

Police must step up amid rising crime

Co-opting private CCTVs for surveillance can only be part of a greater effort

The latest antidote being mulled by police to rising crime in the capital is bringing private CCTV cameras under the central monitoring system of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP). According to a report, the DMP plans to incorporate around 50,000 such devices into its surveillance apparatus initially. Eventually, the goal is to bring the whole capital under the CCTV network. As part of that initiative, the DMP has started to reach out to area-based housing societies, apartment cooperatives, individual households and businesses, requesting them to upgrade their CCTV cameras so that those can supply live feed with II specialised features like face detection, vehicle number plate tracing, etc.

We commend this initiative amid concerns over rising crime in Dhaka. With the rate of crimes going up and patterns of criminal behaviour changing, thanks to technology, police too should change their tactics. Early results from the CCTV initiative are said to be encouraging, especially in terms of combating petty crimes. Currently, the DMP has about 680 CCTVs of its own. There are also 625 CCTVs under the Dhaka South City Corporation. Clearly, there is a need for more given the challenge posed by the massive number of people who live and work here. Police already can use CCTV footage from private establishments in case of investigations, but access to live feed from all available CCTVs in the city can help with preventing crimes. It can also generally boost their crime-fighting chances.

There are, however, a few concerns that should be addressed for this initiative to work. Firstly, its limited scope. Such an undertaking may not work in slums and poorer neighbourhoods where most households can ill-afford expensive technology. The DMP must ensure that it is not seen as discriminatory by any means. Also, why are the authorities not installing more CCTVs of their own to support the initiative? Public funding is vital for this to deliver expected results.

Secondly, its reliance on voluntary public support. In its effort to broaden the CCTV network, the DMP is relying heavily on private individuals, which comes with the challenge of earning their trust in the first place. The question is, have the police been able to do so? What chance does this initiative have of succeeding if the police authorities fail to use feed from private CCTVs properly or establish accountability for errant cops who continue to give the force a bad name? Can the DMP prevent any misuse of this initiative? These concerns are quite valid at this stage. Over the years, we have frequently seen how members of the police force got involved in various crimes including murder, extortion and so on – to which the response of the authorities has often been frustrating.

So while we think that the latest DMP initiative is a step in the right direction, its success will depend a lot on how sincere and proactive the police are in combatting crimes. We urge the police to step up their game under present circumstances. They must show their integrity, honesty, neutrality and professionalism at all times.

Protect Atrai River at all costs

Its pathetic state shows how catastrophically mismanaged rivers in Bangladesh are

Human greed has once again put a river on its deathbed. Back in the 80s, the Atrai river was the lifeblood for locals in at least three upazilas in Pabna. Not only was it a part of fond childhood memories for many, it also played a crucial role in linking Gaznar beel in Pabna's Sujannagar upazila with the Jamuna River. Its minimum width used to be 80 to 90 feet, and maximum width 190 to 200 feet. Over the years, however, that river has been reduced to what is essentially a canal now, lined on both sides by structures that are threatening to forever alter its topography. Currently, as per a report by this daily, it is just 30 feet wide owing to the unchecked encroachment all throughout its trajectory.

Some locals say it was the construction of a culvert a few decades back that limited the flow of the river, while the local chairman believes it was an irrigation project in the 80s that led to its present abysmal condition. Regardless of what started it, the degradation continues unabated. Everyone wants a chunk of the profit. From shops to industrial units to garbage disposal sites, the Atrai is under siege from all sides. If you ask them, owners of most of the structures will claim that they have legal documents signed by relevant government authorities. The question is, how could someone provide paperwork for a piece of land literally sliced off a river?

We understand that in a small country with a huge population, many of whom grapple with poverty, it is difficult to protect natural resources which can be a source of livelihood for many. And with more and more reports of dying rivers bombarding us, it may be hard to feel sympathy for one river regardless of how great or sacred it used to be. But this is also precisely why we must remain alert because, unless drastic measures are taken to reverse the current trend, soon we will have few rivers left, and our children may have no rivers to enrich their childhood memories. Against such a backdrop, we hope that the recent comments by a minister that our rivers are too wide are not taken to heart. Rivers are connected to the existence of Bangladesh. The nation's agriculture, livelihood, soil fertility, and biodiversity all depend on rivers. If they decay or die, Bangladesh as we know it will do too.

