

Rise in urban poor causing problems



A slum in Mohammadpur where most urban poor dwell.

NOVERA DEEPIA

The ever-increasing urban population, presently around five to six percent a year, will create problems in basic rights like housing, healthcare, education and employment on a massive scale in near future, says a report by Bangladesh Urban Round Table (BURT).

It also said the urban growth rate in Bangladesh is almost twice that of the rural sector. If this rate continues, 50 percent of the country's population will be living in urban areas by 2030. At present 25 percent of the country's total population is urban, which was 28.8 million in 2001.

"The result of the rise in population increases the risk of social corruption and degradation of standard of living. Crime increases among the urban poor because of deprivation, poverty and unequal social structure," said Mostafa Quaium Khan, Executive

Director, CUP.

"The risk lies on all city dwellers, whether rich or poor, who will face disaster caused by this uncontrollable growth," he added.

A Bangladesh Urban Round Table (BURT) report states: "Almost 70 percent of the population in Dhaka is from the low-income sector. This population has access to about 20 percent of the land in Dhaka."

The 4,300 slums in Dhaka, the fastest growing mega-city in the world, have a population of 2,840,000.

These slums are located on vulnerable land with high density and unhygienic conditions.

Most slum dwellers have lack of services and no security of tenure. Only 28 percent slum households have water-sealed latrines and 18 percent the own source of drinking water.

"We hardly have basic

needs in this unhealthy slum environment. I have to live here to earn money to support my parents living in the village," said Md Jahangir, a rickshaw puller, from a slum in Rayer Bazar.

"After rickshaws were made off-limits on many roads, it was difficult to earn our bread. I am thinking of switching to a job in the construction or manufacturing field. The government was supposed to give us alternative employment, but there is no sign of such a thing. I have to continue with this, till I learn a new trade," he added.

According to a BURT report about 400,000 people migrate to Dhaka every year. If the current trend of migration continues, the urban poor will increase to 25-30 percent of the country's poor by 2020. The prime reasons behind the high migration rate are natural disasters leading to pauperisation, unemployment and limited livelihood

opportunities in rural areas.

"I had come to Dhaka to find employment because I neither had work nor land in my village," said Jahida, a migrant from Mymensingh, presently residing in Maghbazar.

Urban population is concentrated in big cities, especially Dhaka, which had a population of around 12 million in 2001. If this growth rate continues the population is likely to be around 38 million in 2010.

"Problems caused by the migration trend could be solved by rational urbanisation. Decentralisation will increase investment in rural areas, creating employment opportunities," said Quaium.

An Asian Development Bank (ADB) report states that the reduction rate in urban poverty is faster than rural poverty, but 36.6 percent urban population are still poor.

The Dhaka Urban Poverty Study by the World Bank states: "The country has no explicit policy on urbanisation and urban poverty, and this lack of any coherent, well-thought out approach is a challenge in approaching the challenges of poverty in Dhaka and other towns. The poor in urban areas are affected, as they have no alternatives for meeting their basic needs. And government has taken recourse to demolition of slums with hardly any effort at rehabilitation and there is little coordination effort in trying to improve the living conditions of the urban poor."

Slum eviction is frequent as they are viewed as dens of criminals. This leads to jeopardising the livelihood of the poor, says the BURT report.

Morium Begum, resident of a slum in Gulshan said: "It is unjust to evict a slum without alternative arrangements. The authority cannot deny our contribution to society."

Polythene bags making a comeback

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Polythene shopping bags are slowly making a comeback in the market despite the government ban on its production, marketing and use.

Manufacturers of polythene bags are making profits again as shopkeepers and customers especially in the kitchen markets are reviving its use.

"We still have demands for polythene bags among most of the customers. We just give what our customers want," explained one fish vendor in the Karwan Bazar kitchen market admitting the fact that the use of polybag is banned.

In the wholesale markets of Chawkbazar and Karwan Bazar one kg polythene bags are sold for Tk 90. Most of the kitchen market vendors in the city keep polybags secretly.

"We are conducting raids on a regular basis and collect-

ing a lot of money as fine, yet the use of polythene bags did not seem to cease entirely," said Zafar Ahmed Chowdhury, secretary of the environment and forest ministry. "We tried to promote the sales of jute bags as an alternative item but could not attract that many people," he added. Chowdhury pointed out that jute bags are a little costlier than polybags.

