

Serious lapse in Sylhet airport security

Time to re-evaluate the state of security at our airports

THE story of a woman being trafficked into the UK by a human trafficking network in cahoots with immigration police personnel at Sylhet Osmani International Airport raises a number of questions and concerns. According to a report published by this newspaper on Friday, the woman was tricked into travelling to the UK by a couple of British nationals, but it is how she managed to travel there that is most alarming.

In order to traffic her to the kingdom, British citizen Zain Deen travelled to Bangladesh on February 8, 2019. But along with him, he had a fake passport with the woman's picture and a fake name assigned for her. According to officials, the passport had an entry-into-Bangladesh seal stamped at Osmani International Airport, even though nobody was the bearer of that passport, and thus without the mandatory photograph of the bearer taken at immigration. Although how this happened still remains a mystery, even the investigators at CID admit that this could not have been possible without the involvement of the immigration police personnel. But the story does not end there.

On February 14, Zain managed to board a flight to the UK along with the woman. And it was at the UK's Heathrow Airport that the fake passport was finally identified by UK immigration police, who sent the woman back on February 17. Again, how the woman managed to get through the immigration at Sylhet airport and board a flight remains unclear; however, what is clear is that further involvement of immigration police was required for her to do so. What this means is that security at Sylhet airport has somehow been seriously compromised due to the involvement of immigration police with this human trafficking network. Who or how many people within the immigration police were involved in this unholy alliance is still unknown to us, but it has been reported that a number of immigration officers have been questioned by the CID, who have identified some officials involved in the crime.

This case is a clear example of the danger that is posed to our safety due to security failures at our airports. If it wasn't for the immigration police at Heathrow airport, the involvement of our immigration officers with this crime—and the fact that there has been a serious breach in security protocols at the Sylhet airport—may never have been discovered.

And this further begs the question whether more such vulnerabilities exist throughout the rest of our airports, and whether it is just that they have not been identified yet. Either way, the fact that something like this could possibly happen demands serious investigations and a re-evaluation of the state of security at our airports as well as a rethinking of what more can be done to bolster it.

Drafting a new Road Safety Action Plan is not enough

The authorities must ensure implementation

THE Road Safety Authority has recently drafted a new National Road Safety Action Plan for the years 2021-2024, with the aim of bringing down the number of fatalities and injuries resulting from road accidents by 25 percent by the year 2024 and 50 percent by the year 2030. However, it must be noted that this authority has already failed to deliver on its previous promise, which was to curb the number of road casualties by 50 percent by the year 2020. A total of eight action plans have been drafted by the National Road Safety Council (NRSC) since 1997, but none of them have been able to reach their target. Although a new plan has been formulated, there has been no proper investigation over why the previous ones have been so unsuccessful in their implementation.

Around 56,000 people have died and 63,000 people have been injured by road crashes between 1997 and 2018. At least 4,284 people were killed and 9,112 others were injured in 2017, while the figures were 3,412 and 8,572 respectively in 2016. The amount of accidents had increased by 15.82 percent and the number of deaths had increased by 25.56 percent in 2017 compared to 2016. These facts indicate that the rate of casualties is on the rise, in spite of the various rules and regulations that exist on paper only. What is the point of forming committee after committee and drafting plans and regulations, if none of these efforts are put into action?

Some well-known reasons behind the continuous surge in road accidents are unfit vehicles, reckless driving, physical and mental incompetency of the drivers, poor traffic management, the lack of knowledge about traffic rules and the tendency to disregard them. The authorities cannot implement the new action plan without finding the remedies to these challenges. The inefficiencies are not limited to implementation only—there are also huge gaps in reporting and data collection, with the number of road casualties varying from organisation to organisation. For example, the police claim that around 3,918 people had died from road accidents in 2020, while according to the Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, the figure is 6,686. This is another peculiar situation that has to be addressed.

All the initiatives taken by our authorities to bring order to our roads have been futile so far. An attempt to curb the casualty rate without finding solutions to the underlying factors is not going to bring about any positive results.

Dhaka's paradoxical delights

Will we be able to fix the clogged arteries of our beloved city?



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

DHAKA is growing right before our eyes. Every day it is birthing new projects. The shape and size of the city is constantly transforming, and many of the changes are

incremental as they weave themselves into the urban fabric without much fanfare. We did not even realise when a golf course was carved, when a regimented city within a city was inserted in the city map, or when a flyover from taxpayers' money was built to access an exclusive residential area in Mirpur. The happenings of where the immortal gods and gentle folk live do not affect mere mortal civilians! Then again, there are projects that keep on announcing their presence in the loudest possible way. They disrupt our everyday thoroughfare with a dystopian reality, albeit with a tantalisingly utopian possibility.

