

Save the child, save the woman

Another death makes the dead list even longer

AND one more death has been added to the already long list. Don, a 5 year old has been found strangled to death and floating. Police have arrested his brother-in-law for the crime though till now he has denied it. He was however pressing for dowry from his in-laws and had asked for one lakh taka that was apart from the money he had received as dowry. Another slain child added to the already growing roll call of horror that has gripped Bangladesh in general and Dhaka in particular.

Like it or not, these are terrible times for those who are not strong or powerful. The sense of desperation that pervades society is all too obvious and the legal, moral and social system is obviously under extreme pressure.

But it does also mean that the weak and the vulnerable have become more so, the strong have become more powerful and desperate and the sense that one can get away with crime has grown larger than ever before. While we can be emboldened by the swift process of trial in case of the Shipon murder case, we have many others including the Shazneen murder case to remind us that things can move helter skelter.

However the frequency of death is as frightening as the causes cited for murder. Shipon died because some youths wanted ransom money to be used to go abroad. Bappi was killed over a property feud while Don may have died a dowry death. In each case, economic need or greed played a part.

But other vulnerabilities are not behind. Simi killed herself when she thought she was unable to tolerate the pressure of her neighbours as she tried to make a living, Trisha was a victim of sexual greed and Sony died a meaningless death as two groups fought over a construction tender.

In all the cases we notice the cheapening of life, the weakening of ancient beliefs of protecting the harmless and the denial of the innocent's right to be free from violence. It seems things are falling apart at a rather rapid pace and the centre certainly can't hold as the mythical beast of unreason slouches towards a dreadful destination.

We can't heal all but we should try to hold on to whatever we can. At least let's try. We owe it to those who are being felled by our endless greed and depraved passions.

Ban on two-stroke polluters

Agreed time-table must be strictly adhered to

IN deference to civic wishes which the High Court had upheld, the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority and the Dhaka Auto-tempo, Auto-rickshaw, Auto-truck Malik-Sramik Oikya Parishad have agreed to do away with polluting two-stroke three wheelers by December 31. Of the 20,000 listed for exit 12,500 will go off the street on September 1 and the remainder 5,500 by December 31, so that lead pollution-free city air comes as a new year gift on January 1.

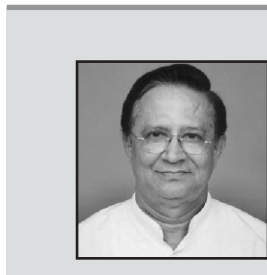
Such a happy prospect, however, is linked to a rehabilitation package which is well-taken. In the first phase, Oikya Parishad will receive 500 CNG-run autorickshaws with no strings attached. In the current month itself, 100 BRTC buses will be given on hire without any demand for security deposit to the listed among the affected autorickshaw owners and operators who shall receive the incomes generated by the bus service.

Furthermore, as per the list of allottees prepared by the Oikya Parishad, CNG-run autorickshaws and taxicabs will be provided to them and by March 31, as many as 5,000 will be given away on easy terms. The number may be raised by another 5,000 in course of time.

However, it seems that the withdrawn vehicles will be allowed to operate outside the Dhaka metropolitan area. That is, these are going to be permitted on the district and upazila roads. The question is: can we set different pollution standards for the outlying areas? We have to do something about it with catalytic converters put in place or CNGfication of the machine or whatever.

In any case, we can not take chances with a progressive implementation of the accord to do away with the veritable polluters of the air we breathe in.

Of benevolence



S H IMAM

T ALES of Ibne Batuta perhaps make the best tapestry of a travelogue on medieval subcontinent. More than characterisation of kings and emperors, it's social dynamics, more precisely, the entrails of them, that wove through his works. So much so that one could almost hazard a guess at Batuta being something of an intellectual alter ego of Naipaul or John Guther.

Ibne Batuta's insight

From that stand point, Batuta, the Moroccan hitch-hiker of a caravan rider, far removed from Chinese traveller Huen Sung, on the time scale, successfully blended travelogue with journalism in a relatively modern sense of the synergy.

