

# Save Buriganga, save Dhaka

If the Buriganga is Dhaka's lifeline, then other water bodies in and around it are its arteries, some of which have already been destroyed. But the existing ones must be saved and restored to shape and size to save Dhaka. This is a gigantic task, as the already undertaken Begunbari-Hatirjheel project shows. But celebrating the capital city's 400th anniversary will carry little meaning without restoring its lifeline and arteries.

MADAN SHAHU

**I**N the name of development we have done so many things over so many years, or call it decades, but without caring for many other things. We cared more for name or fame and of course money than the sustainability of facilities. The trend continued unabated and preference to immediate personal gain over future or community interest became a norm.

And we indiscriminately filled and encroached upon water bodies, felled trees and cleared forests, and even cut hills. All this, entailing change to topography without leaving any option of recourse to nature, has by now caused much harm and damage to the base of our existence. We didn't know or didn't want to know that. Now perhaps we have to pay for all this (crime) through the nose.

In the exhilarated grab-and-gain extravaganza we have not even spared the Buriganga, considered the lifeline of capital Dhaka. We never thought what would happen to the city if its lifeline is squeezed to death! Could this 400-year old capital remain liveable? During monsoon, continuous water-logging for months together will only breed disease, choke movement and also service lines, and the citizenry will be haunted by a sense of non-existence despite having built multi-storied mansions to live in.

And perhaps the process of paying through the nose has begun. The authorities have undertaken a difficult project of restoring Begunbari-Hatirjheel canal to at least partially ease Dhaka's water-logging, entailing demolition of scores of structures. By now it is too late for reversing the undoing, of course. However, it is better late than

never. But why did they illegally allow those structures to come up in the canal jurisdiction in the first place? How can city authorities be so oblivious of immediate future, not to speak of the expected long-term vision, especially in case of a growing metropolis?

A broadly constituted civil society body, National Citizens Forum, is celebrating 400 years of capital Dhaka. Their various events are supposed to spread over two years with the launching -- carnival and grand rally -- on July 25. Hopefully these would help the Dhakaites to be motivated to act according to their theme: "The Buriganga is Dhaka's life line, we must save it."

But, unfortunately, our experience is that motivation seldom works. We are more habituated to act under compulsion. So, to save and restore the Buriganga to its original bliss, there would be required a master plan of actions.

The actions against the accumulated odds may have to be rude, but then that would be for the sake of the liveability of the city, for its 15 million citizens.

There might have been small encroachments on the river also earlier than 1972 before Dhaka assumed its present status of capital of sovereign Bangladesh. But that is just not noticeable in the glare of the scale the practice has assumed after 1972. Nowhere in the world perhaps people have been so indifferent to their past and so oblivious of their future in pursuit of their present. What a "present" -- devoid of the past glory and future sustainability! So what, has been our attitude. We didn't admit or didn't want to know that what we had been doing was crime. And crime does not pay.

Now we have to pay, in cases even heavily, if we want to stay put. And this mode of payment is of course through actions, irrespective of who gets hurt or how much it hurts. It's a massive and hard task. But if the authorities concerned are sincerely in the mission, it's not so difficult. Illegal occupiers on both sides of the river should be evicted for good, the recovered and filled areas dug or dredged up and integrated in the river channel.

All this should be done successively, even simultaneously where necessary, to avoid any let up in the process of restoring full life and shape to the river.

After restoring free flow, no structure of any kind other than terminal points for boats and launches should be allowed on either side of the river all along the stretch of the city and beyond. Both the banks should be secured and beautified with a tree-lined moderately wide road all along, if necessary further removing some structures falling in its path. In many cities around the world people crave for waterfront where they don't find one, and adorn it with all efforts where they have it. We need not go too far to seek examples. In neighbouring Kolkata they seldom encroached upon the Bhagirathi (Ganga), its waterfront.

Now, shouldn't the authorities concerned take a solemn resolve to save the lifeline of Dhaka to save the city itself? And develop a nice riverfront all along? Often it is heard, they want to beautify Dhaka, and they have also done a good job all along the Airport Road, but without developing a waterfront, for which the scope exists, can the task be fulfilled?

