



An ambulance and its driver both smeared with used engine oil, left. The vehicle, which was carrying a patient from Chandpur to Dhaka, was allegedly stopped by transport workers 11 times at different points. At one stage, workers beat up the driver and broke the ambulance's headlights. Protesters attempt to stop another ambulance, right. The photos were taken at Shanir Akhra.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Strike strikes hard

FROM PAGE 1
transport was available as private buses, minibuses and even human hauliers were kept off the streets.

Many office-goers and students had to walk to their destinations. Bus terminals in the capital were teeming with commuters waiting for buses but in vain.

Rickshaws dominated the city roads with the pullers and drivers of CNG-run auto-rickshaws charging extra fares. Of the buses, only those of government-run BRTC operated in the capital.

Starting the strike from 6:00am, the transport workers also obstructed private cars, CNG-run three wheelers, motorcycles and even ambulances at different places in the city and elsewhere.

What was worse, they smeared used engine oil on the faces of some drivers in the capital's Jatrabari and passengers including female students in Narayanganj.

Many owners of private vehicles opted to stay off the roads in fear of getting into trouble. People, however, turned to social media to express their fury and criticised the role of the shipping minister, who is the executive president of the federation.

The workers obstructed buses that defied the strike in Jhenidah, Tangail, Bogura, Nilphamari and Thakurgaon.

Several hundred passengers, coming from India, got stuck at Banapole land port while 200 trucks carrying imported goods were trapped at Bhomra port. Transportation of vegetables from different districts to Dhaka was disrupted and traders apprehended a price hike.

Candidates seeking admission to Chittagong University bore the brunt of the situation on their way to the port city from different districts as the CU authorities are hell bent on holding the "A" unit test today despite the crisis.

Leaders of the federation on

Saturday called the work stoppage from a rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club to press home their eight-point demand.

The demands include making all offences under the Road Transport Act bailable, scrapping the provision for the fine of Tk 5 lakh on a worker for involvement in a road accident, changing the minimum educational qualification required to obtain driving licences from class-VIII to class-V, and ending harassment by police on roads.

The Daily Star could not reach the shipping minister over phone. He didn't reply to the text message sent by this correspondent last night.

Earlier in the day, he refused to make any comment when journalists at the secretariat questioned him about the strike.

'WHY PEOPLE WILL BE HELD HOSTAGE?'

Fifteen-year-old Hanufa, a madrasa student from Haluaghat of Mymensingh, had undergone a tonsil operation at Dhaka Medical College Hospital on Saturday.

Unaware of the strike, she and her parents arrived at Mohakhali Bus Terminal around 10:00am to leave for Mymensingh.

"We came to know about the strike after reaching here. We don't know how we will go home," her mother Shamsunnahar told this newspaper around noon.

Nur Muhammad Mithu, a private service holder, was trying to catch whatever he could get at Jatrabari to reach Cumilla's Chaudhagram to attend the funeral of his uncle.

He got a CNG-run auto-rickshaw that agreed to take him up to Kancharpur bridge. But the transport workers obstructed the auto-rickshaw and humiliated the driver, he told The Daily Star.

"I tried to persuade them to allow me to go saying my uncle died last night. But nothing worked," he said.

A heartbroken Nur, wrote in a

Facebook post, "I will remember my entire life those people for whom I could not see my uncle for the last time."

Pradip Kumar Roy and eight other farmers from Lalmonirhat on Saturday evening started for Munshiganj. After reaching Gazipur bypass yesterday morning, they were asked to get down from their bus.

Then they walked to Uttara and took auto-rickshaws to get to Mohakhali Bus Terminal spending Tk 70 per person.

"We've to go to Munshiganj but don't know how it will be possible," Pradip said.

Maksudur Rahman, a resident of Mohammadpur, who struggled to reach the DMCH, asked, "What's our fault? Why the people will always be held hostage?"

Long route and inter-city buses were seen parked at Gabtoli, Mohakhali and Sayedabad terminals. Many people with luggage were seen waiting for buses and some were going back.

Siddiqur Rahman, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), said the export is being hampered badly as they cannot carry their goods to the port.

"Our export target is \$40 billion. This target will not be achieved if such a strike goes on unabated," he told The Daily Star. He urged the government to take immediate steps for a permanent solution.

'IT'S THEIR OLD TRICK'

On Facebook, a number of people criticised the workers and the shipping minister for the strike.

"A transport strike called by a minister is continuing across the country. Why was the strike called and against whom? The game of holding people hostage to realise demands is something old. We want an end to this game," Probbash Amin, a senior journalist, wrote in his Facebook wall.

Road safety campaigners too

TRANSPORT WORKERS' DEMANDS

- Make all offences "bailable" under the Road Transport Act.
- Cancel provision that allows workers to be fined Tk 5 lakh if involved in a road accident.
- Change minimum educational qualification to class-V for obtaining driving licences.
- End police harassment on roads.
- Include workers' representatives in probe committees of road accidents.
- Reduce weigh scale fines and cancel punishment.
- Issue driving licences in all districts after providing training.
- End corruption and irregularities in issuance of licences.

observed that transport workers making people suffer to have their demands realised is nothing new.

