

Unanswered Questions over Jamuna Bridge

Communications Minister Oli Ahmed told the Jatiya Sangsad last Monday that construction work of the Jamuna multi-purpose bridge would begin by January-February next. The Minister sounded quite confident about it. Let's hope that the events unfolding over the coming months would justify his stance.

Earlier, it was reported that the three co-financiers of the bridge — the World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF) of Japan — have all agreed to put up 190 million US dollars each, or 570 million dollars all together, towards the latest estimated cost of 690 million dollars for the project. The balance 120 million dollars would be borne by Bangladesh. As the Communications Minister told the Parliament, it would take 40 months to complete the construction of the bridge.

Questions over the progress in negotiations with the co-financiers continue to crop up. The deadline for awarding contracts for the construction work is not far off. However, no final decision about the components of the work seems to have been reached yet. First, it was a question of the facilities the bridge would provide. Billed as a multi-purpose bridge, it was to function as a road, rail, gas and power link between the western and eastern parts of the country. Reports surfaced at one stage that all components other than the road link, would be shed from the project. These misgivings have not been fully cleared up yet.

The point at issue is that information available on happenings about Jamuna Bridge are mostly based on hearsay. Reports are now circulating that after all these years of planning, the question of the length of the bridge has now come to the fore. It will be a back to the square one situation if this debate persists. Any alteration of the length of the bridge would entail redesigning the whole project, with its implications of cost escalation and the time-frame for implementation. Gone would be plans for awarding construction contracts by January next.

The issue of compensation for the people affected by the construction of the bridge also remains very much an open one. Should the affected people just be paid compensation money in keeping with the past practice or should the displaced persons be resettled elsewhere with all attendant benefits such as housing, means of livelihood? These seem to be questions being debated now. Some of the people likely to be displaced by the bridge work are already reported to have formed a body of their own — going around, submitting memorandums to different authorities. Meanwhile, the government appears to be going ahead with its plans for paying out compensation money only. A bill has already been passed by the Parliament, permitting government to compensate the displaced persons at a rate higher than that allowed by the present law on the subject.

By our standards, Jamuna multi-purpose bridge is indeed a big project. It is well understood that all sorts of issues would come up before planning and financing of the project are wrapped up. It could also well be true that disclosure of certain information at the wrong time would wreck the project. However, varied reports on the project are circulating anyway. It would have been far better if the concerned authorities could see a way to tell the story themselves.

There is an overriding reason too why the people should be told directly about the project. True, it is the tax payer who pays for the local cost of projects. However, there is no direct linkage between the tax payer and a particular project. Jamuna Bridge project is a notable exception in the regard. Here, through specific levies and surcharges, the people are contributing directly to the building of the bridge. Out of its share of 120 million dollars or roughly 480 crore Taka, for cost of construction of the bridge, government is said to have already collected, as of January this year, 464 crore through Jamuna levy and surcharge. Having paid nearly all the money needed by the government, the people deserve to be told a little more about the bridge.

Immortalising the Dead

Yenahang namritasyam kimahang ten kuryam? — what shall I do with what would not make me immortal, so queried Maitreyee of Jainyabalkya, when the saint wanted to know what his second wife would like to have as an insurance against bad days after her lord will have retired into the forests never to return.

Man's conscious preoccupation with the idea of immortality is far older than the great Maitreyee's. It must have come to man with the development of the new brain at least some million years back. Unsuccessful in making much of a headway on that time, man settled for immortalising a body already dead. And hoping that some time somehow life would return to that body, took care not to allow that again to depart for want of the necessities of life — food to begin with and slaves to boot. The sons and heirs of Imhotep made the art of embalming into a regular science. While this was a royal privilege in Pharaonic Egypt, not long after, pre-Columbian Indians of South America were embalming people by the droves and leaving the bodies in caves.

Zealots of vintage religious sectarianism however thought it beneath the power of the spirituality of their gurus not to be able to live even after death. When Aurobindo Ghose died in the fifties, the body was not cremated in the belief that it would stay for ever without decomposing. A more challenging situation developed in the early months of this year when in Calcutta Balak Brahmanchari died and tens of thousands of his followers would not allow the body to be cremated in the belief that life would return to the body.

