

How Dhaka airport has turned into a game of Ludo



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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Dhaka airport's Terminal-3, which had a soft launch in October 2023, has completed 99 percent of its construction, according to reports. The possibility of the completion of the remaining one percent of this billion-dollar project, requiring road and IT connectivity, tantalised us for over two years. Now we are told that the location is immune to mobile signals; they'll have to undo the ceiling décor to insert networking channels. How could we have overlooked such a vital issue for years? All the local and foreign experts and their collaborators combined could not yet make Terminal-3 operational.

The Humpty Dumpty undertone in the last line alludes to a similar historical failure. A much-vaunted heavy cannon mounted by the royalists on a church wall during the English Civil War tumbled down and cracked like eggshells when the parliamentarians damaged the base. A muffled poet could express his chuckle in rhyme using a coded language. The massive fiasco of our national airport thereby makes me resort to metaphors. So, I pose this question: how many of you have engaged in a game of Ludo, only to find yourself being "eaten" by the final large snake near the finish line?

Why does the news of parts of the freshly minted Terminal-3, still unravaged by the footfalls of passengers, needing to be demolished remind me of a game of Ludo? Come to think of it, the arrival of travellers at the airport has always been like a game of Ludo. Everything is subject to chance. Occasionally, you get unexpected help from here and there, like ladders on a Ludo board. Then there are the "snakes" all around. They come disguised as customs

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FILE PHOTO: JICA

officials who will label your personal goods or gifts as commercial items and levy import duties to force you to come to a "mutual understanding." There are small snakes who will volunteer to write down the arrival forms of the incoming migrant workers and demand service charges in foreign currencies. The snakes will sometimes hiss behind you with their extended tissues when you are relieving yourself after a long flight. The pythons lie in the luggage handling areas and will crush open your suitcases to extract valuables.

How many times will we have to witness passengers wailing over the loss of personal items? In most cases, the poor migrant workers, ironically referred to as remittance heroes, are the primary targets who are considered easy prey. Could we consider installing software that scans the arrival and passenger information from the boarding pass? Could we explore alternatives to handwriting information that may be difficult to read, which then requires sorting by officials? I guess they cannot fully rely on the server and need a backup stack of paper

airport services in the initial phase—while the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) and Biman learn to transition to the world-class mindset required for running an international airport—seemed a no-brainer. It was a ladder for the transition that we were compelled to skip, and we fell right into the mouth of another snake on the board. A terminal that is 99 percent built but zero percent useful is not a national asset. It is a national metaphor. We are so close to being a world-class competitor, yet so far from it.

On the other side of the functional passenger terminals lies the cargo terminal. Anyone using the domestic airlines must have noticed the tangle of boxes filled with imported or about-to-export items. When the fire broke out at the cargo terminal months ago, we realised that "all was not well" in Uttara. The fire burned for hours, leading to numerous unsupported claims. There were machines for nuclear power projects, weapons for the army, and items that would help insurance scammers or bank defaulters. The fire halted flights for hours, but it did not stop our concerns regarding aviation safety,

How valiant our authorities are, catching low-paid security personnel with mobile sets tucked in various pockets of their trousers or searching the pockets of cleaners for tips. These make for excellent social media victories but do nothing to disturb the deeply embedded syndicates whose roots stretch across agencies, contractors, and unofficial actors who thrive in the cracks of institutional weakness.

When can we have a serious reform of Bangladesh's aviation governance? Even a layman knows that too many agencies operate inside the airport: CAAB, Biman, customs, immigration, airport police, contractors, ground handlers, and freelance service workers. The outcome is a governance void in which everyone holds a nominal position of authority, but no one is truly held accountable. A similar dysfunction at the shipping port has created the need for foreign companies to take over handling and management charges. The persistent failure of the local service sector presents a dual challenge: it demonstrates that the sector's vested interests will prevent foreign operators from thriving

right to suspect design, where authorities insist there are only accidents or stray incidents. What is required now is a complete overhaul of our mindset. Simply replacing one operator with another will not fix the airport's fundamental flaw. A shiny terminal does not make a modern airport. Maybe we will need some handholding and knowledge transfer at the initial stage to ensure efficient systems with trained staff and unified command structures. We need a passenger-centric governance to make the airport a welcoming place.

The Ludo metaphor can once again be useful. We need to advance slowly, square by square. We can make every improvement a ladder for the system: a new scanner, an imported trolley, a digital monitor, and a promise of cleanliness. Meanwhile, we need to avoid the snakes on the board: a connectivity dispute, a cargo fire, a bribery scandal, a foreign passenger humiliated, a viral video of lost luggage, a tout attacking a tourist, or a terminal that costs billions but cannot open. I hope the dice will provide us with the required number to reach home with the joy of winning a game.

