

Slow-moving vehicles are risky and banned by law

So why are thousands of them still operating?

ISN'T it a mystery that although the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges, the High Court and the Road Transport Act 2018 have all banned slow-moving three-wheelers from plying on the highways, you still see thousands of them riding around especially in the districts, upazilas and rural areas? Actually, when you come to think of it, it isn't such a mystery. These risky, unfit contraptions driven by untrained drivers who are poor and need to survive have an unofficial clearance from influential quarters. To ensure that the ban is honoured, it is necessary to find out those kingpins who make a quick buck from this illegal business.

According to a report in this paper, the drivers who usually are untrained and have no license operate these unfit vehicles by bribing local syndicates consisting of political leaders, policemen and administration officials.

It is sad that even the Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader has, on several occasions, admitted that the government could not enforce the ban because of the opposition from politicians including public representatives who are behind it. The general secretary of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation has been quoted in the report saying that some of these vehicles operate under ministers' names, some under MPs' names, and others under the local mayors' names. Another transport leader informed that owners of these vehicles have to pay Tk 2,000 to Tk 3,000 just to get listed with the "transport organisations" usually run by political leaders. Thus it seems that even the ministry and the government as a whole have no power to stop these unscrupulous public officials (who are all paid from taxpayers' money) from breaking the law and making money out of a business that has led to countless deaths and disabilities.

On Wednesday, one such vehicle flipped into a roadside ditch in Shibganj upazilla in Chapainawabganj, killing nine people and injuring several others. Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, a passenger welfare body, estimates that 15 percent of the total road crashes (around 5,516) last year involved these vehicles and illegal easy bikes. Most of these vehicles are motorised by single-cylinder diesel engines meant for power tillers or water pumps. Their brakes are faulty. It does not take much imagination to realise how risky they are when plying highways where trucks and buses speed by, some of them recklessly overtaking another vehicle.

It does not take a committee to find out how to solve this problem. Everyone concerned knows what to do—hold those public officials involved in this illegal business accountable, take action against them and find alternative livelihood opportunities for the drivers. These officials are on the government's payroll and answerable for their actions. Unless such corrupt practices are rooted out from the system, laws and High Court directives will not have any effect. And these slow-moving vehicles will continue to kill people.

Rivers being killed by haphazard dumping of waste

At least three maunds of junk recovered every day from Barishal River Port!

A report published in this paper recently revealed the challenges faced by Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) officials when they began a dredging project (required for smooth navigability) to remove silt from Barishal River Port around October 16. The hazardous amount of polythene, plastic and other trash dumped into the water slowed down the project, and more than a month later, not even half of the work could be completed. It transpired that violating existing rules, passengers and port staffers have been indiscriminately polluting the waterbody with large quantities of cloth, ropes and plastic waste which later collect with the silt. Needless to say, apart from hampering the dredging process, dumping such waste pollutes the water and affects marine biodiversity.

The 40-km-long Kirtankhola river—100-150 feet in the middle—stands at just around seven feet during low tide, and launches get stuck on their way to the port if there isn't at least 10-12 feet of depth. In the last two weeks, two launches got stuck near the port due to siltation. Hence, dredging is the only way forward. Two machines will be carrying out the dredging across 30 points on the Dhaka-Barishal route, including a few points at the river port area, but a lot of time and money is being wasted due to the accumulated waste including plastic.

It is disconcerting that despite the huge threat being posed to the navigability of the river by the accumulating waste, the relevant authorities have failed miserably to keep it under control since the pandemic struck. The waste is also a threat to the very life of the river. The administration, including the office of the local department of environment, must be firm in carrying out their responsibilities in stopping this pollution. The government has time and again stressed on saving our rivers which are the lifelines of our cities and villages. But we have ruined many of them already. The government must make concerted efforts to raise awareness about the damage caused by such wayward dumping of waste. It must also enforce penalties on polluters who, despite knowing the consequences, continue to pollute. These initiatives should not be limited to the Barishal port only, but should extend to all rivers across the country suffering from a similar fate.

The MP's words are an insult to all women

Why did no one in the House object?

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

ONE would think it to be the rantings of a madman had it not been the words of a parliamentarian—that feminists are to blame for the rape incidents across the country.

Such a preposterous remark was made by Rezaul Karim Bablu, an independent MP of Bogura-7 constituency. But he didn't stop just there. He endorsed the obnoxious "tetul theory" of late Hefazate-Islam head Shah Ahmad Shafi.

Late Allama Shafi, as we unpleasantly recall, compared women to "tetul" (or tamarind) because they are like this sour fruit and cause "men's hearts to salivate when they see them" and hence should not be "seen" outside the confines of the four walls of the house.

