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## Safer roads remain a chimera

*Will the situation ever improve?*

DESPITE a plethora of promises and commitments, legislation and endless assurances by functionaries at every level of the administration to make roads safer for the users, people continue to lose lives and limbs in high numbers. Perhaps “accident” is not quite the right way of defining the situation prevailing in this sector. What we witness on the roads and highways in Bangladesh is near anarchy caused by often deliberate carelessness of the drivers and gross negligence of the owners, and perhaps it is they who should take the lion’s share of the blame for the deaths and injuries and for employing untrained drivers and unfit vehicles on the roads.

The situation has been well encapsulated in the latest report of an organisation that represents the stakeholders who are usually the worst sufferers in road mishaps, the Jatri Kalyan Samity. The report presents a very frightening statistic—that there was nearly a 10 percent increase in the number of deaths in 2019, although the number of accidents was almost the same. Each day, 21 people were killed.

While the administration may not agree with the statistics, the report should not be dismissed out of hand, as it often happens. We feel that there are a few important facts that emerge from the report which the administration should take cognizance of. For example, it is worth noting that there have been more deaths on regional roads than on the national highways. The fact that 56 percent of the deaths occurred due to victims being run over by vehicles and nearly a third of the mishaps involved trucks and covered wagons should provide pointers to the planners on what they should focus on. Very few would take issue with the causes of the accidents pointed out in the report. And those should be addressed earnestly, if the poor state of road safety is to be improved.

## Dhaka dangerously too loud

*How are the authorities deaf to it?*

A recent study has, unsurprisingly, found noise pollution in 70 neighbourhoods of Dhaka to be higher than the permissible level. Many studies prior to this had revealed similar results and a number of organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), have been warning about the grave consequences that exposure to such high levels of sound pollution may have on human health. Unfortunately, these warnings appear to have been falling on deaf ears, as the authorities have so far completely failed to reduce Dhaka’s noise level.

The fact that the recent study found sound levels to be higher than the permissible levels in every one of the 70 neighbourhoods they inspected, should turn at least a few heads. What is further shocking is that in the quietest of areas—the Secretariat area—the sound level was at 99.5 decibels (dB), which is double that of the standard noise level of below 50 dB for a silent zone, according to Bangladesh’s noise pollution guidelines. On December 17, the government launched a pilot project to reduce Dhaka’s sound pollution. As part of the project, the government declared the areas surrounding the Secretariat as “silent zone”. Ironically, the data for the study was collected between December 14-22, partly after a silent zone was declared.

If this is the state of things, then the overall situation is indeed extremely grim. According to an earlier report by WHO, exposure to sound above 60 dB can cause temporary deafness, and prolonged exposure to sound above 100 dB can lead to hearing impairment. Moreover, those who are usually worst affected by noise pollution are children, the elderly and expecting mothers. And exposure to noise can even affect the condition of a foetus and lead to premature delivery.

The authorities cannot ignore the seriousness of this crisis anymore. The study gave 11 recommendations, some of which were mentioned before in other studies, and some that the government had already tried to implement in the past, but failed—such as stopping the use of hydraulic horns. However, it is essential that sound pollution in Dhaka be immediately brought down. And so we must once again call on the authorities to get out of its nonchalant attitude and proactively work towards that singular goal.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Stop the wetland grabbers

Recently, Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP) disclosed their study findings on the alarming condition of the city’s wetlands. According to the study, Dhaka’s wetlands have declined to 4.38 percent from 14.25 percent in the last 20 years due to unplanned urbanisation. Also, the greeneries in the city came down to 6.69 percent from 9.20 percent while open space to 4.61 percent from 14.07 percent in 2019, compared to 1999. On the contrary, the report said, areas covered by concrete shot up to 81.82 percent from 64.99 percent during the same period.

A High Court bench has already instructed the authorities concerned to make a list of river grabbers and publish their names in the media so that they can’t contest in any election or avail themselves of bank loans. The HC has also made some other recommendations which should be strictly followed by the authorities. Tough action should also be taken against the wetland grabbers, particularly the repeat offenders, who have been committing such crimes with impunity for long.

