

Traffic mess: Another failure of governance?

DR. SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

It is perhaps not an overstatement that the traffic scenario in Dhaka represents a disaster zone with no relief in sight. I need not recount the variety of daily experiences, but some of them are quite mind-boggling. For example, having to negotiate nearly every intersection, each a veritable battleground where road warriors battle for every inch of space. That such battles are so commonplace also reflects the unimaginable state of traffic mismanagement. One wonders whether the people at the helm of the traffic system in Dhaka are singularly inept or whether they are from another planet: Planet IQ-zero. Just as an example, I'd like to know why the traffic coming from VIP road north cannot make a right turn at the Sonargaon circle and go west on Panthopoth? Instead, on reaching the circle, they must make a left turn going east, cross Hotel Sonargaon, make a U-turn at the next opening and then head west.

Anyone with some common sense would find this idea laughable at best. Just note what happens: It requires all vehicular traffic to use brute force to make room as they make the U-turn. As one might imagine, some of the bigger vehicles find that they cannot make the U-turn in one attempt and must go in reverse to make room. But in the frenzied traffic, where madmen posing as drivers rule, where the laws of the jungle dominate, and where the backseat passengers (madmen of a different strain) urge their drivers to exploit the tiniest opening to make the triumphant one-inch gain, the plight of the big buses are all too well known. They look like hulking dinosaurs stuck in quicksand, unable to go forward or back while the incessant traffic begins to pile up in a huge mess that only gets worse by the second. And those who find themselves caught in the mindless tangle must find the U-turn solution utterly exasperating, lamentable, vacuous, and befitting a few other choice adjectives not fit for public perusal. Sitting in that growing mess it seems so stupid that all and sundry in their pursuit of an inch of space are giving up something far more valuable -- time -- reflecting pristine asinine behavior at its best as they jostle for the inch. It is only when the traffic police show up that the arduous unangling process begins, marked by anger, derision, finger-pointing, and a tumultuous exchange of epithets. I wonder if any psychologist has profiled these road warriors who represent a unique strain of combatants with a unique strain of psychosis!

Is there a Sonargaon solution? Note that there are five streams of traffic that converge at this juncture. Presently at least two streams from opposite ends are allowed to flow at one time, some continue on straight while others make a turn. The right turning traffic quickly reaches an impasse as it encounters oncoming traffic from the opposite

end. As this cohort grows in the center, the space gets gradually constricted, the flow is hindered, backlogs develop, chaotic patterns form (in the absence of traffic lanes), and a new cycle of mess develops.

Here's a simple solution for the traffic department to try out at the Sonargaon intersection. If only one stream is allowed to flow "at a time" for a duration of 1-1.5 minutes, adjusted up or down for the level of build-up, while the four other streams are made to wait far back, it would allow the freed stream to go in any direction unhindered by any other stream. For example, traffic coming from north VIP Road could go in all three directions without any obstruction in the center caused by traffic from opposite ends. By eliminating the congestion at the center, 1.5 minutes of unobstructed flow ought to clear more traffic than our traffic managers from Planet-IQ-zero could ever imagine. As a consequence, the maximum waiting time at the intersection ought not to be more than 7.5 minutes (give or take an extra minute to adjust for build-up) as opposed to the present situation where oftentimes the waiting time is 20 minutes or more because of the bungling at the center, especially during the busy rush. The key principle for the Sonargaon intersection is to "move traffic one stream at a time" and conduct some time and flow studies. One wonders why some education institution that has a statistics or operations research program has not done so yet for the major intersections. While it is also important to introduce the concept of "turning lanes," more of that later, given the planetary origins of the traffic department.

There are several broader issues that the traffic department also ought to address. Perhaps these have been explored before. If so, my reiteration ought to be an independent validation of past prescriptions. Here are the suggestions:

End Stoppages at Intersections: Trucks, buses and other paying-passenger-bearing vehicles MUST NOT be allowed to dally at any intersection. Vehicles making such unauthorized stops must be subjected to behavior modification procedures through the use of negative consequences following dallying behaviors. Thus heavy penalties must be imposed on those who do not comply. The penalties should include fines of a heavy variety, (not the minuscule Tk.200-300 variety the offenders can pay immediately and go free), taking away driving privileges, or even awarding jail time for repeat offenders. It is possible to encounter belligerent drivers who will resist, argue, or even attempt to speed away. This requires the presence of a sizeable force to deal with them. Since such force may not be available (and may not even be required) for all junctions, randomly selected intersections may be heavily manned by enforcers to impose the

penalties and instill traffic rules into their mindsets. The big question, of course, is whether there is the willingness in the traffic department to implement this. Some say they are unlikely to impose such discipline for fear of losing a source of unearned income. It is conceivable, therefore, to build an element of citizens' participation in implementing the behavior change programs so that appropriate penalties are actually imposed. Heavy

partnership arrangement to encourage people's participation in their own affairs.

