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PM can save Kamalapur station

An appeal to preserve a historical icon

WE are dismayed by the news that the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has given its consent to shifting the iconic Kamalapur Station Plaza further north which basically means demolition of the structure and erecting a similar one in the new location. In our reports, editorials and columns, we've repeatedly highlighted the preciousness of this historical structure built by two American architects, Daniel C Dunham and Robert G Boughey. Inaugurated in 1968, the Kamalapur Railway Station was the largest modern railway station in the country and was representative of the modern architecture of the 60s.

The architecture is not just aesthetically pleasing but was also built keeping in mind the climate and traditions of the region. The characteristic parasol roof gives protection from the rains and the design allows natural light and cross-ventilation that is ideal for our tropical climate. Architect Adnan Morshed in a column has summed up the reason why this structure is so important and needs to be preserved: "Serving over half a century as both a literal and a symbolic gateway to the capital city, Kamalapur is intertwined with the country's histories of modernity, transportation and nationhood."

Thus, the demolition of such a historically important structure, which is also valuable in terms of its functionality, is both tragic and bewildering.

The reason given for such a drastic measure is to shift the station building to the northern side to accommodate the scissor crossing of MRT-6 (Mass Rapid Transit 6) line. While this may be a logical reason for shifting a structure, we must ask the question whether there was any other way to build the crossing without touching the structure. The more pertinent question is: should the value of such an iconic structure be disregarded to make way for infrastructural development? If we have no regard for history or heritage, the answer would be yes—we should go ahead with infrastructural development that promises to ease traffic congestion and make travelling more accessible, no matter what the cost. But let us not forget that certain iconic structures are what make a city unique and give it character. We already have seen how Dhaka has been denuded of its character because of indiscriminate development. Many times this has been done by destroying centuries-old buildings despite protests from architects and other individuals interested in preserving history.

The idea that a "similar" plaza will be built in place of the old one would be laughable if it weren't so tragic. It is important that we need a transport hub as the new construction promises, but why can't this be while retaining the old structure? There are many instances in the world where heritage buildings are preserved while making the necessary improvements inside to cater to the needs of the public, and where new infrastructure is built without touching the old ones that have historical value.

According to news reports, the PM has not yet made the final decision to give the go-ahead for the demolition. We can only appeal to her as citizens who care about their city and value the historical structures that tell stories of a glorious past. We fervently hope that a unique architectural icon like the Kamalapur station will be allowed to stand tall and be the transport hub it has always meant to be.

36 districts get ready for the jab

The nation must be fully prepared for the inoculation programme

IT is encouraging to learn from a report published in this daily that 36 districts have already received the vaccine according to a list prepared by the government, and the remaining districts are scheduled to receive them soon ahead of the mass inoculation campaign set to begin from February 7. Bangladesh purchased three crore doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine from the Serum Institute of India (SII)—50 lakh doses of which arrived in Dhaka on January 25. Besides, the country received 20 lakh doses of the vaccine from the Indian government as a gift on January 21. The government has targeted vaccinating 60 lakh people in the first month and another 50 lakh the following month.

Beximco Pharmaceuticals Limited, the local agent of SII, has transported a total of 25.32 lakh doses from its Tongi warehouse to 28 districts on Thursday, and to eight more districts on Friday. So far, no major problem has been reported regarding the purchasing, piloting, transporting and storing of the vaccine. However, there are some who are behind schedule in training volunteers at the district, city corporation and upazila levels. Needless to say, it would have been much better if the training was completed earlier as the vaccination programme has been in discussion for some time now.

The government's swift initiative to carry out the mass campaign nationwide is surely commendable and we remain optimistic about the programme and hope everyone will register online for getting the vaccine. The training phase must be completed immediately so that the volunteers are well-prepared. Priority should be given to the frontline workers, elderly population and those with pre-existing health conditions. All recipients of the vaccine must also be kept under observation in case of any side effects and the follow-up doses must be ensured. We hope the authorities will take every precaution prior to the inoculation programme, including proper storage of the vaccine during transportation especially. Strong governance and a well-thought-out vaccination policy are key factors in executing the campaign successfully. Awareness campaigns to encourage people to take the vaccine and allay any fears regarding its safety should be initiated all over the country to combat the negative propaganda spread in social media and other platforms. Given Bangladesh's excellent track record of immunisation programmes, we are hopeful that this too will be as successful.



BADRUL IMAM

OVER the last 20 years, Bangladesh consumed about 13 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of gas. During the same period, only less than two TCF of new gas reserve was discovered. The number of exploration wells drilled during this time was merely 22, implying an average of about one well drilled per year. This is a prime example, by any standard, of a very underexplored country which has seen major gas discoveries in the past and has been rated highly for further gas prospects.

