

Concrete jungle and commercial brainwave

Zoning-based urbanisation is the answer

THE government's reported plan to convert residential areas into semi-commercial zones has a sense of desperation about it -- desperation on the part of city development authorities to succumb to the pressure of unplanned urbanisation at a dizzying pace. With the capital as the nerve-centre of employment and the livelihood trends in the rural and suburban areas being largely erratic and seasonal, rural-urban migration has increased exponentially over the years. Such a huge influx of rural population has per se translated into more commercial activities than the city can or should accommodate. In fact, commercialisation of physical space threatens to spill into the once-untouched residential areas. This is a menacing trend.

What's more, many an owner of residential plots has found it convenient to rent or lease out their lands for commercial purposes with a view to generating additional income. The concomitant effects have been disastrous on the residential zones: strain on the utility services that resulted in perpetual shortage of water, gas, electricity, etc and increased vehicular movement that translated into traffic tangles for hours on end. The concrete chaos the capital has become today brings into a sharp focus the city planning inadequacies as never before. A Dhaka Master Plan is there which is more obvious in violation than in implementation. Open and green spaces have been taken over by concrete jungles while natural water bodies and floodwater-retaining low lands have been filled up for dubious model town projects. Overall, the capital today sits on the powder keg of a major environmental disaster.

The city fathers, if there were any, pathologically lacked vision. They failed to envisage the growth of the capital. In a least developed country such as ours, rural-urban migration is an unavoidable reality, especially given the deep-rooted city-centricity in our collective psyche. While residents refuse to move away, the entrepreneurs insist on having their industries, factories at the heart of the city, making the capital a veritable concrete hell.

We would like to believe the situation has not yet reached a point of no-return. But it might, very soon. Bursts of emphatic environment-friendly regulatory and enforcement activism with a clear vision may still bring about discipline, liveability and modernity to the city. Unfortunately, the authorities have approached the problem from the wrong end. Instead of semi-commercialisation of residential spaces, they should resort to strict zoning and intra-zoning. For example, as the Dhamondi Paribesh Unnayan Jote puts it, schools and hospitals need to be set apart from each other and from the noise and air pollution associated with heavily trafficked commercial areas. "Schools in the shadows and waste of trauma centres" make no sense, as commercial operations in residential areas do not. A paradigm shift in the shape of an updated national urbanisation plan is the crying need.

Hospital wastes

A health hazard of great magnitude

MANAGEMENT of hospital wastes still remains one of the areas where things need to be set right in order to ensure a minimum adherence to health and hygiene rules. It is no doubt a lapse of a grave kind that the health directorate, which decided in August 1999 to have a clear policy guideline on hospital waste management, has failed to adopt any follow-up measure.

The authorities concerned do not appear to realise, as the lack of action indicates, that hospital wastes, containing highly toxic and filthy substances, pose a serious health hazard. Only that can explain why even big hospitals, producing a huge quantity of wastes every day, are allowed to dump their wastes in open places, without having done anything whatsoever to reduce the harmful effects of the exposed material. If such activities are not stopped, hospitals will be spreading diseases, instead of healing them.

The general rules or laws governing waste disposal are clearly not enough when it comes to management of hospital wastes, which fall in a very different category. The question of enforcing the laws or bringing the violators to justice will arise only when we have a law, making it mandatory on the part of hospital managers to dispose of their wastes in the prescribed manner. It should not be particularly difficult to develop a safe waste disposal system: the hospitals have to follow the standard methods used by modern hospitals abroad.

It is not known when the health directorate will finally respond to this civic and health hazard of great magnitude. It is common knowledge that hospital wastes can spread a number of diseases; but the decision-makers in the health sector do not seem to be convinced that the problem cannot be left where it has been all these years.

Of course, it is necessary to formulate the guidelines and make sure that hospitals go by them. The government should look into the matter with a sense of urgency, since keeping the sources of diseases open and festering is something we can only afford to our peril. It is equally important to keep in view that in the modern world, hospital management is a specialised subject, and, as such, it is unlikely that the waste disposal system will improve unless there is an improvement in overall hospital management.

Rotten at the core!



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE government has suddenly increased the fuel prices by almost 14 per cent with effect from 5 January last. This is the fifteenth such increase in fuel prices since independence and second after the BNP-led alliance took the helm a year before. The reasons advanced are patent and we all are familiar with them: the higher prices in international market, making up the losses incurred by the BPC (Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation), discouraging its smuggling across the border where the prices are still higher and, of course the augmenting of revenue earning. Blah, blah, blah. We heard these excuses from the government of all stripes without being really convinced. Even this time the state minister for energy took pain to give detailed reasons for an apparently arbitrary decision ostensibly to placate at the public anxiety over this unusual price increase of the fuel at a critical time of acute dearness. But there seems to be few takers of his explanations.

