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Tale of a real estate developer

A large number of articles, letters and comments were published in the media, including The Daily Star, blaming the real estate developers for being responsible for water logging and flood problem around Dhaka. Here I am going to narrate my own experience of the same.

I work in Ashulia, Savar, in an organisation located few hundred yards away from a large Housing Project being implemented by a renowned (!) real estate developer. I had been watching for many months now, how the developer, in league with the local bigwigs, had been cutting earth from government-owned highland, and filling up wetland in Ashulia. It was reported one day in the national press that the company was under investigation by a Parliamentary Committee for grabbing government land. Within a few days of the publication of that report, I saw huge ceremonial arches and colourful Shamianas being erected at the project site. The banner proclaimed arrival of a state minister. On the appointed day, the state minister accompanied by the local MP arrived at the site; they visited the project and laid the foundation stone of a mosque and madrassa complex! Probably the grabbing of public land was thus made legitimate.

Since then the company has started filling up of the wetland with renewed vigour. During the floods, the company advertised in various dailies that their site was flood-free and invited people to come and see it for themselves. Indeed, the developer had filled up the wetland and made it higher than the flood level, but at the same time created huge, ugly gaping holes in the interior of Savar.

Such is the irony of development!
Anonymous, Dhaka

Population control

This is in response to the letter of Mr. SN Arbab of Banani, Dhaka (DS 9 August, 2004). The former Soviet Union was the largest country in the world but it broke apart because the Economic Development did not take place equally in all those former States. Till today the population growth in the former USSR is up to the optimum level! On the other hand, the United States of America emphasised on balance economic growth simultaneously in all the 50 States, whereby the steady economic growth could cope with the increasing number of population including many new immigrants.

Our First Planning Commission was manned by Oxford and Harvard Doctorates. It was short-sightedness of the First Planning Commission that they could not introduce the Social Security or Insurance Number for the 75 million people of the new-born state, Bangladesh, who had for many generations undergone various struggles, calamities and sacrifices. Social Security or Insurance Number is not merely an identity card but in it lies the responsibility both of the population and of the government for economic growth, political stability and social security.

Golam Ashraf
DOHS Baridhara, Dhaka

An appeal to British Council

One of the best libraries in Dhaka is the British Council Library. I have been a member of it since class-III. Even my uncles are members of this library. They remember with relish the days when it only cost Tk 50 to become a member there. The library has furnished me with different books all these years; with the help of those books I have tackled numerous school projects, exams, science fairs etc.

A year ago I moved to Uttara. Since then it has become very difficult to visit the library. The 'journey' to the library takes two hours and the return takes another two hours. Uttara holds a large number of English medium schools. I am a student of class-X in one of these schools. My classmates all want to be

Cultural dilemma

Globalisation with its 'ethical teaching of internationalism' has taught the people all over the world many things- we are taught to celebrate Valentine's Day -- a formal day to show affection, love to each other, Friendship Day to formally be friendly with our friends, Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day and the list goes on. Enthusiastic people are garrulous praising the days as

occasions for consolidating the relationships. Now take this. What is the nature of human relation in the Asian countries? It is always so affectionate, loving- it is always a phenomenon for arousing envy in Westerners. Friendship, among us is regarded as the best gift on earth- a friend is one, among us, who cries with us in our distress, laughs with us in our

good days. A son destroys his own life or career for the protection of his family. Parents die in their soul at the parting with their children who are to them a part of their own flesh. These are obviously not available in the West where natural human relation has become a phenomenon as mechanised as other mechanised elements of their lifestyle. Now, to escape the boredom, the morbidity of their life, they are landing on the fantasy lands as we see in movies -- the sequels of 'The Lords of the Ring', the sequels of 'Harry Potter' for the children. They are rushing to the Moon or the Mars to settle there in fiction or the films to escape the crudity of life.

So, if the people of the East accept these norms of western culture which has, from the essence of the days mentioned above we can surmise, been trying to tie the knot at least for a day once a year, we have to consider a hypothesis that the human bondage in the East is declining. But do we really find that sort of cleavage around here? Or, are we forced to think of such a crack in our relations at the pressure of globalisation? It is alleged that this is a part of western dominance all over the world. Then, we must evaluate our condition- as the age of political imperialism is over, the cultural colonialism is engulfing us.

