

# Disentangling Dhaka traffic

## BITTER TRUTH



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH a huge number of all types of vehicles gridlocked near a railgate or road intersection, sometimes even for 30 minutes at a stretch, Dhaka city's traffic congestion problem has assumed alarming proportions. A drive from Kamalapur to Mirpur or Uttara to New Market is a painful experience. The journey from home to office or business centre takes away vital hours from work. Other than being late for office or

The appalling condition of the roads is caused by the rapid deterioration of the road top or the macadam, which is poorly built. According to a World Bank study, none of these roads, not to speak of the lanes and by-lanes, has internationally accepted quality of structural and pavement formation.

Other than the deaths on the roads and drain on the economy to the tune of Tk.20,000 per year, the cost of vehicular damage because of poor road construction is pushing up transportation costs for goods and passengers to limits hardly affordable for the common man.

Dhaka is unquestionably a commercial hub now. The large scale growth of business is changing Dhaka, but with no improvement in road condition. In consequence, business suffers and the economy bleeds. When the rest of the world has taken steps to speed up road construction activities by upgrading technology, we are still clinging to primitive ones.

In the last few years, traffic jams have taken a turn for the worse, with 7.5 lakh vehicles of different categories plying on the city's scarce road space that now stands at 8% as against the requirement of 25%. Sources in traffic management indicate that 30% of this scant

jobs and encourage migration of people from Dhaka city to neighbouring townships. At the same time, this measure will relieve pressure on the highways, and allow people coming to Dhaka on daily basis to move from road travel to train travel. These fast moving commuter trains with stoppages at Uttara, Banani and Maghbazar will reduce congestion on the main Dhaka-Tongi highway appreciably.

In an effort to reduce road congestion to the maximum possible extent in the present situation, the measures listed below need to be tackled on priority basis:

(i) Travel Demand Management: Many developed countries have resorted to travel demand management in order to curb traffic congestion. This important tool aims at reducing the impact of traffic by influencing people's travel behaviour. TDM can be achieved through growth management, road pricing, auto-restricted zones, parking management, car pooling, alternative work hours, flexible time, and compressed work-week;

(ii) Travel Management Issue: Road junctions in the city are not properly planned. Roads were constructed with hardly any thought about the size and number of

# Three dead folk who came back to life



"LOTS of dead people came back to life this week," said a link-filled email from a reader. "Don't the holy prophecies say that's a sign of the Last Days or the Four Horsemen or the launch of a new iPhone or something?"

Sure. Or it could be a sign you've been reading Asian newspapers, I thought.

In India, for example, stories about people who walk in on their own funerals are so common that priests surely now build it into their eulogies: "We will now have a moment of silence to allow the recently deceased to enter the room and family members to gasp and fall over. Amen."

One report in the set was about a young woman named Ganga Devi who ran off with a lover. After several days, she read her own name in the newspaper, not as a missing person, but as a murder victim. Her corpse had been positively identified by family members, it said.

Ganga had accidentally made the perfect escape, hooray! But then she took another look at her new lover, a friend of her father's, and decided to call home, news reports said. The guy must have looked like a hideous, repulsively wrinkled member of the Rolling Stones, or, to put it another way, a member of the Rolling Stones.

I can imagine the phone conversation she had with her brother, who answered the phone. GANGA: "Hi, this is Ganga. How are things at home?" BROTHER: "Fine, except for the fact that you're dead. Wait."

Another link in the email led to a report about a young man who disappeared. His parents got the police to round up his six best friends, charge them with murder and put them on death row. Then the boy returned from a jaunt. Let this be a lesson to all males. CALL HOME.

Imagine if he'd returned later, when it was too late. MOTHER: "You should have phoned. We had all those people killed." BOY: "Sorry, Ma, I will next time. What's for dinner?"

The frequency with which corpses are misidentified makes me wonder how cops identify bodies in India. POLICE: "We found a corpse in the woods. It has two arms, two legs and one head."

PARENT: "Oh no! So did my daughter!" [Falls to floor, weeping.]

