

TROUBLED BRIDGE OVER DARK WATER

The Polo bridge about 3 km south of Tanjay is one of the choke points in the provincial highway system, as it spans a narrow but deep body of water among the fish ponds. The roadway is a 2 lane blacktop that has little space on its shoulders for maneuvering.

To many of us, this concrete bridge looked sturdy and strong, and it surprised us when over a year ago, abutments started to be built alongside the bridge for what would be a temporary by-pass bridge. The explanation was that this concrete bridge would be demolished and rebuilt. The bridge had been repaired 3-4 years earlier, and the repair was reputedly sub par because the concrete started deteriorating.

When the temporary bridge was built, it was a one lane Bailey bridge consisting mainly of a set of steel trusses cross braced by supporting steel members sitting on sets of pillars driven into the river bed below. Wood planks were placed perpendicular to the bridge's axis, and then more planks laid to form two paths for the vehicles wheels. Left photo below shows both bridges in December. Right photo is the main bridge being demolished.



During the past number of months using a one-lane bridge, traffic had to be made to run alternately. That often tested the commuting public's patience because of the long wait time, especially when sugar milling season started, and dozens of big trucks waited their turn. This became even more frustrating when we noted the very slow pace of work, often with just a handful of people working on the bridge. We heard rumors that workers weren't happy at all since they only get two thirds of their supposed pay because the rest goes elsewhere.

The only consolation was that the traffic guards did regulate traffic and did stop heavy trucks from passing when deemed unsafe. Apparently, sometime before March 13, Friday, something must have become amiss, because oversized trucks were barred. They parked as long lines on the northbound right side of the road before the bridge and likewise on the other southbound side. Light vehicles and some passenger buses (passengers had to alight and walk across) were allowed to pass. Photo on right shows how it looked like. With the tendency of drivers to "singit" against the traffic, gridlock very often resulted. Over that weekend, no repair work seemed to have been attempted.



Soon, the effects of the choke point became very apparent. Banks in Tanjay and Bais ran out of money because their armored cars couldn't deliver. Gas stations started running out of gas.

Then Monday noon, even the trickle of light vehicular traffic and passenger buses across the bridge was stopped. This caused tremendous chaos and hardship not just for the immediate area, but for all the commuting public from Dumaguete to Bacolod and all points in between. This lasted till Tuesday night.

Buses from Dumaguete disgorged their passengers about a kilometer south of the bridge, turned around and went back. The poor passengers had to walk and if lucky, could hail a pedicab to bring them to the bridge where they crossed, then repeated the procedure again until they got to Tanjay 3 km further north. Photo below shows passengers crossing bridge on foot. This photo was provided by my friend Wolfgang Stuetzel who was on the site the next day Tuesday when the bridge contractor finally marshaled some people to fix the bridge. He also provided many of the other bridge photos and most of the insights discussed herein.



Fortunately, there is a road bypass around the downed bridge. The Google map above traces it all. This is known as the Azeotes bypass. It passes through some private property notably the Polo Plantation. There is another bypass starting further south that wends its way almost to the mountains through San Miguel, and comes out in Pamplona west of Tanjay, but that is even a much worse route to take.

Anyway, that Monday night, our place near one of the bus stops in Tanjay was like a mad house, with hordes of stranded passengers milling around. We tried calling the Mayor's office to report the situation and later got word that he and the former Governor (who comes from a nearby area) were out in both bypass back roads directing the military in offering assistance and keeping order. We know of friends whose children commute to school in Dumaguete. One couple had their kids on a V-hire for over 6 hours as it first tried the Azeotes bypass, then the San Miguel bypass, then back to the Polo bridge where they crossed on foot at past ten. We lent our van to have them picked up. Earlier that day, there was a grand meeting in Dumaguete of schoolteachers from all over the province. A contingent from Kanlaon had started off at 3:00 in the morning, and now, 18 hours later, they found themselves stranded. Picture above shows some of them. We helped them in whatever way we could, and fortunately, they all could get a bus ride to back home by 10:30 pm.



Tuesday, we had to go to Dumaguete. We took the Azeotes route. It was not that bad, but considering we left mid-morning, we must have avoided the rush. Pictures on right show our progress, driving through the nipa fields, over rocks and dirt road, and finally the gate where we paid toll.



But on the way back, at about 5:00 pm, it was a different story. It was raining lightly, and the road northwards to the bridge was gridlocked, and some passerby on foot said the Azeotes route was closed, too. We were marooned away from our house in Tanjay. Fortunately, we had a fall back position, our beach house where we could spend the night. See map.

By 7:00 pm, we were relaxing in the beach house, after a light meal from the larder and fridge in the kitchen. But it turned out we didn't have to stay overnight. The bridge had been undergoing repair that afternoon and opened to all traffic later that night, as texted in by Wolfgang. Here is edited exchange:

- W: Magic! I spent an hour taking pictures at the bridge while it was being "repaired". Now all the long bed trucks are moving and the first big truck has just come across.
- D: Great news but we are now in beach house to stay overnight. Please send me some pictures.
- W: Just now twelve sugar trucks each with approx 30 tons gross weight came over the bridge. Molasses and other long bed trucks have gone the other way. Let us pray!
- D: Are you still hanging around the bridge? We are relaxed in the beach house doing some reading. We will attempt to cross much later.
- W: I'm actually watching TV after lamb stew dinner at home. My informant is in the big house in the Polo fish ponds.
- D: Your pal in the moated house is a great sentry. Goodnight.
- W: I will try to visit you tomorrow because my pictures require verbal comments to appreciate how UNPROFESSIONALLY the construction company building the bridge works.

Here are some his pictures, echoing the above sentiment in the captions:



The lady chief engineer and local deputy engineer arrive on site. Earlier that morning, only one workman was on site.



She directs some of the work while people crossing the bridge mill around.



The lone chain saw on hand after it's repair. The chain had jumped off and the operator had to borrow tools from a nearby house.

We indeed should be most concerned about these dire developments, and should take action in whatever manner there is to rectify the situation before another breakdown in the bridge occurs. Hope this report helps in the process.