

Eid holidays*And the tale of urbanisation*

LIFE in the city changes in a very marked way during Eid holidays-- the roads remain empty; people don't have to encounter the usual traffic jams; and the unbearable noise pollution also comes down to a tolerable level.

All these happen because a huge number of people go back to their village homes, leaving the city in a state of relative tranquillity. But is it an unmixed blessing?

We need to dig a little deeper into the issue. The exodus during Eid holidays is an indicator of the fact that many people live in the city, but have failed to settle down here. And it is not clear whether the process can be called urbanisation at all, as around 50 per cent of the population still live in slums or places equally bad in terms of civic amenities. They struggle to stay afloat in an urban setting, not designed to cater to the needs of such a big population.

The poor and lower middle class people have their roots in villages and they rush back home whenever an opportunity presents itself. They celebrate Eid with their near and dear ones, which is how their ancestors celebrated the occasion. From the standpoint of family values, it is great, but from the standpoint of stable and steady urbanisation with fulfilment of citizens' needs, it is not quite so.

The matter should provide food for thought to city planners and economists dealing with such intricate problems like unplanned urbanisation and the resultant complications. They must also work out ways and means of diverting the flow of urbanisation to different places, instead of the city alone. It is now obvious that nearly five million people live in the city, the epicentre of urbanisation, without becoming its residents in the true sense, as they don't have access to the bare minimum civic facilities. That is surely not how we can develop Dhaka into a modern metropolis.

Kofi Annan on AIDS*Real weapon of mass destruction*

THE UN Secretary General's comments on the worldwide AIDS epidemic made in an interview with the BBC on Friday were spot-on. While the world, in particular the US and the UK, focus on whether or not there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, AIDS remains a real weapon of mass destruction for the people of the developing world, and one that the world is doing too little to combat.

A report released by the UN last week indicates that 2003 saw three million people die of AIDS worldwide and that five million people were infected with the HIV virus in 2003, bringing the total population of those infected with HIV to over 40 million.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, one out of five are infected with HIV, with the infection rate rising to as much as 40 per cent in some countries. But AIDS is also spreading like wild-fire in countries as far-flung and diverse as India, China, Russia and Indonesia. India alone has over six million infected with HIV.

And even though AIDS is not yet a huge problem in Bangladesh, experts warn that we must immediately take serious measures to counter the spread of the disease or face an impending public health disaster.

Annan places the blame for our collective inability to combat AIDS squarely on the shoulders of the leaders of the world: "I am not winning the war because I don't think the leaders of the world are engaged enough," he told the BBC, "What is lacking is the political will."

The Secretary General correctly pointed out that the developed world has failed to provide the resources needed to pay for anti-retroviral drugs, to set up prevention and testing programmes and to train doctors and nurses in the third world.

The cost to the developing world of funding an effective global campaign to combat the spread of AIDS -- roughly \$15 billion a year -- would be negligible, especially when compared to the costs of the war in Iraq or the war against terrorism. But this is five times the amount that was spent in 2003.

Annan is right. We are fast losing the war against the spread of AIDS and the weapon of mass destruction the world needs to focus on is the HIV virus that kills three million people a year.

Perspectives for the new NATO

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

within Europe. Today, with the process of rebuilding Europe nearing its finality, the spotlight has shifted to the threat from outside Europe, in particular, the mortal threat of global terrorism. Today, NATO's field of vision extends to Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. This is being euphemistically termed as the "nexus of global terrorism."

Similarly, the character of NATO is also changing from being a defensive alliance to a potential offensive

ground in Iraq, the big boys are all absent. Hence the need to seek a new UN Security Council Resolution for giving the US a larger umbrella role in Iraq. The US wants the UN and through that format other countries, but its insistence on retaining the military command is proving to be a challenge for everyone else.

Currently, the USA has undertaken a two-pronged operation. The USA, after its initiative in the UN, is now trying to swing large sections of

the EU. This twin enlargement of both NATO and EU is being considered as decisive in building the new Europe.

It is largely anticipated that the seven new countries set to join NATO next year will strengthen the alliance.

At the same time it is being underlined that because of their different view of history, they will also be more "tough-minded" about the collective need for defence.

One thing is clear. NATO's centre of gravity would shift significantly after

are principally underway to identify future areas of cooperation.

Most NATO experts have also indicated that in addition to looking east, NATO must also look south, towards the Middle East and northern Africa, both of which are important from a security and political perspective. Different workshops in Brussels and Berlin are indicating that the EU is far more advanced than NATO in this respect. It is presumed that in the coming years, this aspect will receive greater attention from NATO as well.

Another problem will also have to be addressed. It is the question of developing better relations within the EU in security and political fields. It is being understood that it is in NATO's interest to see that the EU forges its own security and defence policy. This will have to emerge if future EU-NATO cooperation as laid down in Berlin-Plus agreements (on how both parties should work together) is to succeed. This is a very sensitive area. Among other things, the doctrine states that the EU would refrain from developing institutions duplicating those already existing within NATO. Recent calls from Belgium, Germany, France and Luxembourg that the EU build its own military headquarters in Belgium runs directly counter to this principle. This is an issue which has to be resolved.

