

Unfit vehicles strike again

Will authorities ever pay for their apathy?

ON September 5, around midnight, at least eight people were killed and 50 sustained injuries when two buses collided head-on on the Rangpur-Dinajpur highway in Rangpur. How many times in the last year, months or even one month have we come across similar news of devastating road crashes? A common citizen could be forgiven for losing count. But what of the government? We are frustrated at the apparent oblivion of the relevant authorities when it comes to the country's awful state of road safety. According to the Road Safety Foundation, at least 519 people died in 458 road crashes in August 2022 alone. But this is no wonder, unfortunately, given that – as per the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority's (BRTA) own data from February – more than five lakh vehicles plying our roads have no fitness clearance, while at least 10 lakh registered vehicles are being driven by unlicensed drivers.

In fact, this newspaper has reported that neither of the two buses involved in the Rangpur crash had the necessary route permits. Moreover, one of the buses, under Joyana Paribahan, actually violated the Road Transport Act 2018, as its registration was switched from being under Rozina Enterprise without the BRTA's approval. Worse still, the bus' fitness clearance expired in May 2011. But worst of all, the Joyana Paribahan bus is owned by the general secretary of Bangladesh Bus Truck Owners Association (BBTOA). The fact that a top transport leader is able to run an unfit bus under his ownership for 11 years testifies to the authorities' total lack of care for ensuring road safety.

Is any of this really shocking? Four years after its hasty introduction in 2018, in the face of the students' Road Safety Movement 2018, the RTA 2018 remains unimplemented for the most part. Within this time, it has also been amended numerous times – not to suit the needs of citizens, but to fulfil the demands of transport owners. Meanwhile, as mentioned above, thousands of lives continue to be crushed to death on our roads, which are chock-full of unchecked and unfit vehicles.

As we do at least every other week on this very column, we would urge authorities to wake up and do all that is necessary to lessen the number of road crashes across the country. The Road Transport Act must be implemented strictly. All unfit and unregistered vehicles must be brought to book by the BRTA, while only licensed drivers should be allowed to drive if the government really wants to cut down road crashes by half by 2030. Authorities must know that monetary compensation for road crash victims is not a long-term solution for the disease that is our dismal road safety situation.

Wasa should come clean on sewage bills

Why is it discharging untreated waste into Dhaka waters?

IF you're a resident of Dhaka, here's a question to start your day: When was the last time Dhaka Wasa made headlines for something that wasn't outright objectionable? It may be hard to answer. There remains, after all, an air of inevitability around its incompetence, mismanagement and irregularities that seems impossible to break. On Tuesday, Wasa again put itself on the spot after a daily reported how, between FY 2018-19 and FY 2020-21, it collected Tk 1,066 crore from residents for a service it barely delivered: sewage treatment. The amount was around Tk 400 crore in 2021-22 FY. So why should residents be charged for a non-existent service?

That's something only the Wasa management can answer. According to the report, even though Wasa charges the same for sewage and water services, it doesn't treat sewage enough to justify the billing. Currently, around 910 million litres of sewage are reportedly generated every day in the areas covered by Wasa. Of this, around 900 million litres of untreated sewage land directly into our freshwater sources such as rivers and canals. In other words, only less than 2 percent of the sewage is being treated. Although there is no data to measure the damage done to our waterbodies because of this massive disposal, the chairman of the National River Conservation Commission in May blamed Dhaka Wasa for the pollution of rivers surrounding the capital.

So, not only are citizens being exploited in the name of a non-effective service, but our waterbodies are also being damaged as a result of Wasa's activities. This is totally unacceptable. It is also deeply immoral. This only shows how inattentive Wasa is to the quality of its services or the needs of citizens – its customers – despite having increased its water tariff a total of 15 times since 2009.

Wasa's existing sewage treatment system is all but broken at the moment, with an insufficient and largely ineffective network of sewer lines, pipes, pumping stations and appurtenances. Ideally, there should be enough treatment plants for the sewage generated and in all the areas under Wasa. And only after treatment should wastewater be discharged, not before. Unfortunately, despite reportedly collecting around Tk 3,000 crore in sewage bills over the last 13 years, not only has Wasa failed to reform and modernise its sewage treatment system in line with the need of a growing city, it has even failed to bring more than 80 percent of the areas under its sewage treatment coverage.

