

Deaths in debris

Immediate survey of the old town area needed to assess situation

THE building collapse in Old Dhaka is a tragic reminder of the truth that a large number of dilapidated structures and buildings in that part of the city have long crossed the limits of safety. At least 11 people are reported to have died in the collapse, which was apparently the result of gross violation of the building code. We express our deepest sympathy for the dead and all other victims of the tragedy that struck them unawares.

However, words of condolence and consolation cannot alter the truth that a huge chunk of the city population is exposed to a grave danger due to lack of maintenance and renovation of old buildings. In Shankhari Bazar alone, there are 32 buildings identified as highly vulnerable. The accident that took place early Wednesday should also give us an idea as to the extent of damage that an earthquake will cause in the city.

The tragedy was an avoidable one, or that is what we have to conclude if we closely examine how old structures are maintained in other big cities. Obviously, things have to be set right in many areas. The organisations like Rajuk and the City Corporation have to address the issue with a view to eliminating the risk of such accidents through ensuring compliance with the building code and other safety regulations. Finally, the inhabitants of such buildings have to show a better understanding of the problem. The building that collapsed on Tuesday is reported to have been raised to the sixth floor, though it did not have the required foundations. Unfortunately, the building code and safety regulations are something that most people are not even aware of in this city of nearly 10 million. And there is apparently no one to shoulder the responsibility of such a costly lapse.

But then the authorities concerned cannot allow people to make such blunders and pay a high price for them. We demand that an immediate survey be carried out by the relevant agencies to assess the situation correctly. The unsafe structures must be identified along with those in need of renovation and repair. Obviously, the highrisk structures must be demolished to avoid the kind of tragedy that we have witnessed. The issue must be treated as a major public concern.

Unregulated ship-breaking industry

Recipe for human and environmental disaster

ONCE again the people and the environment in Chittagong are exposed to toxic hazards emanating from a ship-breaking yard. Only last year, a similar incident in the same area affected animal and plant life. In June 2000 as many as forty workers were killed in two separate incidents of fire in ships that were being dismantled.

As per reports, at present, as many as 60-80 large ships are dismantled, in as many as 32 ship-breaking yards every year, but none has ever been regulated and most of them fall short, in many respects, of national and international standards.

There are several reasons why such accidents occur. First, most of the ships that are now being sold out as scraps are of the 70s vintage in which large amounts of toxic substances like asbestos, paints containing cadmium, etc were used. Second, these are not decontaminated as per regulations before being sold out as ships-for-scrap. Third, there is lack of proper equipment and safety in these yards. Lastly, there is a lack of effective checks to ensure that the workers as well as the environment are not exposed to potential hazards that unregulated ship-breaking might bring upon.

Admittedly, over the past thirty years the ship-breaking industry has come to provide jobs for as many as thirty thousand people in our coastal belt, apart from supplying raw material for our steel mills. But one of the reasons the ship-breaking industry in Bangladesh has expanded so fast is the somewhat more stringent regulations in our neighbouring country in this regard and the laxity in following whatever regulations are in place in Bangladesh.

Regrettably, the government has paid little heed to calls by environmentalists and the media to reign in the irregularities, nor has it joined hands with nations that are involved in this trade to demand decontamination by western countries that supply the ships-for-scrap.

We feel that the responsibility to ensure the industry's proper development, keeping the safety and security of workers and environment in focus, devolves on both the ship-breakers and the government. The industry cannot be allowed to be a provider as well as a destroyer at the same time. Failure to stem the rot may spell greater disaster in future.

'Failed state' and Bangladesh



MAHFUZ ANAM

IS Bangladesh a failed state? The question itself, in my view, is unjustified, and those who ask it insult our very existence. The reason I find it unjustified is because the situation is far from what can warrant such thinking. The term 'failed state' has on different occasions been used to describe countries like Afghanistan, Somalia, Haiti, and the like. How can Bangladesh be compared to such countries?