With the world adopting the latest technological innovations in petroleum exploration, Bangladesh needs to open its door to invite and apply the marvels of the advanced technology to explore its true hydrocarbon potential. This view has been expressed by a pool of international geoscientists from Canada, USA, Australia, Bangladesh and other parts of the world with the common link among them being their Bangladeshi origin. The speakers met virtually on the "Mir Moinul Hoque Memorial Lecture Forum", exchanging views on the state of gas exploration in Bangladesh as well as that of the advanced technology-driven exploration in the western world. Most of the discussants, who have years of experience in American and Canadian oil industries, opined that latest technology can change the way hydrocarbon exploration is being carried out in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has to put an end to its extremely slow pace of exploration as well as the bureaucratic overlordship on the national exploration activities. Instead, the explorations have to be self-driven, more frequent and faster with increased linkages with international expertise.

Why is gas exploration stalled in Bangladesh?

Speakers agreed that Bangladesh's gas exploration has apparently been stalled because of a lack of dynamic vision. Exploration drillings are few and far between. Off-shore exploration has come to a standstill despite having bright prospects. Starting in the 1960s, the first phase of exploration, dealing with the easy targets known geologically as structural prospects, has been almost over. This has had several phenomenal successes in the past (Titus, Habiganj, Kailashstilla and Bibiyana gas fields, for example). But the drive into the second stage of exploration, with more subtle targets known geologically as stratigraphic prospects, has not taken place. A large area of Bangladesh plainland seemingly conceals numerous prospects of the

tends to lose confidence in the overall state of exploration and development management. "Is this the reward for our success?" he would ask, referring to the decision of the high-ups to remove Bapex workers from developing their own discoveries, Shahbazpur and Bhola North gas fields, in order to give those to Gazprom (reportedly not registered in Russia), a dubious foreign oil company, for development.

This certainly demoralises the Bapex workforce. Bapex not only discovered the above two gas fields in the northern part of Bhola island entirely on its own, but it has also made a substantial geological data interpretation to pointedly forecast that other parts of the island and surroundings are equally gas prospective.



What's holding Bangladesh back from exploring its sea?

PHOTO: COLLECTED

latter type, according to the geological evaluation. Modern technologies like FPV study, as explained by the keynote speaker, for example, and horizontal drilling and fracking, as suggested by others, could bring major changes in the outcome of exploration.

The consensus of opinions has been clear: Bangladesh has to put an end to its extremely slow pace of exploration as well as the bureaucratic overlordship on the national exploration activities. Instead, the explorations have to be self-driven, more frequent and faster with increased linkages with international expertise.

While one cannot agree more on the above points, the realities on the ground appear grim. It is not difficult to understand why an aspirant geoscientist or engineer of Bapex (Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited)

Bapex appeared set to move into the area to launch further exploration. But perhaps the bureaucratic mentors could not care less about Bapex's call, and it is Gazprom rather than Bapex which has moved in. Gazprom drills a well more than double the cost of a Bapex drill. That does not deter the decisionmakers from engaging Gazprom in many other well-drilling activities, including some taken away from Bapex. Surprisingly, Gazprom does not drill the wells itself but engages subcontractors to do the job!

In 2015, it was announced that Bapex would drill 55 exploratory wells in five years—meaning 11 wells per year—breaking the long-drawn stalemate in exploration. The media hype and political rhetoric on this issue were supposed to be justified, because this could usher in a new scenario in Bangladesh's gas exploration. But in reality, the number of

Islamophobia: A useful prop for Muslim religious soft power



JAMES M DORSEY

THINK the Muslim world is united in opposing Islamophobia? Think twice. Rising anti-Muslim sentiment in countries like China, Myanmar, and India as well as the West, against the backdrop of increased support for anti-migration and extreme nationalist groups and far-right populist parties, is proving to be a boost for contenders for religious soft power in and leadership of the Muslim world.

For Turkey, Iran and Pakistan—supporters of different expressions of political Islam—Islamophobia provides the backdrop for attempts to position themselves as defenders of Muslim causes such as Palestinian rights in Jerusalem, the third holiest city in Islam, the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, and conflict in predominantly Muslim Kashmir.

Absent from the contenders' list is China's brutal crackdown on Turkic Muslims in its troubled north-western province of Xinjiang. China, which aggressively has sought repatriation of Turkic Muslims, recently ratified an extradition treaty that Turkey, home to the largest exiled community from Xinjiang, insists will not put Uighurs at risk.

By the same token, Islamophobia has proven a useful tool to influence efforts by men like French President Emmanuel Macron and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz to crack down on political Islam and shape the faith in the mould of Turkey & Co's Middle Eastern rivals for religious soft power, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The Gulf monarchies advocate a vague notion of "moderate" Islam that preaches absolute obedience to the ruler and is quietist and non-political. The two Gulf states have gone as far as legitimising China's crackdown and persuading the 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to endorse the Chinese policy as an effective way of countering political extremism and violence.

Economics and trade are powerful drivers for the Muslim world's refusal to hold China accountable. But so are the brownie points that major Muslim-

majority contenders for religious soft power garner in Beijing. Muslim criticism of the crackdown potentially could make the difference in pressuring China to change its policy.

