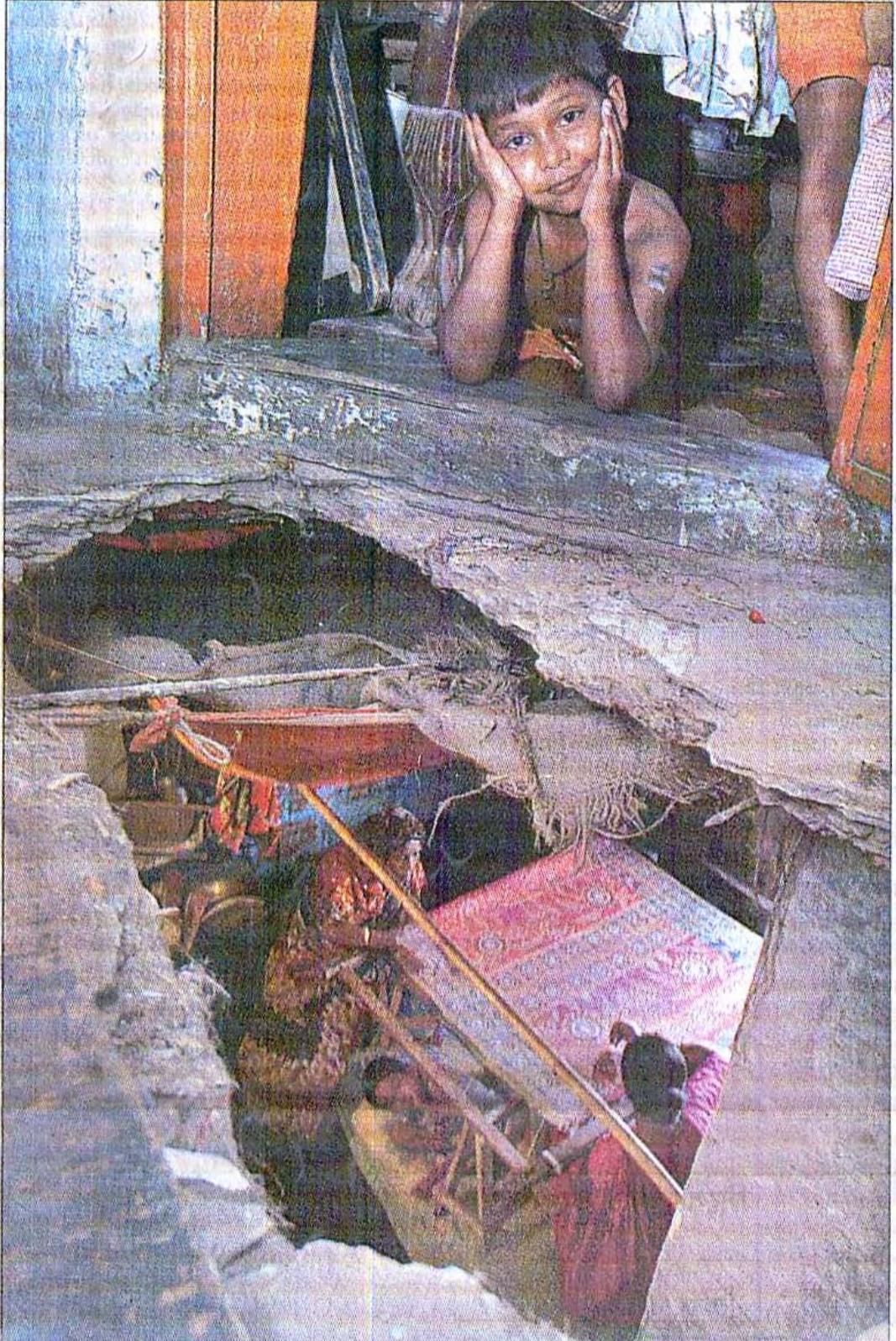


Living with looming disaster

Tale of 500 Biharies and a worn-out building in Mirpur


 A little boy poses for photograph while residents in the ground floor work at a handloom, seemingly oblivious to the looming disaster at the worn-out Wapda building in Mirpur 11. STAR PHOTO: MUSIR RAHMAN

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Every night before going to sleep Noorjahan wonders if she would be alive the next morning. "I pray every night, thinking whether it will happen in the dark of the night while we are all asleep. In the next morning I pray again to the Almighty because the building did not cave in and thank him for keeping us alive to see another day."

Sixty-year-old Noorjahan lives on the ground floor of Wapda building no 4 in Mirpur Bihari camp area along with 11 members of her family. Like Noorjahan, all the other inhabitants of the ramshackle building, who moved in right after independence, pass their day with similar fear of a disaster looming over their fate.

