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Deaths on the roads are so much more than accidents

Lax regulation and non-existent monitoring are the main problems

ALL deaths are tragic. But those that occur on our roads are mostly unnecessary and avoidable. With better planned roads, stricter compliance regarding fitness of the vehicles, better training for our bus drivers, and stronger awareness among our public, these deaths could be easily prevented. According to a police report, a total of 3,095 citizens of Bangladesh were killed in 3,259 road accidents in the first seven months of this year. Just to put these figures into perspective, it is more than the total number of people killed in the Twin Towers attack and far more than the total number of US soldiers killed in the 20-year war in Afghanistan.

The above figures for seven months make for the average monthly deaths of 442 and daily deaths of four. The question is—what, if anything, have the authorities done to prevent these tragedies on our roads from occurring? Most probably nothing. Inaction is perhaps a bigger tragedy than the deaths, as it indicates that such a huge loss of lives of our citizens does not lead to any official action.

One would have expected that lockdowns and closures of intercity bus services would have led to a big dip in road accidents. But the opposite happened as it led to a greater number of battery-run rickshaws, vans and other unlicensed and unroadworthy vehicles filling the void created by the ban on regular transportation.

Whatever the specific reasons may be for the high death figure this time around, the truth is that our roads are among the most unsafe in the world, and the number of road accidents appear at the top of any global list.

Starting from the lack of careful planning—like scientifically calculated space and place in designing turns, curves and width—while constructing our roads, to monitoring the compliance of buses and trucks with road safety rules, to training of the drivers, etc, the whole chain of actors that cause the accidents must be seriously looked into and reformed as per the need of a modern road system. The fitness of vehicles that ply on our roads remain a serious but unaddressed issue. Corruption in the system allows the unfit vehicles to ply on the roads, causing serious accidents.

We urge the home minister-led special task force to take their own work seriously and implement the decisions that they make. While we agree with the BRTA chair that reckless driving by small vehicles is a big problem, it is, by no means, the only one. There are several other regulatory and monitoring problems that need to be addressed immediately. Our economic advancement must be accompanied by other features, indicating an all-round progress. Road safety must be one of them.

Commissionary zeal for breaking the law?

'Secret' amendment to the energy commission's regulations raises uneasy questions

IT is surprising to know how the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) circumvented due process to bring in new licensing regulations in 2016 allegedly to favour businesses in the energy sector. This is a highly unusual practice, not to mention illegal—one that the regulator kept under wraps until the Ministry of Law intervened in 2018. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, prior to bringing in the 2016 amendment—replacing the previous licensing regulations of 2006—BERC had failed to seek the law ministry's permission, forgone the mandatory public hearing, and also published a gazette on said amendment without the ministry's vetting, leading the latter to term the whole exercise illegal. As a result, the fate of over 3,500 licences issued or renewed since 2016 has become uncertain.

BERC has now started to rectify its mistakes by publishing the draft copy of a new regulation. We hope due process will be followed this time. But even if we ignore the fact that it took the regulator over two years to act on the ministry's objections, we must ask: Why did BERC amend its regulations illegally in the first place? What emboldened it to think it could get away with such activities? And what could it have possibly achieved from this? Clearly, it wasn't out of the kindness of their heart that the commission brought in relaxed provisions favouring those in the energy business.

For example, the 2016 amendment dropped three subsections under Section 3 of the 2006 regulations—the first two required licensees to submit details of ownership and assets, while the third required that companies seeking licences provide an estimated production size and the amount of fuel needed for the purpose. It also added a completely new section saying prices of fuel (gas, oil, coal, LNG, etc) would be determined by the "government or according to the fuel distribution agreement between manufacturer and supplier," although according to the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission Act, 2003, the commission is supposed to determine the price of power generation in consultation with the government. Also, all types of licence fees were changed, while the licence period was extended from one year to three years.

So, we must ask again: What did BERC authorities gain from relaxing or reworking these provisions? There is a hint of corruption that must be investigated. These provisions are not legally tenable anymore—nor are the licences provided under them. Of more than 3,500 licences issued or renewed since 2016, 1,058 were in power sector, 932 in gas sector and 1,600 in petroleum sector. Legal experts are of the opinion that these companies shouldn't have to suffer for how things have turned out, but the illegal status of said regulations means every licence issued under it must be renewed. Whatever course of action is taken, BERC must go through a process of legal scrutiny and accountability for what it did in 2016.

We need a solid Covid-19 management plan

Chaos and mismanagement can undo even the best of intentions

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

BDANGLADESH'S second special mass vaccination drive at the city corporation levels was held from September 7 to 9. It was, unsurprisingly, riddled with almost all the hiccups faced during the first special drive that took place about a month ago, between August 7 and August 12: gross flouting of Covid-19 safety protocols at the vaccination centres, lack of clarity, and chaos and confusion among the public. These attributes have somewhat become the trademark of our overall Covid-19 management mechanism.

