

Another disappointing report on human rights

State should urgently address this crisis

A new report by the Human Rights Support Society said that at least 92 people had become victims of enforced disappearances last year. Of the victims, 38 were produced before the court after they went missing, 14 were found dead, 17 returned home and 23 are still missing.

The report further mentions a number of other human rights violations, including the killing of 429 people in alleged crossfire or gunfights involving, in most cases, law enforcers—and that seven people were reportedly tortured to death by the police, five were shot dead and 33 had died in their custody. Though the findings of this report are frightening enough on their own, the reality is that this is but one among several reports that, together, paint a disturbing picture.

Only a month ago, the UN's Committee against Torture expressed concern with "information it received alleging the widespread and routine commission of torture and ill-treatment" that have been taking place in the country. It also stated its disappointment at the lack of investigation into cases of alleged rights violations.

Such allegations have now persisted for years, and so have the government denials. For years, we have heard the law enforcing agencies similarly denying having any connection to the incidents of rights violations, even when family members of the victims claimed to have directly witnessed their involvement.

Even if we are to give the benefit of the doubt to the agencies, the fact remains that it is the responsibility of the state to protect the rights of its citizens and investigate all allegations of violations to determine who are actually involved. Is there a clandestine group operating within the country that is doing this? Finding the answer to this question is also the state's responsibility. More so for the credibility of the law enforcing agencies.

At a time when Bangladesh is being praised for its many achievements, the state of human rights in the country is tarnishing its image internationally. The government should recognise this and take urgent measures to address this crisis.

Implementation of Road Transport Act can brook no further delay

Government should not wilt under undue pressure

ONE wonders whether the government normally withholding implementation of a piece of legislation pending discussions with all the stakeholders directly or indirectly affected by the legislation. Yet that is the exercise the administration has launched into since the Road Transport Act-2018 was passed more than a year ago. It is surprising that the authorities have felt the necessity to amend the law even before it could be put into effect. Even a three-member committee, which was set up in February this year to look into how the law could be executed, has taken seven months to announce basically nothing more than the news that the law may be revised before it is made effective. This confirms the forceful assertion of another member of the committee that there is no scope at all for making the law effective before discussion with the transport workers. For all those who want and demand safe roads, it is disturbing.

One wonders why the application of a law dealing with public safety should be subject to announcement of the date by the government, when many such laws relating to public safety, security and human rights had come into effect immediately after they were passed. One would expect all necessary discussions with the various stakeholders to have been completed and all views considered before finalising the bill.

The reason why the said law could not be implemented—even the rules of procedures in this regard have not been formulated yet—was because of the strong resistance by the transport owners' and drivers' associations, who opposed some of the measures in the law. The public can be forgiven for thinking that what has gone on so far is an attempt to delay the implementation. Implementation of the law brooks no further delay. The law as passed is necessary if a semblance of discipline is to be inculcated in the transport sector, and the government should resist all pressure to alter it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Casino scandal: bring the culprits to justice

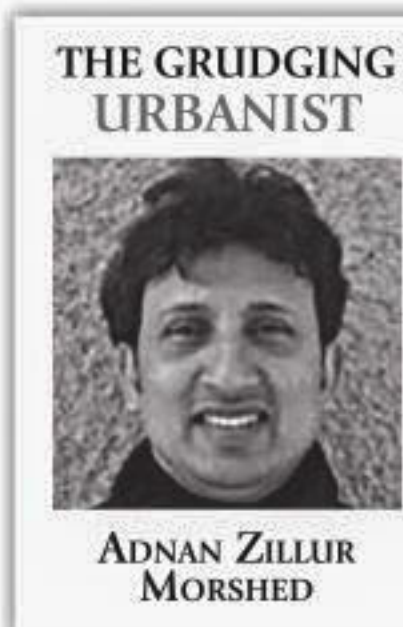
For over a week now, Bangladesh has been in turmoil after news of the "discovery" of secret casino operations, drug dealings and stashing of illegal arms and huge quantities of money surfaced in the media. Behind these illegal activities are leaders and operatives connected with the ruling party, especially its youth wing. A huge amount of money was also reported to have been deposited in foreign banks. Why this degradation of leaders who claim to represent the pro-people, "pro-liberation" force?

