

The high price of the World Bank's blunder



INAM AHMED

It was the country's largest infrastructure project - that is up to that point of time in 2011, costing USD 2.9 billion. It was also the World Bank's largest loan to the tune of USD 1.2 billion. Asian Development Bank, JICA and Islamic Development Bank also joined hands to fund the project that would be so vital for Bangladesh's development, especially for the 30 million people living in the disadvantaged south for whom the River Padma stood as a solid barrier towards national integration.

It was a dream about to come true. And then a bolt from the blue. One fine morning, the World Bank brought the allegation that there had been a 'corruption conspiracy' in the bridge project. Suddenly, the bees were buzzing and stinging. The Bank went into hyper gear to take a stern stand against the 'corruption conspiracy', and its then country director Ellen Goldstein started shuttling between Dhaka and Washington, firming up the allegation.

Bangladesh reeled under the weight of the blow and the high profile activities that whirled on. But it remained firm in its stand - that there had not been corruption. Team after team from the

World Bank came and met the government officials. After prolonged discussions, the government took steps that the Bank sought to investigate the allegation. Then communication minister Syed Abul Hossain resigned, bridges division secretary Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan was sent to jail and PM's adviser Mashiur Rahman was sidelined, though he held his post. The Anti-Corruption

to have gone "the extra mile" when it sent a high-level team to Dhaka to explain the Bank's position and receive the government's response. "The response has been unsatisfactory. The World Bank cannot, should not, and will not turn a blind eye to evidence of corruption," the Bank concluded while cancelling the project, sinking the hearts of 160 million people, putting this country along with its population to

momentarily, to the world, cannot be measured. The insult suffered is immeasurable. Thanks to the country's strong forex reserves and willingness of China to do business, the construction of the bridge is going ahead but at a much higher cost. What could have been accomplished for USD 2.9 billion has now reached USD 3.6 billion. The poor people of Bangladesh will have to pay the almost a billion dollar extra amount just because of the Bank's 'evidence' that did not hold in any court.

Needless to say, another statement by the Bank similar to the one it issued to announce the cancellation of the loan was in order to clarify its position after the Canadian court verdict. An explanation of why those knee jerk reactions that yielded nothing but suffering for a nation was necessary. But it did not come.

It is incredulous that the World Bank, with its expertise on almost anything under the sun, failed to understand through its legal departments that the so-called evidence was all moth-eaten and flimsy. This one single incident will have dented the organisation's standing in the eyes of the world.

Like it demanded a special inquiry team of the ACC to dig out the so-called 'corruption' in the bridge project, the Bank may now appoint its own special inquiry team to dig out what went wrong within and why.

The writer is Deputy Editor, *The Daily Star*.

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Commission (ACC) embarked on an investigation which yielded no corroboration of the allegations.

And yet, the World Bank dropped the ultimate bombshell in July 2012 when it finally scrapped the project because, in its words, it had "credible evidence corroborated by a variety of sources which points to a high-level corruption conspiracy among Bangladeshi government officials, SNC Lavalin executives and private individuals in connection with the Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project". It claimed

shame before the world. And what was its evidence of corruption? Was it so compelling that the Bank could not refrain from taking such a harsh decision? Well, now that the Canadian court decision has come on the case, we know the worth of the evidence that the Bank also provided to the Canadian police. The evidence is worth nothing and that is why the Canadian court has thrown the case out. But what about the price the country paid because of the Bank's 'solid evidence'? Its pride lost, albeit

Padma bridge case

Why were we so humiliated?

THE case against former senior executives of SNC-Lavalin Group in Canada has been dismissed by the Ontario Superior Court. This brings to a close the red flag raised by the World Bank (WB) back in 2011 of a corruption conspiracy surrounding the proposed Padma Bridge loan. It vindicates Bangladesh's honour and stand, and we are happy about it. It is now proven that the WB had acted without due diligence which has stained the image of the country. Given the way the case was summarily dismissed it is evident that there was really no case at all. Therefore, we must ask, why did the WB humiliate us in front of the world?

The cancellation of the loan by the Bank to finance the Padma Bridge stands out both for its rarity and severity. It was a very rare, if not unique case, that a loan to a member country was cancelled on suspicion of corruption which now turns out to be without any basis.

