

ARMING SLUMS AGAINST DISASTER

NILIMA JAHAN

In a disaster-prone city such as Dhaka, slum dwellers are often the most vulnerable to fires, earthquakes, water-logging and other disasters. The fire in Bhashantek slum (known locally as Jahangirer Bosti) this year burnt down 1,000 shanties; the Ilias Mollah slum fire in Mirpur and the Karwan Bazar slum fire of 2018 burnt down nearly 18,000 houses in total; and the Korail slum fire the year before that, gutted at least 500 shanties.

To better prepare slum-dwellers to deal with such disasters (including reducing their risk in the first place) and to ensure that emergency equipment is available, Plan International Bangladesh and Social and Economic Enhancement Programme-SEEP established six Disaster Resource

Centres (DRCs) in three slums and two DRC corners at two madrasas in Mirpur. The DRCs were established under a four-year project, 'Journey Towards Disaster Resilient Dhaka City' (JTDRDC).

Every DRC consists of rescue equipment such as safety belts and ropes, stretchers, helmets, loudspeakers, torch lights, whistles, gumboots, hammers, hand saws, fire extinguishers, first aid boxes, tin cutters, masks, hand gloves and much more. DRCs are generally accessible for children and young people living in the community. Under the project, around 1,200 dwellers of three slums have received training on firefighting, rescue and first aid for emergencies.

These DRCs have become lifesavers for thousands of people living in packed slums. Md Mohsin Ali Hawladar, an inhabitant of Beguntula slum in Mirpur area, remembers what could have been a serious fire incident in their slum. "The fire broke out from a gas stove. The middle-aged garment worker who owned the house was at work. Her house was crammed with many belongings, so the fire spread rapidly. But that time we were able to extinguish it quickly using the DRC resources," explains Hawladar, an urban community volunteer trained in Fire Service and Civil Defense through the JTDRDC project.

Imran Hossain, another trained volunteer of Bauniabadh slum areas, informs us that most of the slum-dwellers don't keep any equipment in their houses (except

water and sand bucket thanks to advocacy by children and youths in the community). DRCs enable them to use valuable resources to protect their homes.

"Last month, when Bhashantek slum caught fire, we rushed there with our DRC equipment and gave primary treatment to the injured," he adds. "Fire service vehicles sometimes can't enter the narrow streets of our slums. By the time they arrived, we have often extinguished the fire already with our resources," he adds.

Inspired by these DRCs, the Dhaka North City Corporations (DNCC) have also established such a centre at Ward 2 (Bauniabadh) councilor office of DNCC. Anwar Hossain Bhuiyan, slum development officer of the DNCC, informs that these DRCs are effective and necessary for the slum dwellers. He has physically visited some of these centres as well. Besides, people of the communities and different organisations, including the DNCC, have also been using these centres for meetings or recreational activities for children.

Bhuiyan adds that, "Hopefully in our next meetings or while drafting future work-plans, we will try to consider building more centres. Currently, we have five warehouses in five zonal DNCC offices. There is enough equipment to handle any kind of disaster there."

The idea of DRCs has already opened the slum-dwellers' eyes. Now, they wait for the government to adopt the model and implement a sustainable measure to reduce their vulnerability to disaster.



After page 5

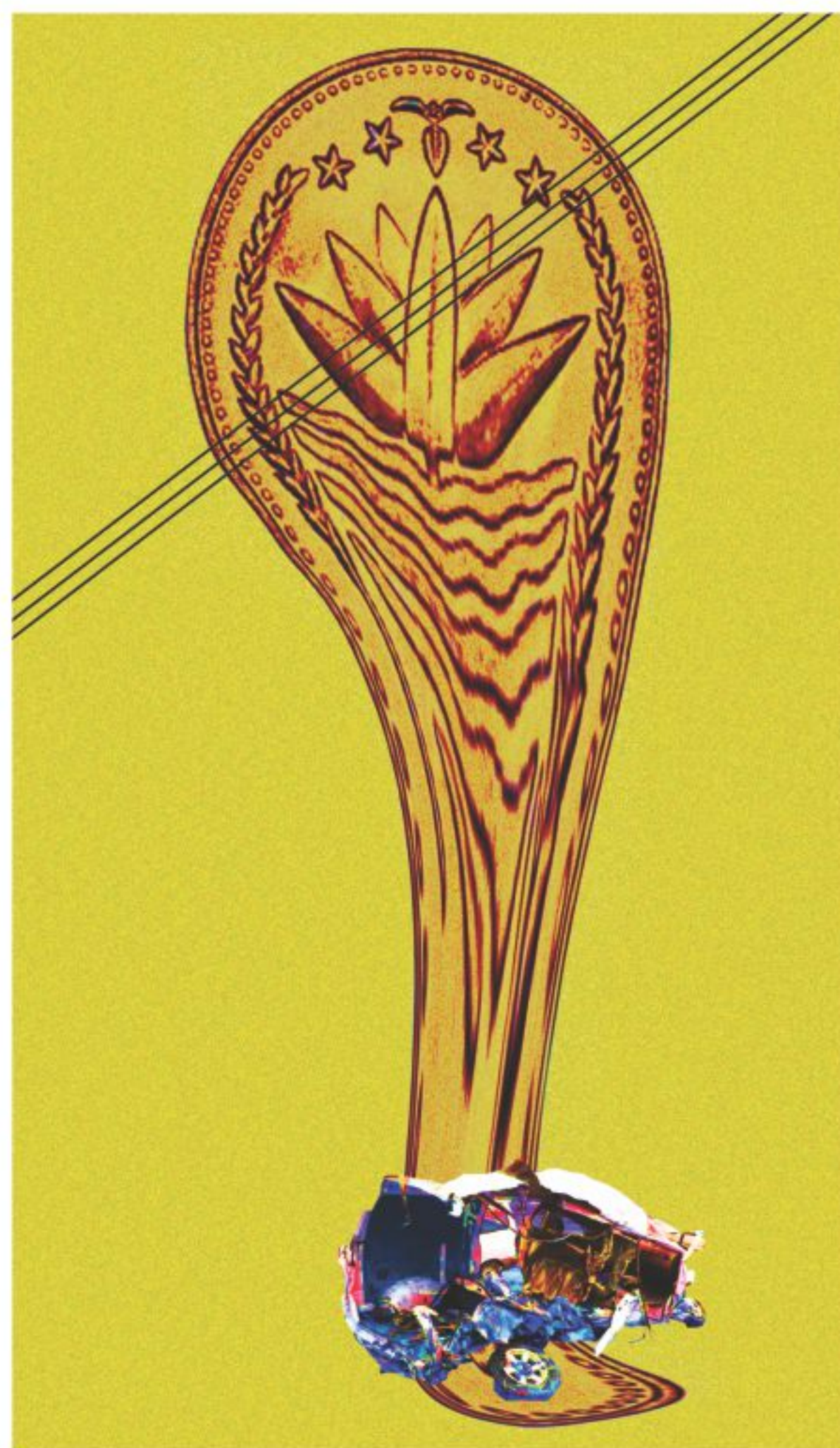
A mini-truck of Pepsi Cola ran over Mozammel Hossain Montu in front of Ananda Bhaban at Kakrail in Dhaka on December 3, 1989. Badsha Mia, a driver of the company, was on the wrong side.

