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## Roads are as dangerous as ever

*Have we learnt nothing from the road safety movement?*

TWO years after the countrywide road safety movement that had made us hopeful about a better-managed transport sector and improved road safety, it is worrying that nothing much has really changed in this sector. In July-August 2018, thousands of students across the country took to the street after two students of Shaheed Ramiz Uddin Cantonment College were killed due to a mad race between two buses on July 29. They sought justice for the killing and demanded safe roads for all. They pointed out the mismanagement in the transport sector and the loopholes in laws that need to be corrected. Subsequently, the government passed the Road Transport Act 2018, the Prime Minister's Office issued a 17-point directive, and a task force was formed to curb road crashes. All these steps, however, did little to bring discipline in the transport sector.

Although the Road Transport Act was made effective in November last year, it could not be implemented efficiently due to the opposition by transport associations, which called strikes several times to put pressure on the government to cancel some sections of the act that penalise the drivers for road accidents. The government had to relax some of the rules amid pressure from them. It is also unfortunate that the task force led by Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan, formed in October last year, held only one meeting until now.

Meanwhile, roads have remained as dangerous as ever before. Unfit vehicles still rule our roads and the number of unlicensed and underage drivers is still very high. More buses have been given route permits and the number of motorcycles is also increasing in an unregulated way. The number of road crashes and fatalities increased last year compared to the previous year. And the rising trend of road crashes remained almost the same until late March, when the government suspended operations of public transport to contain the spread of Covid-19.

In order to bring discipline in the transport sector, the government should make all-out efforts to implement the Road Transport Act. It should not bow down to the pressure created by the transport owners and workers to turn the law to their advantage. Any decision to reform the law must be taken through discussion with all parties concerned. In addition, the task force formulated last year should start its work without further delay. Besides, the prime minister's 17-point directive which included ordering buses to pick up and drop off passengers only at designated spots and to keep the doors of running buses shut at all times, keeping photos of drivers and helpers along with their names, drivers' licences and phone numbers at two noticeable places inside the vehicles, etc.—must be implemented. Moreover, steps need to be taken for bus routes rationalisation and introduction of a bus franchise system in Dhaka city to streamline the public transport system. What this means in broader terms is that we need to reform the entire transport sector in order to bring discipline on our roads.

## A decade of mismanagement and inefficiency at Wasa

*The authorities must immediately take steps to ease the sufferings of Dhaka residents*

IN a detailed report printed in this daily on Wednesday, the level of mismanagement, inefficiency and corruption in Dhaka Wasa's handling of the city's water supply and sewerage was laid bare. It is shocking to see that after so many projects costing hundreds of crores over the years, many Dhaka dwellers are still living with dirty and foul-smelling water, facing acute shortages of drinking water, being deprived of access to sewerage networks and encountering waterlogging.

To add insult to injury, instead of accepting responsibility and attempting to alleviate the sufferings of city-dwellers, the managing director of Wasa, who has been at its helm for 11 years, has continued to pass the buck. Last year, he was widely criticised for famously claiming that water supplied by Wasa was 100 percent safe; he has also told reporters, on multiple occasions, that water-related issues can be attributed to technical problems only. All reports of corruption and mismanagement within Wasa have been routinely denied.

However, recent events clearly demonstrate that it is not as simple as that. Both city corporation mayors have heavily criticised Wasa and the Bangladesh Water Development Board for their failure to avoid waterlogging by keeping canals and drains clean. In a report submitted by the Anti-Corruption Commission to the LGRD ministry last year, various irregularities and opportunities for corruption within Wasa were identified, and a parliamentary standing committee blasted Wasa for its failures, and asked that immediate measures be taken to rid corruption and mismanagement.

Why, despite such clear directions from the authorities, is Wasa still operating as it sees fit? According to Wasa data, in the last seven years, approximately Tk 25,406 crore have been spent on projects relating to sewerage and sanitation, the city's drainage system and the city's water supply. Despite such huge bills, why are Dhaka's residents still forced to wade through knee-deep water during monsoon season, and ration water in certain areas due to limited supply? Despite the price of water having increased 13 times in the last 11 years, why do we have to boil and treat poor-quality water at home, which, according to a TIB report, is leading to the burning of gas worth Tk 332 crore a year?

