

Big step towards clean energy

But are we ready to handle the risks of nuclear energy?

This week, Bangladesh reached yet another milestone in its development journey by becoming the 33rd nation to use nuclear fuel for its energy needs. In a uranium handover ceremony at the Rooppur power plant in Ishwardi yesterday, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who both virtually attended the programme, spoke of how this will have a huge contribution to the country's energy and economic security, while also deepening bilateral ties between the two nations.

We now live in an era where there is no denying the direct links between the use of fossil fuels and climate change, and Bangladesh is a prime victim of frequent and unprecedented climate-related events. On top of that, soaring energy prices and the cost of living crisis have highlighted the risks of fossil fuels, and how vulnerable our energy dependency makes us. In this context, our inclusion into the nuclear energy club is definitely a cause for celebration.

However, we cannot help but be wary of the risks involved. We must remember that even a country like Japan experienced the Fukushima nuclear disaster. While the PM has assured that the plant has been built keeping in mind natural disasters and that Russia has promised to take back the spent fuel, the entire process requires the utmost vigilance, quality control and surveillance, especially in terms of the storage and disposal of nuclear waste. Suffice to say, our track record in these areas have been very poor so far.

Are we ready to deal with nuclear waste when our general, urban waste is still being openly dumped and burned, contaminating our water bodies, lands, and the very air we breathe? In the event of any untoward accidents at the nuclear plant, are we equipped to handle the consequences? It is not enough to open the power plant and begin production. The authorities must now fully commit to implementing the correct protocols and safety plans, and investing in the technical expertise required to deal with nuclear energy, all the while keeping an eye on our debt burden and ensuring the costs of the project don't end up outweighing its benefits.

At the same time, if we are serious about our commitments to clean energy and energy security, the authorities must ultimately look towards renewable sources, and ensure the people's right over their own resources. The climate emergency has proven that further investments in coal and gas is the wrong way forward, especially since our over-reliance on private companies has trapped us in foreign debt and import obligations. While nuclear energy can be part of the solution, the government's energy policy needs a radical overhaul, especially in terms of the influence of private interests, if we are to truly ensure energy security.

Why is child marriage still so rampant?

Shocking revelations coming out of Brac study

While the increasing number of child marriages taking place across the country – particularly as a fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic – has been in discussion for the past few years, hardly any reliable study has been conducted to find out the actual causes behind the trend. Against this backdrop, a Brac survey conducted recently has provided us with a somewhat holistic – and horrifying – picture of the situation on the ground. According to the survey, 45 percent of the girls in the country are currently being married off before the age of 18, and more are at risk of being married off.

While poverty, absence of educational opportunities and a lack of social security were identified as the major reasons behind child marriage all these years, the study also found another factor – parents apparently marry off their daughters early when they think they have found "suitable grooms" for them. Yet another surprising finding is that parents from both poor and well-off backgrounds are marrying off their daughters early, which means that regardless of social status, nearly half of the parents still consider a girl child a burden. Another popular perception among parents that often leads to child marriage is that the demand for dowry is less for young brides. As shocking as this may seem, it is an unfortunate reality that men still prefer marrying teenage girls because they can be easily controlled.

How is it that, despite decades of work by various stakeholders and the government's so-called commitment to stop child marriage, we are still so far from reaching our goals? It is evident that the law to check this social menace is not being enforced, and it's high time the government started taking stern action against administrators who are failing to implement the laws. Women rights organisations have long warned about the dangers of keeping the special provision in the Child Marriage Restraint Act, which allows families to misinterpret and misuse the "special circumstance" clause in various situations. It should be obvious by now to the policymakers that there can be no alternative to repealing it. Furthermore, ad hoc measures to address child marriage will not work unless the underlying patriarchal mindsets of communities can be changed, for which we need sustained sensitisation programmes across the country. Unless the government takes strong actions now, our national target of ending child marriage by 2041 will never be met.

New Message

To

Subject

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Why exactly is Dhaka the slowest city in the world?



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To ease traffic congestion in Dhaka, the government has spent about Tk 135,000 crore in various infrastructure megaprojects such as flyovers, metro rail and elevated expressway over the past decade. But these projects are far from solving the city's traffic jam problem; on the contrary, the average speed of vehicles in Dhaka dropped from 21km per hour in 2007 to a meagre 4.8km per hour in 2022. Recently, a study by the US National Bureau of Economic Research found Dhaka to be the slowest city in the world. This figure emerged from the analysis of traffic speed in more than 1,200 cities in 152 countries. According to a survey by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), on an average, commuters in Dhaka city are stuck in traffic for 46 minutes every two hours, which leads to a waste of approximately 276 hours a year.

The reason for the consistent traffic jams despite so much investment is the continuous emphasis on building private-car-friendly and glamorous infrastructures, without giving due importance to developing the public transport system. Occupying the same amount of road space, a bus transports at least 40 people, while two private cars carry perhaps four to five people. According to a survey by Democracy International conducted in 2017, about 76 percent of Dhaka roads are occupied by six percent of the commuters who own private cars. But priority has been given to building infrastructure like flyovers and expressways that encourage increased use of private vehicles, thus serving only the privileged sections of society.

The Revised Strategic Transport Plan (RSTP) for Dhaka highlights the importance of improving the public bus system by mentioning that, at present, buses are the main mode of transport in the city, and based on the demand forecast, they will remain so in the future as their modal share will remain high. Modal share of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) will be about 20 percent, so the bus transport system needs to be modernised as soon as possible. And for this, the RSTP recommends establishing three to five large bus fleets by merging or abolishing the existing private bus operators. The RSTP also emphasises on feeder services through buses as a prerequisite for the success of MRT and BRT. If there is no proper bus arrangement for commuters to and from the MRT and BRT stations, then



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

The average speed of traffic in Dhaka slowed down to 4.8km per hour in 2022 from 21km per hour in 2007.

those systems will not be successful.

While one MRT line and BRT are under construction and the rest are in the pipeline, there is no progress in modernising the public bus transport system. After much discussion and criticism, a bus route franchise was introduced on a pilot basis through a company named Dhaka Nagar Paribahan on one route in December 2021 and two more routes in October 2022, with 50 buses on each. But the unhealthy competition among the buses did not stop as buses of other privately owned companies continued to operate on the same routes. Those buses picked up passengers at the same time as Dhaka Nagar Paribahan, stopping here and there; as a result, the pilot project failed.

In fact, bus operation in Dhaka does not qualify as a public transport system. Starting from the approval of the new bus route, the total system is riddled with irregularities. Here, the main qualification for operating a bus on a route is political power. By using political connections, influentials get approval for bus routes and then lease them out to various private bus

random places to take passengers, and drive the buses recklessly to compete with other bus operators on the same route. As a result, the quality of passenger service is very poor on the one hand, and the number of accidents causing deaths and injuries are very high on the other.

Most of the buses and minibuses running in Dhaka are unfit, dirty and shabby with malfunctioning brake and indicator lights, making the journey risky, uncomfortable and unhygienic. Even if the commuters are willing to put up with so much hardship by boarding these buses, there is no guarantee of getting them and reaching destination on time. Especially for women, children and the elderly, travelling by these buses is a horrifying experience. This is what encourages people with some financial ability to buy private cars. This is what is happening in Dhaka.

According to the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), on an average 40 new cars hit Dhaka streets every day. Until 2010, the number of private cars on the city roads was 160,000, which in 2023 has doubled to

the expressway.

According to a Jica survey, 60 percent of travellers in Dhaka use public transport. Of them, 67 percent use buses and minibuses. If Dhaka's public transport system is to be fixed, the bus-minibus management system must be improved first. For example, despite a large metro rail system consisting of 12 lines, 288 stations and 393km of network in existence in New Delhi, India's capital, public buses carry more passengers.

To solve the severe traffic congestion and transportation crisis in Dhaka, it is not enough to plan and build expensive flyovers, expressways, metro rail or BRT. The public bus system that transports most of the passengers needs to be revamped. Public control must be established on the transportation system by breaking the clout of politically influential private bus owners. The use of private cars on the roads should be discouraged by providing proper alternatives. A pro-people multimodal transportation system combining public bus, metro rail, BRT, bicycles and walking should be planned and implemented.

Will we see a free, fair election after all?



THE STREET VIEW

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Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader declared at a party rally earlier this week that "the deal had been sealed." His speech was rife with the suggestion of an agreement being struck before anyone got the wind of it. "Delhi is there and the US needs Delhi. so, Delhi is there, and so are we... Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina has balanced [relationships] with everyone; there is no need to worry," he said.

His statement suggests that a green signal from powerful foreign quarters was all the ruling party was waiting for, despite the rhetoric in recent months. One cannot help but note that Quader had a brazen attitude and lacked any embarrassment about the vitriol his party had been spewing against the US for quite some time now. Many have suggested that, quite like the anti-US rhetoric of these past few months, the announcement of having struck a deal was also just empty posturing without any substance to back it up.

But the inherent contradiction between Quader's words and those

of his cabinet colleague can hardly be overlooked. Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen said if necessary, Bangladesh would impose sanctions on those who imposed sanctions on Bangladesh. We know that the US government has started the process of imposing visa restrictions on those who would hinder the democratic process in Bangladesh. So, his statement was clearly directed at the US, a country with which a deal had been made, at least according to his party's general secretary!

This is a clear indication that there is tension within the ruling party. These statements from Quader and Momen came just as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina returned home, having wrapped up her visit to the US and UK. It is also at this point that another bit of news has further muddled the waters. The European Union announced last week that it would not be sending a fully fledged election observer team for the next election, which is their way of saying that they are not happy with the atmosphere

leading up to the election, and the election is unlikely to be inclusive, fair or free. The EU did not send observers in the 2018 election either. They made some observations post-elections, but nothing that would strain their relationship with the government, although they knew about the numerous allegations of vote rigging and ballot stuffing on the eve of election day. In the last election, BNP and other opposition parties joined the polls, but this time, BNP has declared it will not take part in the election if it's overseen by the Awami League government. That has put pressure on the government to hold a free and fair election, and it is increasing every day.

The EU's decision not to send observers could be interpreted in two ways. First, the Election Commission and the ruling party could claim that they invited the observers to show that they were not trying to hold a rigged election, but the EU decided against it, apparently not interested to see it for themselves. Second, if the EU does not have a full election observer team on the ground, they will not have the manpower to be able to collect the information that they should. Whether to commend or to criticise the polls, the EU would need to have enough people on the ground, which they won't according to their latest decision. There are comments that it may in fact be the encouragement that the ruling party needs to organise an

election that will make them "proud."

Against this backdrop, a pre-election assessment team from the US will start their visit to Bangladesh on October 7. This team will also decide on whether to send election observers after speaking with various stakeholders. In such a situation, the chief election commissioner's latest remarks questions his sincerity of holding a free and fair election even further. He said the Election Commission was not concerned about the election's legitimacy, but its legality. He also said the EC would not bother about who participated in the polls and who didn't as the election could be called "participatory" if voters cast their votes.

What is perhaps more alarming is that the CEC has thus far tried to remain conciliatory without showing too strong a resolve to bring all parties to the table. He has expressed himself as somewhat malleable, so this sudden hardening of his stance could only mean that he is doing so at the bidding of the powers that be.

Taken together with the Awami League spokesperson's announcements, the CEC's stance could be a hint that we might be heading towards yet another election that might dispense with the need to include all major parties. It may comfort the ruling party to have struck deals with foreign powers to win for another term, but it certainly does not bode well for us or our democracy.