

ONGOING DHAKA BLOCKADE

Tangail transport workers in tatters

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Road transport workers in Tangail are struggling to eke out a living while the owners of buses and trucks are counting huge losses as the vehicles stay off the road amid the ongoing BNP-led alliance blockade.

The district has an estimated 20,000 transport workers and owners whose income has either stopped or gone down significantly after the opposition programme kicked off on January 6, said sources at the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation.

"Transport workers are the most common victim of the hartal and blockade violence. At least 56 transport workers were burnt to death during the last parliamentary elections," said Mir Lutfar Rahman Lajlu, general secretary of the federation's Tangail unit.

Asgar Ali, driver of a Dhaka

Tangail route bus, said: "I have been borrowing money to run my family for the last few days as I am paid on the basis of daily trips."

Rashedur Rahman Tabib, secretary of the Tangail District Bus Owners' Association, said the blockade was being enforced at a time when the transport owners were trying to recover the losses caused by the political unrest during the national election in 2014.

Sadiqul Haque Swadhin, who took a bank loan to buy three buses, said he was not operating the vehicles fearing vandalism and arson attacks on those.

"I have not been earning anything for the last 15 days. But I will have to pay the loan instalments," he told The Daily Star on Tuesday.

According to the bus owners association, the owners of 1100 buses in Tangail incur a daily loss of Tk 1.5 crore, thanks to the blockade.

Staff at a ticket counter at Barisal Launch Terminal are reserving tickets after checking the national identity cards of passengers yesterday. Law enforcers, launch operators and terminal officials at a recent meeting decided to check the NIDs of passengers after criminals posing as passengers had attempted arson attacks on two launches.



PHOTO: STAR

Stop this butchery

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I know the situations are not comparable in any sense and my comparison could be exaggerated, yet the thought did occur to me. It cannot be denied that for the child victim the world is just as painful and full of anguish as it was for the children who were burnt by the atomic fire. Just as the Japanese children never understood what it was that fell from the sky that destroyed their world, so also Safir has no way of understanding why a burning object entered through the window of the bus he was travelling in and destroyed his world. We pray that the survivors and returns to his playful life full of joy, happiness and love, but it cannot be overlooked that he fell victim to a brutal politics that made no distinction between an innocent child of two and a half years and whosever the bomb throwers thought their political opponents were.

This brings us to a very important question that BNP must answer. In any conflict, however brutal, there are designated "enemies" who are targeted by their opponents. In the present case who are BNP-Jamaat's target? Could the random people travelling in city buses be their "enemies"? Could the innocent victims in

the burn unit of the DMCH be their target? We hope not. Even in their most perverted logic they couldn't have come to such a conclusion. Then who are their 'targets', why are petrol bombs being thrown at random travellers?

There are many reasons also to criticise the government for. The internment of Khaleda Zia, random arrest of BNP high ups, piling up of unfounded cases against opposition members, arbitrary arrest of citizens, restrictions on movements of ordinary people, general curtailment of civil liberties, restrictions on TV talk shows, creating atmosphere of intimidation of the media and many other direct and indirect threats to freedom of speech are serious matters of our concern. We have written about those and will continue to criticise the government for those.

But where are the words to condemn what the BNP-Jamaat combine is doing in the name of "movement"? So far 28 people have died, more than 800 have been injured and hundreds of vehicles destroyed. Seventeen of the 28 dead had no link with any political parties. As we reported Wednesday "... from two and a half year old Safir to octogenarian

Abu Taher, from school teacher Altaf Hossain to priest Alok Chakrovarty, from house wife Rahima Begum to truck helper Sohag Biswas, none was spared". They all died from opposition's random lethal attacks. Can there be any justification for these deaths?

Khaleda Zia in her latest address to the press said she and her party do not take any responsibility for the above deaths. She blamed the government instead. Can just a simple passing of the responsibility exonerate her from these atrocities? Without any proof, we cannot agree also with the PM when she holds the BNP chief criminally liable for these crimes. But there is no way that Khaleda Zia can avoid the moral responsibility for what is happening. There is enough in the newspaper reports and TV footage to prove that BNP and Jamaat activists have been involved in the mayhem and these deaths would not have occurred if there was no call for 'aborodh' and 'hartal'. The bomb-making JCD man whose hands got blown off and who died yesterday proves our point.

