

The accident was waiting to happen

Lack of highway vigil is the culprit

CHEAPENING of human lives has become a pastime here. Aside from the bone-chilling metropolitan murders, highway accidents keep killing droves of commuters when those could be easily averted with some routine precautionary measures in place. On the face of it, the transport operators or drivers seem responsible but in actual fact it's the law enforcement failure on the highways that is to blame. For instance, Monday's disastrous accident on Dhaka-Aricha highway, just one and a half kilometres off Gabtali bus terminal in the city, was eminently avoidable. The minibus with an intake capacity of 31 passengers was packed with 50 and yet the driver threw all cautions to the wind as he approached the city limits. He sped and the bus skidded off the Shalepur bridge at Aminbazar point meeting with its watery grave. Twenty-eight passengers including women and children died instantaneously while 11 were put on the 'critical' list of casualties.

One of the surviving passengers put the accident down to reckless driving; the man on the steering wheel dangerously overtaking transports was duly warned by his assistant, the conductor himself, to slow down but he simply wouldn't listen.

Only on December 27 of the preceding year, overloading and reckless driving had caused a fatal accident near Bogra town in which 38 persons were killed. But who learns? Both the accidents were near-town disasters where the gateway police vigil ought to have been expected to ward those off. But is there any, ever?

The gross enforcement failure stems from the low priority attention given to highways. Everything seems to be city-centric, and never mind the debacle there. But who doesn't know that the slow traffic in the metropolis is potentially much less accident-prone than the highway variety where speeding transports have a field day!

Highway patrol is non-existent, both stationary and mobile types. There is no mechanism to check overloading and reckless driving or speeding in place. Besides, on-the-job training to highway drivers is hardly ever contemplated, far less imparted. This law enforcement slack on the highways will have to be overcome under a time-bound plan of action.

Ancient civilization excavated in Wari-Bateshwar

Protect the antiquities from plunder

THE excavation of nearly 2500 years old relics at Wari-Bateshwar village in Belabo in the Narsingdi district is a historic event. This is probably the earliest site of an ancient habitat in this country and linked to the Brahmaputra civilization. It's an exciting find and the effort of the team is laudable. It will certainly expand the scope of understanding our ancient history.

However, this too needs to be reminded that the existence of a dig in Wari-Bateshwar was known for long. As far as 25 years ago this site was given a lot of media exposure and the government at that time had declared that the site would be excavated but nothing was done. Now a group of archaeologists from the private sector has done the job. While congratulating the scientists, we also condemn the government for neglecting its own past.

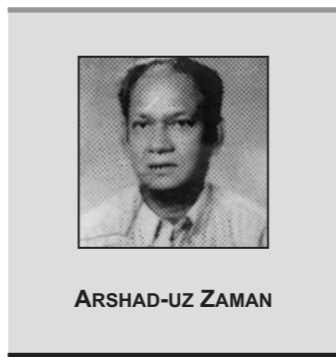
The then media had stated that systematic plundering by the local people was on for ages and pictures were also published showing locals wearing beads and necklaces found at the site. We can only shudder in dread at the grand dispossession that has taken place since then and what happened before that. For neglecting this exposed site and by extension facilitating the possible flight of antiquities from there due to sheer inaction, the authorities are squarely held responsible.

Sadly, this particular site is only one of the many that exist in Bangladesh that lie half buried and fully plundered. It's no secret that Dhaka is a flourishing centre of antiquities smuggling and media has reported many cases of intercepted consignments. However, since this part of the trade circles around the high and the powerful including the expatriate community, the situation is hardly within the control of the authorities many of whom, of course, are in league with the smugglers.

The reason why we are raising these flags of caution is because the freshly dug site shouldn't be subjected to organized looting, a bane which most developing countries have to experience with a considerable degree of helplessness. While the authorities have shown little or no interest in the past history of the land, they can at least pay some attention to the prevention of smuggling and plundering of national heritage.

The efforts of the scientists are very commendable. One only hopes that they don't open another nest for vultures of the human kind to land and loot. We praise the effort and counsel appropriate protection measures.

Euro's victorious march



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

ON New Year's Day 2002, a revolutionary event has taken place. Twelve European nations with a highly industrialized population of 300 million people have voluntarily given up their national currencies and adopted a new currency -- EURO. This event is bound to have far-reaching consequences.

Looking at this event from another angle, that is 11 September 2001, we can easily see what change the world has undergone within a period of three months. The world will never be the same again.

