

Safe roads or highway to death

BITTER TRUTH



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

With road widening programmes and road safety measures like putting road dividers on our national highways are hard to come by, people travelling by bus or cars, or trucks laden with goods ranging from food grains to chemicals to explosives, meet disastrous accidents.

MOST roads in Bangladesh have evolved rather than designed and purpose-built; consequently hazards are mounting. It has been revealed through a study of the ARI (Accident Research Institute) at Buet that out of the colossal number of accidents taking place on the national highways in the country, 35 per cent of these takes place in four per cent area of the national highway. It was learnt that 209 most accident-prone spots were identified on our national

highways by the ARI and the recommendations for fixing up the faults were made over to the communications ministry.

But other than 11 spots in the Dhaka -Aricha portion of the national highway, visibly no work was done in other spots. It has been possible to reduce accidents and consequent deaths by fixing up turnings along 55 km of the highway from Nabinagar to Paturia ferry terminal. But the most dangerous spots identified by ARI on the Dhaka- Ctg highway, where accidents take place more frequently, remained untouched. It was learnt that 90 per cent of the deaths caused by road crashes on the national highways in 2013 occurred in this portion of the road.

There has been no effort to install road dividers in the busiest and most vulnerable points on the highway beyond Dhaka city limits. Road accidents tend to happen also in certain locations like hat, bazaar and areas near bus stand. And all these deaths during the last one decade are being blamed on the government's indulgence of unscrupulous bus owners as well as driver's lack of skill, reckless driving and overriding disregard of road safety rules. The ARI research findings on drivers have revealed that in 48.7 per cent of the cases, drivers are to blame for the accidents. Most of these drivers, about 81 per cent, are just trained by their 'ustads' (senior driver of the vehicle) and the license they procure is always by giving bribe.

But these accidents, numerically shocking as they may be, fail to reflect the social tragedy due to the lives lost in road accidents. Apart from that the number of people getting crippled for life is staggering, and the loss to the exchequer is about Tk 4000 crore annually.

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bus or cars, or trucks laden with goods ranging from food grains to chemicals to explosives, meet disastrous accidents.

Ironically, with the high- ups in the administration constantly devising ways and means to avert accidents and ensure road safety, people are dying on the roads with no effective checks and control by the highway police. Despite the fact that the country lurched from one disaster to another, whether in the road sector or river routes, all these deaths and disasters could hardly wake up the past governments or even jolt the present administration to take bold and drastic action. People running the state must decide which comes first, wide and long roads or the trucks and cars that move on them. If we want real development of the country, we have to make meaningful investment in the road sector, because roads really build up national wealth.

Workshops and seminars held so frequently come out with safety policy guidelines that are hardly implemented on the road. In a country where the police administration at the lower rungs is singularly known for sloth and lax attitude, high-ups in the police administration must make sudden checks on the national highways, and must deal severely with the recalcitrant highway police and violators of road safety norms.

The problem isn't one of resources but of leadership, motivation and political will, and because these are appallingly missing the consequence is frequent disasters. It is impossible to accept the abominable and criminal negligence of throwing the innocent working class who form the most productive segment of the population under the wheels of speeding vehicle because they want to earn a living. Inevitably, they have to come out on the road for their livelihood, but with such tremendous risk every day of the year!

Unfortunately, as the scale of tragedies - man-made and natural-increased during the last few years, so did our apathy, both before and after the accident. All these accidents were mostly preventable. Yet, we never learnt our lessons.

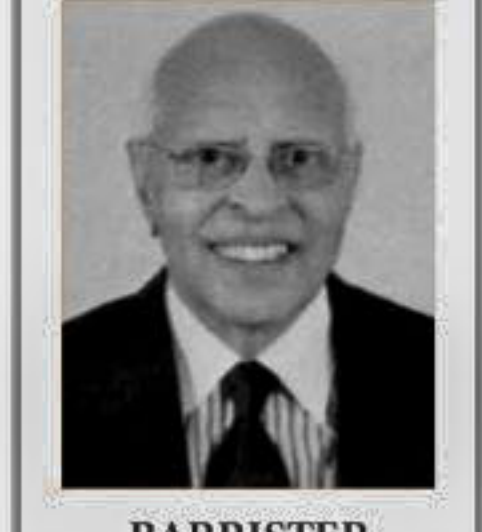
One can now only hope that it is lesson enough that should shake the administration and the concerned agencies out of their stupor. Most importantly, unless the government enacts stricter laws relating to drivers' recklessness, there will be no improvement in the situation. Fully aware of the maximum punishment of three years' jail sentence that they will face if their lapses can be proved by eye witnesses in the court, most drivers have a tendency to flout road safety rules like speed limit, overtaking, and overloading.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.
E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

REMOVE THE MISGIVINGS FIRST

Bangladesh-Myanmar FS level meeting

BOTTOM LINE



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

ONE of the mechanisms of injecting momentum and dynamism into relations between the two neighbours has been the holding of meetings at the level of foreign secretary. The scheduled 8th such meeting in Dhaka on 31st August, between Bangladesh and Myanmar, is to be most welcomed.

The main purpose of the meeting, I would argue, is to remove whatever misgivings Myanmar has about Bangladesh and adopt confidence building measures with Myanmar to put bilateral relations on a positive track. Cooperation on other issues should then move forward quickly.

Since 1972, there have been many initiatives and about ten agreements between the countries to improve relations, but nothing moved. There seem to be deep-seated misunderstandings between the two countries. Some originated in the colonial times when many Bangladeshi nationals controlled the economy of Myanmar.

In modern times the rise of Islamic extremism is perceived as a threat to Myanmar. Since March 2011, the reformist President of Myanmar U Thein Sein opened the doors of Myanmar for foreigners and introduced democratic and economic reforms inside the country.

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh visited Myanmar in 2012 and thereafter Bangladesh took many initiatives to improve relations but did not get enthusiastic response from Myanmar. To this day, for example, Myanmar remains cool regarding road connectivity between the two countries, even though Bangladesh wanted to provide funds for the project.

There are certain issues which generate tensions between the two countries. First is the Rohingya issue and although Bangladesh refers the refugees from Myanmar as Rohingyas who live along the border of the two nations, Myanmar does not recognise any person as Rohingya.

The Rohingya issue should not be seen merely as a refugee problem with humanitarian dimension partly because many Rohingya organisations have been reportedly fighting for decades for a separate land in Rakhine state. Bangladesh is totally against this movement as it firmly believes in the territorial integrity of Myanmar. Given this, both countries need to identify the root causes of the issue and jointly develop an effective border management to prevent the flow of Rohingyas into Bangladesh.

An idea is floated whether Rohingyas could be moved from the border region and distributed over other areas in Bangladesh. So long they live near the Myanmar border, tension will occur because there are many undesirables among them who are reported to be involved in trans-border anti-social conduct. Secondly, Myanmar is also witnessing increased cases of religious intolerance. In spite of its rich cultural heritage and legacy of socio-religious harmony, present-day Myanmar is surely not the best place for its religious minorities. The worst part is that some discriminatory laws against minorities are reportedly being backed by radical Buddhist monks (collectively known as the Mabatha), and there have been petitions signed by as many as 1.3 million people calling for elimination of Muslims from the country. Thirdly, there appears to be no government level structured security cooperation between the two countries and on many occasions, border tension has risen including the kidnapping and killing of a policeman from Bangladesh.

It is reported that Bangladesh will make a formal proposal for security dialogue and discuss a coordinated border management plan. If this is agreed, many of the prickly issues relating to the border would be resolved. It is good to note that Bangladesh Biman now flies out to Myanmar from Dhaka twice a week since last December and negotiations of a coastal shipping agreement is at the final stage. This will facilitate trade between the two countries.

