

# Vehicle registration sees sharp decline

### Experts blame Covid-19 induced economic slowdown

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

The number of registered vehicles across the country -- including the capital -- witnessed a sharp decline last year, mainly due to economic slowdown induced by Covid-19.

While vehicles registered all over the country declined last year for the first time since 2013, Dhaka saw the trend for second consecutive year, shows data of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA).

Dhaka witnessed 34 percent decline last year compared to 2019, with the rate for the entire country being 24.07 percent, it shows.

The registration of trucks saw the highest fall -- 43.26 percent, followed by bus (32.68 percent), private cars (26.08 percent) and motorcycles (22.52 percent).

The government imposed a nationwide shutdown from March 26 last year, to control spread of Covid-19.

During the period, millions lost jobs, poverty rate doubled and many businesses folded up. Income of the vast majority of the population shrank, shows data.

Although the situation has been improving, full recovery of the economy is still far away, experts said.

A total of 3.78 lakh vehicles were registered across the country last year, while the number was 4.97 lakh in 2019, according to BRTA's data.

Of the vehicles, 1.18 lakh were registered with offices in Dhaka last year. The number was 1.58 lakh in 2019.

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Former Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Khokon addresses a human chain in front of the High Court premises in the capital, demanding rehabilitation of people who were affected by a recent DSCC demolition drive. The immediate past mayor had strong words of criticism for his successor at the event, calling him 'ineligible' to hold the post.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

# A leading figure in promoting ethical journalism

### Say speakers at memorial of veteran editor Muniruzzaman

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Acting editor of the Daily Sangbad Khandaker Muniruzzaman will remain an inspiration for the next generation for his devotion to living a life upholding progressive ideology, values, secular politics, democracy and freedom of speech.

This ever smiling, always warm and unrelentingly optimistic man was a firm believer of an exploitation-free society and democracy.

His lifelong involvement with progressive ideals, upholding of the values of the Liberation War and his unrelenting commitment to secular politics and cultural values made him a leading figure in promoting ethical journalism in the profession and democratic values in the society.

This was how his friends, colleagues, and fellow editors of newspapers remembered him while attending a virtual memorial meeting yesterday.

A dedicated and honest journalist, Muniruzzaman always called a spade a spade, they said.

Sampadak Parishad (Editors' Council) organised the event, recalling the contribution of one of its founding members.

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# 'Tortured and left to die in a jungle'

### A trafficked Bangladeshi youth's 27-day ordeal in India, Sri Lanka

MUNTAKIM SAAD

Like many, Ahsan Habib from Brahmanbaria dreamt of a better future abroad.

While working as a marketing officer at a private tour and travel company in Dhaka, the 30-year-old youth named Mamunur Rashid Mamun, hailing from the same district.

He promised Ahsan that he would send him to Malta, a Southern European island. Their contract was Tk 12 lakh and Mamun would arrange a job at a hotel in Malta.

What happened to Ahsan was horrific.

He was first taken to India on a travel visa last year. There, he along with 25 other Bangladeshis were kept in a room and tortured for money. After extorting the money, they were boarded on a trawler to Sri Lanka where the fortune seekers were left in a jungle.

The story came out after Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of police on Wednesday arrested four Bangladeshi members of an international human trafficking ring from the capital's Uttara and Dakshinkhan areas.

At a press briefing on Thursday, CID Additional Deputy Inspector General (Additional DIG) Sheikh Omar Faruque said the racket is active in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

"The group used to 'recruit' people to Malta, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Egypt, the Maldives and Cambodia for jobs. At first, they were taken to India through land ports with 'fake' travel visas."

"The group then collected money from the victims' family members. If anyone refused to pay, he would be detained and tortured. After collecting the money, Indian brokers would take them to Sri Lanka. There, they were left in a jungle," said the police official.

During the raid, 28 passports, 19 seals of different embassies, banks and agencies and 10 fake visas of Cambodia were recovered from the arrestees.

They are: Habibur Rahman (51), Mamunur Rashid Mamun (41), Jamal Hossain (40) and Nahidul Islam Palash.

"They are members of an international human trafficking racket," the police official added.

Talking to The Daily Star, the victim, Ahsan, said he arranged Tk 8 lakh by selling his land and gave it to Mamun and four to five other accomplices, including Habibur and Jamal, at their Uttara office on May 5,

2019.

After 10 days, Ahsan got a call from Mamun, saying that his visa had been issued. When he came to the office, Habibur gave him the passport with an Indian visa.

He told Ahsan that his Malta visa would be issued from Hyderabad, India.

