

## 6 doctors, 68 jails!

### State of prisoners' healthcare appalling

WE have 70,000 inmates and only six doctors to look after them. Although there are 112 posts for prison doctors lying vacant, the state appears to be happy with the pool of just six doctors. Money literally talks in prisons. An investigative team from this paper has unearthed very disturbing facts about what goes on in prisons when it comes to medical treatment. On the one hand, the ordinary inmates suffering from serious ailments may never get to see a doctor or visit the prison hospital and some threaten to commit suicide to get a chance to get admitted to the jail hospital, while on the other, we have the “privileged” class of convicts. These are the hardened criminals, crime bosses or members of the political elite for whom all services are available for a “fee”.

Jail authorities appear to be more powerful than the ministry of health. A recent probe by the concerned ministry found that a certain cocaine dealer was recently admitted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital despite having no major physical problems. He was subsequently transferred back to prison. There have, however, been several cases of “privileged” convicted prisoners who avail medical services either in the prisons where they are incarcerated or get transferred to public hospitals and remain “sick” for weeks or months on end.

An investigation by this paper has found detailed information about how much each service costs a prison inmate and this depends on the duration of his stay at the hospital. It seems that medical services in jails are for the high and mighty prisoners only, not the general criminals. The taxpayers need to know as to why, despite so many exposures by both media and the ministry itself—people continue to enjoy facilities that grossly violate jail rules.

## DB men involved in kidnapping

### Greater accountability is needed within the force

IF abuse of power is the worst of all forms of corruption, as some say, a section of our security forces is definitely making the most of it. The news of seven Detective Branch officials getting caught red-handed for allegedly extracting ransom money for the return of a Cox's Bazar trader that they had earlier abducted adds to the long list of criminal offences committed by members of the police force. Only a day ago, the ACC had filed a case against a former superintendent of police for illegally amassing crores of taka.

Under no circumstance can such offences be tolerated. Criminal offence committed by the police is often confused with “misconduct” in Bangladesh, and since it involves the reputation of the entire force, sometimes there is a deliberate attempt to downplay such offences, or worse, not follow them up with appropriate legal action. When a corrupt officer gets away without punishment, it has dangerous ramifications: it inspires others to commit crimes. And there is also the dangerous possibility that the victims, and indeed the general people, may never fully trust the police again.

For a state to function properly, it's important that everyone should abide by the law, and that includes the law enforcement officials also. Corrupt members of the police force must be punished. Apart from legal action to bring the offenders to justice, we think a radical reform in the way corruption is viewed and treated within the force is needed. We can't allow a few rotten apples to keep bringing shame on the entire force or risk disturbing the public order.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Strong family bonds can prevent suicides

A recent survey found suicide to be the second major cause of death in the world. In the next 20 years, it could become number one. According to the survey, suicidal tendencies are most common among those aged 15 to 29. Another survey found suicidal tendencies among adolescents in Bangladesh to be quite prevalent.

Experts suggest that strengthening family bonds is very important in preventing suicides among youngsters. Parents should be aware of any change in their children's behaviour and set aside enough time for their kids.

Shahid, *By email*

### Ghostly electricity bills

I have been living in a rented apartment in Sector 3, Uttara, since 2012. In March 2013, we detected some abnormalities in our electric bills. At first, we didn't bother with it as it was only a thousand taka more than usual. However, it then gradually started to increase by at least Tk 600-800 each month, despite the fact that we did not increase electricity usage.

At one-point last year, my monthly electricity bill reached Tk 7,000-8,000. I suspected that something wrong and went to DESCO many times, but they did not provide any remedies.

I have seen a number of newspaper reports about such strange cases and would like to urge the authorities to clarify the confusions that consumers are having across the country.

Sharmin Ahmed, *Uttara*

# No city for women

*It hardly comes as a surprise that a recent poll found Dhaka to be one of the most dangerous megacities for women*



NAHELA NOWSHIN

A recent poll conducted by Thomson Reuters Foundation basically reaffirmed the fact that Dhaka is one of the worst megacities for women today—a fact known all too well to the city's women residents. So it barely came as a surprise when the poll ranked Dhaka as the seventh most dangerous megacity for women. The poll took into account four criteria: access to healthcare, economic opportunities, sexual violence, and cultural practices (early marriage, female genital mutilation, etc). It's in the last two categories where Dhaka failed miserably.