Because the government seldom lowered the prices of fuel when its price plummeted in international market. It rarely showed concern about losses which it shows now for BPC -- whether in case of bank loan defaulters, tax evaders and identified smugglers. And about the smuggling? While there are so

many lucrative items to be smuggled about, only the ones lacking gumption would resort to cumbersome operation of fuel smuggling. Neither could the state minister himself produce any specific data on petroleum smuggling. "On the question of BPC losses the minister was far from depicting the true picture." In fact BPC, the state run agency, remains the greatest source of revenue for the government, paying more than Tk 3500 crores to government coffers in duty and value added tax (VAT). The

common people of middle and low income groups are worst-hit by the fuel price hike and they are the ones to bear the brunt of its consequence? Does the government then consciously punish the people most of whom voted it to power with the hope that the change would bring them some succour? It will not do the same with the affluent class who apart from subsuming the ruling elite can well bare its fangs.

There is already a price hike of all

essential goods and the common people have been gasping to cope

because of increased cost of both production as well as transportation. While the growers of the perishable products like vegetable etc in the country's far-flung areas will be deprived of the just prices of their products, the bulk of the consumers of these will have to buy the same items now at a much higher price. Worse still, there is persistent disincentive for the growers to cultivate the country's few cash crops like jute etc having an international market. The growers are, even under normal circumstances, deprived of the

benefit of gas, will be hard hit by increased furnace oil price.

It is feared that the current price hike will be inevitably accompanied by inflation further reducing the purchasing power of our money. It will seriously affect the people of fixed income groups. As they will be hit hard the corruption will inexorably flourish to make good of the losses incurred because of price hike. Those who have no job to thrive on bribes will naturally gag others' throat to extort money for compensating their losses. It is an

money from those dirty hands through an innovative social engineering -- and not only by penalising the poor innocent common folks. If it is so done then you never have to mercilessly put your burden-bearing yoke only on the shoulder of the poor as has been done by the decision of fuel price hike that hurts most the poor.

But are our politicians who specialise at the most in chicanery and mealy mouthed mendacity, equal to the task! There are few signs that they are. Their narcotic dependence on official largesse and their avarice will seldom let them take that bold step, lest their own interests are compromised. They would rather favour status quo to safeguard their entrenched privileges.

In fact, when the politics degenerates and is no longer sustained by any great ideals, morality and an ethical mooring it is left with mundane ministerial berth, government largesse, an odd ministerial plot or a consolation job to offer to its ranks. It then produces bootlickers, favour seekers and sycophants only in the garb of politicians. A great socio-economic transformation of a historical dimension is certainly beyond the capability of this class. Their pettiness can be gauged from a treasury bench law maker who, is one of the earlier serious of the present parliament unabashedly demanded the price of their being the representatives of the people. He asked for increased pay and allowances of the MPs. Their affairs and residences and of course a duty free car every five years, and what not. Remember the chilling wish list of the MP representing some of the world's poorest lot? Will they change own fate or bring about a social revolution to rid as from own recurrent miseries? Isn't it an absurdity!

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

PERSPECTIVES

The poverty is our invention although we are also not an affluent nation. It is the question of extracting out the hidden money from those dirty hands through an innovative social engineering -- and not only by penalising the poor innocent common folks. If it is so done then you never have to mercilessly put your burden-bearing yoke only on the shoulder of the poor as has been done by the decision of fuel price hike that hurts most the poor... But are our politicians who specialise at the most in chicanery and mealy mouthed mendacity, equal to the task! There are few signs that they are.

BPC's predicament, if any, stems from poor management and high taxation. Indeed, the reasonings put forward by a government that feels no compunction in maintaining a motley collection of as many as 60 ministers with their concomitant perks and privileges bear little credibility as far as their concern for public interest goes.

Yet whenever there is a crunch, the cash strapped and revenue hungry establishment conveniently puts its scathing knife on the jugular vein of the people treating them more as sacrificial lambs. They are the people made to bear the burden of filling in the state's exchequer. It

knows that they are unable to resist and will, at the worst, grumble in private before resigning to their fate. Doesn't the government know that

with it. The government has so far failed to curb the upward trend in the market. The increased price of the fuel will only add to the miseries of the dispossessed and destitute and will raise the cost of living several notches upward. Even without the increased fuel price the cost of living went up by 8.52 per cent during the last year. Now it is any one's surmise what shape the market would assume after the new prices take effect.

At national level both agricultural sector, the mainstay of our economy and the nascent industry which is yet to take off in true sense will suffer setback as the production cost of both is bound to shoot up as a result of increased fuel price. The price of the agricultural product will go out of the reach of the ordinary consumers

proper price of jute the cultivation of which has tremendously slowed down. Now with the higher prices of fuel for the power tillers and pumps they will no more find the cultivation of cash crops cost effective.

