

Water-logging in the city takes a menacing turn



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

DHAKA is used to rains. It is also used to stoppages. Several times every monsoon, the city's workforce find itself gridlocked or stranded. Everyone wades home after a few exhausting hours, and the next morning things return to normal. But, on Thursday evening (June 7) it was different. The city that never stops shut down. What took the city dwellers by surprise was neither the volume nor the intensity of that rain, it was normal as usual, just 102 mm in this rainy season, but the impact which was almost apocalyptic. The city's overburdened transport network always takes the first hit, but this time the heart of the capital city, including the vast area from Mirpur to Sangsad Bhaban Avenue to Rampura to Sayedabad on one side, and from Farm gate to Kawran Bazar to Gulistan to Hatkhola to Motijheel, stopped beating. Power grids collapsed at places, as usual, and commercial networks came to a standstill. The low-lying areas of the city like Basabo, Kamalapur, Shantinagar went under waist deep water, and even areas like Kakrail and Segun Bagicha went under knee-deep water. The incessant downpour till 11

BITTER TRUTH

There must be an urban-land policy that provides social justice and treats land as a resource to be used for the benefit of the citizens. Not only that, there should also be a framework of urban institutions which answers the current and emerging requirements of a growing metro like Dhaka city, as well as a cadre of urban administrators who have the training and motivation to meet the challenges. Most importantly, there should be a human settlement technology which helps in the growth of harmonious communities, and a pattern for tapping financial resources and distributing them for balanced development.



PHOTO: STAR

p.m. disrupted the commuter services and rickshaw movement, and hundreds of people were stranded at bus stands. With the collapse of

the city's main transport network, most people out on the roads after the day's work were left with no choice but to wade their own way

back home. The result was pandemonium on the streets with even the main roads, including the road dividers inundated, and traffic

movement coming to a grinding halt.

The rainfall was not the highest ever recorded in either the country's, or even Dhaka's, history. The fact is: Dhaka, one of the most ill-planned cities in the world, has seen a consistent rise in terms of population over the last two decades. But, shockingly, the infrastructural requirements needed to cope with this soaring population have been ignored.

Hamstrung by medieval infrastructure, despite millions of taka being spent in different projects, the city unfolds a dismal picture in respect of water supply, sanitation facilities and drainage system. The sewage system covers only 60 percent of the city's population. About 50 percent of the urban waste is allowed to decompose and putrefy on the roadside. Quite a substantial portion of it goes into the open drains, choking them permanently and creating slush and stink all around. The result is: after even a mild shower, water cannot flow through the drains and inundates the road and the little open spaces left after the helter-skelter construction of apartment blocks in every visible open space in the city.

Horrifyingly, land and building mafias have made illegal encroachments and built apartment complexes in such low lying areas like Ashulia, Badda, Basundhara Kamalapur, Basabo and Mirpur, without leaving any arrangement for the outflow of either rainwater or waste water in normal situations. It is this part, and the central places like Dhanmondi, Gulistan and Shahbag where rampant development has been taking place in recent years, that was paralysed.

The fact is that the accumulated water had no outlet, in spite of

several rivers like the Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Balu and Turag surrounding Dhaka. Experts say that it is the concretisation of Dhaka city that is responsible for the crisis, not the rainfall. And, to that extent, Rajuk's culpability for the crisis is total.

Perhaps the best proof of this is the land developed by filling marshy land for housing complexes in Ashulia, Tongi, Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Badda, Basabo, Basundhara and DND embankment area. All these complexes were built on marshes that surround the mouth of the Buriganga river. In the early 1990s, or even later, when Rajuk gave the nod to the land grabbers for filling up these low-lying areas, environmentalists had warned the government of a possible backlash. Because of the commercial promise they held, many such projects required no environmental clearance and, at the same time, the MoEF played second fiddle in exercising its authority. The ministry did not exert its authority to stop this foul game of filling the wetlands, and the city dwellers now have to bear the brunt of the past follies and mistakes of an uncaring government.

The choking of the rivers, of old canals like Begunbari khal, Baunia khal, and of Gulshan-Baridhara lake, Uttara lake and Hatirjheel lake, is considered one of the major reasons for the water-logging. For safety reasons, if nothing else, the banks of the rivers should have been kept clear, but they were taken up first on the pretext of providing vital services like establishing hats, bazaars and roads for the people, and also for mass oriented schemes like slum development and settlement. So builders took over the

area, along with portions of the river. The first building or structure came on the riverbed itself, thereby restricting its flow and obstructing discharge of rainwater into the river.