Remove Flow-impeding Structures: A third measure, and very essential, is to remove all stationary or non-stationary structures that serve as impediments to the flow of human and vehicular traffic. The innumerable variety of street retailers occupying the footpaths forces pedestrians on to the streets, thus narrowing the space

hoods.

Another major culprit is the construction industry that heavily uses public space for private use without paying any price. The indiscriminate piling of brick, sand, bamboo, and other building paraphernalia on public property for every construction project not only constricts space, they also heavily damage public property built at the taxpayers' expense. A trek through any residential area will reveal

tion needs of the city. A suggestion is to penalize those structures in front of which public roads have suffered serious damage due to construction activities. More specifically, have them pay for the repairs -- seriously!

Match Road Capacity to Transportation Needs: A fourth measure is to objectively assess the capacity of Dhaka's streets to hold an optimum number and combination of vehicles. Decisions must be made on how many

be granted reprieve. Of course, improved public transportation must go hand in hand while law and order needs to be strengthened for those who may have to walk a bit more to avail public transportation.

Scale Back Perimeter Walls: A fifth measure is to objectively assess those residential and commercial areas where the owners, lacking an iota of civic sense, have built walls at the outer edges of their properties without leaving adequate space for vehicular movement. It is time to pass a bill in the parliament that will require these walls to be scaled back to allow widening of the streets. This price ought to be exacted for lacking public spirit and sensibility. A side benefit of this bill is that it will create huge employment opportunities for the marginalized population to earn their daily bread by helping scale back the walls. It may even serve as a window of opportunity to downsize the number of rickshaws that contribute to inefficient use of street space (consider the passenger capacity, efficacy, and costs of moving passengers by six rickshaws or a bus, each option roughly occupying the same space) by shifting this labor pool to the task of scaling back the perimeter and widening the streets. At the same time, more buses should be introduced to supplement lost rickshaw capacity. Ultimately, rickshaws must be phased out completely if we desire better, faster, and more efficient mobility in a more modernized city, but programs to employ them in appropriate sectors must also be devised to smoothen the transition. Laws must also be initiated or implemented regarding any new construction so that adequate space is made available for smoother traffic flow.

Relocate the Street People: Another needed measure is to clear every intersection of beggars, fruit-sellers, flower girls, and the numerous others who sell books, balloons, newspapers, towels, and even some rare varieties of game birds as they dodge the traffic and use a variety of ploys to make a quick buck. In the first place, their very presence on the streets and having to make a living under such circumstances is a testament to the monumental failure of the regimes in charge and their development partners "working" for decades to alleviate poverty. Moreover, intersections are not ideal locations in which to make a living, especially because of the hazards posed by madmen at the steering wheels and risking loss of life or limb. Also, the children of the streets ought to be in schools and in other forms of care so that their lives are more fulfilling and not spent in eking out a living while they fatten the area godfathers who prey on these hapless souls. Traffic weeks and volunteer assisted programs could be utilized along with NGOs to rehabilitate these children whose expectations from life must be changed for the better.

The measures suggested only serve

as a starting point and will require commitment of the traffic department and other sectors with full support of a determined leadership to change the frustrating conditions. I have little doubt that the suggested measures will also cause pain and frustration for selected groups who are likely to resist. The truth of the matter is there will be no gain without pain and the challenge for the leaders is to weigh the gains against the pains with the objective of deriving the greatest good for the greatest numbers, even if some groups have to suffer as a consequence. That is the challenge of governance.

Additional and long-term measures, more comprehensive in form, are also needed to address the traffic conundrum more resolutely. For example, inter-sectoral linkages must be examined by involving education, health, public works, law and order, social welfare, and information sectors to tame the traffic monstrosity. Attention must also be paid to such areas as taxation, public-private tradeoffs, investments in vehicular industries, and policies to shift population segments (e.g., garment workers) out of Dhaka City that ought to be used judiciously so that the traffic system "could" begin to approximate traffic conditions in civilized societies. But that would require visionary governance, enlightened leadership, and a genuine interest of the rulers in addressing the needs of its citizens *all* order indeed!

