

"Road March" attacked?

Where is the people's right to peaceful protest?

IN what can only be termed as very rough tactics, the recent attacks on the "road march" called by the left-leaning platform 'Ganatantrik Bam Morcha' by the police and, reportedly, by pro-government student activists, leave us wondering whether the government has lost its capacity to countenance protest and differing opinions.

The road march had met police resistance on three points en route without any provocation. Some 40 activists of the front have suffered varying degrees of injury in the uncalled for baton charge by law enforcers.

In a democracy, citizens have the right to protest peacefully against a decision made by the government, or are we to take it that the right to congregate peacefully and organise a procession is no longer a democratic right of the people of Bangladesh?

We have noticed that, of late, the police have taken for granted their right to use force at the slightest pretext. But what pretext did these protesters give the police? They were part of an orderly demonstration demanding a rethink by the government of the Rampal power plant being set up in the Sundarbans, which also happens to be a world heritage site. The plan has also come under criticism by experts.

That a small procession of activists' march to the site from Dhaka to elicit public opinion in their favour should generate such police action is difficult to understand. The demand for a judicial probe into the incident is not an unjust one, especially in light of the heavy and ham handed action of the police.

Making roads safe

Don't split hairs on casualty figures

THE alarming number of casualties in road accidents exposes how deadly the roads, particularly highways, are in Bangladesh. Casualty figures in road crashes vary but that should not detract us from the fact that the number of dead and injured is still unacceptably high in Bangladesh.

Road crash is a multidimensional issue involving multiple stakeholders. With ever increasing traffic, our roads and highways suffer from premature failure. On top of it, faulty road construction makes vehicles vulnerable to frequent crash. The road authority should invest more in developing the capacity of the roads and do the necessary maintenance, repair and expansion works timely.

There are also considerably more vehicles on the road than are registered drivers, most of whom are not fully skilled. These issues must be addressed by the government so that the licensing system, while being simplified, is also made foolproof and that potential drivers can learn quality driving at an affordable cost. The issue of defensive driving should be included in the training curriculum, by making a driver aware of the need for behaving responsibly on the road.

In this regard, the traffic police department has a crucial role to play in identifying and holding accountable reckless driving and overloaded vehicles, cautioning signals for hazardous locations and disseminating information on driving and road safety to the public.

Last but not the least, the national and local bodies formed to address road safety issues should be invigorated to ensure participation of all the stakeholders in order to make our roads safer and save people falling victim to avoidable road crashes.

ROUNDTABLE ON How to make our ROADS SAFER

On October 17, The Daily Star organised a roundtable to promote dialogue on how to make Bangladesh's roads safer. Today, on National Road Safety Day, we publish the highlights of the discussion.



BRIGADIER GENERAL SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN (RETD.)
ASSOCIATE EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR AND MODERATOR

Many thanks for your presence. A more appropriate heading for today's roundtable would have been "How to make our roads safe" rather than what it reads now, "Safer". Roads that account for more than 10,000 deaths and 30,000 injuries can never be termed as 'safe.' For example, during the four days of Eid-ul-Fitr this year 40 people were killed and 100 injured. The positive aspect is that this number is fewer than that of the two previous years, suggesting that efforts have been put to improve the situation.

Roads to be made safe needs the active participation of all the stakeholders – the public, the drivers and owners, and the government.

What we would like to spend most of the next three hours discussing and identifying are the solutions and ways to implement those. Road safety problem is like a 'calamity'; the yearly loss of life in road accidents has surpassed casualties suffered in natural calamities in Bangladesh.



COLONEL AR MOHAMMAD PARVEZ MAZUMDER
DIRECTOR (TECHNICAL), BANGLADESH ROAD TRANSPORT CORPORATION (BRTC)

There are three issues that need to be addressed with regard to road safety, which I believe will ensure safer roads and the safety of the people. Our roads and associated infrastructure are not up to par; starting from illegal stoppages to footpaths and flyovers to over-bridges, this problem can be seen in every road infrastructure. Secondly, we need to investigate whether these means of transportation are suitable for our country. Lastly, the problem lies with the people themselves. I believe that we, as a whole, are not truly aware about road safety or the laws concerning road safety.

In my division, there are 1,563 trained drivers. Of these, only 418 are currently working under the division I control. I have tried to achieve 100 percent output from the 33 percent of manpower that we currently have but that is not possible. When I joined BRTC, I had around 1000 buses in my fleet but now I have over 1,100 buses.

We have surface footpaths; we could turn these footpaths to sub-surface or

So we need the help of formally and informally leased drivers.

We have surface footpaths; we could turn these footpaths to sub-surface or overhead footpaths with fencing. We also don't have standardisation of vehicles in the country; articulated buses, for example, look great and work efficiently but the parking spaces in the country are so inadequate that these buses don't really suit the roads of the country. In short, I'd like to stress the need to think of an issue in the context of our country



FARUK TALUKDER SOHEL
CHAIRMAN, BANGLADESH BUS-TRUCK OWNERS' ASSOCIATION

If we look at the post-independence era of Bangladesh, we see that safety as a paramount importance had never been taken into consideration. Come to think of it, if after more than 40 years of independence we have 50,000 km of roads unfriendly for pedestrians, slow-moving vehicles and such, how many more decades will it take until we have quality roads?

