

Fated to die on roads?

A scary prospect we should do without

EVEN after continuous pressure from all quarters, much-needed measures to cut down road accidents remain merely a matter of paperwork to the peril of thousands of commuters everyday. With the rainy season setting in, the already dilapidated roads and highways will be dotted with puddles, aggravating the risks of accidents ever more. The gravity of the situation, however, sinks in the minds of the government authorities only when a celebrity or a large number of people fall victim to fatal accidents.

In a meeting organised by the National Road Safety Council (NRSC) on Sunday, Communications Minister Obaidul Quader castigated the sluggish progress of road development work and urged all concerned government agencies to pull themselves up by the bootstraps to complete their job. Although we appreciate the minister's exhortations, we think he would need to ensure that actual progress of work takes place.

The Accident Research Centre (ARC) of BUET and other transport experts have already identified the reasons behind frequent road accidents. They have made it crystal clear that there are three basic causes for road accidents. First, structural flaws such as designing and engineering of highways that include road shoulders, road markings, and warning signals at bends and sidewalks. Second, fitness of the vehicles and third, eligibility of the drivers. On a number of occasions, the ARC has asserted that if road dividers are installed on highways and city footpaths are cleared of illegal makeshift shops, accidents can be reduced by half. Yet, all of their warnings and suggestions have fallen on deaf ears.

When there are such definitive findings supported by scientific research, the question logically arises who is accountable for the accidents. There is no gainsaying that in the main the responsibilities rest with government authorities such as Roads and Highways Department, BRTA and traffic and highway police who are steeped in laxity and corruption. Plying of unfit vehicles on highways and issuing of fake license to untrained drivers are stark proof BRTA's irregularities. We also recall here the role of the shipping minister as the executive president of the Bangladesh Sharak Paribahan Sramik Federation in giving occasional indulgence to errant drivers.

It is imperative that the communications minister take the government bodies along with his concerns to bring down accidents which, to our mind, requires implementation of the ARC's suggestions.

Harvesting rainwater

Implement the idea quickly

RAIN water can indeed be a good alternative source of potable water for us. Given that there is a fast depletion of groundwater level and that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the WASA in the metropolitan towns and cities to meet the demand for drinking and household-use water in the urban areas, time has come to move to newer sources of clean water. This is something that many countries in the world have already adopted, for example in some of the most water-scarce areas in Pakistan this age-old system of rain water harvesting has offset water scarcity.

The suggestions came at a three-day international convention titled, "Bangladesh Convention on Rainwater Harvesting" organised jointly by WaterAid and several other NGO's and BUET. The idea can not only address, in parts may be, the need for drinkable water in the urban areas, also the rural and the coastal belt areas plagued by salinity particularly can have the benefit of fresh water.

This is an age-old practice that has gone out of fashion with modernity, but natural compulsions demand that we revert to the old practice of holding not only the most refined water but also something that we have in plenty in the monsoons.

And it is not a day too soon to latch on to the suggestion and work on the idea. Given that we receive an average of 2150 mm of rainfall per annum, three times more than the world average of 800 mm, most of this huge volume ultimately runs off to the sea unutilised. Having said that, we must recognise the challenges in implementing the idea, for example we must ensure that the new building plans have provisions for holding rainwater, configure appropriate system for houses in the rural areas, and

Energy efficiency: A change in attitudes needed



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EFFICIENCY has many components. One of the main components has to do with public awareness. The lack of awareness is everywhere. Since consumers are paying Tk.450 for a gas burner does not entitle the average consumer to keep the stove on 24 hours a day to save money on a box of matches. Instances such as this can be found ten-a-penny. In the public sector, for example, there are 250 air coolers installed in Dhaka University, which run regardless of whether there are people in the room or not. The same could be said for most other government buildings across the country. This is the scenario that is prevalent across the land: in private sector, and at apartment blocks. Apartment blocks have become a major headache since most modern apartment blocks are now sporting energy-hungry appliances.

Only over the last few years have consumers begun to feel the pinch of rising electricity bills as the state finds itself unable to sustain high rates of subsidies. The rationalisation in energy pricing has caught up with us as today's dependency on oil-fired power generation dictates realistic pricing adjustments being introduced at a hitherto unknown pace. While demand for power continues to climb at a higher rate than production, it becomes imperative to delve into ways whereby we can stop energy wastage. Decades of low energy prices coupled with little or no incentive to replace old power plants have helped to land us in this mess. We are now at a critical juncture. With less than half the population having access to electricity and the other having erratic supply of electricity, productive sectors ranging from agriculture to industry are bearing the brunt of the crunch.

