

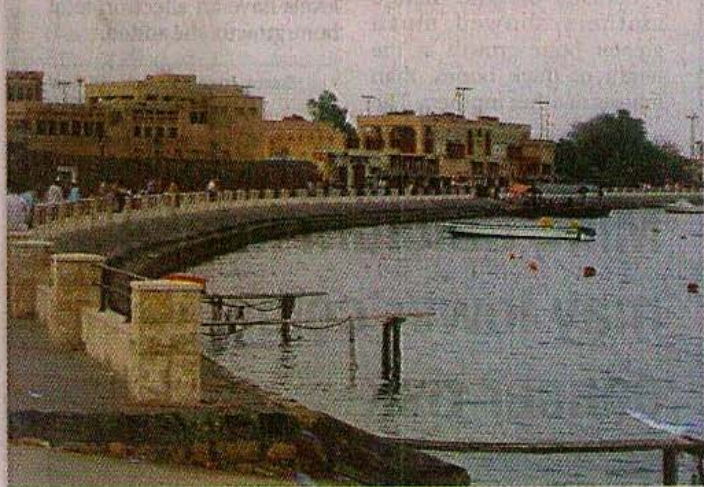
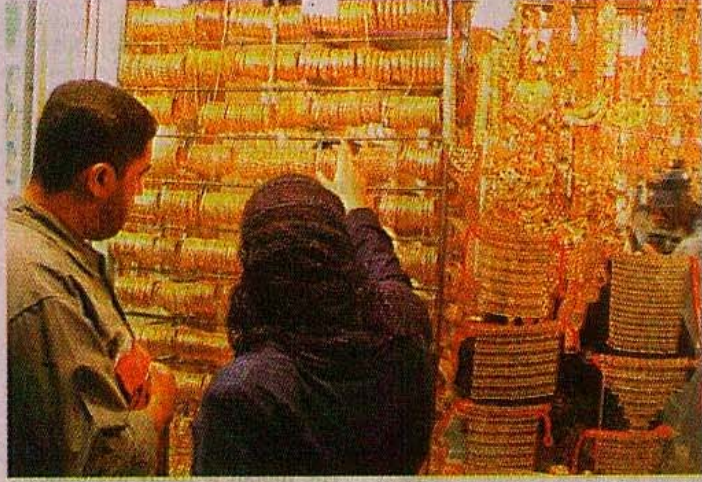
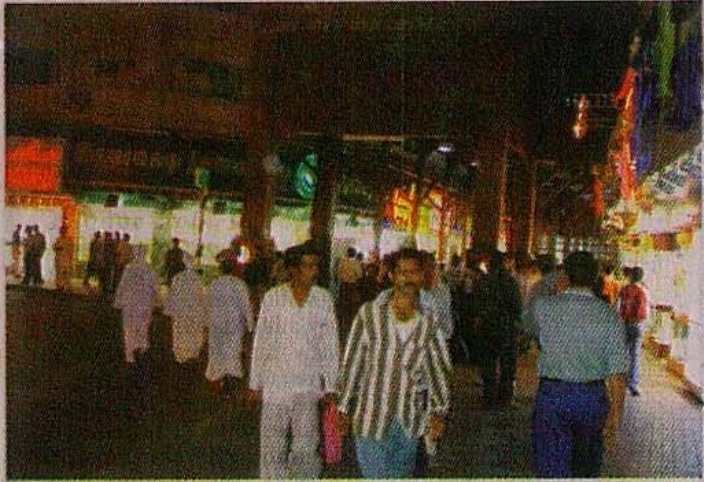
Star HOLIDAY

DHAKA SUNDAY JULY 11, 2004

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LOCATION > DUBAI CATEGORY > FAMILY

Desert Glitz

THE place could easily pass for Sadarghat. That is if you keep your eyes trained only on the ferry terminal.

"Ya Rafique, Ya Rafique," the shrill cries caught me off-guard. I looked around to see if our office colleague is somewhere around.

It's only those white-robed men, sporting typical Arab beards, in their typical Arab-sized strapped sandals. Yet they are not Arabs, might be Pakistanis or even Indians. With long outstretched hands, they call the passengers. Down the pier, several small hoodless square boats toss on the creek's waves. Men and women, mostly Asians, to be exact sub-

continental, cram the boats to be ferried across the creek.

