

# A choking hell?

But even with its filth, dirt and squalour, Dhaka city remains a beacon for the brightest and the bravest from all over the country. Finding no avenues of income and no job and no business in the countryside, people stream into this city in a bid to test themselves against the toughest competition.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE overall situation in Bangladesh is highly alarming. Poverty, overpopulation, over exploitation of scanty natural resources, noxious emissions and toxic effluents from factories and smoke-belching vehicles, coupled with natural disasters, are the major causes of environmental degradation in the country.

Population growth incompatible with development of resources, lack of adequate environmental consideration in the development processes, poor management of waste generated through the production/consumption processes, consumption of both renewable and non-renewable resources without substitution strategy, and inability to adopt cleaner technology and processes are responsible for the environmental degradation and deterioration of the quality of life in the country.

Dhaka city captures the minds of the people living in it, and of those streaming into the city in ever increasing numbers -- about 4,00,000 each year since 1991. Dhaka's population has now swelled to about 1,45,00,000. With the city's skyline thrusting up aggressively and the sprawling market places bustling with activity, people seem to be getting drunk with opulence.

But behind the blinding glitter in some posh areas, the city is failing its citizens on major issues. The pavements on both sides of the railway line from Kamalapur to Tongi have become semi-permanent homes of the floating population. One can hardly believe that humans can live in such appalling conditions.

Most shockingly, largely due to management failure and greed, Dhaka has become one of the world's truly hopeless urban cases. Fleeing droughts, flood and starvation, people pour into Dhaka city from all over the countryside, making it distressingly sick.

The city and its adjoining areas are now bursting with people of all categories looking for some avenues of income. Agitation by garment workers, extortion, hijacking and murder, compounded by street and campus fights between rival groups of students on tender dropping and admission business, have vitiated the once tranquil environment of the city.

Apart from people with jobs in government and private agencies, at least 30 lakh people, mostly female, working in garment factories and other industries in and around Dhaka, find it extremely hard to get a shelter in the city.

The way people are living in some slum areas near Amin Bazar in Mirpur, Ashulia, Tongi, extending up to Kamalapur, Basabo and Narayanganj, beggars description. They have no drinking water or toilet facilities, no electricity or fuel, and some five to six persons live in one-room shanties in submerged land.

But even with its filth, dirt and squalour, Dhaka city remains a beacon for the brightest and the bravest from all over the country. Finding no avenues of income and no job and no business in the countryside, people stream into this city for income, medical attention, education and commercial activities in a bid to test themselves against the toughest competition.

Each immigrant, whether from a village or small town, is bursting with ambition. Each harbours a plan for a better life. More by default than by design, Dhaka is emerging as the dream city of the country, a city that can provide people with jobs and homes.

Dhakaites now tend to believe that the city has spun out of control and the deadly violence, once mostly confined to certain crime-ridden zones, is now lashing out randomly at anyone any time, even in areas once considered relatively safe.

On the transportation side things are in a pretty bad shape. The public buses that wind through the city streets have come to be

known as "savage lines." They are battered, cramped and dingy. Despite the stern warnings issued by the law enforcement agencies that buses 20 years old would be banned from the roads, there has been no improvement in the situation.

Most old buses have again appeared on the roads with a new coat of paint. Most of these buses are overcrowded at all hours of the day and night. With about 2,250 km of roads available for the roughly 1,50,00,000 crore city population the number of registered vehicles is about 5,27,000 including 4,25,000 private cars and motor cycles, according to BRTA.

The bus terminals at Saidabad, Gabtali, Mohakhali etc. appear to be a collage of disorder and lawlessness. Certain intersections have turned into "drive-thru" -- allowing buses, cars, and three-wheelers to make turns in any direction they choose. The police and traffic sergeants are but mute spectators to all these vicious games.

