

Let the road safety drive last all year round

Authorities have shown commendable initiative to ensure safe Eid journey so far

We are happy to see that Eid journey for most people has been quite safe so far, with no major road crashes reported during the official five day Eid-ul-Fitr vacation. Lakhs of home goers left Dhaka on trains, buses and launches in the lead-up to Saturday's Eid. Although there have been some problems including overpriced tickets, commuters have mostly expressed their satisfaction. Therefore, we commend our transport authorities – the BRTA, BIWTA, Bangladesh Railway, and others – for their well-coordinated plan to ensure a hassle-free Eid experience.

According to the ministry of posts and telecommunications, from April 18 to April 22, more than one crore SIM card users left Dhaka for their homes. During the same time, nearly 28 lakh SIM card holders also entered the capital. Ensuring safe journey for such a large number of people is indeed an arduous task, which the authorities performed commendably considering the anarchy that has gripped the transport sector over the last several years. At a time when deadly road crashes have become a daily reality in the country – with the past few months showing a particularly disturbing trend – there were reasonable fears about the massive exodus of people, which thankfully didn't come to pass. However, since people are still coming back to their places of work/residence – which may continue until early next week – the authorities must remain careful. There should be proper road safety measures in place so that all can come back safe and sound.

This time, another notable achievement has been the way the authorities have managed motorcycles plying the roads. In recent years, motorcycles have been responsible for most of the road accidents in the country. But so far this holiday season, we have not heard of any major bike accidents. It was refreshing to see, for example, how a large number of motorcyclists crossed the Padma Bridge following traffic rules.

Historically, the two Eids have always been the times of year when the majority of road crashes occur in Bangladesh. According to the Road Safety Foundation, highway travels during the extended Eid-ul-Fitr holiday between April 25 and May 8 last year had resulted in the deaths of 376, with about 1,500 people injured. Other holidays had been more or less tragic. Thus, while we appreciate the efforts to curb road crashes this time, we also think it is time for the authorities to evaluate what measures have worked, so they can emulate the success in the future. The extra attention given to Eid travels is understandable. But the authorities must ensure safe road journeys at other times, too.

For that, as well as targeted planning and coordination, what our transport authorities need to do is ensure that they have proper road crash data to govern their policies and targets, ensure proper enforcement of the Road Transport Act and other relevant rules and regulations, and establish accountability in the sector so that everyone does their job properly. The time has come to reverse the dangerous road crash trend in Bangladesh.

World should push for peace in Sudan

Otherwise, we might have another major humanitarian crisis on our hands

The ongoing conflict in Sudan, which supposedly began between rival factions of its military government on April 15, is becoming increasingly alarming. Fighting began with attacks by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on key government sites. Most of the fighting so far has reportedly taken place in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and its surrounding areas. In this connection, one of the most concerning factors has been the use of airstrikes, artillery and heavy gunfire. The use of such heavy weaponry automatically increases the risks of casualties on both sides, as well as among the civilian population. Unfortunately, despite calls for and pledges of ceasefire during Eid, there has been no cessation to the hostilities yet.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than 400 people have been killed so far due to fighting, with 3,500 more getting injured. There have also been 11 verified attacks on health facilities, which is particularly worrying as the targeting of critical infrastructure indicates that the warring parties are throwing all caution to the wind and taking extreme measures to gain any advantage. Unfortunately, ordinary Sudanese people will be the worst sufferers from this. In fact, the situation may have already turned somewhat critical, as nearly 70 percent of hospitals in the capital and nearby states have been forced to close. Moreover, according to reports, people in Sudan are currently experiencing widespread food, water and electricity shortages. And internet service in the country has also been almost entirely down, making communication with the outside world very difficult.

Amidst such circumstances, a growing list of countries have started to evacuate their diplomats and nationals from Sudan. Governments of the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy and Spain have all conducted such evacuations. With desperate calls for rescue by people from other countries, Saudi Arabia was kind enough to evacuate expatriates from a host of countries, including Bangladesh.

With a similar cooperative mindset, the world community needs to urgently come together and help the people of Sudan. Even before the war started, the humanitarian needs of children in the country were high. Around 11.5 million children and community members are in need of emergency water and sanitation services. More than 600,000 children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition. Therefore, the international community and multilateral organisations must find a way to deliver emergency aid services to the Sudanese people.

