

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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## Workers injured during BRT construction

*Safety of workers and public must come first*

THE recent accident during the construction of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Line-3, which injured six workers, seem to be because of the rush to finish an already delayed project. A report in this daily on March 15, 2021 points out that though the government project was initially set to be completed within December 2016, as of February 2021, only 52 percent of the work has been carried out. The project has already gone through four revisions of the original plan, with the latest deadline of the handover of the project—June 2022—coming up soon.

The report mentions an engineer connected with the project describing the lifting of the viaducts of the BRT line during daytime, which is prohibited by existing laws. Did trying to hasten the work, and working day and night, cause the accident? Hours before it happened, an under-construction pier cap of the project in Uttara also collapsed. This should have been taken as a warning sign to suspend the work to investigate the cause, but instead, the work continued. As the project in discussion is already five years behind the original schedule, it is possible that pressure from the respective authorities to finish up the project quickly played a role behind these irresponsible actions of the Chinese company in charge of the day-to-day operations of the project.

Three government agencies, namely the Roads and Highways Department (RHD), Bangladesh Bridge Authority (BBA) and Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), are involved in implementing the BRT-3 line. They must provide explanations as to why the project has been extended to such a great extent and also, why no measures were taken to ensure the safety of the workers. The seven-member investigation committee that has been set up to conduct a probe must act fast to find out the actual reasons behind the accident, so that preventive steps can be taken. Most importantly, if the probe committee comes up with a list of any guilty personnel, corporation or government agency, they must be held accountable for negligence.

We know that unavoidable circumstances can cause delays to the implementation of a project. This is why it is crucial to devise a realistic timeframe (taking into account all the logistical bottlenecks that must be removed) while ensuring the safety of workers. Workers should not be forced to work night and day to make up for delays, and rules that prohibit daytime construction work must be enforced and abided by. The time has come for the government to ensure that all its development work continues in a systematic, timely manner, without mismanagement or negligence that may endanger the lives of workers or the public in general.

## Corporal punishment is a crime

*Why are the HC directives not being followed?*

THE High Court on Sunday observed that students cannot be tortured, intimidated and pressurised, physically or mentally, as per an earlier directive of the court, and we are in full agreement with this. It is a well-established fact that corporal punishment inflicts long-term harm, both physically and mentally, on children as well as on their educational process. It is a practice that is banned in the majority of the developed world, and was also banned in Bangladesh by a High Court ruling in 2011. But despite the ruling, corporal punishment continues to be used in madrasas and schools across the country.

The HC delivered its recent observation after a video of a madrasa teacher mercilessly beating up an eight-year-old child went viral. However, many such incidents have been reported in the media from time to time in the past, illustrating the point that corporal punishment is still being used quite widely in different educational institutions of the country. What is the reason for this? Is it due to a lack of enforcement of the law on the part of the authorities and educational institutions? Is it because of a lack of understanding on the part of educators as to the serious downsides of corporal punishment? Or is it a combination of all these factors? That is something that should be looked into with urgency.

Rights groups certainly tend to believe that the authorities could do more to prevent such incidents from reoccurring. Legal action against the perpetrators should definitely be taken to discourage the practice, and the HC also mentioned in its observation that such action could be taken by educational institutions, the education ministry, the directorate of education, and madrasa and education boards should the law against corporal punishment be violated.

We call on the authorities to uphold the law more diligently and take legal action in every case concerning corporal punishment. Torturing, intimidating and pressuring young children is just morally wrong. And the physical and mental trauma that it causes them may last for a very long time. The government must launch awareness campaigns to make sure that all educational institutions and their staff members are aware of the dangers of corporal punishment and the legal ramifications they would face should they ever resort to it.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Neglected hygiene norms

The rate of Covid-19 infection is rising again, and many people are still ignoring the prescribed hygiene rules. The tendency to maintain social distance is also almost zero. Many people are indifferent to the use of masks and many more are not using it properly. Additionally, many have stopped following the rules after receiving the vaccine. People are endangering themselves and others around them without following these parameters. The concerned administration needs to pay more attention and minimise the spread as much as possible, especially with a new variant of the coronavirus around the corner.

