

The Daily Star

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Enforce govt order to stop price manipulation

Why has it been sitting idle for more than a decade?

It is unfortunate that price manipulation of daily essentials by unscrupulous businessmen continue unabated despite there being a government order to curb this illegal practice. According to a report in this daily on May 24, the government issued an order titled "Essential Commodities Distribution and Distributor Recruitment Order, 2011," under the Control of Essential Commodities Act, 1956, to curb price manipulation. But it has remained unimplemented for more than 11 years. That is because none of the stakeholders played their part—while importers and producers did not care to comply with the order, the authorities responsible for enforcing the order or monitor the market also did not do their job.

Since the government order was never enforced, dishonest businessmen often manipulated the supply of essential items by creating artificial shortages in the market to raise their prices. We have seen this recently in the case of edible oils, wheat, and other essentials. Had the government order issued in 2011 been properly enforced, we could have averted the edible oil crisis—or the authorities could have easily addressed it. Under the law, the government would have a list of distributors and the supply data of importers. With these crucial data in hand, the government could have identified and punished those responsible for creating the crisis without much difficulty.

The order states that importers or producers of essentials will designate one or more distributors in every upazila, city corporation and district and send their lists to a national committee. Importers or producers are also supposed to send information on the monthly supply of products to the committee. But this is not happening. And while the committee is supposed to sit every month to assess the stock, supply, sale and prices of essentials and take measures to ensure the availability of the goods in the market, so far, they have rarely met to assess the market situation and have not taken any measures to enforce the order.

Like most of our laws or government orders, this order was also formulated—when the market situation was volatile—with no visible intention from the government's side to implement it. And it is the ordinary people who have had to—and still are having to—pay the price for that. But that should not be the case. We urge the government to enforce the order without further delay and identify and punish those responsible for manipulating the market.

Old age allowance simply not enough to live on

To start, it must be adjusted for inflation

It is a disheartening fact that, while the government does provide allowances to certain vulnerable groups within the population, the amount is never enough to sustain them properly. A report by this daily has highlighted how dire the situation is for those who have no secondary sources of income or any support from close ones, and must rely solely on the government allowance for their survival. Shamsul Huda, an elderly man from Rajshahi, resides in a tiny and unstable tin shack, which used to be a tea stall (and his source of income). Being too old to work now, he must rely on his children for food and his medical bills. How much does the government allowance contribute to this? Only Tk 500 per month (paid at three-month intervals), which Huda would use up at once on the two inhalers that he needs.

But this is one story of one elderly man who is barely scraping by. And to think that the allowance has remained at Tk 500 since 2017, despite the prices of commodities increasing by so much over the last one year alone. Essentials such as cooking oil, rice, lentils, and some vegetables have been getting out of reach for many families. It is unrealistic to think that Tk 1,500 would be enough to help a person sustain themselves for three months, when even people with a monthly income are now struggling to make ends meet.

In the current fiscal year, the government allocated Tk 39,637 crore for cash transfer programmes, which include providing allowance to the elderly, widowed, distressed and destitute women, and financially insolvent people with disabilities, as well as for the pensions of retired government employees and their families.

While something is better than nothing, the government must commit to their safety net programmes by providing enough to each beneficiary to support their survival. We agree with experts that the amount of allocated allowance for vulnerable persons must be at least doubled in the budget for the upcoming 2022-23 fiscal year. Authorities must also bring more people under these cash transfer programmes—namely widows, oppressed women and persons with disabilities. It should also be ensured that not only are beneficiaries from all upazilas covered under these programmes, but that the urban poor—whose number has increased significantly since the pandemic began—are also receiving substantive monetary assistance.



VISUAL: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

There is just one way to save Dhaka



THE GRUDGING URBANIST

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THE notoriety of Dhaka's traffic is now daily news. Civil society members have been venting frustration about this maddening crisis. Transportation engineers—local and international—have been busy offering solutions akin to those in highly developed cities like Melbourne or Singapore. These solutions include, among others, improved public transportation and automated ticketing systems, dedicated lanes for bus rapid transit, smart road signals, and coordinated traffic management. They are all well-meaning suggestions. But they are, alas, pipe dreams, given our tangled urban realities. While technically sound, these solutions are likely to fail, because they ignore complex sociocultural issues and public behavioural patterns that make traffic congestion an insurmountable knot in the first place.

The hard reality is that Dhaka's traffic problem will not go away anytime soon. The causes for the city's clogged streets can't be undone overnight. Technical solutions alone are not enough, since the capital city's traffic jam is the result of a complex combination of sociocultural factors, lack of rational land use, and misguided urban governance. Let me explain these three issues briefly before contemplating ways forward.

First, to unpack the sociocultural roots of our capital city's notorious traffic congestion, it would be logical to zoom in on its primary contributor: the private car. Private cars occupy 70-80 percent of Dhaka arteries, while serving only 5-10 percent of daily commuters. This is a glaring example of social injustice and inequity. Neither Copenhagen nor Singapore would ever allow this asymmetric distribution of urban resources. Let's put it in perspective. Assume 150 people from a neighbourhood need to go from Point A to Point B. Compare the road space needed by three public buses that can carry them with the space needed by 75-100 personal cars to transport the same number of people. Imagine the street: three buses with a lot of free road space versus 75-100 cars with very little road space left. This is the reality of Dhaka's roads. And, this is not fair to the 90 percent of the city's daily commuters.