Bangladesh has enough laws, regulations and institutions to protect rivers. The problem is the lack of enforcement of those rules as well as the lack of sincerity and commitment on the part of those in charge of rivers. As a result, pollution and encroachment, often even by those public departments, are taking place unabated. We must stop this. The authorities must act now before it is too late.

GAS LEAKS IN DHAKA

On the verge of an explosion



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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Panic spread among residents of Dhaka on Monday night as people from different parts of the city complained of gas leaks. The Fire Service and Civil Defence received over 100 phone calls about the leaks at various points, while some agitated residents also called 999 for help. The next day, Titas Gas, the country's biggest distributor of gas, released a statement saying people could smell the odorant that it mixes with natural gas due to high pressure in the gas pipelines. It added that gas supply in Dhaka had returned to normal, and people could resume lighting their gas stoves.

The Titas statement almost seems to have downplayed the legitimate concerns of citizens and experts alike regarding the possibility and danger of gas leaks. And taking it lightly is precisely what has led to a number of gas leak-related explosions in the past, which caused a significant loss of lives and hundreds of injuries.

Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited, Karnaphuli Gas Distribution Company Limited, and Jalalabad Gas Transmission and Distribution System Limited are three of the largest gas providers in Bangladesh. A report by Prothom Alo on March 5, 2021 revealed that most of the gas pipelines of Titas, Karnaphuli and Jalalabad are at least 30 years old, and that more than 500 leakages are reported in Dhaka every month, with most of these leakages occurring in a single part of the gas distribution line – the risers.

In a report by New Age on April 26, 2023, the Titas Gas managing director was quoted as saying that many gas distribution lines are now 40 years old and expired 10 years ago. And although Titas has sent a development project plan to the planning ministry to replace those pipes under a megaproject, until the plan gets approved and is fully executed, people are left on the edge of potential disasters just waiting to happen.

Fire incidents originating from gas leaks clearly seem to be on the rise. According to the Prothom Alo report, in 2018-19, there were 204 such incidents, which rose to 306 in 2019-20. In a survey conducted on a 1,682km pipeline in Dhaka in FY2021-22, Titas detected 985 leaks at 449 points. And although Titas officials claimed to have repaired those, Titas has 7,000km of



The horrific explosion in Gulistan, Dhaka on March 7, 2023, which killed 22 people, happened because of accumulated gas and could've been easily prevented.

FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

lines in Dhaka alone and 2.857 million domestic connections across the country. According to experts, had Titas conducted a survey on the rest of the network, they would have found a lot more leaks. That means there are potentially a number of unidentified leaks out there, which poses serious risk to people at different locations across the country.

Surprisingly, the Titas Gas MD was quoted by this daily as refuting these concerns expressed by experts. He said that no gas pipeline in Dhaka is risky and there is no chance of explosion. But recent events make that hard to believe.

For example, the explosions in Science Lab and Gulistan, which killed at least 22 people and injured more than 150 others, are believed to have originated from accumulated gas, according to different government agencies. And in February, an RMG worker died and her husband and others were injured due to an explosion from a gas leakage in their home in Narayanganj's Fatullah. The

some connections are permanently disconnected due to negligence, the gas supply is not always cut off. For example, police investigations into the June 2021 explosion at a building in Moghbazar, Dhaka revealed that the accident occurred due to gas accumulating from a disconnected Titas Gas pipeline.

Part of the problem, according to four high-ranking officials at Titas Gas, is that even if the company makes a profit, no technological upgrades are implemented to improve safety and service. Pipelines are not replaced even after they have expired, and renovations are done only after an accident takes place.

According to Section 5 of the Gas Sales Rule, 2014, Titas Gas must carry out inspections in the residential sector once every two years for clients without meters, and once every year for users with meters. But that is never done. And the same old excuse – lack of manpower – was given by two officials of Titas to justify the lack of inspection.

do not have such a system in place.

What Monday's events and its aftermath also prove is that our gas distribution system has plenty of deadly faults, which have developed due to years of negligence by the authorities. The downplaying of citizens' concerns illustrates that the authorities wish to continue with their business-as-usual attitude and show no urgency in fixing them.

