

## Death by development?

Authorities must answer for gross safety oversight at Metro Rail construction site

IT is baffling that even a government project is not exempt from the perilous nature of construction practices in Bangladesh. A pedestrian was killed and five others injured in Dhaka’s Pallabi area on Monday morning after bricks fell on them from the Metro Rail construction site. The deceased, Mahbubur Rahman Talukder, a 49-year-old worker at a jewellery shop in Mirpur-10, died on the spot.

How could this even happen? How is it that a government megaproject, costing thousands of crores of taka, does not have enough safety measures in place so as not to cause the death of a passer-by? Are there no safety officers overlooking such large-scale projects? And—as of the time of writing this editorial—why hasn’t there been an official apology or any word of compensation from the authorities? Who will answer for Mahbubur’s untimely death?

Deaths caused by construction work are not rare in Bangladesh. In 2021 alone, at least 154 workers died in the construction sector, according to a survey by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS). The actual figure, one has to assume, is much higher. Particularly in Dhaka, where there is at least one construction project going on in almost every block, there is a serious need for safe construction practices. But for Mahbubur’s death to be caused by a megaproject like the Metro Rail is truly concerning. The Metro Rail construction spans across many areas, most of them extremely busy and populous ones. People often have to walk under the under-construction project, whether while crossing the road or due to there not being a proper footpath in the area. As if the sky-high number of road crashes wasn’t enough, are citizens now supposed to constantly look left, right, front, back, and up when they are walking on the streets? Is death truly at every corner of a city under development?

We hope this death caused by the construction of Metro Rail will be an exception—but one death is still too many. What does it say about our vision of development when a person can die any day as they are walking by an under-construction site, with the authorities responsible often getting away with workers’ and citizens’ injuries and deaths without so much as a slap on the wrist? Mahbubur’s family, including his 10-year-old daughter, deserve an apology and compensation from the government, and we urge that this takes place as soon as possible. Most importantly, the government must investigate the incident urgently and ensure the safety of all involved at and around public and private construction sites. Such avoidable deaths and injuries cannot be excusable.

## No point of Wasa water being safe at source

If it is contaminated when we drink it

WE may recall that a great deal has been reported in the media in the recent past on the conspicuous presence of hazardous germs and bacteria in Dhaka Wasa water. The frequency of reporting increased as hundreds of diarrhoea patients began to visit the city’s hospitals including the icddr,b on a daily basis only a couple of months ago. Breaches in Dhaka Wasa’s supply system was considered to be the main reason behind the outbreak. Consequently, pressure from all quarters mounted on Wasa to take immediate steps to improve the quality of its water before supplying it to the citizens.

However, a recent research done jointly by Dhaka Wasa and icddr,b on the water supplied by Wasa has found it to be safe at the source. That is certainly welcome news. However, the two organisations did not conduct any test on tap water or water collected from the pipes within the Wasa distribution network. Why? We are at a loss to understand what the point is of water being safe at source if the water that consumers are getting from their taps are contaminated? Isn’t it Wasa’s responsibility to ensure safe water to all those drinking it or using it for various purposes, and to answer for their consistent failure to do so?

By now, there have been widespread reports of cross-contamination of Wasa water by sewage in many areas of the capital due to leaks and breaches in the supply lines, or while replacing old, derelict pipes with new ones. We have noted with alarm how Dhaka Wasa has consistently denied their part in the recent cholera outbreak, and we can’t help but think that the latest report will simply enable them to continue their policy of denial. Instead of making misleading claims, Wasa needs to tell us what it has done since the cholera outbreak in March to address the derelict and alarming conditions of its supply lines.

The study shows that sludge and untreated sewage running through the drains contain and transmit coronavirus. If sewage lines are contaminating the water supply, where is the guarantee that the virus—and other untreated bacteria—are not making their way to our glass of water?

Interestingly, WaterAid and the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) revealed in a separate seminar that about 41 percent of the people across Bangladesh don’t have access to safe water. It is of urgent importance that we address the disconnect between what our policymakers claim and what we citizens experience. Unfortunately, we are yet to see any political goodwill to identify, much less address, the mismanagement, inefficiencies and corruption plaguing the sector.

