

City traffic in chaos

There is an absolute need for a solution

THERE is absolutely no question that the city's traffic system is today on the verge of collapse. If one goes through the mess of the last few days on the roads, one will have a fairly vivid idea of the travails citizens are being put through. Dhaka now has a population of no fewer than 14 million people. In contrast, the road network that should have been available for the daily movements of such a vast population is simply not there. Where a modern city should have 25 per cent of its area marked off for roads, Bangladesh's capital has only seven per cent. That is indeed a shame. Where the road network is severely limited in nature, the number of vehicles on the roads is not. Altogether 200,000 vehicles (and among them are buses, trucks and cars) hit the road every day. If now you add the 20,000 vehicles which are introduced on the roads every year, you get a clearer picture of the confusion.

Obviously, there is today a paramount need for the city authorities to get down to the business of streamlining the non-traffic system. The first step in this regard relates to the matter of who controls the traffic signaling system. This is a vital question because of late traffic lights in most cases have been ignored while policemen have gone back to the old manual system of directing traffic. That has only worsened conditions. Which is why it would be advisable to heed the views of the joint commissioner of traffic control, who has noted that while the police are in charge of traffic movement, the signal system is in the hands of the Dhaka City Corporation. Such a dichotomy is plainly inexplicable; and because it is, the authorities ought speedily to resolve the issue. Speed is of the essence because while a very large number of meetings and seminars on the traffic issue have taken place in the last many years, not much of practical activity has followed. Worse, the existing roads are quickly getting into a state of dilapidation, with potholes developing and manholes being at risk of breaking down. As for the pavements that pedestrians need, they have in most instances disappeared.

The traffic situation in the city assumes critical urgency owing to the oncoming Ramadan. It is only to be expected that in the hours before the break of fasting, the roads will be clogged with traffic and so badly impair citizens' movements. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police authorities have suggested that schools be ordered closed half way through Ramadan as a way of easing traffic movement. That is an idea inane at best and outlandish at worst, for it suggests a clear inability on the part of the police to tackle traffic without having some institutions or organizations shut down. Why must school students suffer for the ineptitude of the traffic administration? Obviously, a better way must be found to handle the issue. In the longer term, however, some serious planning would be in order. Else the city will eventually, and soon, grind to a halt.

Corruption in education departments

The minister's resolve to fight it is welcome

BY announcing that he would wage a campaign against corruption and graft in his ministry, the education minister has brought to the fore a problem that has bedevilled the government education sector for long.

Allegations abound about how corruption takes place during transfer and posting of the teachers or while issuing the monthly payment orders (MPOs). As far as reports go, even students' admission is not immune from the evil practice. Even the Transparency International, Bangladesh's reports had more than once identified the education department as one of the most corrupt in the country.

But it is one thing to point the finger at a problem, it is another to show a way out of it. On this score, the minister himself has admitted that to get the proper evidence of the malpractice as it takes place is the hardest part of the job. So, the question that one may raise at this point is: was any serious attempt ever made at the official level to collect such evidence of graft and bribery in the education ministry?

Reassuringly though, the education minister has decided to put his foot down in the matter. A note of caution, hopefully, would not be out of place here. For we have had enough of pledges and even crusades to root out administrative corruption in the past.

To all appearances, the education minister means business. And to address the problem at its source, it would be necessary to set up a strong monitoring mechanism within the different departments under the ministry. If run effectively, this would go a long way in collecting necessary evidences against instances of wrongdoing within the ministry. Apart from oversight from within, members of the public, or other victims, affected by corruption should also be encouraged to come out with their grievances to the appropriate authorities created for the purpose. The media can also play an important role.

After all is said and done, it is now the time to take action. It is hoped the education minister will really blaze a trail in his ministry for other government departments to follow.

The face behind the mask

This is where we are stuck today, in the interstice between face and mask. This is where our minds fester in the decomposing heat of hesitations as hypocrisy consumes our good judgment. Nobody is taken at face value. Everybody is taken at mask value.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE title of this column derives from a 1941 Hollywood movie in which Peter Lorre plays a kind, happy man whose face has been disfigured in a fire. Rejected by his girlfriend and despaired by his condition, he turns to a life of crime. But further agonies await him after he wears a mask to hide his disfigured features and falls in love with a beautiful blind girl. He tries to go straight for her, but can't escape his life of crime or his hatred of his own scarred face.

I thought of this movie plot when I recently stumbled on page 216 of the memoirs of P.A. Nazir, a former bureaucrat, nearly 16 years after it was published. Nazir recounts his experience with a college principal. This teacher of English literature badly wanted to leave his post in Barisal and get reassigned either to Dhaka or Mymensingh. For that he managed an appointment with the provincial governor.

