

## The pressure Dhaka city is under

*Serious thought must be given to its future*

**D**HAKA is increasingly turning into a rather uninhabitable city. That is the bottom line in a report carried by a leading daily in the country. We have no reason to disagree with such a finding, especially against the background of the recent incidents of building collapse and fires in different parts of the capital. There is little question that Dhaka has always been an unplanned city. But what is mind-boggling is the rapidity with which it has in the past three decades or so mutated into a symbol of chaos and confusion. The mere fact that a few minutes of rainfall leave entire areas of the city water-logged speaks of the myriad problems which now the city is confronted with. The bigger reality is that the relevant urban development authorities have little clue as to where all this will push the city in the short term as well as the long-term future.

There are the statistics which point to what one could call an apocalyptic vision of Dhaka as it might be. Where the Detail Area Plan (DAP) outlined by Rajuk speaks of providing living space for no more than 250 persons per acre in the city, the actual numbers are considerably higher. Old Dhaka holds per acre between 350 and 400 people, which alone explains the pressure the city is under. If you take the various slums into consideration, matters look even worse: every slum holds no fewer than 1,000 persons on an acre of land. In essence, Dhaka has been experiencing an influx of people annually to the tune of 700,000 per year. That means an addition of 6 per cent to the existing population every year. If such a trend continues, in the next couple of decades the population of the city will leap to a staggering 20,000,000 to 25,000,000 from the approximately 10,000,000 at present. Such a scenario certainly holds up images of a nightmare. Given that already Dhaka is weighed down with intractable problems, one cannot quite fathom what shape it will assume in the coming years --- unless of course drastic measures are taken to make the city habitable again.

The time is therefore here and now for serious and informed thought to be given to Dhaka's future. Even as we plan celebrating the 400th anniversary of the city, we cannot ignore the realities around us. Parks have been disappearing under a no-holds-barred process of urbanization. Residential areas have been turning into congested commercial regions. There has hardly been any increase in the number of roads in the past twenty years, save for a few flyovers and underground pathways. All of this calls for plans geared toward a major overhaul of the capital. The most essential requirement is a dispersal of the population as a way of reducing the load on existing urban centres. Briefly, the endless influx of people into the city needs to be curbed, a task dependent on the development of a speedy and efficient transport system to enable professionals to commute to and from the city easily from the suburbs and beyond. Such modes of transport as circular railways and waterways as well as underground railways must be given immediate and undiluted consideration.

Cities have historically been symbols of growth and renewal. They have, when left uncared for, turned into emblems of decadence. Our choice is clear.

## Why this foot-dragging on MPO?

*The indecision may prove costly*

**W**E are told that the government is going for revising the already revised monthly pay order facilities. Let us get the fact straight. The first version of the MPO list, that was finalised by the education minister and was ready for implementation on 6th May, and was held back and revised under the instruction of the PM by one of her advisors, is in for another revision. This time the education minister has been tasked with the responsibility, apparently for the same reason that the first revision was done - the list was not to the liking of many in the ruling party.

The MPO facility is one that is very keenly sought after by non-government schools and colleges that use the money to supplement the pay of their teachers. And there are well laid out conditions basing on which the ministry of education determines which institutions should qualify for the grant. What we have seen happening in this respect in the last two months is extremely disappointing and manifestly harmful to the system.

The first list, that included 1022 institutions, was not acceptable to the ruling party members, including some members of Hasina's cabinet, and MPs and their cronies, who had their own favourites to push. The list was amended under the PM's order, that time by an advisor who dropped about 140 institutions from the first list and added 600 new ones. This will be revised once again!

We feel that the matter has been handled in the most amateurish manner. In the first place, while the PM may have wished to have the list revised on very compelling rationale, we wonder whether it was appropriate to have it done by her advisor. Who have said before, if at all, it is the education minister who should have been tasked to review the list to remove the lacunae, if any.

In this very column not long ago, we had impressed upon the need to stick to the established criterion in drawing up the MPO list. We had also cautioned against giving in to political pressure in a matter that has to do with education. In this regard the advisor is reported to have said that in picking up schools and colleges, he had kept in mind the legislators' preference. If that is the case, why have rules and regulations regarding MPO enlistment at all?