As a working woman living in Dhaka, I can testify to the fact that living in this city is extremely challenging. From the horrors of public transportation to the ubiquity of sexual harassment, the list of dangers that a woman is exposed to in her daily life is too long to recount. But “women” aren't a homogenous entity. The risks that a girl/woman faces depend on a number of factors (socioeconomic status, location, age, etc) and the nature of these risks is multi-faceted. It makes me think of the millions of women who have it much worse than me.

Dhaka didn't get to this point overnight. It is the culmination of decades-long flawed model of urbanisation leading to the absence of the very basic ingredients needed for a healthy, functional society. Ask anyone who grew up in Dhaka in the 80s and early 90s and they'll tell you just how much we have regressed in terms of women's safety in the last two decades.

*It is oftentimes a lie that we tell ourselves to either ignore or mask the hideous inequalities and injustices that make Dhaka one of the most dangerous cities for girls and women to live in.*

If there's a lesson to be learnt from Dhaka's journey towards urbanisation, it's that urbanisation does not necessarily lead to true prosperity. At the risk of sounding clichéd, take the lives of our female garment workers—the quintessential representation of a progressive Bangladesh and our go-to (and feel-good) example of a rural woman's journey to becoming economically independent having hit the “goldmine” that is the RMG industry.

Now ask yourself, are these women (who make up 85 percent of the total workforce of the RMG sector) reaping

much also the reality of countless women both inside and outside the sphere of the household.

It is easy to be fooled by ambitious tags such as “megacity” given that cities are considered as the “wealth-generating” centres of any country. The illusory correlation between urbanisation and development goes a long way in masking the inequitable distribution in wealth as economic gains and social benefits barely reach the urban poor. A lack of political willingness and commitment of successive governments towards smart

settlements have mushroomed and the informal economy now accounts for over 80 percent of the labour force in the country. The low quality of both living and working conditions makes marginalised girls and women much more likely to be victims of rape, abduction, etc. It's also in these communities—that are far from socially integrated and are a world of their own—where forced marriages of underage girls are commonplace, and considered as a simply hallmark of “tradition”.

So, where do we go from here? There



PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

The lack of safe, reliable public transportation is one of many reasons why women's mobility and security is at risk.

the benefits in proportion to their contributions in making Dhaka the centre of wealth accumulation? Do the (meagre) wages of the average female garment worker allow her to move into a nicer home in a better, safer neighbourhood? Is she able to access public transport with ease—having the satisfaction of knowing that she will return home safe without constantly having to look over her shoulder? In other words, to what extent has living in a megacity improved her wellbeing and safety?

The answer to all these questions is in the negative. Urbanisation only tells the story of collective prosperity, not individual poverty and misery. While the lives of female garment workers in Dhaka can be considered as a microcosm of the fact that urbanisation does not necessarily translate into a life of physical and social security, this is pretty

urban planning and upholding the rule of law is largely to blame for Dhaka being one of the worst megacities for women today, which, when you come to think of it, is a cruel irony. As more and more women from rural areas move to Dhaka city—a wholly unfamiliar territory—to carve out a living and become more “independent”, their physical security remains at stake.

Women of poor socioeconomic status are undoubtedly more vulnerable to the risks of sexual violence, forced marriage, etc, than other, more “privileged” women who don't have to get to work by foot or spend the night in a ramshackle tin-shed hut in a slum. The effects of a combination of informal employment and informal living—two of many interlocking factors that affect the security of women of low socioeconomic background—cannot be ignored. Post-independence, slums and squatter

is no easy solution, nor do I claim to know what it is. But we have got to start somewhere. How about starting with the basics—like the radical idea of providing safe, reliable public transport or ensuring that crimes against women don't go unpunished?