"They hold people hostage to serve own interests and show the government their strength. It's their old trick," said Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury, secretary general of Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity.

In March last year, they called similar strike protesting the verdicts of two courts, bringing the country to a standstill.

The strike began initially in 10 southern districts under Khulna division, protesting a verdict that gave life sentence to a bus driver over the deaths of filmmaker Tareque Masud, media personality Ashfaq Munier Mishuk and three others in an accident in 2011.

The following day, transport workers extended the strike to other parts of the country without any formal announcement after a Dhaka court

sentenced a truck driver to death over the killing of a woman in a 2003 accident in Savar.

During the student agitations for safe roads in August, transport owners and workers stopped their services as many of them were sued for not having legal documents.

MINISTER REQUESTS, WORKERS REJECT

Meanwhile, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader urged the transport workers to withdraw their work stoppage considering public sufferings.

Talking to reporters at Setu Bhaban, he reiterated that there is no scope for amending the act now in this parliament and if their demands are rational, the next parliament and the government will consider those.

Osman Ali, general secretary of the transport federation, however, turned down Quader's request, saying, "It is not possible."

He said they submitted their demands to the minister on September 27 and the issues could have been discussed then.

"The government could have told us to wait for the next parliament... Now it is not possible for us to respond to the minister's request."

About the public sufferings, Osman said they had nothing to do but to apologise to people. "It is not possible for us to drive vehicles with the law in place."

He further said they are not holding people hostage as they informed the government about their decision to enforce the work stoppage a month ago.

Asked whether Shipping Minister Shajahan had consented to their decision, Osman on Thursday told The Daily Star, "There was no scope for opposing the decision taken by the central committee."

However, another top leader of the federation confirmed that the minister gave consent to the work stoppage.

Also yesterday, Law Minister Anisul Huq said those who are enforcing the strike without knowing the law properly and urged the workers to withdraw it.

THEY WERE INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS

In March last year, the cabinet approved in principle the proposed Road Transport Act. It, however, remained shelved at the law ministry for more than a year for vetting amid opposition from transport owners and workers to some of its provisions.

In the meantime, the government held around a dozen of meetings with transport leaders before finalising the draft, sources said.

The government decided to place the draft before the cabinet amid the student agitations for road safety following the death of two college students in the capital on July 29.

The cabinet passed the final draft on August 6 and parliament on September 19 passed the bill with the road safety campaigners decrying lenient punishment for deaths caused by reckless driving.

Sources say Shajahan was present at the August 6 meeting of the cabinet that okayed the final draft.

Mozammel Hoque said transport leaders were directly involved with the law making process, and being a minister, Shajahan had exerted influence in favour of the workers' demands.

"Their 98 percent demands were met in the law and now they are inflicting sufferings upon people for realising the rest 2 percent demands. This is unacceptable and unethical," he said.

Osman Ali, however, said the law was not enacted as per the discussion they had with the government.

Asked why they did not protest before the passage of the bill, he claimed they raised their concern at the meeting of parliamentary standing committee and authority concerned.

"We had to go for work stoppage as they did not pay heed to our demands," he added.

Excesses committed

FROM PAGE 1
oil on the drivers' faces for bringing cars out on the street.

A photojournalist of The Daily Star, between 8:30am and 12:30pm, saw at least 25 people, mostly drivers, with engine oil smeared on their faces in the area.

Nearly a hundred transport workers divided themselves into several groups and intercepted Dhaka-bound vans, motorcycles, pick-up vans and rubbed burnt oil on the vehicles and drivers' faces before letting them go.

The workers also misbehaved with

photojournalists of different media outlets when they tried to capture the harassment on camera.

At 9:00am, the workers halted a Dhaka University bus and verbally abused the students, blaming them for the enactment of the new law. The students were forced to get off and walk.

Even motorcyclists were not spared and many rickshaw passengers were forced to walk, even though rickshaws were out of the strike's purview.

In Narayanganj, some transport workers vandalised a Narayanganj Govt Mahila College bus and smeared

engine oil on the driver's face. Three college students had gotten stains on their uniforms during the incident, Mojibor Rahman, driver of the bus, told The Daily Star.

Transport workers took position at different important roads, including the Dhaka-Sylhet and Dhaka-Chattogram highways, and stopped BRTC buses, CNG-run auto-rickshaws, motorcycles, rickshaw vans, and empty ambulances.

At 9:30am, some transport workers blocked the Prime Minister's Personal Secretary Sajjadul Hassan's car at

Shimrail intersection for about half an hour. Upon Inspector Molla Taslim Hossain's request, they later let it go.

Many people who tried to reach their destination through app-based ride-hailing services and auto-rickshaws also faced the wrath of the workers.