As I stand by the Dubai creek, a strange feeling takes over me. This is Deira Dubai, the place where today's swanky city originally started. It had grown gradually from a fishing village inhabited in the 18th century by members of the Bani Yas tribe.

The Dubai Creek coming all the way from the Arabian Sea flows inside. Along is a narrow road, well not really narrow if compared to Dhaka, but certainly it is for the glitzy Dubai.

All sorts of noises assail the ears -- people hurrying off to the other side of the creek with Friday shopping, speaking in

here that Maktoum set up his watch tower to keep a tab on the boats carrying goods entering the creek. Every boat had to pay tax to the ruler.

When I went to Bur Dubai across the creek, I had a shocking realisation of how Dubai developed. The palace could be nothing better than a rich village man's mud house in Bangladesh -- small rooms, narrow lobbies, dark passages link one room to another. And photographs of Dubai of the 19th century show on the walls.

I stood in wonder. Before my eyes, decades whirl back and I am transported to a lonely time -- years, years, years ago. Poor

atop holding a .303 Enfield rifle. A sail ship the kind that once brought the goods to Dubai, lies perched on the ground. Away, lights were coming out on the sky scrappers.

I wanted to see the famous gold market and so drove on. We wheeled into the parking lot under the reflection of numerous neon signs all announcing a single commodity -- Gold. It's a huge market place stretching on various ways under roof supported by old iron girders with the semblance of a rail station. Thousands of men and women mill around with a glazed look on their face. Very little they speak. Mostly crowding in front of the tall showcases, looking in the windows at the gold chains dangling like octopus tentacles. Gold has a hypnotic power. Even I who had never bothered so much as to give a cursory glance to ornaments, felt a kind of strange giddiness.

Something unusual I notice here. The gold gazers are mostly Indians or Pakistanis and hardly any Arabs, a reason why foreign workers are so very important for Dubai economy to grow. Many years ago, it has given up on its oil to thrive, in fact only about 6 percent of its GDP now comes from oil. The rest comes from trading, from the shops that blink