The traffic jams sometimes brings the city to a grinding halt, causing annual loss of about Tk.20,000 crore, as revealed by research findings. Without the city growing in a planned way, and without the highways and railways

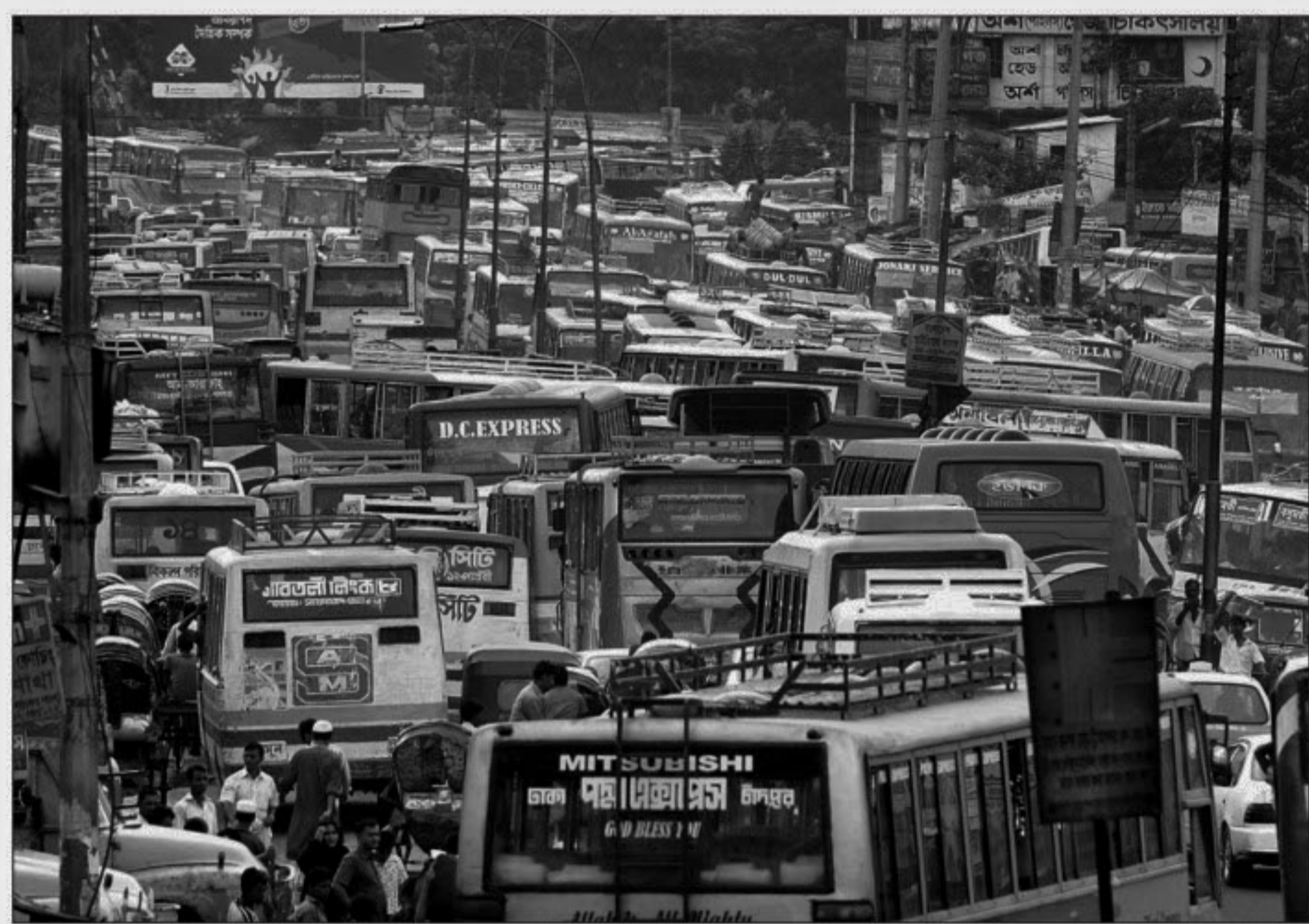
functioning effectively, and city zoning done through proper planning, there is very little chance that the traffic management activities will bear any fruit.

Environmentalists have expressed concern about the environmental degradation of Dhaka, which may spell the death of the city in the long run. The encroachment on the river Buriganga, the lifeline of Dhaka city, traffic congestion, pollution and diseases are turning this majestic capital city into a choking hell.

Once sources of sweet and pure water for the bustling cities of Dhaka and Narayanganj, Buriganga and Shitalakhya rivers are now lifeless receptacles of human wastes and toxic industrial effluents.

The encroachers first dumped waste on the riverbed and then raised unauthorised structures on the reclaimed land. And it has proved to be a very lucrative business! There is no need to buy the land and pay any tax, just encroach. Even the H.C. rulings on eviction of such illegal grabbing have very little effect.

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Choked to the brim.

