

A young couple's dreams crushed under a bus

How long will such tragic deaths be allowed to take place?

UNFORTUNATELY, there has been no letup in traffic accidents and death and injuries therefrom. Although the total number of road accidents in 2020 was fewer than the previous two years due to the pandemic, nevertheless it claimed the lives of nearly 5,000 and left as many injured across Bangladesh in 2020, according to a study. Deaths are always painful, but when the unfortunates are young people whose lives are cut short abruptly by errant bus drivers, it is even more excruciating. The circumstances of their death betrays the utter disregard for law and the sense of impunity that these drivers harbour. On January 18, a young couple who were on their way to work on their motorcycle was hit by a bus of Ajmeri Glory Paribahan from behind. This is the third killing that a bus of the said transport company has been involved in, in the last two years. What is outrageous is that instead of stopping after committing the accident, the bus driver attempted to escape, and in trying to do so, crushed the unfortunate couple to death. While this happened in Dhaka, another unlucky couple met the same fate in Chuadanga the same day.

Despite the formulation of a new road transport law, although very much diluted due to pressure from the very powerful syndicate of bus owners and drivers, it has not been forcefully and effectively applied. Today the drivers, of the private transport companies in particular, have become so reckless that they can, without fear or remorse, drive their vehicle over the helpless bodies that it has just knocked over on the road. This couple might have survived had the driver shown some compunction for human lives. He didn't. The owners of the private companies have become reckless too, caring little about the laws. Untrained drivers, driving licenses obtained through back doors and assurances that the law would not get to them because they have the blessings of the politically powerful, have contributed to road accidents and fatalities. Studies have further revealed that heavy vehicles contribute most to road accidents.

Unfortunately, road accidents and deaths will continue to occur unless the laws are honestly applied, unless the transport sector is relieved of the control of politically powerful syndicates, and unless the errant drivers and owners are made examples of.

Don't let time and cost overruns be the norm

Govt must ensure its projects are implemented smoothly

WHEN a public service agency embarks on a development or communications project based on faulty designs and no feasibility study, it is bound to run into trouble. Throw unchecked corruption, inefficiencies and lack of accountability into the mix, and you have a system where time and cost overruns are virtually guaranteed. While this has been the case with a vast number of projects undertaken by different agencies of the government over the years, there have been a few exceptions too, showing that, with proper planning and implementation, such overruns can be avoided.

A recent report by *The Daily Star* underscores this point by showing the glaring difference in the implementation approaches of two projects. The first project, undertaken by the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) in 2017, involves construction of 130 bridges in 94 upazilas to boost the rural economy by creating commercial and employment opportunities, and thereby reducing poverty. But the LGED did not carry out any feasibility study for about 100 of the bridges beforehand, resulting in faulty designs. As a result, only less than 20 percent of the work has so far been completed, although the deadline is June this year. Project officials have now proposed increasing the overall cost by a whopping 64 percent to Tk 6,457.19 crore—an increase of Tk 2,530 crore—and extending the deadline to another three years.

Conversely, another government project, undertaken by the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) in 2013, hasn't just nearly met its deadline but also been able to save Tk 1,464 crore by reducing costs. This is a laudable achievement indeed. Aided by proper planning, prior feasibility studies and smooth implementation, the "Kanchpur, Meghna and Gumti 2nd Bridge Construction and Existing Bridges Rehabilitation Project" promises to increase traffic volume on the Dhaka-Chatogram Highway and establish uninterrupted road communications with the capital.

These two different scenarios show that the future of a project can be fundamentally affected or altered by how it is approached by the implementing authority. We have often seen how large development projects suffer from myriad challenges both before and midway through the projects, and how cost and time overruns are justified by citing various causes, real or made-up. This also means delaying, and even denying, the projected benefits for the target population, as well as a colossal loss of taxpayer's money when the cumulative costs of such failures are counted. All this can be avoided by putting in place a strong accountability mechanism that ensures projects are properly planned and handled, as the second project cited has shown us. We urge the government to institute a system conducive to proper planning and handling of all its projects, so that corruption and inefficiencies are not rewarded and people can benefit from those projects as promised.

