

Address traffic congestion urgently Some suggestions

DESPITE long-drawn public outcries and discourses on how Dhaka's nightmarish traffic gridlocks are costing the economy and harming the environment and public health, little headway could be made towards adopting mitigation measures. A recent study conducted by the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB) shows that every day some 3.2 million business hours in the city are lost to traffic congestion alone. At this rate, the annual loss to business and industry stands at Tk. 40 billion. This is but the tip of the iceberg, if one also takes into account other attendant fall-outs.

But these are preventable losses that we have brought upon ourselves through a completely resigned and laid back attitude towards traffic management.

We may consider the following set of suggestions to address the knotty problem:

1. Take immediate measures to repair the damaged roads and traffic intersections.
2. Demarcate no-parking zones in the city and arrange for their strict enforcement.
3. Probe if high-rise buildings, shopping centres and office blocks, etc have built-in parking lots. The sight of the endless queues of cars and other transports occupying every nook and cranny in different parts of the city points to stark lack of compliance with building approval clauses.
4. Go for rapid construction of multi-storied parking lots in busy areas of the city such as Dhanmondi, Motijheel, Dilkusha, Uttara, Gulshan and so on.

Once these basic elements to the traffic infrastructure are put in place, traffic congestion in the city will be significantly reduced.

A remorseless chief whip Won't apologize, passes blame on media as usual

WE were shocked at the statement of chief whip ASM Feroz to the effect that he wanted money not crests from the people felicitating him on his assumption of office. We are even more appalled by his arrogant display of attitude not to apologize for his brazen facts on Saturday.

Though he later attempted to make light of his comments, saying these were jokingly stated and not really meant, he is nonetheless exposed for what he did and said through the video footage. Far from admitting his mistake, with all modesty, he blamed the press for misrepresenting his remarks. He even implied that the media fell into a local conspiratorial trap to undermine him.

Every politician makes mistake. If he had only said that he had made the remark at the spur of the moment then it would have been perfectly understandable as a slippage. Even world leaders have apologized for their indiscreet remarks that they said were not intended to hurt anybody's sensibilities or to be on wrong side of law.

But our chief whip went blasé in denying that he made an obnoxious comment and tried to put on a brave face while he should have been sensibly admitting his mistake. Such persons may only bring the ruling party to disrepute and cast an adverse image on the parliament as well as the government.

Mamata's cherished march to Delhi

ABDUL MATIN

AS I was going by car to my hotel in the city centre from Kolkata's new airport on January 27, I noticed a large number of banners posted everywhere saying "Chalo, Brigade Chalo." Each banner invariably carried a large picture of Mamata Banerjee, chief minister of Paschimbanga and leader of Trinamul Congress (TMC). Wherever I went in Kolkata, I found people talking about the meeting of TMC at the Brigade ground scheduled for January 30.

Mamata left no stone unturned to orchestrate the biggest show in Kolkata ahead of the Lok Sabha election. Schools around Dharmatala were either closed or rescheduled. Special trains were arranged and thousands of buses and trucks hired to bring supporters from all corners of the state. Guesthouses and godowns in Kolkata were booked for overnight stay of the supporters.

As I was leaving Kolkata for Santiniketan early in the morning of January 30, I noticed a big crowd in the Brigade ground. Thousands of empty buses were parked around the area. Supporters were coming in processions from all directions, chanting slogans and carrying pictures of Mamata. 200 giant screens were set up across Calcutta to beam the show live. Another 19 screens were at the Brigade ground. Renowned singers and dancers of Kolkata performed on the stage to entertain the crowd.

I missed Mamata's speech, but read it in the newspapers next morning. With a firm grip on Paschimbanga, she now wants to extend her influence up to Delhi. She thundered: "Delhi chalo." She said: "BJP is not the alternative to Congress. Trinamul is the only alternative at the Centre." Without naming anyone, she announced her 3-D plan. She denounced 'dynasty' and 'danga' (riot) and desired to rule 'Delhi'. To achieve her goal, she is ready to form alliances with other small regional parties.

How far is Delhi from Kolkata for Mamata? Regional parties usually exploit the sentiments of the local people and have parochial outlooks often resulting in inter-state bickering. To form a national government, they need to broaden their outlook. Mamata sabotaged the signing of the Teesta river accord and opposes the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh. She also has problems in sharing of water with neighbouring states. She, therefore, needs to improve her record of relationship with the neighbouring states and countries first in order to establish her credentials as a national leader. Until such time, Delhi is likely to remain too far for Mamata Banerjee.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

Counting the cost of imported fuel

SYED MANSUR
HASHIM

AS stated by the prime minister, the government has no plans to tap into its own proven coal reserves. Indeed, the energy ministry officials have categorically gone on record to say that imported coal will become the mainstay for generating more than 50% of all electricity produced by 2030. A number of coal fired plants are in various stages of construction and will depend entirely on imported coal. While that is planned, realities on the ground with regards to infrastructure to handle imported coal have remains unaddressed. With no significant new gas finds on shore, we continue to deplete existing fields of Bibiana, Maulibazar and Jalalabad. Now that Sangu gas field is also out of the picture, it would be safe to estimate that without new gas finds, the logical option to offset the gas shortage of around half a billion cubic feet of gas will have to come from oil-fired rental power plants for the foreseeable future.

