

Nothing unfair before Eid?

CNG auto-rickshaw drivers force passengers to fork out extra fare

MAHBUBUR RAHMAN KHAN

Commuters are usually forced to pay at least two times the meter fares when they travel on CNG-run auto-rickshaws in the capital. The same fare shoots up three to four times ahead of Eid, as drivers don't agree to go until their demands are met.

The auto-rickshaw drivers hold people hostage every day under the very nose of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA). Several drives of the authorities have left little impact on the drivers charging fares whimsically.

It was 1:00pm on July 6. Three CNG-run auto-rickshaws were waiting for passengers in front of Square Hospital when Rupok approached them to go home in Basabo.

Usually, Rupok pays Tk 150 for the distance, but the drivers demanded Tk 250 to Tk 300.

"I know they don't run on meter anymore and I have to make a contract. But the fare should not be more than Tk 150. These drivers are demanding at least Tk 250 on the occasion of Eid and traffic jam," he said.

He finally had to give in and accept the Tk 250 fare to go home.

A BRTA official told The Daily Star they led drives but "the passengers do not cooperate with them to catch the culprits".

Shanta Begum and her mother-in-law was looking for an auto-rickshaw for Gabtoli on the same day at Mirhajirbagh kitchen market in Jatrabari area.

A driver agreed to go and demanded Tk 400. Shanta, who is used to go to Gabtoli from Jatrabari, said, "I often go there at Tk 300."

"It's the festival time," the driver in a sky-blue shirt with sun-burned face responded in a clumsy manner and hastened away.

Defending himself, Mojibor Mia, another CNG driver, who parked his auto-rickshaw near the Teacher Student Centre at Dhaka University, said, "Price of everything has shot up. On top of that Eid is coming. If I run on meter, I won't be able to meet my family's demands."

He alleged the auto-rickshaw owners do not comply with the government's directive and charge Tk 1,000 or

more in rent per day. According to the BRTA rules, the daily rent is fixed at Tk 600.

Around 13,000 auto-rickshaws ply on Dhaka and the current minimum fare for a CNG-run three-wheeler is Tk 25 for the first two kilometres. The charge for next kilometre is Tk 7 and midway intermission charge is Tk 1.25.

But the drivers hardly switch on the meter. Even if they turn on the meter, they do it to escape punishment and ask the passengers not to tell the truth.

Executive Magistrate of BRTA Debashis Nag said they have been conducting drives at different parts of the capital to check if the drivers are violating the rules.

"Most of the time, the passengers don't cooperate with us and save the drivers. Today [July 7], I led a drive and only one passenger said the driver was not running on meter. I fined the driver Tk 1,000 on the spot," he added.

On excessive charges realised by the owners, he said they often record drivers' claims in mobile and call the respective owners. "The owners are shown the testimony of the drivers and are fined as well. But it has problems too. Those drivers have to face repercussions for their testimony," he observed.

Admitting the fact, Dhaka Mahanagar CNG Owners Association President Barkat Ullah Bulu said the fare should be increased to Tk 40 for first two kilometres, Tk 12 for next kilometre and Tk 2 as waiting charge during a trip.

He also demanded increasing daily rent to Tk 900 from Tk 600.

"If it happens and drivers still refuse to go on meter, BRTA can take whatever legal action they want. We will rather assist the authorities to punish those drivers," he said.

BRTA Chairman Nazrul Islam said, "Does an auto-rickshaw driver ever want to take a short trip? No, we have never seen that."

"Many things are involved with the increase in fare. Alongside, we will have to consider how much it might affect the commuters and how much they [drivers and owners] are law-abiding," he added.

"They [drivers and owners] too should change their mentality," he observed.



A passenger argues with a three-wheeler driver over fare in the city's Shahbagh yesterday. Commuters in the city have been suffering for long as three-wheeler drivers would not follow meter rates fixed by the government. The situation worsens further in the run-up to Eid. Lax enforcement of law by the authorities has contributed to this.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Iran, powers agree historic nuke deal

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second such occasion since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said in his own address that "God has accepted the nation's prayers" and that the accord would lift "inhumane and tyrannical sanctions".

