

Lurking dangers on the highways

These call for immediate corrective action

ROADS and highways in the country have regularly been a cause for worry. Now that research by the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology pin-points the factors behind frequent highway accidents, we believe it is time for action. These are the bare facts the report by BUET's Accident Research Unit (ARI) has come up with: ten major highways in Bangladesh are at high risk where accidents are concerned because 219 black spots have been identified on them. It is not that we are waiting for disaster to strike. The reality is that there have already been as many as 2,515 accidents on these 219 spots, the number of casualties being 2,349. That, again, is not the entire picture as the ARI would have us know, for the institute gets only those reports of accidents that the police provide it with. The conclusion is therefore simple: a whole range of other accidents occurring on major roads and highways across the country may very well be going unreported.

That brings us to the crux of the issue. It has been obvious for a very long period that few if any road safety rules are taken into cognisance at the time roads are built. The sketch provided in this newspaper yesterday certainly typifies the problem. Where there should be measures to ensure safety of travel, through a presence of clear road signs and indications of how and when to take a turn on the road, there are only arrow markings which do not let the driver know what he might come up against as he makes a left or right turn. Add to that other difficulties that can block a driver's vision as he tries manoeuvring his vehicle into a new direction. The presence of huge billboards on the highways -- and inexplicably they are mostly placed at bends along the roads -- is a clear invitation to danger, something for which no driver can properly be held responsible.

Now, there are quite a few questions the Roads and Highways Department must answer. The first one is the simplest: with such a huge bureaucratic structure in place, how well has it performed where road and highway safety is concerned? Then comes a more serious one: how is it that the RHD has no list of the black spots the ARI report has just informed the country about? As the organisation responsible for the construction and maintenance of roads and highways, it is the moral responsibility of the RHD to ensure fault-free and accident-free vehicular movement. That it has failed to do the job, that it took a university research team to do what the RHD on its own should have done says a whole lot about the way things have been happening. One of those is, clearly, the faulty engineering and design in the construction of the highways. And, of course, there is too the matter of the corruption that keeps creeping into such ostensibly public interest-related activities.

For the authorities, it is time to sit up and go for remedial action. These 219 black spots have been observed on intersections, roundabouts, junctions and turnings. And then there is the inadequacy of road dividers and speed breakers on the highways. The RHD has spoken of a road safety audit manual being ready in the next six months. Why was such a manual not prepared earlier? It is these questions that the authorities must grapple with and answer, to citizens' satisfaction. Will the minister for communications take notice?

Staying with what's good

Education ministry turns a leaf from caretaker book

IN what looks like a major move, the dynamic education minister Nurul Islam Nahid is resurrecting a project that the caretaker government had taken up but which got lost in a bureaucratic tangle down the road. The undertaking is aimed at upgrading 306 non-government high schools into model public schools at the upazila level. The upazilas having no public school will have one now at the rate of 100 per fiscal.

The Tk 465.77 crore three-phase programme launched with the objective of bridging the disparity in standards of schooling obtaining between the urban centres and the outlying upazilas will be implemented by 2013.

It is strategic move to bring uniformity in the educational standards taking into account the reality that two-thirds of the high school students inhabit the rural outback who have been traditionally deprived of reasonably good education.

Dearth of qualified teachers, educational aids and equipment, computers, libraries, laboratories and sport facilities has been a persistent drawback in a majority of high schools. The teacher : student ratio is extremely adverse while many schools are dogged by severe space constraints.

One of the very debilitating factors lay in lack of sustainable teacher training arrangements. From this point of view, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DHSE) has taken a very appropriate decision to set up resource centres in nine regions for imparting teacher training, and hopefully, retraining, by way of updating skill levels. Only that this part of the project will have to be synchronised with the pace of conversion of private schools into public schools in the selected upazilas. Otherwise, the whole exercise will have a fault-line that may cost dear in terms of providing trained hands to the upgraded schools.

In the end, we emphasise the need for efficient school management committees consisting of reputable, honest and professional elements, not just because the project involves a radical transformation of poorly managed private schools into fully government aided public schools but also entailed here is expenditure of a huge amount of public money.

Politics of late '60s revisited

It is then that you recall what Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did in 1964 and 1966. It is then that you understand why Zulfikar Ali Bhutto caused a new party to be born in 1967. Both men helped their peoples break free of a stultifying political condition in their own ways.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IN 1964, only months after the demise of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, a young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman thought it wise to revive the Awami League by opting out of the National Democratic Front. The front, forged a couple of years earlier, had for its objective a restoration of full, unfettered constitutional politics in Pakistan at a time when the army, with General Ayub Khan in the forefront, was busy clamping controls on the country.

