

Battered and rundown taxicabs roam freely

BRTA Chairman says none operates on valid fitness certificate

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Around 10,000 battered taxicabs are roaming the streets of Dhaka without valid fitness certificates, some even putting passengers' and public life at risk, while the authorities and cab owners pay no heed to the issue of public safety.

"To begin with, it was a wrong decision to use Maruti and Tata (light vehicles) as taxicabs. 5,000 out of the 10,000 registered cabs are these (Maruti and Tata) and these are completely beat-up already. Almost all taxicabs are running in a terrible condition and do not have fitness certificates," said Abu Bakar M Shahjahan, chairman of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA).

Taxicabs were introduced to the capital in 1999. For each brand new vehicle to be used as a taxicab, BRTA issued a fitness certificate valid for five years from the year of manufacturing of the vehicle.

The taxicab owners are taking advantage of confusing regulations set by BRTA and the police and BRTA both seem to be busy pointing fingers at each other when it comes to implementing the regulations.

Humayun Rashid, director of BRTA engineering division tried to clarify the regulation to this correspondent, "They (cab owners) were supposed to obtain new certificates from us

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after five years, but they do not come to us anymore for fitness certificates."

Rashid further explained that when the initial fitness certificates expired after five years, BRTA decided to allow those vehicles for another three years requiring them to obtain a new fitness certificate every year. After eight years, if the vehicle is tested to be unfit, BRTA can bar that vehicle from running in the city.

Although the first batch of taxicabs have been around for eight years now, the police or BRTA did not take any effective measures yet to bring discipline in the sector and ensure passengers' rights and public safety.

"We have mobile teams on the streets. But, we are shorthanded and helpless as we only have a total of 300 employees for the whole country," said Rashid. "We have one mobile court for Dhaka city that works five days a week. If the mobile court finds an unfit vehicle, it fines them. We do not have the authority to

enforce the law beyond that. We are only the regulatory body."

"Since fitness certificates expired few years ago and most cabs do not have valid ones, now it is the responsibility of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) traffic division to impound unfit vehicles from the streets," he added.

"Just one mobile court is not enough for the entire city. Without the help of the police and owners, it is not possible for us to get rid of unfit vehicles from the city," Rashid observed.

DMP traffic department is not least bothered about the condition of the taxicabs. "According to the Motor Vehicle Ordinance 1983, if a vehicle does not have a fitness certificate, we file a case and fine Tk.700. That is the best we can do in our jurisdiction," said Mohammad Altaf Hossain, a Dhaka North traffic inspector of DMP.