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# Slow death of Bangladesh’s state-run jute industry

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

FOR hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi state-run jute mill workers, this year began with an assurance that is all-too-familiar to them. After a month of protests, mostly by some 30,000 workers of nine state-run jute mills in Khulna’s Khalishpur area, the government, on January 2, promised to implement the new pay scale and disburse all their dues within 15 days. Although the workers left the streets when the state minister for labour and employment, Monnujan Sufian, made this promise, they expressed their disappointment and suspicion over the government’s commitment. These workers spent the entirety of December on the streets, staging protests and hunger strike for their dues. When around 1,000 workers fell sick and two of them died during the hunger strike, the state minister requested them to call it off and assured them of payment within a week. On December 21, the workers postponed the strike till December 28. However, nothing happened within that deadline. Subsequently, they started their strike and again the state minister came up with the same promise and a new, extended deadline. So, the workers’ suspicion and disappointment are not baseless at all.

While many private jute mills are making considerable profits, all the 25 state-run jute mills have been incurring such heavy losses that the mill authorities cannot even pay salaries and financial benefits to their workers. Workers of these mills are owed salaries of six to eight weeks, and since 2013, none of the retired workers got pension and gratuity. In 2015, the cabinet division headed by the prime minister approved a 100 percent increase of wages of workers of all the state-run factories. However, Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) failed to implement it in the jute mills due to heavy financial losses. At present, the permanent workers of these mills get only Tk 4,150 to 5,600 per month. However, a majority of the jute mills are run mostly by temporary workers who have to work on a “no work, no pay” basis. In the jute mills of Khalishpur area, these temporary workers earn only Tk 277 as daily wage. Unfortunately, jute mill workers do not even get this meagre amount regularly.

As a result, the workers took to the streets for large-scale protests in late 2018. Their principal demands were implementation of the new pay scale, regular payment of wages, and payment of all their dues. They spent almost the entire 2019 on streets due to empty promises made by government officials that led to frequent strikes. Thanks to their relentless protests and strikes, on November 26, the government allotted Tk 100 crore to the BJMC to pay all due wages and financial benefits of the workers. The fund was allocated on

several conditions—one of which was that the BJMC would not use it for any other purpose than the disbursement of outstanding wages and financial benefits of the workers. However, according to BJMC officials, the fund was too small to pay all the dues and implement the new salary scale, as the corporation has to spend around Tk 650 crore to pay salaries and wages for all of its workers and employees annually. At present, BJMC is asking for more funds from the government while the jute mill workers are passing days in abject poverty.



The state-run jute industry is confined to a vicious cycle of mismanagement and resultant financial loss that has threatened the very existence of the industry at a time when the global market of jute products is increasing significantly.

PHOTO: RASHED SUMAN

To save tens of thousands of these families, many of whom have been working in jute mills for generations, there is no option but to allocate necessary funds to pay their rightful dues as soon as possible. However, besides this humanitarian aspect, there is another more practical side to this crisis. The BJMC, an autonomous body tasked with operating and managing the state-owned jute industry, has been incurring financial losses for decades. It has earned notoriety for sucking thousands of crores of taka from the public funds without making any visible improvement of the industry.

When the Awami League government came to power in 2008, it made a promise to revive the country’s jute industry. In 2009, the government allocated Tk 5,241 crore for BJMC to revive the shrinking industry on the condition that the factories would become self-sufficient and the BJMC would not borrow funds

crisis. For instance, instead of purchasing raw jute during the jute harvesting season in June-July, jute mill authorities procure their raw material in the dry season. Due to this delay, they have to buy raw jute at Tk 2,000-2,200 per maund (around 40 kg) whereas in June-July the cost per maund is only Tk 1,000-1,200. The jute mills also don’t have any marketing and promotional initiatives. Thousands of tons of jute products are seen lying unsold for years. Currently, these mills sell their products, mostly sacks, to different government offices. For such limited production, large jute mills like Crescent Jute Mills and Platinum Jubilee Jute Mills are currently engaging less than 10 percent of their production capacity, but they are retaining a massive production line that comprises thousands of workers, officials and sophisticated instruments which require regular maintenance.

made of jute. Many privately-run jute mills are making profit by diversifying their products although their production capacity is much smaller than the state-run mills.

Before pouring taxpayers’ money into them, the government must devise a pragmatic and sustainable plan to rescue the industry. Radical reforms are necessary in BJMC and factory management to ensure transparency and efficiency. At the same time, age-old machines should also be replaced with modern technology. The jute industry is one of the few industries in Bangladesh that require very small investment, do not require any import, but can earn a huge amount of foreign currency. However, without these reforms, there will be no alternative to shutting down the state-run jute mills, and this will put the final nail in the coffin of this highly potential industry.