After two weeks there is sufficient reason for the BNP to reassess the situation. Their activities so far have had a very negative impact on the

public mind. Our reports from districts confirm that people are increasingly getting fed up with the disruption of their daily lives. Their economic loss continues to mount and increasingly they are blaming the opposition for it. Though initially there were sympathies for the opposition's cause, especially when Khaleda Zia was kept confined to her office. However, the deaths and destruction of the last fifteen days or so have had a serious change of position in the public mind. What BNP is doing is morally wrong and politically suicidal. It is only increasing the public sufferings and isolating them from the people.

If BNP unthinkingly continues to follow this path of death and destruction, their alienation from the people will increase further. The former PM must understand that whatever may be the justification for her movement, killing people, throwing petrol bombs at running buses, setting fire to stationary vehicles with people inside those cannot and will not gain her support.

If for nothing else, at least for the sake of two and a half years old Safir and thousand other 'Safirs', please put a stop to this killing and burning.

Stay alert to smear campaign

PM asks foreign ministry officials

UNB, Dhaka

Reaffirming that her government can handle the current situation, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday asked the officials of the foreign ministry and Bangladesh embassies abroad to remain alert about any smear campaign against the country.

"The prevailing situation in Bangladesh is a like a 'temporary black cloud' and we're capable of handling this, and we'll surely do it," she said alleging that the BNP chief's main aim is to kill people.

The PM came up with the remarks in her introductory speech during a meeting with foreign ministry officials as she made a visit to the ministry.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali delivered the welcome address at the meeting, which was attended, among others, by State Minister for Foreign Affairs M Shahriar Alam, Foreign Secretary M Shahidul Haque, and other senior officials.

The premier said, "We've been able to tackle natural disasters in the past

and we'll be able to overcome the manmade disasters like 'temporary black cloud' the same way and Bangladesh will continue to move forward and I can say that."

Hasina also hoped that the good sense would prevail among the BNP-Jamaat men since the current violence and anarchy are hindering the pace of development that Bangladesh has achieved over the last six years.

She asked the foreign missions abroad to go out for searching newer exportable items and markets, boost export earnings and trade and commerce and attracting more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

Recognising the role of some 80-90 lakhs Bangladeshi expatriates abroad in keeping alive the country's economy through sending remittance, the PM asked the foreign ministry officials and the officials at the Bangladesh missions abroad to give due importance towards addressing the problems of the Bangladeshi expatriates and stressed the need for gearing up issuance of MRP passports.

Restriction perplexes

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lakh bikers and their families who depend on the small vehicle for travelling.

The Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges issued an order in this regard following complaints that bike-riding criminals are hurling petrol and crude bombs targeting vehicles and law enforcers in the capital and elsewhere in the country during the ongoing blockade.

The step was taken to ensure security of the people, said the order. If anybody is found guilty of violating the order, law enforcers will take necessary actions against those in line with the Motor Vehicles Act, 1983.

TROUBLE FOR BIKERS

Around 4:15pm, Shahabuddin along with his co-rider Aminul was heading to Phulbaria from their home in the capital's Demra. As they reached the police headquarters, cops intercepted them and compelled Shahabuddin to leave Aminul on the way and drive away.

"How can I carry food to my patient at the hospital if police do not allow a co-rider on my motorbike," questioned Selim Reza, who carries food to this patient at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Nazrul at Farmgate said, "I always take my wife to her office and my kid to this school on my bike, which I won't

be able to do due to the ban."

Asked whether the family members of a biker can travel as co-passengers, Road Transport and Bridges Secretary MAN Siddique said, "We've made it clear in the order that none other than the biker would be allowed."

He said the cabinet committee on law and order at a meeting on Wednesday made the decision.

Earlier on December 29 in 2013, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) had imposed a ban on carrying passengers on bikes to check criminal activities and ensure security of people.

Amid an uproar from different quarters, the ban was lifted after three days.

NID CARDS FOR LAUNCH CABIN
While selling tickets of cabins, launch owners will ask passengers to produce their national identity cards.

The instructions came from a meeting at the BIWTA headquarters on Wednesday.

"At the meeting, we discussed safety of passengers and vessels with the law enforcers," said Shafiqul Haque, director (marine safety and traffic) of BIWTA.

"We decided to check the national ID cards of cabin passengers, but it has not been made mandatory till now. However, we started implementing the decision," he told The Daily Star last evening.

Escorted convoy of trucks attacked

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friends around 8:00pm on January 14.

The eleventh grader, who had to work part-time to support his education, went beyond all struggles as he breathed his last around 1:00am yesterday.

JCD leader Mahbubur Rahman Bappy, 28, who was critically hurt while "making crude bombs" in Lalbagh area on Wednesday, died around 5:00am, said Mozammel Haque of DMCH police outpost.

The right wrist of Bappy, general secretary of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal Dhaka's New Market unit, was blown off in the explosion that also injured two minors -- Happy Akhter, 13 and Ripon, 6. The two were reportedly inside the room during the blast.

Meanwhile, stray incidents of vandalism, arson and explosion in different parts of the country marked the 17th day of the BNP-led 20-party alliance's blockade as hit-and-run attacks continued.

The last day of 48-hour hartal sponsored by the BNP-led alliance in Dhaka and Khulna divisions passed off without any major incident.

At least 308 vehicles were torched in different districts since January 5, according to the fire service. However, the number of vehicles torched is believed to be much higher as the fire

service counts only those its members douse.

Yesterday, at least 15 vehicles were torched across the country, including four in the capital.

At the city's Mohammadpur, a human haulier helper was injured in a crude bomb attack.

In Narayanganj, miscreants set ablaze a microbus and a truck in the afternoon at Fatullah. No one was hurt as the arsonists forced out the passengers and drivers of the vehicles before setting those on fire, police said.

In Rajshahi, a pedestrian and two employees of a printing press suffered injuries as suspected blockaders attacked a convoy of 25 goods-carrying trucks at Dorikhorbona in the city around 1:00pm yesterday.

The trucks were going to Dhaka from Chapainawabganj and escorted by police, BGB and Rab.

Masem Sheikh, 40, his brother Kazim Sheikh, 28, both employees of Uttaran Printing Press, were admitted to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital as splinter hit their ears and hands.

Abdur Rashid, 38, a pedestrian, was wounded in the right leg. He was given first aid at the hospital, said Iftekhar Alam, assistant commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police.

Witnesses and law enforcers said some 10 masked men threw nearly a

dozen cocktails and petrol bombs on a truck which was in the middle of the convoy, breaking its windshield. The other vehicles managed to speed away safely.

One of the bombs landed inside the printing press, damaging its shutter and glass walls.

The attackers also vandalised two tea stalls and torched chairs of Asha Salon at Dorikhorbona intersection while fleeing before the police reached the spot.

Police suspect Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of 20-party component Jamaat, was behind the attack.

Joint forces members arrested a Shibir man with two firearms and ammunition at Rajbari BGB check post at Godagari.

The arrestee is Anarul Islam, 23, of Shibganj upazila of Chapainawabganj. He was on his way to Rajshahi to deliver the arms and ammunition to his fellow Shibir men, said SM Abu Forhad, OC of Godagari Police Station.

In Chittagong, a garment worker was injured as blockade supporters hurled brickbats at a bus carrying workers in the city's Panchlaish area yesterday.

Sumi Akhter, 20, of DK Apparels in Mohora area was admitted to

Chittagong Medical College Hospital with cuts in her face.

In Chandpur, suspected opposition men set fire to the district AL office on Chandpur-Comilla highway yesterday.

Suspected blockaders torched two passenger buses and two vehicles in Sylhet, a human carrier in Gazipur and vandalised five battery-run three-wheelers in Jamalpur.

