

Say no to the right to wrong passage

Fast implementation of Indian loans

Joint panel for better project monitoring

BAKING has formally taken a third line of credit (LoC) to the tune of USD 4.5 billion from India. Certain changes are being made, which includes a joint panel with representatives from Bangladesh's Economic Relations Division, various ministries concerned and the Indian lending agency Exim bank. It stands to reason to have such a joint monitoring body to be put in place, especially in light of the fact that we are in a very sorry state of implementation with our earlier LoCs. A report in this paper on October 1 states that Bangladesh has only been able to utilise USD 576 million since 2010 when the first LoC was availed by us.

The problems have primarily been on our side with delays in project selection, tedious approval process, tender procedures, project design finalisation to name but some of the sticky issues that have not been addressed despite so many years having gone by. With bureaucratic delays comes the issue of cost overruns.

These issues have been highlighted by media over the years and now as we commit ourselves to yet another multi-billion dollar loan arrangement, one can only hope that our policymakers will get a move on in getting projects approved faster by the Executive Committee of National Economic Council (Ecne). Following approval by Ecne, come the issues of preparing tenders and project implementation.

Our biggest hurdle remains land acquisition. Unless procedures are simplified regarding that crucial element, any project regardless of size will not be going anywhere. It is too early to pass judgement on whether we will have better luck with project implementation this time round, but our work is cut out for us and it is time for more changes and less talk.

Small farmers' need for credit ignored

Trend needs to be reversed

ACCORDING to the latest Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS) carried out by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), only 7.15 percent of small and marginal farmers (who constitute 76.6 percent of the total farmer population) have access to farm credit and 10 percent can avail agricultural extension services provided by the state. Conversely, big- and medium-size farmers who constitute 23.4 percent of the farming community enjoy 13.35 percent of credit and services.

Ironically enough, despite this lack of attention and services, the produce or yield per unit of land from these small-scale farmers is much higher than that of richer farmers with bigger land holdings. What this tells us is that even bereft of much-needed loans from state-run financial institutions and the services offered by agriculture extension, the small and marginal farmers are much more serious about farming than their larger counterparts.

Unless much-needed credit becomes easily available to the small farmer, it will be very difficult to fight hunger and malnutrition issues. As pointed out in the report, 30 percent of the child population in Bangladesh suffers from vitamin A deficiency and 44 percent of women are anaemic. Although we like to showcase Bangladesh as a country that has reached self-sufficiency in food production, our rice production has actually slowed in recent years with growth in farm sector coming down to 2.4 percent in the last five years in comparison to 4.7 percent growth in the preceding five years. We need to work out the problems associated with cumbersome and graft-ridden credit disbursement procedures to facilitate more credit to small farmers so that productivity may get a boost and malnutrition checked.



This may well be the reason why our traffic problem has reached such ridiculous heights—because our leaders just don't know any better! The poor things have never been in a traffic jam—how can they possibly find ways to remove it?

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN



NO STRINGS ATTACHED
 I don't know about you but when I read about traffic law enforcers stopping VIP cars going on the wrong side of the road and giving them tickets, for some reason I feel like jumping with joy. Forgive me for being gleeful at another individual's inconvenience. But every time I am in the middle of one of those mind numbing gridlocks that can carry on from one to two to three hours and have to witness the flag carrying car of a VIP or their offspring, mother-in-law or just the chauffeur—all of whom are semi-VIPs by association—breeze away on the wrong side of the road, I am ready to implode. This sentiment of outrage mixed with heavy doses of helpless frustration is shared by thousands of other desperate travellers, sweating buckets as they waste away precious hours of their life in traffic congestions.

Even more infuriating is the fact that often the choking jams are caused by these very deviations that only the powerful and their minions have been able to get away with. For which traffic police would have the temerity to stop a VIP vehicle from violating rule number

one of traffic rules: Do not drive towards the opposite flow of the traffic? Remember what happened when one such masochistic fool tried to stop a VIP during Ramadan when the traffic reaches its most insane height? The VIP pulled the typical: *Do you know who I am?* mantra and explained to journalists later that he was forced to go on the wrong side as he would have been late for an official Ramadan party if he had taken the regular (read legal) route and how would that have been in terms of public relations, to be late for *iftar*, for goodness sake? You can't argue with such logic right?

