

Even a stronger law means nothing if not implemented

BRTA, police should strictly enforce new transport act

We are quite underwhelmed by the lacklustre start of the much-awaited new transport act. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the Road Transport Act, 2018—which came into effect on November 1, more than a year after it was passed in parliament replacing the Motor Vehicle Ordinance, 1983—has had little impact on its first day thanks to a lack of preparation by the authorities. Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and the police were found wanting in basic arrangements. New on-the-spot fines for violations could not be imposed due to the absence of relevant documents. BRTA and district administrations could not operate mobile courts as the schedule of the Mobile Court Act, 2009 was not updated to incorporate the provisions of the act. Overall, there were no visible signs that a new law is now in force. This lacklustre display by the implementing agencies as well as those responsible for laying the necessary groundwork for the new act doesn't bode well for the future.

The new transport act, although not as stringent as the passenger welfare activists have expected, fulfils a demand by the student protesters of last year's road safety movement. It provides harsher punishment, including hefty fines, for traffic rules violations. But experts have pointed out the maximum sentence fixed for those causing accidents by reckless and negligent driving which, they said, is not strict enough. They blamed it on external pressure from the transport owners and workers. Be that as it may, a new law is still welcome but it will be only as effective as it is implemented. Without ensuring the basic condition required for any law to be effective—an implementation mechanism governed exclusively by transparency and accountability—expecting a significant change to the chaotic state of our road transport will be unrealistic. The government, therefore, must remove the barriers, including corruption and negligence by the officials, to implementing the law in its entirety. It must enforce it strictly, without discretion, and establish order on our increasingly fatal roads.

Stabilising onion prices in the city

Requires multi-pronged policy intervention

DHAKA residents are feeling the pinch since they're having to pay Tk 150 per kilo of onions—an essential ingredient needed to cook food. The fact that both the local and imported variety are trading at the same prices, and the prices of both have jumped by Tk 20 to Tk 30 over the past few months, have led to speculation of syndication by unscrupulous businessmen at wholesale level to raise prices. It has been standard government policy to open up imports in times of such abnormal price spikes of essentials. Unfortunately, what we have learnt from talking to traders and consumer rights associations is that such short-term interventions rarely have any lasting impact on prices.

For there to be long-term stability, we need to move away from an import-dependent strategy. Since onion is a basic commodity, we have to introduce farmer-friendly policies to increase local production and that too of improved varieties that have higher yields. This is not impossible, especially if farmers are given policy support in terms of fertilisers and better access to finance. Obviously, onion production output will not increase in a day and the government should build up buffer stocks of onion from neighbouring India (where the bulk of our onion imports come from) when prices there are low, i.e. at peak production times. This would naturally require an improvement in preservation facilities so that these stocks can be released to the market whenever scarcity hits.

These are practical and doable interventions for the relevant ministry and we hope that they will be incorporated into standard policy. Farmers can always do with a diversified agro-product range to help increase their incomes and consumers can breathe easier if onion prices remain within reach.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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A beacon of hope on our roads

It is a matter of relief that after much anticipation, the Road Transport Act, 2018 has finally come into effect. So many lives have been lost and many more injured in careless road accidents all across the country. Things can now begin to take a turn for the better.

However, despite the new law being put into effect, it seems that the citizens are yet to abide by them. It cannot be expected that everyone will be aware of the new regulations. Thus, it is business as usual on the streets for now.

It was reported that the traffic police are also not ready to address the new rules from their end due to "technical issues". It would have been beneficial if the authorities had conducted awareness programmes prior to the implementation of the new law so that it could have been imposed and implemented from day one as this is one of those "the sooner the better" situations.


Nonetheless, it surely is a positive step taken by the government. It is only a matter of time till we start to see the benefits of the Road Transport Act, 2018, if properly applied.

Md Daud, Dhaka

JAIL KILLING DAY

A daunting investigation

STRAIGHT
LINE



MUHAMMAD
NURUL HUDA

NOVEMBER 3 shall remain as one of the most ignominious day in the annals of Bangladesh's political history because on this day in 1975, four national leaders, undoubtedly some of the brilliant minds in our body politic, were most brutally murdered while in custody. It was gruesome and diabolic because these defenceless persons were lodged in the sanctum sanctorum wherein they were entitled to state protection, but where unfortunately pursuant to the macabre designs of a notorious cabal, they were killed in the cruellest of manner.

