

Land developers' aggressive posture

The whole city cannot be up for grabs!

THE way the land developers tried to push forward their case, a patently untenable one, in a meeting with the state minister for housing was appalling, to say the least. They not only challenged the government decision to preserve 21 per cent of the city's land as water bodies but also accused the government of influencing Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury, the head of the DAP review committee, to have the report in its favour.

While we appreciate some aspects of the role played by Rehab in urban development, we can hardly overlook the fact that land developers face a number of allegations, some of which amount to gross violation of the law. The state minister for housing had a similar encounter with land developers in January this year when he went to the extent of saying that some developers were actually illegal occupiers of land. He took strong exception to the activities of some of the developers that bordered on cheating or swindling.

It is a sad truth that most people, or buyers of the developed land, would agree with much of the state minister's observations on the issue. There are thousands of reports on how people did not get their land in due time, despite paying the prices according to the developers' demand. The developers often delay handing over possession of land on this or that excuse, causing loss of time and money to the innocent buyers.

Now they appear to be determined to scuttle the government's plan of not allowing real estate development in the flood flow zone and earmarking certain water bodies for both technical and ecological reasons. Is the whole city up for grabs by a handful of people calling themselves land developers? Are not technical or environmental issues important in assessing the overall situation?

We are watching what unplanned and haphazard construction of buildings and structures can lead to. The news of buildings tilting is causing panic to people on a regular basis. And we have not heard the land developers and Rehab leaders saying anything on it, except defending themselves and trying to steer clear of any stigma. But the truth of the matter is that experts do not consider some parts of Dhaka's soil fit for high-rises. Against this backdrop, the idea of turning water bodies into land for raising high buildings appears to be nothing but creating potential death traps.

The land developers or those in the real estate business have to attach due importance to people's safety and convenience instead of blaming the government whenever something does not suit their own vested interests.

We fully support the government plan as visualised in DAP. In fact, our criticism is that not enough has been done by the government to implement it. Now the emphasis should be on total and unconditional implementation of the Detail Area Plan.

Public vow to stop stalking

We offer our wholehearted support

WE are happy to note that a public declaration was made the other day by all segments of society to put up a common front to resist the evil of eve-teasing. This was done under the aegis of the education ministry. We endorse the move and pledge our full support to the cause.

There are some social ills which cannot be stopped through legislation or through the process of law alone. These ills gradually turn into evil, as we observe happening with so-called eve-teasing, unless society at large is made to realise that it has a stake in rectifying the malady. The situation has come to such a pass that without the involvement of all of us such behaviour cannot be put right.

Eve-teasing, a euphemism for the vilest form of repression against women, has, of late, taken a new dimension in this country. The practice of stalking young girls has driven many to commit suicide. In some cases the parent of the victim was driven to such a state of desperation that he was left with no other alternative but to end his life, unable to seek the help of police under threat from the criminals.

And society had appeared helpless in the face of such depraved conduct to do anything meaningful. One of the reasons why incidents of stalking and eve-teasing have gone on in this manner is the impunity that these people enjoy, with some of the perpetrators benefiting from the patronization of the political parties.

The ministry of education, the minister in particular, must be complimented for the idea of an awareness campaign and bringing together various sections of society and the students in the venture. We agree with the call of the minister that the stalkers will not be spared. But at the same time we must all come together to ensure that such things do not occur in the first place. And in this regard the political parties must take the lead at the national level.

While all that is needed to create disincentives for the perpetrators must be done, we feel that both, the programme of awareness as well as resistance, ought to start at the local level. And all the available institutions at the local level must be involved in the programme. Not only must the elders of the locality, led by the ward commissioners, get involved in the programme, the influence of the cultural organisations, sports clubs and other such bodies of the locality must be made use of, both as a means of entertainment to keep the youths occupied as well as a way of creating awareness against social evils.



No room to breathe!

Making space in Old Dhaka

It is the part where most of our traditions, heritage and pride linger in every nook and niche, silently bearing testimony to many historic events for the last four hundred years. Old Dhaka must survive. Old Dhaka must live. If it is gone, we will be left with no past; no history.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

IT is time to think and talk about old Dhaka and the people living there. It is more pertinent to do so after the tragic fire incident at Nimtoli that claimed so many lives recently. We must not let it happen again. Old Dhaka is unique by every definition. It has a character of its own that can be felt only by people who continue to live there or who had lived there for at least a good number of years. New Dhaka lacks that character.

