

High cost of road construction

Address the major reasons

THE World Bank has found that the cost of road-building projects in Bangladesh is far higher than both India and China. The figures are mindboggling: construction cost per kilometre is USD 6.6 million for the Rangpur-Hatikumal four-lane highway, which jumps to a stupendous USD 11.9 million per kilometre for the Dhaka-Mava four-lane highway. In comparison to China, where it costs USD 1.1-1.3m, and India, which is building at USD 1.3-1.6m, it would appear that we are spending many times more for our projects! The cost per km construction varies from project to project, and most of our projects are delayed by many years that results in cost overruns. In the absence of serious accountability, there is always the possibility of graft happening at various levels of procurement. Such massive construction cost is naturally tugging upon the concerned ministry when it lays out its budget every fiscal and with no real mechanism to measure work progress; projects get delayed and costs keep escalating.

It is obvious that we need to streamline our projects and appoint consultants who will coordinate with ministries an overseas development partners to keep such projects on track. It requires a major overhauling of the ways we do business – ranging from case of fund release to developing a pool of experts who will see projects through their lifetime – and the tendering process needs to go online so that the bidding process is made both transparent and accountable.

Misappropriation of rice

Ordeal of landslide victims continues

WE are appalled by the reports of misappropriation of rice allocated for victims of the recent devastating landslides in the hilly districts. Many of these victims haven't yet received their share of rice – 30kg for each – because local leaders have allegedly taken the rice meant for the widows and given it to their relatives and neighbours who are getting unaffected. The allegations do not end there. Authorities also blamed a BNP Ward Councillor when it was found that the list of affected persons has twice as many names as it should have.

Just when we thought that the ordeal of these people – who have lost their homes, belongings, and even loved ones – could not get any worse, claims of such irregularities with food supplies intended for them have surfaced.

It has been more than a week since the landslides – the worst of its kind in a decade – unleashed havoc and it is incomprehensible as to why a transparent and structured mechanism of distribution of rice isn't yet in place. The fact that individuals yielding political power are getting their hands on these much-needed food supplies and misusing them clearly points to a lack of supervision in the distribution process.

After all this, the authorities have rightly decided to involve executive magistrates, police and local elected representatives to tackle the problem. The government's well-intended relief efforts will go in vain if these irregularities are not immediately addressed.

We must remember that the ongoing relief efforts are only the first step towards supporting the people affected by the landslides, and a failure to deliver on this does little to restore our confidence that the much more arduous task of rehabilitating them in the long-term will be carried out efficiently.

What is meant to divide should unite

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Binu Gazi Shahin, ANAM Khan, NDC, PSC (Ret'd)

THE Finsbury Park Mosque attack was another manifestation of Islamophobia that has gripped Britain and many other western countries including the US in recent times. Reportedly, there has been a fivefold increase in hate crimes against Muslims in London after the London Bridge attack. There has been a similar spike in incidence of hate crimes against Muslims in the US, particularly after January 20, 2017.

Regrettably, there are a few in Britain who are glorifying the attack as a resurgence attack like the English Defence League leader Tommy Adams. There may have been a few Muslims who might have drawn a kind of vicarious delight and rejoiced after the Twin Tower attack or the ones carried out since then by Muslim extremists, but one has not come across such views articulated in any expressed form as one is now seeing in the social media after Darren Osborne's attempt to fulfil his desire to "kill Muslims". A few examples are in order. One commenter said: "A hero... hope he starts a wave of retaliation against the evil within our country that's killed so many already." Reportedly, some have praised Osborne, arrested on suspicion of attempted murder and terror offences, as a "true hero" and "patriot". "Well done that man," said one comment in social media. "Why didn't he use a bigger van?" another asked.

