

Another awful tragedy in pursuit of development

BRT project authorities must answer for their negligence

THE latest in the series of development-project-related tragedies in the country saw the crushing of five members of a family on Monday, when a section of a box girder (meant for the Bus Rapid Transit project) fell off the crane carrying it at the Jasimuddin Road intersection in Uttara, Dhaka. As the crane – being driven by an operator who reportedly only had a light vehicle licence – toppled over, the girder fell onto the car carrying the victims including two children. Clearly, the crane was unsuitable to support the weight of the heavy concrete slab. Add to that the fact that this risky operation was conducted without closing off traffic on the road, making the “accident” all but inevitable.

As we try to process this utterly meaningless and totally avoidable tragedy, the question that arises is: How could the project authorities allow this to happen? What happened in Uttara is far from a one-off incident. On March 14, 2021, at least six workers, including three Chinese nationals, were injured after a girder fell on them near Dhaka airport. Then, on July 15 this year, a construction worker for the BRT project died after a crane fell on him at the Chandona Chowrasta area of the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway in Gazipur.

Reportedly, the contractor, China Gezhouba Group Co Ltd (CGGC), was not supposed to conduct the loading, unloading, and lifting of viaducts for the BRT project during daytime. But due to being behind schedule (the project’s original deadline was December 2016), the CGGC has been working round the clock. Our report indicates that at least one of the four implementing agencies is well aware of this fact. So, if such risky tasks had to be performed on busy roads, why did the project coordinators not enforce safety measures? Why didn’t they pause traffic on the road or cordon it off when lifting the girder section? And why did they employ an unlicensed driver or an unsuitable crane for such a dangerous work? All this shows how nonchalantly public funds are being spent to accommodate the ever-rising costs of our many behind-schedule development projects. But are citizens also supposed to pay for them with their lives now?

The sheer negligence demonstrated by the BRT project authorities is totally inexcusable. Those sued by the family of the deceased for “death by negligence” must be investigated and punished properly. Such tragedies also stand as an example of a mindless pursuit of development without taking the safety or welfare of citizens into consideration. We urge the authorities to check the mounting human cost of development projects everywhere. No amount of development is worth such tragedies.

Action, more than public avowal, needed to check graft

CJ’s warning against corruption needs to be taken seriously

WE welcome Chief Justice Hasan Foez Siddique’s strong warning against corruption as he urged all to resist and socially reject individuals engaged in corruption to establish justice in society. We cannot agree more. Corruption is the biggest barrier to not only justice but also inclusive development and people’s safety and welfare. Unchecked corruption, including state corruption, creates economic disparities, subverts law and order, and erodes the effectiveness of public institutions.

The CJ’s statement, when weighed against the reality, is also a painful reminder of how widespread corruption has become and how little is being done to prevent it. The burden of that failure, unfortunately, falls on the executive branch. But there is also a role for the judiciary itself. For the government, preventing corruption requires having a functional administrative system with checks and balances regulating all actions and decisions in the public sector. But for a greater impact, the criminal justice system also needs to be proactive and preventive, which will ensure that not only is justice served quickly and fairly, but potential criminals are also discouraged.

How is the judiciary faring in this respect? Not very well. We still remember the frustration expressed by a former chief justice in 2021 who, when asked if the judiciary follows up on the implementation of its directives in public interest cases, said that implementing government agencies and officials can be held in contempt but “we’re tired of declaring contempt”. He added: “Often our directives are not executed properly even after that.” Clearly, the executive branch should, and is bound to, extend full cooperation to the judiciary. But the court also needs to be more assertive and proactive in this regard.

The relative noncooperation of public authorities is not the only problem preventing it from playing an effective role. The judiciary is hamstrung by various challenges including shortage of judges, intervention of the executive branch in judicial matters, a huge backlog of unresolved cases, and other systemic shortcomings. The result: Bangladesh is more known for criminals, including those charged with corruption, going unpunished than being held to account.

