

## The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

### We must protect vulnerable migrants

#### Alarming revelation about undocumented workers in Libya raises questions

It breaks our heart to see the desperation that continues to push a large number of migrants to undertake perilous journeys in search of a better livelihood. A recent report by this paper sheds light on the horrors facing these people, especially those seeking passage to Europe via Libya, their journey marred by captivity, extortion, torture, and starvation. The statistics are staggering: a shocking 63.2 percent of undocumented Bangladeshi migrant workers in Libya, according to BRAC's Migration Programme, were held captive in torture camps. BRAC interviewed 629 survivors who were rescued and repatriated to Bangladesh in 2022. Of them, 557 were from Libya alone.

The North African country, despite having a formal agreement on labour migration with Bangladesh since October, continues to attract droves of people trying to reach Europe illegally. There are many who harbour no such intention but still end up with the same harrowing experiences. The cycle of exploitation begins at home, with agents of trafficking networks reportedly more active in areas like Faridpur, Cumilla, and Noakhali, luring individuals with promises of lucrative job opportunities. Once in Libya, most are kept in detention camps, tortured, and their families extorted for exorbitant sums of money. The exploitation doesn't end there, however, especially for Europe-bound workers, as hundreds perish during treacherous boat journeys across the Mediterranean.

The question is, why does this cycle keep repeating itself? While the desperation of overseas jobseekers is largely to blame—with 1,722 people repatriated from Libya to Bangladesh just over the past one year, according to airport and immigration data—a number of other factors are also responsible. Among them are the lack of conviction in trafficking cases, unchecked operation of unscrupulous recruiting agents, lack of awareness, and lack of effectiveness of existing anti-trafficking initiatives.

In the face of the immense suffering caused by this situation, it is imperative that the government takes meaningful steps to address it. First and foremost, there must be enhanced collaboration with labour-receiving countries to dismantle trafficking networks and hold perpetrators accountable. Law enforcement agencies must prioritise the investigation and prosecution of human traffickers, providing avenues for survivors to seek justice. Moreover, efforts must be made to tackle the root causes driving migration, including poverty, lack of economic opportunities, and political instability. The authorities must also undertake regular awareness campaigns to educate people about the danger of illegal migration.

### Satrasta traffic needs better response

#### Illegally parked trucks are causing suffering for commuters

The perpetual traffic gridlock on the Mayor Anisul Huq Road, a vital artery in Dhaka's Tejgaon Satrasta area, stands as a glaring symbol of administrative short-sightedness and inaction. Large part of the road often remains occupied by illegally parked trucks, with the existing truck stand able to accommodate only 3,000 of the approximately 5,000 vehicles that arrive daily. Besides, the separate rickshaw lane intended to ease congestion has ironically further narrowed the road, intensifying the gridlock. Against this backdrop, the announcement by DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam about receiving land approval for constructing a multi-storey truck terminal there comes as a ray of hope. But the promise must swiftly transition from words to action, given the suffering of daily commuters.

Over the eight years since the late mayor Anisul Huq's initial attempts to clear the road of illegally parked trucks, very little has changed. This is a clear testament to the inadequacy of short-term solutions and the urgent need for a comprehensive, long-term strategy. The DNCC's intermittent drives against illegal parking have been a mere temporary fix, failing to deter truckers who return shortly after. This cycle of action and inaction highlights the necessity of a long-term solution, which doesn't just lie in constructing a terminal; it has to be part of a critical rethink about urban planning and traffic management in Dhaka.

A more immediate solution could involve the enforcement of strict penalties for illegal parking, coupled with an increase in the frequency and intensity of DNCC's drives against such practices. Additionally, short-term parking zones with a time limit could be established to discourage long-term parking on the road. The creation of alternative temporary parking spaces, perhaps in underutilised areas, could provide some relief until the terminal is operational. Collaboration with the relevant organisations, including the Bangladesh Truck Covered Van Owners Association, will also be helpful in ensuring compliance.

