



We must unite to end violence against women

The United Nations in Bangladesh and The Daily Star have joined hands to raise awareness on violence against women, as part of the UN Secretary General's global UNiTE campaign. This is the first in a series of articles that will appear in The Daily Star until December 10, focusing on the context, the policy interventions, and the actions needed in combating violence against women in Bangladesh.

NEAL WALKER

BA NGLADESH has joined the Global 16 Days Campaign on ending violence against women. The theme of this year's campaign, which runs from November 25 to December 10, is "Safe home, safe society: Stop violence against women now."

Unfortunately, the women of Bangladesh know all too well how unsafe homes can be. In fact, intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence against women and girls. In a recent survey by the National Human Rights Commission, 62% reported beating by husband and family members as the most common form of violence against women. Over 63% of married women responded that violence against wives is acceptable. But only 18% of the victims reported accessing formal justice. Thirty percent did not take any such steps because they saw violence as a family matter.

This must change.

Violence against women is a profound and fundamental violation of human rights that has devastating consequences on the health, well-being and future prospects of women and girls. It has adverse and long-ranging impacts on families, communities and nations. It is an epidemic --- global in its scale and impact. Six of every ten women around the world face violence in their lives. Domestic violence extracts billions of dollars from national economies around the world, in part through greater health burdens on healthcare systems and lower productivity.

Bangladesh has made significant achievements to address violence against women, in particular through advanced legal framework, such as the High Court Guideline to Prevent Sexual Harassment (2009) and the Domestic Violence Act (2010).

But there is much more to be done.

The 16 Days campaign is a global campaign and coincides with the United Nations

Secretary General's Campaign to End Violence Against Women, UNiTE. The Campaign brings together governments, civil society, private sector partners and the entire UN family calling for action to jointly end gender-based violence at global, regional and local levels. This means ending all forms of violence against women -- from dowry-related violence, early marriages, rape and sexual harassment to trafficking of women and girls, acid attacks, and fatwa -- all of which are very common in Bangladesh.

The campaign kicked off in Bangladesh on November 23 with a March of Brave Men in front of Dhaka University to convey the message that violence against women cannot be ended unless men and boys come to understand its impact, and explicitly agree to take a stand, in both their personal and professional lives, to stop violence against women. On November 26, for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, the police forces created a "human chain" saying NO to violence

and committing to contributing to efforts to end impunity in Bangladesh. And at a gathering in front Bangladesh's national Parliament, the Speaker of the House, joined by other parliamentarians, civil society, UN and partners, made an oath to end violence against women in Bangladesh.

Parliament has a critical role to play. It must not only adopt the legal framework but also ensure to allocate funds for services such as hotlines, counseling and medical treatment. As Bangladesh prepares for elections early next year, the parliament must also take into account the impact of political violence on women and candidates.

The campaign continued in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), the post-conflict region of Bangladesh, through a series of awareness raising activities and vibrant rally expressing solidarity on strengthening access to justice for women survivors and ending impunity. Out of 215 violence against women cases filed in three districts of CHT, charge sheets were submitted for 166 cases and court verdicts were declared for nine cases. Although gender based-violence affects women and girls in every country, culture and religion, some groups of women, in particular indigenous, disabled, those from ethnic or religious minorities, are often at risk. Serious concern was expressed about 19 incidents of violence against indigenous women in 2012 in CHT,

which included two of the girls being brutally killed and ten raped.

Combating Violence against Women is at the heart of the UN's efforts to assist Bangladesh to achieve the MDGs and promote sustainable human development. The UN family is supporting a series of events and programmes tackling all dimensions of violence against women, including health, HIV/AIDS, access to justice, police reform, children, education and strategies to change harmful social norms.

And finally, let me voice my view that violence against women is, not only, a fundamental and gross violation of human rights. I deeply believe that violence against women in Bangladesh could potentially push back by decades the achievement of Bangladesh's coveted objective of middle income status. Yes, achieving middle income status is an ambitious objective, but it is truly feasible for Bangladesh -- as long as women are economically and socially empowered to contribute with their full potential to this great national objective.

