

## No more chaotic urban development

### City planners must address rising challenges and expectations

Last week, the High Court issued a contempt of court rule against five government officials for not complying with its directive to evict illegal structures from Cox's Bazar sea beach – a directive issued 11 years ago. Alongside the Cox's Bazar deputy commissioner, one of the officials against whom the rule was issued included a former chairman of the Cox's Bazar Development Authority (DA), which was set up in 2016 to transform Cox's Bazar into a modern and planned city and which, six years down the line, has yet to come up with any master plan for doing so.

In fact, according to locals, the only thing the Cox's Bazar DA has done in this long period is construct its own building, put up street lights, preserve three water bodies and build four sculptures in public spaces. However, the Cox's Bazar DA is not the only one of its kind to fail in upholding its wider mandate of urban planning.

The Gazipur Development Authority, for example, has not even managed to recruit any manpower or appoint a chairman, even though it technically began operations two years ago. The situation is the same with the Khulna Development Authority. In Dhaka, time and again, we have seen buildings being constructed without permission from Rajuk or, worse, Rajuk officials themselves getting mired in allegations of corruption.

Yet, despite the unfit and often superfluous nature of existing urban development authorities – and accusations that they are not being able to systematically contribute to the planned development of the areas under their purview – the government is reportedly going ahead with a decision to establish five more development authorities in Sylhet, Payra, Rangpur, Barishal and Mymensingh.

While we understand the need to have bodies in charge of planning the development of cities as densely populated as ours, we are confused as to why these bodies are being set up without much thought being given to making them operational or effective. The lack of manpower, and of cooperation from other government departments, have been cited as main reasons blocking certain development authorities from becoming functional. In that case, why are these issues not being dealt with first, instead of wasting precious resources on setting up more bodies that run the risk of being only for show?

We cannot stress enough on the role that an effective development authority can play in creating a liveable city. The ongoing discussions around the new Detailed Area Plan (DAP) for Dhaka show just how important such initiatives are for the long-term welfare of city-dwellers. It is not only about economic development, but about ensuring a certain quality of life for the inhabitants of a city encompassing economy, public infrastructure, environment, social justice, and public health. We need development authorities that can properly address all these concerns, not bodies that end up being ornamental at best, and corrupt and incompetent at worst.

## Another river on its way out

### Habiganj authorities must take urgent steps to save Khowai River

It's quite alarming that even after so many protests, pledges and a historic High Court verdict declaring rivers as "living entities", little is being done to stop ongoing onslaughts on our rivers by encroachers and polluters. One such river, which has been dying slowly for nearly a decade, is the Old Khowai that flows through Habiganj, Sylhet. It was once 250 to 300 feet wide, and a lifeline for the district. But now, it has narrowed down to 20 feet in some places, as over 2,000 illegal establishments by both individuals and public authorities tower over it. Besides, the incessant dumping of waste has left little room for the river to breathe, let alone provide livelihood to fishermen.

According to locals, government initiatives including recent re-dredging and rehabilitation projects undertaken to restore Old Khowai's navigability have failed completely. Unfortunately, many rivers across the country are more or less suffering the same fate. In the absence of effective interventions, they are being encroached and polluted, many losing their navigability and turning into mere canals in the end.

For Khowai, this is especially unfortunate because promising initiatives had been taken to revive it. In 2019, the Water Development Board (WDB) undertook an initiative worth about Tk 2,000 crore, called the "Khowai River System Development Project," to restore its normal flow. As part of the project, 600 structures had been identified as illegal, and 500 of them were demolished with the help of the district administration. But all this came to naught when the project was abandoned midway, and old encroachers returned like nothing had happened while new structures were built on the banks and dried-up sections of the river. What's more frustrating is the involvement of public authorities in the act of encroachment. Buildings set up illegally on its banks include the Habiganj District Council office, a multi-storied general hospital, the District and Town Freedom Fighters' Sangshad, a government library, as well as establishments of other government and non-government institutions.

It is no surprise that locals now see no hope in the occasional eviction drives conducted by the authorities, given that so many government offices themselves have encroached on the river's land and are contributing to its destruction. The question is, why is the National River Protection Commission doing nothing about it even after a HC directive that gave it the power to do whatever is necessary to protect rivers? What are other relevant departments doing, anyway?

