

A game-changer for Dhaka commute

Uttara-Motijheel metro rail to reduce travel time, traffic and pollution

The inauguration of the Agargaon-Motijheel portion of Dhaka metro rail marks a momentous step towards the goal of an efficient transportation system in the city. It comes around 10 months after the launching of metro service between Uttara and Agargaon, and the extended 8km route—set to open to the public on Sunday—offers a ride all the way to Motijheel, covering a total distance of 20.10km. What's remarkable about it is the time it will take to travel this distance. Previously, it took at least two to three hours to reach Motijheel from Uttara or vice versa, due to perennial traffic gridlocks. Now, it will take just 31 minutes. This means not just convenience but also a renewed hope for a less stressful daily commute.

As well as travel time—which has long been a source of consternation for those frequenting these vital parts of the capital—the Uttara-Motijheel metro service is also expected to reduce traffic and pollution. As experts have pointed out, there will be fewer vehicles on the streets because of the operation of electricity-driven trains, which in turn will cut an estimated 2.02 lakh tonnes of carbon emissions annually. In a city grappling with the adverse effects of excessive vehicular emissions, this environmental benefit cannot be overstated. There are also considerable financial benefits to be derived, both for commuters and businesses surrounding these areas.

We congratulate the government for the extended metro route. However, we must add that its success, in the long run, will be determined by the quality of service and maintenance. In the past, we have seen how some services run by the government have been marred by poor customer service. We have seen expensive state-owned buses frequently run into problems because of lack of maintenance. The experience in state-run air and railway services has been disappointing at times. The metro service—which will eventually involve six metro lines forming a 140km network surrounding Dhaka—comes with huge expectations. There have been massive investments already. So, the relevant authorities must ensure that the service is run properly and carefully.

That said, as the metro rail network continues to grow, we expect not just shorter commutes but also a cleaner and more sustainable future for Dhaka. This new chapter in the city's transportation history is indeed a cause for celebration and optimism.

When will hospitals be accountable?

Vital medical equipment lying idle in government hospitals

Over the years, we have seen how corruption, mismanagement and lack of accountability have crippled the public healthcare system, with corrective measures seldom taken to address this situation. A recent report by Prothom Alo, citing data from the health directorate, showed how far the rot has spread. Apparently, some 3,331 medical equipment worth over Tk 800 crore are lying idle in 84 public hospitals across the country. About 933 of them are damaged beyond repair, the report said, while the rest can be used if repaired. The problem is, there has been hardly any initiative from the relevant authorities to this end.

For instance, at the Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital, an MRI machine has been out of order for more than two years. But instead of repairing it, hospital authorities have been sending patients to other clinics to do an MRI. (Allegedly, such referrals often involve clandestine dealings with the service providers.) And not just expensive machines, even basic equipment such as ECG or X-ray machines, ultrasound machines and nebulisers have been left unused or without repair in these hospitals, adding to the suffering of patients. Strangely, in many cases, there are equipment that haven't even been unboxed. For example, a linear accelerator (LINAC) machine, purchased at a cost of Tk 10 crore, has been lying unopened at the Khulna Medical College Hospital since 2012. Reportedly, it was sent by the health ministry even though the hospital did not give any requisition for it.

The question is, why would the ministry send machines even if there was no need for them? Previously, we have seen how the Central Medicine Store Depot, the procurement agency under the health ministry, got involved in various malpractices and supplied unnecessary equipment to public medical colleges and hospitals. Such corruption must not be tolerated. We urge the higher authorities to ensure that all hospital equipment are put to proper use, or repaired if they are out of order. They must establish accountability in the health sector, otherwise ordinary patients will continue to suffer.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Stop child labour

Poverty is forcing many children into taking hazardous jobs. Children are working in tea stalls, restaurants, factories, as bus helpers, and so on. In rural areas, if a child's father dies, people assume education is not necessary for him or her. And if the mother dies, the father often remarries, and the child is forced into hard labour. Unfortunately, there are not many initiatives to prevent child labour in our society. If we want to reduce child labour, the entire nation must be made aware of its ills. We must ensure that our children have a carefree childhood and proper education. I hope the authorities will take appropriate measures to address this crucial issue.

Md Abdul Wohab
Department of Arabic, Dhaka University

EDITORIAL

BNP's options after the Oct 28 rally

THE STREET VIEW

Mohammad Al-Masum Molla
is chief reporter at The Daily Star.



MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

In my last column preceding BNP's October 28 rally, I said that the day would be important for both the main opposition and the ruling Awami League, and the party getting the upper hand in the rally would be ahead in the upcoming general election. After the rally, it became crystal clear that the ruling party got the upper hand, while the opposition faced a setback as it had not been prepared for the violence that unfolded on the day, driving the BNP members away from the rally venue. There is no doubt that the country is heading towards a long-drawn confrontational politics ahead of the election. True, the rival camps were already at loggerheads, but the situation just worsened after the fateful rally.

Let's look at the opposition camp first. BNP, which has remained out of power for 17 years, has been holding rallies and road marches in Dhaka and around the country peacefully as part of its anti-government campaign for the last one and a half years, drawing increasingly large crowds. Until the grand rally in Nayapaltan, Dhaka on October 28, the party was successful in keeping its street programmes peaceful—despite provocative rhetoric from some AL leaders and non-cooperation from the law enforcers. Throughout the non-violent movement, BNP was also able to distance itself from the violent street agitation programmes that it had launched before the 2014 election. At the time, the party faced severe criticism at home and abroad for mindless violence and arson attacks, killing and injuring many, to foil the election. However, throughout its current movement, BNP high-ups announced their street agitation programmes very carefully, and were able to keep their activists in check during demonstrations.

But it suffered a setback as the October 28 rally suddenly turned violent, leaving a policeman and a BNP leader dead, and injuring scores more, as campaigners clashed with the police. The day also saw a return of vandalism and arson attacks on vehicles. Could this violence have been averted? I think it most certainly could have. BNP leaders should have had more of the restraint and patience that they had shown earlier. Media reports



FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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said BNP men attacked AL activists, and then police and the Awami League men went on to disperse the BNP members from the rally. The police's role was questionable from the beginning, since they were instrumental in barring thousands of BNP activists from entering Dhaka to attend the rally.

This violence triggered BNP to go for the typical hartals and blockades. Many of the party leaders said they had no option but to toughen up their programmes as their peaceful rallies had not been effective. The government did not pay heed to their demands at all, so it was inevitable that at one point BNP would have to employ tougher measures such as general strikes and blockades to bring life to a halt. But it had intended to do that much later, if at all; what happened on October 28 forced its hand. Regardless, given how the current regime has everything under its iron-fisted control, BNP's chances of success in

to have a rally is not clear. True, Jamaat is not a banned political party. But how were they allowed to hold it without permission? The curious case of Jamaat may answer many questions regarding BNP's violent rally.

The ruling Awami League is upbeat after the rally. Although very few ruling party members took to the streets on the rally day, they were there carrying sticks. Police and the ruling party men were on the streets to contain the BNP and Jamaat. But then, that is not quite the role of the ruling party men, is it? One must ask: who gave the AL men the authority to guard the streets with sticks? If they have to take to the streets to protect public property, what are the police supposed to do? This trend is nothing new in Bangladesh's politics, though; it seems to have become the norm.

One can assume that after the October 28 rally, the ruling party is feeling relieved about the upcoming

Obaidul Quader has warned the BNP against tough programmes. Referring to what happened at Shapla Chattar in Dhaka on May 5, 2013, he said the consequences would be far worse for the BNP. Addressing a massive rally of AL's youth wing at Bangabandhu Avenue on Monday afternoon, he said, "What happened at Shapla Chattar that night? Didn't they flee? Didn't they run away? I do not want to say it, but BNP will have a more tragic end. Sheikh Hasina does not bow down and fears no one except Allah."

It is unfortunate for a nation that it could not devise an election strategy that would ensure a safe and peaceful transfer of power and ensure people's voting rights after five decades of independence. It's a matter of shame for us, and our politicians are to blame for this. Many people asked me who won in the October 28 rally. In reply, I said no matter who won, it's the people who lost.

Sustainable finance can catalyse Bangladesh's renewable energy sector



Enamul Huque
is head of Client Coverage,
Corporate, Commercial and
Institutional Banking at
Standard Chartered Bangladesh.

ENAMUL HUQUE

Bangladesh has been a shining example in numerous macroeconomic and social parameters. Based on research by Standard Chartered, it is forecasted to become the 23rd largest economy (measured by market exchange rate) by 2030. This trajectory has been achieved on the back of the nation's stable government, sustained infrastructure investment, and a strong, growing domestic demand.

A key enabler of this growth has been the remarkable progress in increasing its electricity access rate from just 47 percent in 2009 to 100 percent in 2022. But with progress comes a growing appetite for power—with peak demand expected to grow at an annual growth rate of 6.8 percent till 2040.

According to the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), 55 percent power generation was from gas in FY2021-22, followed by 27 percent from furnace oil, nine percent from power import and only 0.4 percent from renewables. This dependence on imported fossil fuels exposes the country to price volatility and environmental risks. At the same time, Bangladesh has committed to reducing carbon emissions by 22

percent within 2030 under the Paris Agreement, which also includes an unconditional emission-reduction commitment of 6.7 percent. To achieve these goals, investment in renewable energy sources will be vital.

Conventional finance alone will not help our nation to achieve its full potential. This is where sustainable finance can play a key role. For example, green bonds, green loans or green funds can provide low-interest or concessional financing for renewable energy projects. Risk mitigation instruments—such as guarantees, insurance, risk sharing with multilateral agencies or hedging products—can protect investors and developers from currency fluctuations or natural disasters. Blended finance instruments, such as grants, concessional loans or equity investments, can leverage public funds to mobilise private capital for renewable energy projects.

Many financiers prefer financing renewables over fossil fuel-based power generation. This is already happening around the world—not just in developed economies. In sub-Saharan Africa, the World Bank's Scaling Solar programme has helped make

privately funded grid-connected solar projects operational at competitive tariffs. In Latin America, the Inter-American Development Bank created the Sustainable Energy and Climate Change Initiative, which acts as "start-up instrument" for climate investments.

Bangladesh has been one of the first movers among emerging markets in designing policy regulations and interventions to build a greener and more sustainable financial system. The Bangladesh Bank introduced policy guidelines for green banking in 2011 and has been implementing prudential regulations to secure financial sector resources towards sustainability goals. The taxonomy for green and sustainable finance was introduced in 2020, which supported financial institutions nationwide to identify green and sustainable sectors and mobilise capital therein. A number of local and foreign currency refinance schemes were introduced to provide stable and lower-cost funding to enable green finance.

The government has conducted a comprehensive assessment of renewable energy technologies in consultation with the relevant stakeholders. This is an area where Bangladesh has already achieved great success, but there remains the opportunity to scale up. There are challenges to address, such as high upfront costs, high generation cost, scarcity of non-cultivable land, ownership challenges for available land, weather and terrain challenges. Further policy incentives, such as feed-in tariffs, tax breaks, subsidies and

minimum offtake guarantee would further accelerate investments in this sector.

Developing the capital markets in Bangladesh is foundational to implementing diverse instruments and platforms for raising and investing funds for sustainable finance. The domestic green bond market holds promise, but it requires enabling actions from government agencies and regulatory authorities, such as developing national guidelines and standards on green bonds, creating a pipeline of green projects, building awareness and capacity among issuers and investors, and providing financial support and risk-sharing mechanisms.

Bangladesh has achieved several milestones in recent times, with Standard Chartered originating the country's first sustainable trade finance, first-ever sustainable bond, and first green bond for its corporate clientele. The bank supported the development of the first utility-scale solar power plant through a pioneering deal—one that created a new template for private sector renewable energy operators across the nation. The country has come a long way over the last decade and can be seen today as a global model of sustainable growth. For continued growth and inclusive prosperity, our nation has to concurrently respond to the realities of climate change and the need to fuel rapid development. Sustainable finance and renewable energy are two key pieces of this puzzle, and they could catalyse the next chapter of Bangladesh's growth.