

Chaos in the transport sector

Must the authorities need prodding to do their job?

THE prime minister has ordered the BRTA and the DMP to take action against those responsible for the deaths of two students and injuries of several others a couple of days ago, as well as against underage and unlicensed drivers. We understand that the home minister has also visited the house of one of the victims, on the PM's instructions.

While we thank the PM for her intervention in the matter, which we hope will help quell the situation, we are constrained to say that her directives are an indication of a dysfunctional transport sector that has been plagued by abjectly poor governance. Were it not so then it would not have needed the PMO's directives to the authorities to do what is their bounden duty to do, or the High Court's order to hold a nationwide survey to determine the number of unfit motor vehicles. The question is, does the PM have to intervene every time there is a disaster on the road? Why can't the relevant departments and agencies just do their job sincerely so that no such casualties take place in the first place?

There are separate departments in the administration to check the fitness of vehicles, driver license, route permit and so on. Ensuring public safety and maintaining order in the transport sector are the most important tasks of these departments, which they have constantly failed to do. If that was not the case, then the bus that killed the two schoolgoers would not have been on the road at all since it did not have a route permit, or thousands of unfit vehicles would not be plying the roads, or there wouldn't be so many drivers with fake or no licence at all.

The fact is, the transport sector is in total disarray. We have repeatedly talked about how it has been bedevilled by corruption, mismanagement and political influence over the years, and the need for a long-term solution to bring order in this sector. Those in charge of the transport sector must look within themselves to find the solutions and bring about necessary reforms in how it functions on a daily basis.

Sex crimes on the rise in CHT

Another schoolgirl raped

A fourth-grade student of Noymile Tripura Guchchagram Primary School was found raped and murdered in a forest. This is the latest incident in Khagrachari, where at least five girls have been raped in the last three months. While the incident has sparked outrage and demonstrations and the alleged culprits have been arrested, the incidences of gang rape seem to have grown exponentially across the country. The stories of horror plague both rural and urban population centres. While sexual crimes occurring in the city hog all the headlines, rights activists say that only about half the victims of rape actually seek any kind of remedy from law enforcers. Victims often are deterred from seeking legal remedy due to a myriad of social, legal and institutional factors.

Rapists rape because they know they can get away with their crimes—because they are well connected, and are influential enough to escape the clutches of law. The lack of gender sensitivity of law enforcers who are predominantly male, and of society in general, dissuades many rape victims from seeking justice. The issues are direr in the area where this girl was raped and brutally murdered.

Law enforcement and the justice system must step up efforts so that legal process, from the time any sexual crime is reported to the final conviction of the rapist is effective in dispensing exemplary justice. Only a strict crackdown showing no tolerance to these crimes, whoever the perpetrator is, can tackle the rising incidences of rape. We hope that these horrific cases, of rape and murder, will be properly investigated.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Attack on school children a new low

A number of video footage allegedly showing the police beating up school students protesting the death of two fellow students who were killed in a road accident caused by two competing drivers have gone viral on social media. Many students in these videos seemed to be severely injured by the police attack, while others were seen being arrested.

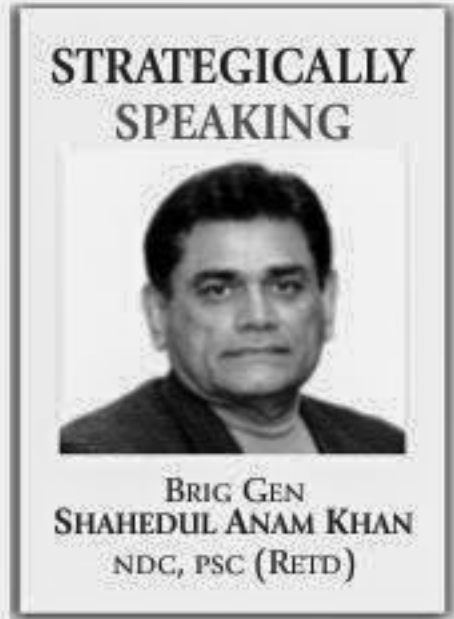
It is simply unacceptable that the police are not even thinking twice before attacking children—both boys and girls. They were simply demanding that the roads they use be safe and were seeking justice for their peers.

How can the police justify such action?

Violence against peaceful protestors seems to have become the norm in this country nowadays. The government's increasing intolerance for any form of protest, which is a right enshrined in our constitution, is very alarming. Despite that, this attack on school children is definitely a new low, even for us.