Beyond the virus: Global priorities and perspectives

MOHAMMED PARVEZ IMDAD

IT is encouraging to know that the World Health Organization (WHO) is sending a mission to Wuhan in Hubei Province in China for the review and assessment of the origin and reasons of Covid-19, and China has endorsed this mission. Never before had the world been confronted with such a critical and desperate situation as Covid-19 spread all over the world with alarming intensity and incredible magnitude towards the end of 2019. While the much-awaited vaccines have provided some hope, further time and evidence is required to fathom the long-term effectiveness of the vaccine and its overall impact in combating the virus. The discovery of new variants of the virus compounds current complexities, but it is expected that the available vaccines will also cater to effectively confronting the new variants to Covid-19. Researchers tested the effectiveness of the available vaccines with Covid-19 virus related variants with different mutations, and it has been confirmed that the current vaccine-induced immune response is effective not only for Covid-19, but also the variants.

Substantive outcomes should further be visible within the new few months. However, despite the effectiveness of vaccines, the process of combating and eliminating Covid-19 may require continued and comprehensive focus and efforts. The WHO could prioritise advanced research and build up on the experiences in handling previous viruses with similar symptoms such as SARS, MERS and Ebola. Having the Covid-19 vaccines on board within a year of the breakout reflects strong potential for advanced medical research to meet

emergency requirements.

For over a year, the world has been going through extreme uncertainties and a transition towards the erosion of gains achieved through globalisation and market expansion. Should the virus be around for longer, the world may head further towards shrinking trade and businesses, declining growth and prolonged recession. Declines in employment and incomes may lead to the contraction of key sectors of growth. In such a scenario, countries may have to bear budget deficits and shift further towards increased external borrowing. Bilateral and multilateral financing institutions will be required to spare significant volumes of resources beyond country partnership allocations, in order to enable countries to overcome growing deficits and fulfil the need for resources

erase hypothetical assumptions.

However, at this stage, despite the cautious optimism and obvious skepticism regarding the outcome of the WHO mission to China, there may be justifiable reason to believe that this would be the beginning of a credible process. The findings of the mission should enable the world to gather significant clues on unanswered questions relating to the pandemic. The international community looks forward to the WHO's conclusions and actions based on their recommendations. Irrespective of the outcomes of the WHO mission, it could be relevant and useful for research institutions and medical research centers, and even independent NGOs working on medicare research, to explore intensively for further details and insights on the key causes

pragmatic option for consideration.

In addition, the UN may consider setting up a Global Pandemic Research Institute or Global Virus and Infectious Disease Control Centre. These initiatives should facilitate prompt and proactive actions and effective responses, should such a crisis re-emerge in future. The UN could find it useful to stimulate private investment and promote public-private partnerships for expanding health infrastructure and research, with a view to gearing up functional efficiency of international health mechanisms. Simultaneously, there is a need to prioritise addressing governance issues, especially the institutional bottlenecks and management-related deficiencies that impede the efficiency of global health institutions. An increased share of the health sector to GDP should also aim at strengthening strategic thrusts and efficiently implementing programmes, as well as overall stakeholder buy-in and engagement. For mitigating the impact of the virus, the UN may consider an Emergency Post-Covid Recovery Fund on extremely concessional terms, and support countries in meeting trade and budget deficits, rises in poverty and unemployment, and economic stagnation.

Reforms in international health mechanisms would only bear effective results if adequate provisions are in place to ensure speedy and simultaneous access of all countries (irrespective of stages and levels of development) to available vaccines and required medicare benefits. Vaccine access and coverage for all citizens should be a core priority in line with the SDG principle of "Leaving No One Behind". Production roll-out and distribution mechanisms should concentrate on comprehensive availability, access and cost-effectiveness.

Another dimension that warrants priority attention at this stage relates to broadened international collaboration on improved health surveillance and monitoring, accountability and disclosure. Had these elements been given due focus, the impact of the pandemic could have been less. Supportive legal frameworks and provisions under the UN umbrella will strengthen accountability to prevent and detect negligence and lapses, which ultimately causes immense human suffering and losses. Regional Cooperation and Integration (RCI) frameworks could also propel avenues to promote such initiatives. NGOs and CSOs need to come forward for extending assistance to national and international initiatives in this regard. Substantive community engagement could add value to the much-required awareness of risks and vulnerabilities, and add momentum to endeavours in effectively combating such pandemics in the future.

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to finance development priorities. These trends may propel a revision of the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) key targets and indicators.

