

# Edge of the abyss: Population and climate

SELINA MOHSIN

**W**E are beginning to become comatose if we fail to respond to the situation around us. In just 2 square kilometres, 250,000 people live in sub-human conditions. The locality is closely punctuated with huts of bamboo roofed with CI sheets and strips of polythene. Dirt and sleaze are everywhere. Nearby is a stagnant polluted lake. A test of water samples by ABC News found the lake water contaminated with E coli bacteria. This is Karail, the biggest slum in Dhaka. Just a few kilometres away are Gulshan and Baridhara, the most exclusive areas of the country. The contrast is almost palpable. The implications are phenomenal.

The population explosion since independence has significantly decreased the man-land ration to less than 2 decimals per person. Along with this, the negative impacts of climate change have forced rural/urban migration of people in search of employment. Frequent coastal flooding, destruction of rice crops due to saline intrusion and entire villages being swept away by recurring storms are increasingly common. Around 500,000 people, almost the population of Washington DC, move to Dhaka and the banks of the river Buriganga annually. In Dhaka alone, some 3.4 million people live in slums. Almost 90% of the rural migrant population is absorbed in the four major cities -- Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi.

The population of Dhaka is growing at a rate of 4.4% per year, one of the highest in the world. The estimated population of Bangladesh in 2011 is 160 million in a country with a land surface of 143,998 sq km. According to UN data, the average population density per sq km was 1111.1 in 2008. It is the most densely populated country in the world excluding city states. In 2005, CIA Factsheet ranked Bangladesh the 7th most densely populated country. A remarkable contrast is provided by Russia, with slightly less population spread over a landmass 120 times larger than Bangladesh.

The world's population growth is fastest in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. High fertility has a very strong correlation with poverty and lack of female education. Over 20% women in poor countries have no access to contraception. Over 55% of the popula-

tion of Bangladesh is 25 years of age or younger and only 6.3% is over the age of 65 (UN 2009). This denotes a dangerous "youth bulge" far exceeding employment opportunities. The pressing issues include lack of infrastructure and essential public services for the

Bangladesh, resulting in mass migration with cumulative pressure on limited resources.

The population of Bangladesh according to USAID is projected to reach 231 million by 2050. A tragedy which has already begun will reach an apocalyptic stage.

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surging millions. This is further aggravated by escalating food prices and social unrest. Human tragedy has already begun.

Each individual has basic needs which, multiplied by a factor of 160 million, leave behind almost unimaginable ecological footprints. Widespread diseases, emergence of new ones, food and water shortages and adverse effects of climate change all have devastating social consequences. Moreover, the country is one of the most climate vulnerable nations since one meter rise of sea level would inundate a third of

Population pressure influences all aspects of life, both directly and indirectly. It results in a higher rate of absolute poverty and is a major obstacle to improved health and education. It compels people to overexploit natural resources. Improper use of fertilisers and pesticides to boost agricultural production, industrial plants spouting poisonous waste increasing water toxicity, human encroachment on forests and wetlands all have depleted the biological balance.

The position of the five major environmental issues -- land degradation; water pollution and scarcity; air pollu-

tion; biodiversity and natural disasters -- indicates that the environmental conditions of our resource base are deteriorating at an exponential rate. In Dhaka, the population density has given rise to cramped housing in slums, where at a time 35% to 45% of the people suffer from diseases. Furthermore, unprecedented numbers of passenger vehicles cause high concentration of lead pollution in the air. This results in 500,000 premature deaths and 45 million new cases of chronic bronchitis each year (UNEP, SOE 1999). Water from rivers surrounding Dhaka is considered unfit for human consumption and aquatic life vanished long ago. The quality of life has deteriorated at an alarming rate.

The forested coverage of the country has reduced to 6.7% as opposed to the 25% that a country should possess. Although Bangladesh is a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Modhupur jungle area of 'sal' forest, one of the country's last remaining natural forests has reduced to 8,000 acres from 45,000 acres by 2003, a decrease of 85% in less than 40 years.

Bangladesh needs to double its food production by 2020. Malnutrition is high and almost half the population lives below the poverty line. The country is already facing challenges of unemployment, inadequate housing, energy shortages, affordable food and quality services. These have exacerbated levels of crime and violence as increasing numbers of people compete for limited resources.

