

Execution of public projects must be more efficient

Will government projects ever be completed on time and without cost escalation?

THE long-awaited opening of the Payra Bridge is finally set to take place next month, five years after the stipulated deadline and at a cost that is 3.5 times higher than the original estimate. Although the bridge, once complete, is expected to bring huge relief to the people living in the southern region, it stands as a testament to how poorly our development schemes are planned and implemented.

The project was supposed to be completed within December 2016 at a cost of Tk 413.28 crore. However, it has been delayed by five years and the cost has skyrocketed to Tk 1,447.24 crore. According to a report published by this daily on Thursday, the main reasons for the delay and the cost escalation include a poorly conducted initial feasibility study (which led to a major change in the bridge's design), a long delay in land acquisition, a lengthy tender process and, more recently, problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is something that we have heard all too often, about way too many government projects. The fact that over the last nine years, the Payra project's cost had to be revised three times and its deadline was deferred twice, speaks volumes about the quality of planning and implementation by government authorities. We believe the main problem is that, despite the repeated failures to complete projects on time and within the initial cost estimate, no one in the administration—or those in charge of the projects—are ever held accountable for such failures. Such failures are often an outcome of inefficiency or corruption—or both. Despite the prime minister's directive last December to take action against those responsible for the delays in project execution, we have not seen any meaningful action so far, which is extremely disappointing.

Why should the government projects be delayed and made costlier every time? Such delays and cost escalations can only be accepted as an exception; they can't be the norm. But in the unlikely event that they do—as in the case of our publicly funded projects—it has to be accepted that the concerned authorities are clearly the ones at fault. And the sad reality is that it is the general public who suffer when the abnormal is normalised. It's their money that goes into keeping these costly projects afloat.

The only way to change this culture of delay in publicly funded projects is to hold the authorities concerned accountable. In that regard, we would like to remind the authorities of the prime minister's directive and ask that those responsible for the delay in the Payra Bridge construction project be held to account. Not doing so will only encourage those who profit from ill-executed projects.

Why are so many children dying from drowning?

Implement countrywide remedial plans immediately

THE statistics of death by drowning among children in Bangladesh is very grim. According to one survey report, in the last year and a half, 1,400 individuals died by drowning, 83 percent of whom were children. However, according to a 2016 survey of the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh, around 14,438 children aged 18 years or under die by drowning in Bangladesh. In other words, 40 children die by drowning every day. According to WHO, the number of deaths from drowning in Bangladesh is around 18,000 every year, and drowning accounts for 43 percent of all deaths in children aged one to four years in our country.

It is not surprising that the rural areas are the most risk-prone, given that our countryside is dotted with innumerable ponds. In many places, there is a pond for a cluster of houses consisting of a few families. It is not surprising, too, that children below five are the most at risk. That is an age when few can be taught swimming or develop any comprehension of danger and safety.

This matter is serious enough to have merited global attention—it being a global phenomenon—and the first World Drowning Prevention Day, declared by the UN, was observed on July 25, 2021. We are happy to note that the resolution was introduced by Bangladesh.

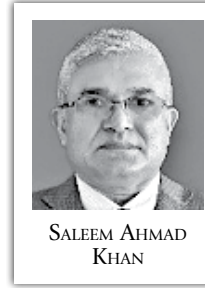
Therefore, what begs the question is this: when there is an acknowledgment of the seriousness of the problem at the government level, why has the issue of child drowning not been addressed with the same urgency as it deserves, given the abysmal data quoted above? When the country has made remarkable progress in reducing under-five mortality in diseases like diphtheria, polio, pneumonia and other child diseases, the fact that so many children should succumb to a preventable cause of mortality is unacceptable.

We understand that several programmes are underway, while some are awaiting government approval, like the draft national strategy for drowning prevention—prepared by the Directorate General of Health Services—providing for massive awareness development activities. It has been awaiting approval since 2019. We wonder why.

There are several proven measures that have also been recommended by the UN, which must be incorporated in our action plans and implemented immediately. This is a matter of life and death, literally, and plans and programmes to implement the remedial measures cannot afford to be hamstrung by bureaucratic red tape.

47 YEARS OF BANGLADESH'S UN MEMBERSHIP

How the UN efforts began in a war-ravaged country



SALEEM AHMAD KHAN

TODAY marks the 47th anniversary of Bangladesh becoming a member of the United Nations, so it's an opportune moment to take a look at the UN operations in the early days of independent Bangladesh.