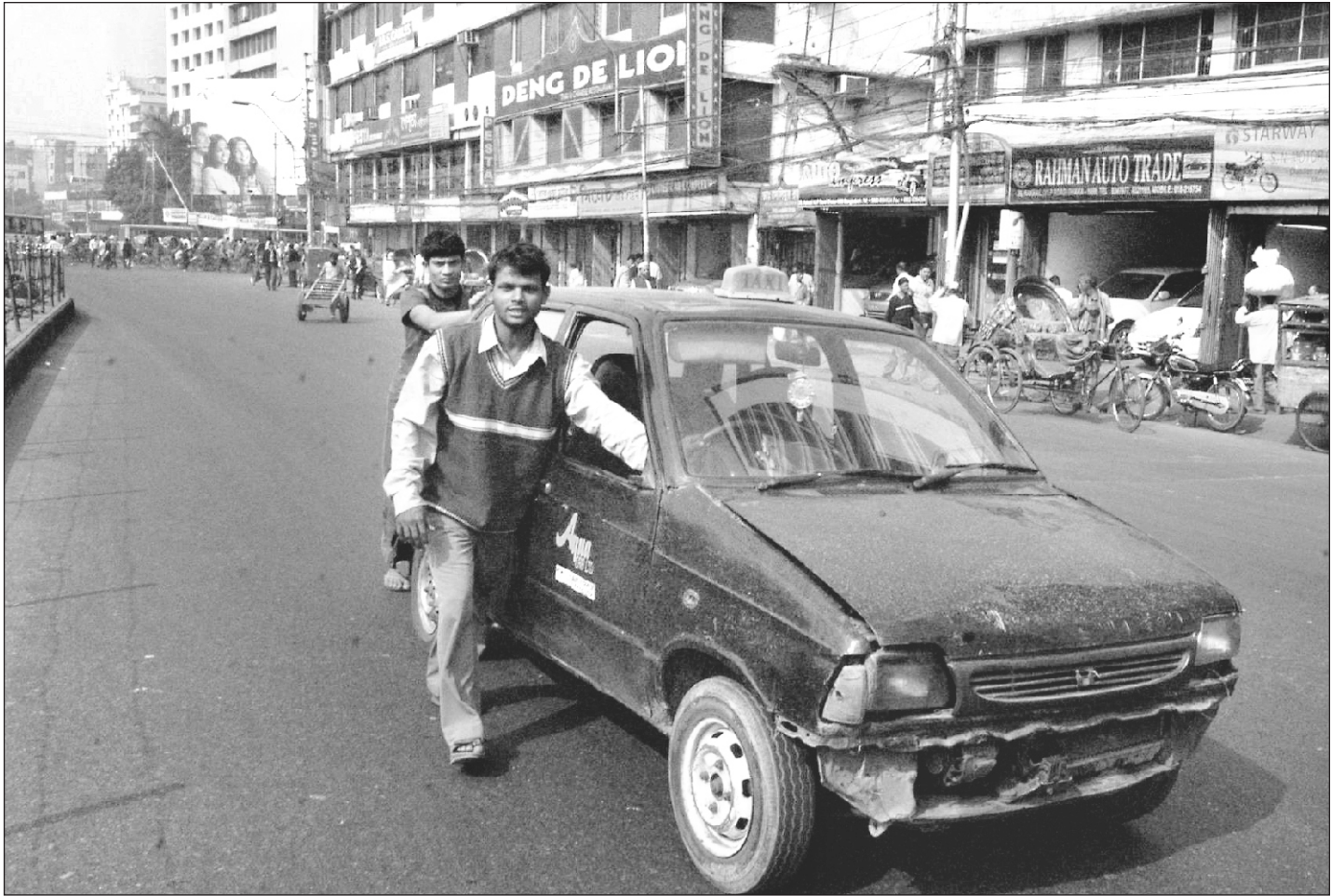
"Most cabs pay the fines and continue to ply the streets. It is the responsibility of BRTA to check for fitness, not us," he

confirmed.

"Reckless driving cannot be punished effectively under the current law as the penalty is only a fine of Tk 500. Most taxicab drivers are young novices who often do not follow traffic rules. Besides, we still cannot book them because they also have driving licences and that is all we need to know," Altaf continued.

The owners blamed the drivers' reckless driving for causing damage to the taxicabs and cited the example of Nepal where Maruti and Tata is widely used as taxicabs. But GM Shiraj, chairman of Cab Association of Bangladesh, hoped the situation to improve soon. "We don't go for new fitness tests because we are not using that particular batch anymore. We are replacing them with blue ones. Within a year, there will be no black cabs on the streets."

Shiraj explained that when the concept of taxicab was introduced in 1999 in the capital, there were not enough drivers to drive them. "Drivers



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A taxicab driver is in trouble with his rundown vehicle on the city road.

of two-stroke auto rickshaws, that were banned in 1998, became jobless. Later, they became taxicabs drivers. Without any motorcar driving experience, they wrecked most of the cabs in a short time -- especially the black ones."

The BRTA chairman however disagreed with the opinion that the new batch of blue taxicabs would improve the situation, "These blue ones are in fact the same Maruti or Tata cars with only a coat of different colour."

"A committee was formed to examine the current situation

and to find a way how we can replace the current batch. A decision had been taken allowing at least 1350cc vehicles as taxicabs from now on," he added.

The prevailing lawlessness in the sector coupled with law enforcers' constant engagement to handle the current volatile political situation paved the way for criminals and drivers to take advantage of the situation. The city experienced a sharp rise in mugging using taxicabs during the Eid holidays. Besides, the cab drivers have been making

the passengers hostage by turning the fare metres off and collecting outrageous fares from passengers. Most of them do not put their identification (ID) cards on display inside the cab either.

