

Living on the lines, chancing death

Ordeals of children living-by rail lines

SULTANA RAHMAN

One-and-a-half-year-old Smriti is lucky to be still alive. She fell under a running train on September 8 but because of her tiny frame she did not get seriously injured.

Smriti's elder brother Hridoy, who is seven, did not have the same luck and lost three fingers under the wheels of a train two years ago. He was playing on the rail line and slipped as he tried to get out of the way of a passing train. The slip cost him his fingers.

Their grandmother Hajera had been hit by a running train too.

"I did not hear the whistle of the train and suddenly I felt a jolt. My right hand got separated from the body by the force of the moving train," said Hajera who has been living in a slum near the railway line at Karwan Bazar for 20 years. She is also a witness to a number of such mishaps some of which were fatal.

Every 30 minutes a train passes by and minor children living in slums on both sides of the rail lines often become victims of accidents as they are unable to comprehend the danger. According to the traffic wing of Dhaka Metropolitan Police 72 trains move to and from the city everyday.

Aleya (3), Billal (5) and Rabeya (4) bear the marks of near fatal accidents. Aleya and Rabeya lost her left wrists

while Billal's right leg was severed in separate incidents.

"Rabeya was only one-and-half when that accident happened," said Rabeya's mother. "I had gone to collect firewood for cooking and she crawled on to the rail line."

Thousands of slum people on both sides of 23-kilometre

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"Our shanty is so small and there is hardly any room. Most of my time is therefore spent on the rail lines where I play with my mates. Sometimes we take food while sitting on the rail line," said Chumki, a nine-year-old of Begunbari slum.

According to Dhaka GRP

(Government Railway Police), 117 people died in train accidents between January 1 and September 14 this year in areas under the jurisdiction of Dhaka GRP which is from Kamalapur Railway Station to Eastern part of the Jamuna River. Of them, 44 were run over and 11 had been hit.

"We only keep the record of deaths in train accidents and file unnatural death cases. The accidents which do not end in deaths are not recorded," said Dhaka GRP's duty officer Md Anwar Kamal.

The slums built as close as 10 meters from the railway tracks increase the risk of accidents. Apart from vendors, children, vagabonds and commuters also walk freely on rail lines which are crowded most of the time. People only tend to leave just seconds before a train arrives. Some children also try to race the trains as a form of entertainment.

"Children love to play on rail tracks despite the fear of accidents because they do not have any other place to play. And it is not always easy to keep watch on them," said a mother of two at a slum.

Many children in slums close to railway tracks carry some form of physical disability from train accidents. As the parents are often away at work, the children play on rail tracks unattended and unsupervised.



Aleya and Rabeya who lost their wrists with Billal whose right leg was severed in separate train accidents at Tejgaon.



Karwan Bazar underpass reeks under filthy, stagnant water.

STAR PHOTO

Karwan Bazar underpass in shabby condition

IMRUL HASAN

The Karwan Bazar underpass remains dirty all the time due to lack of regular maintenance by the authorities concerned.

The underpass was renovated in September last year at a cost of Tk 63 lakh by the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), but its environment is worsening rapidly because of the authorities' carelessness.

Rainwater drips into the stairs and walkway of the underpass and remain stagnant, causing suffering to the pedestrians.

"During rain the underpass becomes slippery and dirtier. My daughter has slipped two times over the walkway," said Rashida Begum, who comes to Karwan Bazar kitchen market everyday.

"If the underpass remains in such a condition, it will be quite unusable," said Rashida, a resident of Panthapath area.

The underpass located in the busy commercial area is used by hundreds of pedestrians every day. "It is an important underpass, the city corporation

should maintain it regularly," Rashida said.

The pedestrians also contribute to the dirty environment of the underpass by spitting on its walls and floor.

"It is not only the government's duty, we should also be conscious about its cleanliness," said Jamilur Reza, a government employee who lives in the Green Road area. Reza uses the underpass every day.

There is a generator that supplies electricity during load-shedding but it often remains out of order, said the security guards who maintain the security of the underpass.

"DCC hardly sends any staff to clean the walkway," said a security guard who works for a private security company. "It is not our duty to keep the underpass clean. It is the job of DCC."

The security guards said they always ask the pedestrians not to spit on the walls or floor, but they do not care at all.

Sources said the workers of DCC do not come to clean the underpass during the weekly holidays.

"The cleanliness is maintained by the DCC sweepers who also clean the

streets in the early morning every day," said Md Abod-Al-Zabbar, the chief executive officer of DCC zone-6, when asked about the lack of proper maintenance of the underpass.

"The electrification system in the underpass will be improved soon," he said adding: "We inform the higher officials about these problems, but in most cases they do not pay heed to us."

Waterlogging inside the underpass during rain quite often made it unusable with water dripping inside continuously because of technical faults of the structure, said an official of DCC zone-6.

The maintenance of the underpass is carried out under a project of DCC called Dhaka Nagar Abokatham (Dhaka City Infrastructure).

The DCC head office looks after its security and zone-6 office is responsible for the electrification system and cleanliness.

DCC began its renovation in September 2004 as part of the city beautification project. City Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka inaugurated the underpass after the renovation.

With Ramadan comes price hike

KAUSAR ISLAM

With the month of Ramadan just days away, the prices of essentials have seen another 'traditional' hike with wholesalers allegedly creating an artificial crisis in the market.

The items usually in demand during the Ramadan are still not sufficiently available. Businessmen at different kitchen markets are saying that the wholesalers have stocked the stuff to influence the price.

"If the supply crisis goes on then price of essentials will automatically go up. Everything will be made available immediately before the start of the Ramadan but at a hiked rate. This happens every year," said a retailer at New Market.

