

Shocking state of private primary schools

Govt must critically assess and provide assistance to those in need

We are shocked to learn about the number of privately run primary schools that were permanently closed across Bangladesh in just one year since the Covid pandemic broke out in early 2020. According to a government report, 14,111 such schools—mostly kindergartens or those run by NGOs—were permanently shut down during this time because the authorities could not bear their operational costs. During the same period, the number of teachers and students in these primary schools also fell drastically; according to the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), the number of teachers declined by 83,268 and students by 1,461,634. We believe this situation needs immediate attention of the government.

The DPE report has, in fact, revealed some crucial facts that we were not aware of until now. While we were somewhat aware of the high rates of school dropouts in the past two years, we were totally in the dark about the high number of teachers who lost their jobs and never got them back.

Moreover, the decline in the enrolment of students in pre-primary schools—reportedly, while 3.9 million students were enrolled in pre-primary schools in 2020, the number fell to 3.1 million in 2021—is something we should take seriously, and the reasons behind this must also be found out.

The DPE authorities are saying that many of the private primary school students shifted to government primary schools due to the permanent closure of their institutions. But did all of them enrol in government primary schools? We need proper data before we can reach this conclusion.

Also, the DPE report has only revealed the situation of the first year of the pandemic; we fear the situation may be worse now. Thus, what we need now is a proper analysis of the situation on the ground and act urgently to improve the overall state of our primary education sector.

As for the private primary schools that have been closed permanently, we think the government should give them some kind of financial incentives and hold discussions with their owners—mostly NGOs—to make them reopen soon. But before doing that, all such institutions must be brought under a regulatory framework, as educationists have opined.

Bangladesh-US relations

Well poised to attain newer heights

SETTING a unique example of diplomatic nicety, US President Joe Biden wrote in a letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that he was confident regarding further strengthening of the Dhaka-Washington partnership for the next 50 years and beyond. He appreciated the drive, resourcefulness, and innovation of Bangladeshis in rebuilding after the 1971 War of Independence, and that the nation is charting a path of economic growth and development, which he believes serves as a model for the rest of the world.

President Biden further mentioned that the two countries strongly believe in the ideals of democracy, equality, and respect for human rights, climate crisis, helping the Rohingya survivors of genocide and supporting UN peacekeeping worldwide.

We welcome the good gesture of President Biden for such an uplifting letter on the occasion of the 50 years of diplomatic relations between our two countries. Such appreciation of the achievements will surely inspire Bangladesh.

The content of the US president's letter reverberated in the meeting held between Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington, DC. The cordiality on the US's part was articulated well when he said that the two countries were looking forward to strengthening their partnership. He further said that even as the US thinks back on those 50 years, the country is looking ahead to the start of the next 50 years, and the work that can be done together to strengthen the bilateral partnership.

We appreciate the fact that the US has given due recognition to Bangladesh as a leader in rallying other countries to deal with the climate crisis going on across the planet.

Secretary Blinken was candid in mentioning that the US was grateful that Bangladesh is showing extraordinary humanity and generosity in hosting nearly one million Rohingyas who had to flee persecution in Myanmar. At the same time, he appreciated Bangladesh's work as one of the strongest supporters of UN peacekeeping missions.

The US is our biggest trading partner, with most of its investment made in the energy sector. Time has come for the diversification of US investment in newer areas, like renewable energy, ICT, pharmaceuticals, shipbuilding, and so on. We can say with confidence that Bangladesh is now ready with necessary infrastructure to welcome more US investment, as well as joint ventures with big US companies of repute.

We believe the US administration appreciates our foreign policy of friendship to all with malice to none. As a superpower, the US has views and perceptions that may differ with ours. It is imperative that we have cordial relations with all our neighbours, including India and China, which is boosting our socioeconomic conditions on mutually beneficial terms. While we pursue a policy of respect and neutrality towards our friends, we also remain non-interfering in the foreign policy of other countries.

Dhaka, for all intents and purposes, is dead

Time to split the capital city's functions to revive it



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

Badiuzzaman Bay is an assistant editor at The Daily Star.



▲ With its dirty air, nasty water, loud noises, and costly living, what Dhaka needs to continue functioning is a hard reset.

ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Dhaka's residents deserve a chance to live and breathe without having to worry about their city dying or, worse, causing their deaths.

not too long ago, when the city ranked seventh among the most stressful cities, the worst in terms of density, one of the worst in terms of traffic congestion, and the second worst in terms of physical health and family purchasing power. The city's status in these rankings is unlikely to have changed now. Its water quality also remains a constant source of worries, with the ongoing cholera outbreak blamed on Dhaka Wasa's poor supply system.

The true costs of all these problems are immeasurable. To give just one example: air pollution in Dhaka, according to a study last year, is taking 7.7 years off a resident's life. Imagine the cumulative effect of all of its chronic problems and pollutions on the physical, mental, financial and intergenerational health of its residents. It really boggles the mind.

Many solutions for each of the problems have been suggested, some of them implemented to little or no effect. The problem is, Dhaka's afflictions are mostly interlinked. With no central oversight, and with none of the agencies responsible for the city working in conjunction, we've reached a point where targeting one problem at a time no longer stands a chance of improving our living experience. What Dhaka needs is a hard reset, a complete overhaul of how it functions as a capital city and as the residential hub of 20 million people. Clearly, Dhaka's ambition as the former is no longer compatible with the expectations of the latter.

