

Images you cannot unsee



NO STRINGS ATTACHED
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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The view from my window has taken on a new meaning for me over the last two months. It is a concrete jungle that stares back at me—columns of tall residential buildings almost stick together as every little space is “utilised.” Between the gaps, you can see skeletons of other structures waiting to block the view of the buildings in the front. In fact, right in front of this chaotic mosaic of buildings of varying heights are two humongous under-construction monstrosities—rods sticking out, pillars half built, a little bit of brick exposed here and there, a dusty safety net half-heartedly placed to protect passers-by from pieces of concrete hitting their heads. It looks like a ruin and is the final embellishment to complete this unsavory installation against the bit of dull, smoggy sky.

But today, I am not complaining about the less-than-pleasant view outside my window. I am lucky to have a view at all. I am not going to go on a tirade about unplanned urbanisation, the near-total absence of greenery, or the oppressive air pollution that gives us regular “poor air quality” ratings in the Air Quality Index for Dhaka.

I have stopped trying to fathom the unfathomable. How can residential buildings, schools, churches and hospitals be bombed in the name of ‘self-defence’? How can an occupying force claim self-defence against a population it has confined in an ‘open-air prison’ that it controls with brute force? How can minors and women be kept in prison without specific charges, or be sentenced to years in jail, many without any trial?

No, to be honest, I am grateful that I am in a position to observe these buildings and make out the feverish activity of their residents—though they look like miniatures from this distance. I am happy to see little children running up and down the thin iron steps on the terraces; their joy makes me set aside my nervousness at the shortness of the railings. I am reassured by the bright colours on the clothes line and the occasional spark from various corners from a worker dangerously perched on a ledge, welding together something or the other.

I am grateful because I don’t have to see these—mostly residential buildings, full of women, men and children—crumbling to the ground one by one, bombs raining down from the sky. I am relieved that the skeletal structure, that awful eyesore that blocks chunks of the sky from the view, is not the ghost of an apartment building blasted away by an air strike.

I am grateful, most of all, to be alive and to know that my loved ones, friends, neighbours and colleagues—and all the babies and children I know and don’t—are still breathing.

Because there are some things you just cannot unsee. I know you know what I mean. I don’t want to remind you but I have to. I cannot unsee those endless rows of bodies wrapped in shrouds, out in the open; the dead calm of a mother describing the death of all three of her daughters and mother while trying to escape; the wailing of a little girl in unbearable physical pain and mental anguish, because her parents were blown off in a matter of seconds; the boy who begged his father to wake up even as he lay dead in wraps; the doctor who said on TV that he had no intention of leaving his patients and was then killed alongside his family; the juxtaposition of a grandfather sharing a fun moment with his cherubic grandchild and the same man holding her lifeless body to his heart—all a grim montage that keeps doing the rounds on social media. I can’t forget that

man running around with two plastic bags with his children’s bloody remains in them, or the white phosphorus-covered little children looking in bewilderment and utter shock, as if to ask, “How could they do this to us?”

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“Gaza” is a word that we will remember all our lives. We will remember the faces of the

smiling children and their families in the photos—the faces of people who have been wiped out for no fault of their own. We will remember the blatant bias of the Western media in compassionately covering the attacks on Israelis on October 7 while leaving out what had happened before: the 75 years of Israeli occupation of Palestine, the regular murdering of civilians by settlers and soldiers, the indiscriminate arrests and torture of the Palestinians, and the eviction of Palestinian residents from their own homes and lands. We will remember the dehumanising of people by Israeli officials, who have called Palestinians “human animals” and have no qualms about announcing that they will cut off water, food, and fuel as punishment. We will remember that “never again” does not mean “never again,” because the current genocide of the Palestinian people is being allowed to happen (like other genocides before it—in Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and so on) because they do not fall under the category of people who are “entitled to the Western world’s leaders being outraged,” even when they are systematically killed. Because they are on the wrong side of the fence, are of the wrong colour, or believe in the wrong religion, or all the above. We will remember how thousands of people all over the world, including those of the Jewish faith, marched in protest of the genocide and called for immediate ceasefire. We will remember how even millions of these voices of humanity could not prick the conscience of Western leaders to stop this barbaric, grotesque, and sadistic carnage against a people—against infants and children—who have the right to live in freedom on their own land.

It is evening already as I finish up this piece. I hear the cacophony of Dhaka’s peak-hour traffic, see the smog of pollution, and feel winter’s fog get thicker. I feel grateful again for the noise that signifies life, not death, and feel thankful that those dark clouds are not smoke coming up from a massacre below.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

VIP movements are Dhaka’s undiagnosed illness



Afia Jahin
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AFIA JAHIN

“Is there something going on today? Been stuck at Panthapath Signal for 35 minutes.”
“Avoid Mohakhali.”
“Avoid Uttara.”
“If they are indeed VIPs, why can’t they just use helicopters and leave the roads for us?”
“Don’t hit the road today unless it’s a life-or-death situation.”
“Avoid Dhaka.”

These are some of the quips and complaints repeated on Dhaka-centric citizens’ forums on Facebook daily. The tragic, honest-to-God truth is that Dhaka is nobody’s *jaadur shohor*. It hasn’t been so for a while. And despite many developments, city life only seems to be getting worse for the lot of us.

