

Unsafe highways unsafe travel

Authorities must move to address the danger

OUR highways are veritable death traps that have over the years on the average taken more lives per year than in any other country. And we seem to be in a state of torpor when it comes to addressing this danger. Statistics of the Highway Police indicate a figure of 510 deaths on the highways only in the first half of 2010. The figure is perhaps much higher considering the fact that many accidents do not get reported at all or are taken cognizance of by the police.

Just take the statistics of death in highway accidents over the three-day holiday period of Eid-ul-Azha. Forty-five people perished while travelling on the inter-district roads. And most of the accidents were caused by over-speeding bus running into the roadside ditch or hitting a road side tree, or colliding head-on or motor cyclists run over by overloaded vehicles running at speeds much higher than the driver's ability to control.

There have been several studies on the causes of highway accidents and remedies thereof and there have been endless colloquiums and articles and meetings at the highest level of the government, yet nothing tangible by way of remedial measures has been done.

Of the factors, faulty road engineering and lack of police supervision have emerged as the two most important ones. And these two areas continue to be neglected. In spite of the fact that major faults on the highways have been identified by the by the authorities concerned, very few, if any, have been set right; and this despite the instructions of the PM to address the issue of highway safety on urgent basis.

But if mending the construction faults is a time-consuming process the essential supervision by the police, particularly during the Eid rush, might have helped reduce the number of accidents and prevent deaths. But this has been scant at best and at worst totally non-existent.

We have on many occasions in this very column stressed the need to reinforce the highway police. It is not only the shortage of manpower but also of mobility which is woefully lacking. Add to this the graft-taking propensity of the keepers of law and order that allows the errant drivers to not only violate traffic rules but also escape after causing an accident. And some regulatory measures like speed governors have not worked.

Road travel will become an even more dangerous proposition unless something is done about it soon enough.

Suu Kyi moves cautiously

The junta should be receptive

THE newly freed Aung San Suu Kyi has been giving out cautious signals of what she plans to do now that she is back in sunlight. While her release from long detention was surely a seminal event not only for the people of her country but also for the rest of the world, it was how she intended to make use of her freedom that became an important question for many. Perhaps there was reason enough here for such a question. In her previous stints of fitful freedom, Ms. Suu Kyi's refusal to go soft on the military junta ruling her country swiftly saw her back in lonely imprisonment. That as well as the feeling in a good many quarters that her idealism had all along been getting the better of her judgement may well have played a role in her present change of attitude. Where earlier she was vociferously in favour of outside nations clamping sanctions on her country unless the regime relented, now she appears to have shifted ground just a little.

And that shift has largely to do with how she perceives the role of the United States in an evolution towards democracy in her country. She does not believe any more that American engagement with the junta is ruinous for pluralism. The position fits in rather well with that adopted by the Obama administration, which clearly has come round to the idea that a dialogue, after all, with the military regime is better than a so far fruitless policy of isolation of it. One may quite be mystified by the way in which the military, in power since 1962, has hung on despite international condemnation of it. Sanctions have not worked, for the simple reason that a good number of nations, notably the country's neighbours, have regularly maintained trade with Myanmar. That has certainly not earned the regime any respect. It has only demonstrated its entrenched nature. Such a reality now seems to have dawned on Suu Kyi, who has nevertheless urged Washington to keep its eyes open and remain alert about what happens from here on in Myanmar. Her emphasis on human rights is a sign that while she may be ready to change tactics in pursuit of her politics, her goal remains unflagging.

Ms. Suu Kyi must be encouraged in the careful moves she makes toward egging, by slow degrees, Myanmar toward democracy. The regime, for all its self-confidence generated by the recent 'elections', will need to engage not just with America but with Suu Kyi as well. The woman who led her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), to a landslide electoral triumph in 1990, is in every sense Myanmar's face to the outside world. It is for the Obama administration and other democratic nations to see that Aung San Suu Kyi remains the symbol of her people's aspirations. And it is for Myanmar's generals to make sure they do not again make the mistake of ignoring her. So far, she has refused to fade away or be silenced.

Why this recurrent impasse in rawhide market?



QUDDUS ALAM / DRK NEWS

The good news is that the apex bodies of the tanners and wholesalers are trying to find out a solution to the crisis together. They are also expecting that the government will step in to lend a hand in solving the crisis. The situation calls for early intervention of the government to protect the rawhide market, or the leather industry for that matter that brings in around half a billion dollar annually through export.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE hopes of the seasonal rawhide traders, middlemen, the wholesalers as well as the tanners have been shattered this year. The anthrax scare that started in the third week of August caused an acute shortage of meat as well as leather in the country. The anthrax attack that was first detected in a village in Sirajganj, which soon spread to Pabna, Tangail, Kushtia and other places, prompting the government to issue a month-long red alert in early September across the nation.

