

A rare verdict

Will it stop the deaths on the road?

THE families of Tareque Masud, Mishuk Munier and three others killed in a fatal car crash in 2011 have finally found some measure of vindication as the driver of the bus that hit the microbus carrying them was sentenced to life imprisonment by a Manikganj court. We welcome the rare verdict and hope it will send a signal that those responsible for such reckless killing on the roads will not go unpunished.

But will penalising one errant driver stop the terror on our roads? In this case the driver, was reportedly driving without a licence. He was also sleep deprived as he had driven all night without taking rest. Now why would a driver operate a heavy vehicle on one of the busiest highways of the country without a valid driver's licence? And more importantly, how did he get away with it? Was the owner of the bus not aware of this fact? What is the role of the highway police? And what impels someone to drive all night? Is it not because the monthly income of the commercial driver comes not from a monthly salary but the number of trips he can make and how fast he can make it? Other than the drivers, there are a few more who are responsible for the deaths on the roads. And they must also be held to account.

According to a leading Bangla paper, 143 people were killed in road crashes in the past 13 days across the country. Therefore, unless the many other factors behind such a high number of road causalities -- unfit vehicles, condition of the roads and lax attitude of authorities -- are addressed, the situation is unlikely to improve.

Learning in ethnic languages

Accelerate book distribution

THE laudable initiative of the government to impart education to ethnic communities in their mother tongue faces a setback at its take-off stage due to delayed distribution of books. A report published in this newspaper on February 22 reveals that students of the Tripura community in Bandarban district are yet to receive a single book.

In some cases, the distributed number of books falls short of the demand. The local authorities of the Bandarban district had estimated that 5,121 copies would be needed for students of the three ethnic minorities. So far only 744 copies of pre-primary textbooks have been distributed. How come after passing of almost two months of the education year students do not get their textbooks? When contacted, the textbook authority could not give any valid reason behind this undue delay in printing books. It clearly indicates their inefficiency if not insincerity.

Again, the government has distributed only pre-primary text books. There is no visible initiative yet to print textbooks for students of class-I and above in those five languages. The government should also include other ethnic languages in this initiative, many of which are facing imminent threat of extinction.

Offering education in the mother tongue is the best way to preserve and revitalise the ethnic languages and ensure development of the deprived communities. We urge the government to expedite the book distribution process and take necessary steps to ensure that every child can complete at least primary education in their mother tongue.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Uphold the rule of law

This is in response to yesterday's editorial titled 'Torture of a 12 year old'. The spread of mob culture these days reveals how law and order has almost ceased to exist in the society. It seems as if no one is fearful of the consequences of illegal or criminal actions. This is bound to worsen because of the extremely low conviction rate due to political interference, lack of witnesses, tedious legal processes, etc.

Degradation of the social mindset has also contributed to this, instigated through rampant corruption, unemployment, domestic problems and fierce competition in educational and professional lives, all of which cause people to lead frustrated lives.

In this dismal scenario where might of law does not evoke fear, the vulnerable are treated with cruelty, and people prefer to look the other way instead of protesting against acts of torture, innocent lives will continue to get nipped. Unless the rule of law is practically restored in the society, the situation will become much more dreadful in the coming days.

Kajal Chatterjee

By email

Private cars using police lights and sirens

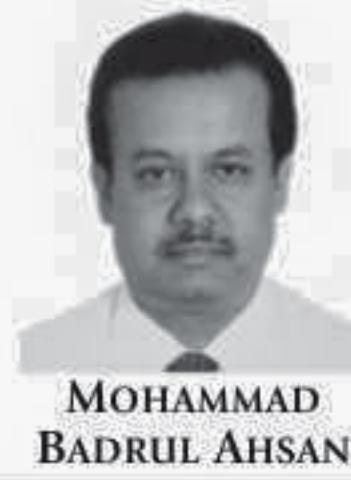
On my way to the airport the other day, I noticed a car driving with flashing red and blue lights and also a wailing siren. Thinking it was a police vehicle, I changed lanes to let the vehicle pass. When it overtook me, I realised that it was an ordinary private car. I was just wondering, is this legal or this allowed?

