

Five steps to put the RMG sector back on track

Transport workers continue to get the upper hand

Are people's lives of no value?

THE horrific collision between a microbus and a speeding bus that killed nine people—part of a bridal party and included six members of the groom's party—on Friday November 22, is yet another tragic reminder of how dangerous our roads are in the absence of proper enforcement of the law. What is also tragic is the fact that the much-watered down Road Transport Act 2018, is still yet to be enforced on the ground because of random strikes by transport workers' unions across the country that succeed in paralysing the entire nation and holding the public hostage. Now Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation has announced that it will enforce a countrywide 72-hour strike in January if their demands to bring certain amendments to the Road Transport Act are not met.

And what are these "amendments" that the transport workers believe are justifiable for such strikes? The demand for an end to police harassment on the roads is quite legitimate and is in fact an essential condition to ensure that the Act is enforced fairly and objectively. The allegations of police taking speed money for various reasons have to be dealt with very strictly and the practice must be eliminated. But the demand to make all offences under the act bailable, is the most controversial one, as this is exactly what will ensure that the long-standing impunity enjoyed by transport workers who have caused death and injury due to reckless driving, will continue, keeping the roads as unsafe as ever. The indulgent attitude of the government towards the demands of the transport workers at the expense of public safety is disappointing to say the least.

After the passionate road safety movement by students that was supported by the public in general, the act, though passed last September, still cannot be implemented because of the lobbying of transport leaders. Are we to understand that the government will have to agree to make all offences bailable, even if it entails the wilful negligence or recklessness of a driver leading to death? Should the crime of illegally modifying a vehicle, which may also lead to injury and death in a road crash, be made bail-worthy? Are the transport workers' unions so powerful that they can actually make the government bend over backwards to accommodate such unreasonable demands? We sincerely hope not.

Cox's Bazar's environment will suffer heavily

Coal plants could shoot pollution sky high!

ACCORDING to a report prepared by Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA) and Waterkeepers Bangladesh, the government is moving ahead with land acquisition to set up some 17 coal-fired power plants in Cox's Bazar and Maheshkhali areas. The fear of environmentalists is that not enough study has gone into the potential environmental or social impact these plants could have on the coastal town. In a country where impact assessment studies are seldom done or where the regulatory body is hardly effective, the fear is that at a time when the world is moving towards greener power generation technology, we are stepping into a coal-centric pollution trap.

Of course there is need for development. However, at what cost? Though the plants will generate some 17,944 megawatts of energy over the next decade, all of these projects are situated between 25km to 50km of Cox's Bazar and Chattogram city. Environmentalists believe that these 17 plants will generate some 72 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) every year, which is equivalent to the total carbon footprint of Albania, Armenia, Bhutan, Cambodia, Congo, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Senegal and Zambia.

That is a lot of CO₂ to swallow for a small and densely populated country like Bangladesh! The people of Cox's Bazar will have to bear the brunt of the environmental impact. The 247,000 people in Cox's Bazar engaged in economic activities are dependent on fishing, catering, fish processing and other agricultural activities. It is time for a real assessment on precisely what impact these plants will have since so many people's lives and livelihoods are dependent on the biodiversity of Cox's Bazar. Development, at the cost of the environment is not development, but sheer folly. We cannot be complacent when it comes to development of environmentally sensitive areas like sea beaches, hills and forests.



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

RECENT figures show the export of ready-made garments (RMG) from Bangladesh during the first four months of the current fiscal year (FY2019-20) fell by 6.67 percent to USD 10.5 billion. Knitwear exports for the four months fell 5.73 percent to USD 5.5 billion, while woven garments exports fell 7.67 percent to USD 5 billion.

These figures offer cause for concern and should encourage all of us involved in this most vital of industries to pause for reflection.

The most important markets for RMG exports from Bangladesh are the US and the EU. Neither of those markets are, at the present time, in recession. Therefore, we cannot blame wider economic forces for the decline in exports from Bangladesh.

Instead, we must look inwards, as difficult as that might be.

Unlike some, however, I do not think it is all doom and gloom right now for Bangladesh's RMG industry. However, I do think the industry is at a crossroads and has reached a stage of its development where fresh thinking and ideas are required if export growth is to get back on track. Blindly following the same road that we have been going down in the past will not, in my opinion, deliver the growth we all know our industry is capable of.

Here I offer five ways in which Bangladesh's RMG sector can get back on track in the medium to long term.