Puran Dhaka, as it is popularly called, is a moving canvas of colour, faces, food, dress, language and lifestyle that can hardly be emulated by outsiders. It is the part that never sleeps. It is the part where most of our traditions, heritage and pride linger in every nook and niche, silently bearing testimony to many historic events for the last four hundred years. Old Dhaka must survive. Old Dhaka must live. If it is gone, we will be left with no past; no history.

As we see the population increasing like crazy everywhere, old Dhaka is no exception. But, not all are genuine Dhakaiaas who live there. At the moment, a guessti-

mate is that one third of the population there is constituted by people coming from other districts.

This gradual infiltration by aliens has not only alarmingly diluted the original character of old Dhaka but has also created a demand for more living space. But, as space is a big constraint in that part, house owners have opted to go skyward to earn rents.

They are building floors on weak foundations despite the fact that most buildings have outlived their allotted time. The invasion has in turn created tremendous pressure on the utility service supply system in the entire area from Wari to Wiseghat, from Laxmi Bazar to Lalbagh. The increasing number of people, shops, hotels, restaurants, schools, cars and rickshaws has resulted in the narrowing down of the roads and lanes in the area.

What the government must do on an emergency basis, if it is serious about not allowing any man-made disaster striking again, is formulate a pragmatic policy of creating a new residential area for the people of old Dhaka -- for the genuine Dhakaiaas that is. Offer them compensation package for dismantling their dilapi-

dated buildings. Then find land for them and sell plots on instalment basis. Where would the government find land in old Dhaka? There is a solution.

Remove the Central Jail. Take it to somewhere in Savar or Gazipur or anywhere. The Central Jail is situated on a large area, which can be cleaned up and then divided into hundreds of plots. Those plots would be sold on lottery basis. No minister's nephew would be eligible to apply. Everyone will have to submit evidence to prove that he or she has been living in old Dhaka for five to six generations.

As an alternative step, the government can construct spacious, modern multi-storied residential buildings and sell flats to the Dhakaiaas. The entire enclave should be built with a modern concept. There should be wide roads criss-crossing in all direction with a park and a shopping mall for the residents. There should also be a small field for children to play in. The demand for such flats would rise among the people in old Dhaka. But, where is land to construct more flats? There is a solution.

Remove all the tanneries from Hazaribagh and remove all factories and illegal warehouses from old Dhaka and you will have sufficient land to construct hundreds of flats. Hazaribagh itself is almost half the size of Dhanmondi residential area. One can visualise how many flats the government would be able to construct there; how many old Dhaka families would be able to live amidst fresh air and sunlight. Then why don't they do it?

Here everything stops. All good ideas

and good initiatives come to a dead end when we ask the government to do something. Why? because, government does not belong to anyone, neither does it belong to itself. It is a strange conglomerate, if we may say so for argument's sake, constituted with some strangers who do not know each other well and do not share any common interest. Each member of the government has his or her individual interest to fulfil.

Then who would do it? Private developers? But, cynics say that most of them are even worse than the East India Company. Well, a dilemma indeed and we shall have to find the best way as to how we can help our brothers living in old Dhaka. To reach a solution, let us form a strong committee comprising some highly respected, elderly citizens who would visit the entire old Dhaka, talk to the people, talk to the local leaders and seek their advice regarding how the crisis of residential quarters can be overcome.

The time bomb in old Dhaka is ticking. The ominous signs are there. If we do not act fast, greater man-made disasters will take more lives. Someone, some organisations will have to come forward with the good intent to help solve the problems. The commercial banks have been doing good business in old Dhaka for over a century under different names. Can they all get together and set aside a big fund from their CSR account to undertake massive facelift work?

Whether government or private sector, the bottom line is Save Old Dhaka.

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From pillar to post

The Hurriyat should ask New Delhi first to restore the ante-1952 situation, where Srinagar gave it three subjects -- foreign affairs, defence and communications. It would be better than going from post to pillar.

KULDIP NAYAR

GENERAL Ayub Khan, then at the helm of the Pakistan government, is believed to have told Soviet Union's Prime Minister Kosygin that if India were to come to a settlement with Sheikh Abdullah, head of the Jammu and Kashmir government at that time, Pakistan might accept the agreement. Kosygin was trying his best to span the distance between India and Pakistan, despite Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's doubts over the role of Russia, who had been supplying arms to Pakistan.

Soon after, the Sheikh was detained for nearly 12 years in South India. He had reportedly asked New Delhi to make the terms of the Instrument of Accession good. The state had given to the centre only three subjects -- defence, foreign affairs and communications.

Since then, the All Party Hurriyat Conference jumped into the arena. Its agenda goes far beyond the Sheikh or, for that matter, the ruling National Conference. Unfortunately, the Hurriyat has split into hardliners and moderates. Whatever its verdict on the government headed by Farooq Abdullah, the Sheikh's grandson, he has made the security forces accountable.

