

Mega projects to solve city's traffic woes

Thinking harder before rushing to decision is advisable

THE prime minister's announcement to establish elevated and underground trains is a welcome move, if only to solve the city's ever-worsening traffic tangle. However, as she has put forward both the ideas of elevated expressway and the underground rail in the same breath, the question that now arises is which of the systems would get the first priority. For both the projects are ambitious and would involve astronomical costs. So, it would be first necessary to choose between them and then take steps for its implementation on priority basis.

Since either of the projects falls under the category of mega projects, a word of caution would not be out of place here. For in most cases here or in other parts of the underdeveloped world, there are experiences of many such projects, which are often promoted by big companies and their local agents, becoming white elephants. So, a comprehensive feasibility study should be undertaken before going for such mega transport projects. At the same time, it would also be necessary to gather experience from neighbouring countries, such as Kolkata of West Bengal in India and Bangkok in Thailand where metro-rail and sky train systems have already been introduced.

Moreover, comparison of the soil conditions of these cities with that of Dhaka would help determine Dhaka's prospect for the elevated expressway or the metro-rail in particular, in a better way. So, it will be absolute imperative that these steps are taken by the implementation agencies concerned before any of the projects get the go ahead signal.

Since the above projects are long-term, time-taking ones, short-term measures like construction of more flyovers and setting up of circular roads and orbital waterways, should be undertaken with priority to address the city's urgent problems, before going for the larger mass transit projects.

Anyway, apart from its promise of addressing the traffic woes, such system of mass transit does also hold a promise to give the city a more modernistic look. So, considering from both the angles, the introduction of a modern mass transit system in the city has been long overdue.

While appreciating such a radical idea to improve and modernise Dhaka's communications network, we would again stress with a note of caution about the risks that the suggested mega-projects involve. Prospect of long-term viability and sustainability of such projects will remain a big issue, for ideally, the envisaged projects should last for about a hundred years. Last but not least, we would like to remind the authorities concerned the old adage: look before you leap. In fact, it is always advisable to have a rethink, before rushing to any decision.

EC move to exempt parties on audit issue

The story should not be repeated next year

THE decision by the Election Commission to exempt 39 political parties from submitting their annual audit reports to it is extremely unfortunate. All these parties were expected to submit these reports by July 31 this year, an instruction they failed to follow through. The fact that the EC has simply acquiesced in the parties' refusal to come forward with the audit reports is a defeat for the body and, worse, will surely give the impression that it is ill-equipped to have its authority accepted or respected. If the EC has been defeated, conversely it can be said that the political parties have, by defying the instructions of the commission, won a victory which again does not advance the cause of democratic politics in the country.

By not submitting the audit reports, the political parties have sent out a pretty bad signal to the country. It is that no matter what the Election Commission may do about streamlining politics, the parties can with impunity ignore the body and go ahead with their own programmes as to how they mean to operate. In this present instance, despite having registered themselves with the EC before the general elections of last year, the parties have conveyed the feeling that efforts to take politics on to a high moral ground can easily and automatically be blocked if they simply look the other way. And once that happens, there can only be sympathy for the Election Commission. It really had no options here. There were simply no means by which it could have its directives enforced. The glaring truth for the EC is that if the political parties choose not to heed its message, there is no mechanism it can employ to have that message heard. Which is a pity.

The Election Commission has now decided that the parties can submit audit accounts of their financial transactions by July next year. Having seen the parties ignore the deadline set for last July, the EC clearly hopes that it can save face by giving them a whole new year to make amends for their failure. We believe that this time round, the parties ought not to come up with excuses or stay silent on the audit issue. For all its defeat and its limitations, the EC has taken a pragmatic move by giving the parties a fresh opportunity to clear their record.

Finally, we think it is necessary to remind our political parties that on such issues as audit accounts and the like it is for them to come forth voluntarily with information about their activities. As organizations professing to uphold the interests of the people, they owe it to themselves and to the nation to do everything which ensures transparency and accountability in politics. By failing to meet the audit-related deadline of July 31 this year, they have taken things backward. Let us hope this story will not be repeated in July 2010.

