

Will the govt stop the killing of rivers?

Political affiliation must no longer shield the violators

Yet another river is on its deathbed because of indiscriminate sand mining. And as with most of these deaths, political influentials are behind it while the Department of Environment (DoE) and other relevant authorities turn a blind eye. The river in question, as per our report, is the Someshwari in Netrakona which has fallen prey to hundreds of dredging machines excavating its sand. It is unfathomable why the government is allowing such incursions despite its commitment to save rivers and a High Court verdict declaring rivers as “living entities.”. How is it possible for a former lawmaker to deploy 1,000 dredgers to carry out illegal sand-lifting operations round the clock?

The answer is simple. Being politically connected has given him impunity to do this, as many others like him. Reportedly, the former MP’s workers have even built a dirt road by filling up sections of the river with sand. A picture on yesterday’s front page shows clearly how the river has been narrowed and how innumerable dredgers have been brought in, putting the whole area at risk of erosion.

This aggressive and unregulated extraction is destroying plant and fish habitats, depriving fishermen of their livelihoods and decimating the riverbanks. Strangely, a DoE official has said that he had no knowledge of these activities, which begs the question: what is the role of this department if it is not even aware of individuals blatantly defying environment laws? The local administration has apparently sent four letters to the ex-lawmaker asking him to stop operating unauthorised dredgers. But it was the same administration that had granted the person four out of the five “balu mahals.”

Meanwhile, in Mymensingh, bamboo structures have been placed in another river, the Ayman, obstructing its flow and preventing local villagers from using it at those points. According to a report, the local mayor and his men are allegedly involved in cordoning off those points for their own purposes. Again, these structures have been built in violation of environmental laws. If they are not removed, we will witness a slow death of this century-old tributary of the Brahmaputra.

Over the years, this paper has published innumerable reports on rivers, canals and other water bodies being encroached upon, hollowed out, or rendered dead because of indiscriminate disposal of waste. But nothing seems to be swaying the relevant authorities to take effective preventive action. Why have the polluters, encroachers and sand traders not been punished for destroying our natural resources? Unless the government ensures strict enforcement of laws and punishment of the violators, regardless of their political affiliation, we will continue to witness this mindless killing of our lifelines.

Don’t muck up youth skills training

Madaripur case shows how haphazardly these programmes are being run

The objective of the government’s skills development programmes is to help unemployed youth and women from disadvantaged groups to get jobs or be self-employed, thus eradicating poverty. However, as a report by *Prothom Alo* indicates, these programmes are being run in a manner that defeats the purpose. The report sheds light on a Madaripur District Council programme that provides free training in sewing, driving and computer skills to selected participants. However, despite the significant funds allocated, it has largely failed to deliver results due to mismanagement and irregularities in the selection and training processes.

Each year, 155 women receive sewing training, and a sewing machine upon completion. Additionally, 200 people receive computer training and 120 receive driving training, with financial incentives for each participant. However, the process is marred by lack of proper vetting as participants are often selected not based on eligibility but recommendations by powerful individuals, leaving out those truly needing it. For many, the certificates earned serve as little more than paper decorations. Some among them have managed to acquire sewing machines without ever attending any training session, while some of those attending driving training had vehicles of their own. Moreover, the training sessions are conducted haphazardly, uninspiringly, and often without providing hands-on practical experience.

As a result, most trainees remain jobless or otherwise unable to use their training in related professions. This means that the 30 million or so taka spent over the 10 years of this programme has hardly benefitted the targeted population. Madaripur, thus, offers a case study in how an important initiative to help the poor can derail in the absence of proper management and oversight – not just during training but also afterwards to ensure its effectiveness. An ideal programme should target the most eligible of participants and give them proper training. It should also track their professional journey, and even help find gainful employment if necessary. We, therefore, urge the government to conduct a thorough review of all skills development programmes and undertake necessary reforms. Otherwise, these will continue to fall short of their intended goals.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

E-cigarettes: friend or a foe?

As the world moves forward, we witness technologies and innovations that make our lives easier. But not all technologies are advantageous, and some can truly be a foe to human beings. One such example may well be the e-cigarette, which has become very popular among teenagers, young adults and other groups. These little devices are considered to be a substitute for cigarettes and carry popular myths around society that e-cigarettes are not harmful. It is said that e-cigarettes generally contain fewer toxic chemicals than the deadly mix of 7,000 chemicals in the smoke from regular cigarettes. However, e-cigarettes still contain substances such as nicotine, ultrafine particles that can be inhaled deep into the lungs, and volatile organic compounds. So my question is, how is it a friend to us?

