

## Rehabilitating slum-dwellers

Make it part of overall vision for urban development

**T**HE government's plan to rehabilitate at least 7,000-8,000 evicted slum-dwellers through constructing buildings on two plots of the works ministry land in Mohakhali and Mirpur areas in the city is a welcome step, if only because it is for the first time that an initiative on such scale has been taken towards providing concrete roofs for the homeless to live under. Whilst the move is reflective of the decision makers' concern for an essentially humanitarian issue, we have a long way to go in alleviating the housing problems of the numerous people who turn to the capital for making a livelihood.

We believe the government needs to take a serious look at the urban slum issue and deal with the matter on a long-term basis. First of all, there should be growth centres developed in the outlying areas to hold the people to their rural habitats. Secondly, what do we do with the existing slum-dwellers or the 40,000 evictees who are not covered by the first phase of the housing programme? The problem with slum-dwellers in our context is that they have always been looked upon negatively. However, quite a few examples can be cited to prove that these people are providing both skilled and non-skilled labour in many sectors and making significant contributions to the service sector and the economy as a whole. One can hardly overlook the garment workers in this respect.

There are good examples of how developing countries have provided low-cost housing for the urban poor initiated on the basis of pragmatic plans under public-private sector collaboration which attached due importance to the slum-dwellers' role in an urban setting.

Shanty owners and middlemen exploit the urban poor and finally they are evicted from their homes when the land under their occupation is earmarked for real estate development. So, the latest government move has to take into account the vulnerability of the poor and leave no loopholes in the plan to transfer the buildings to the homeless at a nominal cost payable at easy installments.

Obviously, piecemeal efforts will not bring about the desired change in the lot of the urban poor. The plan of creating housing facilities for the slum-dwellers, evicted or otherwise, has to be included in the overall urban development scheme of the government.

## Date-expired food handout

### Contemptible lack of sensitivity

**A** leading Bangla daily has carried an investigative report revealing detection of a consignment of seven and a half thousand metric tonnes of substandard rice, with the year of production shown as 2002, arriving at Chittagong port.

Going by international norms, rice produced more than three years ago would be considered as fodder, not fit for human consumption, and therefore neither tradable nor distributable. The stuff procured from China and Australia under a Japanese food grant as part of the World Food Programme (WFP) commitment was received at Chittagong port at the end of last year. Clearly, five years have passed since the rice was produced.

Moreover, the moisture content of the rice procured from China was more than 14.5 percent which is clearly above the stipulated maximum.

Even so, this rice, now stacked up in silos in Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Khagrachari and Bandarban seems set to be distributed to the rural destitute under vulnerable group development programme (VGD), going by the food directorate's instructions.

There is a plethora of questions begging answer here. How did it come to happen, and who is to be held accountable for this raw deal to a helpless segment of humanity? Does it not constitute an act of dumping?

The BSTI representative at Chittagong was quoted as saying, "Our basic job is to test the edibility of a food grain and if it is found wrong, to proceed legally against it." He has not obviously done his job nor have the food department officials who reportedly shied away from bringing it up lest it offends the WFP. But in any case, more than one internal report of the food directorate have highlighted the poor quality of the stuff, especially against the backdrop of a five-month long shut down of the VGD programme due to political circumstances.

Taking all these into account, we urge the caretaker government to stop distribution of the substandard rice and probe the matter thoroughly with actions taken where necessary so that we are spared this predicament in future.

## Baffling utterances



Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Neither do people want to go back to the situation of the pre 1/11 period, nor is it their wish to see the current arrangement perpetuated. An unelected government, such as we have now, can be effective only for so long, and in spite of the many faults of democracy it can never be supplanted by any other form of government. It is, therefore, for all to take note that the situation does not come to such a pass that self-perpetuation of the current system becomes a fait accompli.

**W**e have again been confronted with some baffling utterances. And this time confusion is being created by remarks from all quarters -- the political parties, the government and the election commissioners. My discomfiture is because of the wrong signals that these have carried to the public.

With so many reform-masters from the Big Two appearing everyday with their own plans, some of the utterances, by way of suggestions about party reforms and politics and, indeed, about democracy and the next election, have managed to overstretch the capacity of ones cerebellum.

