

CNG AUTORICKSHAW

# Increasing chaos adds to public suffering

Disagreement between owners and drivers over two-shift system

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

A chaotic situation continues to prevail in the CNG autorickshaw sector as owners and drivers still ignore the newly fixed fare and deposit rates, leading to public sufferings.

The commuters are held hostage due to the tug of war between the drivers and owners over the drivers' daily deposit money and shift system.

In the wake of continued harassment of the commuters, BRTA on Monday sued a number of owners and drivers for charging higher deposit money and fare.

After the government re-fixed the deposit money at Tk 450, the owners decided to introduce two shifts for drivers reducing driving hours. In some part of the city, especially in Jatrabari area, the owners have already started two shifts.

Earlier a driver used to get an autorickshaw for 14 hours (8:00am to 10:00pm), but with the introduction of two shifts, they get only around eight hours. The drivers say their livelihood would be seriously affected if all the owners introduce 8-hour shift.

"Owners have become greedy. Two shifts mean more money for them. It means twice the amount of the fixed daily deposit," said Mujibor Rahman Master, president, Dhaka District Autorickshaw, Auto-tempo, Mishuk Transport Workers Union.

"Earlier the owners used to take Tk 600 instead of the fixed daily deposit of Tk 300. Now they are introducing two shifts. They will get Tk 900 daily from the two shifts at the government has re-fixed the rate at Tk 450," Master explained.

"A CNG autorickshaw driver has to take gas two to three times a day. Every time we have to wait for around an hour in queue at gas station. That leaves only a few hours to run, which is not enough to feed our families," added Master.

In the current system drivers have to bear the expenses for gas and minor repair of the vehicle during the driving period.

"The owners cannot impose shifting system on us. It will only increase the sufferings of the passengers," Master added.

Admitting the fact, Barkatulla Bhulu, president, Dhaka City

Autorickshaw Business Owners Association, said: "We have heard that some owners introduced the shift system." But he blamed a few corrupt people for this.

"We are discussing the issue with our members and requesting them to comply with the rules. The association will not extend any help to those corrupt owners if the law enforcers take action against them," he added.

In the new policy the authorities have not fixed the duration of driving hours.

Barkatulla said three-wheelers were introduced in Dhaka city in 1956. From the beginning the sector worked through understanding between the drivers and owners. The system worked in the same manner after the CNG run autorickshaws were introduced in 2001. "If there is any crisis, both the parties need to sit together to resolve it."

Around 13,000 CNG-run autorickshaws are currently in operation in the capital. The sector plunged into a state of disarray as most of the drivers did not use meter and refused to go to destinations as requested

by the passengers.

On the other hand, the autorickshaw owners charged more money than the fixed daily deposit money. The owners and drivers blamed each other for the disorder while the passengers remain hostage to the chaotic situation.

On May 1 the government introduced new fare structures in a move towards resolving the crisis. The passengers are now paying Tk 13.50 for the first two kilometers, which was previously Tk 12. For each extra kilometre the fare is Tk 5.50.

The new waiting charge is Tk 0.75 per minute, which was Tk 0.50 before. Daily deposit for the drivers was increased to Tk 450 from Tk 300.

Moreover, most of the autorickshaw had tampered meters that show higher fare. So far metering system has been upgraded in around 7,000 autorickshaws. Tampering was detected even in newly installed and upgraded meters.

The drivers who are yet to upgrade their meters are charging fare at their will.