We're told that the Wasa authorities have taken up a project to rebuild its sewage collection/treatment system. But we must remind them that having enough sewer lines and pipelines is not enough; those need to be effective as well. But more importantly, the authorities must answer for exploiting the residents in the name of a phantom service and polluting our rivers for so long.

The Mirage of Teesta Treaty



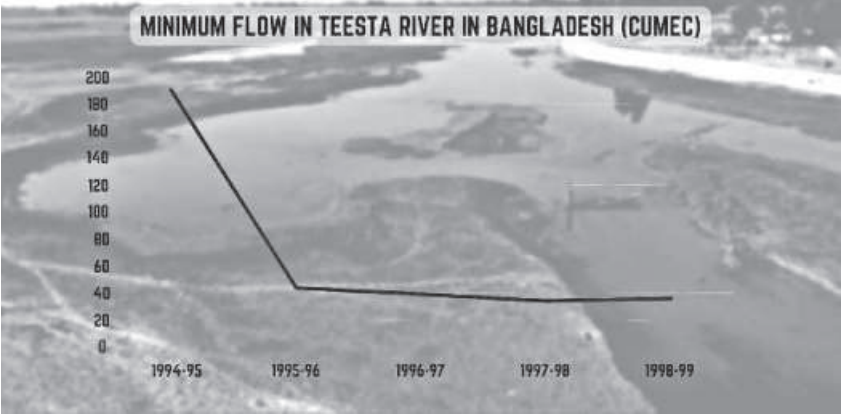
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EVERY time the prime ministers of Bangladesh and India visit each other's country, the issue of the Teesta treaty surfaces in public discussions – at least in Bangladesh. The same has happened during Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ongoing visit to India. Bangladesh's foreign minister has now clearly stated that there is no scope for progress on the Teesta treaty during this bilateral summit. However, what is necessary is to go further

prevents India from accommodating Bangladesh's demands.

Following the construction of Gajoldoba Barrage, the minimum flow of the Teesta River in Bangladesh has precipitously declined from about 200 cumec (cubic metre per second) to below 40 cumec. Furthermore, the Indian authorities are planning to build about 15 more diversionary and impounding structures on the upstream reaches of the Teesta and its tributaries. The river's flow at the



Decline in the flow of the Teesta River in Bangladesh due to India's Gajoldoba Barrage (left), and the Ganges River due to the Farakka Barrage (right).

and make an honest admission that there is no scope for any meaningful Teesta treaty, so far as augmenting the dry season flow of the river into Bangladesh is concerned – neither now, nor in the future – if the country continues its water diplomacy with India within the confines that it has boxed itself into. Such an admission will prevent the people of Bangladesh from raising their expectations during these visits and then feel disappointed when nothing actually materialises. It's necessary for them to understand that the Teesta treaty has now become a mirage, running after which can only lead to frustrations.

There are two reasons why the Teesta water-sharing treaty is now a mirage. The first concerns the centre-state relationship of West Bengal and Delhi. It is nearly impossible for India's central government to sign any meaningful treaty over the stiff objections from the state government of West Bengal. However, the second and more underlying reason is that so much of the Teesta flow is diverted via the Gajoldoba Barrage for irrigation in West Bengal that there is hardly any dry season flow left to be shared with Bangladesh. It's because of the entrenched interests of the irrigators in West Bengal that the state government cannot agree to a greater share of the Teesta for Bangladesh; this, in turn,

Gajoldoba point will, therefore, surely decrease in the future, shrinking further the possibility of dry season flow augmentation in Bangladesh.

This mirage of water-sharing treaties with India applies to the Ganges River too. The 30-year treaty, signed in 1996, is often presented as a success. Unfortunately, while the pre-Farakka dry season volume of the Ganges flow in Bangladesh was more than 2,000 cumec, it decreased to less than 500 cumec after the Farakka Barrage went into operation, and this volume basically remained unchanged after the 1996 treaty. Moreover, the absence of any guarantee clause in this treaty makes Bangladesh's situation more precarious, because India can now let the Ganges flow into Bangladesh to fall below the minimum environmental flow.

