

## **KARACHI: Expressway to concrete paradise**

### **By Zofeen T. Ebrahim**

KARACHI, April 26: City Nazim Syed Mustafa Kamal believes that the answer to this port city's many woes lies in constructing a 24-km elevated expressway at a cost of 225 million dollars.

"Completed in three years, this (the Karachi Elevated Expressway) would act as a southern bypass linking the seaport to the airport," the nazim told IPS during an interview. Mr Kamal also spoke of "marketing Karachi internationally and showing that the city has the potential of becoming the biggest business centre of the region". The expressway, being built by the Malaysian IJM Corporation, would be part of the "infrastructure that would showcase the city," he said.

But urban planners and architects wince at his vision of a Karachi served by concrete flyovers, underpasses and expressways, and some say it is nothing short of 'apocalyptic'. Even ordinary citizens are sceptical. "If a journey that takes three hours is reduced to a mere 20 minutes on this signal-free corridor, there are savings on fuel and traffic congestion is reduced then why is there so much criticism?" asked one citizen referring to the debate raging over the project.

Mr Kamal calls his critics "enemies of development". He draws courage from the Asian Development Bank (AsDB) which, in September, released 10 million dollars for the Karachi Megacity Development Project, earmarked for planning, development and creating infrastructure.

Further, the AsDB, according to an official statement, promised to "establish an innovative financing vehicle for the megacity's infrastructure and services that will act as a means to channel development funds to the city" and act as an "agent to mobilise funds from non-government sources for large-scale capital investment needs".

Little wonder that the nazim says he does not care what people say about his grand vision. "They need to understand the dynamics of this city, which is not like any other city of Pakistan."

But then that is exactly what his critics are talking about. "Understanding dynamics entails knowing what kind of a city its people want, the needs of the people, designing a city for people not cars ...and to learn from errors made by some advanced countries and not make the same mistakes," says Arif Hasan, eminent urban planner and architect.

"We are doing what the rest of the world is undoing," said Mr Hasan citing the examples of Asian cities such as Manila, Bangkok and Seoul where the traffic situation is far worse. "City administrations everywhere are trying to limit or ban heavy traffic on their inner city expressways. San Francisco, New York, Boston, Seoul and Paris have actually demolished their expressways and turned them into public space or housing."

"There is nothing wrong with uninterrupted flow of traffic from one end of the city to the other," says Arif Belgaumi, member of the National Council, Institute of Architects. "But, for one thing, such traffic corridors are not rammed through the commercial centre of the city and routed from the periphery."

Environment issues are also being raised and the environmental impact assessment (EIA) carried out by the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency (Sepa) has been questioned. "It's just a rubber stamp to justify the project," said Arif.

To Mr Belgaumi the destruction of as many as 1,100 trees grown along Sharea Faisal over which this expressway is going to be built is unacceptable even if the EIA speaks of replacing the trees with "vegetation that survives under low levels of solar radiation."

Those using SF, under the expressway, will not be able to see the sky or some of the finer buildings of Karachi. Instead, he says, they will have “a continuous view of the underside of a concrete expressway. It will be dark, dreary, lit 24 hours by sodium halide lights, and will deny residents and office workers access to the sun, uninterrupted views and fresh air.”

Noman Ahmed, chairman of the department of architecture and planning at the NED University of Engineering and Planning, calls the project as something “conceived in isolation” by the city government. He foresees a “long gestation period of chaos” as a result of the expressway damaging the water supply, sewerage and drainage lines. “There will be a decline in the property values close to SF.”

Already Karachi’s population of 14 million has to cope with dug-up arterial roads that slow vehicular traffic to a crawl. Most experts speak of possible improvements through better traffic management.

To Prof Ahmed’s mind “separating corridors of movement for through traffic from local traffic; policies to reduce the exponential rise in motor cars, increase in the number of buses and synchronisation of traffic signalling/monitoring system” are some measures that can be taken to relieve the traffic pressure that are not financially draining.

And if there was one significant step needed to fix the city traffic, his suggestion is a cheap, simple and doable solution. “Increase the number of large buses with proper route rationalisation.”

“The more I study the traffic issues all over the world, the more I am convinced that the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system is the most effective means to relieve traffic woes,” adds Mr Hasan. For years he canvassed the revival of the single-track Karachi Circular Railway which has remained disused since 1999. “I’ve not given up on that totally, since it links the suburbs to the city centre and can supplement the BRT. However, buses are a more logical and cheaper way out.”

But will the citizens of Karachi choose to abandon cars and motorcycles, symbols of upward mobility and affluence, and switch to public transport? “It may be difficult but not impossible,” says Mr Ahmed. He suggests running a pilot project in an elite area to gauge people’s interest.

Hasan adds: “If the journey is comfortable, safe and secure, the bus clean and efficient, there is no reason for not switching over to this mode of transport. Human behaviour is determined by the ambience and environment you provide to them.”

—*Dawn/The IPS News Service*