

Unregulated shipbreaking industry

Govt guidelines must be in conformity with Supreme Court's order

NO sooner than a report front paged recently in The Daily Star highlighted the lax safety measure in the ship-breaking yards than there was an incident of fire in one of these in Sitakund the very next day in which seven workers suffered burn injuries.

The statistics of death and injuries over the last 20 years in this industry, and the facts related to the ship that was being scrapped in this instance, and the shipyard that was undertaking the job, the dubious ways that orders of the courts have been violated, speak volumes about the way the industry is being run and managed.

The ship in question was imported last December in violation of the Supreme Court's order that prohibits import of ships which contain hazardous material including ships that has inbuilt toxic substance. Not only that, the department of explosives has given the yard owner safety clearance without conducting safety inspection of the ship. And to top it all the ship breaking yard does not have DoE clearance; it has been operating without one for many years. And there is contradiction in the statements of the owner and the DoE regarding procurement of, and submission of application for clearance, which suggests that at least one of them is not telling the truth. What does one therefore make of the prevailing situation?

The matter has been occupying our attention for a long time now, particularly because operation of the scrapping yards has serious consequences. While forested areas have been denuded to set up these, the working conditions as well the contaminated ships-for-scrap pose enormous threat to the environment and people living in proximity of the scrapping yards.

In this context it is the position of the Ministry of Environment on the pre-entry clearance certificate that we are rather surprised at. It is seemingly in favour of not having a strong safeguard against importing ships that have inbuilt toxic substance as it has advised the commerce ministry to amend its policy that it had formulated in line with the court's directive. All because the ministry of environment doesn't want that the yards should be shut down.

We repeat what we have said so many times in the past in this regard. The responsibility of ensuring proper development of the industry, keeping the safety and security of the workers and environmental safety in focus, devolves on the ship breakers, the shipbuilders, the ship owners, the DoE and most of all, the government. The industry cannot be allowed to be a provider as well as a destroyer at the same time.

We are happy to note that the government is in the process of formulating a guideline but that should not, under any circumstances, circumvent the Supreme Court's directive nor be oblivious of the hazards posed to the workers and to the environment.

Constructing seaport at Kuakata

Managing the existing ones should be the focus

THE government has reportedly prepared the groundwork for the construction of a seaport at Kuakata. In other words a third port is envisioned to offer India, Nepal and Bhutan the facility of shipment after transiting their goods through Bangladesh territory. On the face of it, it's a welcome piece of news promising to facilitate intra-regional connectivity.

Questions will however naturally arise about full utilisation of the operational capacity of Chittagong Port, which is to currently handle nearly ninety percent of the country's maritime trade. But how is it faring? The turnaround time at the Chittagong Port was over 10 days before the last caretaker government took over. The situation dramatically improved during the caretaker regime, but things are again slowing down. When the major seaport of the country fails to live up to international standards, the losses incurred through demurrage can be very heavy, as we have seen in case of the Chittagong Port. As for Mongla Port, it now appears to be a forlorn cause since it has been performing well below its installed capacity for a long time -- something around 25 per cent of it.

Construction of a new seaport can produce the desired results only when it is not plagued by strident trade unionism and resistance to modernisation that invariably leads to job cuts. The business is highly competitive as shipping companies look for safe ports where quick service delivery is guaranteed. Our ports have lost a lot of ground to their competitors in recent past. Now, with regional connectivity related loads envisaged are the two ports themselves prepared? Management is at issue here, in addition to revamping of the port capacities.

Our expertise in port management leaves a lot to be desired. So, improvement in this area is badly needed before we can make the most out of constructing another port.

Kuakata is also known as a tourist resort having great potential. It is imperative that the impact of a seaport in its vicinity on the tourist spot is carefully weighed before construction of the port gets underway.



Writer's visualisation of water bus ghat and commuter station.



Mass transit now!

The only rapid solution is to introduce systems that will bring in and move as many people as possible in as few vehicles as feasible. The strategy is simple; reduce the number of vehicles from Dhaka's choked roads.

KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF and SAIF UL HAQUE

TRAFFIC and transportation are the topics of the day. Not a single day goes by without commuters lamenting about Dhaka's traffic conundrum. And not a single day passes without new news of flyovers, elevated expressways, subways, metros and other transport schemes; the only thing missing in the list are flying carpets. Many a method and system are being applied, but nothing seems to be making a difference in Dhaka's stubborn traffic.

Where is the magic wand that will make some dent in Dhaka's traffic turmoil?