As regards industrial products they will not be able to capture even the domestic market with their higher price tag and the people lured by foreign trade mark would tend to buy at the same price the smuggled goods finding access to our market through myriad illegal channels. The entry of Bangladeshi products to export market had already been difficult. Now they will further lose their competitiveness. It will take long for our industry -- still a non-starter -- to recover from the repeated such shocks. Particularly the industries in the North Bengal,

irony that on one hand we are trying to curb corruption and terrorism but on the other actually creating conditions where people affected by the problem of making both ends meet will in desperation resort to the means they themselves abhor.

It is a paradox of our society that despite of abject poverty there is no dearth of money to change its face. The way our affluent class lives, behaves and indulges in reckless hedonism disproves the theory that we are indeed poor. This is apart from hundreds and thousands of crores of taka squandered away through unpaid bank loan, tax evasion, smuggling and kickback in official purchases. The poverty is our invention although we are also not an affluent nation. It is the question of extracting out the hidden

Is Sri Lankan peace process moving in the right direction?

ZAGLUL A. CHOWDHURY

THE latest round of talks between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil rebels in Thailand for the first time dealt with certain most sensitive and complex issues of the longdrawn civil war in the island state and two sides could not make any headway on these matters. However, none really expected much progress on such issues like the decommissioning of the arms by the rebels and dismantling of the army camps in the rebel-dominated areas. The dialogue ended without any agreement on the key issues but this should not give the impression that the talks have failed or have run into too rough a weather. Having made progress in recent months on their sensitive discussions, two sides this time picked up the most contentious subjects and it will be height of folly to expect a breakthrough on these in four days of parleys. No doubt, any major progress on the vexed issues would have given unexpected but desireable impetus to the on going peace process. But not surprisingly, this did not happen and the two sides will have to make some headway on the delicate matters in the coming days should the dialogue produce expected outcome towards a permanent settlement of the Sri Lankan conflict.

It is true that the positive ambience for a dialogue to settle the complex civil war in the island state of Sri Lanka may be marred because of new complexities introduced in the peace process. Signs are being discernible that the current talks between the government and the Tamil militants may suffer setbacks in the form of fresh differences unless the new hiccups are resolved to an extent to facilitate continuation of talks before they threaten the progress already made so far in the direction of a permanent peace in the country where the rebel Tamils have been fighting for nearly two decades for a separate homeland in the north but have jettisoned this main demand as a big concession to the peace process. The government too gave several concessions in a spirit of accommo-

ation so that the difficult peace efforts brokered by Norway and supported by the international community continues unabated despite problems within Sri Lankan government. The government of prime minister Ranil Wickramsinghe is in an uneasy cohabitation with president Chandrika Kumaratunga, whose hardline attitude towards the Tamil rebels runs in contrast with the prime minister, who heads the government that is in effect charged to run the nation despite enormous powers by the presidency in some matters. The president and the

taken for attaining this situation conducive for a dialogue between the two sides. This followed several positive measures that have helped creating a congenial environment for negotiations to end the problem. The scenario has changed for better after a new government came to power following the December 5, 2001 parliamentary elections. Among other steps, the government expressed its readiness to lift a ban on the "Tigers" as the militants are known. This has been a major development in the island state where the Tamil militants are

atmosphere even though they stuck to their positions on the issue of decommissioning of the arms by the militants. The observation made by the chief negotiator for the rebels Anton Balasingham that giving up arms by the rebels at this stage will be "suicidal" should not come as a surprise since the militants are expected to take such a crucial decision only when they are hopeful that a permanent settlement is round the corner and they are not robbed off their bargaining power which is their military strength. On the hand, the head of the govern-

ment explored for a resolution of the civil war through dialogue. The win of anti-Kumaratunga alliance in the elections was seen as a mandate by the electorate to intensify efforts to end the war that overwhelming majority of the Lankan people want but little progress was made earlier in that direction. The president is not favourably disposed to the peace process evidently for the reason that a permanent settlement is round the corner and they are not robbed off their bargaining power which is their military strength. On the hand, the head of the government did not succeed in bringing two sides to negotiation and possibly now she does not relish a situation where her political opponents are

MATTERS AROUND US

The very fact that the two sides despite lack of advance on the key issues decided to continue the talks and not let the progress be obviated by insistence at this stage on the difficult issues itself is a tangible outcome towards the bumpy road of peace in Sri Lanka. Arguably, the thorny issues cannot be settled so easily and the Gordian knots cannot be untied in quick time. Serious differences may persist on sensitive matters for days to come and this is the reality in such a complex crisis. But the discussions are being characterised by a spirit of give-and-take.

prime minister belong to rival political platform.