When our national leaders begin to understand the importance of inter-sectoral linkages, comprehend their ramifications, and are able to take decisive steps to benefit the wider public instead of political cronies and special interest groups, this nation will not have to make too many needless U-turns that disrupt the patterns and flows of public life. The traffic mess of this city is also reflective of the failure of governance and leadership at the highest tiers who just don't seem to care. One wonders whether this is because of the state-of-the-art vehicles they ride with similar air-conditioning systems that make the ride a pleasure trip. If so, it suggests the need for another parliamentary bill that all political honchos and lawmakers be required to use public transportation once a week... or so. I know now I am hallucinating! The point is the present traffic mess suggests -- nay, screams loudly -- that if we are unwilling to learn, unwilling to make compromises, unwilling to seek positive changes, unwilling to be responsive to public needs, and unwilling to listen to good advice to attain the greater good of society, this nation will continue to trek through life in chaos, confusion and exasperation that the Dhaka City traffic so vividly portrays. And when the trio becomes unbearable, profound and unexpected changes might follow.

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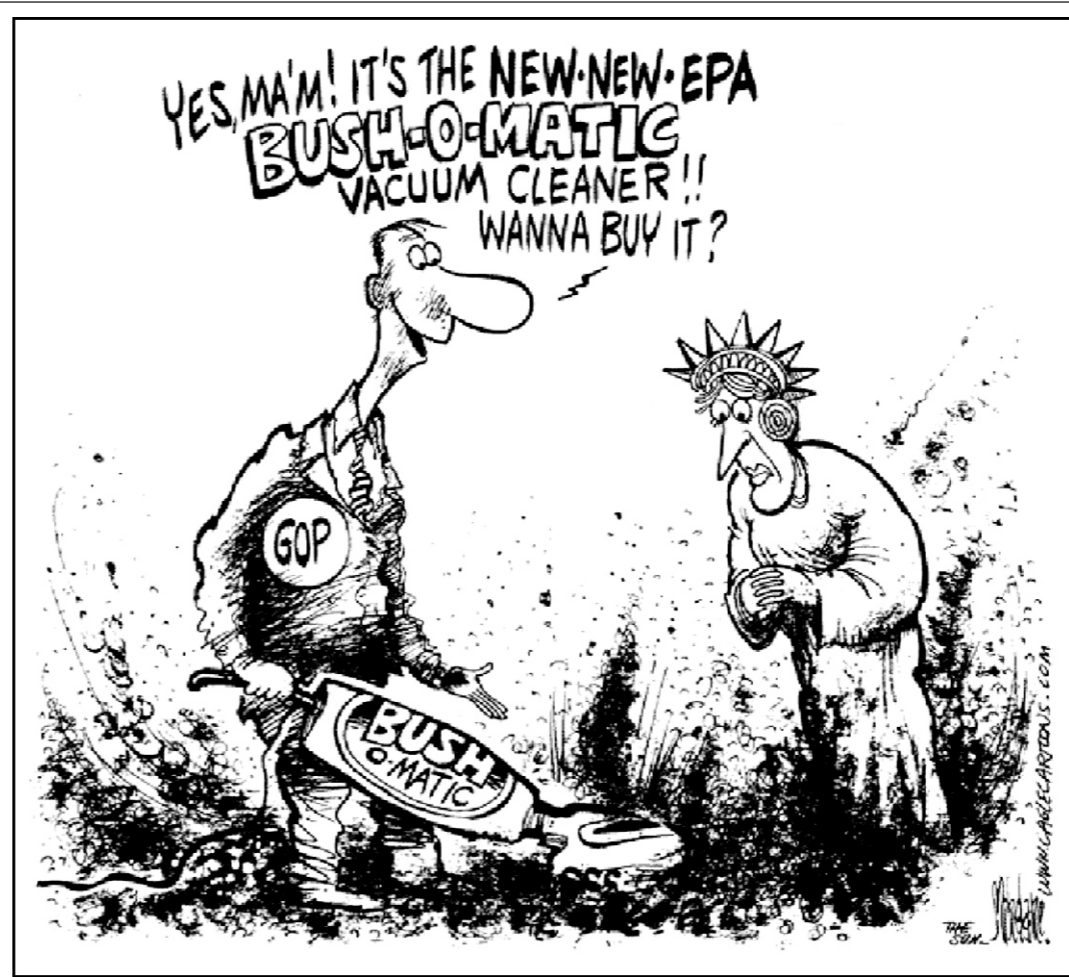
media coverage should also precede implementation of such programs so that violators cannot say they didn't know! New measures based on "official" perks and incentives are also needed to build a new traffic department by a disciplined, well-trained, and adequately compensated workforce. When this is coupled with proper supervision, rewards for good performance, and clear designation of where passengers can be picked up or offloaded, the traffic scenario stands to be greatly improved.