We must unite to take action to end violence against women. Violence against women is neither acceptable nor inevitable. The time to stop it is now.

The writer is United Nation's Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Bangladesh. To join hands with UNiTE, go to www.endviolence.un.org

Padma Bridge: Transparency needed every step of the way

M. INAMUL HAQUE

THE World Bank, referring to its earlier complaints on corruption in the implementation process of Padma Bridge, withdrew its funding proposal on June 30, 2012. It accused some senior government officials, the consultant SNC Lavalin and some non-government officials of corruption, for which they sent letters to the Finance Ministry and Anti Corruption Commission in September 2011 and April 2012. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, on July 8, criticised the World Bank in the Parliament and demanded its audit, and raised the possibility of building Padma Bridge on local initiative.

JICA estimated cost of \$1,074 million, the cost at Mawa increased to \$1,473 million in 2007, \$1,800 million in 2009, and \$2,600 million in 2010. Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith said in November 2011 that the estimated cost of the bridge was \$2,900 million. But its progress is being delayed because of corruption charges by the World Bank. Why, or for whose interest, is the cost estimate galloping upwards over time? We want transparency on this item.

We can see from figures 2 & 3 that the approach road from Bhanga passes over the Arial Khan River in a zig-zag way, and along the proposed bank protection work of Padma River. Normally, the main bridge should be aligned in a convex shape (e.g., Jamuna Bridge) towards

funding comes from investors or banks, then what is the interest rate and how favourable will it be to our country's interest?

The prime minister, in reply to a question in the Parliament, said that Asian Development Bank (ADB) had released \$26.46 million and the WB \$1.75 million, which was to be spent on pre-feasibility study, design and preparatory works. It means no physical work has been done so far. Then why was Tk.1,200 crore spent for acquisition of land on preselected routes before full feasibility study and study on social and environmental impacts?

The fourth step is engaging consultants. It was the corruption of SNC Lavalin, the consultant firm from Canada, because of which WB withdrew its financing