Step 1: Diversify
We continue, as an industry, to be heavily reliant on the export of cheap, basic commodity garments for the mass market retail sector. Such commodities represent more than half of all total exports, around 54 percent according to the most recent world trade figures.

Meanwhile, RMG exports represent about 84 percent of Bangladesh's total exports. With more than half of that 84 percent being cheap, commodity garments, this leaves Bangladesh hugely exposed in this area. What if the market for such products shrinks? Where will that leave our national economy?

We need to diversify from commodity products, firstly, because a shift to more high added value products will boost margins for exporters but secondly, because an over-dependence on one product category exposes Bangladesh's economy to far too much risk.

Step 2: Work smarter
Are all our RMG factories working to

their maximum efficiency? There is plenty of evidence to suggest that this is not the case and that productivity rates continue to languish at relatively low levels compared to one of our biggest competitors, China.

There are a whole host of statistics in this area but most observers on this issue claim that productivity in Bangladesh stands at around 40-50 percent, significantly below China. This means garments being made in Bangladesh are, in many cases, taking twice as many labour hours as they take to make in China.

With labour representing such a large proportion of overall overheads in Bangladesh, low labour productivity rates

proactive in embracing energy saving initiatives but there is always more that can be done. This includes the industry as a whole—led by the BGMEA—addressing strategic issues such as affordable rates of interest and broader regulatory reform required to scale up energy saving methods.

Suppliers need to understand that our industry is only heading in one direction on this issue, with many apparel retailers looking to enrol suppliers into energy projects to help them meet their own climate goals.

Step 4: Change the brand—go circular
Bangladesh is known for its discounted garment products. This has been a successful backbone of our economy

Bangladesh to do that: to become a testing bed for garment recycling at scale. If Bangladesh and the various players in its garments industry could collaborate on this issue, the country as a whole could gain major First Mover Advantage in this market of unlimited potential. But we must move quickly and decisively.

Step 5: Let's all be world class
There's a phrase we sometimes hear in business: you're only as good as your worst employee. One bad employee can easily tarnish the reputation of a whole business. In a similar way, one bad business can easily tarnish the reputation of a whole industry.

In the Bangladesh RMG sector, where the global spotlight always shines so



The industry is at a crossroads and has reached a stage of its development where fresh thinking and ideas are required if export growth is to get back on track.

mean that extra time—and wages—are being spent by RMG factories on per unit of production.

Increase productivity, and we can increase overall profits and exports revenues.

Step 3: Improve energy efficiency
There is so much "low hanging fruit" to be had for RMG factories in Bangladesh when it comes to the issue of energy efficiency. Whether it be through the use of inverters, thermal oil heaters, biogas plants, sky lights, boiler economisers, the use of solar—and a whole lot more—energy saving opportunities represent a huge opening.

for many years but there are signs that this model is running out of steam. As indicated earlier, it is time to diversify.

So why can we not become known for something else? Why can't we take the lead in the circular economy?

There are very few areas of huge untapped potential in the global apparel industry at the present time. However, the circular economy is certainly one of them.

There is a huge amount of technological developments in textile-textile recycling at the current time. Yet no textile producing country has seriously taken the bull by the horns on this issue—till now.

bright, it only needs a report of products being sourced from one factory which is found to be unsafe, or reports of one factory mistreating its workers, and the whole industry is damaged.

We have a great many world class RMG factories in Bangladesh, but the achievements of the majority risk being overshadowed by the blemishes of a few unless standards and levels of compliance are raised across the board.

In short, it's time for us all to be world class.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE). Email: mostafiz@denimexpert.com

Some solutions to Dhaka's traffic problem

How would you describe traffic conditions in Dhaka? Is it awful and chaotic? Is it gridlocked or is it mismanaged? Yes, it is all of these and much more.

GAZI A RAHMANI

SO much has been said about how the traffic situation in Dhaka could be improved, but little has been achieved in that regard. To have safe and jam free roads, you need to have a sound urban transport system and an integrated strategy. Those are things we don't have.

An analysis of future urban transport needs, assessing existing accessibility levels with the expected trends of urban sprawl, concluded that just maintaining accessibility level would require road investments that are not financially or environmentally sustainable. So, our transport sector may not develop as required to meet the needs; but some innovative measures can improve the situation.