Most importantly, the international community needs to bring the warring parties to the negotiation table and facilitate a political settlement to the crisis, while pushing for an urgent ceasefire to prevent any more unnecessary bloodshed. With the growing number of crises that the world is currently experiencing, it can ill-afford another prolonged armed conflict in Sudan. In trying to find a peaceful settlement in Sudan, perhaps the world community can also begin the process of rebuilding bridges that can lead to finding solutions to other ongoing conflicts.

Something's rotten in Bangladeshi workers' recruitment in Kuala Lumpur



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A recent report in *The Daily Star* caught my attention. According to the report, remittance flow to Bangladesh rose to a seven-month high in March as expatriate Bangladeshis sent home \$2.02 billion – the highest since September last year when \$1.53 billion flew into the country. It said this could be related to the expats sending back more for their families to celebrate Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr.

Citing data from the Bangladesh Bank, March's receipts were nearly 29.3 percent higher than February's \$1.56 billion and 8.5 percent higher from \$1.85 billion recorded in March last year.

Data from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) of Bangladesh reveals that in 2022, 612,418 Bangladeshi expatriate workers secured jobs in Saudi Arabia, 179,612 in Oman, 101,775 in the UAE, 64,383 in Singapore, and 50,090 in Malaysia. In 2021, overseas jobs for Bangladeshis stood at 617,209.

While the official figure for Malaysia is the lowest, there is much suspicion that it could be higher if the number of undocumented migrant workers are taken into account.

While I am not sure of the situation in the other countries, the pre-Covid stories of thousands of Bangladeshis landing in Malaysia with no jobs seems to be emerging now.

Coincidentally or otherwise, two senior aides of Human Resources Minister V Sivakumar were arrested in connection with corruption regarding the foreign workers quota. The first step in the process in securing foreign workers is for the employer to apply for the quota. The companies have to provide proof and other documents to show that they actually need the number of workers they ask for. The relevant authorities have to verify the need first before they issue the quota. In other words, if everything is done above board, no worker should land in Malaysia without a job after spending about \$3,000-4,000 to reach here.

So, something is terribly wrong when we see Bangladeshi workers arriving here to a named company on temporary work visas, but they are not employed by the firm. Activists and NGOs are claiming that the company only exists in name, but has no operation.

And a few days ago, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Agency (MACC)



FILE PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

The authorities must work together to alleviate the sufferings of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia.

ordered two officers from the Malaysian embassy in Dhaka to return home, nabbing them upon arrival for probes linked to the recruitment of migrant workers. They were remanded on suspicion of receiving bribes in connection with the issuance of visas to Bangladeshi tourists and workers.

Reportedly, the MACC has also frozen more than 20 bank accounts and seized assets estimated to be worth 3.1 million Malaysian ringgit believed to belong to the two officers. The assets include eight plots of land.

In a rare public message, the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur made a lengthy post on its Facebook page hinting at the recruitment process in Malaysia not being fully transparent. The mission has also been seen as "a little more" outspoken when its High Commissioner Md Golam Sarwar told the news portal FMT that they had lodged complaints with the Malaysian labour department against the firm that was named in the stranded workers' temporary visas.

While there is some cheating on the Malaysian recruitment agencies' part that is creating the current problems, some people are saying they are working in collusion with agencies in Dhaka, or some strong and influential individuals there. And the rumour is that these individuals are strongly connected to certain leaders at the top level or some middlemen linking the two. The problem of

they will be blacklisted.

Hermono even went to the extent of telling the Malaysian government to look for other source countries if they are not happy with the Indonesian conditions. Malaysia relented and signed the new MoU last year.

His no-holds-barred stand comes from his experience of heading the national body for the placement and protection of Indonesian migrant

Bangladeshi workers being cheated has been persisting for decades. What has the high commission done so far to mitigate the problem to protect its citizens who work hard in Malaysia to earn a living for their relatives back home?

The general consensus is that there is a lot to be done to bring back dignity to the workers in Malaysia who are generally "looked down upon," although they are a vital cog to the nation's economy at various levels for smooth operation.

Perhaps the mission should take a leaf out of the book of the Indonesian ambassador in Kuala Lumpur, Hermono, who calls a spade a spade – even if it hurts the Malaysians. His vocal and non-compromising stand on defending his country's expatriate workers has seen massive changes in how they are protected. He managed to get the old MoU on the recruitment and protection of domestic helpers completely changed. Their rights are now completely protected, and if the employers violate any of the clauses,

workers at one time. The Indonesian government made the protection of migrant workers its utmost priority, and incorporated it in the National Action Plan of Human Rights 2015-2019.

