

SHIFTING IMAGES

The anger gridlock



MILIA ALI

REMEMBER the theory about "Survival of the Fittest?" It is alive and, in fact, thriving in the streets of Dhaka where, every day, one witnesses SUVs with reinforced fenders bulldozing their way in the midst of the traffic gridlock. Smaller vehicles, motorbikes, and rickshaws also jostle for space in a constant battle to get ahead. However, it's the mightiest that win this tug of war of hooting horns, prodding buses, flaring tempers and, sometimes, violent fist fights!

Traffic congestion is not unique to Dhaka. Almost all mega cities have their fair share of frustration. But in most countries, vehicles keep moving in an orderly fashion. Few break out of lane, or honk, or jump the queue. What is it that makes the difference? Is it the volume of traffic, inadequate infrastructure or is it a systemic failure where traffic laws are not imposed? The following incidents may throw some light on the underlying causes of the traffic mayhem in Dhaka!

A couple of months ago a friend was driving, in pouring rain, on a US highway when she had a flat tire. Because of adverse weather conditions and the consequent traffic crawl, she was stuck in the middle lane and couldn't pull onto the shoulder. Switching on her double blinkers, she called AAA (the roadside auto service) and decided to wait inside the car. Unfortunately, within minutes she was rear-ended by another driver. As if this was not bad enough, the lady who had rammed into her car stomped toward her in a rage and punched her right in the face. The physical attack was accompanied by screaming obscenities and accusations about bad driving. My friend called 911 and the police arrived within minutes. The woman who had assaulted my friend was arrested. Subsequently, she was convicted in a court and put on two years probation, including mandatory participation in anger management classes. Recently, someone shared a story about a road rage episode that occurred in Dhaka. The Bangladeshi version, however, had quite a different twist. In this case the trailing car was a racing Pajero, which ploughed into a mini Honda stalled

in the middle of the road, with a flat. No sooner did this happen, two men in black outfits (complete with aviator sunglasses and gold chains) emerged from the Pajero and started thrashing the Honda's driver. Apparently, the beating was interspersed with comments like: "You two-penny worth of SOB driving a tin toy, how dare you stop in the middle of the road? Is it your father's property?" The verbal tirade seemed to insinuate that a more expensive car had more rights and smaller vehicles should know their place in public streets. As expected, a large crowd gathered and watched the debacle with side comments and a degree of resignation. No one thought of calling the police. Finally, a frightened lady came out of the Honda and begged the Pajero guys to spare her helpless driver. She, literally, snatched him away from the attackers

after which the "proud Pajero" sped away leaving the "humiliated Honda" to replace its tire. Readers, before some of you leap to the conclusion that I am holding the perpetrators of the "driver-thrashing" incident to high Western standards, let me clarify that I sincerely believe that basic human instincts are the same world over. In both episodes, the offenders behaved irrationally and succumbed to their anger and rage. However, in the first case the authorities promptly stepped in and defused an emotionally charged situation. Besides, the aggressor was given the strong message that assaulting a person is a criminal offence. In the Dhaka incident, the attackers took the law in their hands and departed with the confidence that they can repeat the offence without any repercussions. The underlying point is that when citizens understand that even a minor infraction of the law will invoke heavy penalties or arrest, they tend to become more cautious and law-abiding

The close correlation between orderly behaviour and enforcement of discipline is amply demonstrated by the queue at the bus stand in front of the Gulshan Market in Dhaka. The bus authorities have instituted a rule that anyone breaking the line will not get to ride the bus. Result? People form long, disciplined lines and follow the directive, despite the fact that there is no police intervention. If you don't believe me just take a little time to visit the spot during peak traffic hour and you will be pleasantly surprised to see how well the system works. It will restore your faith in the ability of the common people to respect the law, provided there is fairness, accountability and incentive!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Experiencing the devastating earthquake in Japan

M. JALALUL HAI

THE massive earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan on March 11, 2011, causing release of radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, represent one of the greatest disasters to strike Japan in recent memory. The earthquake triggered powerful tsunami waves which reached heights of up to 40.5 metres in Miyako of Iwate prefecture in Tohoku region, which in Sendai area traveled up to 10 km inland.

The then Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan said: "In the 65 years after World War II, this is the toughest and most difficult crisis for Japan." As per official figures, 15,841 people died and close to 8,740 people were missing minutes after the earthquake and tsunami. In addition to loss of life and destruction of infrastructures, the tsunami caused a number of nuclear accidents at three reactors in the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant Complex, affecting thousands of residents.