But what is most shocking is the total silence in parliament after such abominable words regarding women were uttered. Forget all the men in the House, how could not a single woman member of parliament or other women holding high positions object to such an outrageous and clearly misogynistic comment? The occasion was the passing of the Women and Children Repression Prevention (Amendment) Bill 2020 which added the provision of the death penalty for rapists, when several MPs proposed circulating the bill to get public opinion on it and sending it to a select committee. The MP in question claimed that feminists were continuing to "expose" women in the name of women's liberation, which was actually encouraging rapists to rape. Pray tell, what is the reasoning behind such twisted assumptions?

Human rights activists and feminists are appalled at such remarks in an institution that is supposed to represent the people, men and women. They are especially dismayed at the silence of the women MPs, the Speaker of the House, and the leader of the House at such objectionable statements about women. We may recall that the prime minister herself had categorically criticised the comments of Allama Shafi in a congregation which showed such disrespect for women. Surely, reiterating those ideas cannot be something that can be acceptable to her or any of her cabinet colleagues. Apart from the sheer crassness of his words, MP Rezaul

Karim's statement runs contrary to all the goals that the government is trying to achieve in terms of empowering women through its ministries and international commitments. These include access to education for girls, opportunities for employment and earning an income, encouraging women to enter male-dominated professions such as in the police, army and air force.

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What he said cannot be dismissed as a careless remark made without thinking. It was made by a sitting member of parliament over a bill on rape at a time when we are deluged with incidents of rape, gang rape and all kinds of sexual violence against women and girls, crimes that you would think would be universally condemned.



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with incidents of rape, gang rape and all kinds of sexual violence against women and girls, crimes that you would think would be universally condemned. The "tetul theory" that the MP was referring to included a prescription for women given by the late religious leader that declares that they do not step outside of their home and just stay inside, dust the furniture and take care of the children—the only tasks they are meant for. During his infamous "tetul" sermon, the cleric condemned men for "allowing" their wives and daughters to work, to go to schools and universities to be doctors, to work as garment workers—which somehow meant they were of "loose

character". Girls should have a maximum of grade 4 or 5 education so that they could help their husbands to calculate household expenses. At that time, we were outraged, as was our prime minister, but we did not really take it as seriously as we perhaps should have.

One cannot deny that religion is a powerful tool to influence people. So when these regressive, anti-woman ideas are spewed out misusing the name of religion at gatherings attended by hundreds and thousands of men, many of whom will blindly support anything prescribed by a religious leader, it is something to be worried about. When an MP advocates these ideas in parliament, implying that the victims of rape had brought it upon themselves, it basically absolves the rapists of their crime and is, therefore, dangerous and damaging. And when no one in parliament, not even those women holding such high positions of power, objects to them, it is shocking and disturbing.

The lawmaker has shown extreme contempt for the tireless work of human rights activists and feminists in trying to bring to the forefront the gross gender inequalities that have led to women being physically, emotionally and economically abused. If it weren't for their continuous protests condemning violence against women especially, the resolute demanding of justice for survivors and victims, their nationwide campaigns to create consciousness about such violence and their determination to get their voices heard by those in power, we wouldn't have seen the changes in laws and policies to protect the rights of women; we wouldn't have seen the murderers of Yasmin and Nusrat be brought to justice. If it weren't for these feminists who have dedicated themselves to helping women survivors escape indescribable torture by providing shelter or through pro bono

legal aid, many would not have survived. To try and make "feminist" sound like a dirty word is the oldest trick in the book of patriarchy that cries of blatant ignorance and a total disconnect with the ideas of equality and justice which our constitution guarantees.

In an interview with *The Daily Star's* Golam Mortoza, MP Rezaul Karim gave a somewhat befuddling explanation for his statement. In a nutshell, what he said was that the onus of not getting raped fell on how women dressed and appeared in public. So when girls wear T-shirts, it is only natural for men to want to rape them. When asked why girls like Nusrat and Tonu who adhered to the religious dress code had been sexually abused and raped, before they were murdered, MP Karim was evasive and said those examples did not apply here. How convenient! And how would MP Karim explain why rapists rape children (including small boys), babies and women who stay at home and in front of their husbands, and why children are sexually abused inside their homes by close relatives?

It is tragic that a lawmaker who represents the people and who takes part in passing laws would—instead of condemning rapists and sex offenders and advocating for sensitisation of the male members of society including law enforcers in treating all women and girls with respect, and for removal of the culture of impunity of rapists—chose to use the cheapest misogynistic scapegoat: *how women are dressed.*

The MP in question has shown extreme disrespect to all the women in the House as well as to all women and girls of this country. He has also sent the wrong message to rapists and other sexual predators.