## CLOSEUP JAPAN

# Vanishing centenarians

If isolation of individuals is the illness that Japan is suffering from resulting in the incidents of vanishing centenarians or solitary deaths of elderly, then resorting to forgery in the death of family members is something that goes beyond the limits of anything that we term moral.

MONZURUL HUQ

IT sounds almost like a thriller, but with a sad tone. A man thought for quite long to be the oldest living male soul in Japanese capital had suddenly disappeared. The man, 111 years old Sogen Kato, was living in Tokyo's Adachi ward with his relatives and had been drawing pension and other benefits on a regular basis. Moreover, when his wife died in 2004, family pension benefits totaling to more than \$100,000 were paid to him. In all Japanese official documents Kato was alive and Tokyo Metropolitan Government had recently listed him as the oldest male resident of the capital.

Then all of a sudden something happened when in late June ward officials contacted police to inform that they had been unable to confirm the whereabouts of Kato and suspected that he might have disappeared or even have died. Police then went to Kato's house in search of the disappeared centenarian, but was refused entry by the relatives who told police that the old man had shut himself up as he wanted to become a living Buddha. Japanese police was obviously puzzled as there is no guideline that tells them how to deal with a living Buddha.

It took police some time to overcome the barriers that protect citizens from undue harassments of law enforcement officials, and when finally they were able to get inside the house, what they had found in a first floor room was a body lying in a bed. The partially mummified body was dressed in underwear

and was covered by a blanket. Part of the body had already turned into skeleton. That was the first revelation of vanishing centenarians in Japan which has raised many questions that are yet to find convincing answers.

Kato is thought to have died around 30 years ago. However, the bank account where his pension benefits were deposited still held 3.4 million yen after 2.7 million yen was withdrawn from the account in July.

What exactly happened to Kato still remains a mystery. He lived with the family of his eldest daughter who has turned 81 this year. The bank transactions give clear indications that someone in the family must have been handling the account and ripping the benefits of Japan's generous pension payment at a time when financial situation of the country and families are turning worse. Family members gave police different accounts of why Kato's body remained in the house for that long. According to relatives, he had shut himself up in the room about 30 years ago with the vow to become a living Buddha and they had decided not to disturb him at all.

Lord Buddha, after all, is a respected figure in Japan and someone trying to imitate the ways Buddha lived needs to be given the liberty of choice! The daughter and a 53-year-old granddaughter told police that the old man did not want to meet anyone and they simply decided to respect his wish. The granddaughter also told police that her grandfather was a man of very harsh character, so nobody dared to enter his room. But the handling of money from his account suggests the opposite. The

family most likely wanted to keep on enjoying the financial benefits of the dead man and the easiest way to do that was just not to inform the authority of his death.

As the incident started receiving wide media attention, the local authorities all over the country felt the need to go through the lists of Japan's ballooning centenarians to find out if Kato's case was just an isolated one. This triggered searches for the whereabouts of other centenarians in Tokyo and rest of the country that revealed not only fascinating accounts of disappearing centenarians all over Japan, but also exposed the symptoms of a serious social ill that not only undermines the image of Japan as a country that takes good care of its elderly citizens, but also holds the potentiality of damaging the international standing of Japan as a country with one of the highest longevity rate in the world.

Just a few days after Kato's semi-decomposed body was found at the house of his daughter, a 113-year-old woman listed as Tokyo's oldest person also went missing. The woman, Fusa Furuya, is registered at an address in Suginami Ward. But when ward officials went to visit the home to make sure that unlike Kato the lady is the genuine living oldest person, they could meet only Furuya's 79-year-old eldest daughter who told them that she had not seen her mother for more than 20 years. The ward later tried all means available to conduct a search using the family and resident registration entries. This led to further confusion as the residency record of her son led officials to a vacant plot and her second daughter said she had not met her mother in nearly 50 years.

The mystery surrounding the vanishing old lady remains unsolved. However, in Furuya's case there is no record of her receiving old age pension or having used the national health insurance programme in last five years.

The two incidents prompted officials all over Japan to take account of the elderly and

the count of missing centenarians across the country climbed to more than 60 at the end of first week this month. According to official records, the number of centenarians in Japan stands at about 40,000. Most of them receive pension and are presented with gifts. Unless death notifications are filed by family members of the elderly, payments usually do not stop. The cases of missing centenarians suggest that in some cases there might have been deliberate attempts to hide the death for taking advantage of pension benefits, particularly at a time when many in the country had been hit hard by the continued economic downturn.

Erosion of social bondage in urban life makes it easier for people to keep secret of family matters. As a result, every family in big cities is turning into an island of which others living around know almost nothing and also care the least. This is exactly the situation what the deceased Japanese novelist Kobo Abe masterfully portrayed in many of his writings. Should he been alive today, he probably would have thought the reality somehow is surpassing the range of his imagination. If isolation of individuals is the illness that Japan is suffering from resulting in the incidents of vanishing centenarians or solitary deaths of elderly, then resorting to forgery in the death of family members is something that goes beyond the limits of anything that we term moral.

Hence, Japan needs to think seriously how to check this moral erosion. Welfare Minister Akira Nagatsuma said he plans to begin face-to-face survey of pension beneficiaries aged 110 or elder. This might be helpful in identifying anyone resorting to unfair practices. But to ensure that the unhappy incidents of disappearance are not repeated again, what the country needs more is to find out the reasons that led to such deep moral erosion.

Monzurul Huq writes from Tokyo.

# Why Asian hits never go global



MOST people know karaoke is painful. But did you know it can be fatal? Today, boys and girls, we will look at the topic of music in Asia.

An in-depth survey by yours truly shows that there have been scores of deaths at sing-it-yourself places, particularly in Asia. Sometimes fights are triggered by audience comments about

amateurish singing (what do they expect at a karaoke venue? Pavarotti?).

Or disputes break out when one singer hogs the microphone for too long -- and five seconds is too long if my former boss is performing.

Then there are the technical glitches. There have been at least four deaths in Vietnam alone in which a karaoke performer puts an ill-wired mike to his lips, leans against the speaker and goes out with a bang -- literally. POW!

Karaoke deaths are also common in the Philippines, but not due to bad wiring. In one unfortunate incident in a town north of Manila, listeners criticised a singer for being off-key.

Bad idea. The singer and his friends turned out to be heavily armed agents

of the Philippines National Bureau of Investigation. They drew their guns.

Bad idea Number 2: The hecklers turned out to be heavily armed police officers.

There were numerous deaths in the ensuing shoot-out. And it was all over a few duff notes in My Way.

The deadly underside of karaoke is worrying, considering its prevalence in Asia. One Singapore hotel installed karaoke equipment in each guestroom. The Royal Dokmaideng Hotel in Vientiane, Laos, boasts in brochures about its 16 karaoke fun rooms: "Yell your joyfulness. Seek the spiritual communication."

Sometimes karaoke kills by sheer excitement. The present writer watched a Hong Kong politician sing

Unchained Melody, better known in Asia as the theme from the movie Ghost, in a large ballroom.

We held our breath as he strained for the high note close to the end of the song: "Are you still mine? I neeeeed your love."

He finished singing. We applauded. He dropped dead.

Or to put it another way, he yelled his joyfulness and found spiritual communication.

Five actual names of Japanese pop music bands:

1. Bump of Chicken;
  2. Dog Hairdressers;
  3. The Pees;
  4. Elephant Kashimashi; and
  5. Super Butter Dog.
- Quiz: What Asian language are the

following phrases from?

"Fallin' in lurve," "Breakin' my heart" and "Kiss me, baby."

They sound cliché, but they are popular English clichés used in vernacular pop songs throughout Asia.

In South Korea, bands jump seamlessly between English and Korean, such as in T.T. Ma's Wanna Be Loved: "Hear me now, hanguhleum da gawa nal aeajwo nae jinshimeul," which means, "Hear me now, take a step closer and embrace me and my truth."

The good news is that anglicised Asian pop still retains a delightful charm all its own. For example, top Japanese boy band Glay's Kissin' Noise goes like this:

"I and love don't kiss me noisy love

don't kiss me only you don't kiss me lost my love."

As you can see, it has lots of nice English poppy sort of words scattered around, but no meaning at all.

Their countrymen, The Pees, have released a thoughtful song called Brain:

"I want to throw my brain of a half, I want to throw my brain of a half, wanna throw it away, wanna throw it away."

This, for me, is on a par with the greatest lyrics of the Spice Girls:

"I wanna huh I wanna huh I wanna huh I wanna huh I wanna really really really really really zig-a-zig-ah."

Yes, the heirs of Cole Porter are refining their skills.

For more ways to stay in tune visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com.

# Let's survive a mugging

KHANDAKER ZIA HASAN

LATEST scenario: A mugger was shot dead by an MP's gunman when he encountered the latter while fleeing after mugging a housewife in Gulshan area of the capital.

A businessman was killed and a shop employee injured after a group of muggers stabbed them and snatched Tk five lakh away on Dhaka-Barisal highway at Rajoir upazila in Barisal district on Tuesday.

Motorcycle-riding armed muggers snatched away Tk 50 lakh of One Bank Ltd in broad daylight on Sunday from city's Jatrabari area when the amount was being taken to Narayanganj in a microbus.

Armed muggers also on Tuesday in broad daylight shot two persons and made off with around Tk 4 lakh in separate incidents in the capital's Shyamoli and South Keraniganj areas.

Police said three muggers on a motorbike shot Acme Laboratories' Accounts Officer Mostak Ahmed, 35, and snatched Tk 3.78 lakh from him when he stepped out of a CNG run auto rickshaw in front of Dutch-Bangla Bank Ltd on Ring Road around 2:45pm.

These are a very few of the stories of mugging taken place in Dhaka over the last one month. Despite an ongoing special drive of police in the city since May 13, muggings using small firearms are continuing to rob people, putting the city dwellers in a state of constant panic. Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) sources said over 81 incidents of mugging took place in the capital in June. But one can easily assume the figure would be three to four folds more, as most of the victims do not report to police fearing legal complexities.

According to different law enforcement sources on an average around 70 to 100 incidents of snatching take place in the capital per day at over 435 crime prone spots, but most of the victims do not report to the police. Muggers carry firearms and use motor vehicles including motorbikes to commit the crimes, despite deployment of law enforcers and constant police patrol at different intersections across the city.

Incidents of mugging have been on the rise in the city, in which favourite targets seem to be clients of banks coming out of the financial institutions, sales representative of different cell phone companies, moneychangers, travel agents, traders carrying money and last but not the least of course the helpless city dwellers from all walks of life.

Positive news: Dgallers such a backdrop, the police administration sat for a meeting at the police headquarters in July to figure out effective strategies for fighting crimes in the capital.

In the meeting, the DMP authorities decided to divide jurisdictions of police stations under their sub-inspectors (SIs), holding them liable for any crime occurring within the areas of the jurisdictions, which sounds pretty good. Let's hope for the best.

How to survive a mugging? Well, being a Dhaka city dweller, have ONLY ONE humble request to government to survive mugging: PLEASE deploy 435 military policemen at 435 crime prone spots. Army personnel have stood beside civilians to help them out in water crisis to fire fighting everywhere. Why not at this severe crisis? I do believe they will heartily stand beside the city dwellers to protect them from being mugged. And now some tips for city dwellers as a safety measure to survive a mugging:

- Travel with a companion and steer clear of dark, empty buildings, poorly lit streets known and crime prone areas.
- Walk confidently at a steady pace, close to the kerb and facing traffic. If you think someone is following you, cross the street. If the suspicious person does the same, walk quickly to a busy, well-lit area or go to an occupied house or shop and phone the police.
- Drive with your car doors locked. If you are being followed in your car, drive to a garage or police station and sound your horn or flash the lights until you attract attention.
- If your car breaks down, stay in it and wait for help. Let friends and family know your route and proposed times of departure and arrival. If strangers approach, roll down your windows slightly and ask them to call the police. Wait inside until help arrives.
- Stay alert and be aware of your surroundings. It's important, especially for women, to be aware of their body language when walking in public places.
- Try not to carry a lot of bags and other items that might prevent you from fighting back in the event of an attack and minimize other distractions when walking such as listening to an iPod or talking on a cell phone. They can make you an easier target.
- Conceal your belongings by carrying a slim purse with a strap that goes across the body or hiding your purse inside your jacket if the weather is cold. Some self-defense experts even suggest wearing a fanny pack to foil would be robbers
- Let go. If an attacker is grabbing your purse or wallet, don't fight him for it. The contents of your pocketbook are not worth your life. Throw the wallet away from you at a 45-degree angle. When the attacker goes after it, run to safety. Seek out a place where other people are, such as a neighbor's house, a nearby shop or gas station. Call the police as soon as possible.
- Walk confidently with your head up. Always maintain eye contact. A mugger is less likely to attack someone who has gotten a good look at his or her face.

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