Designate Pedestrian Crossings: Street-crossing by pedestrians is another flow-disrupting daily experience. Given the potentially life-threatening consequences (not all brakes work all the time), pedestrians must only be allowed to cross at designated points, not anywhere they wish. This re-orientation will require time and effort using multi-pronged approaches. For example, instead of spending enormous sums building barriers all over the city (while enriching contractors close to the powers that be) that the pedestrians will easily find ways of scaling, it is important to initiate behavior change programs via regular traffic education where the media can play a vital role. Skits, catchy slogans, and a variety of other innovative approaches are worth a try. Zebra-crossings (or innovations such as tiger crossings for a more indigenous flavor) must also be widely painted; and voluntary help from boy scouts, civic organizations, and local residents must be used in tandem to assist in directing pedestrians to the right crossing points. Some pain may even be inflicted upon those who are not compliant by making them sit and observe the process for thirty minutes or so. The use of volunteers will require the use of special arm-bands, head gear, whistles and other paraphernalia to accord legitimacy. Their involvement would also be instrumental in achieving greater diffusion of needed practices regarding traffic rules in various communities. In fact, in resource-limited Bangladesh, more and more civic functions ought to be shared with local communities in a

available to traffic flow and causing jams. Similarly, parked cars, trucks, rickshaws, etc. on major thoroughfares restrict traffic lanes, causing congestion. Heavy penalties for parking on main thoroughfares should free up more space. Shops, sweetmeat and "fuchka" stands, and retailers of vegetables, religious artifacts, books, clothing, and a plethora of other offerings sold on the footpaths or sometimes even on the streets must also be cleared systematically to free up space. However, designated places must be offered to these operators so they can continue to earn their liveli-

hoods. Another major culprit is the construction industry that heavily uses public space for private use without paying any price. The indiscriminate piling of brick, sand, bamboo, and other building paraphernalia on public property for every construction project not only constricts space, they also heavily damage public property built at the taxpayers' expense. A trek through any residential area will reveal

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Electricity for all at affordable price

Will it remain a dream or become reality?

FEROZ M. HASSAN

POWER outage in the country results in substantial economic loss. In the industrial sector alone the loss amounts to USD 778 million dollars a year. This was about 11.54 per cent of the sector's GDP and 1.72 per cent of the national GDP in 2000-2001. A study report on "Economic Impact of Poor Power Quality on Industry", done under USAID-SARI/Energy programme and not challenged by power ministry or PDB, reveals that the unplanned interruptions results in economic losses that are nearly two and half times than those of planned interruptions. The interesting part is that the frequency of unplanned interruptions during 2000-2001, was an average nearly one interruption per day lasting about two hours. In contrast, the number of planned interruptions is about one in two months, each lasting about seven hours.

The electricity position of Bangladesh is at a critical point. How vulnerable the situation is evident from the recent failure of national grid. The whole country plunged into darkness. There was no power in the entire country.

For the past few years, frequent power outages have become a way of life for the people of Bangladesh. Even though the peak season with sapping heat of summer is almost over, people are still being subjected to power outages. Most people in the country specially the people living in cities and towns have lost all hopes that PDB or REB will help them out of this plight. At a citizens rally organised by Notundhara, one speaker said "We have been hearing from the government authorities now for some time that the situation will be improved very soon, but 'very soon' never comes."

Every year Bangladesh faces a vicious circle; with the summer comes the same old power crisis. The city people of course get to feel the veracity

of problem more than the rural people. For the past few years the situation has been unbearable. Subsequent government has done nothing tangible to meet the demand for electricity, which according to expert reports, including the government reports is increasing at the rate of 10 per cent per annum. Neither have they tried to curb theft in the name of so-called system loss that has reached an intolerable level.

We should opt for small capacity dispersed generation rather than large centralised ones. However, as an immediate measure and to meet the urgent need PDB should set up 10 power stations in and around Dhaka with 25-30 MW generating capacity gas fired plants. This would solve the acute crisis that exists now and help to avert a catastrophe coming in the next summer.

