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The city of hardboard dreams

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Dhaka never says no -- it welcomes everyone who arrives! The city may not hand you breathing space, but it will always carve out a corner for you -- sometimes generous, sometimes barely enough to call a coffin.

Step into one of the countless messes and hostels scattered across Farmgate, Mirpur, Jigatola, or Mohammadpur, and you'll see what I mean. From the outside, these apartments look ordinary -- tiled, painted, respectable enough. Inside though, Dhaka's improvisation takes over.

Two-bedroom flats, meant for families of four, are carved into human beehives. Brittle hardboards divide rooms into cubicles where thousands of students arrive each year after HSC -- like migratory birds carrying suitcases full of ambition.

If luck is on your side, your cubicle has a window. If not, congratulations -- you now live in a hardboard coffin with Wi-Fi. Bathrooms are shared by so many people that they start to feel like public utilities. Kitchens are so cramped that you can stir noodles and bump into someone ironing



their shirt at the same time. Silence is extinct. Privacy is optional. Mosquito bats are your most loyal companions because it's a city where dengue seems permanent. Yet, life blooms in these fragile corners. Shampoos vanish mysteriously. Maggi noodles become communal property. Someone is always frying eggs at 2 AM. Strangers transform into "mess brothers" or "mess sisters" -- bound not by blood but by necessity, shared ambitions, and late-night gossip.

Though their parents would faint if they saw the pigeonholes where their "future doctors" or "future engineers" sleep, Dhaka seems to shrug: this is training. Survive this, and you can survive anything.

Fahmida Ahmed Tithi, a software

student, remembers her early years in one of these cubicles: "My mother cried when she first saw where I lived. I was in college. For two years, I stayed in that cardboard-surrounded room. And honestly, I learned more in those two years than anywhere else in my life. I almost befriended those woodlice who helped me stay awake at night."

Now, reading this, Fahmida's mother might shed tears again. But Dhaka's mess life is its own curriculum. You learn negotiation with landlords who charge extra for the privilege of plywood partitions. Diplomacy -- with roommates who think one shower a week is enough. Resilience -- against cockroaches, bedbugs, heartbreak, and homesickness. These lessons may not appear on

academic transcripts, yet they shape you far more than lectures ever could.

And Dhaka being the hub of everything, this cycle never really seems to stop. Every year, new batches arrive with dreams too big for their cubicles. Every year, apartments are sliced thinner, hardboards multiplied -- as if the city itself were expanding just to make room for the dreamers. Some move on -- to better flats, better jobs, better lives. Others linger, leaving their cubicles for the next dreamer.

So yes, Dhaka overwhelms -- it tests you, it reshapes you, and sometimes, it even bruises you. But it also somehow never abandons you. It welcomes you with open arms, then nudges you into tiny, impossible spaces, yet somehow gives you the freedom to dream beyond the hardboard walls that barely contain you.

Even the flimsiest hardboard cubicles, the ones too small to call rooms, become more than shelter. They bear witness to ambitions that refuse to shrink and hope that refuses to leave, even when the electricity does. Because hey! It's Dhaka, after all!

'Punish those involved in July atrocities'

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"On July 17, when universities were asked to vacate dormitories, DGFI warned us that brutality and oppression on the students would increase if we did not make compromises with the government," he said. But the student leaders refused to hold dialogue, insisting they would not "sit for talks standing on the blood of their brothers already killed".

After the lunch break, the tribunal resumed with Nahid's testimony. Entering the witness stand at 2:45pm, he was greeted by the tribunal chair, "How are you, Mr Nahid?". He replied, "Fine."

His appearance followed completion of cross examination of Amar Desh Editor Mahmudur Rahman by the state defence counsel. Nahid recounted his activism beginning with the quota reform movement in April 2018. Protesters then faced police rubber bullets and teargas shells, and Chhatra League activists also attacked the demonstrators at halls.

"The movement only intensified after these attacks," he said, adding that Hasina eventually announced abolition of quotas, but it was tactical, a ploy.

His doubts were confirmed in June 2024 when the High Court reinstated quotas by cancelling the government

gazette. After the judgment, students erupted in protests and gave the government an ultimatum until June 30 to resolve the issue. But no response came from the government side.