"The situation in the three-

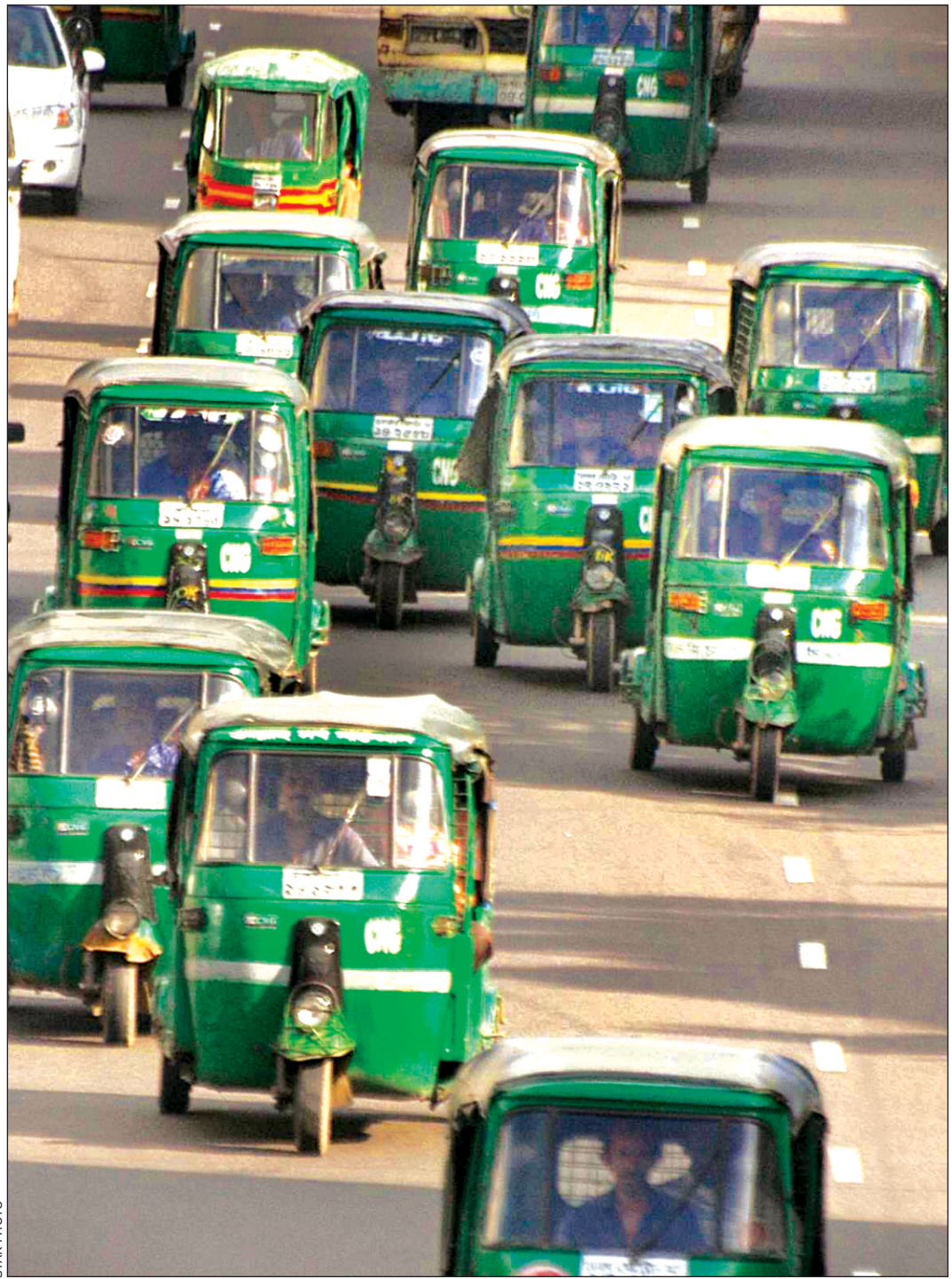
wheeler sector was quite chaotic. It will take a little more time to straighten it out," said Humayan Rashid, director (operations), Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA).

"When we decided to enforce the new fare and deposit structures both the parties were present. But the problem remains among the owners themselves. They have several associations who disagree with one another," he added.

"We will enforce the new policy at any cost. Our main goal is to reduce public sufferings. Those who do not comply with the rules will face charges and fines. Mobile court is working to prevent the irregularities," he said.

BRTA on Monday sued drivers and owners for charging higher fares and deposit money. A mobile court conducted a drive to check the harassment of commuters. Thirteen cases were lodged against drivers and they were fined Tk 3,150. Besides, 10 cases were filed against the owners and their autorickshaws were seized.

Two autorickshaw owners were arrested for forcing shifting system on drivers.



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Over the last few years residential areas in the city have been invaded by various commercial establishments. The photo was taken in Dhanmondi residential area.

CITY'S LAND USE

## Rajuk notice for restoration of residential character

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) has for the first time served notice to the illegal commercial establishments in the city's residential areas, asking them to vacate the residential buildings within two months.