Aminur Rahim

By email

Will the World Bank eat humble pie?

CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

IT was once a familiar refrain amongst the restaurant-goers in Dhaka that even if one didn't eat or drink anything in a restaurant, one could still end up paying twelve annas for breaking a drinking glass. That saying embodied concerns over the costliness of eating out and its incidental hazards, but eventually acquired a deeper meaning of life. It implies a Kafkaesque helplessness when one has to pay for something without partaking in any of its pleasures. Almost five years later, the Padma Bridge scandal looks like a throwback to that disturbing despair. Some people may have paid the price without doing anything significantly wrong.

Unless the World Bank knows something we don't. The bank now seems to be the sole custodian of a scandalous secret, dutifully guarding the entrance of truth like Anubis guards the entrance of the underworld in Egyptian myths. The global lender, for reasons best known to itself, seems to have taken an unbreakable vow of silence.

Meanwhile, others have spoken out loud. On February 10, a Toronto court acquitted three former officials of SNC-Lavalin, who were accused of planning to bribe Bangladeshi officials to secure a consultancy contract in the Padma Bridge project. This accusation formed the eye of a storm that forced a minister to resign, a secretary sent to jail, and the project director removed from his post. It also brought shame for us watching our country dragged through the mud.

Now we feel ashamed of being ashamed, and only the World Bank can save us from this terrible embarrassment. It knows what had happened and why it cancelled the USD1.2 billion IDA credit for the bridge. The construction of the Padma Bridge, which is going to connect 21 districts with the country's capital, got delayed while the cost multiplied. Lucky for Bangladesh, it stuck to its guns and mobilised Chinese loans and internal resources not to give up on that dream.

Whatever transpired between their government and the World Bank, the people of this country have paid the price. They not only suffered the awkwardness of a scandal that involved their government, but also withstood the anguish of watching their country being



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put on the spot. They have also lost time on the benefits of a more connected country. The budget for the bridge multiplied to Tk. 288 billion from Tk. 102 billion in 2007.

What the World Bank has done compares to a hit-and-run accident. The

international agency made a serious accusation and then fled the scene, leaving behind a wounded nation of 160 million to live with the consequences. If this is how the bank wished to behave, it should have been more discreet about the whole thing. Nobody is guilty until proven. The World Bank upended that maxim of law by maligning our country before it proved anything beyond doubt.

The burden of proof always lies with the accuser. The World Bank owes it to the people of Bangladesh and the rest of the world to show how it's right. So far this global body appears to have demonstrated the scruples of a village hag, who goes around spreading slanders just for fun. The bank may use its policies as a shield for its reticence. But after it brutally defamed a country, it simply can't hide behind that purported smokescreen.

The Bangladesh government couldn't have thrown out a more open challenge than it did after the recent Canadian court verdict. Our Prime Minister has even named the names to establish her claim that the cancellation of the World Bank loan for the Padma Bridge was a part of the sinister design to twist her arm. The World Bank should realise that while it may think silence is golden, its silence is actually giving consent to that

cynicism.

"Speak now or forever hold your peace," is a trope usually used in Christian matrimonial proceedings. If the World Bank doesn't open its mouth now, it should never talk about it again. It has already confused us twice, first by levelling an accusation against this country and again by refusing to corroborate it. If nobody has eaten or drank anything, nobody should have to make the ludicrous payment for breaking a glass.

Will the World Bank eat humble pie? It depends on how confident our government feels that no wrong was done. It can pursue this matter in international forums, work with the international media, and take it up with the governments of countries which donate big money to the World Bank. Going to the court is another option.

Oscar Wilde defines scandal as gossip made tedious by morality. We have had enough gossip over the Padma Bridge scandal for almost five years. Now is the moment of truth. If the World Bank doesn't open up, morality will degenerate into scandal made tedious by gossip.

