

## Managing traffic amidst constraints

*Some pressing short-term imperatives must be addressed*

**I**NADEQUATE road space, unmanageably high number of vehicles and chronic disorders of all other types, which create regular and seemingly interminable traffic jams, are the severe problems that the traffic authorities are facing in the city, with the citizens taking the excruciating brunt of immobility and loss of man hours.

Not surprisingly, traffic snarls are unavoidable in a city having roads comprising less than eight percent of its area, when, ideally, it should be 25 percent. Evidently, things are going wrong in almost all areas. It has been found that the city now has more than 10 lakh vehicles while its traffic load handling capacity is not more than 1.5 lakh. And the number is increasing by around 180 vehicles every day. To cap it all, only two important roads have been constructed in the city in the last 20 years.

So, we know for sure that the situation calls for drastic, immediate as well as longer-term measures. While development of traffic infrastructure in order to keep pace with the fast increasing number of vehicles is needed to avoid total stagnation, there are areas where the traffic managers need to act with a sense of urgency here and now.

Things have to be kept under control until something approximating a reasonable road space-vehicle ratio can be ensured. For example, everybody knows that ramshackle vehicles having long lost their roadworthiness and driven by young boys have to be eliminated as a matter of top priority. These vehicles not only inflate the number of vehicles but are also a constant source hazards to citizens. There are a huge number of mini-buses and human haulers in the city which should have been dispatched to scrap-yard long back.

There have been repeated drives against the dilapidated vehicles, but with little success as prime minister herself has pointed out. So, it has to be the first priority of the traffic authorities to dispose of.. Similarly, Dhaka roads must be cleared of unlicensed rickshaws with the DCC, which issues the license, obliged to play the corrective role in the matter.

It is not clear why the BRTA, which issues driving and vehicles fitness certificates, does nothing as the supervisory body after issuing such certificates.

The overarching imperative for the government is to develop a mass transport system as soon as possible if the multiplicity of and dependence on private cars and other modes of transport are to be put a lid on.

Then there is the perennial problem of parking and footpaths being turned into markets and shelter for rootless people. This has to be addressed to recover some of the road space lost to them. It is also imperative that the inter-district buses and trucks do not move through the long queues of stranded vehicles. Parking lots will have to be created away from the busy city centres and it must be made mandatory for all owners of tall buildings to have parking lot. There is potential for the private sector to be into commercial parking lot management, if necessary, through bank financing

## Cleaning up of rivers

*Dumping and cleaning can't go together*

**O**NE wonders whether the agencies mean business when they talk about cleaning the four major rivers around the capital, while the cleaning-up is being conducted by the BIWTA on one hand, does the DCC authorities allow its garbage disposal trucks to off load refuse alongside the very rivers that are being cleaned, causing thousand of tons of rubbish to be dumped back into the same rivers.

It appears to us that the river-cleaning project has been initiated without much planning, otherwise the first priority should have been to make arrangements for dumping the sludge from the rivers, and also finding alternative places for waste dumping which was being done in the rivers so long.

It is also a classic case of lack of coordination between various agencies of government. And this makes complete nonsense of the river cleaning effort which started off with a lot of fanfare, and which involves a sum of Taka 6 crore.

What we find as utterly unacceptable is the very casual attitude of the DCC authorities to stop the dumping. The relevant DCC official, according to a report in this paper, is aware of the matter, and has been so for a long time, and despite his assurances to put a stop to this, has been either unwilling, or unable, to do so. Where or what is the difficulty, we wonder!

Let us not be oblivious of the fact that there is heavy stake in cleaning up the river. The four rivers in question are really the lifeline of the metropolis and surrounding areas. And all but one are dead biologically, according to a report of the department of environment. Apart from the fact that the rivers have become highly toxic, posing a hazard to the people who depend on these for sustenance, the water of these rivers has become deoxygenated which means that no marine life can sustain in these rivers.

We feel that the time is now to evolve a holistic river management system that will obviate disjointed and unplanned work. The rivers can no longer be the receptacle for the city's waste and there should be a waste management plan for the Capital. The government should also consider recycling the waste to use in agriculture and alternative energy source. We understand that several NGOs have expressed their eagerness in this venture, but we have not seen any progress in the matter.