And that is precisely what has happened. Going by recent newspaper reports, a government panel has recommended that existing contracts for rental and quick rental power plants be extended till 2020.

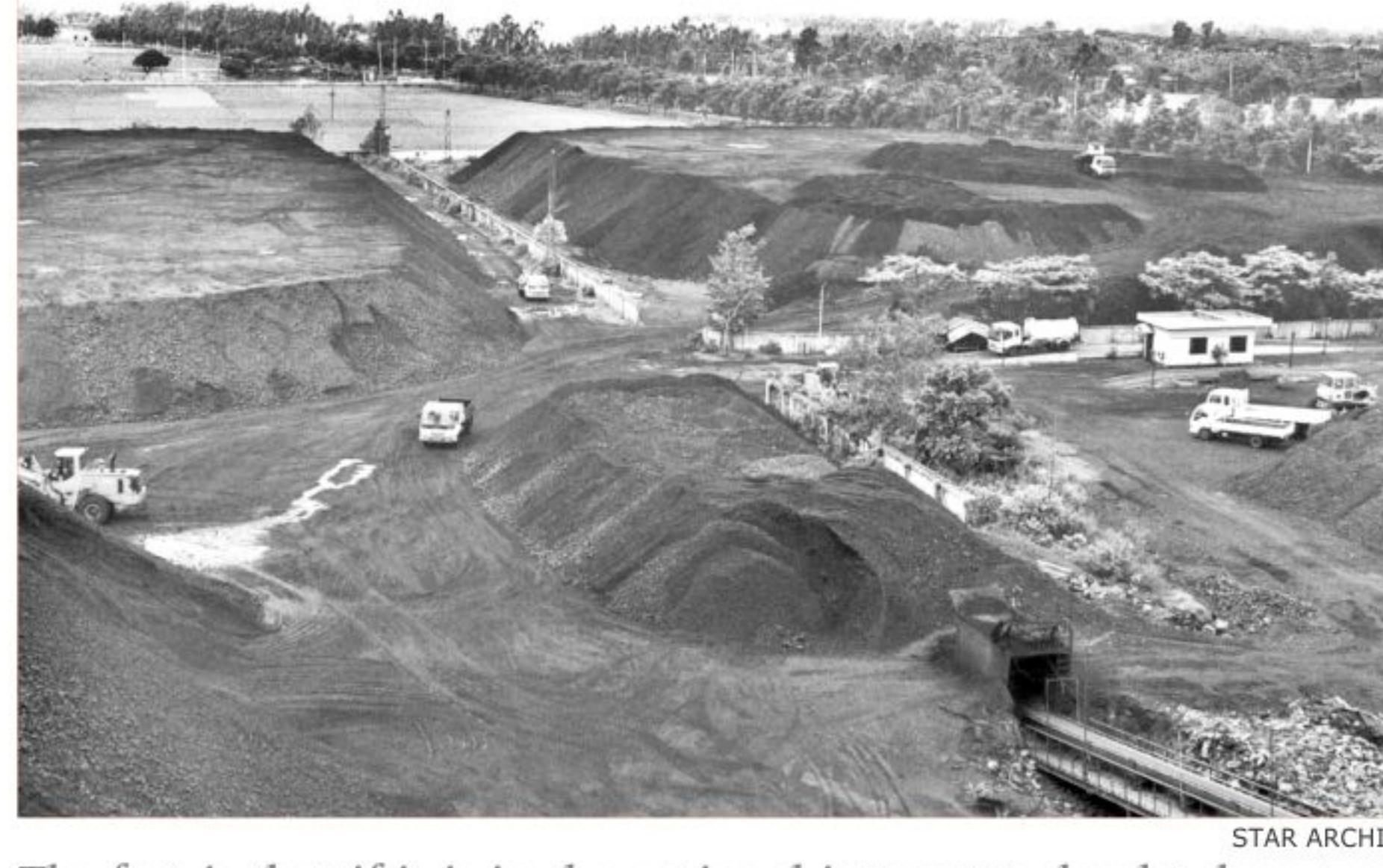
Going by what has been reported in *Prothom Alo* on February 9, due to various intricacies involved in converting rental power units to independent power plants, it is far easier to go for an extension on existing contracts. Decisions will have to be made on price of electricity, duration run, and fuel supply and so on. The whole idea behind the rationale to extend looms from the fact that there is no viable alternative to the fuel-fired plants in operation at present. As the government in its previous term spent its time mulling over the decision on whether local coal would be extracted, no mid or long term project for coal-run plants could be finalised.