We urge the authorities to take urgent and meaningful action to stop the gradual killing of rivers by encroachers and polluters. Too many life-giving rivers have already suffered irreparable harm because of their inaction or, worse, participation in wilful destruction of rivers. This cannot go on any longer. They must ensure our rivers can live and breathe again like before.

# If only irony could pay bills...



#### THE SOUND & THE FURY

Sushmita S Preetha  
is op-ed editor at The Daily Star.

SUSHMITA S PREETHA

There are two kinds of numbers that I find difficult to digest these days. The more I try to swallow the one, the more unpalatable the other becomes.

On the one hand, there are those numbers that are burning a literal hole in your pocket – the rising cost of everything, from every essential item in the market, to the utilities, to transport fares, to healthcare, to that cup of tea and *bonruti* by the roadside stall. Just when you think life can't possibly get any worse, lo and behold, prices go up further, taunting you ever so more. The number of things that are left out of the weekly grocery list seems to increase by the week, as does rationing of what one does end up buying after pinching the pennies. It is redundant at this point to have to cite the prices to prove my point, but for the benefit of those who have the privilege to remain oblivious, here's a sneak peek: the price of unpackaged wheat has increased by a whopping 96 percent over the last two years; the price of soybean oil by 88 percent; *masoor dal* by 73 percent; broiler chicken by 64 percent; and unprocessed rice by 53 percent. Transport costs have gone up by more than 50 percent in the past year alone.

**The stories of desperation are everywhere, but they don't seem to penetrate the diesel-run, air-conditioned, lavish crore-taka duplexes of the policymakers and their ever-growing list of loyal cronies living off of public misery.**

If I, with a somewhat well-paying job (what's a well-paying job in journalism, anyway?) – with the additional income of my partner to supplement our ever-escalating household expenditure – am having to cut down on the number of eggs or chicken consumed during the week, how are those living on minimum wages or below even surviving? The minimum wage for garment workers, which at Tk 8,000 is grievously insufficient to begin with, cannot even buy half of what was possible when it was first declared in 2018. Even if a garment worker works inhumane hours of overtime, she can't feed her family three full meals on a single income after rent



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

and utilities are deducted, without resorting to loans – which she can't afford to pay the next month. The CNG autorickshaw driver says he now owes three different microcredit institutions weekly instalments, but no way of making the payments. The cleaner hasn't seen a gynaecologist in months despite an excruciating pain in her lower abdomen, because she can't afford the treatment. The elderly guard, on the verge of retirement, is seeing the value of his life savings deplete by the day, and has taken his youngest daughter out of school to be married off any day now. As for those without a job or a regular income? They may be starving, but at least they are starving as the citizens of a country that can boast 7.2 percent economic growth and a per capita income of USD 2,824.

According to a recent survey by the World Food Programme (WFP), 68 percent of people in Bangladesh are struggling to buy food, while 64 percent said they had to take a loan, 29 percent said they had to resort to their savings, and 10 percent said they spent all their savings simply to buy food in the month of August. The stories of desperation are everywhere, but they don't seem to penetrate the diesel-run, air-conditioned, lavish crore-taka duplexes of the policymakers and their ever-growing list of loyal cronies living

estimate, without anyone having to answer for the cost overruns. We're not just talking crores; we're talking thousands and thousands of crores of taka, for projects undertaken without public consent or participation, a disturbing number of whom are found "unfeasible" after years of construction have already taken place. Though we were promised "austerity" on the government's end, we continue to see these impudent revisions haunt us in return for little to no concrete improvement to our lives.

Meanwhile, luxury apartment buildings for the cabinet secretary and the principal secretary to the prime minister are being constructed at a cost of about Tk 43 crore, and the Election Commission is proposing to spend TK 8,711 crore to procure 200,000 electronic voting machines (EVMs) without so much as a feasibility study or verification of market prices (to say nothing of widespread concerns that EVMs can be easily manipulated). Ironically enough, at the same time, allowances for elderly and widows and women abandoned by their husbands – some of the most marginalised populations in the country – have reportedly been suspended due to a lack of allocation for these programmes. When food inflation is the highest in a decade and large

cyclone, calculates whether taking his own life will free or further burden his family, businessmen with the right contacts get away with defaulting loans of crores of taka – over Tk 1 lakh crore, if anyone's even counting anymore.

