

## A rare example of sacrifice

### Jashore man dies trying to save child from train

OUR CORRESPONDENT,  
Benapole

Next to creating a life the finest thing a man can do is save one, said the seminal American president Abraham Lincoln.

And Jashore's Abdul Hakim yesterday indeed did the finest of deed in the town's Railgate area. Sadly, he did not live to take in the plaudits.

Like every morning, he was returning home from his morning walk, when he noticed a seven-year-old child dangerously crossing a rail line in the area – with a speeding train fast approaching.

**Hakim, however, slipped on the rail track as it was wet due to morning rain, and the onrushing Betna Express, a local train that operates on the Khulna-Benapole route, hit him, said witnesses.**

He instinctively rushed to rescue the child, successfully dragging him from the rail track.

Hakim, however, slipped on the rail track as it was wet due to morning rain, and the onrushing Betna Express, a local train that operates on the Khulna-Benapole route, hit him, said witnesses.

Passers-by rescued Hakim and took him to Jashore General Hospital where the on-duty doctor declared him dead.

He died on the way to the hospital, said Shahinur Rahman, the on-duty doctor at the emergency ward of Jashore General Hospital.

Hakim's brother Rafikul Islam said the 52-year-old Hakim was involved in social activities alongside his watch shop in the district town.

He used to go on morning walks as part of a local health-awareness campaign Bhorer Shathi.



Students stage a demonstration while one of them paints the slogan “Nirapad Sarak Chai” on the Rampura bridge in the capital yesterday. They were demanding road safety and justice for Rajshahi University student Mahmud Habib Himel, who died in a crash on the campus on Tuesday night.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

# Crashes claim seven lives in five districts

STAR REPORT

At least seven people, including three motorcyclists, were killed and 23 others injured in road accidents in Dhaka and four other districts yesterday.

The incidents happened on a day when a group of students demonstrated in the city's Rampura area demanding safe roads.

A 38-year-old restaurant manager, who was on his way to work, died after an oil truck hit his motorcycle in the capital's Rampura area in the morning.

The victim, Abu Naser Partwari, manager of a restaurant named “Chittagong Bull” in Gulshan area, was from Noakhali's Sonaimuri.

“Naser was going to the eatery when the oil truck, coming from the opposite direction, hit his bike near Farazy Hospital in Rampura around 6:30am,” said Shahriar Hossain, a sub-inspector of Rampura Police Station.

Naser fell on the street and was crushed under the wheels of the oil truck, said the SI, adding that he was declared dead at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

The truck was seized and its driver Nurul Islam, 42, and his assistant Imran Hossain, 22, were arrested, the SI added.

Victim's brother Yasin Patwari said Naser used to live with his family in

Meradia.

In Cumilla, a road crash claimed the lives of two motorcyclists on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway in Nazira Bazar area of Burichang upazila.

The deceased were Morshed Alam, 24, and Anand, 20.

In the district's Debidwar upazila, a CNG-run auto-rickshaw driver, Alamgir Hossain, 45, died after a truck hit the auto-rickshaw in Jafarganj area around 4:00pm yesterday, said Masud Alam, inspector of Mirpur highway police outpost.

In another accident, pickup driver Khairul Islam, 30, and his assistant Mamun, 28, were killed as two pickups collided head-on in Dinaipur's Phulbari, said Ashraful Islam, officer-in-charge of Phulbari Police Station.

The accident, which happened around 6:40am yesterday, left three others wounded.

In Rangpur Sadar upazila, 20 people were injured in a road crash in Nabdiganj village yesterday morning, said Farid Ahmed Chowdhury, assistant director of Rangpur division fire service and civil defence, who led the rescue operation.

The injured were taken to Rangpur Medical College Hospital.

A rickshaw-puller, Torikul Islam Mollah, 45, died when a truck hit his rickshaw near

Singa intersection in Pabna Sadar upazila around 2:00pm, said Aminul Islam, OC of Pabna Sadar Police Station.

Police seized the truck, but its driver managed to flee, he added.

Data shows a rising trend in road crashes in the last few years though government agencies promised a change and initiated various steps after a major road safety movement in July-August 2018.

According to a police report, 5,088 people were killed in 5,472 road crashes in 2021, which is 30 percent higher than the previous year.

The data shows that motorcycles were involved in 1,358 accidents last year, which is 41.46 percent higher than in 2020.

**STUDENTS' DEMO**

Students, who demonstrated in December last year for safe roads following the deaths

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## Covid deaths cross 5 lakh in India

### Some analysts count millions more

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's official Covid-19 death toll crossed 500,000 yesterday, a level some data analysts said was breached last year but was obscured by inaccurate surveys and unaccounted dead in the hinterlands, where millions remain vulnerable to the disease.

The country, which has the fourth-highest tally of deaths globally, recorded 400,000 deaths by July 2021 after the devastating outbreak from the Delta variant of the coronavirus, according to official data. Some believe the figures were much higher.