On 11 September 2001, for the first time in her three-century old history, sole superpower USA received a devastating blow on her own soil. The terrorist operation was masterminded with a brilliance and

precision, unmatched by any other event in the recent past. The operators hijacked four US planes, which in itself is an audacious feat. They, however, used those planes along with the hundreds of passengers as engines of death and destruction in broad daylight as the whole world watched in total awe. Thus in one swift blow superpower US lost her invulnerable status as war was brought to the citadels of her eco-

nome and military empire. As the US attempts to adjust to this revolutionary new situation, Europe, better known as EU from now on, has taken a giant leap forward towards integration. The EU journey began more than half a century ago. Tired of two bloody World Wars, France and Germany, the main adversaries in Europe, decided to take a halting first step towards economic integration. They formed the coal and steel community in the early fifties. Then

came the French visionary Jean Monnet, who took a big step forward in economic integration of Western Europe. It began with six West European nations, who joined hands and launched what came to be known as the Common Market. The enterprise proved so successful that these six never looked back. Britain, always slow to respond, opposed the Common Market and in fact attempted to set up a rival

renamed EU, has 15 members and another 10 standing in queue. They will come, almost all of them, from central and eastern Europe.

The case of Turkey deserves special mention. Turkey applied for membership in the early fifties and has been making valiant efforts to join EU. She has taken big steps like joining the Customs Union in order to find a place within the EU. The leadership in Brussels has so far

pretty certain that they will join the EU sooner or later.

It is remarkable that EU is maintaining its schedule. The decision about single currency was taken ten years ago in the Summit at Maastricht in Holland and the EU has kept its timetable after ten years. The decision to abandon national currencies has not been an easy one. It was not easy to abandon French franc nor German

Quo Vadis? On 11 September the unipolar world has been severely jolted. EU is not about to bring about a multipolar world. Yet euro will inevitably propel this expanding community towards political integration. With the single currency the European nations have abandoned economic sovereignty to a large extent. Abandoning political sovereignty is a very different operation and will take a very long time. Humanity coming from the caves have managed to reach the stage of nation-state. That process is far from complete. It is difficult to imagine Europe achieving a supranational state anytime soon.

Yet the march of events point clearly in that direction -- political integration. The Europeans have become accustomed to travel across their borders without any kind of control. Here is a vibrant market of 300 million functioning. This interaction is bringing daily the people closer to each other. There is the latent desire in human hearts to be part of a larger state. Time will show if this desire catches on and the leadership is made to accept the manifestation of popular will.

With euro the world has taken a giant leap forward and the prospect is a brave new world.

Arshad-uz Zaman is a former Ambassador.

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK
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market with the Scandinavians. The effort failed.

The Common Market set up its headquarters in Brussels, the capital of Belgium and along with economic integration moved ahead in integration in virtually all fields except political one. The Common Market continued to serve as a magnet and attracted more and more new members. The six were choosy and took a long time before it became a club of eleven, including Britain. At the latest count the organisation, which has been

effectively blocked the entry of Turkey. There is no doubt that the reason is not the fragile nature of Turkish economy, nor her Human Rights record. It is more some mental block within the EU members, which is the result of long, historical and perhaps religious hostility towards Turkey. Although historically starting from Central Asia, the Turks have always moved west, either as conquerors or lately as simple workers, they have their eyes fixed on Europe. Since the Turks are a determined people, it is

deutschmark, which have world wide reputation and are valid tenders beyond their borders. It is not surprising that Britain before taking the plunge wants to consult her people through a referendum. In one single decision 300 million people have started using a single currency -- euro. That it will be a strong competitor against the all-powerful virtual world currency US dollar, is almost certain. For behind the euro there is the will of the 300 million people, with very strong economies.

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The telecom 'revolution': All for the elite's sake?

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

IT'S a "revolution", we were told when India's private cellular operators announced a 50 percent cut in mobile-to-mobile national long-distance (NLD) tariffs. The mobile handset, a mark of the upwardly mobile, was proclaimed to have become "downwardly mobile", even the "poor man's telephone".

Private mobile telephony, it was said, would wrench India out of the cesspool of laggards, with an abysmally low tele-density of just four lines per hundred people.

Just days later, the public sector Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) declared a whopping 60 percent-plus cut in telephone tariffs.

This too was welcomed as the greatest-ever "bonanza" for subscribers. The pendulum had swung from wireless telephony to the good old land-based line.