If the Buriganga is Dhaka's



Choke Buriganga, choke Dhaka.

lifeline, then other water bodies in and around it are its arteries, some of which have already been destroyed. But the existing ones must be saved and restored to shape and size to save Dhaka. This is a gigantic task, as the already undertaken Begunbari-Hatirjheel project shows. But celebrating the capital city's 400th anniversary will carry little meaning without restoring its lifeline and arteries.

There are many other formidable problems Dhaka is growing up with which also need urgent attention. Some of these are encroachment on streets in the ground and in the clearance above, unabated non-abidance of building construction rules; for instance, raising structure covering whole area of plot without leaving four-foot clear on any side, not to speak of the 40 percent clearance.

These, if not addressed now, will soon reach the point of no return. These problems and wrongdoings may be discussed vis-a-vis imagining what an ideal city should be or look like for the esteemed reader's kind comprehension. But the authorities concerned must brace themselves for action now, before it is too late.

Madan Shahu is Senior Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

# A deal on climate change

But, while the five-page communique is the first time Bush has committed his country to a long-term target, the deal agreed at the G8 summit in northern Japan was quickly dismissed by the big five emerging economies, which want the world's biggest polluters to go much further in cutting emissions.

Tarequl Islam Munna

**A** new global deal on climate change, heralded by G8 leaders as a significant step forward, ran into trouble within hours as developing nations, including China and India, rejected it because they believe the commitments are not strong enough.

After years of US intransigence, President George Bush finally signed a G8 statement vowing to "consider and adopt" a target of at least a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, an agreement described by Prime Minister Gordon Brown as "major progress."

But, while the five-page communique is the first time Bush has committed his country to a long-term target, the deal agreed at the G8 summit in northern Japan was quickly dismissed by the big five emerging economies, which want the world's biggest polluters to go much further in cutting emissions.

Leaders from Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa will meet with Bush and other G8 leaders at the summit, and will demand more concerted action from the developed world.

In a statement last night, the five nations, after meeting at a separate summit in Japan, said: "It is essential that developed countries take the lead in achieving ambitious and absolute greenhouse gas emission reductions."

They want the G8 countries to commit themselves to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80-95% below 1990 levels by 2050. They are also concerned that the deal fails to set interim targets for the coming decades and does not make clear the scale of the cuts to be expected from the developed and developing world.

Mexico, Brazil, China, India and South Africa also urged all developed countries to commit to absolute emission reductions based on

a medium-term target of a 25-40% cut below 1990 levels by 2020.

The G8 is making an offer to provide up to \$150bn in public and private investment over the next three years to help them grow economically while using green technology.

Despite the tough statement from the emerging economies, Gordon Brown said the deal marked "major progress," and British officials claimed that the deal opened the way for agreement next year, under UN auspices at Copenhagen, on a new long-term framework on climate change, replacing the flawed agreement struck at Kyoto in 1997.

They pointed out that the Democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama, was already committed to an 80% cut in US carbon emissions and his Republican rival, John McCain, to a 60% reduction. Both candidates' commitments would be sufficient to meet the US required contribution for a worldwide cut of 50%, seen as the minimum to avert catastrophic climate change.

Green groups slammed the deal, although they privately acknowledged that Bush has shifted his position substantially from a time when he denied the science of climate change.

Friends of the Earth's international climate campaigner, Tom Picken, accused G8 leaders of an "elaborate smokescreen" to try to fool the world that they were showing international leadership on global warming.

"Setting a vague target for 42 years' time is utterly ineffectual in the fact of the global catastrophe we all face. Urgent action is needed to tackle climate change and spiralling energy prices caused by our addiction to increasingly expensive and insecure fossil fuels."

The EU Commission said any

mention of mid-term goals was an advance from last year, when the G8 agreed only to "seriously consider" a goal of halving emissions by mid-century.

Yvo de Boer, head of the UN Climate Change Secretariat, said the G8 deal had positive elements, but warned: "What I find lacking is any kind of language on where industrialised nations, G8 nations, want their emissions to be in 2020, and I think that is critical to making progress in the negotiations."