This is because they are VIPs or Very Impatient Persons who are also Very Influential Persons. They are our royalty and our nobility and therefore cannot be exposed to ordinary, mundane experiences of the masses. Their time is far more valuable than the public who have elected them. Their skin is far too delicate to be exposed to long hours of vehicular air-conditioning and their eyes cannot take in so many hours of ugliness of the concrete jungle. Traffic jam? Gridlock? What in heaven's name are those things, our aristocracy may wonder when confronted with such phrases. For they and their children, their attendants and their attendants' attendants have never experienced the things that we commoners have—whether it is inhaling the dizzying odour of rotting garbage or

the pain of waiting two hours for the luggage at the airport after twenty-one hours of travelling across the globe. This may well be the reason why our traffic problem has reached such ridiculous heights—because our leaders just don't know any better! The poor things have never been in a traffic jam—how can they possibly find ways to remove it?

All that seems to have changed in a matter of days. Miracle of miracles, someone in the police department decided to conduct a three-day drive to educate those clueless souls on why they should not drive on the wrong side. On the very first day of this courageous (some might say suicidal) drive 57 drivers were pulled over and fined for taking the wrong side of Hare Road. Among those fined were none other than a state minister, a lawmaker (let's hope he doesn't work on traffic laws), several high ranking bureaucrats, an army officer and yes, unfortunately a few journalists.

It didn't stop there. Vehicles of a senior and a deputy secretary of the home ministry, an additional secretary of the ministry of communications and an officer of the public administration ministry were also fined.

To make things more dramatic the driver of a secretary of the Rural Development and Co-Operatives Division was fined on two consecutive days for the same violations—that too

with Madam Secretary inside the car! Perhaps she thought this was a just a token fine, a publicity stunt, to appease the disgruntled subjects.

Obviously these guys meant business and they have been carrying on their brave operation to try and get the high and mighty to smell the stink of ordinariness. They have gone as far as fining even the car of a top ranking police officer—who would have ever imagined such a thing?

Funnily enough it is not just government officials and their associates who have so far enjoyed this peculiar privilege of being able to go on the wrong side of the road. Motorcyclists, Dhaka University buses and even cars of television channels have happily plied on the wrong side. It seems the ability to bully the traffic police by invoking names of the Influential and Mighty has been a key factor in the right to wrong passage.

So when even after the three day drive we still see police officers stopping cars with flags going on the wrong side and then fining them we cannot help but feel the unfamiliar yet exhilarating joy of vindication. We cannot refrain from cheering them on: "Catch him, catch him, do not let him go."

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GOVERNANCE AS FARCE

The antics of the Trump administration



Lord knows we could all use a little levity. The United States, barely recovering from three major hurricanes hitting Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico, is reeling from the biggest mass murder in its modern history in the wake of mayhem in Las Vegas.

Take the latest development in Trumpland. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson saved his job by the skin of his teeth after reports surfaced that he had called our dear president a moron.

The reporter stands by her report, adding that her source confirms that Tillerson had actually called Trump a "f***ing moron."

Tillerson committed what US political reporters call a gaffe. The dictionary definition is "a social or diplomatic blunder" (Merriam-Webster) but I prefer political commentator Michael Kinsley's wickedly funny characterisation: "A gaffe is when a politician tells the truth—some obvious truth he isn't supposed to say."

Readers surely have not forgotten the flamboyant Anthony "The Mooch" Scaramucci? His brief appearance back in July had all the hallmarks of a colourful clown's cameo.

The voluble former financier has the dubious distinction of getting fired even before he started his job as White House communications director. In his infinite wisdom, The Mooch saw it fit to give an interview to *The New Yorker* reporter Ryan Lizza, which included some choice tidbits, such as a harsh critique of another erstwhile White House aide, Stephen Bannon. Scaramucci seemed somewhat unclear on the concept of speaking on or off the record, an odd attribute for a future communications guy. The interview, which Lizza reported in detail, proved to be his undoing. The Mooch, it turns out, is rather partial to carnal metaphors. His

choice remarks, targeted at Bannon, included some imaginative if anatomically impossible carnal speculation.

