

SUNDAY POUCH

Congratulations Dhaka!



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DHAKA city is in a mess. By any standards, this city is the least livable in the world. This was confirmed officially in the 2012 Econo-

mist Intelligence Unit (EIU) survey of 140 cities around the globe. Dhaka scored 38.7 points. The best city is Melbourne in Australia scoring 97.5 points. In other words Dhaka today is 140th out of 140 cities surveyed. So congratulations, Dhaka!

The EIU survey to rate cities is based on 30 factors across five broad categories. They are: (1) Stability (2) Healthcare (3) Culture (4) Environment (5) Education and Infrastructure. The Survey originated when the need arose to give hardship allowance to expatriates working in any of the 140 cities. It, therefore, assesses which locations around the world have the best or worst living conditions.

So what do our city fathers have to say? Sorry, but those who are living in Dhaka cannot boast of having such a father. We have been orphaned in that respect since 2011, when our wise leaders cut up the city in two parts -- north and south -- and appointed two government bureaucrats as administrators, at least till the next mayoral elections. The government is reluctant to announce fresh elections, although overdue, because it knows that it suffers from an electoral disadvantage due to breakdown in delivery of municipal services.

By world standards, Dhaka is a medium-size city (only 1,464 square kilometers) but with one of the largest populations (about 16 million). It has, therefore, the densest population per square kilometer. But what specifically makes the city unlivable?

Four things perhaps make it so. First is of course its abysmal infrastructure. There are only 1,868 kilometers of paved roads which are mostly in a state of serious disrepair.

None of the paved streets are of international standard. Dhaka does not have strict zoning laws. So hawkers, petty traders, multinationals and families live merrily along the same streets. There is coexistence of crass poverty, pollution and wealth in all areas of the city. The city has also very poor drainage and sewerage system.

The next aspect that makes Dhaka unlivable is its huge population. Not only are the streets crowded at all times the growth of population here is also the highest (4.2% each year) compared to any Asian city, including those in China and India. By 2025 the

The third aspect which makes Dhaka the least livable city is the lack of services. In any case why should the municipal people work? Since they are poorly paid they often resort to corruption. Not only is garbage not picked up on time and allowed to rot, but also the streets are not regularly swept. Other essential service workers behave in the same way as the municipal employees. Take the case of the telephone repairman or the TV cable man, or even the electricity line repairman. All of them think that their services would only be available to those who can afford it.

the services of unrepresentative people to run the affairs of the city? Why is the government, which is loathe to have unelected persons running a "caretaker" or "interim" national government, so adamant in running this megapolis with such non-representative persons. The purpose of any politics is to bring welfare to the people. The low ranking of Dhaka is also because we have not devolved responsibility to the right elected people.

But Dhaka has a future, just as it had a glorious past. This city is at the crossroad of traffic between South Asia and South East Asia. South West China can also avail of Dhaka's geographical location to connect with South Asia. With such immense possibility of Dhaka developing as a regional metropolis, what this city needs is a visionary who can lead us out of the present mess and also take the city to its natural destiny. The government has a serious role to play here. It must put in place a local government that can avail the services of the best minds of the country to fix things up as well as to change this city into a modern, livable place. In Dhaka, this local government must be allowed to generate enough resources to run its affairs and also be able to coordinate the activities of all the essential services. When will the central government stop interfering in the running of this city?

Innovative methods must be found to restore the cleanliness and the lush greenery of Dhaka. In Singapore, one of the cleanest cities in the world, the president of the country personally rewards the best sweeper and the best kept public toilet with a prestigious prize each year. Why can't we do the same? Let us restore the dignity of this great city by doing the right thing, at the right moment, at the right cost.

A wise man had once said: "There are two primary choices in life: to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them." Which, Mr. Local Government Minister, is your cup of tea?

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With 16 million residents and over 2 million joining them everyday from the suburbs, there is chaos on the streets. Criminals find easy pickings when people are shopping, parking or even travelling from one part of the city to the other.

population of this city will be 25 million. Look at the squalor, the garbage, the graffiti that adorns the streets now. Add to it the torn and defaced political posters hung up on light posts and the ramshackle bamboo welcome gates for ministers and small leaders over busy streets. What hellish manifestation of aesthetics! Then look at the few public urinals that cater to the thousands that use them everyday and convert them into stinking hell holes. Sometimes people urinate along drains beside the streets. You have almost a Dante-like scenario that keeps visitors at bay from Dhaka.

