

Most Japanese unhappy with two major parties: Poll

AFP, Tokyo

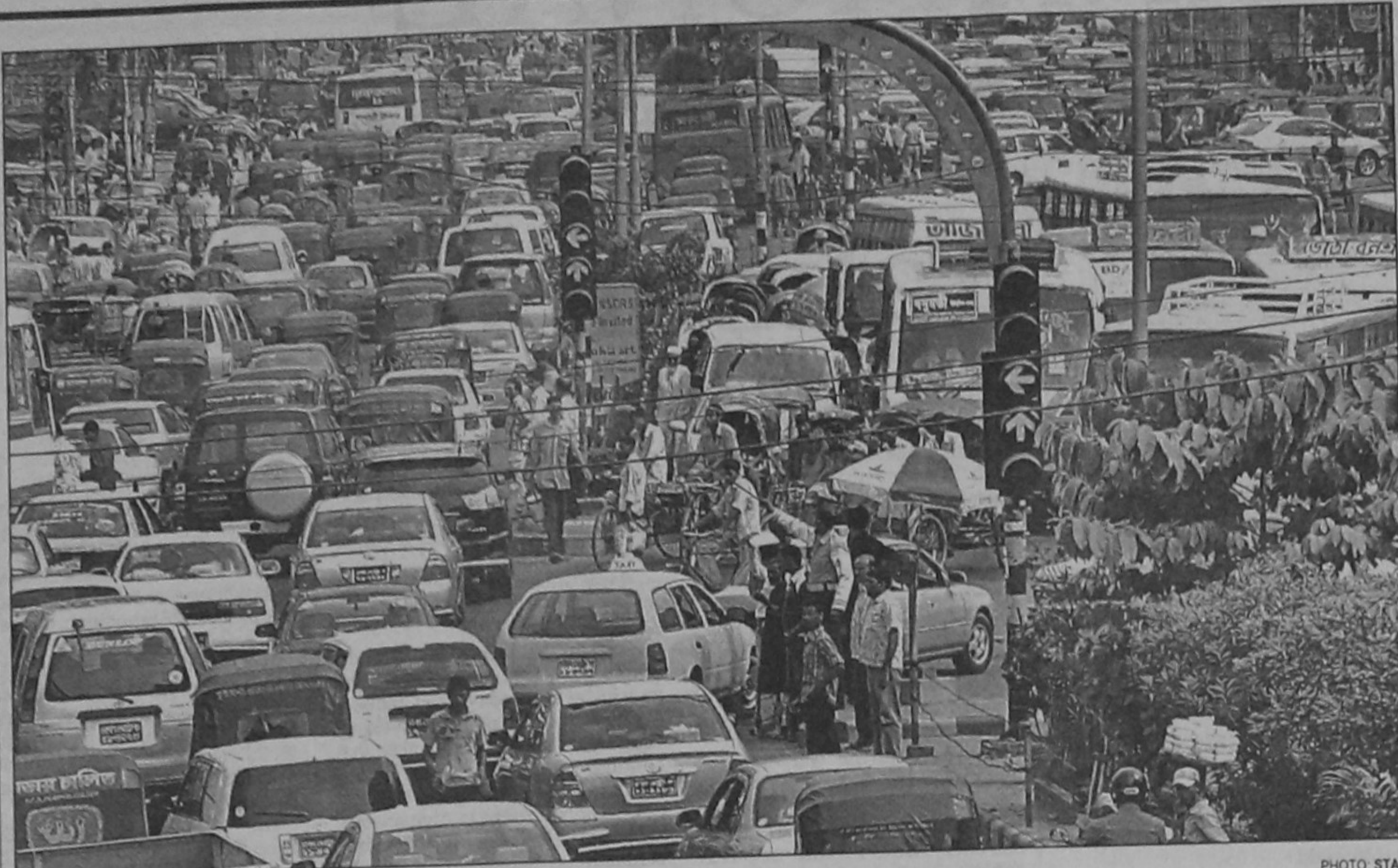
Japanese voters are unhappy with both the ruling and opposition parties, with a majority saying they are disappointed and dissatisfied, according to a new poll.