There have been reports of long queues at the vaccination centres, where hundreds gathered from early in the morning, hoping to secure the second shots on time, and before the stocks ran out. Pictures of different vaccination centres circulated by various media outlets showed throngs of people standing in multiple congested lines—some without wearing masks, their faces betraying their worries, frustrations and exhaustion. And amid all the pressure, crowd management was a Herculean task for the authorities.

Since most people came to know about this second drive—for those who had received their first jabs in August—at the last minute, they had to juggle work and daily chores to make time to get the vaccine shots. For instance, a local daily quoted a private company employee who had been waiting in the queue since early morning hoping to get the shot on time, as he had to attend office. He said he could not take leave from work because he had not been aware of the drive until the day before. He had taken the first dose on August 7.

The same report quoted Brig Gen Md Sharif Ahmed, chief health officer of Dhaka South City Corporation, as saying: "I got to know at 5 pm yesterday that the vaccination programme would be held today [September 7]. Then I arranged with others to implement it. I didn't expect so many people to respond in such a short time. All centres are full."

So why this last-minute initiative? Apparently, as reported by news outlets, the decision regarding the second special mass vaccination drive came on the night of September 6. Why this decision came so late, only the authorities can tell.

Although the second drive was in discussion for some time, the call was made a little too late for an effective mass communication. In addition, there were also those who went to the vaccine centres

during the second drive to receive their first dose, as they were not fully aware of its objective, and they were turned away.

This time around, there was another reason for overcrowding at the vaccination centres at the city corporation levels: the duration of the drive. While the first drive was conducted over six days, the second drive was conducted over three days only.

Despite the drawbacks, the positive side of the second special mass drive cannot be left out of this discussion. As a result of this special campaign, more than 4.3 million people are now fully vaccinated in the country. The rest of more than five million people who had received the first dose in August can still visit the designated centres to receive their second jabs, as informed by the officials of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

However, it goes without saying: this campaign could have yielded better results—more in compliance with Covid-19 safety protocols—had it been communicated with the people and the campaign conducted on time. Unfortunately, this is not the first instance where the government's indecision or lack of clarity regarding their plans added to the common people's sufferings.

We can consider another case to see how the lack of planning, coordination and communication are creating confusion among the people with regard to accessing Covid-19 vaccines: vaccine registration for people over 18 years. Without a National ID card or a passport, the young adults are facing difficulty in registering for the much-needed vaccine doses, especially in view of the government's decision to reopen educational institutions. Various universities on their websites have advised students to register and get fully vaccinated before the resumption of in-person classes. Those who do not have NID have been advised to apply for NID. Only after getting the NID can they register for the vaccine.

Getting a new NID takes some time. And then once the students register for the vaccines, they will have to wait another few weeks to get the schedule for the first dose, then another month at least before they can get the second dose and be fully vaccinated.

The announcement lowering the age limit for inoculation to 18 years—for students—came on August 20. While schools and colleges reopened yesterday, universities are set to resume in-person classes from October 15. Does this give enough time to the university students to register for the vaccine and get fully vaccinated with the two required doses by that deadline for reopening? What about those who will have to first register for

NID, then the vaccine, and then wait in the long queue for a schedule?

These are the questions that the government should have considered before announcing the decision to reopen higher educational institutions. The students should have been given ample time to register for NID, sign up for the vaccination, and get fully vaccinated. There are cases where it has taken people weeks, if not months, before they could get a schedule for vaccination after

transmission, and young adults struggling to register for vaccines to become eligible to attend in-person classes.

Even if we ignore the past fiascos of the government's handling of Covid-19—including the so-called "strict" but ill-planned and ill-executed lockdowns, the trouble these lockdowns caused the urban working class, the pitfall-ridden vaccination drives, where the government struggled to source sufficient vaccines (with the uncertainty over Sputnik V



The authorities need to be better at planning the Covid-19 vaccination campaign in Bangladesh to avoid confusion and people's sufferings. FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

registration.

To resolve this issue immediately, the government can consider allowing young university students to register for the vaccine using their student ID. When they apply for their NID, the student ID numbers can be tagged along with the NID to track vaccine recipients. This can be an easy solution, but how the government decides to handle this remains to be seen.

The government needs to address its own deficiencies in formulating and implementing a watertight Covid-19 management plan. The government's current plan—if there is one at all—is full of inconsistencies, and its implementation has been mired in irregularities of all sorts. It has formed a National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 and a Covid-19 Vaccine Management Taskforce Committee to tackle the pandemic. Along with these, the Ministry of Health and especially the DGHS are working to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic. However, despite all these, the Covid management plan of the government is clearly malfunctioning, and often. As a result, we are seeing these special vaccination drives, which are rather turning into hotbeds of virus

procurement still unresolved)—one cannot overlook the repeated instances of gross mismanagement that are exacerbating the plight of the common people.