That day turned out to be what a newspaper columnist (technical term: "lazy good-for-nothing") would describe as a busy morning.

Just before lunch, another email arrived. The same reader had found yet another "dead person alive" story, this time from China. A street vendor in Hubei province was said to have died of harassment by officials. A huge protest was organized around his corpse. Two hours of angry shouting followed. And then the "dead man" threw off the sheet covering him and said: "It's so hot. I can't bear it any more." His workmates glared crossly at him for spoiling the scam. They should have smiled, fallen to their knees and said: "Hal-lelujah, he's risen from the dead!"

Then it really would have seemed like an earthshaking event of great religious significance, such as the coming of the Last Days or even the launch of a new iPhone. Amen.

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AMRAN HOSSAIN

scheduled appointment, the loss of effective man hours is a colossal drain on the resources of the country.

The influx of about 40,000 vehicles that hit the road every year and the huge increase in the number of rickshaws, many of which are allegedly unlicensed, have added to traffic congestion. In the absence of a separate lane for rickshaws on most of the roads, they occupy the whole road space and hamper the movement of mechanised vehicles, which can, at best, move at 15 to 20 km per hour.

Wide and long roads and the vehicles that move on them herald economic growth. Former US President John F. Kennedy had said: "It's not wealth that built our roads, but the roads that built the wealth." Leaders in our country, it appears, thought the other way round, judging from the dilapidated state of the roads and by-lanes connecting the city roads.

With the axiom that the tonnage on city roads, especially an industrial city, grows twice as fast as the economy, the traffic growth has risen at least 10% in each of the past 15 years. The total number of vehicles on the city roads is 7.5 lakhs, at least five times more than what it was in 1990. The weight of freight moved over the city roads in recent times has jumped at least 50 times in this period, and the number of passengers has leapedfrogged to 70 times.

With the maintenance aspect of highways and arterial roads blithely ignored, roads with innumerable potholes, clouds of dust, accumulated water in the ditches and smoke blowing over the commuter's face as junk vehicles pass by are features symbolic of the squalid state of the city roads in summer and winter. With the onset of rainy season, most of these roads are either canals or mini-reservoirs of water.

The major cause of congestion and accidents is lack of guidelines for land use in the city. Transportation planning in big cities is done through appraisal of travel demand management that aims at reducing trips in congested parts of the city. The mushrooming growth of shopping malls, residential apartments, schools, colleges, private universities and clinics has aggravated the problem to a large extent. The haphazard growth of the city with no 'Master Plan' has given rise to chronic congestion. The only solution to the chronic traffic jams is building subways under the existing roads or sky rails above the roads, which seems to be a distant dream till now.

road space remains occupied by parked vehicles and hawkers. Except two major roads -- Airport Road and Mirpur Road -- all thoroughfares in the city are accessible to all types of vehicles at all hours of the day and night.

The proposal for building metros or subways or sky rails is still in the embryonic stage and there is hardly any possibility that these will come up in the next ten years, even if there is political will to implement it. But we have to redress the problems of the people of all categories and vocations, ease traffic congestion and usher in easy movement by introducing some measures that can yield viable results.

The most imperative need is to reduce the number of transports, especially smaller vehicles that occupy more road space but carry fewer passengers. And the next important task for the government on fast track implementation process would be introduction of commuter trains which will run at quick intervals from nearby townships in the morning and evening rush hours.

With improved communication, trade and commerce will flourish in satellite towns, which will create

vehicles that would be plying on them years later. Experts opine that steps like street widening, intersection widening, building of flyovers at every intersection, one way routes, grade separation, bus bays, and parking control can improve the situation to a great extent.

In Dhaka city, there is no parking policy in force. 95% of the commercial buildings in Motijheel, the hub of the city, hardly have parking facilities. Parking spaces allotted in Gulistan, Fulbaria, Motijheel and New Market areas are now being used for other purposes by politically influential persons. New shopping complexes are coming up with no provision of parking facilities.

