

Cracks in Bangabandhu Bridge widening

Save the national asset of an infrastructure

WE are greatly surprised at the degree of indifference shown to the cracks on the Bangabandhu Bridge that were detected five years ago. Remaining unattended to, for that long a time without any repair done to fill in the breach, the cracks have widened threatening the life-span of the bridge and its load carrying capacity.

It's a major infrastructure linking the northern region of the country with the capital and the hinterland with the Chittagong port on the east. It's our longest bridge and a vital passage way for speedy transportation of goods and passengers through road and by rail. How such a grandiose project could be set up with design and construction faults unfolding through the cracks developing for the last five years is a matter for Hyundai Engineering and Construction Company Limited, the executing company, to answer and recompense for. But despite the findings of the first investigation team headed by Prof Jamilur Reza Chowdhury in 2006 sounding warning signals calling for urgent repair, the matter has been allowed to languish on the sidelines. The repair work is apparently stuck up in indecision about selecting a contractor. Three firms -- two Japanese and a Chinese -- have made finance offers which are under evaluation. The Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain assures us that once repaired, the bridge would be okay. We take it as being based on expert opinion. Prof Jamilur Reza Chowdhury's recommendations for a separate railway bridge on the western side of the existing bridge merit consideration as it would effect a risk-free road management.

Meanwhile, we urge the expert panel of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) constituted in early July to carry out another investigation of the bridge to ascertain its latest condition to complete its work urgently, so that the job can accordingly be assigned to a selected firm. If Chowdhury's recommendations in 2006 were heeded the bridge would not be in such a bad shape as it is now. So let's not lament for the second time over risking the existence of the bridge by delaying repair once the new investigation process is completed.

Flooding in Pakistan

We should extend a helping hand

PAKISTAN has been hit by the worst floods in a century, and according to official sources the losses have been worse than that of the earthquake of 2005. The enormity of the disaster is quite incomprehensible as much as the suddenness of it.

The loss in human lives and livestock has been unprecedented. It is estimated that nearly twenty million people have been affected, and with more rain predicted the situation is not likely to abate soon. By any definition the situation in the flood affected areas has assumed a catastrophic proportion. And in this hour of national calamity, a testing time of tribulation, we offer our deepest sympathy to the flood affected people of Pakistan.

For us in Bangladesh it is not difficult to relate psychologically with the tragedy caused by floods and other natural calamities. We have been victims of similar devastations and wrath of nature that we keep constant company with. The distress of the flood affected people resonates in us only too well.

Pakistan Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani has acknowledged that the unprecedented devastation caused by the country's worst ever floods has gone beyond the government's control. While calling for help from the international community Mr. Gilani has admitted that his government has done everything possible, but the situation has gone beyond the capacity of the government to tackle all by itself.

It is encouraging to see the international response by way of commitment made to the relief effort. Some 450 million USD is required of which some 150 million has been committed. But Pakistan needs more than mere commitments. And we take this opportunity to call upon the Government of Bangladesh to extend all possible help within its capacity to the flood affected people of Pakistan for now as well as all necessary assistance to tide over the post disaster phase, and for which preparations must start now.

We recall the swiftness with which the Bangladesh government had reacted in providing help to the earthquake victims of Pakistan not very long ago. And while our government should take the lead in providing relief, in this regard the private sector, particularly the NGOs, can play a complementary role alongside that of the government's.

It is to our credit that Bangladesh has evolved outstanding expertise on management of flood and post flood phase of relief and rehabilitation, and this should be offered to the extent possible to help relief operations in Pakistan. We feel too that it is time for SAARC as a regional body to assume appropriate role and help Pakistan combat the situation.



Closing schools is only a stop-gap measure.



Impromptu measures make matters worse

While these bigger solutions are proving to be a chimera one by one, the notorious traffic tangles are going from bad to worse. And now, the government, too concerned about the constituency, is only jumping from one ad hoc measure to another. But such reactive responses to the problems that need urgent but long-term addressing will only make matters worse.

SYED FATAHUL ALIM

THE government's sudden decision declaring month-long holiday for schools ostensibly to give some relief to the city's beleaguered traffic raised many eyebrows. The city's traffic undoubtedly took a vicious turn in recent times. The daily journey to workplace and home of the commuters as well as other road users had already crossed the limit of tolerance. Once stuck in long tailback, they curse the entire traffic system out of sheer desperation.