Miles of concrete pillars are raising their heads behind the steel fences, promising us that once everything is cleared, there will be better management. The traffic will flow seamlessly. The dust, the concrete particles, the noises of a post-war landscape are but temporary. Soon, we will have giant metal snakes carrying humans inside their bellies from one side of the city to the other; soon, we will have raised platforms allowing cars and buses to fly above the rest for a few Takas more. Soon, we will have canals cleared, and the waters will run to the river without clogging the city in monsoon. Soon, we will be able to walk along the river banks to see the city grow while having peanuts and fresh air. Such flow management in a smart city will remove several blocks that nearly choked the city to death.

The city experts went for aggressive interventions when they identified the blocks in its arteries; traffic jam was one major symptom. They decided to open up the blocked regions, where they are now inserting stents in a desperate attempt to save the city from a possible thrombosis. In a live theatre, we are witnessing a "bypass" surgery of the city. We see the concrete pillars, we see the u-loops, we see the digitised traffic system, and hope that the surgical interventions will save the city. And then again, when we have time, which we have plenty of while sitting in standstill traffic, we think of all the bad decisions responsible for the near heart attack of a 400-year old city.

Was the city dying because of the bad air it has been inhaling? A recent pathological report suggests that the amount of pollutants and toxic gases such

as nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulphur oxide and ozone found in Dhaka city air is second only to the joint champions: Delhi and Lahore. We are the second worst city in terms of the Air Quality Index. Don't you feel lucky now to wear that mask, enforced by the Covid-19 reality? Those masks are now protecting you from the air pollution too. Nature has its own way of coming in handy and telling you a thing or two! Infrastructure is just one of the

Or how about allowing the industries to throw their toxic waste into our natural resources? If these industries have added billions to our growth, we will now need billions to clean up the mess that they have created. How do I know all these? What credibility do I have to make such tall claims as a literature professor? Am I not better off reciting poems of better days?

Indeed. I should leave these matters to the experts who know what they are

to compensate for the one taken up by the flyovers. Dreamer that I am, I even thought that some of the wetlands would be restored to have a roadside canal near Banani. Surely, they would not dare to destroy the wetlands under the watchful eyes of a media house that has sacrificed heavily for its investigative journalism? But it was not meant to be—the brick and mortar of the construction helped the same house to gain a parking lot; and it went mysteriously unreported. Near the



PHOTO: STAR

categories that makes a city liveable. The Economist Intelligence Unit identifies stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education and infrastructure as the main components of a liveable city. In 2019, the agency ranked us as the third worst city to live in, and we were placed in the cohorts of the Syrian capital Damascus and the Nigerian port city Lagos. With apologies to Jibananda Das, I can only say, "I have seen the face of Dhaka, therefore I do not seek to face Damascus and Lagos".

What other bad decisions are there? Well, the decision to allow the cables of satellite TVs was a pretty bad one, and only now are they being decluttered. It only goes to show that we were once the crow capital of the world (I am guessing). How about the plastic bags that we littered to fill up the wetlands? Wait, wait, I have a better one: how about the fact that we allowed industries to grow inside a capital city, encouraging millions of people to come to Dhaka for work, putting pressure on its infrastructure?

doing. Say for instance, you look at the BRTA, Bridge and SKS buildings near the Mohakhali flyover. You sit there for ages and think, who in their right sense of mind would build a building blocking the flow of traffic like that? We have seen cases against Rangs Bhaban and BGMEA Bhaban earlier. They were private organisations guilty of imposing themselves on public properties. In a landmark decision in 2008, the 22-storied Rangs Bhaban in the city's Bijoy Sarani was demolished to create the Tejaon link road. We, Dhakaites, waited in anticipation to see the road being opened up. To our disappointments, we learnt that the road had to be narrowed to save some government residential quarters. It has been a source of perennial jam ever since.

The same thing happened when scores of government residential housings were pulled down to clear the roadside from Mohakhali to Dhaka Gate. One imagined, as common sense would have had it, that these side-roads would be expanded

same location, the recovery of an "enemy" property resulted in an imposing building for donors, making them an involved party, so that they cannot protest against such an anomaly. Now that the press and the donors are happy, the arteries can be further blocked with new indigestible buildings.