One picture spoke thousand words

The odd one in this convoluted conflict is the four-month-old infant in her mother's lap. She doesn't yet have an opposite number in this rivalry. She is too young and innocent to inhale the deadly fumes of madness that has consumed two generations of her ancestors.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE bomb attack on a parliament member last week was a cowardly act of violence. But what made it truly alarming was the choice of the target. Although a dozen others have been wounded in the blast, the man on whose life the attempt was made is the scion of a blood-soaked family, a citadel of our national politics.

No less alarming is the list of suspects who have been rounded up. One is the brother of a renegade army major, who was instrumental in the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family in 1975. The other suspect is the daughter of a fugitive army colonel whose name is amongst the masterminds of that August night. Three days ago, the police arrested two sons of another convicted killer awaiting death sentence.

As it looks, it may have happened like a sequel to a blood feud. May be it's just a coincidence. May be it's also correlation. History is rife with examples when feuds run in the family, from sibling to sibling,

from parent to children.

The odd one in this convoluted conflict is the four-month-old infant in her mother's lap. She doesn't yet have an opposite number in this rivalry. She is too young and innocent to inhale the deadly fumes of madness that has consumed two generations of her ancestors.

But this baby has turned into an icon of contradiction. Neither a casualty nor a culprit in this visceral strife, she has become its cause célèbre, her innocence being in striking contrast with the grim nature of the gruesome crime. She has become the poster baby of this ugly tragedy, the brand ambassador of its grinding horror.

Her mother and maternal grandfather may be suspected to have had a hand in the attack on the parliament member. But this little one has performed her own sleight of hand. From the pictures showing her nestled in mother's arm, flashed to newspapers and on television screens across the country, she reached out to people and touched their hearts. She drummed up a great deal of sympathy for her vulnerable

condition.

Not to deny that the brother of a brother and the children of their fathers could be in cahoots with their elders. It's possible that they conspired to hurl that bomb, each in his or her way, perhaps she by planning and he by action, perhaps by other means unbeknown to us. But the pictures of that baby girl clinging to her mother have been dissonant with all of these assumptions.

Instead, those pictures made an anti-climatic statement. Only four-months into the world, these pictures showed her caught in the acrimony of adults like chilies crushed between pestle and mortar. Yes, the police may have allowed a maid or some policewomen to look after the baby while the mother was being interrogated. But the pictures have beguiled people. They conjured the epiphany of common suffering shared between mother and child.

That has created a perception issue in the public mind. Could it have been avoided or done in a different way? Could the mother have been placed under house arrest and interrogated in her living room? Would that have made any difference in terms of extraction of information or confession from her? Would that have in any manner compromised the investigation?

These questions are relevant because punishment bears greater responsibility than crime. It has to walk the tightrope of justice, doing the right thing in tandem with doing it right. For example, early this month a large contingent of American

bands signed an open letter to the US Congress. They requested declassification of government records concerning how music was utilised during interrogation of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay detention centre.

What happened there? Alongside the techniques of torture such as water boarding, stripping and other means of intimidation, music was played for 72 hours in a row at volumes just below that to shatter eardrums. Musicians are angry because their music was utilised to make prisoners feel hopeless while exploiting their psychological, moral and sociological weaknesses.

It means even interrogation has its melody, failing which it becomes torture. In the pictures of a mother holding her baby, that melody was fractured. Those pictures projected the image of a distressed mother more than that of a deadly suspect. The mother looked hopeless, more concerned to protect the baby than to face her interrogators.

Those who attacked the young lawmaker may have done it with a vengeance. They may have done it under an illusion that fresh wounds should heal festering ones. But a picture is worth a thousand words. One infant has done more damage than all the grownups taken together. In her quiet innocence, she has spoken more eloquently that it's possible to take revenge without so much as lifting a finger.

