

Extortion institutionalised?

Authorised by DSCC, 2 companies collecting tolls from commercial vehicles in name of non-existent terminals

HELEMUL ALAM

Donning vests that say "DSCC Toll Collector", they move around Gulistan, Jai Kali Mandir Road (between Thathari Bazar and Wari), Motijheel, Fulbaria, Azimpur and Laxmibazar (near Bahadur Shah Park) in the capital -- signaling commercial vehicles to stop.

Some of these toll collectors are quite energetic. Oftentimes they run behind vehicles whose drivers are mostly baffled to see the signal to stop in the middle of the road.

Though collecting tolls at a terminal or designated point may be a normal practice, many things are wrong in the abovementioned situation.

First of all, even though the toll is being collected in the name of terminals, there is none. Secondly, this collection is going on violating a government order. And lastly, it's being collected in the middle of the road in the name of road repair, as per the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC).

These tolls range from Tk 10 to Tk 60 and are collected from CNG-run auto rickshaws, human haulier, pickup vans, minibuses and buses.

DSCC introduced the levy on different modes of transports from terminals, a move that people involved in the sector have termed illegal and violation of a government order.

DSCC leased out the two "terminals" -- Gulistan-Jai Kali Mandir (Saydabad) bus terminal and Fulbaria bus terminal -- to Uttara Chaka and Minhaz Enterprise respectively, on November 11 and October 13 last year.

Mentionable, Uttara Chaka won

the bid at Tk 2.93 crore while Minhaz Enterprise secured the one-year contract at Tk 2.50 crore.

According to the one-year contract, the two companies have been authorised to collect tolls from commercial transports from the two terminals -- which do not exist.

The amount collected is kept by the companies.

DSCC also allowed the two companies to collect toll in the name of stopover terminals from over two dozen designated points of the city under its jurisdiction.

INSTITUTIONALISED EXTORTION? Transport insiders, however, said the two terminals do not fall in the category of bus terminals as those do not provide any amenities associated with one.

They said this "toll collection" is nothing less than an "institutionalised extortion". Besides, the companies seem to be in a mad race for making as much money as they can, they alleged.

They also said collecting tolls at different points on the street is a violation of a government order. The lessees even collect tolls from trucks and rickshaw-vans, violating contracts, they alleged.

Osman Ali, general secretary of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation, said Fulbaria, Jatrabari, Ittefaq crossing, Demra and Natyamancha at Gulistan are not terminals.

"A terminal is a place where a restroom, washroom and some other facilities should be in place," Osman told The Daily Star recently.

He also said as per a contract between the LGRD ministry and bus



Stopping two goods-carrying vehicles in the middle of the road, a man collects toll from drivers in Wari's Jai Kali Mandir area, top. Even though these workers, wearing DSCC vests, continue to collect tolls from commercial transports for using "terminals", there is none in the area. The photos were taken last week. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

owners, the city corporations cannot collect tolls from roads.

DSCC has even authorised the two companies to collect tolls from vehicles at kitchen markets and from roads, alleged Osman, adding that some people are collecting tolls from truckers at night.

He said they have already raised the issue with DSCC authorities.

"The way the city corporation is collecting tolls, it might force the owners to stop operating their buses," he warned.

LGRD UNAWARE

The LGRD ministry in a letter issued on December 3, 2015, said collecting tolls from highways by setting up boxes and other means by the city corporations and municipalities instead of designated bus or truck terminals is illegal.

The letter also directed all concerned to refrain from such harassment.

Contacted recently, Mohammad Nure Alam Siddiqui, joint secretary of the Local Government Division, said they were not aware of the DSCC decision.

"They [DSCC] did not inform us," said Siddiqui.

He also mentioned that the LGRD directive on city corporations and municipalities is still valid.

Asked, Supreme Court lawyer Shafiqul Islam Babul said collecting toll from roads without providing any terminal facility is not logical.

"They [DSCC] should have held meetings with the home ministry, BRTA, Road Transport Owners' Association, Road Transport Workers' Association and other stakeholders before imposing it," he said.

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199 women, 153 girls suffered violence in March: Mahila Parishad

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A total of 199 women and 153 girls suffered different forms of violence over the last month in the country, says a report of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.

Of 109 rape incidents, 70 involved children; 62 girls were raped, five were gang-raped, one was murdered after rape, and two died by suicide after rape, says the report, prepared based on news published in 13 national dailies.

The women's rights organisation sent its monthly report to the media yesterday.

The report also said seven women and 10 girls faced rape attempts in March.

Two women and two girls were sexually assaulted, and three women and seven girls were sexually harassed in the same period. Besides, 16 women and girls were abducted.

Also, two women suffered from acid attacks, and four succumbed to burn injuries.

At least 49 women and girls (12 girls) were murdered due to various reasons, while another 11 faced murder attempts.

Also, 20 women were tortured over dowry, and nine of them were killed.

Thirty-three women and girls were physically tortured, while 15, including eight girls, took their own lives due to torture.

Also, 43 women and girls (12 girls) died mysteriously.

There were five incidents of child marriage in the country last month. Besides, seven women and girls were victims of cybercrime.

Mahila Parishad regularly compiles the data to document incidence of reported violence against women and girls in the country.

Expressing serious concern over such incidents, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad General Secretary Maleka Banu said the statistics do not point to a society safe for women.