# Be careful with ‘over-optimism’ for megaprojects



### THE OVERTON WINDOW

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GEOSTRATEGIC factors such as its location between South Asia and Southeast Asia, sustained economic growth, relative political stability, availability of cheap labour, and a large consumer market have made Bangladesh an attractive investment centre for many regional and international players. Capitalising on this, the Bangladesh government has been eyeing a number of megaprojects to shift its economy into the next gear. Three of these projects are being funded by China. Japan is providing funding for the Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit (metro rail) and Matarbari deep seaport projects and contributing to the Jamuna Railway Bridge and Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport Terminal 3 projects, while Russia and India are financing a project each.

In April, the prime minister said 2022 and 2023 would be very important years for Bangladesh in terms of infrastructure development. The Padma Bridge, which is expected to contribute 1.2 percent to the GDP, she said, is set to be inaugurated in less than a month. The Dhaka metro rail will be opened on the 14km Uttara-Agargaon route by the end of the year, bringing “revolutionary change” to Dhaka’s transport system. The Karnaphuli River Tunnel in Chattogram, the country’s first underwater tunnel, is expected to be opened this October. And the first unit of Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (1,200MW), the largest development project in the country’s history, is expected to be commissioned by the end of 2023.

While all this is good news, the recent financial debacle in Sri Lanka should provide us with some food for thought.

Experts have provided a range of reasons such as cronyism, dictatorial power, family politics, lack of economic diversification, and excessive foreign borrowing for what is happening in Sri Lanka. But another factor that has recently been discussed is the issue of endemic over-optimism. Due to the terrific post-war performance of the Sri Lankan economy, “policy complacency and irrational exuberance led to investments in popular big-ticket projects,” which ignored the underlying macroeconomic vulnerabilities. Clear warning signs such as “falling exports, mounting debts and rising inequality were ignored much like a ‘grey rhino’ running at you at a high speed,” according to Dr Niaz Asadullah, professor of economics at Malaya University and Monash University Malaysia, and also policy adviser on food and agriculture to the Malaysian government.

Does Bangladesh face similar risks? Perhaps not, if it can overcome the various challenges to its ambition, such as maintaining economic diplomacy between



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**The government needs to develop the capacity to implement all its megaprojects on time and within their original budgetary requirements.**

FILE PHOTO: STAR

most expensive highway in the country and the world, where more than Tk 200 crore has been spent per kilometre. But with the toll plaza not yet ready, the expressway is still not able to generate the expected revenue. Perhaps because of this lost revenue, even before implementing the toll rates previously fixed for the expressway, the government is already planning to increase the toll rates—a move that will push up transport costs.

If we look at the RNPP project, it was originally supposed to start generating 1,200MW of electricity in 2021 and 2,400MW by 2022. However, even though the first reactor has been installed, no electricity transmission line has been designed or built yet, and so, even if the reactor is ready, it will not be able to move into production, and the government will have to pay capacity charges against the idle plant. The same thing happened with the Rampal power plant.

These are some examples of how public expenditure is not paying off the promised economic utilities. Because development projects in Bangladesh have a tendency to go through multiple phases of revision, resulting in cost escalation and delays, when juxtaposed against the initial projection of expected outcomes, the majority of them fail to achieve their targets. In the end, the burden falls on the end consumers, who are deprived of the timely delivery of services, while the cost of the services to be delivered by the project rises.

Repayment of the loans we have taken for these projects also become more problematic. According to eminent economist Debapriya Bhattacharya, Bangladesh’s debt situation may become somewhat tricky in 2024-2025 if the government fails to increase its revenue base now, as the repayment schedule for many of the costly loans would begin then. Bangladesh’s foreign loan composition

has already started to change, with concessional loans from multilateral lenders being replaced with costlier bilateral loans—with higher interest rates and shorter grace periods—because of the country’s graduation from the low-income bracket. Therefore, it is essential for the government not to be wasteful with these foreign loans, and to find some way to increase the tax-GDP ratio, which has proven to be a Herculean task so far.

Another factor that should not be overlooked is that because the fast-track megaprojects grab a large chunk of the budgetary allocation set aside for the Annual Development Programme (ADP)—for example, in FY2021-22, 10 such projects grabbed nearly one-third of the Tk 225,324 crore ADP—the Planning Commission cannot provide adequate funds for many other small, medium and big projects, per their own admission. The opportunity cost that arises from this is by no means insignificant, and it adds up over time.

