

Commuters fleeced in name of seating service

There should be continuous monitoring

A survey carried out by Jatri Kalyan Samity on 310 buses in different parts of the city in the first week of Ramadan has found that 8 out of 10 passengers are unhappy with the random manner in which fares are being charged in the name of “seating service”. Despite so-called seating service offered by buses, nearly a third of bus passengers stand on their trips despite paying extra for seating. Although this seating service was apparently discontinued on April 15 of last year, the practice continues in the absence of any regular monitoring by authorities. The last time BRTA conducted monitoring, bus owners withdrew their buses that were operating the so-called seating services and the drive was discontinued.

We feel that the drive must be a continuous one and mobile courts must be set up on a permanent basis. And this monitoring is needed for CNG autorickshaws too who invariably charge extra for trips. BRTA had made several recommendations to Dhaka Metro Regional Transport Committee (MRTC) earlier which need to be looked into. City corporations need to build city stop-overs and counters for seating services, and only new buses with special permission to ply on specific routes should be allowed to offer such services to passengers. These were some of the recommendations that have not been looked into. As such, passengers continue to be at the mercy of ad-hoc decisions of bus companies. Authorities need to get rules of business in order to stop this unethical practice of overcharging commuters without providing the service.

School for the underprivileged

Such initiatives should be supported

A group of students from Barisal University and Govt BM College took the initiative to establish a school that is providing underprivileged children education for free. The school currently has around 70 students, and besides education, children enrolled in the school also receive new dress and food on different occasions from their school. Classes are voluntarily conducted by the 22 founding members whose vision we applaud, and whose determination to make a positive contribution to society, is inspiring. We hope that their example will motivate others to also step forward and make a contribution to our society, especially through education.

Some of the children enrolled in the school are street children, working menial jobs to help support their family. Having come from poor families, they had never before had the opportunity of attending school, despite their willingness to learn. This initiative, however, has helped to fulfil their dream of getting an education. And a very important step these particular teachers have also been taking is counselling guardians to send their children to school as, understandably, some of the parents are compelled to send their children to work, rather than school, due to their difficult economic circumstances. But if the benefits of sending children to school are properly explained to parents, perhaps it can make a big difference in our society's cultural mindset.

We call on the government to help these young individuals with their bold initiative. Given that the school is currently being run in an open space and that the rainy season is approaching, financial support from the government could ensure that it can continue to operate and thrive in the future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Contain Sanchayapatra rate

Sanchayapatra is a national savings scheme of the government. The government collected more than Tk 750 billion during the 2016-17 fiscal year by selling Sanchayapatra. The government had an initial aim of selling Sanchayapatra worth Tk 450 billion by April but ended up selling about Tk 650 billion. Sanchayapatra is attractive because its interest rate is almost twice the rate banks are offering. The collective interest paid by the government in this scheme has now reached about Tk 150 billion.

The actual beneficiaries of this scheme were wealthy families and businessmen. Sanchayapatra is now creating a bubble which might explode anytime soon. The government should contain this scheme in order to maintain sustainability of our economic growth.

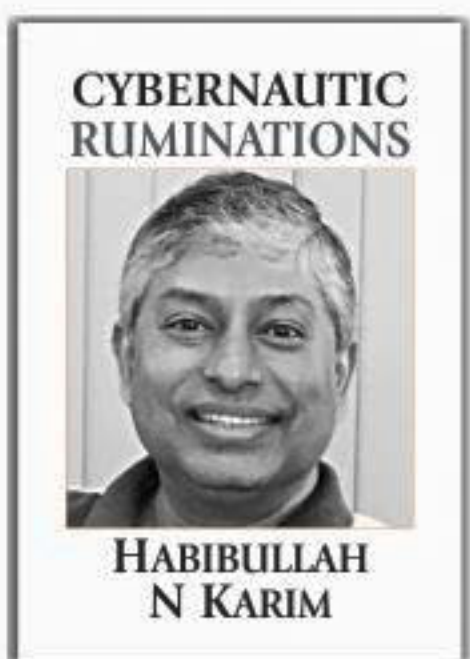
Mojammal Hoque, Fatikchhari

Build a citywide drainage system

West Kazipara is one of many areas in Dhaka that resembles the seashore after only a little rain. Sometimes during my commute to work, I have to fold my trousers over my ankles while wading through the filthy water. The water is so dirty that it looks totally black. I can only imagine the woes of my female colleagues.