Failing to ever gain consciousness, Montu died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital 13 days after the accident. His wife Professor Rawshan Akter filed a case with the sub-judge court-3 in Dhaka on January 1, 1991. Noted jurist and former attorney general Aminul Huq conducted the case under the Fatal Accidents Act, 1855 for the journalist's family free of cost, according to newspaper reports.

After a legal battle spanning 26 years, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court ordered Bangladesh Beverage Industries Ltd, the owner company of the vehicle responsible for the accident, to pay BDT 1.69 crore as compensation to the family members of Montu. The order is yet to be complied with.

"Professor Rawshan has not gotten a penny in 27 years because an appeal over the amount is still pending at the Supreme Court. She is severely frustrated and says no one should ever spend money from their own pocket to get compensation," Barrister Halim says when asked about landmark cases in connection to compensations.

The second compensation order was made after the demise of renowned filmmaker Tareque Masud and former ATN News CEO Mishuk Munier in a road



COLLAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

accident near Manikganj in 2011.

In December 2017, the High Court awarded Tareque's family BDT 4.61 crores in damages from the bus owners, the bus driver, and one insurance company. Catherine had filed the case before the Motor Accidents Claims Tribunal, Manikganj. She claimed damages for herself, her minor son, and Tareque's mother. The compensation was ordered

for loss of dependency, loss of affection, care and nursing, medical expenses, and damage to property.

Back then Catherine termed the case as a "ground-breaking attempt" to bring the long-neglected MVO (and tort law in general) to public notice but in an email on February 15, she wrote to this correspondent that she had not received any of the compensation money awarded by the court yet.

"The case hasn't quite gone on appeal yet, we are still seeking leave (permission) to appeal (regarding the amount awarded and the issue of the insurer's liability) as are the owners of the buses and the driver," wrote her lawyer, Barrister Sara Hossain.

The third high-profile case was that of Rajib, who lost his right hand after it got stuck between two speeding buses of BRTC and Sajan Paribahan, which were trying to overtake each other in the Bangla Motor area of Dhaka on April 3 last year. The third-year student of Government Titumir College died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, 13 days after the accident.

On May 22, the Supreme Court stayed the High Court order that directed the bus owners to give one crore taka to his family and also asked the HC to form an independent committee to assess the liabilities for the accident. No update in the case has surfaced ever since.

The last order of accident compensation was in the case of the deaths of two young students of Shaheed Ramiz Uddin Cantonment College. Dia Khanam Mim

and Abdul Karim Rajib were killed as a Jabal-e-Noor bus ploughed through a crowd while competing with another bus of the same company on Dhaka's Airport Road on July 29 last year. The two buses were immediately torched and what followed was a wave of Dhaka-wide protests by students in demand of justice for their fellows and road safety.

The Supreme Court on October 4 upheld a High Court order that directed Jabal-e-Noor Paribahan to pay BDT 500,000 to each of the two students' families.

At the end of the day, the question remains why a country like Bangladesh, which has the highest rates of road fatalities in the world, still lacks a robust law in this regard. To curb road accidents (if they are still to be called 'accidents'), there needs to be a law that makes both the government and transport workers and owners accountable.

A balanced system is necessary where insolvent, illiterate people lacking legal knowledge, who cannot afford lengthy, costly legal battles, should be given interim relief through funds.

But should the short-term relief replace the long-term legal process and give impunity to vehicle owners? No. Authorities must make sure that compensation orders are executed without delay and not lost in prolonged legal battles to save the victims from further hassle.

Promiti Prova Chowdhury is a sub-editor at The Daily Star.

| ROAD SAFETY |