The city development authority has taken the move as commercial establishments like private offices, shops, restaurants, private universities, hospitals, clinics, diagnostic centres, shopping malls, factories and other non-residential set-ups have mushroomed in the areas over the years occupying residential buildings.

Residents of Dhanmondi, Gulshan and Banani residential areas say the commercial set-ups have destroyed the very residential character of these areas causing traffic congestion and creating noise pollution.

"We have served the notices giving a two-month deadline to vacate unauthorised commercial uses of residential buildings, barring those on the main roads," said KAM Haroon, chairman of Rajuk. Interestingly, Rajuk itself allowed commercial and non-residential use of residential buildings in these residential areas.

"The notice has been served to four categories of unauthorised non-residential and commercial usages of residential buildings. These are restaurants,

universities, hospitals and garment factories," said the chairman.

He said that Rajuk authorities have already taken action against six building inspectors for negligence to duty, which led to such deplorable state of the residential areas.

A Gulshan resident Shirin Shila, who filed a case against raising height limit and commercialisation along Gulshan Avenue, said that the Rajuk authorities must mean their move against unauthorised non-residential uses of residential buildings. They must not exploit the innocent people manipulating the notice.

The case was filed challenging a government order that allowed commercialisation of the residential buildings and high-rise beyond the six-storey ceiling.

"It is regrettable that Rajuk often harasses people over issuing permission for non-residential use of residential buildings referring to the case I filed," she said. "Rajuk has to come up with a clear definition of non-residential and commercial uses of buildings."

Leaders of Dhanmondi Paribesh Unnayan Jote at a press conference yesterday demanded freeing Dhanmondi residential area from widespread commercialisation through relocation of educational institutions, hospitals and clinics.

They said the 473-acre

Dhanmondi area was absolutely residential in 1952. A total of 1,083 plots were allotted only for residential use, but in the face of growing population, Dhanmondi was declared a mixed-use zone in 1995.

The government declared Mirpur Road, Satmasjid Road, Dhanmondi Road no-27 and 2 as commercial areas through various administrative orders during 1985-96.

According to the Jote's survey in February last, there are 200 campuses of private English medium schools, colleges and universities in the area including 96 of schools, 35 of colleges and 45 of universities. Besides, there are 24 coaching centres, 12 restaurants, 26 shopping malls, 24 hospitals, 56 clinics and 32 diagnostic centres.

Educational institutions set up indiscriminately are the principle reason behind traffic congestion in the residential area, said Jote's Convener Sultana Alam.

It is true that the residents themselves are responsible for such degradation of the area as they have rented out residential buildings for non-residential use, Sultana said.

Inspector of Schools of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board Dhaka Ataur Rahman Khan said, "So far as I know, the government is going to take decision on relocation of the excessive schools from residential areas."

LANDFILLING

## 'Stop plundering our homesteads, agricultural lands'

Residents of Beraid, Santarkul, Kathaldia and Dumni appeal to the government to protect their homestead, livelihood, agricultural wetlands and floodplains from the grip of private housing land developers

TAWFIQUE ALI

In the face of persistent aggression of private housing land developers in the city's eastern fringe, affected locals and farmers fervently appealed to the interim government to protect their ancestral homes, their traditional livelihood and the environment of Dhaka.

At least half a dozen powerful land developers have been destroying thousands of acres of low-lying arable land, wetlands and designated floodplains by sand-filling in Boro Beraid, Santarkul, Kathaldia and Dumni moujas in the city's eastern fringe. The eastern fringe comprises of a large area of floodplains of the River Balu, canals and wetlands.

According to government records, none of the ongoing private housing development projects has any necessary approval.

The locals who have settled in the area and have been living there for generations, now face forced displacement from their ancestral homes as well as their traditional livelihood based on agriculture.

Most of the locals are illiterate, poverty-stricken and too weak in general to put up any resistance against the land developers.

The land developers are filling up wetlands with sand in violation of several regulations of the country including Wetland Conservation Act 2000, Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP Structural Plan), Private Housing Land Development Rules 2004 and Environment Conservation Act 1995.

Mosharaf Hossain Badal, secretary of the local landowners' association named Beraid Bhumi Malik Samaj Kalyan Samity, said the powerful land developers have sand-filled and earth filled a vast expanse of arable lands in Beraid, Santarkul and Kathaldia moujas of Badda belonging to the poor locals along with wetlands, flood plains and canals.