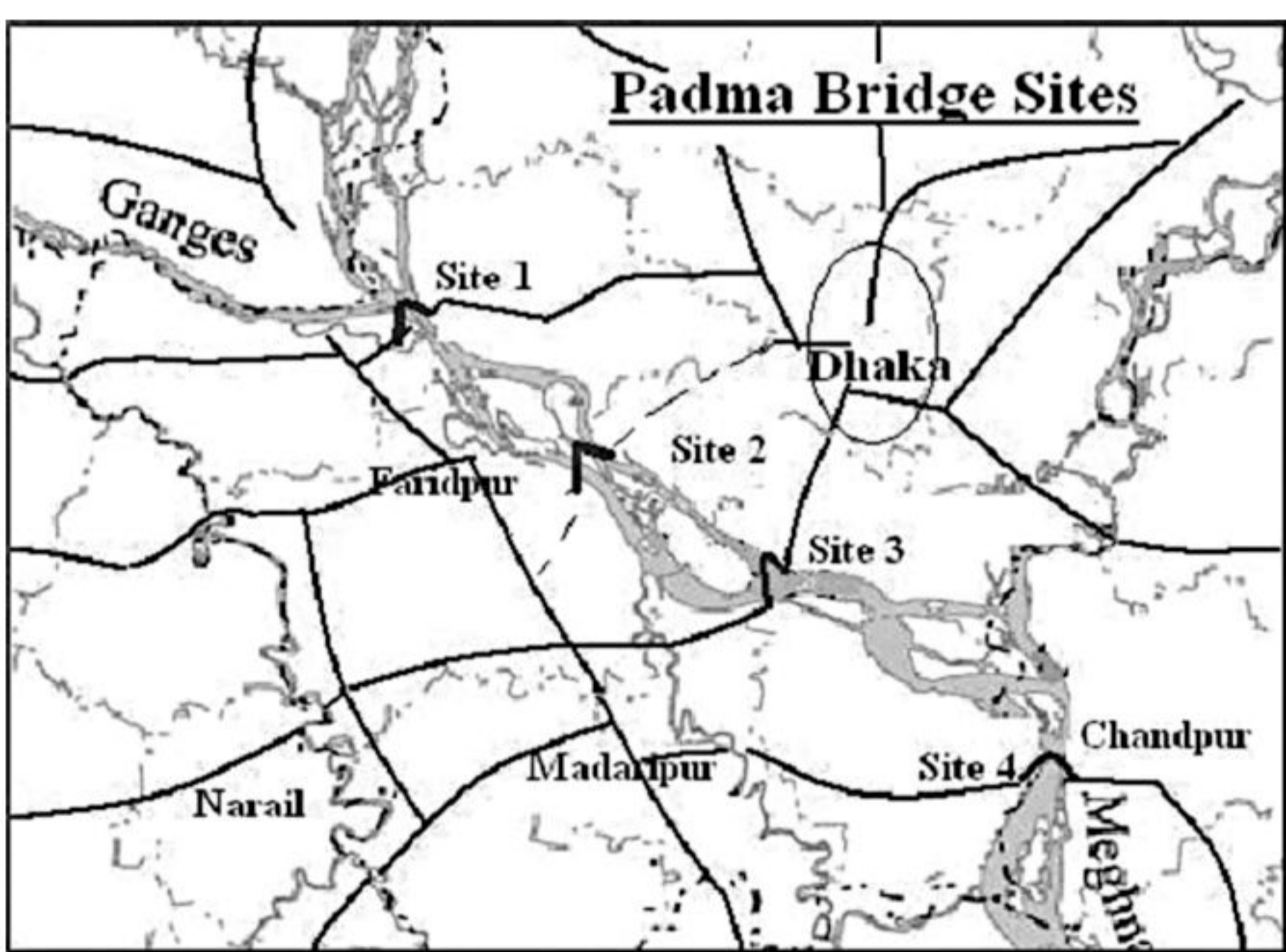


Figure 1: The proposed sites of the Padma Bridge

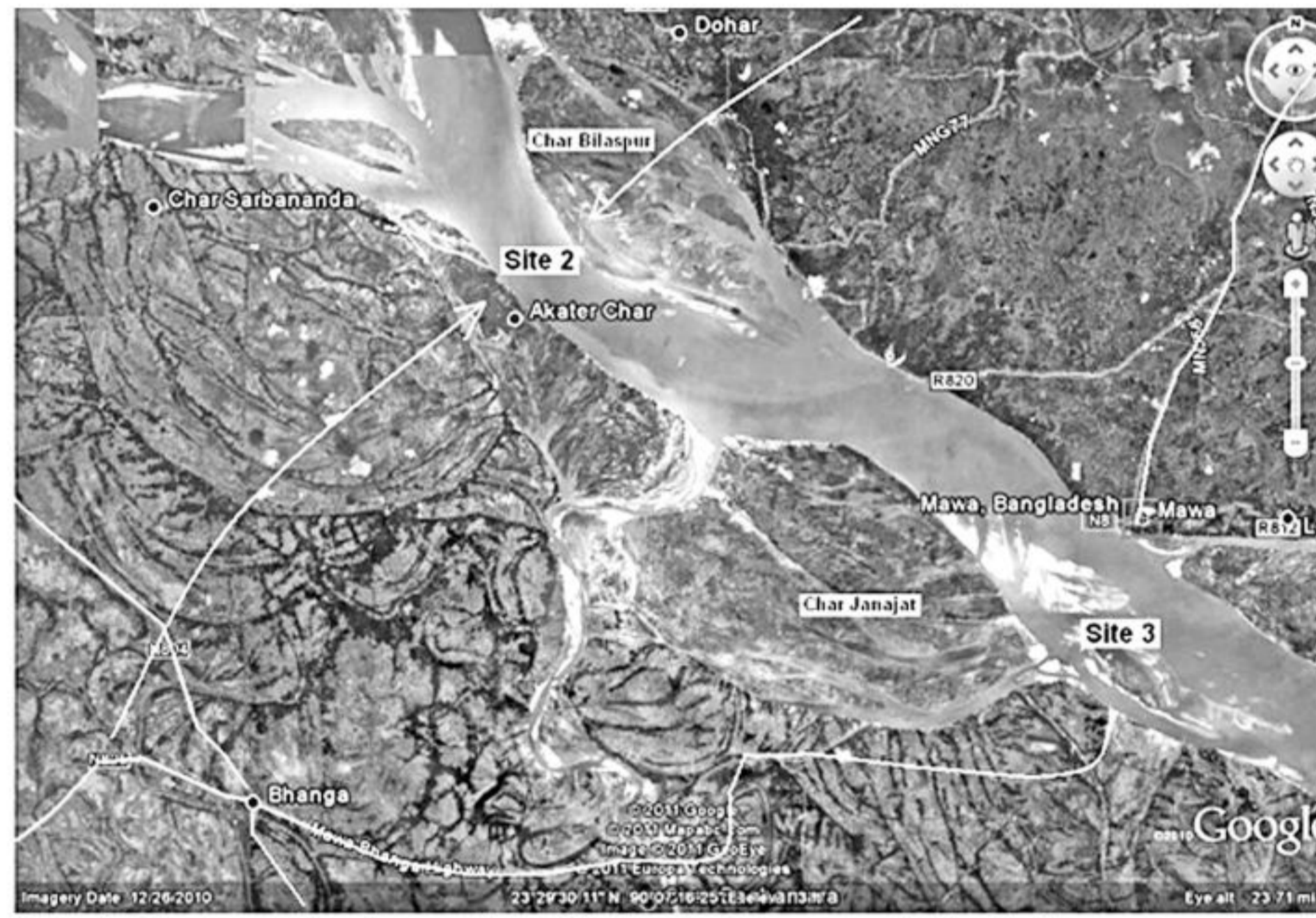


Figure 2: The proposed road connection to Site 2 and existing connection to Site 3

We appreciate PM's comments in the Parliament, but also say that transparency is needed at every step of this project.

The first step is site selection. It may be mentioned that Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) made a pre-feasibility study in 2004 for construction of the Padma Bridge at four possible sites: (i) Paturia-Goalondo, (ii) Dohar-Char Vadrasan, (iii) Mawa-Jajira, and (iv) Chandpur-Vedarganj. JICA estimated that either the Paturia-Goalondo or the Mawa-Jajira route was economically viable. The then BNP government endorsed the JICA study and declared that the Padma Bridge would be constructed at Mawa-Jajira point.

After the declaration of the government decision, people on the Paturia-Goalondo route started agitating and demanded that the bridge be built at their point. In response, the BNP government declared that it would construct another bridge at their point. Surprisingly, JICA did not evaluate the Dohar-Char Vadrasan site as a compromise, maybe under pressure from the lobbyists of those two sites. This site is only 30 km away from Paturia-Goalondo or Mawa-Jajira sites.

JICA recommended a 6.2 km bridge at Mawa, but the bridge secretary of the government, Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan, said that the cost was increasing because the bridge length had increased to 10 km (*The Daily Star*, 20-10-2010). The Dohar-Char Vadrasan site (Char Bilaspur-Akoter Char) if selected, will save about \$3 billion to construct an extra bridge. This site can also be linked with the railway from the nearby Pukharia Rail Station of Faridpur District.