This brings us back to the subject of energy efficiency at every level of consumption. Driving home the message that energy is not free to waste requires massive awareness campaigns that must be initiated by the government. This goes far beyond the mere issuing of public service statements and

printing of posters. As pointed out by some energy experts, the education sector can play a crucial role in educating tomorrow's consumers on the need for energy conservation. Teachers and students can be trained to check their daily electric consumption and tailor-made courses can be arranged to understand the correlation between electricity consumption and cost of production.

For its part, the government can encourage the growth of energy efficient commodities by reducing taxes on specific items to encourage consumers to buy greener products like energy efficient lighting

tion devices like room occupancy sensors that automatically detect the number of people present and adjust cooling with the use of "building automation system." While estimates vary as to how much power could be conserved through such measures, even if we were to estimate a conservative 15% saving (peak energy demand estimated at 7,300MW), this translates into nearly 1,100 megawatts of additional energy that could be diverted to energy-starved industry. At present, the country possesses 6,200MW to 6,500MW de-rated generation capacity. So, if we save an estimated 15%, we

would not be requiring any new investment for any additional generation capacity.

When fuel is cheap, there is no compulsion to save. To put it in another manner, the commodity price (natural gas or power) is sold cheaper than the cost of production, and then inevitably there will be wastage. The real price of generating electricity and reduction in subsidies are two important elements of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) billion dollar loan given to Bangladesh. As pointed out by the new managing director of IMF, Christine Lagarde, rational pricing of energy has become a key component of the organisation's new approach. The new way of thinking evolves from the rationale that governments around the world "need to target spending to the people who need it most -- by moving away from universal price subsidies, especially on energy, and moving toward effective and targeted social programmes such as conditional cash transfers. As a good example, Iran slashed its enormous energy subsidies and compensated the population with cash transfers. Mozambique is also

phasing out poorly-targeted fuel subsidies and using the savings to improve social protection. It is easy to point the finger at the government for the pains that are being driven home on the general populace due to largely an unsustainable subsidy regime. It is however much more difficult to initiate changes in our lifestyles and give up all those luxuries we have to take for granted. But at the end of the day, everyone must pitch in.



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(fluorescent tube lights, energy saving lamps etc.). The Bangladesh Standard Testing Institute can play the role of watchdog ensuring that imported products conform to stated specifications and performance. For the rural populace, the large and vibrant NGO sector can come up with easy term loans to promote energy efficient appliances help raise awareness at grassroots level about how to save energy. Looking beyond awareness raising, policy level initiatives are required to introduce architectural designs with energy saving systems. For instance, the use of automatic energy conserva-

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A steep, slippery path

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IN assessing the current state of US-Pakistan ties and determining their future direction, what is one to make of the reports over the last week?

First we have a report that the US has rejected the Pakistani claim for reimbursement of \$2.8 billion from the Coalition Support Fund. The next day we have a report that the Pakistan embassy in Washington has been able to persuade the chairman of a congressional committee to drop his objections and allow the reimbursement of \$1.18 billion which, as in the past, represented about 75% of what Pakistan had claimed.

Then we had yet another report quoting an American official that no agreement on reimbursement had been reached. Clearly, the Americans are not yet relinquishing this pressure point.

More drone attacks have been carried out and the Pakistan Foreign Office has lodged more vehement but meaningless protests. Since the Nato summit in Chicago last month eight drone attacks have been reported and some 30 people apparently killed.

Most reports on these attacks have come from foreign sources and suggest that the people killed were militants. Reuters has reported being told by Pakistani and American officials that the latest attack early on Monday morning was aimed at Abu Yahya Al Libbi a close aide of Ayman Al Zawahiri.

There is no confirmation that Abu Yahya was hit but it is significant that Pakistani officials knew of the raid and knew who the intended target was, although whether this information came to Pakistanis before or after the raid is not clear.

