

4 8-year-old service holder Oshim Kumar Saha had a terrible motorbike accident in 2015; at a 'black spot' near Iliaganj Bazaar of Daudkandi in Dhaka-Chittagong highway (a black spot is a place that has a record of large numbers of crashes).

"When I lost control over the bike, I only remember thinking about where it was going or how I could stop the brakes. Within the next minute, I fell unconscious and hit a tree," recalled Oshim.

"It all happened in a split second, and when I opened my eyes, I found myself on a hospital bed," he said. "Later I came to know that I was at a nearby health complex." Oshim was very eager to know who brought him to the hospital instantly.

"Immediately after the crash, an eyewitness called an emergency number that was developed in our area by Traumalink," he said. Traumalink is a volunteer-based organisation working in the Daudkandi black spot of Dhaka-Chittagong highway to ensure emergency first aid for road traffic injuries.

"When the operator collected information from him on where the crash occurred, volunteers who live close to the scene received a text message about the accident. And based on that message, two volunteers rushed to the crash scene with their first aid boxes within five minutes and tried to stop my bleeding," said Oshim.

"After that I was immediately sent to the health complex with their help" he stated.

Even the doctors later informed Oshim that if his bleeding had not stopped immediately after the accident, it would have been difficult for them to save his life.

Oshim was undoubtedly lucky and he is one of the fortunate few. Most road accident victims, however, have a much worse experience.

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Every day, many traffic injury victims either die or become permanently paralysed due to significant delays in treatment or lack of emergency medication by trained personnel. As a matter of fact, bystanders who hurriedly move the victims to take them to the hospital don't know how to handle a trauma patient, causing added harm to victims.

According to a 2012 report by the World Health Organisation (WHO), every year, on average 21,000 people die on Bangladesh's roads and 80 percent of trauma patients die before reaching the hospital. A joint study by the Accident Research Institute (ARI) of BUET and the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) states, "In Bangladesh, 65 percent of road fatalities occur on the spot and 35 percent within one to two hours. With the needed medical services, most of these victims could have survived and the severity of the injuries could have also been reduced."

Transportation consultant and road safety expert Dr Md Shamsul Haque, who is also the ex-Director of ARI, BUET, informs that if a road crash victim is taken to the hospital within the first one hour following the traumatic injury – the 'golden one hour' – the chances of



PHOTO COURTESY: TRAUMALINK

## AFTER THE ACCIDENT

NILIMA JAHAN



PHOTO COURTESY: TRAUMALINK

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survival are higher.

"In developed countries, we see the pervasive use of surveillance camera in the highways in order to detect road crash scenes for swift response," says Haque. "Also, when a bystander calls 911 (an emergency telephone number that is used in the United States, Canada, and Mexico among other countries), he/she is connected to an emergency dispatch who immediately knows his/her exact location, and can therefore dispense the appropriate emergency resources as per the victim's exact necessities," he adds.

However, in Bangladesh, there is neither any national emergency hotline system, nor any affordable or effective emergency response service available. Especially in the highways, where 70 percent of total fatalities occur, even when victims can find a private ambulance, it is often unaffordable and the staff don't have any medical equipment or training, according to a collaborative report by the Civil Engineering Department and ARI of BUET.

Although there are a few non-profit organisations working on this issue that have received support from members of

### ROAD SAFETY

the community, local police, highway police, and fire brigade, the greatest challenge these organisations are facing is securing financial support to continue to expand their operations.

"Because of the enormous scope of this problem, we feel a great sense of urgency in bringing these first aid services to all Bangladeshis. And, we can only expand as quickly as our access to funding allows," says Jon Moussally MD, the co-founder and president of Traumalink Bangladesh Ltd. He is also an Attending Emergency Physician at the Massachusetts General Hospital and North Shore Medical Centre.

Starting in November 2014, Traumalink has covered an area of 20 km as their pilot project, established a 24/7 hotline number in that area, recruited more than 100 volunteers and given them a two-day first aid training. After more than 250 crash responses, the volunteers have not missed a single call and their response times have been exceptional. Their average time for responses is around five minutes within receiving the message, said the operations director of Traumalink, Esha Chowdhury.

We contacted some of the volunteers to get to know more about them and they all either lived or worked near the highway within the target location. All the volunteers belong to the immediate community – we talked to Noyon, a man with a tailoring shop on the road, Parvin who is a housewife, living near at the highway and Hasina and her husband, who have farm land close by. This organisation found its success by training the community to tackle crisis situations.

"We are now working on expanding our operations on the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway east towards Comilla. We are also beginning a new project in Manikganj, on the Dhaka-Aricha Highway," said Moussally.

Services like these however face a number of problems when trying to do good. Rahat Hossain, programme director of CriticaLink, another non-profit organisation that developed a mobile app for alerting the nearest volunteer first-responders, talks about the problems.

"The hospital authorities are not willing to obey the law while admitting road accident victims," said Hossain. He was referring to the law that states that hospitals must admit and treat any and all accident victims being brought in.

"Most of the time they give us general excuses, such as, there are no doctors available, or the hospital doesn't have necessary facilities. But we all know that although doctors may not be available, the hospitals at least have the resources to save a life!" said Hossain.