Ahsan boarded a bus to Benapole, escorted by a broker named Ali. From there, another broker took him to Kolkata where he stayed for a night and met another Indian broker, who took him to Hyderabad by train. There, he met 19 more Bangladeshis, kept in a room. The traffickers took away their passports.

"We were locked there. They wanted Tk 4 lakh from me. As I refused, they tortured me. I called my father back home for money. He gave the money to Mamun's brother Sumon," said Ahsan, adding that the traffickers did the same to others.

From there, they were taken to Sri Lanka by a trawler and left in a jungle. Ahsan found six more Bangladeshis there, trapped like him.

Luckily, Ahsan was able to escape and eventually met a Sri Lankan man who helped him call his father.

His father sent him Tk 33,000 for a plane ticket. With the help of the administration, Ahsan could get back to Bangladesh, after 27 days in captivity.

But his ordeal was yet to be over.

After coming back to Bangladesh in June last year, he found out that his father had passed away.

Resolute, he then went looking for the traffickers but found their office closed. There, he met another victim -- Al Amin. "Al Amin told me that Habibur took Tk 27.03 lakh from six people, promising to send them to Europe and Egypt."

After a week of search, they finally got the location of Habibur and Mamun. When they went there to get their money, the two threatened them with dire consequences.

Ahsan then made a complaint to the CID. A case was also filed with Uttara East Police Station under human trafficking act in this connection.

The CID official said these so-called recruiting agencies don't have any registration. They take money from people, change their location frequently and go into hiding.

He said they would communicate with their Indian counterpart soon to take action against the international racket.

# Freedom ends when someone spreads lies that hurts others: Joy

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister's ICT Adviser Sajeeb Wazed Joy yesterday said everyone has the right to freedom of speech, but that freedom ends when someone spreads falsehoods that end up hurting others.

"No one has the right to hurt others," he said, noting that Twitter and other social media in the US have banned US President Donald Trump along with several other people and organisations that spread falsehoods that led to violence.

Joy said this is the limit of freedom of speech in the United States.

He also said he wants the US Embassy in Dhaka, as well as other western embassies to take note of this.

"We do not want to see hypocritical statements from you in the future regarding freedom of speech in Bangladesh anymore," read a post he shared on his verified Facebook page.

For all of those who complain about Bangladesh Digital Security Act, in the US, the government lets private companies dictate, he said.

"In Bangladesh we believe that it should not be up to private companies, but up to the courts to decide," Joy mentioned.

# 626 children raped last year: MJF report

### 2020 saw 60pc increase in child marriage

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Despite the closure of educational institutions and absence of public gatherings amid the pandemic, 626 children were reportedly raped between January and December last year, revealed Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) at an online press conference yesterday.

The number of child marriages also increased by some 60 percent during this period, it said.

During the period under review, 145 children died as a result of rape, attempted rape, murder, abduction, disappearance and torture. Eight girls were tortured while working as housemaids while three of them died.

In addition, 192 children were killed in various incidents, out of which, 156 were killed in road accidents and 165 children were drowned. A total of 29 children went missing and were abducted.

The data was found after analysing related news of five national Bangla dailies -- Prothom Alo, Jugantar, Samakal, Ittefaq, Kaler Kantha -- and three national English dailies -- The Daily Star, New Age and Dhaka Tribune.

According to MJF's review of the deteriorating child rights situation, it was found that children in Bangladesh are not safe at home, as most rapes are perpetrated by acquaintances within the family and their neighbours.

There have been incidents of rape during the collection of pandemic-related relief.

Besides, at least 145 children faced murder attempt in 2020 and according to news reports. The reasons included family disputes, complications over property, rejection of romantic proposals, protesting injustice, rape and many more.

On the other hand, 34 children died by suicide, and the reasons were failing

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CAPITOL RIOTS

# US envoy thanks Bangladeshis for their support

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Days after US President Donald Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol in protest of Joe Biden's election as new president -- through what they claim to be "electoral fraud" -- US Ambassador to Bangladesh Earl R Miller issued a statement for Bangladeshis.

"Democracy is tested. But through the work of committed citizens, we get back up, always striving to live up to the principles we cherish," he said yesterday.

Earl R Miller said despite the reprehensible events which unfolded in Washington, D.C. the United States Congress completed its constitutional duty and affirmed the lawful election of Joe Biden as President-elect and Kamala Harris as Vice President-elect. They will be sworn into office on January 20, 2021, he added.

The riots occurred as the Congress was in a session to certify Joe Biden as president after the presidential elections of November 3.

World leaders condemned the storming,

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# Workplace accidents took 729 lives in 2020

### Says BILS study

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Some 732 workers died in events such as accidents, torture and labour unrest last year, according to a new study of Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS).

