

A serious catastrophe averted

Kudos to law enforcement agencies

THE nation can breathe a sigh of relief. Luckily, the plot to hijack the Dubai-bound Biman flight on Sunday night was foiled and the armed man, who boarded the plane in Dhaka, was quickly neutralised without loss of life in a commando operation after the plane made an emergency landing in Chattogram. We deeply appreciate the swift response of all the law enforcement agencies who reached the spot quickly—leading to the hijacker being overcome and safe evacuation of all passengers.

That the hijacker successfully boarded the plane with a weapon points to a serious security breach at Dhaka airport. How he managed to get on the plane despite there being at least two layers of security checks is anybody's guess. We are already getting conflicting reports about the weapon the man carried; the Chittagong Metropolitan Police said that it was a "fake pistol" whereas passengers' accounts point to the weapon being a real pistol since a crew member was seen to be bleeding by passengers. This was an extremely serious incident that could have been catastrophic, and we hope that whatever statements are issued by the authorities have a basis grounded on evidence and facts rather than conjecture and speculation. Fake or not, the pistol should have been detected during carrying out the security protocol. And if the gun indeed was fake, what explains the crew member's injury on his arm and the gunshots heard by passengers?

This is something that the authorities, including the five-member committee formed by the civil aviation ministry, must seriously investigate. The security lapse which put so many lives in danger must not be taken lightly and the gaps in the security protocol that led to this incident must be addressed. We do not want a repeat of the time when Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport was declared a "red zone" by the EU due to lax security measures.

Delays and red-tape at what cost?

Relocation of hazardous industries should be priority

NINE years after it was decided to relocate four types of industries—chemical, plastic, printing and light electronics—from Old Dhaka, the projects are still in their preliminary phases as this newspaper reported yesterday. Almost a decade and as little as 0.20 percent progress (as in the case of relocation of the plastic industry)—the progress rate is ridiculous by any standard. And the culprits are the same old: delay in land acquisition and red tape.

Meanwhile, the risk of similar incidents to the one which prompted these projects, the Nimtoli inferno, remains just as high. In last one year alone, there were at least nine incidents of fire in plastic factories or warehouses in Old Dhaka, and on February 21, at least 67 people died because of a chemical-fuelled fire. Of course, the opposition and reluctance of the owners of these warehouses and industries to relocation is to blame. But, the failure to get these relocation projects off the ground is equally responsible. 1,200 plastic factories and 4,000 chemical warehouses or industries still operate out of Old Dhaka, the dangers of which are still too fresh in our minds.

Understandably, land acquisition can be a time-consuming process. But nine-years just to get started for a high-priority project cannot be the norm. And reportedly, at least for one project, multiple years were taken up just on forming committees, holding meetings, selecting the project site, and reaching an agreement with industry owners. The government has a responsibility of ensuring that on its part it has provided the scope for relocation of these factories and warehouses. We have seen similar bureaucratic hurdles and incomplete project completions hamper the relocation of the tannery industry in the recent past. We observed a day of national mourning yesterday; let us also take this cruel incident as the final prod to complete these projects on a high-priority basis, and once and for all, relocate these hazardous industries from Old Dhaka.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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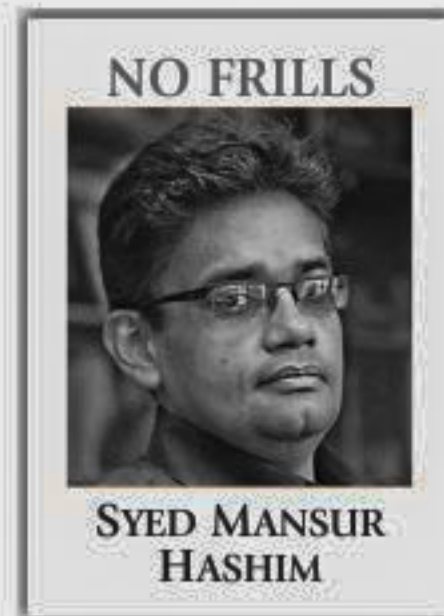
Four simple rules for alleviating traffic congestion

I think alleviating (not solving) Dhaka's traffic congestion requires four enforcement rules. First, the left lane must be kept free for vehicles turning left; and all other vehicles going straight or going right must not block the left lanes. Second, parking, especially on side/narrow roads, must not be allowed on either side of the street. Street signs must be put up to let vehicles know on which side they are allowed to park (if at all).