Safa Akter Noon, North South University, Dhaka

NATIONAL ROAD SAFETY DAY

Road crash victims deserve a better compensation scheme



Naznin Tithi
is a member of the editorial
team at The Daily Star.

NAZNIN TITHI

The government finally inaugurated the long-awaited compensation scheme for road crash victims on October 19. Primarily, 162 victims and their families have received a total compensation of Tk 7.08 crore under the scheme. The Bangladesh Road Transport Authority reportedly received a total of 396 applications for compensation till September 30, out of which the trustee board selected 162. The BRTA chairman said that they are still verifying the other applications and if their claims are genuine, they will also be compensated. While the amount given to the affected families is not much and the number of families that have been compensated so far is also quite low, this is still a positive development.

Before the enactment of the Road Transport Act, 2018, victims of road crashes could claim compensation in the Motor Accident Claims Tribunal for death, injury, and loss of property due to road crashes under the Motor Vehicles Ordinance, 1983. But since the ordinance was repealed after the Road Transport Act, 2018 came into effect in November 2019, it became difficult for victims to make any such claims. Over the last four years, the victims’ families rarely filed writ petitions with the High Court seeking compensation. The government formed a trustee board in 2021 as per the act, but it sat idle in absence of relevant rules. The rules were finally formulated last December, which removed all barriers to compensation.

However, there are loopholes in the process that need to be addressed if the compensation scheme is to be made efficient and the victims’ families can actually benefit from it.

Compensation amount is too low

Under this scheme, the families of those killed in road crashes are entitled to at least Tk 5 lakh in compensation, while those who would lose a limb or suffer severe injuries will receive Tk 3 lakh. Meanwhile, those who are likely to recover from their injuries and return to normal life can get a compensation of Tk 1 lakh. But questions have already been raised by road safety activists as to whether a human life can be valued at only Tk 5 lakh. Or if someone who has suffered a life-altering injury can be compensated with only Tk 3 lakh. As experts opine, the amount of compensation must be increased as per our current economic reality, too.



Given how corruption is all-pervasive in the country, questions have already been raised by many as to whether the real victims will get the compensation.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

The 30-day time limit must go

At present, from claiming compensation to actually receiving it, the entire process is quite complicated to go through for affected families. For instance, the rule that says that an affected family has to claim compensation from the chairman of the trustee board within 30 days after the crash does not seem to be well-thought-out. Road crash survivors have to spend a long time in hospitals and need many more months to get back on their feet after the crash. So how can they be expected to file an application for compensation within 30 days after the crash? To do so will be even more difficult for those living outside the capital. This time limit therefore needs to be extended if the compensation scheme is to be inclusive and sensible.

Trustee board should represent all stakeholders

According to the act’s rules, a 12-member trustee board, headed by the chairman of the BRTA, is to manage the compensation fund and settle claims made by survivors and victims’ families. The board also holds the power to increase or decrease the amount of compensation from time to time, upon approval

scheme more efficient and transparent, it is crucial to include members from these groups.

Will real victims get the money?

Additionally, given how corruption is all-pervasive in the country, questions have already been raised by many as to whether the real victims will get the compensation from the fund. The government’s social safety net schemes are glaring examples of how funds designated for the vulnerable are grabbed by influential quarters instead. To prevent the same from happening here, the government needs a robust system to ensure transparency and accountability. The participation of rights activists in this process is therefore necessary.

Managing fund the biggest challenge

A major portion of the fund is to be created through an annual contribution from vehicle owners, while the government will also provide a significant amount. Other sources of funds will include fines collected under the Road Transport Act; grants from owners’ associations, trade unions or labour associations; and any other legal source in the BRTA. However, as of now, the BRTA has not gotten any funds from other sources except for from vehicle owners. While

the suggestion of one road safety campaigner, if the fines traffic police collect every day from vehicles is added to the fund, the amount will be more than adequate to compensate all road crash victims. But while charging vehicles annually to boost the fund seems like a good idea, whether the BRTA can actually make them pay their fair share remains to be seen.

Updated road crash data needed

Given that road crash survivors and victims’ families have to pay staggering amounts of money for treatment, it is crucial that the government provides them with the compensation as quickly as possible. For this to happen, authorities must have a system in place so they can access updated data on road crashes – which they currently lack. Having updated data will also make the application verification process easier for both the authorities and the applicants.

