

Dhaka rivers on death throes

Wake up before it is too late

YESTERDAY was perhaps the umpteenth time that the state of the four rivers of Dhaka was the lead in this newspaper, and this is perhaps umpteenth time that we have editorialized on the issue. But regrettably, there has been little improvement in the situation; on the contrary we have witnessed with dismay the incremental worsening of the condition of these rivers, with the most damaging consequences on the capital itself.

We are sure that the importance of the four rivers, to the survival of Dhaka city, is not lost upon those associated with the job of saving the rivers. But the incremental degradation in the condition of the rivers betrays the indifference of these agencies to this very important issue of the rivers. Lack of coordinated effort, lax oversight, faulty marking of the rivers etc., have contributed to reducing the rivers to the present moribund state. It is unthinkable that drinking water for the city has to be fetched from far outside the Dhaka city not only because of the depletion of the ground water but also because of the fact that the other source of water – the rivers, have become so polluted as to render their water unfit for treatment. We find it hard to believe that the rivers have been demarcated in a faulty way that has allowed the land grabbers to encroach and grab part of the rivers.

A very recent World Bank sponsored international conference on options for development of Dhaka flagged the point of proper planning – a matter that we have also been harping on continually for the last decade. Regrettably, there is no shortage of plans, but those have stumbled in the face of petty corporate or group interest. The fate of the Dhaka Detailed Area Plan is an example. There must be a comprehensive plan for the development of the city that must include the four rivers also, and must be implemented resolutely.

Migration fraud

Offenders must be brought to justice

IT'S no secret that the path to Bangladesh's success in labour migration is covered in prickles. Every year our expatriate workers are making a huge contribution to the country's GDP, but behind the shiny façade lie heartbreaking stories of deception that simply refuse to go away. A new report on Wednesday by a local migration watchdog agency painted an unflattering picture of the migration process, detailing complaints by families of individuals who were deceived either in their destination countries or while trying to make the move.

The report says that about 51 percent of job seekers are deceived in various stages of migration. About 19 percent of them fail to migrate even after making full or partial payments, while 32 percent are subjected to degrading treatment after migration. It was based on a survey conducted in nine villages and 11 wards in Tangail district.

The fact that corrupt recruiting agencies and government officials continue to take advantage of the desperation of job seekers questions the sincerity of the regulatory authorities, and effectiveness of the laws that are meant to be safeguards against such practices. Also importantly, we need to understand what's driving so many of our citizens to seek jobs abroad and recognise the importance of reaping the benefits of our demographic dividend.

The immediate challenge is to stop migration fraud. Bringing the culprits to justice can be a good start, as it will help deter future offenders from indulging in the practice. There should also be greater clarity in the migration process so that recruitment agencies function within the bounds of the law and the job-seekers are discouraged from circumventing official channels.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Infrastructural developments in rural areas

Countless reports recently published by *The Daily Star* have been highlighting the incompletion of small scale projects like bridges, culverts, and roads in rural areas. The construction of several bridges over canals and approach roads have remained incomplete for too long, causing enormous sufferings to the people and hampering local business.

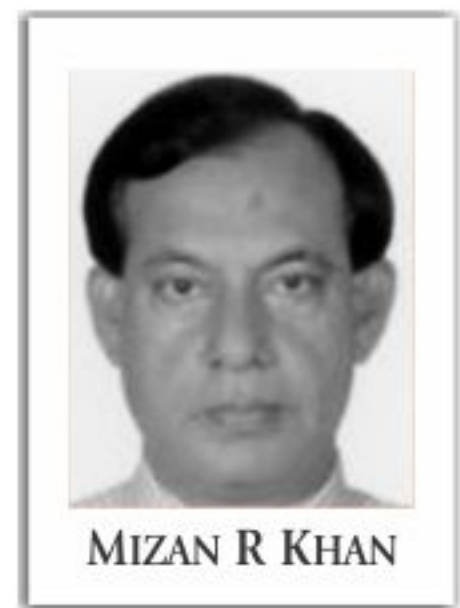
There are many cases where villagers with their own money have made makeshift arrangements by erecting temporary bamboo/wooden bridges for use. Many of them are in danger of getting broken or collapsing because of poor construction work. Some of the temporary facilities are difficult to maneuver, especially by women, children and aged people during wet seasons. These are relatively small projects which should have been completed in time. Let us not forget that the majority of people in Bangladesh live in villages. It is therefore essential to develop basic infrastructure in rural areas.

It is hoped that the relevant authorities will take notice of such incomplete development work as soon as possible to ease the sufferings of the rural people.