Abu Faruk, Banarupa Para, Sadar, Bandarban

# Surveillance without any oversight



KAMAL AHMED

THE launching of an On-site Identification and Verification System (OIVS) by Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) is undoubtedly a significant addition of a digital tool in policing. It will allow them to dig out details of anyone's NID, passport and immigration history, criminal database, previous arrest history and information about any stay in jail within seconds, simply by putting in the fingerprint of a suspect into the OIVS. The device required for the OIVS is as portable

which allows authorities to unlock and access the data of any phone." It says the deal was done via its Singapore based entity. There has not been any response, so far, on the part of RAB.

In September 2020, the Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) told a meeting on innovative ideas for policing that they would be using their own system called DRIMS for accessing national databases to identify and/or verify identities of suspects. DRIMS stands for DMP Renovated Information Management System, which suggests there could have been a previous version. Meeting notes published on the Bangladesh Police's website under the Innovation Corner tab, however, does not make it clear whether DMP's reasoning

*How many other state and non-state institutions like telecom operators have developed similar capabilities and have been accessing the NID database remain unclear.*

abuse stemming from the absence of an oversight mechanism are too high. If we take the number of false cases against opposition activists and dissenting voices, it is quite worrying that the usage of the OIVS will make them more likely to be detained again. These law enforcing agencies may increasingly be tempted to deploy and use such digital tools in controlling opposition demonstrations and activities.

Autocratic regimes worldwide are increasingly relying on such digital tools for surveillance on citizens. In this context, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) observes that "though state surveillance is not inherently unlawful", governments desire to enforce political repression and limit individual freedoms "may infringe upon an individual's right to freedom of association and expression".

While governments commonly justify surveillance on national security or public order grounds, the OHCHR warns that such restrictions may "unjustifiably or arbitrarily" restrict citizens' rights to freedom of opinion and expression. It contends that legitimate surveillance requires states to "demonstrate the risk that specific expression poses to a definite interest in national security or public order," and that a "robust, independent oversight system" that entrusts judiciaries to authorise relevant surveillance measures and provides remedies in cases of abuse is required. The most recent former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, David Kaye, in a report in 2019, adds that legitimate surveillance should only apply when the interest of a "whole nation is at stake," and should exclude surveillance carried out "in the sole interest of a Government, regime or power group."

A leading US think tank, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, classifies this surveillance technology as AI technology. In September 2019, it published a report titled "The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance" detailing the technologies and schemes deployed by states across the globe, which includes Smart City Platform, Facial Recognition and Smart policing. It has also published the first Global AI Surveillance Index, which shows Bangladesh has been availing all of these AI technologies for surveillance over its citizens. In these circumstances, the need for wider discourses on oversight mechanisms and rules should not be ignored anymore, if we do not want to sleepwalk into an Orwellian society.

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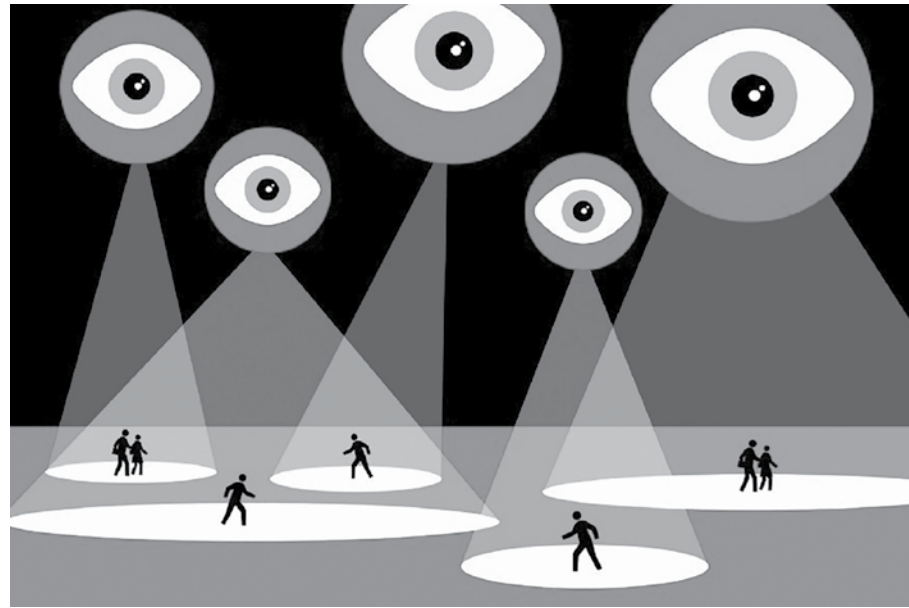