The initiatives that Moussally and Hossain have undertaken are nothing short of commendable. But their work cannot advance very far without broader initiative. The government has a crucial role to play here. Experts suggest that the public and private sector should jointly develop a national emergency hotline, and ensure the provision of emergency medical care. Different stakeholders must also come together to create awareness among the general people so that they, too, can take effective steps to save road accident victims. ■

### SPECIAL FEATURE

2 000, 1958, 1535, 1396 – these are the numbers of people killed in the lawless roads and highways of Bangladesh over the last four years. These statistics were disclosed by the Bangladesh police; the unofficial records suggest that the actual death toll is no less than 4000 on average every year. A major reason for this staggering number of deaths is the impunity with which transport companies run unfit, illegally modified vehicles by untrained drivers at devastating high-speeds.

The verdicts on February 22 and February 28, convicting two drivers – one for deliberately killing a woman by his truck and another for the crash that killed renowned filmmaker Tareque Masud and Mishuk Munier – were momentous, for they challenged the culture of impunity protecting transport workers. However, the transport sector union's subsequent reaction to it – paralysing the whole country for two days by blocking the roads and highways – laid bare, once again, the power and sense of entitlement enjoyed by the transport owners and workers.

According to experts, Bangladesh's road transport sector is one of the most unregulated service sectors in the country. The road transport system, regulated by the Motor Vehicles Ordinance, 1983, which is 34 years old and considered outdated, and the Association of Bus Owners and Federation of Road Transport Workers are the two main bodies that actually control the entire road transport system of the country. These unions, backed by influential political leaders, allegedly pressurise regulatory bodies like Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) to accept their illegitimate demands.

It has been reported in the daily *Prothom Alo* that due to the pressure of these unions, BRTA issued 190,000 professional driving licenses without any driving test (*Prothom Alo*, July 30, 2015). The BRTA also could not ban and withdraw illegal and dilapidated vehicles such as *Nasiman*, *Kariman* and *Votvoti* from the highways.

Ilias Kanchan, Chairman, Nirapad Sharak Chai (We Demand Safe Roads), a non-profit organisation campaigning for road safety for decades, argues that the trade union organisations of Bangladesh's road transport sector do not abide by any rules and regulations. "Even the government has been unable to develop any system to monitor their activities. As a result, owners of buses and trucks recruit drivers and other workers without following any procedure. They often abuse their political power to run unfit vehicles; in a word, an absolute absence of management is apparent in the road transport sector," he says.

Ilias claims that even the rights of the transport workers are being violated in this situation: "Most of the drivers and their helpers work for around 12-15 hours a day. There is no provision for physical fitness check-ups for the drivers. Their payment is also irregular as there is no regulation to determine the wages of the transport workers."

A few of the established bus companies have formulated their own regulations. "However, in the absence of any

substantial supervision by the government, most of the smaller companies run their vehicles according to their will to maximise their profit at any cost," adds Ilias.

The death toll from accidents reaches the peak during the Eid holidays when millions of people leave the capital to spend their holidays with family members. To benefit from the holiday rush, all the bus owners ply every kind of vehicle, fit or unfit, without any trained driver, in the

our vehicles. So, you cannot just blame the bus owners and the workers if they want to earn more. Most of us can just make ends meet after paying a huge amount of toll and loan instalment," he adds.

The government officials also admitted the intensity of the crisis and the government's inability to solve it. MAN Siddique, Secretary, Road Transport and Highways Division, Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges, says, "I agree that

workers into apologists for killers and miscreants. With several transport company owners and union leaders in the cabinet, it might be a challenge for the government to formulate a strong legal framework to regulate the transport companies and ensure the rights of their workers.

As we have already witnessed in the past, Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan, also the Executive President of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers'

# WHO RULES OUR ROADS?

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN



PHOTO: STAR FILE

highways, catering to the numerous travellers. During the last vacation of Eid-ul-Adha, 265 people were killed in 210 road accidents within just six days. According to a study titled "Road Safety: Realities and Challenges" published by Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), 49 percent of these accidents occurred due to the driver's fault and around 70 percent of all the road accidents involved buses and trucks.

Khandaker Rafiqul Hossain, President, Association of Bus Companies, blames the severe traffic jams for overworking drivers and workers. He argues, "Due to traffic congestion, wrecked roads and long queues for ferry crossings, most of our buses take more than eight hours to reach the destination. So, how can we maintain the limit of eight working hours for our drivers?"

"Also, we have the burden of paying the loans with which we buy our buses on one hand, and on the other, we have to pay illegal tolls to various sources to run

there is a severe lack of management in the transport sector and one of the reasons behind it, I think, is lack of coordination among different government agencies. We can formulate regulations to control the activities of the transport companies; however, we have to depend on the law enforcement agencies to implement those laws. Again, when we enforce the laws, the transport owners and workers call strikes and create such a crisis that the government has to sit with the owners. This is actually a vicious cycle and we have to break it with a big push."

The government has almost finalised the new law which will replace the Motor Vehicles Ordinance, 1983, which he believes, we will be able to solve this disruptive situation.

While trade unions are formed to ensure the rights of the workers, abuse of political power by the leaders and the government's inability to work with them in a constructive manner has turned the trade unions of Bangladesh's transport

Federation, recommended the issuance of driving licence without any driving test and demanded a law which would give indemnity to drivers after road crash (*The Daily Star*, October 25, 2011). It has also been reported that the transport workers sat with Shahjahan and State Minister for Rural Development and Co-operatives Mashiur Rahman Ranga, who is also the President of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners' Association, before declaring the strike (*The Daily Star*, March 1, 2017).

To regulate the transport sector, it is necessary to depoliticise the industry workers and owners so that the new law can be formulated and enforced properly. There is no doubt that if the legal framework is not developed and its enforcement is not ensured as soon as possible, the death toll in the roads will continue to increase and the country's entire road transportation system will remain at the mercy of the big transport companies. ■