

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Cairo: Still in the Third World

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Dear Peter;

If you climb to the top of the Cairo Tower at night — that syringe-like 16-story structure with the ribbed shaft and needle peak overlooking Gezira Island — walk around the observation deck and peer over the rim, you'd think you were in Europe.

A million electric lights marshal along the sides of broad avenues and clover-shaped traffic circles and array themselves in tiers up the sides of the glittering riverside hotels.

During the day, the shop windows in the bustling modern commercial districts exhibit the latest in western-style clothing and electronics equipment. Above the storefronts in fashionable Talat Harb or Adly streets, the domes and balconies of the great stone buildings might remind you of turn-of-the-century Rome or London.

In this westernized core, shirts and slacks for the men and blouses and skirts for the women are the norm. But move eastward to medieval Cairo of the 1,000 minarets, around the Al-Azhar Mosque and Khan el Khalili bazaars, or south to where the Coptic churches of Old Cairo are under siege by fetid slums, and you encounter the traditional culture of galabiyah-clad men, where the women clothe themselves in black when leaving the sanctuary of their homes. Here, the narrow teeming alleyways are occasionally overlooked by the old style mushrabiya or lattice work windows; the donkey carts and sheep flocks compete for space with trucks, cars and motorcycles; the open air produce stands sell fresh plums, strawberries, oranges and miniature peaches; the sidewalk cafes are a second home to men playing dominoes or cards, sipping tea or smoking the nargileh water pipe; the radios and cassette recorders play Arab music and the loudspeakers broadcast Koranic sermons; the smells are a potent mixture of dung, garbage, sawdust and automotive wastes; and the ragged children are not the kind you'd want to put on a picture postcard.

Parts of central Cairo may look European, or at least Mediterranean, but the Third World laps around the fringes, seeping in through every available crack:

— Alongside the river, on the western edge of Roda Island near the Giza Bridge, a family has built a mud hut and planted crops in a field the size of an outdoor billboard. The field, in turn, is divided into several small square plots. While a young woman tends a kerosene stove, a small boy turns the handle

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of an Archimedean Screw, bringing a steady flow of water up from the river into a ditch running past the hut and into the field. There, another young boy breaks the dirt barrier surrounding one of the square plots, letting the water in to cover it. This is traditional Egyptian agriculture in microcosm, except that it is being practiced in the middle of downtown Cairo rather than in the rural Delta or Nile Valley.

-- Two boys with sticks are driving a flock of about 10 sheep up the pedestrian stairway of the October 6 bridge. The woolly white coats of the sheep are streaked with a purple dye. Practically in the shadow of the Ramses Hilton tower, the boys drive the sheep onto the busy freeway, hugging the narrow pedestrian walkway, bunching their sheep up along the railing, and usher the flock across the river to Zamalek.

-- An amputee, prominently displaying his leg stump, crouches along the side of the elevated pedestrian walkway that circles the Midan Tahrir ("Liberation Square"). His cane leans against the railing. His face is hidden by a dirty piece of cloth wrapped around his head. But a hand is outstretched, waiting for the touch of paper currency or coin. The man is usually in the same spot each day. Further along the walkway in the direction of the Mogamma, or government building, a young girl in a yellow peasant dress has twice been seen sprawled on the same stairway, sleeping, as the crowds gingerly step past her.

-- A man and woman fish from a rowboat in the stretch of the river in front of the Nile Hilton. While the man rows, the woman carefully feeds the net into the water. Later, the man is seen stretched out in the bottom of the boat, fast asleep, as the woman leans over the side, washing their clothes in the river.

-- In the eastern part of the city, between the Midan Ataba and Citadel, a man and woman crouch in the darkness of their sidewalk shack built of discarded pieces of wood and metal. A very small boy toddles unsteadily about the entrance, but can't go far -- a string looped around his waist snakes back into the recesses of the shack.

The continuing migration of people from rural Egypt to Cairo promises to maintain a relentless pressure on the city's physical infrastructure.

The usual estimate of Cairo's present population is 10 million. The government's new urban plan for Cairo, submitted to President Hosni Mubarak last week, predicts 16.5 million people living in Greater Cairo by the year 2,000. * This would cause an average population density of 300 persons per feddan (an acre equals 0.963 feddans), according to the report.

The Egyptian press is aware of what this means to vital services. An editorial in the English language Egyptian Mail on May 21 reported that a major sewer pipe in Giza recently burst and five workmen, overcome with fumes, died trying to repair it.

"According to some, the day is not so far away when catastrophes of this type will be beyond our control," the writer warned.

*By comparison, New York City had only 7.4 million in 1976.

