

## Pay raise of govt servants a welcome move

*It would be now their turn to deliver*

THE just announced new pay scale aims to address a long-standing feeling of deprivation among the government employees. And it cannot also be denied that the old pay scale did not match the reality of the present market that dictates the cost of living. The present effort of the government will hopefully go to address the mismatch between the old pay scale of the employees and the rising cost of living.

While welcoming the present move of the government, we would like to point to the greater responsibility and obligations that it will naturally place on the beneficiaries of the pay raise. For the enhanced pay does also imply that from now on an additional cost of Tk 62.22 billion will have to be borne by the public exchequer annually.

But how is the government going to meet the additional cost from its exchequer? It would then require a better management of the budget, so that it may not have to increase its borrowing from the bank for the purpose. At the same time, it should put a brake on freewheeling and all kinds of wasteful expenditures.

As the pay raise will also increase the public's expectation from the public servants, it should therefore encourage them to reflect on how better they can perform their tasks. But if past is any guide, they will be able to find room for improvement. Inefficiency, corruption, laxity and some other vices were rather pervasive in the administration. Even then, in the face of this common perception about the public servants, there was also a powerful factor that went in their favour. It is that low pay affected their level of performance. But now with higher pay, they would be left with little room for any sloth.

It would be worthwhile to call our attention to other possible ramifications of the wholesale pay raise such as inflation and price hike of the daily essentials.

However, the finance minister, while briefing the press about the good news, assured us that the new pay regime would not negatively impact the kitchen market. So, it would be another great news for us if there were no further spike in the prices of the essential commodities after the announcement of pay scale.

The worries aside, the pay scale is expected to boost the morale of the public servants, which would go to inject a fresh dose of dynamism in their work culture. At the same time, they should also return this government move with greater accountability, commitment and efficiency in their delivery of service to the nation.

## The faltering demolition drive

*Strong, purposeful action over unauthorized structures imperative*

OVER the last couple of years there has been much talk and quite some action regarding structures falling foul of building regulations. During the period of the caretaker administration, some purposeful exercises were undertaken to demolish unauthorized structures. But at a point those drives appeared to come to a stop for reasons that have never been explained. And since the present government took over early this year, the demolition programme has been going on at various places in the capital. Every so often, there have been news reports of the authorities, in this case Rajuk, getting busy retrieving spots that have fallen into the hands of unscrupulous elements. In the past few weeks, if not months, one has come across reports and images of bulldozers busy pulling down parts of structures not authorized under the existing regulations.

That should have been cheering news; and indeed it was so in the initial stages. But now come reports, pretty substantiated ones, that speak of the overall demolition drive losing force and therefore turning out to have been an effort compromised. That is borne out by the fact that after the Rajuk authorities demolish a structure, or part of it, some mysterious happenstance results in the demolished structures or parts of buildings being restored. This much was made clear through a front-page photograph in the issue of this newspaper yesterday. A particular reason why the demolition drive was undertaken in the first place was the need for parking spaces at organizations purporting to provide public service. That is only normal, for when parking spaces are not made by such organizations, it is not just the law that is violated but also citizens' movement that is impeded. The question now is why all these years the Rajuk authorities allowed such buildings to come up or simply looked the other way when such gross activities were taking place.

If mistakes were made in the past, what is happening now is simply beyond explanation. Bulldozers demolish a structure and building owners are told in no uncertain terms that parking space for cars must be constructed there. Within the next few days or weeks, the situation is almost back to square one. Are we to suppose that the owners are too powerful to be intimidated by the law? Or must we suspect some underhand dealings to have gone into a rebuilding some of the demolished structures?

Let strong action be taken here. And such action must deal harshly not only with those who are guilty of putting up unauthorized structures but also those who undo demolition and those within the government who fail to follow up on their previous action.

## Small nations in the big world

But what makes a nation a nation is its sovereign autonomy. It's said that good things come in small packages. But what is good about small nations when bigger countries literally rule them? From many small countries to a few large ones, the realm of effective influence narrows down to one superpower.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE number of small nations is bigger than the number of big nations in the world. G. Pascal Zachary writes in *The Global Me*, published in 2000, that the world had 74 small nations in 1946. At the time of writing his book, he counted 190 small nations, of which 87 had populations below 5 million, 58 less than 2.5 million and 35 lower than 500,000. But does size matter in international relations? As Bob Dylan sang, "the answer my friend is blowing in the wind."

Some of these small nations are islands. Others are either archipelagos or enclaves. Vatican City is the world's smallest state with an area of 0.2 square miles and a population of 770, none of them being permanent residents. There are small nations in dire straits. For example, Seychelles is 1,500 kilometers from any other country. Cost of living is very high, because almost everything is imported from faraway neighbours.

