

OPEN MANHOLE

Deadly manholes become deadlier in rain

CITY CORRESPONDENT

... It was June 7, around 10pm. Dr Shamonto Lal Sen, head of burn unit, Dhaka Medical Collage Hospital was going home after his evening shift. On the day down-pour created severe water log-ging at Dhanmondi road no 27 intersection and the adjacent area virtually crippling the traffic move-ment.

As the traffic came to a stand-still Sen left his chauffeur-driven vehicle in the middle of the road near Manik Mia Avenue and started wading towards his house in Indira Road.

"I was wading through knee deep water at Manik Mia Avenue. All of a sudden I fell into a deep hole. I found myself in neck deep water and felt a current under-neath my feet. Then I realised it was an open manhole and the flow of water was the mixture of rainwater and sewer water."

Two young men appeared out of nowhere and came to the rescue of Sen. "It was dark and the streets were empty. I am lucky that those two boys showed up otherwise I do not know what could have happened to me as the current was quite strong", Sen added.

He sustained severe knee and ligament injury from the fall and blamed the authority for not marking the open manhole with signs.

"It is in the nature of our gov-ernment departments that they do not pay attention before some-thing tragic happens. The munici-pality authority should be more careful as open manholes pose danger to the pedestrians", Sen stressed.

In another incident, a young man who did not want to be named fell in to a manhole in Banani. It was mid April. His taxi-cab stopped right opposite a restaurant in road no 11. There was no streetlight.

As he got off he could not find land underneath his feet and landed in a hole full of thick mud up to his waist. His friend and the cab driver helped him up. He felt lucky as he only received bruises but the incident left an awful feeling for a long time.

Open manholes posing seri-ous hazards to the pedestrians and smaller vehicles are a com-mon feature in many thorough-fares of the city.

This danger becomes greater during monsoon when heavy shower causes water logging in the streets of Dhaka and covers up the gaps of the open manholes, liter-ally creating death traps.

Sources from the Water and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), however, blamed it on thieves and drug addicts. One of the officials of Dhaka Wasa drainage section said that metal covers of the manholes are often stolen at night and after-wards sold at various scrap metal shops in the city.

Officials are riddled with this problem for long and so far they could not come up with any theft



An open manhole on the link road in Nayapaltan poses danger to all road users.

Both Wasa and DCC officials have no clear idea of the total number of man-holes in the city. They said that there are no specific department to look after the manholes. Supervising civil engi-neers of DCC in different zones and drainage circles of Wasa are responsi-ble for looking after the manholes in their respective areas

proof system.

"We are helpless in this matter. We cannot set up check points for each manhole", the official said.

"During the monsoon however, we open the lid to ease the drain-age of the stagnant water. In that case we post signs with red flags or branches. If someone removes the sign we cannot do anything about it," he added.

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They are not even aware of the total number of uncovered man-holes. After the covers are stolen the manholes often remain open and unprotected for months. They take action after someone from the neighbourhood lodge com-plaints.

A DCC source said that without the installation cost one metal cover costs about Tk 1500. They are mostly made of iron and steel. "We have stocks in every division. Whenever theft is reported we replace them. On average around 8 to 10 covers get stolen every week from my area," said one of the zonal engineers of DCC.

This illegal business of stealing manhole covers has been going on for years in the city. Apparently no preventive measures have been taken by the authority.

It is also causing environmen-tal pollution.

Too scary for DCC

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"Our job was to design the project accord-ing to the budget of DCC. As DCC has shortage of manpower we proposed to include the local residents and public par-ticipants like players and joggers and the local ward commissioner in the mainte-nance work of the park," he said.

"A volunteer group can be engaged to guard the place so that the park can be saved by local leadership. But the ward commissioner is on the run at present," he added.

Around 57 shishu trees were felled

recently as they were dying from a kind of 'worm'. A decision was taken one and a half years ago to chop down 600 shishu, 200 acacia and 70 eucalyptus trees as they are harmful to the soil and soak up groundwa-ter. These trees were imported and planted during the rule of Ershad.

"We are already late. These harmful trees should have been cut down a year ago," said Hasnat.

"Instead of these trees we are planting 650 local environment friendly trees like arjun, mehogoni, banyan, bokul, kodom,

teak, silk cotton, mango, jackfruit and coconut over the last one year," he said.

Construction of eleven fountains named after eleven sector commanders of the Liberation War and an open stage for cultural shows were reportedly dropped from the design due to shortage of funds.

At present there are 18 gardeners of DCC working in the park. Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed, head of architecture department, Buet, did the design of the park.

Rickshaw fare on the rise too

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Kader Mollah, a rickshawpuller from Rupnagar said, "During the half-day shift I earn around Tk 300. Since there is a shortage of rickshaw I don't get one to pull every day. In this situation it is hard for us to pay the house rent, which is Tk 1000-1200 in my slum."

Zakir Hossain, a resident of Shershah Shuri Road, Mohammadpur said, "Rick-shaw fare has increased dramatically during the last few months. Earlier I used to spend around Tk 6 to 7 to take my son to school at Asad Avenue. Now the fare is Tk 10. My wife goes to pick

him up after school so you can guess the additional daily expense."