Talks on the reopening of the transit route appear to be dragging on interminably. A new shot in the psychological battle was fired by Nato Secretary General Rasmussen who announced that agreement had been reached with the three Central Asian Republics bordering Afghanistan to allow the use of their territory to ship in or ship out Nato vehicles and other heavy equipment. This suggests that extra expenditure notwithstanding Nato could withdraw without resort to the Pakistan transit route.

Was this mere whistling in the wind? Earlier statements from the logistics commander had suggested that without the Pakistan transit route withdrawal would not be completed by end 2014.

The full transcript of an interview President Karzai gave to *Time* magazine on May 13, the day of Arsalah Rahmani's assassination, was released on May 31. In this long rambling often contradictory interview, Karzai was nevertheless clear that what they were fighting in Afghanistan was not an insurgency but terrorism and that "the war on terror is not in the Afghan villages or homes. It's in the sanctuaries, it is in the training grounds...." and he went on to add "if it is a war on terror then the Afghan people will join you on terror."

This would seem to suggest that the Karzai administration would happily allow the use of its territory for the US war on terror including attacks on "sanctuaries" in Pakistan.

Having pointed the finger at Pakistan he

Pakistan and the US have many more areas of convergence in this area than they do of divergence. Pakistan, more than the US, needs to build on these convergences. To do otherwise will ensure that the slippery path on which we mistakenly embarked many years ago will intensify regional tensions and perhaps make our survival difficult.

refused to term Pakistan an enemy and claimed that "an effective war on terror ... has not been done, and we must do it together." He seemed to think that reconciliation was needed both in Pakistan and Afghanistan: "The other point is for both of us to seek to bring the reconcilable in this process to reconciliation, to peace and Afghanistan should help Pakistan do it in their own territory, and Pakistan I hope will help us do it in our own territory...."

One does not know what sort of reconciliation in Pakistan Karzai wished to help with but we do know that from the perspective of certain circles in Pakistan Mullah Fazlullah and his band of insurgents are being assisted in Kunar and Nuristan by Afghan intelligence. More recently, the inspector

general of the Frontier Corps, Balochistan, said that several *farari* (fugitive) camps of Baloch dissidents are based in Afghanistan.

As regards Pakistan's assistance in Afghan reconciliation Karzai maintains that those who want reconciliation are suffering in Pakistan when they don't follow the Pakistan line.

We have a host of grievances with the Americans ranging from their strategic partnership with India though Pakistan was the South Asian country sacrificing the most while partnering with the US in the war on terror.

The grievances include encouraging India to play a larger role in Afghanistan while ignoring the concerns this arouses in Pakistan, and urging Afghanistan to enter into a strategic partnership agreement with India, as well as refusing to give Pakistan the same civil nuclear deal the US has with India.

There are also complaints of the refusal to recognise that Pakistan, because of its position as landlocked Afghanistan's route to the outside world and for bearing the heavy burden of Afghan refugees, had a right to a substantive role in determining Afghanistan's future dispensation. There have also been apprehensions vis-a-vis the sinister motives of America seeking a presence in Afghanistan post-2014.

The highlighting of these grievances and apprehensions and the fuelling of fears about malevolent American intentions with regard to Pakistan's nuclear assets have helped generate a degree of anti-Americanism in the general public that will be difficult to overcome, particularly when there is no visible impact from the \$22 billion in assistance that the Americans say they have given Pakistan over the last decade.

This is truly a ridiculous situation. Our principal differences arise on Afghanistan. And yet any clear-headed analysis would show that if we do not entertain unattainable ambitions, Pakistan and the US have many more areas of convergence in this area than they do of divergence. Pakistan, more than the US, needs to build on these convergences. To do otherwise will ensure that the slippery path on which we mistakenly embarked many years ago will intensify regional tensions and perhaps make our survival difficult.

The writer is a former foreign secretary of Pakistan.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 19

1821 Decisive defeat of the Philikí Etaireía by the Ottomans at Drāgā'ani (in Wallachia).

1875 The Herzegovinian rebellion against the Ottoman Empire begins.

1961 Kuwait declares independence from the United Kingdom.

1966 Shiv Sena a political party in India is founded in Mumbai.

1991 The Soviet occupation of Hungary ends.

2009 War in North-West Pakistan: The Pakistani Armed Forces open Operation Rah-e-Nijat against the Taliban and other Islamist rebels in the South Waziristan area of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.