

Mounting traffic hazards: Substantial reduction possible

The government has invested hundreds of crores of taka (mainly loan money) for improvement of city roads in particular; but the issue of the proportion of the number of motorised vehicles, particularly smaller vehicles vis-à-vis availability of road area in Dhaka city (also Chittagong and Sylhet) has been neglected and overlooked so long by the relevant ministry /authorities. It is possibly high time that the traffic related issues are addressed promptly and effectively with strong determination.

KARAR MAHMUDUL HASSAN

An article, captioned "How Dhaka collapses!" was published in The Daily Star on September 24, in which Mr. Morshed Ali Khan narrated his "a few hours experiences" regarding the fast deteriorating traffic-jam situation on different Dhaka city roads. He writes how hundreds of battered city buses, private cars, covered lorries, three wheelers and taxis inched their way towards Farmgate during enduring power outage which caused all traffic signals to go off resulting in thousands of home-bound commuters occupying one third of the road at Farmgate bus station, anxiously looking for transport. He also narrated how half a dozen baton wielding policemen were trying in vain to prevent pedestrians from invading the main road, and how hundreds of people pushed each other and staggered ahead on the half-encroached footpaths nearby, and how a dozen traffic sergeants and their assistants, totally soaked in the drizzle, ran up and down the intersection trying to keep the vehicles moving. Then Mr. Khan narrated similar traffic hazards-related picture of Manik Mia Avenue and Dhanmondi areas. These horrifying pictures were of recent pre-Ramadan days.

On the 2nd day of Ramadan, another news item, captioned "Commuters suffer as gridlock chokes city," was published, again in The Daily Star. It was stated that the capital yesterday (September 25) experienced a day long traffic jam stretching almost from one end to the other, and creating chaos on all the major thoroughfares, as commuters suffered badly on the third day of the traffic month.

Many other similar complicated traffic hazards related scenarios have been narrated in the said news item and the statements of a traffic sergeant, the Joint Commissioner(Traffic) and others have been quoted, who gave their respective views about this horrible traffic jam scenario. Experts blamed this situation on 20 years of mismanagement in Bangladesh

Road Transport Authorities(BRTA) and in the traffic department, the governments, faulty policy on car import and Rajuk's failure to build new roads. Lack of foot over-bridges, and repair work on some roads were also the causes of huge traffic jams, in addition to demonstrations on the city streets almost everyday, said the Joint Commissioner (Traffic), who, of course, did not nullify the experts' opinion as quoted above by The Daily Star correspondent.

The major blame on BRTA for traffic jams is possibly not based on facts. Blaming the Ministry of Communication for the unabated traffic problems in the country in general, and Dhaka city in particular, should have been genuinely most appropriate and relevant. The chief executive of that ministry, i.e. the minister himself, since the beginning of the present government's tenure in October 2001, was very busy with his highly philosophical ideas of introducing magnetic train service and constructing express highway between Dhaka and Chittagong, or building an underground railway system in Dhaka and, according to him, all these thoughts were for the greater benefit and welfare of his "dear country people" in general and "city dwellers" in particular.

The Ministry of Communication almost totally neglected taking pragmatic and planned steps for efficiently addressing the traffic problems of Dhaka and other major cities of the country. Rather, the ministry and its total set-up was found busy all the time in some other very high cost "dream projects" like magnetic trains, underground trains, circular railways, and express highways. The ministry, also in the beginning of his present tenure, remained busy in importing three wheelers at reasonable price, and selling them at very high cost, allegedly for illegal financial benefit, and/or allotting RHD/Bangladesh Railway lands at Dhaka and other cities for CNG stations through questionable and dark process.

Now we may look at the number of year-wise registration of

motor vehicles in Dhaka city since 1995 to 2005 calendar years, furnished in Table 1:

From the table it appears that during calendar years 2001 to 2005, a total of 27632 motor cars, 11717 jeeps/st.wagons/microbuses, 888 0 taxis, 2956 Buses and 4282 Mini buses were registered in Dhaka and mostly for plying on Dhaka city roads and adjoining areas. During the last five Calendar years (2001-2005) in the whole of Bangladesh (Dhaka included), BRTA registered 3 2 2 3 0 cars, 1 5 5 7 2 jeeps/stn.wagons/Microbus, 9079 taxis, 3395 buses and 6109 mini-buses. From this scenario, we get a somewhat clear idea that the unplanned and exorbitantly very high volume of addition of smaller vehicles for Dhaka city during recent years, are root cause of 'traffic jams' in the capital.

