The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Have we grown apathetic to deaths?

We seem to have learnt nothing from past chemical warehouse explosions

In yet another incident of chemical explosion, five members of a family – including two children – were burnt to death, joining a long line of victims of similar "incidents" in Old Dhaka. In the early hours of Tuesday, fire broke out at a chemical warehouse in Keraniganj, and quickly spread to nearby residential houses. Reportedly, the explosion was so massive that the heat of it was felt as far as 300 yards away, injuring people and burning trees.

Here is why this event sparks as much outrage as it evokes grief: our report reveals that a trader illegally set up two chemical warehouses in the residential area of Gadarbagh in Keraniganj following the devastating Churihatta fire in February 2019. That fire, it may be recalled, was also caused by an explosion in a chemical warehouse and went on to kill 71 people. Responsible officials apparently had no idea about the existence of the new warehouses. The question is: how could such dangerous establishments in a residential area have escaped their notice? If the administration had paid proper attention, innocent people would not have lost their lives.

The negligence goes even deeper. After the catastrophic Nimtoli fire in 2010 that claimed more than 120 lives – also caused by an explosion in a chemical warehouse set up in a residential building – the government undertook an initiative to move chemical industries to safe, specialised locations, far away from residential establishments. Thirteen years later, there is no notable progress in this regard. The construction of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation Chemical Industrial Park in Sirajdikhan, Munshiganj, where the chemical warehouses were supposed to relocate, is nowhere near completion. The project, drafted in 2011 and revised later, was scheduled to be complete by June 2022, but the pandemic slowed down its progress, according to the project director.

What we cannot comprehend is why the deadline of a project conceived in 2011 was set 11 years later. Given the frequency of fires by chemical explosion in Dhaka and elsewhere, why was it not made a priority project? Seeing the lackadaisical pace at which the initiative is moving, we cannot help but assume apathy on the relevant authorities' part. Nothing else explains why, after a series of horrible chemical explosions that caused so many deaths, there is no proper mechanism to monitor the handling and storage of hazardous items. This heinous pattern of negligence and apathy cannot be allowed any longer.

We urge government offices responsible for monitoring and supervising hazardous industries to ensure that no one can get away with illegal handling and storage of dangerous chemical materials, even more so around residential areas. And they should expedite the completion of the chemical industrial park so that all warehouses can be relocated as soon as possible. We cannot help those whom we have already lost to explosions. But let us not fail those who are still with us.

Put an end to traffic woes

Why is DNCC allowing illegal truck parking on Annisul Huq Road?

We are concerned to learn that the Dhaka North City Corporation's move in February to demarcate separate lanes for rickshaws has done nothing to improve traffic congestion on the busy Mayor Annisul Huq Road in the capital. Trucks continue to be parked unlawfully on the road, damaging the dividers that the DNCC had installed, according to a report by the daily. This is just another example of the authorities' inability to ensure compliance from transport associations, the results of which have been narrower roads, unused rickshaw lanes, and a worse gridlock condition for office-goers, students and ambulances carrying critical patients, among other problems. The situation is totally unacceptable.

The Mayor Annisul Huq Road is a crucial one for city dwellers as it connects Tejgaon, Farmgate and Karwan Bazar with Mohakhali and Banani-Gulshan-Niketon. Furthermore, it stands as an embodiment of the late mayor's fight to reduce traffic congestion by staving off encroachment attempts and opposition from truck associations. But its current state is reversing his efforts to alleviate traffic woes, subjecting thousands of commuters to misery every day. Students and office-goers are reportedly often late to school and work, rickshaw pullers are earning less due to traffic jams, and people with medical emergencies are risking their lives. Trucks occupying a vital part of the space illegally is causing all sorts of troubles, and worryingly still, the DNCC is doing nothing about it.

The fact is, we cannot expect a respite from this reality until the government starts enforcing traffic rules and stops giving in to pressure from transport associations. We have seen them frequently exert pressure to shape policies, such as when they did after the Road Transport and Highways Division (RTHD) in May issued a directive limiting the economic life of vehicles (20 years for buses, and 25 years for trucks and lorries). It took just a little over two months for the RTHD to backtrack on that directive, meaning that unfit vehicles can operate *legally*. It goes without saying that this will only further endanger our safety on roads. It is because of such undue concessions, legal or on the ground, that this sector continues to be in such a pitiful state.

Against this background, experts believe that the priority is to establish order in this chaotic sector rather than taking unplanned, half-hearted measures such as building a separate rickshaw lane on the Mayor Annisul Huq Road. The authorities must first ensure compliance from transport associations and prevent illegal parking. They can also build alternative parking spaces for trucks.

