

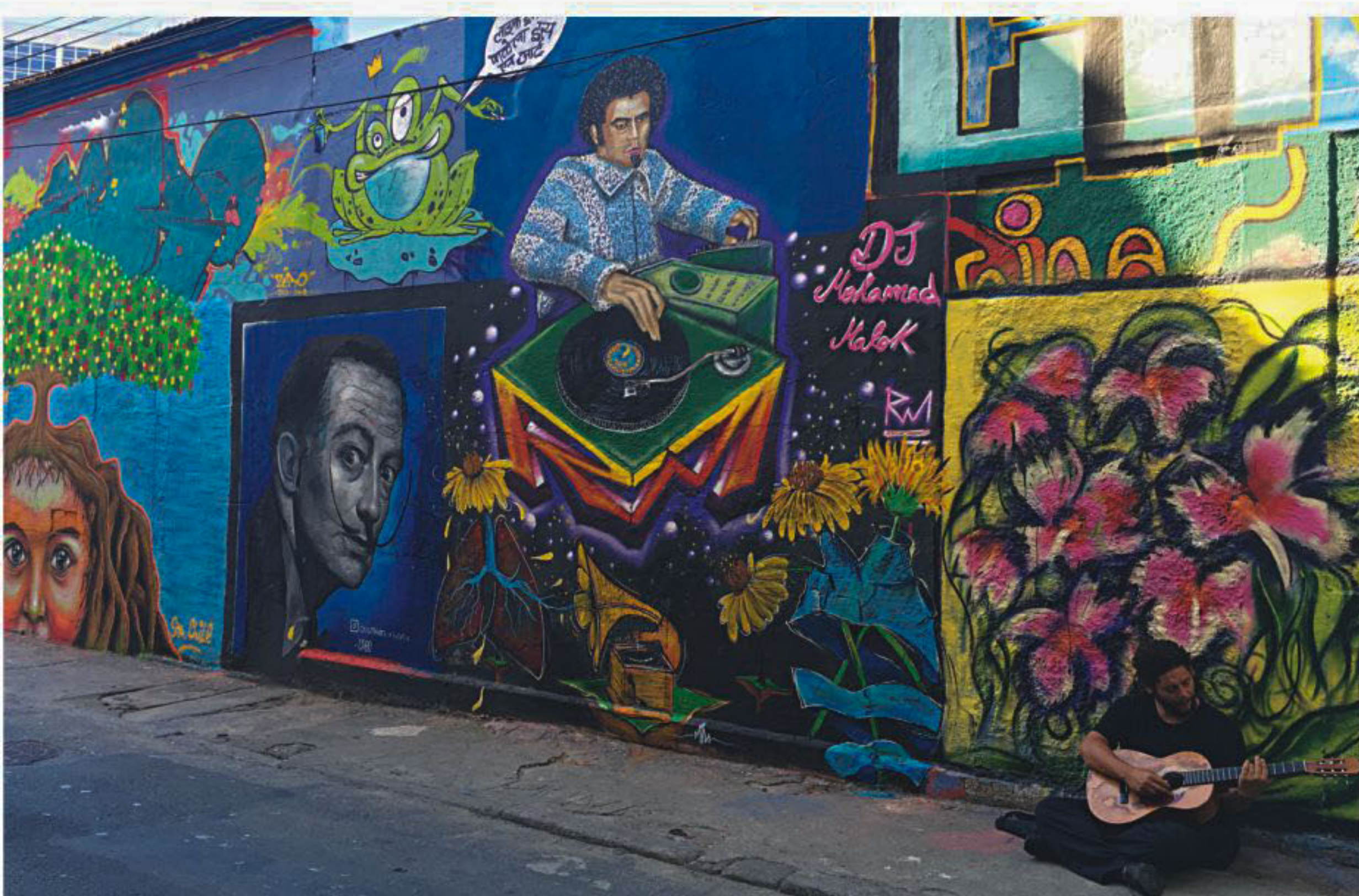
After page 14

As alarming as it may appear, I couldn't help but notice many of them sipping coffee and texting, their semi-automatics slung nonchalantly on their shoulders.

As we sat down to lunch with Pedro and his friends, I realised that slum dynamics didn't change much around the world and nor are they devoid of law and order. They just follow a different set of rules, a different way of life. It was, to put it simply, survival of the fittest.

