

How did zebra crossings become death traps?

How long before our roads are made safe?

Govt must rein in the unruly transport sector

HOW many will have to die before something as fundamental as the safety of travelling is ensured? What will it take for the administration to emerge from its cocoon and take a serious interest in the safety of the citizens? The latest casualty of our unsafe roads is a first-year student who, on March 19, was crushed under the wheels of a bus racing with another, near the capital's Bashundhara Residential Area. Slogans used in protests that have sprouted since, include doom-laden predictions such as "Wait for your turn" and "Who is next?"—which at once manifest the public unease over our anarchic traffic situation and the general frustration that no one is really safe on the roads.

Students, according to latest news, gathered to protest the incident in different parts of the city. If not judiciously handled, it can spark off a widespread protest like last year's nationwide movement for road safety. So far, however, there have been little signs of hope. The new Road Transport Act 2018 which was passed into law after the last movement was criticised for not being a reflection of the demands made by the students and the public and, evidently, has had little impact. Reckless driving and unfit vehicles, among other causes, continue to wreak havoc on our roads. For the record, even after the student movement midway through the year, the numbers of road crashes and fatalities had rather increased in 2018 compared to those of the previous year.

What we fail to understand is how a country that aspires to attain the middle-income country status can possibly expect to do so without rectifying its archaic traffic management system and reining in its unruly transport sector. The fact is, the visible progress achieved in road infrastructure development didn't translate into improved safety for the pedestrians/passengers because of the transport owners and drivers who, for some mysterious reasons, continue to receive protection and complicit silence from the administration. The government must not allow this to continue any longer. Instead of pursuing band-aid solutions that respond only to emergencies, it must redevelop the entire transport sector as part of a comprehensive strategic transport plan for Dhaka.

Enforce brick kiln control law

Administration silent on tree-cutting

LOCAL people living on Manpura Island of Bhola are witnesses to the decimation of trees like chambol and raintree for brick kilns. Though the Brick Manufacturing and Brick Kilns Establishment (Control) Act was ratified into law back in 2013 and strictly prohibits the use of wood as fuel in brick kilns, owners of some kilns openly flout the law since the local administration remains silent on the issue. That unfortunately sums up the situation for these island residents who will have to bear the full brunt of the environmental damage being caused due to the illegal tree-logging taking place in the area.

The reality is that these brick kilns are owned directly or are patronised by local influential people with direct or indirect political links. Despite being armed with an Act, forest ministry and Department of Environment officials are apparently powerless to act against these brick kiln owners. While kiln owners make hay flouting the law, burning firewood poses health risks for humans with increased air pollution. The continued burning of trees is also damaging the biodiversity in the area.

It may be expedient for members of the local administration to explain their inaction blaming vested political quarters, but that cannot be an excuse for not upholding the law. It is their job to act against lawbreakers, in this case errant brick kiln owners and a failure to uphold the law brings into question whether some local officials of these government bodies are complicit in these illegal acts.



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

THERE could be nothing more symbolic of the utter absurdity of the state of our roads than a zebra crossing stained by the blood of a university student, a road safety campaigner who was crushed by another speeding bus. It is a ludicrous scene by any standards but tragically for us Bangladeshis, it is heartbreaking yet not shocking anymore.

Abbrar Ahmed Chowdhury could have been the doctor that he had dreams of being. He might have even been successful in the road safety campaign he believed in and was active in promoting. Alas, that was not to be. In an ironic twist to his story, he was killed in cold blood for following traffic rules—walking over a zebra crossing in a university area.

At this point, one can only helplessly ask: What will it take for something as simple as following traffic rules to be enforced? How many more of our children will have to give their lives before we can ensure that pedestrians will not be crushed on zebra crossings or at bus stops?

It is because nobody really can answer this satisfactorily that students have once again left their classes and the comfort of their homes to be out on the streets screaming for justice. It does not make life any easier for us ordinary citizens who do not have the power to hold traffic to speed away in VIP cars. But what else can these children do except take to the streets, reenacting the passionate campaign they had carried out last year? A campaign that was praised but the lessons of which were not learnt.

We exist at a time when transport owners can actually stall the passing of laws that would make roads safer. Because a sitting minister could also be the president of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation or the president of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners' Association. It's also because transport owners have the ability to bring a city to its knees just by announcing a strike that will leave millions of citizens stranded.

