

Mayhem on the highways

Why do such disastrous accidents occur so frequently? Human error arising out of sickness, exhaustion, alcohol intake, tension, daredevilry, and such unpredictable factors like structure collapse, signal failure, mechanical fault, poor visibility and the like, play a significant role behind accidents in all countries, including the highly developed ones.

MOHAMMED NAWAZISH

THE incidence of gruesome road accidents, especially on highways, has reached a catastrophic level, and is still on the rise. It was revealed in a high-profile workshop organised by the Accident Research Centre last November that 12,000 deaths occur every year in road accidents, though the number of seriously injured and maimed should be much more.

It was also revealed that nearly 80% of the deaths were of people in the age group 5 to 45 years, which has a significant economic and societal impact. It also eats up around two percent of the country's Gross National Product, which amounts to about Tk 5000 crore each year.

The incidents are escalating at a fearsome pace, and the authorities that control and manage the roads and highways are getting more and more ineffective in stemming the surge. Expansion of the road network is an essential precondition for development and it will have to continue, but a parallel spurt in the destruction of human life on the roads is a painful antithesis that has to be tackled with all the available

strategies and resources.

In this write-up, I'll take up only the roads and highways outside the city limits. These long roads are the potent source of death of thousands of innocent travellers and pedestrians. The concerned authorities are working round the clock to check the devastating trend, but so far they have failed to get anywhere near the target.

In fact, there is absolute anarchy prevailing in the entire transportation network, making travel increasingly hazardous.

Why do such disastrous accidents occur so frequently? Human error arising out of sickness, exhaustion, alcohol intake, tension, daredevilry, and such unpredictable factors like structure collapse, signal failure, mechanical fault, poor visibility and the like, play a significant role behind accidents in all countries, including the highly developed ones.

In August last year, a busy four-lane bridge over the river Mississippi right in the heart of Minneapolis suddenly caved in, tossing off a number of vehicles with passengers into the mighty river. Prolonged maintenance failure was found to be the cause of the sudden collapse. This is significant factor, but we have

a few more factors to add in our context.

- Reckless driving is the primary cause of accidents on our highways. The rare speed-limit indications create no impression at all on the drivers. Large, coloured boards at close intervals, with blinking lights at night, would have some positive impact.

- Similarly, "no overtaking" signs are seldom visible. Sizable coloured boards at regular intervals would frequently give out a warning signal. A few days back, as I was travelling to Gazipur in a car, I found the entire road from Uttara to Gazipur junction totally blocked as buses and trucks in four parallel rows clogged the road in such a way that not even a bicycle could slip by. It took one and a half hours to creep out of the awful jam. It would be useful to fix speed breakers made of loose corrugated, steel sheets that would emit a loud creaking noise if the vehicle did not slow down.

- We seldom see electric signals and road markings on highways. This is all the more conspicuous at road junctions and pedestrian pathways. Pale and dusty signals are of little use; brighter and prominent lights, preferably in a row,

usually have a psychological effect on the drivers. Bright road markings indicating road divisions, turning directions, and the permission or otherwise of overtaking also send meaningful messages. Because signal configuration in general is dependent on electricity, it has to be ensured that power outage does not affect signalling devices.

- Road dividers are very useful in preventing frontal collisions. Even in the most developed countries, dividers in the form of low concrete walls, closely dug pillars or wide patches of vacant fields, run along the thousands of miles of busy highways. We have to be very particular in this area, despite financial constraints.

- Bumpy road surface, potholes and invisible pits and breaches often cause the drivers to sharply veer sideways at high speed, resulting in fatal imbalance and smash-up. Every year the monsoon rains and floods take a heavy toll on roads.

- In addition, narrow rickety bridges on older roads frequently come up as positive death traps. Road maintenance as a continuous and all-season process is an imperative need to ensure safe traffic movement on roads and highways, and the responsibility squarely lies with the government agencies. There can be no excuse for failure in view of the high risk involved.