I have frequently noticed water in the streets, apparently from breaks. The puddles and rivulets contribute one more hazard to negotiating the city streets a pied.

The housing crunch, already serious, can probably only get worse. Cairenes live wherever they can now. In the older sections of town, they live on the roofs of apartment blocks.

But the most dramatic evidence of housing scarcity is the population of squatters in the great Muslim necropolis on the eastern edge of the city beneath the arid Moqattam Hills. The miniature houses and courtyards of this "City of the Dead" -- complete with streets and alleys -- were built to house only the dead. But now they are inhabited by the living as well. (See Appendix A for an editorial on this and the housing problem in general)

This is the one area of Cairo that I feel nervous about entering. There is a certain air of unwelcome when you poke your head in there. I stopped to take a picture of some children playing on a swing, but a woman angrily waved me back. It wasn't long before I left.

To the foreigner, Cairo's overcrowding is perhaps most obvious in its traffic congestion. Vehicles, pedestrians and animals -- they all get bogged down in it.

Particularly at midday, when the heat bakes the ever-present dust and smog into cocoon around you, and you face the dense snarl of trucks, buses and cars, the press of pedestrian multitudes and the cacophony of honking horns and revving engines, well, it's all a bit much. It takes all your energy just to stagger over to a juice stand for a glass of farowla (fresh strawberry juice).

An experienced traveler friend of mine insists that the drivers in Lagos, Nigeria, beat the ones in Cairo in terms of sheer awfulness.

True or not, Cairo is still bad. Some of the drivers here think they are engaged in a competitive sport. Their adversaries are other drivers and pedestrians. But maybe it takes aggressive driving to get across town; I haven't tried it and hope I never have to.

Hazards to pedestrians could be minimized if intersections were the only point of danger. But since people here park on the sidewalks, pedestrians are forced into the streets to rub shoulders with hurtling tons of metal.

According to a book I have been reading, Egyptian peasants refer to Cairo as um al-dunya, "Mother of the World." Looking at a typical midday traffic bog, one is easily tempted to change that to "Mother of Chaos."

On the other hand, bus and taxi drivers are marvelously adept in getting through this mess. Despite the problems, public transportation in Cairo still works. For only five or ten piasters (roughly five or ten cents), you can get on a bus and, if you don't mind standing up all the way, get across town in reasonably good time.

Whatever the obstacles, your driver will find a way through.

That attitude of making the best of a situation seems to be emblematic of the city. I have not yet noticed any great despair or popular discontent here. The overall impression is one of stability.

You wouldn't think so at first, with all the armed men about. It's a bit of a shock to a visitor from the States to see soldiers in front of all the government buildings, on the Nile bridges, at the airport and train station and just randomly about town.

The radio and television building on the Corniche, for example, is guarded in the front by troops behind sandbags. Others are posted on the balconies and still more are inside. This serves to remind you that this nation, which recently lost its president through assassination, is taking no chances.

But despite the show of force, Cairo is by no means a threatening place. Violent crime seems to be rare here, for example. The only place you are going to be robbed is at the foreign exchange window of a bank.

On May 18, the Egyptian Gazette carried a crime double feature, the worst crime cases I've yet read about here. A "notorious pick-pocket" had been arrested with his gang and a 22-year-old housewife had stabbed her 61-year-old husband. Not bad for a city of 10 million.

The pick-pocket's modus operandi was to extort money from passengers on crowded city buses with his penknife. But he does not appear to have actually hurt anyone. The housewife, who jabbed her elderly cleaning worker spouse four times with a kitchen knife, at least had an explanation for her action. "With about 40 years of difference in age, we are continually on bad terms," she told police.

Both New York and Cairo have lots of armed men running about. But at least in Cairo, they're under some sort of discipline and add to rather than subtract from public safety and order.

A western visitor might wonder if ruler idolatry is in vogue here. Photographs of a stern President Mubarak are on display at all public buildings, in hotel lobbies and restaurants, and on some lamp posts in Giza. But it could be worse.

The Gazette recently excerpted a piece by Al-Akhbar columnist Mustapha Amin. Mr. Amin quoted a friend who travelled to an unnamed neighboring country and "was bored to death by posters of the RULER everywhere, in shops, tea houses, trams, buses and streets."

Mr. Amin's friend "cursed the radio and TV programs which have always the same topic: the RULER, his sayings, visits, tours and meetings. People can never speak -- as if they have already lost the faculty that differentiates them from the animals."