Now news comes from a remote Chinese village that the body of a woman, dead eight months, is intact, without showing any sign of putrefaction. The reason why her body was neither interred nor cremated lay in a request she made pre-mortem, that her body be let to be without the conventional rites. Experts of the Chinese Academy of Sciences are investigating the case.

There was a lot of hullabaloo over a case in Kushtia some twenty years back. A body disinterred long after it had died and been duly buried, was found to be intact. The *hoichot* died down soon after and there was no one amongst us competent or eager enough to go after a dead man's body for fear of ghosts or police or the wrath of kinsmen.

Human experience is diverse but uniform. Otherwise sciences would not be possible. That experience tells us we would not be hearing of the Chinese case anymore.

AFTER his speech in the White House ceremony on historic PLO-Israel peace accord, Chairman Yasser Arafat walked up with an outstretched hand to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. President Clinton gently pushed Rabin from behind towards Arafat who grasped his reluctant hand and shook it repeatedly with all Arab warmth as if nothing ever happened between them. Arafat smiled generously at the grim-faced Rabin. Rabin's hand remained immobile within the strong grip of Arafat for a couple of moments. Between these two arch enemies, now posed as "friends", President Clinton stood joyously happy with both hands spread like an angel's wings with a view to keeping them closer. His hands remained outstretched till the "historic handshake" was over, he did not want to take the chance lest Rabin moved away without a handshake. President Clinton played the role of an elder brother though he is the youngest of the three. This touching scene in the White House during signing of the peace accord gave millions of viewers the momentary feeling that 'the world was upside down'; the people did not expect this; at least not so soon.

President Clinton's performance in the White House ceremony was superb. Clinton's reception to Arafat looked perfect — added to it was his personal care particularly while conducting Arafat and Rabin to the distinguished guests.

The White House ceremony with two former Presidents of the United States of America and about 3000 distinguished guests was impressive and indeed was necessary to give

White House Ceremony and Clinton's Commitment to M-E Peace

moral, political, diplomatic and financial support to the peace accord. During discussion of the event, a friend of mine said — whatever America wants happens in the world. This was though an exaggerated version of what happened between PLO and Israel, one must admit the pivotal role of the US in the Middle-East whether for oil or for global political purpose. It fought the Gulf war on behalf of its friends though probably this war could have been avoided. The present effort of the US for peace in Middle-East appears to be an attempt to counterbalance the political damages arising out of the Gulf war and also to help America's friends in the Arab world. Moreover, as Iraq was thoroughly defeated, there will be no more threat to Israel from it for a long time to come. Finally, in order to take care of the major threat from Iran, it was probably considered necessary to come to term with the Palestinians and other Arabs.

The commitment of the US on upholding the peace accord was clear from President Clinton's statement in the White House ceremony. He said, "I pledge the active support of the United States of America to the difficult task that lies ahead". Secretary of State Christopher also declared that "This Israeli-Palestinian agreement can be permitted to fail". Thus US commitment appeared total for peace in the Middle-East.

Under the changed situation

the US must act as the active partner in the peace process. In no way it should give the impression that it still has some soft corner for Israel. The US must realize why and how Chairman Arafat abandoned practically everything in terms of his policies and promises to his own people and agreed to the present peace accord which, compared to Palestinian's demand, gave very little. As it seems, he undertook this tremendous risk on the basis of the trust, help and support expected from the US and also recognizing the peace initiative of the present Labour

Government of Israel. President Clinton must have noted some of the words that Prime Minister Rabin used in his speech in the peace ceremony. It was not appropriate for him to say on this great occasion that "We have come from Jerusalem, the ancient and eternal capital of the Jewish people". It was not only Rabin and his people, Arafat and his people also belong to Jerusalem. Moreover, Jerusalem has not been accepted by the international community including the US as the capital of Israel. It still stands as an international city under UN resolution.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Muslehuddin Ahmad

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be upon him) can build their separate and independent houses, each enjoying independence and full freedom on the land they have to share and live together and work together in peace and tranquility. Jerusalem should remain as the Holy City open to people of all three faiths — Muslims, Jews and Christians — for the purpose of pilgrimage.

With trust, good intention and honesty of purpose, the other problems also may be solved. Once the decision is there to live together in the same land and one has recognized the rights of the other, it becomes obligatory to reciprocate

ate and recognize the legitimate rights of the other. There should be no more subjugation and control by one on the other. People say when enemy becomes a friend, he is more than a friend. It is possible provided both behave responsibly keeping in view the long term peace dividends.

