

Donors' interest in Rohingya crisis waning?

Graduation from LDC comes at a cost How can it be lessened?

Planning Commission report has revealed that once Bangladesh graduates from its least developed status to a developing country in 2027, it could lose USD 7 billion export earnings every year as it will no longer enjoy the trade benefits it currently is entitled to. One such benefit is zero duty on its shipments to the European Union, Canada, Australia and many more countries. In fact, the government's impact assessment on LDC graduation report says the loss could be as much as USD 13 billion by 2031. So how can Bangladesh prepare to mitigate these shocks?

Negotiating bilateral trade deals has been suggested to be one way of avoiding such huge losses. It could, for instance, lobby with the EU to retain the GSP+ scheme so that Bangladesh can continue to enjoy zero percent duty rather than have to pay 9.6 percent after graduation.

But duties are not the only thing Bangladesh should be worried about. Multilateral concessional loans too will come down quite significantly according to the report which means the cost of borrowing will shoot up. Also the cost of interest of external debt will go up.

The report has given additional suggestions to lessen the hardship following graduation. These include increasing the tax to GDP ratio, keeping fiscal deficit at less than 5 percent and keeping the inflation rate at less than 5 percent. The report has also suggested spending on the education sector to be increased to 3.5 percent of GDP by 2031 from the current 1.8 percent. Bank monitoring should also be increased and default loans reduced to 7 percent or below by 2021.

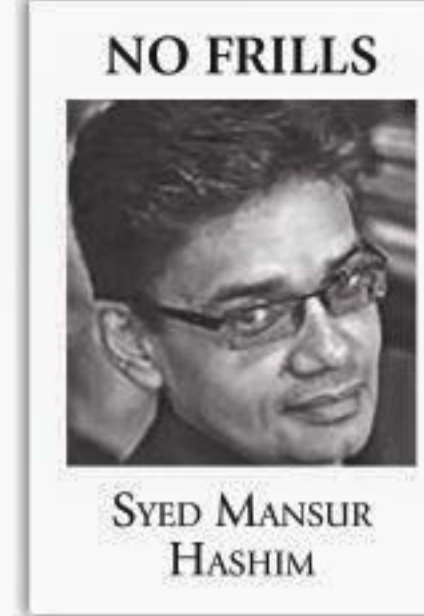
These are some important recommendations to strengthen the economy and buffer the aftershocks of graduation. While being upgraded to a better position in the international arena is something we aspire to, we cannot ignore the costs of this higher status. It is crucial that we improve our business climate to attract more investment, invest in human resources through education and training to develop a skilled workforce and make our financial sector healthy and free from the plague of loan default culture. We hope the government pays heed to these recommendations by the Planning Commission. These steps will take us many leaps forward economically and socially and will help to mitigate some of the bottlenecks that will inevitably appear, once we become a developing country.

Declining number of urban working women Remove the obstacles that hold them back

WOMEN employment in urban areas has seen a decline since 2010, says a recently published report. While the report also mentions an increase in women's employment in rural areas, the fact that female participation in employment in urban areas has marked a 3.5 percent decline between 2000 and 2017, is alarming. Lack of jobs and self-employment opportunities, and high unemployment among young educated women have been marked as some of the key reasons behind the declining number of urban working women. Moreover, lack of support from family, inadequate child care facilities, insufficient access to tertiary education and early marriage, are discouraging urban women from joining the workforce.

In view of this situation, policymakers and the government must come forward with programmes and policies that would remove employment hurdles for women. Facilitating access to tertiary education, effective skills training programmes, providing child care facilities at work, and easy access to finance are some of the steps that can be taken to address the situation.

The government should also take initiatives to increase women's participation in job-sectors that have been conventionally male-oriented, such as the armed forces, IT and aviation, by empowering women with leadership roles. Security and professionalism at workplace should also be strengthened so that female workers do not face sexual harassment or violence at work, and they can appear for job interviews without having to worry about their security. The concerned authorities should also make sure that the increasing participation of rural women in the workforce is sustained. For a country that has seen the number of working women increase to 18.6 million in 2016-17 from 16.2 million in 2010, this is highly disconcerting. It is high time the authorities came up with initiatives to bring our urban women back into the workforce.



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

By all indications, yes, it is waning. Not from ours, but from the perspective of the international donor community that has been providing humanitarian support to the million or so Rohingyas stranded on Bangladeshi soil for two years now. The data speaks for itself.

As pointed out in recent media reports, the humanitarian response to the Rohingyas living in various camps in Cox's Bazar is on the decline. The implication of this trend is surely not lost upon the government of Bangladesh (GoB). According to ICSG, a global platform of volunteer agencies working in the camps, as of August 24, 2019, Bangladesh has received only USD 330 million out of USD 920 million (36 percent) required to last the remaining months of 2019. So, where does that leave Bangladesh? If we look at the situation at the corresponding timeline when the crisis began in 2017, it was 73 percent, and in 2018 it was 71 percent. So, over the course of one year, donor commitments have declined significantly.

