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Opportunist bus operators must be held accountable

Authorities must ensure that ordinary citizens are not charged outsized bus fares

WE are troubled to find that our concerns of increased bus fares only adding to the sufferings of ordinary Bangladeshis, who are already struggling to cope with the aftershocks of the pandemic, have turned out to be all too true. According to a report in this daily, the government decision to raise bus fares, in light of a sudden announcement of fuel price hike that sparked countrywide strikes from transport owners and workers, have led to many operators taking advantage of the situation and charging as much as 50 percent higher fares. The government rule that the new bus fare schedule would not apply to CNG-run buses is also being flouted.

Throughout this entire period—since the announcement of the increase in fuel prices and during all the events that followed—it is the general public who have been the biggest victims of a situation that has been wholly out of their control. Transport strikes forced people to walk, pay more for expensive alternative transportation, or simply miss crucial appointments, and strikes from goods-carrying vehicles disrupted supply chains, making certain daily essentials more expensive as well. The government's solution to this state of affairs—a hike in bus fares, which includes a 28 percent hike in Dhaka and Chattogram—has been in accordance with the demands of transport associations, but has once again left the public in the lurch.

Millions of people are already struggling to recover from the blows dealt by the pandemic, and on top of that, the prices of essential food items, such as onions and edible oil, have gone up and are unlikely to come down soon. In such a situation, how will ordinary Bangladeshis deal with higher energy prices and bus fares, especially if they are being taken advantage of and charged higher rates than the ones fixed by the government?

A report in *The Daily Star* detailed how the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority's (BRTA) mobile courts conducted a drive on Monday against a total of 220 vehicles, and realised Tk 1.54 lakh in fines. While we appreciate that such steps are being taken, we feel that more must be done to ensure that bus operators are held accountable, since this is not the first time that their opportunist actions have added to commuters' woes. We also hope that, going forward, the authorities will enact policies that will help the people recover from the pandemic's negative impacts, as opposed to adding to their burdens when they are already struggling.

Cheap labour does not equal cheap lives

It's high time for the govt to ensure safety for construction workers

A photo published on the back page of this daily yesterday, showing two workers on an eight-storey under-construction building in Dhaka's Mohammadpur area, both standing on the very edge with no protective gear or harnesses, concerns us greatly, but does not surprise us at all. The deaths of construction workers in Bangladesh due to precarious working conditions is, unfortunately, not a new phenomenon. Even in September, a construction worker named Mohammad Sajib (24) fell to his death from an eight-storey building he was working at in Dhanmondi. The scaffolding he was working on collapsed, and the "safety belt" he was wearing was obviously not secure enough to prevent the tragedy.

But how long are we going to keep calling the deaths of construction workers "accidents"? Given the absence and/or inadequacy of the safety gear they are provided with by their employers, are incidents such as these not bound to happen? What is more horrifying is that people of all ages are allowed to work these dangerous jobs, including teenage boys and elderly men.

Construction of new buildings, many of them high-rises, abounds all over our cities. But will we continue to call this "development" when these projects are often tainted by preventable deaths of poor workers, who are only looking to earn their livelihoods?

The country's Labour Act does not cover this growing and thriving industry, which is still counted as part of the informal sector. In 2019 alone, the Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health, and Environment Foundation found that 156 construction workers had died on the job. During the pandemic, these workers were among the sections most hard-hit due to not being prioritised for government or other financial assistance. Yet, they are having to risk their lives every day to carry our economy forward, while irresponsible construction firms and employers don't even do the bare minimum to protect them.

The government and labour ministry authorities must legally hold to account those who allow construction workers to work without effective safety gear, subjecting them to severe injuries and even death. Besides implementing existing rules—such as the 2014 National Building Code, which stipulates that everyone working with concrete must wear helmets and gloves—proper laws must be introduced in order to protect the health and safety of construction workers, and to also ensure that they are not paid in mere change for the dangerous work they do.

Why the lax attitude in bringing traffickers to justice?

Human trafficking continues to be a major problem in Bangladesh



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

"Dance Club." The elite force also rescued 23 trafficking victims from three "safe houses" across Dhaka.

