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TOWARDS A BETTER

PUBLIC TRANSPORT SERVICE



Dr. Dimantha de Silva



M.A.P. Hemachandra

NUSHKA NAFEEL

Despite various promises to improve the public transportation system, the public in general have experienced very little in terms of improvement in their daily commute. They instead complain that the public transport system has gone from bad to worse.

According to the Sri Lanka Transport Board (SLTB), there are approximately 20,000 private buses and approximately 5,500 SLTB buses operating on our roads. These numbers however make little difference to the public as the services they offer are still insufficient to meet public demands.

The Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development has suggested many projects in order to improve the transport system and whilst these projects would take years to be implemented there are a few other projects currently under discussion that are expected to be completed in the next two to three years. One of the most important medium and short term projects that can be implemented by the government is to ensure that the current bus service is comfortable and safe to the public. And whilst this seems to be a practical measure to take at present, authorities have found this to be a great challenge to enforce.

According to Western Region Megapolis Planning Project (WRMPP) Consultant and transport team leader Dr. Dimantha de Silva, buses that are eight years or older should be replaced and new buses have to be purchased to avoid causing inconvenience to the public.

"Many buses that are plying on the roads now are more than 10 years old. All buses need to renew their permits every year but the authorities check the overall condition of the bus and not the number of years that it has been running on the road," he said.

No consideration to passenger comfort

Dr. De Silva pointed out that the buses that are operating in Sri Lanka today are very similar to trucks and lorries and that they do not provide

comfortable transport facilities to the public.

"What we bring as buses today are not actually buses, they are similar to trucks or lorries. Lorries fitted with a body to carry people. The people who travel on them should realise that they are better formed for goods transport and not passengers. The normal buses do not adhere to the seat capacity unlike the luxury buses and the passengers would feel the difference in comfort," he said.

Chairman, National Transport Commission (NTC) M.A.P. Hemachandra said that they were only checking the inter-provincial buses and added that there is a fleet of 3,200 buses under the Commission and nearly 19,000 buses belonged to the Provincial Road Transport Authority.

"We check the condition of the buses once a year. There are many parameters that the bus owners have to adhere to and if they fail we will not give them the permits. If there are minor problems, the NTC will issue them a warning to repair it," he said.

An official attached to the Ministry of Transport who was reluctant to be named said that the officials and the government had failed to consider the comfort of the public when discussing public transportation.

"Anyone would agree with the fact that the buses that run on the roads today are in poor condition and that it is not a passenger friendly transport system. But no measures have been taken yet to combat those issues," he said.

He was quick to agree that there were many buses that are 10 to 15 years old and added Sri Lanka did not have a rule to indicate the life span of buses.

This however did have a negative impact on the transportation system.

Practical problems

Super Luxury, Air Conditioned and Semi Luxury buses cannot carry people more than their seat capacity. It is not easy to cater to the passenger demand, therefore the normal buses have no restrictions in carrying any amount of passengers, said Hemachandra.

"The transport authority cannot cater to the passenger demand during peak hours. If we increase the amount of buses on the road, the traffic would increase. Also the

bus owners get an income only during the peak hours and they do not earn much during non-peak hours," he added.

Acting General Manager, Operations, Road Transport Authority, Central Province, M. Nishanka said there were many problems with the condition of the buses and added that they did not consider the life span of the buses when issuing permits.

"We check the buses once every year. The bus owners should give a fitness report from a garage approved by the Transport Authority. The condition of the engine will be checked in the garage and any default in it will be mentioned in the report. We would look into all these before issuing the permit," he said.

He further explained that the problems in buses after issuing the permit would be checked only once a complaint is lodged. There are laws in place to stop the conductors from boarding people more than the seat capacity of the bus, but normal buses do not come under that category.

"We are aware that several bus conductors carry people more than the available seats and sometimes more than the capacity of the bus. But, the police has the authority to charge only if people travel on the foot board. However, there are no laws in place to stop conductors from boarding excess number of passengers," he said.

Passenger grievances

N.K. Piyumi, a student who often uses buses to and from classes said our transportation system was far from passenger friendly.

"Going in normal buses is a struggle we face every day. All the higher officials travel in A/C vehicles and they do not understand the hardships that the average person faces due to an inefficient transport system. They have been speaking about measures to improve it but I do not see any change," she pointed out.

Speaking on the conditions of the buses, she explained that these buses needed to be replaced.

"The bells do not work properly; it is very hard to get down at the right bus halt as the buses are always crowded. Some of the seats and the handles are broken. Nobody is looking at those issues," she complained.

R. Shakhivel a Senior Citizen who was very disappointed by the prevailing transport system, questioned why the relevant authorities were taking no measures to improve it.

"If the government is taking measures to improve the transport facility as they claim,

kind of improvement in the system. But unfortunately it is the same, the public continues to suffer. I can neither drive nor can I afford to hire a tuk, the only option left is the public transport system," he said.

M. U. Prasadi in the meantime commented on girls and women being harassed every day on public transport with many activists even having higher level discussions on it.

"I have seen many incidents of how women and girls are being treated in the bus by men. When the buses are usually fully packed, there is no room to stand. I don't say that women need to be given special places but we should consider the fact that an efficient transport system will provide solutions to these issues as well. It will be great if the government would take measures to board people according to the seat capacity," she said.

Dr. De Silva was also with the view that these buses were not meant for passenger transport and that the country needed to go for specific vehicles that are meant for passenger transport and added that, with the prevailing weather condition, people would prefer travelling in air conditioned buses.

Proposed improvements to transport

"The new Light Rail Transport System (LRT) and Railways would take minimum of four years to be implemented. But the inland water transport system using the canal network would be implemented in a year or so," he said.

He further said they were going to implement special specifications to buses using modern technology.

"We are in the process of developing the specifications. Once we have the specifications which also include an eight year renewal plan, all buses in the Western region would have to adhere to the specifications. The buses with special specifications will be three times the cost of the normal buses. Therefore we have to make it affordable for them and we are still discussing this," he explained.

He further said that they are also going to identify new routes and restructure the bus services and added that the whole bus service need to be restructured to provide a better service.

"We all have single operators and that's the reason why they are competing for passengers. They should earn per Km not based on per passenger. The government authorities tried to do this so many times but they did not succeed. We have to make it happen," he emphasized.

He also said that the bus routes were currently not catering to the Railway or LRT and when the LRT is in place, the bus transportation should cater to that too.

"There are issues in people getting to the railway station. We have to find routes to solve those issues and also increase the use of the express way. Now many buses have to come out of the express way to drop or pick passengers. However, we should implement a system where buses stop at interchanges therefore people can get off and get in at these interchanges. We are looking for possibilities to provide those facilities. Using the bus services efficiently is what we are looking for, while improving the quality to establish a modernised bus service," he said. Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake presenting the 2017 Budget mentioned, "The transport infrastructure is an indicator of development and a conduit for investments. We have a Multi-pronged approach to transport, with the Megapolis plan addressing the large issues in the Western province."

He further said the Central expressway and the Ruwanpura expressway with an investment of around USD 6 billion would be completed by 2019.

However, he pointed out that even though Sri Lanka Railways and the Sri Lanka Transport Board have been financed by the government for almost Rs 25 billion per annum, the economic cost to the country was enormous due to inefficiencies in the transport system. He has proposed that the Sri Lanka Transport Board and the Private Bus Association formulate a joint time table, and incorporate the "Metro Transport Corporation".

These proposals have been proposed time and again but few have been implemented. In the meantime, our daily route to work has become a struggle for all.

