

# From road to river

MD. ALAMGIR

We can imagine a road 100 years back where only bullock carts, horse carts and elephant and donkey drawn vehicles traveled. No mechanical sound could be heard nor could any smoke be seen on the road. Today, this is quite unimaginable. With conversion of horse cart to car in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the transport system of this country gradually shifted to roads and has finally reached a stage where there is no safe passage for vehicles on the roads, causing many road accidents every day. It is too expensive as well in terms of fuel cost and environmental cost.

Since our independence our population has more than doubled. The roads have not been broadened and developed to handle today's traffic load. Number of vehicles has gone up with increasing movement of people and goods. As a result, the roads are now too congested, resulting in frequent traffic jams, road accidents and loss of man-hours because of the longer than expected time to reach the destination. Added to these is the damage to people's health due to environmental and sound pollution.

Although it is not possible to go back to the blissful condition of 100 years back, it is possible to reduce the traffic jams on roads if we increase utilisation of our waterways.

Transportation of heavy containers has added to the load on the roads. Chittagong port alone handles about 120,000 containers every month. That is, about 4,000 heavy containers move on the Dhaka-Chittagong road every day. That shows how difficult it is to maintain the roads.

A truck loaded with a container takes about 20 hours to reach Dhaka from Chittagong. The waterway distance between Dhaka and Chittagong is about 170 nautical miles (315 Km). A feeder container ship of 150 to 200 containers, loaded from mother vessel at Chittagong outer anchorage, will take about 15 to 20 hours to reach

Dhaka from Chittagong.

A truck with one container takes 170 liters of fuel for back and forth travel between Chittagong and Dhaka, whereas a container vessel which carries 140 Twenty Feet Equivalent Units (TEU) consumes approximate 8,500 liters of fuel for a to-and-fro trip between Dhaka and Chittagong. The difference in fuel consumption between road and river transport will amount to a saving of 109 liters per container. Therefore, carriage of 1.5 million containers by waterway will save 150,000 tons of fuel per year. In today's market, the cost of saved fuel will about \$120 million. At the same time vehicles on the roads will

transport sector of this riverine nation.

Funds also may be utilised to facilitate construction of new ships as well as dredging of waterways to maintain the depth of navigable waters.

Department of Shipping, Government of Bangladesh has already issued licenses for production of 32 container vessels of about 140 TEUs. Estimated cost of each vessel is \$5 million. Only a few shipyards of our country have experience of building this type of vessels of international standard. Donor agencies and government should come forward to finance such shipyards to build such ships.

About 50 oil tankers of capacity 600 ton to 2,200 ton are already under construction in Bangladesh. They will transport fuel to power plants and edible oil to factories from Chittagong to other places of the country. These vessels are expected to be delivered in 1 to 2 years time.

Similarly, government and other stakeholders must work together to promote safe and fast passenger transportation on the rivers. The major disadvantage of passenger transportation by waterways is that the vessels are too slow. Such disadvantage can be overcome by good design of passenger vessel that will enable it to operate at 30 to 40 km per hour, which is better compared to a vehicle on the road that moves at an average speed of less than 30 km per hour due to traffic jam.

Considering remarkable savings in fuel consumption and environmental cost as well as easing of traffic congestion, a riverine country like Bangladesh must pay attention to water transport. We must urge our development partners to provide funds for development of inland water transport system that includes new-building shipyards, loading and discharging terminals, roads linking the terminals, and dredging of silt on river beds.

The writer is an Engineer Surveyor in an International Ship's Classification Society.

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STAR ARCHIVE

save approximately half of the fuel cost due to ease of traffic. Loss of man-hours due to traffic jam will decrease, and the number of accidents will be reduced.

The contribution to the environment will be enormous. Heating of environment as well as emission of carbon dioxide and other harmful substances will decrease proportionately. Climate funds from donor organisations may also be utilised in doing research and development in the water

## An unsent letter



Baby Nuhash with parents

Sometime after my father's first surgery this July I wrote him a letter, which I had planned to email to my aunt and uncle who were there with him in New York. I wanted them to read it out to him once he was conscious. He didn't get to read it, he never fully gained consciousness before his passing, and I feel this stark emptiness inside of me because I never got to share it with him. It's a very personal letter but I thought maybe, just maybe, I could fill that void a little if I shared it with another soul.