A good number of the small nations don't make economic sense. Economies of scale don't permit the smallest of these small nations even to operate universities on their soils. They are constrained to send their students abroad. Some of these nations also don't make military sense. They can't raise their own armies, and rely on alliance with larger countries to defend their territories against foreign invasion.

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of effective influence narrows down to one superpower.

According to Bouvier's *Law Dictionary*, a sovereign state is one which governs itself independently of any foreign power. Is that true for the small countries? Are these countries capable of warding off the meddling foreign hands muddling their internal affairs?

Seventeen of the smallest nations have a combined territory of less than 200 square miles. Their combined population is 1.4 million. What does sovereignty mean for them? These are independent countries with their respective governments. The question is, do these governments have supreme and independent authority over their respective territories and populations?

In 1985, a report of the Commonwealth Secretariat concluded that small countries weren't simply scaled-down versions of large countries. These small countries have ecology of their own. But does that ecology enable them to exercise control over their own fates and resources? Are these countries sovereign in the true sense of the word?

Imagination needs a twist here. Small nations don't always have to be small in area and population. There can be large countries with large territories and population, but small because of the size of economy and military might. The *CIA Fact Book* shows that Israel has an area of 22,072 square kilometers and a population of roughly 7 million.

By comparison, Bangladesh is 6.5 times the size of Israel in terms of area, and more than 22 times in terms of population. But Israel is a more powerful country compared to Bangladesh in economic and military



The powerful and the weak.

strengths. Which proves Zachary's point. There is no statistical relationship between country size and economic growth rates.

Instead, experience shows that small countries at times outperform big ones, which are endowed with oil, minerals and other resources. Nigeria, Iran and Indonesia are an example of what Terry Lynn Karl, a political economist, calls "the paradox of plenty." Their opulence became a handicap for their economic growth.

Even if we believe that small countries can have big economies, does it mean they can enjoy their authority without the blessings of big countries? In other words, are the small countries independent enough not to depend on large countries? Do these countries have sufficient autonomy to stand with big countries on an equal footing?

These questions are nothing new, because the viability of small nations has always been suspect. In 1843, the independence of Belgium and Portugal was argued as a "ridiculous" concept. Giuseppe Mazzini, the nineteenth-century unifier of Italy, had

said that the ideal number of European nations would be twelve. That number today is fifty.

Then, what gives the small nations their right to exist? Most of them are neither powerful nor resourceful nor successful. Most of these nations are struggling with democracy, a good number going through economic hardship and political upheavals. They are culturally invaded. Their governments are remote controlled. Their intellectuals are indoctrinated. Their markets are dominated.