During that time I was working with United Nations Industrial Development Organization's (UNIDO) Tokyo office. We were in a meeting at their Head Office on the 31st floor. The first shock of the Great Earthquake was felt around 2:45 p.m. We continued with the discussion, but the tremors continued one after another. The duration of each shock might have been around 3-5 minutes, but it felt much longer. I did not panic, nor was I afraid. I had confidence in Japanese technology, particularly in the building we were in. It was not possible to continue the meeting, so we climbed down the stairs from the 31st floor. Everybody was going down very quietly and in a disciplined way. At that time the mobile telephone network was not working and subway communication was stopped. The roads were congested and it was impossible to find a vacant taxi. Everybody was on the surface. It was quite a new experience for me in Tokyo. My counterpart tried the land phone but she found it difficult to get in touch with the company with whom we had an appointment. While walking toward UNIDO office, we saw thousands of people returning home. They were

calm and quiet. After one and half hours walking we reached the UNIDO office in Hanzomon. Due to unavailability of the elevator, we walked up to 7th floor and found that all the decoration pieces of the office fallen down. Though the cellular phone service was completely disrupted, the land telephone/public coin telephone was partially working. Many people were in a queue in front of public coin telephones, but nobody was in a hurry. The electricity supply at that time was not disrupted. People were buying food items from convenience stores in a disciplined way and there was no price hiking. On the same day we had another appointment with a reporter of the *Asahi Shinbun*. We thought he would not be able to come, and were surprised to see him arrive on time. He told us that he came by bicycle. There were aftershocks, one after another throughout the night. I was so scared that I just could not stay in my room, so I watched television in the lobby. Next day, I went to see what had happened. I didn't

There were aftershocks, one after another throughout the night. I was so scared that I just could not stay in my room, so I watched television in the lobby. Next day, I went to see what had happened. I didn't see any collapsed buildings or any signs of the earthquake.

see any collapsed buildings or any signs of the earthquake. After the big earthquake, there were around 900 aftershocks, with about 60 registering over magnitude 6, within the next few days as per CNN report. But it was more or less normal in Tokyo. We had quite a good number of prescheduled business meetings with different companies after earthquake from March 12-17, and almost all were held. The earthquake of March 11 was one of the most powerful in recorded history. There was destruction, loss of life and fears of a nuclear catastrophe. The world also saw the strength, resilience, and generosity and compassion of the Japanese people throughout the crisis. In the aftermath of the disaster, they demonstrated remarkable resilience with no report of rioting and looting. It was a great experience for me to see the calmness of the Japanese people during such a grave crisis. They did not allow life to come to a grinding halt, but kept on moving.

The writer is a former BoI Director.

Tsunami recovery faces the test of survivors' minds

DAVINDER KUMAR

IN the last year the tsunami-ravaged coastline of Japan's north-east has undergone a clean-up never seen before in history for its sheer scale and speed. Town after town affected by the tsunami has been razed to the ground. The horizon is now marked with towering stockpiles of scrapped cars, recovered metal and millions of tonnes of cleared debris. Some colossal industrial units will take longer to dismantle. The great fortresses of Japan's economic power stand like grim mausoleums, annihilated by the brute force of tsunami waves that tore through their steel ramparts as if they were made of paper. Much like their nation, Japan's tsunami survivors have also put on a brave front to their immense loss and suffering. As the world watched the news of March 11 with disbelief, the survivors were making an orderly queue to receive emergency relief. Even in the face of catastrophe there was no public display of emotion. One year later, survivors are still mourning their dead. Nearly 16,000 people died in the tsunami. Many, like Mizue Yamamura, are still waiting to hear about their missing relatives. The 71-year-old spends all her time in a temporary accommodation in Onagawa worrying about the fate of still missing Yoshio. Mizue and Yoshio were in their third-floor apartment in Onagawa town on March 11 when the earthquake struck. As the tremors grew in intensity, the couple left their apartment for safety. "It was snowing outside and Yoshio came out wearing his sandals. He went back to get properly dressed while I made my way up the hill," recalls Mizue. That was the last time Mizue saw her