In the meantime, it is heartening to note that despite a lot of dust, all sides are trying to avoid confrontation within NATO. Responsible Europeans are advising on the need to avoid reflexive anti-Americanism. Americans are also being asked to reject unilateralism. There is great merit in this effort.

Both sides need to work together within multilateral institutions such as the UN. After all, they have a common interest in defending and working towards peace, justice and the reconstruction of poverty-ridden societies. Unnecessary distraction will divert attention away from serious issues like trade, health care and poverty reduction that are foremost in the agenda of developing nations.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

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grouping. In this context emphasis is being given to peacekeeping efforts. There is also a shift in its focus.

Initiatives are being examined regarding Afghanistan. Over the next weeks NATO will debate whether peacekeeping forces should remain concentrated in Kabul or be deployed to other parts of Afghanistan, as has been suggested by the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, and various other non-governmental organisations.

NATO believes today that long-term stability in Afghanistan is crucial, both in terms of peacekeeping and development assistance. NATO planners are carefully scrutinising the lack of infrastructure in health care, education and other areas in Afghanistan.

This itself is a major departure from previous NATO involvement outside Europe. In doing so, NATO understands that this will entail a fundamental rebuilding of the country and development aid from donors. This also reflects NATO's acceptance of US views pertaining to Afghanistan.

NATO's problem has however been Iraq. Although, sixteen European governments have soldiers on the

European public opinion (that opposed the war in Iraq) through NATO. To do this, they are pointing out that if Iraq can be reconstructed into a society that is more stable and just, then both the Iraqi people and the NATO partners would be better off.

Whether this strategy succeeds in Brussels will largely depend on what happens in New York.

Analysts wary of new challenges

within NATO under a new Secretary General, also perceive other problems in future US-European relations within NATO. They are drawing attention not only to the capabilities gap, but also to the deployability gap. It is now being recognised that since the first Gulf War, there has been a revolution in military technology and doctrine. Continental warfare has been replaced by expeditionary warfare. Instead of deploying large numbers of soldiers, the emphasis is now on "strategic lift." This in turn translates into secure communications and precision-guided munitions (heavily used in the second Gulf War).

Unfortunately, only some NATO members have accepted this new technology and new doctrine. They

have all invested heavily in new technologies as required under the new doctrine. Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and Canada have however not yet made the shift from a reactive to a pro-active approach. It would be worthwhile to note here that Germany's defence spending accounts for only 1.4 per cent of gross domestic product which is below the 4 per cent

the entry of these countries into the alliance. After 2004, about 40 per cent of NATO member states will be former Communist countries.

It is believed that after 2004, NATO will keep its doors open to new members. Under the same analogy, it is being suggested that it would be just as vital for the EU to do the same. This obviously points towards Turkey (already a member of NATO). The emphasis for such an argument probably arises from the logic that everyone would be better off if European countries were in both.

Today, NATO countries understand that they have to be able to deploy soldiers far from their own shores for peacekeeping operations. It is here that hard strategic decisions will have to be taken.

NATO has already supported the development of the EU's Rapid Reaction Force but now understands that it is just as important for NATO to have a response force as well. NATO realises that it needs the ability to project a significant amount of force within a relatively short period of time, to put soldiers on the ground and get the job done. A debate has started as to whether it is acceptable if only some countries are able to take on these challenges, while others fall behind for budgetary and capability reasons. The USA is particularly pointing out that German leadership is vital at this critical juncture when seven new NATO members are due to enter the alliance in May 2004 (coinciding with the entry of 10 new Member States into

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OPINION**In defence of Communicative English**

TERENCE PENHEIRO

EVERY year right after the HSC and SSC results, experts write columns in newspapers shedding tears for those who did not pass, especially in English. They prescribe many kinds of medication for the treatment of the causes of failure in English. One such treatment was prescribed in The Daily Star (Nov 14) by a teacher of English. The gentleman gave some examples of the grammatical errors our students make and went to denounce the new HSC text book on the grounds that it does not help students learn correct English, or even English at all. The gentleman went so far as to praise the text books and syllabus of the past -- he recommends the country go backward not forward. This writer wishes to examine the effectiveness of the present syllabus and the unworthiness of the previous one, but not before sharing with the readers an experience he and his colleagues gained only a few months ago.

At the request of an internationally renowned social worker, the writer and his colleagues began the arduous but rewarding task of helping Rekha, a 30 year old woman learn English. The time given was twenty-eight days, two hours daily.

Rekha had dropped out of elementary school after three years. Her father, a farmer, married her off at a very early age. The marriage did not work out and Rekha, with a son in her lap, was abandoned by her husband. To the consternation of her parents and relatives, she left her only son with her parents in the village and began work at an NGO. Later, with her hard work, perseverance, and indomitable courage, she became the driver of the aforementioned social worker.