## From vision to action

Now is the moment for grand visions and grander actions. If Bangladesh was guilty of being shackled to the mindset of the past, let India not be accused of having failed to think outside of the box when the opportunity beckoned.



MAHFUZ ANAM

**T**HE history of mutual suspicion, petty bickering on trade negotiations, cavalier attitude on border killings, dangerous gamesmanship with arms smuggling, etc. of the last three decades of Bangladesh-India relations would not normally justify the agreements that Sheikh Hasina penned two weeks ago in Delhi. Only a vision would. A vision of a South Asia doing what Asean did several decades ago, a South Asia of trusting neighbours rather than of subverting them, of fighting poverty and not using it to justify other failures, of a thriving market place of goods and services rather than of counting items in the negative list. In the latest agreement Bangladesh has moved towards such a vision. Has India responded? For us, the jury is still out.

Take two of the biggest concerns of the two sides: for India they are security and connectivity with the north-east, and for Bangladesh water sharing and trade imbal-

ance. It is the feeling here that the clarity and precision with which Bangladesh responded to its neighbour's concerns were not reciprocated in equal measure by India.

On Indian security concerns Bangladesh's commitment was unequivocal, that it will not permit the use of Bangladeshi soil for activities inimical to any other country, basically meaning India. It was in dramatic contrast to the past when India's worries about terrorist links and arms transit fell on deaf ears. India desperately needed friendly borders in the east that Bangladesh has now assured, and is following up by decisive deeds. Sheikh Hasina has launched the most determined and widespread actions against internal militants and extremists and is systematically dismantling the terrorist infrastructure.

The permission for the use of the Chittagong and Mongla ports for shipment of Indian goods to the northeast is a very important step forward. With Bangladesh's

present position on Asian Highway and Railway routes, the regional and sub-regional connectivity scenario is set to undergo a fundamental change.

On Bangladesh's priorities -- water sharing and trade imbalance -- there are no dramatic progresses. On Teesta water sharing, the positive development is that

a meagre \$10 to \$15 million in taxes from exports from Bangladesh of around \$300 million. That is what it would have cost India to give Bangladesh zero tariff.

The promise of rebuilding our railways, roads, bridges including the two ports, is a welcome. The US \$1 billion credit line will serve to stimulate early action. However all these are ancillary to both the functionality and efficiency of connectivity, which is a euphemism for "transit." The offer of 250mw of electricity is of extreme relevance and is among the most significant gains that Bangladesh stands to make. Another hopeful sign is the agreement to amicably demarcate our maritime boundary.

Predictably the Bangladeshi opposition, led by Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and supported by Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) have called the agreements a total surrender of Bangladesh's interest to India. They have called for unity among all opposition and are clearly marking time for an appropriate moment to strike against Sheikh Hasina's government.

As for the immediate action, we urge Manmohan Singh's government to guard against the agreement getting entrapped in bureaucratic maze and implement its provisions at the earliest. As a first step, India should formally assure that as an upper riparian India will always consider Bangladesh's interest and display maximum openness and transparency on water sharing.

The killings on the border must immediately stop and the promised 24-hour access to Tin Bigha must be implemented. On maritime boundary, go for a liberal interpretation and allow Bangladesh to have access to all available hydrocarbon and fish resources. The zero tariff access must be immediately granted to all Bangladesh's exports. This must be followed by the elimination of all inter-state taxes and non-tariff barriers. We must institutionalise annual summit, and informal meetings in-between, for a few hours on one-day trips, as the EU heads of governments do. Such a step will do wonders for our relations.

The moment is opportune for India and Bangladesh to lay the foundation of a durable and mutually beneficial relationship that will transform the strategic and security scene of the region. Now is the moment for grand visions and grander actions. If Bangladesh is guilty of being shackled to the mindset of the past, let India not be accused of having failed to think outside of the box when the opportunity beckoned.

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## Roadblocks to Obama presidency

With the costs of prosecuting two wars simultaneously and near unrestrained domestic stimulus spending, the country is sinking deeper and deeper into debt.

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**B**ARACK Obama walked into the White House with a vision of hope and change. Yet, no sooner had his first year in office glided into the second, his detractors started saying that Obama will be a 'one-term President' who is 'completely overwhelmed' by the challenges that confront him. The Senate Republican minority would relish nothing more than seeing him "fail and fade."