The intolerable traffic jams harms not just the economy by stealing hundreds of thousands of man-hours everyday. The daily ordeal does also inflict severe physical and psychological damage on those at the receiving end, the road users. Understandably, the government's main objective in declaring the school holiday was to reduce at least the pressure of the morning rush of school-goers on the traffic and thereby give some relief to the fasting commuters.

The idea of addressing the woes of the

commuters during Ramadan by closing down schools is undoubtedly a novel one. But the first question that comes in mind in this connection is: would this step help solve the terrible traffic jams of the city on a long-term basis? In fact, after the Eid, we will again be back to square one. And the old traffic knots will again return with a vengeance. And the secondary school students who enjoyed their long vacation will have to go through more packed schedules, if only to compensate for the time they had lost during windfall vacation.

In fact, such impromptu measures hardly help to solve the real problem at issue. The horrible traffic mess of the city was not created yesterday. It is at least for the last two decades that we are facing this problem. And all the governments that were voted into office over the years never failed to evince serious interest about addressing this nagging problem of the city.

According to an exclusive report published in a widely circulated Bengali daily, the population of the city has

increased by about four million in the last decade. More people added to the population means more transports have to be made available for their movement. So, the number of buses has increased in these years.

The number of manually driven three-wheelers has also increased phenomenally. However, thanks to the drive against the polluting auto-rickshaws, their number has rather diminished in absolute numbers even after the introduction of CNG-driven ones.

In the intervening period, with the expansion of the consumerist economy, the neo-rich class has grown in size. So, has grown the number of flashy cars in the city. And as some of the banks are aggressively expanding their credit market through providing consumer loans, more people are nowadays making a beeline for the car selling shops. As a result, the car fleet of the city has been witnessing a rapid growth in recent times.

And it all happened before the eyes of all the governments that came and went. But they only talked, talked and talked; formed committee after committee; conducted study after study; broached ambition plans. Some came with the billion-dollar solution of a Maglev train service. Others with sky rails, metro-rails, and so on. A host of ideas were thrown up by umpteen quarters. But at the end of the day, we did not move an inch towards the solution.

Why are we playing with schemes? Sometimes with grandiose ones. But in the end those are all ending in a whim-

per.

While these bigger solutions are proving to be a chimera one by one, the notorious traffic tangles are going from bad to worse. And now, the government, too concerned about the constituency, is only jumping from one ad hoc measure to another.

But such reactive responses to the problems that need urgent but long-term addressing will only make matters worse.

Before cursing the traffic hell, it is important to get to the root of the issue. In fact, the existing roads are too few to accommodate the increasing number of vehicles. So, the government will have to come to a firm decision on the number and kind of vehicles it will allow to ply on the city's roads until more roads, arterial ones in particular, are constructed.

At the same time, it will have to take drastic measures to expand the number of highways. Side by side with the scheme of building highways, it will have also to close as many of the lanes and by-lanes connecting the major roads and highways as are possible. That is because a nasty traffic jam is created at the points where the feeder lanes connect to a main road.

Next comes the issue of allocating different lanes for the fast and slow moving vehicles. And finally, the traffic department will have to impose its rules strictly on the roads. And for all these, it is the government that has to exert its will steadfastly to achieve the result.

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Brutalising a city, unleashing sleaze

To ensure the Games' success, the government has permitted violations of the Delhi Master Plan, building regulations, recommendations of the Delhi Urban Arts Commission (DUAC) and the Archaeological Survey. In 2008, the entire DUAC, headed by eminent architect Charles Correa, resigned in protest against rampant corruption and pressure to clear Games-related projects.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE Commonwealth Games to be held in October in Delhi have turned into a gigantic multi-billion rupee racket. Public funds are being looted, wasteful projects recklessly implemented and poor people's human rights violated -- all to enhance India's global "image" and "prestige."

Corruption pervades every contract awarded to builders and contractors by the sleazy Games Organising Committee. The booty exceeds Rs.30,000 crores, which nearly equals the budget of India's flagship social program, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Even Urban Development Minister Jaipal Reddy admits to a Rs.28,054 crore expenditure.

Every Games project involves bribery and kickbacks. The Queen's Baton Relay inaugural, which cost Rs.32 crores, is only one instance. Another is purchase of liquid-soap dispensers, each costing Rs.9,379, meant for the Games Village.

Corruption is being shielded through a Doctrine of Necessity; whatever is necessary for the Games is worthy. The Games' critics have been branded "anti-national" by Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dixit.

However, the Games' pathology runs beyond monumental corruption, to moral perversion. The enormously expensive but maldeveloped infrastructure will empty public coffers and displace thousands of informal-sector workers and poor people. The newly built stadia won't be used and become irrele-

vant to sports.