Road safety, transport politics, and a curious policy U-turn

OF MAGIC & MADNESS

Badiuzzaman Bay
is assistant editor at The Daily Star.

BADIUZZAMAN BAY

On August 6, 2018, the cabinet, under pressure from students waging a countrywide movement for road safety, green-lit a draft bill that would later be known as the Road Safety Act. Five years later, on August 3, 2023, the Road Transport and Highways Division (RTHD), under pressure from transport associations, green-lit the reversal of an order that would have prevented unfit vehicles from plying the streets, meaning that those vehicles can now *legally* put your life at risk, and there will be no stopping them.

Between the two approvals – and two instances of policy goalposts moving in diametrically opposite directions – lies a truth that we often talk about but whose gravity we seldom truly appreciate: the crippling effect of politics across the transport sector.

In Bangladesh, this sector, which represents various modes of transportation both private and public, has had profound implications for the country's economy, infrastructure development, and public welfare. Its significance can be understood from the fact that no other sector has as many ministries as it does: the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges, the Ministry of Shipping, the Ministry of Railways, and the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism. However, over the years, the intersection of political and business interests has frequently taken precedence over safety and sustainability. This has been evident not just in policy formulation but also at the business end of it, such as issuance of permits, vehicle registration, license renewal, fitness certification, training and recruitment, procurement, construction, fare determination, and allocation of contracts, often bypassing competitive bidding processes – the list goes on. Beyond their political clout that influences such decisions, transport associations are also well organised, capable of mobilising their members to whatever end necessary.

You need a pesky probe report or court verdict to go away? They are your men. You need a road occupied for illegal truck parking? They have your back. You want to prevent BNP supporters from attending a district rally? They will cut off all communications through strikes. You want some undue legal concession in your favour? They will give teeth to your demands.

Did protesting students during the Road Safety Movement ever really have a chance against the powerful political-industrial complex that controls our transport sector?

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Road transport is but one of the many frontiers where these influences and tactics, hard or soft, coalesce. But it's the one grabbing most of the eyeballs – for obvious reasons. Every year, without exception, this is where most of the tragedies occur. In 2022, according to the Passenger Welfare Association of Bangladesh, a total of 10,858 people were killed in accidents on the roads, railways and waterways combined. Of them, a staggering 9,951 died on roads alone. That's a 27.43 percent increase over the 2021 estimate, and the highest in eight years. Let that sink in.

What this goes to show is how the billions of dollars spent in building road and bridge networks and improving associated services across the country have had no effect at all on the safety of travellers, largely because of the interplay between politics and transport, or more specifically, patronage politics. In no other sector have terms like "regulatory capture" and "conflicts of interest" made more sense than in transport over the past decade or so. Even the minister of road transport and bridges appeared to acknowledge it when, in 2018, he blamed politics, and politicians, for the problems plaguing the sector. It is against this backdrop that the 2018 Road Safety Movement that rattled this nexus had seemed so promising, but also, with the power of hindsight now, so doomed to failure. Those students never really had a chance against the powerful political-industrial complex that has a vested interest in resisting reforms that might negatively impact their interests.

True, the Road Safety Act, 2018 – the fruit of that storied movement – is still here. But in effect and substance, it is as good as dead. The gradual rolling back of legislation on road safety has happened right in front of our eyes. Before the latest policy U-turn on unfit vehicles, several sections of the act were suspended for months after a strike by transport associations in late 2019. Following their demands, the RTHD then prepared a draft to amend the act, reducing fines under 11 sections as well as punishment under four sections. On multiple occasions, the authorities also waived the fines on vehicle owners who failed to update their documents on time. All this is proof of the undue concessions that transport associations continue to enjoy while the authorities turn a blind eye to the woeful state of our road safety situation.

What I find curious about the August 3 U-turn is that it rolled back an order that, however short-lived, had seemingly come without any immediate external pressure. It is as if our policymakers had a momentary "lapse in judgement" or amnesia, if you will, before they remembered that they had certain interests to protect, and a status quo to help maintain. Equally curious is the defence given by the RTHD secretary who, when asked whether they are backtracking because of pressure from transport associations, said: "Can't we make a mistake and fix it?" The mistake he spoke of – and which his division took over two months to notice – is the apparent lack of a clear definition of "goods-laden vehicles." And their idea of fixing it was to rescind the entire order. Speak of excuses.