This game of revision and re-revision cannot go on much longer. It will be the institutions that will suffer. We say again, the government should go by the established norm in drawing up the list and not succumb to any pressure. In any case, never will the government be able to make everybody happy.



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## We mourn and then forget

To enforce rules is the job of the government, and it should be held liable for defaulting in that respect. But what about our own sense of responsibility as law-abiding citizens? Or must we have to be forever chased by the big stick to follow the rules?

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

**S**CARCELY had the nation come around from the trauma that Begunbari building collapse of Tuesday (June 1) caused, when it was jolted by yet another shock of a far more severe kind -- Thursday's (June 3) inferno at Nimtoli in the older part of the capital city.

The blaze that burnt to death some 117 inhabitants of four buildings at Nawab Khatra in Nimtoli was perhaps the worst of its kind in living memory. Words fail to express fully the scale of devastation and death that the fire left in its wake. The nation observed a mourning day on Saturday (June 5) in memory of those who died in the Begunbari building collapse and Nimtoli fire.

We have been grieving over the unnatural deaths of our fellow people so often nowadays! The deaths from road accident, launch capsizes, fire and stampede in the garment factories, violence inflicted by criminals of all make-up on their prey, storms and floods, hunger, disease and so on leave the families and communities sad-

dened by them to mourn about every other day. Add to those the grievous wounds and deaths male violence metes out to hapless women regularly.

But to mourn the dead on a national scale, especially in big disasters like the ones that happened in Begunbari and Nimtoli, is an instance of greater compassion and respect that the country has ever shown to disaster victims. This act would certainly raise our status as a civilised people who hold the lives of their fellow citizens in the highest esteem.

Now will our responsibility end with this demonstration of sympathy, care and respect for the disaster victims alone? In the editorial of this paper last Sunday, it had been suggested that we should observe a National Accountability Day in memory of the fire and building collapse victims only because those responsible for the tragedies should also make themselves accountable to the nation.

The question naturally comes because, if one is to go by experience, the experience of past tragedies in which human error or failings of some kind had a role to play should have

provided us with some lessons. But for all practical purposes, that has not happened. The reason for that is all too obvious.

The ability to draw a lesson from a bad experience attributable to human error or lapse requires that the subject in question also has the seriousness of mind, and the responsibility that goes with it, to learn. But from the manner in which the disasters are taking place one after another, it appears we have remained quite unperturbed by them.

This is why there is a need for a change in our attitude towards the misfortunes that are befalling us more often in recent times. That change should be from one of resignation to our fate to something that goads us to take responsibility for what has happened. The Begunbari or Nimtoli disasters should have made us ready to take collective responsibility for the tragedies.

Take the Begunbari case. Without question, it was the engineer, the designer and the owner of the collapsed five-storey building who should primarily be held accountable for the manmade calamity. Next comes the role of the Rajdhani Unnoyon Kortripokkho (Rajuk), which is tasked with the job of ensuring that any building that springs up in the capital city follows the building codes properly, and monitoring and punishing those who are found to violate them.

But none of them has so far taken any responsibility for the fall of the building

on nearby tin sheds and the loss of lives and damage to properties that it has caused. In the case of the Nimtoli blaze, on the other hand, it is the lack of breathing space due to unplanned construction of buildings, which stand wall-to-wall in Nimtoli as well as in other parts of what is known as old Dhaka, which is primarily the reason for such a large number of casualties in the conflagration.

Secondly, the practice of allowing factories that use highly explosive materials to make, for example, plastic goods and other commodities, should have been prohibited in such a densely-populated area. The reports on the circumstances of the Nimtoli conflagration show that the fire started with an explosion, which caused highly flammable substance to erupt, flowing like molten lava in the entire surroundings. It also created dense fumes that choked to death most of the inhabitants of the affected buildings.

It has, therefore, been an example of unpardonable lapse on the part of the authorities concerned to have waited for a catastrophe before awakening to the gravity of the problem -- or have they as yet?

To enforce rules is the job of the government, and it should be held liable for defaulting in that respect. But what about our own sense of responsibility as law-abiding citizens? Or must we have to be forever chased by the big stick to follow the rules?

## The many colours of red

Mamata has empowered Muslims by making more of them candidates, but she will be vulnerable where she gives seats to the Congress. The red of Bengal has already been diluted by time.

