

Dirt and chaos greet passengers at Sadarghat terminal

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Sadarghat launch terminal, the largest river port of the country and the gateway to Dhaka city for southern people, remains as a source of sufferings and nuisance for around 75 thousand passengers using the terminal daily.

The terminal is completely devoid of any modern commuter services. The dark, dirty and damp terminal building is a hangout for vagabonds and beggars. The few benches set up there for passengers are often occupied by these people.

The only waiting room that can accommodate 20 persons, is always in a shabby condition. The toilets are never cleaned.

Hawkers occupy many parts of the jetty obstructing movement of the passengers. There are no proper facility for food and drinking water. A few floating restaurants established on discarded launches serve unhygienic food often processed and prepared with polluted riverwater.

Passengers are always greeted with unruly traffic on the way. The congested entry point of the terminal is a source of chaos. Harassment by the launch staff and stealing of luggage are regular experience of the passengers.

But there is nobody to help them. The information centre at the terminal remains closed all the time. The law enforcers hardly pay heed to the passengers' problems.

The police forces stationed at the terminal including 2 sub-inspectors and 22 constables under one sergeant usually spend their days languidly.

For millions of people living in the

southern part of Bangladesh, waterway is the most favourite mode of transport. A nightlong sleep in the motor launch usually ships them to the capital city or to their destinations out of the capital.

Halima Begum, a passenger bound for Subidkhali, Patuakhali said, "Getting on board a launch using the narrow plank is really risky. I wear a Hizab. For me it is even more risky. And I'm always scared when my children are with me."

She said the terminal authorities should introduce a safe and comfortable way to get on board a vessel.

Passengers alleged that many launches often change timetable without prior notice. "I have come here at 3:00pm but on arrival I heard that my launch will start at 8:00pm for Mothbaria," said a dejected Mostafizur Rahman, a garment worker from Mirpur.

"Now I have to wait for hours sitting on the floor as there are not enough sitting arrangements. I have to keep watch on my luggage. If I am not paying attention for a single moment I might end up losing everything," he added.

Abul Hasnat, hailing from Amtoli, said, "For any information we have to come all the way to Sadarghat, which takes two to three hours due to traffic jam. There is no way to know the launch timetable or book a cabin without coming here."

"Besides, there is continuous harassment by launch employees and porters who will swindle passengers every chance they get. The on-duty policemen bother little about these incidents," said Hasnat. "The foul odour of polluted water and garbage here is also unbearable."



A pool of dirt lying below the slippery gangway shows the state of the terminal at a glance.

Around 150 launches operate from Sadarghat on 49 routes every day connecting all the districts of greater Barisal and Khulna divisions. Many passengers of greater Faridpur, Munshiganj, Kishoreganj and Narsingdi also depend on the waterway. Total number of launches plying all around the country is around 6 thousand and among them only 4500 have proper document.

According to Bangladesh Inland Waterways Passenger Carrier Association (BIWPCA), around 1.20 crore people travelled using Sadarghat in the year 2006.

Since its inception in 1960, the river port saw very little modification. The last attempt was taken in 1983, though that did not change the face of the Sadarghat.

The only modification that took place in the terminal recently is the enlarged jetty and increased number of gangways. Currently the terminal has 13 jetties and 10 gangways. However, due to lack of proper maintenance these are falling apart.

Launch owners blame the government for neglecting the immense prospect of the water transport sector and the river ports.

Md. Sahabuddin Milon, vice chairman of BIWPCA, said, "Waterways of

Bangladesh have immense potential to become a major source of revenue since we are a land of rivers. The government however has always neglected this sector."

"The government has no investment to explore this prospect. The meagre amount of budget allocated is usually spent on paying salaries of the employees," he added.

Milon pointed out, "The launch owners every year pay millions of taka in taxes. We don't know where does this money go."

Milon suggested that arrival to the Sadarghat terminal must be made easier for the passengers. "If entry to the port cannot be improved, then nothing will change. The severe traffic jam and disorder at the entrance must be eased."

He suggested that launch owners must be included in the planning process. "It is not possible to improve the services without involving the launch owners"

Contacted, Abdul Mannan Howlader, chairman, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), the supervising authority of the terminal, said a project for beautification, modernisation and extension of the terminal is currently in progress.

"A project started last month to modernise Sadarghat terminal to provide improved services. We are introducing some of the facilities that modern river ports have," he said.

Under the project, the terminal will have an electronic display board for announcing timetable and routes of the launches. Signs and directions will be installed at all the points. Number of toilets will be increased.

The waiting room will be extended. Wheelchairs will be added to ease the sufferings of the physically challenged passengers. There will be trolleys for more comfortable luggage carrying. The ferry point from where small boats operate will be shifted.

"Usually people have to come to Sadarghat to know launch schedules or book a cabin, which cost the passengers a lot of time and money. This is about to change," he said.

"We are discussing with the launch owners about establishing ticket counters at important points inside the city. Phone services will be established at the terminal so that passengers can get any information just making a phone call," he added.

The Tk 4.97 crore project will be implemented by 2009.