With regard to the WHO's investigative mission to China, this should have been undertaken earlier. However, better late than never. There is a need to undertake extensive and transparent investigations on what sparked Covid-19 and the factors that resulted in its destructive spread all over the world. The United Nations (UN) Secretary General wanted to convene a meeting of the Security Council in April last year to discuss the pandemic. However, this was reportedly vetoed by one of the Permanent Members of the Security Council. The WHO Chief expressed his optimism that the fact-finding mission to Wuhan will be able "to work closely with the Chinese counterparts to identify the virus origin and its introduction to the human population". The WHO and China have reportedly agreed on the Terms of Reference, focus and process of the investigation. There is reason to expect this is a positive approach and should

and circumstances that triggered the pandemic. This would enable broader understanding, clarity and transparency in the whole investigation process. This will also stimulate further focused and effective interventions based on the findings, and important lessons will be derived so that in future, such circumstances could be avoided or handled at the outset to prevent such a fast spread.

The other important perspective in the medium-term would be for the United Nations to set up a Commission for determining an upgraded mandate with broader technical support for the WHO. This is aimed at facilitating and promoting the WHO's advanced research and strengthening its functional alignment to national and regional health institutions and centres. The UN may also assess whether the roles and functions of the WHO remains relevant in the current context, or whether a new specialised institution would be necessary to address such unusual challenges to human health and safety. In this context, restructuring and realignment of the WHO may be a

Bangladesh can lead the world on the journey towards climate resilience

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

TWO years ago, the Global Commission on Adaptation (GCA) was set up under the chairmanship of Ban Ki-moon, former Secretary General of the United Nations, and with a number of eminent

individuals as Commissioners, including Dr Muhammad Musa from BRAC. The Commission was supposed to study and promote different aspects of adaptation to climate change and it was supported by the government of the Netherlands, as well as a number of other governments, including Bangladesh. After conducting a year of multiple studies and consultations around the world, the GCA came out with its flagship report called "Adapt Now: The Urgency of Action", which identified eight areas where adaptation to climate change was needed to be accelerated. These included cities, infrastructure, water sector, food and agriculture, disaster risk reduction, nature based solutions and locally led adaptation, as well as finance.

This flagship report was presented during the Climate Action Summit held at the UN in New York in September 2019 in the presence of the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Ban Ki-moon, Bill Gates and many of the Commissioners and heads of government, including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh. I was also fortunate to have been invited to attend as the advisor on the locally led adaptation action track.

At that meeting, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands declared a year of action to promote all the eight separate action tracks, which was supposed to culminate in a global Climate Adaptation Summit to be held in Amsterdam in October 2020. However in view of the Covid-19

pandemic, the summit was postponed to January 25, 2021 and will now be held as a virtual event, which will begin with a high level session hosted by the Prime Minister of the Netherlands where a number of heads of government will also speak, including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh. This high level event will then be followed by a series of separate anchor events on the different action tracks over the following 24 hours. Each anchor event will be hosted by a different country. The anchor event on Locally Led Adaptation,

organised by the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD). Since then, there has been a well organised global effort to bring together governments, donors, UN agencies, multilateral banks, NGOs and grassroots groups who have developed a set of principles to support locally led adaptation.

The focus of the principles on locally led adaptation is to change the current top-down paradigm of targeting vulnerable communities (by

taking place now as a global online event with over 90 sessions running over 24 hours, every day for seven days, ending on January 24. The outcomes from the Gobeshona conference will then be presented at the anchor event on Locally Led Adaptation of the Climate Adaptation Summit on January 26.

It is expected that this will initiate a 10 year journey towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change goals by 2030, where Bangladesh



Community-based afforestation in a coastal area of Bangladesh.

PHOTO: GCA

to be held on January 26, will be hosted by Bangladesh, where Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will open the two hour long event. Here, many speakers, including Dr Musa from BRAC, will speak about what they will be doing to promote locally led adaptation going forward.

With respect to the action track on locally led adaptation, this was initiated by Ban Ki-moon at the 6th annual Gobeshona conference held in Dhaka in January 2020, hosted by the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) and

governments as well as global funds and agencies) for supporting adaptation, but without the effective involvement of the vulnerable communities themselves. The new paradigm is to include the vulnerable communities in the design, implementation and even monitoring of the adaptation support to make them more effective.

This coalition of actors from all over the world are now running sessions during the 7th annual Gobeshona conference, organised by ICCCAD,

would lead the way towards achieving resilience through promotion of locally led adaptation.

If all goes according to plan, the government, the private sector, parliamentarians, academics, NGOs, youth and others in Bangladesh will collectively lead the world on the 10 year journey towards resilience through locally led adaptation to climate change.

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