PHOTO: COLLECTED

as a mobile phone and works via WiFi and mobile connections. According to a press release issued by RAB on February 28, it claims, immediate access of law enforcement agencies to various national databases including NID, Passport and BRTA has become urgent. But it is not always possible to get information directly from the National Telecommunication Monitoring Center's (NTMC) databases. Hence, RAB's Management of Information System (MIS) unit has developed its own tracking system.

About a week later, on March 9, an Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported that a human rights lawyer Eitay Mack had taken the Netanyahu government to court seeking a ban on exports of spy-technology to Bangladesh. The report names Israeli company Cellebrite and claims that it has sold "spy-technology to Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion

is similar to RAB, of not remaining dependent on NTMC. It comes despite the fact that DMP has set up a separate database of residents of the capital in partnership with a private company, despite public outcry questioning the motive of financing such a project by a business entity.

All these units of the law enforcing forces/agencies apparently have only one objective—to curb crime and ensure the safety and security of citizens. However, such tracking systems, despite their innocuousness, raise some serious questions too. Among those, the most important one is under which law these databases are being accessed. The official custodian of the NID database is the Bangladesh Election Commission. The RAB press release suggests that the NTMC has unlimited access to the NID database and all other law-enforcing agencies rely

on them for locating or tracking their suspects. About its history and objectives, NTMC on its website says, that "With the support of the Government of Bangladesh and financing of mobile operators, National Monitoring Center (NMC) was formed in 2008. The NMC (later renamed NTMC) provides interception assistance to the law enforcement agencies by relinquishing duty on a daily basis of 24 hours a day."

It now seems that access to the NID database over the years has been widening for the law enforcing agencies. Thankfully, RAB has made it public through a press release, but the DMP seems not so enthusiastic to let others know about their DRIMS. How many other state and non-state institutions like telecom operators have developed similar capabilities and have been accessing the NID database remain unclear. Isn't it quite natural that any commercial entity financing the NTMC would be tempted to access the database for commercial gains? What are the rules and regulations in place to check any misuse of the database? Since the government allowed the National Identity Registration Authority (NIRA) Ordinance 2008 to lapse, there is no law to regulate the safekeeping and maintenance of the database. On the contrary, the Election Commission seems unable to stop the issuance of false NID cards, despite a number of media revelations about false NIDS being used by high profile criminals and thousands of fake passports being detected abroad.

Our concern, however, is more about the potential abuse of the database to stifle freedom of expression and harass political opponents and critics of the government. Although the enhancement of tracking and monitoring capacities of law enforcing agencies seems essential and helpful to curb crime, the risks of

## Can Biden clean up the mess with more debt?



ANDREW SHENG

THE pandemic has left us a terrible mess to clear up. What policies will get us out of the huge debt that we have incurred to pay for the health, wealth and job crises? 2020 was a year of terrible devastation, cushioned only by massive government spending. Aside from the favourite sport of blaming China for everything, each country will have to concentrate on the tough business of getting their economy back to a more even keel.

The latest OECD Economic Outlook published this week showed how bad the situation has become. World output was down 3.4 percent last year, but OECD sees growth of 5.5 percent in 2021 and 4 percent in 2022. However, poorly performing countries will continue to suffer low growth rates. China was the only major country that had positive growth in 2020 (2.3 percent), whereas the Eurozone was down 6.8 percent, with severe declines for France (-8.2 percent), Spain (-11 percent), and UK (-9.9 percent). Amongst the emerging markets, India was down 7.4 percent, Mexico was down 8.5 percent, South Africa had -7.2 percent and Argentina -10.5 percent.

