

# A week in DHAKA



Photo by Niels van Gijn



My first impression of Bangladesh was the usual assault on the senses that I experience when arriving from Australia into one of the world's least developed nations. No matter how many times I make such a trip, I can't help but being overwhelmed by the crowds, the smells, and the sense of uneasiness that invades me as soon as I leave the plane. Call it 'rich man's guilt', but my obvious separation from the local population means I can never relax. I am very aware that I am a privileged outsider.  
By JOHN CASEY

**I**n April I had the good fortune to spend a week in Dhaka, its capital, visiting a friend who is a working there.

Bangladesh is a small South Asian country, about twice the size of Tasmania, with a population of 158 million (Tasmania in comparison has just half a million people). It is the seventh most populated country in the world.

It is a product of the partitioning in 1947 of the Indian subcontinent on independence from Britain. It is a primarily a Muslim region. It became known as East Pakistan, even though it was situated some 1,600 kms from the rest of Pakistan. After a civil war in 1971, Bangladesh separated from Pakistan and became an independent nation.

Since then, it has remained politically unstable, with fourteen heads of government and four military coups in 35 years. The population is generally poor and rural. With a per-capita annual income of only US\$2,300 in 2006, it is ranked among the world's poorest countries.

Most of Bangladesh is part of the delta of the Ganges River. The delta is at sea level, so each year when the monsoon rains fall, 65 per cent of the country is flooded. If the rains are particularly bad or accompanied by cyclones, there can be widespread devastation.

My friend in Dhaka is working on a UN-sponsored police-reform program. When I arrived, he introduced me to some of his colleagues working on poverty reduction



and education programs for a Spanish non-government organisation (NGO), Intervida. I spent the week shuttling between police stations and schools in the slums.

My friend had spent seven months working on a police reform program, but political turmoil had led to frequent changes in Inspector Generals (Commissioner) and senior officers, so he admitted that very little has been done on reform itself, as most of his time had been spent just briefing the new appointees.

The cultural, social, and economic gap between the expatriate consultants and nationals working on the police reforms program is huge. The expatriates I met appeared to be good people and good professionals, but seemed to be driven by the high wages offered to UN consultants. They appeared to have little commitment to the country, had made no effort to learn the language, and didn't hold the nationals in particularly high regard. Given the distance between the foreigners and nationals, it was hard to imagine that much collaboration or learning was taking place.

But I did observe some significant changes in policing. I visited a police

station that is being renovated from the old "fort" model. Police stations had traditionally been surrounded by iron gates and the only entry was by permission through locked gates. Now, in an attempt to break down barriers between the police and the population, police stations are being remodelled to include modern reception areas where the public can make enquiries. Outside the station there were new motorbikes and 4-wheel drive vehicles that bore stickers indicating they had been donated by the UN.

However, while there were new waiting rooms and new vehicles, the lower level police officers were still living upstairs in the police station, with 12 to 15 of them crammed into barracks so small that beds were pushed together. Low wages and poor working conditions still present the greatest barrier to reform.

I've been on a few capacity-building missions to third world countries over the years, so I know there are no easy solutions as reform is a long-term prospect. I always try to evaluate the level of the "residue of reform" that is being left by each mission. I got the sense that there was some of it in Bangladesh, but I found it hard to judge just how much.

I visited the schools they ran in the slums of Dhaka and in a small rural village. My friends from the Intervida seemed to be committed. They were working with local grassroots initiatives to provide education to primary school children, where no other opportunities existed. There is no doubt that they were making a significant contribution to the lives of their pupils, but they were frustrated by the small numbers they could teach and their inability to connect to broader education or poverty reduction initiatives.

Walking through the slums, it became obvious to me how cricket-mad the men and boys are. Wherever there was a patch of clear ground, they were playing cricket, often with a crowd of women and girls watching.

But what was most remarkable about my time with the Intervida staff was that during that week they learnt that directors of the NGO back in Spain had been accused of embezzling \$20 million. According to Spanish prosecutors, the directors of Intervida, the third largest aid NGO in Spain, had diverted public contributions to create private businesses. The directors are currently under arrest and the future of Intervida and its aid programs around the world are in jeopardy.

In Bangladesh, human labour is so cheap that unlike in developed countries where "time is money", it is cheaper to use human labour than to buy and maintain machines. Near where I was living, a building was being demolished by a legion of workers with picks, while all around the city tall buildings were being erected with bamboo scaffolding lashed together by rope, with workers carrying bricks and concrete in baskets on their heads.

Aside from these contacts with the realities of life in Bangladesh, my main recollections of my week there are about the lives of the expatriates. They live in Dhaka's best suburb and hang around the clubs of the foreign embassies or the city's finest restaurants, where the other diners are all expatriates or local film stars and business leaders.

But even in the best neighbourhoods of Dhaka the streets were in terrible condition, and the reality of the poverty was pressed up against the wealth of the upper classes. One of the most evident differences between rich and poor countries is the lack of connection that exists between the private and public spheres in poor countries. Inside the homes of the rich, luxuries are the same as in Australia.

But this private inside world has to be protected from the outside by an army of security guards and as soon as one moved out into public realm you were surrounded by the poverty of the masses.

An article I read recently described Western men living in Japan as "nerds and losers in their own countries who become gods in Japan". Perhaps that description is a little exaggerated and cruel, but it has more than a grain of truth as a description of many expatriates working in developing countries. The ones I met in Dhaka would probably be just one of the crowd in their home countries, but in Bangladesh they automatically became part of an elite. With my Australian dollars changed into Bangladeshi Takas and by the mere fact that I was a westerner I was welcomed into that status.

Living as an expatriate working in a developing country is both seductive and unpleasant. At home I always choose to walk wherever I like and think nothing of walking for half an hour across town. In Dhaka it was all but impossible because as soon as I left my building I was besieged by persistent rickshaw drivers. At times I resisted, but ended up giving in and jumping into the rickshaw (and allowing

myself to be charged 10 times what a local would pay for the same trip).

The challenges faced by Bangladesh are considerable. It is a densely populated country with few natural resources and a history of conflict and instability, which still persists. Last August widespread rioting broke out in universities across Bangladesh. Students have become impatient with the military-backed caretaker government's delay in restoring democracy and its increasingly repressive tactics. This government was installed in late 2006 to oversee a new election process, and moved swiftly to quell the rioting. It could not afford to allow the protests to reach other sectors of Bangladesh society as the government had already lost the support of much of the business and political sectors and the population was angry as prices of staples such as rice were rising quickly.

When I decided to go Bangladesh, it was hard to find tourist guides to the country and most people who I told about my trip would ask, "Why go to Bangladesh?" It is a hard question to answer from a purely touristic point of view, but it is a country that provides a warm welcome and an unforgettable experience to anyone who ventures there. ■



Rickshaws in Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka

Photo by Isa Ismail