The BNP is now clearly split on the issue, if not down the center, at least there are two shades of opinions on the matter. While one group -- the "reformists without the current chairperson" (we have also the "reformists with the chairperson." She has thought it wise to display more discretion than valour on the issue, and, reportedly, has her own set of recommendations up her sleeves) has

decided to get its reform agenda through at any cost, albeit under the provisions of the party constitution, the latter have chosen to leave their lot in the hands of the councilors. This is good news indeed for the councilors who, for the last fourteen years, had remained a forgotten and uncared for quantity. Those who have so long criticized the BNP for having made it a one-person show should note -- there will, after all, be a council meeting, at long last after fourteen long years. And it will be the councilors who will decide on the manner and the means of reform. Better a council meeting after fourteen years than never at all!

However, the AL's position on the issue is perhaps more confusing, if somewhat amusing, at least from what has so far been conveyed through the remarks made on the issue of intra-party reform by one of its senior leaders. The AL is also beset with the same problem -- "to have or not to have" the party chairperson onboard the reform bus. And some have turned out to be more "catholic than the pope" in suggesting their own reform

measures. But what is most startling is the remark made by one of the very senior members of the party regarding democracy and the run of future politics in Bangladesh.

A democrat from head to toe, at least that was what we had known him to be, an uncompromising champion of a pluralistic political culture and people's rights, always at the forefront of movements against autocrats, both before and after 1971, it was disquieting to hear Tofael Ahmed suggest that there was little need to revert to democracy and elections for the time being, and that the present system should continue for the next three years. This after he had unhesitatingly admitted that behind all the woes that the nation is suffering are the politicians' follies, both as individuals and collectively as political entities. He would rather have the next three years used to cleanse the system of all the bad cholesterol, so that the choked polity could be reinvigorated with fresh blood.

While very few would find it hard not to agree with his second proposition, it is very difficult to see many takers of the first. He appears to be quite like an erstwhile Soviet communist, who found to his rather joyful surprise after the collapse of Soviet Union that communism was the shortest route to capitalism. One wonders what chemistry could have worked on an inveterate democrat to compel him to suggest the continuation of an unelected government.

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Neither do people want to go back to the situation of the pre 1/11 period, nor is it their wish to see the current arrangement perpetuated. An unelected government, such as we have now, can be effective only for so long, and in spite of the many faults of democracy it can never be supplanted by any other form of government. It is, therefore, for all to take note that the situation does not come to such a pass that self-perpetuation of the current system becomes a fait accompli.

In this regard, one is also getting to hear all sorts of views on party leadership. It is rather puzzling to hear people talk about joint leadership in the party, when what they perhaps are suggesting is having a mechanism in place where the decisions would not be a one-person, or a coterie, show, but

really be informed by the collective wisdom of the party members down to the lowest level. A situation of duality of command can be a cause of systemic dysfunction, more so in a political party. The reformists must, therefore, not go overboard when talking about reforming the mechanism of running the party. While you need a group of rowers to propel the boat there can be only one oarsman to guide it. And that is why having an intelligent and good oars-

man is so very important.

To add to the bafflement are comments that we hear from the high-ups in the establishment. The one on the NSC we will deal with separately. But another comment, that of Commissioner Sahul Hossain, of making implementation of intra-party reforms conditional for any talks with the political parties on electoral issues, causes concern. It is, therefore, not surprising that some of the parties have taken umbrage at Sahul Hossain's remarks, and if some have found a similarity in the tenor of his remarks with those that were made by his immediate predecessors, they can hardly be faulted.

One wonders whether it is for the EC to lay down such conditions, or to even worry about who is in charge of the parties. It is not individuals, but the appointment holders, that it will invite for talks, and it is for the respective parties to decide who should represent them. Any party that meets the criteria set down by the EC merits invitation for discussion with the EC. Nothing that may create hurdles in the process of holding election should be done or uttered. Even more important is that nothing should be done that may convey a negative impression about the EC's intention of holding election as early as possible, but not later than end of 2008.

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## The rickshaw conundrum

When a road is rickshaw-free, is it fully immune to traffic jams? No. Look at Sonargaon crossing. What does it say? It does not remain jam free for two minutes at a time. The clean road in front of the chief advisor's secretariat always has traffic jam. On the other hand, Dhaka Cantonment roads have rickshaws, but in different lanes and following certain regulations.

Md. MASUM BILLAH

**T**HE passage for plying rickshaw in the city streets is getting narrower day by day. Does it mean that we are heading towards development? Or does it show real improvement of our traffic system? The answers will not be straightforward and direct. The presence of rickshaws in our cities and towns is a reality. It was necessary to flood our cities and towns with rickshaws, and a time may come when they will disappear.