The additional problem that Bangladesh is now facing is that the Indian barrages have now become an additional source of severe fluctuations in the river flow, causing horrendous floods at unexpected times of the year. This has been particularly the case with the Teesta Basin, where such sudden onrush of water, let out by Gajoldoba operators by opening all the vents of the barrage, are causing immense miseries to the people of the basin, destroying their crops and washing away their household assets.

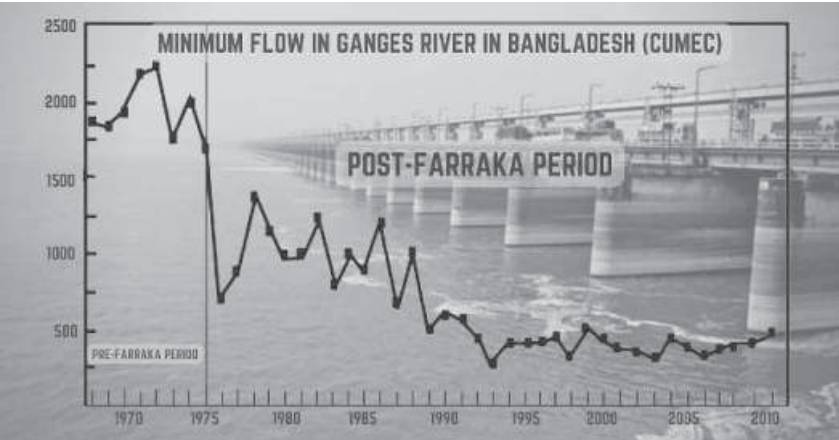
There were several such episodes this year alone.

The drastic reduction of the dry season flow, followed by high volumes in the wet season, is destabilising Bangladesh's rivers, causing harmful changes in their morphology. In the dry season, the river beds desiccate and harden, reducing the bed scouring that previously took place in the wet season. To accommodate the high volumes of the wet season, the rivers therefore erode their banks, with devastating effects on the lives and properties of the people living in the river basins. Consequently, Bangladesh's rivers are becoming shallower and wider.

It's not clear whether the representatives of Bangladesh are conveying properly to their Indian counterparts the multidimensional harmful impacts of India's dams and

rivers. Signing this convention can also make it easier for Bangladesh to use any international opportunity that may arise to promote its cause regarding the shared rivers.

Second, Bangladesh can link the river-sharing issue with the issue of transit, transshipment, port, and other facilities that it has already granted and plans to grant to India to help it accelerate the development of its seven northeastern states. Both India's advantage as the upper riparian country and Bangladesh's advantage as being able to provide India a shorter and more convenient route to reach the Seven Sisters arise from the same historical fact, namely the Radcliffe border. Hence, it makes sense for Bangladesh to propose that the two countries should trade the respective advantages that this border conferred



SOURCE: COURTESY

barrages on Bangladesh. The young ministers who recently returned from attending the Joint River Commission (JRC) meeting held in Delhi after a long hiatus of 12 years couldn't quite reassure the nation that they raised and pressed the right and important issues at this meeting.

It is, therefore, necessary to be aware of the real and unvarnished truth regarding the sharing of common rivers. Once this awareness sinks in, it can prompt Bangladesh to stop running after mirages and instead think about real alternatives that can be pursued to establish the country's rightful claims on the shared rivers.

The first step should be signing the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which upholds many legitimate rights of lower riparian countries. It's true that India wants the negotiations regarding shared rivers to be confined to the bilateral framework. However, signing this convention will allow Bangladesh to refer to and seek backing from this convention even in its bilateral negotiations with India. Bangladesh may urge India and other countries in South Asia to sign this convention, so that all the countries can refer to a common and internationally agreed code of conduct regarding international

to them. Thus, Bangladesh can ask India to restore the full natural flows of the rivers in exchange for granting India the transit, transshipment, port, and other related facilities.

Third, Bangladesh can add its voice to the growing demand inside India for the demolition of the Farakka Barrage. About 50 years of experience has vindicated Kapil Bhattacharya, the chief engineer of West Bengal who had opposed the construction of Farakka and predicted that it would not be able to flush sediment from the Hooghly River and instead would cause flood and erosion in Murshidabad and Bihar. The time has come to undo the damage that Farakka has done to both India and Bangladesh.