One of the arrested happens to be Kamrul Islam alias Jalil alias DJ Kamrul alias Dance Kamrul, a trafficker who lured unsuspecting girls with promises of lucrative jobs abroad, posing as a dance club owner. He had earlier been arrested in April 2019 for trafficking a woman to India, but he was released after only three months in jail.



Police can arrest as many human traffickers as they want, but without stringent application of the law, only arrests will not bear fruit.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Prior to this spate of arrests, in June, law enforcement agencies arrested 11 suspected human traffickers, who had been poaching girls and women using the social media platform TikTok. Later, Rab stated that Rafizul Islam Ridoy, also known as TikTok Ridoy, was the leader of the racket, and used to entrap girls with promises of making them TikTok models. However, the girls were trafficked to

Southern India as sex workers. The TikTok gang came under surveillance after a video of sexual assault on a woman in India went viral on social media. She was one of their victims.

In the past years, multiple trafficking rackets have been busted by the law enforcement agencies, yet the number of human trafficking victims kept spiralling. Citing NGO reports, this daily revealed that in the last 10 years, about 500,000 women and girls from Bangladesh—aged between 12 and 30 years—have been trafficked to India alone. Apart from India, trafficking hotspots include countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and East Asia, where Bangladeshi men, women and children are smuggled.

Given the upward trend in human trafficking, we need to take a closer look at the contexts of these incidents in order to be able to comprehensively address the situation, because these sporadic arrests are certainly not doing anything to curb this crime.

jobs abroad. This means these vulnerable people have no access to education, skills development, or any means of livelihood.

This brings us to the context of this evil called human trafficking: the root of these desperate journeys. In order to address this, the government needs to promote skills development training for these vulnerable, marginalised groups; the state needs to tap into this segment of the potential workforce, empower them with skills, and include them into the mainstream economy through access to decent workplace or entrepreneurial opportunities.

Secondly, for those who seek employment abroad, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment needs to carefully assess the credibility of the various agencies that supposedly offer foreign jobs opportunities to interested candidates. Often, criminals and *dalals* pose as recruiters and sell the job-seekers into slavery instead. Therefore, there is a need for strict vigilance in their sector. This includes close monitoring of the interactions, and transactions of any individual or agency claiming to be an overseas job recruiter.

Also, the government needs to create a support system for those who want to go abroad for jobs, by creating one-stop information centres, from where these interested individuals can connect with legitimate and credible recruiting agencies. There is also a need to educate people about the services that are being offered by the recruiting agencies, and the pitfalls of attempting to go abroad through illegal channels. If people are aware and are empowered with information and knowledge, they will be less likely to fall for the fake promises of the smugglers.

Now, if we talk about curative actions, the first concern that comes to the fore is the noticeably low conviction rate of human trafficking cases. According to media reports citing the Brac Migration Programme data, of all the human trafficking cases filed between 2012 and March 2021, only one percent of the cases ended in conviction.

Post the enactment of the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act in 2012, as many as 5,738 cases involving human trafficking were filed, of which only 282 cases have been cleared till July this year, and only 36 cases resulted in conviction. Of the 24,500 traffickers named in these cases, only about 10,500 were arrested. What is even more unfortunate and alarming is that, except for 71 of the criminals who were

convicted, the rest are out on bail. There are two problems with this: first, once these criminals are out, they become more reckless and return to hunting for the next victim. Secondly, these bails send a strong message to the criminals—that even if they get nabbed, they can easily escape the long arms of the law.

It is understandable that there is often a lack of evidence in such cases, or victims end up making out-of-court settlements with the criminals, or witnesses fail to appear at the court for testimony. However, the practice of giving widespread bail without keeping the accused under any sort of surveillance, while their cases get lost in a legal quagmire, cannot be a solution to this problem.

Take the case of DJ Kamrul, for instance: had he not been out after three months in jail in April 2019, he would not have been able to victimise more girls. Who will take the responsibility of the women and girls who are having to endure unspeakable horrors day in and day out, thanks to the system that enables criminals like DJ Kamrul to go scot-free?