"The consumer is king", proclaimed market enthusiasts, forecasting a 70 percent increase in long-distance dialling. They predict the private sector will invest in a big way in basic telephony.

Never mind that the "Information Technology Revolution" has lost steam. Telephony could provide another shortcut to rapid growth.

The time has come to pour wintry-cold water over the euphoria. NLD tariff cuts will be a bonanza for about one-seventh of India's

can buy one outright for a mere Rs 8,000 to 15,000, or rent one by depositing Rs 500-3,000, and then paying a monthly rent (Rs 50 to Rs 250).

DoT makes up this difference out of its NLD profits. NLD accounts for about half the Rs 25,000 cores revenue earned by DoT subsidiaries, BSNL and MTNL.

This cross-subsidy is socially progressive. It allows DoT to lay new lines in small towns and villages, and keep local call rates low. A good 40 percent of DoT subscribers have "zero-calls" bills, because they use the telephone frugally.

At the other end are high-use customers like corporations, governments and rich individuals.

These form only 15 percent of subscribers, but yield three-fourths of DoT's revenue.

It is rational that they subsidise the poorer subscribers in the short run. In the long run, they themselves benefit through increased connectivity, lower tariffs and improved service. This mechanism allows DoT to add 4.5 to 5 million new lines

The official policies' beneficiaries are less than 10 million individuals--in a country of 1,000 million.

Private companies have provided just 4.2 lakh new lines (compared to DoT's 35 million). They indulge in cherry-picking: concentrating on super-rich clients. Their rural connections total an appalling 300!

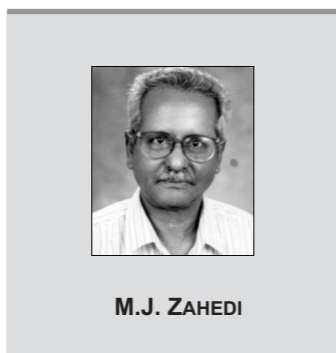
They are now illegally digging up roads to lay cables. Some have announced grandiose schemes. It is doubtful if these will see the light of day. In the past, private operators grossly overestimated the likely rise in telecom demand. They can't compete with DoT's low rates, but will drive down its surplus from Rs. 9,000 cores to Rs. 3,000 cores. Rural telecom expansion will slow down. Equity will take a big hit.

Equity has been one of the biggest losers from India's recent economic policies. The elite, comprising five percent of the population, has been the biggest gainer.

This class preys upon national resources, and returns little to the common pool. It is the main benefi-

Dualism is repugnant--morally, socially and politically. It is corroding Indian democracy, and breeding apathy among the privileged, and resentment among the majority. Stress in school and at home, aggression in the street, and insecurity in the workplace, have become features of daily life. Not even the wealthiest are free from these. Gaping inequalities will catch up with everyone unless India radically changes policies.

The year that was: Glimpses from the press



M.J. ZAHEDI

General Pervez Musharraf 'suddenly the darling of the West' because on that day he 'ditched his Afghan policy.'

What were the happenings and their consequences? The paper's answer to this question was indeed succinct. It said, 'the fall of democracy and the fall of the economy' brought 'a reprieve out of the blue'.

It also, the paper further said, provided him the pretext to crack down on religious extremists. And it may have also saved him from an

attack by India because of US intervention, the paper opined.

Referring to the Sept. 11 happenings in the USA, 'The News' said that it was a year that deeply impacted upon human destiny by a single act, the convulsions of which were felt around the world, especially in Afghanistan. There, the editorial said, an unequal war resulted in more death and destruction than was warranted by the limited size of the conflict.

'Dawn' wrote the longest editorial (full two columns) on the new year which, it said, has driven Pakistan to yet another turning point in its tumultuous history.

'Dawn' dealt mostly with what happened in 2001 and how they will impact on the following year. The paper said, 'Pakistan will enter the year 2002 trying to cope with the political falling of aligning itself with the world coalition against 'terror', it said and added that the year 2002 is likely to throw up numerous challenges for the rulers and people alike. It referred to Taliban's decision to ditch the Taliban and join the US-led war against Osama bin Laden and his Al

despite generous international assistance that has been pledged. 'Dawn' said the religious parties which were very vociferous during the US-led attack on Afghanistan are 'now licking their wounds' following the collapse of the Taliban.