Somewhere along the way, however, the NDF lost its way. It was a dispirited Suhrawardy who made his way out of the country after his release from prison. And men like Choudhry Mohammad Ali and Hamidul Haq Chowdhury were not quite intellectually or politically equipped to carry the struggle forward.

It was therefore a courageous act on Mujib's part to inform all regions of Pakistan that the Awami League was back, that it was about to launch a crusade against the military regime, which by then had commandeered a faction of the Muslim League and was busily and fruitlessly trying to convince Pakistanis that Ayub Khan was now a civilian politician.

There were plenty of politicians who

pounced on Mujib at the time, charging him with drilling holes in the democratic struggle against the regime. In light of what was eventually to happen, Mujib's move was a clear call to the country that passive resistance to Ayub Khan would not work, that indeed a bold call to action was the need of the hour. And yet, even as Mujib ventured out on that new mission for the party, it was a section of his party colleagues, personified by the likes of Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, that often came in the way.

With the Nawabzada happy to go slow against the junta, with Moulana Bhashani famously asking people not to disturb Ayub Khan and with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto publicly demanding that Ayub Khan be made president of Pakistan for life, there was little hope that a gradualist approach to politics would work at all.

And hence the Six-Point programme for regional autonomy Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would reveal in Lahore in February 1966. If anything, that radical programme was a potent hint of the heights the Bengali politician would scale in the years ahead. He was not yet Bangabandhu, but he was on his way to attaining that exalted status.

The bigger point for him, though, was his conviction that politics as usual

had fallen flat on its face, that if change was to be wrought in the country, it would need to come through an adoption of substantive and sustained measures. And all of that came within the ambit of the Six Points. History would never be the same after February 1966. The Ayub regime would be rudely shaken out of its complacency and eventually shown the door.

Politics, when it remains captive too long in the hands of individuals who have a poor understanding of it, tends to atrophy. Fatigue settles in and all avenues to a sprouting of new ideas and newer philosophies appear to be getting shut down one by one. It is in such conditions that good, well-meaning and idealistic politicians come forth to help a society turn around, the better to make its way to that tantalising city shining gloriously on the hill. These politicians either remould their political parties to approximate their dreams; or they branch out to form new ones, to let society know that hope yet lives.

If Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did a remoulding of the Awami League in 1964 and 1966, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto went for a new platform through giving shape and form to the Pakistan People's Party in 1967. Whatever criticism you might hurl today at Bhutto for the ham-fisted way he ran his party and his country, you cannot ignore the truth that he did make a difference in the tottering stages of the Ayub Khan regime.

For the first time in the history of what used to be West Pakistan, Bhutto told the people of the Punjab and Sind and to a certain extent Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province (today Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) that they

mattered in politics. Bhutto's populism did something to his people: it made them stand up to the arrogance of the old-fashioned feudal chieftains in Pakistan.

Politics is an engine for social change. And change happens when political parties are ready and willing to keep afloat the policies and programmes they have strenuously promoted towards guaranteeing an empowerment of the masses. But that picture changes, alters badly, when political parties seek to become the establishment and unabashedly go for an acquisition of power that has little or no responsibility attached to it. An absence of idealism in a party quickly leads to a haemorrhaging of it.

That is what you see when, before a train put to the torch by her own followers, a former prime minister of Bangladesh harangues the powers that be on the terrible fate that will befall them in the times to be. And when you observe, to your horror, a mid-level opposition politician being clubbed to death by ruling party goons masquerading as political workers, when you hear their local lawmaker loudly proclaim his intention of keeping them safe from the law, you comprehend the dark depths to which politics has sunk in this country.

It is then that you recall what Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did in 1964 and 1966. It is then that you understand why Zulfikar Ali Bhutto caused a new party to be born in 1967. Both men helped their peoples break free of a stultifying political condition in their own ways.

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35th anniversary of Bangladesh-China diplomatic ties

The two countries share many of the challenges that will shape the region in the years ahead. Likewise there are avenues for collaboration to take advantage of opportunities that will unfold with the 21st century. It is clear that both nations can and should do more together.

HARUN UR RASHID

THE 35th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Bangladesh and China was observed on October 4, this year. In 1975 on this date, China opened its diplomatic mission in Bangladesh.

Relationship with China has become one of the priorities of successive Bangladesh governments. The heads of government of Bangladesh, irrespective of their political affiliations, invariably visited China and met with top Chinese leaders to strengthen relations in every possible sector.

Both nations seek a modern partnership based on common interests in meeting the major challenges of the 21st century.

