

## Acute gas crisis is hurting everyone

### Govt must take prudent steps to resolve supply problems

There is an element of irony in the public assessment of the ongoing gas crisis – that it has reached a “boiling point,” given that we have hardly enough gas to burn or boil. The crisis, as per a report by this newspaper, has been affecting domestic and commercial consumers equally. And despite assurances to the contrary, it's evident that a drastic improvement in the situation is unlikely to happen anytime soon. This means people will have to go on to make painful compromises indefinitely.

The crisis has been attributed to a considerable shortfall in gas supply – claimed to be 10 percent – caused by the government's decision to stop purchasing liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the international spot market in July. Its effect has been felt across the board: while households had to grapple with arbitrary and unscheduled gas rationing – unlike the more predictable load-shedding – the same in industries requiring gas to run their boilers and burners saw a significant fall in production. According to the Bangladesh Ceramic Manufacturers & Exporters Association, the ceramic industry alone has seen a 10 to 30 percent drop in production due to the ongoing crisis. Industry insiders say this has hurt their business prospects, including cancellation of orders from foreign buyers.

At the CNG filling stations, there has been a five-hour daily shutdown along with insufficient gas pressure during active hours, an affliction shared by households and industries as well. To top it all off, the power sector, which consumes 42 percent of the total gas supply, had to reduce electricity generation at around 30 gas-fired plants, leading to over six hours of load-shedding a day. These problems, interlinked and mutually exacerbating as they are, have only compounded suffering. The extent of suffering becomes clear from the remark of Jummatul Bida, a resident in Dhaka's Gandaria area, who told this newspaper, “For the last two months, we haven't got any gas from 8am till 7pm... If I can't get up very early in the morning, we either have to starve or buy food from restaurants.”

Clearly, the government is at a critical juncture, unable to affect the outcome of global events pushing up gas prices. But at the same time, and rather inexplicably, it is unwilling to adapt itself to better cushion external shocks. These external shocks, in the form of price volatility and supply disruptions in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war, would have been more manageable, had the government diversified its sources of energy or, better yet, not been so heavily reliant on gas imports.

The government has long rubbished calls for further exploring and extracting our own gas reserves. It has allowed a quick-fix mentality and collusive deals to compromise our energy security. This cannot happen any longer. We urge the government to take urgent steps to mitigate people's suffering. The acute gas and electricity crises must have an expiration date. The authorities should immediately engage with experts to find durable and long-term solutions to these problems.

## An outrageous project

### Austerity for people, but luxury for govt officials?

The recent decision to build “luxurious residences” at the cost of Tk 42.85 crore for the cabinet and principal secretaries by the housing and public works ministry is one of the most outrageous decisions that has been taken by this government in recent times – and that is saying a lot. At a time when government high-ups, including the prime minister herself, have been repeatedly telling the public to practise austerity, under what justification did the government undertake such a project? Why should the public be suffering under strict austerity measures, while government high-ups enjoy such luxury? Such an atrociously expensive project funded by the taxpayers' money makes a mockery of the so-called austerity measures.

Project documents indicate that the estimated cost of the two three-storey buildings is Tk 18.88 crore. Another Tk 22.5 crore will be spent on the interior and exterior designs and a service building. Each of the three-storey buildings will be built on 18,000 square feet, and will have two swimming pools, which would cost another estimated Tk 5.1 crore. When half of Dhaka city does not have safe drinking water, why do public servants need such huge swimming pools in their houses? Are we living in a democratic system where you have citizens and public representatives, or are we back to living in feudal times, where you had lords and ladies living in their big mansions, while the peasants and serfs were left to fend for their own safe drinking water? This project makes it look like we are living in the latter system.

We understand that top secretaries should have houses. But why should it cost taxpayers nearly Tk 43 crore? Even if we were living in normal times – and not in a time when there is a severe economic crisis – how can such a project be justified? Are we one of the richest countries in the world that such luxury should be afforded to public servants? We just cannot believe what we are reading and seeing in regard to this proposal. And we really fail to understand the mindset of the people who had the audacity to propose it, let alone those who approved it.

This project, in many ways, reflect the general tendency of the government to waste thousands of crores of taka at a time when the country's economy and the people in general are suffering. While people are being told to swallow the austerity pill, we see no sign of government officials cutting back on their own costs or trying to be more efficient when it comes to completing different government projects using taxpayers' money.

We strongly call on the government to scrap this project, and get rid of such a ludicrous idea altogether.