#### Centro

Like so many cosmopolitan cities around the world, Rio's commercial hub is a hive of activity with locals flitting between soaring skyscrapers, shops and restaurants. The glass and steel behemoths stand in stark contrast to shabby art-deco shopfronts and the gilded splendour of baroque churches and theatres. The Paço Imperial, the formal imperial palace, and



Bohemian Lapa

PHOTOS: SAMAI HAIDER



Downtown Rio - a mix of skyscrapers and shabby, old shopfronts

the National History Museum, harken back to the days of old-world colonialism, proffering stunning displays of Portuguese architecture.

It was amidst these dilapidated buildings and grungy streets of central Rio de Janeiro that I came across the most enchanting example of old-world charm—the 180-year-old Royal Portuguese Reading Room or *Real Gabinete Português de Leitura*. As the receptionist signed me in, she gave me a crash course in the history of the library before ushering me into the belly of the building.

I entered the reading chamber and was immediately transported to what can only be described as a set from the Harry Potter movies. Bright shafts of sunlight filtered through an intricate stained-glass dome, lighting up the dark shelving, three-storeys high, every inch of which was covered in dusty tomes. The sheer magnificence took my breath away and I had to sit down at one of the study carrels to take it all in. My hands grazed over the aged table, worn

smooth by centuries of researchers who had sat there before me. Tourists tiptoed past, taking care to protect the sanctity of the site. It was equal parts tranquil, magical and spiritual. A greying, bespectacled man sat across from me, half hidden behind a towering pile of books. He looked up briefly, caught my stunned gaze, and said in the softest of whispers, "A remarkable place, isn't it? Inspires you." I nodded mutely. We both turned to our journals and began furiously scribbling down our thoughts.

Next stop: Rio's most breath-taking views!

**Samai Haider is a writer, traveller, artist and... economist. If her rather odd amalgamation of interests isn't dotty enough, she took to travelling around South America—with her pack and toddler strapped to her back. Read about the fables of her foibles here at The Daily Star. You can see more of her work at: <http://samaihaider.com/>**

After page 16

Since the world air quality report came out last month, talk of air pollution in the city have arisen yet again. A parliamentary standing committee, led by MP Saber Hossain Chowdhury, gave a recommendation that a public health alert be given if the AQI hits 300 (classified as hazardous), which would mean serious health effects for the entire city.

On January 28 this year, the High Court ordered the Department of Environment to conduct mobile drives twice-weekly against bodies causing air pollution. On March 13, the High Court once again asked for reports from the environment department and the city corporations as to what steps they are taking to combat air pollution.

But a look at the city shows that one of the major sources of air pollution is not being tackled sufficiently, if at all.

The leading cause of ambient air pollution are brick kilns around the city which, according to the Department of Environment's CASE data, are responsible for 58 percent of air pollution.

Modernisation of the industry has been underway since the 1990s to be cleaner and more efficient, including phasing out fixed chimneys for cleaner and more efficient kilns.

Next, vehicle emissions which make up 10.4 percent of air pollutants, too, have

been addressed with compressed natural gas (CNG) and lead-free gasoline being introduced and two-stroke engines removed from the roads over the last two decades.

Fighting the public health impact of air pollution in Bangladesh has also tended to focus on indoor air pollution, such as introducing cleaner cookstoves to the traditional *lakri*-burning stoves. But what most affects indoor air quality has been found by researchers in Dhaka (and worldwide) to be outdoor air quality.

Road and construction dust account for 15.3 percent of air pollution.

Dust on the roads originate from unregulated construction sites and are constantly stirred up by moving vehicles. "Dust pollution is a major problem now. Addressing constant roadworks and building construction across the city is challenging. For one, there are thousands of buildings and high-rises being built by both public and private bodies," says Md Ziaul Haque, director of air quality management at the Department of Environment.

Norms which are supposed to be followed include covering under-construction sites and materials being transported, and that sprinklers be periodically used at construction sites to control dust. But, says Haque, "There is a serious lack of coordination in this regard,