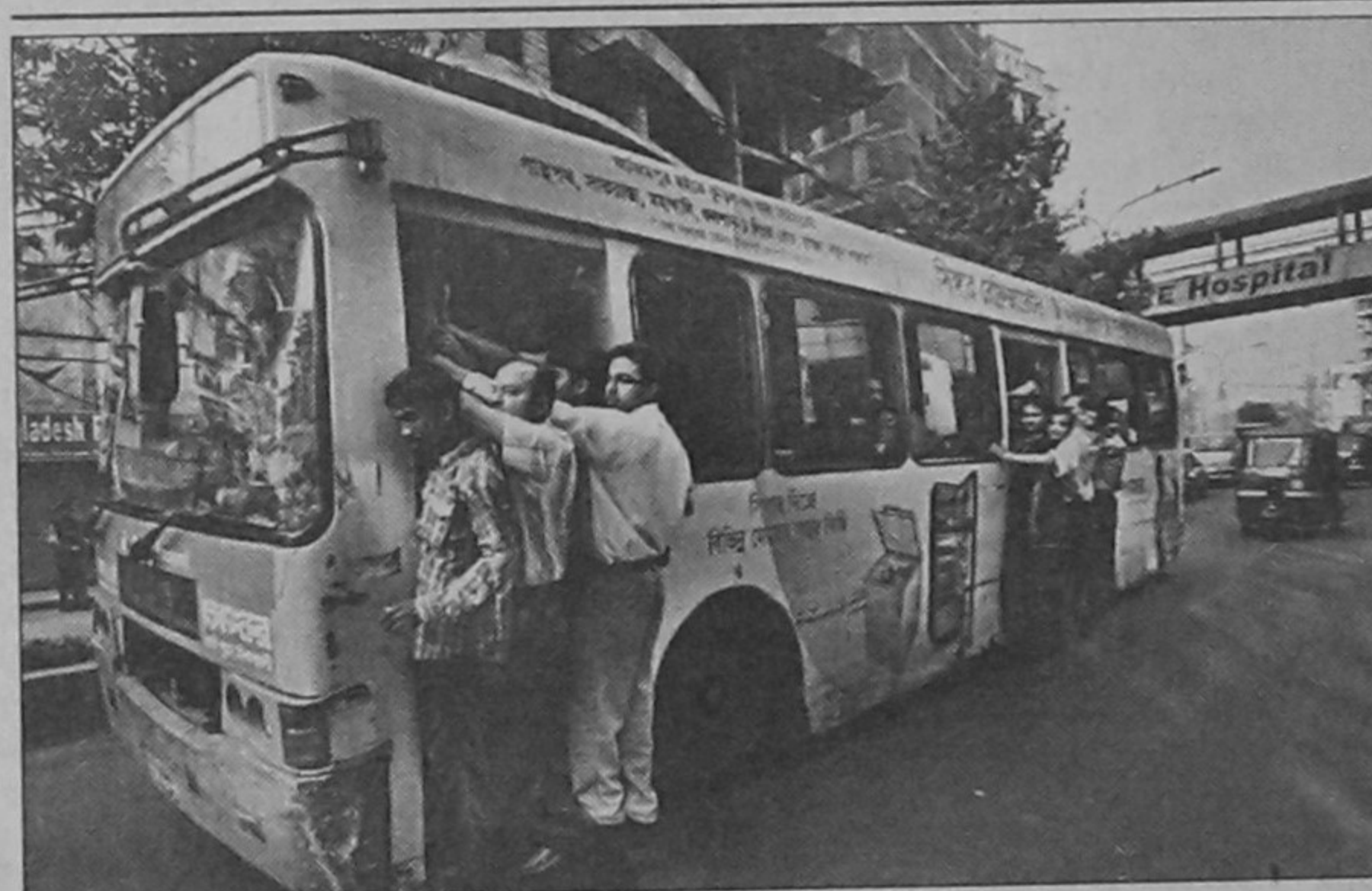
Paul Saffo, a futurist, offers optimism to the small nations. The critical ingredient has shifted from natural resources to knowledge. In the emerging order, a country won't be successful if it has the most brains, unless these brains can also act in concert. Competition not cooperation will make a small nation big.

Dear leaders, hope it rings a bell.

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## Rampant extortion by transport associations

Road transport, as a vital pillar of public mobility, is an integral component of the country's socio-economic structure. Strong political will at the highest level is required to ensure coordinated efforts by the home, communication and labour ministries to establish discipline in this vital sector by addressing the root causes of this malaise.



MD. REZAUL KARIM

FOR decades, the road transport sector in Bangladesh has been plagued by rampant extortion and bribery. Due to the domino effect, the cost of extortion is passed on from vehicle owners to transport users to wholesalers to retailers and finally to the hapless consumers who are the ultimate victims. This issue has been recently highlighted by the food and disaster management minister, who went on record in the electronic media citing precise figures to emphasise how extortion results in manifold increases in transport costs.

It is, thus, clear that commodity prices can never be brought down to tolerable levels without controlling this menace. Unfortunately, successive governments have failed to undertake any effective remedial measures in this regard. Road transport, as a vital pillar of public mobility, is an integral component of the country's socio-economic structure.

Strong political will at the highest level is required to ensure coordinated efforts by the home, communication and labour ministries to establish discipline in this vital sector by addressing the root causes of this malaise.

### Analysis of root causes

**Lack of accountability:** There is no agency or clear-cut government policy for the regulation of the activities of the transport associations. In the absence of a precise set of rules delineating the nature and scope of their activities, they are free to operate as they wish. Furthermore, there is no auditing system to monitor how the collected subscriptions are utilised.

**Numerous transport associations:** Readers will be surprised to know that there are more than 53 associations operating in the routes of the southern and western parts of Bangladesh. In the absence of updated official records, the actual number could not be ascertained. Under existing provisions, it is easy to establish transport trade unions.

They come into existence with the professed manifesto of protecting the rights of the transport workers and owners and with the promise of providing various facilities to the stakeholders of this sector.

In reality, however, their main objective is to achieve dominance over transport routes for the purpose of extortion. It is relatively easy for persons with political backing to take advantage of the flexibility of existing trade union and labour Acts to set up transport associations.

**Absence of eligibility criteria:** Due to weaknesses in the trade union and labour Acts, persons who are neither vehicle owners nor transport staff become office-bearers of transport associations by using their political connections. At the risk of losing their lives or facing other forms of intimidation, the general transport owners and workers rarely dare to protest such practices. They are even reluctant to unite under a common banner for the realisation of their legitimate rights.