There have also been instances where individuals had been given multiple jabs of the vaccine within minutes and had to be kept under observations. And then there have been irregularities in executing the government-announced social safety programmes, the benefits of which often did not reach their intended recipients: the poor.

Because of the mismanagement and mishandling of the government's Covid-19 management plans, the people are suffering at both the macro and micro levels. This cannot go on. The authorities need to look into their own deficiencies and inefficiencies and fix the glitches in the system. It is time for the authorities to roll up their sleeves and get down to work, and work as a team in order to alleviate the suffering of the common people. After all, it is the government's responsibility to ensure that both lives and livelihoods are sustained during the pandemic.

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Why Bangladesh needs to set price floor for garments

RMG NOTES



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

THE US government has passed well-documented "anti-dumping laws" aimed at providing a level playing field and protection for the local industries. These laws have been enforced with regards to the textile industry several times in recent years, when polyester producers from outside the US "dumped" their product on the US market at prices that were substantially below the market rate.

The US authorities take a hard-line stance on dumping and have issued anti-dumping tariffs as high as 50 percent to some external businesses selling polyester in the US market.

I am beginning to wonder whether we need our own internal anti-dumping laws in Bangladesh when it comes to cotton apparel.

Confused? Well, allow me to explain. As a ready-made garment manufacturing hub, we have been trapped in a spiral of declining unit prices for years. There are many theories as to why it is so. People often make the link between the end price of clothing and the prices paid to apparel makers. It is also argued that too many suppliers are chasing too many buyers in Bangladesh, and that these supply-demand dynamics force the prices downwards—with buyers taking advantage of the market situation.

I believe there is some truth in both these theories. However, perhaps it is time to start looking inwards as garment manufacturers if we wish to resolve this issue for the benefit of all. At present, we are seeing relatively healthy orders in Bangladesh's RMG sector as the market bounces back, thanks to the reopening of economies in Europe and the US.

In theory, this should mean that prices would hold relatively firm. But this is

not the case now and, indeed, it has not been the case on previous occasions, when demand has been robust. Instead, we continue to see a tendency of some manufacturers to offer products at way below the prevailing market rates. In effect, such manufacturers are "dumping" products on the domestic market in the same way that polyester exporters to the US were dumping their product in the situation I highlighted earlier.

Is dumping too strong a word? Perhaps

ground where pricing is concerned. There seems to be more collaboration and a collective understanding that it is not in the interests of any manufacturer to have a glut of under-priced products flooding the domestic market.

I hear anecdotes from our own industry about manufacturers taking orders at prices below the cost—even at a time when the market is strong. This suggests to me that this problem will always be with us unless it is tackled



Price flooring will not only keep the local market stable in Bangladesh, but will also benefit the RMG workers. FILE PHOTO: STAR

it is, but there is no doubt that some manufacturers are selling at or below the cost in some circumstances. This is madness. It creates problems for us all, and risks dragging us down into a perpetual race to the bottom.

Are other garment production hubs like this? The picture is varied; however, as an example of where garment makers have a stronger reputation for offering "take it or leave it" prices, one needs to look no further than China. Chinese factories appear better equipped when it comes to negotiation, and hold their

head-on.

The issue with accepting such low prices is that it is not sustainable. The people who suffer are, of course, the garment workers. It is also unrealistic to think that one can run a sustainable operation in a market where prices are continuously being dragged down by factories, which are happy to offload garment products for next to nothing.

I believe our industry needs to take action—and by that I mean the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), and

perhaps the Ministry of Commerce as well. Shipping and customs declaration records would provide a means by which to gain an insight into what is being shipped and for what prices.

Surely as an industry we have to consider some kind of minimum pricing, with warnings for factories that do not comply and potentially the removal of export licences for repeated offenders.

If this sounds draconian, consider again the anti-dumping laws cited earlier. Minimum prices are simply a way of protecting our industry as well as raising standards across the board. Better prices will also enable factory owners to take a more long-term view of sustainability issues, which all buyers are demanding right now. This, in turn, could lead to more orders for all of us.

It would be for the BGMEA and other industry leaders to decide whether such an initiative would merit being implemented and what form it might take.

For my own part, I would add a few final thoughts. The first is that we cannot, as an industry, continue to blame buyers for requesting lower prices or consumers for demanding cheaper fashion. We have been complaining about such issues for far too long when, in reality, we have to ask if there is anything we can do to make our industry more stable, professional, and sustainable.

The second is that perhaps it is time to think more collaboratively and look at the bigger picture as an industry. Obviously, there will always be intense local competition, and this is one of the factors that makes us such a popular choice for buyers and ensures that the quality standards remain high. But the "race to the bottom" prices help none of us and only serve to tarnish us all with the "cheap and cheerful" brush, ruining our industry's image. We are better than that.

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