

## Result, not rhetoric, is key for road safety

### New RTA rules can improve safety if properly enforced

It's heartening to know the "rules" of the Road Transport Act have finally been formulated, more than four years after the act was passed into law. According to the rules, the family of a victim killed in a road crash due to reckless or negligent driving will get at least Tk 5 lakh in compensation. Victims losing an organ or suffering other life-changing injuries will get Tk 3 lakh each, while those who are likely to recover from injuries will get Tk 1 lakh. If properly implemented, these rules, among others, will hopefully bring some discipline in a sector where powerful transport associations use political connections and loopholes in the system to remain unaccountable.

But first, we must talk about the long delay in formulating these rules – which stands in marked contrast to the hurried enactment of the law in 2018, under pressure from students demonstrating for safer roads. Several sections of the law, including the one related to compensation, could not be enforced in the absence of the rules. The last four years of inaction have shown that, if given the chance, the state would rather delay redressal than hold those responsible to account. Its misguided preference for rhetoric over results, and for cosmetic changes over long-term reforms, has cost us dearly. The rules, and their desired impacts, must be seen in light of that experience.

As per the 2018 act, the government will create a fund for compensating and treating road crash victims; it will be created with a one-time or annual "contribution" from vehicle owners. While the rules do not specify how much money the government itself will put into the fund, they, however, mention how much a vehicle owner will have to pay, which varies depending on the type of vehicle. The process through which compensation claims will be settled have also been laid out.

All this is good news, but there are questions about some of the provisions. For example, the process of getting compensation or settling claims seems very bureaucratic, meaning additional suffering for bereaved families struggling to cope with their loss. One can also question the relatively small compensation package fixed, while the fees of many services provided by the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority were raised – which, for a service-oriented public institution, makes no sense. Until now, families of victims could file writ petitions with the High Court seeking compensation, which happened rarely. Now, those seeking compensation will have to apply to a 12 member trustee board within a month of a road crash. But what will happen to the families of victims who lost their life or limbs before the rules were approved? Can they claim compensation, too?

Clearly, these issues need to be sorted as soon as possible. But most importantly, the authorities must ensure proper enforcement of these rules. Enforcing the rules will be the biggest challenge, one that the authorities must show their sincerity to overcome. Thousands of people are dying in road crashes every year. The government must ensure these rules contribute to creating an environment where this can be prevented.

## Don't let dengue ravage us again

### Authorities must not repeat last year's botched response

Despite all warnings about dengue, 2022 saw the highest annual death toll – at least 281 – and the second-highest cases ever recorded in Bangladesh (with 62,382 hospitalisations). Of the patients, at least 27 died and 5,024 were hospitalised in December alone. Such high numbers had never been recorded since the first dengue outbreak in 2000. What's worse, this is happening at a time when, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), the total number of dengue cases has been decreasing globally.

Therefore, the only logical explanation for why Bangladesh suffered so greatly is our woeful lack of preparation. And it's completely unacceptable, more so given that dengue is a preventable disease, and its trajectory is, and has been, totally predictable.

In Bangladesh, dengue cases usually start to surge around June-July every year, and we have decades of experience in dealing with such surges now. Yet, the fact that Bangladesh experienced huge numbers of casualties last year illustrate that the health authorities, as well as the city corporations, have failed to take timely actions. This is something that experts have been warning about for long. Despite our history of dealing with dengue, why is that when the season comes around, we see the authorities moving from pillar to post to handle it? The authorities only start to take action once people start losing their lives, or huge numbers of them begin to get hospitalised. What is the reason for such late responses?

The number of lives being lost as a result of this is extremely worrying. A large portion of those who died could have been saved if timely action was taken. Therefore, the high number of deaths from dengue is a social and institutional failure on our part. Throughout the world, dengue has decreased because of preventive actions. Every society, when they are attacked by such viruses, becomes equipped to handle them within years. Why haven't we?

According to experts, the changing nature of urbanisation – increased construction of high rise buildings, for example – is one of the biggest reasons for the high number of dengue cases in Bangladesh. The near-ubiquitous presence of stagnant water in the open, and in the basements of under-construction buildings, provides the perfect breeding ground for Aedes mosquitoes. Moreover, infrastructure projects are underway round the year, with mosquitoes taking refuge at these sites to breed. Experts have often identified the prime locations where mosquitoes breed the most; despite that, the authorities cannot conduct early drives to destroy them.

It is time for the authorities to take responsibility for the dengue-related deaths. With another year starting, we urge them to not repeat the same mistake. We urge them to take appropriate measures, including addressing harmful social and institutional practices, before the dengue season starts. Should the same tragic drama unfold again this year, the government must hold the city authorities and other concerned bodies directly responsible, and take stern action against them.

# 2022: The year the rich won, and the public lost



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The year 2022 brought with it some big challenges for the majority of people in Bangladesh. The cost of living increased, and prices of oil, gas and electricity went up. Each price increase was like an attack on the public, and led to the widespread rise in the price of all sorts of goods.

The war in Ukraine has definitely had an impact on energy prices. Ever since the conflict began in February, the government has pointed to it as the reason behind much of what has happened, and has used the increase of global oil prices as pretext to increase the price at home. But closer inspection tells us that the price of oil has been quite low in the international market since 2014, and the government made a profit of almost Tk 48,000 crore until February, 2022. On the other hand, the losses incurred from the recent rise in prices was Tk 8,000 crore, so the government could have easily offset the two. Instead, it increased prices. And at the end of the year, when oil prices went down again on the international market, the government made the choice to not lower local prices.

