

Star City talks to Dhaka city Mayor

Sadeque Hossain Khoka



SOHEL ISLAM

...
"Many important decisions relating to the development of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) are now coming directly from the Prime Minister's (PM's) office. It is good news that the DCC can now offer better and timely services to city dwellers than in the past," said Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka in an exclusive interview with The Star City.

"In the past, lengthy bureaucratic processes used to hamper the urgent development activities of DCC. Because of this DCC had earned a bad reputation. Now, I am really happy that many of the issues are looked into by the Prime Minister herself," said Sadeque Hossain Khoka.

Since my taking over as Mayor, I have been speaking of placing my office under the direct control of the Prime Minister. "If the DCC was under the PM's office it would not only be better for us but also for city dwellers. I wanted Tk 200 crore from the Ministry of Local Government for development work in the city but I was given only Tk 28 crore. Had it been under the PM office then I would

have directly justified my needs and bargained for more money without being hampered by bureaucracy," said Khoka.

Sadeque Hossain Khoka was elected Mayor of Dhaka in 2003. Besides carrying out the job of Mayor, he had to perform as the Minister of Fisheries and Livestock till May 22 this year. Khoka was given the charge of the ministry after the four-party alliance came to power in 2001.

Many critics have dubbed Khoka as the 'Part-time Mayor' of the city. Refuting this criticism, Khoka said, "This allegation is totally irrelevant. Let's forget about the past and dwell on the present. Now I am concentrating fully on the problems and development of the city."

Elaborating on the problem of billboards (see side-bar), Khoka said, "The contracts of the billboard owners have not been approved for this fiscal year because we want to bring discipline and add some sense of aesthetics to this sector. Some of the contractors have gone to the High Court against our decision. Now the matter is in the hands of the court. So I can not comment any further on the issue."

"However, our final decision will be to remove the old billboards on DCC land and replace them with modern ones. To ensure discipline, the process of contract has been decentralised, and many of the responsibilities have been given to our 10 zonal offices, said the mayor.

Replying to a question on billboard-free roads, Khoka said, "We are considering making some of the VIP roads free from billboards to preserve their natural state and beauty."

Asked about waste dumping and its privatisation (see side-bar), the Mayor replied, "We have already privatised waste dumping in the Gulshan zone on a pilot basis. Initially they had some problems, but they are improving."

"In order to make it a success, we are thinking of handing over waste management for at least three years. I think, it will yield a very good result," added the Mayor.

When asked why, when no other country in the world has trees planted in road dividers, does Dhaka have them obstructing the view and movement of vehicles, Khoka replied, "Well, we are planting trees, which will grow

vertically, and their branches will not obstruct vehicular movement."

Speaking about plantation of trees on footpaths rather than on road medians, he said, "We will talk to the experts about it and will decide based upon their opinions."

Asked to speak about the graveyard crisis, Khoka explained, "It is the Primer Minister's initiative that may solve some of the problems the city is facing regarding graveyards. We are going to build four new graveyards at Hazaribagh, Mirpur, Badda and Demra. Once this project is complete the city dwellers will not have any problems for the next 100 years."

"Azimpur graveyard is, at present, struggling to cope with the pressure of demand. I know that the bodies of the dead have to be buried there before the proper preparation of the ground can take place. In order to reduce the problem, steps have been taken already to acquire the garage area of the Ministry of Food adjacent to the graveyard. Therefore, seven bigha of land will be added to Azimpur graveyard in the near future," assured the Mayor.

Unplanned road digging often grabs the headlines, as it causes various degrees of chaos and inconvenience for city dwellers. Talking about the plans for avoiding future chaos in this area, Khoka said, "The DCC just last month took an initiative to greatly reduce inconvenience caused by unplanned road digging of different utility service providers. We have divided the roads of the city into two categories -- the important roads comprising about 200 kilometres, and the lanes and by-lanes comprising about 1800 kilometres of roads."

"We will select three pre-qualified contractors for all road digging of the 200 kilometres of major city roads. The contractors must be equipped with adequate skilled manpower, sophisticated machinery and so on," said the Mayor.

"For the 1800 kilometres of lanes and by-lanes, we will choose ten pre-qualified contractors who will be responsible for all digging and repairs. The already formed 'One-stop Cell' will monitor their work to avoid unplanned and unnecessary digging. If the contractors cannot meet the demand and specifications of the

cell they will be penalised with monetary fines and blacklisted," explained Khoka.

The DCC has a food-testing laboratory under its health department. Although the laboratory has been in operation for some time, and lawsuits are filed against unscrupulous adulterators of food, due to very minor fines compared to their misdeeds, the perpetrators get away almost free with their crime. Food-adulteration is not just continuing unabated, but on the increase.

However, the Mayor chose to ignore the question of food adulteration, saying, "We have a lot of other important issues to take care of. After taking care of them, we will properly address the adulteration of food."

Many of the city parks are being illegally occupied by land grabbers and are being used for commercial activities. Reports of grabbing are regularly reported in the press, but nothing substantial appears to have been done so far.

"I know that the parks of the city are not in a good condition. But a few days back, a park at Syedabad was freed from illegal occupiers. I will look into the matter very soon and take necessary

steps," stated Khoka.