Md Zillur Rahaman, By e-mail

Pakistan out of the binary bind



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

THIS was the second consecutive election in Pakistan held following the completion of full tenure of the incumbent government, but Nawaz Sharif added his name, once again, to the ingloriously long list of prime ministers not to have completed his or her full term in office. The circumstances of decoupling the leader of the ruling party from politics and election, and his subsequent conviction on charges of corruption and incarceration have raised serious doubts about the role of the Pakistan military in the entire episode. But this is not the first time Nawaz Sharif has had a tiff with the army, the first time was when he was deposed in a coup in 1999, and the mastermind of which, the then Army Chief, he tried in vain to put on trial this time.

Given the rather abrasive nature of the mutual relationship, Pakistan Army had an axe to grind against Nawaz. What did him in mainly was his effort to stamp civilian authority over the military, a status that Pakistan army has never countenanced. It is inconceivable that the generals in Pakistan would subordinate themselves to the elected authority and cede their "right" to have their say in the policymaking of the country. Thus the perception that Imran Khan was sponsored by the army and that his victory was underwritten by it may not be totally farfetched. And also because he was the only alternative who has a countrywide support and who was willing to play along with the military to gain what he had aspired for the last 22 years. But there is a counter posed by



Pakistani soldiers patrol a street with a billboard featuring an image of Imran Khan in Rawalpindi.

PHOTO: AAMIR QURES

many wondering why then should he have not been afforded a comfortable majority, instead of a prospect where many feared that the transition of power may be as tumultuous as the elections. That is a very pertinent question which we shall leave till the last to offer our own explanation. There have also been allegations of rigging, a phenomenon that we in Bangladesh are not new to; the fact that the election results were not declared till after almost 72 hours, lends credibility to allegations of fraud and rigging.

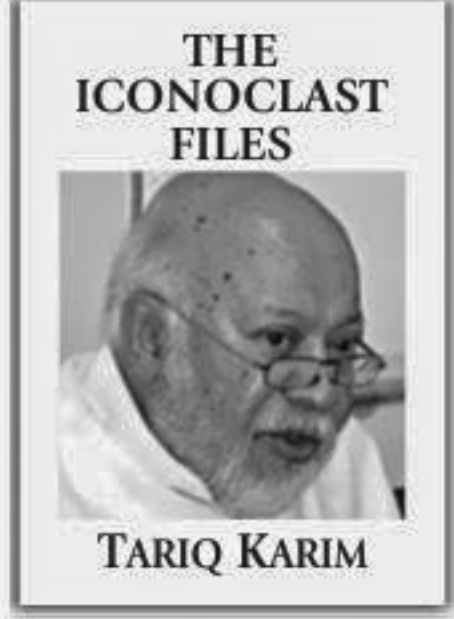
There are a few uniques thrown up by the election. This is for the first time in many years in Pakistan that neither of the two major parties has been voted to rule at the centre. Apart from the various incarnations of the Muslim League and the PPP the only other "party" in Pakistan politics has been the army. And a happy outcome for most Pakistanis is that none of the extremist groups has fared well in the election, although the religious-political parties under the umbrella of

MMA have garnered 12 seats on their own.

Although Imran's PTI is confident of forming the government, the PML-N, PPP, Awami National Party and MMA have put their heads together to discuss ways and means to form government in the centre, and the PML and PPP have decided to combine in the national assembly should PTI form the government. What the observers are looking at is what is in store for Pakistan given the prospects of a parliament whose stability is likely to be tenuous infusing more instability in Pakistan politics, and of a government likely to be headed by a western educated gentleman with very deep-rooted conservative proclivity.

However, once the PM-in-waiting dons the mantle of PM, it will not be long before he realises that being the prime minister of a country is not quite the same as leading a team in the field of cricket. While in the latter instance one has to contend with eleven opposition players and a shining red or white ball, in

Addressing the problem of trash and plastic waste



THE ICONOCLAST FILES

OUR attitude to garbage disposal and plastic waste is flagrantly callous. What is particularly eye-soring is the mass of plastic waste of all types, ubiquitously filling up

unending stretches of areas beside roads, railway lines, all conceivable nooks and crannies between buildings/shanties and, most egregious of all, as flotsam floating listlessly on all types of water bodies that have still managed to escape attention of insatiable land-developers. To be fair, this is not unique to our metropolis Dhaka or indeed to Bangladesh alone.

Humans produce nearly 300 million metric tons of plastic every year, 50 percent of which is for single use. Well over 8 million metric tons of this plastic waste, generated globally, end up in our oceans annually, of which around 236,000 metric tons are microplastics. Microplastics fragment further into nano-plastics that get easily mixed with normal food of marine life and get ingested by them—so ultimately, they travel back into the human food chain with deleterious consequences for human well-being.

It is estimated that over the last 10 years we have produced more plastic than during the whole of the last century. The UN Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Pollution (GESAMP) estimates that land-based sources account for 80 percent of the world's marine pollution, of which between 60-90 percent comprises plastic debris. This waste accumulates over time at the centre of the vortices of ocean currents, forming huge garbage patches of floating debris. There are five such patches in the oceans, the largest in the Pacific having a size similar to the state of Texas. Plastics in the ocean have been found as far as 11km deep. Plastics will not biodegrade for long (estimates range from 450 years to almost never).

