

“Metro Rail will bring about a significant social transformation in Dhaka”

Bangladesh's much-anticipated Metro Rail project will be launched today. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has provided approximately 60% of the Tk 33,472 crore funding and technical assistance for the MRT Line-6. In an exclusive interview, Ichiguchi Tomohide, Chief Representative of JICA Bangladesh office, shared details about the project with The Daily Star's Porimol Palma and Tuhin Shubhra Adhikary



Ichiguchi Tomohide

The Daily Star (TDS): The Metro Rail is going to be launched today. Please share with us your reaction.

Ichiguchi Tomohide (IT): Ten years ago, when the project was still at the concept level, I was the director of the Bangladesh desk at JICA. Today, I am extremely excited to see the dreams come true for the Bangladeshi people and for myself.

TDS: How will the Metro Rail benefit the people?

Tomohide: First and foremost, the traffic congestion and air pollution in the city will be reduced as the MRT network is developed. But I would like to emphasize the transformative impact that the MRT will have on people's lives. It will be the most efficient, comfortable, safe, and timely mode of public transportation, and this will have a huge social impact on the lives of ordinary people. JICA has provided cooperation for MRT projects all over the world, including in India, Indonesia, Vietnam, China, and Korea, and we have seen a huge change in people's lives as a result. For example, in India, the metro rail has improved the safety of women, who may have otherwise faced harassment on public transportation such as buses. In Delhi Metro, there are women-only cars, which will also be implemented in Dhaka Metro. According to our research, the women's labor participation rate significantly increased after the completion of the Delhi Metro, and we hope to see the same in Dhaka. In general, the metro rail will have a huge social transformative effect on life in Dhaka.

TDS: Traffic management is very important for reducing congestion, but it's quite poor in Dhaka. Are you doing anything about it?

Tomohide: From JICA, we are not only providing loans to Bangladesh, but also offering training, such as in transit-oriented development. This is a type of

township development that focuses on the stations, similar to what we see in Japan. The stations should be the hub for township development and should also be connected to public buses or other modes of transportation. Currently, we are conducting a technical cooperation project with the Uttara Centre and Gabtoli stations, which will serve as model stations for us. These models can be replicated at other stations as well.

TDS: Who will operate the metro trains? Will they come from Japan or will they be recruited locally?

Tomohide: Dhaka Mass Transit Company Ltd (DMTCL) is responsible for operating the metro trains. In other countries, private companies are sometimes entrusted with operation and maintenance, but in Dhaka, DMTCL has decided to handle both. We have provided substantial cooperation and training for the operators in Dhaka, Japan, and Delhi, and the training is ongoing. The recruitment process is also underway. Operating an urban railway is not an easy job, so initially, the operation time and frequency may not be long. Gradually, the engineers and staff should become accustomed to the system. Then DMTCL can increase the frequency and operational time and eventually start full-fledged commercial operation.

TDS: What were the challenges while implementing the project?

Tomohide: First of all, let me emphasize that the completion of the urban railway project is not a miracle. It requires the daily efforts of many people to tackle the small and big challenges. DMTCL consultants and contractors have to handle these tasks, such as recruiting a large number of staff and training them, acquiring land, relocating utility services, and completing the tendering process. It is essential to hire

quality contractors and companies for these tasks. After construction begins, they have to procure a lot of materials and manage traffic. They are currently preparing for operation and maintenance.

Secondly, during the implementation, we faced two significant incidents. The first was the 2016 Holey Artisan incident, in which seven Japanese people working on the feasibility study for two other metro rail projects were tragically killed. It was a difficult time, but thanks to the efforts of DMTCL and other government ministries, special safety measures were put in place to rebuild the confidence of Japanese and other companies that were afraid to come to Bangladesh. As a result, foreign companies participated in the bidding process. Then, we faced the COVID-19 pandemic, which required us to suspend construction work for a few months. Many people returned to their home countries, but thanks to the efforts of DMTCL, better measures were put in place and people returned to work and resumed the project.

TDS: People had to suffer a lot because roads were shrunk due to the MRT construction. Is it possible to reduce such suffering as more MRTs are going to be built?

Tomohide: Certain inconvenience is inevitable when building infrastructure like the MRT, but we have introduced technology and management techniques to minimize it. For example, in MRT 1 and 5, most sections will be underground, and a tunnel boring machine will be used there. This means that excavation will only be used at the stations, not in other areas. Additionally, we will introduce cutting edge technology to minimize hindrance during construction.

TDS: The distance between the metro stations appears quite small. Is it the same in Japan?

Tomohide: Yes, it is the standard distance. The distance between one station and the next is typically one kilometer.

TDS: Do you have any suggestions as people will soon start using metro rail?

Tomohide: In the beginning of the metro rail in India, there were many chaotic situations as people rushed to board the trains. However, I think this will not happen in Bangladesh. I have seen people waiting in queues for buses in Bangladesh and was very surprised at their discipline. Safe operation is very important, so passengers need to be disciplined as well. I think there will not be much crowd when the train first starts from Uttara to Agargaon, which is actually good because it will give us an opportunity to learn about both the operation and use of the metro. However, more people will start using the metro when the portion from Agargaon to Motijheel becomes operational. When the entire network of the metro rail is implemented, there will be a huge demand for it. Even many JICA staff will use it.

TDS: What lessons can be learned from the construction experience of the MRT Line 6?

Tomohide: Bangladesh is still a developing country, so it requires a lot of experience, especially in project and contract management. During the tendering stage, it is essential to select a qualified company. Sometimes, people excessively provide low cost, and contract management should be guided by project documents. Sometimes, people simply ignore the contract conditions. As the government gains more experience, it can better understand these issues. Currently, it is in a transitional stage, and obstacles should be removed in the next phases.

TDS: Let's move on to some other aspects. Can you tell us what motivated

Japan to provide such a large loan to Bangladesh?

Tomohide: There are several factors that contributed to Japan's decision to provide a large loan to Bangladesh for the metro rail. First, Japan has extensive experience in developing metro rail systems around the world, and we believe that the metro rail is crucial for the large city of Dhaka. Secondly, the diplomatic relationship between Japan and Bangladesh has been strengthening. In 2014, we elevated the relationship to a comprehensive partnership and announced the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B), along with a commitment to provide a large amount of funding. Additionally, Bangladesh has a need for development and cooperation, and Japanese companies are investing more heavily here. All of these factors combined contributed to Japan's decision to lend for the metro rail project.

TDS: Do you have any plans for funding additional MRT lines apart from MRT-6, MRT-1 and MRT-5 (northern route)?

Tomohide: We are very interested in assisting with the MRT line 2 and 4, in consultation with the Japanese higher authorities. The MRT network - three lines - is far from enough, so it is natural that lines 2 and 4 are needed. (MRT line 2 is from Gabtoli to Narayanganj via Kamalapur and MRT line 4 is from Kamalapur to Madanpur in Narayanganj.)

TDS: As many say, the projects that Japan funds are relatively expensive. Why is this the case?

Tomohide: Quality should be prioritized over cost. When signing contracts, don't only consider the cost, as it may lead to misguided decisions. In such cases, the project may be delayed, the quality may be poor, and people may suffer. Maintenance costs may also be higher when poor quality work is done.



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