The idea of a hard reset, therefore, should no longer sound radical. "The

the "mofussilisation" of other cities in the country, before suggesting that we should split the administrative functions of the capital into two cities.

He adds: "We should begin to incubate this idea in our political and administrative heads. Given the historic significance of the parliament building, the legislative arm of the government may stay in Dhaka. The executive and judicial branches, along with the cantonment, can move to the new city to initiate a culture of decentralisation. This model of decentralised government would be a great fit for Digital Bangladesh. Physical proximity as a prerequisite for governance is an outdated idea of the yore."

This is not to suggest a complete relocation of the capital away from Dhaka, which would be an impractical move. But taking some of the administrative burden off it means a chance to reduce its urban footprint as well as dependence on its resources. How does the split plan sit with the expectations of the residents? Well, this is still just a means to an end. A hard reset should ideally see a "Save Dhaka" principle govern all the decisions and activities of all the agencies responsible (DNCC, DSCC, RAJUK, WASA, DESA, Titas, DMP, Traffic Division, etc.), guided by a strong political will and a central vision of sustainable urbanism.

Dhaka's residents deserve a chance to live and breathe without having to worry about their city dying or, worse, causing their deaths.

Why should we need to demand safe roads?



Afia Jahin is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

AFIA JAHIN

MAISHA Momotaz Meem, a 22-year-old student of English at North South University (NSU), was riding her scooter on Kuril flyover to her university on April 1 morning when she was run over by a covered van. It was being driven by someone who only held a licence for driving light vehicles, not heavy ones such as a covered van.

The driver of the Meghla Paribahan bus which hit and killed two pedestrians in Gulistan on January 8 this year had been driving it with a light vehicles licence for around two years.

When a pickup van ran over and killed five brothers on the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar Highway on February 8, it had already been operating for three years without updated fitness clearance papers, route permit and tax token.

According to police data, 5,088 people were killed in 5,472 road accidents in 2021. Latest data from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) indicates that at least one million registered vehicles are being driven by unlicensed drivers.

It would be naïve to expect a driver, who has been operating a heavy vehicle without a proper licence for years without being caught, to be responsible behind the wheel.

So, how many thousand more avoidable murders on the roads will it take for the authorities in charge of making our roads

The fact that road crashes and resultant deaths have now become a national problem seems obvious to experts and ordinary citizens, but not to those who could actually formulate laws and plans to help curb these deadly numbers.

safer to take notice?

Unfortunately, this lax attitude of authorities is not unique to how they handle issues of expired or missing vehicular documents.

Back in 2018, after students from schools, colleges and universities protested for road safety, the Road Transport Act, 2018 was introduced and came into effect in November 2019. But it is yet to be fully implemented.

Neither statistics—the number of deaths and road crashes rose by 29.86 percent and 30.34 percent, respectively, in 2021 from 2020—nor the daily news of deaths caused by vehicles seem to push the authorities towards the urgency that this epidemic demands. Why else is it that the draft of the National Road Safety Strategic Action Plan 2021-2024, which was prepared over a year ago, is yet to be approved? The fact that road crashes and resultant deaths have now become a national problem seems obvious to experts and ordinary citizens, but not to those who could actually formulate laws and plans to help curb these deadly numbers.

A high-powered taskforce, formed in October 2019 to tackle road crashes and bring discipline to the sector, led by the home minister, began its journey with a 111-point recommendation. Though it took several decisions during its three meetings till June 2021, only one has been fully implemented: appointing a focal person from four ministries concerned to oversee the implementation of all other decisions.

What hope is there for a country—soon to become a developing country—to be a safe one for its citizens if people are being killed on the roads daily, with little intervention from the authorities besides what's on paper?

Many are looking at Meem's death through a misogynistic lens: "Why does a girl need to ride a scooter anyway?" I believe the question can be tweaked to ask: "Why aren't our roads safe enough for women to ride scooters on?" Why must they practise independence while treading a line between facing harassment or meeting death? And if it's so unacceptable for women to drive their own vehicles, what is the alternative? To keep boarding buses wherein they face harassment from other passengers simply for being women? Or to search the horizons and wait for one of the mere six-women-only BRTC buses that currently operate within the capital?

Others are wondering why students, especially from NSU, have not taken to the streets in larger numbers to protest their peer's death. Again, why must students, who are supposed to be able to uninterruptedly pursue their education, be forced to come out and demand as basic a need as safe roads from the government? This concept baffles me now as much as it did in 2018. Even if students do take to the streets now, what would change anyway? We all remember too well how the state responded to their legitimate demands in 2018. And even the protests in November last year don't seem to have moved the authorities to action.

Having laws and regulations on paper, holding meetings with specialised task forces, conducting traffic safety weeks are all well and good. But it's past the time now for the relevant government bodies to step up, smell the road accident deaths, and actually implement their myriad decisions. Every day that they don't, we lose tens of Bangladeshis to avoidable deaths—for which only systemic flaws can be blamed.