‘Bureaucratic obstinacy is the root cause of the BRT failure’

Dr Md Shamsul Hoque, *professor of civil engineering at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), talks to* **Monorom Polok** *of* **The Daily Star** *about the failure of Dhaka’s first dedicated Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project, the flaws in its planning and design, and the lessons to be learned from this experience to design better public transport.*

The cabinet has recently scrapped the country’s first dedicated Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project after 14 years and with Tk 2,810 crore already spent. We have since witnessed various reactions from experts and even street protests in Gazipur. What is your view?

I must say the BNP government, and the interim government previously, made the right decision in this regard, much like a surgeon performing a necessary amputation to prevent greater harm. I understand the public’s emotional attachment. People endured prolonged disruption believing the project would provide them with a direct route from Gazipur to Motijheel. If Gazipur residents think BRT offered them a dream, they saw only half the picture. The question that should be asked is: what would they do if they get dropped off at Dhaka airport when their destination is Motijheel?

A BRT that stops short of the built-up city cannot sustain itself. The idea of getting off at the airport to hunt for another bus is impractical, especially when parallel intercity buses already offer curb-to-curb pickups and drop-offs along the highway. A local bus lets you board and get off wherever you like, but this system would have required you to walk to a distant station, climb a footbridge, queue, ride to the airport, climb another footbridge, and hunt for a second bus. By contrast, commuters can now simply stay on direct local buses. Even if completed, the BRT would never have fulfilled its original objective.

The only reason highway traffic moves today is that the BRT lane was opened to general traffic over the past year and a half. Squeezing long-haul and industrial freight into two lanes to reserve the middle one for a low-utility bus service is the very definition of congestion.

The government has reportedly opted to convert the Gazipur-Airport corridor into a six-lane road. Is this the most sensible option, given the infrastructure already built and the needs of commuters?

Yes. The cabinet resisted political pressure and made a strictly technical decision. A four-member Buet committee submitted an 86-page report confirming that the project lacked merit, worsened congestion, and conflicted with the industrial zoning in Dhaka’s Detailed Area Plan. The contractor was also facing insolvency and litigation; appointing a replacement would have meant two more years of legal delays. The Roads and Highways Department (RHD) has proposed an expressway with flanking service roads.

The narrative that Tk 2,810 crore was “wasted” is factually incorrect. The actual sunk cost is about 4 percent of the total, or roughly Tk 99–100 crore spent on the stations. Demolishing the stations will cost Tk 45 crore, while installing barriers will cost Tk 27 crore. Salvaging the steel, however, will recover Tk 7 crore. The other 96 percent of the investment—including the 10-lane Tongi Bridge, flyovers, drainage, footpaths, and service roads—is in public use. Converting the corridor into an expressway with flanking service roads would ensure a consistent geometric configuration and save Tk 2,000 crore in future waste.



Md Shamsul Hoque

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Some media outlets claimed that 97 percent of the BRT infrastructure work was complete, which is incorrect. Project authorities had earlier sought a revision that would have extended the deadline to 2029 and raised the overall budget to Tk 6,598 crore, only to deliver a fragmented bus service that few people would have possibly used.

The real high-capacity solution for Gazipur is already built: the third and fourth railway tracks, conceived to serve commuter trains between Gazipur and Narayanganj. It is congestion-free and free of level crossings, running straight into Motijheel and Kamalapur.

What were the fundamental planning and design flaws that led to the BRT project’s failure? How could they remain unresolved for so long?

The project began with good intentions. The 2004 Strategic Transport Plan proposed three BRT lines, with BRT-3 running from Motijheel to the airport. The World Bank showed interest, and the ADB then proposed extending a line from Gazipur, but its feasibility hinged entirely on that anchor carrying passengers all the way to Motijheel. But then, the World Bank section was scrapped around 2018-19, and the project’s whole purpose vanished.

The ADB advised converting the corridor into a metro and offered to finance it. It had initiated a logical project designed to integrate with an anchor corridor, but once that anchor disappeared, the donor rightly saw that a fragmented BRT had no utility. Non-technical bureaucrats at the ministry refused to accept this and ordered the project to proceed unchanged. This obstinacy is the root cause of every failure since.

The second flaw was a rushed desktop feasibility study. It skipped drainage, footpaths, and land for stations. To make the proposal look lucrative, the consultants bypassed these expensive engineering challenges on paper, claiming the project could be completed in 1.5 years. Fourteen years later, it remains incomplete. Independent investigations by my team and two separate RHD committees revealed monumental blunders. Rather than hiring independent international specialists, the donor relied on in-house consultants who rushed through a desktop design. It was not a genuine BRT project but an unplanned corridor redevelopment, and it ignored the fact that the N3 is a heavy industrial artery. A six-lane highway cannot accommodate a 10-to-12-lane BRT footprint. The RHD, which builds highways but has never operated public transport, then took on the mega-project, succumbing to the allure of managing such a high-profile initiative. When buses could not cross truck routes at grade, eight flyovers were bolted on. These additions inflated the budget, extended the timelines, and turned the BRT into an ad hoc civil infrastructure initiative that abandoned its original transit mission.