There is a need for extreme caution in using such expressions. If we have a state which is failing, then what do we have left? In one sweeping and all encompassing expression, we negate the country, everything we have fought for, everything we have tried to stand for, everything we have ever gained. We also make a mockery of our Liberation War, which is the biggest, the brightest and the most precious jewel in our crown of national achievements.

I am firmly of the view that those who have used such expressions have really not meant it in the way I have described above or as it has generally been understood. I think what they meant to say is that Bangladesh has a failed government and many of its institutions are falling apart. There could have been a confusion in the choice of

words between 'government' and the 'state'.

Regardless of whether we agree or not I think a very strong argument can be made about Bangladesh having a failed government at the moment. The way fundamental institutions of the state have been and are being distorted and politicised (more about this below), many of us can quite legitimately conclude that we have a failed government and that failure is actually leading to severe erosion of the effectiveness and

fabric itself has been put under severe strain. We cannot escape the fact that serious questions are now being raised about which way Bangladesh is heading? Why are our politics, society, and daily living becoming so violent? Why are we unable to solve any problem and only create new ones? Why is the country getting more and more divided? Why is there a rise in religious intolerance? Will the parliament ever function at the level and with the effectiveness that our constitution envisaged?

Though this can be termed as a law and order issue, its existence over an extended period and the obvious failure of the government to stem it in any fundamental sense, have created the suspicion that the government has become structurally incapable of doing anything about it.

Insecurity coupled with ever increasing corruption, especially in the area of law and order, has further added to the perception that not only has the government failed, but it is unwilling and

and justifiably changed. We felt that after a lapse of a decade and half we got our democracy, elected government, and representative parliament back and as such we were on track for establishing the 'Sonar Bangla' of our dreams. We all felt that given two or three genuinely free and fair elections, ten to fifteen years of representative parliament, and successive elected governments with direct mandate from the people, we would be well on our way to having a truly transparent and account-

whole mechanism of governance into a structure of extortion.

It is a matter of supreme regret that neither of our two big parties gave the parliament a chance. The ruling party of the day always distorts its privileges as the majority party and tries to twist the procedures of the parliament to its imaginary advantage (because ultimately those advantages turned out to be meaningless as both the BNP and the AL saw later), and the opposition always tries to suck the very life out of the parliament by their unthinking, immoral, unethical, and politically suicidal open-ended boycott of the parliament.

So we have a lot of reason to feel deeply disillusioned. Our leaders, especially the present ruling group, seem to have no idea how deep, how pervasive, and how all encompassing our sense of disappointment is. And it is growing everyday because we see no sign of any fundamental shift for a positive change in the offing.

My esteemed colleague and editor of daily Prothom Alo questioned whether Bangladesh was becoming a 'dysfunctional state'. This must be read as distinct from the term 'failed state'. The former is an expression of a passing condition while the latter is that of the end result. While the former serves as a warning and wake up call. The latter consigns us to the dust-bin of history. Let the issue of 'failed state' be rejected as it deserves to be. But let not the underlying message contained in it be ignored. For if it is, then we seriously run the risk of proving our worst enemies correct. We may actually become tomorrow what we vehemently and sincerely reject today.

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Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher of The Daily Star.

SPEAKING UP

My esteemed colleague and editor of daily Prothom Alo questioned whether Bangladesh was becoming a 'dysfunctional state'. This must be read as distinct from the term 'failed state'. The former is an expression of a passing condition while the latter is that of the end result. While the former serves as a warning and wake up call. The latter consigns us to the dust-bin of history. Let the issue of 'failed state' be rejected as it deserves to be. But let not the underlying message contained in it be ignored. For if it is, then we seriously run the risk of proving our worst enemies correct. We may actually become tomorrow what we vehemently and sincerely reject today.

efficiency of the state. But to equate this phenomenon with that of a 'failed state' is something I refuse to accept. Suffice it to say that in spite of our corrupt, inefficient, insincere, short-sighted, highly partisan and self-serving leadership and destructive political culture, we as a state and as a people have come a long way. Don't let our considerable failure cloud our hard-earned successes, and our just criticism of a government lead to a negation of something far greater and deeper.