Whereas such attitude by our gas distribution companies should ignite an outrage among government high officials, nothing of that sort has happened, despite one accident after another taking place. The officers and employees of these organisations cannot be allowed to simply leave people in such a danger. And to ensure justice, murder charges should be filed against those responsible at these companies for gas leak-related accidents. Otherwise, people will be exposed to more such terrifying incidents or, even worse, a much bigger disaster than the ones we have already witnessed in recent years.

No, it's not alright to dress up as an acid attack victim

Even worse is rewarding someone for doing so



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Dressing up as a monster of some kind – zombie, witch or the stuff of nightmares – may be foreign, but the trend has been adopted by Bangladeshis, and not even particularly those who are necessarily affluent, or who have had more exposure to foreign cultures. I'm not necessarily referring to Halloween costumes, by the way. I have come across Bangladeshi SFX or special effects artists who have the ability to metamorphose into grotesque monsters that would even trump any Kafkaesque creature, or be a perfect candidate for a Tim Burton film. I have seen boys fascinated with the character of the mentally deranged super-villain The Joker, so much so that at any Comicon, you'll not just see one, but multiple Jokers – in gaudy purple suits, green hair and a chalky-white face that, through makeup, appears to have a "Glasgow smile" (a wound caused by making a cut from the corners of the mouth up to the ears, leaving a scar in the shape of a smile). I could give more examples, but you get the idea.

Unfortunately, certain non-fictitious groups of people in our

Bangladeshi society are perceived to have monstrous appearances and are thereby oothered by the masses. These include members of the hijra community and victims of acid attacks. While it would be belittling for one to dress up as a member of the hijra community, because no one wants to be mocked at for pretending to have a non-conforming gender identity of "half-ladies" (transphobia and/or intersex phobia are a topic for another day), never could I have imagined that a day would come when I would have to witness a youngster dressing up as an acid attack victim for a dress-as-you-like competition at an educational institution in Dhaka.

And yet, unfortunately, it happened, and the cosplayer, in her teens, was awarded first prize. The misguided teen was surely unable to comprehend that pretending to have the distorted face of a victim of a crime motivated by vengeance, aimed at disfiguring the face (and more often than not, blinding the victim) is wrong on many levels.

For starters, dressing up as someone who has undergone unimaginable

pain and suffers from lifelong mental, emotional, and physical scars is distasteful, to say the least. Moreover, posting very chirpy photos and selfies as a pretend acid attack survivor on social media is downright insensitive towards real-life survivors of acid attacks. Furthermore, using prosthetic makeup to turn someone's trauma into a "fun" project to participate in a competition with the aim to "win" is simply in bad taste. I'd like to call this tactlessness an act of "pain appropriation," i.e. using the victim's pain for one's own benefit, without the consent of the victim.

And last, but not the least, it is appalling to see that a college in Dhaka has awarded the unwise teen with the first prize; it is disturbing to see the participant receive any reward for this act, for that matter.

Teenagers may not have the maturity to understand political correctness, and perhaps in many cases, their parents lack the wisdom to guide them. But shouldn't educational institutions play any role in fostering sensitivity? What kind of a society do we live in, where an institution fails to reprimand a student for their lack of empathy towards victims of one of the most violent crimes, and in fact ends up rewarding them? If realistic special effects makeup is simply looked at for its artistic value, without judging the implications of such a form of "art," then perhaps that institution lacks basic values that should have otherwise been enough to disqualify

the ignorant and mindless cosplayer from the competition. If this had been done, the authorities concerned could have taught a valuable lesson to the participant in a strategic manner. If there is anyone to blame here, it is the educational institution that has failed to do its part.

This isolated incident may not mirror the state of every educational institution in the city or the country, but it is definitely one that is worrisome. Schools and colleges tend to focus on the academic syllabus, allow the scope for some extracurricular activities, and may organise a couple of annual events at most, but neglect something that's even more important – values education. The incorporation of secular moral education classes into the curriculum will enable children to develop capabilities as they grow up, such as suppressing selfish tendencies and channelling their energies towards the welfare of society. Without values education, they may not develop a strong moral compass.

It is high time for curriculum developers to consider this matter and design carefully planned lessons incorporating art, stories, service-oriented activities, music/songs, cooperative/non-competitive games, etc in order to instil ethics and virtues in children, and thus help in the upbringing of morally sound, upright human beings. It is up to the schools, then, to make sure they grow in the right direction, and in the process, "cast their beams like brilliant candles."