Baba

I hope you're feeling well. I haven't been feeling great myself. I caught typhoid and the sickness made my stomach extremely sensitive. For an entire week I ate nothing but a disgustingly unappetising form of rice that I believe is called *jau* in Bangla. Bed ridden and stuck eating *jau*, I imagined all the delicious things I'd finally get to eat once I was better. At one point, I was really craving lobster and it reminded me of something.

Right after you and Mom got divorced, things were pretty rough for me. For one thing, I always hoped that things might get back to normal and you would move back in with us. But after the divorce I realised that door is permanently closed. In chemistry terms, I witnessed a combustion; a burn. An irreversible process.

What I was most afraid of was that you and I would get distanced and you wouldn't see me as your son anymore. A few days after the divorce, you called me up. You said you just came back from the bazaar with some gigantic lobsters and you wanted to cook them and have them with me at your place. We both knew that wouldn't be possible. You can't have a feast during the Cold War. But that wasn't the end of it. About half an hour later, the intercom started ringing. The guard told me my father was standing outside the gate holding a live lobster. I went downstairs puzzled, amused and slightly excited. You said, "Son, I really wanted to have this with you, but it just isn't possible right now. I can assure you, however, that I'll always be around. And someday, we can sit and have a good meal together again. But for now, I want you to have this." And then you handed me a live lobster. That horrendous creature, with its beady eyes and slimy long feet, to me, meant hope. Hope that no matter the circumstances, you would always try to be there for me.

I don't think I've been there for you, at least not as much as I should have been. When I did call you, you were usually not in a state to talk. And even when we did, I've been too upset to express myself well. I was never the wordsmith you were. Coming to see you was painful when you returned to Dhaka before your surgery. It was painful to be stopped at the gates to your place every time. No son should have to answer to a security guard every time he wants to see his father. But none of that is an excuse; I should have been there for you more. I want all that to change. I want to let you know that I really miss you. I want you to know it still burns me that I can't have you around as much as I'd like. This letter is my lobster to you.

Your son, Nuhash

# Ode to PLA, China

MAHBUBUR RAHMAN

ON August 1 the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China celebrated its 85th Founding Anniversary. PLA indeed has come a long way in its arduous struggle and challenging journey since it took birth in the armed uprising in Nanchang, capital of Jiangxi province, on August 1, 1927. The glorious history of PLA is a long saga of a protracted war of the Chinese army against imperialist and reactionary forces. PLA went through a long revolutionary process. It started as Red Army, took different names -- New Fourth Route Army, Eighth Route Army -- at different times and situations and finally transformed to People's Liberation Army.

This great revolutionary army undertook the historic Long March of more than ten thousands kilometers, fighting for one year from Jinggang Shan mountains of Jiangxi to the plains of Yanan of Shaanxi, crossing jungles, endless marshes and swamps, narrow valleys, steep gorges and snow capped rocky mountains fighting guerrilla battles all through. This army was led by great commanders like Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Chen Yi, Peng Dehuai, Nie Rongten, Ye Chienying, Liu Bochen, Ho Long and many others. It fought against Japanese aggression and Chiang Kaishek's reactionary forces and liberated the country. Post-liberation, this great army continuously pursued highest combat excellence, struggled to consolidate the country's independence and sovereignty and always remained a bulwark of national defense as an invincible fighting machine.

PLA, true to its name, always maintained its basic people's army character. It always bore in mind what Mao Zedong taught, that the army is like a fish and people are like the water in a river. This has been the ethos of PLA and the essence of China's civil military relationship. PLA never was isolated from the broad masses and always remained involved in all national development and socioeconomic activities. It played a domi-

nant role in national reconstruction and infrastructure building, and combating floods, cyclones, tornadoes, draughts and earthquakes.

PLA always enjoyed the utmost trust, confidence, love and respect of the people of China. It is an all pervasive force with multidimensional characters. It is a fighting force par excellence with highest combat readiness. It is a productive and skilled force beyond comparison.