The slain leaders—Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, AHM Qamaruzzaman and Mansur Ali—were all very close and trusted associates of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, architect of independent Bangladesh, and whose contributions to our liberation struggle shall be remembered forever in solemn silence and with deep gratitude. They were all popular and capable colleagues of the Supreme Leader and were doing their best to steer the country out of the tumultuous post liberation aftermath. Amidst national and international conspiracies when the country was venturing to find its feet, Bangabandhu's gory assassination on August 15, 1975 interposed between the nation and the polity as a great historical aberration.

In a scenario where towering Bangabandhu's demise obviously created a lackadaisical environment in a shell-

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shocked polity that was frenetically venturing to come to grips with altered reality with a view to restoring normalcy, much depended upon the stewardship and wise guidance of the four slain lieutenants of Bangabandhu. This dimension of our political existence surely drew the attention of the then ruling cabal who lost no time to carry out their nefarious designs by sending a murderous gang to the Dhaka Central Jail for doing away with the aforementioned national leaders.

It is time once again to remember the four national leaders whose sacrifices and fidelity to their leader and the nation make us proud. They were special because allurements of safety and state honours were on hand from the ruling cabal but they resolutely refused to compromise



Tajuddin Ahmad, Syed Nazrul Islam, M Mansur Ali and AHM Qamaruzzaman, the four national leaders who were killed on November 3, 1975.

their dignity and betray their leader. These leaders definitely harboured a certain extravagance of objectives and thus wandered beyond the safe provision of personal gratifications. They displayed the sterling characteristic of stressing on work and achievement and not power and acquisitiveness for their own sake. They stood like solid rocks in the wilderness of shifting sands and thus remain admirable beacons of freedom.

The compounding tragedy in the whole transaction is that the brutality and shame did not stir the national conscience until a favourable political scenario emerged in 1996.

Records show that the slain leaders could have bargained with the assassins and their patrons but they did not wilt.

This was a rare instance of displaying inner strength; a necessity for establishing truth under adversity.

The tragedy in Bangladesh is that we, as a nation, have not been able to come out of our self-centeredness and it was thus no surprise that it took 21 years to officially recognise the culpability of a heinous offence committed in the most blatant manner.

The historical significance of the sacrifice of the four national leaders cannot be lost sight of and we have to admit that by wavering for a painfully long time in taking the legal action we have made ourselves small.

The state sprang into action to investigate into the ghastly misdeeds only when a favourable scenario emerged. However, the task was not easy by any

to take initial steps towards the investigation.

Between 1975 and 1996 the investigation could not commence due to establishment indifference, and consequently many relevant supportive papers and direct evidence just disappeared much to the prejudice of the prosecution.

Some of the jail employees of the relevant period had been located from different places around the country after prolonged efforts and the complainant of the incident, the very old former DIG Prison was traced from Sandwip Island to prove the FIR.

Some old files had been retrieved from the prison records but copy of the inquest and the post-mortem reports of the slain leaders could not be traced.

The then establishment instituted a Judicial Commission after the incident but the said commission could not complete their inquiry. The relevant file regarding this commission could not be traced at the ministry as some interested quarters were suspected to have caused its disappearance.

Admittedly, the investigator's job was made very difficult.

The misguided soldiers who committed the atrocities were rewarded with diplomatic postings. The job of tracing them and bringing them under the law was an awesome task. These accused persons were staying in "Bangabhaban" the seat of power and from there they proceeded to Dhaka Central Jail to commit the massacre.

After a lapse of so many years, it was extremely difficult to trace the relevant files in these sensitive places. Equally difficult was locating important exhibits from Radio Bangladesh.

Despite all the odds, encumbrances and limiting factors, the case ended in charge sheet against 21 accused persons including 14 absconders. The trial court awarded death sentence to three accused persons and sentenced 12 to life imprisonment, thanks to the mind exacting and gritty investigation of Mr Abdul Kahhar Akand, the then Senior Assistant Superintendent of Police. The trial was held in the ordinary court of law where defence enjoyed all the statutory privileges.

Of significant consequence is the fact that our socio-political situation turned for the worse with the tragic murder of the Father of the Nation and four national leaders in 1975.

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Tajuddin Ahmad: A leader of incredible moral integrity and political acumen

TAJ IMAN AHMAD IBN MUNIR

Tajuddin Ahmad, our nation's first prime minister and founder of its government in exile, was mercilessly gunned down and bayoneted, in wrongful captivity, just after performing *wudu*, alongside his three Mujibnagar Government compatriots, Syed Nazrul Islam, Mansur Ali and AHM Qamaruzzaman during the early hours of November 3, 1975. Upon hearing the news of her husband's death, my grandmother, Zohra Tajuddin Lily, shed her last tears as she realised that whatever the tragedy of her personal loss, losing Tajuddin was a far greater loss for the country.

