

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## How many times can a project be revised?

### RHD expansion project continues to hit roadblocks

The state of a project intended to turn a 190km road from Elega to Rangpur into a four-lane highway has once again shown what is wrong with the government's Roads and Highways Department (RHD). The project was approved in September 2016 and supposed to be completed by June 2021 at a cost of Tk 11,899 crore, with loans mostly from the Asian Development Bank. However, the project authority did not even start physical work until 2020, and then added some new elements resulting in a major project revision. Consequently, its budget shot up to Tk 19,016 crore, and its deadline was pushed back to December 2024.

But so far, the project has seen a 75 percent progress, with the authority unable to even start the planned construction of two major flyovers in Gaibandha due to long delays in land acquisition. As a result, the authority has again sought two additional years, including a one-year defect liability period, and an additional Tk 40 crore to complete the job. The revision proposal is now pending with the Road Transport and Highways Division. Provided that it passes through all the procedural hoops, the project will have until December 2026 to complete—about five and a half years after its original deadline, which is ridiculous.

That being the case, the road transport and highway minister recently opened one railway overpass, seven road overpasses, and two bridges built under the project, boasting that these were the prime minister's "gifts" to citizens. How he could boast about a perennially protracted undertaking is beyond us. The delay in project implementation, including due to its revision, shows that the original plan was poorly done. Given that a major part of it is being financed via loans, which will have to be borne by the citizens, means that the RHD has once again failed to properly perform its duty leading to increased suffering for people.

Over the years, such delays and budget revisions by RHD seem to have become the norm, as have all forms of irregularities, whether they be forgoing crucial road safety audits, or hiring firms with questionable records, or something else. Therefore, it is high time the government overhauled the RHD and held its high officials accountable for their repeated failures and for turning the institution into a cesspool of irregularities and mismanagement.

## Eid and dengue can be a dangerous mix

### Spike in infections feared as many thousands leave cities

After 2023, which saw the worst dengue outbreak in Bangladesh since the first recorded epidemic in 2000, experts have been warning that this year could be even worse, largely due to rising infections outside Dhaka. Last year, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) reported 1,705 deaths as well as 321,179 hospitalisations. This year, as of April 4, some 1,740 patients were hospitalised, 1,135 of them outside Dhaka. With the country entering an extended Eid holiday, when tens of thousands of people leave Dhaka, experts predict a spike in the breeding of Aedes mosquitoes. Empty houses and public spaces are ideal breeding grounds as stagnant water, caused by intermittent rains, can accumulate with no one to clear it.

This is but one reason for the predicted increase in infections, however. As an entomologist told The Daily Star, Aedes larvae have been found "in high densities" outside Dhaka. Moreover, in many areas outside Dhaka, dengue cases are being recorded for the first time this year, which will be reflected in year-end numbers. Reports from several divisional headquarters also indicate delayed or lacklustre early response, which is vital to control outbreaks. Another issue is the lack of initiatives outside Dhaka to identify the location of patients or destroy breeding grounds. Lack of awareness also hugely influences the trajectory of an epidemic, with a survey in Chattogram finding that around 50 percent of patients did not know that stagnant water helps spread dengue while around 40 percent did not use mosquito nets.

Against this backdrop, so many people leaving for their villages can mean trouble as far as the spread of dengue is concerned. Those leaving cities and those staying back both need to be careful. Wherever they are, it is important that they take appropriate steps to ensure that water does not accumulate and to clean their houses regularly. Vehicles that people will take to go to various districts must also be sprayed with insecticide before travel. The city corporations should carry out such spraying at all bus terminals and across neighbourhoods. Along with the DGHS, they should also ramp up their anti-mosquito and surveillance initiatives.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Clean Dhaka's garbage

It is concerning to see heaps of litter and garbage accumulating along Dhaka's lanes and bylanes for months and even years. The lack of visible action from the city corporations suggests this issue isn't a priority for them. As a daily commuter in Mohammadpur, for example, I've observed piles of old garbage accumulating along roadsides from Satmasjid Road near the Physical Training Center field, all the way to Johuri Mohollah on Salimullah Road. While stakeholders in the print and broadcast media discuss the detrimental environmental effects of this rotting garbage, the concerned authorities remain seemingly oblivious, leaving residents like us with the impression that we have no right to a clean environment.