I had the opportunity to live in a PLA unit in a garrison very near to Beijing for a month in mid 1977. In my outdoor study (*kai men ban xue*) I was sent to a PLA unit and lived in the military barracks along with PLA junior commanders. There was no rank system in PLA at that time and officers were called commanders and soldiers. I wore their uniform, ate, worked, played and slept with them. I was introduced to epic work *Art of War* by the great master military strategist of ancient China, Sun Tzu.

The PLA unit I was with was fully self-sufficient to cater its logistic needs. It had its own uniform and shoe making factory, its own agricultural fields, its own farm-yards to raise cattle and get meat and dairy products. The unit even had a medicine factory to produce medicine for local use.

In my Chinese language textbooks I read stories of Canadian Dr. Norman and how he participated in the Long March and selflessly rendered his service in treating wounded soldiers and saving their lives. My text book also contained

stories of Lei Peng, the great soldier of PLA who dedicated his life for the service of poor people and was always available in their crises and difficulties. The motto of PLA, he firmly believed, was "*wei renmin fuwu*," (serve the people).

I was in China during a very significant period of its history. It was a time when the conspiring clique, the Gang of Four (Jiang Qing, Zhang Chun Qiao, Wang Hongwen, Yao Wen yuan) fell and the so-



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called Great Cultural Revolution which caused untold sufferings to the people and brought chaos and disorder in the society met its ultimate demise. I saw the jubilation of Chinese people, which was most spontaneous. For several days the celebration continued and I participated in all the activities shouting slogans, *dadao si ren bang* (down with Gang of

Four), *dadao wen hua da geming* (down with Cultural Revolution).

About 35 years ago when I lived in China, it had a tiny footprint in global economy and political and military power. Today as I see China, I am totally amazed. It has emerged as a most vibrant and strong nation occupying centre stage of world economy and power. This happened because of country's wise and able leadership, pragmatic policies, national unity and solidarity and harmony. The unifying factor and the stabilising core element has always been PLA, the liberator, the redeemer. It indeed always remained most patriotic, dedicated, loyal and trusted by the people -- as the name PLA indicates. It never failed in its tasks and never fell short of the people's hopes and aspirations.

PLA today is the largest armed forces in the world, most modern, up-to-date, professional, trained and motivated. PLA underwent extensive reforms and modernisation after the demise of Cultural Revolution in 1976. China started opening up in 1978 under the pragmatic leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the architect of today's China. The first four areas selected by him for modernisation were, agriculture, industry, science and technology and defence.

PLA, to modernise its weapons and equipment, went into joint venture collaboration with Germany, France, etc. PLA also developed its nuclear arm. It built its own aircraft carrier and is

increasing their numbers. PLA Air Force has the most modern stealth aircraft -- a technology only shared by the US. China has also significantly advanced its outer space technology achieving stunning success. China is vigorously pursuing its modernisation drive and is fully confident of thwarting any threat. However, even with the technological advancement and modernisation, the PLA remains truly the people's army -- for the service of the people, for their welfare and wellbeing and for their security.

Bangladesh armed forces received almost their entire military hardware from PLA. Our armed forces were built from the scratch through PLA's support and assistance. I, as the first military attaché to China in the '80s, am a witness to how PLA most generously supported the raising of our army, navy and air force, and training them and strengthening our defense capability.

I was invited to China by PLA in 1996 when I was the Chief of Army Staff. I met General Fu Quanyou, the Chief of General Staff and General Chi Haotian, the defense minister. I also had the privilege of meeting His Excellency Jiang Zemin, the President of China and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, the highest military organ of the country. President Jiang said: "China has changed a lot. It is not the same China which you saw when you lived here in the '70s and '80s. It is a changed China, developed China and it is a new generation, a new leadership. The world is changing. I heard Dhaka skyline has also changed. But in all these changes one thing has not changed and it will never change and that is our relationship with Bangladesh, our policy for Bangladesh." He continued: "I assure you general, China is your friend and will ever remain a friend. In time of need she will be always beside you." His words still ring in my ears. I believe this epitomises the true relationship of our two militaries and two countries. Long live PLA. Long live Sino-Bangla defence cooperation.

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