

Interview with outgoing British High Commissioner Dr David Carter

'Let the politicians talk to one another ... in the national interest'

After four and a half years, as British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Dr. David Carter finally bid a fond farewell to us last week. His last few days in the country were understandably filled with functions and official duties, but he kindly made the time to meet with *The Daily Star's* (DS) **Zafar Sobhan** to discuss his time here in Bangladesh, his thoughts on the state of the nation, and his plans for the future. The following are excerpts from their conversation:

DS: Let's start with you telling us a little about yourself. Where and when you were born and brought up and where did you go to school?

Carter: Let's just say that I was born a very long time ago...

DS: So ... you decline to answer the question?

Carter: Yes, that's right. I decline to answer [laughs]. My father was a civil servant and so I grew up in Africa -- Zambia. This was a very formative period for me. It taught me a lot about the relationships between different peoples and the value of tolerance and understanding. In between school and university I returned to Africa to teach. I went to college at the University of Wales, where I read modern history and politics before going onto the University of Durham to do my Ph.D on non-violent resistance in South Africa.

I joined the Foreign Office in 1970 and have been a specialist in African and Asian affairs. Aside from Bangladesh, I have also worked in Ghana, Zambia, South Africa, the Philippines, and India.

DS: What were your impressions when you first got here?

Carter: What did I expect? I suppose I initially expected something of a gloomy picture -- as one does -- but of course that is only part of the story. What I found was an immensely vibrant society with extremely welcoming people who were very keen to advance the relationship between the two countries. And I could not have been prepared for the chaos and confusion that is Dhaka!

DS: What has changed in terms of your initial impressions and what has stayed the same?

Carter: When I first arrived, I had no real understanding of the depth of the culture and history. Bangladesh has a living culture. When I go to people's homes I see modern Bangladeshi art, I see music recitals and dance performances, the local culture is a living thing. It's very, very rich and quite wonderful.

Now, on the other side, I couldn't have believed -- I couldn't have imagined -- how intractable and

challenging the political situation could be.

DS: Probably a good time to ask you what your biggest frustrations have been:

Carter: Oh well -- that's easy. Traffic jams [laughs]! The real frustrations of course are the political and governance related problems. Bangladesh has been developing so rapidly economically and socially but it is equally clear that things are being held back by what appears to be unnecessary interference. There is no reason why Bangladesh should be held back in this way. None at all.

DS: Do you have any suggestions as to how best to move forward?

Carter: The advice I would give to the politicians is to think the unthinkable. Do the undoable. Talk to one another. Do it in the national interest. My fear is that if the current climate of mutual distrust and hostility persists then it is the country that will suffer and the parties will themselves lose out if they don't change their approach.

I feel that my time in Africa -- South Africa especially -- has been instructive. What I learned there was the value of lessening confrontation. Take South Africa and apartheid for instance. The post-apartheid period especially was a time when the politicians were able to think the unthinkable. Even extremely bitter political opponents learned to talk to one another and the result -- the smoothness of the transition -- the lack of violence -- was a great benefit to the country -- a real achievement. There's a lesson there for all of us.

DS: How is Bangladesh viewed in the UK?

Carter: Bangladesh is viewed with tremendous respect in the UK. We understand the challenges that you have faced after liberation and the difficulties that you have overcome. We have real respect for the progress that has been made in the last thirty years.

And of course we think of Bangladesh as a special friend with a very special relationship. The principal reason for this is of course



that we have between 400-500,000 British citizens of Bangladeshi descent. So there'll always be that connection between our countries.

We also have our concerns. The persistent climate of confrontation and corruption. The law and order situation. This damages development, reduces the prospects for

foreign investment, and harms the image of the country abroad.

DS: What have you enjoyed most about your job here?

Carter: I have personally enjoyed the diversity of the job which reflects the diversity of the relationship. I have enjoyed seeing civil society come together and I

have greatly enjoyed the opportunities to travel.

DS: Which parts of the country have you visited and which is your favourite area?

Carter: Sylhet. There is of course the particular connection to the diaspora community which always makes it a favourite destination of mine -- but it's also one of the places I really enjoy visiting. Chittagong -- a lively vibrant city -- if only you could get the port functioning properly. Kurigram. Going out to the remote villages -- on the chors -- visiting with the marginalised communities and seeing how they live.