We have three responses for Dhaka's traffic trouble: Mass transit! Mass transit!! Mass transit!!! The only rapid solution is to introduce systems that will bring in and move as many people as possible in as few vehicles as feasible. The strategy is simple; reduce the number of vehicles from Dhaka's choked roads. Elevated roads and flyovers are lovely for freer movement of individualised vehicles, but they will have little effect on mass transit and congestion on local roads.

We have identified three crucial sectors -- metro, bus and waterway -- where new transportation modes may be implemented immediately without facing too many infrastructural and constructional challenges. The term "metro" is typically used for underground rapid transit system, but in this context we are also referring to on-ground rail system.

We believe that a large component of the three sectors can be implemented within a year with effective results. We understand that some of these ideas may be under consideration by various transportation teams working on

Dhaka. If they are, well, what are we waiting for? And if they are not, we suggest that these ideas may be given full attention by whoever is in charge of our transportation destiny.

Mass transit rail line

We suggest shifting of Dhaka's main train hub from Kamapur to Tongi. Kamapur has no particular locational benefit as all trains pass through Tongi. Shifting the station to Tongi will free the train line from Tongi to Naryanganj for a faster and more frequent commuter train system serving the city.

People will be encouraged to use the commuter train, which in turn will reduce the number of the thousands of itsy-bitsy vehicles shuttling people around in the city. There is understandable complexity with the shift, such as relocation of container goods hub and finding adequate space in Tongi for an upgraded station, but it is possible to carry out the major changes within a year on fast-track implementation and complete the rest in phases.

- Shift the central rail terminal from Dhaka to Tongi;
- Upgrade Tongi station into a major inter-district rail hub;
- Convert train link from Tongi to Naryanganj into a commuter line;
- Start brand-new commuter trains that run every five minutes;
- Create flyovers or underpasses at existing rail crossings (some of these will need special design attention);
- Create flyovers or underpasses at existing rail crossings (some of these will need special design attention);
- Create well-designed urban stations that also act as neighbourhood social centres (see map).
- Link urban stations with other transportation modes, especially

- buses, taxis etc;
- Use the opportunity for a new station for planned growth impetus for Tongi.

Next stage: The Tongi-Naryanganj line may be the starting point for a more elaborate commuter system that is already in various transportation planning strategies. In the next phase, an elevated track may be constructed over the existing lines for an express line. At another stage, a new east-west light rail line may be installed from Mirpur point to an appropriate junction in the Tongi-Naryanganj line.

Dedicated bus lines

Buses continue to be the accepted mode of urban mass travelling, but are hardly mass transit as desired. A thorough revision of bus networks is needed, where eco-friendly vehicles carrying large number of passengers may be introduced on dedicated routes.

- Create a new network of bus routes along selected axes of movement. For these routes, keep the left lane free as dedicated route for special and designated buses;
- No vehicles will ply on the dedicated routes (this may be ensured by special traffic monitoring and applying hefty fines for law-breakers);
- Frequency of buses should be high, with service every 2-3 minutes;
- Construct specially designed bus stands for faster transfer and passenger loading;
- Large (articulated) buses will ply on these routes in order to carry maximum passengers (all small vehicles such as tempos and human haulers will have to be eliminated).
- The system may be initiated through a private-public initiative. To implement it quickly, tax benefit and other incentives may be provided to private operators;
- Provide incentive to potential passengers through monthly and annual travel passes.

Next stage: All major roads in the city may have dedicated bus lanes.

Circular waterway

Water-based transportation system for

Dhaka is a natural choice in a waterborne geography, a matter that has been under discussion for a while now. It is not understandable why this is not pursued aggressively as little infrastructural work is needed for this. A regularised and extensive water-transport system may be one way of ensuring the effective use and control of rivers and canals, and their banks. A widespread riverine transit system must be implemented.

- Implement a water-based transportation system that links various local and regional traffic networks;
- Create multi-modal points that are conveniently linked with other transportation loops, especially bus stands (such as at Gabtoli and Sadarghat) and taxi stands;
- Terminals/stations can be hubs of riverine development and growth with economic and social potential. Design stations carefully in order to prevent degeneration of the area into unplanned chaos. Undertake area development plan in line with transport-oriented development (TOD) to spur planned growth;
- Acquire water vessels that can carry a large number of passengers. Besides large passenger vessels, water taxis that can connect various points along both banks of a river (some of which are being implemented) may be introduced;
- At the initial stage, a western waterway may be created connecting Naryanganj with Tongi and all points in-between;
- Encourage private investment in implementation and operation through tax breaks and other financial incentives.

