

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## PM's timely call to tame inflation

### People also expect to see some results sooner than later

We welcome the prime minister's call to different ministers to take steps to lower the prices of essentials. The PM stressed that the government must ensure that middlemen are unable to manipulate the market, which is one of the leading causes behind inflation persisting in Bangladesh. Despite most South Asian nations succeeding in reigning in inflation in 2023, Bangladesh has failed to do the same, much to the chagrin of citizens. Even Sri Lanka, which witnessed one of its worst economic crises since independence, brought down consumer prices following an unprecedented spike. Bangladesh, on the other hand, witnessed an average increase in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) of 9.42 percent in November.

People have suffered tremendously as a result, despite global prices of commodities falling in recent months. This clearly shows that the recent inflation surge has been driven not so much by external factors as by internal issues. These include a 28 percent depreciation of the taka against the US dollar since February last year, and persistent foreign currency shortages, driven by a 30 percent drop in the reserves, leading to import restrictions. Economists have blamed the central bank for not using monetary tools the way other central banks did around the world. Meanwhile, they have also blamed regulators for not being able to stop big players in the food supply chain from misusing their market power to gouge prices.

Even in December, inflation remained at more than 9 percent for the 10th straight month. Though it eased a bit due to the arrival of winter vegetables, market trends suggest that prices of food have not fallen, rather the rate of price increase has slowed down due to supply-side factors. The persistence of corruption and high public expenditure, in the form of unnecessary cost overruns of projects and operating costs, means that the government's fiscal policy has also failed to align with the target of lowering inflation.

All the measures taken to bring down inflation have either been too late, or too inefficient. Therefore, the PM's demand to see results from different ministries is a timely one. The fact that she also talked about addressing corruption and irregularities is equally important. We, therefore, hope that the ministries concerned will take heed of her message, and ensure transparency and accountability in governance which can help prices to finally come down.

## Why this constant onslaught on nature?

### Razing of hills in Bandarban and elsewhere must stop

It's frustrating to see the total indifference of those in charge of saving our forests, hills and rivers when, one by one, these irreplaceable natural elements are being ravaged or degraded. Over the years, we have published countless reports showing how we are losing nature's precious gifts to human greed. Sadly, such reports did little to stir the conscience of the relevant authorities. On Tuesday, this daily again published a picture in which a hill in Chinipara of Bandarban's Chimbuk area is seen being ravaged by local influentials to build a road to carry illegally felled trees. One crime is being committed to enable another. We must ask: how can people so openly destroy hills and trees despite there being departments responsible for them?

Politically powerful quarters across the country are similarly involved in all kinds of illegal businesses that are directly affecting our nature. What's more shocking is how many government projects have been undertaken over the years without the slightest consideration for nature. Building a residential training facility in Khuniya Palong of Ramu, Cox's Bazar or a road through Ramu reserve forest are just two examples of state-led onslaughts on forests. If this trend continues, the government can hardly expect to fulfil its COP commitment of stopping deforestation and increasing forestland by 25 percent by 2030.

Besides destroying forests, hill cutting has also remained rampant. We have seen how vested quarters cut hills in Chattogram's Lohagara upazila for constructing houses, and how many small and medium-sized hills in Tangail were cut to fill up low-lying areas and wetlands. Again, all of these were done without any consideration for the environment or the ecosystem of the areas involved. In many cases, the local administration was allegedly complicit in such crimes, while the Department of Environment (DoE) also completely failed to do its job.

But whatever the reason, nothing can justify hill cutting or forest destruction. Those who are destroying our environment and those responsible for them must understand that unless we stop such practices, the environmental cost would soon be unrecoverable.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Two years of gas crisis?

At a time when many households are suffering from a severe gas crisis, the state minister for power, energy and mineral resources has said that people will have to wait at least two more years to get uninterrupted supply. This comes amid reports that gas distribution companies have proposed a hike in the monthly gas bill for households—from Tk 1,080 to Tk 1,592. In simple terms, it means that the latter will have to pay more for less gas if the proposed tariff is greenlit. This is totally unacceptable. Any increase at this moment will undoubtedly exacerbate people's sufferings and likely further increase prices of essentials. The government must address the gas crisis more carefully.

Sulaiman Sikder  
Cumilla

# Structural killings, not road 'accidents'



Kallol Mustafa  
is an engineer and writer  
who focuses on power,  
energy, environment and  
development economics.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

Cognitive scientist and usability engineer Don Norman, in his best-selling book *The Design of Everyday Things*, wrote that when an error causes an injury or death, a special committee is convened to investigate the cause and, almost without fail, the guilty parties are identified. The next step is to accuse and punish them with fines and/or imprisonment. But this doesn't fix the problem as the same error will occur over and over again. To counter this, Norman suggested that when an error happens, we should determine why it happened and then redesign the product or the procedures being followed so that the error never recurs. Even if it does, having this redesign mechanism in place will ensure the error has minimal impact.

This is why Tripod Beta—the world-renowned and widely used accident analysis methodology—rather than focusing on blaming the individual that made the error, concentrates on the logical analysis of these error-inducing systemic influences. For each accident, Tripod Beta uncovers 1) an "immediate cause" (the human action or decision that led to the accident), 2) the factors or the "preconditions" which resulted in the behaviour/decision, and 3) the "underlying causes" or systemic factors (such as policy, culture, design, leadership, and more) which created the preconditions. Implementing the remedies to improve these structural factors often takes time and resources, but does have wider implications and benefits in terms of accident prevention.

However, in Bangladesh, much emphasis is put on the behaviour of individuals during the causal analysis of accidents while the underlying structural factors are neglected. This trend is most visible when the causes behind road accidents are analysed. For example, causes which are highlighted in accident analyses include the reckless attitude of the driver, the dangerous speed of the vehicle, lack of necessary skills and licence to drive the vehicle, etc. None of this is unimportant. But do we analyse why thousands of drivers behave in the same reckless manner, how they can drive on highways without having the necessary skills and licences, and why no action is taken against them when they exceed the speed limit? These key questions are rarely raised.

Thus, no matter how much criticism is aimed towards the apparent factors behind accidents, if we keep neglecting the root causes, the occurrence of

road accidents will never become less frequent. This is why we see the number of road crashes stacking up year on year. According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, at least 9,951 people were killed and 12,356 injured in 6,749 road crashes in 2022, which was the highest in the previous eight years. The number of road accidents increased by 18.89 percent while fatalities rose by 27.43 percent in 2022 compared with the same numbers in 2021.

In the case of many road crashes, it is identified that the driver did not have a valid licence or proper training. No doubt, a driver should be held accountable for driving without a licence. But if the unlicensed driver was prevented from driving, either by the authorities or by the vehicle's owner, would it have been possible for him to cause the crash in the first place?

