

## How many more will die before Chattogram's drains are fixed?

*City authorities must be held accountable for their negligence*

WE are saddened and deeply troubled to hear of yet another death in Chattogram as a result of the city's uncovered drains. This time, the victim was 19-year-old Sehrin Mahub Sadia, who slipped on the wet road and fell in. The long and deep drain was clogged with waste, and it took the fire service divers around five hours to recover her body, about 100 feet from where she fell in.

There are no words of condolence worthy of the loss of such a young life—that too, from such sheer negligence. Only about a month ago, a similar incident occurred when vegetable trader Saleh Ahmed fell into a roadside drain, never to be found again. We are dumbfounded to find that—despite such a recent tragedy, and despite the fact that at least two more people were killed and many others sustained injuries in similar incidents over the past four months—the city authorities took no responsible actions to ensure that such preventable accidents do not occur again. It is noteworthy that, at the time, Mayor Rejaul Karim Chowdhury told journalists that steps would be taken to cover up open drains and build retaining walls around canals, but no such actions were taken.

It is even more frustrating to find that the Chattogram City Corporation's (CCC) and Chattogram Development Authority's (CDA) reactions to Sadia's death are a repeat of the blame game that we had witnessed after Saleh's death. The fact that neither department is willing to accept responsibility is a reflection of the inefficiency and ineptitude that has continued to mar the city authorities' daily operations. In fact, this lack of coordination amongst related agencies, along with poor planning and bureaucratic hurdles, have been identified as the major reasons behind the rising costs and delays in the CDA project to improve Chattogram's drainage system. Rather, the project is now considered to have made waterlogging even worse in the city.

What is the point of development projects that end up costing the taxpayers more, fail to solve the issues they are meant to address, and actually make things worse? The losses from the failure to improve the city's drainage system have not only had socioeconomic repercussions—lives of innocent people have also been lost as a result. Such criminal negligence from the Chattogram city authorities must be investigated immediately, and the government must show its commitment towards its people by ensuring that no more lives are lost from such preventable accidents, especially when some very simple steps can be taken to avoid them.

## Admission seekers struggling for accommodation

*RU authorities should have made arrangements to reduce their sufferings*

WE are concerned about the prospect of an acute accommodation crisis facing admission seekers at the Rajshahi University (RU). Every year, during RU's admission tests, students from different parts of the country find refuge in the university's halls. These dormitories usually house around 50 percent of admission seekers, particularly those from non-affluent families or coming from faraway places. This year, however, admission seekers are already facing difficulties in finding accommodation, as the university authorities have decided to keep their campus halls shut due to the pandemic.

Other than accommodating students in rooms, the university authorities generally allow admission seekers to stay in auditoriums, mosques, dining rooms, and sometimes other open spaces, including verandas of the halls. Students also stay in the Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology, Rajshahi Medical College and other educational institutions, which are all closed this time around. As a result, private dorms are already almost fully occupied, as well as the city's residential hotels. Students have also alleged that some hotels have been taking advantage of the crisis and charging exorbitant fees for rooms.

Although the current crisis is largely a product of the pandemic, we believe that it is, in fact, part of a bigger problem. The fact that students have had to travel long distances just to sit for each university's separate admission exam has taken a huge toll on students and their guardians over the years—in terms of time, energy and financial cost. The university authorities should have taken some steps to reduce such stress from admission seekers. The UGC, one may recall, had proposed that universities should follow a cluster admission test system—something that the RU authorities, along with other major public university authorities, didn't agree with—which could have potentially eased students' sufferings. Aside from that, the RU authorities could have arranged for alternative exam locations so that students didn't have to travel far to sit for their admission exam; for example, Dhaka University has done for its admission seekers from Rajshahi.

The fact that the RU authorities have been caught off-guard by the situation is proof of the current state of mismanagement and poor planning on the part of public university administrations. RU authorities should have pre-empted these problems and formulated some strategies that would have allowed students to sit for their exams without going into so much trouble. Having to worry about accommodation and other related health and safety issues in the middle of a pandemic is not something that students should have been put through. Therefore, even though the admission exams are only days away, we call on the RU authorities to urgently find some alternatives that can ease the suffering of admission seekers.

# Development for whose benefit?

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

WHEN we ask the question, "Who should development benefit?", the answer should be quite straightforward: "the people." But in reality, that is not often the

case. This is not only true for Bangladesh, but for all countries as well. What is unique about Bangladesh, however, is the difficulty in holding government officials accountable for their ill-conceived or ill-intentioned development schemes that are oftentimes designed only for the benefit of the influential or vested quarters.

A key reason for this is the pathetic state of our electoral system. In a democracy, the best way to hold public representatives accountable is to vote them out for their incompetence or for failing to properly serve the public.



A country's development cannot come through a waste of public money and resources.

ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

However, when you have politicians getting elected into office unopposed—which is basically equivalent to them being selected into office—they cannot really be called public representatives, because the public didn't vote them in. This was quite evident in the most recent local body polls, where a substantial number of ruling party candidates won uncontested, and the voter turnout was embarrassingly low, probably because people in large numbers realised that the election was already a foregone conclusion.

Another strange aspect of development in Bangladesh is politicians or the political party in power taking credit for "giving" development to the public—as if they just took the resources needed for said development out of thin air or out of their own pockets. The fact that almost all government projects are funded with taxpayers' money—or through loans, which the taxpayers have to repay—tends

to get lost in the political rhetoric.

Since all development projects are funded by the public, in one way or another, the only way to ensure that these projects serve the people of the country is by holding government officials accountable. It is because of the absence of such accountability that our development projects often go astray.

In 2017, a World Bank report revealed that Bangladesh spends a much higher amount than India and China on road construction because of time overruns and lack of competitive bidding. A four-lane highway costs USD 1.1-1.3 million in India, and USD 1.3-1.6 million in China. In comparison, in Bangladesh, the estimated construction cost of a kilometre of the Rangpur-Hatikumrul four-lane highway was USD 6.6 million, USD 7 million for the Dhaka-Sylhet four-lane highway, USD 11.9 million for the Dhaka-Mawa four-lane highway, and USD 2.5 million for each of the Dhaka-Chattogram and Dhaka-Mymensingh four-lane highways. Despite Bangladesh having the highest road construction cost in the world, the report said that quality

as to why road construction cost in Bangladesh was so much higher. Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader told parliament in 2019 that it was due to "difference in soil conditions." It is, however, hard to believe that the soil condition between Bangladesh and its next-door neighbour India is so different that Bangladesh's road construction cost was 2-10 times higher than India's.

In any case, what about other development projects? Surely, the higher

*It is vital to properly hold public officials and politicians accountable for misusing funds, and for their ill-conceived or ill-executed development schemes.*

costs for all projects can't be blamed on soil conditions? Let's take a look at the Payra Bridge project. According to a recent report published by this newspaper, the bridge is set to cost 3.5 times more than what the government originally estimated, and has taken five years longer than the original deadline. The project was supposed to be completed within December 2016 at a cost of Tk 413.28 crore. It is only now nearing its completion at a cost of around Tk 1,447.24 crore.

According to one official, the feasibility study conducted before the project's approval was done poorly. As a result, when consultants prepared the detailed design, they had to bring significant changes to the initial plan, resulting in cost escalation. Was anyone held responsible for this mess-up?

If we take another example, in 2017, the Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) undertook a project to solve Chattogram's perennial waterlogging problem. However, according to a report published in this newspaper on September 24, the Tk 5,617-crore mega scheme has been stumbling at every step of the way, due to "a hastily done feasibility study and poor action plan." The three-year project has been extended by three more years in two phases, while the estimated cost of the project has gone up by 8-39 times, according to project-related documents. Even more shockingly, the CDA, before unveiling the project, carried out a feasibility study in only about a week. According to town planners and engineers, a sound feasibility study for a project of this scale should have taken somewhere around a year at least.

According to a report published by the planning ministry, "The CDA has failed to provide important documents, including those on purchase, vouchers, and meeting minutes." The report also blamed the

roads were hardly built in the country due to a lack of proper monitoring by the relevant authorities, and because construction firms were rarely held accountable for time and cost overruns.

"Politicians are now involved with many construction firms. So, when they fail to maintain proper design and quality during road construction, no one dares to make them accountable," says Sarwar Jahan, professor of urban and regional planning at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet). Similarly, Buet's civil engineering professor Shamsul Haque said most construction firms, having political clout, rarely ensured quality road construction due to a lack of proper monitoring by the authorities concerned. Government engineers, who must be present to ensure quality during a construction work, "remain absent in most cases," he further added.

Meanwhile, in response to a question

## Can we get some solid progress in climate action, please?

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

LAST week, a number of events were held around the world to promote actions to tackle climate change and get everyone ready ahead of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26),

to be held in Glasgow, Scotland in November this year.

The week started off with a high-level meeting at the United Nations in New York, co-hosted by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, where a number of world leaders were invited to be persuaded to enhance their ambition to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to keep the world temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius, and also reach the target of USD 100 billion annual fund promised by the rich countries to support the poorer and more vulnerable countries in tackling climate impacts.

While there was indeed some progress—particularly the announcement coming from US President Joe Biden to double America's contribution to climate finance and Chinese President Xi Jinping announcing that China will no longer support coal-fired power plants abroad—it was not enough to keep the hope for reaching the goals of annual fund and temperature rise cap alive.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attended the meeting, representing the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), a platform for nearly 50 of the most climate-vulnerable developing countries. Attending the meeting as the CVF chair, the Bangladesh premier once again pointed out that the biggest emitters and richest countries were failing to fulfil their promise to keep the global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius as well as deliver the annual climate support fund of USD 100 billion.

