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“Building a Secure Future
Seeking Practical Solutions”

1.Living and studying in Dhaka

The alarm goes off at exactly half past six, abruptly ending my peaceful slumber. I open my eyes instantly but it takes me a few seconds to realise I am not lost in a gigantic factory but at home, as my ears adjust to the din from the construction site next door. Within a few minutes I am sipping tea and skimming through a handout in preparation for a quiz while trying my best to ignore the continuous noise. At exactly quarter past seven I leave the house for classes at the university, which commence at eight sharp. The two-kilometre journey to the university from my home in Dhanmondi usually takes twenty-five minutes by rickshaw but experience has taught me not to take any chances since the roads of Dhaka are highly unpredictable.

Dhaka is one of the most densely populated cities of the world and its continual unplanned growth is worsening the problems everyday. Therefore Dhaka is no stranger to the problems that plague large cities such as congestion and pollution to name a few. At present ten million people live within the two hundred and fifty square kilometres of Dhaka city making it one of the most densely populated cities in the world¹.

Congestion is a daily headache for the citizens of Dhaka. It is not only wastage of time but waiting for hours in the polluted and dusty environment of the roads in Dhaka can be very wearisome as well. The government recently adopted The National Land Transport Policy² which seeks to improve traffic flow and road safety in Dhaka by providing separate routes for rickshaws and motor vehicles. Since a certain section of the Mirpur Road is off-limits to rickshaws, they have to travel through a lane at the back of the New Market. The lane is narrow, unpaved and filled with potholes besides being extremely unhygienic. This lane is adjacent to the fish-market and there are flies all over the place but the worst part is the garbage and sewage spilling on to the streets. The shopkeepers dump all sorts of waste on the roadside and years of neglect and mismanagement has resulted in the failure of the drainage system. The stench and the filth make me feel like throwing up every time I have to travel along that road.

The transportation system of Dhaka is in a mess. With a growth rate of over three percent Dhaka is set to become the world's second most populous city by 2015. Since the infrastructure of Dhaka cannot even support the current population the government needs

to implement long-term solutions for Dhaka's numerous problems such as congestion, water, gas electricity and housing shortages, pollution, etc. The authorities should realise that the dismal condition of Dhaka is a result of their inaction and take immediate steps so that the city can cope with the projected population of over twenty-one million in the year 2015³.

The completion of two flyovers in the past year is a fairly good beginning although it has made little difference because the misery of Dhaka dwellers will not abate unless additional roads are created that will accommodate the rapidly increasing population. Besides creating new roads the authorities need to make optimum use of available roads that includes allowing the public full access to restricted areas such as the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) residential area in Pilkhana and the Dhaka Cantonment, which will reduce congestion on two major thoroughfares, Mirpur Road and Airport Road respectively. In 1997, the annual economic wastage caused by traffic congestion was seventy-five million dollars and the figure is certainly much higher now because the number of roads remains relatively unchanged while the number of vehicles has increased significantly. Dhaka City has very inadequate road networks, which are only eight or ten percent of the total city area, whereas the acceptable ratio is twenty to thirty percent⁴.

Buses and trucks powered by ancient diesel engines emit black smoke and pose a major health risk for the citizens of Dhaka. However concrete steps are yet to be taken to get these vehicles off the streets or motivate their owners to replace the engines. The buses cater to citizens belonging to the lower income groups and should be replaced with new, yet cheap forms of transport.

Unfortunately most of the measures taken so far have failed to address the main problems, which are inadequacy of roads and mass transit and a high urban population growth rate. The removal of rickshaws from the arterial roads as proposed by the Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP) ² has made little difference to the congestion on Mirpur Road and Airport Road. The government needs to undertake projects for construction of underpasses, flyovers, and possibly even an underground or overhead rail system to remedy the chronic congestion in Dhaka. At the same time it needs to address problems such as absence of parking spaces in commercial areas, illegal parking and poor

maintenance of roads. But most of all it needs to curb corruption, which increases the time and cost of developing and improving the roads and also allows law-breakers to get away with their crimes. It is equally important to continue family planning programs in both urban and rural areas so that our limited resources are not overstretched further.