While it is true that the Gazette's lead story every day is President Hosni Mubarak visiting some cement factory or calling for a stable peace in the region, the editor is not shy about calling attention to governmental incompetence. In a wonderfully witty and pointed editorial, he recently referred to the planned Cairo Metro system as a bureaucratic "hallucination." (See Appendix B)

"... when I returned home, I began to tolerate all the daily troubles we are suffering," Mr. Amin's friend concluded. "At least we have opposition parties and papers which severely criticize the rulers."

Actually, I have yet to hear an Egyptian severely criticize Mubarak. A couple of students told me they liked Sadat better, but they expressed no strong feelings about their current leader.

Although the students were not so fond of him, Nasser seems to still stand high in public esteem. Poster size photographs of him are sold in the streets and his painted portrait sometimes decorates cafe walls, surely a sign of enduring popularity.

I recently watched a portrait painter at work in an alley. He specialized in rulers and entertainment personalities. I counted five paintings of Nasser, two of Sadat, two of Mubarak, and one of Sadat and Mubarak together, which should give you an idea of the demand for these icons.

I also noticed that the Nasser portraits showed a smiling, friendly face, like an easy-going and benign uncle. Sadat was more stiff and Mubarak practically glowered from the canvas. I wonder if Egyptian leaders become more human in the popular imagination as they recede in time.

The stable succession from Nasser to Sadat to Mubarak has certainly been good for some Egyptians. "... despite the object (sic) poverty of many people, there is more big money floating about than in the time of King Farouk, and most of that money is dishonestly come by," the Mail has said. (Appendix A)

Some of that big money turns up at the Nile Hilton wedding celebrations, as I discovered one night. The Hilton is a favored spot for these events because the open staircase zigzagging from the center of the lobby to the second floor banquet rooms provides a kind of runway to exhibit the bride in all her glory.

The announcement in the lobby had set 8 p.m. as the time of the party. The staircase was festooned with pink and white flowers, but there was little traffic on it.

During the next two hours, the guests continued to arrive at the hotel entrance in late model European or Japanese cars, some chauffeur-driven. They joined others milling about the lobby or walked upstairs to the banquet room.

The men all wore conservative dark formal suits. The women dressed in stylish western gowns or oriental ones with bright hoods, mostly the former.

Waiting in the banquet room were three long rows of tables crammed with trays of food. To the left, was a Pharaonic bust surrounded by floral arrangements. Beyond this room was a long dining hall from which issued "Copacabana Lounge"-style music.

I did not see any alcohol being served, and it's a pretty good guess that they were drinking hot tea in there. But another American observer told me he had seen some young males in the bathroom taking swigs from hip flasks.

By 10 p.m., the lobby was packed with wedding party guests and other onlookers. An accordionist and saxaphonist ran through bits of material, warming up.

The crowd had become so dense that I missed seeing the bride come in. But suddenly there was the piercing trill of that high-pitched ululation favored by Arab women. I looked over some shoulders to see the bride, groom and a belly dancer bathed in the brilliant white glare of portable lamps set up for the photographers.

The rather modestly attired belly dancer -- her stomach and legs were veiled by a gauze-like material, unlike any of the movies you've seen -- did a little bump and grind as two of the Hilton staff played a trumpet flourish.

The groom looked grave, like he was being inducted into the army, and the bride smiled nervously. The bride's maids beat tamborines and threw rose petals over the couple.

With the band playing and the tamborines jangling, the procession ponderously ascended the staircase, some of the women carrying candelabra on their heads. The ululations of the women mixed with the "Arabian Nights"-type music to produce an effect that was exotically, sumptuously oriental.

The bride was stunning in her white western-style gown, but she had difficulty negotiating the steps; people kept crowding onto the hem of her train. Frowning with concern, she had to halt while her maids lifted it up so she could climb the next few steps.

Midway up the stairs, people in the procession threw out a shower of small gold discs to the watching tourists and Hilton guests below.

It was silly, but I joined the rush to grab some of them. An American woman had earlier informed me that wealthy Egyptians once had a tradition of distributing gold coins at their weddings. Unthinking reflex made me bend down to take a closer look at these objects.

Of course, they were nothing but flimsy pieces of play money.

Whatever it was like in olden times, trickle down economics does not work in Egypt now.

EGYPTIAN MAIL

APRIL 30, 1983

HOUSING

FOR a good few years now, houses have been so scarce in Cairo that several people have been living in the charnel-houses of the cemeteries. A grave situation indeed! And we make no bones about it. While cemeteries are turning into houses for the living, houses of the living are turning into burial mounds for the dead, what with all these new buildings collapsing. So, if you ever feel lonesome, pay the cemetery a visit. You are bound to see some familiar faces among the living there; you might even recognise friends of yours that are newly-wed. If not, you will certainly see familiar faces among the newly-dead, buried under the rubble of a newly-built, freshly collapsed building. So why not go there and dig up old friends?

