

## Highway accident or murder?

A crash that exposes all the problems with our road transport system

The horrific crash that killed 19 people on the Dhaka-Bhanga expressway on Sunday highlights nearly all the problems with our road transport system. Firstly, the bus which smashed through a highway fence and plunged into a ditch should never have been on the road in the first place. Having been involved in another serious accident only four months ago – which killed three people and injured 15 others – the bus had its registration and route permit suspended by the authorities. Its fitness permit also expired on January 18. Yet, the owner of the vehicle kept it running. All this exposes the serious lack of enforcement of rules by the relevant government agencies, including the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and the highway police.

BRTA authorities have reportedly said that they do not have the manpower to check whether all vehicles plying on the roads have proper documentations. Such excuses to escape responsibility for tragic consequences seem to have become the norm among government officials and agencies, but at what cost? The number of lives that continue to be lost as a result of unfit vehicles or drivers keeps piling up. Who will answer for them? As one expert has said, the highway police should be well aware of the fact that early mornings are risky hours and, therefore, should strengthen monitoring at that time. But such steps should be taken before accidents happen although, in our case, they are usually not taken even after so many tragic deaths.

Even though the cause of the latest crash has not been confirmed yet, witnesses alleged that the bus was speeding. Other suspected reasons include a punctured tyre – which could have been avoided had the vehicle gone through proper fitness testing – or the driver falling asleep at the wheel. Given the inhumane working hours that drivers of passenger vehicles in our country are forced to endure, despite the Road Transport Act 2018 clearly stating that drivers cannot drive for more than five straight hours or a total of eight hours a day, such accidents are, in fact, just waiting to happen.

At the heart of it all is the problem of lack of enforcement of relevant rules and regulations by the authorities. For any improvement to take place, road safety campaigners and experts have repeatedly stressed the importance of a shift in the attitude of those in charge of the transport sector, including the top brass at the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges. Yet, nothing seems to change.

Such apathy and dereliction can only be considered criminal. This must be fixed before anything else. Responsible agencies and officers must be held accountable for their repeated failure to do their job. As for the Dhaka-Bhanga expressway tragedy, the authorities must punish the vehicle owner for flouting suspensions and keeping the bus running. We don't need exemplary punishment; we need regularly meted out punishment in light of the law so that transport owners/drivers know better than to breach it. There is no alternative to enforcing the law properly, evenly and regularly.

## Take stern action to stop RMG theft

Such incidents are becoming a serious problem for apparel exporters

The suspicious handling of a suspected mastermind behind a series of highway robberies involving export-bound RMG products has once again highlighted how highway safety, particularly that of cargo trucks, is still ignored by the authorities. The mastermind in question is Md Shahed alias Sayeed, who was arrested in 2021 for his involvement in the theft of RMG products on their way to the Chattogram port. According to a police statement then, Shahed led highway gangs that stole apparel products from at least 5,000 lorries for around two decades. Yet, in a recently submitted charge sheet in one of the cases filed in this connection, he was downgraded to “accused no. 7” among a group of eight.

The question is, why would police go against their own statement? Why would they submit a charge sheet without naming a mastermind? On the face of it, this seems to be an example of weaknesses in the investigative process. A criminal lawyer told *The Daily Star* that recovery of the stolen goods and confessional statements from other accused robbers would have been sufficient to prove whether Shahed was the mastermind. But as we know from experience, flawed investigations are often down to underhand dealings, where investigators show leniency in exchange for bribe, etc. But there is a bigger issue at play here: the threat that unchecked cargo theft poses to our RMG industry, which must ship products on time and in full.

Last month, the BGMEA president also highlighted the problem at a press conference, saying about 20-22 cases of theft occurred on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway in 2022 alone. This, according to him, is posing a serious threat to the RMG sector. “There are gangs who are committing the same crime over and over again and getting away with them without any punishment,” he said, adding that often they are abetted by dishonest employees of the industry, buying houses, shipping lines and C&F agents. He also called for severe penalties for organised cargo thieves, amending the law if necessary.

