

Caught in traffic flood ahead of rainy season

IN MY VIEW

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KUWAIT: This file photo shows heavy traffic at a partially closed road in Kuwait. — KUNA

Commuters in Kuwait endured hours of excruciating traffic this past week, as road crews closed lanes in several main roads for much-needed, yet ill-timed maintenance.

The Interior Ministry announced the lane closures due to roadwork including on the Fourth Ring Road, which ran from 6:00 pm Wednesday night to 6:00 am yesterday morning. But as expected, the warnings did little to prevent major traffic jams with cars at nearly a standstill for hours, clogging several highways in the country's interconnected road network.

Motorists were left baffled as they searched navigation apps for alternate routes only to find that almost all possible roads were red or deep red - denoting heavy traffic and super heavy traffic, respectively. In short, drivers were left with no option but to sit on highways for hours of barely moving traffic.

The Fourth Ring Road (also known as Hassan bin Ali Al-Roumi Road) is one of the most important highways in Kuwait, running from Salmiya in the east all the way west to Sulaibikhat. It is used by commuters going to and from some of Kuwait's most heavily populated areas including

Salmiya, Hawally, Jabriya, and Shuwaikh. It is also connected to other important roads such as Airport Road, Ghazali Road that leads to Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, and Jamal Abdunnasser Road (via Jahra Road) which leads to Al-Sabah Medical Zone.

Closing two or even one lane out of the road's already narrow three lanes - like what happened on Wednesday, especially during the evening rush hour - always results in lines of backed up cars. Kuwait's roads network is so interconnected that a slight disturbance in one main road triggers similar tailbacks on all other roads connected or remotely linked to it.

The Ministry of Public Works is rushing to complete roadworks before the start of the rainy season next month. Partial road closures began in two phases starting from April: from 6:00 pm till 6:00 am on weekdays and from midnight till noon on weekends. The roads involved include King Fahd Expressway (from the First Ring Road till Bayan Palace), First Ring Road, Fourth Ring Road, Sixth Ring Road and Doha Spur Motorway.

Daily maintenance has to be completed before 6:00 am to avoid works extending into the morning rush hour. But the ques-

tion that remains unanswered is why maintenance works could not have been completed during the summer when traffic flow sharply declined?

Delayed projects are nothing new in Kuwait - and that includes all kinds of projects: from major construction and maintenance deals, to simple school furnishing and catering services. Kuwait's government still follows a business model based on awarding tenders to run a majority of its contracts. The process of awarding tenders usually hits obstacles that force delays, which create a chain reaction that often makes a seemingly minor issue evolve into a major problem.

After last year's rainy season caused severe road damage, flooding and damage to homes and properties, the Ministry of Public Works moved quickly to prepare tenders for road maintenance works in order to avoid this problem from repeating again this year. But those tenders faced delay after delay, putting maintenance works on hold for the majority of the summer, and forcing authorities to take drastic measures such as conducting major road closures in Kuwait's busy

fourth quarter.

With the new parliamentary term just around the corner and National Assembly elections not too far behind, it is highly expected that road maintenance will be a hot topic of debate in Abdullah Al-Salem Hall. But in the meantime, what happens to the thousands of drivers sitting in their cars just trying to get home from work?

Not only are the public skeptical about authorities' ability to finish roadworks before the rainy season, but they remain largely doubtful that the much-awaited 'major road maintenance' works would yield positive results and protect streets from heavy damage. After all, they have seen it happen many times before in major projects heavily promoted by the government yet failed to live up to the hype.

Wednesday evening's mishap is only a small example of a glaring governmental mismanagement problem that Kuwait has suffered from for decades. People have lived long enough to see through all kinds of promises that authorities give, and it is high time the government faces the public's mounting frustration by showing actual results.