One hopes that these were the thoughts, apart from contemporary political considerations, that persuaded both to sign this historic peace accord in the White House with a Christian President as the principal witness and thus people of all three faiths — all believers and having faith in the Revealed Books — joined hands for bringing peace which will benefit everyone. Let all involved work unitedly and with full trust to extend peace to those who have not got it yet and win over those who are against peace. A comprehensive solution of the M-E problem is a must, otherwise even the present one may fail.

Israel succeeded in pursuing the Camp David style in the peace process — deal with the Arabs one by one — but with the difference that this time it decided to deal with the major player in the conflict — the Palestinians. This is why it is expected to get support of the majority of the Arab countries. The reservation of Syria and Lebanon, apart from Iraq and Libya which oppose also for different reasons, was obvious and expected as nothing concrete

has yet been proposed with regard to withdrawal of Israeli forces from their territories. Negotiations with Syria have reportedly progressed but it might need another Oslo type secret session to strike the deal. Same is probably true for Lebanon. Withdrawal of Israeli forces from all occupied territories seems to be the most urgent task. It is accepted that withdrawal has to be done over a period of time but agreement on the time table and modalities including deployment of UN forces in place of Israeli forces has to be concluded and only this can reduce agitations in the occupied territories. The presence of Israeli forces in the occupied territories will continue to strengthen Hamas hands. Arafat may look for a temporary reconciliation with Hamas but it will not work unless Israeli forces are withdrawn.

Though majority of Israelis support the present peace accord, the opposition is still considerable. Rabin is facing serious challenge in the Knesset — Israeli Parliament. He might win probably with a very slim majority if Shas finally decides to vote against him. Their concern, apart from traditional hatred, is Israel's security. The US must provide assurances on security to the Israeli people through participation in UN peace keeping forces and improving relations with some of the Arab countries and particularly Syria.

Thus the role of the US and particularly of its President is extremely important. It must work for peace as an active partner and without any bias. This is the last chance and must not be missed.

Will Turkey Step into the Azeri War?

by Hazhir Teimourian

Reports of Iranian military exercises on the borders of Armenia and Azerbaijan are a reminder that the five-year-old war between the two former Soviet republics is now threatening the security of neighbouring states. Gemini News Service investigates the war and asks whether the recent humiliating defeats suffered by the Turkish-speaking, Muslim Azerbaijanis at the hands of the Christian Armenians might provoke intervention from Iran or Turkey.

The war in the Caucasus

At least 10,000 people have been killed and nearly a million displaced since the conflict began in 1988

Populations

Nagorno Karabakh: 150,000
Armenia: 3 million
Armenian diaspora:
Europe and Middle East - 1m
North America - 1m
Former Soviet Union - 1m
Armenians have been Christians since the 3rd Century

Azerbaijan: 7m
Azerbaijanis living in the two provinces of north-west Iran and in Tehran - 15m, Turkey - 2m
Azerbaijanis are Shia Muslims



European state in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Turkey could capture large parts of western Armenia overnight to hold until the Armenians withdrew from Azerbaijan. Worse still, Turkey could overrun southern Armenia to enable itself to be directly linked to Azerbaijan and the other Turkic-speaking states of the former Soviet Union.

At present, it is physically cut off from them by the non-Turkic, Christian states of Armenia and Georgia.

The problem is, that the Armenian President is not fully in charge of his country, whose people feel strong solidarity with the Armenians of Karabakh. His word carries even less weight with the leaders of the enclave itself. The capital city, Stepanakert, was almost destroyed by Azerbaijani rockets two years ago.

As for the Azerbaijanis, the morale of their troops has recently almost totally collapsed. Tens of thousands of their

conscript soldiers have deserted, a coup in June resulted in the overthrow of their democratically elected president, Abulfaz Elchibey, and they face a minor rebellion among their Persian-speaking minority in Talysh, adjoining Iran.

Their present leader is Haidar Aliyev, a former KGB general and deputy Soviet prime minister who is, again, not fully in charge of events.

Even so, the victorious Armenians push on with their onslaught. Said an Armenian activist: "The fighters of Karabakh, in particular, feel that they may have to take the war to Baku (the capital of Azerbaijan), if necessary, to make the Azeris see sense."