"Iran will never seek a nuclear weapon, with or without the implementation" of the Vienna deal, he added.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini described the agreement as "a sign of hope", while Russian President Vladimir Putin said the world had "breathed a huge sigh of relief".

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a close ally of Iran, called the agreement a "great victory".

French President Francois Hollande said "the world is making headway", while NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg called it a "historic breakthrough" and German Chancellor Angela Merkel hailed it as "an important success" of

international diplomacy.

Hundreds of Iranians poured onto the streets of Tehran to celebrate after the Ramadan fast ended at sundown.

"Maybe the economy is going to change, especially for the young people," said Giti, a 42-year-old woman.

STRINGENT UN OVERSIGHT

The deal limits Iran's nuclear activities for at least a decade and calls for stringent UN oversight, with world powers hoping this will make any dash to make an atomic bomb virtually impossible.

In return Iran will get sanctions relief although the measures can "snap back" into place if there are any violations.

The international arms embargo against Iran will remain for five years with deliveries only possible during that time with permission from the UN Security Council, diplomats said.

Tehran has accepted allowing the UN nuclear watchdog tightly-

controlled access to military bases, an Iranian official said.

Iran will slash by around two-thirds the number of centrifuges, which can make fuel for nuclear power but also the core of a nuclear bomb, from around 19,000 to 6,104.

Painful international sanctions that have cut the oil exports of OPEC's fifth-largest producer by a quarter and choked its economy will be lifted and billions of dollars in frozen assets unblocked.

World oil prices fell Tuesday following the breakthrough, with US benchmark West Texas Intermediate for August delivery down \$1.05 (0.95 euros) at \$51.15 (46.46 euros).

The agreement is Obama's crowning foreign policy achievement in six years, and the fruit of Rouhani's bid since his election in 2013 to end Iran's isolation.

The agreement may lead to more cooperation between Tehran and Washington at a particularly explosive

time in the Middle East with the emergence last year of the Islamic State group, which controls swathes of Syria and Iraq.

DECADES OF ENMITY

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the deal paves the way for a broader coalition to fight IS, a common enemy of the West and Iran in the Middle East.

But erasing decades of hostility will be tough, and the prospect of better US-Iran relations alarms Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-ruled Gulf Arab states, which accuse Shiite Iran of stoking unrest in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere.

Reflecting the concerns, a senior US official said Obama would soon speak to Israeli and Saudi leaders.

In what was seen as a thinly veiled threat of strikes against Iranian nuclear sites, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday warned: "We did commit to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and this



BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir coming out of the prison cell in a wheel chair at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University in the city yesterday, after securing bail in several cases. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Fakhru out of jail at last

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Hospital in Gulshan with gastric problems later, said a doctor there.

On January 6, law enforcers detained the BNP leader near the Jatiya Press Club. Later, he was shown arrested in seven cases, his lawyer Sagor Hossain Leon had said.

Accompanied by his wife, Rahat Ara, and party men, Fakhru came out of the BSMMU, where he had been undergoing treatment, in a wheelchair.

Talking to journalists there, he thanked the media for reporting on him frequently. He also talked about his health.

"I am very sick. I lost some 12kg in the last six months. I am suffering from different cardiac ailments," he said, adding that he would go abroad for treatment.

Fakhru said his wife had already consulted with some doctors in the US and Singapore.

"I am seeking blessings so that I can serve the people of my country after returning from abroad," he added.

From the medical university, he went to the United Hospital in an ambulance and visited his ailing mother there. Rahat Ara was also present during the visit, said party insiders.

Later, Fakhru was admitted to the hospital, Dr Fowaz Shuvo told The Daily Star.

On Monday, the Supreme Court granted a six-week bail to the BNP leader on medical grounds, clearing the way for his release from jail.