Similarly, during the above period, (2001-2005), the number of year wise registration of bus and minibuses in Bangladesh and Dhaka may be seen in Table 2.

From these two comparative pictures, anybody can conclude that a very high number of smaller vehicles like cars, jeeps, stn. wagons/microbus, taxi etc. have been registered or added to the chaotic transport fleet in the country against a very small number of registration of mass transport like bus and mini bus. Actually the scenario should have been the other way round. More favourable and planned conditions and facilities should have been created in the country by the Ministry of Communication with continuous follow up actions to encourage private sector entrepreneurs to import more high quality buses (preferably CNG) with modern amenities for plying on city roads with more priority on Dhaka. The Ministry of Communication should have equipped the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) to deliver its responsibilities efficiently, effectively and transparently and advise the government on different road transport issues, including import requirement of different types of vehicles in the country, taking into pragmatic consideration the availability of road

facilities in Dhaka city and other cities and towns of the country as well.

Similarly, we may now examine the comparative scenario of different types of motor vehicles (Com. Assembled and CKD & SKD)* imported in the country during 2005-2006 FY and 2004-2005 FY -- as given in Table-3:

(The information has been collected from the Bangladesh Bank and office of the Chief Controller of Imports & Exports) * CKD = Completely knocked down * SKD = Semi knocked down

From perusal of the comparative statements of import of motorized vehicle during the last two financial years, it reveals that complete assembled motor cars were imported 82 percent more in 2005-2006 FY in terms of costs than those in previous FY, whereas during 2005-2006, import of Bus (com. assembled) was 27 percent less in terms of financial expenditure than the previous FY.

In terms of cost-expenditure relating to motor cars, vis-a vis bus import (com. assembled) during 2005-2006, 11.15 times more amounts in Foreign Exchange was expended for importing motor cars (\$102.25ml) against bus (\$9.17 ml). Actually the scenario should have been just the opposite. The ministry of communication should have advised the ministry of finance and ministry of commerce as to the requirement of types of motorised vehicles to be imported vis-a vis availability of road space in different cities, towns etc including the capital.

The Ministry of Communication should have taken effective initiatives to set up a high level expert committee with representation from different ministries and agencies like Ministry of Finance, Commerce, Home Affairs, BRTA, NBR office of the chief Controller of Import & Export, and department of Environment. Chief executive officers of different city corporations also could be included in that committee, which could sit once every month to discuss the transport issues in



totality, and formulate appropriate recommendations on relevant issues including the requirement of imports of different types of motorised vehicles vis-à-vis availability of road space in the country.

As the size (length and width) of Dhaka city roads hardly increased during the last five years or so, the traffic hazards are increasing to the total disadvantage of the commuters of the capital city. All these are very ominous signs and seriously alarming as well. And if this trend goes unabated due to the stupid carelessness of the government, all the roads of Dhaka city will be fully occupied very soon by smaller motorised vehicles resultant driving out process of mass transports like buses etc from Dhaka city roads. General elections are likely to be held within 3 to 4 months and all (position and opposition are very busy in the battle for establishment of democracy, rights of the voters (who are generally poor), writing election manifesto with catchy wordings and so on. The political heavyweights have hardly any time to ponder over "small matters" like traffic jams, road blockades etc. Dozens of seminars are held, workshops being organised on traffic/environment issues by different interested quarters almost every month, at times at posh hotels, with financial support from donors and very "highly thoughtful as well as philosophical speeches and sermons" are being delivered on the agonies and sufferings of the citizens of the city, but unfortunately pragmatic suggestions for addressing the traffic problems remain almost constantly absent in most of those seminars or workshops.

Statistics collected from the relevant source state that the metropolitan Dhaka city has 220 sq. km area and it has total length of roads of different categories as furnished below:

- Primary Roads : 61.44 Kilometers
 - Secondary Roads : 108.20 Kilometers
 - Connector Roads : 221.35 Kilometers
 - Local Roads : 573.74 Kilometers
 - Narrow Roads : 331.27 Kilometers
- Source : RMMS : 2003 (DTCB)
- During the last 7 years or so (since 1999 to be more specific) many of Dhaka city roads, including 22 intersections, and three inter-district bus terminals have been developed under World Bank project named Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP), and about 600 crore taka (loan money mainly) has been expended for all these road and roads related works. The road from Mohakali to Shahbagh, which passed through prime minister's office area is being widened since last March at very high cost. But the widening or improvement of city roads hardly has any enduring impact on easing traffic movement as hundreds of additional smaller motorised vehicles are pouring into city roads constantly almost everyday.