In no way mitigating the deep significance of the attack, I feel that we Muslims should have seen such a reaction coming. Should one be surprised at all by the reaction of a minuscule number of white Christians who believe in "an eye for an eye"? The IS must be having a big laugh seeing such a response physically manifested in the Islamophobic behaviour. This is exactly what the IS wants. To divide societies that thrive on their diverse and cosmopolitan composition, and generate a situation of mutual animosity that would launch them in a mutually destructive path. And they have succeeded in creating Osborne and his likes who are not many in number though, but enough to incubate fears in the minds of the

Muslims in Britain. This is exactly what the brutal Holy Artisan killers also wanted to do, and was successful for a time. But the most redeeming feature after the mosque attack is the great feeling of unity that was displayed by the people of Islington area in particular and of Britain in general, with leaders of all faiths coming together not only to express grief but condemn the attack in unison, showing their solidarity, and calling it what it is – a terror attack

redemption lies in the annihilation of everyone that does not follow their faith. So much so that they do not hesitate to plough through unsuspecting revellers in Nice or bomb sports lovers looking forward to a football match in a stadium in Paris, or run over pedestrians using the Westminster Bridge. And there are the likes of David Osborne who seek comfort in avenging the killings in Paris or England.

where we need to cut across religious lines, as we see in Britain, as well as national boundaries and come together to combat this menace.

I repeat what I have said in the past also, notwithstanding the causative factors that have fanned the growth of IS or al-Qaeda, the lead in this regard must come from the Muslim countries, which, to be true, have borne the brunt of religious extremism more than others. For too long the majority of the



A man walks past floral tributes outside Finsbury Park Mosque in the Finsbury Park area of north London, on June 19, 2017, near to where a vehicle was driven into pedestrians.

against the Muslims, without hedging the issue as a section of the media did for a time, and the attempt to give the matter a different gloss did not escape the eyes of the more perspicacious followers of the electronic media.

There are the likes of Salah Abdeslam (linked to Paris and Brussels attack), Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel (Nice attacker) and Khalid Masood (Westminster Bridge attacker) working alone or in unison, some so brainwashed by the distorted interpretation of the religion that they have come to believe that their

It is more of Abdeslam, Lahouaiej-Bouhlel and Osborne that IS would like to create. It suits their overall strategy well. Having been cornered in Mosul and their stronghold Raqqa, the terrorist group is being increasingly deprived of ground that they will hold for the last three years. That will induce a change of strategy on their part certainly, but what that will also induce is creation of surrogates through the use of social media who may not be organically part of IS but would carry out attacks on soft targets at their own behest, motivated by it. And this is

Muslims, who neither condone the extremist violence nor the US and western policy in the Middle East, have remained silent against the rise of radicalism, fanaticism and intemperance. It is time for them to convince their leaders to come together and cohere with the rest of the world to formulate a strategy to defeat the extremists, of whatever hue. What is meant to divide should unite us. If not, then an eye for an eye will render the world blind.

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The curious case of rice price hike



REAZ AHIMAD

reference to the current high price of the staple in the retail market. Supporting his comment, someone asked, isn't this government providing the ultra-poor with food doles – giving them cushion

in rice price is apparently connected to a government initiative of providing the ultra-poor with rice at Tk. 10 per kg.

In the latter half of last year, the government started enlisting five million ultra-poor with an aim of feeding them with 7.5 lakh tonnes of rice in the subsequent five months at a rate (Tk. 10 per kg) that is a fourth of the market price. This programme has been running since September 2016 along with the government's hundred other strange social safety net programmes, many of which are also related to food.

While the government was in a frenzy doling out low-cost rice to the ultra-poor, it nearly exhausted its safe level of

market intervention, at which point profit-mongering rice traders started to benefit.

Things got further complicated when unusually early flash-floods washed away, according to the most conservative estimate, 10 lakh tonnes of rice in the northeastern backswamps – where winter Boro rice is the only major cereal that grows in a crop year. On top of that, we lost more Boro rice in fungal attack (rice blast) in as many as 19 districts. Up until now, as the Department of Agricultural Extension has not come up with any concrete estimation on fungi-induced crop losses.

with non-lucrative price offers. The result was obnoxious. Why should rice millers – who can easily fetch Tk. 39-40 for each kilogram of rice in the open market – sell rice to the government at Tk. 34 a kg?

