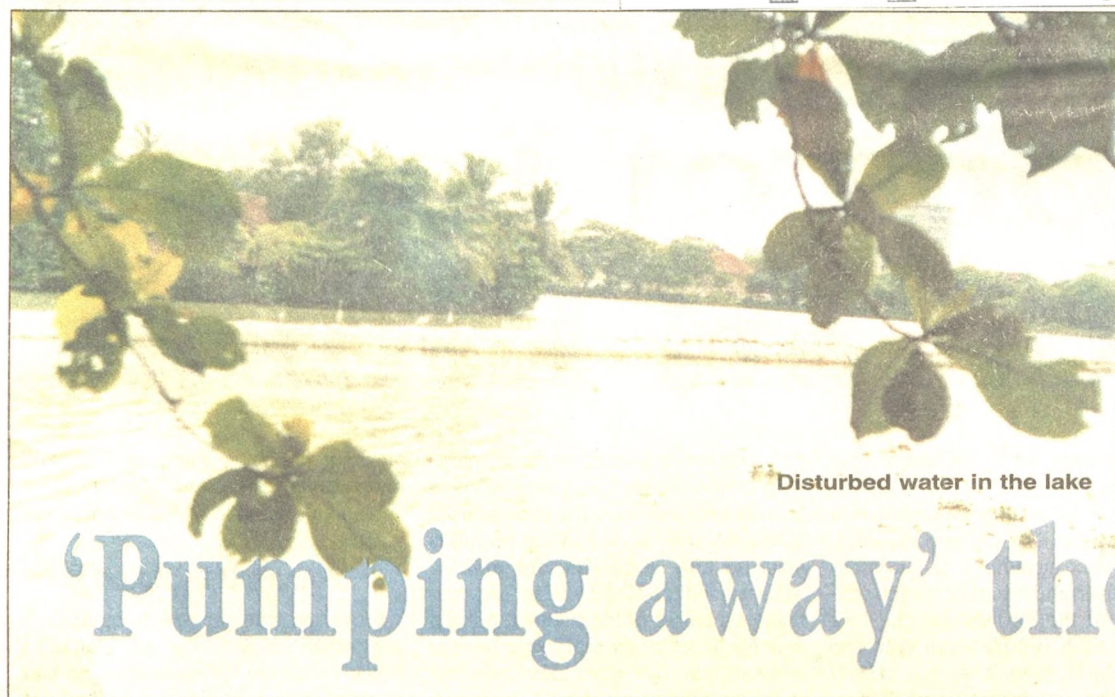




Disturbed water in the lake



Dredger in full swing

'Pumping away' the Beira stench

Text and pix by
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Enough is enough! The authorities at last are determined to put a stop to the nauseating smells that emanate from Beira Lake, surely may now be reaching even the high heavens.

Many in the heart of the city are inconvenienced and annoyed by the stench over the years. Records indicate that Beira started to stink from early 1900. Many an attempt had been made to fight the stench, but without success.

Pilot project

Now there is an accelerated pilot project by the Sri Lanka Land Reclamation Development Corporation (SLRDC) under the Ministry of Urban Development Housing and Construction to clean up the Beira.

In spite of a major task on sewerage connections to Beira under Stage I of a different project carried out currently, an accelerated project, was a long-felt need to deal with the pathetic situation.

The restoration work which began last week is due to be completed before

this century ends on December 31. The program guarantees a smooth sailing into the new millennium- for all residents and offices around the Lake and the passers-by, that Beira would be thoroughly clean and devoid of all offensive odours.

Though it was earlier thought that dead fish, decaying vegetable matter and chemical pollutants were the cause of obnoxious smells, now it is evident the real problem happens to be the accumulation of tonnes of human faeces.

How come this grievous issue tolerated, especially when one sits for his meals? Selvaratnam who lives in a shanty on a by-lane in Slave Island said he was accustomed to the 'pranks' of Beira. "It is a one-sided affair. So I mind my business," he said.

Beira becomes intolerable during the dry months. Rapid blowing brings about a full blast to the shores.

The four lakes constituting Beira are the East Lake, West Lake, South-West Lake and Galle Face Lake, all interconnected. They are polluted at different degrees. The current pro-



Pollutant mixed water being ejected from the pump at rapid speed

ject involves exclusively the dredging and cleaning of the South-West Lake (SWL). According to SLRDC Deputy General Manager Gemunu Alawattegama in charge of the operation, SWL is the worst affected of all four. It measures 11 hectares. SLRDC is funded with Rs.26 million from the Treasury for the job.

It is estimated that 60,000 cubic metres of silt is accumulated in the SWL. A wide area in it has

become extremely shallow by the deposition of silt and pollutants. These have grown to such heights that at intervals it braces the water surface or even penetrates it.

Drought

During drought, the water level drops exposing patches of these accumulations. Though there are 1,200 sewerages still opening to the Lake, in the past it had been much higher. Waste matter from industrial complexes in the

proximity also sizeably contribute to the pollution.

A Holland-made dredger is used to break the silt. It has a cutter-suction operation machine. As far as possible the machine is to make the bottom uniform. First, it will dredge the thickly silted areas. When the work is concluded, the SWL will have a minimum depth of two feet at any point on it.

The dredger is connected to a heavy duty pump which ejects about 1000 cubic metres of silt per hour. The phenomenon

involves mixing the loosened silt with water in a ratio of 30 to 70. A higher volume of water here is to facilitate mixing and throwing out process.

The silt is stockpiled in one corner of the lake, and will not be removed simultaneously as there is the tendency to litter the highways in doing so. This aspect will be dealt in at a later date. Beira is an artificial waterway which is on a higher plane than the Mean Sea Level (MSL). Dredging and cleaning project also includes construction of

four semi-circular gates at the Galle Face Lake region, at a height of six feet above MSL enabling the emptying of water to the sea at Galle Face through the spillway gates.

Spillway

Another set of spillway gates are located in the McCallum Road area. Here, water is emptied to the harbour region. Draining of the Lake is usually carried out during the rainy season. The current inter-monsoonal rains are said to be ideal. Level in the lake is allowed to drop by two feet by opening the spill gates. Replenishment is by rain water.

Records say that Beira had been made in 1554 by a Portuguese engineer, Beiro. However, this artificial waterway did not get its present name Beira until 1927.

Till then it had been called 'Colombo Lake' or simply 'Lake'.

Subsequently the Dutch developed it and was used as a medium of transportation within the city limits.