While I refuse to accept the argument of a 'failed state' it would be unrealistic for me to deny the fact that, due to the failure of our successive governments, our social

Will our political party ever be able to institute internal democracy so that its bosses become 'leaders' and not dictators?

Are we not festering old wounds in a manner that turns a small problem of yesterday into an intractable one today? The very fact that the question of 'failed state' has arisen, in however a limited circle -- in the background of the fact that such a question was never asked before -- is in itself a statement that deserves serious attention.

What has perhaps raised doubt about the effectiveness of our state is its failure to provide the most basic service of guaranteeing security of life and property.

unable to mend itself.

The way our country has been run in the last 13 years has not helped to strengthen our faith either in our state or in our future. On the contrary it has considerably eroded our faith in both.

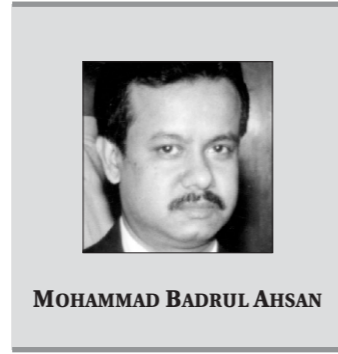
From the autocratic government of Gen. Ershad we did not expect much except corruption, exploitation, and personal aggrandisement. We knew it was an illegitimate government springing not from the people's mandate but from a constitution-breaching coup, and that nothing good can come from such a government.

With the restoration of democracy, our expectation totally

able administration. All this could have easily been ours, only if our leaders were a bit more sincere and committed to the people and to the nation.

Obviously we are far from achieving our dreams. In fact in many ways instead of going forward we have moved back. We have criminalised our politics, made bureaucracy partisan, literally turned the police into party 'thugs' (whose primary tasks seem to be to beat up the opposition and pamper the ruling party), made all utility services sources of rent seeking, turned almost all big business deals into sources of accumulating illegal wealth for the party high ups, and have turned the

Give up your future



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

I know it is easier said than done, perhaps even easier for someone who does not have to do it himself. But once I also was encouraged to sacrifice past and present on the altar of the future. I was pushed to build my future, study hard, keep good company, shun bad habits, eat proper diet, respect the elderly, read biographies, and learn from the examples of great lives. I could not play when I was fit, I could not sing when I was happy, and I could not watch movies when reality had not yet encroached upon fantasy. My eyes were fixed on the future, because I was told that the sacrifices I made were nothing compared to the coming stream of returns.

Today I can see my future, and count my returns. Believe me, it is not much to give up. Much more people earn much more than I, much more people are much more powerful than I, and much more people get much more respect than I. These people never studied hard, never followed good examples, and always picked up bad habits along the way. Now I am told that man can only try, but it is God who decides who gets what. I have grown up to find that the totem

pole of everything I was told stands upside down.

Which is fine. Once burned is twice warned. So I am asking you to give up the future. I am not asking you to not save money, work hard, or plan for the future. Yesterday's present is today's past, and tomorrow's past is today's future. But just don't get hung up on the future, and don't worry about a stitch in time. It does not matter if you do not save nine. Tomorrow comes back, so does the future. If you were not at the right place at the right time with the right person, it was

I am asking you to be brave, because I was not. Take the cash and let the credit go. A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush. Remember these are also words of wisdom, the semiotics of sensibility. Always look before you leap, but you must not be afraid to take the leap if you do not like what you see. Then soldiers could never go to war, mountaineers could never climb mountains, and astronauts could never go to space. There is much more to life than the future, which is more focused on the end than on the beginning. The future

nothing moves ahead unless something falls behind. You must move ahead and go through the approaching time. I am not asking you to give that up. You cannot give up living in the future, but I am asking you to give up living for the future. Take life as a story line, where every act is as important as another, where every character, however small, brings meaning to the plot. Touch every life that comes your way, enjoy every moment, and do not put away today's experience for tomorrow's expectations.

make you a coward, instead let the prospect of failure make you courageous. Think about those heroes who have fought against tyranny and occupation, knowing that death was imminent, that future was short. Ambition is to future what infatuation is to love. Inordinate ambition becomes a one-sided affair. Man disposes, God opposes. The first sign of maturity is to know you do not get everything in life.