The UN made its mark in the country on July 17, 1971, with the UN Relief Operations in East Pakistan (UNEPRO). Thomas Oliver and Brian Urquhart, in their 1978 book *"The United Nations in Bangladesh,"* argued: "UNEPRO had been ill-conceived from the beginning, and the war had saved the UN from a major scandal." UNEPRO later turned into the UN Relief Operations Dhaka (UNROD) on December 21, 1971, and then to the UN Relief Operations Bangladesh (UNROB) on April 1, 1973. UNROB was terminated on December 31, 1973. According to the UN, UNROD/B was the most successful and largest operation of its kind ever mounted by the UN during that period.

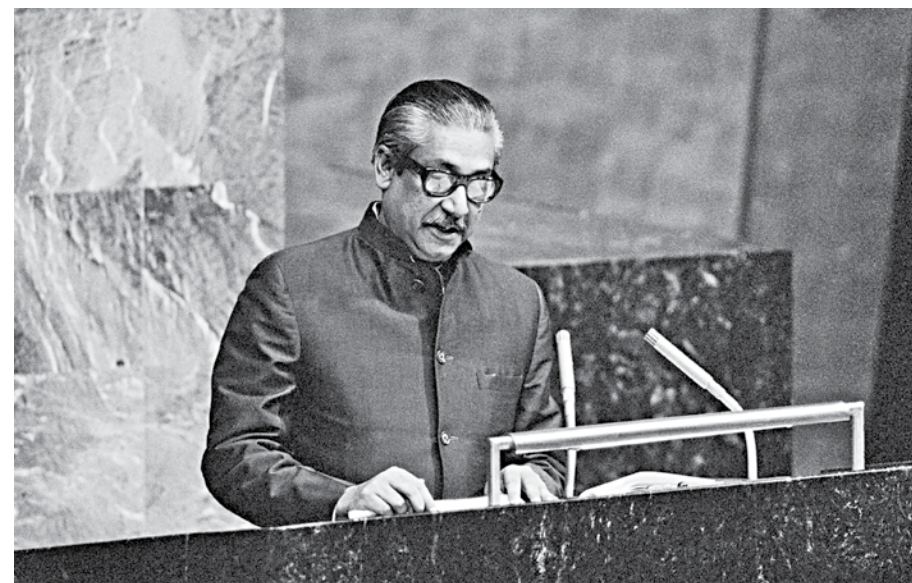
After Pakistan's crackdown on innocent civilians on March 25, 1971, neither the UN secretary-general nor any other country used Article 35 of the UN Charter to bring the situation to the attention of the Security Council. But earlier in 1960, the UN secretary-general had taken the initiative to bring the situation in the Congo to the attention of the Security Council. Thus, the Cold War rivalry played its part in different contexts. After all, the Congo was a classic case of the Cold War rivalry mainly for its vast natural resources. On the other hand, East Pakistan was a part of Pakistan, and the world was blind to the views of Pakistani leadership. Arguably, the UN's dilemma to get involved in East Pakistan had helped freedom fighters pave the way to develop their capacity to evict the occupation forces.

Oliver and Urquhart argued that the UN officials, while coordinating humanitarian assistance in Dhaka in June 1971, felt that some Bangalee civil servants were still influenced by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's call for non-cooperation. Moreover, the distribution of relief goods was affected by the influence of local peace committees. UNEPRO faced difficulties due to the delays in recruitment, the ongoing war, and increased guerrilla activities. The UN clarified that there was no question of a peacekeeping element in UN humanitarian assistance as requested by Pakistan.

The "Mujib" factor remained at the forefront for the UN for a peaceful solution of the conflict. Thus, on August 3, 1971, then UN Secretary-General U Thant sent a personal message to then Pakistan President Yahya Khan, requesting him not to undertake any trial of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as it would further escalate the tension among the people. He also wrote to the secretary-general of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) expressing the same opinion. Due to the stalemate, the UN decided

to regroup personnel, evacuated non-essential personnel and diverted ships carrying relief goods to Singapore from November 22, 1971. Later, the Mujibnagar government sent the first official delegate to the UN on December 4, 1971.

The Security Council arranged its meeting on the situation in East Pakistan on December 4, 1971. According to UN documents, there were three draft resolutions—all were vetoed. Later on December 12, the Security Council met again, and continued debate until December 17. At that time, the Indian foreign minister read a statement stating that the Pakistan forces had surrendered, and the ceasefire had come into effect. Thereafter, on December 21, U Thant informed the matters to the General Assembly, and a resolution was adopted, with no veto, mentioning a durable ceasefire, cessation of hostilities, withdrawal of armed forces, return of refugees, and international assistance for humanitarian support.