Taking stock of parks, playgrounds delayed further

TAWFIQUE ALI

The Public Works Department (PWD) has prepared an incomplete list of city parks and playgrounds under its jurisdiction as requested by an inter-ministerial committee.

The LGRD and cooperatives ministry at an inter-ministerial meeting on September 5 formed the 10-member inter-ministerial committee and gave a 15-day deadline to the agencies concerned to submit the lists to the committee.

But PWD and NHA, the two organs of the Ministry of Housing and Public Works, missed two deadlines for submission of the lists.

Based on the lists submitted by different agencies, the committee is to prepare a detailed report delineating locations and latest state of the parks and playgrounds under different agencies within the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) area.

Abeda Akhtar, a deputy secretary at the works ministry, said that they have received the lists from PWD and NHA after a long delay.

"The PWD has submitted a compilation of particulars mainly of playgrounds located in various residential areas in the capital. It is not a comprehensive list of all such parks and playgrounds under PDW jurisdiction," she said.

Abeda said they will send the lists to DCC as soon as possible.

Due to delay by the PWD and NHA, the committee submitted a partial compilation of lists provided by different agencies to the LGRD secretary on January 27.

"We delayed the submission twice and finally submitted the compilation of lists without any information from PWD and NHA," said Sirajul Islam, chief town planner of DCC and member secretary of the inter-ministerial committee.

Leaders of Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (Bapa), an environmentalist group, met the LGRD adviser on August 21 last year and recommended identification and demarcation of all the parks and playgrounds not only in the capital but also across the country for a coordinated maintenance and conservation with participation of the local community.

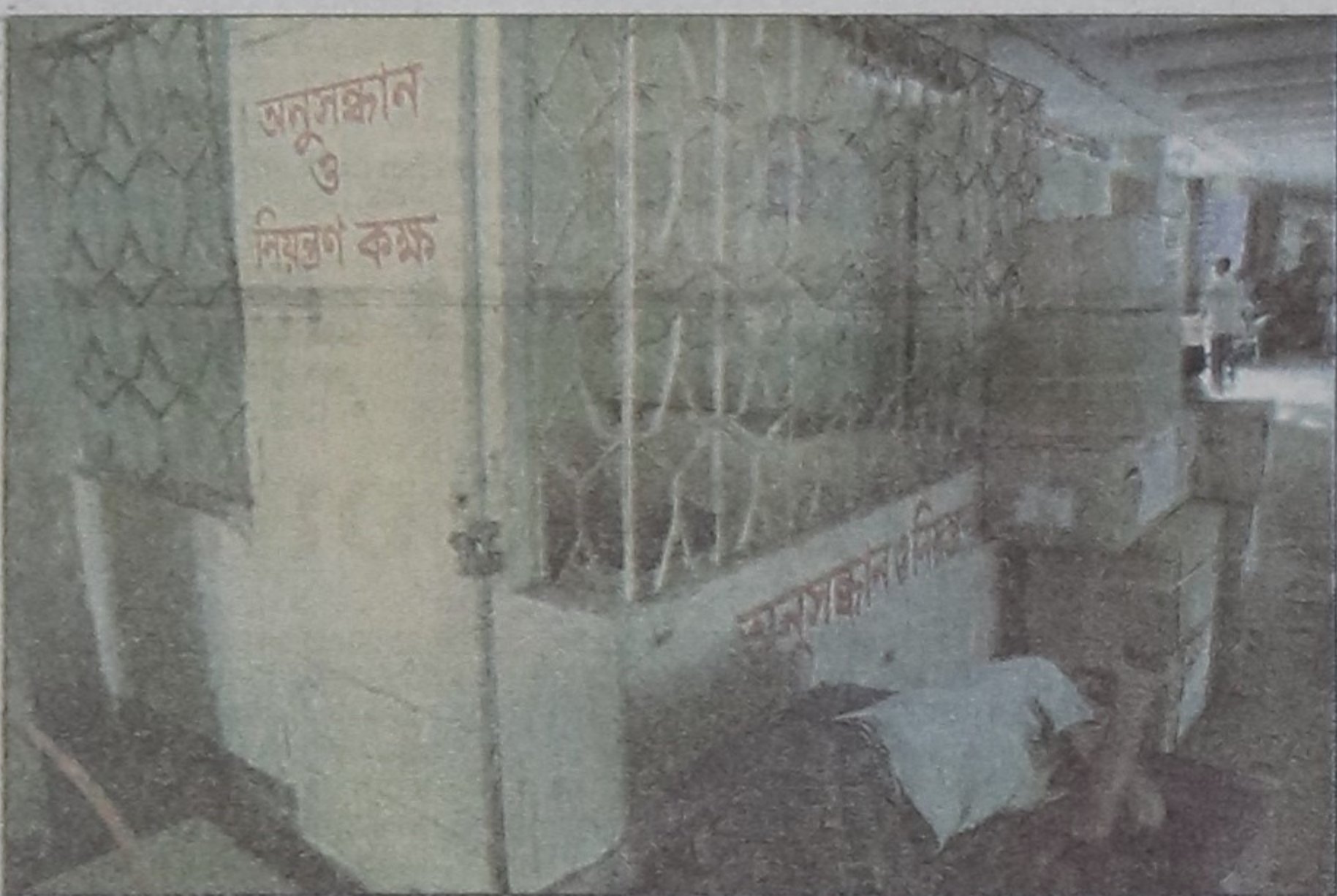
Sharif Jamil, member secretary of Bapa's parks and grounds programme committee. "We need the lists to know about the condition of all the parks and playgrounds in the city."

The inter-ministerial committee wrote to all the agencies concerned including DCC, Rajuk, PWD, NHA, BTTB, Railway, BIWTA and Sports Ministry asking them to provide information on the parks and playgrounds under their ownership or maintenance.

According to the lists submitted to the committee, DCC has a total of 49 public parks, 10 playgrounds, six graveyards and two cremation grounds in its area.

Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) has 31 parks and playgrounds and three graveyards in Uttara, Gulshan, Banani, Nikunja, Mohakhali and Badda.

Bangladesh railway has three playgrounds and one graveyard, National Sports Council has seven playgrounds and Directorate of Sports has one playground in Mohammadpur.



The information centre remains under lock and key most of the time.

Innovative plan to reduce traffic jam at city's level crossings

Train services to be suspended at busy hours in mornings and evenings

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Bangladesh railway plans to suspend its train services for two hours and ten minutes in the mornings and evenings in the city to ease traffic congestions at the level crossings.

If implemented, the city's 15 rail tracks will be without trains from 8:00am to 9:00am in the morning and 5:10pm to 6:00pm in the evening.

"The idea is to reduce traffic congestions in the level crossings during the office opening and closing hours," said a Bangladesh Railway (BR) spokesperson, adding the railway has already worked out a compromise schedule.

Timing of around 14 trains in the eastern zone of BR will be adjusted in tune with the proposed schedule. However, a handful of commuter trains will not come within the purview of the new scheme, railway sources said.

Commuter trains are regional trains that shuttle between central business districts and commuter belts. Dhaka has a number of commuter trains operating within shorter distance such as Tongi or Gazipur drawing a large number of people on a daily basis.

"As a large number of people depends on the commuter trains, adjourning them in the office hours will create problems for them. Furthermore, those people would have to opt for buses and other transportation adding to the traffic tailback," said a top official concerned at BR.

According to sources in the BR,

the new plan is currently being reviewed and evaluated. While no date for its implementation is yet to be specified, railway officials hoped to finalise it within the next month.

The new initiative from the railway comes at a time when traffic situation in the city have reached a state of chaos.

With 72 trains arriving at and departing from Kamalapur Railway Station every day, each of the 18 level crossings in the city experiences a total traffic halt for over six hours a day, railway sources said.

Railway officials said around five minutes are lost when a train passes

a level crossing. "If we calculate the time lost for passing of 72 trains, it would be 360 minutes," said an official.

Traffic officials also believe level crossings often contribute to the traffic disorder. "Streets with rail crossings frequently witness the worse kinds of tailbacks. They stretch a long way and create traffic congestions in the link roads and adjacent regions," said Sohail Arman, a traffic sergeant who was on duty near the Malibagh rail crossing.

Citing the Malibagh level crossing as an example, he tried to explain the

severity of the traffic congestions near level crossings. "When a train passes through this crossing, it creates a tailback up to the Mouchak market, another one goes towards Khilgaon while the third one towards Rampura. Each of these tailbacks, in the end, creates traffic chaos in the adjacent areas," he said.

The traffic situation further aggravates when motorists lock themselves in overtaking each other violating traffic rules. Rickshaws, small vehicles and pedestrians are often found crossing the level crossings when a train is about to pass. They ignore the red signal and cross

the rail tracks even when the bar is lowered, traffic official observed.

Rail crossings across the city often turn into death traps for people due to violation of traffic rules and lack of awareness among the city dwellers, they said.

According to Bangladesh Railway data, at least 172 people were killed from January till September 2006 in accidents on the 39 kilometres Tongi-Dhaka-Narayanganj line. In 2007 the number of people killed was more than 119. A good number of these accidents occurred at level crossings, especially during the rush hours.

Md. Belayet Hossain, Director General of Bangladesh Railway however expressed his scepticism about the effectiveness of the new scheme.

"I think one hour of recess in the operation of train twice a day would make little difference in the severe traffic congestion of the city. But it's a start," said Belayet Hossain.

Successive governments have pledged to relocate the rail tracks to address the city's perennial traffic problem but none has so far acted positively on the issue.

Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB) also had a plan to construct partial grade separation (bridges over the rail crossing) at existing level crossings of the city to ease traffic congestion. However, experts opposed the idea.

The government is also not interested to shift Dhaka's central rail station from Kamalapur to outside the city considering that it would increase the cost of carrying goods into the capital, some officials said.



A train at the Mogbazar level crossing creates tailbacks.

FOOTBRIDGE AT BANGLAMOTOR



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

The much-talked about and needed footbridge at Banglamotor finally opens to public. A similar footbridge at Paribagh point opened at the same time.