Finally, sustainable and wide-ranging cooperation between Bangladesh and India requires the goodwill of the people of the two countries to each other. It cannot be denied that the restoration of full natural flows of the rivers would go a long way in strengthening the goodwill between the two nations. It is, therefore, in India's interest to rethink its river policies towards Bangladesh. Instead of ruthless maximisation of the upper riparian advantage, it should adopt a more enlightened view. Instead of mirages, it should propose real solutions.

Right policies can protect workers in Asia and the Pacific



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MOST of the 2.1-billion-strong workforce in Asia and the Pacific are denied access to decent jobs, healthcare and social protection. But there is an array of policies and tools that governments can use to remedy these deficiencies and ensure that the rights and aspirations of these workers and their families are upheld, and that they remain the engine of economic growth for the region.

A new report titled the "Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: The Workforce We Need" offers tangible solutions to immediately address the alarming trends that both preceded the coronavirus pandemic and were exacerbated by it.

While 243 million new people were pushed into poverty during the pandemic, half of all people in our region had already been surviving without cash, a third without necessary medicine or treatment, and a quarter had been going without enough food to eat. This can not only lower productivity, which has fallen below the global average, but also affect tax revenues and future economic output.

With two-thirds of all workers in the

region being employed informally, often with low wages, in hazardous working conditions and without a contract, half of our workforce is at the brink of poverty. People in our region are also at a higher risk of being pushed into poverty by healthcare expenses than anywhere else in the world, causing inequalities to widen further. With more than half of all people being excluded from social protection, pandemics, disasters, economic downturns, or normal life events such as falling ill, becoming pregnant or getting old often have detrimental impacts on households' well-being and life prospects.

The reality is harsh; our workers are generally ill-equipped to unlock new opportunities, fulfil life aspirations for themselves and their families, but also to face ongoing challenges emanating from megatrends of climate change, ageing societies and digitalisation.

Climate-induced natural disasters cause businesses to relocate and jobs to disappear, disproportionately affecting rural communities. Digital technologies are bringing disruptive change to the world of work and the digital gap is intensifying inequalities

in opportunities, income and wealth. Population ageing means that the number of older people will double by 2050, making policies to support active and healthy ageing ever more urgent.

None of these vulnerabilities is inevitable. With the right policies, our region's workforce can become more productive, healthier and protected.

First, active labour market policies, through life-long learning and skills development, can support a green and just transition into decent employment and improve access to basic opportunities and adequate standards of living. Harnessing synergies between active labour market policies and social protection can help workers upgrade their skills and transition into decent employment, while smoothing consumption and avoiding negative coping strategies during spells of unemployment or other shocks.

Second, extending social health protection to all can significantly improve workers' health, income security and productivity. Covid-19 demonstrated the weakness of a status quo in which 60 percent of our workers finance their own healthcare and receive no sickness benefits. A focus on primary healthcare as well as curative health protection is needed as well, to support healthy and active ageing. People who are chronically ill or live with a disability must be included in healthcare strategies. Given the large informal economy across the region, extending social health protection is the key policy instrument for achieving universal health coverage in our region.

Third, building on the ESCAP Social Protection Simulator, a basic package of universal child, old age and disability social protection schemes, set at global average benefit levels, would slash poverty in our region by half. Our analysis also shows that social protection helps increase access to opportunities, particularly for furthest behind groups. This income security would improve the workforce's resilience. Extending social protection to all means increasing public spending by between two and six percent of GDP, an investment well worth its cost. The Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific can guide action towards broadening social protection coverage.

With this information at hand, there is a long overdue need for action. The policy recommendations set out in the Social Outlook are a priority for most countries in the region. These require bold but necessary reforms. For most countries, these reforms are affordable but may require a reprioritisation of existing expenditures and tax, supported by tax reform. Decent employment for all and an expansion of social protection and healthcare should form the foundations of a strong social contract between the state and its citizens. One where mutual roles and responsibilities are clear and where our workforce is given the security to fulfil their potential and be the force for achieving the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific.