

PHOTO: STAR FILE

The Game of Blockades

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Every New Year's Eve, the city's authorities go into overdrive trying to block entry points to particular areas where trouble may brew. The fear is that rowdy elements will spread to these areas and create nuisance. True, in the past mobs of hooligans have stopped cars, vandalised property and worst of all, sexually harassed women on the streets. And obviously the best solution is not to punish such perpetrators and provide security to people but to ban peaceful ordinary folk from coming out of the streets. What a brilliant strategy!

This year they have taken even more stringent measures. Citizens have been asked to go home by 8pm on New Year's Eve and avoid moving around the Baridhara-Gulshan-Banani and university areas. In view of the recent incidents and with the opposition announcing an indefinite blockade these measures are not unexpected.

Blocking free movement is now the name of the game. While Khaleda Zia and her allies have successfully paralysed the country with their blockades, terrorizing citizens with petrol bombs and cocktails to burn and maim them, the government has begun its own blockade programme. It isn't just blocking opposition members from coming onto the streets with the help of its hooligans who had no qualms about beating up a woman within the High Court premises. This is perhaps the first time we have heard of such total clamping of movement of ordinary people, turning away trains, buses and ferries destined for Dhaka. The suffering of the ordinary citizen has entered yet another chapter.

Rabeya Begum, a part time domestic maid, cannot stop her tears as she recalls that her little girl Sheema might have been lost forever. Sheema was returning home with her half blind father from Kishorganj. But the bus was told to stop at Bhairab and the passengers were asked to get down. There were hundreds of people stranded. In the chaos of people getting down and trying to find a way to get to Dhaka the little girl was shoved into a bus while her father was looking for her outside. It took almost the whole night of frantic searches at various bus stops all the way from Bhairab to Dhaka to find the child. The child's maternal uncle, miraculously found her on a bus that had stopped at Kamlapur. She was throwing up continuously, petrified and unable to speak with shock. It took almost 24 hours before she could say anything. It could have easily gone the other way, says Rabeya Begum, her eyes filling at the horrible thought.

Such stories of suffering are aplenty. Critically ill or injured patients, whose only hope of survival was to reach a hospital in Dhaka have been turned away. Families have been stranded in the middle of nowhere with no money to pay for a hotel room. Elderly men and women have had to walk miles in the cold to reach their destination.

Freedom of movement was once a constitutional right. But all that seems like a fairytale now. Blocking people's right to movement and live is the 'right' our political leaders are gleefully exercising to settle scores with each other.

Writing this on the eve of another new year, all one can feel is a sense of misgiving. Will 2014 begin with more violence, economic bleeding, disruption of public life and uncertainty about the future? Or will there be a miracle like finding a child lost in the diabolical web of politics? ■