That is also the first sign of bravery, a man who does not confront himself cannot confront others. I

ambition because by that sin fell the angels. Ambition and future go hand in hand like dream and slumber, the absurd and the absolute caught in the tangle of a chancy endeavor. Roman poet Horace cautioned, "While we are talking, envious time is fleeing; seize the day, put no trust in future." Live for today is what I mean to say. Live for today, because yesterday is history and tomorrow is hubris. You cannot recover what is gone and you cannot discover what has not come.

Give up the future for the freedom of all, because past and present are forfeited on the cutting edge of future. Future is ambition, which is compromise, which makes you a coward. Future is when a student must cram instead of challenging what he learns. Future is when the subordinate is busy satisfying the boss instead of doing his job. Future is when intellectuals bend to the wish of politicians to get their favours. Future is when Faust signed away his soul to Mephistopheles in return for his assistance.

Future is just another today on rotation tomorrow. Live in the continuous time, save for today and spend for today, live for today and die for today. Future holds you back. You do not see everything you believe, and you do not believe everything you see. Give it up, and you will be free again. So will be the rest of us from the curse of building a castle in the air. For man who does not know if there is a tomorrow, the future is just that.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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not your turn.

A French sculptress named Anilore Banon has created a sculpture on the 60th anniversary of D-Day, which rises out of the waves at St. Laurent-sur-Mer on the beach in Normandy. She said that the young Americans who came ashore on Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944 inspired her work.

"Those kids who landed on D-Day were just 18," she explained. "They had futures. To give us freedom, they gave up their own. That is the very best of humanity." That is why she called her sculpture "The Brave."

is an extension of the present, and the past is erosion of the future.

It is said that meditative people should be talkers, otherwise they are mental misers, mills which grind corn only for the miller. If you think of future all the time, you are bound to ignore the present and the past. You will be a kind of mental miser who will save everything for the last minute, only to find that what you saved was stolen by time. It is risky like putting all your eggs in one basket. Life, like currencies, can devalue, and wipe out your savings by surprise.

Future is important because it is the culmination of time, because

Thus I am asking you not to break the sequence. Yesterday, today and tomorrow, which are respectively the ground, the tree, and the fruit. You must take care of the ground first when you plant the seed, and then take care of the tree so that it grows to yield the fruit. I am not asking you to give up any of these things. A good gardener would not do it. But at the same time, I am asking you to believe in what is called the green thumb. Not everyone has the skills to be a good gardener. And the tree might not yield the fruit despite the best of your intentions.

Do not let the hope of success

am asking you to be brave in order to confront yourself. Ask why future is important, ask why you must miss the near to look far. An eye on the future often brings out the worse, if not the worst, in you -- selfishness, calculation, acquisition, opportunism, arrogance, greed, and deception. Look at us, generations of us, how we have ruined our collective future in the mad rush to build our respective futures. Look at us, how we have tried to hold future in our grip, yet it has been slipping through our fingers.

In Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, Cromwell is asked to fling away his

Monitoring global poverty

Will we reach the Millennium Development Goals?

RYANATUL ISLAM

THE World Bank, through its 2004 World Development Indicators, has released new global poverty estimates for the 1981 to 2001 period. The world's poor are classified by determining whether their income/consumption levels fall below two so-called international poverty lines: \$1 a day and \$2 a day. Both these thresholds are expressed in terms of 1993 purchasing power parity (PPP). It is customary to treat the \$1 a day poverty line as a measure of extreme poverty, while \$2 a day is interpreted as the practical minimum for middle-income economies.

The \$1 a day poverty line is now enshrined as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that the international community - represented by 189 countries -- endorsed in September 2002 at the UN Millennium summit. The MDGs commit the global community to attain target reductions in

both income and non-income dimensions of poverty by 2015 (using 1990 as the base year).

The global figures suggest that extreme poverty in relative terms has apparently fallen significantly (from 39.5 per cent in 1981 to 21.3 per cent in 2001). Projections made by the Bank suggest that the developing world as a whole is likely to reach the target set by the MDGs.