After the state-run agency, Trading Corporation of Bangladesh, showed through market analysis how prices of the coarse varieties of rice jumped 47 percent in June, comparing it to the corresponding period of 2016, the government thought of buying rice from the international market. It struck at least three deals to ship in 3.5 lakh tonnes of rice; but it is unlikely to reach before early July. The government also took a long time in deciding that it should decrease a high tariff (28 percent) on rice import.

In fact, such high tariffs on rice import deterred the private sector from importing rice in a crop-loss year – which is rather unusual. One can now easily and very legitimately raise the question: Who pushed up the rice price? Why did we allow rice stock to deplete in the first place? Why didn't we replenish the stock while going full throttle with newer rice dole schemes? Why did we fail in procuring rice from the farmers early in the season? And why did it take us so long to lower the duty on rice import?

In a country with more than 160 million people, the ultra-poor and burger-eaters are definitely a minority. I beg to differ with the notion that one should not worry about high rice prices – where burger-eaters can take care of themselves (even with the finance minister slapping a 15 percent VAT on top of the 10 percent supplementary duty on fast food) and the government takes care of the ultra-poor – because of a simple reason. There are still millions of others in this country whose quality of life is compromised when coarse rice price jumps from Tk. 30 per kg to Tk. 48. As they are now pushed up against the wall, what they will essentially have to do is consume less rice which is the only major source of energy for many and/or cut down their expenditure on other food items such as vegetables, fruits, etc.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Street crime on the rise before holidays

Mugging and robbery have become regular occurrences in the streets of Bangladesh these days. While criminal activity used to be confined mainly within busy marketplaces and highways, they have now become common in quiet residential areas as well. People have been known to lose their lives for showing the slightest bit of resistance to those demanding their valuables at gunpoint. A man was recently stabbed while talking on his mobile phone on the streets in Dhaka.

These crimes have become particularly common as Eid approaches, and can be expected to continue increasing. The traffic tailbacks and gridlocks allow snatchers to take advantage of innocent people who have their guards down in their lightened, holiday moods. It is all a cause of perpetual unemployment, poverty and drug abuse, and the lawlessness that allows these crimes to run rampant.

The government needs to take serious steps to control street crimes, especially during the holiday season. Special police booths and hotlines should be set up to deal with complaints relating to street crime. These services will also help us feel safer and encourage us to seek help if we are robbed and attacked. I urge the authorities to look into this matter and put greater emphasis on safeguarding the security of Bangladeshi civilians.
Zubair Khalad Hagi
By e-mail



PHOTO: STAR

The food department completely failed to prepare for what was coming and did next to nothing to replenish the dried up rice stock. The stock fell below a nadir at 1.85 lakh tonnes, a 10-year low in this country.

No matter how slow the government apparatuses move in making trustworthy loss assessments, rice millers and private traders were smart enough to recognise a looming supply shortage in the market. As they started to push the price up, it still didn't occur to the concerned government departments that they should intervene to ensure higher availability of rice.

The food department rather missed a chance to replenish the rice stock, completely failed to procure paddy directly from the farmers early into the Boro harvesting season and then made a late entry into the market, that too,

against the high rice price in the market? Obviously, he had essentially failed to take into account the overwhelming majority of people who are either poor, or belong to the lower middle-income bracket – who neither fall into the relatively small category of ultra-poor, nor the marginal category of burger-eaters. They are not taken care of. Any rapid and unusual surge of rice price (as is happening now) would definitely dent their wallets and dent it deep.

We'll deal with the rice-skipping, burger-munching minority of urban youths later. Let's talk about the ultra-poor first. In fact, today's abnormal hike

rice stock in the public granaries. Its food department completely failed to prepare for what was coming and did next to nothing to replenish the dried up rice stock. The stock fell below a nadir at 1.85 lakh tonnes, a 10-year low in this country.

Independent think tanks, farm and food sector experts and economists forewarned the government not to allow such depletion of rice in its stock. But for whatever reason (only the government can explain), it allowed the freefall of rice stock. This weakened the government's position and made it difficult for any sort of