

## Dilapidated buildings

### Urgent steps needed for safety and preservation of heritage

ALL the follow up reports after one of the most tragic accidents in recent times at Old Dhaka paint a very grim and sad picture of living conditions in that part of the city. It has almost become a regular practice for us to dig into the actual causes behind such catastrophe only after it takes place and claims innocent lives, not before that. Similarly in this particular case, we conveniently overlooked the poor and unsafe condition those people of Shankhari Bazar were living in and ignored the magnitude of the problem. Statistics revealed in The Daily Star shows that there are hundreds of buildings in that part of the city which date back to almost two hundred years. And worse is people are living in those dilapidated structures.

Taking a cue from the unfortunate accident last week, we urge the authorities concerned to draw up a policy under which an accurate list of such derelict buildings would be prepared and appropriate actions taken according to the needs. For example, those which can be renovated would be repaired accordingly and those which cannot be, would be demolished. The authority might consider giving the owners of those buildings loans at low interest and extend other facilities for erecting new houses. But one thing is for sure -- no one should be allowed to live in such buildings that put not only the lives of those living there at risk, but also of those living in the neighbourhood. The building owners should also realise that life is more precious than fighting legal battles and obstructing the process of renovation.

Here we would like to draw the authorities' attention to some of the buildings that have archeological values but are being illegally occupied by many. For example the South Plaza of Bara Katra built in the Mughal era for housing students of a madrasa. There are many other such monuments that represent our heritage and history. These need urgent attention. Sadly we have never followed any code of preservation as other cities like Kolkata and Delhi with historical relics have. In the rush for modernisation, we seem to have lost our interest in preserving our roots. Society must not be oblivious of its past glory.

## Dengue threat shaping

### Take it as a warning signal

WITH the onset of monsoon, ten dengue cases have been confirmed by four city hospitals, five of them in the last week alone. The last two years having passed without any significant dengue attack, by past standards, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) was lulled into lowering its guard -- so it seems. The laid-back attitude is reflected on two levels. First and foremost, the absence of surveillance and monitoring -- in a continual sense -- leaves the experts apprehensive that dengue affliction this year might go out of hand. Secondly, there is no sense of direction as we brace up to meet the challenges this time around.

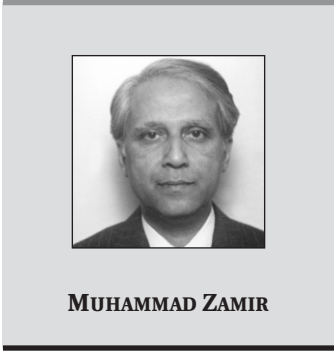
Two years ago a scientific study was made and a road map charted out with the full knowledge of the density of Aedes population and larvae or egg infestations to be able to combat the menace in all its forms. DCC had, in fact, carried out a larvaecide campaign that helped check the growth of Aedes population.

But this year such knowledge-base is missing for the lack of an update. Resultantly the DCC gropes in the dark about the density and location of the Aedes, its larvae or eggs.

Materially, the DCC is ill-equipped. Very few of the 'ten zones' have sufficient stocks or larvaecide to spray, to say nothing of having the sprayers in poor working conditions. Last one month has seen virtually no spraying of larvaecide.

Clearly, the DCC has been caught unprepared and the only way to make amends on it is to build up the right inventory and clean up the environment on a double quick basis. This is the right time to revive the information dissemination campaign at the ward levels to make people aware of the dos and don'ts applicable to the dengue season. The preparedness at the hospitals should leave nothing to be desired.

# Greater interaction between China and SAARC



A fresh wind of change has been blowing in South Asia since the beginning of this year. Acrimony, suspicion and tension appears to be on the wane, at least for the time being. The sound of willow on leather has taken over from that of gunfire and artillery. This has also given rise to hope and belief that nearly 1.4 billion people inhabiting South Asia, can if they so want, enter into meaningful implementation of collective regional endeavours. There is a common feeling among hundreds of millions that we can change the existing politically sensitive and conflict ridden environment in South Asia and move forward.