Structures developed on the banks of the rivers Buriganga and Shitalakhya are good examples of uncontrolled development. And now these areas are concrete jungles. Every single inch of encroachment is responsible for the present crisis. Moreover, there had been cloudbursts in the past, but Dhakaites had never faced a situation like this. Years of bad development has been exposed by even such moderate rain. The writing has been on the wall for a long time. So, whether it was 102 mm rain or less than that is not the issue. It has nothing to do with the quantity of water. It has everything to do with the faulty planning of the city.

Now the question is: why did this happen? Every city has its share of dissipation space -- wetlands, wastelands, mangroves, and even salt-pan lands if the city is adjacent to the sea. In other cases, wetlands and wastelands act like sponges and take the pressure out in such abnormal situations. Shockingly, watershed sand wetlands surrounding the city have given way to building complexes. It is happening all over the city, from the midlands to areas bordering the rivers and lakes.

In a sense, Dhaka is being strangled. Whenever any agency gets clearance for any infrastructure project, it uses that project to create more land so that this extra land could be allotted to builders, and more money can be made. It is a carefully planned strategy. It is a transition from wetland to wasteland, and then to wealth land.

Let us now look at the land aspect. Initially, this newly created land from the wetland was kept as no-development zone, but in the past five years or so it has been opened for development and even urbanisation. This means concretization of these lands. And if you concretize land, then the soil is unable to soak in water. This is a double loss, because the underground aquifers are also not re-generated.

There must be an urban-land policy that provides social justice and treats land as a resource to be used for the benefit of the citizens. Not only that, there should also be a framework of urban institutions which answers the current and emerging requirements of a growing metro like Dhaka city, as well as a cadre of urban administrators who have the training and motivation to meet the challenges. Most importantly, there should be a human settlement technology which helps in the growth of harmonious communities, and a pattern for tapping financial resources and distributing them for balanced development. Unquestionably true, cities are the spiritual workshop of the nation. They are manifestations not only of physical architecture but also of the architecture of the mind. We can't let the rot persist.

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Stop hazardous child labour

RAHIMA AKTAR

CHILD labour in Bangladesh is a major problem. It is a great hindrance to development, as a large number of children are engaged in various types of economical activities instead of attending school.

A child, between 5 and 17 years of age, who works for more than one hour per week, paid or unpaid, is called a child labourer. According to ILO, child labour is an activity conducted by a person below the age of 15, and when a child aged between 5 and 14 years works between 14 and 43 hours per week, paid or unpaid, it is called hazardous child labour.

According to the second "National labour survey" in 2003, of 42.39 million Bangladeshi children aged 5-17 years 7.42 million were economically active, of which 3.18 million were considered child labourers. It revealed that there were 1.3 million children involved in hazardous work. At present there are 45 hazardous sectors in Bangladesh where a large number of children are working at the risk of their lives.

Hazardous child labour is the most vulnerable form of child labour. It hinders the natural growth of a child, and leads to adverse effects on the child's safety, physical or mental health, and moral development. It violates child rights, and children suffer from

severe muscular-skeletal and respiratory ailments due to hazardous work. There are many forms of hazardous child labour, e.g.

- Those who are engaged in working with heavy or dangerous equipment, tools or loads, and who work in glass factories, bidi factories, automobile workshops, balloon factories, motor garages etc.
 - A large number of children aged 8-15 are engaged in domestic work. Most of the domestic workers work 16-17 hours a day, and 81% of them are female.
 - We can see a new form of hazardous child labour, i.e. selling popcorn, chocolate, cigarettes etc. near traffic signals on many roads.
 - About 40,000 children are engaged in producing dried fish, and working in salt factories in Cox's bazar.
 - The most hazardous and worst forms of child labour are child prostitution and pornography, and forced or bonded labour.
- There are a good number of reasons for hazardous child labour, the major ones being poverty, deprivation created by natural calamities, lack of access to education, lack of primary and community schools, lack of awareness, and poor implementation of labour laws.
- The following measures should be implemented to remove hazardous child labour:

- Poverty alleviation programs for the people living below the poverty line, as poverty is the main cause of hazardous child labour.
- Existing laws for the hazardous sector should be implemented.
- The government should intensify its efforts to finalize an age limit for admission to hazardous sector, e.g. 14 years age.
- Education is the best tool for reducing child labour, so education must be ensured for working children, but not in the traditional form. It must be provided in pleasant ways, with stipend, food, and vocational training.
- Alternative income generating programs should be implemented for their parents.
- Child labourers and their guardians and employers are not aware of child laws, child rights, CRC, and the bad effects of hazardous child labour. So awareness raising campaigns are needed.
- Birth rate control and effective family planning programs are essential for reducing hazardous child labour.
- Domestic child workers should get special attention, and people have to employ them under specific terms and condition.
- Workplace safety must be ensured to reduce hazards.
- Social mobilization and networking should be implemented.