Traffic weeks
Traffic weeks should be continued for six months as observed by Dhaka Metropolitan Police. The services to be provided are: i) Creating awareness, civic sense and consciousness about traffic laws and traffic safety. This should target all the vehicle owners, drivers and pedestrians; ii) Assist disabled, blind, elderly people, children and pregnant women to cross the roads, ensure that the pedestrians use the foot overbridges wherever available; iii) Ensure that the vehicles do not stop on/over the zebra crossings; iv) Brief rickshaw-pullers about the benefits of driving in single lines and parking in columns and rows, as may be applicable; and v) free footpaths and foot overbridges from hawkers.

During the initial weeks, the traffic

police should give verbal warnings to the drivers for eventual punishment in case of violation of traffic rules during the fourth and fifth months. In the sixth month, there should be no compromise—driving licenses and fitness certificates should be confiscated from traffic rule violators.

Uniform holidays
It is a blessing for Dhaka-dwellers that area wise shopping centres/malls, markets remain close on certain days in a week. In line with this, all the schools, colleges and universities should ideally remain closed during those days. The concerned authorities should be able to decide on this. Even doctors' consultation chambers should follow the same weekly holiday.

All the buses and minibuses should be installed with this equipment, thereby limiting their speed. Dhaka North City Corporation, Dhaka South City Corporation, Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority, Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation and Bangladesh Road Transport Authority may be requested to come up with the fund and share the cost among themselves.

Circular bus routes are in practice in Banani and Gulshan areas. Similar bus services could easily be introduced in Gulistan, Motijheel, Mohakhali, Mirpur and other places. These short duration circular services would reduce travel time and play a significant role in reducing traffic.

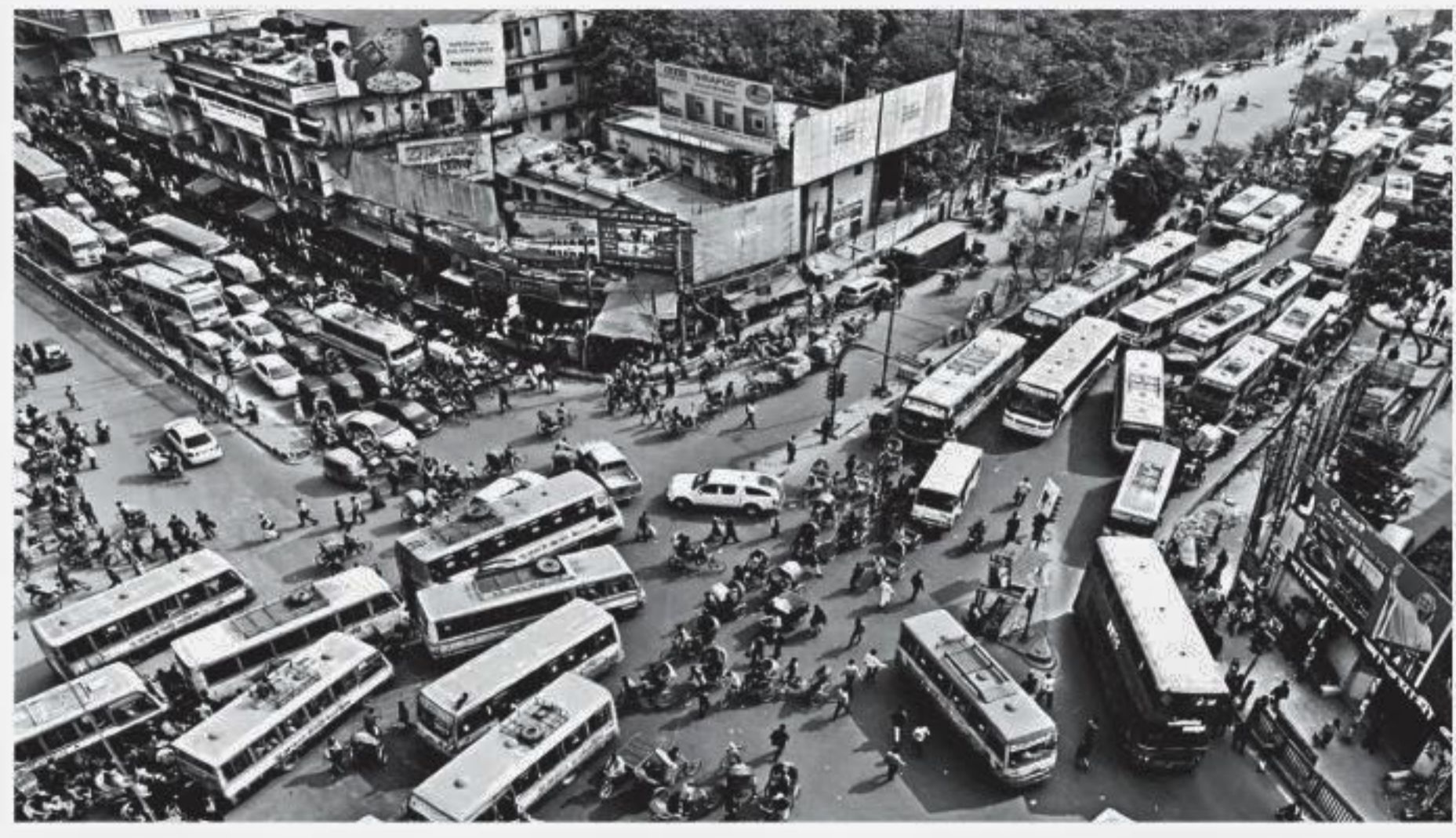
Gulshan, Banani and Uttara have a number of internal roads/lanes. Based on the local traffic flow/conditions, some of these could be designated for parking during peak hours, thereby reducing roadside parking and at the same time lead to revenue for DNCC and DSCC.

