

# Save timeworn St. Gregory's school

**BARNABY SKINNER**

Old buildings of St Gregory's High School and the adjacent bell tower of the Holy Cross Church are under threat of collapse, but the diocese of Dhaka cannot raise sufficient funds to save the historical nineteenth century architectures.

Robi Purification, headmaster of the high school, has a dream and a nightmare, which are merely separated by a playground.

On the one side of the playground stand four new school buildings. Two of them are currently under construction. As soon as they are finished, the new buildings will offer 2,100 students and 80 teachers the most modern high school in Old Dhaka.

There will be 40 classrooms, a library, a spacious teacher's room, a large IT room and an extensive assembly hall. This is a dream coming true early next year.

On the other side of the playground stands the old school building with the attached Holy Cross Church. The buildings were constructed by Belgian missionaries in 1882. Surviving the 1897 earthquake they are among the oldest buildings of the city.

Both buildings, however, are in urgent need of maintenance or else they will crumble away to nothing. This is Purification's nightmare, sadly, also threatening to come true.

"There's very little me and the priest Edmond Cruze can do," said Purification, an ancestor of Portuguese missionaries, which explains his name. "We have had to use all our funds to construct the new school buildings. And even they aren't enough."

The old school was renovated once in 1984, when a new roof and iron beams were installed, but the church has not been touched since 1882. "When it rains, the church's roof leaks profusely," said Fr. Edmond Cruze, "but the real problem is the bell tower."

privately. What's more -- even if we did set up a fund, we couldn't be sure that the church would use it to renovate the buildings."

Paulinus Costa, secretary to the Archbishop of Bangladesh, said: "Yes, we know we must act. But shall we do? We need money to really make a difference." He claims that he is currently looking for money abroad and has contacted the Vatican on the issue.

For Headmaster Purification this is the wrong approach. "My predecessor Marcel Duchesne looked for funds in France. But to no avail," he said. Purification believes that one should be asking people that are attached to the school.

The government could also lend a helping hand. However, there is a hurdle to such an involvement. Shafiqul Alam, director of the Department of Archaeology, said: "The church authorities must make an official request. Otherwise we cannot help them."

Alam makes clear that his department would respect the school building's religious status but will not get too involved.

It is ironic that such a renowned school, that produced scholars like Amartya Sen, the 1998 Nobel Laureate for economics, cannot mobilise enough funds to save its original buildings.

The new buildings cost Tk 5 crore -- Tk 1 crore is coming from a private fund of ex-students, 1 crore loan was taken from the community and 3 crore come from student fees. "I cannot even make an estimate how much a renovation would cost," said Purification. "I just know it will be very, very costly."

Cruze is concerned about a crack in the tower. He fears it could topple over and in a worst-case scenario crush churchgoers.

Shasmin Hussein, secretary of the Gregorian Association, a body of ex-students of the school, said: "Our association does not get involved in the school's monetary issues. If members do, they do it



The church's belfry housing the 19th century Italian bell has a crack virtually from top to bottom. The lime stone roof above the arched windows leaks heavily during rains (left).

# Bird flu fear fails to dampen chicken prices, consumption

**SYED TASHFIN CHOWDHURY**

The consumption of chicken in Dhaka remained almost unaffected despite a fear of avian flu, which is spreading fast in a number of Asian and European countries.

Most city dwellers have little idea about the disease while the government officials ruled out serious threat of bird flu outbreak in the country.

The current outbreak of Avian Influenza A (H5N1) affected countries including Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Russia, Turkey, Romania and Vietnam.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), wild birds carry the virus in their intestines without being affected but the virus, quite contagious in nature, can infect domesticated birds like chickens and ducks.

The flu has proved fatal to animals, causing death in most cases. There is always a risk for human beings, who are in direct contact with infected birds or surfaces that have been contaminated with excretions from infected birds.

The latest outbreak in Asia and Europe also involves human infections. But despite the panic in most affected countries, Dhaka City dwellers have little idea about it.

"I have heard about the disease but have no idea about its symptoms and the ways it can affect a human being," said Senjuti Rashid, a housewife.

"It is possibly a serious fever that birds acquire after flying in the cold weather for too long," said Fahim Raza, a student of Class VIII.

Some city dwellers are aware of the disease but they believe it cannot affect them.

"I have learnt about the disease from a BBC report but I do not think the situation is something that the citizens of Dhaka need to worry about," said Tanvir Ahmed, a student of a private university.

Ahmed said there is little fear of such outbreaks in Bangladesh. He pointed out that the possibility of an outbreak in Bangladesh is slimmer now, as the government has banned the import of birds from as many as 18 Asian and European countries.

