



It was November and I was swathing my cot in mosquito netting and popping anti-malarial tablets. I nodded off to sleep my first night here with "Life During Wartime" playing in my head.

*This ain't no party
This ain't no disco,
This ain't no foolin' around. . .*

I woke to the sounds of shouting and heavy traffic two hours later. Muslim countries bed down early, so the noise was a puzzle. Then my roommate, Kumar, told me the president had announced that an indefinite curfew would begin in an hour.

I had just arrived in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, where for several weeks the opposition parties had been inciting massive public demonstrations and strikes calling for the resignation of president Hussain Mahammad Ershad.

One of the poorest countries in Asia, Bangladesh is a predominantly Moslem nation of 110 million people which gained independence after 1971.

After a series of military coups in which two presidents were killed, Ershad, an army lieutenant-general, took power in a 1983 coup. Martial law has been intermittently imposed since, and hundreds of political opponents arrested.

Against the advice of the Canadian consulate, I had flown in from Calcutta to see for myself, while staying at the local YMCA. So far in my trek across Western Asia I had endured 10-hour jeep rides with machine-gun toting Afghan rebels, anti-American rallies complete with flag-burnings, and worse, overnight bus rides in India.

Outside, people were scrambling to stock up on necessities, leaving the store shelves bare. I pushed and shoved through the crowds, caught up in food free-for-all.

Anti-government general strikes had succeeded in bringing much of the country

to a grinding halt and president Ershad was taking action. All fundamental rights of citizens were suspended; rallies prohibited; and criticism of government decisions was not advisable during this official state of emergency.

With a small stash of food rations safely tucked away, I climbed on the roof of the Y to watch. Like the calm after the storm, an eerie silence enveloped the city of over 10 million as the curfew approached.

The only sounds came from police trucks, bullhorns, and rifles.

The next day I tried to get out of Dhaka, to head south where I assumed the living was easier. At the railway station I was advised the railworkers were not officially on strike but they weren't working neither. It didn't make much of a difference since most of the track had been blown up the night before.

I went to the communications office to let my loved ones know I was still alive. The grinning little fat man behind the counter laughed when I asked to make a telephone call to Canada.

Next stop — the telegraph office. "Everything fine in Dhaka, Love Tim" read my message. The clerk took it to his boss, who checked it over several times to make sure it contained nothing subversive or that would offend the government. In any event, he insisted on knowing where I was staying.

The airport was closed, the food stalls were closed. I ate whatever I could find, mostly bananas, crackers and peanut butter.

This was a crisis, but it could have been worse. Kumar, a native Bangladeshi, told stories of the 1971 war of independence when he was a boy. He had been shot by Ershad's soldiers while trying to find food for his family. Since 1971 the country has led a precarious existence full of political turmoil and climatic catastrophe, with at least a dozen coups.

Kumar and I sat watching the police

trucks roll past the Y.

I felt sorry for Kumar. He had just returned from the United Kingdom with his master's degree in nutrition. If he had studied in Bangladesh and aligned himself with the military, he would have a job and security. Or he could have worked in the West. Instead he did neither, simply because he felt he owed something to his people. Later he left the Y to stay with a friend and I never heard from him again.

I met two Australian travellers and together we decided to explore the city during curfew, to try and find out what was going on. The local papers were heavily censored and the talk on the street seemed mostly rumour. We tuned into the BBC's

I was in no position to help, but the presence of a foreigner might have stopped even more violent questioning. For the next hour I sat with the police and offered them bribes to let me take pictures of the scene, which I wanted to send to the press, or to let him go. I refused to leave; they told me "no pictures".

While we waited for a commanding officer, an English-speaking cop showed me how to use his tear gas outfit and his 1950s vintage British rifle. The younger policemen were friendly and professed that they didn't like President Ershad's policies or beating children, but a job was a job.

When the commander arrived, I was escorted away from the scene and asked to

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by Tim Colby
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nightly newscast on the shortwave to find out all we could about the situation we lived in. Sometimes I tried to bribe police for information, any information about the curfew.

When darkness fell we ventured into the uncertain night, keeping to the alleys where the police wouldn't go for fear of ambush.

Fortunately, when we did stumble on a police patrol or roadblock they were kind enough to hold fire until we explained we were just stupid, lost tourists.

The most memorable incident from my experience in Dhaka wasn't the nightly forays into the desolate streets, or the bomb blast 20 metres behind me. It wasn't the memory of the two-day opium-induced sickness I endured.

What sticks out most in my mind was an incident of police brutality, I had witnessed police beatings in India and Pakistan, but never one involving a child.

I was hurrying home just before the 5 pm curfew, then stopped to talk to a group of police officers. I noticed a scuffle further down the street — they tried to hold me back but I pushed through. The screaming came from a young boy, maybe 10 years old, who was suspected of throwing bombs at police trucks. The police were venting their suspicions — the officer in charge, all 220 pounds of him, standing on the boy's fingers, slowly rocking back and forth. A younger officer pinned him to the ground with blows to the ribs from his billy club.

leave in no uncertain terms.

Stealing one last look, I saw the dirty, crying boy surrounded by police, shouting questions and backhanding him across the face. His hysterical mother stood on the sidelines. That's when I decided it was time to get out of town.

I spent most of that night, my last in Bangladesh, sitting on the roof of the Y, just thinking. I remembered visiting my rickshaw driver's family, living in a hovel in view of the luxurious Dhaka Sheraton hotel.

Or the slum children down by the river and how they love it when I tried to juggle oranges, or brought them bananas or sweets. It was easy to buy some fleeting smiles — so many outstretched hands and pleading eyes — with a few rupees. When I fell headfirst in the mud down by the river, they brought out half the village down to see the stupid Canadian covered in shit (literally). And there was shit everywhere. Diarrhea is one of the leading causes of death in flood-prone Bangladesh.

The airport finally reopened just a mass of white people trying to get away and I was one of them.

Now I'm back here, studying Third World development, and they're back there, with their slums and million dollar jetfighters and tanks. I wondered what the future held for myself, for Kumar, for the boy beaten by the police, and for all children of Dhaka.

Tim Colby, 24, spent six months travelling in western Asia last year, jumping from his Third World textbooks into Third World reality, before continuing his studies at Carleton.

