

## Labour or torture?

Innumerable children engage in hazardous jobs like breaking bricks and stones without protective equipments. Some work in restaurant and motor workshops. The pangs of hunger force little girls into child prostitution.

MD. SHAIKUL MASHREQUE

A national child labour policy is going to be adopted very soon, which is really good news. There must be a well-balanced public policy to establish the rights of the child labourers and improve the child labour situation.

Child labour, a longstanding exploitative structure, is a social vice. Thousands of poor children fall prey to the notorious labour exploitation mechanism. The employer-employee relationship here is lopsided -- service without terms of employment. A poor child is engaged in inhuman, hazardous and risky works, with a meager wage in a cruel environment.

The child employee is subject to acts of kindness or malice depending on his luck or misfortune. If the master is good with humanitarian predisposition the working child gets good treatment with education and the opportunity to blossom into a complete human being. This is rare in this mundane world full of cruelties. In most cases, the master treats the young

employees with blatant cruelty. There is no law to prevent torturing of working children.

The patrons engage poor children and take full advantage of their pitiable condition. The children serving in residences do not get proper remuneration, food and medical facilities. There is no proper living arrangement for the servants. There are incidences of inhuman torture of young servants by the employers. There is also news of molestation of young maidservants by the males in the family.

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The child labour scenario in Bangladesh does not meet the provisions of the ILO convention. This is a gross violation of human rights. The ILO convention states that a job that contradicts the right to education is not approved for a 12 year-old child. Scores of seminars on the occasion of

child day proclaim the right to education for children, removal of obstacles to child development, stopping of perilous child labour and ending of child exploitation by the employees.

ILO and Unicef advocate for measures to curb child labour. The UN Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has been universally ratified. There is institutional arrangement, as reflected in national child policy, the children act, 1974, and some ordinances to prevent child labour. This is well in conformity with constitutional provisions and UNCRC.

The present government is actively considering formulation of a national child labour policy. It is, of course, a good move. We have a child policy. But we do not have child labour policy. We may contend that if there is child labour there must be a control mechanism to erase its evils through legislation and public policy.

One may wonder whether all such policy and legislative measures will be mere paper tigers. We have laws to protect child workers from the deluge of exploitation. The problem lies with implementation. If antiquated legal procedures and codes framed during the colonial period come into conflict with a future child labour policy the implementation process will be in the dock.

Street children, children working in ship-breaking industries, young maid



Man's inhumanity towards man.

servants and young hawkers and porters, van pullers, etc. should be brought under the fold of the policy. A phenomenon like child labour cannot be eliminated by legislation because so many extremely poor families send

their children to work for bare survival.

We have to think of the gravity of the crisis of destitution, the need for child participation as working force, and an age limit for child labour. We would like to suggest remedies and recom-

mend policy strategies to combat child labour exploitation after the draft policy is ready for open discussion.

Dr. Md. Shaikul Mashreque is Professor, Department of Public Administration, Chittagong University.

## Meeting of giants

The strategic and economic dialogue between United States and China is a welcome development for the global economy in general and the smaller nations in particular. The US is likely to persuade the Chinese to bring about more reforms with active and friendly engagement rather than with pressure or confrontation.

MAHMOOD HASAN

THE United States and China, two major economic engines of the world, met for the first round of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), under the Obama administration, in Washington on July 27-28. China is the largest developing nation, with a GDP of \$4.2 trillion (2008) and US is the largest developed country, with a GDP of \$14.2 trillion (2008) -- the two have been nicknamed "G2".