All these measures could be implemented within six to 12 months and would significantly decongest the busy roads.

Introducing double decker buses
Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation signed a contract with Ashok Leyland, India, in August 2018. Under the agreement, India is to procure 300 double-deckers for Bangladesh within eight months. We do not know how many have been delivered. As a second option, these could be assembled in Bangladesh. There are about six to eight well established bus assembly plants in Bangladesh who could assemble double decker buses. All they need is to train up some engineers and technicians to improve their capabilities. Even if six companies are given the license to assemble, we would have 288 double decker buses in two years.

Enforcing the Road Transport Act, 2018
This was passed more than a year ago and surprisingly as the media reports, could not be implemented due to strong resistance by the transport owners and drivers' associations who opposed some of the provisions in the law. Strikes have been called but the government should deal with this situation firmly and decisively.

Neighbourhood schooling (area wise)
This is in practice in many countries around the world. Neighbourhood schools are the schools assigned to all nearby children of a certain grade level. Higher-grade students need to travel a little farther, implying that the higher their grade, the farther away their school/colleges are. The Ministry of Education, which is the apex policymaking institution of the government concerning education, needs to change its mindset about introducing this.



To have safe and jam free roads, you need to have a sound urban transport system and an integrated strategy. PHOTO: STAR

In addition, all schools and colleges should take the initiative to introduce bus services for their students. This would be a great relief for the parents.

We have 366 bus routes having 6,167 buses and 2,805 mini buses (approved). Twenty percent of these could also remain off the roads on the day that shopping centres, malls and markets are closed. Bus owners could have the option to decide for themselves which buses and minibuses to keep off the road by rotation per week.

Speed reducing equipment is available and cost about Tk 4,000-6,000 each.

Unauthorised and/or illegal parking
We have seen the Dhaka Metropolitan Police initiating some steps to combat illegal parking by introducing wheel-locks. They need to continue with this and on a larger scale. This would discourage drivers and or owners from repeating the same offence and would also be a lesson for others to not commit similar violations.

Separate office timings could be introduced for all private firms/offices located in DNCC and DSCC. This will reduce traffic jams significantly.

The residential areas of Dhanmondi,

We have seen the Dhaka Metropolitan Police initiating some steps to combat illegal parking by introducing wheel-locks. They need to continue with this and on a larger scale.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Broadcast businesses on the brink

The private satellite channels of Bangladesh have been struggling to maintain their business for some time now. With approximately 30 private channels in existence, many of them are facing financial complications. Yet, more channels are in the pipeline, ready to air upon authorisation. How are they going to survive in a market that seems to be in a crisis already?

Even though the quantity of channels has gone up, the quality has not. In fact, the lack of qualitative material on our TV channels has led people to turn to foreign programmes and channels, as well as streaming services.

It is evident that TV is losing its grace. Even with the limited amount of entertaining content, TV channels tend to air advertisements repetitively, so much so that one can't help but flip to the next channel just to avoid the monotony. If our TV industry is not resuscitated soon, it might be too late to "switch it back on" again.

Md Sayeeduzzaman, East West University

Gazi A Rahmani is Senior Advisor, Euro Consultant Mott MacDonald, Dhaka.