The amount of bilateral trade is meager-only a few hundred millions. It can reach easily to one billion dollar. For this to occur the ceiling for transaction value must be increased per consignment and payment could be made through the Asian Clearing Union. There is a report that Myanmar wants to set up a wholesale market with Bangladesh and hold trade fairs near the border to increase bilateral trade. Myanmar has similar markets and trade fairs with China and Thailand. Bangladesh has also such markets (hats) on the border with India and it has been beneficial to the people of both sides. Furthermore, this will stop the illegal smuggling of goods between the two countries.

It may be recalled that Myanmar, which recognized Bangladesh on 13th January, 1972, was the 7th country to do so and Bangladesh remembers this friendly gesture. Bangladesh shares 271 km border with Myanmar- both land and water. The border shares the boundary Naaf River between the two countries. Bangladesh is adjacent to two states of Myanmar-Rakhine and Chin.

Both nations are interested in establishing the economic corridor known as BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar) and both are members of BIMSTEC which is currently considering free trade area among the members in other development sectors. The diplomatic dialogue between the two will hopefully be able to create an environment in which both Bangladesh and Myanmar will be best of friends. Bangladesh may deepen its relations with Myanmar with a visit of the President of Myanmar U Thein Sein to Dhaka.

The writer is Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva

CRYPTOQUOTE

EXUTU ZTU EXTUU EPIUR DN QZRUQZVV
IVZPUTR: EXDRU SXD OZHU KE XZIIUA,
EXDRU SXD SZEMX KE XZIIUA ZAG EXDRU SXD
SDAGUT SZXE XZIIUAR.

- EDOOP VZRDTGZ

AXYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One 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.

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:

YOU CAN BE CHILDLIKE WITHOUT BEING CHILDISH. A CHILD ALWAYS WANTS TO HAVE FUN. ASK YOURSELF, "AM I HAVING FUN?"

- CHRISTOPHER MELONI

S	T	A	Y	S		S	M	I	L	E
T	O	T	U	P		P	A	C	E	S
A	N	A	L	Y	Z	E	T	H	I	S
G	A	L		W	O	N		A	S	A
E	L	E	G	A	N	T		B	U	Y
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S	C	A	R	E		S	I	D	E	D
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I	M	A	G	I	N	E	T	H	A	T
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G	N	A	T	S		D	E	N	T	S

Yesterday's answer

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8	9
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14						15			
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34			35					36	
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39								40	
41								42	

ACROSS

- 1 Twitch
- 6 Computer fodder
- 10 Overly virile
- 11 Speeders' worries
- 12 Quiver item
- 13 Fuming
- 14 Real hoot
- 15 Kindle
- 16 Bar bill
- 17 Historic time
- 18 Filming site
- 19 Ocean banks
- 22 Flight part
- 23 Headphones site
- 26 Mild onions
- 29 Fitting
- 32 Completely
- 33 Barn sound
- 34 Easter event
- 36 Rotate
- 37 Cabaret sight
- 38 European fashion center
- 39 Getting on
- 40 Old saw
- 41 Fallon's predecessor
- 42 Doctrine

DOWN

- 1 Know-how
- 2 Outcasts
- 3 Circus performer
- 4 Bar order
- 5 Do a yard job
- 6 Bedrock pet
- 7 Black cattle variety
- 8 Far from wordy
- 9 So far
- 11 Adieu
- 15 In the past
- 17 Dominant guy, figuratively
- 20 "Miserables"
- 21 Mineo of movies
- 24 "Star Trek" baddy
- 25 Closet use
- 27 Brewpub product
- 28 Shakespeare work
- 29 Shock
- 30 Pitcher Satchel
- 31 Use the gym
- 35 - Domini
- 36 Ocean motion
- 38 Small tug

A SAARC Development Bank to Bridge the Infrastructure Deficit in South Asia?

SAMAN KELEGAMA

I N the third week of July, the Narendra Modi government mooted the idea of a SAARC Development Bank (SDB) along the lines of the BRICS Bank announced by the BRICS Summit around the same time. It was reported that India will propose the SDB at the SAFTA Ministerial Council in Bhutan and later at the forthcoming SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, Nepal.

This is not something new. As far back as 1998, the report of the SAARC Group of Eminent Persons (GEP) highlighted the need for a development bank for the South Asian region. The report titled: "SAARC Vision Beyond the Year 2000", strongly argued for a South Asian Development Bank in addition to the South Asian Development Fund of US\$500 million. It said "The South Asia Development Bank should mainly finance commercially viable infrastructure projects and trade-creating joint venture projects". What the GEP had in mind for the South Asia Development Fund was to play a role to assist the LDCs to achieve higher levels of development, and particularly enhance their export production capacity. A similar Fund operates in EU for economically weaker members like Ireland, Poland, etc., to assist them to catch up with others.

Despite nearly three decades of SAARC and two decades of preferential trade via SAPTA and SAFTA, intra-regional trade in South Asia remains at a low level of 5%. Among other factors, two issues that explain this low level of intra-regional trade is poor infrastructure connectivity in the region, and the lack of a supply base in small South Asian countries to exploit the growing market demand in the large South Asian countries, in particular, India.

Both these problems can be addressed if South Asia could have more funding for physical infrastructure development and improving regional connectivity. In that context, a readily financing SAARC Development Bank can be a key player in stimulating intra-regional trade in the region. Needless to say, to play such a role the SDB should function along the lines of the World Bank and the ADB and should extend concessional financing to SAARC member countries. The details pertaining to the Bank's start-up capital, annual budget, and functioning mechanisms will have to be worked out by the member states.

A recent report released by the World Bank sheds some light on the annual financial resources required and sectors to which such resources should be channelled. The report titled: "Reducing Poverty by Closing South Asia's Infrastructure Gap" was released in early 2014 and according to the report, South Asia has a US\$ 2.5 trillion worth infrastructure deficit. The gap is defined as the difference between South Asia's development goals and its actual capability to meet these goals. The said amount according to the report is required to invest in transport, water supply and sanitation, solid waste management, telecommunications, and irrigation to bridge the infrastructure gap over the next ten years. The report says that one third should be spent on transport, one third on electricity, and the remainder on water supply and sanitation, solid waste management, telecommunications, and irrigation.

The SAARC Development Fund was established in 2005 due to the shortcomings of the South Asia Development Fund that functioned from 1996 to 2004. In 2010, the SDF Secretariat was established in Bhutan with three Windows - social, economic and infrastructure, and a total fund of US\$ 300 million. So far, only the social window has been active with fund allocations made to various poverty alleviation and social development projects in the region. The other two windows have been dormant, perhaps due to the small capital base and problems of identifying viable projects for funding.

If the SDB comes into operation, it may be prudent to take out the infrastructure window out of the SDF and make it a part of the SDB. The economic window which is defined as non-infrastructure projects related to trade and industrial development, agriculture, service sector, science and technology, etc., can remain under the SDF with more focused areas for fund allocation.

In addition to what the World Bank report has identified, the SDB can focus on highways, ports, etc., that will play a key role in improving the connectivity in the region. SDB can complement the current sub-regional economic cooperation projects funded by the ADB and other multilateral financial institutions in South Asia. It could also draw lessons from existing regional group specific development banks such as Caribbean Development Bank for CARIFTA (Caribbean Free Trade Agreement) where it finances specific projects in national, sub-regional and regional development programmes.

In all probability, the Indian proposal in establishing an SDB will be endorsed at the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, Nepal scheduled in the last week of November 2014. While the SAARC member states would welcome this initiative, it is disappointing to note that an idea mooted in 1998 never got into the SAARC agenda for 16 long years. And this has happened in a regional grouping which is lagging behind most others and referred to as the least integrated region in the world.

The writer is the Executive Director of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka.

QUOTABLE Quote
Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.
Thomas A. Edison

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