

## Ambulance service indeed!

Break the syndicates in public hospitals

THE accident caused by an ambulance owned, reportedly, by a staff of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) reveals more than merely the tragedy that killed four persons including a pregnant woman and her unborn child. It speaks of the syndicated services run by a coterie of hospital staff, of which ambulance service is one. The ambulance in question is owned by a ward boy and was driven by the helper of the ambulance.

For long patients in government hospitals have been held hostage by hospital staff. They exploit the many shortages of the public hospitals, from shortage of beds in various wards and the difficulty in getting admission to inadequate number of ambulances. They also work as agents of some private clinics and lure the gullible patients away from these hospitals by promises of cheaper and better treatment. One cannot believe that the authorities are unaware of the malpractices that the lower grade employees indulge in. And there is an attitude of ambivalence of the hospital authorities in these matters that allows these employees to exploit the patients. One wonders, why the lack of action against these illegal activities.

While we hope that the families of the dead and injured would be adequately compensated, though there is no compensation adequate enough for the loss of a family member, we feel the need for a thorough independent enquiry into the matter by the ministry not only of the DMCH but other public hospitals too to put a stop to the activities of syndicates run allegedly by some of the staff of these hospitals.

## A good example of bad planning

Crores down the drain

THE old adage 'measure twice, cut once' may sound clichéd but assumes a critical meaning in any project implementation. It seems that the city planners are doing exactly the opposite when it comes to planning for the capital's infrastructure. A 50 metre-carriageway of a ramp of the Moghbazar-Mouchak flyover is being demolished to expand the ramp towards the Sonargaon Hotel over the Karwan Bazar level crossing at the cost of Tk. 85 crore. Can we ask why is it being done now? While the idea of extending the flyover over the railway crossing is a good one, the extension is likely to exacerbate the gridlock if it ends at Sonargaon Hotel, according to a traffic survey conducted earlier this year.

The entire exercise is inexplicable. One wonders what kind of planning the concerned engineers did for the project. Are the authorities preparing to ease Dhaka's worsening traffic congestion with this sort of ill-thought-out infrastructure? Why have the planners come up with this idea which will waste such a huge amount of taxpayers' money and will only worsen the traffic jam in that particular area?

Poor planning is mistake number one in any project implementation. Failing to plan properly is planning to fail. Will the digging up of the capitals' roads in the name of "service work" ever end? Dhaka's traffic problem has already gotten out of hand. The authorities need to start planning for tomorrow, not yesterday. And departments should be held accountable for taking on projects that do little to solve the problems they are intended to.

## XI'S VISIT TO BANGLADESH

# An Asian success story?

ERESH OMAR JAMAL

MUCH was expected prior to the Chinese President's visit to Bangladesh, and surely enough, he did not disappoint. The milestone visit — the first to Bangladesh by a Chinese President in 30 years — was capped off by the largest ever pledge of assistance to Bangladesh by any single country. 27 deals worth USD 24.45 billion in soft loan to Bangladesh were signed for various key development projects. On the sideline, 13 joint venture agreements involving USD 13.6 billion of Chinese investment was agreed upon by 13 Bangladeshi and 13 Chinese companies.

The Chinese media's extensive coverage of the visit and statements from official Chinese sources also showed its significance. But while one can easily understand the weight of the visit and its resulting outcomes for Bangladesh, what does it mean for China? And why did China agree to invest so heavily in Bangladesh? For one, if we take the comments of Chinese officials at face value, then it is partially because China sincerely wishes to assist Bangladesh grow and develop as its close partner. And if we look at recent Chinese endeavours across the globe, we can see that it has indeed helped many countries around the world, with large sums of investments and similar assistance, true to its words, in a most friendly way.

But then there is another reason. And that is that China is thinking long term towards implementing successfully its Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road initiatives, collectively known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR). And as explained by a Chinese diplomat in Dhaka, "Bangladesh's location in between South Asia and Southeast Asia is highly important" in regards to connectivity and the OBOR as the northern part of South Asia is key to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the southern part is vital for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

Its strategic location between China, India and ASEAN countries also make Bangladesh key to the realisation of the OBOR initiative which encompasses 60 countries representing 30 percent of the world's gross domestic product, 63 percent of global population, and most of known energy reserves (Interview: China's Belt and Road Initiative to stimulate Asian, global economic growth: Bangladesh economist, Xinhua, September 7).

