

Padma rail service closer than ever

Trial run of first train marks key step in connecting Dhaka with Jashore

We are delighted to see the successful trial run of a special train from Faridpur's Bhanga area to Munshiganj's Mawa area via the Padma Bridge, the first train to cross the mighty river after about nine months of the inauguration of the road section of the bridge. With that, the 6.15km-long multipurpose bridge project, with a four-lane highway on the upper deck and a single-track railway on the lower deck, reaches an important milestone. Commercial operation will not begin until September, when the prime minister is expected to inaugurate the 82km-long Dhaka-Bhanga rail line via the bridge. By June next year, the planned 169km-long rail line connecting Dhaka with Jashore is expected to be finished.

It brings us immense joy to know we're inching closer to that goal and the possibility that it holds. Reportedly, the first train journey was conducted in a festive manner, with the railways minister and the local lawmaker in attendance. People were seen greeting the passengers with cheers on the way. Many stood near their houses or railway tracks and captured the scene on mobile phones. School children were also seen waving to train passengers. Speaking to journalists after inaugurating the trial run of the first train, the railways minister said: "With this journey, Padma Bridge has reached full fruition."

The Tk 39,247 crore Padma Bridge Rail Link Project is an important part of the vision surrounding the Padma Bridge. Once the entire 169km-long rail line with its 20 stations is opened to the public, the distance from Dhaka to Jashore would decrease by 200km, and the travel time would be halved – from about 10 hours to five. Together with the newly established highway connectivity, it will lead to not just much faster communication between the capital and the 21 southwestern districts of Bangladesh, it will also expedite the economic transformation of this region, which is already underway. As an expert has mentioned, economic activities – i.e. fish trade, food processing, tourism, trade of jute and other agricultural products, etc. – will increase more due to the reduced cost of doing business. The government will also need to establish industrial zones, and ensure sufficient supply of electricity, gas and other resources to encourage the establishment of garments, leather goods, cement, pharmaceuticals and textile industries, which will open up employment opportunities for millions of people and reduce poverty in the region.

However, without building the necessary industries and supportive infrastructure to take advantage of the increasing connectivity, the Padma Bridge, which is only 40km away from Dhaka, cannot reach its full potential. We, therefore, urge the authorities to take appropriate steps in this connection to support our vision for the southwest, which demands greater policy support in terms of economic and administrative expansions. Moreover, they should ensure that the rail link project is completed on time and within budget.

Break the syndicate of ambulance owners

They are forcing patients to pay almost double the usual fare

At a time when people are finding it difficult to bear even regular healthcare expenses due to the extremely high cost of living, it is disheartening to know that a syndicate of ambulance operators is holding patients hostage at public hospitals by forcing them to use their service, often with double the usual fare. According to a report by this daily, members of two ambulance owners' associations have combined to form the syndicate that operates in every public hospital of the country to make sure that no ambulance from outside their network can take patients to their destinations.

For instance, when patients from Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) want to go back to their respective districts, they are forced to use the services of these two associations, paying extra money. If an ambulance from outside the capital somehow carries any patient out of a hospital in Dhaka, the syndicate takes half the fare as its cut. This has become the general practice, with the hospital authorities turning a blind eye.

An ambulance owner from Kushtia told our correspondent that as soon as patients are taken inside DMCH from ambulances, they are driven out of the hospital premises by the syndicate members to eliminate competition. And a patient's father, who was trying to hire an ambulance to go back to Noakhali from DMCH, said that while an ambulance from Noakhali would cost him Tk 3,000 for the ride back home, the ambulances available in DMCH would charge him around Tk 6,000. This is nothing but extortion. At a time when people are already left high and dry by their increasing medical bills, the syndicate is just worsening their misery.

It should be noted that over the last decade, people's out-of-pocket spending on healthcare has increased significantly. According to the Bangladesh National Health Accounts (BNHA) 1997-2020 data, such expenditure rose from 62 percent in 2012 to 68.5 percent in 2020. This is in addition to the astronomical prices of nearly every commodity, food item, utility or service that people are forced to pay. Unfortunately, the government's effort in this regard has been nothing short of disappointing. Even though the government promised to bring down out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure to 32 percent by 2032, it is most likely to remain a pipe dream given the present reality.

The ambulance menace is just an example of how mismanaged and poorly governed the public health sector is. The question is, why would people have to struggle even to access basic healthcare? Why would they have to sell their assets or borrow money to come to the capital for treatment? Why can't patients get healthcare at affordable prices in their own districts? Clearly, the government has a lot to do to ensure that the middle and low income people can afford healthcare.

As regards the cartel of ambulance associations, we urge the public hospital authorities to take effective steps against them so that they cannot exploit patients. Patients must be spared the extra financial burden during these difficult times.

The myriad gaps in our fire safety measures



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At least 10 fire incidents occur in Dhaka city daily, according to Fire Service data. As such, it is not all too surprising that we regularly hear of or see fire incidents happening around us. In fact, the available data and statistics also confirm the possibility of such frequency of fires breaking out. So what are the causes behind this apparent increase in the number of fire incidents in the country?

If we take the Bangabazar fire as an example, it was four years ago that the Fire Service had declared the complex to be at risk for fires. Over the years, several fire incidents have in fact occurred at this site, too. There is no denying, by any parties, that this complex was at risk of such a fire. Now, who's to be held responsible for the oversight in not preventing the Bangabazar fire? The designated city corporation? Or the market authorities? Did these parties take any measures to prevent this risky location from catching fire? Such things must be investigated thoroughly.

We usually tend to try to hold someone or an entity responsible for such fires. In doing so, we forget to also identify the causes behind the fires. In the Bangabazar fire case,



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

on individual authorities to enforce fire safety measures, no amount of awareness will be enough to prevent these tragedies.

Among the recent fire incidents, we have also seen a prevalence of explosions or blasts (such as in the Gulistan blast of March 7), which multiplies the impacts of a fire. It must be kept in mind that whenever gases or chemicals are involved, there is a very high chance of an explosion occurring. In people's homes, gas leakages and subsequent accumulation of gas can easily result in a blast and fire incident. Allowing adequate air circulation can prevent this from happening. However, this is made difficult by compact spaces in newer buildings and the fact that mercaptan (an odorous chemical added to gas to make leaks detectable) is not added to gas. Given that leakages from LPG cylinders (used in many households for cooking purposes) are undetectable and cause fires, authorities must consider adding mercaptan to the gas as a preventive measure.

As for preventing explosions at chemical storage factories or facilities, many related internationally-practised

of hazardous ammonia, the products stored require defined methods of handling. But process safety – which focuses on preventing fires, explosions, and chemical accidents in facilities dealing with hazardous chemicals or materials – is markedly absent from our laws. These facilities having the clearance of all regulatory authorities means very little in terms of explosion or fire prevention.

Another issue of concern is that, when an explosion does occur at a facility storing hazardous chemicals, the firefighters who respond to these incidents are never equipped with information on whether dangerous chemicals are involved or not and in what types or quantities. This makes emergency management of fires deathly dangerous for firefighters. The need of the hour is a national database of businesses which are manufacturing or importing chemicals, where these chemicals are being stored, and how they are being used.

We often see truckloads of flammable chemicals being transported through busy daytime roads. This itself represents the

gap in our laws regarding the safe transportation of hazardous materials. The haphazard way in which the drivers and staff of vehicles carrying chemicals or gas cylinders handle the goods also sparks concern as to how adequately trained they are for the job.

When a business sets out to work with hazardous chemicals, there are at least 20 or so regulatory organisations which must first provide clearance to said business. However, when a massive explosion or fire incident occurs involving the business, none of these regulatory authorities accept any responsibility. Given this reality, when it comes to the safe handling and usage of hazardous chemicals, the need for a single regulatory body cannot be stressed enough.

Moreover, Bangladesh's import of chemicals has been increasing year by year thanks to the growth of the RMG and pharmaceutical industries. But how and where are these huge quantities and varieties of chemicals stored? There must be a separate authority overseeing the registration, handling, and storage of these chemicals in order to ensure safety.

Keeping in mind Bangladesh's imminent graduation out of the least developed countries (LDC) status, it would be fruitful to use whatever subsidies we are granted (while still being an LDC) to progress the sustainable management of chemicals nationwide.

Transcribed and translated by Afia Jahin.



SCAN TO WATCH INTERVIEW

what might have been the reasons behind the complex authorities not taking the steps to prevent the fire? Was it an intentional oversight or were they simply unable to carry out these measures for one reason or another?

Another factor to consider in terms of fire incidents is awareness. Notably, the most recent fire incidents which garnered attention have taken place in both commercial and residential establishments, in older buildings and newly-constructed ones. Do these newer buildings have adequate fire safety measures in place, such as fire alarms and regular fire drills? More importantly, have our laws made enough room for fire safety to be adequately ensured? After all, fire safety awareness must have a top-down approach. If the relevant government bodies do not put pressure

NO EVMS IN GENERAL POLLS

Can ballots ensure free and fair elections?



THE STREET VIEW

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The Election Commission has done an about-face on their previously resolute decision to use Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in the upcoming 12th parliamentary elections of Bangladesh, citing "a lack of funds" from the government and strong reservations from some of the political parties as reasons for doing so. Until this sudden change of heart, the commission had appeared rather adamant on using the technology in the elections. According to media reports, the EC meeting on Monday did not dwell much on the sensitivities around EVMs. In fact, when asked if there was a political dimension behind this sudden change of mind, the EC secretary failed – wittingly or not – to shed light on the matter.

EVMs are an eventuality; sooner or later, elections in Bangladesh, with nearly 100 million voters, will have no option but to resort to using electronic voting methods. However, there should be little doubt that, for the moment, the Election Commission's decision to not use EVMs is a good move in the

context of the existing national polity. This change in course warrants some examination, though, to ascertain if it is for the right reasons.

The Election Commission did not pay heed to the political parties previously when they expressed strong reservations about the use of EVMs during their dialogues last year. However, the latest decision, commendable as it may be, has come late and fails to address the core challenge this commission faces – credibility with the political parties – especially since the change of heart has not been explained elaborately. Had the commission taken this same decision immediately after their dialogues with the parties, they would have earned more trust, which remains a major impediment for the electoral authority to hold an inclusive election. The commission had, in fact, mentioned in their roadmap that gaining trust was a major challenge. Unfortunately, they missed an opportunity with EVMs.

The change of course regarding EVM use has not been able to sway

the main political opposition camp, BNP, in the slightest. The party said it was least bothered about EVMs and concerned only about the nature of the election-time government. And in this particular issue, the Election Commission has nothing to do really. Despite its limitations, the EC invited the BNP and its like-minded parties for informal talks, which the BNP rejected, calling it "meaningless." Now, we have to see how the other political parties react to the EC invitation in light of its new decision, which certainly provides some food for thought for the parties.

It seems that the Election Commission is giving an impression of becoming increasingly pliable, apparently with some flexibility for the political parties, in order to hold an inclusive election. But is it too little, too late to reduce the distance with the political parties?

If anyone is wondering whether this EVM decision will sway things in the Election Commission's favour, they are in for a rude awakening. It won't. EVMs were used in six constituencies during the 11th parliamentary elections in 2018, and paper ballots were used in the rest. We all know what happened.

The Election Commission has also said that although EVMs will not be deployed during the general polls, they will be used in all five city corporation elections, the biggest elections before the general elections.

If the commission had decided to use paper ballots in those polls as well, it would provide a good opportunity to see how things would pan out and what possible challenges could emerge.

According to the US Department of State's 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the 2018 elections were neither free nor fair, because they were marred by serious irregularities, including ballot box stuffing and intimidation of opposition polling agents and voters.

There are also reports that ballots were stuffed even before the election day. We can remember that Jatiya Party (JaPa) General Secretary Mujibul Haque Chunnunnu, during a dialogue with the Election Commission on July 31 last year, said, "We are proposing that the ballot paper be delivered on the morning of the election. This way, there would not be any issue of stuffing ballot boxes the night before. What can I say, even I have allowed such activities. It is not right."

A genuinely inclusive election depends on a wide range of factors, many of which the Election Commission cannot even begin to address. The decision not to use EVMs is a good start, but it will certainly not be enough. The commission needs to do much more. For now, though, they have earned the ability to at least claim that they are being sincere about getting all quarters to participate in the elections.