This is also simple maths justifying the utility of public transportation. An efficient public transportation system means people won't have to rely on private cars to go around. Yet, we don't embrace the idea of public transportation. There

are a host of reasons for this. For the rising middle class, the personal automobile is the ubiquitous expression of social mobility—a moving family fortress that ensures safety on a hazardous road and showcases social status. About 4,000-6,000 newly registered cars and other motorised vehicles pour into the streets of Dhaka every month. Banks offer up to 90 percent of car loans to help clients buy their dream cars. The mushrooming car dealerships across the city are viewed as symbols of a prosperous society. Rapidly growing personal car ownership is the future of the city. And that future is filled with insanely congested streets.

The personal car is not the disease. The problem is how we embrace the personal car as a lifestyle. In a democratic society, how would the government discourage a family from buying a personal car when there is no safe, comfortable, and gender-friendly alternative for mobility? Singapore deploys draconian measures to make car ownership an impossibly expensive and bureaucratic process. Policies are in place there to encourage the public to utilise an efficient mass transit. Owning a car in Singapore is, in fact, a burden. In Dhaka, such measures won't work yet, because there are no comfortable alternatives. The Singapore model won't work because we have not yet figured out what kind of city we would like to develop. It is a deeply political and cultural question.

Second, Dhaka traffic is a multigenerational crisis, long in the making. Since the 1980s, when the capital city's urbanisation began to accelerate, we have ignored one of the key tools of creating a sustainable urban DNA: land-use planning. We allowed the city to become an untenable urban juggernaut, an infernal urban agglomeration, paying little attention to how the city's land could be developed with a logical sequence of use and zoning. What is land-use planning? A basic example begins with your family. Your children should be able to walk safely to their school in 5-15 minutes. This means each neighbourhood or a ward should have a number of good schools, so that a kid from Dhanmondi will not have to make an exhausting trip to school in Uttara. A good Segunbagicha school for Segunbagicha kids is good land-use planning. A city with a prudent land-use template reduces unnecessary road traffic, because people will not have to crisscross the city to reach their destinations.

Third, it is inevitable that a lack of coordinated urban governance would result in unregulated clogged streets. Much has been said about the lack of coordination among Dhaka's different urban agencies responsible for providing services. The streets of a megapolis like this city are too heavy a responsibility to be left to too many agencies. Cleaning the traffic mess in the city needs one tsar. That tsar needs to go to sleep thinking about solutions for Dhaka streets and wake up

thinking about solutions for Dhaka streets. Period.

What are the ways forward? The hard truth is that if Dhaka's urban status quo continues, it is going to take a generation or two for the city to become sane before it bursts at its seams.

If we don't want to wait until Dhaka becomes Mohenjo-daro, the only way out is its decentralisation. Dhaka needs to stop being a monstrous primate city (greater than two times the next largest city in a country or containing over one-third of a nation's population). As the former World Bank economist Ahmad Ahsan studied, the economic costs of the capital city's overgrowth are a staggering 11 percent reduction in GDP, or about USD 32 billion in 2019. Ahsan wrote, "The urban population of Bangladesh has grown by nearly 10 times after independence, where as much as a third of which has taken place in Dhaka, whose population grew at an annual rate of 5.4 percent per annum between 1974 and 2017. Other large cities, though—Chattogram and Khulna with populations of more than one million—have grown at a far lower rate of 1.7 percent per annum."

Dhaka must stop being the only dream centre in the country. We need to lessen the city's burden. University education? Go to Dhaka. Heart surgery? Go to Dhaka. Establish a startup? Go to Dhaka. Why can't Sylhet become a national hub of healthcare? What's stopping Chattogram from becoming all things maritime? Why is Rangpur, with a new airport, not an industrial hub? Why can't Barishal be a new centre of high-tech industry, like Bengaluru, in the wake of Padma Bridge? Dhaka doesn't have to be everything. Being everything is killing Dhaka. Why are some ministries not located in other divisions?

Decentralisation is easier said than done, particularly when there is a pervasive but irrational political fear that being away from Dhaka—the centre of all powers—is to risk being forgotten, ignored, and diminished. Nobody wants to go outside Dhaka. The risk is too high. Time has come to fight this entrenched fear to save this city from the looming disaster. Dhaka must be decentralised. If necessary, the capital should be split between two cities. In an earlier column, I wrote, "Time has come when the idea of splitting the administrative functions of the capital into two cities should no longer appear absurd. On the contrary, the idea should rapidly sink in... Indeed, we should begin to incubate this idea in our political and administrative heads." I provided many examples of capital relocation across the world.

During Eid holidays, the insanity of Dhaka's streets disappears. That's because people return to their homes in other parts of the country. This "return" should be encouraged, facilitated, and incentivised by a policy of decentring Dhaka. Which ministry should we move to Rajshahi first?

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Create a healthy political environment

There was a time when politics was a means of practising patriotism, honesty, compassion, and selflessness. The main objective of politics was to ensure people's welfare. But nowadays politics has become a tool to earn money as well as to exercise power. Politicians often earn money through various

illegal practices. Students also join politics for the same purpose. We, of course, need young people to join politics. But we need educated young people with good intentions. The situation is quite different from what we need. The question is: How much can the less-educated young politicians contribute to the nation's

welfare? Or are they a burden for us? At present, our educated young generation avoids politics. But to create a healthy political environment in the country, they must step up. I think senior politicians have to take the responsibility to encourage them to join politics for the sake of public

good. Our country is moving forward economically. With good people joining politics, we can definitely make more progress both socially and economically.

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