- The entry of slow-moving, manually operated vehicles like rickshaws, bikes, vans, push carts,

carriages etc should be prohibited on the main roads. They may have different tracks for movement but those must be metres away from the main road. These slow moving objects often cause fatal accidents on account of technical limitations and absolute ignorance of traffic rules combined with obstinacy.

- Firm measures are needed to restrain and regulate these cheap and primitive vehicles. To this, it may be added that no bazaars, shops or assembly of people close to the highway should ever be allowed; for safety of the speeding vehicles and the people on the roadside.

- To lessen the traffic flow we must upgrade and modernise our railway network to make it more attractive and convenient to the travellers. At the moment, the condition of the railway stations, tracks, bogies, and service is so deplorable that people try to avoid train journey at all costs.

An attractive railway service would have sliced off more than a half of the number of road commuters. Unfortunately, this alternative has never been addressed as an integrated part of the same basic issues -- quick transportation, and safety and security of long distance passengers. I would have added waterways as well but feel obliged to pull out considering the overall economic situation of the country.

Arguments and suggestions will never end, but the sum total points to one fundamental precept -- roads and highways shall have to be



Highways or die-ways?

kept under 24-hour surveillance, much like a battle-front. No restriction, no law, no discipline will ever work on the free-for-all trails unless the drivers are 100% convinced that they are under close watch, and that the violators of rules will not be spared under any circumstances.

Here comes the role of the highway police and the checkpoints, both of which are virtually non-existent these days. Once upon a time the creation of highway police was trumpeted loudly, and even colourful cars were

reportedly supplied as their primary tool. These have vanished, and the roads have turned into hunting grounds of rogue drivers and robber gangs.

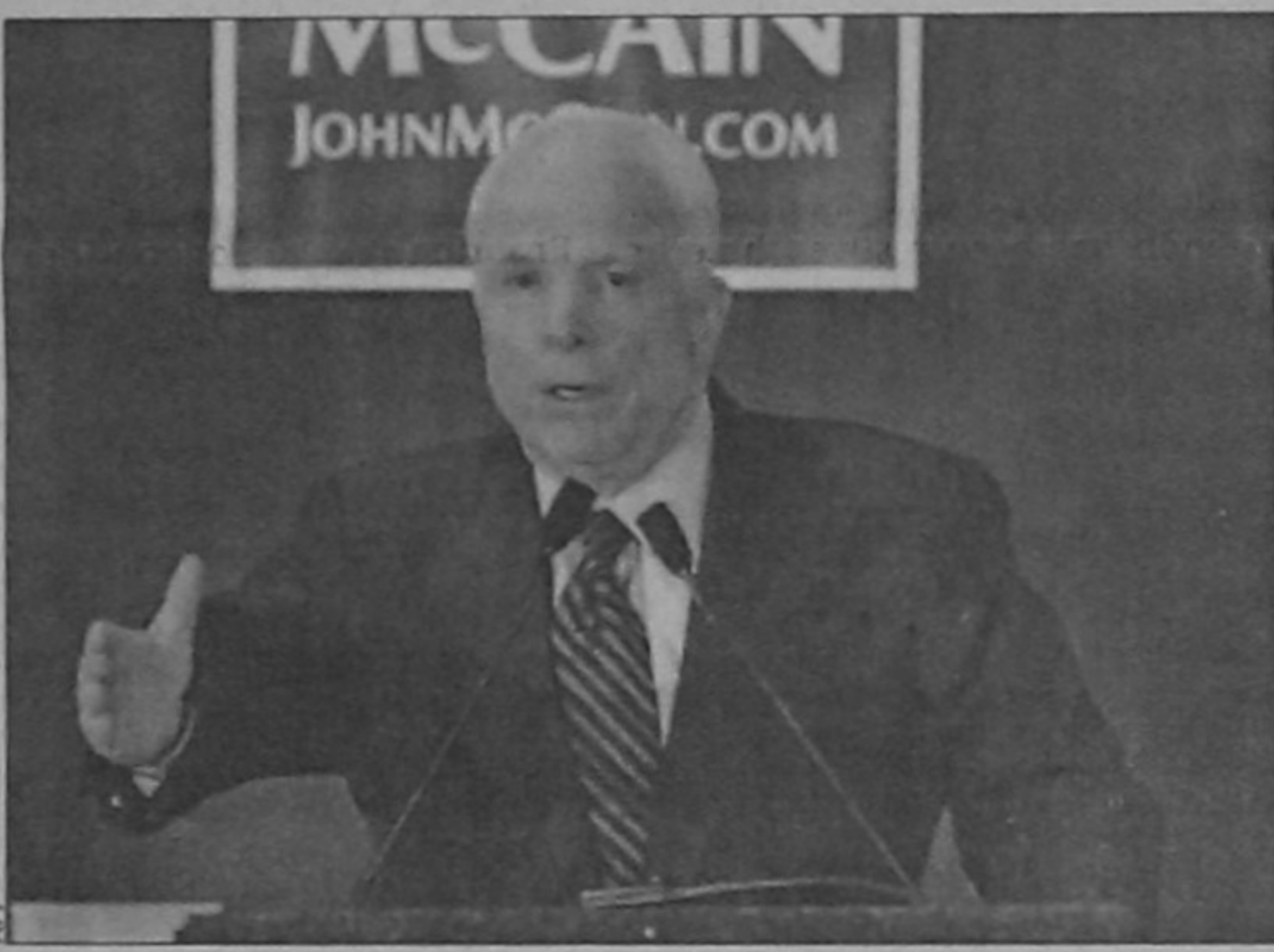
The one and only cure is to clamp an iron-fisted discipline on highways by permanently deploying an armed and trained highway police force with fast cars or motorcycles, and establishing interconnected observation posts at all vantage points. The highway police should have the power to track and seize vehicles and appre-