How did it last so long? From the departments to the ministry, the Planning Commission, and IMED, there was not a single transit professional who understood BRT. The RHD lacked transport planners, the ministry blindly pushed files forwarded by departments, and the Planning Commission operated without qualified planners. Non-technical officials approved massive budgets without evaluating whether the project was still fit for purpose. Working with the Dhaka Bus Rapid Transit PLC, the operating company, was one of the most frustrating experiences of my professional life. It functioned largely as a rehabilitation centre for bureaucrats, who cared about bus procurement schedules, not technical modelling. Seeing expert advice ignored, Buet and four professors from CEPT University in Ahmedabad withdrew around late 2022.

What lessons should the government draw from this failure when planning and implementing other major transport infrastructure projects?

Test technical feasibility before building, and entrust the work to people who actually understand transit: independent specialists rather than rushed in-house consultants, and agencies with real operating experience. And listen when a donor tells you that the premise of a project has collapsed.

A BRT should ideally take nine months to two years to build at modest cost, but ours set records for cost overruns and delays. After its mayor visited Brazil’s Curitiba, Jakarta built around 14 BRT lines without foreign consultants or external borrowing, funding dividers and stations domestically. We are taking on foreign debt to build ours. Experienced transit leaders in Malaysia or Indonesia would have conducted a proper feasibility study before undertaking a project.

Where a corridor is constrained, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Chinese cities build low-cost elevated viaducts for BRT, which is what ITDP guidelines would have recommended here. After all, on our industrial corridor, about 88 percent of garment workers must cross the highway on foot. An at-grade barrier creates a social divide, and workers will breach it out of sheer necessity.

Over the past two decades or so, transport infrastructure development has often prioritised major roads and projects that primarily benefit higher-income groups, rather than affordable and accessible public transport. What should the government’s priorities be to ensure that the urban poor, too, have access to reliable and affordable transport?

BRT’s original promise was exactly this: a sustainable, reliable system accessible even to low-income commuters, at a fraction of a metro’s cost. Curitiba functioned without a metro and built multiple BRT lines for the cost of a single one. Metros are fast, but they require enormous capital investment. Reliability is what daily riders value most. Even at 30 km/h, arriving and departing on time is preferable to most commuters.

Our priorities should follow that logic: low-cost, dependable systems that connect places people actually need to reach, designed around how low-income workers really travel, including on foot. For Gazipur, the place to start is the rail infrastructure already built. Connecting commuters to it is the most reliable, rapid, and sustainable strategy available.

What should Bangladesh gain from its first sovereign bond?



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Bangladesh is preparing to borrow up to $1 billion from international investors. According to a recent report by The Daily Star, the government plans roadshows in London, New York, and Hong Kong for its first sovereign bond. The interest rate and repayment terms have yet to be finalised. But before we start jet-setting around the world in search of financing, we should take a beat and try to understand what we intend to achieve with the money.

Our public finances are already stretched. The FY2026-27 budget allocates Tk 1.27 lakh crore to interest payments on existing debt. That is more than Tk 18 of every Tk 100 the government expects to collect in revenue, before repaying any principal. The caveat is that the government’s revenue goals have consistently tended towards the aspirational.

Bangladesh has good reasons to seek new financing. During July-September 2026, foreign loan disbursements fell 42 percent to $662 million, while repayments reached $1.35 billion. Meanwhile, last year, the government borrowed around Tk 1.66 lakh crore from banks, exceeding its revised target by nearly Tk 47,500 crore. Moving some government borrowing offshore could ease pressure on domestic financing, provided it actually replaces local borrowing. A sovereign bond would also give international investors a publicly traded reference price for Bangladesh’s dollar-denominated credit risk. Banks and companies seeking offshore financing could then be assessed against that benchmark, potentially improving access to international capital.

An estimated interest rate of around 8 percent has featured in public discussion, although no final rate has been agreed upon yet. A $1-billion, 10-year bond at 8 percent interest would cost $80 million a year—and $800 million over a decade. The $1 billion principal would also be due at maturity. At Bangladesh Bank’s (BB) recent exchange rate of Tk 123.75 per US dollar, the annual interest would be Tk 990 crore. For comparison, BB’s 10-year domestic government bond benchmark stood at 9.26 percent on October 25. Borrowing internationally at 8 percent appears cheaper by 1.26 percentage points.

But this comparison leaves out a major risk. Domestic debt is serviced in terms of the taka. International bonds must be repaid in US dollars, while the government collects most of its revenue in the local currency. If the price of a US dollar rises by 10 percent, the annual interest payment would increase from Tk 990 crore to Tk 1,089 crore. Repaying the principal would cost approximately Tk 13,613 crore, instead of Tk 12,375 crore. The government would then owe the same amount in US dollars but need substantially more taka to pay for it.

The apparent saving on interest rate could cease to exist with relatively modest depreciation. The actual financing cost would also depend on the repayment schedule, fees, and any protection against currency movements.