The bottom line is that Bangladesh is not guaranteed to benefit greatly from the megaprojects that are currently in the pipeline. In fact, if we continue along our current trajectory, they even have the potential to do more harm than good. That’s why the government should avoid falling into the trap of being overly-optimistic about them. Instead, it should work towards developing the capacity to implement all these projects on time and within their original budgetary requirements.

## Democracy crushed under BCL’s boots?



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BANGLADESH Chhatra League (BCL) has hogged headlines once again. Last week, the student wing of the ruling party, armed with sticks, iron rods and machetes, launched an attack on some leaders and activists of their arch-rival Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), the student wing of BNP, near the Central Shaheed Minar when the latter tried to enter the Dhaka University campus for a scheduled programme. The attack resulted in chases and counter-chases that continued sporadically for several hours, turning the campus into a battlefield. Video footage and photographs showed how the BCL members beat up their opponents mercilessly, leaving about 30 JCD activists—including some female members—injured.

What earned the JCD such a thrashing? They wanted to hold a press briefing to clarify the remarks made by one of their leaders about the prime minister. During a rally near the Raju Sculpture on May 22, JCD General Secretary Saif Mahmud criticised Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her remarks on BNP chief Khaleda Zia over the Padma Bridge issue. Saif’s remarks reportedly made the BCL furious, and he was supposed to clarify his comments that day. But before he could make his point, the JCD members were beaten up and driven out of the campus. Two days later, when they tried to bring out a procession in protest of the attack, BCL men again swooped on them near the High Court

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area. A battle ensued soon, with the BCL activists chasing some of their rival members into the High Court compound. The incident, which left 50 people injured, set off a chain reaction, with members of the ruling party attacking members of the JCD and its parent organisation in some places across the country.

BCL leaders, while justifying the attack, said “progressive students” had united with them to protest against “criminal activities.” BCL DU unit General Secretary Saddam Hussain said it was done to “protect the general students of the university and preserve DU’s academic environment.” He warned that students would not return home until the “criminal forces” were rooted out. Now the question is, has the BCL been given the responsibility to protect the academic environment of Dhaka University? Then what is the role of the university administration? In fact, the DU administration’s role was all but dubious. Firstly, it failed to create an atmosphere conducive to peaceful coexistence of all student bodies affiliated with the political parties. Secondly, it did not take any visible measures to prevent the violent clashes last week. All the DU authorities did was file a case with Shahbagh Police Station against unnamed people, though photos and videos of BCL activists wielding weapons went viral on social media and were run by newspapers. Eventually, it was the JCD members who were accused in the cases filed by the BCL; police detained some of them, too.

JCD has been out of the DU campus since 2010, a year after the Awami League came to power. They were ousted from all the residential halls and could not enter the campus, let alone hold any political programmes. However, towards the end of 2018, JCD members were allowed on the campus because of the Dhaka University Central Students’ Union (Ducusu) polls, held in March 2019 after a 28-year hiatus.

Since then, JCD leaders and activists have been seen holding brisk processions and meetings on the campus, although the university remained shut for a large period of the last two years because of Covid-19 shutdown.

Now, the BCL has driven them out again and kept their guards up so that JCD members can’t enter the campus. Isn’t this move tantamount to curtailing JCD’s rights to assembly and protest? Peaceful assembly is a fundamental right and a key pillar for civic space. Article 37 of our constitution states, “Every citizen shall have the right to assemble and to participate in public meetings and processions peacefully and without arms...”

But the way JCD’s programmes at DU were thwarted goes against the democratic norms. It was as if the JCD’s efforts to enter the campus was a crime, but not the BCL’s attacks on them. The right to peaceful assembly in a democracy cannot be hindered just because the protesters hold views contrary to that of those in power. The beauty of democracy is that it’s all about accommodating differences in political opinion. Unfortunately, that’s what is lacking in the BCL, which has been in supreme control over the public universities in the country for more than 12 years. Their actions over the years demonstrate that they hardly care about the words given by the high-ups in their mother organisation—that processions and rallies of the opposition would not be disrupted.

After the Ducusu polls, which was mired by allegations of irregularities, many had hoped that a positive change would come in student politics in Bangladesh. But the BCL members’ repressive attitude towards the others indicates that nothing much has changed, and they are not only constricting the space for the opposition, but also earning the student organisation—which played a glorious role in the history of the nation—a bad name.