Third, vehicles must not occupy the centre of any intersection, restricting flow in the active lanes. Note how far the traffic edges forward into the intersections at Manik Mia Avenue and Mirpur Road or Mohakhali and Airport Road. And finally, dropping off passengers in the middle of the road poses life hazards and must be stopped immediately (for example, at the flyover near Shaheen School).

One or two traffic police officer at an intersection cannot alone enforce the above changes. These officials are often ignored. Soit would be best to have teams of 10-15 roaming traffic enforcers pick up random traffic intersections at random times of the day to enforce the above. Penalties must be severe to deter violations.

Syed S Andaleeb, Dhaka



NO FRILLS

SYED MANSUR HASHIM

ACCORDING to a report published in this paper on February 24, an industries ministry probe committee has claimed that it found no evidence of a chemical factory or warehouse in the vicinity of the Chawkbazar fire. A member of the committee mentioned to this paper that the doctors had found no sign of chemical burns on patients. The full probe report is due at the end of this week. We find the initial remark confusing because the firefighters who were on the scene battling the deadly fire last Friday found several hundred barrels and sacks of combustible and flammable substances stored in the basement of the four-storey Hazi Wahed mansion, where the fire reportedly originated.

Despite all the media coverage and eyewitness accounts from the day, there appears to be an attempt to put the blame for the incident squarely on an exploding gas cylinder and not on the overwhelming presence of chemicals that are stored routinely in areas like Chawkbazar. Indeed, Shamsul Alam, chief inspector at the Department of Explosives, contradicted this theory. He stated on February 23 that "we have so far not found any sign of a blast of a cylinder." A fire service official has told us that an LPG cylinder blast within the confines of a residential building would result in shattered doors and windows and the collapse of parts of walls. "Such an explosion of a cylinder leaves marks of splinters on the walls," he said. "But nothing like that happened in the two restaurants." Our reporters on the ground visited a restaurant called Rajmahal and found three LPG cylinders intact.

We will, of course, know the details of the probe report if and when it is published. But the running commentary in the press backed up by fire-fighter accounts from the scene tells us that there were perfume bottles at the scene. The Old Town has been a vibrant centre for making both fake and original cosmetics and perfumery for decades. Chawkbazar is primarily a wholesale market for these products and also a place for raw materials to make plastic goods. That is why such huge quantities of raw materials for making these products are found in areas like

The people of the Old Town do not need monuments and a day of mourning. They need action and a commitment from the local authorities whose responsibility it is to keep neighbourhoods safe for living.



SAIFUL ISLAM

WATCHING TV talk shows nowadays has become tantamount to listening to people trumpeting development projects taken or being taken by the government. The scale of development that we have seen over the past decade is praiseworthy, to say the least, but many tend to use it to advance their personal and political interests. One cannot help but notice that development is evident especially in areas such as energy, infrastructure and information technology. That people want development has never been a bone of contention either. What seems to be the problem is how we frame the development narrative and to what extent can "development" be allowed to encroach on other areas of public interest.

Currently, some well-worn phrases like "development and democracy" are seen to circulate in TV talk shows, public processions, rallies, in tea stalls and so on. In my



SOURCE: COINSS.COM

view, the kernel of the argument is "development at the expense of what?" I think when we talk about democracy, our view is generally shaped by what the West means by it—a group of leaders elected by their citizens, leaders accountable to various organs of the state, rule of law, independent media, freedom of expression, transparency, and so on and so forth.

