

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Safe food still a far cry in Bangladesh

Presence of excessive 'trans fat' in soybean oil a threat to public health

Food safety has always been a big issue in Bangladesh with the departments responsible for ensuring food quality failing to play the role expected of them. While not much research has been done to know if what we eat every day is safe for consumption, the few studies that were done came up with dangerous revelations. One such study, conducted by the Dhaka University's Institute of Nutrition and Food Science and BRAC University's James P. Grant School of Public Health, has found that around 67 percent of bottled soybean oil in the local market contain trans fatty acids (TFA) above tolerable limits for human body; the level of trans fat in loose soybean oil is even higher. This is worrying as high levels of trans fat in food can cause long-term damage to health, including via high blood pressure and heart diseases.

Reportedly, in 2021, the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority formulated a policy to control trans fat in food products with the maximum tolerable level set at 2 percent. However, the recent study—done on 1,521 oil samples collected from each division—found their trans fat levels to be two to four times higher than expected levels. This means people who have been consuming the oil for years are likely already severely affected.

This is, unfortunately, just one example of how we are consuming toxic food without even knowing about it. In the past, we came across studies that found harmful heavy metals in pasteurised milk and turmeric powder. We do not know if anything has been done to improve their quality later. The damage that such unsafe food products cause to public health is unimaginable. But do our authorities care about it? Every year, around 80,000 people die due to air pollution-related diseases. Has anything substantial been done to check this? One can ask the same about dengue and other seasonal or long-ignored health threats.

But we cannot build a prosperous nation if the majority of the people are in ill health. Therefore, we urge the authorities to give proper attention to public health. The presence of trans fat in food items is one of those threats that have long-term implications and, therefore, must be addressed seriously. The authorities must conduct regular inspection of all food products and ensure they are safe to consume.

How long before our roads become safe?

2023 figures show safety concerns remain unaddressed

It is alarming to know that some 7,902 individuals were killed on roads in 2023, as per an estimate by Jatri Kalyan Samity. This is a horrific tragedy that we believe is a direct consequence of inaction and mismanagement by those in charge of our roads. When repeated appeals for safer roads fall on deaf ears, transgressions by transport associations are indulged, calls for accountability of relevant government institutions are ignored, and road crash victims do not get so much as an acknowledgement from the higher ups, we cannot help but call these deaths murder by indifference.

It's no surprise that our roads are so dangerous, thanks to the proliferation of unfit and unlicensed vehicles, reckless driving by people who are often appointed without adequate training (or even licenses), and violations of road safety rules and regulations that go unpunished. Often, transport owners push for dangerous competition and long work hours among drivers, thus causing accidents.

And these unhealthy practices are sustained year after year by the inaction, irregularities, and mismanagement of those in charge. Despite frequent criticism, there have been no improvements in our traffic control mechanisms. Both existing road safety policies and their implementations also remain inadequate. For example, even six years after the nationwide road safety movement, that led to the enactment of the Road Transport Act, it is frustrating to see the law's total lack of effect due to the undue concessions granted to transport associations.

Every year, whenever any organisation presents reports on road killings, the BRTA is seen disputing the numbers instead of playing their role to prevent road accidents. Even one death caused by their negligence and mismanagement is one too many. With several ministries and many institutions dedicated to the transport sector, Bangladesh seems well-positioned to take on this challenge. Yet, it has frequently allowed citizens' safety to be compromised by the interests of the powerful political-industrial complex that controls the sector. This has to stop. We urge the government to make a serious effort to ensure road safety going forward.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The struggles of winter

As Bangladesh confronts winter's icy grip, we mustn't overlook the struggles of the less fortunate. The cold presents a daunting challenge for those burdened by poverty, lacking adequate shelter. While some enjoy the warmth of home, a significant portion faces this harsh reality. It's vital for us to unite as a compassionate society, offering help through community initiatives, donations, or policy advocacy. Let's ensure no one is left out in the cold. This winter, let empathy and collective action define us, as we stand in solidarity with those most affected.

Shernia Sadiq
Mymensingh

The biggest risks facing our world in 2024



MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

The World Economic Forum (WEF) just released its annual Global Risks Report 2024, ahead of its annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland. The report presents a sobering assessment of current and future socio-economic and political situations, signalling a global risk landscape that is gradually eroding human development progress. Against a backdrop of escalating global conflicts, intensifying climate adversities, and growing societal discontent, the WEF report portrays a negative outlook, anticipating global shocks in the coming years.

The report delves into the current global risk landscape by exploring economic, environmental, geopolitical, societal, and technological issues. Drawing on insights from the Global Risks Perception Survey, the report identifies significant risks in both the short and long terms. The survey, which was conducted among 1,490 risk experts (primarily from the business sector but also representing academia, government, and civil society), asked respondents about prominent risks in the areas of the economy, environment, politics, society, and technology.

Approximately 54 percent of respondents foresee instability and moderate risks, while another 27 percent anticipate increased turbulence. Only 16 percent respondents expect a stable outlook in the next two years. Looking further into the future, 63 percent have a turbulent outlook of the next decade, with fewer than 10 percent anticipating a calm situation. These responses underscore experts' widespread concern regarding global stability in the years to come.

The report looks at four structural forces shaping global risks, such as climate change, demographic divides, technological acceleration, and geostrategic shifts. As per the WEF report, the biggest risks for the world over the next two years are: misinformation and disinformation, extreme weather events, societal polarisation, cyber insecurity, interstate armed conflict, lack of economic opportunity, inflation, involuntary migration, economic downturn, and pollution.

As for the next 10 years, some of the risks identified (in order) are: extreme weather events, critical change to Earth systems, biodiversity



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

loss and ecosystem collapse, natural resource shortages, misinformation and disinformation, and adverse outcomes of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies.

Specifically, the report cautions about a troubling future, marked by a rise in false, AI-generated information. It mentions that advanced technology and declining trust are making manipulated information more powerful. Misinformation and disinformation are significant global risks, exacerbated by user-friendly interfaces for powerful AI models. Hence, it has become challenging to filter out false content.

While new regulations are being introduced by governments for both content hosts and creators, the regulation of generative AI is still in its early stages. These efforts may support existing measures, but the response might not be able to keep up with the fast-paced development of this field.

The Global Risks Report comes at a time when the world is likely going to experience a lot of false or inaccurate information. In 2024, about half the world's population is expected to take part in elections in over 50 countries.

The growing use of AI, especially tools like deepfakes, raises concerns about the spread of false information, posing a significant threat to the

fairness of voter influence. False information during elections can seriously undermine the legitimacy of newly elected governments, leading to potential political unrest, violence, terrorism, and a gradual erosion of democratic processes in the long run.

Recent technological advancements, especially in AI, make it easier to create and spread fake

extremists, social media personalities, or business leaders can exploit this discord to expand their influence.

False information and unreliable content might be used to make digital authoritarianism stronger. It is no secret that technology is often used to control people. As such, governments might decide what is true, giving political groups the power to control

information, particularly through social media. Misinformation and disinformation go beyond politics, shaping people's views of reality. False information harms how people see the world, creating problems for society and individuals' mental health. Clearly, the spread of false information can have far-reaching effects, influencing national elections and leading to protests or even violence.

When people strongly believe in different things, they are more likely to trust information that aligns with their beliefs, even if it is not objectively accurate. Plus, if people already lack trust in the government and media, questioning the truth of information can make societal divisions even worse. This not only impacts politics but also affects areas like health, justice, education, and the environment. Fake information can also lead to more fights, discrimination in workplaces, violent protests, hate crimes, and terrorism.

Governments and online platforms, in their efforts to safeguard free speech, face challenges in tackling false information and harmful content. Differing opinions on what the truth is lead to various groups harbouring conflicting views of reality. Influential individuals such as conspiracy theorists, politicians,

talks and silence people who disagree with them, such as journalists and critics. Sometimes, citizens even face punishment and political repression for not aligning their views with the unfounded narrative that is promoted.