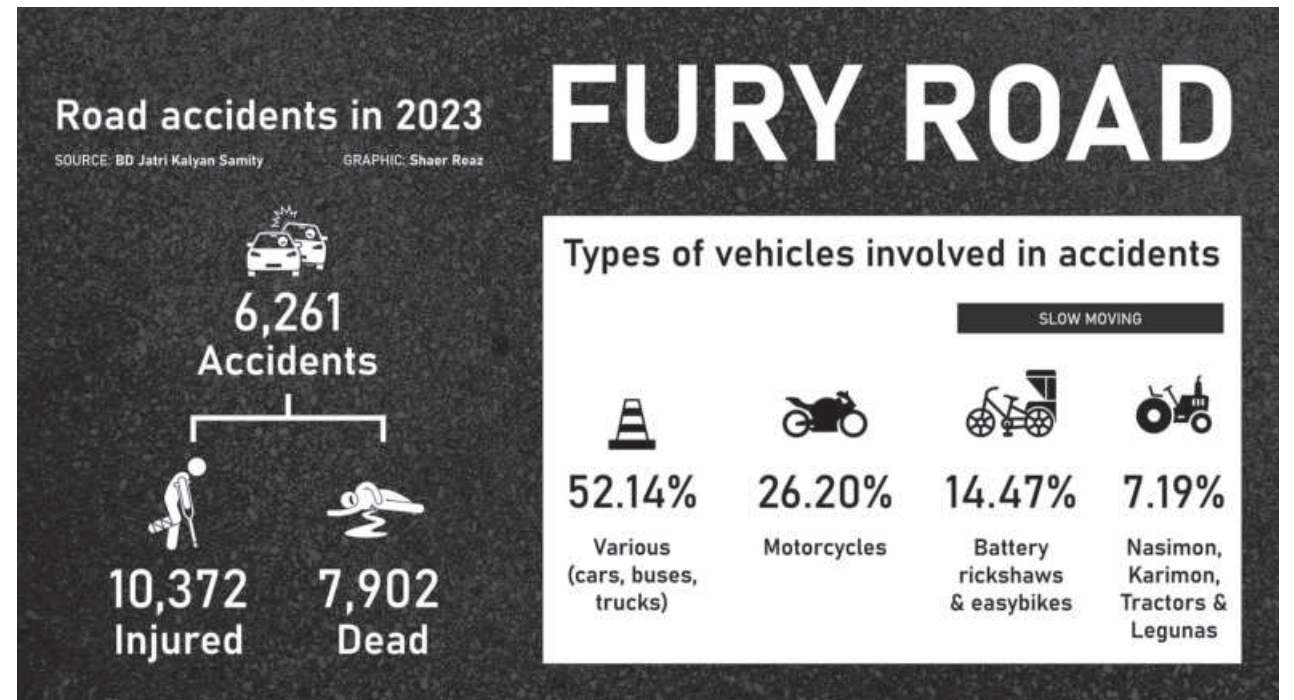
Bangladesh lacks institutional arrangements for training drivers. In most cases, one becomes a driver after being a helper/conductor who was personally trained by a senior driver. As a result, unlicensed drivers were found to be at the wheels of at least 10 lakh registered vehicles, according to 2022 data from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority. Moreover, most bus owners rent out buses to drivers on a daily contract. So, to maximise income, drivers steer the buses recklessly to compete with other buses, thus causing crashes. So while

the driver is responsible for the crash itself, the root cause is much deeper and implicates the vehicle owner and the government by extension.

A similar situation is observed in the case of unfit vehicles. More than five lakh registered vehicles are on Bangladesh's roads which do not have a fitness clearance. Although

Against every 10,000 motorcycles in the country, 28.4 persons die in crashes annually. However, in Vietnam, a country where motorcycles are much more widely used than in Bangladesh, this number is only 4.1 while it is 9 in India.

According to the World Health Organization, the correct use of



a lot of investment is made for the construction of roads and highways, the capacity of the regulatory authority is not even enhanced enough to ensure that the licence of drivers and the fitness of vehicles are existent and up-to-date.

According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, 28.59 percent of the vehicles involved in crashes in 2022 were motorcycles, 11.42 percent were battery-powered rickshaws and easy bikes, three-wheelers, and 8.32 percent were vehicles like nasimon, karimon, Mahindra tractors, and Toyota lagunas. Of course, the dangerous movement of these vehicles on the highways can be blamed for these accidents. But if we do not raise the question of why the world's most expensive highways do not have separate lanes for slow-moving vehicles, and if no alternatives are provided for short distance travel, people will continue to use these risky vehicles out of necessity.

In fact, it is because of the crisis in the public transport system that motorcycles have become more popular in Bangladesh. The production and sale of motorcycles in the country have gained pace due to favourable government policy, but the capacity to enforce necessary safety measures has not been bolstered proportionately. As a result, although it ranks last in the number of motorcycle users per capita, Bangladesh has the highest death rate due to motorcycle crashes in the world.

helmets can reduce the risk of death in a crash by more than six times. So, by ensuring the manufacturing and/or import of quality helmets in the country and enforcing their use among motorcyclists, the rate of deaths due to motorcycle crashes can be significantly reduced. In Vietnam, for example, the helmet use law, Driving Under Influence law, and lower speed limits have evidently reduced the number of motorcycle-related crash fatalities.

Regular deaths on the highways of Bangladesh have become quite a "normal" thing. Those who are prematurely killed on these highways become mere numbers. The dreams of a human being and the hopes and aspirations of a family are lost behind statistics. But are these tragic deaths really accidents? By definition, an "accident" is an unforeseen, unexpected, and sudden event. But when certain incidents occur again and again for similar reasons—reasons linked to the structure of the country's transport system—they can no longer be called accidents. These incidents, then, become structural killings. In this structure, the interests of the owners of unfit vehicles, unlicensed drivers, extortionist owners' associations, brokers, and government regulatory agencies are intertwined. Unless these vested groups are demolished and the structural problems are resolved, the procession of premature deaths by road crashes will not stop.

