

## The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

### Will road safety remain a mirage?

#### Lack of political will to address systemic challenges is alarming

Despite suffering massive casualties year after year on the roads, Bangladesh just can't seem to solve the mystery of road safety. According to the latest data compiled by Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, 475 people were killed in road accidents in November alone, while another organisation, the Road Safety Foundation (RSF), put the number at 467. The RSF further reported that over 80 percent of the victims were aged between 18 and 65 years—the most productive segment of our population.

For a better understanding of the extent of devastation caused by road crashes, here are some more numbers. As per RSF data released in January, the loss of workforce caused by road crashes in 2022 amounted to Tk 23,460 crore in Bangladesh. Including damages to property, the figure would amount to more than 1.5 percent of our GDP. It is widely believed that even these startling numbers do not represent the real picture, as many such incidents go unreported. Add to that the psychological and financial scars that every family of a road crash victim/survivor has to endure.

At this point, what can we say about this menace that hasn't been said already? We all know where the problem truly lies: long-standing systemic challenges including poor road and traffic management, reckless driving, unfit vehicles being allowed on the streets, etc. We have yet to see the full implementation of the Road Transport Act, 2018, even though five years have passed since it was passed into law. That is mainly because the authorities are unable to withstand the pressure of the powerful transport owners' associations. Their lobbying effectively blocks or weakens every road safety measure that could be unfavourable for these vested interest groups.

It is ironic that the government has made great strides in developing communication and transportation systems over the last 15 years or so—building bridges, expressways, culverts, roads, etc—but still failed to ensure safety. This clearly indicates to a lack of political will to break the status quo. Six months ago, the government in collaboration with the World Bank rolled out a huge five-year project, with a budget of nearly Tk 5,000 crore, to make our roads safer. We are unsure how effective it will be if the underlying systemic challenges are not first addressed. What citizens need now are results, and they need that fast.

### Where will the erosion victims go?

#### Displaced families in Lalmonirhat need urgent support

Every year, thousands of people across the country fall victim to river erosion, leading to displacement from their ancestral land as well as separation from their loved ones. But government efforts to help them with shelter and livelihood opportunities have often been inadequate. This daily has published a number of reports in recent months detailing the miserable conditions in which these families are being forced to live. While many end up migrating to other places, those who remain—particularly the elderly population—struggle to manage shelter or even three meals a day.

In Lalmonirhat, according to a recent report, erosion of Teesta and Dharla riverbanks has affected at least 12,500 families over the last decade, devouring over 9,000 acres of arable land. There are 20-22 points in Teesta and Dharla shoal where erosion takes place every year, yet hardly any measure has been taken to prevent it or address the vulnerability of local communities. Another issue that deserves scrutiny is the plight of erosion victims. Reportedly, during the 10-year period, Tk 200 crore has been spent to monitor and prevent erosion in the district. If that was the case, why does it continue to devastate communities? Why do victims still need to live on abandoned railway lines, dykes or roads?

The situation is the same in other districts where river erosion has been a common phenomenon. For instance, around 70 percent of the land of one upazila in Sirajganj has been lost to the Jamuna over the past 20 years, leaving around 50,000 people from 50 villages homeless. We wonder how these people will bounce back without proper support.

It's disheartening that people who once had their own homes and lived a normal life are now having to live the life of refugees in their own country. We urge the government to take appropriate measures to address this situation, including by properly utilising climate funds to build resilience among vulnerable communities, addressing the Teesta crisis through bilateral negotiations, and better supporting erosion-affected families. Otherwise, these people will continue to suffer.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Preparing for a catastrophic earthquake

With unplanned and congested buildings, violations of building code, lacklustre monitoring and inadequate response infrastructure, coupled with a growing population, it seems more than likely that we will face an unfathomable humanitarian crisis if/when a major earthquake strikes Dhaka. Despite repeated warnings from experts and minor earthquakes like the one on December 2, whose epicentre was alarmingly close to the capital, the authorities appear unconcerned. So, should we assume that they have accepted our fate and are simply waiting for hundreds of thousands to die? I wholeheartedly hope that is not the case. So, I urge the authorities to take the safety of our lives seriously and work diligently to prepare for the aftermath of a major earthquake.