During the appointment, the governor sat on a sofa and the principal, to the shock of many, sat down on the carpet. Then the visitor in the earnest submission of his plea touched the governor's feet. The governor sprang up in surprise, and expressed his disdain that the principal should have done something so silly for the sake of a job transfer!

The book doesn't reveal the name of the feet-clutching principal, but the description meets the profile of a man who is a leading light of our intellectual world. Now, it's not my intention to single out and embarrass him. But he is an excellent case

study of a genre of men and women in this country whose faces have long since vanished behind their masks.

Of course, I would give these people the benefit of doubt. Their faces got burned in the fire of necessity. That college principal stooped below his dignity out of desperation so that he could move to a new location for whatever reasons. People do stupid things when they are constrained and confused. It disfigures their self-esteem, and then they are left with no choice but to repair that damage by wearing masks.

The problem is that it doesn't diminish their desire to love their country, the beautiful blind girl of our story. In fact, this desire torments these souls. They at once have to grapple with the shame of their stupidity and the pain of their inability to overcome the horror of their own deplorable pasts.

So, it's only logical that they would try to hide their faces behind their masks, as if to sweep their past under the rug. I don't know if the college principal is ever racked with guilt for clinging to an iconic image, which doesn't go with that embarrassing episode of his life. Is he ever pricked by moral compunctions that, once so condescending, he allows himself to be considered a wellspring of righteousness?

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James Madison, the fourth president of



Who is behind this?

the United States, has written that "pure democracy" doesn't work because "there is nothing to check an obnoxious individual." What it means is that a government of the people, for the people, and by the people isn't entirely possible because all the people aren't equally sensible. The real world always falls short of the ideal.

It's a similar problem with our patriotism. There are those amongst us who sacrifice their lives for the country, and there are those who sacrifice the country for their lives. How do we tell who is who? How do we separate these two opposite types?

That makes the mask relevant for us. How do we handle those obnoxious patriots, who pretend to love the country after having done everything to hurt her? Where do we draw the line between the face and

the mask? How do we separate the imposing from the imposter?

In this country one can't stretch one's leg without poking a hypocrite in the groin. A person may be notorious for plundering the country, but nobody can question his love for it. A person may be most unscrupulous in private life, but he ascends to become a role model in public. Every face is tightly ensconced in his mask.

This two-faced traffic has created an inexorable gridlock on our moral lanes. The college principal is a classic example of how the mask takes over the face. I thought of something else when I read about him. What about his conscience? Does it keep him awake at night? How does he hide from himself what he has hidden from others?

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Tense Sylhet border

The incidents near the Sylhet border indicate that there has not been any improvement in India-Bangladesh relation despite recent discussions at high level. To develop really good relations we need to appreciate each other's problems.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

IT has been reported in some dailies (August 8) that Indian BSF illegally intruded into Bangladesh territory at 3 points in Jaintapur and Goainghat upazilla of Sylhet district. In Tamabil area about 150 members of BSF in full battle readiness entered nearly 400 meters inside Bangladesh territory and encircled a local BDR camp. The BSF members left the place after about 30 minutes when the local people came forward to rescue the encircled BDR members. The local people praised the patience of BDR personnel in not allowing the situation to deteriorate.

As per BDR statement, some BSF personnel along with some Khashia entered into Sreepur Minatila of Sreepur upazila and the Khashia started cultivating paddy in Bangladeshi-owned land. In Tamabil border area, around 150 BSF illegally entered and assisted the Khashias to cultivate land. Similarly, in Pratappur area, 20/25 BSF personnel entered illegally. Though BDR tried to arrange a flag meeting immediately no satisfactory response was received from its counterpart. Instead, BSF is reportedly increasing its strength along the borders.

Illegal entries and provocative activities by BSF on the Bangladesh-India border are

nothing new. Despite high-level conferences at experts and political levels we have not been able to obtain any satisfactory solution so far. These meetings always ended with some hope, and the expectation of the common people that with improvement of India-Bangladesh relation such incidents may decrease. Regrettably, such days have not come as yet.

There is no scope for developing good neighbourly relation through one-sided effort. Bangladesh alone can never establish good understanding with India, which is reported to have become more aggressive with its small neighbours due to change in "geo-political balance" through entry of India and EU into Afghanistan, which US considers part of South Asia.

The incidents in Sylhet appear to be specially significant in view of the Tipaimukh dam issue. BSF is increasing its strength at Sylhet borders. At present, BDR is not fully reorganised. Nor has it regained its past glory and strength. Despite Indian assurance it is not difficult to understand that as long as we are not able to strengthen and modernise BDR BSF will increasingly become audacious and aggressive, resulting in loss of human lives and property and loss of morale of our people at the borders.