## Decolonising minds in the Global South



Andrew Sheng  
is a distinguished fellow of Asia Global Institute  
at University of Hong Kong, and chief adviser to  
the China Banking Regulatory Commission.

ANDREW SHENG

What does the "decline" of the West mean? After Ukraine and Gaza, the line between the West and the Rest (what is today called the Global South) has been drawn up clearer than ever. In Ukraine, the West expected the Rest to support its principled stance in fighting for national sovereignty, freedom to choose, and against aggression from neighbours. The West was surprised that the Rest did not fall in line, with many abstaining from taking sides. In abandoning diplomacy and balance in favour of weaponising everything, the collective West (the US, Europe, Japan, and Australasia) is increasingly isolating itself from the Rest, divided into the East (strangely grouped as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea) and the Global South (comprising those countries which refuse to be aligned either with the East or the West).

Today's modernity is clearly associated with the West, which has set the scientific, educational, and cultural standards since the 15th century, when Portuguese and Spanish explorers opened up the Americas, Africa, and the Asian maritime trade routes.

Colonisation became a land and power grab by Europeans against the Rest, with the use of superior military firepower, energy, and industrial and financial technology.

When the US took over the global hegemon mantle from the British empire after the end of the Second World War, many former colonies were brought into the neoliberal ideology that free trade and markets, democracy, rule of law, and equality would be a universal creed for all nations and cultures. That naive belief ended when inequality within the West itself widened, even as the gap with the Rest narrowed. Neoliberal idealism shattered as the West's middle class began to turn toward protectionism, industrial policy and in the case of Israel, military occupation and subjugation of Palestinian rights.

The Palestinian-American father of post-colonial studies, Edward Said, said: "Part of the main plan of imperialism...is that we will give you your history, we will write it for you, we will re-order the past...What's more truly frightening is the defacement, the mutilation, and ultimately the

eradication of history in order to create...an order that is favourable to the United States."

The colonisation of the mind, which is the ultimate aim of imperialism, is achieved when the colonised, slave, or vassal believes that the imperial power is superior to his or her own culture. Mental slavery is more frightening than physical slavery.

Decolonisation means different things to different peoples, depending on their own colonial or near-colonial history. In former colonies like India and South Africa, the British "Raj" mentality is being replaced by home-grown narratives in which the countries seek "strategic autonomy" for foreign affairs, and greater sovereignty (some call it nationalism) in owning data and developing control or regulation over generative AI. But no one has total sovereignty if a handful of platforms can use AI to obtain full data about how individuals and entire nations are thinking or behaving.

We are in an uncharted mental territory. The self-order of free markets is being replaced by an unpredictable non-order, arising from competition by new state-market bureaucracies that are neither fully elected nor humanely designed. The new order may even be machine- or AI-generated. Where is justice in AI-generated algorithms being able to order the execution by missile strike or drone of someone branded a terrorist outside legal jurisdiction? Who will enforce natural justice when the system systematically dehumanises humanity

by treating individuals as digits to be manipulated, controlled, or deleted?

In an over-crowded planet, the system is inherently unstable when we attempt to resolve differences via conflict and war. As history has shown, war begets more war.

If there is a fundamental difference between the West and the Rest, it is that the theory-biased, principles-based West often forgets history and context, opting for fundamental "principles" of inalienable rights to guide its action. Russian historians remember that it was the Western Europeans (Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany) who invaded Russia twice in the last two centuries. The Israeli expansion of territory in Palestine over time is also there for all to see.

The paradox of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals is that the Global South must find its own paths and intellectual paradigms in a diverse search for sustainable living. Decolonisation of the mind requires the courage to reject the unsustainable, but also to find new pathways that are more holistic and democratically legitimate than the old.

In short, decolonisation is a journey waiting to unfold. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado, in his famous poem "Caminante, no hay camino" ("Traveller, there is no road"), made the point that the road is made by walking on it. In a post-Western world, the Global South must walk its own paths in search of a more peaceful and sustainable future.