

## ROUNDTABLE

# Address rural problems first to save Dhaka, say speakers

CITY CORRESPONDENT

"Prevent Dhaka from becoming a mega city before we are prepared," said MM Akash, professor, Department of Economics, while discussing the conditions of Dhaka as a mega city.

He was discussing at a roundtable conference 'Mega City Dhaka: Are the conditions fulfilled?' organised by Department of Population Sciences of Dhaka University (DU) in cooperation with UNFPA.

Prof Akash said that national effort should be redirected to reduce rural-urban disparity in distribution of wealth and therefore help curb rural migration.

Development of suburbs and planned relocation of important centres are needed. Instead of including suburbs into Dhaka autonomy can be offered to towns like Narayanganj with good transport, he said.

"The rich should change their attitude towards the working class because it is the working class that provides drivers, peons, maids, laundries and garment workers among others. The affluent section of the society should ensure their social security," he said.

The slum dwellers are paying more than the rich and middleclass people for water and electricity through middlemen. Rehabilitation of slum dwellers by the government is needed, he said. Force cannot be used to solve the problem of hawkers. A harmonious coexistence among pedestrians, motorists and hawkers is required because hawkers are sending money to keep their villages running, he said

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The pressure of population, waterlogging, water crisis, importance of decentralisation, slum dwellers condition and traffic congestion problem of the city were the most discussed topic among the discussants.

Prof KM Maniruzzaman, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Buet, said that public transport should be developed to solve the traffic congestion problem.

"Our transport plan is car-centric. We always think how smoothly I can drive my car to the destination," he said.

In Bogota, capital of Colombia, there is a rule through public voting that cars will not move on the street in peak hours. They have sepa-

rate lanes and platform for buses. We can follow this kind of rules," he added.

Prof AQM Mahbub, Department of Geography, DU, said that the climate of Dhaka city is very favourable but we could not reap its benefit.

"We have ruined the rivers surrounding the city and now we cannot use surface water. This has given rise to a serious water crisis," he said.

"Waterlogging is a manmade problem. Previously the rivers and canals drained water but now the canals are turned into box culverts, which do not have enough capacity to drain water," he added.

He termed the decision to convert canals into box culverts as 'suicidal'.

Prof Roxana Hafiz, head, Urban and Regional Planning, Buet, said that all plans must take into account every individual in the city.

"We shelved the first DAP

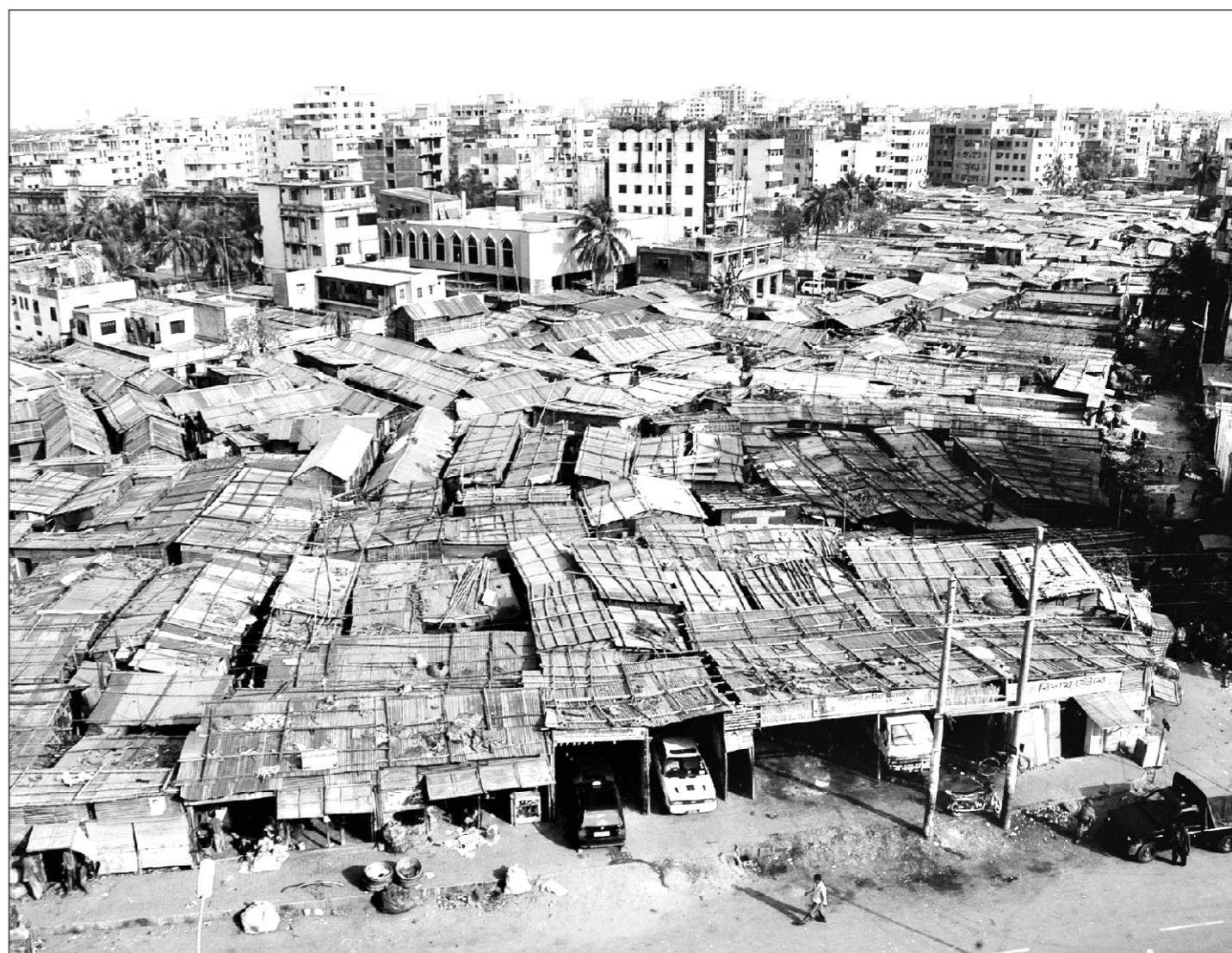
[detailed area plan] of the city and the second one is limping. We take so much time in implementing DAP that its deadline expires. DAP becomes outdated before it is implemented," she said.