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addresses the United Nations General Assembly at New York in Bangla for the first time on September 24, 1974.

PHOTO: ARCHIVES

After independence, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his government succeeded in turning the Mujibnagar government into a central government—a rare accomplishment in world history. In many cases, newly independent states bore colonial legacy and crumbled, and fell prey to the Cold War rivalry between the 1950s and 1970s. Though Bangladesh was a newly independent state, the government created favourable conditions for the UN's relief operations. The efforts of the UN were only on relief operations—a unique phenomenon as the UN was fully involved directly in state building in the Congo in the 1960s upon its independence. In more recent times, the UN has engaged heavily in South Sudan to develop its state capacity before and after its independence in 2011.

On December 20, 1971, UNEPRO was renamed UNROD, the UN Relief Operations Dhaka. The first chief of mission of UNROD was Toni Hagen, a Swiss geologist, who had experience in relief work. Bangabandhu returned to Dhaka on January 10, 1972 and

met Hagen on January 15. He initiated a series of working-level meetings between the government departments and senior UNROD officials on food supply, distribution system, shelter requirements and emergency salvage operations. Bangabandhu's leadership impressed Hagen, who developed an excellent relationship with him. With Sheikh Mujib's leadership, UNROD became the pivot of relief operations and the government's main channel to communicate with UN member states. In the absence of recognition and being a non-UN member, Bangabandhu's decision to use UNROD as a vehicle was prudent.

In March 1972, a letter from the secretary-general was handed over by UNROD to Sheikh Mujib, who pointed out that he was the prime minister of Bangladesh, not Dhaka. Hagen later said: "Despite the damage and the shortages, there was activity everywhere." Sheikh Mujib endorsed sending a high-



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level assessment mission under the UN leadership to consider long-term rehabilitation and reconstruction work. With his able guidance, from February 1972, Bangladesh Planning Commission started functioning and could submit appropriate needs of assistance to the UN.

Bangabandhu undertook a lot of innovative steps in state building. He also instructed that assistance from voluntary agencies be channelled through the Bangladesh Red Cross and be integrated with the government's programme—otherwise, they must leave. He informed UNROD that the salvage operation was the priority of the government, and he sought UN assistance. Sensing a credibility gap in UN technical assistance as well as a delay in the salvage operation in Chattogram and Mongla port by UNROD, Bangabandhu went to the USSR in the first week of March in 1972, and accepted the Soviet offer to undertake salvage operations, which was the key to begin economic lifeline of the country. In August 1972, the Soviet decided not to undertake salvage operations of Mongla port, as it envisaged clearing Chattogram

port by 1973. The government then requested UNROD for assistance, and the UN then negotiated with a consortium on October 24, 1972 to complete the essential clearance work by May 15, 1973.

From May 1973, ports were cleared for international shipping. Sheikh Mujib, upon discussion with UNROD officials, formally requested the secretary-general to continue relief assistance mainly in food grain and transport sectors to commensurate with the outcome of Aman harvest after March 31, 1973, the date of termination of the UNROD programme. UNROD operated for 15 months and assisted the new country to stand on its feet. On April 1, 1973, UNROD turned into the UN Relief Operations Bangladesh (UNROB).

In late March in 1973, the secretary-general received a request from Bangabandhu for UN assistance in arranging transportation to repatriate a limited number of Bangalees from Pakistan. Thus, the UN helped to repatriate Bangalees, who were in Pakistan, to Bangladesh in 1973. By July, the first batch of 425 Bangalees was airlifted to Dhaka. Sheikh Mujib also sought UN assistance to rehabilitate repatriated citizens—estimated to be 150,000 to 200,000.

In summary, the UN's slow approach and the non-committal attitude of the Great Powers prolonged the war. In 1971, UN headquarters lacked efficient staffing and focused on humanitarian assistance, rather than stopping the civil war. UN's approach was also affected when then Secretary-General U Thant was seriously ill and admitted to the hospital. Pakistani leaders lacked strategic thinking and arguably failed to understand the parallel undertaking of diplomacy as well as military lines of operation by India.