For too long, the authorities have looked the other way and allowed mismanagement and corruption to run rampant. The problems faced in terms of ensuring safe water supply and reducing waterlogging are manifold, and long-term planning and proper management are required to come up with solutions. But it will not be possible to implement any of these solutions if those responsible for a decade of failures and inefficiency are not held accountable.

## EDITORIAL

### WORLD DAY AGAINST TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

# How do we address human trafficking during a pandemic?



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

KUWAIT. Another involves a network illegally sending workers to Vietnam with the false promise of well-paid jobs. Then there was the unfortunate revenge killing of 26 victims of human trafficking from Bangladesh in the Libyan town of Mizda, by the family of a trafficker. These incidents have, once again, brought to the fore Bangladesh's struggles with human trafficking.

The US State Department's 2020 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, which promoted Bangladesh to Tier 2 from Tier 2 Watch List, also referenced the Kuwait scandal, stating "a Bangladeshi parliamentarian bribed Kuwaiti officials to bring more than 20,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers abroad on work visas that stipulated a different job and lower salaries than their contracts, and the parliamentarian then paid the workers the lesser wages or not at all." As per reports, officials from both countries were involved in this profitable arrangement. Gulf News reported that during interrogation, "Islam [Mohammad Shahid Islam] reportedly confessed to have provided 1.1 million dinars by cheque to an official at the Ministry of Interior, one million dinars in cash to another official, in addition to 'bags' of millions of dinars in cash to a third official."

And then there are those myriad cases this writer had mentioned in previous columns about the trafficking of Rohingya refugees to Malaysia. As recently as July 27, 2020, Malaysian authorities found 26 Rohingya refugees hiding in an islet near Langkawi. They had apparently travelled from Bangladesh in a mother boat along with hundreds of other Rohingya refugees, and were later transferred to a small boat so that they could discreetly enter Malaysia, reported Al Jazeera.

Driven by poverty, climate change, limited income-generating opportunities, and lack of access to finance, among many other factors, thousands of people every year undertake desperate journeys in search of a better life and livelihood. And these conditions enable the traffickers to dupe helpless people into trafficking through their sinister tactics.

While trafficking in persons had been a concern in the pre-Covid-19 era, the pandemic has made the situation worse for the country. "The global restrictions on movement, to curb the spread of Covid-19, are posing new challenges to migrants, forcibly displaced populations and refugees. We fear an increase in trafficking and smuggling across borders in several countries, as the global economic downturn is making these migrants more vulnerable and they are exposed to increased risk of exploitation and abuse," said Giorgi Gigauri, IOM Chief of Mission and UN Migration Network Coordinator in Bangladesh, while commenting on this issue.

With the changing circumstances, the behaviour of traffickers is also taking new

is eliminating the root causes that are making people prone to trafficking in the first place.

For one, with economies shrinking, governments now need to play a more proactive role in eradicating the economic triggers that drive people away from their roots. Making sure that aid and essentials reach the people living in the fringes of society during this time of distress can be one way of addressing this problem. A family with food and essentials would be less likely to fall prey to the lures of traffickers.

In addition, governments need to focus on creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for the people who are being affected by this pandemic. With private-sector entities grappling to cope

regard to Bangladesh, observed that the "government increased convictions of traffickers but decreased investigations and did not take adequate steps to address internal sex trafficking or official complicity in trafficking, both of which remained pervasive." This remains a serious concern that Bangladesh must rectify immediately. Women and children are extremely vulnerable to sex trafficking, and any lax in rooting this out would lead to disastrous human rights and social consequences.