Bangladesh has suffered enormously in the court of public opinion. Nothing the WB can do will make up for our pain. We thank the Canadian court for its judgment and vindicating our position. Let this be a lesson for the WB not to play with the future of nations who seek their assistance. It is a clear case of failure to act with assiduity on the part of this multinational body and clear sign of arrogance of its high officials to "punish" a member state without appropriate evidence. We are proud that Bangladesh's reputation has been vindicated.

Yet another question paper leak

Bring the masterminds to book

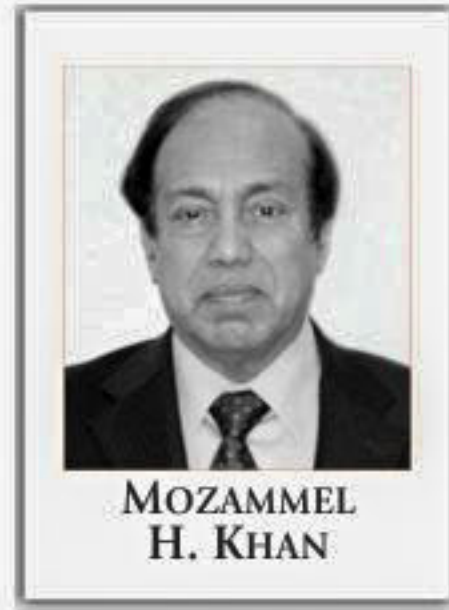
WE are deeply disturbed by the recent leak of the Math question paper of the SSC Exams, which adds to a long list of such scandals. Even though the concerned minister has pledged to take the necessary steps and a number of suspects have been arrested, the ministry's handling of previous leaks does not leave us much hopeful.

Disclosure of question papers before the exam is at best a disgrace to the nation and at worst a hurdle to bring about a meritocratic society, which the purpose of education and public exams really is. A nexus between some unscrupulous officials and teachers is reportedly behind the regular leaks that have plagued us for long. It is befuddling as to why the education boards have not taken pre-emptive measures this time especially after such widespread allegations had tainted a large number of public examinations.

What also shocks us is the culture of impunity that surrounds the affair, which has emboldened the criminals so much so that they now approach unsuspecting students on social networks with leaked question papers. This is surely the easiest way to instil into the young minds the idea of accepting graft as a part of everyday life!

We believe that the entire process from beginning to end should be supervised and moderated by the ministry so that it knows at what point the paper has been compromised. Also General Pocket Radio Service (GPRS) tracking devices can be introduced while moving the question papers, reducing chances of them falling into the wrong hands. A thorough investigation into the past leaks and exemplary punishment of the culprits only can put an end to the horrendous practice.

A scandal based on flimsy grounds



MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

THREE business executives have been acquitted on February 9 in a major foreign corruption case involving SNC-Lavalin Group Inc., known otherwise as the Padma Bridge scam, after an Ontario judge threw out wiretap evidence key to the case, saying the wiretap applications were based on gossip and rumour.

Justice Ian Nordheimer of the Ontario Superior Court ruled he had serious concerns about three applications the RCMP, a highly independent and respected organ of the Canadian federal government, filed in 2011 to get court approval to use wiretaps. The RCMP, had sought the approval as it probed allegations that SNC staff planned to bribe officials in Bangladesh to try to win a USD 500-million contract to supervise construction on the country's Padma Bridge project, an estimated USD \$5 billion undertaking.

"Reduced to its essentials, the information provided in the [wiretap applications] was nothing more than speculation, gossip and rumour," Judge Nordheimer concluded. "Nothing that could fairly be referred to as direct factual evidence, to support the rumour and speculation, was provided or investigated. The information provided by the tipsters was hearsay (or worse) added to other hearsay."

The RCMP originally charged five people with corruption in the case, but charges against two of the accused - Bangladesh born engineer Mohammad Ismail and Abul Hasan Chowdhury - were dropped on November 15, 2015. The case against the remaining three accused - former SNC vice-president of energy and infrastructure, Kevin Wallace, former SNC vice-president of international development, Ramesh Shah, and Bangladeshi-Canadian businessman Zulfiqar Ali Bhuiyan - ended Friday when Judge Nordheimer acquitted all three. The decision came after Crown attorney Tanit Gilliam elected to call no witnesses at the trial following the judge's decision to exclude wiretap evidence.

In his ruling, Judge Nordheimer said much of the information provided in the wiretap applications came from e-mails sent by three anonymous or unreliable tipsters. He said police had not attempted to first interview other sources, even though informants had named people they said police should contact.