The exterior of the building says it all. It is a four-storey building with a long veranda in the front without any railings. Eroded walls, exposed bricks and the iron bars in some places show the appalling condition.

While Noorjahan awaits her doom, Nusrat and her family members survived a disaster recently. On the night of October 5, the roof of her ground floor room collapsed, injuring several members of her family.

"It was around 11 at night. We were standing on the adjacent

street because of a load-shedding," she said. "It happened all of a sudden. My son-in-law saw death from a close range as the roof along with the furnitures of the upper floor came down on him."

"We are thankful to see the power outage, otherwise we were inside home and we would have been crushed while asleep," she said.

In another incident the veranda of the top floor cracked and collapsed in January this year, confining the residents in their rooms for hours. Later, the fire brigade crew saved them with ladders.

SM Akhtar, one of the very first residents of the building, said that it was an under construction building in 1971 intended for the then Water and Power Development Authority (Wapda) employees.

"When the war in 1971 ended, the building was used by the International Committee for Red Cross as a shelter home for the Biharis," he said.

Noorjahan came to live in the building in December 1971. Her family used to live in Gabtoli area before independence. Nusrat was born in the building right after independence. The building became their permanent address as the issues of stranded

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STAR PHOTO: MUSIR RAHMAN

Senseless contests by reckless buses put passengers' lives at risk

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Road safety is a concept that seems to be of little value to the city bus drivers as it appears that their main concern is to get ahead of other buses by any means.

Caught in the middle of this senseless competition are the commuters and pedestrians, who often fall victim to the reckless driving of the bus drivers.

Most of these accidents -- minor or major -- go unnoticed and unreported every day as the city lacks a reliable, efficient and hassle-free mechanism that would encourage all to report such accidents and at the same time the authorities would ensure prosecution of the drivers involved.

It was a sunny Wednesday morning when Abdul Wahab -- one of the many commuters who regularly rely on local bus service to get to Karwan Bazar from Kakoli of Banani -- saw a double-decker approaching. Wahab heaved a sigh of relief as it was the only alternative to the dinky little mini buses.

He wrestled his way to the rear door of the bus where a handful of people were already standing. No sooner had he barely managed to put a leg on the foot of the steps with only a wobbly grip on the door handle, the driver hastily hit the accelerator and Wahab found himself landed on the street.

He could wind up being dead the very next moment unless another speeding bus screeched to a halt -- only a few inches away from him.

A few good Samaritans later

came to Wahab's help and hired him a CNG auto rickshaw.

"They [bus drivers] are maniacs who have no regards whatsoever for their passengers or anyone else," said a visibly shaken up Abdul Wahab.

Shah Alamgir Hossain, a student of Dhaka University, was waiting for his bus at Farmgate bus stop. Having seen the bus approaching in the

distance, Hossain got off the sidewalk and started striding towards the bus. Just then, a mini bus with its horn blaring, flew by him. The bus missed his face only by a few inches.

Before he could recover from the spine-tingling experience, another mini bus zoomed past behind Alamgir, leaving him dumbfounded between the two vehicles.

"I almost had a heart attack ... Then suddenly the other bus came out of nowhere and I felt like I was going to be smashed between the two buses," said Alamgir.

"They [bus drivers] are 'terrorists' who terrorise the lives of commuters and other drivers on the road these days tends to be more concerned about reaching his or her own destination than the safety of a fellow commuter, Alamgir said.

ing them to their senses," he added.

Incidents of this sort are on the rise and these mostly go unnoticed in the hustle and bustle of the city. Everyone on the road these days tends to be more concerned about reaching his or her own destination than the safety of a fellow commuter, Alamgir said.

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The government-promoted training programme on effluent treatment plant (ETP) received poor response from owners of dyeing and textile mills.

Department of Environment (DoE), the organiser of the training, received only 30 applications for the programme scheduled on October 31 to November 1, said DoE officials.

"We expected hundreds of applications from the owners. But they seem to be unwilling and they intend to delay the process," said Mohammad Reazuddin, director (technical) of DoE.

"The factory owners have been playing ignorance since the initiative was taken up to set up ETPs [at the factories]. They claimed that the whole concept of ETP was new to them and they lacked the necessary know-how," he added.

As pollution in water bodies -- mostly caused by waste water discharged from dyeing and textile plants -- reached a dangerous level, the Ministry of Environment in March this year issued an ultimatum to the owners of the plants to install indoor ETPs by October 31 in order to check the pollution.

"The goal [of the training workshop] is to introduce the owners with ETP, explain why it is important and provide them necessary preliminary technical assistance so that they become willing and are able to run and maintain the ETP plants with ease in the future," Reazuddin said.

The training workshop is a follow-up programme of the ETP Fair held in September. Foreign experts and environmentalists will conduct the two-day training workshop.