CHAWKBAZAR FIRE

Confusing comments may compromise findings

Chawkbazar, and why firefighters had such a devil of a time in containing the fire in one location. It also explains why some of those involved in the chemical business have reportedly asked the press to report that the blast of a gas cylinder triggered the blaze. (*The Daily Star*, February 23)

While top lawmakers of the country have been publicly voicing what the rest of the country are feeling—that is, there has been gross negligence in upholding the law when it comes to storing chemicals in residential areas—we have a different narrative coming from the minister of industries. The minister claimed on the day of the incident that the cause of the

another deadly fire nine years ago, in Nimtoli, which took the lives of some 124 people. The latest incident took place less than a kilometre away from Nimtoli and the similarities are uncanny. While some policymakers may be content on debating what caused the fire, the evidence points to the continued presence of chemical warehouses in these areas. Lives have been lost, families ripped apart and yet we continue to take no lessons from a very basic fact of life—residential areas cannot be used for storing flammable material and chemicals without experiencing tragedies like Nimtoli and Chawkbazar. Life may be cheap to the illegal hoarders of chemicals, but is it really?

The High Court in its directives after the Nimtoli



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

fire at Chawkbazar's Hazi Wahed mansion had nothing to do with chemicals since the building did not have any chemicals stored there and the cause of the fire is from an LPG cylinder. (*Prothom Alo*, February 21) In effect, this implies that the whole issue of the presence of chemicals and inflammable materials in Chawkbazar does not exist. How exactly that conclusion was reached, even before the probe committee has published its findings, is of course a mystery. We are informed by the minister that what was found in the said mansion was not a warehouse for chemicals, but a warehouse full of material to make perfumes and cosmetics. Now, to the best of our knowledge, the commercial perfumery and cosmetics manufactured in the old quarter of the city are not made from vegetable or plant extract—they are made from chemicals! Everyone knows this. Of course, the minister may be privy to information which we are not, in which case it would be good if it was shared with us.

The Chawkbazar fire comes in the aftermath of

incident in 2010 had given specific instructions: identify unauthorised buildings, warehouses and factories where chemicals and other flammable or petroleum products are stored. Had those directives been acted upon, we would not have had the Chawkbazar fire and loved ones of hundreds of families would not have had to suffer a gruesome death by fire. The people of the Old Town do not need monuments and a day of mourning. They need action and a commitment from the local authorities whose responsibility it is to keep neighbourhoods safe for living. Today, those responsible for illegally storing hazardous chemicals are facing public wrath, but unless those in the driving seat begin to treat the matter of public safety as a priority issue, where safeguarding people's lives are more important than profits—the Chawkbazar fire will just be another footnote in a growing list of "accidents" where people die by fire.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

We need inclusive development

The magic of democracy is the people's ability to choose their own leaders through vote, the one feature that makes democracy so unique and unbeatable. But can a mere voting exercise change everything? Can we still attribute our problems such as corruption, political turmoil, money laundering, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearance, muzzling dissenting voices that we have had in Bangladesh since our independence to the British colonial empire or the Pakistani rule?

What signal does it send to the rest of the world when someone who talks about rule of law or points out to our societal issues is told to look at the development taking place in the country and basically forget about everything else? What signal does it send to the foreign investors when they get to know that the rule of law is taken for granted here, and the legal system, in some cases, favours the powerful? Is development-minus-democracy what we want? We may have been able to attract a certain amount of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) but not to the extent that we should have.

The FDI flow is also dwindling, which is evident from the data shown by UNCTAD where FDI Inward Flow to

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major partners like India, South Korea, China and Japan, are we even trying to garner support from other developed countries that could help boost our economy?

Then, what value does our particular brand of development hold for those who lost money in the last share market scam? Why have the masterminds behind this scam not been identified and brought to justice? When we let criminals of any type get off scot-free, we must keep in mind that it sets a dangerous example before the young generation upon whom the future of our country depends. The youths growing up today are highly likely to develop a tendency to replicate what they are seeing unfolding before them—the law favouring certain classes, kowtowing to people in power, restricting the freedom of the media to unearth corruption and anomalies, etc.

If Bangladesh truly wants to be recognised as a model for development in the world, it has to be a model at the centre of which is the belief that all people are equal, whether in getting their share of development or other benefits of democracy. There should be no inequality and discrimination among people. The mere development rhetoric being churned out by the loyalists will not make Bangladesh a role model for the world. The ease and comfort with which they keep on promoting the one-sided narrative is disquieting, to say the least. But I want to believe that we can do better. Establishing equality and eliminating discrimination are possible, since development and democracy can go hand in hand if we are really sincere. All we need is a strong political will and commitment to that effect.

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