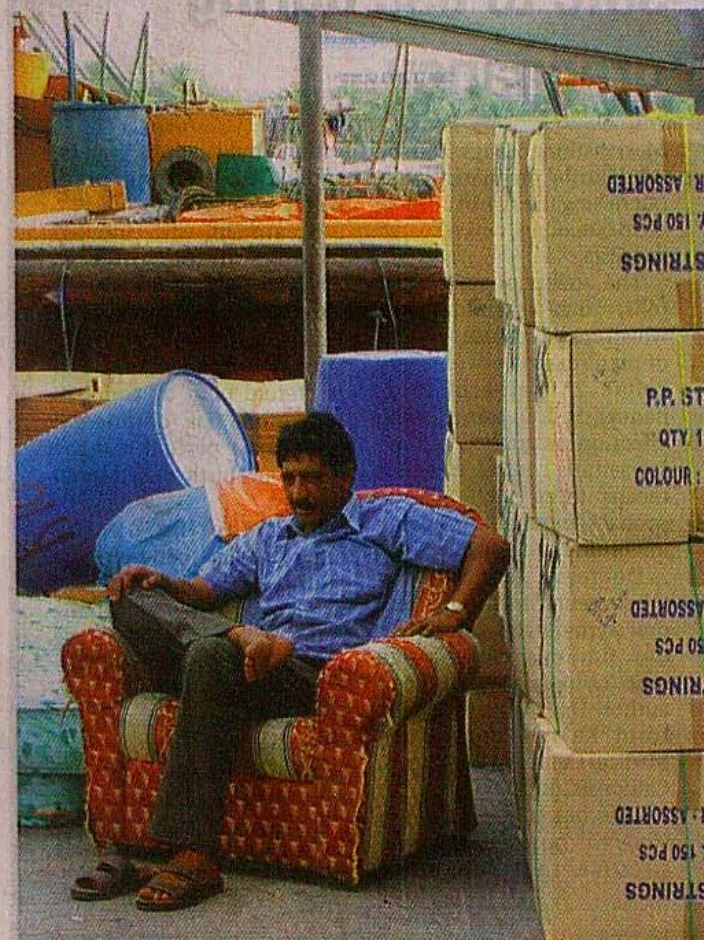
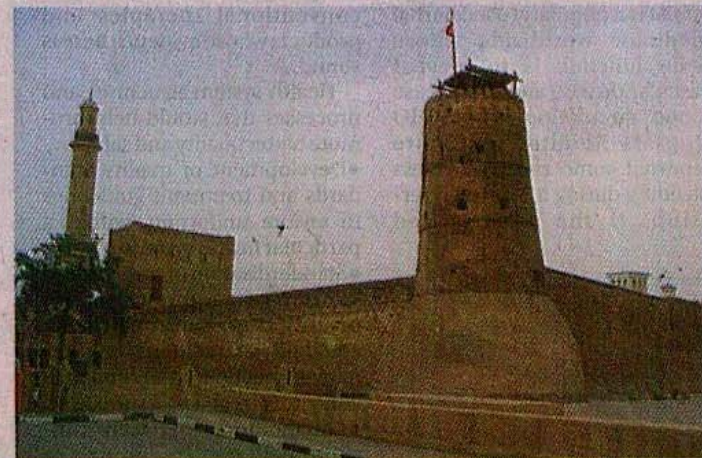
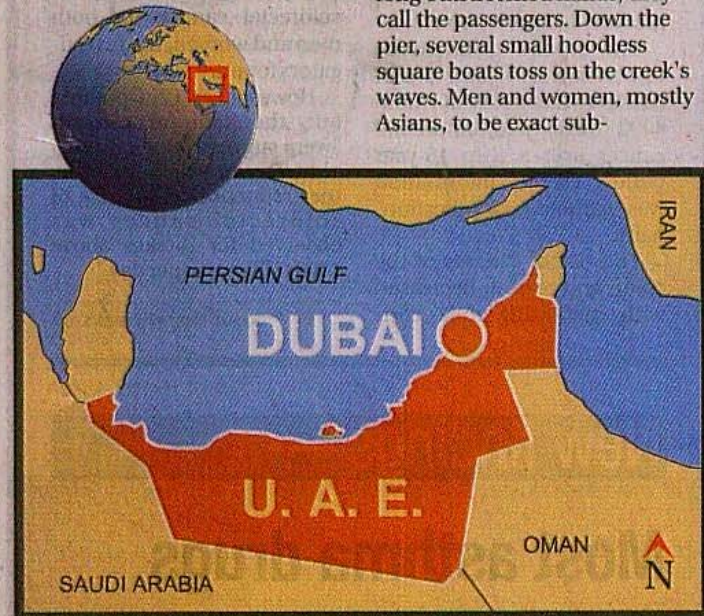
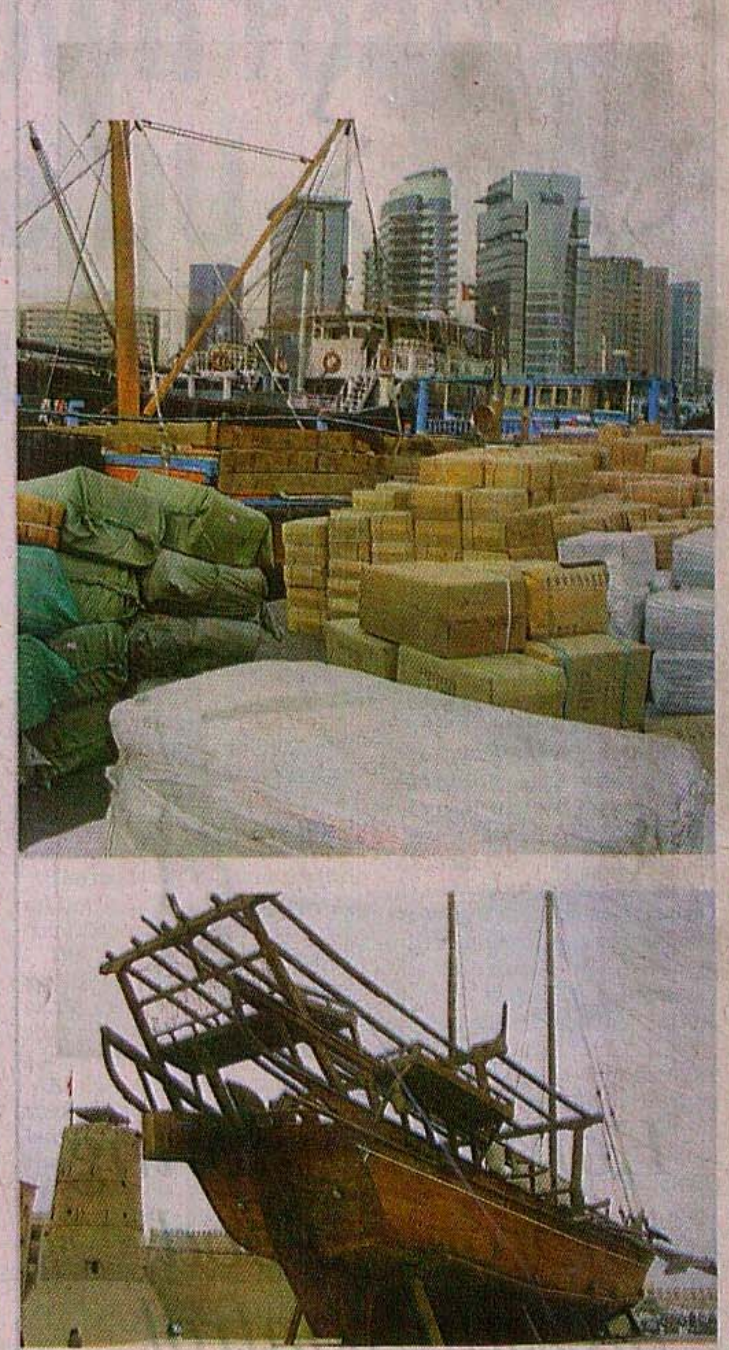
all night, from the warehouses that work over-shifts to serve as the hub of goods for much of Asia and Africa, from the myriad of tourists who throng to this desert oasis.

