

## Grand mosque's grand plan still stalled

MIZANUR KHAN

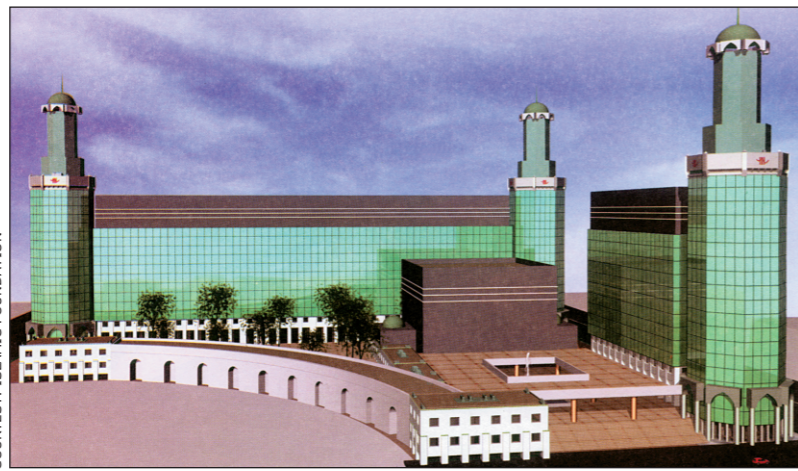
Beautification and expansion of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque have yet to begin nearly two-and-a-half years after the Saudi government agreed to finance a proposed project

Under the memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed on December 26, 2001, the Saudi Finance Ministry was to provide Tk 26 crore to the Islamic Foundation.

The project envisages construction of a 160 foot high minaret on the mosque's southern wing, large eastern yard or 'sahan,' a basement and a 40 foot high canopy covering the eastern side.

"Tenders have been floated and a consultant has also been appointed but the Islamic Foundation is unable to get on with the job. The plan has been revised at the insistence of the foundation's governors and religious affairs parliamentary standing committee," a source at the Islamic Foundation preferring anonymity told Star City.

Both the JS body and board of the governors want to build a 350 foot high minaret and three basements instead. Moreover, the chairman of the parliamentary committee, has opposed a canopy at the eastern 'sahan' saying, "It would block the view



COURTESY: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION

The proposed Baitul Mukarram Mosque project and (top) the foundation laid in 2001.

and be in conflict with the architectural design of the mosque."

According to the source, the Ministry of Religious Affairs on November 1, 2000 asked the Islamic Foundation for a proposal to beautify and expand the national mosque with Saudi assistance. And three weeks later they submitted a draft with estimated cost of Tk 150 crore to the ministry.

It proposed to expand the 'sahan,' construct a 160 foot high minaret and a single basement. Before the project got to the table, the previous government

decided to give the mosque a massive 350 foot high minaret and establish 302 shops around the complex instead.

But just as the foundation of the minaret was laid, the BNP-led coalition came to power in October 2001 and so the project's remaining components had to be shelved.

"The BNP produced a White Paper that found gross anomalies committed in both the planning and implementation of the project," the source added.

It was alleged that the foundation's former DG Syed Ashraf Ali,

in signing the MoU, had breached certain protocols by keeping officials at the Religious Affairs Ministry and Economic Relations Division (ERD) in the dark.

Furthermore, Ashraf Ali was believed to have written to the Saudi finance officials asking them to transfer necessary funds to their embassy in Dhaka for disbursement later.

Recently his successor AZM Shamsul Alam, who was appointed last October, submitted the plan to the board of the governors.

Though insiders said, the plan was never unveiled before the governors, which discussed the project in three meetings, and decided go ahead with a 350-foot high minaret, three basements under the extended ground floor and a giant canopy.

After careful review the project's cost was slashed to Tk 60 crore. The foundation then sent the revised plan to Saudi government through the Ministry of Religious Affairs on January 29.

"As there has been no response from Riyadh, in that case State Minister for Religious Affairs Mosharref Hossain Shahjahan will shortly lead a four-member delegation to the Saudi capital in an effort to obtain funding," the source said.

"We are hopeful that the Saudi government will accept our proposal and then beautification of the mosque will proceed," said Shamsul Alam.

The foundation DG also wants to construct a 25-storied building without changing the grand mosque's structural integrity.

"Baitul Mukarram is grossly under-utilised. It could easily have 25-storied towers on three sides. And on each one a 150-foot high minaret could be built. That would make it one of the world's most beautiful mosques."

The grand old mosque was built in 1960.

## Banning of honking delayed again

DoE now seeks public opinion on proposed law

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

Plans to introduce legislation banning the use of hydraulic horns in motor vehicles have been put on hold for the moment as the department of environment (DoE) has sought public opinion on the proposed Noise Pollution (Control) Rules 2004.

The DoE was expecting to outlaw such loud horns in July after the Ministry Environment and Forest issued an order regarding noise pollution in April. As part of the crackdown vehicle owners were given a two-month deadline in May and June to remove their nuisance horns.

But now it seems the DoE wants ascertain the views of the general public before implementing the new rules.

"We thought the people ought to have the right to express their views on the issue since it affects them," commented a high official of DoE.

He said the department had circulated a draft of the pollution control rules in different newspapers in March. Besides, anybody could comment on it through its website.

The official said they had to do something to curb the excessive use of hydraulic horns, microphones, loud speakers, power generators and heavy machinery.

"Today noise pollution is not only becoming unbearable for the people it is doing great harm both physically and mentally," he added.

The proposed rules aim at banning continuous use of any loud speaker or sound amplifier for more than five hours. It also prohibits horns or amplifiers in clearly earmarked 'silent zones' near hospitals, educational institutions and court premises.

In such zones not more than 50 dBA during the day and 40 dBA at night would be permitted. On the other hand sound levels in residential areas have to be kept within 55 dBA in the daytime and 45 dBA at nights.

Noisy construction machinery would be allowed to operate according a strict timetable, say between 7 am to 7 pm.

Offenders can expect either paying a hefty fine of Tk 10,000 or spend six months behind bars under the draft rules.

The DoE has received positive feedback from 70 different organisations on its proposals to tackle noise pollution.

"We are now compiling all the comments and opinions. Hopefully these help us to finish the draft so that it can be sent to the Ministry of Environment and Forest for approval," said deputy director Abu Mohammad Nurul Alam Khan.



## BACK TO SQUARE ONE



Hawkers have again occupied footpaths. Special teams including the army were deployed a few months ago to drive away the hawkers. But they returned soon after the drive died down.