So much in praise of Ibne Batuta. But he himself was not all that appreciative of what he saw in these parts of the world. For, one of his insights sounded somewhat critical: "suave-looking natives (well-attired ones), are rather impertinent". That is, the ordinary people, he came across were 'polite'. Several of them are, even to this

day, among the mass of the people, but not perhaps as many as he had seen in his times. Between then (early thirteenth century) and now, some of that comparative 'modesty advantage' held by the generality may have evaporated thanks to the decimation of moral fabric over the long haul. And every thing seems so overwhelming these days in a

Grand Trunk Road and water casks

Sher Shah's four-year rule in our parts is star-studded with competent administration topped off by social benevolence put to good use for the welfare of his subjects. The tree-lined Grand Trunk Road, one of the marvels in highway construction

semi-government and corporate house dak bungalows and rest houses which are exclusive in nature, although private citizens can stay in some of them at unsubsidised and, therefore practically, prohibitive tariff. Dormitories of some established NGOs and YMCA and YWCA as parts of their international networks are there, too. The

ties available on way to the northern and western districts of the country can compare with what one gets to see as the best in the region and beyond. They are spick and span, offer very good food at a reasonable price and the rest rooms are a class apart from the stinky so-called 'conveniences' one had been generally loathe to. This brand of mid-way

help weary pedestrians quench their thirst.

Benevolence needs cultivating

The spirit is important and needs to be built upon to further volunteerism, self-help and community service. Free Friday clinics or charitable dispensaries are few and far between leaving room for more of them to come up. Do we have public feeding or gruel kitchen arrangements for the extremely vulnerable groups except for when we have floods or a drought-induced famine situation? The vulnerable group feeding project needs to be taken up in earnest. There has to be a mitigation strategy to address the concerns for subsistence of the extremely vulnerable groups. The potential for channelling philanthropic urges of well-to-do people in this direction is perhaps worth tapping now. This has to be in tandem with neighbourhood management which is missing now.

The idea is not to provide any segment of people with doles except in extreme cases of disability; on the contrary, it has to be designed to getting work from the would-be beneficiaries in exchange for guaranteed subsistence. The food-for-work programme has been riddled with corruption and therefore proved to be an unqualified disaster. We have laboured with it for too long for any good to happen to either politics or economics.

An infrastructure for benevolence will help employ the idle youth and bring back some of the family and social values we have lost over time.

SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

highly populous context.

Sufi-run inns

The Sufism network had spread so far and wide across the subcontinent that Ibne Batuta would be invariably billeted in a Sufi inn wherever his odyssey took him. In that sylvan setting of medieval times, the Sufis, a mystical Muslim sect, ascetic and rather retiring, had nonetheless their feet in the ground with a worldly sense and commitment to be of service to weary travellers.

Even if it were a hospitality flair devoted to an ideology, and in this case one that was wedded to higher ideals and metaphysics, the network of inns, for all practical purposes, did serve a hugely social pur-

architecture that connecting Bengal with the Punjab and beyond, boasted tucked away inns spaced out with a great grasp of travelling public's requirement. In addition, earthen casks of water laid out on rocky platforms appeared every few koshes along the road.

These were all provided for free by the state in lieu of levies, usually in kind, imposed on and collected from people.

How free our facilities?

In this category, these days we have our scanty and none-too-well-maintained public toilets and urinals, largely confined to municipal areas of the country.

But yes, we have government,

catchier the names of the Parjatan Corporation motels and hotels, the more expensive they are for local individual or even family tourists. The group travel rates do not make the aggregate costs any affordable for even the high middle income group.

These are hardly the equivalents for the basic, austere and romantic ambience that inns of yesteryers used to provide to travellers.

Something to be pleased about

Even so, there is something extraordinarily positive that has happened in recent times, especially north-west of the Jamuna Bridge. The excellent mid-way restaurant facili-

modern hotelery is also to be seen along Dhaka-Chittagong highway.

Traces of old times

Leave aside competent tourism and successful business practices, on the spirit of benevolence or public spirited service itself, we discover faint traces of traditional hospitality of Afghan or Mughal origins strewn around. For instance, at Gulshan an earthen pitcher of water sticks out into your field of vision as you cross the inter-section to and from segment Baridhara. Old segment of Dhaka has some such water supply corners.

Also, along some inter-district highways, one happens to come across earthen casks of water usually placed by the side of mazaros to

Asian brown cloud and sustainable development

The challenge lies in reaching a balance with nature



HARUN UR RASHID

T HE UN Environment Programme's recent study revealed that a killer cloud hangs over South Asia, South East Asia and China. This news has been released prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development to be held at the end of August in Johannesburg (South Africa). The UN Environment Programme Executive Director Klaus Toepfer said: "The concern is that the regional and global impacts of the haze are set to intensify over the next 30 years as the population of the Asian region rises to an estimated 5 billion people".