Bangladesh and Malaysia signed an MoU on the recruitment of Bangladeshi workers in 2021, effective for five years until December 2026.

Obviously, this has not changed things much. The agents, with the help of influential individuals, have turned it into modern-day slavery. The general feeling here is that the Bangladesh mission is not pulling its weight by being too diplomatic.

This could be related to the repatriation of huge amounts of money from its workers abroad, which is among the country's highest revenue earners. No one should ignore the suffering of the poor migrant workers just for national revenue. If they do and their citizens suffer, let me say: they have blood on their hands.

Bangladesh and Malaysia need to resolve this problem together.

Mind your busyness



Muna Khan researches newsroom culture in Pakistan.

MUNA KHAN

In an article for the *Harvard Business Review*, author Andy Watz recounts a story about a new immigrant to the US, who mistook "busy" to mean "good", because that is the response he got when he asked "how are you?" Of course, busy does not mean good, yet I'm guilty of using "busy" myself as a response and it rarely means I'm OK.

Have you noticed how more and more people say they don't have time to do anything because of their busy – sometimes crazy – schedules? There's a lot of value placed on being busy – especially in corporate culture, but it's trickling down to familial life too. Being busy means you're super productive, often multitasking as a parent or child, but when relaxed and free, I'm sure everyone in the family is busy on their own devices, not talking to each other.

There's status in looking busy too. I see folks walking in the park talking on their Bluetooth headsets, giving off "I'm powerful" vibes; but they also look unapproachable. I think advancement in communication is creating more distances between people and a world without human connections should cause everyone concern.

Watz writes that being busy should

stop being seen as a virtue. I'm sure you know at least one person in your office who drones on about how busy they are and they may even be the boss' favourite, but are they productive? Watz quotes research that indicates that when organisations "overload employees, base their incentives primarily on the amount of time they work, and excessively monitor their activities, productivity and efficiency actually drop".

Maybe that's what led to the "quiet quitting" trend that surfaced last year in the US and became a hot topic of debate. The term refers to doing the bare minimum on your job, including not putting in any extra time, so while it's not quitting, it was seen as a reaction to work dissatisfaction.

A Gallup survey in 2022 said at least half of the US workforce was composed of "quiet quitters", and that shocking revelation also became the subject of intense discussion, with everyone questioning the methodology of the survey rather than examining the structural barriers that caused so much dissatisfaction. The bottom line is that the folks surveyed were not happy with their work, because work was placing unrealistic expectations on them.

I'm more familiar with newsrooms, having spent a good portion of my life working in some iteration of them, largely in Pakistan and some in Dubai and Hanoi. Working in the news keeps everyone busy, but each technological innovation seems to have impacted journalists' lives for the worst.

They are feeling burnt out quicker than before. In my conversations with

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young journalists for research, I hear phrases like "toxic culture" and "unfair supervisors" who don't have the time to train or mentor staff. Since no one (or thing) is challenging this culture, it's almost accepted as the norm. Too many good people have left journalism because managers reward the wrong goals. One young woman told me staff was reprimanded for asking for time off, even when it was due.

This kind of work isn't working. This incentivised structure, which

rewards productivity, needs reform. Companies need to hire more people instead of overburdening existing staff. This is true in healthcare too, which witnessed near collapse during the pandemic in countries that made budget cuts in social service sectors. I fear that the more the advancements in technology, especially in AI, the more people will feel burdened to outperform the robots.

What is the other side of being busy, and if it is being unproductive, can it be presented in better light; shown to have value that may benefit work, health and life? Solitude, for example, seems like an alien concept because one is rarely without their device; yet solitude allows for reflection and a quieting of the mind. Of equal import is being in the presence of other people. Social media may bring people together, but it also prevents people from being together, writes Watz.

If busyness increases a person's sense of self-worth, as psychologists say, and is an indicator of status, what needs to be done to increase the worth of leisure, family time and idleness? Self-help gurus often ask readers what they would do if they knew their days were numbered. How much time would they give to activities "that have nothing to do with striving and achieving?" asks Lori Deschene, the founder of Tiny Buddha, before reminding readers that "our days are numbered". It is a question worth reflecting over these Eid holidays, preferably in nature and sans devices.

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