Bangladesh has already experienced significant exchange rate pressure. A long-term currency hedge could reduce the government’s exposure, but whether affordable financial safeguard is available for a bond of this size remains unclear.

Nevertheless, the real question is: what will Bangladesh do with the money?

Earlier this year, Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman and I argued in these pages that expanding credit has done little to resolve the weaknesses holding back productivity. Repeated refinancing and easier liquidity have often postponed difficult reforms. The same concern applies to sovereign borrowing: additional financing could cover existing expenditure without addressing the problems that constrain the economy.

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Using a bond to retire more expensive debt could generate savings. Refinancing obligations falling due soon could reduce pressure on the budget. Productive infrastructure investment would strengthen future earnings and improve the country’s capacity to repay. Holding the proceeds in foreign exchange reserves would serve a different purpose. If the government borrowed at 8 percent while earning substantially less on those reserves, it would be paying for an additional liquidity buffer. That may be useful insurance, but the cost of it should be clear.

Bangladesh has a long record of public projects delayed by cost overruns and weak implementation. Expensive borrowing to paper over weak accounting would compound these failures unless project selection improves.

Some advocates of sovereign bonds point to their flexibility. Commercial borrowing generally comes with fewer restrictions on expenditure than many multilateral loans. Multilateral appraisal, procurement requirements, and monitoring can be slow, but they provide checks against waste and system loss. With commercial borrowing, Bangladesh must rely more heavily on its own institutions to maintain those standards, and our ability to do so remains a perpetual point of contention.

When debt servicing consumes more public revenue, governments face harder choices over spending, taxation, and further borrowing.

The public should be able to examine those choices. Before issuing the bond, we should understand the intended use of proceeds, the full borrowing cost, and the repayment schedule. We should know how much existing debt would be replaced, if any, and how future payments would change if the taka depreciates. The government should clarify its comparison with domestic borrowing, multilateral financing, and credit-enhanced alternatives. The parliament should also have an opportunity to examine these commitments, while subsequent budget reports should account for how the proceeds were used.

Under Bangladesh’s constitution, servicing government debt is a standing obligation of public finances. The parliament may discuss these payments, but these are not subject to the ordinary annual vote on spending grants. A bond issued today will therefore create repayment commitments that future budgets must accommodate, regardless of which government is in office.

Therefore, before committing to its first sovereign bond, it behoves the government to show what Bangladesh stands to gain, what the country will owe, and how the public can judge whether the borrowing was worthwhile.

অমর একুশে বইমেলা ও অনুষ্ঠানমালা ২০২৭

ইভেন্ট ম্যানেজমেন্ট বিষয়ক বিজ্ঞপ্তি

পত্র সংখ্যা : ক্রনিস-১৬৫০/২০২৬/৩৪২/৫/বাএ

তারিখ : ১৩ কার্তিক, ১৪৩৩ / ২৯ অক্টোবর, ২০২৬

বাংলা একাডেমি ০৭.০১.২০২৭ থেকে ০৬.০২.২০২৭ তারিখ পর্যন্ত ‘অমর একুশে বইমেলা ২০২৭’ আয়োজন করতে যাচ্ছে।

স্পন্সরের মাধ্যমে বইমেলার নির্ধারিত কার্যক্রম বাস্তবায়নে সহযোগিতা করার জন্য ইভেন্ট ম্যানেজমেন্ট প্রতিষ্ঠানকে দায়িত্ব প্রদান করা হবে। এ সংক্রান্ত কাজের বিবরণী (ইভেন্টসমূহ) ১,০০০.০০ (এক হাজার) টাকা মূল্যে ০১.১১.২০২৬ থেকে ১১.১১.২০২৬ তারিখ বিকেল ৪:০০টা পর্যন্ত বাংলা একাডেমির ড. মুহম্মদ শহীদুল্লাহ্ ভবনের হিসাবরক্ষণ ও বাজেট উপবিভাগ থেকে সংগ্রহ করা যাবে।

ইভেন্ট ব্যবস্থাপনায় আগ্রহী প্রতিষ্ঠানের নিকট থেকে মুখবন্ধ খামে প্রস্তাব আহ্বান করা যাচ্ছে। আগ্রহী প্রতিষ্ঠানকে আগামী ১২.১১.২০২৬ তারিখ বৃহস্পতিবার দুপুর ১২.০০টার মধ্যে সচিবের দপ্তরের সভাকক্ষে রক্ষিত বাক্সে প্রস্তাব জমা দিতে হবে। প্রাপ্ত প্রস্তাব/প্রস্তাবসমূহ বিবেচনা করে একাডেমি ইভেন্ট ব্যবস্থাপনা প্রতিষ্ঠান চূড়ান্ত করবে।

ইভেন্ট ব্যবস্থাপনা প্রতিষ্ঠান নির্বাচন ও স্পন্সর গ্রহণ সংক্রান্ত যেকোনো বিষয়ে বাংলা একাডেমির সিদ্ধান্ত চূড়ান্ত বলে বিবেচিত হবে।

সচিব
বাংলা একাডেমি, ঢাকা
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