



The metro represents the most developed method of transportation, serving as the backbone for a more efficient Dhaka city. PHOTO: MARUF AREFIN MIM

MRT-6 NEARING COMPLETION

How is Dhaka’s metro rail doing so far?



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The two stations on each end of the MRT-6 line, Motijheel and Uttara North, are both finally operational. We now have our first completed metro line, save for the Bijoy Sarani, Kawran Bazar, Shahbagh, and Dhaka University stations, which will soon be fully operational. So, where has this new addition to Dhaka’s public transport infrastructure brought us? Before the metro rail, small fleets of buses—owned by private individuals and some by the government—with no specific schedules or designated stands, represented our idea of public transportation. This idea has changed with the addition of the metro rail, arguably the best method of transportation the modern world has to offer.

Boarding a bus in Dhaka often requires physical strength and agility. Those who cannot cope with the rush of getting on and off buses are referred to as “slow passengers” by bus operators, including drivers, helpers, and conductors. Moreover, bus services often neglect women, the elderly, and individuals facing physical challenges. Instead of assisting these groups, the operators make an effort to prevent them from boarding, often using various excuses or tricks.

In line with the country’s goal of inclusive development, the Dhaka metro rail ensures equal access to all, both the abled and the disabled. This equal access is a significant departure from our past public transport reality. On the metro, there is no hassle, no discrimination, and no one is left behind. People’s privacy is respected, making for a reliable, safe, and comfortable commute, particularly for women. The metro can serve as the backbone for a more efficient Dhaka city. Once all five spines of this massive public transportation project are built, a significant transformation in Dhaka’s public transportation is expected.

The tested and approved metro rail is a reliable and sustainable mode of transportation for the public, whose usage of it will free them from the hassle associated with other forms of transportation, while also helping to decongest the streets. This creates a win-win situation for commuters on every mode and is one of the primary merits of building metros. People will finally be able to reach their workplaces on time from distant areas, providing a unique opportunity for decentralisation.

However, we must consider one critical aspect: in order to maintain the metro’s inclusivity and universality, the fare rate charged to commuters must be affordable for all. As the country’s first metro project, the government has invested a substantial amount into it. I say “substantial” because, when we compare our costs to those of our neighbouring countries’ for similar projects, the Dhaka metro rail expenses are significantly higher.

Ideally, the metro’s fare rate should be so low that even for short

distances, commuters never have to question why they should walk to the station, climb the stairs, purchase a ticket, and board the train when they can simply raise their hand in the middle of the road and board a bus for the same or a lower fare. When it comes to fare considerations, we should prioritise the lowest-income individuals, assessing how much they spend on getting to and from work via the metro, including the additional expenses of reaching and leaving

addressed in the months to come. The most significant problem, though, may be that station landings are located in areas with narrow footpaths. This is a fundamental issue that cannot be undone. Before building a metro system, the first step should be to improve accessibility around it. Wider footpaths should be prioritised, followed by creating transfer facilities for the various small vehicles used by people coming to and departing from the stations. Our current approach appears to involve building the metro first and then placing the landings wherever the stations are situated. So far, we have seen construction being delayed due to issues with land acquisition for the landings on or around existing footpaths. This raises questions about what the consultants, to whom we pay thousands of crores, are doing. Transit-oriented development, with a \$3 billion investment, is not solely

In planning the future MRT lines, authorities should aim for a maximum speed of 70-80 km/h, which will lead to a lighter elevated track and significantly lower costs. Most countries are now gravitating towards lighter systems because of the lower development costs, resulting in significantly lower fare rates for commuters. This substantial reduction in fares is often referred to as “fatal attraction,” and becomes the deciding factor for people choosing the metro over smaller transport vehicles on the roads.

the stations. In the grand scheme of things, people are less concerned with their comfort and more focused on the total amount of money they spend daily.

For future metro projects, a performance evaluation of the MRT-6 should be conducted. For instance, if authorities had hoped for a speed of 100 km/h, but only achieved 50 km/h on the speedometer, they should recognise that 50 km/h is the attainable speed. Moreover, once there is a station every kilometre or so, and with the metro’s route having several curves and turns, the train will end up running at a speed much lower than its capacity.