The cloud is 3km-thick and reportedly consists of a mass of ash, acids, aerosols and other particles. It is the result of forest fires, burning agricultural wastes and dramatic increases in the burning of fossil fuels in vehicles, industries and power stations. The enormity of the problem can be gauged from the fact that 280 million tons of firewood are reportedly burnt annually in India alone.

The cloud, commonly known as Asian brown cloud, is not new. It has been visible by the pilots of the airplanes in every summer and was conspicuously noticeable in 1997 when Indonesian forests were ablaze. It is reported that exactly a year ago US astronaut Frank Cuthbertson, commander of the international space station, Alpha, was observing Earth. He was struck by how much the planet had changed since he first flew into space in 1990. It was less blue, more

blurred. If the astronaut were to fly today over the Earth the vision would be even more blurred.

Much of South Asia is covered in a blanket of man-made smog. It partially blocks the sun and threatens the quality of life of those who live below and adjacent to it. The 200 or so scientists working with the UN Environmental Programme reportedly said that the cloud put hundreds of thousands of people at risk, initially from respiratory diseases

trial, medical and household wastes have added environmental hazards in the country. Poverty leads to unhygienic and unsanitary practices that in turn cause pollution.

Massive deforestation beyond the borders of Bangladesh has a direct impact on the country as with less vegetation to absorb the rains, floods have risen to higher levels destroying agricultural crops. This year India, Nepal and Bangladesh are again in grip of floods which

on the streets from 1st of September. However the biggest challenge appears to remain is the disposal of all kinds of wastes that remain an acute environmental problem.

Environmental degradation in Asia

The report of the UN Environment Programme indicating the existence of Asian brown cloud comes on the eve of the World Summit on Sustain-

able Development in Johannesburg in Manila, Asia is the world's most polluted and environmentally degraded region.

Global warming appears to be worse than predicted by the scientists in the early 90s. The US abandoned the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 which envisaged industrialised countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions between 8 percent and 6 percent from its 1990 levels by 2012. The non-participation of the US,

existence. While the environment is being perceived as a small slice of the economic pie, the umbilical relationship between human existence and healthy environment is to be recognised.

Balancing growth within a healthy natural environment is difficult for any nation. It requires not only money but also farsighted and effective governance -- farsighted enough to foresee emerging problems and effective enough to impose necessary regulations. The civil society is too weak to provide sound advice to governments. Most of Asian environmental scientists believe that Asia's challenge is to give its people the taste of economic success without toxic side effects.

It is expected many environmental issues will come up for discussion at the Earth Summit. A few bottom line questions need to be addressed, such as (a) Are industrialised countries prepared to re-design their economy on renewable energy resources? (b) Will the US show green leadership in changing the global attitudes towards protecting environment? (c) Are industrialised countries willing to spend money for research purposes on alternative energy? (d) Will developing countries follow the recipe of industrialised countries (pollute first and address the problem later)?

The Earth Summit II in Johannesburg will be considered a success if policies and programmes are put into place to ensure life is sustainable for the present and future generations with minimal risk. It is no exaggeration to say that humanity now faces a challenge that is unprecedented in human history. The challenge lies in reaching a balance with nature while continuing to improve quality of life for the billions of people who live below poverty line.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

Balancing growth within a healthy natural environment is difficult for any nation. It requires not only money but also farsighted and effective governance -- farsighted enough to foresee emerging problems and effective enough to impose necessary regulations. The civil society is too weak to provide sound advice to governments. Most of Asian environmental scientists believe that Asia's challenge is to give its people the taste of economic success without toxic side effects.

because the pollutant particles that constitute the haze were direct killers. Some reports have put the potential toll at tens of millions of lives.

The cloud is reducing the amount of sunlight or solar energy hitting the Earth's surface by 10 per cent to 15 per cent. Many experts claim that the cloud is raising temperatures in the atmosphere with the result that it may change rainfall patterns, more droughts and floods in South Asia and China in the near future. West Asia is also affected in another way. It is drying up and the global models in the UN report suggests that the haze may reduce rain over Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and northwest India by 20 per cent to 40 per cent.