It is unfortunate that despite all the talk of “zero tolerance” against corruption by the higher-ups of the government, a practice of sustained and systemic action against the corrupt, including those politically connected, is yet to be instituted. We urge the authorities, of both the executive and judicial branches, to match their commitment with concrete action, collaboration, and reform, where necessary, to uproot corruption. Citizens, too, need to do their bit in this regard.

What have we done with our strategic assets?



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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STRATEGIC assets are those that demand attention from the highest levels of the state, and are subject to interstate competition. For the leaders and decision-makers, it is not only important to identify a nation’s strategic endowments, but also to manage and use them to further national interests.

Of late, discourse on this particular issue has gained traction, definitional vagueness of the term notwithstanding. Such a discourse in Bangladesh, to identify the country’s strategic assets, was essential so that the planners, policymakers and leaders could take informed decisions to stave off any extraneous influence on those on the one hand, while on the other, employ their inherent attributes to secure our national interests. Unfortunately, there has been a tendency, a mindset which clouded much of our thoughts, to make light of the geopolitical assets of Bangladesh and consequently minimise the inherent importance of many resources that nature has gifted us with.

It had taken a long time to get in to our heads that neither is Bangladesh a basket case, nor does our location in the backwaters of the Bay of Bengal diminish our geopolitical importance.

Thus, the general remark that Jeffrey Ding and Allan Dafoe makes in their very interesting article, referring to the world scenario in this regard that, “even as nations are increasingly concerned about strategies to build up technological advantages over their rivals, much more work needs to be done to understand the underlying logic of what makes an asset strategic”, could not be more relevant in the case of Bangladesh. And a cursory look at how our strategic assets have been handled will make it amply clear whether our decision-makers have fully comprehended the fundamental rationale of “strategic asset”.

We have taken our geographical location, that makes us “India locked” on all three sides, as fait accompli, beset with the psyche that we shall have to remain at the mercy of our neighbour. But our geographical location should not have been seen in isolation but in the context of our neighbour’s geography, too, particularly our big neighbour and its geographical configuration.

We have emerged from the mental doldrums and have only just come to internalise the huge boon



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PHOTO: STAR

our geographical location is. That, coupled with our population and the demographic composition have lent Bangladesh tremendous weightage, which we have, unfortunately, not fully used to our advantage. If anything, it has been frittered away at the expense of the country’s national interest. Our strategic assets have been lent out, and the legitimate question which the administration should answer is, at what cost, what have the returns and the gains been for Bangladesh?

One would like to ask if our planners and decision-makers had calculated the strategic weight that our facilities that India had been seeking, and has since got, and whether they have done enough to ensure that the use of our strategic assets have paid us the dividends that they should from their utilisation by a third country.

Let’s put this particular matter in a more concrete context.

What took us long to figure out is that if Bangladesh is “India locked”, so is a good part of Indian North East. This reality has never been out of the discourse of the Indian planners as well as its strategic community, who realised that with a backward, poorly developed North East, the remoteness, psychological and physical division between the region and Delhi would

words, development of the Indian NE and its integration with the rest of India was predicated on the disposition of Bangladesh towards India. And getting access through Bangladesh was India’s singular aim.

Thus, the Indian stress on regional connectivity, which would gain them more than one strategic advantage in one shot. The idea that an interconnected South Asia through multi-modal network would boost the economic development of the region, was promoted by India. On the face of it, the idea has merits, and there was no reason for rejecting it. Bangladesh bought the idea and has since allowed its land territory to be used by India – road, rail, river, etc. In the last 10 years there has been more bilateral connection between Bangladesh and India, than multilateral. Bangladesh’s river and sea ports have been opened for use by India. Presently, there are 13 points of entry and exit from India through Bangladesh. Interestingly, all connectivity has been eastward, very little connection has been made west or northwards. Of late our geopolitical significance has been multiplied by the recently completed Padma Bridge. One need only to glance at the coverage of the completion of the project by the

time and money. Giving Bangladesh transit to Nepal and Bhutan would cost it trade. But is the levy of Tk 524 per ton on Indian goods and a pittance of Tk 2 per km of road usage adequate? At least we have levied some money. Initially we got the impression that these might be given free to India, given the remarks of the PM’s economic advisor, that asking money from our neighbours for the use of our territory for commercial purpose is uncivil. But, is the levied amount adequate recompense for the use of our road, river and port facilities, or for the loss in trade that Bangladesh has suffered and will suffer, due to benefits of transit given to India?

Now that the Padma Bridge has added immeasurable strategic significance and value to our infrastructure, what will we do to reap the economic dividends from it? Reportedly, the first Indian truck made the use of the bridge to move from east to north and northeast of India a few days ago. But what have we got in return in so far as connecting with our other neighbours, namely Nepal and Bhutan? Have we used the weight of our assets to gain our strategic aims? Have we measured up to India’s bargaining capacity?

Is the UNFCCC still relevant?

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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THE United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was signed 30 years ago at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, by all the governments of the world. The first annual Conference of Parties (COP1) was held in Berlin, Germany, with the then Environment Minister of Germany, Angela Merkel, as COP President in 1995. Since then, there have been 26 COPs, and COP27 is scheduled to be held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, in November this year.

COP27 will be the first COP in the new era of climate change, where impacts and losses and damages have become daily phenomena in different parts of the world. And Egypt has already promoted the idea of it being an action-oriented COP, with the focus on adaptation and loss and damage.

As one of the few people who has attended every COP so far, I think these sessions are no longer fit for the purpose, and I will use COP27 as an opportunity to make some suggestions for revising the COPs and how they are organised and reported on going forward, to make them fit better in the new era of loss and damage from human induced climate change.

The first issue to address is the difference between talk and action. COP



PHOTO: REUTERS

A woman with two children waded through water as they look for shelter amidst heavy rains that caused widespread flooding in Sylhet on June 20.

was designed for governments to come together and talk and make collective decisions to tackle the problem of human induced climate change. While that was adequate while we still had time to prepare ourselves through actions like mitigation and adaptation, it is now too late. Hence, the emphasis needs to shift dramatically from talk to action. This is indeed happening through some initiatives.

stage to the coalitions of actors that are taking meaningful action and relegate the talkers to the backstage. This does, in fact, happen to a certain extent by designating a thematic day each day during the COP on a particular theme such as mitigation, adaptation, etc. This was quite successfully done by the COP26 presidency in Glasgow last year, and it is good to see that the incoming

COP27 presidency of Egypt is also planning to continue this practice.

The second proposal is for all the different coalitions to find ways to find synergies between them, and where possible, join forces to enhance the effectiveness of their respective actions. This would mean a very different way of working together with many different stakeholders, not only national governments, and more importantly, will not require consensus to reach decisions.

My third proposal is to elevate the topic of dealing with the now visible and getting worse, adverse impacts of human induced climate change, which are happening everywhere in the world. This is truly an emergency that is much bigger than the war between Russia-Ukraine, or the Covid-19 pandemic, and we need a much stronger and more robust approach to address it.

Unfortunately, the UNFCCC has so far shown itself to be totally inadequate in dealing with it. In fact, loss and damage is not even a standing agenda item in every COP. This time, for COP27, the developing countries have proposed it as an agenda item which has been accepted provisionally and will be subject to a debate as to whether it should be in the COP27 agenda at all.

In my view, all countries should agree to include loss and damage as a regular agenda item in every COP going forward. Failure to accept it as such, which we will know at the beginning of the next COP, will make or break COP27 before it even starts.

If the UNFCCC is to still have any semblance of relevance, COP27 must adopt loss and damage as a regular agenda item for all future COPs, starting with COP27.