Spending on the Games, which will be far grander than the 1982 Asiad, has spiralled wildly. India's original Bid Document (2003) estimated the entire sports facilities expenditure at Rs.150 crores.

A report by the Housing and Land Rights Network -- South Asia Regional Programme (HLRN) (www.hic-sarp.org) shows, however, that already an expenditure of "at least Rs.3,390 crores has been incurred on stadia" alone -- an increase of 2,160%.

The total infrastructure expenditure is unknown. Mr Reddy's figure (Rs.28,054 crores) probably underestimates the spending.

The Union budget allocation for the Games has increased 6,235% since 2005-06. In addition, the Centre has loaned Rs.2,394 crores to the Organising Committee. And the Delhi government has spent Rs.15,000 crores on infrastructure.

Obnoxiously, Rs.744 crores have been illegitimately diverted from Delhi's Scheduled Caste (Dalit) Sub-Plan to the Games. This violates the National Development Council's directive that such sub-plan allocations be made "non-divertible and non-lapsable."

The Games are premised on the mistaken idea that sports mega-events produce big returns. But all sports mega-events in the past 40 years -- including the 1982 Asiad, and even the Olympics and the football World Cup -- have lost money, except the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Host countries incur heavy

long-term debt; massive sports venues remain unused and are a drain on the economy.

Besides "image"-building, the Games are rationalised on three grounds; they will improve Delhi's infrastructure, promote tourism, and create a better sports culture in India. These specious arguments were advanced in 1982 too.

The Asiad gave an unhealthy, irreversible direction to urban development through flyovers and other expensive projects geared to private transport. The CWG will intensify the maldevelopment.

To ensure the Games' success, the government has permitted violations of the Delhi Master Plan, building regulations, recommendations of the Delhi Urban Arts Commission (DUAC) and the Archaeological Survey. In 2008, the entire DUAC, headed by eminent architect Charles Correa, resigned in protest against rampant corruption and pressure to clear Games-related projects.

The government has bypassed clearances to promote environmentally unsound projects. Thus, the Yamuna's Flood Plain, which is essential for the river's survival, and must be treated as a no-go area, has been colonised. The misconceived Barapullia elevated road has endangered Humayun's Tomb.

Delhi's roads and pavements, and parts of Delhi and New Delhi railway stations, have been ripped up, increasing congestion and inconveniencing millions. The poorly designed new buildings are incongruous with their surroundings.

The tourism promotion claim is mistaken. The tourism watchdog group Equations says: "People who come for regular tourism are not interested in the Games, and vice versa. During such periods people avoid coming to the city hosting the Games."

Asiad only drew 200 foreign tourists, but the tourism ministry estimates 1 lakh tourist arrivals for the CWG, which translates into an excessive 40,000 hotel rooms; only 3,000 additional rooms were built for the Melbourne Commonwealth Games. To build these rooms, taxes were waived and 39 properties auctioned. But

only four hotels are ready.

Take sports promotion. The Asiad experience suggests that stadia are unlikely to be used. The Indira Gandhi stadium was mothballed for 20 years, and the handball and archery venues were demolished. (Stadia in Sydney, Beijing and Athens too lie disused, and annual maintenance is a liability.)

Sports would be better promoted if playgrounds were built for half of India's primary schools, which lack them, and sports training is organised at district and regional levels.

Now consider the Games' human and social costs. More than one lakh poor families have been evicted to accommodate infrastructure projects. About 20,000 roadside eateries will be shut down; and thousands of informal-sector workers will lose their livelihoods.

Homeless people are being summarily uprooted and gaoled by mobile courts, whose number has been tripled. Why, even night shelters for poor people have been demolished to build parking lots.

Working conditions at the Games venues and other sites are appalling, with unregistered employment, sub-minimum wages, delayed payment, child labour, unhygienic living conditions, and lack of safety equipment. More than 100 workers have died at the sites.

The Games subsidise the egotistic elite's search for global glory at the expense of the poor. The privileged will use them to legitimise intrusive surveillance and exclusion on "security" grounds -- an especially damaging component of the social cost.

The Games have raised the Delhi government's fiscal deficit by 26% in a single year. It has cancelled all new health projects this year, and raised taxes on city residents, especially poor people.

Delhi will further lower its social sector expenditure. The Games will make Delhi even more inequitable than it already is.

The regression fuelled by the Commonwealth Games speaks of a terrible sickness in Indian society and body politic.

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