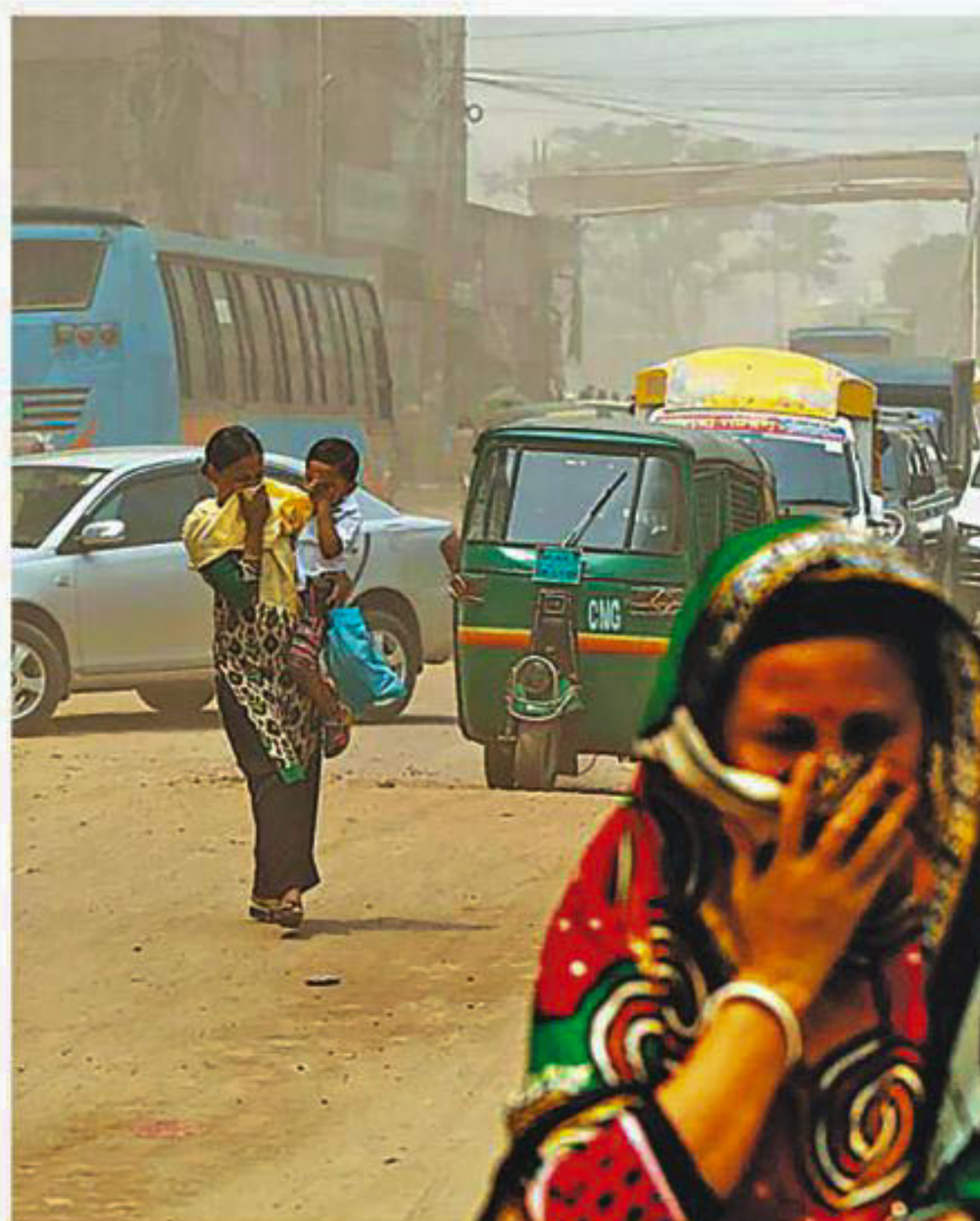


PHOTO: STAR

Road and construction dust account for 15.3 percent of air pollution.

especially poor coordination among government agencies."

What this means is that the department of environment can take little action beyond trying to engage powerful government bodies and agencies such as Rajuk, the city corporations, the mayor's office, WASA, and Titas gas. The last two, for example, constantly do roadworks which means stretches of the city's roads

are perennially in a state of being dug up.

One case in point is the biggest and most visible work, the construction of the metro and elevated expressway by the Dhaka Mass Rapid Transport Authority. Spanning across the city, sites where the work is ongoing such as Mirpur and Uttara have regularly been clouded in a cloud of dust since construction began. "We set several conditions when issuing clearance to the metro authorities," says Haque. On the other hand, the metro is touted as an environmentally-friendly solution to the city's pollution and traffic congestion.

These, though, have not been fulfilled. "We have sent multiple legal notices, instructed the authorities to come to our office to explain why these are not being fulfilled and requested that they send compliance reports." These have not yet come in, he says, the latest notice having been sent two weeks ago.

"We all realise that when it comes to government projects, there is a lack of coordination," says Haque. The environment department has legal avenues open to it such as fining the companies and authorities involved or shutting them down completely. "But how can we fine or stop work when it is such a big, priority government project? It is a sensitive matter."

"We have some limitations—even if we want to, we cannot."