The overall trends are influenced by a 'China effect'. Rapid growth in China has been accompanied by a rapid reduction in poverty. Given its large weight in the world's population, the trends in the absolute numbers in extreme poverty have been heavily influenced by developments in China. If one excludes China from the estimates, the absolute numbers in extreme poverty are slightly higher in 2001 than they are in 1981 (881 million in 2001 vs. 845 million in 1981). Regional trends are consistent with this conclusion, where stagnation and negative growth seem to have taken their toll, as in

Preoccupation with the \$1 a day measure of extreme poverty has also deflected attention from assessing changes in non-income dimensions of poverty within the framework of the MDGs, especially target reductions in hunger and malnutrition, child and maternal mortality as well as provision of universal primary schooling for boys and girls. The challenges of attaining the MDGs are clearly monumental!

Africa and, for much of the 1990s, in the ex-Communist bloc in Eastern Europe.

In recent years, the global poverty statistics have been mired in controversy. Some argue that the use of the PPP method imparts both a downward bias and considerable volatility to the poverty estimates. Thus, for example, the Bank's decision to update the PPP series (from 1985 to 1993) caused large and arbitrary changes in poverty counts for quite a few countries.

At the other extreme are those scholars who demonstrate that the trend decrease in extreme poverty has been much faster than the

evidence compiled by the Bank and that the MDG goal of halving extreme poverty has already been reached. Surjit Bhalla has made the astonishing claim that the Bank deliberately overstates the incidence of poverty so that it can continue to justify its large operations in developing countries.

As Angus Deaton has argued, the nature of the controversy can be traced to the fact that some scholars have relied on readily available national accounts data to generate the poverty estimates, while the Bank relies on household surveys. The average consumption/income that can be derived from the national accounts are usually significantly higher than the corre-

sponding mean from the survey data. In some important cases, such as India, the discrepancy has grown over time. This suggests that household surveys underestimate the income/consumption growth of the poor and thus overstate poverty levels.

One should not, however, jump to the conclusion that the national accounts data are more reliable than survey data. The former aims to measure macroeconomic aggregates, while the latter are geared towards estimating living standards at a household level. It is a perilous procedure to conflate the two. This has motivated Angus Deaton to argue that the professional community concerned with

global poverty estimates must come to an agreement on appropriate protocols for monitoring global poverty. At the same time, he suggests that the Bank should seriously consider abdicating its current position as the sole official producer of global poverty statistics and either transfer the enterprise to an independent, accountable body or pursue its current obligations jointly with the UN.

In a refreshingly radical paper, Lant Pritchett has rejected the idea that one should continue to measure global poverty in terms of the \$1 a day benchmark. He makes the important point that the current approach does not measure

global poverty because its application inevitably means that there is hardly any poverty even in a middle-income country such as Malaysia. Any measure of global poverty should have a uniform standard against which all the poor in the world -- from Chad to Canada -- can be assessed. Using this novel approach, Pritchett argues that a measure of global poverty would need to rely on \$15 a day (in terms of PPP dollars) which corresponds to the practical minimum for OECD economies. In this scheme, \$1 a day is a measure of destitution, while \$2 a day is a measure of extreme poverty. The message clearly is that the world in last two decades of globalisation has witnessed some progress against destitution, but any meaningful progress against global poverty is a long way off and is certainly not going to be achieved by 2015.

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assessing changes in non-income dimensions of poverty within the framework of the MDGs, especially target reductions in hunger and malnutrition, child and maternal mortality as well as provision of universal primary schooling for boys and girls. Here is the latest report card compiled by the World Bank. Less than 50 per cent of the countries are on track to reach the 2015 target for reductions in hunger and malnutrition; children in more than half the developing world will not receive primary education by 2015; most regions in the developing world will not achieve the target reductions in child and maternal mortality by 2015. The challenges of attaining the MDGs are clearly monumental!

The author is Professor, Department of International Business and Asian Studies, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Australia, and one of the founding editors of the Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy.