

Has the mountain brought forth a mouse?

Drive against unfit vehicles and illegal drivers

Follow through with it

IT is heartening to note that the Dhaka South City Corporation and the relevant agencies will launch a joint drive against over 20-year-old buses, unfit vehicles, and illegal drivers in the capital starting next month. But what begs the question is why special drives have to be launched when it is within the normal everyday routine duty of the agencies to see that unfit vehicles and dangerous drivers are kept off road at all times? However, we hope that the initiative will reduce congestion and accidents on the roads.

Given the degree of road congestion in Dhaka and the number of unfit vehicles that ply the roads - endangering the lives of commuters - the necessity of such a drive cannot be overstressed. It is necessary to remind that on average, 64 people die every day from injuries suffered in traffic accidents - according to a recent government supervised survey. The authorities had announced plans to carry out similar drives on numerous occasions in the past, regrettably without much effect.

Disappointingly, once the announcements are made and initial stages completed, the authorities fail to follow through with their promise, and the initiatives simply peter out. Without the necessary determination on the part of the authorities and a well coordinated plan of action, one might, unfortunately, see the same outcome.

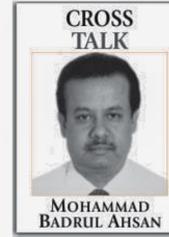
If the separate bodies involved in the drive perform their tasks dutifully without being influenced by external pressures - political or financial - the drive can be a success. That is exactly what we hope to see from the authorities.

Breathing the worst polluted air

Immediate remedial actions needed

THE people in Dhaka breathe the most polluted air risking their lives to fatal health hazards. This has been revealed by the 'State of Global Air 2017' report recently launched by the US-based Health Effects Institute and Institute for Health Matrix and Evaluation. According to the report, during the period between 1990 and 2015, air pollution saw a meteoric rise in Delhi and Dhaka, securing them top two positions in the list of the worst polluted cities. Bangladesh is at the gravest risk of air pollution related dangers, according to the report. It is estimated that around 122,400 people die every year in Bangladesh as a result of air pollution.

The major reasons for high prevalence of harmful particles in city air are messy construction works, excessive use of coal in industries, emission from vehicles and outdated brick-kilns. The situation can be addressed by modernising brick kilns, strict enforcement of construction codes, shifting to less-polluting fuels. The authority can also consider replicating the example of Rajshahi city which successfully cut air pollution more than any other place in the earth in 2015. It nearly halved emission of smaller PM2.5 particles to 37 micrograms per cubic metre from 70. The extraordinary feat was achieved by taking a massive tree-planting drive, gradual shifting from diesel-run vehicles to battery-run three wheelers, updating brick kilns, and creating more and more pedestrian-friendly pavements across the city. But whatever needs to be done has to be done urgently. Things are getting worse with every passing day.



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE appointment of the new Chief Election Commissioner was an elaborate undertaking that had a curious resemblance to the construction of the Taj Mahal, albeit on a much smaller scale. Twenty-two thousand labourers and 1,000 elephants worked for 22 years to build the monument of love in Agra at the cost of 32 million rupees. In comparison, a six-member search committee laboured for almost two weeks to find our next election boss. It shortlisted 20 names after consulting 16 eminent citizens and examining 125 names proposed by 25 political parties, narrowing down the search for a loveable name. The find eventually reinvented the found.

Which reminds one of the Aesop's fable titled The Mountain in Labour. It's about a mountain that went into labour and groaned terribly, inciting great expectations in the country. But the mountain eventually disappointed everyone, when it gave birth to a mouse.

The new CEC is a retired bureaucrat, who was sacked by the BNP government for his alleged involvement in Janatar Mancha in 1996. In case some of us don't remember, the Mancha was a rebellion launched by a group of partisan bureaucrats that forced the BNP government from power in March that year. While it matters if the CEC had played an enthusiastic part in that rebellion, what matters more is why this man had to be the final choice for a sensitive position.

The eminent citizens reportedly made a number of suggestions to the selection committee. One of them recommended the enactment of law before appointing the chief election commissioner and other commissioners even if it took time and delayed the formation of the new election commission. Another idea floated was replacement of the existing five-member commission with a three-member one.

Many of those renowned citizens had also urged the committee to be transparent, making its recommendations public and giving reasons for picking each name. All of them also advised the committee to pick neutral, honest and competent people. Hard to tell how much of those ideas have eventually distilled through the selection process.

Two gallons of milk make a pound of butter. On average 2.5 tonnes of mustard seed produce a tonne of oil. These are examples how great undertakings don't always have to generate a great deal of impact, so long



PHOTO: STAR

as output is as substantial as input if not more. If anything, the grandstanding of the EC formation started with an orchestrated big bang and ended with a hurried whimper.

The search committee needs to ask itself if it was meant to be a misnomer. It may have frantically searched for what was already found, ultimately doing a fool's errand. And the eminent citizens may have been taken for a ride, helping to give legitimacy to a strategy that has achieved its goal by massaging their egos.

All of these well-meaning people may or may not have realised it, but a vested group could have cleverly used their shoulders to shoot its gun. Some of these keen minds of this country may have seen it as a call of solemn duty to serve their country. Others may have responded for other reasons. But most of them may be feeling cheated, now that the country is still stuck in a rut where it was before.

Thus the end result of the whole exercise diligently carried out by the search committee looks dismal. The prospect of free and fair election is going to be a tough proposition since the Election Commission is headed by a man, who has all the reasons to bear a grudge against his persecutors. Whether he was rightly or

wrongly shown the door, nobody short of an angel can stop licking that wound. In a country of so many million people it had to be this one man, who could be discovered to do a critical job that has a lot to balance.