Many of the leaders, including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, also spoke at

the UN General Assembly during the week, emphasising the need for taking stronger actions where climate change is concerned, but the actual commitments have still fallen short of what the world requires.

So, the pressure must be kept up on all those countries to deliver what they promised, by the time they come to Glasgow in November.

An additional issue that has recently come up following the publication

climate change, which was not possible in the past. This does not mean that every extreme weather event such as cyclone, flood, heatwave, wildfire or drought is happening because of human-induced climate change, but that they are certainly getting much worse because we have raised the global mean temperature with our activities. Hence, we are now in the era of human-induced climate loss and damage.

Developing countries have made



World leaders must speed up on taking effective climate action to leave a better world for our children who, like Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg, are already out on the streets, demanding a safer planet.

PHOTO: REUTERS

of the sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in August this year, where scientists, for the very first time, made an unequivocal statement that human-induced climate change had caused the global mean temperature to rise more than one degree Celsius over the last century.

Thus, the scientific community can now make clear attributions of the loss and damage caused by human-induced

demands to both the British prime minister and the UN chief. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been asked to appoint a special envoy for loss and damage to discuss ways to deal with the issue at COP26, while UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has been asked to appoint a special envoy for loss and damage to continue the discussion beyond COP26—to take the matter to COP27, which is due to be held in Africa in 2022—as well as beyond the

CDA for not carrying out annual audits of expenses, which is mandatory for fund release for the project work.

Highlighting the methodological flaws in the work, city planner and engineer Subhash Barua said as the infrastructural work of the project had started before the renovation of canals, waterlogging had increased rather than decreased after half of the project work was done. And according to a study commissioned by the Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industries (CCCI), Khatunganj traders incurred a loss of over Tk 514 crore due to waterlogging in 2020. Who is going to pay for this?

There are countless other such examples, where time and cost overruns have become a severe headache. But it's not always incompetence that is the main issue; corruption is another major factor.

Recently, the Anti-Corruption Commission's Chattogram office shed light on a how powerful syndicate—which included a former deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar, former additional deputy commissioner, former UNO, four former and current officials of PBI Cox's Bazar unit including the SP and formal additional SP, and seven political leaders including Cox's Bazar district Awami League president and secretary—systematically siphoned off Tk 78 crore of public money from three development projects. It is not often that we see such syndicates and influential people get exposed for their corrupt activities. And even when they are, rarely do we see any administrative action taken against them. Moreover, those who do get exposed or punished are frequently the small fish in comparison. Which means that the more powerful individuals or groups who are responsible for numerous development projects going to waste can continue on with their crooked ways.

The only way for this to change is through action by moral and courageous individuals, which is badly missing at present. Unfortunately, there is also a serious lack of vision among the government leadership, which is allowing for such short-sighted looting of the country's valuable resources that could have been used more efficiently for faster development.

That is what makes transparency groups—such as the media, NGOs, civil society, etc—so valuable at this current juncture. Perhaps with better exposure of the corrupt practices leading to our development projects going awry, and with sustained public pressure, many of them can be brought back on track. However, at the end of the day, relying on the good-heartedness of public officials to deliver on development projects is a recipe for disaster. That is why it is so important to put in place a system to hold public officials and politicians accountable for misusing funds, and for their ill-conceived or ill-executed development schemes.

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. His Twitter handle is @EreshOmarJamal

UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and engage with the humanitarian agencies that will have to deal with the ground reality.

Perhaps the most significant event took place at the end of the week, when the Fridays for Future activists held a massive worldwide strike, joined by millions of school children in well over a thousand cities and towns in over a hundred countries around the world. This movement of young girls and boys was inspired by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, who started boycotting her school every Friday three years ago to stage her protest against the lack of action in dealing with climate change. In the last few years, this movement of school children has grown all over the world, including in Bangladesh, and is still growing. It has the potential to become a powerful enough force to overcome the barriers against climate action that still seem to pervade the governments throughout the world.

The friendship and solidarity among the youth from different countries across the continents, initiated and fuelled by Greta Thunberg, will become an unstoppable force in the years to come and engage the world to tackle climate change with the urgency that it requires.

In my view, although we have seen some promising announcements made by different leaders, they are still inadequate to tackle the climate change crisis with the due urgency. I also feel sceptical about what success COP26 will bring be in November. Even the idea of waiting for a COP to talk about the problem once a year has become redundant as actions have to be taken by everyone, every day, to tackle climate change. Hence, I believe every leader of a country, province, city, town, company or any other organisation that has declared their intention to take actions to tackle climate change should give a weekly update on their progress every Friday, to the school children who we are all now answerable to.

Dr Saleemul Huq is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).