Surprisingly, the information minister, apparently in an attempt to shift the blame onto their rivals, claimed that the casino business had started during the BNP government's term. BNP hasn't been in power for more than a decade. What has the AL government been doing all these years? People will not accept such lame excuses. So it would be wise for the AL leadership to refrain from making such comments and own up to their failings and take corrective measures.

I also hope those involved in the drug and casino businesses and their political backers will be brought to justice and that they will be punished for their crimes.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

Why not a national footpath policy?



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

THE GRUDGING URBANIST

POPULATION density in cities like Dhaka and Chattogram is daunting. According to the World Bank data, Dhaka's population density per square kilometre is above 45,000, which is the densest in the world. How does this ultra-dense human mass manage to move about the city?

In the absence of a comprehensive, affordable, and efficient mass transportation system, and for a host of other positive and negative reasons, a lot of urban people rely on walking to commute to work. Research shows that within the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) area, 19 percent of primary trips are made on foot, whereas in the greater Dhaka Metropolitan Area (excluding DCC), it is 37.2 percent.

While this daily share of commute by walking is encouraging and should be welcomed—because urban-liveability advocates across the world are championing walkability as the foundation of a healthy and carbon-neutral urban lifestyle—it should not be interpreted as Dhaka streets' success in pedestrian-friendliness. Despite poor footpath conditions, people walk because they have no other options available to them. Pedestrians are the most vulnerable urban group in this metropolis. They are survivors in city streets ravaged by air pollution, noise pollution, open drains, occupied footpaths, overflowing dumpsters, threatening buses and motorbikes, and, in general, an unpleasant pedestrian environment.

In fact, Dhaka's footpaths are not only at the epicentre of the capital's urban challenges but also cause many of them. With the exception of some affluent areas and the Parliament zone, footpaths are mostly "anti-pedestrian" (same in Chattogram), as they typically turn into wild frontiers of "informal" economies and all types of clandestine encroachment. Footpaths are occupied by vendors and tea stalls, makeshift shops and construction sites, and a host of other malpractices. Footpaths sometimes simply don't exist along roads or are dangerously interrupted by open drains, traps for orthopaedic journeys to hospitals. Sometimes they are too high and unfriendly to people with disabilities. Under current conditions, footpaths in Dhaka and other cities are unlikely to foster a positive pedestrian culture.

In short, footpaths in Bangladesh are an uncertain and arbitrary urban affair. Bangladesh needs a national footpath policy. The foundation of this policy could be as simple as this: if there is a

road, there is a footpath. All kinds of urban planning—from the metropolis to small towns—should vigorously focus on footpath design. This has to be an urban requirement by law.

However, there is one caveat. We should not forget that footpaths in this part of the world are conceived differently than sidewalks in western metropolises. The "local tradition" of the coexistence of pedestrians and vendors (the significance of "informal" economy on the street can't be overlooked) has to be integrated into the footpath design.

Creating a national footpath policy will help make Bangladeshi cities efficient, pedestrian-friendly, people-oriented, carbon-restricting, business-friendly, attractive to investors, healthy, and less reliant on motorised vehicles. Over the summer this year, I often walked through cities across Bangladesh as a way to understand the general state of footpaths in the country. My realisation: pedestrians

The other day, I was reading urban planner Jeff Speck's *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time* (2012). Speck offers a "General Theory of Walkability," which explains how a walk must meet four essential goals: usefulness, safety, comfort, and interesting. When a walk satisfies these conditions, a pedestrian can highly rate a city's walkability score.

"Usefulness" implies a kind of urban organisation in which a walker can reach his or her daily destinations by walking. "Safety" suggests that a pedestrian can both walk without being hit by a car and feel safe. "Comfort" means that the organisation of footpaths and adjacent buildings should be undertaken at a scale that the pedestrian finds welcoming. And, "interesting" is when the pedestrian finds the footpath not only walkable but also full of exciting experiences, including views of unique buildings, sites, trees, and water, and, in general, humanity.