In Dinajpur, at least three people were burnt badly as pro-blockade activists hurled a petrol bomb at a truck at Bhatgaon of Kaharole upazila on Wednesday night.

In a separate incident, pickets torched two more trucks in Raniganj area of Ghoraghat upazila at 11:30pm Wednesday.

In Bogra, three people were injured, two critically, in a petrol bomb attack on a truck.

The injured are Titon Mia, Sujon and Abdur Rahim. They were first taken to Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital. Sujon and Rahim was later brought to Dhaka Medical College Hospital after their condition worsened.

Mobile courts jailed two Jamaat leaders for two years in Satkhira and two others in Bogra over subversive activities.

Law enforcers arrested 45 people in Satkhira and 25 in Bogra.

Question

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However, the note of the British House of Commons said despite the almost constant political turmoil, Bangladesh's economy continues to perform remarkably well.

Termining the January 5 general election as "extremely flawed", the note said the western donors refused to endorse the election outcome on the grounds that it did not reflect the will of the people of Bangladesh.

"In recent weeks, the hostilities between the 'battling Begums' have further intensified," said the note as it details the events after January 5, 2015 when police confined Khaleda Zia to her Gulshan office and she called for an indefinite countrywide transport blockade in protest.

Regarding BNP Senior Vice-

Chairman Tarique Rahman, the note said, "A gagging order was also issued against Tarique Rahman, banning the media from publishing statements by him." The chairman of Ekushey Television, it added, was arrested shortly after the channel broadcast a speech by Tarique.

About calls within Bangladesh for the extradition of Tarique Rahman, it said under the Extradition Act 2003, Bangladesh can make an extradition request to the UK authorities, but it does not necessarily mean that the UK will actually extradite.

"The UK does not extradite people who could be, will be or have been sentenced to death. Extradition becomes possible only if assurances are received that the sentence will not be carried out," it said.

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Sanjid Hossain Ovi was an arts and humanities student in the capital's Kobi Nazrul Islam Government College. A pro-blockade picket had hurled the bomb at him at Phulbari on January 14 when he was on his way to his Laxmibazar home in the old part of Dhaka.

"He wanted to be a lawyer. His grades in school were very bright," said his mother while tears rolled down her cheeks.

His poor father sells boiled eggs at Sadarghat and his mother is a homemaker. Ovi used to support his own education working part-time at a computer service shop. He earned Tk 1,500 from his job which he spent over his tutor and other educational expenses,

said Noor Jahan.

"I cannot count how many days I fed him rice only with green chilli. He'd ask for fish curry which I seldom could afford. I'd often lament saying I'd feed him fish next time," she said, wailing and recalling her hardship.

"Our relatives often suggested arranging a job for him to support the family. But neither my son nor I was interested in such an idea before he finished his studies," said Noor Jahan, who had already lost her daughter, the eldest of her three children, three months ago.

Ovi was her second child. Her youngest son is only one and a half years old.

Sources at the DMCH morgue,

where his autopsy was conducted, said Ovi died from a head injury.

While talking to this correspondent, Noor Jahan alleged that her son had not received proper treatment at the DMCH.

Quoting doctors, she said her son needed treatment at the intensive care unit (ICU) but when she approached the ICU staffs on Wednesday they refused to admit him, saying no empty bed was available.

They asked her to come three or four days later, she said.

The DMCH ICU Chief said there were no beds available during that time and it was against the hospital rules to shift a critical patient to make place for another.

Relatives said although the govern-

ment announced that it would bear all treatment costs of blockade victims, Noor Jahan had to spend around Tk 25,000 to buy medicines.

Contacted, DMCH Deputy Director Moshir Rahman said they would bear all the medical expenses if any blockade victim or his family met the hospital authorities with related documents.

Meanwhile, teachers and students of Kobi Nazrul Islam College yesterday formed a human chain in front of the campus, protesting Ovi's death and terming him "a victim of the country's ill political culture".

After a namaz-e-janaza at the college premises, Ovi's body was sent to his ancestral village in Munshiganj for burial.