Though there are plans till date to generate about 20,000 megawatts (MW) of electricity from coal within 2030, no substantive step has been taken to develop either the infrastructure or clinch long term contracts from foreign sources. So precisely where will we end up in 2021 when the extended contracts run out? The other source of primary energy that has become somewhat of a buzzword in energy circles in the country is liquefied natural gas (LNG). For that to happen also, a LNG terminal and associated infrastructure will have to be constructed. Even with a contract landed today, the best possible timeline for completion and operation is still two years away. Then of course there is the cost factor. At current prices, importing 500 million cubic feet gas form of LNG will cost the national exchequer an estimated \$2.75 billion (@ \$15 per mmcfd). The cost of producing electricity based on such costly fuel supply can easily be left to imagination. It will certainly not be possible for the government to continue to subsidise generated electricity indefinitely and we can safely look forward to rationalisation. The question of course at this juncture is whether

industry will be able to afford electricity at such cost.

With such stark examples of "costs" involved in any fuel that is imported, we have chosen to close the chapter on local coal deposits. We have chosen to dig our collective graves. The argument that open pit mining would automatically translate into loss of farmlands is a weak one. Farmlands are being lost at an alarming proportion to make way for commercial housing and industry. This is an established fact. And environmental degradation is happening as we continue to look the other way on the wholesale toxic discharge by industry. The fact is that if it is in the national interest to develop long term fuel supply that is "affordable" and whose supply is assured, there is no alternative to development of local deposits of coal.

But for the sake of argument, let us have a look at what is in store for us if we go ahead with imported coal. With the domestic coal development chapter safely closed (with the exception of very minimal coal coming out of Barapukuria mine that produces approximately 1 million tons per annum), the country will require an estimated 30 million tons to generate around 10,000MW of electricity. Our brick fields will require another 4 - 5 million tons. Where is the infrastructure to handle such huge shipments of coal? First, the port will have to be upgraded substantially. Next,



STAR ARCHIVE

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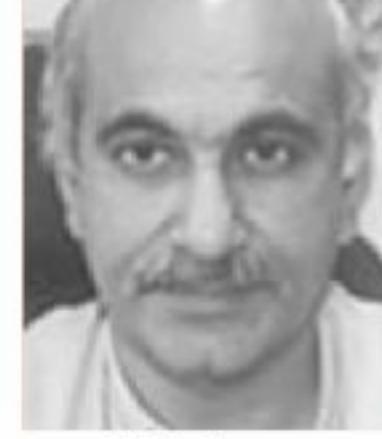
substantial finances will have to be made available for capital dredging. Also, financial outlays will have to be committed yearly for the maintenance of these river routes to transport coal from the port to the various plants using river routes (the least cost option for transportation).

At current international prices, the cost per tonne of imported coal will not be less than \$130 - 140 at point of delivery. That will demand \$3.9 - \$4.2 billion per annum. And this estimate is not final since prices of coal in the international market are subject to fluctuation which will prove immensely risky for a developing nation like Bangladesh. Should the price of coal increase, our balance of payments will certainly take a nosedive. The costs involved in developing infrastructure to handle such massive volumes of coal have not been brought into consideration here. Nor has the timeline been addressed. At the end of the day, policymakers need to ask themselves whether energy security will be addressed by putting faith on an import policy with so many unknown variables attached.

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The political calculus of Bengal

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

WHY, and when, does a politician defect? The simplistic, but not all that simple, answer is money. We have good reason, of course, to be cynical about the morality of politicians. But if money alone was sufficient to buy the loyalty of legislators, there would be serial instability. Too many politicians, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, can resist everything but temptation. Defection remains an occasional game because money is, at best, a one-time payoff. Politicians, like other professionals, prefer a career to any retirement benefit.

When three MLAs from the Left and three from Congress switched sides to send a fourth Trinamool candidate to the Rajya Sabha last week, they were signalling something more significant than the variable role of money in public life. They delivered a political message: the Left Front was dying, and Congress was comatose in Bengal.

The CPI(M) is still alive, although not well, but it is time to draft notes on an obituary for the Left Front, a coalition of principal and junior partners who built up one of the most extraordinary political machines in modern history. The CPI(M) still has the strength to wave the red flag, but small parties who added incremental, but critical, percentages to its vote share are being squeezed out of political margins. Two of the MLAs who abandoned the Left, Dasrath Tirkey and Ananta Adhikari, were from RSP, a party which once promised both revolution and socialism. The third MLA, Sunil Mondal, is from Forward Bloc, another outfit that no longer knows why it exists. All are Scheduled Caste and Tribe leaders. Once the underprivileged walk away from a Marxist fortress, you know that the ramparts have become vacant.

The Congress is in equally grave trouble. It lost support in Malda, a seat which remained loyal even through the decades of Left ascendancy, thanks principally to the local influence of the Ghani Khan Choudhary family. The veteran Ghani Khan has passed away. His brother Abu Naser, an MLA, did not vote on party lines. His colleague Emani Biswas, from neighbouring Murshidabad, refused the compromise of half-measures and gave his vote to Mamata Banerjee. This rebellion could reduce Congress to just one seat in Bengal after the coming general elections.

The great churn in Bengal makes sense if you know how to decipher the emerging political mathematics. Mamata

Banerjee is the new establishment, and will remain there for the next few years, but the Marxists are no longer in command of opposition space. This is not merely because their organisation has imploded. A party built on a cadre system can always replenish its ranks once it emerges from the shell-shock of defeat. Its problem is that it has not been able to refurbish its ideological narrative, let alone offer an alternative one. The Bengal voter has seen enough of local-variety socialism, and wants to hear something different.

Mamata Banerjee can get away with populism because she has not promised anything else. Her challenge is to practice what she preached, but she still has the luxury of time. Not as much time as she or her party thinks, but not as little as the Marxists would wish either. She is safe for the moment. The Marxists, however, cannot be sanguine. When they were in power their threat came from Mamata Banerjee. Now that they are in opposition, the danger to their fortunes is from BJP.

This is the meaning of Narendra Modi's successful rally at the Brigade Parade Ground in Kolkata. Not too long ago, BJP leaders would be awash in self-congratulation if their enthusiasts filled an indoor stadium. In this election season, saffron was visible at a venue that was once dominated by the red flag and now flies the green standards of Mamata.

You do not have to be an Einstein to count numbers at a rally. Television cameras do it for you.

The BJP is not a worry for Mamata Banerjee. But the Left could cede territory in Bengal if it does not revive, and quickly. We are not talking of any dramatic leap forward; BJP is not going to win too many seats in the state this year. But its rising support will be evident when votes are counted. A political party moves a bit like an army. Defeat can degenerate into collapse if commanders are unable to rally troops in adversity. But any advance can only happen in stages. Marxists thrive on dialectics. They should be able to understand this quite easily.

The Bengal Congress has lost its connect with Bengal. At best, Congress is playing hop-scotch, jumping from one square to another. In the Rajya Sabha elections, it joined forces -- unsuccessfully -- with the Left. Simultaneously, it is sending desperate private messages to Mamata for an electoral alliance on any terms. Beggars, as the proverb puts it, can't be choosers.

If Congress and Left Front MLAs believed that their parties had a chance of victory this year, there would not have been any defection.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Ekushey book fair in other cities



STAR

As usual, the Ekushey book fair has kicked off on the Bangla Academy premises and Suhrawardy Uddyan. Surely this fair boosts the habit of reading, as readers from different age groups throng the book fair. Readers can meet their favourite authors there. Even toddlers move around the stalls and look for their coveted books. It is said that the habit of reading is waning as there is a plethora of other sources of information and entertainment -- computers, tablets and e-books. But nothing compares with the fresh smell of new books.

But the dwellers of other cities are deprived of such a book fair. We hope that similar type of book fairs will be arranged in other cities of the country.

Zabed Wali

Chittagong

Badsha Solaiman

Dept of English

University of Dhaka

Save potato growers

We came to know from the media reports that the unfortunate potato growers of the northern region voiced their resentments by littering the busy roads with potatoes, because they were not getting fair price for their produce.

Badsha Solaiman

Dept of English

University of Dhaka

Kapil Dev Roy

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Comments on post editorial, "Chittagong arms haul and our intelligence agencies," published on February 06, 2014

OpeeMonir

Thank you for presenting us with an insight into the issues concerned. When will our military, intelligence agencies, and other associated state organs in the administration work together?

Pro-Voce

Dear Brig. Gen. Khan, I am curious to know how a policeman could bring this case to the attention of the public and the media, when two top military intelligence officers were directly involved in bringing the consignment. Why didn't they get hold of the consignment and take possession of it secretly? Was it impossible? How come a policeman had the guts to ignore 'red eyes' of the two top military men? There is something fishy in all of it.

"Cash, not crest!"

(February 09, 2014)

M. Ashraf

We also cut just a joke when we say that filthy, greedy bigots and dacoits run the country.

Barkat

People should present him with torn shoes and slippers and if he protests, they can say it's a joke.

Nabin

He is great! He is a real politician!

"Open trade with illegal gas lines" (February 08, 2014)

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Titas, Petro Bangla in connivance with local ruling party leaders started this dishonest trade. After the one-sided election, the ruling party activists, leaders are now more desperate to plunder the state properties.

Barkat

Absolutely correct.