On the developments in the home front, 'Dawn' considered Nawaz Sharif's 'exile' to Saudi Arabia in the last week of the previous year, the beginning of the crumbling of the Pakistan Muslim League which, it said, was 'in traditional

devolving power to the grassroots level. 'Dawn' said that although the elections were held on a non-party basis, they threw up many of the same old faces, 'at least at the top Nazim level'. However, it said, at a lower level the elections brought to the fore a whole new breed of people. The most welcome aspect of the exercise was that it brought a large number of women as councillors, although there were some resistance in the remote and tribal areas.

said that with rout of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the religious groups might be feeling the heat now.

Pakistan's relations with India also came in for discussion in the 'Dawn' editorial. It said Musharraf's visit to Agra in July of 2001 raised many hopes 'only to be dashed at the end'. Musharraf's plain speaking on Kashmir upset Indian hard-liners and an agreement did not materialize. The relations took a turn for the worse following an attack on the Indian parliament building. Indians blamed Pakistan for the attack. Indian troops buildup and bellicose rhetoric reached a crescendo in late December, when the possibility of a war between the two nuclear power neighbours became a frightening possibility. Indian feathers were ruffled by Pakistan taking the centre stage in the war against terror in which India merely stood by. But thanks to Americans working feverishly from behind the scene to defuse the tension and there were signs in late December that the Indians decided to stand back from the brink. These suggest, 'Dawn' said, the US is finally set on a more active role in trying to prevent a potentially catastrophic war in the sub-continent.

'That in itself is a welcome beginning in a new year that is likely to be tinged with hope, grave risks and challenges in equal measure', 'Dawn's' new year's day editorial said.

M J Zahedi is an eminent columnist in Pakistan and formerly the Editor of the Khaleez Times.

LETTER FROM KARACHI
Pakistan's decision to ditch the Taliban and join the US-led war against Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda network provoked angry response from a section of the population. The Sept. 11 events are likely to cast their 'long shadows over every aspect of Pakistani life in the year ahead'.

Qaeda network which, according to it, provoked angry response from a section of the population. The Sept. 11 events are likely to cast their 'long shadows over every aspect of Pakistani life in the year ahead'.

Two of Pakistan's four provinces, viz. the NWFP and Balochistan, already heavily burdened with a large number of Afghan refugees for two decades, saw a further influx of displaced people after the start of the American bombing of Afghanistan. The refugee problem is likely to create further economic and social strains on the two provinces which are already hard-pressed,

Muslim League fashion'. According to it, even the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy, too, 'all but collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions'. It concluded that General Musharraf is feeling secure enough both at home and abroad, so there was little outcry when he announced that he would remain president of the country even after holding elections.

'Dawn' said that in 2001, the country also became a laboratory for another political experiment. The centrepiece of the experiment was the local bodies election under an entirely new system that is aimed at

The elected councillors, 'Dawn' felt, are feeling frustrated by their lack of power, especially financial powers. 'Dawn' felt that because politicians are unable to maintain unity in their ranks or provide a reasonable alternative roadmap, the country seems destined to continue in a semi-autocratic mode in the foreseeable future.

The 'Dawn' editorial also noted that sectarian violence continued to blight the country but its focus had shifted from Punjab to Sindh. The paper particularly referred to the massacre of 16 people in Bahawalpur in a church. But it also

reserves at current usage rate may last for 15 to 17 years, then obviously if further gas reserves are not discovered, all proposed sectors will face shortage. Even if further reserves are discovered it will have to be kept reserved for increased demand/usage. Hence gas export does not seem recommendable.

1.5. If UNOCAL proposal is implemented the 900 million dollar pipeline constructed between Sylhet and New Delhi may seem an wastage after 20 years, because its life span may not be less than 50 years; even any time before 20 years, the pipeline may be closed for political or other reason. If 900 million dollar or Tk 5000 crore is invested in pipeline within the country the benefit will be reaped over 50 years. From this point of view as well, gas export seems less recommendable.

1.6. The net earnings of Tk 400 crore per year as per UNOCAL

proposal is only 1/17th of Tk. 6750 crore anticipated to be earned according to the above proposals. It seems not justified to export gas in the face of all controversies from all corners just for a trifling amount of Tk 400 crore per year. It is a matter of assurance that the government has already formed two committees comprising various professionals and experts to examine the proposal and explore alternative usage of gas. I expect the committee will have a look at the proposals made here.

Lastly, we may remember that gas is a trump card for Bangladesh amidst such powers as are playing with the world's energy reserves, hence we should be very careful to apply it.