However, with the withdrawal of the red alert in the first week of October, the situation in the meat and hide market gradually improved. As a result, hope was rekindled among the hide traders. They naturally expected a brisk business in hide at the time of the Eid-ul-Azha. During this second biggest Muslim festival, the market gets 40% of the entire annual supply of rawhide. Small wonder that the seasonal traders in rawhide at the base to the wholesale merchants and tanners at the apex were all equally euphoric.

The number of animals slaughtered during this Eid-ul-Azha was also 20%

higher than in the previous year, which amounts to around 6 million animals including cow and goat. Some 4.5 million cows and 2 million goats were slaughtered during this Eid-ul-Azha festival. But as ill luck would have it, so far, their hopes have not been translated into real business, as the prices at which the seasonal traders and middlemen bought the hides were far higher than the prices fixed by the tanners.

It has been learnt that the seasonal traders and the wholesalers have bought every square foot of cowhide at rates that were 40 to 45% higher than that fixed by the tanners -- which between Tk.55 and Tk.60. The tanners, on the other hand, are also not in a position to buy the hides at higher rates than the fixed ones as they have to keep pace with the international market for hide and skin, where they export their tanned hide. Same is the case with other members of the leather industry, such as the manufacturers and exporters of shoes and other leather products.

The leather industry is, therefore, in a serious predicament. But what went wrong in the market so that the seasonal traders as well as the wholesalers were induced to buy

rawhide at prices that were higher than that set by the industry? Is it not strange that the seasonal traders and the farias (middlemen) were buying the rawhides at a higher price knowing fully well that the supply of hide in the market would be abundant? Does this market behaviour not defy the law of demand and supply?

Some wholesale traders have alleged that a syndicate of the tanners is to blame for this situation in the market. They say that before the Eid they had to buy rawhide at higher prices -- between Tk.80 and Tk.90 per square foot -- because there was an acute shortage of supply at that time. And that was also the reason why better quality rawhides were sold at higher prices. However, outside of Dhaka, rawhide was sold at the prices fixed by the industry leaders.

Some rawhide merchants in Chittagong have pointed at the unknown traders who bought the rawhides from seasonal traders at a very high rate compared to that set by the apex body of tanners, who are the usual end users of rawhide. Who are those unidentified purchasers of hide? It has been alleged by the Chittagong seasonal traders that those purchasers of rawhide are cross-border smugglers, who intentionally caused this artificial crisis in the market. Are they also active in the capital city?

But these are only allegations. And it is through proper investigation into the matter that the truth would finally come out.

But the fact remains that this is not also for the first time that the rawhide traders are in a crisis. In the past years, too, they had to face similar crises due to anarchy in the post-Eid-ul-Azha market. The allega-

tion about the smugglers aside, the common complaint in the capital city as elsewhere in the past years was that rackets of local bullies controlled the seasonal trade in the rawhide market. In this way, they forced the original owners, who slaughtered the animals as a sacrifice to God, to sell the rawhide at prices far below their market value in order to make a windfall gain out of the seasonal business in rawhide.

But the reports have it that such rackets of local groups were not active this year, if only due to the government's unsympathetic attitude towards them. But then why are we still facing the problem though in a different form this year?

If anything, it is only the circumstances of the crisis that are different this year. So, what we are experiencing now is nothing but the usual post-Eid-ul-Azha hide market syndrome, though it is now the seasonal traders, the middlemen and the wholesalers who are at the receiving end.

What will the wholesalers now do with the hides stocked in their depots? They, together with the tanners, will have to find a way out of the crisis. They will have to do that in their own interests as well in the greater interest of the industry as a whole.

The good news is that the apex bodies of the tanners and wholesalers are trying to find out a solution to the crisis together. They are also expecting that the government will step in to lend a hand in solving the crisis. The situation calls for early intervention of the government to protect the rawhide market, or the leather industry for that matter that brings in around half a billion dollar annually through export.

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The Security Council seat mirage

Mr. Obama's support for a permanent Council seat for India remains mainly symbolic. The Indian elite's elation over it stems from its irrational obsession with global prestige, status, and the symbols, not substance, of power. It's prestige, not security rationale, which drove India to cross the nuclear threshold in 1998.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

PRESIDENT Barack Obama visited India at a time when US hegemony is in decline and India is in the ascendant. The visit offered India an opportunity to tell him what kind of world order it would like to see.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh squandered the opportunity. Mr. Obama sealed deals worth \$20 billion to create 55,000 jobs in America, lectured India on Iran and Myanmar, and sold illusions of grandeur.

Perhaps the greatest illusion is Mr. Obama's "offer" of a permanent United Nations Security Council seat for an already "emerged" India. This provoked "strong disappointment" from Pakistan. Pakistani analysts assume that US support instantly guarantees India the seat -- although State Department official Robert Blake cautions against an early "breakthrough."