"We still have no reports of avian flu outbreak in the country and we have taken necessary steps to prevent the occurrence of such a crisis," said an official of the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock.

But the ban on the import of poultry birds is causing price hike in the domestic market, according to traders and consumers.

"Earlier, Bangladesh imported around 2 million parent and 25,000 grandparent chicken stock from Britain, France, the Netherlands, Germany, USA, Canada and some other countries. But with the import ban, this number has declined significantly," said a trader.

"Price of broiler chicken rose from Tk 70 to Tk 85 per kg at the beginning of this month," said Mamun Hasan, a poultry seller at the Karwan Bazar kitchen market.

Explaining the reason, another poultry seller at Malibagh kitchen market said: "Most hatchery owners are increasing the prices as they know that there will now be a high demand for poultry from local producers."

Besides, the price of local poultry has also risen by Tk 10 to 30 per piece.

Some chicken traders however speculated that the price may not



With the bird flu fear in the air, consumers refrain from buying farm-chicken although the supply has been flowing as usual.

# Steps against tremor come first

## Experts suggest strict building code

**TAWFIQUE ALI**

A few experts termed updating the building code's earthquake resistant measures crucial, others emphasized on making the code legally binding first, but together agreed that a review of the earthquake chapter is needed to face possible disaster in Dhaka and the country.

The recent earthquake disaster in Pakistan and India showed the need for an extensive modification of quake resistance measures as the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) of 1993 lacks inadequate focus on the issue.

"The building code should be reviewed immediately incorporating an adequate seismic zoning map which is not well reflected, to address Dhaka's vulnerability to earthquake disaster and the entire country," said Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakkha's (Rajuk) chief engineer, M Emdadul Islam.

"The construction act should have an enforcing agency of building code along with a specific organogram," he said.

When pointed out that Rajuk is the designated authority, he said that it has no adequate manpower to monitor compliance with safety measures, issue occupancy certificate and enforce other requirements.

The BNBC that is to be approved in parliament soon, lacks attention to the issue of earthquake disaster and resistant measures and an update in present day context is essential, said Mehedi Ahmed Ansari, an associate professor at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) and general secretary of Bangladesh Earthquake Society.

The 22-member steering committee formed by the Public Works Ministry 18 months back to review the BNBC, recommended the update at a meeting on May 12, but it is suspended on grounds that it is more important to get the code legally enforceable, said a meeting source.

Buet engineers in the committee suggested revision of building requirements and structural design, underscoring the need of an ethical code of practice for engineers but unanimously agreed on the update addressing earthquake vulnerability.

Bangladesh earthquake society has suggested ground (soil) improvement, foundation detailing, and code of practice in earthquake resistant designing and retrofitting of significant buildings in the city. Public Works Department representative suggested the incorporation of seismic micro-zonation mapping and practice of American Concrete Institute (ACI) code to reduce the earthquake disaster, while House Building Finance Corporation representative wanted a revision of the BSTI standard certifying building materials, with the Geological Survey of Bangladesh suggesting the incorporation of fault line mapping.

"Construction design buildings must be monitored and approved by professional architects and civil engineers, said the president of Bangladesh Earthquake Society Prof. Jamilur Reza Choudhury and Vice Chancellor Brac University.

Choudhury said the existing provisions in the code addressing earthquake is adequate, but must be updated on regular basis as done every five years in the developed countries adding that Rajuk must be decentralised with increased technical manpower to address any situation.

The building code must be updated in line with the ACI requirements, said engineer Md. Abdul Awal, senior vice-president of Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (Rehab) that has 200 members.

"I believe the earthquake resistant provisions in BNBC is adequate, but many engineers have are not familiar with the code itself and errant developers who pay no heed to the building code," he said.

"The seismic zoning map in the building code is sketchy and needs reviewing and incorporating latest techniques in design and material," said Architecture Department's chief architect Abdus Salam, and convenor of steering committee.

But he said it is more important to provide a legal basis to the code than its updating at present.

An amendment to the Building Construction Act of 1952, expected to be passed in the upcoming parliament session, will make the building code legally mandatory, said the Public Works secretary Iqbal Uddin Chowdhury.

Once passed, the amendment will empower the public works ministry to prepare and adopt a code and incorporate reviews from time to time, he said.

"Let us take a step at a time. The passage of amendment to the act may be further delayed if the issue of updating the code comes up right now," the secretary said.

It had not been mandatory for builders to follow the BNBC, prepared in 1993, in past 13 years.



The concrete jungle of Dhaka city sams an effective building code.