Only if a proper drainage system existed in this city, the problem wouldn't have been so severe. We urge the authorities concerned to build a storm drainage system and recover the city's water retention areas to resolve this serious issue.

Mohammad Belayet, By email



CYBERNAUTIC RUMINATIONS

HABIBULLAH N KARIM

NEWS about security forces mowing down several dozen “drug dealers” in the last two weeks has got many of us writhing in moral agony over “shootouts” happening on an increasing tempo. True, drug abuse is highly detrimental to our youth and surely drug dealers need to be checked vigorously, but committing the state-sanctioned “ultimate sin” to rid ourselves of some low-level operatives is quite disturbing, to say the least.

In the last two decades, drug abuse has risen sharply to the point where one out of every 15 adults are thought to be addicted. How did it reach such epidemic proportions right under our nose? According to anti-narcotic social activists, drug kingpins have resorted to a proven distribution model where the purveyors remain imperceptible until the distribution network grows geometrically to a point where its tentacles reach every nook and cranny of our society. Yes, I am talking about multi-level marketing or MLM in short—a marketing and distribution system in which the consumers are also the sellers, the sellers are also the recruiters, and the recruiters are also the distributors. With a product that preys on the vilest instincts of addictive dependencies, drug peddlers have spread across the whole gamut of our society via MLM.

These drug addicts—no matter how reprehensible their acts are—happen to be ordinary people who are among our family, friends or acquaintances and are certainly not hardened criminals. Yes, using and distributing addictive drugs destroys the prospects of a healthy life but subjecting them to extrajudicial execution is really pushing the moral envelope too far. Besides, killing off a handful of such dealers is like playing whack-a-mole—liquidating a few perpetrators simply replaces them with others only too eager to take their place. In other words, our law enforcement agencies are soiling their name for virtually nothing.

The law enforcement functionaries are



Handcuffed and tied to each other, several young men, who according to Rab are suspected drug dealers, sit on the side of a road in the capital's Geneva Camp area from where the elite force detained them on May 26.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

servants of the republic, employed by the government with taxpayers' money to provide security to the lives and properties of the very same taxpayers—citizens to whom all government service holders are pledge-bound to uphold the supremacy of the rule of law. The paradoxical situation surrounding police “shootouts” with drug dealers versus upholding the rule of law reminds me of another paradox, though fictional, that emanated from Isaac Asimov's moral code for robots. Asimov, the Russian science-fiction writer, gave robots a simple moral code known as The Three Laws of Robotics, which are: 1) A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; 2) A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; and 3) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

In many of Asimov's science-fiction

novels, the paradox stems from what makes us humans and robots not humans. There is a similar moral paradox in sanctioning the law enforcers to play judge and executioner at the same time when dealing with the very citizens they are pledge-bound to protect.

Despite paradoxical scenarios in exceptional situations for Asimov's robots, at least they are guided by a set of explicit moral codes. When it comes to “shootouts”, can the law enforcers cite any legal or moral codes that precipitate their irreversible actions? Many people, including some in high places, often display cavalier attitude when it comes to dealing with criminality in society, not realising that criminals are never born but are products of the society in which they live and as such we all share a collective responsibility to dig a little deeper than just scratching the surface and jumping to draconian conclusions that simply do not solve anything but rather destroy the very fabric of our

moral standing as a nation. The Three Laws of Robotics can be an excellent starting point when revisiting our own moral code for state functionaries.

Drug dealers and distributors cause tremendous harm to society and destroy the productive capacity of a large section of the population. Drug abuse certainly must be contained and gradually eradicated. But playing whack-a-mole with petty drug pushers is not the way. We need to cut off the transit routes from the source of all hard drugs, educate our youngsters everywhere on the evils of drug abuse and rehabilitate those that have gone astray. These measures require meticulous planning and diligent execution, not the kind you carry out with bullets but with a lot of care and compassion. Our citizens deserve no less.