AKM Ehsanul Haque
Dhaka

The Gordian Knot of Dhaka city governance

"It was a beautiful city, sometimes easily mistaken for a village"
FB Bradley-Birt, *The Romance of an Eastern Capital* (1906)



WE have managed to turn a serene, rustic, romantic Dhaka into a dishevelled, messy concrete slum just within a century. What a feat! The issues are many: governance failure, dysfunctional coordination committees, traffic congestion, elite capture of city investments, lack of comprehensive planning, etc. All these problems have multiplied over the years, making the situation worse.

The solutions that have emerged are mostly a repetition of previous ones: improving governance through establishing a metro-government with its own constitution; improving coordination among more than four dozen service agencies; coordination with the Prime Minister's Office; corporate ownership of the transport sector; development of mass transport; introduction of bonds for raising funds; learning lessons from the Pudong and Kolkata models, etc.

But it seems that we have not addressed the elephant in the room. Why has there been persistent failure of governance for decades? Why is there elite capture of city investments under a democratic system? Is it a problem of land or money shortage? Or, is it the dysfunctional process of governance? Why does this dysfunctionality continue? This piece focuses on this last issue.

In framing the governance of a metropolitan city, we should look at three dimensions. First, the legitimacy of the regime is beyond question because

our two mayors have been elected through a democratic process. Second is the competence of the regime. Here, we have serious deficits particularly among the elected ward commissioners and the serving bureaucrats. Together with handling the age-old urban issues, the corporation managers have to pay heed to additional challenges of controlling pollution and environmental sustainability—what we call management of brown and green issues. Whatever competence is there is compromised in absence of public servant and service orientation.

Finding an answer to the Gordian Knot of city governance won't be easy or simple. But what we need to do, first and foremost, is make our institutions more accountable and transparent.

The final and most important dimension is the process of functioning of the regime. This is the Gordian Knot, or an "intractable problem." Our two mayors have acknowledged themselves as "Nidhiram Sardars." Most of the service jurisdictions that they are supposed to take care of to satisfy voters' expectations are beyond their control. This lack of command of the elected caretakers over the manifold vital city services is regrettable.

True to his late father's wish, the Mayor of Dhaka South renewed his emphatic demand of an independent metro-government as the prime remedy for this imbroglio. This demand was echoed by successive mayors of Dhaka and also by the former Chittagong mayor. With just one percent of land, Dhaka city contributes to 36 percent of the country's GDP.

Here, let me cite an extraordinary example of autonomy enjoyed by a US state agency. About a decade ago, a letter was sent from the White House to the Virginia Transport Authority that an entourage of President Bush Jr will pass through the speedier toll-road off the Dulles Airport to attend a campaign rally. The agency boss replied 'yes' with the condition that the president would have to pay for the income forgone when private commuters are barred from using the road. He neither earned the wrath of the most powerful man on earth, nor lost the job!

So why does the repeatedly-raised city government issue fizzle out? The reason is well-known: the successive central governments showed no interest in letting the prime seat of power out of their control. After all, the development of Bangladesh is very much Dhaka-centric.

Given appropriate policy instruments for fund mobilisation, the city corporations can fully sustain themselves, independent of what the central government doles out. The tenure of elected mayors cannot be cut short by the the government, as was evident from Khoka holding onto the post of mayor for nine years. Then why cannot they be independent? We need to delve deeper into these issues.

Central to this process of regime-functioning is the coordination among so many disparate agencies, with their

purpose being the same: providing services to citizens. The successive governments since the 1980s have instituted coordination committees, either led by the mayors or by the PMO. The mayor-led outfit apparently does not command enough power to ensure the presence of agency bosses in city corporation meetings. The principal secretary of the PMO also led this process for some time. So why didn't the services improve? Perhaps, the problem lies in the culture of impunity wherever power, either economic or political, is involved.

Finally, let me briefly touch on the transportation problem. The country director of the World Bank has laid bare a few horrifying facts about the massive cost of traffic jams. The Mayor of Dhaka North has proposed that this problem can be solved through corporate ownership. He did not elucidate the difference between the current ownership and control of the sector. Prothom Alo, on February 19, 2014, ran a story about politicians as the main owners/controllers of the lucrative transport business. Businessmen-politicians run the show because route permits can be managed only with power and connections. This is actually one of the primary reasons why ticket prices in this sector are out of control and why killer-drivers are hardly ever brought to book. Our sense of "conflict of interest" in the public sphere is almost zero.