Saudi and Emirati rejection of and campaigning against political Islam bolsters the rationale of not only China's crackdown but also Russian efforts to control Moscow's potentially restive Muslim minority. China may not like the propagation of political Islam by the Gulf states' religious soft power rivals but values their silence.

Chinese Turkic Muslims is not the only issue over which contenders, including Asian states like Indonesia, irrespective of what notion of Islam they promote, stumble in their quest for religious soft power. So is another litmus test of

November lifted the ban on consumption of alcohol and cohabitation among unmarried couples. This week, the UAE opened the door to the naturalisation of foreign nationals.

The other contender, Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim movement, has begun tackling legal and theological reform of Islam with the encouragement of the government. The movement offered in October a platform for then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to lash out at China's treatment of Turkic Muslims.

By contrast, Pakistan, in an act of overreach modelled on US insistence on extra-territorial abidance by some of its laws, recently laid down a gauntlet in the struggle to define religious freedom by seeking to block and shut down a US-



File photo of Istanbul protesters holding up banners in support of the oppressed Uighur Muslim minority in Xinjiang, China.

PHOTO: REUTERS

claims of a majority of the contenders to embrace religious tolerance and inter-faith dialogue that raises the question of whether contenders should clean up their own house first to give credibility to their often-opportunistic embrace of "moderate" Islam.

Among the rivals, the UAE, populated in majority by non-nationals, is one of only two contenders to start acknowledging changing attitudes and demographic realities. Authorities in

based website associated with Ahmadias on charges of blasphemy. Ahmadias are a minority sect viewed as heretics by many Muslims that have been targeted in Indonesia and elsewhere but nowhere more so than in Pakistan, where they have been constitutionally classified as non-Muslims. Blasphemy is potentially punishable in Pakistan with a death sentence.

The Pakistani effort was launched at a moment when anti-Ahmadi and anti-

wells drilled was 2 in 2016, 2 in 2017, and so on. In the five years since 2015, only 6 exploratory wells were drilled instead of the 55 wells announced. The programme was scrapped and Bapex workers went back to their den to await what comes next.

In 2016, Bapex drilled an exploratory well at Pabna named Mubarakpur well. Exploration drillers around the world know that it is not unusual to face a stuck pipe problem at some point during deep drilling, and accordingly, mitigation measures are prearranged. But Bapex was given just enough fund to drill the well and nothing to handle a technical emergency should a pipe get stuck. Over the course of drilling, Bapex identified a gas zone at a deep section of the well, but at one stage the pipe was stuck. This usually needs a remedial measure called side-tracking. Bapex did not have the small amount of fund required to do the job. To get the fund, it had to wait seven months during which time the fund-seeking file crawled from table to table in the bureaucratic wonderland before the fund was sanctioned. By the time the fund reached the drilling point, the gas zone was damaged due to overexposure in the open hole and the gas could not flow. This is probably the worst kind of emergency handling in a gas well ever known in the exploration business.

Nobody seems to have an answer as to why offshore exploration in Bangladesh did not kickstart even years after the maritime boundary disputes with Myanmar and India were resolved in 2012 and 2014, respectively. Based on the discoveries made in Rakhain offshore in Myanmar just adjacent to Bangladesh's maritime boundary, geoscientists are highly optimistic about the prospects of large gas reserves in Bangladesh offshore, too. But there is no answer about what's holding Bangladesh back from exploring its sea.

The government had done its share in giving Bapex a hand by providing funds for procuring drilling rigs and other essentials. It seems interested in developing a national workforce so that the national entity grows to take its share of responsibilities of developing the gas sector. But some quarters within the bureaucratic system play it the other way, perhaps so that businesses of their own interest prevail over the national interest. This group seems to purposefully try to undermine Bapex as well as other gas exploration programmes in Bangladesh.

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Saudi and Emirati rejection of and campaigning against political Islam bolsters the rationale of not only China's crackdown but also Russian efforts to control Moscow's potentially restive Muslim minority.

Shiite sentiment in Pakistan, home to the world's largest Shia Muslim minority, is on the rise. Recent mass demonstrations denounced Shiites as "blasphemers" and "infidels" and called for their beheading as the number of blasphemy cases being filed against Shiites in the courts mushrooms.

Pakistan's rivals in the competition for religious soft power have largely remained silent about the worrying trend, raising questions about the integrity of their commitment to religious freedom and tolerance as well as their rejection of Islamophobia.

Newly appointed Indonesian religious affairs minister, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, a senior Nahdlatul Ulama official, is proving to be the exception that confirms the rule. Mr Qoumas pledged in one of his first statements as a minister, during a visit to a Protestant church, to protect the rights of Shiites and Ahmadias.

Said Indonesian scholar Alexander R Arifanto: "Qoumas' new initiatives as Religious Affairs Minister are a welcome move to counter the influence of radical Islamists and address long-standing injustices against religious minorities. He now has to prove these are not empty slogans, but an earnest attempt at promoting equal citizenship for all Indonesians irrespective of their religious beliefs."

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