SAARC, from its inception, has been most unfortunately a victim of distrust, suspicion and intra-regional tensions. This has in turn affected the evolution of the concept of regional cooperation in South Asia. Some of the inbuilt, crippling limitations have contributed to this situation. Requirements like the presence of all seven members in all meetings, particularly the Summit, taking of decisions on the basis of unanimity and not consensus and exclusion of bilateral and contentious issues have all led to the stunted and slow growth of SAARC. The fact that the initially agreed areas of cooperation were peripheral and did not include the vital areas of trade, joint ventures, investments and harmonisation of fiscal and social policies also hampered integration within the membership.

More than one report and several seminars in the recent past have pointed out that South Asia has failed to share the economic dynamism of the rest of Asia. The average growth rate for South Asia in the past 25 years, ending 2003, has been only 4.6 percent compared to 8.8 percent in South East Asia. In the aggregate, other Asian countries have increased their share of world trade by about 180 percent between 1970-1990s but South Asian share has declined by slightly over 25 percent. The relatively slower economic growth

pointed out that promoting economic cooperation in a sub-regional context has not worked very well in ASEAN and will also face similar difficulties. In addition, others have expressed fear that bilateral trade agreements among SAARC countries is likely to lead to further fragmentation of the common South Asian goal towards regional integration.

It is against this background that several members of SAARC, in the recent past, have expressed their intention to expand relations not only within themselves but also

Track-II level reflects the earnest desire of that country to project itself in South Asia. It is also clear from the statements coming out of China that they favour, in this context, the realisation of BIMST-EC. Like most inhabitants of South Asia, China today understands that establishment of communication network in the area will help cooperation in trade, industry, investment and tourism. They are beginning to appreciate that it would only be logical to foster links with South Asia through an institutional framework that would

This evolving scenario is not helped by the fact that ASEAN and China are strengthening their mutual interests through dialogue aimed at intensifying cooperation. This is a major development. One may recall that till very recently, most founding members of ASEAN had serious differences with China on vital political and security matters. On-going territorial disputes also sharply separated China from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar. These sensitivities have been overcome. This has been facilitated by the end

consolidated with China. Initial dialogue and discussion could start within the private sector, civil society and academic levels. Such a model can eventually ensure a future viable cooperation arrangement.

The imperative of good neighbourhood and challenges and opportunities of this century with regard to peace, cooperation and development dictate the needs for a bold and speedy action to move forward in this direction.

As in the case of other areas, we will also need to have a Track II initiative to prepare grounds for promoting and complementing any official level discussion that might be required for this purpose.

We must not forget that China's closer association with SAARC members will have wider significance and far reaching implications. It can, and will contribute in pro-moting the comparative advantage in several trade commodities and other industrial products in this region. I believe that China's fast paced economic development, its accession to WTO and its growing state-of-the art technology can also positively help the forward movement of South Asian states.

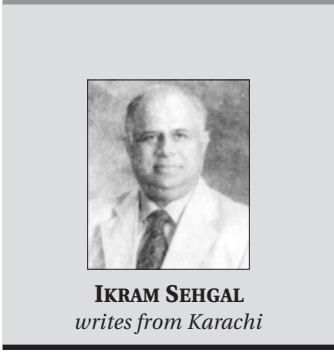
Such inter-regional development will enable South Asia to compete effectively with others in ASEAN.

It is in this context that Bangladesh as well as the other countries of South Asia should take the upcoming third Ministerial meeting of the Asian Cooperation Dialogue (21-22 June in Qingdao, China) very seriously. Last year, its focus resulted in the development of the billion-dollar Asian Bond Fund and greater cooperation among the region's monetary authorities and capital markets.

One can only hope that SAARC states will be able to catch this train and its potential for greater interaction at the wider regional level.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

# Crunching humans with numbers



THE business community says (i.e. if you discount the CVT misstep which led to stock brokers going on a rampage breaking things) the Federal Budget is a good investor-friendly initiative. Nothing innovative about it, mostly an adjustment of statistics giving to each audience what that particular audience wants to hear, viz (1) a populist commitment to the masses for alleviating their miseries and (2) for the benefit of the world at large and (particularly) international aid agencies, maintaining a high economic growth rate by not splurging on the social sector. Good in macro-economics there is no perceptible change for the better in the 'misery index' (micro-economics) of the masses despite the Finance Minister's (FM's) insistence that the population below the poverty line has reduced by 4.2 per cent overall, the common man's buying power continues to be eroded by the rise in the price of essentials. The data from which the 4.2 per cent poverty reduction figure was arrived at is a matter of doubt and controversy.