Tony Blair and the reduction of Gaza to a political laboratory



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For months, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's role has been lobbying US President Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to head a "temporary transitional authority in Gaza." The former UK PM's intense interest in taking the leadership role of a "governor of Gaza" was a red flag from the start. The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI) drew up a plan behind the scenes with Jared Kushner, who publicly stated that Gaza's "waterfront property could be very valuable." Tony Blair amassed an empire of wealth unlike any other former UK PM since leaving office, through an overlapping web of charities, advisory positions, firms, and foundations, and thus became one of the wealthiest people in the UK.

Many Western political leaders have had shady careers, but Blair has proven to be a self-serving opportunist who injects himself wherever there is a shot to become relevant in the global political scene. His involvement in the "Gaza peace plan" was in the least interest of the Palestinian people, who are being killed mercilessly in the Gaza Strip. Blair's plan revealed a hierarchy in which an international board of billionaires and businesspeople sit at the top, a long-known tactic of his to mix private enrichment with

so-called "public service" for the Palestinians. Blair sees business opportunities beneath the rubble of Gaza.

In the many periods in which he held the positions of power, Blair turned British politics into a follower of US imperialist politics to serve his own interests and position himself as a loyal lobbyist for US foreign policies. Even as PM, Blair unwaveringly supported George W Bush's plan to invade Iraq. It is even documented that Blair wrote a private note to Bush in 2002, saying, "I will be with you, whatever." The chair of Blair's own intelligence committee at the time had questioned the evidence of "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq. However, Blair admitted that he wanted to ensure he was the US's first partner of choice. He subordinated his own government to the goals of the Bush administration. Prominent British politicians such as Jeremy Corbyn had long accused Blair of war crimes. Tony Blair's involvement must be blocked immediately because his history of corruption and failure poses a risk to the Trump administration's political timeline as it tries to manage the crisis in Gaza for its own benefit.

Right after he left office as PM, Blair's impulses behind the US invasion of Iraq led

to his appointment as representative of the Quartet to salvage the peace process between Israel and Palestine, which had begun to show signs of dying and had reached the brink of inevitable collapse. The Quartet committee consisted of the US, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations.

During his job as Middle East envoy, Blair lobbied for the development of an oil field off the Gaza Strip, which would



Tony Blair
FILE PHOTO: AFP

be owned and operated by British Gas. He proposed economic policies that would benefit JP Morgan, where Blair was also serving as an adviser, and drew a salary of

two million pounds per year. He intrepidly used his position to make financial gains for himself, his initiatives and those of his family's as well. In 2010, Blair used his access to Middle Eastern people of power to help his wife, Cherie Blair, raise funds for her charitable initiatives worldwide, including in Bangladesh, showing further conflict of interest.

When Israel launched a brutal war against Palestinians in Gaza in 2009, Blair, the Middle East envoy to negotiate peace for "Palestinian statehood", was silent and was said to be on holiday. It was later revealed that he was, at the time, meeting the Israeli defence minister. All that Blair did, unsurprisingly, benefited Israel's interests. While Gaza was in rubble, he received \$1 million from Tel Aviv University for his "exceptional leadership." Later in 2011, Blair created a proposal, which championed dropping Palestinians' calls for an end to illegal occupation and instead demanded that Palestinians recognise Israel as a "Jewish state." Two years later, Blair hired Netanyahu's former aide as his own private consultant, ruining his credibility that he could undertake any neutral position in the peace process. Blair's career in the Middle East went hand in hand with US

Israeli policies, demonstrating a fusion of his business dealings and diplomatic dealings to profit off the backs of Palestinians.

Blair's history made many in the Middle East reserved about the US administration's choice of him as a front for their effort regarding Gaza, which finally led to his recent removal from the main executive position. The first and most important conclusion from Blair being dropped is improvisation and haste policies, as if the Gaza Strip is a field of experiments in which formulas, initiatives and even players change from day to day. Improvisation and haste positioned Blair as the CEO of the most important political project on the basis of which the future of the Middle East will be determined. The lack of sufficient consultation with those concerned, such as the partners of the US administration's project, is reflected in what happened to Blair being dropped as a major figure from the "peace council" before he began his work in Gaza. Blair's supposed appointment and quiet dismissal point to a fragile and bleak plan of field testing politics in Gaza, the result of which can lead to further uncertainty about what will happen to the region, and most importantly, the self-determination of Palestinians.