Why are footpaths neglected in our urban vision? According to the Danish architect and urban planner Jan Gehl (who visited Bangladesh with much interest), it is a problem of the level from which city administrators and planners look down on the city. Gehl argues that they only see the "big story"—the mega-scale of the city viewable only from above and then the "medium story" of land-use plans, Detailed Area Plan (DAP), and infrastructures. But they often fail or are reluctant to see the "little story," experienced only at the ground level or at human scale. Yet, most people live their lives at the level of little stories. This is where their houses, neighbourhood parks and markets, and footpaths are. These are the places where the community flourishes.

But, alas, these little stories apparently offer neither the political capital of infrastructures, nor instant economic benefits. But the time has come for a



Footpaths are like the poor, needy relative that nobody wants to encounter.

PHOTO: ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

are found aplenty on city streets but they are an exceedingly fragile species. Reason: footpaths are the most neglected, under-designed, and underfunded urban infrastructure. They are like the poor, needy relative that nobody wants to encounter. And, they apparently don't offer the visual glamour of flyovers, nor could they be showcased as uber-emblems of national development.

In Dhaka, there is no single agency in charge of designing, maintaining, and improving city footpaths. However, there are 13 agencies within five ministries that have fragmented responsibilities toward pedestrian environment.

Today, around the world, footpaths/sidewalks are enjoying an urban renaissance as the foundation of walkable urbanism. "Walkability Studies" is a growing sub-field in urban planning.

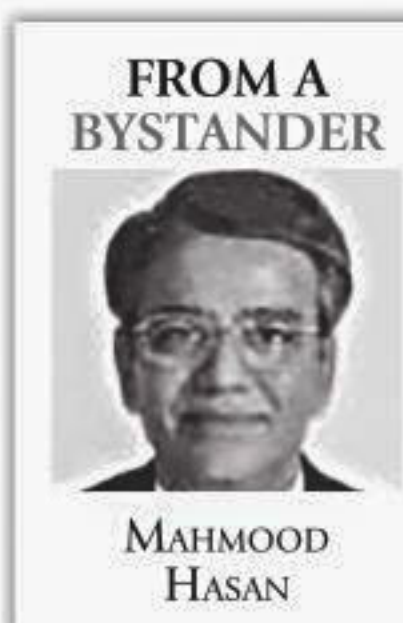
Interesting derives from what the acclaimed American journalist, urbanist, and activist Jane Jacobs memorably called "sidewalk ballet." (Jacobs is the author of the classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961) From Jacobs, urban planners learned the virtues of planning from below or, in many ways, from the footpath.

This is not to say that footpaths are only about safety and aesthetic pleasure. It is also about business-friendliness and environmental wellbeing. Speck writes: "We must understand that the walkable city is not just a nice, idealistic notion. Rather, it is a simple, practical-minded solution to a host of complex problems that we face as a society, problems that daily undermine our nation's economic competitiveness, public welfare, and environmental sustainability."

change of mindset. All stories—big, medium, and little—are important. But sometimes little stories require extra attention, sensitivity, and care because their impact on the ground, on the public, has much more potential to create long-term sustainability. The social, environmental, economic, and health benefits of footpaths, for instance, can't be overestimated. Bangladesh is in need of a national footpath policy. But making this prudent policy will be possible only when we graduate to the next generation of urban thinking in which little stories and their everyday infrastructures matter the most.

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Recounting the Brexit drama in five acts



MAHMOOD HASAN

FROM A BYSTANDER

IT'S been more than three years that the Brexit drama is being enacted in Britain—dividing the country, its political parties and the parliament. Since joining the EU in 1973, the controversy over whether the EU membership is bringing prosperity to Britain has never ceased in its political circles. Let us see how the ongoing Brexit drama has unfolded, through five acts.

Act I
 In January 2013, pro-Europe Prime Minister David Cameron said he favoured a referendum on UK's EU membership. By October 2015, some leading politicians and business leaders formed the "Vote Leave, Take Control" campaign, which included both Conservative and Labour MPs. Boris Johnson, at that time mayor of London, along with Nigel Farage of UK Independence Party (UKIP), spearheaded the campaign to leave the EU. The UKIP at that time became popular in Britain for its anti-Europe stand.

Act II
 With a general election scheduled for May 2015, the "Vote Leave" campaign got momentum. Nigel Farage denounced the membership of EU as people were taking home less money than they supposedly did ten years ago. He came up with figures that Britain could save 10 billion pounds a year on EU fees. He decried the spread of Islam in Britain and castigated the EU immigration laws which he said were changing British society and hurting the economy. Nigel Farage's iconic slogan was, "We want our country back."