According to some estimates the city now has 6 lakh or more registered motor vehicles and over 4 lakh pedal rickshaws. How can they move in an orderly manner through the narrow streets? The traffic police is hardly of any help. Almost 98 % of the traffic lights are out of order. Control of traffic is done mostly by hand. Add to this the recurrent blocking of arterial roads by street protest groups. The mini buses are some of the most disorderly vehicles. Their deformed bodies add to the squalour.

With 16 million residents and over 2 million joining them everyday from the suburbs, there is chaos on the streets. Criminals find easy pickings when people are shopping, parking or even travelling from one part of the city to the other. Police are not always available to help the citizens because they are engaged on lesser issues like providing security to the VIPs or protecting political meetings or preventing hartals becoming violent.

A horrific aspect of travelling in the city during night is that most of the streets are dark. Even in posh residential areas the streets are not lighted. In fact, many people wonder who the suppliers of the street bulbs are and why the municipal technicians are unable to keep the lamps burning. The EIU survey has been generous in giving Dhaka 38.7 points. But an average resident here would give Dhaka only 10 points or less on a different slate of categories, which would assess the services that are provided to them.

What kind of politics is this that we do not hold elections to the city government? Why do we need to call up

| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

After Afghanistan, a new great game

ALEXANDER COOLEY

SINCE 9/11, America's priority in Central Asia has been to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan. But as the United States and Nato pull out, there is a new danger: that the West could become entangled in regional rivalries, local strongman politics and competition with Russia and China.

Central Asian governments have sought for years to manipulate foreign powers' interest in the region for their own benefit. In the summer of 2005, the United States military was evicted from its facility at Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan after American officials criticized the Uzbek government's slaughter of hundreds of anti-government demonstrators in Andijon; Russia and China, which have both been expanding their footprints in the region, publicly backed the crackdown.

In 2009 Kyrgyzstan's kleptocratic president, Kurmanbek S. Bakiyev, drummed up a bidding war between Washington and Moscow over the fate of the Manas air base, the main staging facility for American troops in Afghanistan. Following Bakiyev's ouster in an April 2010 revolt, Kyrgyz officials claimed that many of these payments had been laundered through a complex network of offshore bank accounts controlled by the former first family.

As America begins withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Central Asian states are likely to increase their demands for tacit payoffs for cooperation. Currently, the United States pays the Kyrgyz government \$60 million a year to lease Manas

and funnels hundreds of millions of dollars in fuel contracts to local suppliers and intermediaries.

The United States also pays roughly \$500 million annually in transit fees to ship equipment and material via the Northern Distribution Network, a set of road, sea, railway and air routes that traverse the Central Asian states, which was opened to provide an alternative to Pakistani supply routes.

In June, Nato reached agreements with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan for taking equipment out of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan, which effectively controls rail shipments out of northern Afghanistan, has already announced that it will charge up to 150 percent of the distribution network's prevailing transit rates, and American officials expect to be further squeezed as neighboring states bargain hard during the West's rush to the exits.

Most controversially of all, Nato and the Central Asian states are still negotiating over the potential transfer of military equipment, used by coalition forces in Afghanistan, to Central Asian governments' security services, which have a bloody human rights record.

In January, the Obama administration lifted a ban on foreign military sales to Uzbekistan, on national security grounds, to allow for sales of counterterrorism equipment. American officials insist that such

future transfers will include only nonlethal items, but the Uzbek government has long sought items like armored personnel carriers, helicopters and drones, which could be used to suppress protests.

Withdrawal from Afghanistan also elevates the risk that the United States, together with other external powers, will be drawn into a number of local disputes and escalating regional rivalries. Over the last decade, Central Asian leaders have consistently invoked the specter of insurgents' spilling over from Afghanistan to justify their own counterterrorism efforts and the need for security cooperation with Russia, China and the United States. Western withdrawal will encourage local elites to stoke these fears, justifying domestic crackdowns, rendition of political opponents and escalation of border tensions with neighbors.

The Tajik government recently cracked down on local militias in the remote town of Khorog near the Afghan border. Though the government claimed that it captured Afghan-trained fighters in its crackdown, locals view the action as an attempt to take over lucrative smuggling routes along the Afghan border and finally bring the autonomous region under full state control.

Russia seems keen to reinforce this narrative to justify extending its military basing rights throughout the country, which, in all likelihood, Tajik

officials will then use as leverage to demand more Western assistance.

Washington's "new silk route" strategy, an attempt to promote sustainable development in Afghanistan by linking its infrastructure, energy transmission grids and pipelines to Central Asia, may lead to further corruption and enrichment of top officials. Promoting big-ticket projects and labeling them in grand terms has already provoked suspicion in Beijing and Moscow about the West's long-term regional ambitions.