Mahfuzul Haque
Department of English,
University of Dhaka

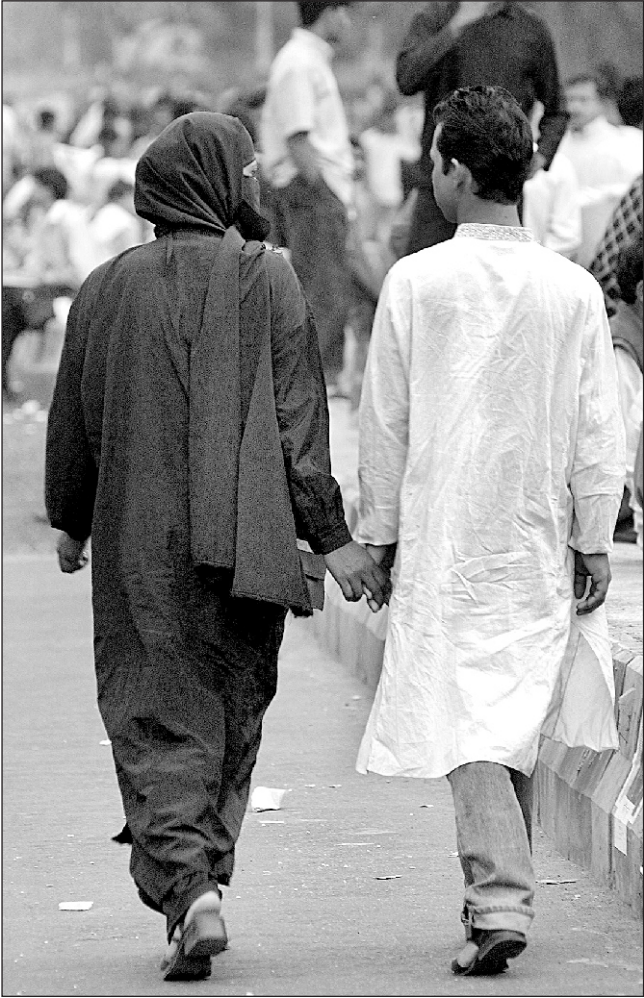


PHOTO: AFP

members of the library because of the amount of GCE textbooks, revision books it has. But they are discouraged by its distance and mainly by the time it takes to reach the library.

The British Council should open a branch of its library in Uttara. The branch will help the pupils here to get information on the exams, syllabus, question papers, and to get access to the latest books.

I have consulted a lot of people and they all share my idea and are eager to see a response from the Library in this regard.

Labiba, Uttara, Dhaka

Of Arakanese Muslims

I would refer to "Plight of Arakanese Muslims", DS dated 4-08-04.

It was mentioned in the said article that white card has been issued to Muslims of Arakan as a temporary second class citizenship card. As far as we understand, white card is not a citizenship card but a temporary residency identity card meant for Rohingyas or Muslims of north Arakan only. Hence, the readers should not be confused on the citizenship status of Rohingyas who fled to Bangladesh en masse in 1978 and 1990s. They are stateless and treated as aliens in their homeland.

Besides, the article mentioned the Muslim Community in Arakan as the Arakanese Muslims while the Buddhists have been referred as Rakhine Buddhist Maghs. Although it is understood that the present Burmese junta recognises the Kaman Muslim as one of the ethnic nationalities of Arakan, the Rohingyas are excluded. The harsh truth in Arakan is that the Muslim community

suffers highhandedness both racially and religiously.

The SPDC continues human rights violations in Burma and the Rohingyas are the hardest hit because of statelessness. Their problem needs to be addressed at least regionally, better if world bodies extend their role in this respect.

M Ali
General Secretary, Arakan Historical Society, Chittagong

Does John Kerry have a chance?

I happened to read the article from the gentleman (Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton, New Jersey) published in your paper. I found his explanation of what happened to the Dean candidacy to be plausible. I sent excerpts from his write-up to some of my friends, with the following post script:

Now, the teflon coating is wearing off and the truth is starting to stick to the pan. I don't know how to discuss the subject without being attacked, but I agree that this country and the western world in general have created their own mess. Why we thought that we could place a reactionary religious conglomeration of tortured Jews back in their ancestral home is beyond me. I think it was to counter the rise of Islamic fundamentalism personified at that time by an Egyptian cleric who was threatening to take over Egypt and the Suez Canal. The repatriation of the Jews at the beginning of the 20th century was ratified by vote of the United Nations after WWII. The details of this movement, the corruption of the Turkish regime that sold parts of Palestine to the Zionists, the persecution, the near destruction of

the Jews by the Nazis, the complaints and persistent resistance by the Arabs, and the rest of it are all boiling the soup.