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Dhaka

# The consensus and clashes COP28 brought up



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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By the time you read this commentary, COP28, the international climate conference in Dubai, would be drawing the curtains, following various groups engaging in intense negotiations to reach an agreement. It is almost certain that in the end, some progress would be made on some of the contentious issues, but a decision to act on key areas—the pace of emissions reduction, sources of funding, and clean energy choices—will most likely be kicked down the road once again for COP29.

At the beginning of the gathering, there was some good news and some bad. First, the good ones. A number of announcements aimed at decarbonising the energy sector were made at COP28 on December 2.

Sultan al-Jaber revealed that 49 oil and gas companies, among others, have pledged to dramatically reduce methane leaks to “near zero” by 2030. Methane is a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. The COP28 Presidency also announced a renewable energy and energy efficiency pledge, which, along with the methane phaseout, is one of three components of a Global Decarbonization Accelerator (GDA).

The Green Climate Fund received an additional \$3 billion commitment from the US, in addition to the \$20 billion already committed by other countries. An undertaking by 117 countries, led by the EU, the US and the United Arab Emirates, also aims to triple renewable energy capacity worldwide by 2030 and double the “annual rate of energy efficiency” improvements. Finally, more than 20 countries signed a declaration with the aim to triple nuclear power capacity, currently at 370 gigawatts, to help achieve the “net zero” emissions target by 2050.

There were some disappointments and controversies, too. A few of the big names the organisers of COP28 were expecting, including presidents of the US and China and the pope, were unable to attend. It is well known that the US contributions are subject to the approval of Congress, and many of the Biden administration's global clean energy initiatives could be in limbo because the country is now mired in two wars.

On December 5, a *The New York Times* headline hit the nail on the head: “Finding Money to Fight Climate Crisis Is Big Obstacle at UN Summit.” And it always has been. Earlier, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres



Activists protested against fossil fuels on the sidelines of the COP28 in Dubai.

PHOTO: AFP

was dismissive. “The promises made clearly fall short of what is required,” he said.

“The world needs long term money,” said the prime minister of Barbados Mia Motley last weekend in a statement on behalf of a coalition of climate-vulnerable countries. “We give thanks to the progress made but it does nothing but assuage consciences. Choosing between people and the planet is a false choice. The world has enough funds.”

It has been known that all the steps discussed—whether it's tripling of renewable energy, adapting to the hazards of a hotter world, or compensating countries for the irreparable losses of climate change—require tons of money. As the *Times* aptly points out, unkept promises of aid have led to “mounting frustration” of leaders from the Global South. “Money is crucial to restoring confidence.”

The media has played up the comments made by al-Jaber, who got enmeshed in a verbal duel with Mary Robinson, the former Irish president. On November 21, during an online discussion, al-Jaber allegedly declared there was “no science” behind the call to urgently phase out fossil fuels as a way of limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees and said it would send humanity “back to the caves.”

However, after I listened to the entire video, it became clear that his response

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developing countries to adapt to climate change, \$300 billion by 2030, and warned that contributions so far are also an order of magnitude less.

On December 5, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a report with the headline “US Funding Hasn't Weaned Developing World Off Coal.” It detailed how South Africa and Indonesia received \$28.5 billion in funding to cut back on coal consumption, but pro-coal politicians

in both countries are questioning the economic and technical viability of replacing the fuel quickly, jeopardising the agreements.

Now for some ideas. The financial world also needs to consider “more creative ways to steer money” to countries across the globe that are struggling with high interest rates, officials say. Most of the money is now coming in the form of loans, increasing the borrower's debt burden.

If interest rates were to rise to seven percent from three, the cost of a new gas plant would rise only marginally, one recent analysis found. But, the cost of a new offshore wind farm or new solar farm would rise by roughly one-third.

