



Reckless driving, inactive law both to blame for rising road mishaps

"Hello father. My exam is going to begin next month and I'm coming home right after that. I just can't wait to see you and mother," Shammi Akhter Happy, a student of Psychology Department of Dhaka University (DU), was telling her father over phone.

She returned home much earlier but as a dead body. On May 28, 2005, she died in a road accident at Shahbagh intersection, run over by a bus.

Reportedly around 11,000 students died across the country in the last three years including six DU students. The traffic fatality rate in Bangladesh is 25-30 percent higher compared to that of the developed countries. This rate is 8-10 per cent higher than that of the South Asian countries.

A survey by the Accident Research Centre of Buet in 2004 shows some 4,000 people die each year in road accidents and 52,000 others get seriously injured.

The survey reveals that financial loss caused by road accidents amounts to Tk 4,000 crore, which is about 2 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) as a handsome amount of money is spent on the disabled caused by road accidents. Besides, when one dies his contribution to GDP also comes to an end.

Bangladesh tops the world in road accidents.

The causes of road accidents in Bangladesh as mentioned in a World Bank report in 2004 include poor traffic management, incompetence of the drivers, faulty vehicles, shabby roads, falling unconscious while driving and becoming drivers from helpers before learning the job properly.

Manik Hawlader, driver of the bus that killed Happy, confessed to the Rapid Action Battalion that he was actually a helper of that bus. He could not control the steering while driving recklessly. Encouraged by his fellowmen in the bus, he overtook two buses before hitting a motorcycle and then ran over Happy. Manik did this only to reach the destination ahead of others.

According to the drivers one hardly needs to have a licence for driving in Bangladesh. If a driver is stopped for driving recklessly or for his licence, Tk 50 or 100 does the trick to go away. Putting the money into their pocket, police simply let the driver go away.

Talking about this allegation, sources at the Traffic Police Department frankly admit there are some dishonest police personnel who do this. Subject to the nature of the complaints, actions are taken against the



A mangled microbus: An accident can sometimes ruin a family for life.

responsible individuals, they claim.

There is a provision of on-the-spot fine for driving offences. The fine varies from Tk 15 to 100. For example, Tk 50 is fined for violating traffic signals, Tk 50 for driving on the wrong side, Tk 100 for overtaking where prohibited and Tk 50 for failing to show documents like licence, fitness certificate, insurance certificate and registration certificate. Taking advantage of the law, some dishonest police personnel regularly take bribe from the drivers.

What measures are being taken to prevent accidents?

Police say a new department named 'Highway police' has been recently included in the police force for ensuring safe transportation and traffic discipline. The task of the highway police is to take measures against reckless driving, carrying excessive passengers and goods, plying unfit vehicles and having unauthorised licences.

With a view to preventing accidents, highway police posts have been set up in 72 important points of the country. Besides, five trauma centres have been set up at five important points of the national highway network for providing quick treatment to the injured.

In most cases, according to a World Bank report, drivers are

responsible for road accidents as incompetent drivers and their helpers are allowed to drive vehicles.

A transport worker, wishing anonymity, said that it was wrong to blame drivers only for road accidents. "Corruption by owners of vehicles and officials at the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) are equally responsible. Some dishonest BRTA officials help the owners obtain licences illegally. Sans training, many get licences by simply bribing the BRTA officials. Unskilled people are out there on the streets, causing frequent traffic accidents.

Despite a ban, 20-year-old vehicles, including buses and minibuses, are still plying the streets of Dhaka city because of corruption by a section of officials.

The Ministry of Communications imposed the ban on plying of 20-year-old buses and minibuses in Dhaka Metropolitan Area. Now the ministry itself admits that the 20-year-old vehicles are still plying the streets.

"Some people are making crores of taka by providing fake registrations and false documents in connivance with some BRTA officials. Fake registrations are provided for unfit old

vehicles," said a source at BRTA.

He says bodies and chassis of buses and minibuses are smuggled in from neighboring countries. Old vehicles are given a facelift so that they look new.

Sources at the Buet Accident Research Centre say the country has got 23,000 kilometers of main roads and accidents do not take place at all the places. There are some places where accidents take place frequently because of technical troubles, pedestrians' behaviour and disorder on the roads.

Experts said pedestrians' disregard for traffic rules is a big problem, while pedestrians say they are forced to walk along the street as there is no room to walk on footpaths in many areas of the city. Besides, the number of footbridges is too inadequate. Even there is no footbridge in many vulnerable places like Motijheel, Shahbagh and Bangla Motor intersections.

Many people are not even aware of traffic rules. People do need proper education in this regard. So, kids should be taught about traffic rules in their schools first.

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Krishna Bagchi, News Network

Flood victims pour into city for job, succour

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

Flood victims from Dhaka's surrounding districts are now moving around in the city to earn some instant cash to repair homesteads and sow seeds.