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Slow death or new direction for the UN?



MARK MALLOCH-BROWN

FOR much of its life, the United Nations has hidden behind the comfortable maxim that "If we didn't have it, we would have to invent it." Now at the venerable age of 75 (old enough

to have been a 2020 US presidential candidate), the organisation still enjoys widespread approval in global opinion polls.

But beneath the surface, the UN faces difficulties that cannot be ignored. Judging by traditional and social media, the issues that the UN pushes tend to get little traction. Worse, when it comes to maintaining peace and security, the UN is often stymied by its dysfunctional Security Council, which itself reflects an increasingly divided world. Whether in Syria, Yemen, or Libya, progress toward securing peace has been glacial, with much more being decided on the battlefield than at the Security Council. These same divisions have also hampered human-rights advocacy, as has the recent election that awarded seats on the UN Human Rights Council to Russia, Cuba, and China.

Of course, the UN has always mirrored the world it represents. There was broad member support for a strong UN only in its initial years and during the early years of Kofi Annan's tenure as secretary-general in the late 1990s. Otherwise, the UN has typically operated against strong headwinds.

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Today's world is younger overall. US power appears to have peaked, and the

Trump. At the UN General Assembly in September, Chinese President Xi Jinping took an extraordinarily consequential step, pledging that China would become carbon neutral by 2060. Yet the same regime that has committed to environmental sustainability is also brutally persecuting China's Uighur minority.

This points to the UN's central dilemma. In terms of population, most of today's world is under authoritarian rule, ranging from despots without even



PHOTO: REUTERS

global distribution of power is being redistributed to China and others. At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic has ensured that the world will be poorer, just as digitalisation has made it less equal.

With a charter that rests squarely on the liberal-democratic values of the winners of World War II, the UN has struggled to accommodate the changing global order. Under its current secretary-general, António Guterres, the UN has admirably continued to pursue gender parity and more diversity in its staffing. Still, too many top jobs remain in the hands of the founding member states. And, more fundamentally, the organisation seems out of touch with the world beyond its doors.

China, the second-largest contributor to the UN's assessed budget, has increasingly tried to assert global leadership on climate change and other issues, following America's abdication under outgoing President Donald

a pretence of democratic legitimacy to elected autocrats who have eroded democratic institutions and checks on their power.

With no choice but to contend with this increasingly undemocratic world, the UN's challenge now is to fashion a practical, achievable agenda without betraying its founding charter and its commitment to human rights and other freedoms. It will have to tap into its current strengths. As a representative of "collective rights," the UN is uniquely positioned to mobilise action on issues like climate change, which threatens poor farmers in developing countries as much as it does rich Manhattanites who are exposed to rising sea levels.

Likewise, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which seek to tackle inequality and exclusion everywhere, remain an example of the UN at its best, as does Guterres's call for "A New Social Contract for a New Era." The UN provides an indispensable global good

by producing league tables of human development and organising broad coalitions to achieve steady progress on key indicators of well-being.

But just because the UN is a leading voice for social, economic, and environmental justice does not mean that it should be given a pass on human rights. The organisation has a duty to report human-rights abuses wherever it finds them. Though it should be smart about passing evidence on to others and issuing denunciations, it must remain fearless in its advocacy. Here, its best allies are civil-society groups and the few brave countries that are willing to defy narrow commercial or political interests to take on the likes of China, India, or Saudi Arabia.

By contrast, the UN probably will have to bow to the logic of the twenty-first-century cold war. The Security Council will remain ineffectual until it is reformed, which is a distant prospect. But there are ways around this paralysis. During the original Cold War, the UN, without reference to the Security Council, launched major initiatives to address humanitarian crises and to support new members emerging from colonial rule. UN development and humanitarian agencies often drew on their own mandates and international law to intervene when the circumstances required it.

Today, UN Special Representatives in conflict areas and UN Resident Coordinators elsewhere do much unsung good, working tirelessly behind the scenes to avert local conflicts, defend civil society, and address inequality and other root causes of political instability. This field-based UN thrives out of sight and out of mind, safely removed from the obstructive state-driven politics of the Security Council in New York City.

It is here that the UN's future will be secured or lost. In a younger, angrier, increasingly impatient world, a distant club of men in dark suits is doomed to irrelevance. Where the UN matters is on the ground, deploying its remarkable mandate to fight for those who need it most.

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