Now, the question is whether we have reached the time to send the rickshaws to the museum, or are we forcibly trying to bring about that situation at the cost of the livelihood of millions? This grim reality cannot be denied by enforcing laws and threatening the rick-

shaw pullers. When the traffic system develops further, and people have enough vehicles to reach their destinations, the slow moving vehicles like rickshaws will say "good-bye" to the cities; but it seems that rickshaws are being made to say "good-bye" to the cities by force.

If one observes the office going hour and office closing hour in the city, one cannot but say that the presence of rickshaws in many parts of the city is a must. The number of people competing with each other to get on board the public vehicles shows that the number of vehicles is much less than is needed. This is about a long distance journey from one part of the city to another. Public transports usually don't take passengers for shorter dis-

tances, and the passengers cannot find even a little room for getting on board the vehicles. Then they remember the necessity of the slow moving but environment friendly vehicle.

When no CNG agrees to take you to your desired destination, even after you have been standing and waiting for hours together, it reminds you how useful the rickshaws are! You have decided to go to somewhere with your wife and children, but you cannot make suitable room, or passage, in the bus to have seats close to each other. You cannot afford to hire a CNG, and CNGs have become scarce. In this situation, a rickshaw is the only alternative.

Some luxurious buses have been introduced to ease the burden of passengers on some routes, but it is not the same on all the routes. So, suddenly banning rickshaws in these areas is not a good idea. The streets of Chennai have a considerable number of CNGs, and the fares are also close to rickshaw fares. This city has removed rickshaws as the CNGs have taken their place. Without making ample arrangements for easy movement, we cannot, and should not, remove rickshaws suddenly and emotionally.

When a road is rickshaw-free, is it fully immune to traffic jams? No. Look at Sonargaon crossing. What does it say? It does not remain jam free for two minutes at a time. The clean road in front of the chief advisor's secretariat always has traffic jam. On the other hand, Dhaka Cantonment roads have rickshaws, but in different lanes and following certain regulations. So, removing rickshaws from the roads for removing traffic jam does not always prove successful. Beijing, one of the busiest cities in the world, has bi-cycles on its roads, not

one or two but hundreds and thousands. These bi-cycles ply side by side with mechanized vehicles, showing a harmonious relation. The paths for bi-cycles have been marked by road dividers. We can also follow this example until we establish a modern and sophisticated traffic system.

In social science it is said that the growing slums are responsible for social crimes, and for making the city dirty. And the slums are home to the rickshaw pullers. When village people find easy access to these slums, a stream of poor people will migrate to cities. All these are the reality, and no reality can be buried by unreal and unreasonable step. When there will be scope for money making in rural areas, the rural poor will stop migrating to cities.

To cope with the fast growing population of Dhaka and other cities we need to establish over-bridges and underpasses, as the existing roads cannot be broadened further. Money for this purpose can be collected in two ways. The first way is to use

the money of the national plunderers, and the second one is through tolls from the vehicles. More buses and small vehicles should be introduced, both in the private and the government sectors. CNGs and taxies must be made available everywhere, and in ample numbers. There must be a condition for getting the license, that they should be ready to go anywhere.

The easy availability of CNGs and similar vehicles, and reasonable fares, will automatically discourage rickshaw plying in the streets. As long as we cannot ensure all this, we have to ask ourselves whether we have the right to ban rickshaw pulling. Instead, rickshaw plying should be made systematic, without completely preventing them from plying. It's a matter of human rights.

When we cannot ensure human right, can we afford to break it?

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## We need to come to terms with HIV

There is a great risk of HIV flaring up at any time in Bangladesh. In a country where poverty, illiteracy and poor health are rife, the threat of spread of HIV presents a daunting challenge. It is not only a public health issue, but also one which will affect the economic and developmental pace of the society. It will wipe out the adult population of a country, who are the driving economic force, besides orphaning scores of families. It will also break down the notion of progress and growth of our country.

ZULFIQUER AHMED AMIN

**S**INCE time immemorial, human kind has been ravaged by waves of pandemic diseases at frequent intervals: with most mysterious, unknowable and uncontrolled tragedies, the thin veneer of human rationality was peeled back to expose a dark surface capable of incomprehensible horrors and unimaginable evil.