Division headed by Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha also directed Fakhru to surrender before a lower court concerned after the given time.

In its order, the apex court said he could get advanced treatment abroad within the six weeks' time as the medical report suggested.

The SC order maintained the June 21 High Court decision granting ad interim bail to him in three cases for vandalism and arson.

On June 28, the SC upheld the HC orders that on June 18 had granted bail to the BNP leader in three other vandalism and arson cases.

On April 16, Fakhru, who is accused in 89 cases, got bail from the HC in another similar case.

IG of prisons gets death threat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Inspector General of Prisons Brig Gen Syed Iftikhar Uddin yesterday received a death threat through a text message to his official mobile phone.

Jailer of Dhaka Central Jail filed a general diary with Chawkbazar police. The SMS in Bangla reads, "Our beloved big brother was sent to Jessore from Kashimpur Jail. If he is not returned, you will be killed", said the officer-in-charge. Police said top terrorist Pichchi Helal was recently relocated to Jessore. The OC said they were investigating.

Happy extortion

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auto-rickshaws and rickshaw-vans. They even extort money from hawkers and street vendors in and around Karwan Bazar areas.

The drivers, hawkers and vendors are given parking charge receipts, originally issued by the Dhaka North City Corporation, that do not have fees above Tk 10 printed on them.

On an average, about 700 trucks and pickups enter Karwan Bazar from different parts of the country every night.

The extortionists work round the clock to collect the "parking fees" from vehicles, said a trader, adding that a section of the city corporation officials

were skimming off the extorted money.

"Putting up resistance is useless. They are organised and they are not shy about using their muscle," Shohag, a truck driver, told The Daily Star correspondent last week after he reached Karwan Bazar with his truckload of bananas from Jhenidah.

Visiting the area during the day and at night in the last few days, The Daily Star correspondents talked to 30 traders and as many drivers. They all claimed to have complained about the extortion to the city corporation several times in vain.

Asked, DNCC Zonal Executive Officer (Karwan Bazar) Pranab Kumar Ghose

said it was the responsibility of law enforcers to take action against illegal toll collectors.

Last month, the DNCC collected Tk 55,000 in parking charges, he added.

Asked about the illegal toll collection, he said the money was being taken by extortionists.

DNCC officials said the job of parking fee collection was leased to Momtaz Enterprise owned by one Kazi Mustafa for Tk 8,99,900 for one year. The lease ended on February 22 but the DNCC has yet to call a fresh tender.

Since the expiry of the lease, the DNCC itself is collecting the parking charge.

Those who are collecting the illegal

toll are Mustafa's men, said traders at Karwan Bazar.

DNCC Office Assistant Abul Hossain has been overseeing the city authorities' collection since March.

Traders alleged that he got a fair cut of the money extorted by the gang, a charge he denied.

Mustafa, once a fruit wholesaler at Karwan Bazar, could not be contacted for comments despite repeated attempts over the past few days.

Contacted, Tejgaon Police Station Inspector Moshir Rahman said he was aware that sometimes drivers were being "overcharged" for parking.

"But sometimes drivers willingly pay more for parking," he claimed.

Policeman 'helped' main culprit flee

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Following his allegations, SI Aminul was withdrawn from duties yesterday. The Sylhet Metropolitan Police (SMP) commissioner asked him to report at his office as soon as possible, reports our Moulvibazar correspondent.

The SMP also formed a three-member probe committee, headed by Additional Police Commissioner SM Rokon Uddin, to investigate the allegations against the SI, said SMP Police Commissioner Kamrul Ahsan.

"The committee will submit its report in three days," he said.

Rajon's father also alleged that when he went to Jalalabad Police Station to file a case on the night of Rajon's death, he was told that the police had already filed a case in this connection.

As he wanted to know whether Kamrul and Muhit's names were included as accused in the case, SI Aminul told him that he was giving wrong information, as none of them were present at the time of the incident.

"Put the paper here. We will see it later," Azizur quoted Aminul as saying. Contacted, Aminul denied all the allegations.