Some 78 percent of respondents were not satisfied with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, while only 20 percent said they were, according to the survey, conducted by the Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper and Waseda University.

Meanwhile 79 percent said they were not satisfied with the opposition Democratic Party of Japan either, in comparison with 17 percent who said they were.

The survey found that 69 percent were disappointed with the ruling party, while that number was 50 percent for the opposition.

The nationwide poll of nearly 1,800 people was conducted on October 4-5.



Commuters remain stuck in a gridlock at Kakrail yesterday as many areas of Dhaka city experienced massive traffic congestion throughout the day.

PHOTO: STAR

Ancient history gets in the way of Beirut's modern towers

AFP, Beirut

Ancient history is getting in the way of construction in Beirut's building boom as new archaeological discoveries delay the long-planned high-rises.

And the delays can be long, frustrating and expensive.

Construction on a luxury 23-storey residential building in the heart of the Lebanese capital, for example, has been stalled for 15 months after excavators stumbled on a 2,000-year-old Roman bath house.

"Imagine a developer waiting a year and three months without any progress being made on his building," says Samir Bey of Saifi Crown real estate development company that owns the 1,144-square-metre plot of land.

This latest discovery of the ancient bath house is considered "a peripheral archaeological site for Beirut. It is not a landmark," says archaeologist Asad Seif of the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA).

The price of expropriating the site, next door to a trendy Beirut restaurant, was too high and the

action deemed unnecessary, he told AFP.

Instead, archaeologists and architects came together to devise a plan which would allow the preservation of the artifacts and at the same time permit the tower construction to proceed.

Under the plan, the three-roomed bath house is being taken apart piece by piece and will then later be rebuilt in its original form on the ground floor of the tower when it goes up.

"We are preserving it, but we are preserving it in a different way," says Seif.

"Since we are going to integrate it on the ground floor of the future building, we will not be losing the information or the spatial memory of this place," Seif says, labelling the measure a "mitigation solution."

"This is the first time this is being done in Lebanon and the Middle East," he said.

Architects are now busy redrawing their designs to allow for the changes.

In the meantime, archaeologists are working to dismantle the structure's columns, once used to hold up a marble floor, to allow for four

levels of underground parking.

The team -- about a dozen archaeologists and 25 support staff -- are also working behind a red metallic fence on the dig, taking measurements and sifting through sand for small finds that comprise everything from coins, pots and nails to human teeth.

"Every detail, every object will tell us a story about how things were done and we can discover trends," Seif says.

"The objects are meant to help us see and understand the dynamics of how it got built, how they used it, why it was destroyed and why it is abandoned," he said.

Lebanese law requires developers to work with the DGA to find solutions when artifacts are found during building excavations. But the solutions don't come cheap.

"We had to reach a compromise. The people who are going to build here are disturbing this archaeology. So they have to pay a tax," Seif explains.

"This tax is used to pay the archaeologists to remove the information in a proper way. Everyone has to assume their role," he adds. Saifi Crown is absorbing the

major portion of the costs of the excavation, including thousands of dollars to remove, package and transfer a 110-square-metre mosaic from the site.

The mosaic will later be erected as a backdrop to the bath house when it is restored in the tower building.

"This creates a large burden for the developer. However, we as Lebanese understand that Lebanon has archaeological treasures that shouldn't be taken lightly. We want to preserve them," says Saifi Crown's Bey.

The task is not without its complications. There is the question of moving the 18-tonne basin or labrum that once served as a source of fresh water for people in the "hot" room of the bath house.

Ways also have to be found to keep the antiquities from being harmed by slight movements coming from the parking garage below.

Plus, there is the issue of how to make the restored bath house publicly accessible.

"Though every person has a right to see it, it's a residential building, not a museum. There are

problems of security," Bey says.

The floor plan, therefore, is to include glass windows for passers-by to be able to see the artifacts from the outside. Visits inside the building can be coordinated with the DGA.

In a city whose history spans over 5,000 years of Canaanite, Phoenician, Hellenistic, Roman and Ottoman civilisations, it's not surprising that many traces of antiquity lie below the surface.