Controlling of inflation below double digits sounds wonderful on primetime TV, for the middle class and the poor it is mere rhetoric. Reducing the duty on edible oil by a grand 0.5 per cent, the GST on it was raised by 15 per cent. Ghee will cost more, one guess who uses ghee more? The average food bill has gone up by about 16 per cent,

further diminishing the consumer buying power of the common citizen, though the commutative effect of lowering of consumer sales may not affect the economy given the incentives made available for the 'upwardly mobile', Pakistan's Budget reflects somewhat the mood generated by 'India Shining', the rich and the upper middle class are better off (Pakistan Shining), the overwhelming mass of the middle class and the poverty-stricken are in far worse condition than they were

to reduce the cost of doing business, encourage fixed investment, promote exports and build crumbling infrastructures. The levy of tax on share purchases has already unsettled the Stock Exchanges, the stockbrokers' rampage made share prices fall almost 200 points, giving a paper loss of Rs 500 million to the market. This strong negative response may make the government lower the tax rate; on that premise the market regained some ground. Two years extension in capital gains is

are major fiscal measures. Consumer textiles, Fertilizer, Chemicals and Packaging are meant to be the major beneficiaries of the budget. Banking and Telecom sector stand to draw some benefits. Autos shall be very adversely hit due to the large cut in duties on CBUs in the face of no reduction offered on CKDs. The automobile owners will not reduce their prices, they will continue to get commission on imported cars and employees of automobile manufacturers and vendors will be

for individuals and associates of person is increased from Rs 80,000 to Rs 100,000, (5) profit on debt from Certificates of Investment issued by investment banks has been exempted, (6) income of vocational institutes, technical institutes or poly-technical institutes is exempted from tax for 5 years and (7) senior citizens are allowed reduction in tax if maximum income is below Rs 300,000, (8) Behbood Savings Certificate or accounts are tax exempted.

not now?

And on the subject of Pay & Pensions Commission, the Chairman should be from the superior judiciary, the other members should be equally divided between the private and public sector; (3) some banks have recently issued circulars that unless the person is a Govt/Semi Govt employee Rs 50 will be deducted every month if his account has balance of less than Rs 10000 (Rs 5000 for females). Where will the poor salaried employees go for depositing their cheques? The message is clear, if you are earning (and living on) less than Rs 5000 pm, take a hike and don't darken the doorstep of the bank. Discriminating against almost the entire majority of the salaried class living below the poverty line the banking system caters only to the rich and the upper middle class. Another negative point in the Federal Budget, viz Withholding Tax rates remain unchanged except on amount of raffle/lottery winning and cross-word puzzle or prize on winning a quiz offered by companies for promotion of sales. This will directly affect the common man who is greatly involved in such activities.

Simply re-hashing numbers and state-of-the-art presentations will not break the poverty logjam in the country. The President must not be carried away by gift of the gab. Now that he is getting a direct feedback from Parliamentarians by sitting in the National Assembly on a day to day basis he must come to grips with a ground reality, that 'trickle-down' economics is not trickling down to the masses. Only a wholesale renovation of the philosophy of budgeting and a revised budgetary strategy thereof will change things for the poor and downtrodden, and those that are joining their ranks in increasing numbers on a daily basis.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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.

### Common pictures of Bangladesh

If we analyse the recent happenings of Bangladesh, we will surely find a dark and gloomy picture of the country. We have become habituated in hearing the news of violence, murder, rape, corruption and all kinds of misdeeds. Followings are the common pictures of present Bangladesh which need immediate attention of the government.

The recent examples of murders are horrifying. Men are not only murdered but cut into pieces. Every other day we hear the news of murder, often committed in daylight, which does not obfuscate us much as mentioned above we are now habituated to this. We are rather surprised if we don't see any blood-stained body on television every day. The authorities' concern about this matter is questionable.

Explosion of bombs at different significant places in the last few years has taken many lives. These explosions have now become common.

There is always some fear in common people's mind as to which place is going to be the next target of the terrorists. And the government's role in this case is nothing more than turbid.