Needless to say, the common people of



The tension must be eased.

Bangladesh are uncertain about the impact of Tipaimukh dam. Incidents such as BSF's illegal intrusion into Bangladesh will certainly affect India-Bangladesh relation. Mere assurances from India cannot satisfy our people.

Unless India engages itself peacefully with all nations, honouring the sovereignty of these nations and building a paradigm of peaceful existence, no real improvement of our relationship appears to be possible.

The immediate need for Bangladesh is to reorganise BDR, modernising it with arms and equipments to match its Indian counterpart. If necessary, all the young people along the India-Bangladesh borders may

be trained to support our border forces. Road networks at the borders should be improved to increase the mobility of the border forces.

The incidents near the Sylhet border indicate that there has not been any improvement of India-Bangladesh relation despite recent discussions at high level. To develop really good relations we need to appreciate each other's problems. We may have divergent views, but we also share similar attitudes. Our mutual respect must increase if we want a better future for our people.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.

The Israeli Kurd

Kurdistan does have a warmer history with the Jewish state, however. Many of the current crop of Kurdish leaders have visited Israel in past decades. Jews lived in Kurdistan for centuries, working as traders, farmers and artisans.

ABDEL HAMID ZEBARI

A new magazine in Iraq's Kurdistan region has caused furore among conservative Muslims with a rousing call for Jews to leave Israel -- and come back to Iraq. The magazine, "Israel-Kurd," is the brainchild of Dawood Baghestani, the 62-year-old former chief of the autonomous northern region's human rights commission.

The glossy, full-colour monthly in Kurdish and English has a lofty mission: to help solve the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict by convincing more than 150,000 Kurdish Jews living in Israel to return to Iraqi Kurdistan, Baghestani told AFP.

"The biggest reason behind the complexity of the Palestinian problem is the unjust practices of Arab regimes against the Jews -- there are more than 1.5 million Jews

originally from Arab countries in Israel," Baghestani said.

"If the Jews had not been subject to an exodus, the Palestinians wouldn't have been either," he said, referring to the flight of 700,000 Palestinians from the newly created Jewish state in 1948 during the first Arab-Israeli war. "If the situation in our new federal and democratic Iraq, and particularly in Kurdistan, becomes stable, then many Jews would want to return and reduce the number of Jewish settlements in Palestine," he said.

The latest edition of the 52-page magazine, which has a circulation of around 1,500 copies, features a woman draped in an Israeli flag on the cover. Inside are stories about Kurdish Jewish traditions and photographs from the first half of the twentieth century, as well as arguments on how a return of Jews would help to build a wealthy and strong Kurdistan.

But many people in Iraq are not buying the argument. "I'm suspicious. I don't see the point of this kind of publication," said Zana Rustayi, a representative of the Islamist Jamaa Islamiya party in the regional assembly. "The Kurds are part of the Muslim nation, and Kurdistan is part of Iraq."

Iraq has no relations with Israel, and the country was an implacable foe of the Jewish state under the regime of former dictator Saddam Hussein, who was overthrown by the US-led invasion in 2003.

A Sunni member of parliament in Baghdad, Mithal Alusi, was suspended from parliament and threatened with charges last year after visiting Israel for a conference. The decision was later overturned by the constitutional court.

Kurdistan does have a warmer history with the Jewish state, however. Many of the current crop of Kurdish leaders have visited Israel in past decades. Jews lived in Kurdistan for centuries, working as traders, farmers and artisans. But the creation of Israel and the rise of Arab nationalism in the mid-twentieth century dramatically altered the situation, spurring most of Kurdistan's Jews to leave.

Baghestani -- who has been to Israel four

times, including on a clandestine trip in 1967 -- denies that he works for the Israelis. "What I am asking for is enshrined in the constitution; every Iraqi has the right to return to his homeland. Jews who were Iraqi citizens were subject to injustice," he said.

"If every Arab country allowed the Jews to return, ensured their safety and gave them back their land, Palestinian refugees would be able to return to their territory because Israel would not need so much land," he continued.

Mahmud Othman, a Kurdish Coalition MP in Baghdad, disputes this. He says that while relations with Israel may be a nice idea, such a move would not be pragmatic for a region ringed by other Muslim states.

"Kurdistan needs the Arabs. We are living in an Arab country and we are federal region within Iraq. We don't need a relationship with (Israel), we need a relationship with Arabs, we need a relationship with Iran, we need to be close to Turkey," Othman said. "I haven't heard of any Jews in Israel trying to return to Kurdistan. I think they're better off there."

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