The existing facilities in the city for disabled and elderly people were not enough, she said.

"We will have to think about disabled and old people who are absent in our planning. We seldom see a disabled and older person on the street. That does not mean that they do not exist. The reason is the city's planning is not fit for a disabled person to go out," she said.

"Why do we want to remove rickshaw which is the favourite transport of most of the city dwellers?" she said.

Other discussants dwelled on unplanned urbanisation, housing, education, waste



STAR PHOTO

Urban migration into the city gives birth to numerous slums devoid of civic amenities.

management, environment, crime, lack of open space and recreation.

The keynote paper was presented by Prof Mesbah-us-Saleheen, Department of

Geography and Environment, Jahangirnagar University.

Dr SMA Faiz, vice chancellor, DU, was the chief guest; Dr Harun-or-Rashid, dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, DU

and Nurul Ameen, assistant representative, UNFPA Bangladesh were special guests.

The roundtable was moderated by Dr AKM Nurun Nabi,

project director, Department of Population Sciences and chaired by Tehmina Gafur, chairperson of the same department.

## Too little to raise hope

## FROM PAGE 21

No official statistics is available about the number of children receiving assistance from the NGOs. According to Shishu Odhikar Forum and a few other NGOs, around 10 percent of the street children receive NGO assistance.

According to U M Habibun Nesa, head of the child protection programme of Save the Children UK, the underprivileged vagrant children are 'socially disabled' and they could otherwise be assets of the society.

"While growing up, these children usually experience severe malnutrition, social repugnance and considerable vulnerability. As a result,

they often grow hostility, hatred and distrust towards the society. This hatred and distrust draw these naïve children toward criminal activities -- tainting the society in the process," said Habibun Nesa.

"With rapid increase in the number of vagrant population and if the present situation continues, it will be a social disaster in the near future," she added.

Habibun Nesa emphasised on community-based vocational schooling programmes and arrangements to help that the children make use of their skills in an effective way.

"It is ironic that the NGOs

are [mainly] providing support to these underprivileged children. Whereas, the government should bear the main responsibility and step in [to address the issue]," she suggested.

According to Amin Islam, a coordinator at Aparajeyo Bangladesh, rehabilitating these underprivileged children with sustainable and effective life skills requires organised assistance programmes.

"The number of NGOs dedicated to this cause is too small to cope with the such a overwhelming number of children. Most of them lack proper psycho-social counsellors and capacity to pro-

vide life skill training as well," said Islam.

"The eight or nine shelter homes run by NGOs in the city are overcrowded while the government infrastructure is conventional and inadequate for the cause. Lack of efficient social worker only makes the situation worse," he added.

In the recently proposed national budget for the next fiscal year, the present interim government has allotted Tk 13 crore for the development of children shelter homes.

According to Hafizul Islam Mia, director general of department of social welfare, the interim government has

adopted a development programme titled 'Extension and Development of Existing 6 Vagrant Homes (second phase)' to ease the overall situation.

Hafiz however expressed his doubts about the future of vagrant population, especially the children, as the skills they learn at the homes are not helpful enough to make a living in the real world. "I have seen residents of different shelter homes make beautiful handicrafts, but all these skills are of little use in the real world if they cannot market their products."

## Surviving only on water

## FROM PAGE 21

Eleven-year-old Shahin works for Rupban mahajan. "My employer gives me Tk 1 for each bottle I sell," Shahin said.

Shahin said besides buying bottles from Nimgoli, they often collect the empty bottles they had just sold. "Often some travellers finish their water before the launch sets off and we sometimes collect the bottles or buy the bottles back from the passengers for Tk 1 or 2. We then refill and sell those," he said.

Shahin said that they are not usually authorised to enter the jetty area, but 'arrangement' made with Sadarghat police box personnel makes the job easier.

The only water vendor doing business comfortably on the jetty is Firoza. Looking for a better future, she arrived in

Dhaka with her husband when she was a newlywed. "It was okay for a few years," said Firoza, adding, "My life was rearranged after three children were born. My husband died after being paralysed for a few years."

After her husband's death, Firoza became a water trader. Back then she used to sell water out of pitchers in the jetty for Tk 1 per glass.

Firoza now lives in a boat near jetty two. She sells about 100 bottles every day and with the earnings, she sends her children to school.

"I fetch the water from nearby WASA pump. I have an arrangement there for an hour everyday. They set the meter when I start and pay on a monthly basis, costing me about Tk 600,"

Firoza claimed adding that her deal with the WASA is legal. She also claimed that the water she and other vendors sell is hygienic as all of them purify the water with 'chemicals'.

When most inter-district bus services have started to provide bottled water to their passengers, the authorities of passenger launches seem to care less about adopting similar measures to ease passenger sufferings.

According to Inland Waterways Passenger Carrier Association, around 3000 passenger launches, of which only around 1000 are registered, ply the rivers all around the country. Passengers of these vessels have no way but to rely on the water sold in discarded bottles.

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