The suspension by the army of a major and removal of a colonel from service for their "role" in dubious encounters is not a small achievement. In fact, Farooq has ordered an inquiry into the fake encounters in the past and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, on his recent visit to Srinagar, said that strict orders had been given to the

security forces not to violate human rights.

Hurriyat Chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said: "We expected the prime minister to start a bold political initiative on Kashmir but nothing of that sort has come through."

Obviously, the Hurriyat has not taken into account Dr. Manmohan Singh's message that the government was committed to push forward the process of negotiation. His was the first visit to Kashmir after he had met Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gilani at the Saarc summit in Bhutan.

The Indian prime minister wanted the Hurriyat to come on board before India held a series of ministerial-level meetings with Pakistan. It is naïve on the part of Mirwaiz to demand a public announcement on what the government has in view. A dialogue is the only way to hammer out differences. In the case of Kashmir, Pakistan is also a party.

True, Srinagar was shut and hundreds were on the street when the prime minister arrived there. But this is an exercise over which the Hurriyat has gone many a time before. People are tired. They see very little on the horizon. They have sacrificed nearly all that they had.

The span of 25 to 30 years, the hey days of Hurriyat, is not a small period to wait. It is nobody's case that the people's alienation in the valley has not disappeared, nor that the Hurriyat has ceased to count.

I think the failure of the Hurriyat is in having preferred bullet to ballot. They revolted when they, young and idealistic, witnessed the charade of an election in Kashmir in 1987.

Indeed, the polls were rigged. But going

across the border, getting training and returning with weapons was the reaction of angry, helpless people. Violence, as some Hurriyat leaders have realised, was not an option that could have yielded results. Coming into conflict with the state, which is thousands of times stronger, was foolhardy. Believe me, I am not underestimating the sacrifices of people. Very few movements in the world have been so determined and so sustained.

The Hurriyat should have returned to the ballot box after the violent agitation it had launched gave diminishing returns. In violence, the people in India witnessed a forceful cessation of Kashmir, which is considered part of the country. The Hurriyat movement was seen as a challenge to the country's integrity.

The Hurriyat should have tried to capture the Jammu and Kashmir assembly. Instead, they propagated the boycott of elections. Their argument was that the polls under the aegis of the Indian Election Commission were not acceptable to them. They proposed supervision by the UN observers. No sovereign country could have accepted this.

Had the Hurriyat leaders demanded that the Indian human rights activists should be the observers, they might have had the consent of New Delhi. But would the Hurriyat have won? This uncertainty might have been the main reason for it not participating in elections, which have their own dynamics. Popular agitators are not normally put in the gaddi.

The Hurriyat's tilt towards Pakistan, probably necessitated by the situation in which they were, has distanced it from India. That the solution of Kashmir is not possible without Islamabad is understandable. But the Hurriyat did not have to play the Muslim card. It only created further doubts in the mind of the majority in India. After the exodus of most Hindu pandits from Kashmir, the valley has nearly 96% of Muslims.

But this is the Hurriyat's weakness, not the strength. Not having the support of the Hindu-majority Jammu and the Buddhist-majority Ladakh, the Hurriyat has forfeited the right to speak for the entire state. It should have at least wooed the Kashmir pandits, many still in camps, to return to their homes. Some Hurriyat leaders have realised this a bit late. But the party as such still cannot pursue the matter wholeheartedly because a few among them do not want Hindus back till the Kashmir solution is finally settled.

Even in its demand, the Hurriyat has been equivocal. It has oscillated between autonomy and independence. Realising that Pakistan is equally opposed to independence, as India is, the Hurriyat wants a solution that is acceptable to the people of Kashmir. But that has not been spelled out.

The fact that Jammu and Ladakh are nowhere in the picture means that the Hurriyat's demand is only for the valley. This brings the Hurriyat in conflict with what Manmohan Singh has said many a time, that he has no mandate to change the borders. Even otherwise, the Indian nation would not accept another partition on the basis of religion.

After the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York, the scenario in the region from Afghanistan to India has changed beyond proportions. America and Pakistan on one hand and India and Pakistan on the other are trying to come to terms with new developments. Kashmir too figures, but in the larger context.

The Hurriyat might do better if it were to confine the talks between Srinagar and Delhi till India and Pakistan reach a settlement on Kashmir. The Hurriyat should ask New Delhi first to restore the ante-1952 situation, where Srinagar gave it three subjects -- foreign affairs, defence and communications. It would be better than going from post to pillar.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.