Moreover, Russia continues to push for the inclusion of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the new Moscow-led customs union, while China continues to build new infrastructure and energy pipelines. Far from promoting increased regional trade and commerce, the Central Asian states now seem to be using external economic initiatives to extract new revenue.

After 11 years of pressing the Afghan government to improve its governance and create democratic institutions, Washington has failed to effectively promote these same goals in neighboring countries. Now withdrawal from Afghanistan risks dragging the West even further into a hotbed of domestic power struggles and regional rivalries.

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Losing forest to housing

At what cost?

WITH the capital city's population reaching some 15million people, the need to expand its area has been a priority area for Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha's (Rajuk). In line with this, the body has undertaken a number of housing projects including Jhilmil and Purbachal. Unfortunately, the Purbachal housing project has run into hot water. From what has been reported in the press, the Purbachal housing project in the district of Gazipur will decimate around 1,300 acres of forest. This is particularly damning in the backdrop of a Department of Environment report published in 2010 that went invariably against the ongoing Purbachal project stating that land being acquired is thick with vegetation, particularly with Shorea robusta, also known as uâl tree. In fact, according to a land study by Rajuk itself found nearly 43 per cent of the area to be covered by forest and nearly 40 per cent by cultivable land.

Apart from deforestation, the area under consideration is home to some ten thousand people who by occupation are farmers and fishermen whose livelihoods come under direct threat as they are uprooted from their homes and means to earning that revolve around uâl tree, fruit orchards, bamboo groves, sandal and rain trees disappear in the face of city expansion. Yet the project continues in defiance of Dhaka Area Plan (DAP) approved by the Cabinet in July, 2010, but which remains stalled in the face of opposition from land developers and real estate interests. Perhaps in line with this, the housing and public works ministry informed the Prime Minister's Office in September 2010 that there is no forest or arable land in the acquired area.

While we fully agree that the capital city needs to be expanded to make it livable, such expansion must be in accordance with DAP, for the master plan has incorporated in it significant recommendations to make Dhaka livable. Unless the government makes the DAP public, housing projects, both public and private will continue to mushroom following the pattern of indiscriminate filling up of low lands, grabbing of agricultural lands and water bodies in the name of city improvement and expansion.

Dusting and doing up needed

National heritage sites in poor state

IT really saddens us to know that almost all 109 national heritage sites in Dhaka have been virtually laid to waste due to the government authorities' indifference. Although one or two sites may still be found to stand the test of time, a news item in Saturday's issue of The Daily Star brings it to our attention that most other sites are either in dilapidated condition or have lost their original archaeological vigour owing to lack of repair and maintenance.

Historically important sites such as Bara Katra and Chhoto Katra, which date back to 17th century Mughal architecture, have already been turned into commercial establishments with the Bara Katra recently expanded to accommodate a madrasa. Another 19th century palace Ruplal House is now being used as a vegetables warehouse. The once fascinating Radhakrishna Temple on Tipu Sultan Road has been pulled down.

For all we know, after a survey in 2009, as many as 109 sites in Dhaka were given the status of national heritage and the Department of Archaeology (DoA) was entrusted with the responsibility of protecting them from ruination. We understand that a good number of these are now private property, but according to the Antiquities Act, 1968 and the Building Construction Act, 1952, the government, having assumed guardianship of these places, can renovate and repair any site of public importance.

We, however, are dismayed to learn that none of the owners of the sites were notified; nor has there been any conspicuous attempt on the government's part to initiate any repair or renovation work. Granted that the cash-strapped DoA has its limitations, we'd like to see it take a more proactive role in initiating repair and renovation work with necessary back-up from the government and the private sector, if possible.

Archaeological sites are not merely structures with architectural distinction, they are also the repository of a nation's heritage and historical developments. These not only reinforce cultural identity and instill a sense of pride but can also draw tourist revenues. Therefore, we think the government should immediately come forward to

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

August 26

55BC

Roman forces under Julius Caesar invade Great Britain.

1071

Battle of Manzikert: The Seljuk Turks defeat the Byzantine Army at Manzikert.

1303

Ala ud din Khilji captures Chittorgarh.

1429

Joan of Arc makes a triumphant entry into Paris.

1997

Beni-Ali massacre in Algeria; 60-100 people killed.

1999

Russia begins the Second Chechen War in response to the Invasion of Dagestan by the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade.

2002

Earth Summit 2002 begins in Johannesburg, South Africa.