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SAFE MOTHERHOOD DAY

Safe motherhood is a right, not a privilege

NAZNIN TITHI

LAST year when the news of Rohingya women giving birth in no man's land along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border first surfaced in the media, I heard many men glorifying such births which took place out in the open without any assistance from any birth attendants. They were comparing the Rohingya women's experiences of childbirth with that of our urban women, who can afford quality maternity care during their pregnancy and give birth at quality healthcare facilities with the assistance of skilled birth attendants—and commenting on the privilege that urban middle-class women usually get. Needless to say, I was shocked to hear such comments and arguments. Because when I read about the Rohingya women's

100,000 live births—this rate has not changed between 2011 and 2016. In 2016, maternal mortality rate was 196 per 100,000 live births, almost the same as the rate of 2010. This is the finding of a survey done by the National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT) last year. Bangladesh has to make extraordinary efforts to reduce maternal deaths to 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030, which is an SDG goal.

However, Bangladesh has made significant improvements in many fields of maternal healthcare. According to the Bangladesh Maternal Mortality and Healthcare Survey (BMMS 2016), the percentage of births in health facilities increased from 23 percent in 2010 to 47 percent in 2016. Seeking treatment in healthcare centres for pregnancy-related complications has increased from 29 percent in 2010 to 46 percent in

emergency healthcare to pregnant women. And not only emergency care, these facilities are not even capable of providing treatment for two of the most common reasons of maternal death: haemorrhage and eclampsia. At present, haemorrhage and eclampsia account for 55 percent of maternal deaths. Although cheap, simple medicines can prevent deaths from these two causes, the risk of dying from these causes remained unchanged between 2010 and 2016.

While talking about providing quality healthcare to expectant mothers, the need for skilled birth attendants or midwives should be given priority. A majority of maternal deaths can be prevented simply by having a professionally educated midwife attending women at childbirth. In Bangladesh, only 42 percent of deliveries are attended by skilled birth attendants. And medically trained attendance for home deliveries has consistently been around three to four percent during 2001-2016.

Besides providing quality healthcare, there are other issues that need to be addressed if we are really serious about ensuring safe motherhood for every woman. One such issue is child marriage. Maternal deaths cannot be reduced if early marriage is not stopped. Adolescent mothers are more likely to suffer from childbirth-related complications than adult mothers. According to UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2015 report, in Bangladesh, 65 percent of girls are married before they reach the age of 18. As a result, both maternal and child mortality rates are increasing in the country. Also teenage mothers are more likely to go into premature labour, which can be deadly in many cases. Amid such a situation, child marriage was “legalised” in the country through a special provision in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017. In order to stop child marriage, this special provision must be eliminated.

Another important issue which is often ignored is family planning and the use of contraceptives. Although our family planning programmes saw huge success in the past decades, at present we do not see much effort on the part of the government regarding providing family planning services in the remote rural areas. According to a study, use of contraceptives and quality family planning services can prevent more than 32 percent of maternal deaths. So the government's family planning programmes need to be strengthened. Also, the role of men in family planning programmes need to be determined.

When the BMMS survey report was made public last year, our health ministry outright rejected its findings which said maternal deaths had not reduced between 2010 and 2016. But if the government is really sincere about ensuring safe motherhood, it needs to shift from this denial mode and make real efforts to ensure that all expectant mothers get quality maternal care from skilled birth attendants or midwives, which is the theme of this year's Safe Motherhood Day.

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PHOTO: ISMAIL FERDOUS/WORLD BANK

childbirth experiences, I was extremely horrified as these women gave birth in the worst conditions possible and their sufferings during pregnancy and childbirth were not something to glorify.

What I learned from this is that there is something seriously wrong with our society's perception of safe motherhood which needs to be changed. Because “safe motherhood” is not an opportunity; it is a right of every woman. And Bangladesh has a long way to go when it comes to providing quality maternal care and reducing maternal deaths.

Although maternal deaths declined significantly between 2001 and 2010—from 322 to 194 deaths per

2016. Also, in 2016, 50 percent births were attended by medically trained personnel, compared to 27 percent in 2010. Despite all this progress, maternal deaths have not reduced in these last years.

BMMS 2016 found that although delivery at healthcare facilities is important to lower maternal mortality rate, this is not enough. For maternal deaths to reduce, quality of healthcare needs to be improved, meaning that our healthcare centres need to be fully staffed and equipped with competent health workers to provide emergency maternal care. Although healthcare centres have increased across the country over the years, these centres lack skilled health workers to provide