A breakthrough is unlikely anytime soon, for five reasons. First, a permanent seat requires a two-thirds majority in the UN General Assembly, and approval of the five permanent Council members (US, Russia, Britain, France and China). Neither is assured.

Second, US endorsement is conditional upon India taking on "increased [global] responsibility". Mr. Obama said: "In the years ahead, I look forward to a reformed UN Security Council that includes India as a permanent member." This is much weaker than the US's "unambiguous" support for Japan in 2005.

Third, the Council's expansion is a divisive issue. The US would like only two new permanent members with veto power, and two or three new temporary members. But many countries want a much bigger Council. Some among the P-5 want additional permanent members -- without veto power.

Japan and Germany want permanent seats with veto power. They joined India and Brazil to form the G-4, but this is strongly opposed by the "Coffee Club" (Pakistan, Italy, Spain, South Korea, Mexico and others). China stoutly opposes Japan and will probably resist India.

So, neither condition for Council reform -- two-thirds majority and non-exercise of veto power -- will probably be fulfilled soon.

Fourth, numerous contending claims could produce a deadlock. In 2004-05, when Council expansion was debated, Secretary General Kofi Annan proposed two plans. Both were rejected. (Plan A would add six permanent members, without veto, besides another three new temporary developing-country seats. Plan B proposed eight new re-electable "semi-permanent" seats for four years, and one new temporary seat.)

The G-4 advocated a version of Plan A with reconsideration of veto power in 15 years. But the African bloc scuttled this by demanding veto power for all permanent seats.

The Muslim countries, the Arab League and the African Union all have hard-to-reconcile claims. For instance, Nigeria, South Africa and Egypt each wants to represent Africa. Indonesia and Nigeria both

want the "Muslim seat."

Finally, India no longer enjoys all its allies' strong support. Russia's position on India's permanent membership has shifted from unambiguous endorsement to "consensus."

The G-4's unity stands dented -- ironically, by Washington's backing for India. Germany and Japan have protested at being overlooked. India could now find the G-4 a liability, rather than an asset.

Most Pakistani analysts have overreacted to Mr. Obama's statement, which they see through a wholly India-centric prism, while assuming India-Pakistan parity. This is partly rooted in their suspicion of Washington, especially resentment over US desertion of Islamabad after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Pakistan's hostility will translate into greater "Coffee Club" activism and lobbying of China. It's unclear if Premier Wen Jiabao can be persuaded during his forthcoming India visit to modify Beijing's official stand, namely, that China "understands India's aspirations to play a greater role in the UN and is ready...[for] consultations."

Mr. Obama's support for a permanent Council seat for India remains mainly symbolic. The Indian elite's elation over it stems from its irrational obsession with global prestige, status, and the symbols, not substance, of power. It's prestige, not security rationale, which drove India to cross the nuclear threshold in 1998.

The same trend was reflected in Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna's exultation over India's election last month to a temporary Council seat as a "big day for Indian diplomacy." But, under the Asian rota system, India's victory was inevitable once Kazakhstan withdrew.

True, India got the most votes of the five winners -- 187 out of 192. This is explained by India's Herculean lobbying -- Mr. Krishna personally spoke to 123 foreign ministers in New York in September. Pakistan, which wants the Asian seat in 2012, didn't campaign against India and

voted for it. But even tiny Colombia polled 186 votes.

However, India's temporary seat won't easily translate into a permanent one. Nor does a permanent seat give untrammelled power. The P-5 cannot get a Council resolution passed without four temporary members' support.

Non-permanent members can block P-5-sponsored resolutions. In 2003, the US motion for invading Iraq was defeated primarily by small countries like Angola, Cameroon, Guinea and Chile, besides traditional US supporters Mexico and Pakistan.

The real issue isn't a permanent seat but what kind of Great Power India should become. What causes should it advocate? What are the true purposes of India's growing power? On these, there is, sadly, very little domestic debate.

Mr. Obama's visit was a good occasion for India to tell him it would bring a strong moral dimension to its global role, guard its autonomy and not become Washington's camp-follower.

This could have been done in three ways. First, by asserting India's independent views on current issues like Iran, Palestine and Afghanistan. Second, by refusing to join the US attempt to recruit various Indian states into a China containment strategy -- the primary purpose of Mr. Obama's Asian tour. And third, by reaffirming the urgency of universal agendas such as North-South inequality, militarisation of international relations, prevalence of mass-destruction weapons, and climate change.

Regrettably, Dr. Singh said nothing that conveyed India's resolve to create a distinct, independent diplomatic-political space, or act as a tribune of underprivileged peoples and nations.

Building closer, equitable relations with Washington is one thing. Joining the US bandwagon is another.

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