"Incidents of violence are not decreasing in any way, and the state is not being able to ensure justice for these offences. Mahila Parishad calls for justice for every single incident of violence against women and girls through impartial investigation," she said.

"We also urge the government to execute a zero-tolerance policy against all forms of violence against women and girls," she added.

Atiqullah a 'lighthouse' for the marginalised

Say speakers at memorial for the eminent journalist

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eminent journalist Atiqullah Khan Masud was a "lighthouse" for marginalised and disadvantaged people, while his lifelong struggle was that against fundamentalist groups, speakers said at a commemorative programme yesterday.

With his demise, the country has lost a valiant fighter and a man who believed in the spirit of the Liberation War, they said.

Janakantha Unit and Dainik Janakantha Shangbadik Karmachari Oikya Parishad organised the commemorative programme at the capital's Jatiya Press Club, said a press release.

Atiqullah, who was editor and publisher of daily Janakantha, passed away on March 22 at the age of 71. He was a valiant freedom fighter.

The commemorative programme commenced by observing a one minute silence in remembrance of the noted journalist.

Addressing the programme as chief guest, Awami League lawmaker and former president of Jatiya Press Club Shafiqur Rahman said Atiqullah created space at Janakantha for many, including those who believed in communal harmony, to practice free thinking and write on relevant issues.

Atiqullah was unshaken when taking a stand in the Liberation War, he said.

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'Ensuring the safety of helpseekers top priority'

The National Emergency Service-999 has been providing service to around 23,000 to 25,000 emergency help seekers daily. Capable of attending around 120 calls per minute, the service providers mainly connect with the police, fire control, and ambulance services. Recently, the government has given approval to turn the 999 service into a dedicated police unit. In this new arrangement, fire service and health ministry officials will work along with police to ensure better service. **Mohammad Tabarak Ullah, additional deputy inspector general and chief of the 999 service unit, recently sat down with The Daily Star's Mohammad Jamil Khan and Shaheen Mollah to talk about the new features and limitations of the unit.**

The Daily Star (DS): How many calls do you have to attend everyday? What is the most popular kind of service sought?

Tabarak Ullah: The 999-service started its journey on December 12, 2017. Till March 15 this year, we've received around 2.73 crore calls.

Among them, we managed to provide service to some 78.74 lakh calls. Of them, 78 percent were for police assistance, 11 percent for fire service, and 11 percent for ambulance service.

Although we provide emergency assistance for police, fire and ambulance services, a huge number of callers call on the toll-free number for other issues too, for instance over lost cell phones, information on how to file a general diary with police, request to arrest criminals or submit charge sheets.

DS: Where are most of these calls



from? Is there any specific time of the year when the number of calls increase noticeably?

Tabarak Ullah: Urban callers out number rural callers by far, and the majority of them is from Dhaka metropolitan area. Of them, 78 percent are male callers while 22 percent are female.

The number of calls increase during national programmes or natural disasters, and religious occasions

like Eid or Ramadan. Queries during these times are mostly related to information on the natural disasters or issues such as moon sighting (for Eid).

During these times, we sometimes receive up to 60 to 70 thousand calls a day.

DS: Is there any plan to increase capacity?

Tabarak Ullah: Initially, the only way to call the toll free 999 number was from T&T and cell phones. But now, citizens have the scope to communicate with us through our Facebook page, messenger, Twitter and WhatsApp.

We have around 100 stations to receive calls from T&T and cell phones and one station for the digital platforms. We have the capacity to receive around 120 calls per minute now.

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With the government announcing a weeklong countrywide lockdown -- starting tomorrow -- amid the surge of Covid-19 infection, the Amar Ekushey Book Fair was largely empty yesterday despite being a weekend. Smaller publication houses saw a particularly slow day, and even the food court, inset, which is usually bustling, was quiet.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN



MBBS final examinations postponed

BSS, Dhaka

Dhaka University (DU) authorities have postponed all professional final exams of Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS), which were scheduled to start today under DU-affiliated medical colleges.

The decision was taken amid the spike of Covid-19 across the country. The revised dates for exams will be announced later.

First and second professional MBBS practical and oral exams will be held on time maintaining health rules, said a press release.

Washington DC mayor declares March 26 as Bangladesh Day

UNB, Dhaka

The mayor of Washington DC has declared March 26, Independence Day of Bangladesh, as "Bangladesh Day."

Mayor Muriel Bowser congratulated the government and people of Bangladesh on the golden jubilee of the country's independence.

31 Hefajat men sued over Gazipur clash with police

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

At least 250 people, including 31 Hefajat leaders and activists, were sued in a case filed over Friday's clash between police and Hefajat supporters on Dhaka-Mymensingh highway in Gazipur.

Sub-inspector of Bashon Police Station Kamrul Islam filed the case with the police station on Friday night, mentioning names of 31 Hefajat men.

They were made accused on charges of preventing police from discharging duties and for clash.

At least 21 people were detained from the spot during the clash that left at least 20, including seven policemen, injured.

The clash broke out as Hefajat men tried to block the highway near Chowrasta Jame Masjid area. As police went to clear the blockade, the protesters threw brickbats at them, leading to the clash, said witnesses.

Police later fired tear gas shells in a bid to disperse the crowd.

Today is the 10th Death Anniversary of Prof. Dr. M. Alauddin

We request all relatives, friends and well-wishers to remember him in their prayers and pray for the eternal peace of his soul

Alauddin family

<http://www.entbd.org/about/remembering-dr-alauddin>