The second step is cost estimate. Starting with the

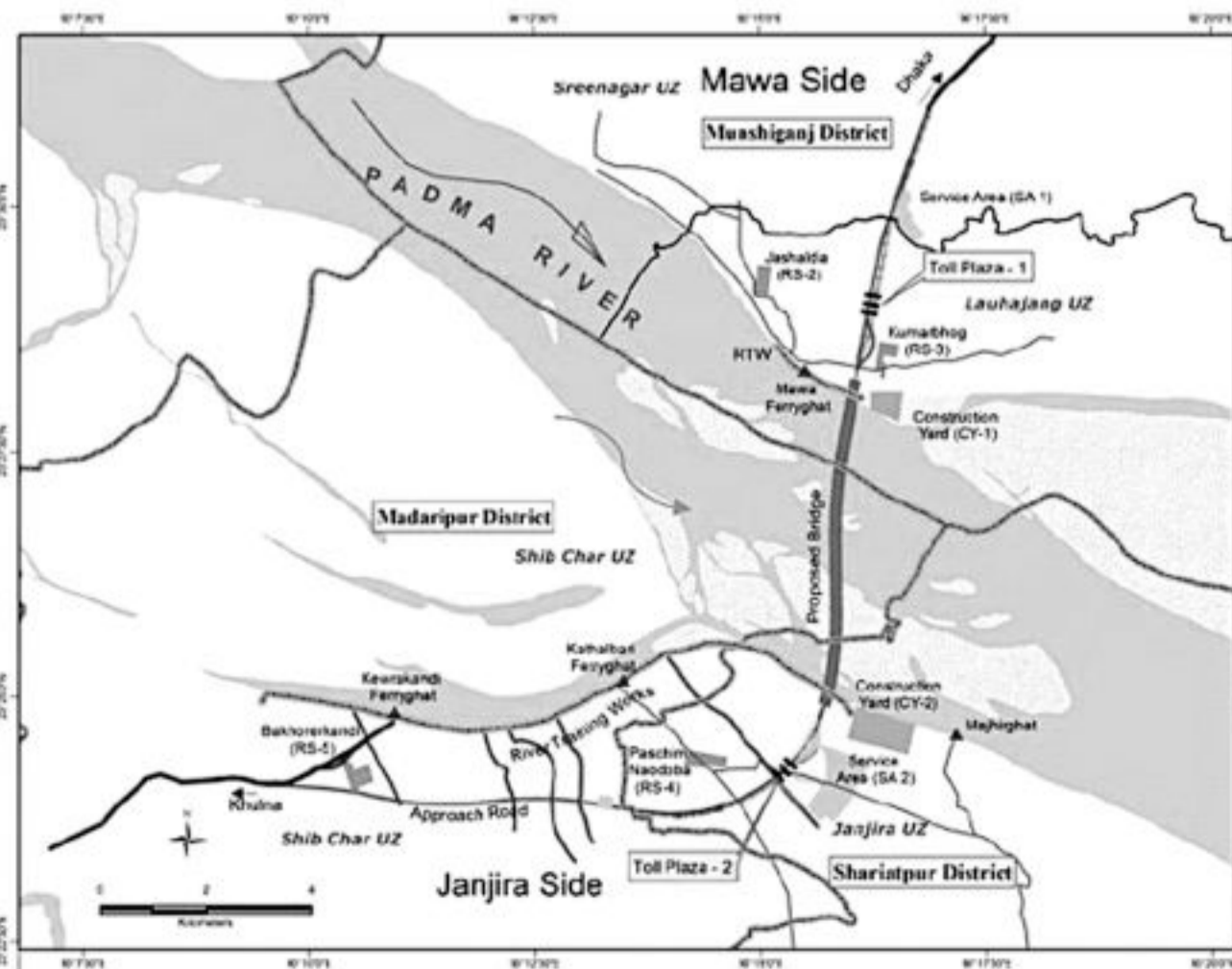


Figure 3: The Padma Bridge layout and its approach road (Maunse//AECOM)

incoming flow. But here, the Padma Bridge is designed in 'S' shape like a snake.

The third step is financing. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said in Parliament that the cost of Padma Bridge would be Tk.22,554 crore. She said that she had discussed this with different ministries and found that Tk.24,000 could be saved from the Tk.55,000 crore development budgets. But for that, some sacrifice had to be made (Prothom Alo 9-07-2012). If it is possible, saving money for one year would be enough for the bridge. But what would we need to sacrifice? We appreciate PM's approach but ask for transparency in the sources of funds and on allocations for spending. If the

proposal. Corruption is there in engaging consultants, and is done in collusion with the consultants. If appropriate screening is not done, the consultants will cheat the client by working in favour of a particular lobby. Transparency must be there in their working domain, and in the terms of reference. The client must not be dependent on the consultants, but should be able to monitor their performance and ensure accountability.