Evidence of smallpox was found in Egyptian mummies dating back to 1570 B.C. It was discovered in the New World in the 16th century, and continued as a killer till the 17th century in England. A plague pandemic occurred in 540 A.D. at Pelusium, Egypt (Plague of Justinian), and swept across Europe, Constantinople, Alexandria and Asia, killing 13 million people before it ended in 1345 (Black Death) and

develops, and this is what kills.

Till the end of 2006, 39.5 million people were living with HIV/Aids, 2.9 million died in 2006, 4.3 million got newly infected, and 25 million died since 1981. Around 63% of the people living with HIV are in sub-Saharan Africa (24.7 million cases). Approximately 33 million people in Africa are living with HIV/Aids, and 7.1 million in Asia. A study in South Africa has indicated that by the year 2020, the level of GDP could be lowered by 17 percent due to HIV/Aids, while the level of per capita GDP could be lower by 7 percent.

The first case of HIV in Bangladesh was detected in 1989. Official sources show that 874 HIV cases were detected from 1989 to 2006. There were 240 Aids cases, of which 109 died. But the World Fact Book shows that 13,000 people in Bangladesh are living

with HIV/Aids, with 650 deaths, because there is significant under-reporting of the cases due to the limited voluntary testing and counseling capacity.

UNAids shows that an estimated number of 11,000 HIV cases are adult male (15-49 years), 1400 are adult female, and 481 (3.7%) are infants & children. Its prevalence rate is below 1%, which is far below the 5% rate to turn into epidemic proportions. At the present level of prevalence it may not look like a major threat, but, in a population of more than 14 million, a mere rise of 1% would mean an addition of more than a million to the numbers.

Commercial sex workers (CSW), male gays having sex with multiple partners, intravenous drug users, and professional blood donors, are the main sources of HIV/Aids in Bangladesh. The situation is augmented by certain social factors like poverty, gender discrimination, denial, low prevalence of health facilities, lack of reproductive knowledge, illiteracy, high risk behaviour, high prevalence of other sexually transmitted diseases, multi-partner sexual activities,

partners. Truck drivers and commercial sex workers are the main transmitters of HIV/Aids, and become a pool in their local community. CSWs transmit the disease to the high-risk group, and the high-risk group spreads it in its own community, and the vicious cycle continues.

Sharing of needles among intravenous drug users (IDU) is another most important mode of transmission of HIV in Bangladesh. A national survey data indicates that HIV incidence among IDUs jumped from 1.8% in 2001 to more than 4% in 2004. In one Dhaka "hotspot" the prevalence has jumped to 9%. A survey in central Bangladesh revealed that more than 70% IDUs routinely share needles. This is comparable to levels in countries that are experiencing a concentrated and growing HIV epidemic.

A large section of IDUs have aberrant sex behaviour, and among them only one in ten used a condom during commercial sex (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2004). The fourth round of national HIV and behavioural survey reports that HIV infection rate among the IDUs is now 4%, up from 2.5% previously, and is just short of the 5% mark of a concentrated epidemic. UNDP has estimated that between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people in Bangladesh are addicted to drugs.

In Bangladesh, the culture of donating blood is not yet fully developed, thus, professional blood donors remain the main source of blood in an emergency. A study found that among the professional blood donors almost 48.7% are IDUs, and 37.9% visit the brothels or have sex with street sex workers. These donors remain a potential source of HIV.

Bangladesh has another geographical disadvantage with regard to HIV/Aids, as India and Myanmar are our neighbouring countries. It is estimated that in India 5.7 million people are infected with HIV, with an estimated 270,000-680,000 deaths due to AIDS in 2005. As of August 2006, most of all nationally reported AIDS cases have been found in 10 out of 38 states. The greatest numbers were in Maharashtra and Gujarat in the west; Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in the south; and Manipur and West

Bengal in the north-east. There is frequent mobility of Bangladeshis across the border to all these states, and any contact with the CSWs there is likely to infect that individual, and he will come back with the disease to infect many more within the country. Myanmar, with 1,30,000 people living with HIV/Aids, has an estimated adult prevalence rate of 1.6%. So trans-border movements have made Bangladesh more vulnerable to HIV.

There is a great risk of HIV flaring up at any time in Bangladesh. In a country where poverty, illiteracy and poor health are rife, the threat of spread of HIV presents a daunting challenge. It is not only a public health issue, but also one which will affect the economic and developmental pace of the society. It will wipe out the adult population of a country, who are the driving economic force, besides orphaning scores of families. It will also break down the notion