As the length or size of roads in Dhaka city did not increase even to the extent of 10 percent during the last 10 years, we may go for addressing the traffic issues of Dhaka city in particular and the other city/towns in general, to get substantial pragmatic and

implementable solutions. The proposed solutions may be as under:

Import of smaller vehicles may be stopped with immediate effect almost in totality for next five years, or if this decision is found very difficult to implement, 500 percent tax may be imposed to discourage import of smaller vehicles on the city roads.

Bus import to be encouraged in all possible ways and tax on good quality new buses may be substantially reduced so that 500 to 1000 (approx) buses could be put to operation in Dhaka and other cities within next six months or earlier, by the private entrepreneurs.

The estimated 300 illegal rickshaw making factories (190 of them were pin-pointed by the DMP during 1999), situated mainly in old Dhaka areas, dismantled and closed immediately and at least 50% of the total rickshaws now in operation on the secondary and connector roads in Dhaka city, may be removed within next 3 months or earlier. CNG-three wheelers and petrol driven Mishuks may be limited to maximum 10,000 or less by next December 2006 on Dhaka city roads.

Side by side, as per proposal of the IAP (Immediate Action Plan) suggested in DITS some 13 years back (1993) there is a dire necessity to expand bus services, but at the same time it is equally necessary to involve rationalisation of services to ensure the optimal vehicle sizes used on all routes.

Public meetings at the Muktanggon and the road adjacent to Baitul Mokarram north gate area in Dhaka city should be strictly discouraged. Meetings on these two places may be allowed on Friday only. Any meeting on these two venues during Saturday to Thursday may be allowed on payment of rent @ Taka fifty thousand per hour and the payment must be made to the DMP 48 hours before each meeting. Meeting at Paltan Maidan may be allowed at the hourly rent payment of Taka two lacs only per hour.

Public procession on working day is to be strictly disallowed on any city road of Dhaka in particular.

The number of traffic police (which was 1410 during 1996) on Dhaka city roads may be increased substantially commensurate with the increased number of commuters and vehicles on roads. Footpaths of all the primary and secondary roads need to be made out of bound for any kind of hawkers.

Road taxes on the existing smaller vehicles may be reviewed and increased proportionately so that the owners of smaller vehicles get interested to travel by quality mass transports.

Construction work of the proposed new road from Cantonment third gate to Mirpur road through the old Airport may be started immediately.

The Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) may be thoroughly reorganised immediately with sufficient manpower and required equipment so that it is in position to deliver services smoothly, efficiently and transparently.

The taxi-cab service operating mainly in Dhaka city since 1997-98, needs to be reviewed by a high

level committee and appropriate steps may be initiated for bringing this service to order. Allegations against the taxi-cab drivers regarding high handedness, robbery, snatching money & materials from the passengers are there, and these are reportedly increasing day by day. Positive steps are required to address these issues strictly.

A high level standing committee with the former bureaucrats who served BRTA at the capacity of chairman and director during last ten years or so (now retired) may be formed immediately. This committee may sit once or twice a month to review the total traffic and transport issue of the country including Dhaka city and advise the government from time to time for needful action.

In all these endeavours, the role of the government is paramount. The government has invested hundreds of crores of taka (mainly

loan money) for improvement of city roads in particular; but the issue of the proportion of the number of motorised vehicles, particularly smaller vehicles vis-à-vis availability of road area in Dhaka city (also Chittagong and Sylhet) has been neglected and overlooked so long by the relevant ministry /authorities. It is possibly high time that the traffic related issues are addressed promptly and effectively with strong determination. The present Ministry of Communication cannot do this job as they successfully failed to address these issues during their five years tenure. We will request the next caretaker government to take needful steps to address these issues for prompt and effective solution.

Karar Mahmudul Hassan is a former Secretary to the Govt. of Bangladesh.