Before coming back to power second time around the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) promised 'a country free of corruption and terrorism' and even promised to get rid of mosquito and load shedding. Now when the nation is plunged into an energy crisis, this government like the previous government of Awami League gives the same old story. The government come out with the same excuses like their predecessor government -- that the World Bank and Asian Development Bank "are not giving us the money that is needed to improve the power problem". What seems very clear now that the BNP government just as the previous Awami League government did not do any home work about the problem and do not have any solid plan even though they made election pledge. So when pressed hard the usual stuffs come from the Ministry and BPDB, "please understand it's not easy, it requires lots of money to get rid of such a huge problem. We are poor and we do not have so much money" (so please suffer).

But many public officials and the energy experts believe that the immediate problems can be solved by us and with our own resources. What is lack-

ing is the real political commitment. There is no willingness to take on the problem with zeal. However, many experts believe that definitely there is solution and it is possible to avert the current acute crisis in the power sector. There is money and technology available in the country which could improve the situation.

Presently, the peak hour demand for power in the entire country is about

outages and brown outs are occurring.

We all know, the demand is increasing and to meet that increasing demand we need to increase our generation capacity. The real fact is the amount of electricity generated by the PDB has not increased over the last seven years. All the increases came from IPP projects. That too at a high cost to the public. These IPP projects are helping fill the gap between PDB

supply and the nation's demand.

The subsequent governments seems to be waiting for big grants from World Bank for big generation plants that would perhaps enable the politicians to get big kickbacks and business houses to make large commissions. Many energy experts believe that by using local gas we can easily produce electricity at an affordable price. We should opt for small capacity dispersed generation rather than large centralised ones. However, as an immediate measure and to meet the urgent need PDB should set up 10 power stations in and around Dhaka with 25-30 MW generating capacity gas fired plants. This would solve the acute crisis that exists now and help to avert a catastrophe coming in the next summer.

Simply by installation of some transformers in main city substations and laying cables can immediately improve electricity supply situation in Dhaka. The question is why it is not being done? Is it the shortage of money or lack of advance planning? Why is the government not allocating enough money to PDB or even directly to DESA? Money has to be found and work must be done to avert the acute power crisis. There is plenty of liquidity

available with the private banks, if necessary BPDB and DESA may borrow from them.

Activists of Notundhara -- a movement for change -- have been organising citizens to campaign against load shedding in the city since August. In Dhaka its committee has identified power as an important issue to address. Citizens in Dhaka hardly enjoy proper civic amenities, are choked by air pollution, suffer from traffic congestion and are assaulted by muggers and thugs. For the past few years frequent power outages has been threatening their life and work. As a part of the campaign activities several demonstrations and rallies have been organised in the various areas of the city. In these programmes hundreds of citizens from all walks of life have joined and demanded to end load shedding and provide quality electricity for all. Citizens have also voiced their serious concern about high system loss, severe corruption and wastage of money in politically biased projects in the power sector. The campaigners are mobilising citizens to put pressure on the government to act quickly in addressing the power issue.

It is a glaring social and economic injustice that only 30 percent of the population (some say it is only 20 per cent) have access to electricity even after 30 years of independence. Generation and distribution of electricity need to be expanded to provide more and more people with opportunities to access electricity at an affordable price. So the main goal of the movement is "Electricity for all at affordable price." The organisers believe that only through mass social movement by mobilising citizens through a broad based platform the existing unfair and unjust situation that exist in the country can be effectively addressed. It's time that the general people get together, marshal enough support, to put enough pressure on the authorities to listen to them and meet their basic needs and fulfil their aspirations.

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Cleanliness can be learned

DR. LIAQUAT ALI KHAN

NOW for more than a century, cleanliness has been a profound American value. This value is manifested in both personal and public hygiene.

For most Americans, personal hygiene comes first. They take daily showers, shampoo their hair, use deodorants to suppress sweating, manicure their nails, and keep their mouths fresh; women go regularly to beauty parlors, men prune themselves mostly at home. Personal grooming is prompted by a desire to be clean as well as by an impulse to look nice -- for the American culture of cleanliness has come to appreciate good looks -- though painted with the brush of narcissism.

A fusion of cleanliness and good looks is not confined to personal grooming. It is also visible in homes and public places. Government buildings, corporate offices, schools, hospitals, and shopping malls are clean. An additional effort is made to make them look pleasant and beautiful. Flowers, trees, plants, and decorations highlight entrances, hallways, and common areas. Just like grooming a human face, a lot is contemplated and done to improve the looks of public buildings.