The roads of Dhaka are a nightmare because of the congestion, filth, air and noise pollution but unlikely as it may seem many people prefer them to sitting at home in the sweltering heat surrounded by darkness when the power is suddenly cut off. The citizens of Bangladesh are very familiar with the concept of load shedding, or blackouts. The authorities responsible for electricity supply have to cut off the power in different areas at various times because demand often exceeds supply by thousands of megawatts in summer. New malls and residential buildings are mushrooming all over the city and the power shortage persists all year, even in winter when people consume less electricity. City dwellers experience load shedding for one to two hours but for the rural people it can exceed up to sixteen hours per day. My frustration knows no bounds when I am on a tight schedule and typing furiously so that I can meet the deadline and the power is suddenly cut off, since all I can do is sit and watch the precious moments tick by. On the eve of an exam I have no choice but to study by candlelight knowing fully well that the strain will probably worsen my myopic eyes.

Supply of electricity has remained fairly unchanged in the last few years. The plans for several new power generating plants have been on the table for years but no progress has been made due to a change in government, bureaucratic red tape and corruption.

A large percentage of the youth are overwhelmed by pessimism and disillusionment because of the numerous obstacles they face in obtaining an education and employment in this country. Most of my friends, who constitute a lucky few among millions have applied to and been accepted by foreign universities. Nowadays people who can afford to go abroad rarely stay back simply because the lure of a quality education without any kind of disruption is too great. Those who cannot afford foreign universities or the private universities in Bangladesh have no option but to study in the public universities where the future is always uncertain. In most countries of the world students enter undergraduate programs with the aim of graduating in four years but at

Dhaka University students consider themselves lucky if they manage to graduate within five to six years. This is chiefly due to the participation of university students in mainstream politics. In a politically unstable country like Bangladesh tension between the two rival parties in or outside the campus usually culminates in clashes between students affiliated with the two major political parties. During such periods of tension classes come to a halt, sometimes for more than a month resulting in a major setback for most students. The presence of police at several points on campus is hardly reassuring- it is common knowledge that many students carry arms and consider themselves above the law. These students harass other students with different political leanings and the vendors within the campus who refuse to pay them tolls. Such activities are not confined solely to the Dhaka University campus; all the other public colleges and universities in this country are highly unsafe places because of student participation in mainstream politics.

The solution to this situation is simple-ban students from possessing arms and participating in mainstream politics on campus. However students should be allowed to participate in peaceful demonstrations so that they do not lose the right of free speech. The corrupt leaders of this nation have been exploiting students to achieve their ends for years, so we have to put an end to this practice as soon as possible. The youth of today are the future of the nation and the world, and holding them back will only serve to impede our development.

2. Women and children: The challenges of the 21st century

My mother becomes extremely anxious whenever I step out onto the road by myself and insists on my carrying a mobile phone wherever I go. My freedom is very limited since the only place I am allowed to go alone is the university. I have never been tempted to break these rules because Dhaka is extremely unsafe for women. Crimes such as harassment, rape, kidnapping and murder are daily occurrences in the city.

Last year an eighteen year old girl died from injuries sustained when a man from a nearby village threw acid on her face for refusing his marriage proposal. She was one of the hundreds who are similarly victimised each year for reasons such as land, family or marital dispute, dowry and even political reasons. Between May 1999 and October 2004,

nearly fifty percent of the 1883 victims of acid attacks were women⁵. The efforts of the Prothom Alo newspaper and the Acid Survivors Foundation has been successful in raising funds to help the victims and reducing the number of attacks in recent years by creating awareness and urging the government to impose controls on acid availability and punish the perpetrators of such heinous crimes. The Acid Survivors Foundation is playing a major role in the rehabilitation of victims by providing medical care including plastic surgery, access to education, training for new skills, finding employment and providing legal advice.

Social vices that claim the lives of women every year are child marriages and dowry. In Bangladesh, girls as young as thirteen or fourteen are forced into marriage and this is the main cause behind the high birth and infant mortality rates. Some women have to pay with their lives for failing to fulfil dowry demands and satisfy the greed of their husbands and in-laws. Others are abused, tortured or mutilated because they were unable to bring money or gifts from their parents. Polygamy is another major problem that is making large numbers of women destitute every year and increasing the number of poor women who are forced to migrate to the cities in search of low-paid jobs.

In a poverty-stricken country like Bangladesh children need to fend for themselves, as their parents cannot provide them with two square meals each day. These children have no option but to work, often in hazardous places such as waste disposal sites, tanneries and chemical factories. Recently though the focus has shifted to children working as domestic help in homes due to the surge in the number of cases of abuse. The stories of torture are horrifying to say the least, children seared with hot irons or metal instruments, beaten with wooden planks and iron rods, their skulls cracked open by heavy blows or skin slashed by knives simply because they made trivial mistakes while doing housework. The worst part is that educated and respected middle class citizens commit some of these crimes. Some of the victims take refuge at the One-stop Crisis Centre run by the government where they receive medical attention and legal help from Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA), while those who cannot escape from their employers endure inhuman forms of punishment. The criminals are initially arrested under the Prevention of Women and Children Repression Act 2000 but usually manage to escape justice because of the numerous loopholes in the legal system⁶.

Since the rights of women and children are rarely upheld they are extremely vulnerable and present an easy target for traffickers. Poor families are lured into sending their women and children to distant lands in the hope of making money. But once they are across the border these people are forced to work in life threatening or inhuman conditions, often without pay. They cannot escape for fear of being jailed in an unknown land where people speak a language that is beyond their comprehension. The government needs to take preventive measures such as ensure greater security at the border. The non-governmental organisations have a major role to play since they can raise awareness among the poor in remote rural areas so that they do not fall into the clutches of greedy traffickers.

We must combat the increasing crimes and injustice against women and children through education and awareness. Eighteen million children attend primary schools all over the country while three million children are deprived of any kind of education. The Gulshan Literary Programme School has been providing primary education for children living in the slums of Gulshan since 1985. Shoishab, a human rights organisation has been working with urban disadvantaged children in Dhaka since 1991. The organisation provides formal and non-formal education and training to empower street children and raise their voices against abuse. The Advocacy and Social Mobilisation Programme is raising awareness among employers regarding the issues of abuse and torture and motivating them to eliminate violence, improve conditions and ensure basic rights for the domestic child workers⁷.

The crimes committed against women and children are numerous and quite often the criminals not only move about freely but also threaten the victim's family with dire consequences if they report the crime or seek legal help. The cases that receive media and public attention undergo investigation and possibly even a trial, the police usually ignores the rest. Very few are ensured justice and that too when a case creates public outrage or if it is accepted by human rights organisations like the BNWLA or the Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK) who investigate and try to ensure justice is served. Since the legal system and the law enforcement agencies are unreliable the responsibility of ensuring justice has fallen to human rights organisations, the media and conscious citizens.

The legal system has many flaws, which need to be identified and amended accordingly. It is of prime importance that the judiciary is separated so that it can operate without interference from the executive and legislative branches of the government. This will also eliminate the practice of appointing lawyers because of their political views. Considering circumstantial evidence in torture cases, providing protection to witnesses and victims, amendment of The Criminal Procedure Code to avoid lengthy procedure and curbing corruption in the law enforcement agencies will also help to ensure justice for ordinary people.

It is necessary to remove the misconceptions of rural people who do not know that polygamy is a punishable offence and still believe that verbal divorce is valid. Both formal and non-formal education should include lessons on the rights of women and children and the penalties for violating those rights. People should be encouraged to report any neighbours or acquaintances who are guilty of abusing family members or domestic help. Educational programs for slum and street children should be promoted within every community especially in the urban areas. Leaders within every community must be encouraged to take a strong stand against child marriage, dowry, polygamy and repression of women and stop illiterate people from engaging in such illegal practices. Exemplary punishment should be handed out to anyone who refuses to abide by the law.

3. Global warming

Bangladesh is still trying to recover from the massive financial and economic losses that were incurred last year when most of the country including the capital got flooded not once, but twice. Offices and educational institutions had to be closed down since boats were the only available mode of transportation in many areas. People in the rural areas were forced to leave their homes and take shelter in local school buildings or under the open sky. Pure water became inaccessible, either due to inundation of tube-wells or the entry of sewage in the water supply. Many people starved for days and were forced to drink dirty water because they were unable to obtain relief or water purification tablets. Water-borne diseases spread at an alarming rate, worsening the situation. However these problems paled in comparison to the loss of homes and thousands of

hectares of crops which left millions of farmers and landless labourers destitute, and stripped of their few belongings.

Floods in Bangladesh are occurring more often and their severity is increasing steadily. A report by the United Nations Panel on Climate Change has predicted more extreme droughts, floods, storms and the inundation of low-lying islands and coastal areas due to global warming. The United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan has already warned that a rise in sea level could lead to the disappearance of a large part of Bangladesh⁸.

By the year 2050 the temperature in Bangladesh is expected to rise by 1.5⁰ C to 2.0⁰ C. As temperature increases on a global scale, the hydrologic cycle will intensify and the level of precipitation in Bangladesh will increase. Climate models indicate that Bangladesh may experience ten to fifteen percent more rainfall by 2030. In the past two decades, extensive flooding triggered by heavy rains occurred in the years 1987, 1988, 1998, and 2004; and resulted in losses of millions of dollars. Meteorologists have predicted that global warming will increase the frequency and intensity of tropical storms. Bangladesh has been experiencing catastrophic cyclones throughout its history, a cyclone that hit Bangladesh in 1991 claimed the lives of a hundred and fifty thousand people. Therefore the sufferings of the people of Bangladesh will increase in the near future due to greater rainfall and more cyclones in the region⁹.

Bangladesh is a low-lying and densely populated country and the repercussions of a rise in sea level will have a negative impact on the economy and hinder our efforts to reduce poverty. Coastal areas will experience erosion and scarcity of drinking water will increase the hardships of the people.

The threat of global warming is real and imminent but there have been very few visible efforts to prepare the country for the worst. Bangladesh is heavily dependent on agriculture and the loss of over sixteen percent of the land⁹ would have a terrible impact on the economy, and the millions of people dependent on this land will not only become unemployed and homeless and but could face starvation as well.

Such a bleak situation may be averted if we emulate the Dutch who have successfully kept seawater out of their land by building dykes. The Netherlands has flourished and continues to do so, several feet below sea level. Its newest bulwark is a

5.6-mile dam made up of a hundred and thirty-one steel blocks that remains open during normal conditions, to preserve the tidal flow that feeds the rich sea life but can be closed down during adverse weather conditions. Another example is Venice, which has constructed a 1.2-mile flexible sea wall to protect the city from Adriatic storms without doing ecological damages to the city's lagoon¹⁰.

It is just as important to identify measures that will reduce the severity of floods and minimise the losses and destruction they cause. Bangladesh, as well as its neighbours India and Nepal must take steps to reduce deforestation, a major cause of floods. Biotechnology and development of crops which can tolerate submergence and grow in saline soils can save millions of farmers' incomes and reduce food shortages in the months following the floods. Care Bangladesh is working in six southwestern districts of the country to help communities deal with climate changes¹¹ and similar efforts should be made all over the country so that ordinary people are aware and prepared for the changes.

The implementation of the Kyoto Protocol will buy more time for countries like Bangladesh which are already facing the problems of global warming. Industrial nations that have ratified must take strong measures to meet their targets to cut emission. Countries that have refused to become signatories, including the United States of America which is the world's biggest polluter contributing to twenty-five percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions must be made to realise the social, environmental and human cost of their refusal to ratify the treaty.

3. Conclusion

At the launch of the Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index, TI Chairman Peter Eigen said, "Corruption in large-scale public projects is a daunting obstacle to sustainable development, and results in a major loss of public funds needed for education, healthcare and poverty alleviation, both in developed and developing countries. If we hope to reach the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015, governments need to seriously tackle corruption in public contracting".¹² The public sector in Bangladesh is steeped in corruption and therefore projects such as the construction of roads and power plants

usually take many years to implement. The law enforcement agencies are so corrupt that traffic police stopping cars at random on the road to extract cash from the public is a common sight on the roads of Dhaka. There is no accountability of the law enforcement agencies and so criminals often roam about freely terrorising the ordinary citizens while innocent people languish behind bars. In a corrupt nation like Bangladesh everything has a price, even security and has to be bought like any other commodity, but for most this commodity is a luxury beyond their reach.

We will succeed in building a secure future only if we all recognise that security is not a luxury but a natural right of every human being in this world.

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