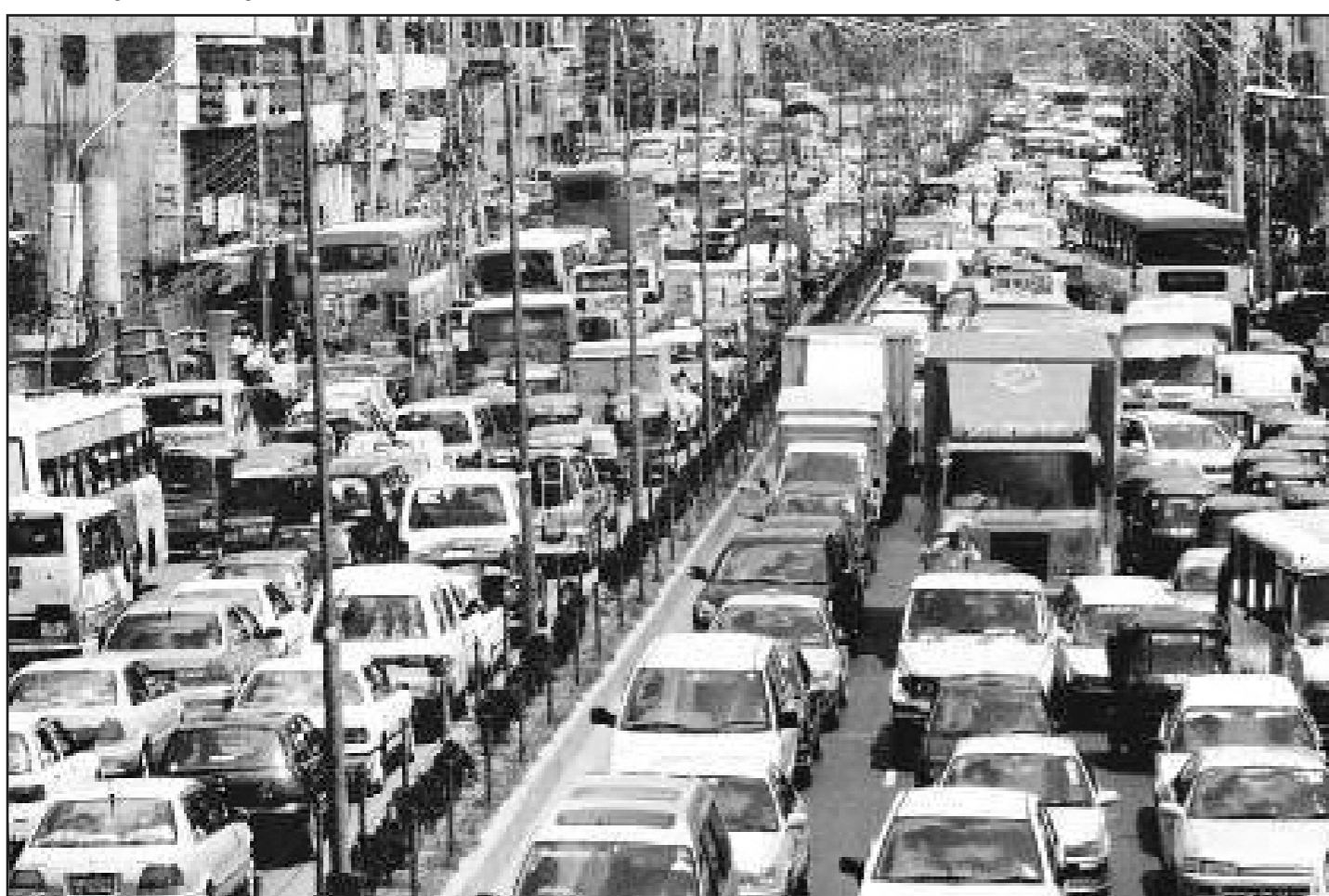


Table 1: Number of yearwise registration of motor vehicles in Dhaka

Sl. No	Type of vehicles	Before 1995	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
1.	Motor Car	36998	6923	8386	6528	4984	4330	2452	5560	5542	6163	4734	5633	98233
2.	Jeep/Stn. Wagon/ Microbus	17937	1556	1387	1492	1438	1371	910	1579	2911	1810	2114	3303	37808
3.	Taxi	787	25	35	14	102	215	348	762	2101	4980	523	514	10406
4.	Bus	269	145	73	58	184	224	202	453	632	374	779	728	4121
5.	Minibus	2009	324	167	397	300	215	242	831	1924	1051	368	118	7946
6.	Truck	9775	802	615	834	1681	855	1635	890	1127	2128	1437	1104	22883
7.	Auto-rickshaw/ Auto tempo	8359	7301	4615	1902	1689	682	1881	75	2616	7996	2344	139	39599
8.	Human Hauler	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	673	136	20	829
9.	Covered Van	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	527	12879	5027
10.	Motor-cycle	61478	4427	4027	5346	4992	5330	8768	8590	9102	7239	7872	2361	140050
11.	Others	2063	878	828	310	196	1326	819	1825	1012	3257	1300	26799	16175
	Total	139675	22381	20133	16881	15566	14548	17257	20565	26967	35671	22134		378577

*26 429 two-stroke three-wheeler (Auto-rickshaw/Auto-tempo) removed from Dhaka.