Good-looking public places, however, are not mere faces without substance. Real efforts are made to safeguard genuine cleanliness, for public hygiene is the science of preserving the health of the community. In most American counties and cities, therefore, local governments make sure that water is available and safe to drink, and that garbage and sewage are properly removed from streets and factories. Americans have learned that municipal housekeeping requires political action. And it also needs the expertise of skilled engineers and town planners who must carefully plan water and sewage systems. Air pollution is a more complex problem that, above all, requires cooperation of the industry.

No government, however, can maintain public hygiene unless the people cooperate. Ordinary Americans do. They do not trash roads, parks, parking lots, or other common areas. Except some base ball players, very few Americans spit in public.

But Americans were not always like this. In her remarkable book, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (Oxford, 1995), Suelen Roy traces the history of how America has changed from dreadfully dirty to clean. Before

the American Civil War (1860s), she writes, men spat everywhere, flies accompanied every meal, foul smells emanated from everywhere, hundreds of roaming pigs scavenged garbage thrown into thoroughfares, there was no running water and no plumbing. Of the American habit of chewing and spitting tobacco, Charles Dickens found this filthy custom inseparably mixed with all the transactions of social life. For the most part, the author of *Chasing Dirt* concludes, the American cities and towns were dirty and dangerous.

After the Civil War, however, American leaders began to advocate personal cleanliness as a moral and patriotic value. It became un-American to be

Purification is a profound Islamic value. In Islam, cleanliness is a religious duty. The mandatory wudu (ablution) before daily prayers is a practical lesson in personal hygiene that all Muslims internalise from childhood.

dirty, regardless of the nature of work. New immigrants were taught English and hygiene. Dirt was no longer touted as the worker's jewelry. It was now associated with disease. Epidemics such as cholera and yellow fever brought home the liaison between filth and death. The fear of disease and death, coupled with vigorous education about the benefits of personal hygiene, persuaded Americans to reform their personal habits.

But personal hygiene was not enough to fix the macro problem. Something had to be done to clean cities and communities. Committed sanitarians harped on a simple thesis that uncollected garbage was the greatest nuisance. They lobbied with the government for laying sewers and with the people to install plumbing in houses. Indoor plumbing and outdoor sewers became America's obsession. Resources and political will were brought together to enforce the ethic of cleanliness. With an unprecedented vigor and commitment, America was changing from a dirty nation to a world-class model of personal and public hygiene.

The American story of hygiene transformation has great lessons for

rest of the world, particularly for the Islamic world.

Purification is a profound Islamic value. In Islam, cleanliness is a religious duty. The mandatory wudu (ablution) before daily prayers -- for no prayer is accepted without it -- is a practical lesson in personal hygiene that all Muslims internalise from childhood. Wudu cleans hands, arms, nostrils, mouth, and feet -- all the limbs exposed to dirt. Furthermore, Muslims are required to wash private parts after answering the call of nature, a value not yet American. And if water is available, the Quran mandates ghusl (taking a bath), particularly after sexual intercourse. While taking a bath, the prophet recommended that the hair be thoroughly washed; and he was fond of taking scented baths (Bukhari). Thus, we see that personal hygiene constitutes a core value of the Islamic faith.

While most Muslims are clean in their bodies, some Islamic communities are dirty. Indoor plumbing is still unavailable in many cities and villages. Adults urinate and children defecate wherever they can or want to. We go to masjids in clean clothes but remain unsure whether we will get there clean, for the road to the masjid is often strewn with raw sewage and flying garbage. Visitors are not going to think highly of our great religion if Muslim cities and communities are dreadfully dirty.

The American story of *Chasing Dirt* tells us that if a nation is determined to obtain public hygiene, it can achieve dramatic results. But to do so, everyone -- government, businesses, neighborhoods, charities, families, and individuals -- has to join the jihad to enforce cleanliness throughout the Islamic world. This should be done not for one time cleaning but for establishing a culture of public and personal hygiene. As I am finishing writing this article, I receive an email from Topeka Corporate Volunteer Council. In sponsoring the Operation Sweep Clean, we are gathering products here on campus that will be distributed to organizations such as the Rescue Mission, Doorstep, and Let's Help. Products needed are soap, shampoo, toothpaste or any personal care items. The donation boxes will be in every building. The email confirmed my belief that cleanliness is a constant jihad.

Taking the faith seriously and marshalling the necessary will and resources, Islamic countries can and must be clean and good-looking, for "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty."

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