Bangladesh

This hanging killer-cloud appears to be an additional environmental hazard to Bangladesh. In recent years Bangladesh has been confronted with severe environmental degradation. Urban pollution, ground water contamination with arsenic, improper disposal of indus-

have caused about 900 deaths in the three countries (floods have caused about 1,000 deaths in China as well).

The earth's continued warming accelerates sea level rise and adds up to one metre to the depth of our oceans. Experts believe that such an increase in oceans could affect more than 60 per cent of the population of Bangladesh. Higher sea level may cause intrusion of salinity in surface and ground water supplies. Salinisation of farming lands may cause irreparable damage to production of agricultural crops in the country.

In recent years the government of Bangladesh attempted to face the environmental problems by enacting laws, such as Environment Conservation Act, 1995 updated in 2002. Another law sought to ban the sale of polythene shopping bags. Three Environment Courts now cover the country and these Courts are aimed at a speedy trial of cases relating to breaches of environment protection laws. The authorities have taken steps to ban the two-stroke three-wheeler vehicles plying

able Development in Johannesburg at the end of August. The Summit is being held after the first Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and is therefore billed as Earth Summit II. The Conference will include discussions on climate change, effects of global warming, water usage and sustainable development (the concept of sustainable development means that the natural resources may be used to meet today's needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs).

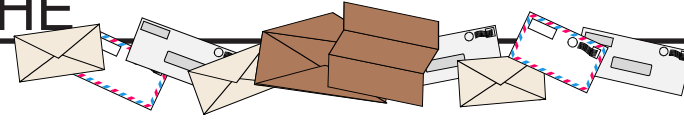
In conventional terms, developing countries believe that development comes first. In three decades it is reported that Asia has lost half of its forests. A third of its farmland has been eroded, salinised or otherwise made less fit for agriculture. Of the world's 15 most polluted cities in terms of air quality 13 are in Asia. China is becoming the second largest producer of greenhouse gases after the US and much of its gases come from coal-fuelled power plants and fuming motor vehicles. An automobile boom is raging in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philip-

being the largest polluters on earth, has been a serious blow to protect the environment.

Another issue that may likely to be hotly debated is the link between the climate change and the occurrence of devastating floods in Europe and the presence of Asian brown cloud. There appears to be two views on it. Some find a link between the two and maintain that erratic behaviour of climate in different parts of the world including the El Nino effect in many countries may be attributed to global warming. While others acknowledge that it may be a different climate to what it used to be but whether that can be linked to climate change and the greenhouse effect is a different story. They believe that climate is always variable and there is not a single year that is the same as the year before. They maintain that more research is needed to connect between the two phenomena.

The unprecedented nature of floods in Europe and droughts in southern Africa, among others, have triggered the debate that economic prosperity is not central to human

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



Great Army

The letter writers of *The Daily Star* seem to get carried away too easily. They also usually veer away from the main subject. The same thing happened with the 'Great Army' issue. Now the letters debate on whether we at all need an army.

Regarding entry into the cantonment, just take a drive through the Airport Road and you will understand that by opening the Jahangir Gate for light and medium vehicle it has made Mohakhali almost congestion free. If the road inside cantonment was open for at least light and medium vehicle from the beginning there was no need for a flyover in Mohakhali. Instead of Mohakhali a fly over could be made at Bijoy Sharoni or at Moghbazar crossing.

Showrov, Dhaka

The debate on Great Army is not about entry into cantonment roads but about privileges and their symbols.

The cantonment is the ultimate in benefits, exclusiveness and non-accountability in the name of defend-

ing the people by the army and other sections of the ruling class. The army, the bureaucracy, the tycoons are all the same.

Naureen Khan Dhaka

ES in his slightly strange letter (August 20) makes a bizarre observation. He seems to be implying that people who criticise the army or demand the right of way through the cantonment are somehow left-wingers.

Look, maybe in Missouri ES would have a point. There probably exists in Missouri the pro-military right wing and the pacifist left wing. But even that is a bit of an oversimplifying caricature.

In Bangladesh I don't think we have a serious schism between hawks and doves. I don't think that distinction even applies to us.

What we do have, it appears to me, is one group of people who seem to be arguing for a critical transparent review of army excesses and expenses and the supremacy of civilian needs. Another group proba-

bly weaned on the myth of military discipline and superiority seems to be willingly subservient.

I will continue to argue for civil rights and rational defence expenditure and I don't appear to be in the minority on this issue.