But enough of this light-heartedness and on the subject in hand.

The problem of buildings falls into two categories, old buildings and new. Old buildings were built to last, and most of them do. Only the water and drainage pipes have a limited lifespan. When they wear out, they leak. Water gets into the walls, floors and ceilings and weakens them, especially in bathroom and toilet areas. Eventually the building weakens and crumbles. If the occupants are exceptionally lucky, they get out in time. Government grants are available to do renovation work on old buildings. The trouble is that most owners simply don't bother to avail themselves of these grants. They want their buildings to fall down. Then they can either sell the land at fifty or a hundred times its value, or else build afresh and collect, say, a hundred pounds rent per month from each flat instead of ten, or even less. This aspect is perhaps the easiest for the government to control. A systematic inspection of each and every old building shouldn't take too long. That should be followed by an order to renew all piping within a certain period of time on pain of imprisonment.

When it comes to new buildings, the problems are of much greater magnitude. It is sufficient for a person who owns a quantity of building wood and has a few labourers at his command to set himself up as a builder (muqaawil). In fact even construction companies cannot always cope with their schedules so they sub-contract work to builders such as these. As for private housing, the need is so overwhelming that any Tom, Dick or Harry can embark on building work just by advertising that they are prepared to do it. A person owning no more than an empty piece of wasteland can sell twenty storeys worth of hypothetical flats for up to L.E. 100,000 each in a matter of weeks. What greater temptation can there be for unscrupulous builders? The trouble with Egypt now is that, despite the object poverty of many people, there is more big money floating about than in the time of King Farouk, and most of that money is dishonestly come by. Then with all the foreigners with fat pay-cheques flowing into Egypt, plus all the people from the Arab oil-states, there are apparently enough people prepared to pay stupendous sums for flats and houses.

Ironically enough, the person who makes the least money out of any building project is the person who holds the most responsible job: the building engineer. In fact his pay is hardly better than that of an unskilled labourer on the site. Ought we to be surprised when he falls a victim to bribery and corruption by the builder? Even if the government could supply one of its own engineers for every new building being erected, could we guarantee the integrity of a government engineer on government pay? The question doesn't need answering.

Frankly speaking, we can only see one thing that the government can do. Stop greed at its source: in the price of land. Impose strict prices on all land without allowing any piece of land to stand empty. Then ban all building by anyone but reputable firms, local or foreign. Of course this means large-scale recruitment of foreign firms ready to carry out the work required. But what else can be done? Strict laws have been passed, but prevention is far better than cure. And let's admit it, many of the builders now on the market are simply not to be trusted.

The Egyptian Gazette

APRIL 21, 1983

Responsibility

TWO faculties appear to be sadly lacking in the execution of state 'enterprise': initiative and responsibility. Where one is present, the other frequently is not, sometimes an initiative is taken and barebrained schemes result, as though planned under the influence of «hashish». Take the Tahrir Province Project, which was started in the first year or so of the Revolution. Some young engineer thought that a new green province in the middle of the desert would look wonderful — thought, that is, or hallucinated. He picked the spot without considering the nature of the ground, and sent the plan to the Presidency which fell for it. It turned out that the ground was totally unfit for reclamation and the project was a disaster. The Cairo Underground would appear to be another hallucination. Britain has declared that it could never have borne the expense of digging the London Underground in this day and age. It was built in the 19th century. However, Egypt is perhaps wealthier than Britain. All the realities, the stupendous expense, the nature of the ground, the existence of unmapped networks of cable and pipe, the danger to buildings — all these realities disappeared in some pleasant hallucination. When the day comes that some responsible person has to halt the whole thing, the men who were to blame for starting it will disclaim all responsibility and pass the blame onto others.

The ironic thing is that in areas where someone ought to show initiative and bear responsibility, no one comes forward. Take street accidents. Crowds gather round to gape and stare but no one thinks of administering first aid or phoning for an ambulance or the police.

Take another example. Just over two years ago USAID loaned five million dollars for the development of local crafts, many of which are dying a slow but sure death. This sum has been lying in the Nasser Bank since it reached Egypt two years ago. The bank manager sent a letter to the Local Crafts Guild asking to be directed as to the best way to use the American loan. It took the Guild a whole year to answer, then the director wrote back saying he wasn't responsible for such things. But then who is? Egypt has 394 production co-operatives and more than one minister under whose jurisdiction this loan might be administered. Why haven't some responsible persons come forward? Must we wait until, pardon the pun, they are smoked out?