OPINION

Gas export: Compute the cost/benefit first

ALI M IDRIS FCA

THE only natural resource of a poor country like ours is gas. If we cannot utilise this resource effectively in the economic development of the country, our next generations will forgive neither the government nor the professionals and intellectuals of the country. This is a crucial time for the scientists, economists, professionals, intellectuals to compute with expert brain the costs and benefits of the proposal for gas export. The government may commit mistake if they decide unilaterally to export gas without first considering results of cost/benefit analysis. In this connection the following information/data may be referred to:

1. UNOCAL has proposed that by exporting gas to India, Bangladesh will earn Tk 3.7 billion US dollar or 20,000 crore Taka in the next 20

years. UNOCAL, however, has not mentioned the cost of pipeline construction, extraction etc. which roughly may be estimated at 60 per cent of the sale price i.e. Tk 12,000 crore (including estimated pipeline construction cost of dollar 900 million). Hence Tk 8000 crore in 20 years or Tk 400 crore per year will be added to the foreign exchange reserve of the country. This net earning of Tk 400 crore per annum is a ridiculous sum, like a drop in the ocean for a country of 13 crore. The cost/benefit ratio of this earning is 1/66 and rate of earning is 3.33 per cent. With proper development of the gas sector a fat amount of Tk 6,750 crore yearly or 135,000 crore in 20 years can be earned from gas sale in local currency and by way of saving foreign currency. The following proposals may be examined in this regard:

1.1 Currently the country is importing Tk 12,000 crore worth of

fuel for running vehicles, mills and factories, pumps, generators and burning lamps etc. If this import of fuel can be substituted by gas gradually say @ 5 per cent yearly, then after 20 years Tk 120,000 crore can be saved in foreign currency. The process may be as stated below:

(a) All the vehicles of the country should be converted for CNG fuel. CNG saves 70 per cent fuel cost. Infrastructural facilities like pipelines and filling machines, accessories for conversion should be imported free of duty and taxes with foreign aid or loan. Since eradication of pollution is linked with this process, foreign aids or loans will be easily available. It is worth mentioning that countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, India etc. have converted a large portion of their vehicles for CNG and Delhi has banned petrol/diesel vehicles in the city. Time has come for Dhaka to ban polluting vehicles to save the life of

one crore people. CNG is a must for all the vehicles of Bangladesh in the next 20 years; this will save Tk 6000 crore per year in foreign currency which can be utilised in importation of infrastructural and pipeline accessories, technical know-how for implementation of the project. CNG will eradicate pollution, improve health of the people, increase their life-expectancy, productivity and thus increase GNP.

(b) 100 per cent of the electricity generating plants can be run with gas which will save foreign currency spent for import of fuel.

(c) Factories, mills, generators, chillers, boilers etc. can be run with gas which will also save a lot of foreign currency used in import of fuel.

1.2 Only 5 per cent people of the country are currently using gas for cooking. If this rate is raised by 2 per cent every year on an average then in the next 20 years 45 per cent

people will be using gas for cooking the sale price of which may stand at Tk 20,000 crore. After deducting the cost of pipeline, extraction etc (estimated at 50 per cent of the total) the net saving will be Tk. 10,000 crore in 20 year or Tk 500 crore every year. Although this earning will be in local currency the use of gas instead of traditional fuels will increase the productivity of the people leading to increase of GNP.

1.3 Gas Sector reforms and administration should be geared up for the very basic level in order to remove pilferage, system loss, corruption etc. instead of looking up for earning revenue from export of gas. The daily system loss of Titas Gas T & D Co. is about Tk 1 crore; it has actually 760,000 users, but only 391,000 customers are billed. The loss of revenue due to system loss and illegal or non-paying customers is almost Tk 500 crore per year or 10,000 crore in 20 years. If at least

50 per cent of this loss is recovered, the revenue will go up by Tk 250 crore every year without any cost. Titas Gas T & D Co. has overdue arrears of Tk. 1,320 crore from various customers, on the other hand it is failing to pay off the oil companies. If the government takes serious actions against the defaulters, the dues will be realised in six months, hopefully.

1.4. According to UNOCAL and other experts currently we have a recoverable reserve of 11.15 tcf and this might go up to maximum of 30.0 tcf during the next 30 years. This is a forecast or prediction, there is no certainty about it. Currently 48 per cent of it is used for electricity generation, 22 per cent for mills/factories and commercial purposes and 30 per cent for fertilizer, domestic consumption and vehicles. If the above proposals are implemented, gas use will accelerate tremendously. Experts say the current