

The Daily Star

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## No more toxic ships on our shores

### Govt must address plaguing issues in ship-breaking sector

Despite countless pledges to ensure the safety and rights of workers, corporations around the world seemingly take advantage of the fact that Bangladesh is a country where regulations take a backseat. No more is this evident than in our homegrown, hazardous ship-breaking industry. Out of the 446 ships scrapped around the world last year, 170 were wrecked on the shores of Chattogram. Of them, 159 were built before 2002, when the cancer-causing material asbestos, widely used to insulate ships, was banned. This means there are high chances that our workers, unbeknownst to them, have been exposed to this hazard.

A report in this daily highlighted that none of the dismantled ships carried a flag of the country where their company is based, which conceals the owners' identity. What's concerning is that these ships have actually arrived from some countries—including Greece and Japan—that are bound by international regulations. The tactic is as such: cash-buyers from countries like St Kitts and Nevis, Comoros and Palau purchase these ships, offering a "last voyage" package, and send the vessels to our shores for dismantling. Such coordinated evasion of binding pledges is purely sinister.

Let us, however, not ignore our own shortcomings. There's a reason Bangladesh's ship-breaking industry is booming: the absence of regulations and oversight. For years, experts and activists have been voicing concerns on behalf of the workers, who regularly get injured—or even meet their demise—in the shipyards. To illustrate the crisis, since 2009, as many as 447 workers have died in these yards, and past studies have found that up to a third of the workers suffer from asbestosis, a chronic lung condition. Many have fallen to their death, in absence of any safety gear. Ship-breaking is not only taking lives, but is also damaging the ecosystem as the hazardous chemicals seep into our water and soil.

And yet, we have seen efforts of shipyard owners to reduce regulation. Last year, it was reported that Bangladesh Ship Breakers and Recyclers Association was putting pressure on the government to do away with the need to obtain environmental impact assessments. This is unacceptable. While we acknowledge that this sector heavily contributes to our economy, its current form cannot be encouraged. For this industry to be sustainable, it must follow international regulations, adhere to high safety standards, and must fight the practice of international companies obscuring information about ships. We also have to analyse the sector's economic output, as the country's \$6.5 billion steel re-rolling industry gets only 10 percent of its steel from ship-breaking. Above everything, we must save our workers from the disturbing reality of putting their lives on the line to make ends meet.

## Will rivers exist only in our nostalgia?

### It's time for the govt to take the death of our lifelines seriously

Time and again, we have seen how our rivers, the lifelines of this country, are losing their lives to human greed and negligence. From rampant encroachment to indiscriminate sand-lifting, many of these water bodies are clinging to their last breath, while the authorities are seemingly unconcerned about the dire consequences of a riverless Bangladesh. So unconcerned, in fact, that they too are involved in killing many of our rivers. In a quite helpless manner, we have no option but to hope that the government will take this crisis seriously soon enough, because only the government can stop this devastation.

Recent reports published in this daily have illustrated just how grim the situation is. For instance, the Halda riverbank in Chattogram's Fatikhkhari has lost all semblance of greenery over the last six years, due to unchecked, illegal soil extraction. The level of "unchecked" is apparent by the fact that influential soil lifters have actually constructed a bridge to transport the soil on trucks, while the authorities turned a blind eye.

Meanwhile, the Louhajang River in Tangail—once a boon for trade, agriculture and navigation—is under threat due to unabated encroachment and pollution. Its woes started when the Water Development Board constructed a sluice gate in 1992, disrupting navigability. Unplanned garbage-dumping amid a lack of local waste management and establishment of factories and textile mills on its bed are further pushing the river to its demise. Mayur and Sonai rivers in Khulna and Sylhet, respectively, are reeling from a similar fate brought on by dam construction, encroachment and pollution.

When the scenario is so clear, and the issues so apparent, it's baffling to see the authorities ignoring the condition of our rivers for as long as we can remember. Whenever news of a particular dying river is brought up, they either claim ignorance or promise to "look into the matter." How could the authorities be unaware when government agencies themselves often contribute to this crisis? Or is the level of monitoring so abysmal? All this just points to a severe lack of will on the authorities' part to save and protect our rivers. All the government needs to do now is wake up, realise the horrific ramifications of dying water bodies, and do everything in its power to make sure that our rivers are alive and thriving.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Living conditions of service class

It's a reality that all the facilities of city life are dependent on a massive population of service class—rickshaw pullers, bus drivers, cleaners, shopowners—and it's a harsh truth that in Dhaka, the living conditions of these service providers, most of whom live in slums or low-income, underprivileged residential areas, are nothing short of inhumane. It is the moral duty of the city authorities to invest into improving their living conditions. I urge the authorities to make this a priority so such a significant part of our urban population can live an easy and dignified life.