Boris Johnson also created lots of controversy with his comments. His comment on EU was most disparaging when he said the EU's attempt to recreate the golden age of the Roman Empire by different methods has failed—as Napoleon and Hitler had failed. An uninformed Johnson also said the UK sent 350 million pounds to the EU every

week, which was totally misleading.

Act III
 Conservative leader David Cameron won a 12-seat majority at the May 2015 general election. Ed Miliband resigned as Labour Party leader. Cameron was under no pressure to push for the referendum on UK's EU membership. Yet he went ahead with the referendum on June 23, 2016. What was odd about it is that Cameron, after calling for a referendum, started talking about the advantages of EU membership and actually called on people to vote for staying with the EU. Critics say that Cameron went for the referendum to keep his leadership in

on what the deal should include and reject. After lengthy acrimonious debates, Theresa May on March 29, 2017 triggered Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon, which set the two-year time frame to conclude the divorce procedures.

But Theresa May, buoyed by opinion polls, called for a snap election in June 2017. May wanted a fresh mandate to strengthen her hands in negotiations with Brussels and also keep troublemakers like the Liberal Democrats and Scottish National Party at bay. But as the Conservatives lost their majority, Theresa May kept her job by tying up with the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland.



Pro-EU demonstrators protest outside parliament in Westminster London, Britain, on September 13, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS/HENRY NICHOLLS

the party. The Tories at that time were under threat from the UKIP, which was becoming increasingly popular.

The in/out referendum result came with a slim majority of 51.9 percent voting to leave the EU and 48.1 percent voting to remain. A dejected Cameron quit as prime minister on July 13, 2016, paving the way for Theresa May to lead the Conservatives and become prime minister. By then, the word "Brexit" was added to English lexicon.

Act IV
 It fell upon Theresa May to draft the Brexit deal. The parliament got busy debating

In June 2017, formal negotiations with Brussels began. But when negotiations stalled in Brussels, rebel Tory MPs sided with opposition Labour in December 2017, and passed a resolution that forced the government to guarantee a vote in parliament on the final Brexit deal.

After rocky negotiations, the deal drafted between Theresa May and Brussels was rejected by the parliament thrice (on January 15, March 12, and March 29, 2019 respectively), primarily by MPs from both the main parties. There were three main options—hard Brexit, soft Brexit, or no-deal Brexit—that MPs failed to agree upon. The deadlock over the deal forced

Theresa May to seek extension from Brussels, which now stands at October 31, 2019. If by that date the parliament does not approve a Brexit deal, Britain has to quit the EU without a deal—no-deal Brexit by default. At that time, the call for a second referendum increasingly became louder. Many also called for fresh elections.

What's amazing is that the Brexit issue has shown that British MPs can ignore their party leaders and vote against them, which is unthinkable in other parliamentary democracies. The House of Commons showed it was fully sovereign and MPs represented their constituencies, not their party leaders. After three turbulent years as PM, Theresa May resigned on June 7, 2019, after the third rejection of the deal.

Act V
 Conservative MPs then chose Boris Johnson, a committed Brexitite, as their leader. He took over as PM on July 24, promising that he would take Britain out of the EU by October 31—"do or die". But soon after taking over as PM, he moved a bill in parliament for fresh elections on October 15, which was defeated. He then advised the Queen to prorogue the parliament for five weeks from September 10 to October 15, ostensibly "to prepare a new legislative agenda". Actually, Johnson's move was to prevent lawmakers from blocking his Brexit plans, cement his position and avoid scrutiny.

But woe to Johnson as the Supreme Court on September 24 unanimously announced that the parliament prorogation was "unlawful". He now owes an apology to the Queen and the parliament. With calls for his resignation, Johnson now faces a hostile parliament and has lost control over Brexit. Unless the parliament decides what to do next, Britain is inching towards a no-deal Brexit.

Cynics say that Britain could not destroy the European Economic Community (EEC) from outside, so it went into the organisation to sabotage it. But now with twists and turns every step of the way, the ongoing Brexit drama has totally wrecked Britain's political culture.

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