

The Asian stage for the American show

Boiler safety in name only!

Farcical number of inspectors

HERE are an estimated 5,500 factory boilers nationwide and there are only six boiler inspectors. For those inspectors to examine and certify them as safe for operation, each inspector would have to inspect an estimated 900 factory boilers in a year. So that means every inspector has to inspect, on paper, 2.47 boilers daily (given that there are 365 days in a year) including the weekends. It is a mathematical impossibility which is not unknown to the authorities. The situation would be comical were it not for the fact that more than 30 people were killed at the Tampaco Foils factory, which is attributed by the Fire Service to the boiler explosion.

Now that we have had a disastrous accident, there is talk of a proposal lying with the concerned ministry for initiating a recruitment process of 350 inspectors in post-Eid period. But given the pace of implementation, one wonders if the requisite manpower will be inducted into service so that such disastrous accidents in future can be prevented. Our scepticism arises primarily out of the fact that the proposal for new manpower recruitment was apparently sent in February and it has been six months already.

Given that boilers are an essential part of many factory operations, a piece of equipment that is used to generate steam for sterilisation, drying, power generation, etc. we sincerely hope that the ministry goes into high gear to recruit, train and induct the inspectors as soon as possible.

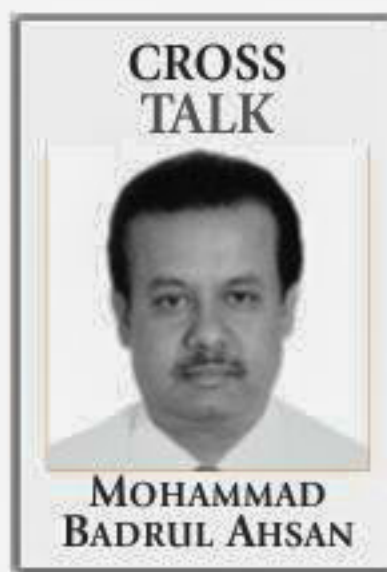
Continuous hassle for Eid travellers

Coherent planning needed

GOING home during the Eid holiday has continued to be a painful experience over the years and this year is no exception. Newspapers and TV channels have been flooded with reports of long tailbacks on the highways, overcrowded buses, trains and launches, despite some additional efforts by the authorities. Many transport owners or operators charged extra for tickets although the authorities have talked about deploying vigilant teams to check the malpractice. Transport operators, on the other hand, allege that rent-seeking by powerful groups compel them to engage in this unscrupulous practice.

The result is an unmitigated catastrophe for the home goers. Travel time has doubled or tripled in various routes. There were reports of snarl up on Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Mymensingh highways which were expanded to four lanes recently. The supply is failing miserably to keep up with the demand. For instance, the authorities added a few more trains but many passengers had to travel on the roof risking their lives. Battered buses, most of them unfit for the road, were given a facelift.

No one blames the authorities alone for the mess. The rush during the Eid holidays is extraordinary. But it's not unpredictable. Measures should be taken well ahead of time to ease the discomfort of passengers. It's going to require involvement of transport companies, law enforcement agencies, department of roads and highways and the public to reach a solution to ensure safe and hassle-free travel. There is no single, grand solution to the problem. And it can be solved only by thinking out of the box and through innovative measures.



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK
 THE Americans had their eye on Asia since Commodore Perry opened Japan in 1853, but now they have their heart set on this distant continent. It's clear as daylight that a quiet showdown is imminent, if not already at work. The United States signed a 10-year defense framework agreement with India last month. Japan is trying to reel in Russia. The purpose is to build a bulwark against China, and isolate it in its own backyard.

History will vouch that such manoeuvres go back in time. The rise of Athenian power and the fear it inspired in Sparta constituted the true cause of the Peloponnesian War lasting from 431 BC to 404 BC. This observation of Thucydides became famous as "The Thucydides Trap." If you put China in place of Athens and the United States in place of Sparta, that ancient trap is returning with a vengeance, this time in Asia. The conflict between ruling and rising powers has, most of the time, led to war.

Underneath the surface of sublime diplomacy are surreal tensions. The United States wishes to thwart China in its ambition to become a global power. India has its own territorial concerns in Arunachal Pradesh besides countering the Chinese predilection for Pakistan. Japan is locked in a bitter dispute with China over the South China Sea islands, which were annexed by Japan during World War II.

In the coming years, if not months, the resulting rift system is likely to split the continent. While the United States has united with India and

Japan, Pakistan and Myanmar appears to have sided with China. North Korea's position doesn't need a second guess. Russia, which is currently holding an eight-day naval exercise with China in the South China Sea, might sit on the fence for sometime before making up its mind. Other Asian countries will eventually fall in line with one side or another. Long-time US ally Philippines has a new president, who not only publicly insulted the US president in a recent outburst, but also

instead of being sucked further into the quagmires of the Middle East.

To cut to the chase, the real fight is over energy and markets. The US goal is to kill two birds with one stone, which is to contain China. First, it wants to ensure that China doesn't get to flex its muscles in Asia. Second is to cut down to size the Chinese ambition to march its influence overseas.

China desperately needs Europe and the Middle East for markets and oil. Experts believe it's now more

home from the oil and gas fields of northern Iraq and Central Asia.

Besides developing overland alternatives, China is also building a navy and has invested in the so-called "string of pearls" strategy of building maritime centres in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Somalia to protect its sea routes to Africa and the Middle East. The seaport China attempted to build in Sonadia in Bangladesh has been apparently pushed back under the US and Indian persuasions. Japan is now going to build that seaport in Matarbari as an affront to the Chinese option.

In 1941, the "sleeping giant" that the USA was, was drawn into the war by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. It was a time when the world was smarting from the excesses of Nazism. Between 1947 and 1991, the US engagement spanned every continent mostly due to the spread of communism. The rallying cry in today's world is the fight against terrorism.

The US has military presence in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. It's possible the Americans will look for more touchpoints to strengthen its military buildup in Asia. The defence pact with India has already secured a new destination.

As contenders vie for control, this continent is heading for turmoil. Terrorism will escalate, countries will vacillate, and politics will fluctuate. Lives will be lost, institutions will be debased, and humanity will be debased. Asia must brace for rocky times ahead marked by bloodshed and chaos.

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It's not rocket science that the theatre of confrontation is shifting to Asia. The crux of this confrontation is cross-directional. China is pivoting west with its ambition to expand its reach across the continent and towards Europe. The United States, on the other hand, is pivoting east. It's convinced that its future should be entwined with the Asian prosperity instead of being sucked further into the quagmires of the Middle East.

asked the American forces to leave his country.

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concerned over America's superior sea power that can squeeze its oil supplies. The American armada dominates the Pacific and Indian Oceans and every body of water in between, particularly the two choke points in the Straits of Malacca and the Persian Gulf.

In its desperate bid, China is heavily investing in West Asia to create a sophisticated network of roads, railways and pipelines stretching

PROJECT SYNDICATE

India's prohibition hypocrisy



SHASHI THAROOR

AWAKENING INDIA
 LAST month, 18 people in the Gopalganj district of India's Bihar state died after consuming illicit alcohol, highlighting – once again – the peculiar

relationship between morality and tragedy in India. The victims were poisoned because this April, in a fit of moralism, Bihar adopted a draconian law prohibiting the sale, possession, and consumption of alcohol. It is far from the first such ban that has ended badly.

In a country where the national hero is the saintly Mahatma Gandhi, who considered alcohol an unmitigated evil, drinking has always carried a whiff of disrepute. India's Constitution, in its non-enforceable Directive Principles, urges Indians to work toward prohibition, and the government does not serve alcohol even at state banquets and official receptions. Four out of 29 Indian states (Bihar, Gujarat, Manipur, and Nagaland) and one union territory (Lakshadweep or the Laccadive Islands) are currently attempting to enforce total prohibition.

But maintaining a sweeping prohibition policy has long proved difficult in India. In Manipur in 2002, the 1991 ban was lifted in five hill districts, where alcohol consumption is a centuries-old local tradition. Lakshadweep makes an exception for an uninhabited island, where a tourist resort is allowed to operate a bar. When I was a child, what was then Bombay excused anyone with a doctor's note confirming alcoholism. (Well-heeled executives tripped over themselves to be labeled alcoholics.)