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Dithering on police reform

At this point of time one perhaps cannot be faulted for accusing the concerned authorities of dithering on police reform. Such a view acquires credence when one sees that after ten months of the installation of a democratically elected government there is no tangible move afoot to re-invigorate the stalled reform process.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE necessity of carrying out the much needed police reform on a priority basis has once again been highlighted by *The Daily Star* editorial of October 27. The military-backed caretaker government facilitated the passing of many reform-oriented ordinances during its two-year tenure but did not initiate any substantive measures towards the police reform. That is an unwelcome reality too live with despite the manifest urgency to reform and thus to modernise our police force.

At this point of time one perhaps cannot be faulted for accusing the concerned authorities of dithering on police reform. Such a view acquires credence when one sees that after ten months of the installation of a democratically elected government there is no tangible move afoot to re-invigorate the stalled reform process. Much work, including eliciting of public opinion on the proposed new Police Ordinance, had been done in the preceding years; leading newspapers and NGOs have held workshops/seminars with a view to exchanging opinion. The matter now lies in the home ministry.

Under circumstances as above, it would be in the fitness of things to hope that the

home ministry, now steered by popularly elected leaders, would take appropriate administrative and legislative measures to accord final shape to the new police ordinance. The subject may be extensively discussed in the concerned parliamentary standing committee and the parliament itself to dispel any misgivings whatsoever.

It may be worthwhile to remember that the politicisation of the police has been a serious malady. Pressures have been exerted for dropping proceedings against those with political connections and also to filing trivial charges against political enemies to harass them. Local politicians, at places, even sat in the police stations to serve as a buffer between their supporters and the police. Many felt that Bangladesh had developed a dual system of justice, one through the formal channels of the criminal justice system and another through political channels.

Political manipulation between 1991-2006 led to decline in discipline, and senior officers were often unable to control undisciplined juniors with political connections. A situation developed wherein intrusion of politics in matters of police management led to solicitation of further political influence. Pervasive disillusionment, loss of pride and collegiality was the result. As against being the

professional imposition of a coherent moral consensus on society, policing largely transformed into disconcertingly partisan political activity.

The establishment has to realise and appreciate that politicisation of the police, its unaccountability to the people and its outdated managerial practices largely result from lack of professionalism and accountability within the organisation. Political misuse of the police has been the direct result of internal organisational problems and poor performance. One cannot, however, lay all the blame on the political class, ignoring the negative role of the police leadership.

For the British, the maintenance of their rule in India was the prime consideration. Crime control was only a secondary objective to be achieved through fear of the police. The Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code and the Evidence Act put in place a legal framework and a police force equipped for the maintenance of British rule by force. The Penal Code prioritises offences against the state and the maintenance of public order. It begins consideration of traditional crime only from Section 299 onwards. The Criminal Procedure Code begins with the "arrest of persons" and the "maintenance of public order and tranquility" before getting to grips with criminal procedure relating to investigation and trial.

We have to remember that the Police Act of 1861, despite its preamble, prioritises collection and communication of intelligence affecting the public peace. The prevention and detection of crime is included among the duties of the police only in section 23 of the Act. The Act fur-

ther provides for punitive policing at the cost of local residents in the event of "disturbances" and for the appointment of private persons as special police officers.

It would be relevant to remember that our political leaders have failed to introduce administrative changes in tune with the provisions of the republican Constitution of Bangladesh. The police remained distant from the people and are as disliked as before.

It is very important to note that the blanket power of superintendence vested in the government by the Police Act, 1861, is not appropriate in a democracy. Further, the role of intelligence agencies has not been redefined to protect the fundamental right to freedoms of association, expression and movement. The police in Bangladesh still keep a watch on all political activities without discrimination and exclude only the ruling party of the day, which gives them authoritarian powers antithetical to the democratic spirit.