Last year, on February 28 and March 1, transport workers went on a nationwide "work abstention" for two days, protesting verdicts of courts that punished two drivers on the charge of killing people by reckless driving. It didn't matter to the authorities that hundreds of people suffered immensely because of such a strike, that there were patients in dire need of medical treatment but who could not go to a hospital. It didn't matter that thousands of work hours were lost along with millions of taka to the country's economy. More

significantly, these transport strikes were "tolerated" because transport workers have enough political backing to do whatever they want in this country.

Last September, the Road Transport Act-2018 was passed although it had little impact on reducing the number of road accidents or deaths from road crashes. It certainly did not save the life of Abbrar Ahmed Chowdhury or many of his fellow human beings. Last year, the number of deaths from road accidents according to police was 2,635 although these numbers are far lower than those given by organisations working on road safety. These statistics moreover do not include

the streets drivers who are underage or under the influence of narcotics or who have no valid licences. But even transport owners, many of whom have strong political links, have to be held liable for their vehicles or their drivers being unfit. Passengers too must not be allowed to get on or get off buses in the middle of the road and safe crossing of roads must be taught from an early age. The ridiculous practice of showing one's hand to stop upcoming traffic in the middle of the street has to be abandoned. The government must delink the political patronage enjoyed by transport owners so that they can be held accountable when they are clearly



How many more of our children will have to give their lives before we can ensure that pedestrians will not be crushed on zebra crossings or at bus stops?

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

the thousands of people who have been injured or permanently maimed or the families who have been psychologically scarred forever or have lost their only earning member. They also do not calculate the loss in productivity to the nation or the loss of wellbeing of a significant number of people who are being added to the demographic of the grief-stricken.

The truth is, it will take much more than the enactment of laws to fix this serial killer known as road crash. The law has to be effective in keeping out from

accomplices in road crashes.

It almost feels banal to be reiterating what, in most countries, is obvious—basic, mundane traffic rules. But, in our reality, even the most commonplace norms of road behaviour cannot be taken for granted. Hence the absurdity of a bloodied university student on a zebra crossing.

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Senior Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, The Daily Star.

JACINDA ARDERN

What leadership should look like



NAHELA NOWSHIN

THE horrific Christchurch attack that took away at least 50 lives was one of New Zealand's darkest days. The country of about five million is still reeling from the shock of the gruesome attack

on two mosques by a man in his late 20s whose sickening motivations behind the attack are now clear. This was apparently his way of retaliating against the "invasion" of foreign lands by migrants.

For those of us watching from afar the developments that continue to take place, it's refreshing to see the outpouring of support, love and compassion of the people of New Zealand towards the Muslim community. People have vowed to guard mosques and stand watch and Maori gangs were seen performing the haka—a ceremonial war dance—to honour the victims of the attack. These universal moments of poignancy and solidarity are a testament to the fact that those willing to divide and spread hate are only a minority, and that humanity is not dead.

If divisive political rhetoric in the West is largely to be blamed for the rise of white nationalism, isn't it also true that exemplary leadership can bring out the best in the people whom leaders govern? Because that's what comes to mind when I think of the powerful way in which the people of New Zealand have come together and the way in which New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern conducted herself in the wake of the worst mass shooting in the country's modern history. The two, I believe, are strongly related. Leadership matters.

"Our power is in our choice of how to respond to the challenges and crises in our lives," Ardern, the youngest female prime minister in the world, recognised that power from the get-go and proved her mettle in the course of action following the attack. Not only does the media around the world seem to have fallen in love with her, but she has also won millions of hearts—from Australia to Bangladesh—as evident by people's reactions on social media.