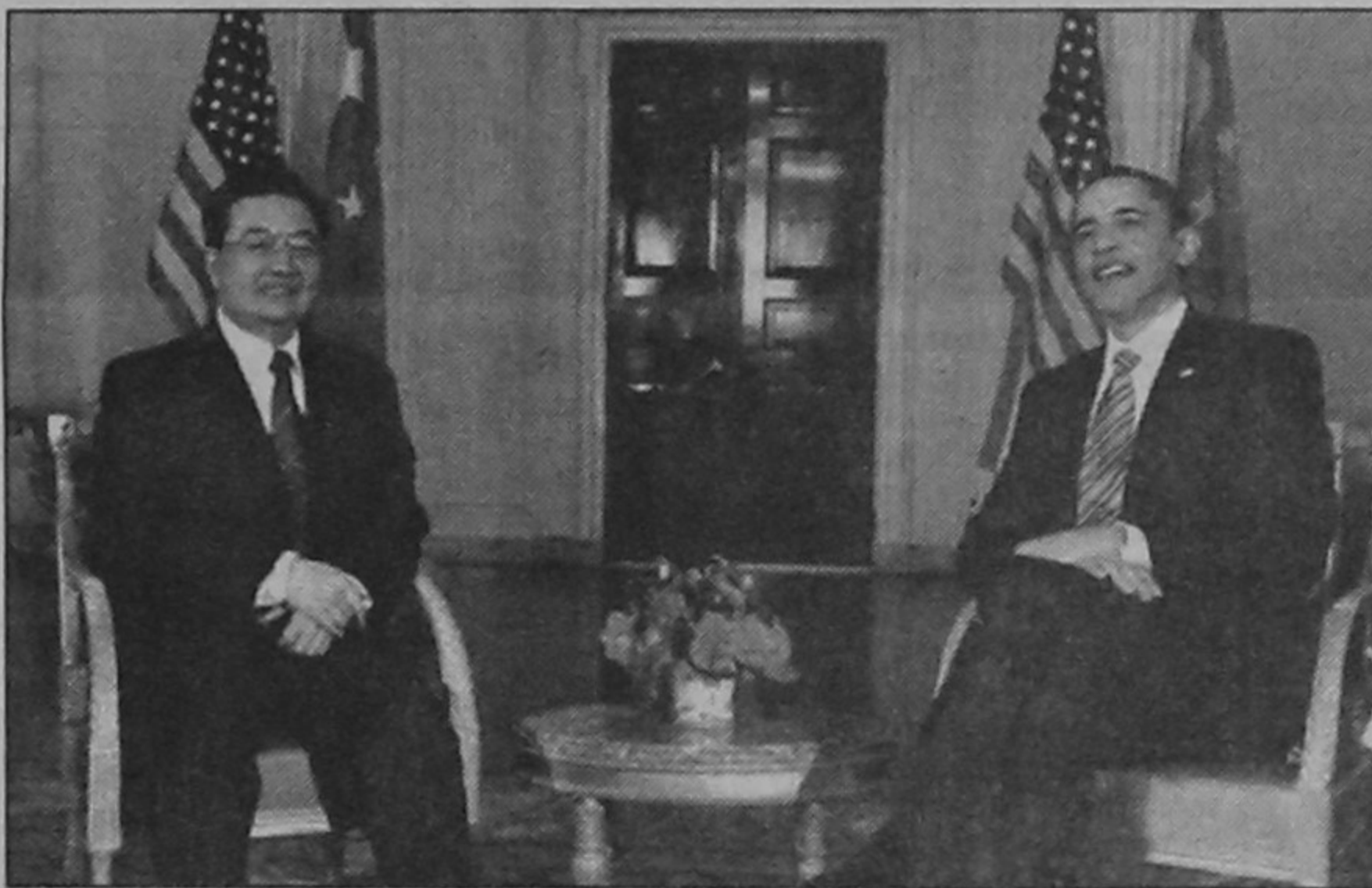
President Hu Jintao and President George Bush had initiated the S&ED in 2006 to discuss long-term strategic issues in bilateral economic relations, twice a year, alternatively in Washington and Beijing. During the Bush administration four dialogues were held between 2006 and 2008. The decision to continue the S&ED was taken by President Obama and President Hu Jintao in April at the G20 Summit in London.

Chinese Vice-Premier Wang Qishan and State Councilor Dai Bingguo led the 150-member strong cabinet-level delegation to Washington. President

Barrack Obama addressed the inaugural session on July 27 at the Ronald Reagan Center and wanted the agenda to expand to include foreign policy issues. Thus, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton came into the scene and co-chaired the "Strategic Track" with Dai Bingguo. US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner co-chaired with Wang Qishan the session on "Economic Track."

The dialogue comes at a time when the world economy is in doldrums, but the situation in the two countries is quite different. The financial meltdown late last year, has compelled the Obama administration to cough up two rescue packages -- \$787 billion for economic stimulus, and another \$700 billion to bail out its financial system.

This, in turn, has put tremendous pressures on its current budget. To finance these packages and pay for the two ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US Treasury has been selling its debts abroad, which will eventually push the 2009 budget deficit to a soaring \$1.84 trillion. Its trade deficit now stands at \$820 billion, i.e. 4.7% of its GDP, which is rather untenable.



Towards a new world order?

Because of the recession, the US economy is projected to have a negative growth of 2.6% this year.

On the other hand, though China is also adversely affected by the economic recession, its economy is expanding. Its GDP growth rate is expected to be 7.2% in 2009. And it enjoys a huge trade surplus of \$360.7 billion (2008).

The most interesting aspect of US-China relationship is that, despite wide political differences, China has invested vast amounts in US Treasury bonds. The US Department of Treasury is selling its bonds to oil-revenue-rich countries of the Gulf and to China, which has an enormous current account surplus. China currently is the single largest creditor of the US and

holds US Treasury bonds worth \$801.5 billion.

China has intelligently turned its trade-surplus into a formidable clout to soften US criticisms on human rights and democracy, and emerged as a credible interlocutor on global issues. China however, has also shrewdly retained its prerogative to be critical of US. Thus, the Sino-American financial relationship has had a profound impact on these two erstwhile "adversaries" -- it has turned them into cooperating "partners."