The fact is that, while formulating rules for curbing chaos and unbearable traffic situation in Dhaka city, encroachment on public space has neither figured in policy planning nor engaged the attention of the concerned authorities because the encroachers, who are politically very powerful, cannot be removed.

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# So, the whole world is in collusion against Koko!

IT is widely perceived by us, and more so by outsiders, that ours is a corrupt society and the corruption is committed and perpetuated by some politicians and their cronies. However, if one takes into cognisance the number of convictions for corruption, it hardly reflects the validity of the perception. For instance, we see only two high profile convictions over the decades if we set aside the guilty verdicts awarded during the two military rules and those during the tenure of the last CTG. One of them was H.M. Ershad and the other one is Arafat Rahman Koko, who was sentenced to six years' rigorous imprisonment on June 23, 2011 in absentia.

It is absolutely paradoxical that although we talk so much about corruption, it has never been a social stigma in our society. Even during an election, corruption takes the back seat, making room for non-tangible issues such as religious sentiment, as happened in the last few municipal elections. Where else in the world would a fallen dictator, even after multiple convictions for corruption, be elected -- once even while in prison -- and not from one but from five constituencies in general elections, and bounce back as a kingmaker in politics? In any society where ethics has even an iota of presence, a politician's fate would be sealed, once and for all, if his/her offspring are known for "egregious corruption," let alone being convicted, both at home and abroad.

It is common practice in our society that a political party or cronies of the ones accused of or convicted for corruption would invariably term the charges or convictions against them as 'politically motivated.' These days, BNP's acting secretary general is in the forefront of forwarding that hypothesis. Recently, he said that his party boss Tareque



Rahman was a symbol of "our independence and sovereignty," while a former US envoy of Dhaka described Tareque as a symbol of "kleptocratic government, egregious political corruption and violent politics." If one integrates both the attributions, what would our "our independence and sovereignty" transpire into?

Recently, there was a news item in the nation's media that the ACC had received Tk.7.40 crore, the last installment of Tk.21 crore that BNP chairperson's second son Koko and his associates had siphoned off to Singapore. As usual, the acting general secretary accused the government of filing the 'politically motivated' cases against Koko and Tareque with intention to "tarnish the image of Koko and the BNP." "The verdict in the case was delivered in absence of Koko without giving him any chance of self-defence," said the ASG.

The fact of the matter is that Koko was summoned to the court, following cancellation of his parole, to stand trial, but he preferred to abscond along with his co-accomplice. So the accusation of trial "without giving him any chance of

self-defence" is a travesty of truth. Quite to the contrary, the courts in Bangladesh have always been extra kind to his family, specially to his mother, who prefers to keep herself out of prefixed court proceedings at her own will, one after another, on the pretext of being 'busy with political works,' an unheard of alibi to keep oneself abstaining from the court proceedings, in any country where rule of law exists. He had hundreds of lawyers to defend him who, in this case, covered their faces with black cloth to protest the verdict against him.

According to the charges, Koko and Saimon had received Tk.19.71 crore in bribe from German telecom giant Siemens and Chinese engineering firm China Harbor to win them telecom and terminal-building contracts. They later siphoned the money off to Singapore.

In the meantime, Arafat Rahman Koko had achieved the dubious distinction of finding a place in the World Bank publication named *Asset Recovery Handbook*. This World Bank-UNODC publication mentioned the alleged embezzlement of several million dollars by Koko as an example of stealing national assets.

Also, on January 3, 2011 the *Straits Times* of Singapore, under the heading, "Fine for not reporting \$3 million in transfer," reported that the managing director of a company providing corporate secretarial services failed to inform authorities in 2007 that he had been instructed by Arafat Rahman Koko to transfer and hold some \$3,171,000 in his personal bank account. In connection with the money laundering, a Singapore court on January 2, 2011, fined Lim Siew Cheng, a local businessman, for keeping Koko's money in his account. The *Straits Times* reported that the court fined Cheng \$900,677 for having Koko's \$3,171,000 transferred to his account and holding on to it on Koko's advice.