Asked to describe the successes and failures of his one year-and-four-months in office, the Mayor replied, "I think it's too early to comment on it. But there were many financial irregularities in the past in DCC. The employees were suffering from a lack of confidence too. Many of the irregularities are being dealt with and employees' confidence is improving. My effort will be to bring back their complete confidence in

DCC."

As Mayor and BNP Dhaka city president, does Sadeque Hossain Khoka manage to spend time with his family?

He replied with a smile, "My business does not stop me spending leisure time with my family at all."

SOME OF THE ISSUES OF CONCERN



ALUSOAR MACDONALD

City's open garbage an embarrassment for DCC

Dhaka City Corporation has failed to cope effectively with approximately 4000 tons of waste produced by the city's inhabitants everyday

One of the basic criteria of cleanliness in any urban habitat depends on the effective disposal of the huge amounts of garbage produced by 'modern living standards.' Left to rot on streets, or clog drains and waterways, organic and inorganic waste pollutes the air and water and fast becomes a major cause for the spread of disease.

"We were in Malaysia for 15 days. The air is so clean and fresh it was a pleasure to breathe. But as soon as we landed in Bangladesh my four year-old daughter started to sneeze due to the polluted air of Dhaka", said Raihan of Purana Pallan.

Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) has failed to cope effectively with approximately 4000 tons of waste produced by the city's inhabitants everyday. There are allegations that mismanagement

and corruption among DCC employees are major obstacles for the effective execution and enforcement of decisions.

Recently DCC was forced to change a decision to transfer 250 transport employees to the ailing conservancy department to aid garbage collection and disposal and to curb the pilferage of fuel, which was common among transport workers. On hearing the decision, the transport employees immediately went on strike, while some union members ransacked the chief conservator's office (CCO) who would be responsible for curbing pilferage after the transfer.

Through fuel pilferage DCC is not only losing money but also failing in its waste management duties. Garbage truck drivers were habitually making

fewer trips than required to collect waste from secondary dumping sites of the city to the only dumping ground at Matuail.

To deal with the corruption problem of the employees DCC has also tried privatising waste disposal. Eight wards of the city have been handed over to private and non-government organisations on a pilot basis.

Community based waste management systems are also gaining ground due to the poor performance of DCC.

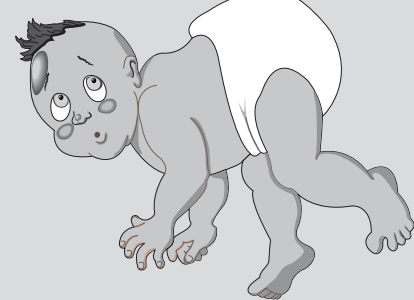
"The open garbage system of the city corporation is spreading filthy odours and disease within the city," said a community garbage collector. "Which is why we have decided to take matters into our own hands."

What happened to the mosquitoes?

The good news, as a relief from the bad news, is that city dwellers have not had to experience too many mosquito problems this summer. Last summer, the dengue scenario in Dhaka reached almost to panic levels, for which Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) drew much flak from many quarters. Owing to DCC's failure to control the aedes mosquito, the spread of dengue fever reached a peak.

This year, however, credit goes partly to the unfavourable weather conditions. Due to the lack of humidity the aedes mosquitoes were unable to breed in such vast numbers. However, DCC also had a part to play. The far-reaching awareness campaign to educate the public about breeding habits and how to deter the aedes mosquito was a success story for DCC. So far, no dengue cases have been reported in any hospital in the city this year. However, the winter is yet to come.

"This summer, the temperature was very favourable for the aedes mosquito to breed but the humidity did not help them. Along with an optimum temperature range of between 31 to 33 degrees Celsius, the humidity should also be around 80 per cent. In addition, the high rainfall this year, and in particular thunderstorms, also were a deterrent for the mosquitoes, which need stagnant water to breed," said a senior official of the DCC's health department.



At the beginning of this year, the culex mosquito caused some problems for DCC. But, again, the weather came to DCC's rescue.

As a result, Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka is riding high as far as mosquito control is concerned. But can the weather be depended on next year?

Billboards continue to create 'vision pollution' for city dwellers

Over the last few years, the splendour of Dhaka has diminished largely due to a steady spread of billboards

Outdoor advertisement has become a visual nuisance. Going out now means exposure to ever-mushrooming illegal billboards installed on sidewalks and rooftops. Over the last few years, the splendour of Dhaka has lost out largely to a steady crawl of billboards.

The skyline of Dhaka is plagued with high-rises of every kind. The commanding height of billboards here and there adds to vision pollution, which is as bad as noise, air and water pollution -- all detracting from the pleasure of urban life.

Bangla Motor, Shahbagh, Farmgate, Gulshan, Karwan Bazar, Kurl, Biswa Road, Mohakhali and other major crossings and streets are bursting with billboards.

The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) started dismantling the billboards on July 19, but the High Court (HC) stayed the move upon lawsuits by 19 advertising firms.

This year, the DCC has raised advertisement rates, which prompted the advertising firms to file lawsuits in May.

Recently, six more firms filed similar cases with the HC against the DCC decision to dismantle the billboards.

According to the revenue department of the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), either side of a road cannot have more than 20 billboards in a space of two kilometres. But the stretch between the Hotel Sonargaon and the Bangla Motor crossing has at least 40 billboards.

"An advertiser needs permission from the DCC. But if a company has approval for two billboards, it sets up ten," says a source in the DCC revenue department.



ALUSOAR MACDONALD