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Dhaka’s current metro system lacks several advanced amenities. It relies on a driver-dependent model and employs age-old tram-like catenary systems with overhead wires. This creates visual intrusion and contributes to a tangled appearance of the city. In contrast, many of our neighbouring countries use a third-rail centric system for electric supply, which is visually pleasing.

It is also surprising that the Dhaka metro rail lacks built-in Wi-Fi, despite having a consultant as innovative as JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency). This is a significant oversight and should be

about transport; it aims to make the city smart and life within it smoother. The current approach resembles that of a flyover project, rather than well-planned town development, especially since Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) is missing as a partner in the project.

Another issue is the dividers below the metro structure separating two sides of the roads. These dividers are intended to deter pedestrians from crossing the roads recklessly. However, the two-and-a-half-foot tall dividers appear inviting to pedestrians, who cross the road from whichever point they wish. This may lead to slower traffic as vehicles on the roads try to accommodate pedestrians, reducing the efficiency of roads—underscoring that the Dhaka metro rail is being built without sufficient consideration for the roads below.

As the Dhaka metro rail is the first of its kind, and authorities are planning even larger investments for future parts of the megaproject, we need to learn from the mistakes made in this one and plan wisely. A third-party evaluation should be conducted as operations expand. Fares for commuters must not be the sole source of cost recovery. Non-operational revenue should be prioritised instead. Station areas should be redeveloped through land consolidation, and block development should be pursued. The landowners will remain the same, but development will be handed over to the metro authorities. When commercialisation and transportation are properly utilised, both landowners and the government, along with the people, will reap the benefits.

As told to Monorom Polok of The Daily Star.

Suppressing Palestine’s truth will not change it



A CLOSER LOOK

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her X handle is @tasneem_tayeb

TASNEEM TAYEB

Issam Adwan, a Gaza reporter for the Associated Press, Zahraa Al-Akhress, a Palestinian-Canadian journalist for Global News, and Jackson Frank, a PhillyVoice.com sports reporter were fired by their respective employers for expressing pro-Palestine opinions on social media.

The BBC—having recently been thrashed into docility by Israeli president Isaac Herzog for not branding Hamas as “terrorists”—, is “urgently” investigating at least six of its Arab journalists, including senior reporters in Egypt and Lebanon, for their activities on social media—which are mostly pro-Palestine.

It is interesting to note that most of these reputed news outlets have used the terms “fairness,” “balance,” “unbiased,” “impartial,” and “comprehensive” in justifying their sacking of employees. But what does fair, unbiased, impartial, comprehensive, or balanced mean

in America (CAMERA), have been lobbying to silence pro-Palestine activists, journalists, academicians, politicians, for some years now.

To understand how such lobbying works, let us take a closer look at the aforementioned *Artforum* letter issue. After the letter was published by *Artforum*, influential art dealers and collectors—including ultra right-wing US Israeli multi-millionaire venture capitalist Michael Eisenberg, who invests in emerging Israeli companies, and is also an art collector owning artwork worth millions of dollars, including some by the signatories of the letter—made phone calls not only to *Artforum* management to pressurise them to fire Velasco, but also to individual artists to coerce them into retracting their stance. This influential group mobilised social media resources and common art platforms, including art magazines, to decry their outrage

violence which have been reported to law enforcers.

But in a country where the government is aiding and abetting crimes against humanity, what can be expected of law enforcers? The FBI, it has been reported, has increased targeting Palestinians, detaining and questioning them, and visiting mosques more frequently in the wake of the ongoing Gaza genocide. American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and Stop LAPD Spying Coalition have both raised flags regarding more reports of federal agents intimidating not only Palestinians but also supporters of the Palestinian cause.

European countries such as Germany, France, Austria have banned pro-Palestine protests, and expression of any form of support for Palestine are being scrutinised. France is trying to systematically silence protests by proposing a so-called anti-Semitic law that would punish any critic of Israel with jail term and a hefty fine. The country has in fact slapped a fine of \$143 on a journalist for covering a “banned” Palestine solidarity protest, despite the journo showing his press ID card. These same countries, however, allow pro-Israeli protests and events. The British government is also planning to ban pro-Palestine protests on



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

in the context of the dispossession of Palestinians since 1948 and their occupation by Israel of more than five decades?

Academicians, cultural personalities, politicians, and even states have been subjected to similar suppression.

Michael Eisen, editor-in-chief of esteemed science journal, *eLife*, has been sacked for retweeting a satirical Onion article, titled “Dying Gazans Criticized For Not Using Last Words To Condemn Hamas,” with the caption, “Bingo.”

David Velasco, editor at *Artforum*, one of the world’s most reputed art magazines, has been fired for publishing an open letter supporting the liberation of the Palestinians—which had been signed by thousands of artists, cultural activists, and academics—because it was apparently “not consistent with *Artforum*’s editorial process.”

British MP Paul Bristow has been fired from his role as an aide to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, after he wrote a letter to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak requesting him to reconsider his stance on the Israel-Gaza War and support a “permanent” end of the conflict.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently asked Qatar to “tone down” Al Jazeera’s Gaza “war” coverage, and change its posture towards Hamas.

Similarly, India-based *The Eastern Herald* speculated that Bangladesh might be slapped with “Further Stricter US Actions” for its position on the Gaza genocide and its media’s reaction to the Israeli attacks, as documented by a report of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), supposedly an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit body that provides “original analysis of political, ideological, intellectual, social, cultural, and religious trends to the governments of the US and its allies, and to their counterterrorism officials, law enforcement agencies, militaries, and other authorities.”

These blatant attempts by establishments and global powers to suppress pro-Palestinian voices has added an alarming dimension to the ongoing Middle East crisis. Not that this is happening for the first time. Ultra right-wing pro-Israeli groups, such as the Canary Mission and the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting

and mount pressure on the artists to back down. This resulted in some artists submitting into the demand and retracting their statement.

What these lobbyist groups, establishments, and governments must realise is that freedom of speech and expression are basic democratic rights of the people. By suppressing the people’s rights, these so-called progressive authorities are creating a culture of fear within their organisations, communities, and even countries. At the same time, this is also emboldening ultra right-wing groups and providing them with a moral arsenal to attack victims and gag them for good.

Popular social media platforms including Meta, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok have also been found to be censoring content critical of Israel or sympathetic towards Palestine. The 7amleh has documented 238 cases of pro-Palestinian content censorship and has, along with 47 other organisations, issued a statement expressing their concern over this.

For instance, due to the irrational “ironclad” support of the United States for Israel, hate crime against Muslims has increased manifold in recent weeks in the country. A six-year-old US-Palestinian boy, Wadea Al-Fayoume, was stabbed to death by a 71-year-old man in Chicago recently. The boy was stabbed 26 times with a military-style knife. His mother was also stabbed a dozen times, being left severely injured. They were targeted for being Muslim.

At the University of California, Los Angeles, a group of extremists intruded on a webinar, threatening to tear off the heads of Palestine supporters and branding them terrorists. In Oregon, the Islamic Society of Greater Portland stated that the Muslim community there is living in fear, under threats of

Armistice Day.

Interestingly, it is these so-called developed, democratic countries that intrude into the internal affairs of other sovereign nations and preach democratic values. But the West and its allies have lost the moral compass and authority to talk about democracy. For them to be able to take on the moral high ground, they need to first ensure the basic democratic rights of their people, including the right to freedom of speech.

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The October 7 Hamas assault on Israel did not happen in a vacuum, as rightfully pointed out by the UN secretary-general. This needs to be contextualised with the Balfour Declaration by the British government in 1917 giving its blessing for the creation of a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine; the 1948 Nakba, when Zionist militias raped, killed, and displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homeland; the 1967 capture and occupation of Gaza and the West Bank by Israel; the dehumanised lives the Palestinians are being forced to endure in their own lands under the Israeli occupation. And people—brave people, strong people, people with conscience—should not be persecuted for asking the right questions.

If this trend of suppression continues, it will only snowball into a bigger problem of right-wing terrorism and suppression of victims, as we have seen already happening in various parts of the world, more pronouncedly in the US.

The world is witnessing the Gaza genocide in real time despite Israel causing blackouts. More than 10,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel in Gaza alone in the last one month.

Israel will go down in history as an apartheid, genocidal regime, with its allies as its enablers, no matter how much they try to suppress the truth. They would do better to stop the genocide, than try to bury the truth under Gaza’s rubbles.