In a January 12 CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll, 48% of the respondents opined Obama's presidency has been a failure so far, with 47% calling it a success. One wonders how any one can regard any presidency a failure or a success just after one year.

The Republicans' adversarial feelings seemed to have galvanised around the \$787 billion stimulus package. Their anger has recently been compounded once it was revealed that part of this bailout money was squandered by recipient institutions in paying bonuses to senior executives who had largely caused the crisis. This emerged against the backdrop of an economic decline where millions of Americans still go to bed hungry every night, 45 million don't have any health care, over 8 million are jobless, over 9 million homes are threatened with foreclosure, people are going bankrupt and business are failing. With the costs of prosecuting two wars simultaneously and near unrestrained domestic stimulus spending, the country is sinking deeper and deeper into debt.

Although the economy grew 5.7% in the 4th quarter of 2009, and last month's unemployment rate declined from 10.1% to 9.7%, most people are not convinced about the economy's health.

Republican critics are berating Obama for record deficits -- though he inherited most of them from the Bush era tax cuts and deficits spending. George W. Bush took over the presidency with a \$230 billion surplus. But his \$1.35 trillion tax cut in 2001, a \$1.5 trillion tax cut in 2003, and a massive defense buildup through the Iraq

and Afghanistan wars transformed a budget surplus economy into a deficit-mounting economy. Republicans falsely assert that Obama tripled the budget deficit in his first year since the deficit jumped from about \$450 billion in 2008 to \$1.4 trillion in 2009. They forget that most of it Obama inherited from the Bush era and just added an additional \$1 trillion.

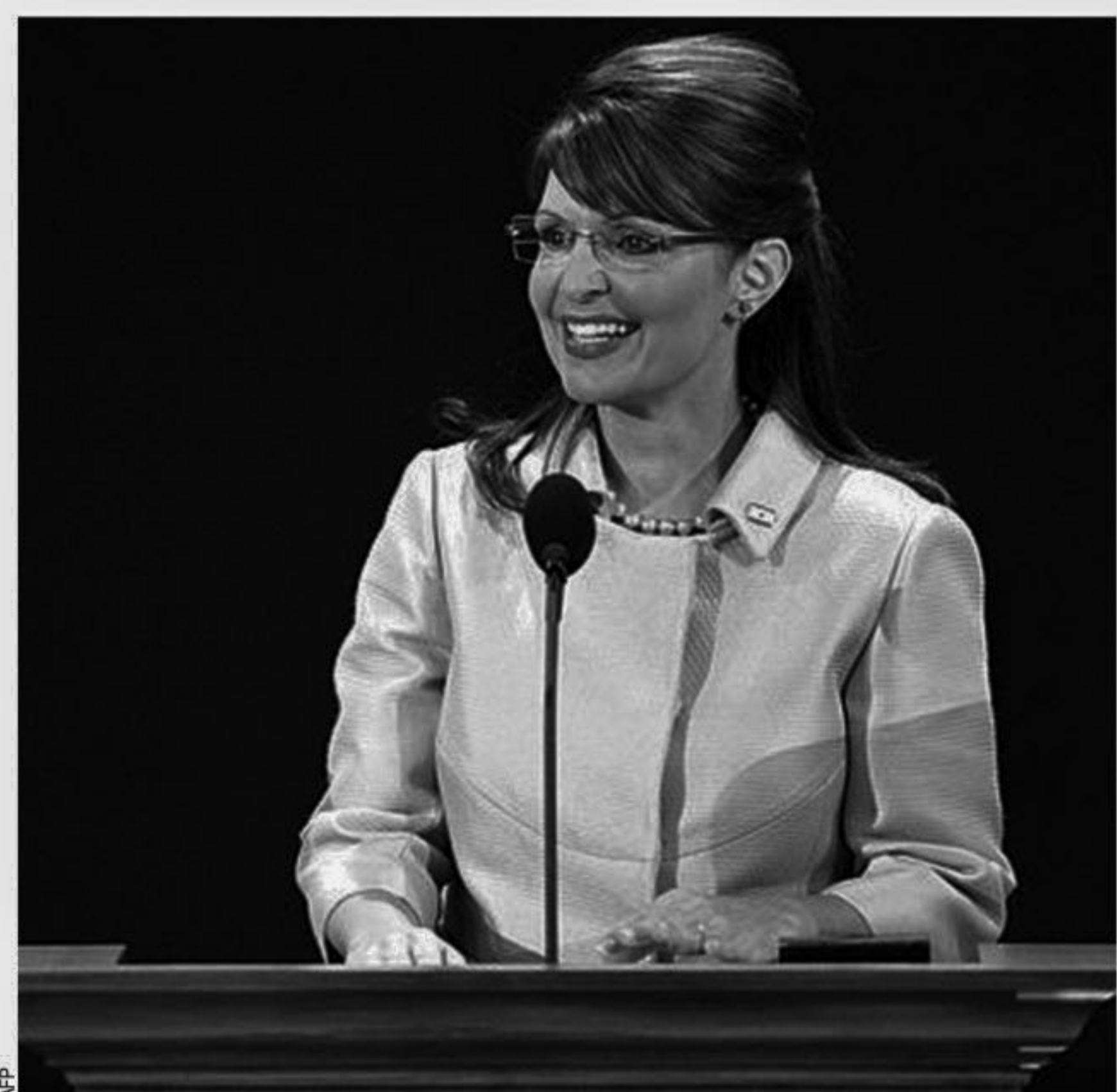
Here is a blunt example of Republican hypocrisy. They're claiming to be deficit hawks, yet having been the majority from 2001 to 2006 in both houses of Congress, they loyally rubber-stamped the Bush agenda that transpired the current fiscal crisis. Many of the same Republicans enthusiastically backed Bush's \$1.35 trillion tax cuts in 2001. Now they're standing ready to oppose and crush the Obama agenda with concerns about the budget deficits.