In a very short time, seven class days, Rekha was able to respond to the simple questions mentioned above. The teacher tried to get Rekha to write questions and answers, but she could not, because she did not know the spellings of words and neither did she have any idea of English syntax. The teacher gave up the idea. Not a big

deal, he thought. Rekha needed to communicate with her interviewer in English. She was not expected to write grammatically correct reports in English. She needed to learn how to talk and respond to questions.

All Rekha needed was encouragement and a lot of practice listening and speaking. She heard grammatically correct English, but was not able to reproduce exactly what she had heard. But what she said was understandable. The "he" always became "she," and her grammar was very weak. But her teacher persisted. He continued repeating the same questions and eliciting the same kind of responses daily before asking new questions. Rekha and her teacher did not

communicate sitting in a class-room but walking in the university campus.

The teacher would ask, "What tree is that, Rekha?" and Rekha would answer, "Coconut tree." The answer was accepted and appreciated. To the teacher's utter surprise, Rekha was able to name many different kinds of trees and plants which the teacher did not know. In a fortnight, Rekha was able to introduce her teacher to many workers of the NGO where she had been working. She was also able to give her teacher a lot of information about these people. The most amazing thing was that Rekha was able to tell her teacher the addresses of almost all the embassies in Dhaka and also the shortest and hassle-free routes from a particular place to those embassies. At the end of her 28 class days, Rekha was interviewed by her prospective boss and was found suitable to be the director's driver. Her interviewer and she communicated in English. She was

hired. Her communication skills were appreciated, not by a non-native teacher of English, but by a native speaker, who has mastered her language. This is what Communicative English is all about!

The National Curriculum and Text Book Board have rightly selected "English For Today" as the set text for the examinations to meet the need of teaching and learning how to communicate in English. Every unit has been

meticulously and painstakingly selected to help our learners learn the technique of communication.

days when they would sell their all important "notes" for the students to memorise and regurgitate in the examination hall without understanding much of what they were supposed to read in school or college.

The HSC syllabus of the past consisted of four short stories, one essay, ten poems, and limited sentences based on some grammatical items.

Board question papers would reveal that the five prose pieces did not have more than ten essay type questions and about twenty questions expecting short answers that would be set at alternate years. Most teachers had the answers prepared beforehand and used to sell them to their most liked students (their fortune makers).

teach and verify whether her/his students have learned those items of grammar or not. If not, have them review the chapter, and rewrite, rewrite, speak, speak, and speak, of course in English (both the teacher and the students) in the class-room. Until the teacher is convinced the chapter has been mastered by, if not all, most students, the leap to the next chapter would not be fair to the students.

It is too short a syllabus for two years compared to the number of units in the book and the number of working days. The kinds of grammatical errors the writer points out and blames on the new syllabus may also be directed at those who graduated from high school and college before the new syllabus "Communicative English" was introduced.

The writer of this article had the opportunity to give "English Teaching Methodology" classes to about three hundred secondary school teachers, English Language classes to more than a hundred bankers, many police officials and physicians, and almost the same kind of grammatical errors were detected in their writing and speech. The fault, therefore, is not with "Communicative English," but with the not very acceptable teaching standard, lack of motivation and sincerity of students, teachers, and administrators, and above all, a non-conducive English Language teaching environment in almost all government and government-aided schools and colleges. With a proper English Language teaching environment, teachers can bring about a radical improvement in our schools and colleges in a short time. Let's keep our fingers crossed!

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every year and the experts would find no reason to shed tears and write prescriptions for the country to go backward and provide the means for the teachers to become the only beneficiaries.

The principal of a women's college in Comilla invited the writer to visit his college to find out the reason for the high number of failures in English. The writer sat in three classes and to his utter dismay found that none of the three teachers knew exactly which lesson they would teach that day. In the note for the teachers in the text books, the editor very clearly gives the guidelines on how to handle the book. It would not be an exaggeration to say that very few teachers read the editor's instructions, and even if they had read it, very few knew how to handle the text. The problem is the teachers' lack of interest and skill in teaching Communicative English. Most of them still want to go back to the good old

But only a few were able to read, understand, write, and speak English properly. The lucky ones became lucky

not due to the great teaching of their teachers, successful administrators, and the effective syllabus, but because they had a congenital atmosphere of hearing and speaking English at home. Their parents are to be lauded for this, not the teachers or institutions or syllabi. They would have done pretty similarly had they not attended a single English class in college.

The writer of the Nov. 14 piece gives evidence of the kinds of errors students of the new syllabus make because, according to him, the new syllabus, Communicative English, does not encourage teachers to teach elements of grammar. This is not true. On the top of the page, beginning each unit, there are hints for the teacher about the elements of grammar that the students are supposed to learn at the end of that particular unit. It is the teacher's job to

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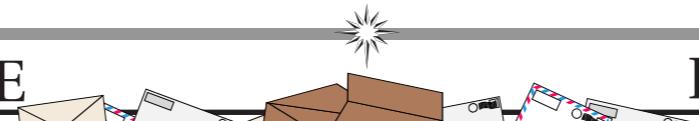
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Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

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