The powerful housing devel-

opers cunningly and sometimes by using force dump sand or mud on the arable lands and wetlands only to turn the area unsuitable for farming or fishing.

Ishrat Islam, Assistant Professor of Urban and Regional Planning (URP) department of Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology (Buet), conducted a study since 1989 on the wetlands of Beraid, Ashulia and Baghair (Keraniganj) areas. She also conducted a micro level study at Boro Beraid, Kathaldia, Patira and Dumni moujas.

While speaking at a seminar organised by Save Environment Movement, Beraid Bhumi Malik Samaj Kalyan Samity and the URP department of Buet at National Press Club on May 6, Islam said the developers initially purchase a few pieces of lands here and there. They fill up their purchased lands during the wet season when the adjoining plots belonging to others lay submerged. While filling their own land with sand, they craftily fill up the adjoining plots by letting the sand spread outwards onto the neighbouring plots. The neighbouring landowners are

then bullied into selling their possession to the developers, as the neighbours are left with no other workable option.

This situation clearly indicates massive corruption at Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) and utter failure of its governance, added Islam.

Haji Mosharaf, a resident of Beraid present at the seminar, said his forefathers have been living in Beraid for years. Their ancestors used to make a living by rice and fish farming. ".... but the land developers have embarked on plundering our ancestral agricultural lands and homesteads."

"Even though we own the properties, but we are incapable to protect those. I call upon all of you to stand beside us," he pleaded.

Another affected local, Momin Uddin, said he used to live on farming on others' lands. The neighbourhood where he lives in is a community predominantly dependent on fishing, but now many of the traditional land cultivators and fishermen went jobless.

"We don't dare to protest the plunderers of our land as the

local thugs and the police have close ties with them," said Momin Uddin.

Uttarkhan Union Parishad Chairman Kamal Uddin said a local group of brokers facilitate the land grabbers and that is one of the major problems.

While visiting Beraid, Shahidullah Bapari, an elderly local, told this correspondent that the developers first buy a few pieces of land in the area and later on, they intimidate the surrounding landowners with the connivance of local brokers to sell their property.

Shahidullah also described another tactic that is being used against the locals. Recently, there have been two 'robberies' at Aindartek in Kathaldia where two people were killed. Interestingly, in both the incidents, the attackers assaulted the victims but did not take any valuables.

"I have never heard of any incidents of robbery in the neighbourhood in 60 years of my life," he said. "It appears that there's no law in the country to protect the environment and the ancestral homes of the locals from the land grabbers."

"Half a dozen canals from the Balu River including Kathaldia Khal used to provide communication network for the entire area. What will happen now to the environment and communication if those canals are destroyed by earth filling?" wondered the Shahidullah.

Presenting salient characteristics of her findings during her study, Ishrat Islam said at the seminar that 54 percent of the studied area is wetlands. The rate of wetland loss during 1999 to 2006 is 5.41 percent. On an average, the rate of daily wetland loss in Beraid is 19,134 square feet. "There will be no wetlands left in the eastern fringe by year 2029 if the present rate of loss continues."

A total of 57.6 percent of the farmers in the area own less than four bighas of land. According to the findings, 53.2 percent of the affected locals were forced to sell their lands while 25.8 percent were compelled to sell just because their lands were turned into enclaves within areas filled up by developers.

"Though offered a lucrative price, 90.9 percent of the respondents do not want to sell their land in future," Islam said.

As a consequence of filling up wetlands and flood plains by real estate developers, the capital city has already started witnessing nightmarish water logging with storm water after even insignificant rainfall ushering in an imminent environmental disaster, said experts.

Demanding severe punishment of the developers for their illegal land development, chief engineer of Bangladesh Water Development Board Enamul Haq said at the seminar, "They have destroyed two major retention ponds designated by Rajuk."

On February 17, Islam at a seminar at Brac Centre Inn said around 49 housing projects have been identified to be inside the floodplain zones and sub-floodplain zones earmarked in the DMDP covering around 9,241 acres of land.



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Thousands of acres of low-lying area in the eastern fringe of the city are being filled up by the land developers. Photo shows a part of the filled up area.