The highest number of deaths, 348, were in the transport sector, and the second highest, 84, in the construction sector. BILS deputy director Yousuf Al Mamun, shared the findings in an event at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday.

The BILS data said some 433 workers, 387 men and 46 women, were injured in 2020. The highest number of injuries, 68, were in the fisheries sector.

The survey, made from newspaper reports and articles, said 596 workers were victims of different incidents of torture last year. Among the tortured, 316 died, 229 were injured, eight went missing, 24 died by suicide, 14 were rescued from kidnappers; five others' cases were not mentioned.

Last year, some 593 incidents of labour unrest took place in different sectors, with the highest, 264, occurring in the garment sector, and the second highest, 49, in the jute sector.

Amirul Haque Amin, BILS vice chairperson, demanded risk allowance for garment workers who were working amid the pandemic, as their income was affected from Covid-19's fallout. Some 25-30 percent income of garment workers was affected, as overtime payment declined due to the fallout.

Shirin Akhter, lawmaker and BILS vice president, said although Bangladesh made impressive economic growth in the last decade, workers' rights remained poor.

# 6,686 people died in road crashes in 2020: Jatri Kalyan

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 6,686 people were killed and 8,600 were injured in 4,891 road accidents across the country in 2020, according to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity.

Meanwhile, 318 people were killed and 79 were injured in 323 rail-related accidents last year, the organisation revealed at a programme in front of Jatiya Press Club yesterday.

In the waterways, 313 were killed, 342 injured and 371 went missing during the same period, it added.

The organisation prepared the report after compiling data from news outlets. Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury, secretary general of the passenger welfare platform, revealed the numbers.

However, the number of road crashes and casualties were less compared to the previous year, he said.

In 2019, at least 7,855 people were killed in 5,516 road crashes across the country. But the organisation said the coronavirus pandemic had a major role to play in improving the numbers.

"Due to the pandemic, there was restriction on the operation of public

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# Listed criminal Nuru held in Noakhali

### He set up drug, arms smuggling network on govt land in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

After many attempts, police in a drive yesterday arrested listed criminal and land grabber Nur Alam Nuru, who stands accused in at least 30 cases, from Noakhali.

"He was arrested from Companiganj through mobile tracking technology," said Faruque-ul-Haque, deputy commissioner (west) of Chattogram Metropolitan Police, while addressing a press briefing at his office. During the drive police also arrested one of his accomplices.

Nuru is also convicted in an arms case, in which the court sentenced him to 17 years in prison, the official added.

"After his arrest, police conducted a raid at Nachia Ghona hill area, the den of Nuru, and recovered two firearms, sharp weapons and 400 yaba pills," he added.

DC Faruque said, "Nuru was raised in Akbar Shah area and worked as a 4th class employee in Foy's Lake area. He started living in the foot of the hill and later got involved in cutting hill and smuggling logs."

Eventually, he started drug peddling and started to grab portions of the hill, where he set up his group. He soon developed

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Leaders and activists of Bangladesh Hindu-Bouddha-Christian Oikya Parishad in the port city held a human chain and rally in front of the JM Sen Bhaban yesterday morning, protesting a recent 'conspiracy to demolish' the historic structure.

PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

# ANTI-BRITISH REVOLUTIONARY'S HOUSE Demonstrators give govt till Jan 18 to take steps

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Oikya Parishad yesterday set an ultimatum for the government, till January 18, to take steps to preserve the house of anti-British revolutionary Jatindra Mohan Sengupta in Chattogram.

Rana Dasgupta, general secretary of the organisation, set the ultimatum at a human chain in front of the house in port city's Rahamatganj. He warned of starting a hunger strike unto death there, if the demand is not fulfilled within the period.

The parishad organised human chains, demonstrations and rallies in different districts and upazilas yesterday. Leaders of different political and sociocultural organisations attended the programmes.

Centrally, a rally was held in front of the National Museum at the capital's Shahbagh. Acting president of the organisation Prof Neem Chandra Bhowmik presided over the rally. Among others, journalists Basudev Dhar, Monindra Kumar Nath, Advocate Shyamal Kumar Roy and Kishore Ranjan Mandal were present there.

They demanded establishment of a museum of independence and Liberation War in the house to commemorate the anti-British heroes.

In Chattogram's human chain, Awami League Chattogram city unit president Mahtab Uddin Chowdhury and general secretary AJM Nasir Uddin attended and expressed their solidarity.

"Vested property cannot be bought or sold," said Nasir, also former mayor of Chattogram City Corporation.

He said, "Chattogram District Administration is the custodian of the property, which was vested since 1970." He urged the administration to take immediate steps to preserve the house.