The original directive was issued on May 17, setting a limit to the economic life of vehicles (20 years for buses, and 25 years for trucks and lorries). A draft guideline then published by the RTHD also said that no vehicle owner would be allowed to register a new vehicle if they owned one that had exceeded this operational limit. This was meant to ensure the roadworthiness of vehicles, as old and unfit vehicles are a major reason behind road crashes, and also to reduce pollution as black smoke emanating from them is a major polluter of the environment. Currently, there are over 74,000 registered buses, trucks, and other commercial vehicles (as of April) that are past their economic lifespan, as per the now-withdrawn limit. Just imagine the amount of damage that all these and other soon-to-be-expired vehicles, unhooked from any legal barrier, can do to us. Even one day without such restrictions is one day too many in our present context.

Who will be responsible for that? You know the answer.

China's slowing growth, deflation, and support for private firms

M Kabir Hassan
is a professor of finance at the University of New Orleans, US.

Jose Antonio Perez Amuedo
is a doctoral student at the University of New Orleans, US.

M KABIR HASSAN *and* JOSE ANTONIO PEREZ AMUEDO

For several years, China has been one of the foremost exponents of economic growth while also being the second-largest economy in the world due to its large population. According to World Bank data, China is the world's leading exporter with exports amounting to almost $3.7 trillion in 2022. But it is also the second-largest holder of US debt, owing around $850 billion, second only to Japan. However, latest economic reports indicate that China is not experiencing the same level of prosperity as it used to.

In *The Wall Street Journal*, Walter Russel Mead explained how, last June, one of China's best aspects, exports, fell at a double-digit pace of 12.4 percent. In addition, the country is experiencing record levels of youth unemployment, which can sound contradictory when several manufacturers are reporting labour shortages. And even though the central government still has substantial sums of money to counter these problems, some experts are predicting a dramatic market decline.

Having said that, China knows that, in the long run, its slowing growth may become an issue, raising concerns about some internal issues that the country is facing. There are many internal factors that can create political instability, a fact that would not help China's growth at all. The Chinese population is also getting older, the younger generations are experiencing frustration, and the huge gaps between richer and poorer areas can definitely cause turmoil when growth is slowing down.

Another factor worth mentioning, that may hit China soon, is deflation. With inflation being flat in June after the lack of growth, there is a possibility of deflation in the medium run. In fact, some Chinese sectors, such as manufacturing, are already experiencing this due to low internal demand. The Chinese economy had not fully recovered from the consequences of the 2020 pandemic when Western central banks started to raise interest rates. As a consequence, people found themselves in a disadvantaged situation in terms of spending.

In order to overcome this situation, the Chinese government has made a surprising concession for many people. By mid-July, China announced that the country will implement several policy measures to support private businesses and accelerate the nation's recovery after the pandemic. The state news agency, Xinhua, expressed that China will do its best to create a market-oriented, first-class business environment, and that its private sector will promote Chinese-style modernisation and the construction of a socialist modern power. However, the actions that China plans to carry out are more similar to those of Western capitalist countries. Among all the measures, it is worth mentioning that they are going to advocate for the protection of the property rights of private firms and entrepreneurs, and that steps will be taken to ensure fair market competition by breaking down barriers to market entry. Besides that, China plans to create a "traffic light" system to make it clearer in which areas private investors will be able to invest, as well as encourage some private companies to issue more debt in the form of technology innovation bonds. This will allow companies to reach levels that they would be unable to reach without external financing support.

China will also offer support for so-called platform companies to be determinants when it comes to job creation and international competition. The actions will encourage private enterprises to maximise investment in certain areas such as power generation, storage, and industrial internet. Following the example of Western countries, China will also invest heavily in research and development, which will encourage businesses to expand their infrastructure and facilities.

Finally, the Chinese government expressed its desire to refute erroneous statements and practices that may hurt private companies, saying that it will address any problems they are facing as quickly as possible. All these actions together are expected to boost China's economy, just as it was growing in the years before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Given that China is governed by the Chinese Communist Party, it may be surprising to some that they are taking the actions mentioned above. But perhaps it's high time that the country, which has historically differentiated itself from the free economies of the western world, takes steps that its people can benefit from. When these measures are implemented, companies will be able to grow, and their benefits will be reflected in the nation. The country's population can also expect a better salary, which will allow them to spend more. This can reactivate the Chinese economy, which, based on data, is currently stagnant. The country is facing a serious problem of no growth and potential deflation. Against this backdrop, China's proposed policy measures seem like a smart move. On the flip side, if the results of implementing these measures are as expected, it would mean that the model that China has been employing all these years lacked efficiency. It seems that the coronavirus changed the world in more ways than we had expected.

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