The rush of flood-hit people has had a big impact on the price of labour, as working opportunity went down while the number of workers increased due to flood. Negative impacts were seen in visits to some day labourer markets and rickshaw garages across the city this week.

"Water is still in my house. We took shelter on the DND dam a week ago, my father and elder son now are handling circumstances there. I am here to collect some cash for reconstructing my damaged house," Mizanur, a rickshaw puller in the city said on Saturday.

Mizanur, a flood victim, came to Dhaka from Chuhali upazila under Sirajganj district on last Sunday. He

informed that many other males like him were rushing to Dhaka from his area for earning quick cash. Mizanur said that he was fortunate to have gotten a rickshaw from a garage owner at Mohakhali area in the city.

He said that some other fellows from his locality have yet to get rickshaws from the owners, and are seeking help from people on the street to obtain meals. Owners of the rickshaw garages first seek a guarantee person for leasing a rickshaw to a puller, and there are many unfortunate people who do not have anyone to vouch for them.

"I somehow arranged a rickshaw and that helped me to get a lodging in the city, but my comrades are living on the footpaths of Karwan Bazar."

Mizanur can ride on a cycle, but has never pulled rickshaw in the past, so it was a horrible experience for him to huddle in the crowded city. "I was very frightened on the first day of my

rickshaw pulling, but now I am more confident. The problem is that I don't know the fares for the distances," he said.

He brought the reporter to the garage where he is lodging now. Ansar Ali, the garage owner, informed that within last 10 days the demand for rickshaws has skyrocketed.

"At least 5 to 10 persons are coming to me daily to rent a rickshaw. Most of them have references, but I am helpless. Now, all my 15 rickshaws, including the dilapidated ones, are on the road but 20 days ago only 10 of my rickshaws were plying in the city," he said. Ali added that since pullers were competing for rickshaws now, most garage owners have started demanding a higher daily deposit, though he is not one of them.

Usually in Dhaka owners collect Tk.70 as daily deposit for the authorised rickshaws, while they collect Tk.50 to 60 for unauthorised rickshaws. But

capitalising on the surge in demand, the garage owners are collecting more at present.

Even the police are showing more tolerance to pullers with unauthorised rickshaws, Ansar said. All of the rickshaw garage owners interviewed at Mohakhali, Mohammadpur and Mirpur informed that demand for rickshaws increased instantly after the flood. Rickshaw garage owners have been overwhelmed by the demand, and had to turn away many people. Some of the people who were unable to get rickshaws have started selling their services at daily labour markets.

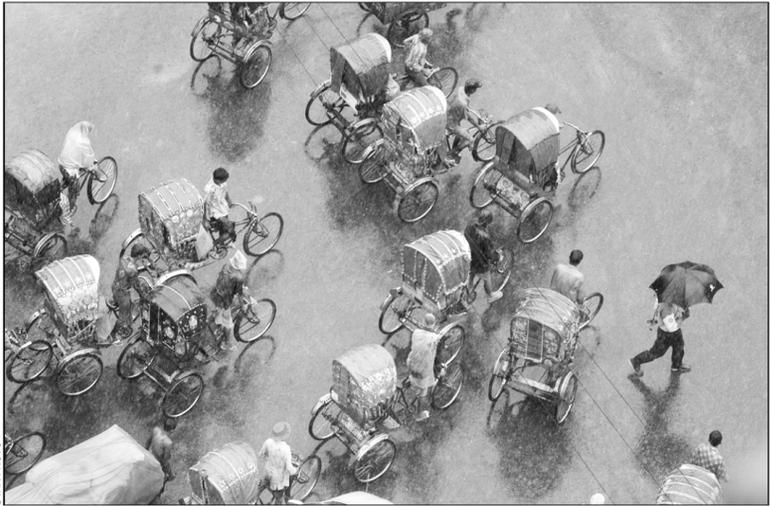
"I failed to get a rickshaw and then tried to sell my labour here," said Kismat Ali, a day labourer market in Mirpur section-1 on the Friday morning.

Kismat is a flood victim who came to Dhaka two weeks ago from Dewanganj, under Jamalpur district. He informed that he spent the first three days trying to arrange a rickshaw to pull, but when he failed, then from the next morning he tried to sell his labour at the market.

"On Friday I did not get any work, but previous five days I got work," he said. He too is facing lodging problems in the city. For the last 8 days, he has been sleeping at the Shah Ali Mazar in Mirpur.

Latif, a construction contractor, said that the flood has driven down the price of daily labour. He said that usually a daily labourer takes Tk.150 for a whole day's work, but now the markets are crowded with lots of workers and the price has gone down to Tk.120.

He said, "This situation in the labour sector will continue till November in the city because after the flood, like other years a famine-like atmosphere will hit the northern districts. The famine is called Monga, and it drives thousands of workers to the city."



Rickshaw-pullers mark a sudden rise in the wake of flood.

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- Dhaka Zoo-Sundays
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