The fifth step is engaging contractors. We want them engaged through open tender with similarity of cost estimates for similar bridges in other countries. Whatever may be the source of funding, local or foreign consortium, there should be clear terms and conditions and specifications for the contractors. If the government wants Private Public Partnership (PPP), then the cost of the bridge shall be two to three times higher because the party shall want the job without tender and shall want to spend public money only.

The sixth step is operation of the bridge after completion. If the bridge is built with public money, it should stay in the government's hand. But if it is built through PPP, then who shall be the owner? What shall be the tolls? For how long shall they collect toll? These need to be clear beforehand, otherwise opportunity seekers may creep in and earn huge profit without much investment; though the cost shall be borne by every citizen of the country. We must keep in mind that the bridge needs to be built for public interest only and it must be public property.

The writer is Chairman, Institute of Water & Environment. Email: minamul@gmail.com

Manifesto for the Extreme Poor

SHAZIA OMAR

WHERE are we now, sonar Bangladesh? The scale of extreme poverty in Bangladesh is deplorable. 25 million citizens of Bangladesh -- girls, boys, men, women, of flesh and blood and dreams, just like you and me -- suffer daily. They are left to survive without access to services such as health care, education, safe drinking water or sanitary facilities, because they cannot afford to buy these services. They have no skills or assets with which to earn sufficient money in an economic system which makes no room for them. They cannot eat the minimum required calories to be healthy, and their children are stunted. Unable to afford land, they are pushed to the furthest corners of our country, where they face the hazard of cyclones and floods which threaten to wash away their homes and family members. Among them are mostly hapless girls and overburdened women, forced into subhuman conditions, denied a basic right to life, by us.

Us? We. We who can read, we who can lead, we who are in a position of privilege. We who do not have to beg. We cannot allow this grave injustice to continue indefinitely. We must set clear goals and allocate sufficient resources to entirely eradicate this ridiculous lack of compassion and common sense. As we fought for an independent Bangladesh not too long ago, now we must fight for an independent, fully inclusive Bangladesh.

Join us in the fight for a fully inclusive Bangladesh: Let us refuse to allow our children to suffer malnutrition and brain damage. Let us refuse to allow our girls to be denied education and earning potential. Let us refuse to embarrass ourselves before the global stage, or before our God. We will be judged by how we treat our weakest. Let us hold our government responsible for its people. It's poorest, most oppressed, unsupported, beautiful, resilient, precious people. Let us rise as a nation of educated, compassionate visionaries who care for their elderly, their disabled, their children, their minorities and all of their vulnerable ones. We need to create an enabling environment for them to live decent lives.

How do we do this? What to needs to be done? Is it rocket science? Why are we baffled perennially by the poverty problem? Is it beyond our means, financially? What would it take? How much would cost to root out extreme poverty in Bangladesh? Let's tackle it, once and for all. Let's put our brains and hearts together and sort this out.

Developing recommendations for a Manifesto for the Extreme Poor:

If all the experts and citizens who cared came forward to make a list of recommendations for the government, what would such a list look like? We have undertaken an initiative, consulting stakeholders across the nation, to put together a list of actionable recommendations that support the honourable Prime Minister's vision of a poverty-free Bangladesh by 2021. We believe poverty is a national issue, not a political one, and we hope each and every person in Bangladesh will stand behind us in working towards a fully inclusive Bangladesh that we can all be proud to be a part of! Join us in this campaign.

The writer is Head of Advocacy, shiree*

*The Economic Empowerment of the Poorest (also known as shiree) is a livelihoods programme funded by the government of UK in partnership with the Rural Development and Cooperatives Division of GoB. However, this Manifesto belongs to all the people of Bangladesh; shiree is simply a facilitator.