So what can we do to address this problem of general waste management and plastic waste management? A number of countries are already doing so, with great ingenuity and remarkably effectively, incinerating waste to produce power and using plastic waste to build roads. Bangladesh needs to look at those examples and consider how to adapt them to local circumstances and needs.

Foremost in waste management, notably, is Sweden which burns over half of its household waste to produce energy. In fact, because its waste disposal culture has so reduced domestic "raw material" for fuelling this industry, it is now even importing household waste from other countries (2.7 million tons in 2014, 2.3 million tons in 2015), to keep fuelling its 32 waste-fired power plants the first of which was set up in 1904. The incinerated waste is reduced to ashes comprising 15 percent of original weight, from which in turn metals are separated for use in other

industrial applications while stuff like porcelain and tile, and the like which do not burn, are sifted to extract gravel that is used in road construction. The smoke from the incineration plants reportedly comprises 99.9 percent non-toxic carbon dioxide and water that can be filtered and also re-cycled.

A growing number of countries, notably India, the UK and Netherlands, are using plastic waste for road building. Enfield Council of the city of London is testing road resurfacing using asphalt made from recycled plastics. The asphalt mix is made up of pelletised plastic waste as a binder with the road mixture replacing the 10 percent fossil-fuel based bitumen that has for long been in use. It is claimed that this is an environmentally-friendly alternative, as well as stronger and longer-lasting.

In Netherlands, a Dutch construction company has developed a technique that

successful. Roads so constructed, initially within campus areas, have proved to be remarkably durable and weather-proof. Impressed by this success, the Government of India has made it mandatory for all road developers in the country to use plastic waste along with decreased bituminous mixes.

Can we think of replicating the "waste-2-power" model *a la* Sweden? We generate sufficient waste, nationally, to do so. If the model succeeds, we can rely on enormous quantities of endless waste that will continue to be produced for quite some time in our own national confines as well as immediate and extended neighbourhood to keep fuelling this project. A pilot project can be commenced with a limited defined area of Bangladesh to begin with. The power produced may be sold for use in the national grid or for designated industrial-economic development projects. Initial

within their own geospatial confines, then expand it to identified highways (converting them into "toll ways" to recoup initial investment on BOT basis in agreement with national or local authorities).

Of course, both above types of projects would, *ab initio*, also have to devise a system of trash (including plastic trash) collection, from defined local areas, expanding it progressively. In the cities, locality cells of rag-pickers or *tokais* can be organised and mobilised for collection of all trash. These organised units may be also be tasked with sifting and separating the plastics from other garbage. In non-metropolitan areas, clustering contiguously located villages may be formed, and the local unemployed denizens, men and women, as well as children in their off time, can be incentivised to collect plastic trash during spare time and take them into defined



PHOTO: AKIB ABDULLAH

results in what they claim is a virtually maintenance-free product that is unaffected by corrosion and the weather. Roads constructed using this material would be capable of handling temperatures ranging from -40°F to 176°F, and will also overcome the perennial problem of attrition to road surfaces and integrity caused by high rainfall. Any type of recycled plastic can be used for the purpose. Converting to plastic roads will reduce substantially the huge carbon footprint globally from use of asphalt, which currently accounts for around 1.6 million tons of carbon dioxide.

Similarly, a technique developed indigenously by "Plastic Man" of India, Professor Rajagopalan Vasudevan of Thiagrajan College of Engineering in Madurai, Chennai is now increasingly in test-use and has proven remarkably

financial and technical assistance may also be sought from the Swedish government and its SIDA, and international development assistance donors. Private sector participation by industrial houses may also be sought. Government could be an active partner by creating the enabling environment and regulatory framework for embarking on this venture.

Roads built with conventional technique used for the last few centuries with bituminised asphalt and gravel wash out with the first rainfall every monsoon. So "resurfacing" the same stretches of roads frequently has become an agonisingly regular feature. We may also embark on pilot venture partnership projects using or adapting the Indian-UK-Norwegian "plastics-2-roads" model. Universities, whether public or private, and industrial enterprises/parks can perhaps first try it

repositories for suitable compensation. A competition may be instituted among villages within the cluster, as well as between clusters, with suitable prizes for best performers. This will create additional income during their spare time for those already employed, some employment for those unemployed, and valued pocket-money for children to augment their family income. Over a period of time it will also induce a measure of much-needed behavioural change.

The Cornucopian belief is that man's ingenuity and sheer grit and determination can find solutions to all problems that challenge his existence. We have an opportunity, now, to prove that this optimism is not misplaced.

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