The only bright hope for the US growing better in the next two years is due to significant fiscal stimulus, plus faster vaccination. But is this sustainable?

The latest IMF Fiscal Monitor showed that overall fiscal deficits are projected at -13.3 percent of GDP for advanced economies, -10.3 percent for emerging markets and middle-income economies, and -5.7 percent for low-income developing countries. Essentially, USD 14 trillion fiscal support was given in 2020, with global public debt rising to 98 percent of GDP, compared with 84 percent in 2019.

In short, almost every country threw money at the pandemic, with very little appreciation whether we are getting value for money. In a panic, doing that is understandable. After the panic, the pain and reckoning must begin in all seriousness.

Note that the US fiscal deficit rose from 6.4 percent of GDP in 2019 to 17.5 percent in 2020, an increase of 11.1 percent of GDP fiscal support to defend a decline of 5.6 percentage points in GDP growth (from +2.1 percent to -3.5 percent in 2020). In essence, US fiscal policy pumped two percent of GDP spending to defend one percent of GDP growth. The IMF estimated that the cost to the

US is a rise in gross debt to 128.7 percent of GDP, far higher than the world average of 97.8 percent. The comparable Chinese gross fiscal debt was 65.2 percent of GDP in 2020, just over half of US gross debt.

Is Biden's USD 1.9 trillion stimulus package this year too much for comfort? The Republicans certainly are alarmed at the sharp rise in welfare spending and debt, so they voted against the package. The nonpartisan Committee

kept low at below two percent per annum and unemployment remains low, long-term interest rates are at record low levels, whilst US inequality numbers have worsened since Reagan from a Gini coefficient of 0.38 in 1981 to 0.48 in 2015. In the meantime, the Fed's balance sheet, which was USD 865 billion or six percent of GDP in 2007 rose over eight times to USD 7.6 trillion or 36 percent of GDP by March 2021.

That's not long-term strategy, but fiscal and monetary over-dose.

Biden's Build Back Better programme will spend another USD two trillion during the next four years on building green infrastructure and create jobs. By comparison, the US spent USD 686 billion in 2019 on defence alone, and the Cost of War since 9/11 for America was USD 6.4 trillion and 801,000 deaths since 2001. All these are funded by more government debt, which the Congressional Budget Office projects will amount to 202 percent of GDP by 2051.

Any emerging market with these

debt numbers would be called a banana republic.

The Biden Administration is betting that the largest US stimulus package since World War Two would restore American competitiveness and heal the nation. But much of this is not funded by domestic savings, such as taxing the rich, but by borrowing on the US dollar. The rest of the world will not fund the dollar forever, certainly not at near zero interest rates.



PHOTO: AFP

on Responsible Fiscal Budget estimates that the total cost, including interest and extensions, would amount to USD 4.1 trillion by 2031. In other words, all stimulus spending cost more than what is shown. From a political point of view, Biden had no choice. If he does not revive the economy and protect his support base, he will lose the mid-term elections in 2022, which would make his second half term a complete lame-duck.

So, from a global strategic perspective, the real issue is not further quarrels between the US and China. The key is whether Biden can turn around US long-term competitiveness damaged by four years of Trumpian fumbling, on top of Congressional focus on short-term issues rather than long-term infrastructure and structural weaknesses.

Take fiscal and monetary policies. Former US President Ronald Reagan famously said in 1981 that "government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem". Instead, US general government expenditure rose by

And if interest rates rise, the fiscal costs would be substantially higher. So bet on the Fed pumping more to keep rates low. Winston Churchill said once, "never waste a good crisis". But in today's complex affairs, even experienced journalists have difficulty figuring out whether Americans are getting value for such massive government spending. So far, the United States have not spent enough good money on her own people, and more on the war machine. If this opportunity is wasted, then America will be lurching from crises to crises.

The truth of US debt is that it is not debt, but the rest of the world's equity. America is the world's too-big-to-fail borrower. If Biden fails, we lose. Which is why the dollar note says "In God We Trust".

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