LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SATURDAY APRIL 30, 2005

Dhaka skies grave risk to flying

Act before international carriers forsake ZIA

UST to think that international airlines may in the near future consider abandoning our international airport in Dhaka is as frightening as reprehensible, merely because of the reason that they me be compelled to do so.

For one thing, the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) has been put on notice for the hazard that is posed by the high-rise buildings that come on the glide path of the aircraft using Zia International Airport (ZIA) by the International Civil Aviation Authority. One hundred eleven such buildings have been identified by RAJUK, and, apparently, actions are underway to reduce those to permissible limits.

For another, inability of the air traffic controllers, both technically and humanly, to keep up with the growing volume of air traffic has rendered using our skies a somewhat risky proposi-

The tale of multistoried buildings is not new. One of the reasons for shifting the international airport from Tejgaon to its present location was to avoid the problem that the fast growing Dhaka city was posing to aviation. Regrettably, the growth of high-rise buildings in and around ZIA has defeated that logic

All those buildings that have been cited as posing risks were constructed after ZIA was commissioned. This merely demonstrates a very good example of extremely bad coordination between the relevant agencies and the ministries of the government. We understand that there are rules that govern construction of buildings in and around airports. That so many buildings were allowed to come up only point to the fact that the rules have been deliberately flouted by the relevant authorities as well as the owners of the buildings. RAJUK cannot hide behind the excuse of lack of manpower for their failure to apply their oversight mechanism to prevent this

While we are masters of 'back sight and forethought' it must be clear to all that not on all issues can corners be cut. Someone must answer for the situation that has been thrown up with its immense loss potential, with the prospect of being ostracised as an airport, as well as that which the demolishing of the buildings will entail.

As for our air traffic control the CAAB must incorporate up to date technology available in this field and enhance the controllers' efficiency through rigorous training, both at home and abroad.

We all deserve a safer sky.

Diarrhoea overtaking us

More material support needed

high incidence of the diarrhoeal disease has been reported not only from Dhaka but from different parts of the country as well. Fearfully, some cholera afflicted patients were admitted to hospitals raising the spectre of an epidemic which needs to be headed off before it turns into an invasive reality. As it is, diarrhoea is spreading like wild-fire and if only we succeed in containing it here and now that the vicious version of the malady called cholera can be kept at

This is the season for diarrhea; only that the incidence is higher this time around than that of previous years which is put down to an earlier onset of the malady this year. So, that's the magnitude of the challenge we face, but are we up to it?

Even Dhaka with its supposedly elaborate existence of facilities including specialised units for the treatment of diarrhoeal diseases face difficulties in coping with the daily onrush of patients. The well-equipped and much renowned ICDDR,B is having to treat double the number of patients it had attended to last year. Consequently, it has had to pitch tents to cope with the rush this year. Imagine then the predicament of the hospitals and health centres in the rest of the country. And true to apprehensions it is learnt that the medicines are in short supply. Crucially, the inter-veinous (IV) saline is dreadfully scarce at the government hospitals calling for urgent replenishment of stocks

The water table going down at this time of the year, supply to city dwellers in particular has drastically fallen. To quench their thirst, most people are having to drink poor quality water bearing all kinds of harmful bacteria. Free distribution of water purification tablets coupled with WASA's mobile supplies could help improve matters there.

Furthermore, perishable food items get stale and rotten too quickly in sweltering heat exposing the consumers to dreadful afflictions. People should be made aware of the risks involved in eating indiscriminately outside home.

It is widely believed that the steep decline in sanitation and hygienic conditions in the metropolis has rendered the denizens extremely vulnerable to viral attacks of all

Nothing short of a comprehensive strategy, inclusive of both preventive and curative elements, can see us through the public health hazards we are facing today.

Lessons from the Palashbari tragedy



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

HAT happened in Palashbari, Savar a few days ago reiterated once again the complete lack of seriousness within relevant government Agencies responsible for monitoring the burgeoning construction industry in this country. As anticipated, one after another, several Departments came up with excuses to cover their administrative inefficiency and corruption.

Unfortunately, their arguments will not restore life to more than one hundred persons who perished in the ill-fated collapse of the ninestorey building belonging to Spectrum Sweater and Knitwear Indus-

try.