Reader, On e-mail

Sylhet scene

Sylhet is distinguished as a 'spiritual city' because it is the abode of Hazrat Shahjalal (R) and three sixty saints. Awfully, the sanctity of this city is at stake after a sequence of bomb blasts within a short span of time. According to a DS report on August 7, 2004, twenty-three people have been killed in fourteen explosions in last seven years in Sylhet. Amongst these blasts, two consecutive bomb attacks at Shahjalal (R) shrine cost seven lives and the apparent target of the second bombing was Anwar Chowdhury, the Honourable British High Commissioner to Bangladesh.

Something must be done about the situation in Sylhet. We do not want it to degenerate into a city of panic.

Md. Nazrul Islam Sumon
Department of English,
University of Dhaka

Death of Pichchi Hannan

RAB (Rapid Action Battalion) arrested Pichchi Hannan, one of the top 23 criminals on police list, turning down his lucrative bribe offer. I had the notion that at last we had a anti-crime force we can trust. In the last two months, six people have 'died' in RAB custody. The last one is the high profile Pichchi Hannan. The RAB team went to Savar to catch some of his associates and as he tried to escape during the shootout between the gang and the RAB members, he was caught

in a crossfire. Doctors at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital are of the opinion that he might have been shot point blank, as three bullets pierced through his chest and nose.

According to the reports, during his remands, he told police of having links with some lawmakers of both the ruling BNP and the opposition Awami League. He also claimed a Dhaka City Corporation ward commissioner and another top listed criminal now in jail were his godfathers. These godfathers are VIPs holding important posts and they will never be caught. Their reputation, and who knows may be their whole political 'career' was on the line, as Pichhi Hannan's admission could reach the common people.

The whole thing is mysterious. New Pichhi Hannans will rise and ultimately meet the same fate while their godfathers will be shielded from justice as ever.

Saif, Dhaka

WTO meet

The recently concluded World Trade Organisations' (WTO) discussions at Geneva ended on an inspiring note because unlike the earlier meets which ended in deadlocks, this time 147 members have agreed upon a framework to carry on future negotiations. We got it that a neighbour, along with five other nations, played a major role in cobbling together an agreeable package. The agreed framework adopted by the WTO members sets the parameters of the future package in five vital areas: agriculture, industrial products, development issues, trade facilitation and services. In a path breaking decision, for the first time, member governments resolved to abolish all forms of agricultural export subsidies and agreed for substantial cuts in trade-distorting domestic support in agriculture. Members also set certain guidelines for opening trade in manufactured products and a clear agenda for improving rules that would greatly benefit the developing countries.

In fact the developing countries' bloc, including Bangladesh, has much to cheer about for some important concessions they wrested. For example, others will allow them to identify items critical for their agricultural economy and rural livelihood and protect them from market access. The developed countries, in turn, have agreed to seriously work on cutting down the subsidies provided for their agricultural produces. No doubt that all this is a good beginning. But one must also understand that the Geneva framework is a broad agreement and there can be hundreds of hurdles, both visible and invisible, created by the member countries that can lead to protracted wrangling. Poor countries like Bangladesh must make sure that they stay together to evolve common strategies to safeguard their long-term social, cultural and economic interests. We must also remember that promises and implementation are two different things.

For example, promises made at the Uruguay round regarding increased market access for products from the developing world have remained elusive.

Sirajul Islam
Social sciences researcher and consultant Shyamoli, Dhaka

A young's response

I've read a letter from Neela in DS of 5th August. She wrote in her letter about some people who spend their money in fast foods and other similar stuff. "If this is the condition of today's young generation, I wonder how far we people can go", she added.

There are people in every society who have a very easy life. But the whole young generation cannot be blamed for what they are doing.

Can't you see what students are doing for the flood victims?

Royal
Sylhet

Flood stricken, truly



PHOTO: AFP

Flood is nothing new in our country. But no effective steps are being taken to minimise the hazards of flood. I am one of the flood affected populace, I've suffered, I know how does it feel to live in the midst of water. Life gets difficult! Floods cut me off from the rest of the world. I could not be on line. Mosquitoes, stinky rotten water, unhygienic environment made my life hellish! I had to live in knee deep water! I got my life debilitated by flood! I don't even want my worst enemy to suffer like this! First, we tried to stop water but all our efforts were to no purpose. Floods submerged everything! Panic seized me! Thank God, the floods did not last long.

But floods will visit us again and again and cause extreme sufferings.

As a citizen, I hope the eastern bypass will be constructed as soon as possible. Our government should take immediate measures to repair the roads damaged by floods.