We love being bottlenecked. I wonder whether these government officers, who are responsible for creating their offices so close to their residences in the city's decent areas, thought of the others who will peek into their SUVs from public buses for hours? How do they feel, being a subject of the voyeuristic gaze of the public for hours because they are sitting in a jam of their own creation? Oh, I forgot, they are there by the side of their masters; they are public servants, after all. Thankfully, the role is reversed. Dhaka is full of such paradoxical delights.

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On the verge of historical amnesia

MUHAMMAD A BASHED

IT is a bewildering phenomenon to see the continuous onslaught on historical buildings that represent our heritage and our past. The recent decision taken by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to demolish the historic Kamalapur Railway Station building to make way for the MRT-6 line is a prime example of this trend. Bangladesh Railway (BR) and Dhaka Mass Transit Company Limited (DMTCL) have reached a joint consensus to move the current railway station 130 metres further

of a nation's history. They help us to understand and respect people who used to live in different eras, with particular habits and traditions. The existence of historical relics helps us to observe the changes that have occurred in a given society over time and also, to get a better understanding of the reasons that lead to the development of cities and societies. Old buildings are the faces of a city. They reflect the prosperity and economic conditions that a specific place has experienced. Their preservation plays

area over a given time period. Old buildings provide people with a sense of connection to bygone eras, especially since they may have features that are not found anymore. Due to these characteristics, ageing architectural sites often possess a distinctive quality, which makes them more intriguing than the modern buildings. An added benefit of retaining and maintaining dated structures is that old methods of workmanship can be preserved by doing so. Historical monuments also attract tourists from

this daily on December 22, 2020 points to the worrisome fact that a decision has been taken to bulldoze this historical compound and replace it with a multi-storied structure. Another *The Daily Star* report published on November 18, 2020 says that a 200-year old building in the Armenian Street of Armanitola has been demolished by its present owners, in violation of a High Court order to make way for shops. Most recently, on January 7, 2021, this daily published a report revealing the attempts by a local influential person and his men to demolish the Shishubag School building in Chattogram, a 250-year old structure with links to the memories of the anti-British movement that originated in Bengal during the last half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. Finally, two other reports published in this daily over the last few years indicate the attempts by the authorities to knock down the century-old Laboratory building in the capital's Khamarbari area, and another colonial era building in Sylhet's Chowhatta area, to erect two multi-storied buildings in their places.

There are a group of people who think that past relics stand in the way of development, progress and modernity. According to their views, old structures are a burden that we must get rid of at any cost in order to comply with the demands of the fast-moving world of the 21st century. Some of these people may have, unfortunately, found themselves in policy-making/influencing positions, and it is due to the disastrous decisions adopted by this certain quarter that we are continuously losing our sense of belonging.

History is important because it links our past with our present, preserving a trail of how we have arrived at our current state of being. At a time when everything around us looks alike, it becomes even more important for communities to ramp up their historic preservation efforts. Heritage buildings provide meaning to the people associated with them.

Are we going to lose track of our journey on the map of global history so far? Will we have to live without any distinction, significance or interesting stories to tell? Unfortunately, the current trend towards demolishing old structures provides positive answers to these aforementioned negative questions.

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Kamalapur Railway Station.

north and turn the present area into a multimodal transport hub (MmTH). It should be addressed that the initial design for the MRT-6 line was from Uttara to Motijheel. It was in 2019 that the DMTCL devised a new plan to stretch the MRT-6 line directly to the Kamalapur Railway Station. If the design can be changed once, it can be changed once again, if the government is willing to preserve a structure that has been a part of our national heritage for decades. However, the current circumstances are forcing us to believe that this is not going to be the case. Old monuments are the reflection

an important role in cultivating pride among the inhabitants of a certain place about their past. Historical buildings also provide character and charm to the neighbourhoods where people usually live.

Conservation of heritage sites is very important because it provides a sense of identity and continuity in a fast changing world for future generations. Historical monuments possess immense cultural value, resulting from their beautiful architecture and their correlation with significant religious, social and political events that had originated in a specific

all over the world and thus generate employment and economic benefits for the local populace.

Unfortunately, all of this knowledge is nonetheless unlikely to bear any fruit, as we are continuously finding both the government and the general populace of our country involved in the destruction of iconic monuments.

It is not only Kamalapur Railway Station that is on the cusp of extinction. Let us focus on another popular establishment, the Teacher Student Center (TSC) of the University of Dhaka. A report published in

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