- NGOs and private organizations must cooperate in facing this problem.

Hazardous child labour is now a matter of great concern, as the 1.3 million child labourers of today will not be able to lead the country tomorrow. The Bangladesh government is also ready to combat child labour, and has ratified the ILO convention 182 which focuses on the worst forms of child labour.

Bangladesh is one of the 22 countries which were the first signatories of the UN CRC (child right convention). Besides, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between the Ministry of Labour and Employment and ILO in 1994 to implement IPEC activities. Bangladesh has implemented 91 action programs. Under IPEC, Bangladesh has removed child labour from garment factories.

The Bangladesh government is implementing many plans to remove child labour under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Social Welfare Ministry, Education Ministry, and primary and mass education. Besides, the government has undertaken the task of formulating a child labour policy for removing some anomalies in the legislation and fixing uniform minimum age for admission to work.

The Ministry of Labour and Employment has been implementing a project named Eradication of



Hazardous Child Labour (2nd phase) Project in Bangladesh, which aims at removing 30,000 children from hazardous child labour, and making them skilled ones.

Elimination of hazardous child labour is a difficult but not insoluble problem. Political commitment, legal protection, social mobiliza-

tion, and the combined efforts of GOs-NGOs can remove child labour. We hope that in the near future we will see our work places free from child labour.

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Sin tax and luxury tax

We are used to calling people industrialists here (Bangladesh) who import consumer goods and sell them to the public with a hefty margin given our appetite and desire for foreign goods. I would rather call them dis-industrialists as they kill the local industries. These are luxury items for citizens of Bangladesh. These are the items that should be taxed heavily.

ASIF ANWAR

THE decision to raise the minimum income to be under taxation is a good one, but doesn't go far enough to be meaningful. The resources required now to collect tax on an annual income of Tk 250,000 (\$3,500 approx.) really doesn't make any sense as most people earning close to that amount (other than salaried government and corporate employees) are not even in National Board of Revenue (NBR) database with Tax Identification Numbers (TIN).

Though an income of Tk 20,833 per month sounds a lot, but one can barely make ends meet with that income in Dhaka city, assuming that majority of the citizens within this income bracket are living in this metropolis. It would be unjust to tax people with that income given current living expenditure level, inadequate utility supply, and the absence of any benefits (i.e. unemployment, social security, etc).

It is ironic that cigarettes, one of the top health hazards, are cheapest in countries with lowest standard of health care. The reason is the systematic exploitation of corrupt governments by the large international conglomerates that control the global market. Unfortunately, since a large population is "hooked" on this drug, a uniform tax increase will hurt people of low income. Therefore, additional taxes on expensive cigarettes may relieve the "biri" smokers from a price hike. The ban on imported cigarettes should be lifted but taxed heavily, since banning anything which is legally available elsewhere will only hurt the government and consumer whilst benefiting smugglers and sellers.

I recall that a few years back, one of the notorious industrialists (currently in custody) almost succeeded in passing beer as a "halal" drink. Subsequently a beer plant was set up at a huge cost which has been sitting idle since, and may become obsolete now that it may be attached by the ACC as part of the recovery process of his ill-gotten wealth. It would be a shame if this plant becomes obsolete as it was built

with the money that belonged to his victims: be it the NBR or the land owner who was forced to sell at a fraction of market price.

One of best breweries in Asia is located in Pakistan, a Muslim country where alcohol is strictly prohibited. I don't see why Bangladesh, a secular country with legal outlets for selling alcohol, should deprive itself from earning local and international revenue (through export) by utilising this plant under private or government management. Likewise, additional taxes on imported liquor will have a positive effect on the sale of "carew" and to the bottom-line of revenue collection by NBR.

I was impressed and disgusted at the same time by an advertisement of a local real estate company touting 7000 sq. ft. flats in Baridhara. Few flats in that building would match the Tk 25 crore government fund set up for the welfare of RMG labours. We have cars that sell for more than 2 crore. Imported LCD televisions for 5 lakhs. Mobile phones costing more than 50,000. A visit to Agora or Nondon reminds me of my days in the US as most items are available here close to prices (in \$ terms) I used to pay there.

We are used to calling people industrialists here (Bangladesh) who import consumer goods and sell them to the public with a hefty margin given our appetite and desire for foreign goods. I would rather call them dis-industrialists as they kill the local industries. These are luxury items for citizens of Bangladesh. These are the items that should be taxed heavily.