**Non-emergence of new leadership:** In the absence of mandatory legal provisions for holding free and transparent elections at regular intervals, a few known faces always manage to remain at the helm with the help of political (and hence administrative) backing and muscle power. Change in government is usually accompanied by change in leadership of the associations,

but the new leaders are again from among the same circle of known faces (albeit from a different party) with the same agenda. It is the classic case of "old wine in a new bottle."

**According to some vehicle owners:** "We have no power to overthrow them democratically as they can manage the influential leaders of the ruling party and keep their position in the association indefinitely. If there is clear and enforceable government regulation for selecting association leaders only through ballot, we could throw them out."

Tacit patronage by political leaders and administration: This is indeed the crux of the problem. If the very persons who, as public representatives and government functionaries, are empowered to curb this menace are themselves partners in crime, this problem will never be solved. It is no secret that a substantial portion of the proceeds of extortion finds its way into the pockets of these patrons.

### Nature and extent of extortion and other irregularities

**Monthly subscriptions:** By setting up counters at district towns, major intersections and entry points to district and divisional towns, the associations collect Tk.500-1,000 as mandatory subscriptions from each bus (www.ti-bangladesh.org) on a monthly basis.

**Trip-wise subscriptions on long routes:** Almost all commercial vehicles carrying passengers and goods have to pay Tk.500-1,000 as subscription for each trip. This is collected at five to twenty places along the routes, like entry points of district headquarters, major intersections and at places adjacent to police boxes and stations.

**Over-charging passengers:** Neither the traffic police nor the mobile courts operated by the BRTA and the RTC have succeeded in ensuring that passengers are not overcharged by bus operators. A TIB study (www.ti-bangladesh.org) reveals that 23%-76% extra fare is charged in 15 routes under DMP area. The situation is not very different in other areas. On-duty traffic personnel are not very effective in solving this problem because of political influence, absence of sufficiently punitive regulations or simply because of corruption.

**Misuse of power:** Influential transport owners care little about laws and regulations. They often use their connections to free bus/truck drivers arrested for causing fatal accidents. They use their influence to obtain recommendations for route permits from the RTC and registration of unfit vehicles and driving licenses for unqualified and inexperienced drivers.

**Total disregard for workers' rights:** A study conducted by the TIB (2009) reveals that 96% of the professional drivers do not get any formal appointment letters from their employers. There are no laws specifying their salaries, benefits and terms of employment and, thus, no way of ensuring their job security. Transport associations are professedly established to ensure the rights, privileges and welfare of the workers

as stipulated in the Labour Act. Ironically, it is they who are responsible for the exploitation of general workers and owners.

**No monitoring authority:** Concerned ministries and BRTA have no regulatory jurisdiction over transport associations or terminal committees. As a result, they can do pretty much as they wish.

**Recommendations**  
**Abolition of political patronage:** Initiative should be taken at the highest levels of government to form high-powered cells to identify the culprits within the ruling party who are engaged in patronage of the extortionists. It should be made clear that such acts would be punishable by expulsion or suspension from the party. Prompt and exemplary action should be taken if such warnings are not heeded.

**Ensuring accountability:** Policies should be formulated specifying the criteria for formation of transport associations, incorporating mechanisms for regulating their activities and ensuring transparency and accountability through formulation of strict rules and regulations in this respect.  
**Eligibility for leadership:** The labor ministry should fix some basic criteria, which must be fulfilled in order to become office-bearers of transport associations. The tenure and scope of work of the associations should be clearly spelled out. Provision for election of leaders through secret ballot should be there.

**Empowerment of BRTA:** BRTA should be institutionally strengthened so that it can strongly and effectively monitor the activities of the associations.

**Controlling bus fares:** Strict penalties (fines and/or imprisonment) should be instituted for charging fares in excess of those determined by the RTC. If necessary, the RTC should be overhauled with competent and honest persons at the helm to implement these measures.

**Abolition of recommendation system:** The system of obtaining approval from the associations for new operators or even for additions to existing fleets should be done away with.

**Ensuring rights of transport workers:** The labour ministry should formulate and enforce a comprehensive code of conduct specifying wages and benefits of transport workers and their right to formal appointment letters detailing their terms of employment.

**Cancellation of registration:** There should be provision for cancellation of registration of transport associations for violation of regulations.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that mere formulation of rules and regulations cannot stop extortion or bring about desired reforms in this sector. As I have mentioned before, only sincerity and determination at the highest political levels can bring this about.

This article reflects the writer's own views

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