

Taxicab service in city on the verge of collapse

Over 70pc cabs already out of service due to poor condition

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Dhaka's taxicab service is on the verge of breakdown as more than 70 percent of the cabs have been taken out of service.

According to Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), out of the total 10,857 registered taxis in Dhaka around 7,500 cabs have been discarded due to unfit condition.

However, many cabs especially the black ones are still running on the streets in a run-down condition without valid fitness certificates, officials of the BRTA said.

According to Bangladesh

Cab Owners Association, only 6 out of 50 cab companies are currently in business. Others went bankrupt for not being able to repay bank loans.

The owners blamed selection of wrong vehicles, untrained drivers, carjacking and damaged road condition as major reasons behind the dismal state of the service.

"Our drivers were not properly oriented for the duty as cab drivers," said GM Seraj, chairman, Cab Association of Bangladesh and also owner of Cabex Ltd.

Seraj said when taxicab was introduced in the capital in 1999 there were not enough drivers to drive them. Drivers

of two-stroke autorickshaws that were phased out in 2001 became jobless and later became taxicab drivers.

"Without any motorcar driving experience, they captured most of the cabs in a very short time, especially the black ones, which was built for light travelling service," he added.

"Carjacking is also a major reason. We were always held hostage by hijackers and received poor cooperation from the law enforcers regarding the matter," Seraj said.

ASE Delwar, manager, Navana Taxicab, on the other hand blamed selection of wrong vehicles for such heavy duty. "It was a wrong

decision to use 800cc Indian light vehicles as taxicabs. These vehicles are not at all fit for such heavy loads."

"Besides, the streets of Dhaka are always in a damaged condition. There are too many potholes that damage these light vehicles," he added.

About 4,407 of the total cabs are air-conditioned yellow cabs while most of the 6,450 non-AC cabs are 800cc vehicles imported from India during the BNP-led government.

Commuters and cab owners said the old and run-down cabs of the city must be replaced by new ones without delay.

SR Khan, general secretary of the cab association and

owner of Anudwip Cab, mentioned that confusing policies of the ministry and BRTA regarding taxicab replacement process is hindering the recovery of the sector.

"The rules and regulations imposed for cab replacement and the amount of time it requires for processing is costing us a lot. I have applied two years ago for replacement and received permission only last month," he said.

Khan however hoped that the situation will improve soon as the authorities have recently assured the owners of necessary assistance to boost the service.

Humayun Rashid Khalifa, director (Operations), BRTA said they have placed a set of proposals in September to the Ministry of Communications for amending the Taxicab Services Policy Guideline 1998, to improve taxicab facilities for commuters.

BRTA invited applications for replacement of the old cabs last July. This time 800cc vehicles will not be allowed to operate as cab. Vehicles meant for taxicabs have to be 1350cc or more. Rebuilding old engines will not be allowed either.

BRTA also proposed that companies should run the service. "Earlier there were owners who had only one or two cabs running on the streets. This had made it impossible to control the sector as there were too many owners," Khalifa said.

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Department of Environment, in association with Bangladesh Road Transport Authority and Dhaka Metropolitan Police started a five-day drive from Sunday to enforce law against sound pollution. They are taking actions against horn-happy motorists while promoting awareness against unnecessary honking. Over 60 vehicles have already been fined for breaking laws. The drive ends tomorrow.

Kitchen shopping gets unpleasant at dingy, crammed markets

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

An hour inside Karwan Bazar kitchen market, the largest one in the city, could make anyone find Dhaka's notoriously hot, humid summer air heavenly, thanks to the city fathers' reluctance to the convenience of tax-payers.

Still it is lucky for the shoppers, their time spent inside the three-storied 'warehouse' should not stretch for more than an hour.

Not so lucky for the traders though. The vendors who spend hours haggling with customers have to virtually grasp for air due to lack of fresh air inside the market.

"Most of the time, it gets really suffocating here. Things get worse during power cuts," said Mohammad Khalil, a trader at the market.

"When all the shops turn on their lights, even the air produced by the electric fans becomes overheated. It makes the place feel like a boiler," said Moktar Hossain, another seller.

Quite a few among the thousands of traders and workers in the Karwan Bazar kitchen markets, who have to toil long hours under the unhealthy atmosphere, complained of asthma, jaundice, skin diseases, headache and chest pain.

"I have been suffering from chest pain since I started working here around four years ago," said Hazrat Ali, a grocer at the market.

"Doctors in Dhaka Medical College Hospital said I should avoid being inside closed spaces for long to get rid of the pain," he said. Hazrat now gallops out of the market for a breath of fresh air whenever he gets the chance.

A quick glance inside the

markets would give one the impression that they were built just to make room for around 3,000 odd stalls, putting facilities including easy movement, ventilation and sanitation at the backyard.

Scenes at some 16 other kitchen markets in the city are hardly any different.

"The stalls are located haphazardly, as if they [vendors] have set their shops wherever they could find a few inches of space to spread their legs. Even walking inside the place feels like a hassle," said Anwar Hossain, a shopper at Malibagh kitchen market.

"There is hardly any space for two persons to stand side by side in the narrow paths between the stalls. Sometimes you may have to get inside the stall to make way for the other shoppers to pass by," said

Anjan Sarkar, another shopper.

A huge portion of the kitchen market is virtually located on the nearby railway tracks where hundreds of people do shopping, ignoring the risk on life.