One of the manufacturers and wholesalers of shopping bags at Karwan Bazar said: "No one usually comes to raid the market. We have our contacts in the police station. We just have to pay them a sum of money on a monthly basis to avoid the raid."

He mentioned that police raids are rare in the factories too. Factory owners also have the same arrangements with the law enforcers. "Sometimes we get caught while transporting the goods. But it is not a

problem. The same arrangement applies here too," he added.

A homemaker said: "I always carry a bag to the kitchen market but sometimes I need a few polythene bags. It is not possible to mix some of the goods like sugar, grains or perishable items like fish together in a jute bag."

"The department stores are using packaging systems. But the system is different in the kitchen markets," said another customer. "I have never come across anyone who was fined for using polythene. In the beginning we heard so many things about the serious effect polythene can have on the environment but not anymore."

As a non-biodegradable environmental hazard, polythene has already wreaked havoc on public sanitation. In January 2002, the government imposed the ban on polythene (20-micron or more in thickness) in

Dhaka city and then elsewhere.

Maximum penalty for manufacturing polythene shopping bag is 10-year rigorous imprisonment or a maximum fine of Tk 10 lakh or both. The fine for using polythene shopping bags other than export trade is Tk 500.

"The campaign against polythene bags was successful for a few years but the grip is gradually loosening now," said Rizwana Hasan, director, Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela). "It has created awareness to some extent. However, alternative items could not create appeal in the grassroots level."

"I think the law has enough provisions. A nationwide enforcement of the law is very important to prevent the production and selling of polybags," she added.

BACK TO BASE



City dwellers are returning to their bases after the Eid-ul-Azha holidays. This picture was taken at the Kamalapur railway station yesterday.

Nursery owners threaten to boycott national tree fair

Demands space for setting up 'nursery village'

MORSHED ALI KHAN

Facing eviction and harassment in their business, nursery owners in the city have threatened to boycott the national flower and tree fairs to be held in February and June respectively, if they are not given a space for setting up a 'nursery village'.

The Dhaka City Nursery Consortium (DNC), with over 150 members also warned that they would stop participating in the ongoing city beautification programme, in which the consortium members provide most of the trees, plants and shrubs.

The demand for the nursery village came after the authorities evicted the city's largest cluster of 35 nurseries from Baridhara Park recently. Although the nurseries were authorised by the Dhaka City Corporation, they were evicted for security measures in the diplomatic zone.

The owners of Baridhara nurseries incurred loss of lakhs of taka as they had to abandon precious plants on the footpaths not knowing where to move with so many plants and materials, Tarek Rahman of Dhaka City



Nursery Consortium (DNC) said.

The DNC leaders have recently asked the city mayor to allocate a proper space for them to set up the village. They have also named several spots in the city, which are laying 'useless' and asked the mayor to consider allocating one of them for the proposed nursery village.

The city nurseries supply the entire lot of trees and plants for the Dhaka beautification programme. Moreover, 99 percent of the participants in the yearly National Tree Fair and the National Flower Show are from the private nursery sector. The National Flower Show is organised by the Export Promotion Bureau and the National Tree Fair by the Ministry of Environment and Forest. The sector also promises a huge export potential.

Minister for Environment and Forest, Tariqul Islam told The Daily Star that he was aware of the plight of the nursery owners in the city. He said that he had already talked to the mayor about allocating a space for a nursery village.

"You understand finding a space is so difficult in the city and moreover the official

procedure for the allocation usually takes a long time," the minister said.

Tarek Rahman, convenor of the DNC, told The Daily Star that although nurseries are greatly contributing to

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national development by supplying thousands of flowerery, ornamental, medicinal, fruit and timber trees round-the-year, their contribution has never been recognised by any government.

In addition, nurseries are

also supplying gardening tools, seeds and environment friendly fertilisers, he added.

Within the last one year, about 100 nurseries in the city have gone out of business due to decisions by the authorities to allocate many of these spaces for construction. Meanwhile, with people becoming more environment conscious, demand for plants and shrubs have risen manifold. The city is increasingly becoming devoid of green space and therefore chances for the nursery owners to set up their stalls in open spaces are shrinking.

"Unless the government comes forward to help us with a proper space to set up our business, this sector is to suffer an irreparable damage," Tarek said. Most of the city nurseries have been set up along the roadsides on public properties and are becoming easy targets for eviction.

"In every country the government has come forward to set up a specific place for nurseries to do business, where people can go to buy their plants but Dhaka is rejecting the business that is helpful to the environment," Tarek added.