In this reckless strategy, the Karabakh Armenians have the support of the great majority of their compatriots in Armenia and abroad. Armenians see Azerbaijanis as Turks, the age-old enemy responsible for the destruction of the bulk of Armenia in the

Ottoman Empire and the massacre of more than two million Armenians in 1915.

In the present conflict, the demand of the Armenians of Karabakh in 1988 that they should be united with Armenia eventually resulted in the decision of Azerbaijan to abolish the autonomy of the enclave and to impose direct rule on it. An uprising by the Karabakh Armenians subsequently caused a full-scale war with Azerbaijan.

Atrocities and massacres regularly committed by both sides have not helped to improve goodwill between the two sides, and the enmity goes back a thousand years, to the time when the first groups of Turks appeared in the Middle East from central Asia.

Under such seemingly hopeless conditions, the neighbouring states of Iran and Turkey have been admirably restrained. They have realised the potential of a military adventure in the Caucasus to drag in the Russians, the traditional protectors of Christian Armenia in recent centuries.

But unless effective pressure is brought to bear on the government of Armenia, particularly by the influential members of the Armenian diaspora living in the West, events might quickly get out of hand. An Armenian march on Baku could precipitate a wider crisis, resulting in the invasion of Armenia by the armies of either Iran or Turkey.

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Importance and viability of Jamuna Bridge

Sir, Early second week of this month, precisely September 8, a report was published in a section of the press that there has been a 'move for truncated Jamuna bridge at inflated cost' which we have noticed with much grief.

After going through the biased report it has to be revealed to the conscious people that the correspondent perhaps had been misguided by vested quarters.

So far we guess the correspondent is not fully aware of the importance of Jamuna Bridge project. Otherwise, how he can mention that Jamuna Bridge project is a politically motivated dream project of deposed president Ershad! Practically, Jamuna Bridge project is a dream of the people of Bangladesh and that of the economically and politically conscious people of the country.

We would like to inform that the first study of Jamuna bridge project was made in the erstwhile East Pakistan in 1969 and subsequently it was again studied by JICA in 1973. After then it again cropped up in the year 1984.

During joint pre-appraisal in May 1990, the cost of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge project was estimated to the tune of US \$528 million. Due to recent global inflation the present cost of the project stood at US \$691 million in September, 1993. Based on latest cost and

traffic demand data and assumptions the economic analysis arrives at a base case ERR (Economic Rate of Return) of about 15%. ERR of the project has mainly increased due to increase in transport benefits, economic life of project, investment costs for the ferry/port alternative and adjustment in the waiting time of trucks.

There may be or must be some vested quarters who might be benefited in absence of the bridge. It can be noted here that the economic rate of return for the viability of such a big and important infrastructure project should not be based on the ERR alone. Some other unquantifiable factors may also be considered. Addition of ferries to the present fleet cannot be effective replacement for Jamuna bridge project. The agencies concerned with the operation and maintenance of the ferry ghats at different locations along Jamuna frequently encounter multifarious problems arising out of siltation and erosion which call for inevitable, very costly, exhaustive dredging or shifting of ferry ghat and approach road with the eventual suspension of ferries because the reconstruction of the terminal facilities takes a considerable time. Because of unpredictable nature of mighty river Jamuna (being a braided river opening up multi-channel at bifurcation points at receding stage), it is therefore established that improvement of ferry system cannot be a rational substitute for the bridge to sustain continuity for proper traffic movement.

So far we know that Jamuna bridge will be constructed by the following facilities: a)

Road, b) Second east-west electric inter-connections, c) Future provision of meter gauge rail, d) Future provision for gas pipeline and telecommunication. This is not at all any dereliction from the main constituents of the projects in its originally proposed shape.

The correspondent has pointed out that this is a giant project and most unproductive and non-viable that any third world country can ever have. Of course, this is a historic project as far as the Bangladesh economy is concerned. It is big not only in terms of total investment involved, but in terms of its social and economic impacts. The mighty river Jamuna divides the country into the north-west, comprising the districts in the Rajshahi Division and the rest of the country regions. The Jamuna bridge project will have definite impacts on labour and goods mobility, migration and dissemination of knowledge and culture across the river. It will have effects not only on the economy of north-west region of the country, but on the total economy as a whole. Moreover, given the nature of the project, these impacts will be more of long-run nature rather than short-term ones.