78-year-old husband. Within minutes vast swathes of Onagawa disappeared under water as huge tsunami waves swept through the town, washing away many lives in its wake. Later, when the water receded, Mizue returned to her home looking for Yoshio. "All I found was dead fish inside the house," she says. Living alone Mizue is going through an emotional upheaval. She is not the only one. Bereaved, displaced and dispossessed, tsunami survivors are facing harsh challenges as they pick up the pieces of their lives. One year on, over 340,000 people are still living in temporary accommodation, mostly among strangers, unsure when they will return to their homes. The tsunami not only just washed their homes and towns away but also destroyed their communities. Despite all this, tsunami survivors rarely express their feelings and least of all complain about their circumstances. For them, to be seen needing help is a dent in self-respect, and seeking help is akin to betrayal of those who need it more. Even with such overarching altruism and valiant attempts to live up to the embodied values of stoicism, tsunami survivors, especially children, need help. For thousands of tsunami-affected people, life has not moved further since March 11 as they come to terms with their loss. It is now beginning to worry psychologists and mental health experts that many survivors could be going through serious emotional distress in silence without seeking any help.

Mental health professionals readily furnish data to show how, years after the 1995 Kobe earthquake that killed over 6,000 people, the number of psychological cases in Japan continued to rise. The 2011 tsunami dwarfs the Kobe disaster in its casualties, magnitude and the geographical spread. The experts fear if emotional needs of affected people are not addressed immediately, it could have long term ramifications on general psychological well being of those at risk, especially children. "When we talk to children about the tsunami they have flashbacks and some start crying. We asked children in a school to fill up a questionnaire 6 months after the tsunami. We found that more than 30% of all children, including those not directly hit by the disaster, had been psychologically affected," says Choji Suzuki, principal of Shichigahama Junior High School. Very young children in kindergartens are also showing psychological impact of the disaster. Junko Kamada, principal of a preschool in Tagajo city was deeply unsettled when she found her school children playing "tsunami games" where they run to escape the tsunami wave and pretend to drown. "As some children in our school were killed by the tsunami, I was really worried," she says.

The events of March 11 have exposed a worrying neglect of emotional well-being in Japan, a sentiment echoed by mental health experts who fear that things could get worse. For prided stoicism and economic realities, the pressure is intense on Japan and its tsunami survivors to be back in business.

Japan has launched a robust response to tsunami damage and will spend 13 trillion yen (\$167 billion) over five years for recovery. The core priorities are set around economic revival and economic benefits, and the urgency to return to "business as usual" is evident. Missing, however, from the equation is any discussion to comprehensively address the emotional and psychological needs of the survivors, which cannot be addressed by Japan's rapid reconstruction and physical recovery alone. "In Japan, we do not have a precise idea of disaster psychiatry; it has not yet been systematised. We know we should do something, but we don't really know how," says Dr. Hiroaki Homma, Director of Miyagi Comprehensive Children's Centre. Child rights organisation Plan's experience of reaching thousands of tsunami survivors in the last one year confirms that the impact of the disaster may run deep. The organisation has come across deeply disturbing stories of children affected by the disaster, such as being scared to flush toilets as it reminds them of tsunami waves. Psychologists working with Plan have reported cases of grown-up children showing anxiety, wetting beds and adults going through depression and some even developing alcohol and gambling addictions. The perceived social duty to be resilient and common confusion of psychosocial care with mental illness in Japan means those in real need may never seek any help. Plan Japan staff had to evolve ways to reach their own, very private people.

Tea parties were used as an excuse to bring people together so they could talk and share their feelings. Psychosocial care had to be rebranded as child support," says Mie Kashiwade who is leading Plan's emergency response unit in Sendai, capital city of Miyagi prefecture. Emotional support or psychosocial care is often neglected in disaster response, yet it is among the most basic needs of disaster survivors. It is vital for affected people to be able to relate to and deal with their circumstances. Simple things such as group activities, games or getting people to talk to each other can play a significant role in the healing process. "Expressing emotions and sharing feelings can prevent high risk people from advancing into stages where they require specialised mental health care involving psychiatrists and clinical psychologists," says Fetty Zachra, a psychologist who worked on Plan's emotional aid programme in Miyagi. The events of March 11 have exposed a worrying neglect of emotional well-being in Japan, a sentiment echoed by mental health experts who fear that things could get worse. For prided stoicism and economic realities, the pressure is intense on Japan and its tsunami survivors to be back in business. As the world's third largest economy races ahead with its rebuilding and reconstruction efforts it faces a tough test to address the emotional impact of its worst crisis since the Second World War on its survivors. It is a challenge and a humanitarian need that must be met. For Japan's recovery to be successful, it will have to be matched in mind.

The writer is an award-winning development journalist and Global Press Officer for global child rights and community development organisation Plan International. He is also a Chevening Human Rights Scholar.