According to the BRTA, we have 22 lakh registered vehicles but only 15 lakh licensed drivers which means there are at least 7 lakh unlicensed drivers. I can guarantee you that the BRTA, with its limited manpower and resources, cannot fix this problem

BRTA needs to work in partnership with the private sector and the passport system's success is

even in the next fifty years. To have able drivers on the streets we must tackle the issue of unlicensed drivers which is increasing by the day. We don't even have a system in place that records the number of accidents each driver has caused.

No matter the number of seminars we hold, no real change can be made until the root causes are addressed. I strongly believe that the BRTA needs to work in partnership with the private sector and the passport system's success is burning proof that collaboration with the private sector can work wonders.



MIRAJUL MOIN JOY
INTERNATIONAL SECRETARY
NIRAPAD SARAK CHAI (NISCHA)

Most people hold only drivers accountable for road accidents. I would say our drivers are pretty skilled considering the condition of our roads. Everybody has to be responsible for making our roads safe -- pedestrians, vehicle owners, traffic police, highway police, etc. It has become a norm for our drivers not to abide by the traffic rules. They do not maintain the speed limit, frequently overtake other vehicles and overload their vehicles. On the other hand, pedestri-

We need to establish a national road safety authority that will take the deci-

ans cross roads simply by raising their hands. We have foot overbridges which pedestrians hardly use.

We have to go to the BRTA for getting driving license. We have to go to the home ministry in order to implement laws and to the law ministry for enacting new laws. But we don't have a central governing body where these people can meet and find solutions of problems. If we can establish a national road safety authority that will take the decisions regarding road safety issues, I think we will be able to make roads safe in 10 to 20 years.



MOZAMMEL HOQUE CHOWDHURY
SECRETARY GENERAL, BANGLADESH PASSENGERS' WELFARE ASSOCIATION (PWAB)

We do not know the exact figure of road crash casualties. We should maintain a national database where all the stakeholders will provide their data.

A study shows that 76 percent of road crashes happen due to head-to-head collision. To stop the menace we need to create awareness among the drivers which does not need huge amounts of money.

We also need to increase load capacity of the existing highways so that those can handle the ever-growing volume of road traffic.

Our driver registration process is not satisfactory. We often see experienced drivers do not get licenses whereas amateur drivers easily manage them. So there is something wrong with the registration system. Moreover, we need to build a national institute for training our drivers properly.

The process of issuing fitness certifi-

We need to increase load capacity of our existing highways so that it can handle the

cate for vehicles is also inefficient. They often provide certificates without physically checking the vehicle. There is a national body for road safety called National Road Safety Council. Now it has 44 members. But there is no representative from passengers who can address their sufferings. There is also no research wing in the national body. I think the government should include passengers' representatives in the committee and open a research wing. I am hopeful about the proposal of forming national road safety authority. It will create more opportunities for passengers' welfare organisations to contribute to road safety issues.



MD. MOKHLESUR RAHMAN
ORGANISING SECRETARY, BANGLADESH ROAD TRANSPORT WORKERS' FEDERATION (BRTWF)

There are some public and private initiatives for training drivers but that is not affordable for poor people. Government should provide adequate funds for these training projects. Road safety issues should be

Road safety issues should be included in the textbooks. Media

included in the textbooks. Media should highlight the issue of road safety to raise awareness.

The new driver registration process is complex. It is difficult for an illiterate person to pass the registration exam. He has to fill up various forms which is unnecessary for a driver. If a physically fit person can understand signs and signals and know how to drive he should be given the license. To fill the huge gap of registered drivers, we should simplify the licensing process.



KHANDAKER ENAYET ULLAH
GENERAL SECRETARY, BANGLADESH ROAD TRANSPORT OWNERS' ASSOCIATION

Road crossing at undesignated places and overtaking are two major causes of road crashes. If we have dividers on the highways, overtaking, which often lead to head-on collision, will stop. After the death of Tareque Masud and Mishuk Munier a divider was built along the curve where the crash happened on the Dhaka-Aricha highway, significantly reducing the number of crashes there.

The condition of roads has improved, thanks to the hard work of the government. For the first time, BRTA is organising several training programmes. They are also running awareness campaigns. The 28 or so driving schools of BRTC, that were not operational for a long time, now are.

According to the Motor Vehicle Ordinance, a driver cannot work longer than an eight-hour shift. But we have a serious shortage of skilled drivers due to which drivers have to

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work longer hours. Each RTC at the district level can organise training programmes for drivers.

Some people say that the condition of public transport is very poor in our country. But how many crashes actually take place due to the poor condition of vehicles?

As citizens, transport owners, workers and journalists, if we all play our parts, the number of road crashes will decrease.

COMMENTS

"Attack on Satkhira temple"

(October 19, 2015)

Salim Uddin

There are always some people who want to disturb communal harmony. Most of us do not support these kinds of unlawful activities. We want peace.

Skeptic Saleh

It spreads hatred, nothing else.

Shahnawaz Khan

This is not acceptable in any manner; not by law and definitely not by Islam.

"SUVs and Rickshaws"

(October 18, 2015)

Nahela Nowshin

Rich people are like, "But there are worse crimes that go unpunished. Why are you people after that kid?" Well, a kid is not supposed to be drunk driving. That's some poor parenting right there. It's about time we stopped comparing injustices. A crime can NEVER justify another.

Abu Umaer

The Police always take the side of the powerful people and the powerful people know that the law cannot touch them.

"Stay alert about plot against country's religious harmony: Khaleda"

(October 18, 2015)

Matiur Rahman

We appreciate this remark.