On the other side of the Pacific, according to a report

posted in FBI website on January 9, 2009, the US Department of Justice (USDOJ) filed a forfeiture action on January 8, 2009, in US District Court. The forfeiture complaint related primarily to alleged bribes of \$3 million paid to Arafat "Koko" Rahman, in connection with public works projects awarded by the government of Bangladesh to Siemens AG and China Harbor Engineering Company and kept in a Singapore-based bank. Siemens and three of its subsidiaries pleaded guilty on December 15, 2008, to violations of and charges related to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), in a settlement with the USDOJ, Siemens agreed to pay \$1.6 billion in fine to various authorities as penalties for its "corruption." Specifically, Siemens Bangladesh admitted that it caused corrupt payments of at least \$5,319,839 to be made through purported business consultants to various Bangladeshi officials.

According to the forfeiture complaint, the bribe payments from Siemens AG and China Harbor Engineering Company were made in US dollars, and the illicit funds flowed through financial institutions in the United States before they were deposited in accounts in Singapore, thereby subjecting them to US jurisdiction.

The publications, the authorities and the institutions referenced above have nothing to do with the current government or the ACC of Bangladesh. So, if BNP's acting general secretary's suggestion is true, then the court and the government of Singapore, the USDOJ, the Siemens AG, the World Bank-UNODC, the former CTG and the current government of Bangladesh, all are in collusion with the Bangladesh ACC to file a "politically motivated" corruption case against Koko.

The writer is the Convener of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

By THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- Barbecue treat
- Exalt
- Creative gorm
- Large lizard
- Linen source
- Mole hole
- Wallet bill
- Last letters
- Mans the buckets
- Lynx or lion
- Incline
- Kitchen fixture
- Hoof it
- Pennsylvania port
- One of the Titans
- Rock groups
- "You betchah!"
- Hitching tool
- Aspirin target
- Greedy desire
- Debt indicator
- "Pinocchio" fish
- Immediately
- Not to mention
- Be important

**DOWN**

- Fissure
- Not active
- Dangerous pitches
- Jazz horn
- Defame, in a way
- "If you say so"
- Trappers' wares
- Road sealer
- First numero
- Pussy foot
- Pimple, in slang
- "Lonely Boy" singer
- Yokels
- Gung-ho
- Golfer's supply
- Influence
- Overdue
- Bulls or Bears
- Position
- Frank holder
- Trail user
- Cream buyer
- Small amount
- Pirate's take
- Zodiac animal
- Greek vowel
- Morse vowel
- Upper limit

Yesterday's answer

19 Yokels  
20 Gung-ho  
21 Golfer's supply  
22 Influence  
23 Overdue  
24 Bulls or Bears  
25 Position  
26 Frank holder  
27 Trail user  
34 Cream buyer  
35 Small amount  
36 Pirate's take  
37 Zodiac animal  
38 Greek vowel  
39 Morse vowel  
40 Upper limit  
41 Upper limit

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

On letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

8-27 CRYPTOQUOTE

S WBOKF VBH FHYM GHU AKSJ  
OM GHU S WBOKF, CQU UBY ESG  
VBH FHYM GHU AKSJ BSM KHTYF  
LHZTYZ UBY WBOKF VBH KMYF  
OG BOE SGF VBH BY VOKK EOMM  
UYZZOCKJ. — ASCKH GYZQFS

Yesterday's Cryptoquote:  
THE SKY IS THAT BEAUTIFUL OLD PARCHMENT IN WHICH THE SUN AND THE MOON KEEP THEIR DIARY.  
- ALFRED KREYMBORG

BEETLE BAILY

LOOK AT ALL THE DRAWINGS ON THE WALL OF THIS OLD CAVE

THEY COULD BE A MILLION YEARS OLD

2-10

HENRY

LOOKS LIKE NOTHING HAS IMPROVED IN ALL THAT TIME

2-11

by Mort Walker

LOOKS LIKE NOTHING HAS IMPROVED IN ALL THAT TIME

2-11

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QUOTABLE Quotes

"Life is like playing a violin solo in public and learning the instrument as one goes on."

Samuel Butler