MA Dhaka

There have been a great many letters defending military extravagance on a common excuse. Apparently because they are alert 365 days of the year military men are somehow superior citizens.

Actually the people who are alert 365 days of the year defending your hides in the line of fire are the police. These underpaid, unappreciated, abused and untrained men are your true protectors. The money poured down for our military should instead be diverted to the police.

Typical of Bangladeshis we can't get our priorities right. Practical but boring investment in police training? Better pay and more equipment? Forget about it.

Joyonto, Dhaka

I would probably be the first to come forward and say that military officers are relatively more honest than civil servants.

But let's not get carried away with our platitudes here. Keep in mind though that this is only an assumption, the only reason we know the civil service is corrupt is because of our daily interaction with it. The military is an opaque secretive body, we are only assuming they are honest.

Kireti Dhaka

Biman: Time to change

Mr. AG, an expatriate Bangladeshi, wrote from California that his sister had to pay bribe to Biman people for flight confirmation ('Biman: What's next', August 14). It's an amazing information.

The government may appoint a probe body to find out whether it's true that bribe plays a vital role for reservation and confirmation of seats in our national airline. If the allegation is found true, then Biman

may replace its present slogan, 'Your home in the air' by a new slogan, 'The only Airline in the world, which takes bribe'.

Certainly, taking bribe from the valued customers is a unique feature for an airline. In fact, how many airlines in the world can boast of having grease money from the clients for reservation and confirmation of seats?

Emirates started its journey in 1985, and Biman, in 1972. Now Emirates has one of the largest fleet of most modern aircraft in the world, and has been nominated the best airline consecutively for the last few years; on the other hand, Biman is limping with its few age old aircraft, sustaining loss every year.

Thousands of Bangladeshis live and work abroad. If they use their national airline for their home coming, Biman does not need international passengers to thrive.

Why most of them don't use Biman, though so many of them, out of patriotism, want to use it? We need to find out an honest answer to this question.

Faruque Hasan Dhanmandi, Dhaka

Export prices

It comes as no surprise that the unit values of exports have declined. This is only the beginning, the decline is going to accelerate and bring even greater hardship to businessmen and our country.

Foreign buyers purchase from Bangladesh on sufferance. No one likes to come to Dhaka, as one consultant once told me, the negative impression starts with Zia Airport and hardly abates. Our RMG factories are of international standards and are more than capable of doing higher value work. The only problem is no high value customer would want to come to this country.

Foreign clients are terrified for the law and order situation, port congestion and hartals, not to mention political violence and natural calamities. Our exporters, especially in the RMG industry, have to face *mastaans* from Titas, Customs, NBR, the Labour Dept. and so on. The fact that every transaction has to be accompanied with bribes is to a great extent liable for our declining productivity.

SSA should be allowed to set up

the private terminal that would allow for shorter lead-time hence greater competitiveness. All the utilities should be privatised so that the extortion stops and bureaucratic red tape reduced.

Dorji Dhaka

Politically incorrect

What difference does it make who becomes the new President? There can't be anything done without the personal intervention of the Head of the Government. The parliament is full of people where most of the MPs have no qualifications to deal with the 21-century challenges. Most of us who believe that we can only make a difference by helping people in personal level had a sense of relief after Awami League was defeated and the first speech by Khaleda Zia.

Unfortunately, 'Who ever goes to Lonka, becomes Ravan'. Controlling crime and reducing corruption, is it really that difficult? The worst thing is that every one is putting up with it.

Citizen

On-e-mail

Empty mosques

More than half of our population are Muslim. But it is really sad that most of them don't say their prayers regularly especially in Dhaka City.

The mosques remain almost empty during prayer times. The biggest congregation is usually on Friday because of *Jumma* prayer. But on the other days mosques remain almost deserted. People should grow up the habit of praying in mosques whenever they can. But sadly this is not the case in our country. During a *Johr* prayer, I only find elder residents of the neighbourhood, a few travelling *moulanas* and a handful of office-bearers and their prayers. This clearly indicates that we are taking our religion for granted or at a lesser degree.

We should prepare our daily schedule/ routine around prayer times, because we cannot do it the other way round. Every office has a time for lunch and *Johr* prayer and also a break for *Asr* prayer. Every Muslim child must be taught the significance of praying.

Being a Muslim does not mean only dressing up for *Jumma* or *Eid* prayer.

Haji Mohammad Isam, Dhaka