Another Roman bath and an ancient Roman road are among the ruins preserved within Beirut's city centre but there are others too.

When excavation began for a commercial and residential complex near Beirut's synagogue in Wadi Abu Jmeil, a Roman hippodrome was unearthed.

The historic find prompted the culture minister to send an official letter to the developer saying the land was of "national heritage value" -- effectively freezing the project.

"The hippodrome in Beirut is a landmark. We cannot in any case remove it," says archaeologist Seif, explaining why the project was frozen.

After setbacks, hunt for AIDS vaccine pushes on

AFP, Cape Town

One year after a puzzling setback in the hunt for an AIDS vaccine, researchers say their defeats have forced them to look for entirely new ways of creating a defence against the disease.

After nearly 30 years, 25 million deaths and billions of dollars spent with no vaccine to show for it, scientists at this year's international AIDS Vaccine Conference said they were turning to novel approaches to overcome their defeats.

"We are in the middle of quite a profound shift of mindset in the research community," said Alan Bernstein, director of the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise, an alliance of organisations working on a vaccine.

Speaking to AFP on the sidelines of the meeting that ended Friday in Cape Town, he said that startling setbacks had forced scientists to delve into sophisticated new research to tackle the disease.

Last year scientists were forced to abandon two advanced clinical trials of a vaccine by pharmaceutical company Merck, after it appeared to actually heighten the risk of AIDS infection.

"The Merck result was such a surprise and everyone was kind of knocked off their horses... What happened no one could have pre-

dicted," Mitchell Warren of the AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition said.

"They still don't understand exactly what happened. That finding forces people to realign and look at new ways and new approaches to how we are going to find an AIDS vaccine because it was so surprising."

About 30 other clinical trials are underway around the world, but the most watched is a study in Thailand that began in 2003, with results expected next year.

That study is the biggest ever, with 16,000 people enrolled. Scientists say that whatever the outcome, it will provide valuable information on the pandemic, which most agree won't see a vaccine for decades.

Meanwhile, Warren says the failure of the Merck trial has already forced scientists to rethink their basic assumptions about how vaccines work.

"People are really grappling with new ways of doing things," he said.

In the past vaccines have either caused the body to develop antibodies that kill a disease, or to attack infected cells to kill them off before a disease spreads.

But HIV mutates at every turn, making it almost impossible to design a vaccine to attack it.

Bernstein said the most exciting

new research involves newly discovered defences in the human body called the innate immune system, which serves as an early warning system for invading diseases.

That system could provide a way to stop HIV, if scientists found a way to trigger it early enough, he said.

"We now know we may have only hours, at most days, before we have a window of opportunity to stop HIV. So that's reason to think this early warning system might be critical to activate if we are going to design a vaccine," he said.

The disappointments in the quest for a vaccine have sparked calls for an end to the research, with critics arguing the money could be better spent on other prevention or treatment efforts.

But Anthony Fauci, one of the world's top AIDS researchers at the US National Institutes of Health, insisted that a vaccine would eventually provide the world's best defence against the disease.

The NIH, the main global funder of HIV vaccine research, spent 1.5 billion on the field in 2008.

"If you look historically, vaccines have been the most cost-effective health interventions in history," by preventing the incredible financial burden of treating diseases, Fauci said.

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PHOTO: STAR

Resource Integration Centre forms a human chain at the Central Shaheed Minar in Dhaka yesterday to mark the International Day of Older Persons.

Nine Chinese oil workers kidnapped in Sudan

AFP, Khartoum

Nine Chinese oil workers have been kidnapped near Sudan's disputed central oil district of Abyei, the Chinese embassy said yesterday, with a Sudanese driver also feared missing.

"Nine Chinese oil workers, they are kidnapped," an embassy spokesman told AFP, asking not to be named. "We're still looking into the issue. We're taking the necessary steps."

He said the kidnapping happened on Saturday and that the embassy was in crisis talks following the incident.

"We're now in a meeting with our ambassador," he said. "We have contacts with the Sudanese authorities to identify and localise the kidnappers."

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