

# Toll money gobbled up

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A serious lax in monitoring the bridge's operations and maintenance, and inaction of the Bangladesh Bridge Authority (BBA) against the perpetrators are responsible for the situation.

Embezzlement of toll money has been taking place since the opening of the bridge in 1998. But there was hardly any talk about the corruption until The Daily Star and other media exposed stories of the embezzlement of Tk 11.93 lakh in three months early last year.

The BBA officials through random scrutiny of toll records of January, February 2012 and December 2011 found the

money missing. The money was siphoned off by hiding real data on the computers and duplication of money receipts.

It was, however, just a tip of the iceberg.

As the authorities finally started monitoring the toll collection procedure following detection of last year's anomalies, they were surprised to see a sudden leap in the number of vehicles.

The latest data show an additional Tk 10-12 lakh is being collected from the bridge as toll every month. The actual amount would be more if a round-the-clock monitoring can be installed, BBA sources say.

"We are now scrutinis-

ing toll data and video footage twice and thrice a week," Kabir Ahmed, chief engineer of the BBA, told The Daily Star recently.

On an average, Tk 95 lakh toll is collected every day.

A similar picture was detected through Buet's inspection after the bridge was opened.

"Buet was assigned to monitor traffic and toll collection for the first five years. The graph of toll collection had increased sharply during the visit of Buet team and audit of statistics," recalled Prof Jamilur Reza Choudhury.

The average daily toll collection was Tk 16 lakh in 1999.

A recent visit to the

Bangabandhu Bridge revealed that the BBA's monitoring of toll collection had failed to stop the embezzlement. Evidence of it was found when a toll collector was caught for stealing money. However, it could not be known how much money he had embezzled.

Kabir Ahmed said automation of the entire system and proper monitoring are needed to fully stop the malpractices.

Although the BBA has been able to reduce toll money embezzlement, it has failed to stop malpractices at the weighing machines. Every night operators allow overloaded trucks to cross the bridge by taking bribes from drivers.

A strong warning in this regard by Communications Minister Obaidul Quader yielded no result as it has been a good source of income.

Finding no other way, the BBA decided to form a vigilance team a few months ago but the committee is yet to be formed.

"We came to know from various sources that taking bribes and allowing overloaded trucks to operate still go on. A chaotic situation also rules the two weighing machines at night. The team's task will be to bring discipline there," said a BBA official.

Prof Jamilur Reza Choudhury said the weighing machines installed to check overloading have become an eyewash. He suggested monitoring by an independent body to stop all malpractices.

The international crimes tribunals have already delivered verdicts against two Jamaat leaders Abdul Qader Mollah and Delwar Hossain Sayeede while two war crime cases against former Jamaat chief Ghulam Azam and Muhammed Kamaruzzaman are awaiting verdict delivery.

Meanwhile, investigation against another war crimes suspect Faridpur BNP leader MA Zahid Hossain Khokon, who is on the run, is likely to be completed within this month, investigators said.

According to the book, Yusuf, who was a member of AM Malek's cabinet in 1971, monitored activities of several peace committees, Razakar and Al-Badr forces and delivered speeches at different anti-liberation rallies.

Inspecting a Razakar camp in Satkhira on November 12, 1971, Yusuf said, "The Razakars of Satkhira have played a vital role in destroying the Indian agents and infiltrators."

He guaranteed that arrangements would be made to provide jobs for all Razakars, the book reads.

The war crimes suspect had gathered men to form the Razakar force since April 18, 1971, he added.

"We got these pieces of information from victims, eyewitnesses as well as documentary evidence including newspapers and books," said Helal, adding that he had visited Khulna region four times to gather the information.

According to historic documents, Razakars were active in Bangladesh from May, 1971, but the then Pakistan government formally established the force through a gazette notification on August 2.

The probe agency started the investigation into the alleged crimes of Yusuf, who hails from Rajair Kaliarpur under Sarankhola in Bagerhat, on January 22, 2012.

He is in Dhaka now, sources claimed.

The suspect, as the then ameer of Khulna district unit Jamaat, led all the anti-liberation elements and political parties in the

region where the Pakistani army and their collaborators killed at least 1 lakh people, said the investigator.

"Ekattorer Ghatak O Dalalra Ke Kothaye," a book published by Mukti Juddha Chetna Bikash Kendra, would be used as prosecution evidence in Yusuf's case, agency sources said.

The sources said Yusuf was arrested under the Collaborator Order, 1972, after independence but was released after cancellation of the law on December 31, 1975.

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