Furthermore, as President Jinping said during his visit, "The China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative can dovetail with Bangladesh's cooperation strategies" well as the "Sonar Bangla dream of national strength and



President Xi being welcomed upon arrival at Dhaka airport.

PHOTO: BSS

prosperity [of Bangladesh] is in perfect harmony with the Chinese dream of great national renewal", and "heralds new opportunities for win-win cooperation between" the two countries. If looked at from an economic perspective in particular, Mr. Xi is absolutely correct in his assertion.

The greater connectivity promised by the OBOR initiative is essential for Bangladesh in increasing its access to foreign markets and reducing transport costs for its goods and services, making them more competitive in international markets. For China, it will ensure stable access to resources badly needed to support its rapid development and maintain its productive capabilities. So, again true to President Jinping's words, cooperation between the two countries can only result in 'win-win' outcomes.

But now the question arises; how capably and quickly can Bangladesh absorb this investment? At a recently held roundtable organised by *The Daily Star*, a major concern — one of Bangladesh's major weakness — was mentioned in that regard. That is, the numerous delays and cost escalations that is often seen when it comes to the implementation of development projects in Bangladesh. After Bangladesh's success in attracting such high Chinese investments, can it now

translate that success into pragmatic actions by abandoning its past habit of inefficient implementations? One can only hope that it will.

Another question that remains to be answered is how will India react to the increased cooperation between Bangladesh and China? Bangladesh is, of course, conscious of the long standing rivalry between India and China. The increased cooperation with China, however, does not mean Bangladesh is looking to move more towards China by moving away from India, but rather that it seeks to grow with both towards the win-win cooperation that the President of China described.

As far as Bangladesh's growth is concerned; given that its relations with India is at an all time high, India can only benefit from the rapid development and economic stability and security that Bangladesh is aspiring for. Meanwhile, the growing business links of recent years between India and China, which have ushered in increased prosperity for both countries, again illustrates why these two regional powers should cooperate even more on all fronts.

And their cooperation is particularly important in the realisation of the OBOR initiative which India is also a part of. With the two regional powers leading by example, other countries of the region

will definitely step up their efforts and be more willing to cooperate in projects that are mutually beneficial. Bangladesh too, will surely benefit from such cooperation, as can the entire Asian region. With that in mind, both countries should consider Bangladesh as the perfect platform where they can work together, invest and help develop, as they should, in relation to the entirety of Asia. Considering all of this, the recent success of Bangladesh in attracting such high levels of Chinese investments should be seen as a success for all of Asia.

There has been much talk about the 21st century being the 'Asian century'. But given that the 21st century is now well underway; the time for talk should now be over. And instead, it is time for us all to walk the talk, side by side, towards peace and prosperity, for all our nations, and for all our peoples. It is time to write a new chapter in the story of Asia, one which its people eagerly hope, will be one of individual successes and collective prosperity. The idea of increased connectivity that was moved forward through the Asian Highway Network by India and Bangladesh, with the addition of Chinese help, cooperation and initiatives, can now take us all a long way towards fulfilling that hope.

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# "Right to know", not "need to know"

DR. SHAMSUL BARI

HOW often do we make use of our networks to get the information we need? Whether the transformer in the neighbourhood is out of order or a relative needs a new passport, we instinctively reach for our networks: old school friends, colleagues, extended family and contacts. Networks are as old as humanity. But what about when we want to hold our government accountable, when it is not just about

Act is ranked 4th in the world, Sri Lanka 9th, Maldives 12th, Bangladesh 23rd and Pakistan 89th. With a clear global trend towards recognition of this important right, its inclusion as target 16.10 in the recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) was logical.

Good legislation alone, however, cannot be the sole measure of efficacy of the law. That depends largely on how it is implemented. The global debate on RTI/FOI laws is, therefore, increasingly focused on assessing whether it is contributing to unveiling the traditional

Bangladesh. Such discussion would include the use of RTI by citizens to contribute, individually and collectively, to making the government more transparent and accountable; to fight corruption in public offices; to assess if systemic changes are taking place; to devise strategies for effective collaboration between citizen-groups and public authorities for progressive improvement in the implementation of the law; and more.

When the journey began seven years ago, our focus as a nation was understandably on proper dissemination of the law and establishing the required mechanism for its implementation, including creating demand and generating applications for information.

The law was premised on a very new concept, which challenged our historical experience in citizen-state relationship - acquired since colonial times - and which opened up revolutionary possibilities for a fundamental change in that relationship. Instinctively, we chose the easiest path, which was to use the law primarily to redress personal grievances. In this way, marginalised communities and poverty groups in the country were able to use the law to obtain their due benefits from the government's safety-net programmes.

However, since we have now gained some experience and have been enriched by knowledge gathered through growing interaction with RTI/Freedom of Information networks throughout the world, the time has come for us to recognise that there is more to the law than simply using it for benefits to individuals or small groups.

The RTI Act evolved globally as an instrument to empower citizens to oversee the work of the government, to monitor its activities, to help fight corruption and make public officials more citizen-friendly and law-abiding. This explains why the progress of RTI has been made a target in the SDG. RTI captures the essence of democracy in which power belongs to the people, who rule through their representatives, who serve the people on basis of the laws of the land and where citizens collaborate with the government to strengthen good governance.

Citizens can ask for any information, except for those specifically exempted under the law, from the concerned public

authority. The latter is not entitled to ask why the information is "needed". The basic assumption is that citizens seek information under the Act to exercise their right and to fulfill their role in strengthening transparency and accountability in the work of public authorities. The "need" for information does not figure in the law.

Focusing on the "rights" aspect will encourage the middle and educated classes to use the law, which has not been the case so far. Most members of the middle class currently claim that they avoid asking for information from public authorities for fear of possible reprisals; and in any case, they can obtain any information they may "need" through their networks.

However, the "need to know" may vary from person to person; the "right to know" belongs to all citizens. If the focus is firmly placed on "rights" - and the power of the law to compel public officials to respect that right is properly propagated - it is likely that citizens of the country who are well-known for their social/political activism and always maintain a critical watch on the government would be more likely to make use of the law. If influential social and political activists use the law, they set a trend for its broader fulfillment. Irrespective of what an activist's agenda may be, as observers and advocates for RTI, our role is not to judge but to encourage the use of the law.

In this context, we can ask if those agitating against the Rampal coal-based power project near the Sundarbans are fully aware of the RTI Act and its potential to advance their cause. RTI is effectively used by environmentalists in many countries.

Upholding the "rights" aspect of RTI and firmly rejecting the often wrongly-imposed "need to know" requirement in its application can be a useful strategy to advance the use of RTI by all sections of the society, particularly the socially/politically aware population. A "right" requires a commitment from an authority to respect. RTI imposes that commitment on the government. Our government has assumed that commitment by adopting the RTI Act. It is for citizens to effectively utilise that right.

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ILLUSTRATION: NAHELA NOWSHIN

my need for information but my right? That is when we reach for the law.

The overwhelming majority of Right to Information (RTI) laws around the world were enacted in the last quarter of a century, following the end of the Cold War. They became one of the fastest growing legislations in the contemporary world. States are ranked today on the strength of their RTI/Freedom of Information laws to ensure the transparency and accountability of their governments to citizens. In South Asia, the Indian RTI

culture of official secrecy and making governance more open to people.

The key questions raised include: are public officials becoming more respectful of the law and responding positively to people's demand for government-held information? Are the provisions of the law being interpreted correctly? Is the law helping to change the age-old bureaucratic mindset of public officials and contributing to systemic change in governance?

Very little, if any, substantive discussion on the above questions is taking place in

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Bangladesh's achievements from President Jinping's visit

It is truly a blessing for us that Bangladesh's location off the Bay of Bengal and its vast and promising work-force are attracting nations like China and India to elevate relationships with us.

The Chinese president has signed 27 deals and a MoU promising USD 24.45 billion for 34 projects and programmes, especially in infrastructure like the Padma Bridge rail link, the power plant in Payra, and the Karnaphuli Tunnel. This is the largest financial bilateral assistance from a single country for Bangladesh. We thank our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as well as the Chinese President for taking such farsighted laudable initiatives with a view to boosting China-Bangladesh relations.

We hope that the trade gap in exports between the countries will be reduced through the present deals; and that China will consider the proposals of Free Trade Agreement and free access of Bangladeshi products to China, proposed by our business leaders.

Finally, we urge our leaders to continue building such rapport with foreign countries while maintaining our national interests.

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### Let's preserve our humanity

I completely agree with Mohammad Badrul Ahsan's article titled 'Humanity's abandoned house' on October 15, 2016.

I'd like to add that if the brutal attack on Khadiza had not been recorded by witnesses, this crime might have remained unknown to us, to media and probably to the legal authorities. We hope the offenders get immediate legal punishment, thereby protecting whatever humanity is remaining within us.

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