The findings of the WEF's latest Global Risks Report are quite relevant to Bangladesh since many of the short-term and long-term issues have already been experienced or witnessed in the country. The prevalence of misinformation and disinformation as a challenge, for example, is already observed here. During the recent 12th national election, people were flooded with information on social media, and were often confused about the authenticity of that information. Consumers of this online content had no alternative sources to turn to. As a result, even many digitally literate people have fallen for false and inaccurate information. While this is a global challenge and the solution requires collective actions, a lot has to be done domestically, too. Though technology has now become a source of risk, it can also help us avoid the same risks. We need to invest more in traditional education and technological literacy in order to improve our awareness of how to differentiate between fake and authentic information.

Dipu deserved better than a death-by-disregard

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MORSALINE MOJID

After around 10 years, I finally found Dipu again. A video of her dying after being struck by a fallen brick chip, while walking by an under-construction building, is going viral on our news feeds. Usually, when such news comes up, we tend to scroll by it quickly. Only this time, the pedestrian has a significant designation. She was a senior assistant director at Bangladesh Bank. She is, or I should say was, my dear friend Dipu Sana.

Dipu was a student of sociology at Dhaka University. A sharp, simple girl, with a tremendous sense of humour. Like me, she used to tutor a student of Class 5. We became close by exchanging notes and suggestions for both of our students. Dipu was very dedicated to her students, even though the honorarium she received was a lot less than what was normal back then. The reason behind this was that she never asked for more. That was Dipu: she didn't ask for anything,

didn't complain about anything. Yet, she was quite aware and observant.

Eventually, I was able to find a better tuition offer for her. The student was the daughter of a Dhaka University faculty member. I gave her a detailed lesson on how to ask for a specific salary and be firmer about the total time she would spend tutoring each month. But Dipu being Dipu, didn't say a word. The teacher's wife called me, "Morsaline, what is with this girl? She seems to be okay with everything!"

The student's entire family became a fan of Dipu's within a very short period of time, thanks to her dedication and hard work. The DU professor called me a year later. He had noticed that Dipu had become a bit absent-minded. In reality, she was frustrated for not being able to land a job and also due to some family issues. The teacher offered to help Dipu in her quest for a job. But again, Dipu never asked for anyone's help.

It was in her character to notice the needs of others. Dipu came into my life when I needed a friend. I was

judged, misunderstood, and cornered in my department. Dipu, without ever judging me or asking any questions, supported me through and through. We used to talk about our dreams, hurdles, and more. I'd always wanted to study and live abroad. Dipu never wanted to leave this country. She always told me, "Duita kotha kowar keu nai, apon manush nai, jeye ki hobe?" ("There'll be no one to talk to, no one to call my own. What will I gain from going abroad?")

As proud as I was seeing her at public service, my heart bleeds now

seeing how this country failed her. Torun Da (her husband) perhaps would always think that Dipu could be alive today if they had gone through with moving to Canada. Often, we talk about brain drain in Bangladesh. But what are the causes behind brain drain? And why is it that someone as innocent as one can be has to breathe their last like Dipu did, while simply going about her day and walking back to her three-year-old son? Was it a death by accident? What qualifies a death to be an accident, really? An accident is an unfortunate and

unexpected event that could not be avoided even after taking necessary precautions. It is expected that someone could accidentally drop a brick while working on a multi-storied construction site. However, it is not an accident that there were no safety measures taken by those leading the construction to prevent that brick from falling down on a living, breathing person. It is not only intentional but also shows a sheer disrespect of human lives and disregard for minimum safety standards.

People are killed in the strangest ways in Bangladesh, for which no one is punished. The way Dipu's death happened is not unique; it is common. A 10-year-old boy in 2017, a construction worker in 2019, a ready-made garment worker in 2021, and a shopkeeper in 2022 died in similar ways. We are callous and such deaths barely touch us anymore. At most, we would tell our close ones to be careful near construction sites. It is time for us to question what we are doing to make this country safe for ourselves and for our close ones. This time, it was my friend. The next incident could claim your life or that of a loved one unless we start doing things differently.