Next stage: The waterway system may be extended into the heart of the city after clearing up and deepening some of the encroached canals. Water-taxis may link Gulshan and Kawran Bazar after completion of the Hatirjheel and Gulshan Lake redevelopment projects.

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf is an architect and urbanist, and teaches at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in the US. Saif Ul Haque is an architect with practice in Dhaka.

A mosque has no door

It is utterly self-defeating to blame Islam, or the vast majority of peaceful Muslims, for the sins of a few. Terms like "Islamofascism," George Bush's intellectual contribution to this debate, are meaningless gibberish.

M.J. AKBAR

CAN there be any rational reason for such subliminal fear of a house without a door? A mosque has no door; it is always open to anyone. Submission is the guiding force of its spirit and simplicity is its objective. There is equality in the prayer. Servant stands beside master to bow, at the same moment, before the Lord. Divisions and pretensions dissipate.

The whole world, as the great Indian theologian and mass leader Maulana Abul Kalam Azad used to say, is God's mosque. Nations may claim to act in the name of God, but God does not need nations. A mosque is neither factory nor fortress: why should it arouse either envy or fear?

The opposition of some sections of the American right, led by politicians like Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin, to a mosque at the site of the 9/11 tragedy is bewildering, at the very least.

A war memorial is not built to perpetuate war. Its relevance lies in the promise of peace. It honours heroes who have given their lives, but this sacrifice,

in the words of a famous testament, is ennobled by the promise that they gave their today so the living might have a better tomorrow. A war memorial is a symbol of conflict resolution, not conflict enhancement.

A mosque near the World Trade Center will epitomise the partnership necessary for a common struggle against the horror of terrorism and its evil masterminds, wherever they might live.

Is ignorance a reason for the right-wing campaign against the mosque? I was at the East-West Center in Hawaii a few years ago for a faith-media seminar. On Friday, our very considerate hosts offered Muslim participants a chance to join a local congregation for noon prayers in a small room where the minute local community gathered regularly for *namaaz* and fraternity.

Some non-Muslim colleagues came along because they had never seen a Friday prayer. We are all convivial, but I daresay at least one or two of them were relieved that the imam had not declared war on the West and we had not unsheathed scimitars as part of ritual.

Ignorance is too generous an alibi for Gingrich and Palin. They have been candidates for the most powerful job in the world. It is foolish to dismiss them as fools.

A mosque at Ground Zero will interfere with their politics, in which the Muslim must be etched as an irredeemable zealot with manic eyes and foaming mouth; the mosque must be distorted into a fountainhead of hatred; and every Muslim be blamed for the sins of the few bigots and terrorists who perpetrated 9/11. A range of political forces has a vested interest in the myth of the mad Muslim as the last evil standing between civilisation and chaos.

The irony is that Palin and Gingrich do not represent the idealism and philosophy of America, a nation that is liberal, open, democratic and secular. Gingrich is a false American; Palin is a false American.

The true American patriot is Michael Rubens Bloomberg, the mayor of New York, who has supported the idea of a mosque. I use his full name deliberately: he is of the Jewish faith, from a family of Russian émigrés. Bloomberg reflects the idealism of America as well as the anguish and wisdom of his own heritage, of a people who have suffered the trauma of bigotry and threat of extinction for two millennia. He knows prejudice when he sees it; he understands the poison it injects into the human psyche; and he is willing to set aside the prospect of political advan-

tage from hysteria in order to stand on the side of justice.

Those who gave Barack Obama a Nobel Peace Prize without much reason might want to consider Bloomberg for much better reasons. He has, in the process, also exposed organisations like the Anti Defamation League, who seem to have sold their principles for politics. Fareed Zakaria deserves our respect for returning the honorarium and First Amendment award given by the League.

Bigotry is not the exclusive property of any denomination; Muslims offer their share in the long list of self-appointed leaders who spawn the culture that leads to terrorism from pulpits which desecrate the meaning of a mosque. But it is utterly self-defeating to blame Islam, or the vast majority of peaceful Muslims, for the sins of a few. Terms like "Islamofascism," George Bush's intellectual contribution to this debate, are meaningless gibberish.

Islam is 1,400 years old; fascism entered the dialectic only with Benito Mussolini. So whatever else Islam might be it cannot be fascist. True, there are some Muslims who are fascist, but why blame Islam for the tyranny of despots? No one blames the Roman Catholic Church for Mussolini.

Terrorists conspire. A conspiracy is hatched behind closed doors. A mosque has no door.

The columnist is editor of The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, and India on Sunday, published from London.