There is no scope of denial of the fact that the physical barrier created by the Jamuna river stands as an impediment to economic development, social unity and integrity of the country. For this reason, there has long been a national desire to remove this physical barrier by constructing a permanent bridge across the Jamuna river.

It is noteworthy to remember that the construction of the Jamuna Bridge at 9 km south of Sirajganj, will be a great boon for the Asian Highway which will usher in a new era not only

for the transportation network of Bangladesh alone, but also for the South-East Asian region.

Abdur Rahman Khan
Nayatola, Maghbazar
Dhaka-1217

Weekly holiday

Sir, It was indeed disheartening to read the views of Mr S M Ali in this newspaper of 17th September, in favour of reverting the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday. The prescription may ventilate the opinion of a group of people but definitely hurts the sentiment of the majority of working Muslims who offers their weekly prayer regularly.

In reality, Bangladesh being a predominantly Muslim country has rightly translated their wish by declaring Friday as its weekly holiday. Sunday being the prayer day of the Christians is being observed as weekend in the West. Moreover, Bangladesh is not the only country to observe Friday as weekly holiday. Many Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Sudan, Libya, and other Gulf states observe Friday as holiday. If their economy can run strong in spite of observing Friday as holiday, then there is no necessity to change it here on any ground.

Bengali has been established as official language keeping in line with hopes and aspirations of millions as well as national heritage and culture. It might have created some inconveniences at the outset in official communications with the West but that does not warrant the necessity to change Bengali as official language. Friday as weekly holiday has been accepted in our country and most of the Muslim world. As regards economic development, all the macro-economic variables of the country including GDP, exports, forex reserve, internal resources mobilisation showed upward

trend even after declaring Friday as weekly holiday. So, the views expressed by Mr Ali are not acceptable.

Abu Zeeshan
Banani, Dhaka

"Convertibility of Taka..."

Sir, Your news item headed "Convertibility of Taka may cause inflation" (September 11, 1993) is a perfect example of the kind of biased economic thinking that serves to obstruct the transition to a deregulated market economy.

The "sources" cited are opposed to allowing brokers, authorised money-changers, and exporters to participate freely in the foreign exchange market because: "if all of them are allowed to trade in the deregulated exchange market, they may try to manipulate the exchange rate by creating artificial crisis."

Now the most elementary fact of economics is that the more participants there are in a market, the more does market approach the competitive ideal, and the less is the probability of collusive behaviour leading to price manipulation.

The source also expresses concern that "the foreign exchange brokers may speculate by stockpiling and later release their forex at a premium". Why only foreign exchange brokers? This is what all traders do. They buy cheap and sell dear, thereby supporting prices when they are low and restraining further rises when they are high. This is one of the major functions of the market, and under most normal circumstances a beneficial one.

Furthermore: "The situation is likely to put pressure on the local currency which may lead to its substantial depreciation". It almost certainly will, and a very good thing too. Exporters

will get higher taka prices for their exports, importers will have to pay more taka for their imports. Thus exports will be encouraged and imports discouraged. Put differently, if the market causes the Taka to depreciate, this means the Taka is at present over-valued.

Abu Abdullah
Research Director, BIDS, Dhaka

Chattak-Sunamgonj road

Sir, Perhaps road communication of Sunamgonj district is worst in the whole of Bangladesh. But so far as natural resources are concerned this is one of the most resourceful districts in the country. It is surplus in food crops and fish. It supplies stones, cement and paper to other districts. But one has to take a long detour for reaching the district headquarters from most of the thana headquarters. With a little imagination and planning road distance from the thana headquarters to the district headquarters can be shortened greatly.

Chattak is the only industrial town of Sunamgonj district. But for going to Sunamgonj by road one has to go via Sylhet-Sunamgonj road by taking a detour and as a result total distance comes to about forty miles. But Chattak-Sunamgonj distance via Duara Bazar is only fourteen miles. What is needed is developing and carpeting a few miles in between. But for reasons not known the Roads and Highways department is not paying proper attention to this road. May I therefore request the Ministry of Communication to take up development of this highly important road which will fulfil a long felt need of the people of this region?

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
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