Cantara Wali Ruhi, Dhaka

Floodwater is yet to recede and the fear of another deluge is looming in the horizon. And, the agencies are out in the field to assess the damage, arrive at ballpark figures on aid to be sought or provided. Such cynicism may however be put aside to be resorted to during normal times - the role of these agencies to reach out to the distressed people is real. I would like to draw attention to several issues that could be addressed for ensuring better resource allocations.

First, there is a need to educate the 'initiators' within both civil and the 'non-civil' societies. These initiators, whether small organisations, welfare societies, individuals, or agencies on the lookout for donor assistance, are currently engaged in various initiatives to remedy the post-flood ailments in

health, sanitation, infrastructure and other areas. It is quite possible that resources may get wasted due to mere lack of knowledge. For example, we may like to do patch works on the roads in our neighbourhood. Clear guidelines on such works under alternative road structures may help a lot. The suggestion applies to other fields as well. Thus, rather than monopolising all post-flood rehabilitation initiatives within the government or 'non-civil' societies, the role of the government may be meaningfully exemplified through mass campaigning on these fronts.

Second, the flood reminded us once more that lack of timely public investment may lead to a situation of private coping strategies which may cost more than the required public investment. People erected mini dams around their compounds to protect their own safe heavens, and in the process, a lot more sediments went back to the lakes and water bodies around us. Should we do the same when the next flood comes? Are there suggestions on the micro technology of erecting such dams with minimum environmental adversaries? Will the government seek ways to finance public investments with resources drawn from property owners in cities, which will be protected by those investments?

Third, demonising of diarrhoea by traders calls for immediate attention. The current shortage in the supply of packaged oral saline has allured many traders to resort to stocking, aggravating the crisis, and the increase in price has encouraged others to market low quality (or, inappropriate) products and fool the desperate consumers. Is there any way to negotiate with reliable producers so that they are encouraged to increase their production and supply of oral saline and their revenue is assured?

Sajjad Zohir, Member, Gulshan Society



PHOTO: AFP

Deployment of Bangladeshi troops in Iraq

Shafqat Rana asks, "Why should our troops go to a controversial battlefield to support US-led coalition forces". (Letter to the Editor: August 09, 2004) He would like us to conclude that the answer is an obvious "no", and given the instances he cites, understandably so. Perhaps it is necessary to rethink that analysis, however, since there are other important factors that we must consider.

To start with, I think he is asking the wrong question. The question we should be asking ourselves is whether it makes sense to send troops to Iraq, given our current interests as a nation, our obligation as a responsible member of the international community, and above all, our moral judgement on this issue.

Considering our interests simply means asking whether sending troops to Iraq will be beneficial for Bangladesh in the long run, and for that, we need to consider both domestic and international issues. Mr. Rana suggests we will become the "hot target" of extremists - the daily newspapers tell us that that is already the case. What we need to prevent is increasing the numbers of their sympathisers by sending our troops to Iraq in a mode that is not acceptable to the general populace. Deploying our troops as an accessory to what is widely perceived as an occupying force will certainly not help in this regard.

On the other hand, we must remember that we are dependent

on other nations too, often in crucial ways, and their interests can affect ours. A case in point would be the fact that Bangladesh's liquidity in the international monetary market is largely based on export earnings from the garment industry, and remittances from the Gulf States. Given that the US accounts for about half of the RMG industry, and our manufacturers are desperately trying to arrange for some sort of privileged access and given that that MFA agreement runs out in 2005, sending troops to Iraq would undoubtedly score us some points in Washington. On the other hand, if it turns out that the chances of securing such access is slight, and that we are to lose much of the market to China and India anyway,

then we have little to lose in rebuffing US troop requests. It is a similar case with the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia. Because the current proposal for Muslim troops has been tabled by the Saudis, responding favourably to it can provide us with leverage to negotiate a better deal in the manpower market. However, Iraq's governing council is perennially suspicious of its neighbours, and should relations with other Gulf states deteriorate, we will be caught in an uncomfortable position with troops on the ground in Iraq.

So there isn't a simple yes or no answer to whether we should send troops to Iraq as far as our interests are concerned - it, simply put, depends. As a responsible

member of the international community, we should seriously consider aiding other member nations of the community if we have the necessary resources and expertise. Our armed forces are one of the best in the world when it comes to keeping peace, as has been demonstrated through various UN missions all over the world, particularly Sierra Leone. There is no doubt that Iraq will present its own unique set of challenges, but in a world where an army that keeps peace is hard to find, I think we have something rare to offer.

Ashirul Amin
Princeton, NJ