This tragedy shocked and the people of megapolis Dhaka in particular. It also raised many questions about a man-made disaster where nature underlined once again the need for following proper building codes and structural regula-

This unfortunate event has also brought into sharp focus the need for re-evaluating housing safety in mega-cities like Dhaka, or for that matter in Chittagong.

Dhaka was a city of about one million inhabitants in 1972. Since then, its population has grown to about fourteen million. In fact, today, according to some demographers, it has about ten per cent of the entire country's population.

This has necessitated massive construction not only for additional residential, shopping and office requirements but also for Ready Made Garment factories and SMÉ units. These industrial units have become the work place for nearly one million persons and are located in different parts of the city and its

suburbs. This includes even posh residential areas like Banani and Gulshan. Certain parts of Old Dhaka

The need to create space for such semi-industrial and industrial enterprises has led many urban planners toward indiscriminate usage of scarce land. This relentless quest for working area has meant not only construction going vertical but also the filling up of lowlying wetlands all around Dhaka city. Ponds, canals and natural water

people would be affected and that more likely than not, a quarter of them would die because of lack of rescue provisions. We are talking here of hundreds of thousands.

must admit that I was horrified. In the last few days, I have undertaken my own research and found to my dismay that our Fire Service and potential rescue teams are most poorly equipped in terms of recovery machines as well as disaster training. A Fire Service officer pointed out to me that the factory in Palashbari was just one building of

safety in the construction sector. The RAJUK Chairman in particular has complained of inadequate manpower. In fact, he has stated that he has only around 50 inspectors to monitor whether the buildings are constructed according to approved design or if piling is done properly. This is just incredible, given the size of Dhaka and the number of constructions going on at any time within the city. No wonder that supervision is inefficient, ineffective and vulnerable to corruption (arising out of greed for inordinate

sions). This Commission could also

better regulated. I would think that it would be advisable for the government to form an independent Commission empowered to approve the construction of shopping malls and high-rise structures over six floors and issue necessary certificates in this regard. This Commission could be constituted of experts in soil testing and piling operations, civil engineers, structural engineers, electrical and plumbing experts as well as civil society representatives (to safeguard environmental provi-

Post BreakfasT

Last, but not the least, is the need to set up a brisk, meaningful enquiry into the whole sordid affair of the construction of the Savar building and the reasons for its collapse. Those responsible for any breach have to be punished severely according to law. Similarly, those who have suffered, need to be compensated suitably, proportional to the economic loss suffered by the families from the death of their kin.

discharge areas are being hastily filled up with soil and sand. Subsequently, piling is initiated before building foundations.

I do not have any objection to using reclaimed land for construction. This is done all over the world in densely populated countries. Singapore and Netherlands are both excellent examples. Rapid urbanisation has led to similar construction in many southern States of the USA and also in Brazil. There is no harm if the rules are strictly followed and careful scrutiny undertaken by the relevant authorities to ensure that there is no breach.

Unfortunately for us. none of these postulates are being

One shudders to think as to what might happen to Dhaka if it suffers a major earthquake. After the Palashbari incident. I was discussing this prospect with some of my friends who are structural and civil engineers. They are conservative in their thinking and seriously professional. One of them said that an earthquake of above seven in the Richter scale might lead to the destruction of nearly forty per cent of all construction above five floors. Another translated this for me into demographic figures. Their estinine floors and that different groups had worked on this accident without pause for nearly two weeks with all available equipment. Yet, the progress had been painfully slow and inadequate. In this context, he referred to a recent earthquake in Turkey, and asked me what would happen in Dhaka, if three or four of the many fifteen storied residential buildings collapsed. I had no answer. He then elaborated that most of the electrical circuitry were faulty and of low-grade, and would definitely lead to fires from escaping gas discharged by damaged gas lines. He also remarked that existing water pressure was poor and would be insufficient in extinguishing such fires. He added that lack of suitable high cranes would also hamper removal of concrete slabs to free trapped residents from higher floors. He ended by noting that the fatality rate would be over eighty per cent of affected inhabitants.

There is no doubt that we have a major problem in our hands and this has to be recognised. We have to fix it. We cannot just continue to talk about it.

The Housing and Public Works Minister and the Chairman of RAJUK have both expressed their unhappiness with the current state

profit) and political influence. He has also stated that RAJUK is unable to oversee construction with regard to usage of standard materials by the contractors who are undertaking approved designs. Apparently RAJUK acts on sub-standard construction only after it has received a complaint. In this regard, he also pointed out that 'there are some people who want to construct buildings cheaply and for that they prefer sub-standard materials. They do not understand that it is not good.' Such a confession on his part does not enhance the reputation of his organisation or solve the problem.