The current piece is really a corollary piece to one I wrote for DS (September 13, 2012) involving the alleged 'conspiracy of corruption' that amounts to around 0.1 percent of the total cost of the abandoned project. Why did the issue receive so much prominence in the country's political arena and the media? The answer is that the plaintiff was the World Bank, the most powerful financial institution of the world, and the accused was the government of Bangladesh that represents 160 million people of a developing nation, which is not yet in a position to bid farewell to the 'Institution' that in many cases writes prescriptions to cure the economic illness of the poor nations, no matter how bitter the prescribed pill might test.

I believe there are not many in the country who were not aware of what was going on in the so-called Padma Bridge scam case. In my piece in DS, even though I am not a journalist, let alone an investigative one, I tried to dissect the fact from the fiction; most of which was circulating in the Bangladesh news media, apparently taking absolute advantage of the freedom of press without adhering to their obligations to speak the truth, both of which must go hand in hand in a democratic society. In fact, the concluding remark of my piece turned out to be prophetic as was evidenced from the proceedings of the pre-trial that I attended, which took place in a Toronto Court from April 8-19. The honourable court, at the onset of the trial, ordered complete media ban on the proceedings of the trial, which was once again re-emphasised by the honourable judge at the end, in response to my query, reiterating that the ban has no

the World Bank, by any stretch of imagination, neither a divine institution, nor is run by a group of angels. As I understood, the World Bank itself did not have a copy of the diary until the pre-trial began on April 8, 2012. In that likelihood, what was the basis of the World Bank's demand to ask the Bangladesh government and the ACC to indict the persons on the diary's list? The pre-trial although was for two former employees of the construction giant, but later on, its periphery got extended beyond them, since one of the accused Mohammad Ismail had little monetary disbursing authority, while the other, Ramesh Shah, could hardly commit any illegal international disbursement of this sort without the approval of his superior authority of the multi-billion dollar engineering giant.

David Cousins, who represented Mr. Shah, said the RCMP clearly should have done more work to validate the



PHOTO: STAR

geographical boundary. However, there were a handful of (Bangladeshi) media which were abiding by the order of the court, while the others were publishing unfounded speculations, quoting their known and unknown sources. There was an online tabloid which was ceaselessly publishing whatever it considered true and right. The whole case of the so-called 'corruption of conspiracy' lurked around a diary of one of the accused. I am one of the privileged ones who have seen the absolute contents of the page of the diary, the authenticity and validity of whose contents acted as a make or break outcome of the trial. In addition to a few other things, nothing could be further from the truth when it was reported that the pertinent page of the diary contained the signature of one of the accused, Kevin Wallace, the former Vice President of SNC. Simple common sense would conclude that one's personal diary would never contain the signature of his boss or colleague.

