

Express and elevated

By Ardeshir Cowasjee

KEE stands for Karachi Elevated Expressway – not for Kickbacks Express and Elevated.

In March 2006, the Karachi city government (CDGK) signed an agreement with IJM Corporation Berhad, a Malaysian construction firm, to build a 25-kilometer Karachi Elevated Expressway from Jinnah Bridge, near the Karachi Port Trust head office, over Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan Road, Club Road, and Shara Faisal all the way up to Quaidabad in Landhi at a cost, then, of \$225 million. The contract was awarded without inviting competitive tenders.

To open with a quote from the Malaysian press of last year : “Giving out juicy contracts without open tendering dramatically increases the likelihood of corruption involving large sums of money..... Now you can understand why Transparency International has placed Malaysia only in 39th position whereas Singapore was ranked 5th in its Corruption Perception Index 2004. Since we are so keen to compete with Singapore, why don’t we get rid of corruption and improve our placing in the index?” This was written by Koon Yew Yin, a founder of IJM Corp Berhad.

And to continue, a quote from S.H. Zaidi writing on the KEE in Dawn this March 13 : “Since VIP movement aside, this is not the most congested route in Karachi, nor the one identified by numerous studies undertaken regarding the provision of a ‘mass transit’ system for Karachi, one suspects that this huge expenditure is envisaged just to facilitate the frequent movement of VIPs on this route. Though the firm is reported to be financing the project, ultimately it is the [Pakistani] taxpayer who would pay through his nose for this monstrosity”

Most of the present government priorities are wonky. Resources are diverted from proper solutions – in this case, provision of economical and safe public/mass transportation.

On September 5, 2006, in compliance with the Environment Protection Act 1997, the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and CDGK organised a ‘Scoping Meeting’ for the mandatory environmental impact assessment required for ‘major roads’. The cost of the KEE had by then, in six months, increased by 56 per cent to \$350 million.

On April 3, 2007, some hundred or so citizens gathered at the SEPA Complex in Korangi for the mandatory public hearing of the comments/objections to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report prepared by the CGDK and its consultants. Two comments from this report :

“The emission level at the intersection, together with that predicted for Level-II (under the expressway), has been used to suggest that there is a likelihood of an increase in air pollutant level under the extensively covered sections, e.g., at Club Road”

“The Karachi city government has estimated that since 1987 over 12,000 people have lost their

lives in about 22,000 traffic accidents. The root cause of this high rate of incidence is attributed to the absence of a mass transit system, which has, as correctly forecast by the Mass Transit Study of 1987, led to the phenomenal rise in privately owned cars and the consequent problem of traffic congestion on the roads. In recent years, the easy availability of bank credit for buying cars has further aggravated the situation.”

At the hearing, Arif Hasan, a renowned architect and social planner, possessing a vast knowledge of Karachi's problems, termed the exercise a “social and environmental disaster.” He challenged the EIA assumption that “expressways in South Asian countries have successfully solved transportation and vehicular movement problems.” He referred to ‘urban transport for growing cities’ by Geetam Tiwari and various publications of the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, which “show that these solutions have been expensive, have caused considerable environmental and aesthetic degradation, have created immense problems for pedestrians, and, in addition, have not addressed the problems they set out to solve.” How many of our government ‘experts’ have read Tiwari’s book or any other ITT publications which discuss problems akin to those facing Karachi?

Arif told us that the many hundreds of kilometres of expressways in Bangkok, Manila, Cairo and Tehran have caused massive environmental problems relating to sound and air pollution, denial of sunlight, loss of urban space and social alienation. Today, the developed world does not build such expressways through city centres (Boston and Seoul are at present demolishing elevated expressways) In Riyadh, the expressway through the city caused so much pollution that authorities had to vacate considerable areas of land on both sides and forest them.

Ejaz Ahed and Arif Bilgaumi of the Institute of Architects Pakistan, a professional body comprising some of the finest architects this country has produced, pointed out that the KEE “was conceptually flawed, conceived under a miscomprehension of the city’s traffic problems, unlikely to solve the concerns raised in the EIA, and guaranteed to cause irreparable environmental damage to the city of Karachi.” They found the EIA Report largely an attempt to belatedly justify the KEE project. They accused the CDGK of having blindly prepared the scheme without involving planning principles or PEPA’s ‘Sectoral Guidelines for Major Roads’, without proper traffic studies (including increased traffic on crossroads leading to the KEE), and without an exhaustive examination of alternative routes/schemes.

With only six in between entry/exit points (Jinnah Bridge, Avari Hotel (entrance only), FTC, Karsaz, Rashid Minhas Road, Star Gate, Quaidabad) the utility of the KEE seemed minimal. The project will not serve the industrial areas, or the central business district of Saddar. Ecological issues highlighted by IAP included heightened noise and air pollution (levels of nitrogen oxide at the Liaquatabad flyover are by far the highest in the city, according to a SEPA survey), respiratory diseases, cutting of hundreds of trees, and ruination of the most attractive boulevard in the city. The up and down nature (to clear existing bridges and flyovers) of the KEE route increases the danger of accidents involving dangerous and volatile cargoes.

Mitigation measures proposed by the CDGK are “vague, unclear and unacceptable.” IAP suggested that: “anyone wanting to picture the ambiance of the resulting roadway need only

stand under the NIPA or Liaquatabad flyovers and imagine them extending over 25 km.”

The IAP also did some number crunching: recovery of the present cost of the KEE would necessitate collection of over three million rupees in tolls each day, leading to a fantastic number of cars or trucks having to use the expressway for the venture to be feasible.

Roland deSouza of Shehri questioned the very raison d'etre of the venture. He went back to the basics and proposed the strict enforcement of driving laws and discipline on the roads of Karachi (unrealistic in the present circumstances but nevertheless vital).

He called for traffic police vigilance and public education campaigns for drivers and pedestrians, for the relocation of critical activities such as the filling of upcountry oil tankers at the Superhighway instead of having products pumped back to Keamari from the National Refinery in Korangi, the enforcement of non-peak road timings for tankers, trucks and others heavy vehicles, parking discipline on the streets, proper utilisation of mandatory parking spaces in buildings, removal of road encroachments, and efficient signals and traffic control (with back-up power supply). He also suggested that whatever inter-port or upcountry freight traffic was projected could be handled more economically and in a more environmentally-friendly manner by rail.

The KEE envisages the acquisition of approximately 15 acres of land for right-of-way at various locations, including the Pakistan Railway, KPT , Qasre Naz, State Guest House, FTC in the public sector, and Pearl Continental, Metropole, Avari, Regent Plaza Hotels, Karachi Gymkhana, Aisha Bawany School, Nargis Cinema in the private sector.

The Catholic Archbishop of Karachi filed an objection to the proposed encroachment of the KEE on 1,337 square meters of land in the Christian Cemetery, terming it contrary to the President's Ordinance V of 2002 promulgated “to protect the properties of minority communities meant for their communal use.”

The people of Karachi want to “LIVE”. This is their inherent right. Even General Musharraf and Shaukat Aziz will not be able to contest this. Many questions asked by the people and their organisations of the corrupt city government remain unanswered.

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