The recommendation for amending the law deserves consideration. According to sources, there are about 10-12 gangs involved in stealing “30-40 percent” of the apparel products, mainly from major consignments, carried to the Chattogram port for shipment. As well as RMG products, cargos of other kinds and passenger buses are also vulnerable on the highways. This is clearly an organised crime, yet miscreants behind cargo theft are charged with “regular theft”, which is a bailable offence with a maximum punishment of three years in jail. They usually secure bail within days of their arrest, and get back to the crime.

We must put an end to this cycle. We urge the authorities to take this issue seriously and improve highway security. They must especially take action against RMG robbers and put to rest the concerns of the industry, so that it can prosper further.

# Import dependence is the root cause of our energy crisis



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Recently, our State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid has said that Bangladesh does not have much unexplored gas and that this is why we need to import liquefied natural gas (LNG). But this statement contradicts reality.

First, his comment contradicts the findings of surveys done by different foreign organisations in the past. According to the last report by Gustavson Associates published in 2010, Bangladesh has at least 38 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of undiscovered gas. Even the government's own gas sector master plan of 2017 (published in 2018), prepared by Denmark-based engineering consulting company Ramboll, acknowledged the 2010 findings to recommend investment in gas discovery.

Second, the government has not invested sufficient effort into discovering potential reserves over the last 15 years. Without conducting surveys and drilling, refusing to recognise past findings is akin to evading accountability.

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Third, different news reports and research findings have informed us of the huge amounts of unexplored gas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and in Sylhet, Bhola, and Shariatpur districts. The government has already taken initiatives to explore some of these areas. As such, does the state minister's comment on our gas reserves not contradict the government's own gas exploration initiatives?

In the gas sector master plan of 2017, it was recommended that the government should not spend money to import costly LNG and should explore indigenous gas instead. The plan estimated that Bangladesh would have to spend \$3 billion by 2030 to import LNG, while exploration of indigenous gas resources will be much more cost-effective.

However, we haven't seen much initiative from the government to do so. After the gas crisis hit the country last year, Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited (Bapex) urgently started exploring new gas fields. The



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government's proactive role instantly made it obvious how neglected our gas exploration activities have been in the past. After the crisis began, Bapex drilled nine wells and saved at least Tk 1 lakh crore on LNG import by spending only Tk 812 crore. This means that Bapex can extract gas at a much lower cost, whereas buying LNG from the spot market requires huge amounts of forex reserves.

The increasing import dependency over the last decade is at the root of our current energy crisis. This dependence will only increase if we continue to become dependent on imported coal and LNG. The Rooppur nuclear power plant itself involves massive import of technology and fuel.

This year, the Rampal power plant has already started to supply electricity to the grid. Although the government had informed us that the per unit cost of electricity would be Tk 8, recently we found out that the cost is Tk 14-15. Electricity from Adani's Godda coal power plant is also being supplied to our grid at high costs. So, we are still implementing the plans we made in 2010.

The master plan seems to have been developed more to serve the interests of producers and technology suppliers than to ensure energy security. As a response to external shocks, our energy security is now at peril because when the dollar crisis

prices. Their concerns have valid grounds, too.

The government's new projects are facing a crisis due to our declining forex reserves. We recently saw that it delayed paying to import coal for Payra. There was also a delay in producing electricity at the Rampal power plant due to coal import payment having to be in US dollars. Under these circumstances, businesses are losing faith in the government's ability to pay for imported LNG from the spot market. Recently, the LNG price has come down to \$14 and the government is planning to import it from the spot market.

Even if the government can import LNG from the spot market at a relatively lower price than what it is during times of peak demand, there is no guarantee that the price would not increase in the future. Therefore, it is not sustainable to rely on LNG imports for ensuring energy security. What we need to do instead is explore our own gas resources. There is no alternative to discovering new gas fields and starting gas exploration. It is in no way believable or acceptable that we do not have any gas left.

Moreover, offshore exploration has bright prospects in the country, but we are yet to explore our offshore blocks. While Myanmar has already discovered some offshore gas blocks, we have not conducted any proper

offer around \$10. Bangladesh's share of profit gas might also go down from between 55 percent to 80 percent down to 40 percent to 70 percent. No matter what, we can guess that signing a PSC with any foreign companies will only allow them to take control of our indigenous resources.