DS: Have you had any particularly memorable encounters on your visits?

Carter: What comes to mind is when the PM Tony Blair visited Bangladesh in January of 2002. We spent several memorable hours in a village where BRAC had been very active in raising the living standard with schooling and health and microcredit programmes -- I can't recall the name -- Demaria perhaps -- but the warm interaction between Tony Blair and the villagers was something I shall always remember.

An equally memorable experi-

ence -- though less pleasant -- was when British nationals were kidnapped and we had to negotiate for their release. It was a depressing experience though ultimately successful.

DS: Has the Iraq War been a challenge for you? Has it made your job more difficult?

Carter: The job is always a challenge. But I don't actually believe that the war did make things more difficult. There was a lot of debate and I have had many discussions and arguments with many different people but I always found the tone of such debate respectful and congenial and found that people were really prepared to engage me on a productive level.

DS: Where are you headed from here?

Carter: Well, in the immediate future I am going on holiday but I shall be back in London in a few weeks and then -- who knows?

DS: Here's wishing you a very happy and healthy future. Thank you very much for taking this time to speak with me.

Dhaka: A growing metropolis or a choking hell?

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

HUMANITY is at war right now and it is not too draconian to call it a war for survival. It is a war in which all nations must be allies. Both the causes and effects of the problems that threaten the earth are global and they must be attacked globally. "All nations are tied together as to their common fate", so said Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden in the early part of 1989.

Most important, as we in the underdeveloped countries step into the new millennium, we find ourselves at a crucial turning point: the actions of those living now will determine the future, and possibly the very survival of the species that are still left. We do not have generations, we only have years, in which to attempt to turn things around. Every individual either here in Bangladesh, or the whole Asian region or any part of the planet must be made aware of its vulnerability and the need to preserve it. And surely no attempt to protect the environment will be successful in the long run unless ordinary people, say, a factory owner in Dhaka, a housewife in Tetulia or a peasant in Teknaf is willing to adjust his/her life style or job operation.

The situation in Bangladesh is highly alarming. Poverty, oversized population, over-exploitation of the scanty natural resources, noxious emissions and toxic effluents from industries and smoke-belching vehicles coupled with recurrent natural disasters like floods, droughts, cyclone and storms are the major causes of environmental degradation in Bangladesh. Environmentalists and conscious citizenry in the country mainly focused on the human factors responsible for deterioration of environmental quality in Bangladesh as well as other regions of the world. The human factors in the deterioration of Bangladesh environment are: population growth incompatible with development of resources; lack of adequate environmental considerations in the

development processes; poor management of waste generated through the production-consumption process; deforestation and hill cutting, consumption of both renewable and non-renewable resources without substitution strategy; inability to adopt cleaner technology and processes.

Environmentalists have expressed concern about the environmental degradation of the Dhaka city that evidently manifests its decline. They have expressed concern that encroachment of the river Buriganga, the life line of

Overcrowding, noxious fumes, unhealthy slums, litters, power shortage, water shortage and contaminated water have all played a part in turning this once growing charming city into a choking hell now. But public reaction to all these human factors is mostly mute. And surely, unless the public takes a unanimous stand, Dhaka's decline will continue.

adjacent wetlands receive an estimated 12 lakh cubic metres of waste water per day through various points like the Hazaribagh tanneries, Dholaikhal and Pagla sewage treatment plant. Shockingly true, the

survey indicates, most residents in the area are suffering from chronic bronchitis and respiratory ailment.

Once source of sweet and pure water for the bustling cities of Dhaka and Narayanganj, Buriganga and

other water borne diseases like typhoid and skin diseases.

City's garbage collection points, some of them provided with steel frame bins by the Dhaka City Corporation are nothing more than

True, new pavements and road islands have been built in many places of the city. But one would be shocked to see how pedestrians, hawkers, rickshawpullers and street urchins are relieving themselves on

taken a macabre look with wastes of all types piled up on them at places. Ironically true, it is not only the absence of amenities but also the unclean way of life and utter disregard of civic obligation that make this city extremely filthy. One can hardly bear with the nauseating stench of raw ammonia blowing by breeze from the pathways.