The above are only some of the problems in the current compensation package. Even some minor amendments to the newly formulated rules of the act, properly updated road crash data, and a transparent system for fund disbursement will go a long way to help road crash survivors, victims, and their families.

Is urbanisation in Bangladesh doomed?



Dr Nazmul Huq
is an urban planner currently working
as a sustainability researcher at the
University of Applied Sciences in Cologne,
Germany. He is also a consultant at the
United Nations Framework Convention
on Climate Change in its Loss and
Damage programme. Reach him at
nazmulhuqrussell@gmail.com

NAZMUL HUQ

By 2030, half of Bangladesh’s population is expected to reside in cities. In a country on track to reach a staggering population of 200 million in seven years, this statistic raises profound concerns about our readiness to embrace the challenges that come with urbanisation.

Major cities, including metropolises like Dhaka and Chattogram, consistently rank among the world’s least liveable urban areas. They grapple with a multitude of issues. Over 50 percent of the urban population is residing in informal settlements or slums. Citizens also face frequent waterlogging, pollution, traffic congestion, and a severe scarcity of essential services like clean water and health care. These urbanisation-related problems are not limited to major metropolises; they also afflict relatively smaller urban centres such as Bogra, Sylhet, and Barishal. These smaller cities experience unchecked development, significant deficiencies in basic services, inadequate infrastructure, vulnerability to natural and human-made disasters,

the gradual loss of green spaces and historic sites, and a host of pollution-related challenges.

The ongoing dengue epidemic, once primarily associated with Dhaka and Chattogram, has now spread across Bangladesh. This underscores how secondary and tertiary urban areas are beginning to replicate the perilous urbanisation patterns of their larger counterparts. The disorganised and unplanned development plaguing our cities has turned them into living nightmares for most residents. On top of all existing challenges, the central government is enforcing a plan to transform our rural centres into urban areas, without any long-term sustainability plan at hand. Given this reality, it is natural to feel anxious about the long-term consequences of such rapid urbanisation.

One can assume that, by 2030, aimless urbanisation will persist, compelling our emerging cities and their inhabitants to adopt unsustainable lifestyles. Inadequate and non-inclusive infrastructure will drive reliance on motorised

transportation, forsaking healthier and more economical alternatives like bicycles or walking, resulting in additional health issues. The rapid depletion of natural resources – soil, land, water, vegetation, forests, and open spaces – without regard for regulations will further diminish the overall quality of emerging cities, incurring pollution-related costs. Regardless of their size or significance, our cities may become extensive dumping grounds for all forms of waste, posing significant threats to public health.

So, do our emerging cities possess the capability to intelligently confront the challenges of urbanisation? Or will they unwittingly replicate the mistakes made in the development of Dhaka, Chattogram, and other major cities? While we have glaring examples and lessons illustrating the perils of unchecked urbanisation, the confounding question remains: why are corrective measures not being prioritised? Given that this scenario will directly impact the livelihoods, health, education, and environment of hundreds of millions of people over just the next seven years, the urgency for action cannot be emphasised enough.

We must first acknowledge our institutional shortcomings, from those in the central government to local administrations. Our city and urban planning must transition from the prevailing infrastructure-centric model to one that is more holistic and accounts for the intricate interplay

between the economy, environment, and society. Integrated and systematic planning, which views urban space as a complex, interconnected, multi-generational, and multi-scalar system, should take precedence. Inclusive planning, and recognising and valuing diverse cultures and population groups in decision-making, which fosters a greater sense of belongingness, should be practised at all levels. Capacity development and awareness campaigns should prioritise creating safe, inclusive, and sound urban environments for all stakeholders. Instilling an understanding of the value of healthy urban living and its far-reaching positive impacts, especially among decision-makers, is paramount.

Most importantly, local-level policymakers and institutions should be empowered with the capacity for sustainable vision-building and implementation. The case of Rajshahi serves as a living example of how local leadership can catalyse long-term vision-building and its realisation towards a more resilient, liveable future. In the absence of urban leaders to illuminate the path forward, secondary cities, like Rajshahi, must embrace the impending compounded challenges (including climate change) and take the lead in avoiding missteps. Now is the last opportunity for our cities to alter their collective course and embark on a journey towards a brighter, more sustainable urban future.