The state that best illustrates the appeal and the pitfalls of such moralism is Kerala, which announced in 2014 that it was implementing a partial ban on the sale of alcohol, with the goal of achieving total prohibition in ten years. It has been backsliding ever since.

A coastal state, Kerala has long been viewed as a tourist paradise – a reputation no doubt kept afloat on a sea of easily available libations. Before the ban, Kerala held a somewhat dubious distinction: India's highest per capita consumption of spirits. But in India, where prohibition is popular among many segments of the electorate, politicians find it particularly difficult to resist the self-righteous urge to improve their fellow citizens.

So Kerala's government introduced the ban. And, at first, many approved. The influential Christian churches applauded the move, as did the Christian-affiliated political parties. Kerala's Muslim leadership, including

the then-ruling coalition's ally, the Indian Union Muslim League, was equally vocal in its support. Working-class women, tired of watching their labourer husbands blow their monthly wages on booze, also welcomed the decision, as did traditionalists, Gandhians, and other moralists, of which India has an abundance.

No public figure of any consequence in Kerala stood up to oppose the decision. Any politician who might have been inclined to do so knew that they would be instantly tarred as a votary of evil alcohol, an agent of the "liquor mafia," a bar-loving enemy of good, wholesome Gandhian values.

But there were good reasons to

oppose the ban – reasons that had nothing to do with religion, morality, or alcoholism. Excise duties on liquor account for 22 percent of the state revenues that sustain generous welfare programmes in Kerala, which boasts the best social development indicators in India. Another 26 percent of state revenues come from tourism, which would surely also take a hit.

Furthermore, much of Kerala's economic viability depends on dynamic knowledge and services sectors. Attracting talent and investment from abroad would become much more difficult if prohibition hampered the state's quality of life. (IT professionals in Bangalore, in the neighbouring state Karnataka, flock to that city's bars and

pubs after long hours at work.) Kerala's leaders should have known that their state could not afford to do without widely available, heavily taxed liquor. But they began to implement the policy anyway. Almost immediately, 20,000 bar workers and distillery employees lost their jobs, in a state that already struggles with high unemployment. Tourism operators were stung by cancellations, as would-be visitors decided to visit Sri Lanka or Goa instead; 50 percent of existing convention bookings were canceled. And IT companies contemplating moving to clean, green, tech-friendly Kerala expressed concern about the prohibition policy.

production) forced its revocation. Four states – Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Mizoram, and Tamil Nadu – have repealed prohibition policies.

To be sure, not everyone loses out from a prohibition policy. When Kerala first announced its plans, neighbouring Tamil Nadu's alcoholic beverages corporation, TASMAC, promptly declared its intention to open a string of new outlets along the states' border, to cater to the demands of Keralite consumers. In other words, excise duties from Kerala would now fill Tamil Nadu's coffers.

Banning alcohol in India has been economically devastating. Yet politicians continue to use the



PHOTO: AFP

promise of prohibition to win votes. When elections were called in Tamil Nadu early this year, its chief minister declared herself in favour of prohibition. After the election was won, however, all such talk discreetly subsided.

My late father liked to say: "India is not only the world's largest democracy; we are also the world's largest hypocrisy." I suppose we can drink to that.

The writer, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and an MP for the Indian National Congress. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2016. www.project-syndicate.org

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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ICUs without doctors



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

It is a matter of sorrow that the Intensive Care Units (ICU) of the public hospitals have been running with shortage of manpower for years. In ICUs patients are admitted with severe and life-threatening illnesses and injuries that require constant and close monitoring. But there are no doctors and staff solely designated for ICUs of the public hospitals. Doctors, nurses and other staff are borrowed from other departments of the hospitals to keep the ICUs running. This in many cases creates problems because doctors of other wards have to come to the ICU either after performing duties in their own wards or leaving their patients unattended. The attention of the authorities has been drawn several times in this regard but to no avail.

The health ministry must do something in this regard because people's lives matter.

Jahanara Begum
 On e-mail

An abominable practice

Honour killing is a common practice in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, India and some other countries. In Pakistan, women are facing the threat of honour killings more than in other countries and the perpetrators often evade punishment using their influences and power. We urge the world leaders to pay attention to this issue and save thousands of women every year from this abominable practice.

Chandro
 On e-mail