"If I go to New Market from Bangshal in a CNG autorickshaw it would cost around Tk 40. Rickshawpullers nowadays ask for the same amount," said Nahid Tabassum, a resident of Bangshal.

Sabbir Hossain, a resident of Mirpur-6 said, "In the residential areas we do not have any other option but rickshaw. We must use them to go to the nearest kitchen market or bus stand. Many roads and parts of the city are off-limits to rickshaws. Rickshawpullers are taking advantage of this and charging higher fare."

Decentralisation of Rajuk

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Commenting on the decentralisation plan, a noted economist and environmentalist Prof Muzaffer Ahmad said the idea of decentralisation and delegation of required power have to be adopted in the Rajuk law first. Decentralisation has to be clearly defined and it must mean that a zone office has decision-making apparatus at the local level, he said.

"Our proposal has all along been that decentralisation of Rajuk must started with separation of its regulating and develop-ment roles," said Prof Ahmad.

Rajuk has to be comprised of various municipalities, he said, adding that coordi-nation of municipal functions must be a core feature of Rajuk's decentralisation. According to Ahmad, Rajuk's functions must accommodate the role of a neigh-bourhood council.

A top official of Rajuk said seeking any-mity that most of the files have to be for-warded to Rajuk head office for disposal. There is hardly any case that the deputy director or authorised officer of a zone office can independently dispose of a file.

Most of the files are of different kinds approval and opinion from the law officers (magistrate and legal adviser), directors, members and the Rajuk chairman.

"Decentralisation of this kind means hardly anything for the people," said the official. "It has rather lengthened the pro-cedure of disposal of a file than it would require earlier."

The authorities should have first devel-oped a mechanism of independent and complete set-up before decentralising the offices, he said.

Disposal of a file, that requires permis-sion from the head office, now takes longer than it would take when all the departments were under a single roof, he said.

But there are examples of speedy dis-posal with strong lobbying from backdoor.

In one example, as the Rajuk official cited, a case of four applications together for ownership transfer of flats was dis-

posed of within two days from Rajuk.

A former secretary vehemently pursued the case and a member of Rajuk disposed it of expeditiously, he said. The file was forwarded from one of the two zone offices on June 18 by urgent messenger and it was disposed of on June 19 with opinions of all officials concerned. The four appli-cants included an army officer.

Such interference of political and bureaucratic big shots in the functions of Rajuk has actually been a root cause behind today's regrettable situation, said the Rajuk official.

A service seeker of Mohakhali zone office requesting anonymity said disposal of the applications is delayed due to move-ment of files back and forth between the zone office and the head office, making the situation more difficult and creating scopes for malpractice.

Another top official of Rajuk said that deputy director of a zone office has dele-gation mainly to collect service charges, return refund money and issue land use clearance at the local level. The DD has to send files back and forth to the head office for disposal of other cases.

Any file, that may require legal opinion, has to be sent to the law officer (magis-trate) at the head office.

This long procedure of moving files back and forth from office to office kills man-hour, wastes resources and causes suffer-ings to the service seekers, said officials.

Two zone offices have been shifted without creating facilities for shifting of records and without developing required logistics, said official sources.

Chairman of Rajuk KAM Haroon said that there are matters that require permis-sion from the chairman or member level and the zone office authorities have to obtain that permission from the head office of Rajuk.

"We cannot delegate all the power to the zone office," he said. "But we will soon start giving the service seekers a fixed date of delivery so that they remain aware of

required time."

The chairman said that the authorities are going to introduce a form detailing all the prerequisites of a certain application and delivery date so that applicants do not have to come again and again to complete the applications and disposal of an applica-tion is not delayed. The span of time needed will vary from seven to thirty days, he said.

Rajuk officials in general said that there is need for adequate manpower and proper delegation of authority to the zone offices for better service delivery.

"It is true that there is shortage of required manpower for quick disposal of such jobs," said Haroon. "We will depute our law officer (magistrate) at the zone offices from next week. The officer will sit for three days a week at zone office for time being."

Regarding two other zone offices, the chairman said they have not yet got the allotment of land and office building from the public works ministry for Dhanmondi zone office but he hoped to bring it into operation by the first week of July.

A deputy director (estate), a deputy town planner and an authorised officer work full time at a zone office along with other officials and employees concerned.

Prof Ahmad said that issuance of land use clearance will remain anomalous and improper as usual, until and unless the detailed area plan (DAP) of Dhaka is put in practice.

The Rajuk was created in 1987 abolish-ing Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT), with no offices in the city periphery to regulate urbanisation.

The office of authorised officer 3 and that of authorised officer 1 are yet be set up in Mirpur and Dhanmondi respectively.

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Emergency no. 9896623, 0171409000

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8913674

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8116061-2, 9119119

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Leaves Dhaka at 12-45 pm
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Singapore Airlines
8811504-7, 9883259
Airport Office: 8911928, Fax: 8811503

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