### NATIONAL ROAD SAFETY DAY 2022

# Road safety law fails to hold the guilty accountable

*After nationwide protests and demands that finally saw the passing of the Road Transport Act four years ago, our roads are hardly any safer. Where exactly is the problem? Two road safety activists talk to The Daily Star.*

Our inability to enforce the Road Transport Act (RTA) properly is one of the reasons why our transport sector is a complete mess right now. The act was passed in parliament in 2018 and became effective in November 2019. Under this law, cases are being filed and people are being fined. However, the progress that we expected after its implementation is yet to happen. We hoped that the law would reduce the anarchy in our transport sector by bringing down the number of road crashes and by holding the transport owners and workers accountable for their unlawful activities – charging exorbitant bus fares, driving without valid driving licences, driving unfit vehicles, etc – but in reality, hardly anything has changed. This is because of the selective use of the law and also because some crucial sections of the law were opposed by the transport owners and workers. Also, although four years have passed since the law was enactment, its rules have not yet been finalised.

Transport owners and workers have proposed to reduce punishment and fines for the offences committed by them. The proposed amendment is now with the law ministry for perusal. The recommendations made by transport sector lobbyists include reducing fines for overcharging passengers, reducing punishment for killing someone by reckless driving, scrapping punishment for giving fitness certificates to unfit vehicles, etc.

These proposed amendments, if approved and implemented, will only make the situation of our roads worse. The changes will benefit the transport owners and workers, not the general people. All of these decisions are taken by transport owners and workers and the relevant government agencies; common people do not have any say in the process. Even the organisations and those of us who work for passengers' rights are never invited to any of these discussions.

Another major problem is that the law is not being applied equally. While the powerful people, including politicians, almost always get away with violating traffic rules, it is the general people who are being fined for not abiding by them.

Due to all these reasons, we are not



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

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getting the desired benefits of the law. In order to bring back some order to our roads and reduce the number of road crashes, the RTA must be fully enforced. We also need expert manpower to conduct research on the critical issues our transport sector has been facing. Currently, there is no expert in the road transport ministry or the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), who finalise and implement all the decisions.

There are also other areas where improvement is necessary. Currently, the way the BRTA conducts driving tests to issue driving licences is not the standard



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practice worldwide. In the BRTA offices, around 500 candidates are tested in two hours in a day. But in other countries of the world, one driver is tested by one inspector for at least a week. So, I personally do not see any difference between those who have a driving licence and those who do not in Bangladesh.

I think proper training institutes should be set up by the government, maintaining international standards. Likewise, the private training centres require government sponsorship, monitoring and standardisation. If we can produce skilled drivers, road crashes will be reduced significantly in our country.

During the road safety movement in 2018, I was a student of Chattogram Cantonment Public College. At that time, we said the incidents – or accidents, as many would call them – that took place on our roads due to the flaws in the country's systems were never accidents in the first place.

The truth is, it is a miracle that someone is able to survive the road system that exists in Bangladesh on a daily basis. Naturally, we want this state of affairs to change. To this end, we presented a nine-point demand, and we set an example for the state and the public as to how discipline can be brought back

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to our roads. After that, the Road Transport Act was hurriedly passed to appease us. But that act only increased the level of punishment, and it made some bailable crimes non-bailable. The state knew full well that if they increased the level of punishment, there would be pushback from transport workers, which would bring us all back to square one. In the end, after amending 29 sections, what remains of the law is almost the same as what already existed before all this. We made the point right after the RTA was passed that simply increasing punishments and fines wouldn't bring about any change. If we want real change, we need to find

out exactly where the flaws in the system exist, and then try to fix them.

If someone drives without a licence, or if an unskilled driver is issued a licence, who should be held accountable for that? Can the administration or the state escape their role in this? The only reason an unskilled driver can get a licence is because brokers at the BRTA illegally facilitate this. When this driver murders someone on the street, the BRTA should be held accountable for this, and in turn, the state. The passenger, the driver or the pedestrians who lose their lives, they are all victims of this system.

It's often said that transportation workers drive rashly, and the events of July 29, 2018 was also due to reckless driving and a race between

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two buses. If we try to understand why this competition between bus services exists, we must look at how the transportation business works in this country. A bus driver, at the end of the day, must give the owner of the bus a fixed amount of money. If they can't earn this amount, they make no money for that day; they can't put food on the table at home. Oftentimes, to make sure that this fixed amount of money is made, reckless driving is the only option.

The system is turning these drivers into murderers. We keep pointing our fingers at the drivers, but we are not addressing the system.

Recently, students in Gazipur protested against the bus company “Taqua,” claiming its buses regularly run over students and transport workers. It should be noted that Taqua buses have no route permits whatsoever, and even the BRTC buses cannot run on its routes. The question is: how can this bus company be so powerful that it doesn't even allow state-run buses to run on the streets?