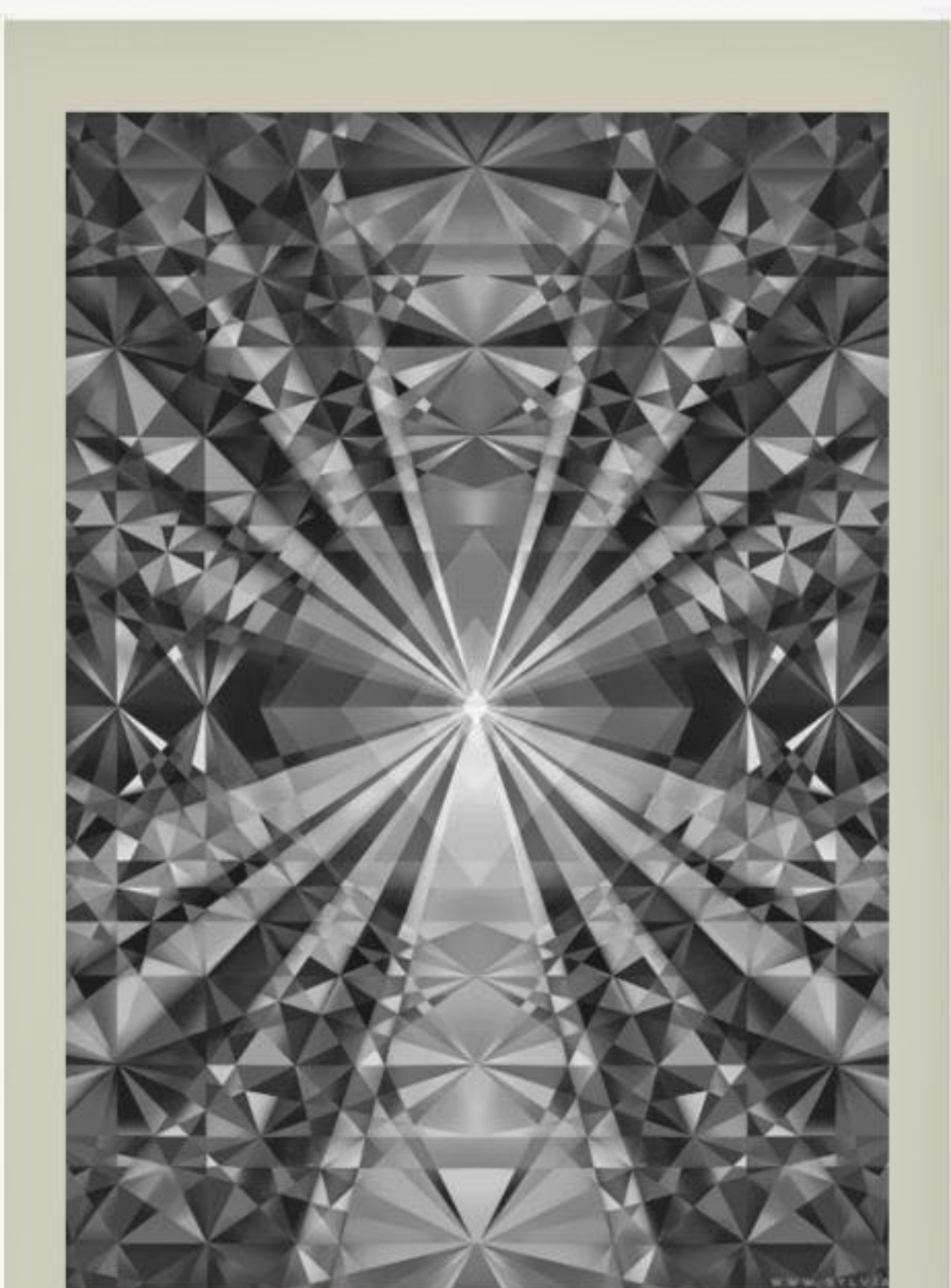
The RCMP initiated the whole episode at the request of

credentials and credibility of the informants, observing that one of them turned out to be an employee of an SNC competitor who had lied in another matter. "Mr. Shah has undergone a terrible ordeal over the past four years - he's been unemployable; he's had his passport seized from him," Mr. Cousins said. "His liberties have been really greatly impinged on."

Mohammad Ismail, the Bangladeshi born engineer who, until this case, had a bright career, told me how his life had been ruined by his sudden termination by SNC. Although he was acquitted on November 2015, he could not get a professional job since every organisation who considered him for appointment did not go forward due his connection with SNC and the case. How and who will rebuild the ruins of their bright careers and compensate for the human sufferings and financial loss they have incurred through this long ordeal?

The writer is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

A WORD A DAY



SATORI
(suh-TOR-ee)

noun: Sudden enlightenment or intuitive understanding.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Comedy of errors

One of my students was recently sitting for the Bangla first paper exam in the SSC examinations 2017. On receiving the creative question section, it turned out that the invigilator had given him a question paper from last year. The invigilator realised this when he looked into the candidate's answers and found no connection with the current year's questions.

Some students received question papers from last year's SSC programme under the Bangladesh Open University during the math exam as well. How are these alarming errors occurring during one of the most important academic events of the year? The authorities must look into this. Md Sefatullah Saarijl
Gopanganj

Driving courses need to be updated

The government took laudable steps by setting up Technical Training Centers in all districts last year. The Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges requested for the introduction of a 360-hour basic motor driving course. Accordingly, the Bangladesh Technical Education Board instructed 64 technical schools and colleges in 64 districts to introduce basic courses on motor driving training. But the decision is yet to be implemented. I request the technical education board to add modules on traffic

rules and regulations, preliminary knowledge of automobile parts, social and financial consequences of road accidents, and basic spoken English in the curricula for driving courses. A national English daily reported that road accidents alone cost Bangladesh one to two per cent of the GDP, claiming about 5,162 lives in 2013. These incidents could be significantly reduced if drivers are properly trained and educated. Md Ashraf Hossain
Bashabo