With a parade of itinerant colourful characters making the White House resemble a McDonald's drive-thru, it's getting hard to keep pace. Take recently departed Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price.

Price is a fearless warrior for fiscal probity. He wants to cut USD 6 billion from National Institutes of Health research. Medicaid expansion to enrol millions of people for health insurance? No sir! We need to rein in the deficit. If it means dumping tens of

national interest included charter-flight trips to the Aspen Ideas Council; a trip to Nashville that coincidentally included a lunch with his son; a trip to a Georgia resort where he owns a vacation home.

To which our dear president's responded: "You're fired!"

New York Times columnist Gail Collins, who has started a new parlour game of who is the worst cabinet secretary, noted drily that this is like gangster Al Capone going to jail for tax evasion.

We must not forget Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, who tried to get a government plane for his honeymoon to Europe. Some killjoy

Meanwhile, in Alabama, Trump made a last-ditch effort to save the Republican Party from itself. In the Republican primary, the establishment candidate, Luther "Big" Strange, was struggling against Roy Moore, who is a real piece of work. Here's a man who believes the terror attacks of 9/11 happened because "we distanced ourselves from God." God was upset because "we legitimised sodomy" and "legitimise abortion." His "personal belief" is that former US President Barack Obama was not born in America. Moore won handily.

A candidate who would be laughed out at aloud in most of America isn't only viable here—this is, after all, Alabama—his candidacy gained an extra filip thanks to the dubious political history of the aptly named Strange. As Alabama's attorney general, Strange was appointed US senator after his predecessor left to join the White House. Many voters smelled a rat, because as attorney general, his job was to investigate erstwhile Gov. Robert Bentley after reports surfaced he was being naughty with an aide. Tabloids had a field day, gleefully dubbing Bentley the "luv guv."

Bentley's terrible with modern gadgets. He accidentally texted his wife Joanne "I love you Rebekah." Then he hastily texted her "I love you Joanne," throwing in a rose emoji for good measure. Joanne wasn't impressed. Her investigation resulted in a full-blown scandal with Bentley resigning in disgrace.

The upshot of all this is Roy Moore is almost certain to be the next US senator from Alabama, and establishment Republicans are having sleepless nights at the prospect.

Meanwhile in Washington, Rex Tillerson's job seems to be safe—for now. The rumour mill has it that Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Tillerson have signed a "suicide pact"—if one goes, all three go.

Whatever you say, there's never a dull moment with this administration. This is reality TV on steroids.

Stay tuned.

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millions of people out of healthcare, so be it.

However, a funny thing happened along the way. Price's financial fortitude conveniently deserted him when it came to his own conduct. Reporters discovered that while in office he has been shuttling about on chartered planes, leaving US taxpayers to foot the bill to the tune of USD 1 million. Price's excuse, that this was due to a tight schedule, seems unconvincing, to put it delicately. It turns out that travel for vital

government bean counter, after finding that it would cost USD 25,000 an hour, shot down the proposal. However, Mnuchin did manage to take his wife to Kentucky to see all the gold at Fort Knox as well as the eclipse, courtesy of taxpayers.

And so it goes on. Let's be honest, if somebody actually wrote a script with characters like these, it would be summarily dismissed as too implausible.

Reality has no such constraint.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rohingyas in India need attention too

I hail from Kashmir, and in our southern Jammu region, a few thousand Rohingya Muslims have taken shelter.

Local BJP members are fuelling resentment against Rohingya refugees, often dubbed as the world's most persecuted people. But local Muslims despite their own shortcomings are providing them with all possible help. But India's BJP government plans to deport some forty thousand Rohingyas who have taken shelter across India after having fled Myanmar's Rakhine state.

Bangladesh has garnered worldwide praise for its generosity towards Rohingya people, but those who took refuge in India do not get sufficient attention from the world. I urge the international community to pay more attention to the plight of these Rohingyas.

Farooq Shah, Srinagar



PHOTO: AFP