To say that we do not have the capacity to explore offshore blocks is illogical. No country in the world starts exploration after developing their capacity, they build it through their efforts and a slow process of technology transfer. A company like India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) itself outsources its tasks to other companies abroad. Bangladesh can develop its capacity by outsourcing some tasks, retaining overall control over management, developing its regulatory institutions and human resources, and closely engaging in the technology transfer process.

We have previously seen how the government expressed doubts about Bapex's capacity to explore new gas fields and how it hired foreign companies like Gazprom to spend three times more money. This approach proved to be unsustainable. Instead of being dependent on foreign companies for gas exploration, we should establish our own control over the sector in order to ensure true energy security.

# What Ukraine needs to learn from Afghanistan



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The greatest enemy of economic development is war. If the world slips further into global conflict, our economic hopes and our very survival could go up in flames. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists recently moved the hands of the Doomsday Clock to a mere 90 seconds to midnight.

The world's biggest economic loser in 2022 was Ukraine, whose economy collapsed by 35 percent, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The war in Ukraine could end soon, and economic recovery could begin, but this depends on Ukraine understanding its predicament as the victim of a US-Russia proxy war that broke out in 2014.

Unless the proxy war ends soon, Ukraine faces a dire future. Ukraine needs to learn from the horrible experience of Afghanistan to avoid becoming a long-term disaster. It could also look to the US proxy wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Iraq,

Syria, and Libya.

Starting in 1979, the US armed the Mujahideen (Islamist fighters) to harass the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan. As President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski later explained, the US objective was to provoke the Soviet Union to intervene, in order to trap it in a costly war. The fact that Afghanistan would be collateral damage was of no concern to US leaders.

The Soviet military entered Afghanistan in 1979 (as the US had hoped), and fought through the 1980s. Meanwhile, the US-backed fighters established al-Qaeda in the 1980s, and the Taliban in the early 1990s. In 2001, the US invaded Afghanistan to fight al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This war continued for another 20 years, until the US finally left in 2021.

Afghanistan today lies in ruins. While the US wasted more than \$2 trillion

of its military outlays, Afghanistan is impoverished. Its 2021 GDP was below \$400 per person.

The proxy war in Ukraine began nine years ago when the US government backed the overthrow of Ukraine's then President Viktor Yanukovich. Yanukovich's sin, from the US viewpoint, was his attempt to maintain Ukraine's neutrality despite the US' desire to expand Nato to include Ukraine (and Georgia). The US' objective was for Nato countries to encircle Russia in the Black Sea region. The US has been massively arming and funding Ukraine since 2014.

But two harsh political realities of Ukraine were overlooked by the US. The first is that Ukraine is deeply divided ethnically and politically between Russia-hating nationalists in Western Ukraine and ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. The second is that Nato expansion to Ukraine crosses a Russian redline. Russia will fight to the end, and escalate as necessary, to prevent the US from incorporating Ukraine into Nato.

At the end of 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin put forward three demands to the US: Ukraine should remain neutral and out of Nato; Crimea should remain part of Russia; and the Donbas should become autonomous in accord with the Minsk II Agreement.

The Biden-Sullivan-Nuland team

rejected negotiations over Nato enlargement, eight years after the same group backed Yanukovich's overthrow.

In March 2022, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky seemed to understand his country's dire predicament as a victim of a US Russia proxy war. He declared publicly that Ukraine would become a neutral country, and asked for security guarantees. He also publicly recognised that Crimea and Donbas would need some kind of special treatment. Yet, the US blocked the peace process.

The basis for peace today is clear. Ukraine would be a neutral non-Nato country. Crimea would remain home to Russia's Black Sea naval fleet, as it has been since 1783. A practical solution would be found for the Donbas (such as a territorial division, autonomy, or an armistice line). Most importantly, the fighting would stop, Russian troops would leave Ukraine, and Ukraine's sovereignty would be guaranteed by the UN Security Council and other nations.

Above all, the government and people of Ukraine would tell Russia and the US that Ukraine refuses any longer to be the battleground of a proxy war. In the face of deep internal divisions, Ukrainians on both sides of the ethnic divide would strive for peace, rather than believing that an outside power will spare them the need to compromise.