Sri Lankan government and the Tamil militants signed a landmark ceasefire agreement last year that has brightened the prospects of a negotiated settlement of the vexed civil war that has so far claimed so many lives on both sides. Two contending sides did reach truce before as well but it is for the first time that they signed an accord to halt hostilities mediated by Oslo and vowed to honour it. Never before, the ceasefire took a formal shape and raised the kind of expectations that this accord has done.

The government forces and the Tamil militants are observing the first internationally monitored truce as the country now sees a concerted move towards ending the bloody conflict. The island state was bleeding white because of long intermining war. Ceasefire in the past had proved shortlived, bringing back both sides on the war path again.

The accord has not come out of blue as sufficient efforts were under-

engaged in a bloody insurgency causing havoc for the country. They entered into a truce with the new government and agreed to extend and honour the ceasefire with all seriousness. Indeed, all these augured well for a settlement of the problem through peaceful means despite the fact that the problem is very complex and hard task awaits for two sides even if sincere efforts are being made for solution of the civil war.

Two sides have agreed to maintain the ceasefire despite the fact that differences persisted on the question of existence of the army camps in the rebel-influenced areas and laying down of the arms by militants. Truces were reached more than once earlier but the ceasefires seldom worked satisfactorily and consequently they collapsed leading to revival of hostilities. All these were occasional and half-hearted efforts towards peace. But the ambience changed after the prime minister Ranil Wickramsinghe's government pledged that all avenues would be

demonstrating success where PA government failed. However, she is bringing in sensitive nationalistic issues to support her position like asking the rebels to dismantle their elite "Black Tiger" suicide group which was responsible for many daring operations including killing of Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa and former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. The majority of the Lankan people are Buddhist Sinhalese whereas the Tamils are Hindus. A small segment of Muslims are also a factor in the peace efforts. President Chandrika is seeking to give the impression that Sinhalese interest is the most important and peace with the rebels cannot be made at its expense. The government of the prime minister Wickramsinghe says that people of Sri Lanka want cessation of this conflict which is ruining the nation itself.

Two sides have agreed to maintain the ceasefire despite the fact that differences persisted on the question of existence of the army camps in the rebel-influenced areas and laying down of the arms by militants. Truces were reached more than once earlier but the ceasefires seldom worked satisfactorily and consequently they collapsed leading to revival of hostilities. All these were occasional and half-hearted efforts towards peace.

Earlier, efforts to bring two sides into talks often ran into difficulties. Government side was keen for dialogue but the Militants were

demonstrating success where PA government failed. However, she is bringing in sensitive nationalistic issues to support her position like asking the rebels to dismantle their elite "Black Tiger" suicide group which was responsible for many daring operations including killing of Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa and former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. The majority of the Lankan people are Buddhist Sinhalese whereas the Tamils are Hindus. A small segment of Muslims are also a factor in the peace efforts. President Chandrika is seeking to give the impression that Sinhalese interest is the most important and peace with the rebels cannot be made at its expense. The government of the prime minister Wickramsinghe says that people of Sri Lanka want cessation of this conflict which is ruining the nation itself.

While some of your readers write about such middle-class pseudo-topics as cloning, autorickshaws, English medium, etc, this country is swiftly sliding into a most insidious form of despotism.

And there is no point of talking about Saree for women. It's a smart and good-looking dress.

Siddique
IUT, Dhaka

people want is a very different kind of war, a war on poverty, unequal terms of trade and commerce, environmental rapacity, and profiteering consumption of resources. Yet this is the kind of war the champions of world peace, freedom and democracy, human civilisation and social justice are not ready to wage, least of all by the emerging new hegemony.

Hussain
Dhaka

"My visit to Bangladesh: An American view"

This is a reply to Amy Mohsin and K. M. Khalid.

What is going on?

The legs of a sixteen-year old boy crushed. Two brothers beaten to pulp. A middle-aged man dies in custody. Political opponents imprisoned, again. Writers locked up without charges, again and again. Thousands hauled up on just hear-

say. High Court rulings flouted. Where am I living? What country is this? Is this the Bangladesh you and I want? Shame on those who think it is business as usual, and pretend not to see the devious nature of what is going on!

While some of your readers write

about such middle-class pseudo-topics as cloning, autorickshaws, English medium, etc, this country is swiftly sliding into a most insidious form of despotism.

I agree that *lungi* is one of our traditional dresses, but don't you think that it is a sort of un-smart dress to wear on the streets? In Arabic, there is a proverb that says

"eat as you like and wear as others like". If someone such as a rickshawpuller or a truck driver who cannot afford a dress rather than a *lungi* then it is acceptable. But if a Nissan Petrol or a Lexus driver wears a *lungi* while dropping his boss to office, it really doesn't look good. Driver's outlook also shows your status.

And there is no point of talking about Saree for women. It's a smart and good-looking dress.

Siddique
IUT, Dhaka