There is no denying that in a democracy police could not be wholly autonomous and political intervention is both inevitable and necessary to some extent. Therefore, there is a need to specify areas where government interference is justified and others where it is not. The recommendation of setting up of Security Commissions/Public Safety Commission as proposed in the new police ordinance can do this job effectively as its members are likely to be non-political persons. The enactment of a new police ordinance brooks no further delay.

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Afghanistan calms security fears

The United Nations said its head of mission in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, had spoken to the Afghan interior minister, who had given assurances that security would be enhanced in the wake of the attack.

WAHEEDULLAH MASSOUD

AFGHAN authorities played down fears Thursday of the Taliban wrecking next week's presidential election run-off and tried to assuage worries of a repeat of the rampant fraud which tarred the first round.

As the international community insisted that a Taliban attack on a Kabul hostel, which killed at least five foreign UN staff, would not disrupt the November 7 poll, Afghan officials said the threat from the terrorists had lessened.

And organisers of the election said they had agreed to a demand from President Hamid Karzai's challenger, ex-foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, for 20,000 of his observers to be accredited to help prevent vote rigging.

"We will try our best to avoid the mistakes made in the first round to hold a transparent and fraud-free election," said independent Election Commission (IEC) deputy chief electoral officer Zakaria Barakzai.

The attack on the Bekhtar guesthouse in

downtown Kabul, carried out by three Taliban fighters who blew themselves up after a two-hour gun-battle, followed a threat by the Islamists to disrupt next week's election.

While the Taliban's insurgency has been largely concentrated in southern provinces, the deaths of the UN workers brought home the stark reality that the several thousand foreigners based in Kabul are now in the militia's crosshairs.

The United Nations said its head of mission in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, had spoken to the Afghan interior minister, who had given assurances that security would be enhanced in the wake of the attack.

The UN was also holding a review of all of its security measures; with spokesman Dan McNorton acknowledging that "it's not business as usual."

Attacks by the Taliban, the militia toppled by US-led forces in late 2001, were a major deterrent to voters in the first round of the election on August 20, when turnout in some provinces was as low as five per cent.

Almost 200 violent incidents around the

first vote were attributed to the Taliban, including amputations of fingers marked with purple ink as proof of voting, and rocket and grenade attacks on polling stations.

A Taliban spokesman said that Wednesday's assault in Kabul signalled the start of a new bloody campaign to wreck the elections.

The Afghan defence ministry, however, played down the prospects of widespread Taliban attacks this time, and said authorities had learned lessons from the first round of voting.

"The enemy had prepared for months with foreign support, allocating loads of funds to disrupt the elections in a well-planned effort," spokesman Mohammad Zahir Azimi said.

"This time round, they haven't had the same amount of time to prepare a campaign of attacks, and the Pakistani Taliban who helped the Afghan Taliban last time to disturb the election are busy fighting in Pakistan," he added.

A White House spokesman said the Taliban's attempts to wreck the poll would not succeed. "In Kabul, obviously, there is an attempt by some to disrupt the will of the Afghan people in choosing their next government that this administration believes will not succeed," said Robert Gibbs.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon also insisted that the organisation's focus would not

be deflected but offered no detail about how to secure hundreds of staff in the country, many living in similar compounds to that stormed by the Taliban. "It is quite an unfortunate fact of life that we cannot ensure 100 percent the security because of these suicidal terrorist attacks," Ban said.

Karzai was forced into a run-off after falling fractionally short of an outright majority in a first round riddled with fraud. Nearly a quarter of all votes were eventually discounted after being deemed fraudulent and Abdullah has demanded the head of the IEC, who was appointed by Karzai, be sacked.

The IEC again rejected calls for Azizullah Ludin's dismissal but it did agree to a request by Abdullah that more of his supporters have accreditation rights at polling centres.

"One part of Dr. Abdullah's demands was 20,000 new candidate agents from his side should be accredited, we agree to that and we will deliver the accreditation badges to his campaign by Saturday," said the IEC's Barakzai.

"Our field offices will be focusing on those areas where fraud was happening in the first round and also we are encouraging candidate agents to send their agents to all the districts that were problematic in the first round."

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