

# Horror haunts business people

**Killings, extortion and robbery grip old Dhaka where 40,000 people run businesses. At least seven have been murdered in the last three months**

MIZANUR KHAN

The grisly killings of a businessman and his son, revealed in a morning find on Sunday in Gazipur, left families of other Old Dhaka businesspeople in worry and underlined law and order downside that took centre stage in public concern.

Police retrieved the shredded bodies of Shamsul Haq and his son Russell Sheikh two days after their driver was found hacked to death in a car on the far outskirts of Dhaka.

The killings brought back the memories of a watch trader who was killed in captivity two weeks ago in an apparently ransom-motivated incident.

Fears gripped the family of Rafiqul Islam (real name withdrawn for security reasons); his wife calls him almost every hour to know his whereabouts when he is out.

"I call him to be sure that he is safe. Extortionists once demanded money that was given," said the woman not wanting to be identified.

The old quarter of the city has lurched into a den of extortionists that target mostly businesspeople. A leader of Sammilita Bebasayee Oikya Jote (SBOJ), a coalition of city businesspeople, said: "It has become difficult to run any business. Extortionists have pushed the situation to a point of no return."

Businesspeople from 45 organisations in Old Dhaka formed the coalition to protest killing, extortion, abduction and attacks on businesses and identified 12 areas as crime zones including Nawabpur, Patuatuli, Narinda, Dholaikhal, Tipu Sultan Road, English Road, Bangshal, Islampur and Fulbaria.

"Mugging is common here. People from far come to the wholesale markets in these areas with cash but go back home empty-handed," said a wholesaler at Patuatuli.

The traders now make transactions by cheque, not in cash and spend less time than before with their enterprises.

"We go to our shops in the morning not knowing whether we can get back home safe," said ASA Kadir Kiron, general secretary of Bangladesh Shop Owners Association.

At least seven businessmen were killed in the last three months in Old Dhaka where 40,000 people run businesses, according to association leaders.

"The killing of one after another, abduction, robbery, extortion and attacks have created a reign of terror," a businessman said.

The killing of BM Selim Reza, the watch trader in Patuatuli, after he was abducted prompted the business community to enforce a daylong strike on March 23. Parts of his body were found in different places. Police said abductors killed the trader and took Tk 3.3 lakh from him.

Earlier, the businesspeople launched their movement a day after Jhon Siraji was murdered, followed by the killing of Humyun, a paper trader.

Seeking government's intervention, business leaders of the SBOJ sat with Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka at a meeting on March 11 where high police officials were present. The mayor asked for a list of extortionists and other criminals.

The leaders accused police of not controlling lawlessness. "The police drive to arrest criminals is nothing but eyewash," an SBOJ member alleged.

"We have asked the government for security for us and our families. If our demands are not met, we will launch a stronger movement," said Giasuddin Khokon, SBOJ convener.

Angry businesspeople of 42 markets in Sadarghat went on strike yesterday to protest the killings of Haq and his son. Traders from Islampur, Kalimandir and Banglabazar expressed solidarity with the protesting Sadarghat businesspeople.

Another strike by the SBOJ has been scheduled for today to protest law and order downside.



Traders with black scarves on their faces stage protest against rampant extortion and murder in Old Dhaka on March 23 (top left), family of Shamsul Haq wail on hearing the news of Haq and his son's murder (top right) and thousands attend their namaz-e-janaza at Sadarghat Monday (bottom).

# Days of bad buildings are numbered



Some old buildings at Shakhari Bazar in Old Dhaka.

**Hundreds of structures in the city have been identified as vulnerable. DCC will ask the owners to demolish them**

SULTANA RAHMAN

At least 726 structures under two zones of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) have been identified as vulnerable because of their age and decaying conditions.

Urban Planning Department (UPD) of the DCC branded those structures vulnerable after a detailed study. The survey was conducted in two of the ten DCC zones and was completed last month. It covered ward 71 and 72 of old Dhaka which include Siddique Bazar, Shakhari Bazar and Khilgaon, Mathertek areas. The UPD's study team is continuing the survey in seven more wards.