It appears from the look of things that the new Chief Election Commissioner and the upcoming general election might be mutually exclusive. BNP and its allies have legitimate reasons to feel nervous. After all they're being given the uneven choice of going to the polls very much like asking someone to believe in the benevolence of his victim.

In short, the search committee had momentarily raised our hope only to be trashed again. Much deception and many manipulations are the hallmarks of our national politics. The risk is that after shuffling the truth so many times, we might forget where we left it.

Some of our best minds argue that we shouldn't cry over the spilt milk. They're in favour of accepting the new CEC on the argument that his appointment is a fait accompli. Last month, the Swiss scientists did a similar prognosis. They said that the patients trapped inside their paralysed bodies are "happy".

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

The private sector and the SDGs

MAHMOUD MOHIELDIN and SVETLANA KLIMENKO

ACHIEVING the ambitious global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - which include ending poverty, improving global health, ensuring universal education, and mitigating climate change by 2030 - will cost a lot of money. The total will be far more than governments can make available, and the gap cannot be closed by official development assistance, now at USD 132 billion per year. The private sector, as well as updated financial markets, will be essential.

Until recently, international organisations and governments had relatively well-defined roles in the global

measures are anchored in SDG target 12.6, which encourages "companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle."

Financial and asset-management institutions can provide positive incentives to such companies - those that incorporate sustainability, long-term thinking, and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance criteria in core business models - by allocating assets accordingly. Such a move would go a long way toward promoting long-term progress on the SDGs.

Fortunately, many companies already fit this description. A 2016 survey of CEOs, conducted by the United Nations

joined by a growing number of their peers. Some are even opting to divest from any company with exposure to industries or business practices that present sustainability challenges.

This trend toward sustainable investment will undoubtedly accelerate. But, even without the agreement, the appeal of such investments stands: evidence indicates that integration of ESG considerations - when implemented intelligently and measured and reported transparently - could help investments outperform expectations, for both companies and investors. Add to that financial-market incentives, and huge amounts of capital could be attracted to ESG investments.

Nonetheless, significant challenges

That framework must also support the private sector and investors in their effort to combine profit maximisation with the pursuit of long-term economic, social, and environmental objectives. Integrated corporate reporting and disclosure of material ESG information can facilitate the creation of an efficient financial system that advances sustainable economic growth, while supporting achievement of the SDGs.

The development of such an integrated reporting framework currently is being led by a few national and international organisations, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), and the International Integrated Reporting Council (IIRC). Their main objectives are to enable companies and organisations to set sustainability targets and key performance indicators; to monitor, prepare, and disclose comparative data measuring their economic and ESG performance; and to integrate sustainable production and consumption practices in company business strategies and models.

Global awareness of this topic is growing. Recently, Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England and Chairman of the G20's Financial Stability Board, and Michael Bloomberg, a former New York City mayor and CEO of Bloomberg LP, issued an announcement regarding market data on climate.

Given the magnitude of the task, however, it is important also to ensure effective coordination and harmonisation of these efforts with the relevant standard-setters, regulators, and professional organisations. The US Securities and Exchange Commission, for one, is already discussing these issues, as it analyses options to respond to investor and business needs regarding ESG.

New ESG reporting frameworks can help to attract billions of dollars from institutional investors to support the effort to achieve the SDGs. But that is only one example of how the public and private sectors can work together to identify opportunities to advance the SDGs. If we take advantage of these possibilities, public-private cooperation can enable millions of people to lift themselves out of poverty and help to build a more peaceful, prosperous, and secure world.

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The SDGs stress everything from zero poverty, zero hunger, good health to clean water and climate action.

development and sustainability agenda, whereas the private sector's participation in the process was often viewed through the lens of its contributions to economic growth, job creation, and tax revenue. That must now change, with the private sector taking on a broader, more integrated role in the development agenda.

The private sector can become a financier, shifting trillions of dollars of capital toward developing economies. And it can play an important role as an implementer, translating profits into sustained economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. The principles underpinning such

Global Compact and Accenture showed that many business leaders already view solving "societal challenges as a core element in the search for competitive advantage." And almost half of all CEOs surveyed believe that "business will be the single most important actor in delivering the SDGs."

According to a recent report published by Moody's, interest in investments relating to climate change and sustainable development by institutional investors has grown rapidly in recent years. Now, institutional investors with long histories of ESG investments, such as the California Public Employees' Retirement System (CalPERS), are being

remain, including uncertain performance expectations and evolving disclosure regimes. Despite innovation in the financial products channelling ESG investment, the supply of ESG instruments, such as green bonds, remains insufficient.

Another challenge relates to data. Good data on ESG investment are indispensable, as they enable investors and companies to determine whether their outlays in this area will promote or impede the achievement of the SDGs.

To this end, we need to develop a robust, transparent reporting framework that allows companies to report on financial and non-financial performance.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Primary education in a shambles

While we celebrate the 98 percent success rate of primary education in the country, a report published by this newspaper on February 10 drew attention to the 45,000 primary schools that are short of sanctioned teachers. Another article reported 4,000 schools that have been running without headmasters. One can only wonder about the kind of substandard education that students across the country are receiving.

What are the primary education authorities doing to tackle these problems?
 A. H. Dewan, By email

Losing shoes at the mosque

Having one's shoes stolen at mosques is a common occurrence, especially in Dhaka. It is unfortunate that we have to be vigilant and worry about our footwear in a place where we are meant to focus on our prayers in a peaceful environment.

It is high time that the authorities take adequate measures to stop these practices.
 Rokon Ansary, By email

