

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 larva 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.



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

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 BIMSTEC. 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.

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POST BREAKFAST

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.

along with faster demographic growth in South Asia has, in addition, sharply increased income differentials between it and other regions.

The compulsions of globalisation, the reduction in aid, the mounting debt burden, the deteriorating terms of trade, the regulatory process being evolved 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.

In view of the slow progress in promoting regional cooperation, the resultant development has been the shift in focus to sub-regional approach and to bilateral trade agreements between SAARC countries. Implication of such an approach has however become the source of debate. Many have

with the neighbours including China.

China is about two and a half times bigger than South Asia. It borders four SAARC countries -- Pakistan, Nepal, India and Bhutan.

At present there is little commercially viable overland communication or direct shipping links between the two areas. This situation could change appreciably, however, according to experts, once improvements underway through the Greater Mekong River Sub-regional Project (dredging of the upper reaches of the Mekong) are completed and building of roads (connecting Kunming with Laos and Myanmar) are finished with the support of the Asian Development Bank.

In the last decade, the views of the Chinese leadership have evolved. They are now positively interested in promoting closer cooperation with South Asia in general and not just with some countries of this region in particular. The ongoing Kunming initiative of China at

be beneficial for both sides.

It is time that SAARC carefully looks around and sees what is happening in the region. Several key processes are already in place for resolving tension, enhancing security and promoting trade.

The ASEM process initiated between the European Union and member states of ASEAN and South Korea, China and Japan is already paying rich dividends. The EU has special Summit exchanges separately with Japan and China. They do the same with India. The ASEM process ensures that continuous and intensive discussion take place between the EU and the other countries of South East Asia and the Far East.

On the other hand, although the EU has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with SAARC, nothing fruitful has taken place in this area. Regular annual meetings even do not take place. The net result is that the rest of South Asia other than India remain marginalised.

of the Cold War and subsequent global events. The two parties now have Joint Committees on cooperation in economic, trade, science and technology fields. The ASEAN-China Business Council holds regular discussions at government, private and academic levels. Annual Summits between them are now convened regularly.

This welcome interaction has led to the Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation which will facilitate China joining the ASEAN Free Trade Area shortly. This will lead to China extending special trade concessions. These are valuable lessons which SAARC should try to emulate.

In my view, given the sensitivities of the area, any new direction from SAARC will require caution. There has been a change of government in India, the major power in South Asia. Nevertheless, the current scenario demands that SAARC should undertake extensive consultation between all involved on how ties can be further

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 doorsteps of the bank. Discriminating against almost the entire majority of the salaried class living below the poverty line by 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.

Crunching humans with numbers



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

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

AS I SEE IT

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.

ever before.

Our financial planners are crunching hapless human beings who make up 70-75 percent of the population by crunching numbers without catering for the needs of humanity. Far from liberalising the financial regime to reflect 21st century reality, the regulators have been given much more authority than ever before to take arbitrary, punitive action against taxpayers. Sales Tax collectors can now arrest anyone, guess who is going to earn more money? The Budget document has bureaucracy written all over it; has Shaukat had really gone into details of what his aides and subordinates managed to slip into his excellent above presentation in the National Assembly? One likes to think he is a populist at heart even though the government has largely avoided populist measures!

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 percent, the GST on it was raised by 15 percent. Ghee will cost more, one guess who uses ghee more? The average food bill has gone up by about 16 percent,

positive for the market. Expectations about the cement sector have remained unfulfilled, cement prices will go up putting pressure on the housing sector. Negative implications for some other areas is very likely to depress the market already weakened by increased flow of negative political news, rising inflation, increasing number of terrorism cases as well as enhanced interest rates.

The economic targets are ambitious, medium term (Financial Year 2007) targets of 8 percent GDP growth, 20 percent investment to GDP ratio, holding inflation to 5 percent, 3 percent fiscal deficit, 1.8 percent current deficit and Foreign Exchange Reserves at minimum 28 weeks of imports. The momentum of higher GDP growth is promised to be maintained through increased spending and tax incentives. Radical liberalisation of import regime for investment, simplification of GST system, reduction in power tariff and increase in PSDP

laid off, the Japanese will adjust the price upwards. Restructuring of National Savings into "Pakistan Savings" with possibly higher returns is very likely to slowdown the flow of funds into the stock market.

In an over-populated country with a need for wide range of labour-intensive services there is almost nothing for the Services Sector, widely acknowledged by modern economists to be the engine of growth. When will they ever learn from the available models of Hong Kong, Singapore and Dubai, etc? However, there are some very positive proposals, viz (1) profit that is paid on housing loan given by a statutory body or a public limited company is also eligible for tax credit, (2) minimum threshold of last declared or assessed income of Rs 500,000 is being introduced for filing wealth tax statement, (3) minimum threshold for withholding tax from rent has been enhanced to Rs 300,000, (4) basic exemption limit

Two widely differing examples of why a good budget becomes a heartless one if conceived by bureaucrats (i.e. those who think they will never retire or fade away): viz (1) addressing the plight of old pensioners giving 16 per cent increase in pensions of those who retired before 1994 and 8 per cent for those post 1994. A general officer retiring before 1994 gets a pension of Rs 9000, the 16 per cent increase gives him an additional Rs 1440 making his pension Rs 10440. A captain who retired recently gets a pension of Rs 11000, the 8 per cent increase will get him Rs 880, still Rs 1440 more than that of general who had retired earlier. So what are we saying, a captain of today is relatively worth more to the nation than a general officer of yesterday? There should be one pension for one rank, there should be no discrimination! This will happen today or tomorrow, either Gen Musharraf and/or Zafarullah Khan Jamali will correct this injustice or someone in the future will. Why

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

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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.

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 in 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.