It would take years before the infrastructure is set to bring most citizens and businesses under the tax net. Until then, if NBR focuses on the "big fishes" and the large local and international conglomerates, it will be successful in collecting more revenue than going after people making less than \$300 a month. The NBR should take a "Top Down" approach not a "Bottom Up" one.

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Stereotypes true and false

JALAL ALAMGIR

THERE is some truth in stereotypes. Take the term "hujuge (impulsive) Bangali" for example. These two little words, in one fell swoop, lampoon our short collective memory, point to our tendency to revise facts on whim, and mock us for our gullibility. Many hujuge Bangalis have been swept off their feet by the campaign to discredit politics altogether. True this effort was well orchestrated; the planners deserve credit. True political parties had become deadlocked in misdeeds, for which only they are to blame. I'll even grant that forceful intervention was the only option left on 1/11.

But what is not true is the claim that politics had given us little, and that all political parties are the same: dishonest, power-grabbing, non-democratic, dynasty-run fiefdoms that have proven ineffective in governance. A quick look at the record between Awami League and BNP in the past three terms reveals the deceit in this

claim. Comparison between the two can run for pages, so I'll just take three basic questions. Have they produced economic growth? Have they respected citizens' right to life and liberty? Have they governed democratically?

Between 1991 and 2005, when elected politicians ruled the country, the average annual growth rate in real (inflation-adjusted) GDP was 5.1 percent, compared to 3.9 percent annually between 1975 and 1990, when generals led the country. Politicians, for all their flaws, grew the economy much better than dictators did. There was better reduction of poverty, better management of inflation. How do they fare against their own kind?

During the first BNP administration (1991-1996), real GDP growth rate was 4.4 percent annually. The AL administration (1996-2001) performed better, lifting the real growth rate to 5.2 percent. The second BNP administration (2001-2006) beat that, clocking 5.6 percent annually. On average, real growth attained during all of BNP's

years is 5 percent annually.

Three conclusions can be drawn from this. Amazing though it may sound, every elected government performed better than the average non-elected government. Second, each elected government performed progressively better than its predecessor. And finally, yes, there was no significant difference between BNP and AL, at least on economic growth rates.

The differences begin to appear once we cast our gaze at politics, human rights, and quality of governance. On these measures, there's no point in a comparison to earlier military governments, since they did not have a commitment to protect rights or govern democratically. So we will focus on the post-1991 years.

With regard to fundamental rights, let's simply take the most basic measurement:

the right to life. Extra-judicial killing is the worst violation of this right, since it indicates gross abuse by those who are entrusted to protect citizens in the first place. During BNP's first tenure, gov-

ernment agents killed 41 citizens extra-judicially every year, on average. This figure spiked tremendously in their second tenure, to 143 per year. In stark contrast, during the AL years of 1996-2001, extrajudicial killings amounted to 19 per year on average. The divergent record in human rights between BNP and AL corresponded, in turn, to differences in their respect for democratic institutions. We know that elections were generally free, so the question to ask is: once elected, did the party value the role of public representatives?

Research by Nizam U. Ahmed of Chittagong University shows that between 1991 and 1996, BNP enacted more than one-third of the bills through executive ordinance, rather than through the parliament. This level of reliance on the executive exposes an underlying temptation to sideline public representatives, especially when compared to the AL tenure, when 97 percent of all laws were passed through the parliament. During

BNP's first tenure, despite opposition demands, bills were not submitted to parliamentary committees; in fact, only 7 out of 173 bills passed during this time were scrutinized by committees. AL, to its credit, submitted every parliamentary bill for scrutiny by relevant committees during its 1996-2001 administration.

Data for 2001-2006 on these measurements are not fully available yet. But based on anecdotal evidence, like Kansat, bombings on the opposition, the rise of Hawa Bhaban, election engineering, and the appalling record of human rights, it's probably a safe bet to say that democratic performance deteriorated drastically during BNP's most recent tenure. This period, after all, culminated in the 1/11 takeover, amid "thunderous applause."

With overwhelming public support for the takeover, there was no need to start distorting facts and denigrate all political parties as the same. But, in the name of "balance," the new government chose to vilify both BNP and AL in

the same fashion-revisionist history.

There were marked differences in political performance as well as governing culture between the two parties. They were also in different leagues with regard to corruption. To point this out is not a matter of prejudice or imbalance, as some might readily conclude, but a matter of fact and evidence. But the "all-politicians-are-equally-bad" discourse is successfully underplayed, and people are happily drugged with that "hujug."

So there is some truth to stereotypes like "hujuge Bangali." But there is no truth in typecasting all parties and all politicians as rogues. The sad result of that is, those who performed far better with regard to human rights and democracy are now being made to pay the same price as those who performed much worse.

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