Extremism which had no existence in Bangladesh has unmasked itself recently. One such example is so called "Bangla Bhai" and his group. Their sordid and execrable activities are reportedly aided by the ones whose duty was to check those.

But the political picture of this country belongs not only to recent days but to the days since last decade. The craving for power has made the political leaders practise the nasty politics which could not bring peace and comfort for people. The politicians are busy in attacking and counter-attacking

their oppositions both physically and verbally.

People have tolerated enough and it's the time for the government to do something which has a positive impact on the life of common people. Otherwise, it will be too late.

Wajahat Anwar  
Dhaka

### Satisfying performance

Bangladesh did pretty well both the ODI and Test series during the recent Caribbean tour. For the first ever time the team drew a test match, not with the help of rain or something else, but by their own performance. Habibul Bashar, Rafique and Masud scored a ton each in the first Test. However, why was the captain Bashar so eager to declare the second innings when Masud was so close to a century? However Bangladesh still lost both

the ODI and Test series as:

- 1.The top order didn't provide enough runs for bowlers to defend.
  - 2.They missed a lot of catches.
  - 3.The team's bowling line up and fielding was a bit weak.
- I think Bashar should be removed from the ODI side because his performance in the short version of the game is not satisfying as a result of his bad footwork. Rather than individual performances, teamwork is needed for us to win. However, we can say Bangladesh has improved a lot and played the game honestly and we shouldn't have to wait for a win for too long.

Nayeem Islam  
Class-VIII, The Aga Khan School, Uttara, Dhaka

### Traffic jam in Dhaka city

I live in Uttara, and now-a-days it usually takes more than an hour to reach Motijheel from Uttara. I wish

our so called ministry of communication understands the pains and sufferings that the ordinary citizens go through in their every day lives. The traffic jam is simply unimaginable. We are hapless because proper steps are not at all taken to eradicate traffic jams. The role of traffic police is certainly worthless. I hope the respected authorities know that time is too important in life. Traffic jam, along with the extreme heat adds to the sufferings of the people. I hope our government will immediately take practical steps to save the people that they are supposed to serve from the miseries.

Minhaj Ahmed  
Uttara, Dhaka

### Agreeing with the fault of democracy

I deeply thought about Mr. Mahboob's point about the flaw of democracy. After giving a serious thought I had to agree with him on

'I don't blame Hasina or Khaleda, I blame Democracy.' All these times we have been blaming a particular person -- only Bush, Blair, Hasina, Khaleda, Sharon etc. but never have we thought that there might be a fault with the system. Now I realise that what are we actually doing. We believe that sovereignty belongs to us as we can choose our leaders and so is our own fate. But in reality we are only choosing our leader and not our fate. We elect the 300 members and send them to the parliament with absolute power, from then on we have no power whatsoever to influence their decisions.

That's what happening to every country right now. The people of US and Britain didn't want the war but it happened, now they want their soldiers back but it isn't happening. Israelis are against the demolition of Palestinians' home, but again their demand is not being fulfilled. Same is the case with us. Everyday there are lots of

demonstrations, human chains, rallies etc against some of the government plans but in vain.

We are also being deceived by the idea that we can change our leaders every five years so actually sovereignty is ours. We are only changing our oppressors and not our fate. I hope the readers will seriously ponder about my argument. Then with more views we may come up with an alternative.

Faizur  
Mirpur, Dhaka

### Medical facilities for retired NRBs living in Bangladesh

It's a well known fact that non-resident Bangladeshis (NRB) are contributing considerably in the earnings of valuable foreign exchanges for the country. A small section of these NRBs, after retirement from overseas, are

settling back in Bangladesh to spend rest of their lives in their native land. Most of these retirees will be getting retirement benefits, in foreign currencies, deposited in their accounts in Bangladesh till their deaths. They would get free medical treatments including hospitalisation while they are in their country of work. Considering their life-long contributions to the economic growth of their motherland, I would request the Government of Bangladesh in general and our finance minister in particular to provide free medical treatment to the members of families of such retirees. I personally know quite a few NRBs living in the USA who are willing to return to their motherland after retirement, but afraid to do so because of absence of medical facilities in Bangladesh.

MA Sobhan  
Atlanta, GA, USA