In our own times where the ability to ruthlessly pursue, acquire, flaunt, and misuse wealth and power at others' expense is often regarded as a hallmark of greatness, Tajuddin stands apart in stark contrast. During our country's struggle for independence he told his fellow freedom fighters, "Let us work in such a way so that we cannot be found in the pages of history."

Who was the man behind this idealistic yet austere statement?

Tajuddin, born to a well-to-do landowning family in Kapasia need not have taken part in a struggle that saw him spend much of his adult life in jail as a political prisoner. Tajuddin memorised the Quran under the tutelage of his father Yasin Khan and was inspired to pursue higher studies by his mother Meherunnisa. Both parents cultivated his moral ethos. A voracious reader, his keen intellect was taken note of by four imprisoned revolutionaries and mentors who fought against British rule. Tajuddin was the only student to finish the large stack of books they had assigned. Recommendations from elders would see him through St Nicholas and St Gregory schools where he further broadened his horizons.

Long before acquiring a position of power, he was known as a peacemaker by his childhood friends. They recall that Tajuddin would never start conflicts but would rather find ways to resolve them. Hardly an adolescent, Tajuddin could enlist the support of his mother to cook for victims of cholera who were cast out to the riverside. No one else dared approach them. The young Tajuddin would tend to them and feed them. When his father passed away, Tajuddin as a young adult, voluntarily gave land

away to those in need and in debt.

In 1959, when my nana Tajuddin chose my nanu Zohra Khatun Lily, his major requirement was that his spouse be someone who could endure struggle and hardship. The bride's wedding jewellery was made of *beli phul* (*Jasmine*), their symbolic rings were just strings. In many quarters of our society today, such a beautifully simplistic ceremony would be discarded for materialistic extravaganza. *Nanu* would tell me that *nana* was not only her husband, but her greatest mentor. If she had to live her life a hundred more times knowing of the tragic outcome she would, just to share



Tajuddin Ahmad with wife Syeda Zohra Tajuddin.

more time with him. Their marriage was more than just a ceremony.

While he was forthright in dissent with those in power, he would speak softly with and care for those who worked for him. He was once found missing uncharacteristically from his Mujibnagar office only to be found with a wet towel in hand caring for his office staff who had come down with a fever. When he was the finance minister, an individual who had refused Tajuddin's fleeing wife shelter during the Pakistani military crackdown was a candidate for

a particular posting. Tajuddin promoted the man based solely on his merit, putting his feelings aside.

The uncompromising moral integrity, astute mind, and wisdom beyond his years were tools Tajuddin honed in his private life and wielded in his public life with great success. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, fearing Tajuddin's prowess, did not participate in a public debate with him over the Awami League's 6-points programme of 1966. Tajuddin was the key organiser of Awami League's civil disobedience campaigns and crafted the historic speeches we quote to this day. Tajuddin brought the various leaders

electoral success. Professor Anisuzzaman, Rehman Sobhan, Dr Swadesh Bose and the likes were part of his planning cells and advisory committee.

While fighting the war, Tajuddin oversaw the sheltering and feeding of 10 million of our refugees who fled from genocide to India. He later stood up to and earned the respect of the World Bank president. After all was said and done, he quietly resigned from his cabinet position in disagreement over the direction in which the country was headed.

When on such historic dates we mourn our fallen heroes, let us reflect

on the run out of hiding to form our first government and established Mukti Bahini. He handpicked men of the highest calibre to help represent the fledgling nation; Barrister Amirul Islam whose statement projecting our resolve was conveyed by Senator Ted Kennedy to the American Public; Mueyedul Hasan who was part of the team to orchestrate the Soviet-Indian pact to keep other powers at bay; and advocate Nurul Qader who won over the support of the reluctant Muslim community who were integral to Indian Congress Party's

upon their lives in earnest and emulate their best qualities in our own. Tajuddin, an avid gardener, planted saplings of *jaba phul* (China rose) during his final period of captivity. The *jaba phul* continued to bloom long after he was gone. Let us then, as his fellow countrymen and as patriots, bloom together to give rise to the Shonar Bangla we fought for, lest we bury Tajuddin's ideals, too, alongside his body.

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