Emile Dhaka

Political dynasty

It seems ridiculous to read AL chief Sheikh Hasina's accusation that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia is trying to create a "political dynasty".

Sheikh Hasina herself is the product of political dynasty. What other qualification does she have to become the party chief (AL), the PM

or the opposition leader in Parliament except for the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman?

She is the crucial example of the worst consequence of dynasty rule or leadership. Being the PM of Bangladesh she left no indecent words unused to her political opponents. She is still making those wanton comments. One of her recent statements was 'Retaliation is the only way to stop attacks on AL'. I wonder what message is she giving to our nation. What lessons are available for our young generation from this type of statement? Does she have any respect for the law of the court of our country?

We do not want political dynasty in our national politics irrespective of Hasina, Khaleda or Tareq Zia or Joy. Sooner they leave politics the better. As a nation we have gotten enough experience of dynasty leadership. Our nation wants such a leader who can lead our country towards progress in action as opposed to leap service. We badly need political leaders who have honesty, magna-

nimity, education, and whose heart really goes towards malnourished people of this poor country.

Ms. Shameem Akhter Portland, Oregon, USA

Good articles

I wish to congratulate Brig (Retd) Abdul Hafiz for his thoughtful articles, especially those on politics of terrorism and the eventuating dynamics in international relations. Without an exception, I find all his articles well researched, well analysed and argued. I also find the views he presents bold and rational. I suggest that Brig Hafiz compiles all his post 9/11 articles into one place and publish these as a book-- may I even take the liberty of suggesting the title of the proposed book--Politics of Terrorism and International Relations. No doubt that such a book will be a great asset to many, especially to the students of international relations, both home and abroad.

Adil Khan Brisbane, Australia

Dying democracy

I always had great respect and admiration for Dr. Badruddin Chowdhury, and was truly happy to see him as the President -- a balance in power. We hope that he would protect the Constitution of Bangladesh and serve the cause of the people. But he has disappointed all with his exit. His justification to resign "to avert a national crisis" was nothing but a lame excuse.

A person of his calibre, experience and quality cannot simply succumb to the pressure of any political party's resolution. He could have asked the law experts to protect his democratic right and decline the "request" of BNPP to resign.

M. S. Munir Dhaka

Hartal again!

What did the Awami League and

Sheikh Hasina achieve from July 4 hartal? How did it serve the nation and people?

The politicians claim that they are fighting for democracy and betterment of the nation. But resorting to hartal isn't democracy. Shutting down everything and depriving the poor from earning their bread isn't what we call serving the people.

Politics in Bangladesh is nothing but vandalism and oppression. The politicians only care about their own welfare and nothing else.

Hayat Khan Cornilla

US mistake

Without a doubt the errant bombing in Afghanistan was a major blunder. But such things happen in the fog of battle and as friendly fire casualties go, the record in Afghanistan isn't that bad.

The Americans have been fighting there since last December if I recall correctly. Since that time thousands of tons of bombs, incendiary devices and missiles have

been thrown at that benighted country. The casualties among civilians have been relatively low considering the amount of munitions thrown around them.

Let this be a lesson, it's a bad habit to shoot guns in the air in celebration especially with a war going on and understandably jittery pilots flying about the place.

T. Ali Dhaka

Violent (student) politics

A student is a person who pursues knowledge. I don't understand why a student should indulge in politics neglecting his primary responsibility of acquiring knowledge. His place is in classroom and exam centre where he will prove his knowledge and skill for future leadership.

Why has student politics become institutionalised only in our country? The answer is simple. Because the politicians wanted it to be. The politicians used the student commu-

nity to serve their selfish interest. The students acted as their pawns. But for how long? How long would the young generation of the country continue to become victims of this violent student politics? Would the politicians at least give us a time limit?

Mohammed Alauddin Dhaka

Improve law and order situation

I was shocked and scared to read of another brutal killing of Adnan Sabbir Galib in Barisal Polytechnic Institute. Galib was a brilliant college student and one of the gentlest boys in our society. He was not associated with politics, bad accompany or a drug. Most of his own time was spent with his computer at home and his parents. But the killers killed him in his own apartment in the secured polytechnic campus in the home district of the powerful Home Minister. Now, what Home Minister Ataf Hossain and his police forces

going to say or do about it? The people of Barisal are in panic and the guardians are so fearful for their everyday life and their family members. We don't want to see any other Galib or Shihab lost their lives within this lawlessness environment.

Where is our destination? Would we be able to save our children from this polluted society?

Mohammad A. Siddique New York, USA

Typos

Watch out, it won't be long before *The Daily Star* is shut down because of a typo. Once the government has set this precedent it will be certainly used again.

In the country, which we will emulate in a few years, a newspaper was also shut down and its editors and reporters jailed and harassed because of an erroneous story they inadvertently published about a common murder. That country: Zimbabwe.

Thor Dhaka