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# The violence of silencing a rape survivor



THE SOUND & THE FURY

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SUSHMITA S PREETHA

We must come to terms with the reality that we live in a country where a woman seeking medical assistance at a One-Stop Crisis Centre, after allegedly being raped by an upazila chairman, can be "abducted" in broad daylight by a group of 10-12 men, in front of the media and human rights activists, with no repercussions at all. The confounding details, for those not following the story, is such: the young woman, an honours student from Dumuria upazila in Khulna, was admitted to the OCC of Khulna Medical College Hospital at around 11 pm on Saturday. There, she told her doctors that she had been raped by the Dumuria upazila chairman, Ejaz Ahmed, earlier that evening at his office in Shahpur Bazar. When asked whether she wanted to file a case, she said she did not trust the police to take her case seriously and would only do so through a court.

The next day, she was discharged by the hospital at around 4:30 pm. Outside the OCC, local human rights activists and the media were waiting to offer her legal support and record her story. But before they could speak to her, a group of men, led by Rudhagra Union Parishad Chairman Gazi Touhiduzzaman—also nephew of the alleged rapist—blocked their way. A video of the incident shows that the men essentially pushed the survivor and her mother into the vehicle, shoving aside and assaulting the journalists and activists who tried to stop them from leaving. According to *The Daily Star's* Khulna correspondent, who was present at the site, the locals managed to apprehend Touhiduzzaman, who could not get into the microbus amid the commotion, and essentially held him hostage till the police traced the woman and her mother.

Forced to take some action, police apparently located the vehicle somewhere in Jashore and instructed them to come back with the mother-daughter duo. After a five-hour wait, the two were returned to the police station, where the seemingly distraught woman declared in front of journalists that she had "voluntarily" gotten into the car. When asked whether she had been raped, she said she was too sick to comment on it further. The police then let them go. One woman and several young men



COLLAGE: REHNUMA PROSHOON

who brought them back said they were taking them home. When the local correspondents checked on them the next day, their family members claimed they did not return home. The police, meanwhile, say they have nothing to do on the matter since no case has been filed.

That justice for rape survivors is a mirage in this country is no news, with a miserable conviction rate of three percent in rape cases. We know about insensitive policing that detracts women and girls from seeking justice in the first place, the victim-blaming that takes place at every step of the process, and the long and painful wait for a verdict—with the cost of the proceedings raking up with each postponed hearing—when one knows that it is likely to set the perpetrator free in the end. We know how women and their families who dare to take on the cases are humiliated, harassed and threatened by the rapists and their supporters—from neighbours to village power brokers to state institutions, such as law enforcement agencies and local government bodies. And when the perpetrator is someone closely or even remotely associated with power, the very act of demanding

justice is tantamount to seeking a life sentence for oneself, with the system posed to protect the perpetrator at every step of the way.

It is, thus, hardly a surprise that the woman did not want to file a case with police, and by the way police acted in the preceding debacle—as if they are passive bystanders who don't have a

and as needed, we are horrified that whatever was shared with the doctors and support staff became public knowledge even before the survivor could come to a decision about whether to file a case or not.

Now, the woman's extended family, who initially had told the media that she had indeed been raped, has

constitutional duty to act when they see injustice and criminal activities taking place in front of them—she was right to think she would get no help from them if she named the upazila chairman as the perpetrator. One does not need a vivid imagination to infer what she must have faced in the five hours that she remained missing and the conclusions she was forced to come to; and yet, the police have taken the woman's word at face value. Had local journalists and activists not apprehended the chairman's nephew during the alleged abduction, the police would probably not even have tracked the vehicle in question.

And what does it say about our rape crisis support that a survivor doesn't even have the minimum level of privacy or security to walk out of there in peace? It is worth asking how the alleged perpetrator's men got to know about the accusation unless information was leaked from the OCC or the police station itself. The local media was apparently "tipped off" by their internal sources, as, we assume, were the men who showed up the next day. While the OCC should prioritise the victim's needs and privacy, and provide protective custody/shelter if

changed their tune, claiming that it was all a misunderstanding. No doubt there's a huge incentive—whether negative, positive or both—for such a change of heart. As for the survivor, she is apparently at a relative's house in a neighbouring village from where the family plans to marry her off to a suitable groom.