Strong political will, along with its demonstration through stricter surveillance, smoother coordination among law enforcement agencies (both internally and externally), efficient identification of cases, and fast-tracking of



PHOTO: IOM/FRANCESCO MALAVOLTA

shape. In a recent report by Interpol, its Secretary General Jürgen Stock addressed this issue, "We see misinformation being used by human traffickers to convince desperate people to use their services, and at an even higher personal and financial cost because of increased difficulties in completing a journey due to travel restrictions. It is essential that law enforcement continues to cooperate and communicate internationally to maintain our vital work in protecting desperate men, women and children from potentially becoming victims of human slavery."

So, how do we address the issue of human trafficking? While cross-border cooperation and coordination among law enforcement agencies are essential to identify and catch the trafficking networks, what is even more essential

with Covid-19 related losses, layoffs have become a common phenomenon. And of course, this has increased people's vulnerability to trafficking. In view of this situation, it has become essential for governments around the world—especially in developing countries such as Bangladesh—to find alternative ways of providing income-generating opportunities to the people.

Along with this, the governments need to strengthen monitoring mechanisms to make sure that individuals involved in human trafficking are apprehended and brought to justice, no matter how high up in the socio-political ladder they are. The culprits, irrespective of their political affiliations or financial muscle, cannot be allowed to continue their criminal activities with immunity. The 2020 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, with

justice delivery processes would be crucial elements in addressing this problem.

Human trafficking is tricky business and Covid-19 has only made the situation worse. But despite the limitations and challenges, governments need to take proactive and exemplary measures, including mobilising more resources to immediately eliminate the primary and secondary factors that trigger and enable human trafficking. A combined set of strategies covering the economic, social, political and law enforcement aspects of human trafficking will now be required to defeat this sinister menace. Given the realities, the road ahead is rocky, but with the collaboration of all, even this challenge can be overcome with success.

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# What kind of civilisation do we want to be?

DEBASHISH CHAKRABARTY

AROUND 3.5 billion years ago, something extraordinary happened in the realm of the observable universe. From non-living matters emerged living organisms that started to occupy the surface of planet earth. Tiny particles like quarks and electrons formed atoms to molecules in various sizes, in such combinations from which emerged living cells. These cells went on a journey of billions of years of evolution leading to numerous kinds of species. After a considerable length of time, life reached a certain species so capable that it could change the face of their home planet.

Humankind, a species that evolved out of the African savannah, has invaded their planet, polymerised it in every manner possible. Human species rose above all other species, and having no other beings to compete with, they developed a sense of superiority. But for thousands of years, humankind fought against many natural forces and even between themselves. They were helpless to famine, diseases, and even gruesome wars. Ultimately, thanks to human ingenuity and scientific development in the last century, humankind achieved amazing feats and found themselves in an unprecedented position. There are still natural threats to consider but those have largely transformed from being an uncontrollable force of nature into something preventable. The collective knowledge and the beginning of greater cooperation among nations have helped them significantly.

What, then, is the human civilisation trying to achieve or become? A plausible answer may lie in a model called the Kardashev scale. The Kardashev scale, proposed by Russian astrophysicist Nikolai Kardashev in 1964, categorises advanced civilisations by taking into account their capacity to harness and utilise the energy available to them. It is a semi-quantitative way to define a civilisation's advancement. The energy consumption part is merely a guideline, and there are other factors as well.

"Type 0 Civilisation" is one that can harness the energy available to its home planet, but not to its full potential yet. Human civilisation is currently at 0.73 on this scale. It is expected that it will reach Type 1 in about a century. The Kardashev scale didn't have any civilisation

categorised as Type 0, but this is where the human civilisation is currently poised. Moreover, most of the energy consumption of our civilisation largely depends on the low-tech harnessing of fossil fuels rather than renewable energy sources.

"Type 1 Civilisation" is a planetary civilisation that can harness all the energy available to its home planet at the fullest efficiency, keeping the planet habitable. A Type 1 civilisation can control a planet's weather, influence the climate, and prevent natural events like earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and asteroid impacts. They are also capable of interplanetary travels.

"Type 2 Civilisation" is a stellar

*But any attempt to measure how advanced the human civilisation is, and how advanced it might become in the future, must be linked to the factor of avoiding extinction.*

civilisation that can harness the total energy output of their home star. They are capable of building structures at a planetary scale and also capable of interstellar travel. They could avoid catastrophic events that may lead to their extinction, like a supernova explosion, by moving to other star systems.