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# Are ministers not complicit in time, cost overruns?



Shamsheer M Chowdhury, *Bir Bikram*, is a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh and president of Trinamool BNP.

SHAMSHER M CHOWDHURY

In an interview published in The Daily Star on April 1, former Planning Minister MA Mannan put the blame for cost and time overruns in development projects squarely on the shoulders of bureaucrats. In so doing, the former planning minister effectively absolved his political colleagues and the policymakers from any wrongdoing. Mannan himself has been a civil servant for about three decades, and a member of parliament for 15 years. During that time, he spent 10 years as a member of the cabinet—first as the state minister for planning for five years and then as the planning minister for five more.

In this lengthy interview, the lawmaker from Sunamganj-3 constituency identified his former civil servant colleagues as the only offenders for cost and time overruns in development projects, while his current political colleagues as victims of bureaucratic machinations.

Mannan is widely respected as an honest and diligent person. It is expected that someone with the healthy mixture of being both a bureaucrat and subsequently a politician, and a cabinet minister, should know better where lies the fault lines for the massive drainage of the nation's precious resources in planning, drawing up, approval and the eventual execution of a development project. Added to that is the huge suffering this brings to the general public, who are the innocent end users. The former planning minister has chosen to single out engineers and project directors as being among the offenders. In the interview, he spoke at length about faulty project designs, unnecessary public expenditure, slow project implementation, and lack of accountability of project directors and engineers, among other systemic faults and outdated bureaucratic methods, as the reasons for the ill health of project implementation.

He may be right, but only up to a point.

As a former bureaucrat myself, I am somewhat aware of the entire process that a project proposal needs to go

through before its final approval at the Ecneec. If I recall right, development project proposals, especially those that are connected to infrastructure development involving huge monetary outlay, are supposed to be first put under a microscope by the concerned or implementing ministry at the level of the relevant minister, then further examined and cross-examined at inter-ministerial meetings mostly headed by cabinet ministers. The proposal is then presented before the



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Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, usually headed by the finance minister, where it is further discussed threadbare before it is presented at the Ecneec, a body headed by the prime minister, for further examination and final decision. Here, too, the feasibility of the project and the benefits it might accrue for the general public are expected to be discussed in detail. Once the project is approved, it falls on the relevant ministry to execute it within the approved budget and the given timeframe.

From what has been stated above,

it should be abundantly clear that it is the policymakers at the ministerial level who are responsible for ensuring the timely execution of development projects and avoiding cost overruns through proper oversight and seeking accountability of those at the field levels.

To cite a glaring example of poor governance, the late Dr Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, undoubtedly one of the brightest engineers of our time and an important player in the hugely successful implementation of Padma Bridge, once described the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project (Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport to Joydebpur) as one of the most ill-conceived, ill-planned, financially wasteful infrastructure projects ever undertaken in Bangladesh. He said there were much better, less expensive and far less time-consuming alternatives available. Experience

and seeking accountability at every stage of implementation? Would failure to do so not make the ministers complicit? Then why singularly blame bureaucrats and project directors, especially those who want to earn an honest living, for cost and time overruns? Public representatives, more so a cabinet minister, should have the honesty and integrity to admit his or her own failures and accept the blame, not just pass them on to those salaried employees involved at the secretarial and technical levels.

In the interview, Mannan said, "Every single bureaucratic tier thinks of themselves as independents, or want to do their work independently." He claimed this phenomenon as "the reason why work gets delayed." To me, this judgement is an admission of one's own failure; it is also gravely wrong, if not unethical. Such a comment from a responsible public representative

smacks of nothing but abysmally poor governance, and poor governance alone.

MA Mannan has also suggested a series of dynamic and innovative changes in the system to make the whole process more time- and cost-efficient. He should be lauded for this, even if they have come too little, too late. Perhaps the right time to push for them would have been when he was a member of the cabinet, not now when he is not part of it. Creative as they may be, one hopes his prescriptions for change do not remain a pipe dream.

# Time for fashion brands, retailers to rethink green strategies



RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

Fashion brands have spent almost two decades attempting to use sustainability as a marketing tool, with varying degrees of success. For many, launching any new product will have a "green" angle to it. Sustainability sells—at least that is what we have always been led to believe. But does it, really? My guess is that most consumers still value qualities such as style, fit, value for money and choice above all else. They also have their favourite brands that they stay loyal to through thick and thin. Take, for instance, the remarkable success of sports giants Adidas and Nike in dominating the global market for sporting apparel for so long. Building a strong brand is critical to business success.

However, over the past two or three years, we have seen a huge backlash against sustainability marketing in the West. The word "greenwashing" has become commonplace, and there is a growing lack of trust around brands and the claims they are making about their apparel products. Some brands have been reported for making misleading or false claims about their clothing collections.

Some are facing potential fines. All are now considering how to approach this subject. Is it worth making green claims if the risk is accusations of greenwashing, bad publicity and reputational damage? At what point will brands begin to think that the drawbacks outweigh the positives? Might we see more "greenhushing" moving forward?

I think we may already be reaching that stage already. Aside from the fact that the benefits of green marketing are negligible anyway, there is another issue to consider: supply chains. Most major fashion brands have now set targets to reduce carbon emissions in their supply chains (tier 3). Many have set science-based targets on these issues, and this is an area which investors and regulators alike are watching closely. Brands are under a huge—and growing—level of scrutiny on this topic.

While fashion brands are often criticised for not financially supporting the green transition in supply chains, major brands are committing time to reduce the carbon impact of their supply chains. This is logical because if they fail on this

issue, there will be serious questions to answer when we hit key milestones related to sustainability and green transition.

I closely follow the sustainability reporting of fashion brands and retailers. Most are now reporting in great detail their progress around reducing CO2 emissions. In some

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cases, they are achieving great success in this area, but mainly this is in their own operations, such as retail stores. These emissions are a tiny part of a brand's total emissions—often less than 10 percent.

When it comes to reducing emissions in supply chains, brands have not been quite so successful. Some are making progress in this area but, for most, it is a case of two steps forward, three steps back. Many major brands set CO2 reduction targets before the pandemic. Since then, their supply chain emissions have gone up.

The problem they all face is that, as their output grows, their supply chain emissions increase. In the absence of a rapid shift to renewable energy in supply chains, it is a thankless

task. The net result of all this is that in about five years or so, the fashion industry will have to make radical changes in supply chains in order to reduce carbon intensity in line with protocols such as the Paris Agreement. If they cannot do this, the backlash from consumers, regulators and investors alike will be huge.

So many fashion brands are now playing catch-up because they have been unable to move the needle on supply chain emissions in the past five years. It would not be a surprise to see some of the relevant goals getting an extended deadline, but I am not sure this will go down well with investors and consumers.

I believe that while consumers may not care too greatly for products packaged in a "green" way, they do take notice of broader climate issues. There will come a point when the public at large will begin to look for people to blame, and large retailers with carbon-intensive supply chains will be high on the list. So brands need to be ready; they need to be seen doing all they can to cut their carbon footprint, and woe betide those who miss the critical 2030 targets.

So perhaps it is time to forget eco fashion and green claims by brands and retailers. As we move forward, green marketing could be less about products and more about the energy and emissions used in the production of clothing. This could spell opportunities for progressive suppliers.