And so a dramatic story comes to a tragic but predictable end. We won't know the extent of the violence inflicted upon her (if any). We won't be privy to the insurmountable trauma that she must bear throughout her life, denied even the bare minimum of the right to seek justice for an inexcusable crime committed against her. We won't find out whether she was mentally or physically tortured in the five hours she was in the vehicle for speaking out her truth. And we won't know how much pressure she must be facing from her family, the chairman's men and state-backed apparatuses to withdraw whatever allegation she had the audacity to make in the first place.

Sure, we cannot know whether the chairman really did rape her—and the real tragedy is that we probably never will.

## How to lower road travel speed and save lives

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RITU MISHRA and SOAMES JOB

Managing travel speeds on the roads of Asia and the Pacific will save lives and avoid costly, often debilitating, injuries. Recent studies show that each one percent drop in average speed will deliver a four percent decrease in road-crash-related deaths and 3.5 percent fewer casualties. This could help lower the staggering annual toll of 11.9 lakh lives lost to road traffic accidents worldwide. In Asia and the Pacific, more than 2,000 people lose their lives in road crashes every day and many more sustain serious life-changing injuries, according to Asian Development Bank estimates.

Policies designed to reduce road travel speeds are usually focused on education and enforcement. To bring about sustained change, road design and features as well as vehicle technology are also important.

Here are some of the most effective ways that policymakers can use to lower road traffic speeds in their countries:

**Enforcement and behaviour change:** Enforcement can be effective if drivers believe that they will be caught for speeding and cannot avoid the penalty. Three proven enhancements increase

these beliefs and reduce speeding (driving at speeds above the limit).

First, the use of speed cameras, including mobile speed cameras, if the country is ready for them, enhances the driver's belief that the penalty cannot be avoided. The introduction of speed cameras should be prominently

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publicised to the community weeks before they are deployed.

Second, public education and campaign messages should focus on the risk of being caught for speeding and the significant penalties, not on crash risk.

Third, minimal "enforcement tolerance" should be adopted, so that drivers are penalised for speeding at 3km/h or 4km/h above the limit, rather than setting the tolerance at 8km/h or even 10km/h above the limit. This change should also be strongly publicised weeks in advance of implementing it. Given that these changes might be unexpected for many, it is important to clearly

communicate the supporting evidence and psychological rationale behind these adjustments.

**Road design and speed-managing infrastructure:** Many road design features are proven to manage speed, including speed humps or bumps, chicanes, raised platform crossings, lane narrowing, gateway treatments, and well-designed roundabouts. These are all shown to reduce speeds and reduce numbers of serious crashes.

Lower speed limits are also needed, as reflected in global trends of urban speed limits being lowered in many countries from 50-60km/h to 40km/h, and now 30km/h and even 20km/h in areas with pedestrians. Asia-Pacific countries are making increasing use of 30km/h speed limits, though much wider application is urgently needed.

Speed-managing infrastructure such as speed bumps, roundabouts or traffic circles are more powerful and sustainable than enforcement. Such traffic calming measures are more effective in reducing speeds than relying on drivers to believe they will be caught and to slow down. Such interventions work all day, every day and cannot be avoided or disputed by the driver, giving them a direct role without relying on a compliant driver.

**Vehicle technology:** Speed-managing vehicle technology is becoming more common, with the increasing availability of GPS (Global Positioning System) in vehicles which can let drivers know the speed limits at its current location.

This can take various forms: speed

governing which prevents a vehicle from exceeding a particular maximum speed; GPS-based speed-limiting to the actual limit; and GPS-based warnings to the driver when exceeding the limit. Technologies that limit speeds, rather than just warn the driver, are the most powerful.

**Reducing speed through modal shifts and city planning:** Speeds can also be reduced through sound city planning policies combined with incentivising shifts to transport modes other than personal vehicles. Opportunities include focusing development of commercial areas around public transport nodes, bus rapid transit systems replacing some lanes on multi-lane roads, and city planning to reduce the travel required to access services.

Lower speeds deliver multiple benefits including to the economy. These can be achieved through road design and infrastructure, vehicle technologies, urban planning, modal shifts, and effective deterrence.

Benefit-to-cost ratios for many speed-reducing interventions show that they are excellent investments for governments. Given the benefits of lower speeds and their cost-effectiveness, implementing stronger speed management is not a question of "Can we afford to do this?" but "Can we afford not to do this?"

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