The Minister for Housing and Public Works has gone one step further. He has stated that in certain situations, action cannot be taken against people who violate approved building plans due to 'stay orders' and other legal complications. This is unfortunate bordering on the absurd. I am confident that the Ministry of Law can seriously examine this criticism made by the Minister. If public safety is under threat due to non-compliance of RAJUK regulations, then the judicial process must protect public interest rather than disregard it.

Various opinions have been aired over the last two weeks as to how the construction industry can be

obtain building and construction codes as practiced in countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore and see whether we can improve our own standards In this context, it would also be

worthwhile to take into account the need for the Ministry of Law to finish scrutiny on a priority basis, and then enact the National Building Code formulated in 1993, unifying and updating all norms regarding building safety. It may be recalled that this code was proposed as a replacement for the outdated Building Construction Act, 1953. Under this system, if any building collapses, then RAJUK can hold the engineers concerned responsible for faulty construction. In addition, such an arrangement can also facilitate the obligation of all highrise buildings being covered by insurance. In such a situation, the insurance companies, out of their own interest will monitor the design and construction of the building to ensure consistency with building

Another aspect that needs to be addressed is the provision of adequate facilities like alternative escape routes and fire escapes. The absence of such facilities has already resulted in several deaths in recent months in different garments

factories.

These are of course long term measures. In the meantime, on an urgent basis, the government should recruit at least another two hundred inspectors for RAJUK from different engineering institutions to tackle the problem of monitoring construction with greater efficiency RAJUK inspection teams should also immediately investigate whether high rises of seven floors and above have actually followed the letters of approved regulations.

The BGMEA should also be asked to set-aside sufficient funds for creation of better safety facilities within establishments where factories are located. At this point of time, we have only seen loud expressions of sympathy from BGMEA and FBCCI but very little in terms of real enforcement of rules to assure worker safety. They should, for a change, understand that welfare of owners is inextricably linked with that of their poorly paid workers. If they do not understand this, public opinion, which matters a lot abroad (in the importing countries) might force importers to seek other avenues of supply. It must be remembered that the issues of compliance with labour safety and welfare laws have become important in the post

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I know that the cheapest object in Bangladesh is probably a human life, but after Palashbari, for once let us forget fake expressions of sympathy and concern and show some degree of responsibility and real accountability. I reiterate this sentiment one day ahead of May Day, the International Labour Day. We owe it to the workers of our

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador -- any response to

How 'irreversible' can the Indo-Pak peace process be?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

AKISTAN president General Pervez Musharraf and Manmohan Singh met on the sidelines of the just concluded Afro-Asian conference in Bandung Indonesia, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the historic "Bandung" conference that led to the birth of the Non-aligned Movement. The Pakistan president was in the Indian capital recently for the Indo-Pak cricket match. The bilateral talks that he had with the Indian premier were seen as a "success" given the sensitivity that governs New Delhi-Islamabad ties. Two leaders agreed to carry forward the difficult peace process and declared the trend as "irreversible" -- a commitment that raised both optimism and skepticism. Broadly, the pledge was welcomed since hostility and belligerence are the hallmark of their bilateral relationship.

Efforts in the past to improve ties were mostly marked by failure, which once again not unexpected since vexed disputes that stand in the way of making India and Pakistan "friends" are too tough nuts to crack. Nevertheless, the fresh reconciliatory process that began over fourteen months ago now appears to be moving somewhat unhindered and the summit level

talks in New Delhi provided an impetus to the encouraging signs. While the success of the rapprochement drive between two traditional south Asian neighbours will definitely be welcomed by those who want to see peace in the tensionridden region, there is no denying that the task is daunting if not Herculean and needs to be assessed in the light of hard realities without downplaying the positive omens.