The cascade of risks due to overpopulation is immense. Yet this is a wake up call, not a cry of doom. Past decades have seen a fall in fertility rate from 6.3% to 1.6%. It can and must be further reduced. The expanding economy is generating wealth that can be better distributed through non-conventional methods. Cities can be powerhouses of creativity and technological innovation. But we require an integrated approach to national efforts with good governance, entrepreneurial drive, better city planning, improved social structure, reforms efficiently implemented, effective adaptation to climate change and a social basis of more and higher quality education, health services and employment opportunities.

We are already at the edge of the abyss. Shall we fall or be rescued?

The writer is a Former High Commissioner and a former Head of Human Resource Development Initiative, Commonwealth Secretariat, UK.

BITTER TRUTH

## The battered half



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

**B**EATING and murder of wives as well as abduction and raping of school and college-going girls are crimes generally associated with the most depraved individuals. Because of the increasing frequency, no one is shocked any longer to hear of such atrocities. True, society has progressed to a great extent, but beneath the veneer of advancement lurks a primitive attitude.

Not only in the cities and towns, but also in the villages, terror has come stalking. Killing for dowry is the most vicious of all social crimes, and despite efforts by social activists and women's rights organisations to eliminate this menace, the numbers have continued to climb. A report published by the police headquarters revealed that from January to October 2009, at least 3,413 women were tortured over dowry, 83 fell victim to torture, 2,336 were abducted and 2,476 were raped and 36 killed after rape. These official figures are but a glimpse of the truth.

A report published by some rights organisations endorses the extent of the problem. Nearly half of the women surveyed across the country were physically abused by their husbands, and in some cases in collusion with their in-laws, to extract dowry from the relatives of the wife. The survey shows that the violence cuts across caste, creed and class and the level of education had nothing to do with it.

Sadly, society has viewed such violence against women as a "private" or "family" matter. It has never felt that it has a responsibility to stop this domestic abuse. Says a women's rights activist in the country: "A woman is often considered an outsider in her husband's home. Her subordination may be ensured in many ways, including a daily routine of violence." This means that the home, which represents the safest space for an individual, often becomes the most unsafe place for some women.

With such abuse and deaths mounting up, the Parliament, in pursuance of a High Court order on May 2009, passed the "Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010" to contain domestic violence that, along with other acts of abuse on women, made cruelty against a married woman a crime. This section allows the hapless women to initiate criminal proceedings. But few women are bold enough to exercise this option because either they do not have the resources to fight the case or are afraid of being thrown out of their husband's house.

Even if a woman gathers the courage to swim against the tide, her complaint is stonewalled by the police. Policemen, sometimes in an unholy alliance with the alleged tormentor or his family, have been known to tell the rare woman who complains: "Why do you want to land your family in jail?" This attitude has become institutionalised.

A high-ranking retired police officer said: "Policemen had often ignored or remained unresponsive to complaints of cruelty because they were not assigned any specific duty to protect these women." The family harmony we celebrate is so often at the cost of the woman's silence. But with the country's apex court issuing rule concerning repression against women and asking the law enforcement agency to take cognisance of such violations, things should have changed for the better. But it has been honoured more in defiance than taking stringent action against the alleged offenders. And so the crime continues.

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put up with the violence for up to 15 years before reporting to any of their relations even, not to speak of complaining to the law enforcement agency.

Other than enacting a new law, a programme of sensitisation is needed -- for the police, the law makers, the judiciary, and society as a whole -- on domestic violence against women for the legislation to have significant impact.

Although many cases of dowry harassment cases were reported of late, a staggering number were not. Despite all attempts to prevent it, an epidemic appears to be in the making. It is a phenomenon that escapes easy answers due to a complex mix of social trends. The sudden affluence of a section of people, in rural areas and cities, in the late '90s is the primary factor.

With get-rich-quick becoming the new goal of life, dowry became the perfect instrument for upward material mobility. Growing consumerism, flashy life styles and in most cases joblessness and drug addiction are fuelling these crimes. If once a bicycle or a small amount of money sufficed for the lower income groups, now a TV set, motor cycle, other than cash, are the common demands.

For the upper middle-class and better educated grooms, the demand is soaring. They look for flat ownership or a plot of land at Dhaka or a chunk of share in business. People are inclined to believe that the quantum of dowry demand may be higher among the upper classes but 90% of the dowry deaths and 80% of the dowry harassments occur at the middle and lower strata.

It is hard to believe and harder still to comprehend. Some of these tales are so horrifying! A report published in the Prothom Alo on

September 26 said that Sukria Begum was married to Shahin Talukdar about two and a half year ago. Sukria's father met the dowry demand by paying Tk.30,000 at the time of wedding. But Shahin's greed was insatiable. Within one year he asked her to bring Tk.50,000 from her parents. Sukria's mother gave him a gold chain costing Tk.30,000. But Shahin was desperate to have his demand for cash money met. He went to Sukria's father's house, and after an altercation with Sukria he cut off her right leg.

For women in Bangladesh, it is a difficult battle to win. They are handicapped by history, victims of firmly embedded gender system. Women are yet to wake up and take a bold stand against dowry because most of them are steeped in poverty often with no education, employment or business to fend for themselves.

Most intriguing, in most cases girls do not have any knowledge of, or participation in, the deal. Dowry is often a monetary deal between two men -- the bride's father and the groom or his father. Despite the promulgation of Acid Control Act, 2002 and Dowry Prohibition Act, the numbers of dowry related atrocities and deaths are climbing. The law may take temporary punitive action, but women need real social, financial, moral and ideological support to stand firmly against an age-old system that has almost got a societal sanction.

Women face double peril: inside the barred doors is humiliation and outside awaits public ire. Despite every stigma, dowry continues to be a signature of marriage. NGOs, or women activists or Women Lawyers' Association may pursue one or two cases and rehabilitate some tortured women, but appallingly, by and large, any major success or breakthrough is hardly possible because social intervention is low and ignorance high.

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## Life as a writer



Nury Vittachi

**I**'M back. A huge number of readers (three) asked me what I did on my holiday. So I have decided to record the details here for convenient distribution to ALL of humanity, plus selected semi-intelligent life forms such as dolphins, chimpanzees and Fox News viewers.

**Day one:**

I spent the first day filing away all my half-written books and articles into different boxes labeled with my various pen names, "JK Rowling", "Stephanie Meyer", "James Patterson", etc.

**Day two:**

Then I jetted to Wales for a catch-up latte with Prince William's new bride Kate. I told her that she'd been majorly smart to move from actress to princess.

I said: "I mean I TOTALLY loved you in Titanic, but movies are a sunset industry. The hot new trends of the future are the monarchy, the phonogram, hardback books and C90 cassette tapes."

She said Titanic was a different Kate (what a joker!) and asked me to stay over, but I have an aversion for the whole treason/ decapitation thing. It's just not me.

Besides, I'd promised to fly to Washington DC to help President Barack Obama prepare for his summit with China's President Hu Jintao.

**Day three:**

At a coffee shop near the White House, I told Obama to chill. "Buzzer, you'll be fine as long as you smile a lot and make sure you follow eastern traditions, such as pausing in the doorway to take your shoes off and throw them at your host."

He wrote it down gratefully.

**Day four:**

I then popped in to the head office of the World Association of Newspapers, where everyone was STILL worrying about the internet and stuff.

"Guys, guys, GUYS," I said. "Mark my words. Computers are a fad. This time next year they'll be gone."

Overcome with joy, they wept at my feet, their salt tears badly staining my Zegna pants.

**Day five:**

Arriving back in Asia, I needed downtime, so I invented a new extreme sport. This involved throwing myself out of a jet at 3,000 metres and using my jacket as a paraglider to land on a skyscraper.

An hour later, film director Christopher Nolan called to ask whether he could put the stunt into Inception 2.

"Of course," I said. "I'll write the screenplay if you like. But you can put your own name on it, like last time."

The rest of the summer was filled with rather mundane activities. I cleaned the apartment and freed a few Arab countries from their dictators. You may have read about that.

Meanwhile, my mate Ben (Bernanke) was looking for some kind of major economic stimulus to refloat the world economy, so I told him I'd write Harry Potter 7 part 3.

By this time, I was missing work, so I headed to my office, arriving just in time to see a security van delivering a million dollars in cash from this newspaper.

I'd forgotten it was payday.

The security team drove back to the vaults to get the rest.

Logging onto my computer, I found an email from a young man named Chris wanting to know what the requirements were for starting a career as a writer.

"You only need one thing," I wrote back. "But you need a LOT of it: imagination."

For more on THE writer, visit our columnist at: <http://mrjam.typepad.com>