**Human Haulers are included in 'others' row (Sl.No.11)

** Covered Vans are included in others row (Sl.No.11)

Source: BRTA, March, 2006

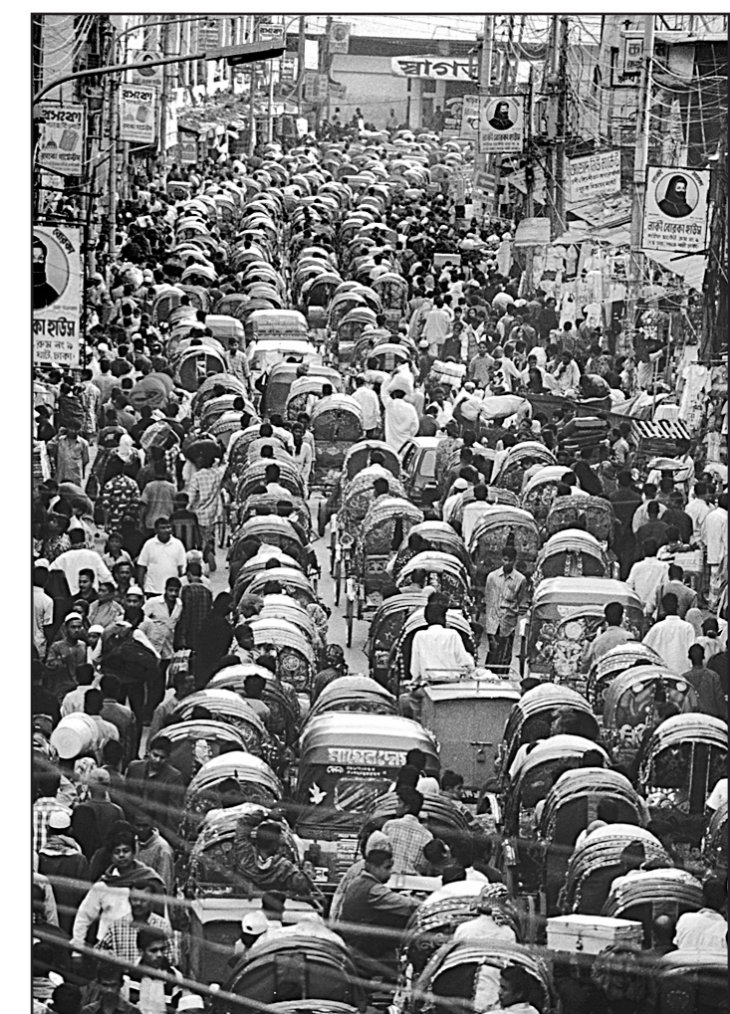


Table-2: Registered in Bangladesh

Type of Vehicles	2001		2002		2003		2004		2005		Total
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008			
1. Bus	594	740	421	857	783						3395
2. Mini bus	1218	2314	1594	622	361						6109

Registered in Dhaka**

Type of Vehicles	2001		2002		2003		2004		2005		Total
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008			
1. Bus	453	632	374	779	728						2956
2. Mini bus	831	1924	1051	368	118						4282

** Dhaka's registered vehicles are included in the statement of registered vehicles of Bangladesh.

Table-3

Motor Vehicles	Total L/C Settlement Value in million US\$	
	2005-2006 FY	2004-2005 FY
(Com. Assembled)	168.84 ml.	104.71 ml.
1. Motor Car	\$102.25 ml.	\$56.24 ml.
2. Mini Bus	\$3.92 ml.	\$1.27 ml.
3. Bus	\$9.17 ml.	\$12.52 ml.
4. Truck	\$12.65 ml.	\$10.87 ml.
5. Motor cycle	\$11.64 ml.	\$7.73 ml.
6. Others*	\$29.21 ml.	\$16.09 ml.

* Lifting Trucks, Covered vehicles, Reconditioned Motor vehicle etc. are included.

Motor Vehicles	Total L/C Settlement Value in Million US\$	
	2005-2006 FY	2004-2005 FY
(CKD & SKD)	\$86.14 ml.	\$117.70 ml.
1. Motor Car	\$12.55 ml.	\$15.32 ml.
2. Mini Bus	\$3.91 ml.	\$4.79 ml.
3. Bus	\$8.66 ml.	\$11.47 ml.
4. Truck	\$14.96 ml.	\$15.95 ml.
5. Motor cycle	\$26.90 ml.	\$26.19 ml.
6. Others*	\$19.16 ml.	\$43.99 ml.

* Motor vehicles parts, radiator net, different types of valuable glasses of motorised vehicles, lifting trucks, covered vehicles, reconditioned motor vehicles etc. are included.