M.J. AKBAR

**R**ED is not a single colour. By the second half of the Sixties most of the world -- Latin America, Africa, Asia, most of Europe -- was awash in its many hues, and Vietnam took its counter-intuitive edge to the campuses and television screens of America.

By the late Sixties, and through the early Seventies, the Naxalite offensive had turned parts of India scarlet. The epicentre was Bengal, but the seepage was powerful enough to affect Delhi. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the most perceptive politician of the last half-century, recognised its implications amidst the comfort zones into which a slothful Congress leadership had retreated. She broke the party and reinvented herself as a pink ruby in a clutter of paste diamonds.

Mrs. Gandhi was astute enough to launch a major offensive against poverty, but did not have the economy to sustain her political will. Nor did she have the conviction in shared governance to build alliances within Parliament, and with industry, labour, peasantry, academia and media that could become the vanguard of change. India is too heavy a weight. It moves only when we all pull together.

That familiar adage of the freedom movement -- when Bengal sneezes, India gets a cold -- worked for the last time during the red upheaval of the Sixties. The sun rose from the east, but that sharp red streak of dawn faded quickly in the harsh sunlight of the rest of India.

Bengal rejected scarlet, and dyed itself in the pale red of democratic communism, introducing a doctrine that challenged other applications of the phrase. Where the Soviet-East European model, for instance, gave primacy to communism over democracy by subverting the latter into a one-party dictatorship, Bengal became a one-party state in a cooperative electoral process that legitimised the party through election victories that might arouse scepticism, but whose credibility could not be challenged.

The fulcrum of communist rule in Bengal was social stability, which Congress had destroyed in the Sixties by cynical manipulation. The peace of the last three decades has veiled the fact that Bengal is a partition province, with a history of Hindu-Muslim antagonism that has deeper roots than Punjab.

The Muslim League was born in Bengal; and Punjabi literature has nothing compared to the anti-Muslim froth that layered so much of the best Bengali writing in the 19th and early 20th centu-

ries.

Why is the colour of Bengal swirling back towards the tricolour of India? There are many reasons, of course, including the rather obvious failure of the Left to embed itself into the consciousness of contemporary youth in the manner that it once dominated the minds of Bengali youth in the Seventies and Eighties.

The young comrades who once drove a wedge into the sky kept the dream alive in their children, but have now lost their grandchildren, the teenagers who are leading the celebrations after every Mamata Banerjee victory. But there is a second, equally important, albeit unrecognised, reason for the electoral debacle.

We are used to dividing Bengal along Hindu-majority West and a Muslim-majority East, with the border as the only definition. But there is a new West and East in our Bengal. Official statistics say that the Muslim population of West Bengal is 28%; it might rise to 30% after the current census.

But this demographic is not evenly distributed. Muslims are concentrated in the eastern districts of West Bengal, parallel to Bangladesh, forming about 40% of the voting population in the thickly populated regions south, east and north of Calcutta. Any map of the results will show that the core reason for Mamata Banerjee's success lies in the shift of the Muslim vote from the Left towards her persona.

One uses this term carefully, since she is at the moment a personality who has inspired a revolt, but not been able to institutionalise her advance into a

political structure. It is interesting that Muslim enthusiasm for Mamata has not transferred to the Congress.

The Left has made gains where it contested the Congress, and its overall vote has increased by 4% compared to last year's general elections. The Congress was routed in Pranab Mukherjee's constituency, which has a Muslim majority.

If Mamata repeats this performance in the Assembly elections, one-party rule will be replaced by one-woman rule. The Left, technically, is a coalition, but in truth, Bengal has been ruled by the CPI (M). Having ensured social peace for three decades, the CPI (M) took the Muslim vote for granted, indifferent to the reality that the grandchild was not ready to accept what father had.

Could anything change what is widely seen as inevitable? The Left has begun to implement a job reservations policy for minorities; we do not know if this is too little, too late. Change is an exciting thought for a generation that has not experienced violence, so the young may dismiss this as a cynical last throw of the dice by a defeated gambler. Moreover, Mamata has empowered Muslims by making more of them candidates, but she will be vulnerable where she gives seats to the Congress.

The red of Bengal has already been diluted by time. The tint of the future will be determined in 2011, and the easel is with the Muslim voter. Both sides know that.