Are deficits and the weak economy the only reasons why Republicans say "NO" to everything Obama proposes? Many Republican wrote him off even before he walked into the oval office. They think of him as being far left on all issues they stand for, and call him an "ideology socialist."

"A large portion of the Republicans think President Obama is a racist, socialist, and non-US citizen. That's the opinion recorded in a poll of 2000 self-identified Republicans nationwide. This manifests the growing far-fetched paranoia encompassing the party and the extreme pressure driving lawmakers further and further to the right from political moderation" (January 2, 2010, The Huffington Post).

It may be noted that a disproportionate percentage of respondents are from Republican strongholds in the South (42%), as opposed to the Northeast (11%). Also, this is a poll of self-identified Republicans. Nevertheless, the poll conducted by the Daily Kos reveals how demeaning and hateful some of the Republicans are to Obama.

39% believe Obama should be impeached; 29% aren't sure, and 32% are against such a move.



Palin in 2012?

36% believe Obama was not born in the US; 22% are uncertain, and 42% think he is a natural citizen.

31% think Obama is a "Racist who hates White people" -- the description once propagated by Fox News's Glenn Beck; 33% are uncertain, and 36% reject such notions.

63% think Obama is a socialist; 16% aren't sure, and 21% reject it.

24% believe Obama wants "the terrorists to win"; 33% aren't sure, and 43% reject it.

21% believe ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) stole the 2008 presidential election; 55% aren't sure, and 24% reject it.

23% believe that their state should secede from the US; 19% are uncertain, and 58% are against seceding.

53% say Sarah Palin (John McCain's vice-presidential running mate) is more qualified to be president than Obama.

Given such mentalities of a party's base supporters, Republican lawmakers are afraid to support any Obama agenda. For

example, outgoing Florida Governor (R) Charlie Crist, who is running for a Senate seat, has been demonised for hugging Obama once and is now running behind polls. Markos Moulitsas, founder and publisher of Daily Kos said, "This is why it's becoming impossible for elected Republicans to work with Democrats to improve our country. And if any of them stray and decide to do the right thing and try to work in a bipartisan fashion, they suffer primaries and attacks. Given what their base demands -- and this poll illustrates them perfectly -- it's no wonder the GOP is the party of no."

At the National Prayer Breakfast on February 5, Obama raised the issue of his own eligibility for office -- saying that people shouldn't be questioning his "citizenship." Talking about the issue of 'civility,' he said, "Surely you can question my policies without questioning my faith, or, for that matter, my citizenship."

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