The recent happy developments governing the perennially belliger-

ment and the outcome of this contact had remarkably changed the nature of the New Delhi-Islamabad relationship. However, such

optimism did exists before as well, but unfortunately fell short of expectations. Summits are not uncommon between two countries and even symbolic gestures in the form of olive branch from one side has mostly been adequately responded by the other. One can recall the "fruit diplomacy" when late Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi and late

seriously felt that these gestures could lead matters to a qualitatively satisfactory stage

But this is also true that at times things which otherwise may look small can significantly contribute to breakthrough in the cumbersome diplomatic tangles and the "Ping Pong" diplomacy is a reminder although backstage painstaking efforts were required for the unexpected development that involved nations like the United States and the communist giant China. Pakimany had expected and two sides were virtually locked in a war situation over Kargil. As such, contacts at high level do produce some sobriety in complicated and even tension-ridden ties but what is important to notice is how long

can it last and how far can it go. This time, however, the developments have been somewhat qualitatively different for the better and the "Cricket diplomacy" seems to have produced a conducive ambi-

ence. Coming close on the heels of

MATTERS AROUND US

The ball has been set rolling and the road is bumpy towards eliminating the root cause of hostility. But this is how difficult things are accomplished in international relations. While one cannot fully count that the Indo-Pak peace process is " irreversible", yet hopes can be certainly placed on the current efforts. Leaders of the two countries deserve kudos for the progress achieved so far and will deserve far greater accolades if they can really turn the expectations into reality.

ent India-Pakistan ties have become a matter of discussion not only in the region but also at the larger international arena for the simple reason that a glimmer of hope has arisen on the possibility of a much better India-Pakistan relations. An optimism exists in many quarters that the two nuclearpowered inimical nations may now be able to find common ground to improve their badly ruptured ties. However, this feeling is "cautious" and also "guarded" in the quarters familiar with the character of their bilateral ties, albeit the positive aspects are not lost.

The last SAARC summit in Pakistan provided a badly needed dialogue at the level of the top leadership of the two countries on the sidelines of the conference of the seven regional heads of governPakistan president General Ziaul Huq gifted each other with Indian "Lichis" and Pakistan's "Anwar Ratol" mangoes. This took place at a time when many of the contacts at bilateral level were not in good shape. Both met with violent deaths while very much in power with absolute authority but the "fruit diplomacy" is very much in the minds of those who watched it.

However, the delicious fruits could not take the sensitive bilateral ties too far as the positive ingredients created by the developments turned bitter in quick time. The Pakistani president once caused a surprise by travelling to New Delhi in short notice and visited his Alma Mater -- the St. Stephen College -and many Indians welcomed him heartily. Things momentarily looked better although none should have

stan's present president Gen Musharraf visited India four years ago and did not miss the opportunity of having a glimpse of his ancestral house in old Delhi: 1947 partition had resulted in huge migration of people between India and Pakistan and now persons in both counties occupying at the helm originally belonged to the other side of the fence. Indian premier Dr Manmohan Singh hails from West Punjab, which is now Pakistan.

But the "Agra" summit between the then Indian premier Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan president Musharraf failed to produce much results even though hype and expectation that surrounded the occasion had raised some hopes. Earlier, the Nawaz Sharif euphoria disappeared much sooner than

some positive steps to bolster confidence building measures(CBM's) like the once inconceivable bus service across the line of control(LOC) in the disputed Kashmir region, the talks in the Indian capital went off fairly well in the given situation and also resulted in some other positive steps like rail communications and re-opening Karachi and Mumbai consulates. All these augur well for reconciliatory endeavour.

This encouraging conditions notwithstanding, one cannot probably lose sight of the fact that the peace process is contingent upon settlement or understanding on main bone of contention, which is obviously the Kashmir dispute. Two sides have diametrically opposite position on the issue, but are showing signs of readiness for

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flexibility. But how far this flexibility can go is the moot point. They have agreed to discuss the dispute but both have compulsions since it is too complex on issue although not beyond settlement. Pakistan President has to take his people and also big chunk of the "Kashmiris" along with his policy on the subject vis-à-vis the peace process with India. Some Kashmir outfits have already described Musharraf as seeking compromise on the fundamentals of the problem but bigger organisations have not yet criticised as they have either not opposed the current drive or not casting cautious watch Realism is dawning on different circles that the dispute cannot be settled by military might and negotiations are important. In India too, there seems increas-

ing awareness that flexibility is required for resolving this contentious matter and thereby create a peaceful India-Pakistan relationship. The ball has been set rolling and the road is bumpy towards eliminating the root cause of hostility. But this is how difficult things are accomplished in international relations. While one cannot fully count that the Indo-Pak peace process is " irreversible", yet hopes can be certainly placed on the current efforts. Leaders of the two countries deserve kudos for the progress achieved so far and will deserve far greater accolades if they can really turn the expectations into reality even though this will take time and assiduous efforts. For peace between India and Pakistan is central to the peace and stability in south Asia.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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.