Bangladesh's relation with China has taken a multi-faceted direction since its inception. Relations with China are not confined only to state-to-state basis. China is interested in developing party-to-party relations and, during early March of this year, a Communist Party delegation's short trip to Dhaka to meet officials of mainstream political parties demonstrated this fact.

China has assisted Bangladesh in infrastructure, power -- including hydro-power -- coal mining, setting up industrial plants, telecommunications, flood control, disaster prevention, river training, irrigation and water resources utilisation.

The visit by Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in March this year, and that of the China's Vice President Xi Jinping to Dhaka in June (he has been anointed as the likely successor to President Hu Jintao as party chief in 2012) are evidence of the strength of the economic and political connections between Bangladesh and China. It has set the scene for greater understanding between the two countries.

A large portion of our country's infrastructural development, including roads and bridges, power plants, mining and industrial establishments

were built with Chinese assistance and technology.

China built six bridges in the country. The 4.8 kilometer long Mukhterpur Bridge over the river Dhaleswari, built by China Road and Bridge Corporation, was inaugurated on February 18, 2008.

All the bridges have contributed to the accelerated socio-economic growth of the country, besides facilitating the movement of people and goods within the length and breadth of the country.

During the visit of the Bangladesh prime minister in March 17-21, China signed Letters of Exchange on construction of the seventh Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge at Kajirtek of Madaripur. China agreed to intensify efforts for the early start of the second Meghna Bridge and the construction of Bangladesh-China Friendship Exhibition Centre.

By 2009 China's direct investment in Bangladesh had reached \$88 million -- much higher than the previous two years -- and in 2010, there are about 186 Chinese enterprises with a registered capital of \$320 million in Bangladesh.

Over the past few years, China has replaced India as Bangladesh's biggest trading partner with bilateral trade between the two nations, as of 2009, standing at \$4.58 billion -- though heavily skewed in favour of Beijing with Bangladesh imports being \$4.4 billion.

This year, China offered duty-free access to some 5,000 Bangladesh products as a "goodwill gesture" in a significant development in economic ties between the two countries. The products include medicinal materials, plastic appliances, leather, timber, textile, readymade garments and poultry products.

China has provided 40 million Yuan as grant under an economic cooperation agreement. According to China, although the sum of money provided to Bangladesh is not the largest among all development partners, they put emphasis on the actual result of the assistance and whether such assistance can bring about concrete good to



Bangladesh-China friendship conference centre, Dhaka.

Bangladesh people.

Furthermore, two agreements were concluded -- one for Shahjalal Fertiliser Factory and another for the establishment of 2.5 3G telecommunication project.

China has agreed to extend its cooperation in agriculture under the MoU of 2005 in areas of hybrid rice, cultivation technology, rice seed technology, agricultural machinery technology, exchange of germ plasma resources of crops, farm products processing and technical personnel training. Furthermore, both sides will explore specific ways and means of expanding agricultural cooperation.

China agreed to increase the number of scholarships to Bangladeshi students from 80 to 150 within the next three years.

China's help is necessary in Bangladesh's efforts to mitigate the severe effects of climate change in the shape of floods and other natural calamities. In river training and dredging China has an enormous reservoir of know-how, which it can share with Bangladesh.

Future Cooperation with China may be explored in the following areas:

- Water resource management;
- Renewable use energy -- solar, wind power and biomass;
- Interconnectivity through multimodal transport between Bangladesh and China;
- Assistance to help build Bangladesh's deep sea port near Cox's Bazar;
- Chinese direct investment in Bangladesh and establishment of an exclusive EPZ for China;
- Shifting of low-end industries to Bangladesh from China, (such gar-

ments and leather);

- Maritime security.

A study by an international group, the Strategic Foresight Group, under the heading "The Himalayan Challenge -- Water Security in Emerging in Asia," released on June 28, says that over 200 dams are to be built by China and India on the Himalayan rivers Yangtze, Brahmaputra and the Ganges to meet their water needs.

The study states that building such dams will alter the flow of Bangladesh rivers in the dry season. A decrease in water supply by up to 22% in the next two decades, rise in sea level, and increase in population may threaten Bangladesh with the risks of food insecurity, outbreak of water-borne diseases and loss of bio-diversity.

In our part of the region, a Himalayan River Commission may be set up with China, Nepal, India and Bangladesh to work together to facilitate basin-wide development to avoid conflicts among states.

The two countries share many of the challenges that will shape the region in the years ahead. Likewise there are avenues for collaboration to take advantage of opportunities that will unfold with the 21st century. It is clear that both nations can and should do more together.

In my view, Bangladesh's relationship with China ought to be a truly modern partnership, one that is practical, open and engaged on the global challenges that face both nations. I am confident that this is an aspiration that people of both countries share.

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