“Our study published in the journal Science estimates 3 million Covid deaths in India until mid-2021 using three different databases,” Chinmay Tumbe, an assistant professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, who co-authored the study, told Reuters.

Last month, the Indian government dismissed the study as baseless in a notification saying there is a robust system of birth and death reporting.

In the capital Delhi, as new infections of the Omicron variant fell sharply off the peak, authorities further eased curbs and said they will allow schools and colleges to reopen from Monday, and permit private offices to be fully staffed.

## Mother, child reunited

### Woman gets back baby sold to pay hospital bills

A CORRESPONDENT, Chandpur

A woman, who sold her newborn to pay the hospital bill for childbirth, has got back the baby.

Administration officials in Matlab Uttar, Chandpur, rescued the boy on Thursday night and returned him to his mother.

Tamanna Begum, 28, gave birth to her son through a C-section at Chhengarchar Pulse Aid Hospital. She remained admitted to hospital between January 26 and 28.

As Tamanna could not pay the hospital bill of Tk 26,000, she sold the newborn to a childless couple for Tk 50,000.

As the matter became known in the area, Upazila Nirbahi Officer Gazi Shariful Hasan along with other officials and police rescued the baby.

Someone brokered a deal between Tamanna and the childless couple, Shariful said.

“The woman who purchased the baby signed a bond, saying she will never claim the baby,” he told The Daily Star, adding that the upazila administration gave Tamanna Tk 5,000.

“Soon after my admission, I gave birth to my son, but no one came forward to foot the medical bills. A man told me that I could sell my baby to pay the bills,” Tamanna was quoted as saying by UNB.

Tamanna's husband, who is a labourer, has not returned home in a long time, locals said.

# What's choking private airlines?

FROM PAGE 1

34.4 percent as well as the corresponding value-added tax under the HS 8528.52.10 code applicable for ordinary LCD television and computer displays.

The rules say that those should be cleared on zero-tax under HS Code 8803.

Documents obtained by The Daily Star show a traffic collision avoidance system transceiver of invoice value \$154,000 was taxed at 26.2 percent, a generator of invoice value \$40,744 at 37 percent and a strobe light at 127 percent.

“These examples are just the tip of an iceberg,” the industry veteran said.

In reality, there is hardly an example that an operator could clear an aircraft part import at zero tax as outlined under HS code 8803.

“Operators face countless hurdles in releasing the imported spares on very flimsy ground and opaque logic, losing valuable time in the process. This puts an operator in an unbearable financial burden,” the industry veteran said.

Subsequently, the Aviation Operators Association of Bangladesh (AOAB) called for a clear directive to cease such arbitrary and whimsical practice of taxation.

“When there is doubt, reference to the IPC should be made,” the IPC said.

To compound matters, a 5 percent advance tax (AT) has recently been imposed

on the import of aircraft, engines and spares.

“This additional tax burden is unbearable for otherwise cash-strapped airlines,” he said.

Not just that, an operator needs to send thousands of parts abroad each year for servicing, overhaul and repair and those are taxed again during the re-import.

Aircraft are grounded for sudden unserviceability of critical parts, which are termed as aircraft on ground (AOG).

While the global practice of imports and clearing of AOG imports is 24 hours, in Bangladesh it takes weeks, causing great operational and financial losses to the operator.

Subsequently, the AOAB called for the clearing of the AOG imports in the shortest possible time and ideally following the global practice.

The existence of a bonded facility will not only ease the life of an operator in such a situation; it will also relieve the volumes of workload in the customs house, the AOAB said.

Besides, worldwide parts trading is done on advance payments through the telegraphic transfer of funds but in Bangladesh, the only mode of payment is through letters of credit, said Mofizur Rahman, managing director of Novoair, one of the two private airlines still in operation.

“Sometimes, it takes

months to obtain permission for import and export. How do you keep aircraft serviceable with such limitations?”

Other than the bonded warehouse facility, Biman also gets monetary assistance from the government.

The amount of money needed to keep an airline running is colossal, according to Momen.

“Our aviation business enthusiasts hardly take into account the enormity of capital intensiveness to run an airline.”

While a syndicated loan of a hundred crores of taka would suffice, such resources are beyond the reach of airlines as they have not earned the credibility that banks demand, he said.

But Biman faces no such problem as the government acts as its bank guarantor, said a top executive of US-Bangla Airlines, the other functional private carrier, on condition of anonymity.

“We want a level playing field between Biman and the private airlines,” he added.

Then there are regulatory roadblocks such as the high rates of surcharges, aeronautical, landing and parking fees and prohibitive jet fuel prices.

GMG Airlines, United Airways and Regent Airways are vivid examples of private operators that had to ground their fleet as the surcharge dues piled up, according to aviation analysts.

Regent Airways, the latest private airline to cease operations, owes Tk 283 crore in surcharge, United Airways Tk 355 crore and GMG Airlines Tk 368 crore, according to data from the CAAB.

“Once you fall into a backlog with the surcharge payments, there is no chance for you to turn around. The surcharge is a major reason why the airlines are struggling,” the industry veteran said.