Finding an answer to the Gordian Knot of city governance won't be easy or simple. But what we need to do, first and foremost, is make our institutions more accountable and transparent. We need to strengthen coordination among all the relevant agencies, and rise above the culture of impunity holding us back from working together. Only then can we begin to solve the numerous problems plaguing this city.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Turkey's year of turmoil



IT has been one year since the failed coup in Turkey, and questions about the country's future still abound.

Last year's attempted coup was nothing if not dramatic. Mutinous F-16 fighters bombed the Turkish parliament, and 249 people lost their lives. But the putschists failed to detain President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who then mobilized his own supporters and sealed the coup's fate. If the coup had not been stymied within the first 48 hours, Turkey probably would have fallen into a devastating and violent civil war, the consequences of which would have extended well beyond its borders.

Today, it is difficult to find anyone in Turkey who doubts that the coup was instigated by forces loyal to the enigmatic Pennsylvania-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen. All of the available evidence seems to support this conclusion. When Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power democratically in 2002, they joined forces with the Gülenists to roll back Turkey's old authoritarian establishment, and to shore up Turkish democracy with a bid to join the European Union.

But the Gülenists had deeper ambitions – and a tradition of secrecy born in an era of military dictatorship, when many religious activities in Turkey were forced underground. After 2002, the Gülenists' infiltration of the police and the judiciary was well known, and they used their position to stage show trials and imprison their adversaries. Less well known was the extent to which they had also infiltrated the Air Force and the Gendarmerie.

In 2013, the AKP and the Gülenists parted ways, and then began waging a silent civil war. Given that ongoing standoff, it is not unreasonable to conclude that last year's failed coup was a dramatic effort by Gülenists to take power before they could be purged from the military.

The Turkish state, which should never have been so thoroughly infiltrated by subversive elements in the first place, undoubtedly needs to cleanse itself. But if Turkey's democracy is to have a future, the process of removing internal threats must adhere to the rule of law and human rights, and have broad support within Turkish society.

Unfortunately, some elements of

Erdoğan's response to last year's coup attempt raise serious concerns. Of the 100,000 people who have been detained, more than 50,000 have been formally arrested. These include at least 169 generals and admirals, 7,000 colonels and lower-ranking officers, 8,800 police officers, 24 provincial governors, 2,400 members of the judiciary, and 31,000 other suspects.

At the same time, countless people have been dismissed from their jobs, with no prospects for the future. Numerous independent media outlets have been shuttered as well, and, in just the past few weeks, prominent human-

political system will be transformed into one in which the president wields highly concentrated power.

This is a departure from the first decade of AKP rule, when Turkey modernized its economy, developed its democratic institutions, and moved toward granting its Kurdish citizens full civil rights. Turkey's impressive progress during this period strengthened its prospects for EU admission.

But now the future is more uncertain. If the Turkish government does not start respecting human rights and the rule of law by early next year, what remains of its EU accession bid could become

accommodate millions of refugees from the conflict in Syria, in which Turkish forces are now participants; and it is a constant target of terrorist attacks by the Islamic State. Moreover, Erdoğan has now decided to insert Turkey into the ongoing diplomatic contretemps between Qatar and other Gulf states.

The future of Turkey is of profound importance. Turkey straddles Europe and the Middle East. It will soon have a population of 100 million, and has impressive economic potential. The history of Europe can't be written without Turkey any more than Turkey's future can be extricated from Europe's. If



PHOTO: AFP

rights advocates – including the director of Amnesty International in Turkey – have been arrested for supporting "terrorism," a charge that defies belief.

In the aftermath of the failed coup, Turkish society united behind Erdoğan. But the government's actions since then have increasingly polarized the country. In its effort to purge Turkey's state of security threats, the government has cast its net ever wider. And in April, it pushed through constitutional changes in a referendum that was strongly opposed by almost half the country, including most young, urban voters. When the changes take effect, Turkey's

unsalvageable. Turkey's membership chances already took a hit from the failed peace and reunification talks with Cyprus – a failure for which Turkey alone cannot be blamed. And so much rhetorical abuse has been heaped on the EU that Turkey has made itself politically toxic in many key EU member states, not least Germany.

Without the political anchor provided by the EU accession process, Turkey's modernization process could go into reverse. And if that happens, the country could be dragged steadily down into the Middle East quagmire. Turkey is already admirably struggling to

it is put on a credible path toward EU participation, it can help to bridge divides in culture and tradition that could otherwise threaten all of Europe.

But Turkey's internal political wars are now jeopardizing this future. The aftermath of the coup attempt could have been healing. Instead, it has so far been divisive. It is still not too late to take another path – but time is running out.

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