hend offenders on the spot.

The situation has reached a point of no return, no amount of theoretical research and dialogue and correspondence can halt the senseless blood bath and devastation on our major thoroughfares. A rigorous and pervasive presence of hard-hitting law-enforcers on roads and highways seems to be the last possible deterrent.

Mohammad Nawazish is a retired senior civil servant.

Scoping out Obama vs. McCain



McCain, 71, tried and tested.



Obama, 46, voice of a new generation.

Neither Obama nor McCain is a natural counter-puncher or champion debater. Obama has lost most of the Democratic debates to Clinton on points. In their 2000 debates, McCain was bested by Bush. Others will try to poison the process. Assorted scum will falsely call Obama a Muslim or McCain the "Manchurian candidate."

JONATHAN ALTER

THE democratic race isn't over yet. Hillary Clinton may still prevail. But the debate featuring Barack Obama and John McCain has already begun. The good news is that a contest between them has the potential to be spirited without being ugly. It may even focus on issues that actually matter to Americans. Imagine that! Instead of an examination of Al Gore's personality traits (2000) or a refigiting of Vietnam (2004), we may get a real debate about war and peace, taxes and spending, duty and hope. Or maybe I'm dreaming.

The contrast is already stark. Obama is 46 and looks 40; McCain is 71 and looks closer to 80, though he's got more energy than someone half his age. Their matchup would represent the largest age gap between major-party presidential candidates in American history.

The campaign would pit change vs. experience, fresh vs. tested, green vs. gray. Once their niceties about one's heroism and the other's inspiration are dispensed with, Obama would try to make the Arizona senator look like a hypocritical, clueless and warlike geezer, while McCain would suggest that the Illinois senator is a naive, liberal and dreamy kid.

The night of the Chesapeake primaries offered a preview. Obama reminded a Wisconsin

crowd that McCain had recently said we might be mired in Iraq for 100 years. He suggested that his early stance against the war would strike a better contrast with McCain than Hillary's early support.

He also signaled that he would hit McCain for reversing his opposition to President Bush's tax cuts. Obama quoted McCain as saying in 2001 that the tax cuts offended his "conscience" because "so many of them go to the most fortunate." But that was then. "Somewhere along the road to the Republican nomination, the Straight Talk Express lost its wheels," Obama said, trying to make McCain look like just another status quo politician.

Every effort by McCain to consolidate the conservative base will be met with a fusillade from the Democrats, with even his position on torture subjected to charges of flip-flopping. Expect to hear references to "Bush-McCain policies" ad nauseam.

Because Obama isn't the surefire nominee, McCain hasn't gone after him hard yet. But surrounded (unhelpfully) by geriatric politicians in Virginia last week, he argued that when a politician offers "only rhetoric" instead of "sound and proven ideas," the result "is not a promise of hope. It is a platitude."

This line of attack hasn't worked well for Hillary; voters like platitudes if they're musical enough. Even so, McCain

may have some presentational advantages that go beyond his compelling personal narrative. He does especially well in town-hall settings, where he deftly deploys his quirky charm to engage with (and often win over) people who disagree with him on many things.

Obama's campaign "is beginning to approach the level of a messianic complex," says one McCain aide who doesn't want to go public before the Democrats settle on their nominee. "McCain's is about putting the country first. I like that contrast."

Their differences on some big issues are negligible. With any luck, they'll try to outdo each other on expanding national service. Immigration is unlikely to play a major role, absent a third-party effort. But should Obama opt out of public financing of his fall campaign, as his aides hinted last week, McCain will pounce.

Besides pork-barrel spending, campaign-finance reform is the only domestic issue where McCain works up any real passion. That's a problem, because he'd better find some on health care and come up with a more convincing plan, pronto. On the faltering economy, likely to be central, neither man has any management experience. The question is who can better fake a deep knowledge he doesn't possess, with the edge going to Obama as the change agent.

To compensate for the huge gap in national-security experience, Obama might pick retired general Anthony Zinni, Sen. Jack Reed (a decorated Vietnam veteran) or former senator Sam Nunn as his running mate. He would stress homeland security, crushing Al Qaeda and how McCain's support for the Iraq War has harmed the military and cost trillions that could be better spent at home.

The last argument would be used to blunt any GOP attack on the high cost of Obama's liberal social programs. (The \$233 million Alaska "bridge to nowhere" that McCain complains about incessantly is equal to less than 18 hours in Iraq.) McCain will put plenty of distance between himself and Bush on the war's execution. And he'll slam Obama for being willing to sit down with dictators without preconditions, a sign, he'll say, that the junior senator isn't ready.

Neither Obama nor McCain is a natural counter-puncher or champion debater. Obama has lost most of the Democratic debates to Clinton on points. In their 2000 debates, McCain was bested by Bush. Others will try to poison the process. Assorted scum will falsely call Obama a Muslim or McCain the "Manchurian candidate."

Independent "527" committees may even try to fling mud-ball ads featuring Obama's black-nationalist past or McCain's "cover-up" of live POWs. But that will all likely be background noise to a substantive choice between two decent men -- unless one of them is a woman.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

Whither Musharraf?

The two parties that have emerged with popular support from this election should get full support from the international community in restoring democracy to Pakistan, which might prove more effective in combating terrorism than continuing to prop up a discredited and despised dictator.

HUSAIN HAQQANI

IN sixty years as an independent country, Pakistan has never changed its government through an election. Monday's election results offer an opportunity for Pakistanis to change that aspect of history. Notwithstanding considerable manipulation beforehand, the people voted overwhelmingly against their highly unpopular ruler Pervez Musharraf.

Almost every candidate who served in Musharraf's government lost. So did all major leaders of the Kings Party Musharraf cobbled together with the help of his security services soon after taking power in a 1999 military coup. The Islamists used by Musharraf as bogymen to garner western support were also trounced.

Pakistan's all-powerful army, now under the command of General Ashfaq Kiyani, is beginning to distance itself from politics. The army's refusal to side with Musharraf's political allies sealed their fate. Now, the army must help Pakistan back on to the constitutional path by undoing the arbitrary constitutional amendments decreed by Musharraf a few days before

relinquishing his command as army chief.

The depth of opposition to Musharraf, coupled with his tendency to change or break rules to stay in power, had raised serious doubts that Musharraf would manipulate the election results in favour of his allies. In the end, international pressure and a tendency to over-estimate his own ability stayed Musharraf's hand.

That does not mean, however, that Musharraf will not try to manipulate the situation again to cling to power. That would be a terrible and disastrous mistake. Some members of the Bush administration have repeatedly described Musharraf as an indispensable ally in the war against terrorism. Economic and military assistance from the United States and other western countries has been crucial for Musharraf's political survival thus far and has probably contributed to his arrogance and hubris.

This might be the moment for Musharraf's western backers to help him understand that annulment or alteration of the election results will only plunge Pakistan deeper into chaos.

Pakistan already faces an Al-Qaeda backed insurgency along its border with Afghanistan,

which is spilling over into other parts of the country. Any attempt by Musharraf to insist on retaining absolute power, rather than allowing opposition leaders Nawaz Sharif and Asif Zardari to return Pakistan to normal constitutional governance, would only anger the vast majority of Pakistanis who have just voted for moderate anti-terrorist parties. The ensuing chaos could strengthen the violent Islamist insurgents.

Musharraf was not on the ballot on Monday but the election was all about his fate, and that of Pakistan. Late last year, he had himself "elected" president by Pakistan's outgoing parliament, which was itself chosen through a dubious election in 2002, and fired 60 percent of superior court judges to forestall judicial review of the presidential election.

Election results show that Pakistan's two major opposition parties, the pro-western center-left Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and the center-right Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), together have secured an outright majority in the 342 seat National Assembly, and Musharraf's allies have been virtually wiped out.



Farewell to autocracy?

The opposition could now form a government that is no longer subservient to Musharraf. Even if he remains president, he would no longer remain the most powerful man in Pakistan.

Musharraf has said in the past that he would rather step down than face the ignominy of being impeached by the newly elected parliament, which would be possible if the anti-Musharraf parties' tally of seats in parliament reaches two-thirds of the total membership.

Since 9/11, Musharraf has marketed himself to the west as the man most capable of saving Pakistan from an Islamist takeover. But under his rule Pakistan has become more vulnerable to terrorists than before. Apart from failing in combating terrorism, Musharraf's government has squandered goodwill through its arbitrary actions against the political opposition and the judiciary. The economic achievements of the last eight years have benefited only a small sliver of the country's 160 million people.

The election campaign was marred by violence, which the government blames on terrorists. But the targets of violence have been the secular opposition parties -- the most notable victim being Benazir Bhutto who became an icon of democracy for Pakistanis after her assassination on December 27. Opposition politicians justifiably expressed doubts as to why the terrorists have not attacked pro-Musharraf groups, given that he is the man supposedly fighting them.

Musharraf would have damaged his diminishing credibility further if he had rigged the results and then proceeded to suppress likely protests by force. Losing the election might actually be better for him -- and Pakistan. Now he must accept the consequence of defeat and work out an honourable exit.

The two parties that have emerged with popular support from this election should get full support from the international community in restoring democracy to Pakistan, which might prove more effective in combating terrorism, than continuing to prop up a discredited and despised dictator.

Husain Haqqani, Director of Boston University's Center for International Relations, is Co-Chair of the Hudson Institute's Project on Islam and Democracy. He is the author of the Carnegie Endowment book, Pakistan Between Mosque and Military, and served as an advisor to former prime ministers, including Benazir Bhutto.