The prices of onion, ginger, garlic, turmeric, pulses, sugar, oil, wheat, rice, chola, powdered milk, salt, and fruits, especially dates have already gone up.

"This year price of dates will break records. The minimum rate for even the lowest quality would not be less than Tk. 50 per kg," said Aminul Islam, a wholesaler.

Fruits have become costlier also.

"It is understandable if imported fruits like apple, date, orange become costlier due to the dollar price increase. But why papaya and banana also? Asked Rehnunah Khan, a housewife.

SPIRALING PRICES AHEAD OF RAMADAN

Essentials	Price last week (Tk.)	Price this week (Tk.)
Sugar	36/kg	38-40/kg
Onion	26-28/kg	31-32/kg
Green Chili	12/kg	26/kg
Gram	35/kg	38/kg
Garlic	44/kg	48/kg
Dates (normal)	40-45/kg	50-55/kg
Salt	11/kg	12/kg
Soybean oil	48-52/ltr	50-54/ltr
Puffed Rice (Muri)	35-36/kg	38/kg

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There is fear that the price of the essentials would see another hike with the start of the new Gregorian calendar month.

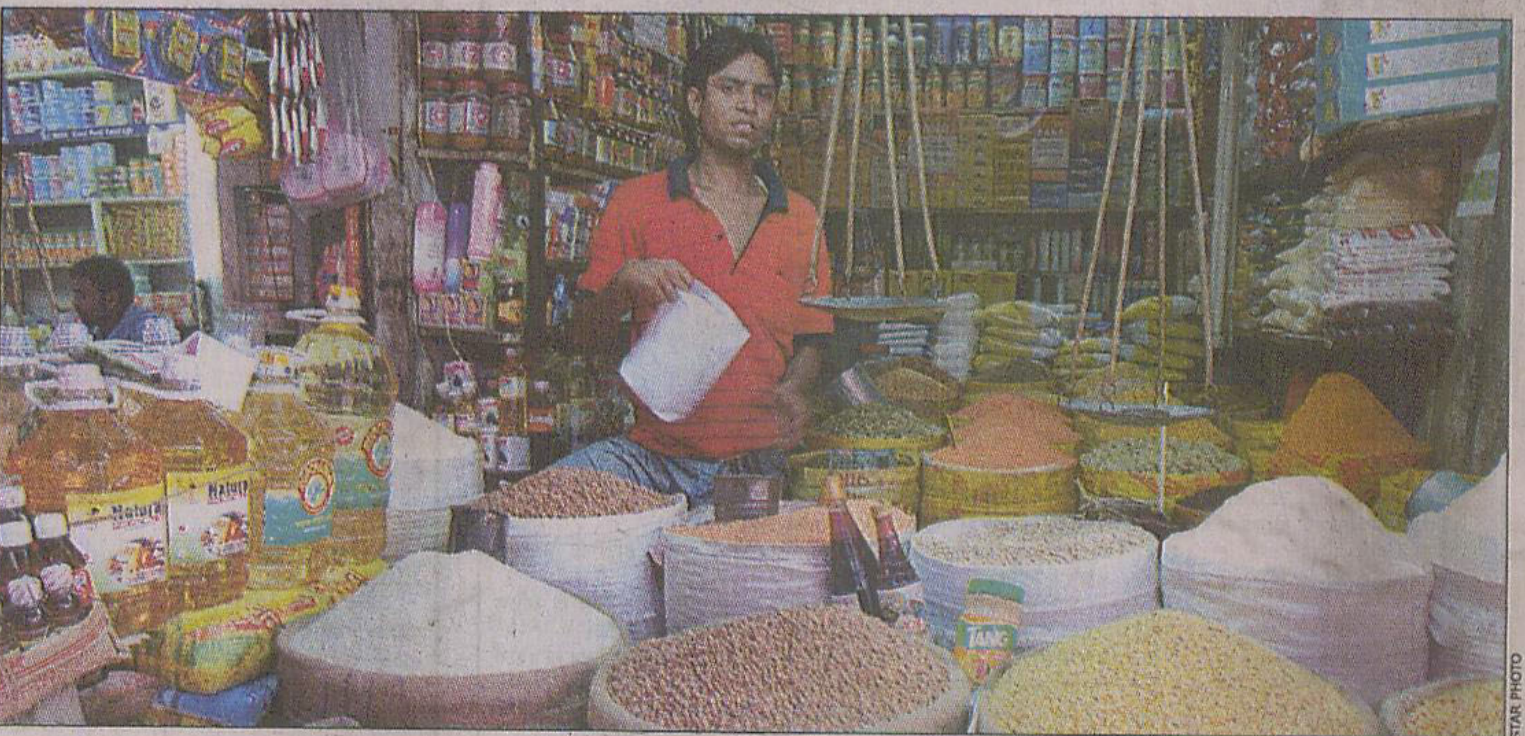
"As the Ramadan starts in the first week of October, people will get their salaries at the same time. Because of that the market will remain expensive," said Md. Shahadat, a retailer at Karwan Bazar Kitchen Market.

Although price hike in the holy month is a usual trend, the businessmen are able to show some legitimate excuses this time around.

"The transportation cost of per truck onion from Pabna was Tk. 6000 three months ago. Now it is Tk. 9000 because of the fuel price hike. Naturally the price has increased and it is not related to Ramadan," said Hasanul Alam, a wholesaler.

The demand of food stuff, mostly agricultural products increase during the month of Ramadan. And as the country depends on imported items to meet the demand the businessmen are also pointing at the dollar situation.

"The government has raised our salary but it has already been adjusted by the hike of expenditure in every sector of life. We don't dream of a better Ramadan this year," said Abdul Halim Khandoker, a government employee.



Though these essentials are in plenty in the markets their prices have shot up.

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