"Type 3 Civilisation" is a galactic civilisation that can harness the energy of an entire galaxy. They can mine and transport stars and manipulate black holes. Type 3 is the most advanced stage of civilisation defined by Kardashev, with the ability of a galactic magnitude. Its people can make intergalactic voyages, and deal with energy levels of the magnitude of a galaxy. This civilisation could survive everything short of the end of the universe.

Currently, the human civilisation is set to make the transition from Type 0

to Type 1. But any attempt to measure how advanced the human civilisation is, and how advanced it might become in the future, must be linked to the factor of avoiding extinction. Eventually, the graduation from Type 0 and the intermediate period of "technological adolescence" is not going to be easy. It's not clear if we're going to make it. As per a mathematical equation, there should be thousands of Type 1, 2, and 3 civilisations in the galaxy but when we look at outer space, we detect no evidence of any whatsoever. Maybe they couldn't make it in the outer space either—since the transition from Type 0 to 1 is the most arduous and important of all transitions, not because of the tremendous technological achievements that are needed but because of the challenges of building a planetary civilisation tolerant of many cultures. It's a race against time and tendency. As theoretical physicist Michio Kaku says, "On the one hand, we have the forces of integration, the forces of tolerance, a multi-cultural fabric emerging before our eyes. On the other hand, we have weapons of mass destruction, germ warfare, nuclear warfare, also the rise of international terrorism." Add to that the incompatible values of exponential growth and sustainability among nations and within cultures. These are the obstacles to reach Type 1 civilisation.

Ironically, there is no natural famine these days on the planet, but only political famine. If any human being dies on the planet earth because they don't have enough food to eat, it's not probably for any natural cause. At least not in its entirety. It may be because some political leaders or governments or ideologues want them to starve to death. Human civilisation has reached a point where there are more threats resulting from politics and incompetence than the uncontrollable natural forces. However, as always, there is recognition and denial at the same time. The tenuous attempts to reconcile and manage this contradiction of exponential growth and sustainability are falling apart.

The contradiction may not be as fallacious as it seems, however. Contradictions are civilisation's engines, pushing forward creativity and dynamism of human species. Incompatible values are still an essential feature of human civilisation. As historian Yuval Noah

Harari put it: "Consider the gradual acceptance of two conflicting values like freedom and equality. Equality can be ensured only by curtailing the freedoms of those who are better off. Guaranteeing that every individual will be free to do as he wishes inevitably short-changes equality. The entire political history of the world since 1789 can be seen as a series of attempts to reconcile this contradiction." Since the industrial revolution, human civilisation has been dealing with questions of exponential growth and sustainability. Human civilisation teeters on the edges of these two imperatives in which it can be understood best. There is the urge for negotiation and dialogue between these imperatives but polarisation is surging as well.

This fury of polarisation left human civilisation baffled. Nations around the planet stockpiled weapons of mass destruction. The threat of these weapons is still severe, and stories of close calls over the past decades only show how lucky we have been. But luck doesn't protect a species indefinitely. Humankind has done embarrassingly little about global threats like climate change. The global population is going through a sense of horror as they are bombarded with news of the threats of climate change, environmental pollution, extremism, terrorism, technological disruptions, pandemics, and whatnot. Traumatized minds get further afflicted by the repetitive cultivation of talks about the problems created by humans instead of what human civilisation is capable of doing to negotiate with these civilisational crises.

What institutional and political preparations are there to overcome this? Are we expecting history to wait for us to reach an agreement? Is the delay due to our perpetual hunger for power? Or short-sighted nationalism? Can we handle the growth in physical power, survive our chaotic technological adolescence, and mature into a species with a chance of reaching old age? Or shall we become the reason for our own extinction because our technology has progressed more rapidly than our wisdom? Maybe there is a hidden urge for conflict in human nature leaving a wound on the face of human civilisation.

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