Similar to the language used by the World Bank, whenever the government wants to increase the price of oil, the word they use is "consistency." In that case, when prices go up internationally, it can go up locally, but when prices goes down internationally, the same

**On exports, with a dollar fetching Tk 105 instead of Tk 85, export earnings have gone up by Tk 90,000 crore without any other changes, simply because of dollar prices. But workers are not receiving any share of the profits, as their real income shrinks and the real income of the owner class goes up.**

should happen on the local level too. But the authorities are only consistent in increasing the price, not lowering it.

Towards the end of the year, we saw that the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC), which used to hold public hearings to set the prices of electricity and gas, was set aside to put into effect a new law that allows the government to raise prices at any time. On the other hand, it has been decided that oil will be imported through the private sector as well. So it's not just that the price has been raised; everything else has gone against the interests of the public and against keeping the economy productive.

The rise in oil prices has led to the rise in prices of everyday goods. The scarcity of liquefied natural gas (LNG), which the government imports from abroad, also increased the cost of electricity production. Coupled with rising oil prices, this led to the return of load-shedding in Bangladesh, that too only a few months after celebrating becoming self-sufficient in electricity. The government says there was nothing it could do with regard to the inflation of LNG and oil prices, but a government being helpless is not acceptable, especially since this situation wasn't unavoidable.

If gas exploration was done properly, if national production capabilities were increased, and if enough heed was paid towards renewable energy sources, then an increase in global oil prices wouldn't have been a problem for us. But instead of choosing these options, the government chose to import LNG and oil, and take on import- and loan-oriented projects.

This reliance on foreign loans played a massive role in the previous year. Compared to 2014-15, the size of foreign loans was 20 times more – almost Tk 100,000 crore. Foreign loans in the private sector is also up to almost USD 17 billion now. This burden has led to a rising pressure for loan repayments, and the quick depletion of foreign currency reserves, forcing

choice. These valuable hours could've been spent working and earning an income, but they are still forced to take that time and queue for hours, and even then sometimes, they can't get access to food. Men, women, old and young alike, have all had to endure this cruel experience.

Despite this, the demand for universal rationing does not have enough

as loan defaulters.

Another way wealth was accumulated was through rental and quick rental power plants. Eleven groups, since 2014, have made Tk 60,000 crore without producing any electricity at all through contracts that were designed specifically for this end. These practices intensified last year, leading to a centralisation of wealth,



VISUAL: BIPILOB CHAKROBORTY

the government to seek a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, the loan amount – around USD 4 to 4.5 billion – isn't astronomical; Bangladesh makes more than that in two months with remittances.

So, while the IMF loan isn't that significant in terms of size, the reason the government was eager to take it is because it makes them more eligible for international loans. But the pressure to repay loans will continue to increase over the next couple of years, which could spell trouble for Bangladesh if remittance and export earnings don't also increase accordingly.

Meanwhile, the value of the taka has diminished. A US dollar that used

momentum and the government did not seem remotely concerned, even though in 2022, we clearly saw the burning need for a universal rationing system, something that is quite widespread in India. The rise in the prices of goods has led to many people suffering from a silent famine. Surveys have shown that around 60-70 percent of people are either skipping at least one meal every day, or they are consuming food that is not up to the mark in terms of nutritional qualities.

In spite of these enormous economic pressures, the government seemed more preoccupied with using the police, or Chhatra and Jubo League, in asserting its dominance over political

and the laundering of this wealth went hand in hand with it as well. Besides, in 2022, we witnessed the government provide more and more benefits to loan defaulters in the banking sector.

How were these collusive contracts allowed to be set up? The fuel and power sector is already above the law; the rules are not followed in this sector and to make sure these practices don't face legal challenges, the government passed an impunity law in 2010. This has ensured that contracts are signed without tenders, without the need to go to court. Alongside local companies, many Indian companies (including Adani) are also receiving extra benefits in the forms of contracts to import oil and electricity. As a result, a big portion of whatever wealth is being created is being funnelled into the hands of these local and foreign companies.

The Padma Bridge was inaugurated last year. And in the same year, we saw three times the amount of money needed to build Padma Bridge (almost Tk 90,000 crore) given to some groups just to have idle power plants. One company took loans from various banks worth the same amount of money, and then defaulted on it.

Because of the centralisation of this massive amount of wealth in the hands of a select few, the education and health sectors have been on the decline this year. In the health sector, we have seen buildings being constructed and equipment being bought, but they are not being put to use. Right now, development has two streams, construction and purchase. These are the two ways development is materialising, regardless of whether it is necessary or not.

Right at the beginning of 2022, we saw protests against certain VCs in universities. Development projects in some universities have also been mired in corruption allegations. Yet, no resolution has been reached. In fact, the government's stance on these issues became clear last year. No matter the allegation, the government's first response is to deny the existence of the problem. Instead, the authorities have provided benefits to loan defaulters, shielded money launderers, and patronised land grabbing, hill grabbing and forest-grabbing in different ways.

Last year, the excitement of the Bangladeshi people surrounding the FIFA World Cup also reminded us that playgrounds in this country are being taken over one by one. In sports, in cultural activities, in everyday life, in education and in health, even after 51 years of independence, we are still going back on the promises of the Liberation War.

Transcribed and translated by Azmin Azran.