

World Environment Day- 5 June 2005 and The Department of Environment

Khan M Ibrahim Hossain
Director General, Department of Environment

The United Nations has designated 5 June as the World Environment Day (WED) to stimulate worldwide awareness of the environment and attract political attention and action. The Day is celebrated around the world in many ways; seminars, symposium, poster competitions in schools, children's art competition, tree plantation are some of the events. Every year a new city is selected to host the celebration. This year San Francisco, USA, is hosting the WED. To commemorate the day a befitting theme of Global Concern is selected to celebrate the auspicious event. The theme for 2005 is "Green Cities - Plan for the Planet!"

Green Cities - Plan for the Planet

At present nearly half the world's population live in urban areas which by 2030 will have to accommodate more than 60 percent of the total population. Virtually all population growth in the next quarter-century will be in urban areas, especially in the developing countries. In 1950 New York was the only city with more than 10 million people. But in 2000 as many as 17 cities grew over 10 million population and Dhaka City entered this club. By the year 2015, twenty three such cities will exceed this limit.

In case of developed countries, 75 percent of the population live in urban areas. Though the proportion of urban dwellers in the Asian region is less than 40 percent, yet its urban population is 1.5 billion more than the combined population of Europe, Latin America, Oceania and North America

Urbanization in the developed world has largely coincided with economic growth and increased Citizen's welfare This is not, unfortunately, the case with developing countries Mainly to get rid of the clutches of poverty a large part of rural community migrate to urban areas. But it is sad to say, a large proportion of them find their way into slums.

The situation can be reversed only if the urban settlements, could be managed in ' environmental way so that it can support growing population by limiting their impact on the environment, health and living standards Most of the inhabitants of urban areas are deprived of urban amenities because the cities lack sufficient supply of electricity, telephone, gas and water; in addition, they lack proper solid waste management systems, and in particular proper living environment. For this, side by side with government initiative, local governments civil societies, business groups and industrialists can play a pivotal role. Unitedly these groups along with the government can solve most of the problems of the cities with innovative ideas and help steer the development of green and clean cities.

Urban Environment: Bangladesh Perspective

Giving a nostalgic look back to 30-35 years we can see a clean, calm and quiet Dhaka when its population was less than 1.5 million. But due to unplanned urbanization, we find a swarming populace trying to find shelter under brick and steel frame. The number of developers and builders has sprouted, and their activities have turned the cities into brick and steel jungle. We have forgotten that we need vegetation which gives life-saving oxygen for our very survival. In addition, we also don't consider that trees can lessen the impacts of air pollution. We have little sense to retain a portion of our land for planting trees while constructing houses.

It is pleasant to note that the Government has taken initiatives for the beautification and greening of Dhaka city by planting trees and flowers. Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP) and Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB) have taken different actions to make the city roads beautiful and decorated, with the support from different organizations. The Principal Secretary to the Government has been leading two committees namely 'Good Governance and Development' and 'Greening and Beautification' of Dhaka City comprising all Ministries, Departments and Agencies. The latest thrust is put on plantation. Already, the changes can be visualized along the roads and parks of the city. This initiative will inspire all other cities to give more emphasis on the environment and greening, so that the lost greenery is restored.

The enormous pressure that the rural-urban migration has created over the existing urban

infrastructure is increasing further mainly in major cities. To keep the rural urban migration within control and to keep the existing urban areas habitable, District and Upazila towns should be developed and creation of employment facilities by developing growth centres in rural areas should be opted for. Initiative should also be taken to improve the civic amenities in the major urban areas, as within these urban centres satisfactory civic facilities are lacking. But we should keep one issue in mind; this development should be environment friendly, so that our scarce resources are not wasted. Along this line, the proposed activities of the Upazilla should start without further delay.

Economic emancipation and urbanization go hand in hand. Due to urbanization residents ,deserve better amenities such as good health care, education, housing etc. Although true for developed countries, it is not true for the underdeveloped countries where urbanization is not the guaranty of economic freedom. Till now majority of our urban population is deprived of basic amenities, and many of them live in slums. In this backdrop we need to ensure environmental urbanization which will mean clean air, cleaner water, and more greenery having an aesthetic environment. On this World Environment Day we have to pledge a healthy environment for all the urban residents.

Activities and Achievements of the Department of Environment

Department of Environment (DoE) has got a huge National Mandate of the Government of Bangladesh to conserve the environment of the country. The achievements of the Department of Environment are notable: National Environment Policy-1992, National Environment Management Action Plan (NEMAP)1995, Environmental Conservation Act-1995, Environmental Conservation Rules-1997 and Environmental Court Act-2000 and Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) Rules-2004. Urban issues are mainly dealt by City Corporations, Municipalities, City Development Authority and Local Government Institutions while DoE has the consultative role to play. DoE's sphere of influence mainly concentrates on giving technical guidance during the implementation of different activities. DoE has played a commendable role to enhance the quality of urban environment in the country.

Ban on the plying of two stroke three-wheelers to combat air pollution is one of the most important achievements of the Government. In a bid to overcome the shortage of those three wheelers one of the most widely used clean fuel, Compressed Natural Gas(CNG) run vehicles were introduced. Department of Environment played a vital role guiding the concerned Ministries to implement the decision.

To further improve the air quality and in order to take mitigation measures and to take policy decision, one Continuous Air Quality Monitoring Station has already been established in the National Parliament compound under the World Bank funded project being implemented by the DoE. Such monitoring station will also be established in other major cities including Port City Chittagong and Khulna. To further improve the quality of air, necessary administrative measures have also been taken in addition to the existing legislation for establishment, operation and maintenance of 120 feet high brick kilns throughout the country. This is an interim option before switching to better brick manufacturing technology.

Ban of Polythene shopping bag is another success of the Government. Banning the shopping bags has achieved a tremendous success in terms of removing a major pollutant of the surface and sewerage, which obstructs the recession of flood water, diminishes soil fertility, destroys fish habitat etc. It is, however, shocking that some polythene bags are still visible, due to few unscrupulous businessmen. DoE with its limited manpower has been organizing mobile courts to enforce the ban

The government under the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change has taken some other initiatives. Projects have been taken to convert the 700 tons of solid wastes of Dhaka City Corporation of Matuail Dump Site into compost and to generate electricity from the extracted Methane Gas at the same site. Under the mechanism carbon credits from the wastes would be sold to prospective buyers to implement the projects. The Government expects to implement similar kind of projects in other urban centers of the country if proven successful in Dhaka City.

Conclusion

No doubt, due to economic reasons people are migrating to urban areas for better facilities. We

cannot stall it or reverse the process; rural urban migration is set to increase in the future. We need to take preparation to cope with the changing situation if we want to live in a habitable environment; otherwise days will come, when increasing urban migration may burst into devastation.

It's a happy coincidence that the Prime Minister's idea of Greening Dhaka City has come to match this year's World Environment Theme "Green Cities - Plan for the Planet". We can seize this opportunity to make Dhaka one of the best cities in Asia. By planting fruit and flower trees we can make all our cities green, healthy and livable for the present and future generation. The success of this year's World Environment Day 2005 is entwined with this action. Let us plan our planet accordingly and make it environment friendly.