UNROD/B was a testing ground for the UN system to work under an umbrella, where the UN secretary-general exercised one voice. For the UN, the experience of Bangladesh provided a model for future operations by UN agencies, voluntary agencies, and donors in harmony. Resources received from voluntary agencies and bilateral assistance were best utilised by the government. According to UN documents, Bangabandhu's leadership was crucial. Bangabandhu made sure that the UNROD/B Headquarters and the government relief coordinator's office were in close proximity to ensure better coordination. The operation was remarkably free of bureaucratic hassles with respect to the functioning of the Coordination Division and the then ministry of relief and rehabilitation. Thus, an excellent, cordial, and supportive relationship between UNROD/B staff and Bangladesh government officials was created. Above all, Bangabandhu's art of leadership in handling the UN system was exemplary, and he utilised the potentials of the UN to the fullest without Bangladesh being a member of the UN.

Brig Gen Saleem Ahmad Khan, PhD is on leave pending retirement (LPR). Information for this article has been obtained from UN documents, UN websites, the book *"The United Nations in Bangladesh,"* the author's book *"Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: A Study of the World Leaders and the UN operations in Bangladesh [1971-73]."*

Reclaiming streets for our children

Parklets are a great way to provide a small breathing space for outdoor activities in our cities



DEBRA EFROGMSON

HERE is an important but little-known fact about car parking: the more that is provided, the greater the demand. No city has solved the problem of

parking by increasing the supply. If you don't want your city littered with cars, it doesn't help to encourage people to drive by providing countless free parking spaces. What does work is to reduce the demand for car parking by charging market prices for valuable real estate. After all, why should car owners get the privilege to store their private properties in public spaces? When people have to pay to park their vehicles by the hour or half-hour, they are likely to park their vehicles for less time. If people park for, say, one hour instead of eight, then you can immediately multiply by eight the number of parked cars you can accommodate without adding more parking spaces.

Here's another fun fact: public space—which includes streets and footpaths—is intended for public use; it was not meant to be usurped by the wealthy few to store their private possessions (automobiles). We have had cities for thousands of years, and cars for less than 150 years. As cars litter the streets, we lose the use of streets as a meeting place, a place of social encounter, where people living in the same areas can come together and

interact, building the social bonds that grow ever more important as pandemics and extreme weather events threaten our existence.

People's need for recreation has only increased, thanks to Covid-19 lockdowns. In response, many cities around the world have started reclaiming public space away from the automobile and making it available to pedestrians and cyclists instead, for outdoor games and

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socialising, in the form of open streets. Sometimes the reclaiming occurs on a more minor scale, whereby a few parking spaces are converted—temporarily or permanently—into small recreational areas, known as parklets. Permanent parklets have exploded in San Francisco and Sweden, and can be found on a lesser scale in many other cities. The parklet movement is so popular, it has its own day: the third Friday in September.

This year, that day, known as Park(ing) Day, is today. Here in Bangladesh, schools are finally

reopening, and children are starting or resuming studies partly offline. But how many schools have adequate facilities for the students to play outdoors? And if students continue to spend most of their time studying, when are they going to engage in outdoor play? If they are lucky, they live on a quiet or dead-end street; even then, it is mostly boys who play outdoors, and their play is regularly interrupted by motorised vehicles. Do

we really value our cars and motorbikes more than our children's mental and physical health? Just because a car or a motorbike costs a lot of money, and our children come "free," does that mean that we believe that vehicles are worth more than children?

If we truly believe in children's right to play—in their right to a childhood—then we should create more opportunities for them to play safely outdoors. Parklets are only a tiny piece of the puzzle; we need abundant fields and parks, and we need to ensure that girls as well as boys can

play outdoors. But parklets could help solve the problem, and would be easy to install throughout the city, so that even small children have at least a tiny respite outdoors.

Any suggestion of taking space away from parking and turning it into parklets is generally met with great concern. What about the vehicles? Where will they park? It is truly astounding that we show such great concern over the housing of inanimate, polluting, murderous objects and so little concern over our children. And even if you argue that, of course, children are more important, but who wants a city littered with cars? Then I must return to my initial statement: We can never satisfy the demand for parking by providing more space for it for free. The city will still be littered with cars—parked legally rather than illegally. Is that really such an improvement? When people are forced to pay to park, they will be less interested in travelling by personal motorised vehicles. Rather than prioritising and rewarding travel via polluting and dangerous vehicles, we should prioritise the mental and physical health of our youngest and most vulnerable people.

And while I focus on children, let's remember: outdoor relaxation and socialisation is important for people of all ages. We all deserve better than to convert our cities into a giant parking space where cars have infinite value and people almost none.

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