

## Karail, 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2004

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We arrived in Dhaka on Friday, 27th of February. It was the first time for us to come to Bangladesh and it was fascinating. Everything was so different; the people, the city, the country. On our first ride through Dhaka we saw this slum, Karail, opposite the BRAC University. The contrast between the posh Gulshan area and the slum right in between was breathtaking and we decided to come back and start shooting a reportage on it.

It was the fourth of March when we finally hired a CNG - one of these three-wheeled, green baby taxis - to BRAC University and took a boat to the island in Banani Lake where the slum was situated. The crossing was quite a shaky matter and we had to give our best to prevent our cameras and us from



falling into the muddy water. Slowly we passed the almost idyllic bank and finally went ashore on a small gap between two houses. Two women were doing their laundry and watched us amazed. We told the boat man to pick us up after one hour and turned around to enter the settlement. The sheds were made of droughty wood, bamboo and corrugated iron and they seemed to have been built in no specific order. Some touched each other and between others

there were narrow footpaths leading in each direction, altogether forming a huge labyrinth where you would definitely get lost without a guide. Already after a few minutes we were surrounded by a small but rapidly growing horde of children. They were curiously watching every step we did and we couldn't make them happier as by taking their pictures. Some of them wore a blue uniform which meant that they were on their way to school.



As we went further into the slum, an old man stepped towards us. "What are you looking for here?" he asked us in amazingly good English, and we told him that we were here to shoot a reportage on their village. "We are poor people. We don't have anything here. You are rich, show the pictures in your country and help us this way!" he answered and stepped away. A few hours later, these words became more to us than just a mere request.

After taking some first superficial pictures we wanted to get deeper into the topic, so Murad, a Bangladeshi friend of ours, asked one of the girls standing around to lead us to her home. Instantly she turned around and beckoned us to follow her. We took some corners until she vanished in one of the sheds in front of us.

Inside it was dim and surprisingly clean. The girl's mother asked us to take a seat on the bed. Since it was our first time to do a serious reportage, the conversation started very stagnant. Khaleda's mother told us that

there were roundabout 40,000 people living in the slum, without proper access to drinking water or sanitary arrangements. In her shed, which consisted of two rooms of about 60 square feet each, there were 8 people, four at a time sharing one room and bed. Apart from the bed there were some clothes dangling from a cord, one turned-around crate with a tattered cloth



serving as table and some more crates used as shelves. Enthroned on these was a pocket radio connected to a pair of speakers. The family came here ten years ago and since then has never moved anywhere else. Unlike her parents, 12-year-old Khaleda has the chance to go to school and she's dreaming of studying medicine one day. The government supports the family by paying half of their education expenses.

During the whole conversation there were at least 15 people standing in the doorway and in front of the hut and they curiously listened to every word we spoke. Most of them never saw any strangers before and they were excited about having foreign guests. After about half an hour we



asked the people to guide us around, to show us where they did their laundry, where they were cooking, where they were buying their stuff, in a word, where their daily life took place. We followed Khaleda's mother outside and she led us through her village. On the way we were invited into every house and everywhere we were welcomed like beloved family members. The hearty hospitality of these people who had almost nothing but themselves deeply touched us inside.



We finally reached the house of Biuty, who lived near the place where we went ashore. Proudly she told us how she and her husband had come here ten years ago and built their house with own hands. Back then there weren't more than three or four sheds standing there. Biuty had a son and a daughter who is already married with children herself. A naked light bulb was dangling from the ceiling, and the old woman turned it on so that we could take some photographs. She told us, that

she had to pay for the electricity on her own. There is an NGO called Proshika that is granting micro credits to people in need. Thus they can create a base to earn their own living and then pay back the loan.

What's needed most in Karail is clean water and a sewerage. The people take

their water for cooking and washing from the lake where they also lead their sewage into. This causes many diseases but the local doctor has no proper knowledge and what's more there's no medical supply. Suddenly, while Biuty was telling us about the village's unfixed roads of clay that are just washed away every rainy season, the crowd around us became excited. At first we didn't realize it since there was always a certain level of noise surrounding us but then



Murad translated what the people were shouting around: A fire had broke out, not far from us.

Together with the worried people we left Biuty's shed and instantly saw the column of smoke rising up between the neighbouring shacks. We walked towards it and on our way, men, women and children rushed by us, carrying buckets and other vessels filled with water. At first we didn't realize the danger at all, but when we saw the cloud of smoke swell with explosive speed, we understood that this wasn't just some campfire that would be put out in a few minutes. This was about to become a vast square fire of catastrophic dimensions.

We move on. Around us panicked people everywhere, some of them carrying children on their arms, others rushing their goods and chattels towards the water. Men desperately begin to tear down huts to create firebreaks, but it's a lost fight. The building material is too droughty and the wind blows too strong. Others poor bucket after bucket of water over their houses to keep them wet but this is an effort comparable to prevent a haystack from burning by spitting on it. Meanwhile the first roofs go up in flames. The fire front moves towards us and we turn around to reach the place where we went ashore. But there is no





and guides us towards a small island right next to the main island with only one or two houses on it. By now, the sky is completely covered with smoke. We are running down the path, the isle coming closer and closer. At the end of the alley we have to cross a small bamboo bridge of maybe 8 inches width and finally we reach a place where we're more or less save, at least as long as the wind is not turning. Everywhere along the bank there are people standing in the water, embracing each other while they have to watch how the few they have is turning into smoke and ashes. Some are still



were asking us to go first. With us, there was a man carrying a small boy on his arms and they were both looking back over their shoulders into the inferno where there used to be their home. A woman with a baby nestling to her sat on the floor of the boat and couldn't stop crying.

As we reached land, some of the people standing there first took out the baby, followed by its mother and then us. The man, who was sitting with his son at the end of the boat, slowly climbed out last. Along with the other



boat in sight. Again we turn, this time intending to reach the southern shore. Everywhere around us crying children and worried mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, trying desperately not to loose each other in the chaos while saving TVs, clothes and all other sorts of stuff. The first path we take towards the shore leads into a dead end, but Murad climbs onto one of the huts from where he can overlook the scene. He jumps back down, beckons us to follow busy to throw anything they can grab into the water. Tables, chairs, suitcases, clothes, shoes, just everything is floating between the shocked people who face their total ruin. Some few still try to keep their sheds wet but they give up, when the fire encroaches to the buildings and consumes them. On the opposite shore there was already a huge crowd of spectators watching the work of destruction. Then, finally, there was a boat with some space left and even now the people

people we were now standing at the shore and watched the fire taking down the last remains of Karail. It may have burnt and fixed the roads, but now there's nothing left to use them for. Nine people passed away in this hell, among them four babies. We don't think it was chance that we were there in the moment the fire started. Remembering the old man's words, we felt that the responsibility we took when entering the island has turned into a demanding duty when we left it.