# Is space the final frontier of superpower rivalry?



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The Hollywood film *The Martian* is an inspiring story of how collaboration in space can help everyone. A crewed mission to Mars leaves the planet in a hurry to avoid an imminent storm, mistakenly leaving behind one of their astronauts Mark Watney. Back on Earth, mission control considers him dead, only to find that Watney has survived by sheer ingenuity. NASA plans to detour another mission to rescue Watney. But it is too risky, and time is running out. The Chinese National Space Administration (CNSA) scientists are also watching the situation. Their till then classified booster rocket can help bring Watney back, and they offer to do so. After a highly complex manoeuvre and intense happy-ending drama à la Hollywood, Watney returns.

But such collaborations between the two space powers can happen only in movies, because Americans enacted a law in 2011 to stop just that. Republican Congressman Frank Wolf introduced a bill to bar NASA and all other American agencies from working with Chinese organisations. The bill, known as the Wolf Amendment, practically blocks all avenues of collaboration between the two most active space players. The battle for economic, technological, and geopolitical superiority has thus

gone to space. In the International Space Station (ISS), Washington has deliberately excluded Beijing where hundreds of astronauts from 19 nations including Moscow have participated.

However, instead of stalling, such exclusions have only persuaded Beijing to build its own space station, the Tiangong, which is scheduled for completion this year. The plan for ISS is decommissioning in 2024, and if the US and its partners do not extend its life, Tiangong may become the only crewed outpost in orbit. China has invited all nations to join it, but the Wolf Amendment will bar NASA astronauts from doing so, even if they want to.

China is a late entrant in the space race. It put the first satellite into orbit in 1970, after which there wasn't much progress for a long time. It has, however, caught up and in the past 10 years, launched more than 200 crewed and uncrewed spaceships. In December 2020, it sent an uncrewed mission, Chang'e 5, to the Moon to collect rock samples from a site not visited by any other nation before. China's progress in space has so far been stunning, which General John Raymond, chief of space operations of the US Space Force, has summarised

as “from zero to 60 really quick.” China also completed its own satellite navigation system BeiDou in 2020, offering complete global navigation service like America's GPS, Europe's Galileo, and Russia's GNSS. On January 2, 2019, China landed a space probe on the dark side of the Moon, which no other nation has done yet. In July, China's first successful interplanetary mission completed mapping the Red Planet a little over a year after its arrival.

China's fast-progressing space technology has raised concerns that it can be used as a weapon against enemy satellites. Space technology is inherently dual-purpose and can power low-end reversible jammers, direct energy weapons such as lasers, and direct-ascent kinetic missiles which can destroy any satellite in orbit. Judging from the developments so far, it is quite likely that China already owns such weapons. Fuelling such speculations further, China destroyed a defunct weather satellite with a missile in 2007, producing a large amount of space debris. Last year, its researchers successfully tested an anti-satellite robotic device, which can produce a time-controlled, steady explosion with little or no debris.

All these point to how China's space technology is leapfrogging and may soon catch up with the Americans, though not all experts agree. Until now, the US is ahead of China in the space race and is likely to remain so in the coming years. Despite China sending more rockets in 2021, America's total number of satellites and payload capacities in

orbit far exceeds those of China. The other advantage Washington enjoys over Beijing is the active role played by a thriving commercial space industry, such as SpaceX and Blue Origin (SpaceX provides internet to Ukraine's forces and Iranian protesters).

These facts are, however, of little comfort to Washington as it, along with its allies, is trying to stall or at least slow down Beijing's progress in every possible way. In 2020, SSC Space Australia (a subsidiary of Swedish Space Corporation) declared that it wouldn't extend the contract for China to use its space tracking station in Western Australia. Beijing, however, has already made alternative arrangements with another such station in Kiribati.

The most recent battle in the space war is being fought on the Moon, as both nations plan to set up lunar bases for long-term settlements and resource exploitation. In August, NASA's Artemis 3 and CNSA's Chang'e 7 missions released their lists of potential landing sites only to find that some of them overlap. How they come to an agreement on this issue is yet to be seen.

Will it be possible for Washington to stall Beijing's progress in space technology? Is cooperation a more pragmatic choice than competition? Will Washington remove the legal bars that prevent cooperation? Given the successive American administrations' policies towards China (Obama's China containment policy, Trump's trade war, and Biden's chip war), that seems unlikely at present. Meanwhile, China continues its space odyssey as Tiangong's final module is ready to blast off.