Last year, the Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP) David Beasley had said that donor agencies were gradually losing their interest in providing food assistance for the displaced Rohingyas who had taken shelter in Bangladesh. In fact, Foreign Secretary M Shahidul Haque had briefed reporters after the meeting between the WFP chief and the prime minister that, "He (Beasley) informed the prime minister that the interest of the donor agencies to feed the Rohingyas is decreasing and the WFP is trying to keep alive this interest

among the donor agencies under the UN system. But it's very difficult for them to keep it up."

Indeed, going by a discussion organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) in association with Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in May, 2018 titled, "Economic Implications of Rohingya Crisis for Bangladesh and National Budget", we were exposed to the enormous challenges

had appealed for nearly a billion US dollars for March-December 2018 to meet emergency needs of both the Rohingya and the host community, with at least 25 percent for the host community which would be negatively affected by the Rohingya influx. At the time of the CPD dialogue, a measly 16 percent of the fund sought had been confirmed and as rightly pointed out by CPD's Executive Director Dr Fahmida Khatun back then, "if the

international community remains divided about what the UN response should be against a regime that has perpetrated horrendous crimes against a section of its own populace, driven them out of their homes en masse and forced them to cross international borders. The Myanmar government has effectively depopulated the Rakhine state of Rohingyas. While the international community bickers about what should be an "appropriate response", we do not expect such poor humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya populace residing on Bangladesh soil. GoB cannot be expected to foot the bill of taking care of such a massive population whilst the international community washes its hands off of its moral responsibility by slashing funds that are essential for their housing, health, and education.

We are informed by the WFP that it takes around USD 800,000 to feed over a million refugees a day. This is just one aspect of the financial burden that Bangladesh is increasingly undertaking on a daily basis.

Today, we are not getting anywhere with repatriation because major foreign powers refuse to be moved by the plight of a million people. We are told that their agencies are suffering from "fatigue" because the Rohingya crisis is seemingly an endless one. And if it is, it is no fault of Bangladesh. Rather it is the failure of the permanent members of the UN security council to speak in one voice to send the message that should have been sent in 2017 when the crisis first began unfolding, that ethnic cleansing will not be tolerated and those governments that allow for it to happen must be held accountable. And while that is going on, the financial commitments needed to deal with the humanitarian crisis must be met.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.



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of getting the financial commitments needed to feed this massive refugee population. What was revealed at the discussion was that, in the first phase from September-December, 2017, fund required to provide humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya populace was USD 434 million. Bangladesh provided about one percent (USD 4.37million). The UN, in its joint response plan,

crisis lasts long, donors at one stage may lose interest in providing funds for the Rohingyas as several human catastrophes are emerging across the globe." And here lies the crux of the problem.

We have to wake up to certain realities here. The Myanmar government is not really bothered about repatriation because at the end of the day, the regime faces no real challenge to its actions

Will the metro rail solve Dhaka's traffic apocalypse?



ADNAN MORSHED

HOPE is high that when Metro Rail Transit (MRT) finally arrives in Dhaka, the capital city's legendary traffic congestion will ease off. Near Bijoy Sarani or in Mirpur or other places, where the construction of MRT is underway, attractive signposts proclaim: "The dream of MRT will soon become a reality in Dhaka," "MRT will be the most time-saving way of getting around," "MRT will be the most cost-effective and environmentally sustainable mode of transportation," and "With MRT school children will be able to reach their schools on time." All of these statements are true. But these truths may not solve the actual problem.

The key question before us now is: will the metro rail live up to its promise? Will it mitigate Dhaka's traffic catastrophe? If it does, wonderful. Money spent well. But if it doesn't, why? What will have gone wrong? There should be a robust policy conversation on post-MRT Dhaka and its promises and perils. At present, this conversation rarely exists. Everybody seems satisfied with the assumption that the grand transportation solution is coming and urban sanity would finally return to Dhaka streets. There is almost no acknowledgement of other undesirable possibilities. But they should be considered in order to avert them.

Nobody seems to be questioning whether infrastructure, on its own, truly has the capability to be a solution to a problem as socially complex as traffic congestion. The success of an infrastructure like metro rail is also contingent upon a host of other factors: people's willingness to adapt to a lifestyle based on public transit; affordable train fare; easy accessibility to metro stations; user-friendliness; metro rail's integration with other modes of transportation and relationship to the city's land-use pattern; distance between home and train station; transportation options from home to train station; parking options around metro station; pedestrian infrastructure like footpaths leading to metro station; gender sensitivity; and, last but not least, whether the status-conscious middle-class would sacrifice its love of personal cars to embrace mass transit as its mobility choice.

Riding public transit is a lifestyle. This lifestyle develops with a combination of civic culture, social equity, voluntary sacrifice of personal space, community-oriented desire for mobility, and carbon-reducing environmental awareness, among other things.

This lifestyle exists, I think, vigorously in Amsterdam or Oslo. London, Paris, Stockholm, and Singapore are case studies of public transit success in various degrees. Although there have been periodic reports of financial loss, Kolkata metro has played a vital role in creating a culture of

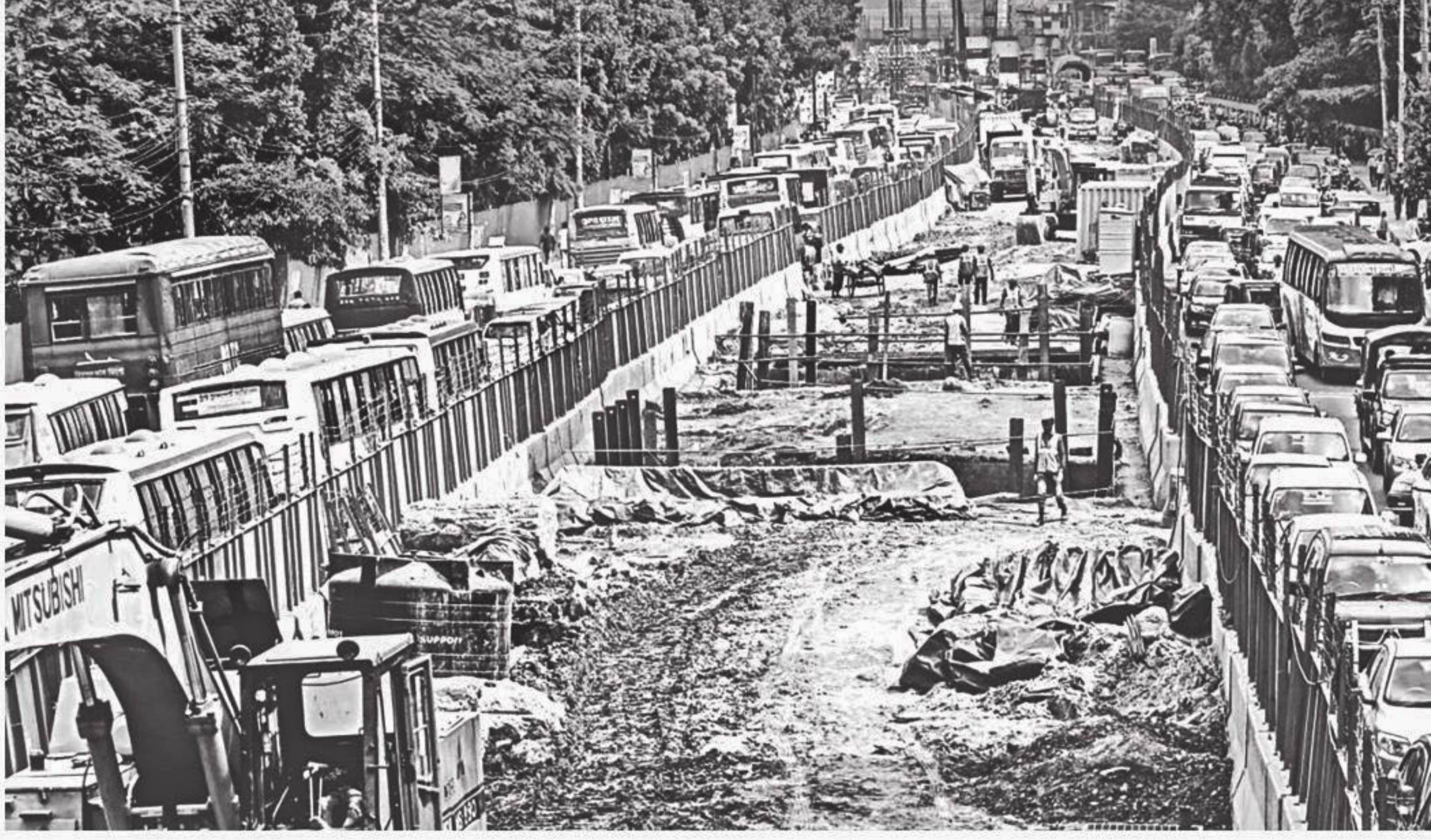
mass transit-based urban mobility and reducing traffic congestion in the West Bengal metropolis. My recent experience of visiting Kolkata gives me this impression.

Public transportation does not work well in many American cities, particularly in those where low-density urban sprawl makes mass transit untenable. According to a report, only 4.7 percent of all commuters travelled by mass transportation in the USA in 2000. In Washington, DC, there is a clear class and racial divide in the city's public bus system. Despite its efficient management and routing, the American capital's bus transit serves predominantly low-income African Americans.

The UK-based global consultancy Halcrow Group undertook a study on mass rapid transit in 13 developing countries

Chattoogram. Are flyovers alleviating traffic congestion in our metropolises?

There should be comprehensive planning in which MRT is seen as one piece of the urban-mobility puzzle. For instance, how are people expected to get to the metro station from their neighbourhoods? Has this been factored into the design and siting of metro stations? How are the metro stations integrated with public and private bus lines? Will there not be traffic congestion around the station during peak hours, in the same way schools create massive traffic clots during morning rush hours? To mitigate this common problem, cities around the world typically seek to cluster high-density housing around transit stops, so that people can simply walk to the



It may be entirely possible in Dhaka that MRT will be packed with people, while roads below will be even more congested. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

and came to the conclusion that cities in those countries witnessed very little reduction of traffic congestion after the introduction of metro systems. This doesn't have to be Dhaka's case. Dhaka could take preemptive measures to put MRT on a path to success.

The city administration's first step towards this goal should be understanding what the MRT is and what it is not. The MRT cannot be thought of as a one-dimensional infrastructure, unrelated to the social patterns, norms, and cultures of the city and other forms of "soft" infrastructure like footpath or "paratransit" like car pools or shared rides from home to station. Simply building a futuristic metro rail may not solve the road congestion problem. It may well become a glamorous but cost-ineffective concrete serpent hovering over the city. We need to learn from the flyover effectiveness in Dhaka and

metro station, decreasing the reliance on private vehicles. This is the case in New York City, among others. People should have abundant affordable housing options around MRT stations.

Most of all, instead of simply glorifying MRT as the ultimate panacea for the city's chaos and congestion, there must be robust social campaigns to develop what I would call city-dwellers' "socio-urban capital," a combination of behavioural transformation toward civic mindedness, propensity for low-carbon lifestyle, walkability and the public's willingness to shift from personal automobiles to mass transit. City people's socio-urban capital can be increased by a combination of social movements, popular advocacy, people-centric urban design (for instance, an integrated footpath system), and a safe, attractive, and accessible public transit. For example, the socio-urban capital of

the people of Copenhagen would mean minimisation of the use of personal automobiles and celebration of walkability and "bikability."

The rising personal vehicle population has been a cause for concern in Dhaka. Nearly 400 motorised vehicles enter Dhaka streets every day. Personal automobiles occupy about 70 percent of the road space while accounting for only 5-8 percent of total daily commuters. This problem will continue to aggravate since people's pockets are getting deeper and they are willing to ensure personal security and comfort by buying cars. As mushrooming car dealerships in different parts of Dhaka demonstrate, the personal car market is skyrocketing. Many would like to buy personal cars to avoid infernal streets and

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Govt. must take responsibility for disappearances

Cases of enforced disappearances have remained pervasive in our country, despite the huge media outcry and public backlash—and have been denied by government agencies, in spite of the alleged involvement of law enforcers in many cases.

While the whole nation watches in disbelief the ease with which an individual just disappears overnight, it is the family of that said individual who has to suffer in anticipation or apprehension.

According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 344 people have gone missing between 2014 and July 2019, out of which, 203 are still missing. It is hard to fathom the agony their families have to harbour, not knowing what condition they are in, or whether they are dead or alive.

The government has been turning a deaf ear to the cries of these families, whereas it should take full responsibility for the disappearance of these individuals. Such a situation demands a louder outcry from the masses and the media which, together, could push the government towards taking immediate steps.

The perpetrators responsible must be brought to trial so that the people of this country can live without the fear of disappearing without a trace.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

unsafe public transportation and showcase their upward middle-class trajectory.

Ironically, severe traffic congestion can be a sign of economic prosperity. The question is, would the rising middle-class embrace a mobility lifestyle based on metro transit? It may be entirely possible in Dhaka that MRT will be packed with people, while roads below will be even more congested. This is what happened to Bangkok. Perhaps Dhaka's most devastating problem is overpopulation. Will the MRT's success depend on the decentralisation of Dhaka?

A vigorous conversation on post-MRT Dhaka should begin now.

Adnan Zillur Morshed is an architect, architectural historian, and urbanist. He teaches at the Catholic University of America in Washington, and serves as executive director of the Centre of Inclusive Architecture and Urbanism at BRAC University. He is an alumnus of Faujdarhat Cadet College, BUET, and MIT. Email: morshed@cua.edu.