As the number of hours spent without electricity continues to increase, the crores that the government has spent in capacity charge payments to private power plants (an unimaginable Tk 35,046 crore to 55 companies over two years) and in importing LNG at exorbitant prices, instead of exploring natural gas reserves in the country, feel even more suffocating, the unbearable heat and humidity notwithstanding.

As the number of laws and rules restricting our thought and opinion – as well as cases against journalists and dissenters – increase with horrifying frequency, the number of times we dare to defy the government or express our criticism of its unjustified, illogical policies – beyond sanitised, perfunctory op-eds such as this – dwindle, until all that's left is undigested anger ready to explode.

If only irony could pay bills, we'd all be sipping pina colada (virgin, of course) in the Maldives, instead of having to cut down on the most basic of luxuries we can afford ourselves – a sugary cup of *dudh cha*.

# Road safety is a public health issue

## We must treat it as such

**Mohammad Khalaf**  
is a doctoral candidate in the global health programme at Milken Institute School of Public Health, George Washington University.

**Fazlur Rahman**  
is executive director at the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB).

**Adnan A Hyder**  
is director of the Center on Commercial Determinants of Health and professor of global health at Milken Institute School of Public Health, George Washington University.

**MOHAMMAD KHALAF, FAZLUR RAHMAN and ADNAN HYDER**

In the month following the United Nations' High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on Global Road Safety this summer, Bangladesh experienced one of its deadliest months on the road. Nearly 400 people were killed and almost twice that many injured in more than 300 road crashes during the Eid-ul-Azha holidays. That's the highest number of road deaths during the holiday festival since the country started collecting data in 2016.

Road traffic injuries (RTIs) are now the eighth leading cause of death worldwide, amounting to 1.35 million deaths and 50 million injuries each year. In Bangladesh, RTIs are among the leading causes of death and disability, killing approximately 25,000 people in 2016 and leaving 2.4 percent of road crash victims with a permanent disability, according to the Global Status Report on Road Safety.

In addition to their impact on public health and safety, RTIs are a major economic burden, costing the country approximately Tk 4,500

crore (USD 76 million) and accounting for approximately 1.5 percent of Bangladesh's GDP annually.

At its high-level meeting, the UN declared a second Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021-2030 to reach its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of a 50 percent reduction in RTIs and deaths worldwide. Bangladesh set similarly ambitious goals of reducing road traffic deaths and injuries by 20-25 percent by 2024 and 50 percent by 2030.

Yet, RTIs continue to climb in Bangladesh and around the world, though not for a lack of awareness.

The UN's first Decade of Action from 2011-2020 helped raise global awareness around the issue of road safety. In Bangladesh, a series of public protests in 2018 following the deaths of two students killed by a bus led to some modest improvements in how the country sought to address the epidemic of traffic injuries and deaths.

Yet, in Bangladesh and beyond, the decade was unable to decrease the number of RTIs, which is why we now find ourselves renewing efforts to solve this problem. Declaring action will not be enough this time; taking action is what we need now.

What's important to understand about this crisis is that nearly all of traffic-related injuries and deaths are preventable and predictable. But in order to prevent them, countries must prioritise road safety and implement evidence-based, systematic-level interventions that can save hundreds of thousands of lives.

The good news is we already know a

great deal about what works.

In a series of papers published in *The Lancet*, one of us, together with colleagues, examined four risk factors – lack of helmet use, lack of seatbelt use, speeding, and drunk driving – that dramatically increase road fatalities. We found that if we implemented road safety interventions around these four key risks, up to 540,000 lives could be saved globally.

We also showed that improving emergency response and trauma care in low- and middle-income countries could save approximately 200,000 lives each year. In Bangladesh, RTIs are a major cause of admissions at primary- and secondary-level hospitals, accounting for about one in five injury-related admissions.

Though we have a growing body of evidence, fatalities continue to rise in lower-income countries while progress on road safety has slowed in higher-income countries. Why? Many countries and cultures remain in thrall to the automobile. As public health practitioners, we study how industry activities harm public health – what we call commercial determinants of health.

A vehicle-centric environment affects everything from our infrastructure choices and vehicle design to how we perceive so-called road traffic "accidents." Even the language we use to describe crashes is problematic. Calling something an "accident" connotes a blameless word that fails to account for predictable risks and generations of vehicle-centric policy decisions and design.