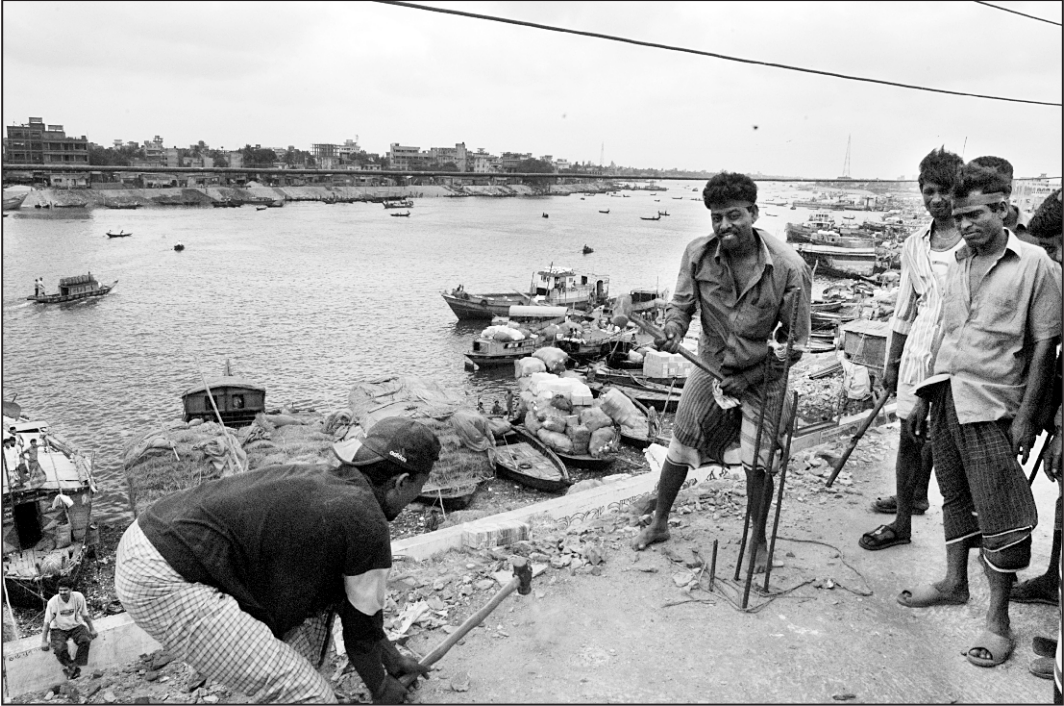
The Mayor must give proper thought about constructing toilets at different places of the city namely Central Shaheed Minar, New Market Kucha Bazaar area, Gulistan etc. to name a few and the

toilets tidy. On the other hand, pedestrians and others must be warned and instructed to use these toilets constantly through electronic media.

Fortunately, the informal system of waste recycling works somewhat through rag pickers who are mostly destitute children and street urchins. But only about ten percent of the waste could be recycled this way. And with the failure to reprocess waste as said earlier, the capital city is running out of space to dump the growing mountains of garbage. Worse, the city's landfills, hotbeds of diseases and innumerable poisons like medical wastes mostly toxic, are leaking into their surroundings. And the landfills are not really landfills but just stretches of land where garbage is dumped. Wastes putrefy in the open, inviting disease-carrying flies and rats and a filthy poisonous liquid called leachate leaks out from below contaminating ground water as has happened in Rayerbazar and Hazaribagh tannery areas in the recent past.

Overcrowding, noxious fumes, unhealthy slums, litters, power shortage, water shortage and contaminated water have all played a part in turning this once growing charming city into a choking hell now. But public reaction to all these human factors is mostly mute. And surely, unless the public takes a unanimous stand, Dhaka's decline will continue. If people showed their outrage all together at what is going on here, it might galvanise the politicians and bureaucrats into real action.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN, formerly teacher of Physics, is Controller of Examinations, BUET.



The Buriganga, Dhaka's squeezed lifeline: Encroachment extending deep into the river.

Dhaka city, traffic congestion, pollution and diseases are turning this once majestic capital city into a teeming-choking hell. True, the river Buriganga, has turned into a narrow polluted canal due to encroachment on its both sides and indiscriminate disposal of waste and effluent. Reports have it that the river and

Buriganga has turned out to be the most polluted river in the country with Hazaribagh Tannery causing the major pollution. The present dissolved oxygen level (BOD) is much lower than four milligram per litre, the minimum dissolved oxygen required for the survival of fish and other aquatic lives. "The waste water discharged through the (above mentioned) three sources consumes 40 tons of dissolved oxygen per day from the river water", experts indicated.

Buriganga's poisoned waters now symbolise not life but death. With installed treatment capacity of 1 lakh 20 thousand ton per day Pagla sewage treatment plant can now only treats about 45,000 cubic metres of liquid waste. The places in and around Hazaribagh tannery right upto Rayerbazar, Sultanganj Road reek of a horrible stench. Liquid waste flowing from the tannery premises is drained into nearby cesspool that empties into the river Buriganga through three outfalls.

In Narayanganj town the river Shitalakhya receives effluents from textile industries located at Kanchpur and Tarabo area. Waste 4 billion cusecs everyday is being thrown into the Shitalakhya. The place is a living hell. People have to walk along the streets with nose-trap. The entire area is a fitting example of how human beings are forced to live in squalid conditions. Exposure to such acidic emissions day in and day out has the potential for causing serious respiratory ailments to residents. Other than the liquid waste that is potentially hazardous to health, gaseous emissions from the effluents contain sulphur dioxide (SO₂) which turns into sulphuric acid when comes into contact with moisture. Sulphuric acid is a highly corrosive substance inhaling which might cause damage to lungs. Horrifyingly true, a one

Shitalakhya rivers are now lifeless receptacles of human wastes and toxic industrial effluents from the dyeing units, textile factories, saw-mills, dockyards, wholesale markets of fruits and vegetables, and small scale manufacturing industries other than encroachment by numerous illegal structures built on both sides and in some cases deep inside the riverbed from Mirpur to Pagla. There are waste recycling factories, slums, and business houses established by land grabbers who are mostly politically influenced people. They did it in a planned way by dumping wastes on the riverbed and then raising unauthorised structures on the 'reclaimed' land. And it proves to be a very lucrative business! There is no need to buy the land nor pay any tax, just encroach!

Lack of awareness about the environmental degradation, total apathy of the government and public to environmental imperatives have made situation so worse. What is happening in the city at present not only constitutes an open loot but also creates a highly unjust situation. While those who ravish the city and imperil its future get away with illegal gains, the law-abiding citizens suffer the consequences very badly.

The city is now under assault on many fronts. Garbage has posed a major threat to health and sanitation in and around the city limits. In most cases, it is not picked up for days. In the teeming city suburbs filthy water and human excreta along with other wastes stagnate in choked drains throughout the year till the rainy season washes a part of them out to the river Buriganga and Shitalakhya. And so citizens using this water or even piped water which gets contaminated through leaks are easy prey to diseases like diarrhea, dysentery, jaundice and



Stinking heaps of garbage: Common sight in Dhaka streets.

rotting, open heaps of refuse. In recent times, these worn out bins are not also visible on most of the spots. That means garbage and household refuse are strewn all over the street.

Only about one third of the Dhaka city has the luxury of underground sewer system and in other areas human excreta, poultry residue, and all sorts of biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste clog the open surface drains. The entire city area generates about 5,000 tons of household and medical waste daily. DCC (Dhaka City Corporation) can collect about 40 percent of the solid waste generated daily. More than 30 percent of the urban waste is allowed to decompose and putrefy on the roadside. Quite a substantial portion of it goes into the drains, choking them and creating slush and stink all around, besides being breeding grounds for diseases.

As this capital city expands, population pressure increases, industrial concerns grow in numbers and the society as a whole prospers, its trash -- mainly hazardous plastic and metal packaging -- is also growing exponentially. With the failure to reprocess waste, Dhaka city is running out of space to dump the growing mountains of garbage. Mountains of garbage heaped up in dustbins, street corners and pathways specially near markets is simply not picked up. People only wish if the Mayor had ever any time and opportunity to visit the New Market Kucha Bazar and its annexe or Thatai Bazar to name a few, he would have a bitter shock to see the appalling condition with excreta both human and animal and other rotten wastes piled up on pathways just close to the food shops and eateries. Precisely speaking, people are being forced to buy and eat disease.

the side walk. Hardly the construction is over the road islands have

business community as a whole must bear the cost of keeping the