The scenes from Jurain kitchen market are quite similar, if not worse. Over 600 hawkers at the kitchen market are operating their business sitting on railroad tracks.

Rampura kitchen market is chock-a-block with hundreds of shops along the adjacent street.

"The condition of the kitchen market here [Rampura] would make it clear why many people these days prefer to shop in the supermarkets," said Arafat Huda, a resident of Rampura and a frequenter in the local kitchen market.

"There you would have a

hard time finding way out through all the haphazardly set stalls and thronging people."

Situations of the kitchen markets in Khilgaon Taltala, Mohakhali, Kalmilata, Hatirpul, Kanthal Bagan, Mohammadpur, Rayer Bazar, Nolgola, Sadarghat, Badamtali, Shyambazar, Sutrapur, Kadamtala and other places are but a little different.

"Most kitchen markets in the city were made, as if to accommodate as many shops as possible with as many varieties of goods. They are far from being hygienic for the sellers as well as frequenters," said Rafi Uddin, member secretary of Karwan Bazar Shopkeepers and Hawkers Association.

"The authorities should give some thought on the convenience of the buyers, and as well as sellers," he said.

Sources at Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) said they are now constructing four new wholesale kitchen markets at Mahakhali, Aminbazar, Jatrabari and Lalbagh in the city.

Authorities in November last year decided that the wholesalers and retailers of Karwan Bazar kitchen market, the largest one in the country, will be relocated to these markets.

The aim is to introduce a better market monitoring system and ensure smooth supply and distribution of farm products in the city, said an official at the Bazar Circle of DCC.

The construction of the markets and the relocation of Karwan Bazar wholesale market is scheduled to be completed by December 2010, DCC sources said.



Most kitchen markets in the city were made, as if to accommodate as many shops as possible, relegating facilities for shoppers at the backyard. The picture was taken from Rayer Bazar kitchen market.

STAR PHOTO

Residential zone plagued by business establishments

Uncontrolled commercialisation of Gulshan Model Town goes on unabated

TAWFIQUE ALI

Gulshan Model Town, which was originally a residential area, is turning into a commercial zone with uncontrolled growth of business establishments.

Corporate offices, garment factories, foreign agency offices, shopping malls, restaurants, hotels and private universities have marred the area's basic residential features.

CM Shafi Sami, former adviser to the caretaker government and presently president of the Gulshan Society, said vast area of this residential town has been turned commercial over the years severely impacting quality of life in the area.

Government authorities, including Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk), have adapted rules for letting Gulshan to be commercialised in total contravention of its original concept of a residential area.

"Sadly, the authorities have encouraged the creeping commercialisation by allowing commercial establishments along the main avenue," said Sami.

"They have also countenanced the commercialisation that has crept into areas designated as residential. Gulshan today is infested with such illegal establishments."

Besides, there are instances of encroachments on public spaces like roads and sidewalks by local and foreign institutions and powerful individuals.

Government and private offices, community centres, rest houses, hospitals and clinics, English medium schools and boutiques are seen all over Gulshan.

Shirin Shila, joint general secretary of Gulshan Society, said huge traffic loads due to commercial set-ups and garment factories have made life miserable there.

"It is the inaction of the authorities concerned that has resulted in the destruction of residential atmosphere of the area," she said.

Moreover, the beneficiaries are so powerful that the authorities in many cases cannot enforce laws and rules to save the ordinary residents, said Shirin who won a High Court stay on the government's move to commercialise the Gulshan main avenue letting the buildings go up to eight-storey, beyond the six-storey ceiling.

Prof Muzaffer Ahmad, president of environmentalist group Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa), said the plan of Gulshan had two designated sites -- Gulshan circle-1 and 2 -

- for commercialisation to meet the needs of the model town.

"So, indiscriminate illegal commercialisation in Gulshan and Banani has no justification and is unacceptable," he said.

According to Salma Shafi, an architect, disproportionate land use in residential area inevitably results in such a suffocating situation.

In case the government intends to allow major thoroughfare or periphery of a residential area for commercialisation, it must carry out analysis of possible traffic situation and its implications, she said.

Architect Iqbal Habib, member secretary of Bapa, said, "Rajuk itself is a violator of Dhaka's master plan and building laws."

Rajuk has turned two sites designated for fuel filling stations, one in Gulshan and one in Banani, into plots for high-rise commercial buildings, said Rajuk sources.

Rajuk started to use a puzzling term 'non-residential' for otherwise uses of residential buildings from 1980s, Habib said adding that Dhaka City Corporation that issues trade licences in the city also cannot evade its responsibility for the situation.

Rajuk Chairman Md Shafiqul Islam said it is true that there are incidents of deviant uses of residential buildings for commercial and non-residential purposes. "There are many offices housed in residential buildings. We too are concerned," he said.

"They should either be evicted or slapped with exorbitant tax to discourage commercialisation of a residential neighbourhood," the Rajuk chairman said.

A senior town planner of Rajuk said that in fact conversion from residential to commercial has occurred with the government's high-level decision from time to time.

"In such cases, where a decision is taken at government's policy level, the matter is not even placed at Rajuk's planning section," he said.

First-ever in history, Rajuk served a notice in May last year to the illegal commercial occupiers of residential buildings in the city's designated residential areas asking them to vacate illegal occupancy within two months.

The notice was served to four categories of unauthorised non-residential and commercial usages of residential buildings including restaurants, colleges and universities, hospitals and garment factories. But the move has been stalled for reasons unknown.