Since the highest number of factories in and around Dhaka city is of textile category and these types of factories play a major role in polluting the nature, DoE's main focus is on the textile mills and industries related to textile.

Experts also said that these factories are mainly responsible for the severe pollution of rivers and water bodies in and around Dhaka.

"If we could control the untreated liquid waste discharged from at least one thousand factories, the situation could improve significantly. Then the pollution level would be neutralised to a tolerable level," added Reazuddin.

Total number of dyeing and textile units in the country is around 4000. Among them, only 700 have ETPs.

There are around 2,000 facto-

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ries including textiles, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and tanneries in and around the city that need to carry out wet-processing during production.

Of them, 900 to 1,000 are textile mills or textiles related industries. Another 100 factories manufacture terry towels and rely on the wet-processing system. All of these factories severely pollute rivers and water bodies by releasing toxic liquid wastes in the nature.

After the formation of an enforcement team, DoE during the last one year has visited 466 factories that produce harmful liquid wastes. Only 108 of them were found to have installed ETPs. However, only 56 ETPs were found to be in use by the owners.

The rest of the ETPs were either turned off deliberately to save operating cost or were out of order. The factories that lacked the necessary know-how continued to discharge toxic wastes in the open environment.

According to Environment Conservation Act 1997, every industrial unit should have an in-house ETP. In default, the factories would not get environmental clearance from the DoE. The environmental clearance is

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mandatory for an industry to obtain electricity and gas connections to their premises.

Millions of gallons of hazardous untreated wastes from these industries are polluting all four rivers, canals and low-lying areas around Dhaka, posing major environmental and health hazards.

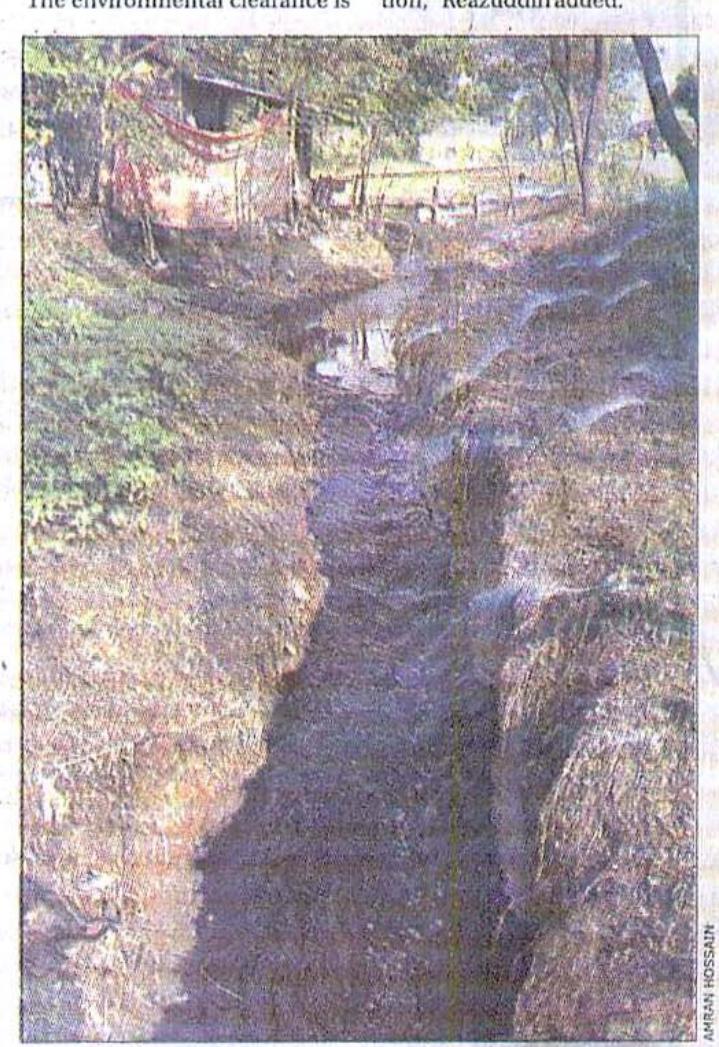
According to a study, 67.7 million litres of untreated liquid industrial wastes are dumped into the nature every day.

The polluting industries are mainly situated at Tejgaon, Shyampur, Kadamtoli, Postogola, Jurain, Fatulla, Tongi, Konabari in Gazipur, Ashulia, Rupganj, and on the riverbanks of the Sitalakhy, Bongsi, Balu and Turag.

Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) has reached very high level in these rivers, especially the condition of the river Balu and Turag has deteriorated to a dangerous level, said DoE officials.

The government so far has been firm on its decision to shut down all polluting industries if they fail to comply with the requirement of installing ETPs.

"Owners are only delaying what is inevitable. The government is unwavering in its position," Reazuddin added.



STAR PHOTO: AMRAN HOSAIN