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# What Soleimani’s assassination means for the IS



which is still reeling from the death of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in Syria last year. In a recent statement, IS has termed Soleimani’s death as a “divine intervention”, and suggested that the removal of their mortal enemy would now give them an opportunity to regroup and re-emerge.

So, how is Soleimani’s assassination linked with the IS? Soleimani was the head of Iran’s CIA equivalent. He dealt with everything outside of Iran and ensured its foreign intelligence interests. And it was Soleimani who masterminded the fight against IS in Iraq and kept them from reaching the border with Iran.

Beyond Iraq, Soleimani also played a key role in the downfall of IS in Syria, where he was fighting the cause of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In fact, in November 2017, it was Soleimani who officially declared the defeat of IS in Syria and Iraq through a letter to Iranian Supreme Leader, Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei.

In view of Qassem Soleimani’s role in the fall of IS in two of its major strongholds—Iraq and Syria—it is not surprising that IS would only leave a sigh of relief at his death. IS’ archnemesis is gone and it didn’t even have to lift a finger, thanks to US President Donald Trump who decided to kill a senior military official of a sovereign nation based on flimsy evidence of threat that the country has not yet been able to produce. This makes the legality of the assassination questionable, to say the least.

The murder of Soleimani has already unleashed a chain of events that has not only led to the deaths of 176 innocent people on board the Ukrainian jetliner Flight 752, which Iran mistakenly gunned down; his assassination has also opened a window of opportunity for the IS to regroup, along with other terrorist/militia outfits in the region. How? Let me explain.

First of all, the murder of Soleimani has shaken Iran—and of course, the Quds Force—to its core. It is natural that Esmail

the advantage of IS.

Third, in the aftermath of Soleimani’s assassination, the US and NATO announced that they were suspending their anti-IS initiatives in Iraq because they were concerned about the safety of their personnel, and they focused on countering retaliatory attacks, as they braced for reaction from the fallen general’s homeland. This interlude in the international forces’ activities against the IS, coupled with the distraction on the Iranian and PMF side, will aid the



Iranian guards hold a picture of the late Iranian Major-General Qassem Soleimani, head of the elite Quds Force, in front of the United Nations office in Tehran, Iran, on January 3, 2020.

PHOTO: WANA/NAZANIN TABATABAEE VIA REUTERS

Qaani, the new head of the IRGC’s elite force, will need some time to cope with the changes and devise further plan of action in Iran’s fight against the IS. This, unfortunately, will give IS the breathing space it needs to revive itself.

Secondly, with the murder of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) that has been an essential partner of Iran in the fight against IS, the drive will witness a slowdown, again to

potential revival of the IS.

Fourth, Syria’s Assad is also reeling from the aftershocks of Soleimani’s assassination. As a result, the IS fragments still left in Syria might get the chance to regroup. And with Donald Trump leaving the Kurds in northeast Syria last year—who had played a key role in dismantling IS in the area—to the tender mercies of Turkey, the IS’ chance of re-emerging in Syria has only increased. With the Kurds cornered and Soleimani gone, it might

not be very difficult for IS to realise their dream of a nightmarish return.

And one fears, with tensions and anti-US sentiments mounting in the region, desperate elements might view the IS as their answer to US aggression, and as a result, they might want to act as their patrons. This will be a very dangerous move. With Baghdadi gone, the IS might break down into various smaller factions with similar extremist ideologies spread all across the Middle East; or it might reappear as one single unit under a new leadership, equally dangerous to the world, if not worse. Both unwanted possibilities.

If anything, Soleimani’s assassination by the US might pave the way for the IS to reunite and reactivate itself. Looking at the potential repercussions of Soleimani’s murder, one wonders what Donald Trump was thinking when he gave this preposterous idea the go-ahead. If the US thinks that by eliminating Soleimani it has gotten rid of an existential enemy, it is wrong. By killing Qassem Soleimani, the US has killed an ally, one who was capable and pragmatic, and thanks to whose efforts in Iraq and Syria, the US’ fight against the IS had become easier. His murder is yet another spark in the tinderbox of the Middle East, and might come back to haunt the US and the world.

The US, NATO, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and regional and global partners now must get over their individual agendas in the region, and together focus on preventing the rise of the common enemy—IS. The world has seen enough deaths, enough bloodshed, enough violence and enough destruction. It is time for the regional and global powers to join hands and completely eliminate all and any possibility of the re-emergence of the IS. If this requires the US and Iran to swallow their ego, then swallow it they must, for the greater good of the region and the world.

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