In response to these allegations, the chairman of Cab Association of Bangladesh complained, "With the help of a section of drivers, a very organised criminal group is involved in this. We have spoken with the owners of different companies but could not do much about it as the police are also involve in the

crime. They (the police) get their fair share out of this."

A high official in the DMP crime division said, "During the Eid holidays, most drivers go on vacation leaving the vehicle to replacement drivers. Our investigations reveal that they (the replacement drivers) are the ones involved in mugging."

"We directed officers in charge (OC) of all police stations to have a dialogue with owners regarding the matter. And we request all passengers to check the ID cards of the drivers while boarding them," he added.



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Rajuk to warn public against

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years or with fines not less than Tk 50,000 or with both.

Violation of the housing development rules destroying natural environment is also punishable under the environment conservation act of 1995.

President of Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (Rehab) engineer Abdul Awal said he would raise the issue at Rehab meeting scheduled for January 16 to adopt measures on how Rehab can deny and cancel membership of an unregistered and otherwise deceiving developer.

The existing article of association of Rehab does not allow the membership committee to deny membership of a developer, he added.

"I just don't understand why a land developer or a builder would be so hell-bent on doing business by illegal means," said Awal, "It is crucial to make the public aware of such illegal businesses, but unfortunately, Rajuk is not playing its due role in this regard

accordingly."

Rajuk's role in making the people aware in this regard appears to be indifferent and apathetic, Awal said.

The Rajuk chairman said that the national committee on approval of private housing projects, under the rules of 2004, decided in principle that a number of projects would be approved provided the developers comply with the preconditions set forth in the rules.

The preconditions include obtaining clearances from the department of environment, Dhaka Transport Coordination Board, Bangladesh Water Development Board, geological survey from the department of geology and clearances from a few other agencies concerned.

The project developers are also required to comply with the Wetlands Protection Act of 2000 under which rivers, canals, wetlands, retention ponds and flood flow zones earmarked in the Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP) have to

be excluded from their project areas.

"As per the committee decision, the aspiring developers have to submit detailed layout plans of each of the proposed housing project to Rajuk, which will not forward a layout plan to the committee for approval until submitted in compliance with the rules," said the Rajuk chairman.

None of the projects mentioned in the report published in The Daily Star on January 8 have obtained approval, as the developing companies not yet have the detailed layout plans approved by Rajuk.

Rajuk has filed a good number of cases with the police against illegal housing projects and written to the home ministry for action, Haroon added.

Secretary to the housing and public works ministry SM Zafrullah had earlier said, "I will look into the matter."

Regrettably, the illegal activities of advertising unauthorised housing projects are going on unabated.

Modern buildings

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Big and modern shopping malls in the city also do not have ramps making it difficult for physically challenged people to enter.

TIM Latiful Husain, resident director of Bashundhara City Development Ltd, said that those in wheelchairs can use the lift from the car parking area on the ground floor of Bashundhara City shopping mall.

When asked why they did not build a ramp in front of the mall, he said: "We did not have the proper angle for a ramp. Besides, children slip on ramps and young boys practice skating, which causes accidents so we did not build it for safety."

The same question was asked to Dhaka Sheraton officials, they said that they have a ramp in the car parking area on the back of the building so it should not be a problem for a physically challenged person.

Officials of Hotel Sonargaon replied, to the same question, that they have their own wheelchair to carry a person with disability.

When asked about ramp system in buses, a high official of Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation said: "We have some reserve seats for physically challenged persons. But when a bus is crammed with people it

becomes very difficult to save a seat for them. In developed countries there are special carriages but we cannot arrange it because we cannot afford."

Sirajul Islam, chief town planner, Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), said a manual is being prepared in collaboration with Bangladesh Protibondhi Kalyan Samity (BPKS) in this respect. He however could not specify current facilities for them.

In a meeting with BPKS Islam proposed making arrangements of ramps for the physically challenged and special tiles on footpaths and alignment at intersections for visually impaired persons.

Animesh Toju, deputy coordinator of BPKS, said that the manual named as 'Accessibility for All' deals with barrier-free movement of the persons with disability. They held meetings with engineers, architects and officials of DCC and BRTC to include their suggestions in the manual and to implement building codes and ramps in buses.

He said that they received a letter on January 11 that the manual had been approved by the Ministry of Housing and Public Works.

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9555915, 9557813,

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