I came out from the unreal world and took a drift towards the Arabian Sea. I passed by Burj Al Arab Hotel.

Built in the shape of an Arabian dhow sail and dominating the Dubai coastline. It is said to be one of the world's most spectacular and incomparably luxurious hotels and the only 7-star hotel ever built.

It was late into night when I drove into the city centre again. I walked through the city square. The Arabian Sea is blowing a hot breeze. By the road side, on small gardens, workers -- Asians and Africans -- who had come to this desert land in search of a dream half-lie on the artificially grown grass. A strange glassy look on their face. Grand Rolls Royce and Cadillac wish by them, spewing more heat to the desert spring. These people, away and lonely, cannot touch the hedonistic life that blinks around them. Above them, the desert sky can only host the zillion stars burning brightly.

story & photo INAM AHMED



high-speed Hindi, Urdu, Bangla and Arabic; Green coconut and snack vendors loudly calling customers.

A little afield, traders from Mumbai, Iran and Pakistan loll around with tired afternoon looks. Some doze off in easy chairs behind stacks of goods -- used airconditioners, freezers, sofas, cars and whatnots. Some of the items look quite rundown, still they will be taken to Bandar Abbas or Karachi. Whatever the rich Dubai throws away always gets a place in the poor men's homes.

Even farther, fishing trawlers similar to the ones you see in Cox's Bazar are moored. Brazen faced fishermen, mostly Indians in soiled trousers and bare-chested, take afternoon nap in the extreme Dubai heat. The whole area reeks of raw fish.

I look across the street. The buildings certainly are not those of the modern day Dubai, the land of gold and free trading. These are the first structures that had sprung up when Dubai first got its oil. What a contrast with the modern Dubai with its high-rises!

Across the creek stands the old palace of the Dubai ruler. It is

vendors in tattered dresses sit by Dubai roads, if you can call sand and dirt ways roads, selling all types of rudimentary things of life. Some of the characters there could easily pass for an Indian in a down under village. One picture I could bet had been from Shankharibazar or something. An aerial view shows the creek and the first settlements of Dubai -- some shanties with leaf roofs. They can pass as Dhaka slums. The barely clothed Dubaites fishing, their sun burnt bodies straining in labour.

And then there is Maktoum, the grandfather of the current ruler. A tall bearded man, simplicity written all over his face and clothes. In modern day Dubai, he could well be passed as any ordinary man, only carrying an ancient gun. His children curiously looking at the camera. Time changes and the Maktoums too. They pose in airports, proud and confident, with British diplomats.

It was getting dark and I came out. The sun hung low on the horizon like an orange fireball, the desert sub brilliant even in its fading. As I strolled on the palatial yard, there stood a huge watchtower with a dummy guard