On July 1, agitation broke out again, leading to the "Bangla Blockade" on July 7. Nahid alleged that the judiciary was "politicised" to restore quotas, and students lost faith when the Appellate Division, on July 10, ordered a one-month status quo rather than suspending the verdict.

As protests spread across the country, Chhatra League activists locked hall gates and cases were filed against the protesters, Nahid said.

On July 14, Hasina branded protesters "children and grandchildren of Razakars". Nahid said the remark "gave a licence for attacks on the protesting students".

The following day, AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader said, "Chhatra League is enough to suppress the movement." Soon after, AL activists attacked students at Dhaka University, where female protesters were brutally assaulted. Nahid named central BCL leaders Saddam, Inan, Shayan, and Soikot among those leading the attack with hired goons.

Injured students were even beaten up at hospitals and denied treatment, he alleged.

On July 16, violence spread countrywide. Police shot dead Abu Sayed, a coordinator of the quota reform movement's Begum Rokeya Five unit in Rangpur, while five others, including Wasim in Chattogram, were also killed.

The next day, students held funeral prayers in absentia and coffin processions across campuses. The University Grants Commission ordered the authorities to shut universities, while police fired sound grenades and rubber bullets at a Dhaka rally, killing one in Jatrabari. Nahid said electricity, water, and food supplies were cut off from halls, and DGFI pressed them to make a compromise with the government.

That night, they called for a nationwide "complete shutdown" from July 18. Students from private universities, madrasas, and the ordinary people joined the programme, while the leaders hid to avoid arrest.

According to Nahid, repression escalated further. Internet services were suspended on July 18, while police and AL activists fired indiscriminately at demonstrators the next day.

"By July 19, we realised the government had taken full control of the electronic media, and no news of our movement or the casualties was allowed to be broadcast," he said.

The military said Palestinians could use the newly reopened Salahudin Road to escape towards the south and that they had until lunchtime on Friday to do so.

The United Nations, aid groups and foreign governments have condemned Israel's offensive and the proposed mass displacement.

Saudi Arabia yesterday condemned "in the strongest terms" the Israeli ground operation in Gaza City, as Canada slammed it as "horrible".

China also condemned the "escalation" in Gaza and urged for peace.

The UN agency for Palestinian refugees yesterday said Palestinians in Gaza are living through "exponential fear amid bombardment and devastation as airstrikes in Gaza City and the north intensify by the hour".

It also reiterated its call for an immediate ceasefire.

Pope Leo XVI expressed solidarity with the population of Gaza, saying that civilians had been "once again" forced from their land and were living in "unacceptable conditions".

In a separate response to the Gaza conflict in general, a UN Commission of Inquiry concluded on Tuesday that Israel had committed genocide in Gaza. Israel called the assessment "scandalous" and "fake".

right Israeli government ministers Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, whose "extremist" rhetoric is blamed for fuelling the violence.

But opposition from key member states, especially von der Leyen's own homeland Germany and Italy, means they will struggle to get the backing of enough EU countries to go through.

Israel estimates about 400,000 people, or 40 percent of those who were in Gaza City on August 10, when it announced plans to take control, have already fled. The Gaza media office says 190,000 have headed south and 350,000 have moved to central and western areas of the city.

An Israeli official said military operations were focused on getting civilians to head south and that fighting would intensify over the next month or two.

The official said Israel expected around 100,000 civilians to remain in the city, which would take months to capture, and the operation could be suspended if a ceasefire was reached with Hamas.

The prospects of a ceasefire appear remote after Israel attacked Hamas political leaders in Doha last week, infuriating Qatar, a co-mediator in ceasefire talks.

In leaflets dropped over Gaza City,

Govt angling

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on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was completed in Seoul last month, with the deal expected to follow.

In addition, the ministry sent a proposal to Canada last month to begin FTA talks, though Ottawa has yet to set a date. Officials are in contact with the Canadian High Commission to schedule discussions, Rahman said.

Dhaka has also been lobbying to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the commerce ministry is forming a dedicated trade negotiation team to pursue deals with major trading partners and blocs.

Despite these initiatives, Bangladesh's success in concluding FTAs has so far been limited.

The only signed trade deal is a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with Bhutan, covering \$22 million in bilateral trade, inked in December 2020.

Negotiations with India on a CEPA were completed more than two years ago but the deal remains unsigned.

The date has not been fixed yet to sign a trade deal with the US as well, the secretary said.

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