"Number of vulnerable structures will increase as land owners often do not follow the National Building Code 1993 while erecting the structures. They are also very indifferent to the safety aspect," said a senior engineer of DCC.

"Common tendency among most land owners is to construct the building as quickly as possible and that too at a low cost. That often leaves the structure at risk of being fragile," the engineer said. "Rajuk is the concerned authority for checking the situation but it has ignored this for a long time," he added.

According to the 1983 Dhaka City Corporation Ordinance, the DCC is responsible for demolishing all vulnerable structures. At first the DCC will ask the owner of the structure to bring it down. If the owner does not comply, the DCC will then destroy it and the owner has to pay

the cost of demolition along with annual taxes.

The identified vulnerable structures are between 30 and 350 years old. They vary from one-story buildings to multistoried ones. Even some modern multistoried buildings were found vulnerable. The DCC has a plan to demolish the vulnerable buildings after completing a survey of the whole city. The plan is in its initial stages and implementation depends on a number of factors, sources said.

"These 726 structures are so vulnerable that a moderate scale earthquake can crumble an entire area. Some of them could give away at any time," said an official of DCC who was in the survey team.

"Most of the buildings in the city hardly have any space between one another. If one vulnerable structure collapses, it could prompt a chain-reaction with adjacent buildings at high risk. It could have catastrophic consequences," the official feared.

The survey was conducted on the basis of two criteria of vulnerability: Age and condition.

"We found many structures very old and seemingly vulnerable, but the soil and geological conditions still kept them standing," said a top official of UPD.

"We hope to complete the survey of the entire city very soon, and we will then propose the Mayor to take steps against the vulnerable buildings," the UPD official said.

# Now 3-wheelers 'kidnapped' for ransom!

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Several organised gangs in the city are involved in CNG autorickshaw robberies.

In most cases, they hold the vehicle for ransom and return it only after the owner had paid them a hefty sum.

According to the drivers, the police also have a share in the booty and law-enforcers are often found indifferent in entertaining complaints of CNG theft.

Two weeks ago Motaleb, a CNG driver picked up two passengers from Motijheel to Gulshan. As they passed through an isolated part of the posh residential area, a gang of four in a microbus swooped on the autorickshaw.

The miscreants forced Motaleb off his vehicle and dragged him into the microbus. Two members of the gang drove off with Motaleb's CNG vehicle while a gagged Motaleb was taken to a location in Ashuliya. There he was released and was given a mobile phone number to

get in touch with the thieves later.

"When I called the number a male voice demanded Tk 70,000 for return of the vehicle. I had bought it for more than Tk 200,000 six months ago," said Motaleb.

He said that the person on the phone identified himself as a middleman and agreed to meet Motaleb and help him recover the vehicle. When Motaleb told him that he could not afford to pay so much money, the middleman reportedly explained the reason for such a big sum.

"We have to pay the police Tk 10,000 for each vehicle," he said.

Motaleb eventually managed to settle the ransom at Tk 55,000 and recovered his vehicle from Kaliakoir a day later.

"In the process of recovering my stolen vehicle, I came to learn that there are six gangs operating in the city and a dozen middlemen working in connivance with the police," Motaleb said.

Last week, a similar

incident took place at section 6 in Mirpur. "I saw three or four people coming in a CNG autorickshaw. They stopped at the gate of the house I work at and dragged the driver inside the premises as the gate was open. One of the goons then held a pistol at the driver's throat while flattening him to the ground. The others took whatever the driver had in his pocket and drove away with the vehicle," narrated a domestic help.

According to a police officer of Ramna police station, every day several three-wheelers are stolen in like manner and the drivers are reluctant to report the matter to police.

"You ask any driver in the city and he'll tell you that he has access to a list of middlemen who operate zone-wise. As soon as a vehicle gets stolen, all the owner has to do is to call a middleman and negotiate a deal to get his vehicle back," said the police inspector on condition of anonymity.