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Seeming peace on the border

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

THE good news from the India-Pakistan boundary is that it is calm. Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar has said in an interview that "the temperature has come down on the border." This could mean that India and Pakistan seem to be settling down to a relationship which was expected 70 years ago when Partition took place.

If this is the case, both countries should cut down on the defence expenditure. We have not introduced the real cut which, at present, is only marginal. Unfortunately, the defence minister's statement of "India much better armed than before" indicates how much we are still spending on the defence. Pakistan, too, has not made any significant reduction in its defence expenditure. This reminds me of the Cold War era when America made the Soviet Union spend most of its resources on defence. The result was that there was very little left for schools, hospitals and people's councils.

This led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the country got divided into several parts. For example,

Ukraine became independent. The Soviet President Vladimir Putin has said many a time that Ukraine is part of Russia. But the independence movement belies his statement. Most of the Russian troops are posted on that front.

The effect on Pakistan has been the dilution of whatever democracy exists there. Now the new Army chief is superior to the elected Prime Minister. The pictures that show Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also depicts that the person in khaki is the real boss. The Pakistan Prime Minister has accepted the arrangement.

Islamabad's worry is that the Taliban are using the soil of Afghanistan to attack Pakistan. Islamabad is no longer safe. Every second day, one incident of bombing or the other takes place in Pakistan, killing innocent people. There has been exodus from the secure Islamabad to other parts of Pakistan.

Thanks to UN pressure, China has agreed to declare Hafiz Saeed as a terrorist. Pakistan's defence minister Khawaja Asif has admitted that Pakistan faces danger from terrorists like Saeed who is now under house arrest. This has been a sham so far but the number at the UN Security Council was predominantly for declaring him as a terrorist.

Now Islamabad has finally realised that Harif Saeed is linked with militancy

in some way but it is to be seen how long Islamabad can keep him under house arrest. In fact, in 2008, the mastermind of Mumbai attacks was placed under house arrest but was freed by a court in 2009. The question before all of us is whether we should read too much into Pakistan's arrest or take defence minister Asif's statement seriously?

The observers in Pakistan are well aware that the action against the Lashkar-e-Taiba chief is not a new step or the most serious measure taken against him over the past two decades. Since 2001, the LeT chief has been in and out of detention at least on five occasions. If, indeed, Pakistan is too serious about the UN list, action against Saeed should have been initiated in 2008 itself when he and Jammat-ud-Dawa were put on the UN list of terrorists.

The recent action seems to have been timed for the Financial Action Task Force's meeting to be held in Paris where the Pakistan's terror funding record is likely to come up. Even otherwise, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif must be worried with the decision of US President Donald Trump who has banned travel from seven Muslim countries. For Pakistan, its nationals will be given visa only after a close scrutiny.

I wish New Delhi has picked up the thread from where it had left off when

India could probably wait and watch for a while before moving ahead. Nevertheless, it is in the interest of both India and Pakistan to sit across and thrash out the issues. Pakistan, on its part, should put the Kashmir issue on the backburner for the time being. They should, instead, address the immediate problems of poverty, hunger and unemployment.

Nawaz Sharif met Prime Minister Narendra Modi the last time in China. They were reported to have a positive dialogue. But things have not moved further because New Delhi asked Islamabad to ensure that the Pakistani soil would not be used by the terrorists. But then incidents like Uri and Pathankot attacks have falsified hopes.

Now that Pakistan has detained Hafiz Saeed and Defence Minister Asif's admission of the dangers from terrorists like the LeT chief, dialogue can probably resume between the two countries. To go forward, India may have to reestablish its position that it would have no talks unless there was a foolproof guarantee on curbs against terrorists' operation from their soil.

India could probably wait and watch for a while before moving ahead. Nevertheless, it is in the interest of both India and Pakistan to sit across and thrash out the issues. Pakistan, on its part, should put the Kashmir issue on the backburner for the time being. They should, instead, address the immediate problems of poverty, hunger and unemployment.

The writer is an Indian columnist.