Having invested its trade surplus in US, the Chinese government is now deeply worried about the stability and value of the US currency. They are concerned about the safety of their investments. The fear stems from the

possibility that if foreign holders of US debts starts selling the bonds -- it would send the dollar crashing and trigger a runaway inflation, which in turn will reduce the value of the assets. No wonder China and several other countries have been openly talking about alternative currencies to the US dollar as the world reserve currency.

The press briefing by the US Treasury Department was upbeat. Actually, nothing much has been achieved. US has not succeeded in getting Chinese commitment to reign in the North Koreans or any agreement on global warming. US and China are the largest producers of greenhouse gases, and neither has signed the Kyoto Protocol. Without US and China on the same table, a solution at the Copenhagen Conference UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), coming up next December, will certainly be elusive.

There has also been no agreement on the sore issue of trade imbalance between the two countries. The Chinese delegation has not agreed to change the exchange rate between the dollar and the "renminbi" (Rmb). The US feels that the over-valued Chinese currency inhibits US exports to China. Americans argue that with a change in the value of "Rmb" and with rising levels of income, Chinese consumers could consume more from the US and help spur the US economy by creating more jobs and also, in turn, remove the

trade imbalance. The US now has the highest unemployment rate at 9.5% of the work force.

President Obama's inaugural speech emphasised the need to strive to cooperate not only on economic matters but also on key issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation and transnational threats, and hoped that the relationship "will shape the 21st Century." On China's human rights record and the recent violence in Xinjiang province Obama's reference was indeed muted. Clearly the tone of the address was mellowed.

The strategic and economic dialogue between United States and China is a welcome development for the global economy in general and the smaller nations in particular. The US is likely to persuade the Chinese to bring about more reforms with active and friendly engagement rather than with pressure or confrontation. The engagement will also lead to reduction in tensions in the Asian region, to the benefit of smaller nations like Bangladesh.

President Barack Obama is scheduled to visit Beijing later this year. One hopes that the summit between President Barack Obama and President Hu Jintao will produce agreements on issues of common concern -- particularly global warming. It will, however, be disastrous if the two giants start to move in opposite directions again.

Mahmood Hasan is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

## Using the stagnant water

The continuous extraction of underground water is surely causing changes to the subsoil strata, which may become a cause of catastrophe sometimes in future unless the same is continuously studied and monitored by experts in the field and protective measures are thought of right now.

S.K. LALA

THE day is July 28, Dhaka city stands half paralysed because of stagnancy of water due to the exceptionally heavy rainfall the night before. With global climate change such a situation is likely to recur, but our drainage system does not have the capacity to cope with it. To design and develop an effective drainage system will not only be a time consuming exercise but will also, apart from being very costly, be almost impossible as unplanned construction is widespread and could be a prohibiting factor.

Such being the scenario on one side, on the other we must not forget the continuous depletion of our groundwater reserves. I do not have the facts and figures but surely the water and sewerage authority is fully aware of the rate of drop in underground water level every year. The continuous extraction of underground water is surely causing changes to the subsoil strata, which may become a cause of catastrophe sometimes in future unless the same is continuously studied and monitored by experts in the field and protective measures are thought of right now.

What I present here can be a likely

solution to both of the above problems. It is a simple one, and can be adopted almost immediately without making any major changes in the city structure

as it exists now. What I propose is putting the surface runoff back into the ground through tubewells, which will not extract water but function as an



This water can be used!

injector.

The city may be divided into recharge zones. In each of these zones the lowest spot can be identified and earmarked, and a filtration bed can be constructed on that. The surface runoff will come down to these filtration beds, in each of which there will be a tubewell that will function as a "soakwell."

The depth of the tubewells and the position of the strainers (these strainers shall have wider slots than conventional ones to allow quicker ingress of water into the ground) at predetermined layers of sand in the underground strata must definitely be higher than the layers from which Wasa is now pumping out water for our daily use. Mother earth will surely take care of the rest. This is an idea that may be explored further by experts in the field.

Further, it has been observed that in areas where large water bodies exist, such as Gulshan and Dhanmondi,

drainage has not been a serious problem as surface runoff water flowed into the same. But these lakes are now full and hardly can contain any more water. If there is heavy rain within a short time, these areas will also become water logged. Recharge tubewells can also provide a solution to this problem.

In each of these lakes, a couple of recharge tubewells can be installed, with strainers above the highest level of water in the lake to allow in-flow into the well. Strainers will also be fitted at the bottom of these tubewell at predetermined sand strata. No filtration bed will be necessary, lakes will not overflow, and ground water will get recharged. Some sculptures can be placed on top of these tubewells and there can be some paintings on the body of the tube that gets exposed when water level falls, which will be an added aesthetic attraction.

S.K. Lala is a Civil Engineer.