First, on the day the attack took place, Ardern, in a strongly-worded speech, termed the massacre as a "terrorist attack." This is significant because in the aftermath of any attack, regardless of the number of fatalities, there is quite a bit of hesitation

on the part of world leaders when it comes to calling an attack for what it is. Statements issued by presidents and prime ministers following violent attacks are often carefully crafted, so that terms with heavy political connotations are steered clear of—given their obvious implications for domestic politics and international relations. For instance, in 2015, after the Chapel Hill shootings that killed three Muslim students, the police claim that the killer, Craig Stephen Hicks, seemed to have been motivated by a longstanding "parking dispute" led to outcry among many, including the victims' families. The facts didn't point to it being a parking dispute, and previous encounters between Hicks and the victims increasingly pointed it to be a hate crime. After a long bout of

Second, Ardern quickly made herself visible and accessible to the media instead of relying on a press secretary or spokesperson to do all the dirty work. We are used to seeing world leaders try their best to avoid face-to-face interaction with the media in the aftermath of an attack of this scale—worried about the repercussions if they slip up in the face of pressure from journalists, among one of the many reasons. As far as "quick" reactions go, what we see is a tweet or a short statement issued by the president/prime minister's press office speaking on behalf of him/her. PMs and presidents are usually seen talking to the press usually after some time passes, when emotions are not running as high. And this is where PM Jacinda Ardern is an exception to the norm.



New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern meets representatives of the Muslim community at Canterbury refugee centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, March 16, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS

silence, President Obama finally issued a public statement which, despite its sympathetic tone, cautiously avoided even a mention of the possibility of it being a "hate crime," although the FBI was looking into whether it was a hate crime or not.

Granted that in the case of the Christchurch attack, it became obvious very early on that this was indeed a terrorist attack due to the trail of evidence left by the attacker (74-page manifesto, scrawlings on his weapons), and for Ardern to say otherwise would have been political suicide. But one must appreciate the swiftness with which she termed the massacre a "terrorist attack". There's a big difference between denouncing and condemning an attack and calling it for what it is.

From taking the responsibility of informing the people herself about the immediate developments on the day that the attack took place, to later talking to the media about the hurdles in the process of returning bodies to victims' families for burial, Ardern made sure she was there, and not someone else, to inform the people about all the goings-on—reflecting just how deeply involved and up-to-date she is.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, as many have already noted, PM Jacinda Ardern's strength of character was exemplified by the fact that she didn't (ab)use this opportunity to take a dig at her political opponents. What she did instead was quite stunning. She showed a willingness to acknowledge the flaws in the existing system, that too very early

Ardern quickly made herself visible and accessible to the media instead of relying on a press secretary or spokesperson to do all the dirty work.

on, without any hesitation. When asked if her country could be a "blueprint" for other countries to follow in terms of how it deals with gun control, Ardern said New Zealand's gun laws are an example of "what not to follow." Such moments of honest introspection and frank admission in the political landscape throughout the world were not only rare, but non-existent—until now.

In the wake of offensive comments made by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who, while campaigning for local elections, said that "anti-Muslim Australians would be 'sent back in coffins' like their grandfathers at Gallipoli (a WWI battle)" and who has been accused of using the horrific Christchurch video as an election prop, PM Jacinda Ardern refused to be dragged into a political imbroglio with Turkey when questioned by a journalist, saying she does not believe the nature of the relationship between New Zealand and Turkey has changed.

This is the first time that a government head has been so widely praised by so many people from all around the globe for showing the world what true leadership looks like. For giving the world a reason to be hopeful about being led by people whose intelligence and compassion outweigh a desire for petty political points. For setting an example for heads of government all around the world by avoiding caustic rhetoric against political opponents at home and abroad. And above all, for putting her constituents first.

Thank you, PM Ardern.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

The heartbreaking mosque massacre

New Zealand, a small peaceful country, was left shattered on March 15 as a white supremacist gunman attacked two mosques in Christchurch during Friday prayers leaving at least 50 people dead and seriously injuring many more. The killer, an Australian citizen, gleefully performed his ghastly mission. We are shocked to the core by this racist act.

We are grateful to the Almighty for saving our cricketers. We pray for those who lost their lives in this grisly attack and hope that their relatives will find the strength to bear the agony.

Nur Jahan, *Chattogram*

Drives against illegal structures

The recent BIWTA and RHD drives to remove illegal structures are no doubt commendable. There is no doubt that these drives are needed to save our rivers from encroachment and to free the footpaths for pedestrians' use. But what do the authorities do before illegal structures are built on riverbanks and footpaths are grabbed? So much money is wasted when a single concrete structure is demolished. Why not act before?

Ummey Habiba Mimuna, *IIUC, Chattogram*