Of course, there would be many hurdles in the process of bringing these notorious criminals to justice—especially because many of them have support from influential quarters—but the authorities need to work around the problems and find ways to put these traffickers behind bars, and for long.

Unless we find long-term curative solutions, and implement them in tandem with effective preventive measures, the nefarious activities of these rackets will not only continue, but increase, and the criminals will get a free rein to make easy money, exploiting the desperation of vulnerable individuals.

The law enforcement agencies can make as many arrests as they want and bust as many gangs, but without stringent application of the law, these will not bear any fruits whatsoever.

It's high time the authorities took a hard look at the reasons why individuals fall prey to the evil intentions of the traffickers and eliminated those, assessed how the criminals get off so easily after being nabbed and closed the loopholes in the system, and took a holistic approach to address the country's human trafficking problem. Safety and security of each and every citizen is the responsibility of the state, and it must do everything in its power to ensure this, no matter what the challenges are, and who the criminals are.

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The next step in climate action is creating a fund for loss and damage



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

enters its second and final week of negotiations, is the matter of loss and damage from human-induced climate change. This refers to the adverse impacts that can be attributed to human-induced climate change due to the rise in global temperature by more than one degree Celsius since the industrial revolution that happened over a century ago.

This means that efforts to avoid the impacts by reducing emissions through mitigation, and also to be better prepared to deal with those impacts through adaptation, have both been inadequate to avoid some real impacts that are now happening because of human-induced climate change. This was made abundantly clear in the sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which came out in August 2021, where the scientists of Working Group 1 said that, for the first time in three decades, they now had unequivocal evidence of the impacts of climate change that are credibly attributable to human activities. This is a breakthrough in the scientific field, which will have profound repercussions in both the COP as well as the reality on the ground.

Inside the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process, there was a decision back at COP19, held in 2013 in Warsaw, Poland, where the countries agreed to set up the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts. The WIM had an executive committee and a work plan for five years, which came up for review at COP25 in 2019, in Madrid, Spain. Going into COP25, the vulnerable developing countries jointly demanded

two outcomes: first, a technical body to provide advice and technical guidance to countries; and second, to get funding for the victims of loss and damage. This topic was highly debated in Madrid and was one of the topics that drove COP25 into two extra days of negotiations, with a partial outcome only.

The demand for a technical body was agreed upon, and it was named the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage (SNLD), but the demand for funding was

with a few items to be settled next week, but so far there is no progress on the issue of funding—at least inside the negotiations.

This year, the climate conference is being hosted by the UK in the city of Glasgow in Scotland. With its own government, parliament and budget, Scotland has also had a Climate Justice Fund of its own, separate from the UK, for a number of years. Just before COP26 started, First Minister of Scotland Nicola

Sturgeon's footsteps and also pledge to contribute towards the new fund. Indeed, if this happens, then it would be a major positive development, even if it is outside the official UNFCCC process that requires consensus-based decisions; it would be a coalition of the willing who may take the idea forward, and then it may be included in a decision at COP27 next year, where loss and damage will certainly be at the front and centre of



Climate-vulnerable poor and developing countries are demanding immediate funds from the big emitters to combat loss and damage caused by human-induced climate change.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

refused by the developed countries.

So now, going into COP26 in Glasgow, the vulnerable developing countries want to work out the details of the SNLD—including its mandate, governance, and activities—and also reiterate their demand for funding to help the victims of loss and damage.

At this point in time, when the first week of negotiations ends, there is some proposed text for setting up the SNLD,

Sturgeon announced a doubling of the country's Climate Justice Fund, and even more importantly, she allocated GBP 1 million for a new Loss and Damage Fund, and challenged other countries and foundations and anyone else to contribute to this new fund.

Many countries and foundations are now considering this challenge from the Scottish government, and in the remaining days of COP26, there is

discussions.

What is needed out of COP26 is to plant the seeds for exploring the options of funding for loss and damage, which can be nurtured over the next 12 months and readied for COP27, due to be held in Egypt in 2022.

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