The single task of commuting from any one place of the city to another is costing us incredible amounts of time, energy, and motivation. Worse still, it’s not just the isolated feeling of a handful of citizens. One recent study by US-based National Bureau of Economic Research found Dhaka to be the slowest city in the world, out of 1,200 cities in 152 countries. For further clarity on the issue, last year, the World Bank alongside Buet’s Accident Research Institute found that the average speed of vehicles in our capital had dropped to 4.8km per hour, from being 21km per hour in 2007.

We must be doing something terribly wrong if, after so much infrastructural development through so many megaprojects—not to mention funds spent in tens of thousands of crores—our traffic congestion has only gotten worse. Sure, one could argue that the country has developed so well that too many people own cars now. And indeed—the unaffordability of eggs, potatoes and cooking oil aside—more roads have also been built all across the country. Still, how come we can’t seem to catch a breather from traffic congestion?

Well, for one, it is an age-old fact that more roads never equal less congestion. As the phenomenon of induced demand goes, building more roads in a still-growing city like Dhaka will only prompt more people to get cars and make use of the new roads. Add to this the dismal state of public transport in the capital, and it remains no wonder that our traffic situation stands where it does.

None of this is news. But there are still two types of people who must be unaware of how much worse Dhaka’s traffic situation has gotten over the past few months: 1) a Dhakaite who rarely or never has to commute between 7am and 11pm;

and 2) someone who is considered a VIP by the authorities. While I—and millions of others—envy both, the treatment given to the latter understandably boils the blood of most sensible citizens.

A bad case of traffic jam, in itself, can exhaust even the most patient of human beings. But when whole sections of a very busy city—the capital of this country, no less—are deliberately put into a standstill, just so the fancy fleet of vehicles guarding one or a few people can pass through the roads in one go, the rest of us waiting in cars, muggy buses, on bikes, or standing on the roads can’t help but feel utterly dehumanised. For this to happen multiple times a day, for weeks on end—as we have witnessed lately—is quite telling of how worthless the people are in the eyes of those who are in charge of us.

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Over the last couple of months and to this day, I have read numerous citizen accounts of sufferings during VIP movements on social media: people claiming to have been stuck in one spot of traffic for over an hour; active ambulances being delayed by a VIP movement; students missing crucial exams due to traffic being halted without notice to let one minister or some dignitary pass. Of course, being forced into a standstill, many opt for reaching their destinations on foot. But with no thanks to the planners of our capital, being a pedestrian in Dhaka is no cake walk. Having to walk on roads and footpaths made up of what can only be described as loose gravel, while trying to not fall into an open drain, really hammers into us the horrifying unliveability of this city we so want to love.

My worst realisation of late has been that most of the public feels helpless. A



How can children and babies be indiscriminately killed and be seen as ‘human shields’ to justify their murders?
PHOTO: AFP

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

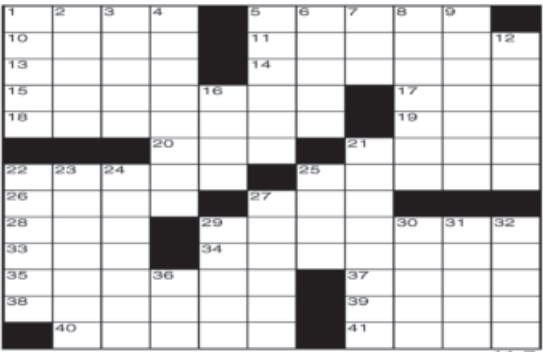
ACROSS

- 1 Bloke
- 5 Free tickets
- 10 Company symbol
- 11 Repellent
- 13 From the U.S.
- 14 Find very funny
- 15 Summoned
- 17 Dam-building org.
- 18 Big snakes
- 19 That woman
- 20 “...man — mouse?”
- 21 Do some modeling
- 22 Syrup-yielding tree
- 25 Party throwers
- 26 Lotion additive
- 27 Saloon

DOWN

- 1 Brooch part
- 2 Welcoming
- 3 FBI worker
- 4 Ship window
- 5 Solar halo
- 28 Knight’s title
- 29 Cost
- 33 Derby or bowler
- 34 Sanction
- 35 Familiar with
- 37 Shortly, in poems
- 38 Wrote
- 39 “What — for Love” (“A Chorus Line” song)
- 40 Constel-lation makeup
- 41 Young ones

- 6 Smells
- 7 Soccer’s Hamm
- 8 Friend of Aramis
- 9 Most charming
- 12 Rude looks
- 16 Golf cry
- 21 The “Mona Lisa,” for one
- 22 Musical mixture
- 23 Fake names
- 24 Omen
- 25 Door fastener
- 27 Rifle supports
- 29 After a while
- 30 “12 Angry Men” star
- 31 Eggshaped
- 32 Tears apart
- 36 Genetic stuff



WEDNESDAY’S ANSWERS

P	A	P	A	S	T	I	R	S
I	R	A	T	E	T	E	N	E
L	A	P	E	L	U	N	C	L
O	R	E	L	O	B	L	E	I
T	A	R	E	N	S	I	N	N
S	T	A	I	N	S	A	N	T
C	O	R	K	S	H	A	P	E
A	M	P	T	R	I	P	E	A
M	E	L	R	E	M	L	O	S
E	L	A	T	E	A	P	A	R
S	T	E	E	D	S	N	E	E

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