He said he talked to Azizur for less than a minute when the latter came to identify his son's body. "A vested quarter is trying to set me up," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Akhtar Hossain, officer-in-charge of Jalalabad police, said he did not know anything about it. "I was not at the

station that day," he said.

He, however, said he had not seen Kamrul or Muhit's name as accused in the case when he first took a look at the case statement.

Their names were included as two of the four accused later. The other two accused are Moyna Mia and Haider Ali.

Meanwhile, Moyna Mia was arrested yesterday from the Tukur Bazar area in Sylhet around 10:30pm.

On Monday, Saudi police detained Kamrul in a suburb of Jeddah. He is now in police custody in Nazlah district.

Muhit, the prime accused in the murder case, was arrested earlier and is now on a five-day remand.

In the video footage that went viral on Sunday, Kamrul was seen beating Md Samiul Alam Rajon mercilessly. He, his brother Muhit Alam and some others beat the minor boy to death in Kumargaon Bus Stand area of Sylhet on the morning of July 8. One of them filmed the brutal beating and shared it on social media, sparking outrage at home and abroad.

Kamrul, who was seen in a black T-shirt and lungi hitting the boy with a stick in the feet, joints of legs and shoulders, and the head, confessed to having beaten the boy.

Mobile phone footage from Jeddah, where he was captured by Bangladeshi migrants, showed him saying that he beat up the kid. He, however, claimed that the boy was still alive when he had left the spot.

But it is still uncertain whether Kamrul can be brought back from

Saudi Arabia before Eid, according to Bangladesh officials in Jeddah.

"Since Saudis went on Eid holidays yesterday, it is not certain if we will be able to send Kamrul back home before Eid," Mokammel Hossain, counsellor (labour) at Bangladesh Consulate in Jeddah, told The Daily Star yesterday.

After detaining Kamrul, the office of Bangladesh consulate in the kingdom filed a case against him.

The Bangladesh consulate is working to send him back to Bangladesh as soon as possible, said Mokammel.

Asked how Kamrul would be extradited since there is no extradition treaty between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, he said the two countries have a very friendly relationship and expressed his hope of getting cooperation from the Saudi authorities in this regard.

Meanwhile, A Sylhet court yesterday gave police five days to grill Ismail Hossain alias Abluch in custody who is a suspect in the murder of Rajon.

PROTEST RALLY

The sickening 28-minute torture video shook the nation to its core and triggered an outcry in social and mainstream media.

A few thousand people held a protest rally at Kumargaon point in Sylhet around 1:00pm yesterday. People from neighbouring areas joined the rally to demand exemplary punishment for the culprits who killed Rajon.

Earlier, separate human chains were formed in different areas in Bandar,

Chouhatta, Pathantula and Akhali. The protesters joined the rally afterwards.

"This incident is barbaric and inhuman, which tarnished the image of Sylhet's people. The perpetrators deserve to be hanged, nothing short of that," said Prof Sujat Ali, a teacher at a local college.

Azizur was supposed to speak in the rally, but he fell unconscious. He was taken to Sylhet Osmani Medical College and Hospital.

In Dhaka, Shishu-Kishor Mela, Samajtantrik Chhatra Front, Samajtantrik Mahila Forum and Bigyan Andolon Mancha jointly organised a protest rally and human chain in front of the Jatiya Press Club protesting Rajon's murder.

The speakers at the programme said it is not possible to establish good governance if the culture of impunity persists.

"When criminals have connection with police, they manage to get released even after committing such crimes. Such practices create anarchy in society," said Shampa Basu, general secretary of Samajtantrik Mahila Forum.

Organising Secretary of Samajtantrik Sramik Front Khalequzzaman Lipon demanded punishment of the culprits involved in Rajon's killing by holding trial at the Speedy Trial Tribunal.

Different organisations also formed human chains in Manikganj, Mymensingh, Pirojpur and Bogra, report our local correspondents.