Another reason for the higher cost to finance cleaner energy investment is the greater risk. The IEA and COP28 secretariat recommend that “Governments, alongside public and private financial institutions, must deliver assistance to de-risk investments and reduce the cost of capital.”

So, when COP28 ends, how many of the items would be in the “unresolved” box and have to be addressed in COP29? On this question, Prof Michael Spence, a Nobel laureate in economics, was candid. “Depending on whom you ask, the outlook ranges from deeply pessimistic to cautiously optimistic,” he wrote.

## Why is sexual harassment at workplaces still the norm?



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MAHEEN SULTAN

Sexual harassment, prevalent in both formal and informal sectors, has been a major deterrent to women's greater participation in the workforce. This form of abuse is not only limited to the workplace; it is seemingly all pervasive. It takes place, for instance, both on the way to work and in the areas they live, constricting the lives of those who wish to work.

Among the 60.8 million employed, an estimated 5.5 percent have experienced sexual abuse (7.4 percent urban women), and such abuse was particularly prevalent in the industries. This figure is most likely a gross underreporting. The Report on Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey 2015 for Bangladesh showed that 76.8 percent of physical violence took place in the husband's house, while 21.9 percent took place at the workplace. This just shows how grim the scenario is.

However, data on the frequency of sexual harassment at workplaces is varied, because definitions and perceptions vary. It is a sensitive

subject that is not easily captured in a survey, and the situation differs greatly depending on the type of workplaces surveyed.

Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) in collaboration with Institute of Development Studies (IDS) conducted research on “The gendered price of precarity: Young women navigating workplace sexual harassment” to study the experiences, voices, and agency of women working as domestic workers and agro-processing firm workers. The research found that there is a general awareness of workplace sexual harassment, although the language to articulate it is limited.

The experience of harassment is prevalent, with women and girls taking various strategies to prevent and cope with it, both at work and during the commute to work. If the abuse reaches a certain unacceptable level, the women leave the job or take various informal strategies to complain or deal with the perpetrator.

Meanwhile, gender-based violence

(GBV) has been a key concern since the early days of the ready-made garment (RMG) industry. A combination of complete control of managers over workers, and fear of losing their job has stopped workers from using formal channels to file official complaints or even voicing their grievances. In the early years of the sector, this was compounded by a lack of fair complaint mechanisms. Thus, sexual harassment and GBV became deeply enmeshed and normalised within the workplace environment of factories.

A large portion of female garment workers are migrants from rural areas and poor families, which means that they do not have local social support networks. At the workplace, supervisors are mostly male, which creates power imbalances, making the women more vulnerable and also less able to complain. Women employees remain in danger of various types of violence despite the fact that entry to the formal economy through the RMG industry has been economically beneficial for many women, as they attain steady employment. The Fair Wear Foundation found that 75 percent of female garment workers had experienced verbal violence at work, 30 percent experienced psychological violence and 20 percent physical violence.

While Bangladesh still has to ratify the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (C190), government policies and laws have already recognised the importance of making

sure that workplaces remain free of all forms of harassment and abuse, including sexual harassment.

The national action plans for National Women's Development Policy and to eliminate violence against women recognise the importance of addressing and ending sexual harassment at the workplace. Besides, in 2009, a High Court directive formulated guidelines to stop sexual harassment in educational institutions and workplaces. This included raising awareness and setting up prevention and complaints committees at all workplaces and educational institutions.

However, implementation is weak and even workplaces that have set up such committees have not been able to make them functional.

While there is increased knowledge about workplace sexual harassment in the RMG sector, we know much less about other formal sectors, the public sector, and the least about informal sectors, where the majority of women work. The BIGD/IDS research has brought out the dimensions related to the naming and protesting of such behaviour, but there is a need to expand and deepen the research on this topic to understand the variations, opportunities, and constraints for reducing such behaviour. Such an endeavour is also vital to establish complaint mechanisms, ensuring that women can avail opportunities to complain and seek redress.