A group of transport workers were seen blocking private cars and CNG-run-three wheelers from moving through Jurain Natun Rasta and forcing them to park beside the road near Ghuntighar.

"It is totally wrong as we are not involved in this strike. I failed to get my

passenger from Gendaria railway station," said an Uber driver, seeking anonymity.

He said he protested when the transport workers stopped him around half-km away from his destination, but was forced to turn back without his passenger.

A video posted on Facebook showed protesters intercepting CNG-run and battery-run auto-rickshaws and the drivers' faces being smeared with burnt engine oil.

In one video clip, some teenagers were seen smearing burnt engine oil on battery-run auto-rickshaw drivers' faces

in front of Sarak Bhaban.

A wedding-party was also blocked by workers in Kanli Bridge area of Daulatpur Bazar of Baralekha Upazila around 3:00pm. A clash broke out when a companion of the groom began videotaping the incident, said Mohammad Mosharrar Hossain, sub-inspector of Baralekha Police Station, adding that the injured were taken to Bianibazar Upazila Health Complex for treatment.

Similar incidents of harassment by protesters were reported in Khulna and Rajshahi as well.

Three crushed under wheels of train in ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Three people, including an infant, were killed and another was seriously injured as they were run over by a locomotive in Chattogram's Sitakunda last night.

The dead are Abul Kashem, 50, his eight-month-old daughter Suma Akter, and Shahidul Islam, an employee of a local factory. Kashem's wife Rokeya Begum, who was critically injured in the incident, was taken to Chattogram Medical College Hospital.

The victims were walking along the railway tracks in Bhatiali Madambirhat area when the locomotive was heading for Kumira station around 7:30pm, said Shahidul

Fresh twists in Lanka crisis

FROM PAGE 16
temple yesterday as he jostled to consolidate his claim to the prime ministership.

But Wickremesinghe got a boost as Sri Lanka's parliamentary Speaker refused to endorse his sacking.

Karu Jayasuriya backed Wickremesinghe's request to retain his privileges and security until another candidate could prove a majority in parliament, saying it was "democratic and fair."

He also warned the president that shuttering parliament risked "serious and undesirable consequences for the country".

Officials loyal to Rajapakse said police will now seek a court order to evict Wickremesinghe from the residence, threatening to escalate the standoff.

Soldiers had been stationed near the residence, although Wickremesinghe's security and official cars were with-

drawn Saturday.

Tensions were high across Colombo, with police leave cancelled amid warnings street violence could break out if the president did not immediately summon parliament to end the impasse.

"Don't try to create a civil war in this country," party legislator Korunaratna Paranawithana told reporters at the prime minister's residence.

Regional neighbours and Western nations have urged all sides to exercise restraint and respect the constitution.

But violence broke out inside the petroleum ministry as police guarding Minister Arjuna Ranatunga fired on a mob surrounded his office.

Witnesses saw Ranatunga, 54, also a former World Cup winning cricket captain, rushed from the scene in a tactical helmet and body armour by police commandos.

In his first televised address to the nation since the crisis began, Sirisena yesterday said he sacked Wickremesinghe

over personal differences.

"Apart from our ideological differences, we also had serious cultural differences," Sirisena said, referring to Wickremesinghe's liberal background and his own rural conservative upbringing.

He said he had no choice but to appoint Rajapakse, and urged parliament to support him.

Loyalists to Rajapakse -- whose controversial decade-long rule was marked by grave allegations of rights abuses, the crushing of the Tamil Tiger uprising, and growing authoritarianism -- still control the headquarters of two state-run television channels.

The controversial new prime minister visited a Buddhist temple Sunday in the central district of Kandy to seek blessings from monks.

Plans to appoint some cabinet members had been delayed until today, aides said. Rajapakse is yet to make a formal statement since being elevated

to the new post.

The strongman is seen as being closer to China than Wickremesinghe, who had sought to re-establish stronger ties with traditional ally and regional power India.

The crisis has again put the Indian Ocean in the international spotlight following turmoil in neighbouring Maldives over its presidential election.

India said it was "closely following" events in Colombo.

"As a democracy and a close friendly neighbour, we hope that democratic values and the constitutional process will be respected," India's foreign ministry spokesman Raveesh Kumar said yesterday.

The United States and European Union ambassadors in Colombo have called on the Sri Lankan rivals to follow the constitution and avoid violence.

Privately-run newspapers yesterday described Sirisena's move as a "constitutional coup".

Bikalpadhara won't decide on polls now

To wait for congenial atmosphere, says Mahi

LNB, Dhaka

Bikalpadhara Bangladesh, led by Prof AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury, yesterday said it would not make the final decision on joining the next general election until proper atmosphere was ensured.

"We'll take all the preparations to take part in the next election, but we won't make the final decision until a congenial election atmosphere is created," said party's Presidium Member Mahi B Chowdhury.

He made the remarks at Badruddoza's Baridhara house while talking to reporters after a meeting of the party.