US sources said that huge challenges remained, including an agreed framework to measure carbon reductions, a mechanism to drive down carbon emissions like an international carbon trading scheme, the scale of the contributions to be required from differing developing countries, and whether targets could be set on economic sectors instead of countries.

Populous developing countries such as India claim their per capita emissions are tiny in comparison with the US. Methods also have to be found to bring aviation and maritime emissions within the scope of a scheme.

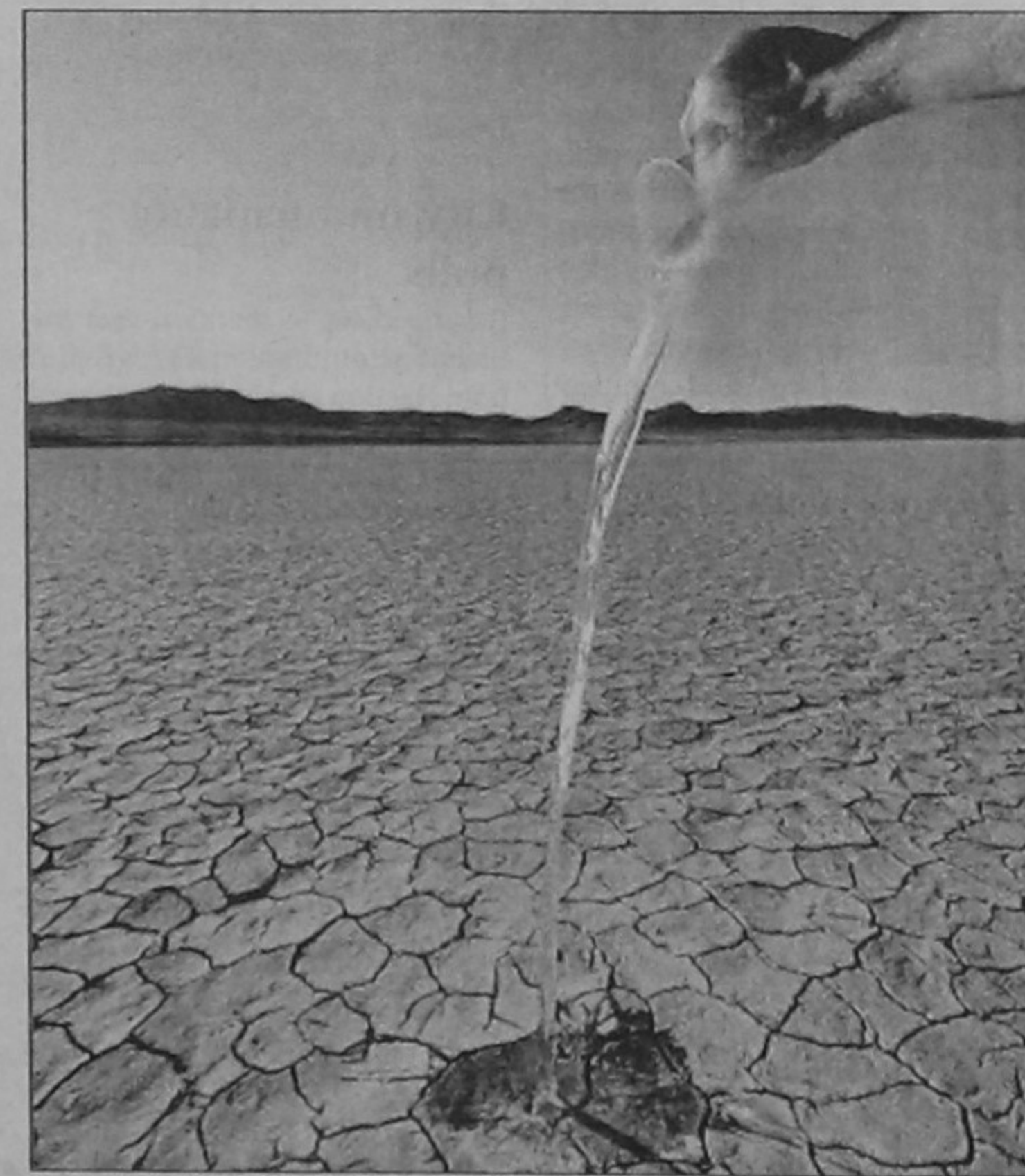
British officials were pleased that there will also be a new push to set international benchmarks on biofuels, a move that could require US corn producers to scale back on production for biofuels.

Oxfam described the deal as tepid and little more than a stalling tactic. They claimed that much of the money from the multilateral banks was simply transferred from aid programs.

The environmental campaign group WWF said: "The G8 are responsible for 62% of the carbon dioxide accumulated in the Earth's atmosphere, which makes them the main culprit of climate change and the biggest part of the problem."

Marthinus van Schalkwyk, South African minister of environmental affairs and tourism, said: "As it is expressed in the G8 statement, the long-term goal is an empty slogan. To be meaningful and credible, a long-term goal must have a base year, it must be underpinned by ambitious mid-term targets and actions."

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Portraying the G8 decision.

# Baghdad burning

The next day, the family recovered the carbonised body of Hafid, a gentle man who used to come home and tutor his children, urging them to focus on schooling. His death has prompted outrage from co-workers and the country's political elite, who are in the middle of negotiating with Americans over the future of US troops in Iraq.

LARRY KAPLOW

**L**IKE most Iraqis, Mohammad Abood expects the highly secured roads at the Baghdad airport to be safe. So when someone told him his father's car had broken down on his way to a job in the terminal, the son calmly went to assist him. But a cordon of US troops stopped him from reaching the car. Abood, 21, could only get close enough to see the two-door Opel engulfed in flames, incinerating 57-year-old Hafid Abood and two women colleagues from his office in an airport bank.

Abood realised the breakdown story had been a friend's way of easing him toward the tragedy. "I couldn't bear it. My father was inside, burning," Abood recalled, describing how he beat himself and fell on the ground in anguish before the soldiers ordered him to stay away.

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Last week, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki called for a special investigation into the June 25 shooting -- though he's launched similar probes into other deaths with little result.

The US military issued a press release the day of the shooting. It said troops from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, were stopped on the roadside when "criminals" travelling the road fired on them.

When the soldiers fired back, the statement said, the car

crashed against a wall and "exploded." Two of the US vehicles had bullet holes and a weapon was found in the burned car according to the military.

The statement provoked anger from Hafid Abood's friends and relatives and, at the very least, leaves many questions unanswered. Those killed were all longtime bank workers on their usual morning commute.

The spot where the shooting occurred is supposed to be one of the safest in Iraq. By most accounts, including a police document shown to Newsweek, it occurred inside the extensive campus of the Baghdad International Airport, a presumed secure zone.

Travellers and airport workers get searched in a series of checkpoints as they enter from the notorious airport highway. Guards watch security contractors to ensure they unload their weapons for the last couple miles on the loop around to the commercial terminal. It's where the dangers melt away and you can finally relax.

Airport police, who spoke to Newsweek on the condition they not be named, said they believed that Hafid Abood was unarmed, having successfully passed through checkpoints that include a bomb-sniffing dog. Their theory is that he was about 30 yards from the parked soldiers when he swerved in their direction to avoid a large pothole.

Another motorist, refusing to be identified because of the intense attention the case is receiving, told Newsweek that the soldiers fired into his hood to keep him away from where they were positioned, apparently after they had already shot Hafid Abood's car.

Military spokesman Lt. Col. Steven Stover reiterated the

account in the original press release and said an officer was investigating the incident -- a standard procedure. In an email, he said the troops involved were staying on their Camp Victory base in the meantime.

He said the military had photographs showing the bullet damage to the vehicles, but he would not release them since they were part of the probe. He confirmed that a man and two women were killed and said the investigation was ongoing as of Monday night.

Iraqis say the women were Maha Adnan Younis and Surur Shahid Ahmed, both in their 30s.

and the nature of the victims -- comes as Iraqis and Americans are hashing out the rules troops will operate under in the future and, possibly, how long they will stay in Iraq.

The self-imposed deadline for a so-called "Status of Forces Agreement" is July 31, but Iraqi officials are increasingly saying it may be finished late or not at all. In interviews last week, several said the airport shooting raised the political heat against the American presence. A parliamentary committee discussed the case and Maliki was briefing top officials about it.



Two of Hafid Abood's seven children, Hussein (left) and Ali, hold an old photo of their father.

The Iraqi police called the shooting "unjustifiable" and challenged the US investigators to disclose the photos or show spent casings from any enemy rounds fired at the soldiers. Mohammed Abood said his father's car appeared to have burned but did not appear damaged as it might after an accident or explosion.

Such shootings have happened often during the five years of war, in which troops at risk of car bombs or gunfire have to operate in proximity to civilians.

But this case -- especially hard to explain because of the location

Like many Shiite Muslims, Hafid Abood was overjoyed when the 2003 American invasion toppled Saddam Hussein, according to another son, Zeaad Abood, 27, who followed his father's advice about education to become a biologist. "Whenever people spoke against the Americans, he would defend them," remembers Zeaad. Whatever happened on the airport access road that morning, Iraqis now find that defence a lot harder to make.

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# Fani, Bubul and Titli are girls you really don't want to get to know

**E**VERY time the wet season comes, I ask myself the same question. Why are the largest, most terrifying things on the planet given the sweetest, cutest names?

No, I am not talking about Naomi Campbell's ego. I'm talking about things, which are even more frightening -- but okay, maybe not quite as large. I refer to typhoons and hurricanes.

Now I flatly refuse to blame those poor people who declined to get out of the way of Hurricane Katrina. I mean, the name Katrina conjures up an image of a cute, frilly, skipping, 20-kilo girly bundle of ribbons and curls. Had they

called it Hurricane Deathbringer or Planetcrusher or Killermonster people may have paid attention.

And look at the names of the typhoons that hit Myanmar and Hong Kong recently. Nargis sounds like a Buckingham Palace dog. Fengshan sounds like a Sichuan restaurant. There was even a typhoon in Asia last year called Nuri. What more cute, adorable name is there on the planet? Not that I'm biased.

No, the only way the authorities can get people to take typhoons seriously is to give them horror-inspiring names. Such as "Mrs. Niblet," for exam-

ple. Mrs. Niblet was the strictest teacher at my primary school, and even now, several decades later, any word that sounds remotely like her name (giblet, tablet, nibble, goblet) sends me gibbering under the table (from where I will write the rest of this column). Mrs. Niblet was an elderly, Gestapo-trained supply teacher who moved from school to school, so there are probably generations of people across many cities who feel the same as I do.

I'm told that the tradition of giving typhoons cute female names came from the days when meteorological experts were all

guys and it was okay to make jokes suggesting that twisters and women had identical characteristics: both were unpredictable, irrational, and could rip up tall buildings and throw them across the city. (This certainly sums up the women in my life.)

But now men are rightly prevented from making such discriminatory gags, because in these days of equality it is no longer acceptable to demean any tropical cyclones.

So the rules have been changed. Now different countries are allowed to nominate names of either sex for storms.

And what do we choose? We

still have a load of girly monikers coming up.

Bangladesh has nominated Nisha, Helen and Fani. Pakistan has nominated Bulbul and Titli. Sri Lanka has nominated Abe and Priya. Laos has nominated Leepi and Phanphone, which sounds to me like a telecoms brand.

You'd think that the Philippines, which gets some of the deadliest typhoons, would give them suitably violent names, but no. They've nominated Nina, Kiko, Henry, Ramon, Queenie, Jerome and Felipe (if there is a wimpier, more delicate name on this planet than Felipe, I would like to hear it).

The United States has learned nothing from mis-naming Katrina, and has decreed that their country's first storm in the summer of 2012 will be called Hurricane Bud.

But the prize for silliest name for a killer storm should go to Hawaii. They've nominated the name Hurricane Lala. Yo, Hawaiians: listen up good. The weather angels, known for their sense of irony, are going to getcha for that one.

It will be horror beyond imagination. Those of us taught by Mrs. Niblet know what that means.

More horror beyond imagination can be found in the jokes at www.vittachi.com.