If the experiences of the millions of women in Dhaka told a story, it would tell us that the tale of Dhaka's “incredible urban prosperity” is a façade. It is oftentimes a lie that we tell ourselves to either ignore or mask the hideous inequalities and injustices that make Dhaka one of the most dangerous cities for girls and women to live in. It is time we stopped lying to ourselves, seeking complacency in deceptive examples of women's empowerment that only tell part of the story.

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Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

# The never-ending gridlock

*How traffic jams are eating away at our GDP growth*

OBAIDUL KARIM KHAN

MANY visitors to Bangkok have described it to be one of the most congested cities due to its traffic situation. Even CNN and BBC have rated this city as the most horrible to travellers. But I would beg to differ. I have been to Bangkok, Mumbai and New Delhi, but have never seen anything like the traffic chaos that I saw in Dhaka.

Last month, I had just landed in Dhaka from my trip to Dubai. After travelling a distance of 3,547km in just four hours, it took me another four hours to travel a distance of 16km in Dhaka from the airport to my hotel in Motijheel. I encountered a traffic jam that remained at a standstill for many hours, worse than the worst jams in Bangkok. During my stay in Bangkok, I had never been stuck in traffic for over 45 minutes, as was the case in Dhaka while travelling to my hotel. The following day I had two meetings to attend, but managed to visit only one although I was late and missed the second meeting because of traffic gridlock in the city. I also witnessed cars going in the opposite direction on a one-way route.

My driver told me that this was a common phenomenon. And when ministers' convoys are about to pass, all vehicles are expected to stop and provide the way for the VIPs. This does not happen in Bangkok. It is hard to schedule more than one meeting amidst this horrible situation. Most people seem to have resigned to this sad state of affairs and schedule only one meeting a day.

The Greater Dhaka area is home to over 18 million people as of 2016. The density of Dhaka is 23,234 people for every square kilometre. Road networks constitute about eight percent of the city, and hawkers occupy large portions of this. Based on Forbes estimates, the extra



The vast population plus slow traffic speed could result in more lost working hours unless the government plans on contingency measures. PHOTO: STAR

rush hour time in Bangkok is 57 percent, but for Dhaka it is not projected. After experiencing extra travel time of about 4-5 hours in Dhaka City, I talked to experts on this issue. Professor Mohammed Akhter from Urban Planning Development approximated extra travel time to be over 200 percent. A senior engineer from the roads and highways department echoed the same sentiment.

The extreme chaos associated with traffic jam affects general productivity in

many sectors and poses negative consequences to the economy. Bangladesh had enjoyed steady economic growth of about seven percent in the past years. This increase can be doubled by getting rid of traffic congestion, especially in Dhaka City. In 2015, it was estimated by the board of investment (now known as Bangladesh Investment Development Authority) in the country that the city faces a loss of about USD 12.56 billion each year because of traffic jam. Whereas extra

consumption of fuel and wastage of working hours is measurable, the consequences for health, environment, and transportation of perishable products are hard to measure.

This is one of the reasons why there are varying figures on actual loss. For instance, UNDP approximates a lower loss of about USD 4.6 billion occurring from lost time, extra fuel and health. The aggregate figure from seven studies (including universities like BUET) on loss resulting from gridlock is about USD 10 billion annually. Surprisingly, none of the seven studies have committed to research on lost working hours as a result of traffic jam. The majority of these studies have adopted estimates of World Bank of about 3.2 million hours that could have been spent at the workplace lost stuck in jam daily in Dhaka. The aggregate figure of USD 10 billion from seven research studies equates to almost five percent of Bangladesh's GDP lost annually, and Dhaka generates 36 percent of national GDP. There is no doubt that Bangladesh can double its GDP growth with the elimination of traffic jam in the city and in other major towns.

In the coming years, the situation may worsen because of slower traffic speed and increasing population of Dhaka City that is estimated to be 27 million by 2030. The vast population plus slow traffic speed could result in more lost working hours unless the government plans on contingency measures. The losses arising from traffic jam can be considered as more damaging to the city than anything else. The actions to redeem the city from this never-ending gridlock have not proved to be adequate. More stakeholders need to join hands and enforce better measures that will stand the test of time.

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