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Dream coming true

FROM PAGE 1

Today, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is going to inaugurate work on the main bridge. Bangladesh government is funding the Tk 28,793 crore project. The government decided to build the bridge with its own funds after the donors, including the World Bank, suspended their pledged assistance over allegations of corruption.

According to various assessments, the Economic Internal Rate of Return (EIRR) of the bridge is estimated at 19 percent while the standard rate is 12 percent.

The EIRR measures the profitability of investments. The rate is assessed by accumulating benefits of travel time and savings in fuel, utility connections, productivity gains, increase in traffic volume, freight service and employment generation.

The southwest region that covers nearly 27 percent area of the country will annually see a further 1.7 percent GDP growth and the country another 0.56 percent growth when the bridge comes into operation, according to a 2010 joint study of the World Bank and Bangladesh government.

\$6 BILLION NEEDED FOR INFRASTRUCTURE

The study recommended investing \$6 billion under a comprehensive programme to develop related infrastructure to get full benefits of the bridge.

Analysts, however, say related rail and road network needs to be built on both sides of the Padma for the best use of the bridge.

The rail network linking the bridge with the capital through Mawa will not be complete when the bridge opens to traffic in December 2018, Bangladesh Railway officials say.

Besides, overall progress has been slow in several projects taken to improve existing rail tracks in the southwest region. Building of new railroads linking the Mongla Port to Barisal is also lagging behind.

The Road Transport and Bridges Ministry is working to expand several



The inaugural site of the Padma bridge at Mawa has been decorated with portraits of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina set on boats. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

highways including the Dhaka-Mawa road into four-lane highways, but these projects are going on at a slow pace.

Asked, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said, "Our next priority is to develop infrastructure on both sides so that people can get maximum benefit of the bridge."

Talking to The Daily Star, transport expert Prof Shamsul Hoque said, "The government must build several ring

roads around the capital to allow vehicles from northern, western and eastern regions to travel through the bridge, avoiding the city's perennial traffic congestion."

"Vehicles travelling from the bridge to Chittagong, Sylhet or Mymensingh will face long tailbacks if related infrastructure is not developed," said Hoque, a teacher at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology.

For example, he said a truck from

Mymensingh now enters the capital at night since trucks are not allowed to enter the city at daytime. But if there is a ring road around the capital, the vehicle could take Mawa road any time bypassing the city.

The government should alter its plan to set up rail tracks from the Padma Bridge to Gendaria in the capital, said Hoque who is involved in a number of infrastructure development projects.

Instead of getting connected with

Gendaria, the railroad from the bridge should be linked with Narayanganj which will merge with the rail network at Laksam.

"If this happens, it will not only establish a direct link between Mongla and Chittagong port but also reduce the Dhaka-Chittagong train link distance by 99 kilometres," he said.

Prof Jamilur Reza Choudhury, who is involved in the Padma Bridge project from the beginning, said even after the

bridge is open to traffic, the country will have to wait for a few years to get its full benefit because related infrastructure is not there.

"Everything is in the government plan but the authorities have been slow in implementing it."

He said Japan already expressed its willingness to construct several ring roads around the capital while China is interested to help construct new rail tracks.

"The government should act quickly," said Jamilur Reza who was also involved in Jamuna Bridge project.

Zaid Bakht, former research director at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, said the Padma Bridge would offer more benefits than the Bangabandhu Bridge.

"Following the opening of Bangabandhu Bridge over the Jamuna in 1998, industries were set up, food production increased and employment was generated in the country's northern region. It helped reduce monga, a seasonal food crisis, there."

He also suggested investing on related infrastructures for getting the full benefits of the bridge.

"Vehicles coming from Mawa should have the option to take Chittagong road bypassing the city," the economist told The Daily Star.

The 2010 joint report says Mongla Port, the country's second largest seaport, can now utilise only 20 percent of its capacity and one of the key reasons for the low use is the absence of a bridge.

The capital is 170 km from Mongla and 264 km from Chittagong. But the travel time from Dhaka to Mongla is longer than that of the capital and the port city.

Padma Bridge will reduce the travel time, increase Mongla port's capacity and ease pressure on the Chittagong port, says the study.

Experts suggested that the government develop infrastructure of Mongla Port and increase its capacity to get full benefits of the Padma Bridge.

PADMA BRIDGE TIMELINE

PRE-FEASIBILITY STUDY 1998-1999
FEASIBILITY STUDY 2003-05
DETAIL DESIGN 2009-11
COST AT THE BEGINNING 10,161 crore
WB SUSPENDS LOAN ON GRAFT ALLEGATION September 2011
WB CANCELS LOAN June 2012
SYED ABUL HOSSAIN RESIGNS July 2012
GOVT DECIDES BUILDING AT OWN COST July 2012
ALL GRAFT SUSPECTS CLEARED September 2014
CONSTRUCTION BEGINS December 2014
TEST PILING BEGINS March 2015
CONSTRUCTION COMPLETES December 2018

Bridge to stand

FROM PAGE 1

the construction work would hamper this migration process," he said.

Traditional fishermen of the Padma report decreasing catches in the area near the Padma bridge construction site.

"We used to net more fish before the beginning of the construction of the bridge. Nowadays we get less," said Mohammad Ismail near the Mawa ferry ghat last Sunday.

An increased traffic of heavily loaded vessels of the construction companies are also having an adverse effect on the fish, he added.

Hasan Matobar, a fish wholesaler at Mawa Ghat, said fish prices have gone up due to less fish coming every day.

An engineer, who is with the project, said all large constructions negatively affect birds, animals and fishes. "Quite naturally, number of fish will decrease in the bridge area," he said preferring not to be named.

According to the EIA report, different types of work for the bridge, especially the pile driving which generates loud noise and vibration, would leave a serious negative impact also on dolphin vocalisation and migratory bird habitat.

Experts say the hilsa migrates from the sea to the estuaries and rivers for breeding and feeding during its spawning seasons, mainly in September-October.

Generally, the hilsa prefer to swim against strong currents in around 25-foot-deep water but they have stopped migrating to many rivers in the country for loss of navigability.

Even in the 80s, hilsa was available in more than 50 rivers, including all the big ones. But now they are found in only 10 rivers -- Padma, Meghna, Jamuna, Paira, Tentulia, Bishkhali, Shibs, Baleshwar, Kirttonkhola and Arial Kha, experts say.

There is a two-week ban on hilsa harvesting in October to increase the production.

Hilsa production in the country slumped to 1.99 lakh tonnes in 2002-03 season, creating a crisis. But the government initiatives helped increase hilsa catch to 3.85 lakh metric tonnes in 2013-14.

Hilsa makes up to 45 percent of the total catch in the Padma every year.

PADMA BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION PROGRESS AS OF OCTOBER 31, 2015

TOTAL PROJECT COST:	COMPONENTS	COST IN CRORE	SPENT IN CRORE	STARTED	TO BE COMPLETED	PROGRESS %
28,793 cr	Main Bridge	12,133	3,399	Nov 2014	Nov 2018	15
	River Training	8,707	1,896	Dec 2014	Dec 2018	11
	Construction Supervision Consultancy-1	133	61	Oct 2013	Oct 2017	43
	Construction Supervision Consultancy-2	383	52	Nov 2014	Nov 2018	13
	Janjira approach road, toll plaza, police and fire service stations	1,097	721	Oct 2013	Oct 2016	51
	Mawa approach road, toll plaza, police and fire service stations	193	132	Jan 2014	July 2016	57
	Engineering support and safety team	70	49	Oct 2013	Oct 2017	55
	Service area-2	208	122	Jan 2014	July 2016	61
	Resettlement cost	1,515				
	To be completed in December 2018					
About 3,000 foreign, local workers deployed						
1,231 hectare land acquired with Tk 1,299 crore						

SOURCE: ROAD TRANSPORT AND BRIDGES MINISTRY



World-class cement manufacturer