The annual surcharge imposed by CAAB is 72 percent, whereas in India it is 12 to 18 percent, in Pakistan 2 percent, in Singapore 8 percent, in Oman 10 percent.

Subsequently, Rahman, also the secretary-general of AOAB, demanded that the government fix the surcharge at a reasonable rate by cancelling the monthly rate of 6 percent.

The aeronautical, landing and parking charges are very high compared with the other countries in the region.

For instance, Indian airlines do not have to pay any landing or parking fees for aircraft with 80 or fewer seats, according to Rahman.

The aeronautical and non-aeronautical charges in Bangladesh are seven times higher than in India.

When Regent Airways was introducing the Dhaka-Singapore and the Dhaka-Kuala Lumpur route, both the airport authorities had offered to waive all charges for a whole year as a gesture

of goodwill as well as a strategy for long-term business, according to Momen.

“We have not practised such even for our homegrown aviation entrepreneurs,” he said.

Subsequently, Rahman called for rationalising the charges to help the airlines to sustain themselves.

Quizzed about the high rates of surcharge and the aeronautical and non-aeronautical fees for which many airlines were forced to cease their operation, M Mafidur Rahman, chairman of CAAB, said the government will extend all-out support to the private airlines so that they can sustain and the country's aviation sector can flourish.

Still, if the high jet fuel prices are not addressed, the local airlines cannot have a proper shot at sustainability.

About 40 to 46 percent of the operating costs of an airline is comprised of jet fuel, according to Rahman.

And all airlines in Bangladesh pay a higher price for jet fuel compared with their global competitors, according to Momen.

The price per litre of jet fuel in Bangladesh is \$0.69, in contrast to \$0.5 in Malaysia and India, \$0.49 in Singapore, \$0.51 in Qatar and Thailand, \$0.53 in Oman, and \$0.58 in China.

On top of the high jet fuel price, the local airlines have to pay 42.62 percent

VAT on fuel for domestic routes, according to Rahman. In contrast, the VAT is less than 6 percent in Myanmar and India.

Since October last year, the state-owned Padma Oil, the lone supplier of jet fuel to airlines, hiked the prices seven times.

Besides, when the global crude oil price comes down to less than a half, the local airlines cannot reap the benefits as the prices charged to them remains unchanged, according to Momen. “This monumental blunder needs to be focused upon,” he said.

“Due to the high price of jet fuel in Bangladesh, our airlines cannot compete with the foreign airlines,” said Kazi Wahidul Alam, an aviation expert.

The CAAB chief begs to differ.

“Different private airlines were compelled to shut down their operations over the years due to their wrong marketing polity, faulty planning and mismanagement,” he said.

Many entrepreneurs enter the airline business to make a profit within a few years.

“But they will have to understand that the aviation business is not like the other types of business,” the CAAB chairman added.

M Mahbub Ali, state minister for civil aviation and tourism, acknowledged that the high surcharge and high import duty for spares were one of the reasons

why the airline industry is facing hardship.

The ministry will sit with the finance ministry to address the issue.

“Without the approval of the finance ministry, we won't be able to reduce the rates of those charges. But, there are 99 other reasons for which different airlines were forced to shut down their operations over the years.”

When asked to elaborate, Ali, who assumed the role in 2019, said: “The airlines business is not like the other types of business. India is doing business all over the world in different sectors. But its national airline, Air India, became bankrupt. Not only in India, but different airlines across the world also ceased to operate in recent years.”

On October 8 last year, Air India, which racked up losses of about \$9.5 billion, was sold to Tata Sons for \$2.4 billion.

Asked what the government is doing to overcome the hardship the local airlines are facing, Ali said the present government is providing all kinds of support to the industry.

He however declined to elaborate on ways the government is supporting the sector.

But the CAAB chairman and Ali's proclamations do have some legs.

ATM Nazrul Islam, an aviation expert who worked with different private airlines, said the defunct airlines had ineffectual

marketing policies as well as wrong aircraft and route selection.

Aviation companies mainly fail due to improper planning and lack of market analysis, he said, citing the example of GMG Airlines's procurement of a 540-seater Boeing 747 aircraft to serve the commercially unviable Dhaka-Dubai route as a case in point.

The Boeing 747 procurement was one of the reasons for GMG Airlines's downfall, while United Airways's fleet of 11 was disproportionate for the number of routes it operated, according to Momen.

“You don't have to be a rocket scientist or a Joseph Stiglitz of economics to run an airline. The wisdom and practices of a corner shop owner are fairly adequate to run an airline – fly where you can make money and give up the routes where you experience bleeding,” he added.

It is, perhaps, with this frame of reference that two new private carriers – Air Astra and Fly Dhaka – are taxing for take-off this year.

Air Astra has received the no-objection certificate (NOC) from CAAB and is now awaiting the air operator certificate, according to Asif, its CEO.

Fly Dhaka is yet to get the CAAB's NOC, said its MD Anisul Islam Mahmud, also a Jatiya Party lawmaker.