"Thai visa"

I refer to a letter published in The Daily Star on 24 April 2005 titled "Thai visa". In this connection, I would like to express my views and also clarify some points in the matter.

Recently, we upgraded our visa system and introduced new policies with the aim of delivering timely visa for Bangladeshi citizens who wish to enter Thailand, as well as to create a stronger check against counterfeit applicants. However, no matter how strictly our rules have been incorporated, the Embassy does not refuse to grant visa to any applicant until all the possibilities have been tried and ruled out. From past experiences, the visa chief may wish to be convinced further about the eligibility of the applicant, in which case the applicant is asked to bring more

papers of guarantee or support. As a result, such applicants automatically get delayed but happily enough. most of them end up getting the visa by cooperating with the Embassy. But it is a pity that even after further

opportunity given to them, a number of applicants fail to show the supporting documents required to obtain urgent visa as they may have requested, or to obtain a visa at all. and have to be denied after all the time they spend at the Embassy, apart from wasting our time and efforts as well. Furthermore, we have put on notices at the visa section on how to contact the Embassy for any inquiries or requests. It is unfortunate how such irregular applicants make unreasonable claims on the Embassy. Vorrassri Sriboon

Consul Royal Thai Embassy, Dhaka

Watching for plea-

Entertainment and politics are not the same thing, time has come to realise this simple difference. Who does not like the way Paki-

stan play cricket? And tell me who does not like the way Brazil play Who does not like continuous 4

and 6? And who does not like watching fastest century in a few minutes? And who does

not like watching an ordinary team defeating strong teams such as Argentina or France despite poor defence? This is called the fun and enchantment of game!

There are many Pakistani cricket fans in Bangladesh. Everybody loves entertainment.

It is not blasphemous. No one can blame them for this because their heart does not ache when Pakistan loses. It's all over when the game ends. There is nothing wrong with chilling and whistling. There are lots of things that we should have clear idea of.

Patriotism is not such a cheap thing that you have to learn from some blockheads. Cantara Wali Ruhi BBA, Dept of Mgmt, DU

writing in the 'opinion' column, which

Perspective -national unity This is regarding Mozammel Khan's

Star. The writer rightly pointed out a sitting minister's previous and recent anomalous stance on declaration of war of independence of Bangladesh. I could not restrain myself to add one thing in this regard. On 26th march 1999 in an interview with BBC Bangla this minister (wasn't a minister at that time) told that there should not be any debate on proclamation of independence by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib. He also added that the real task of proclamation of independence had been done by Bangabandhu on 7th March, 1971 at Race Course ground before a grand rally as he (Bangabandhu) told that 'this time the struggle is for independence, this time the struggle is

came on 12th April, 2005 in The Daily

for emancipation.' If the stance of then one of the close aides (obviously junior) of Bangabandhu could change so ridiculously then national unity may remain an illusion forever. **Omar Faruque**

Bangladesh not safe! The British government has now decided to remove Bangladesh from the so-called 'white list', as the country is not safe! This has come into effect from 22 April 2005. Earlier, Bangladesh was included in a list of 24 countries which were considered to be generally safe. The implication of this inclusion was that any Bangladeshis claiming asylum or humanitarian protection did not have a right to appeal from the UK if the Home Office rejected their cases. They had to go back to Bangladesh

and appeal from there. Removal of Bangladesh from the list will mean that now they will be able to appeal from the UK.

The change in law has been prompted by a recent High Court case R (on the application of Zakir Husain) v the Secretary of State for the Home Department. The court held, "... when it (Bangladesh) was added to the list, or at any time since then, no rational decision maker could have been satisfied that there was in general in Bangladesh no serious risk of persecution of persons entitled to reside there or that removal of such persons thither would not in general contravene the UK's obligations under the Human Rights Convention." The decision suggested that it was wrong to include Bangladesh in the list since it

was never a safe country because of the failure of the state to provide adequate protection to its citizens. This decision will further tarnish the image of Bangladesh and act as a big boost for those who are actively campaigning to portray Bangladesh as a failed/ unsafe/fanatical state The government of Bangladesh must realise that despite taking some measures there is something very much wrong in the administration of law and order in the country and take seriously the criticisms levelled against their failures instead of brushing them aside.

Tuhin Reza