Finally, the plight of office-goers, students, and patients stuck in endless traffic demands decisive and meaningful action. We urge the authorities to take the issue with the seriousness that it deserves.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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#### We need to address air pollution

Air pollution poses a silent threat to health and environment, demanding urgent action. We must enforce stricter industrial emission standards, promote clean energy, and adopt sustainable transportation. It's also equally important to increase public awareness and community involvement to foster a sense of environmental responsibility. We have to come together to secure a cleaner, healthier and breathable environment for all.

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# Why is BR struggling despite huge investment?



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KALLOL MUSTAFA

Despite thousands of crores of taka being invested in various infrastructure development projects in the railway sector, the crisis of Bangladesh Railway (BR) doesn't seem to end. It is still running train services with outdated engines and coaches, old and dilapidated railway lines, and risky bridges amid complaints of delay and mismanagement of tickets.

According to the 2022-23 annual report of the Ministry of Railways, the notable achievements of Bangladesh Railways from 2009 to June 2023 are: introduction of 143 new trains; construction of 873.19 km new rail lines, 237 station buildings and 1,037 bridges; renovation/reconstruction of 1,391.32 km rail lines and 794 railway bridges; procurement of 109 new locomotives, 530 passenger carriages and 277 freight wagons; and repair of 516 passenger carriage and 134 freight wagons, and so on.

Although more than Tk 77,500 crore have been spent on different railways development projects so far, how much of it has been used to solve the basic structural problems remains a question. A major part of this expenditure went towards the construction of new railway lines and station buildings. New railway lines were constructed and new train services launched one after another without provisions for adequate engines, coaches and manpower. As a result, on the one hand, a sufficient number of trains cannot be run on the new lines, and on the other hand, coaches cannot be added to the existing train services as per the demand. Even many local and commuter train services have come to a halt. According to a report published in *The Daily Star*, the number of train services suspended by December 2022 was 99. And according to a report by *The Business Standard*, 13 pairs of local, commuter and mail train services have been shut down since December 1, 2023.

According to an estimate, more than 3,000 passenger coaches and about 500 locomotives are required to properly run all the trains of BR. But according to the railways ministry's 2022-23 annual report, currently there are 1,788 coaches, 47 percent of which have reached the end of their economic life. And the number of operational locomotives is only 295, of which 60 percent have expired. The number of freight wagons is 3,247, of which 67 percent have expired. These dilapidated engines, coaches and



Although more than Tk 77,500 crore have been spent on different railways development projects so far, how much of it has been used to solve the basic structural problems remains a question. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

wagons often break down and cannot be used regularly. Consequently, engines that are functional operate more than one train a day, resulting in frequent train stoppages, disrupting train schedules.

At present, there is a huge shortage of railway station masters, loco masters (drivers), porters, level crossing gatemen, etc. The size of the current manpower is only 24,500 against a total of 47,637 posts. There are 2,236 posts of loco masters, assistant loco masters and sub-loco masters in two railway regions. In contrast, only 850 personnel are employed, which is only 38 percent of the manpower required for running trains.

Due to the shortage of engines, coaches, wagons and manpower, the BR is not able to provide full-scale services on three newly constructed routes—Dohazari Cox's Bazar, Khulna-Mongla Bandar, and Kamalapur-Bhanga to Padma Bridge Rail Link—with a total investment of Tk 62,861 crore. Because of the shortage of locomotives and manpower, dedicated train services are yet to be launched on the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar route. After upgrading the Dhaka-Chattogram route to a double line with an investment of Tk 10,500 crore, only one train has been added.

But it has not made the necessary investment to increase the capacity of manufacturing or repairing railway coaches and wagons in the country. The Saidpur railway workshop, the largest in the country, is struggling with old and broken equipment and insufficient manpower. At present, there are only 622 people working in the workshop against the requirement of 2,859. Most of the 750 heavy machines are broken.

Even an adequate budget is not allocated for repair work. In the last financial year, against the demand for a Tk 27 crore annual budget, only Tk 6.5 crore was allocated. As a result, a workshop that used to repair 900 coaches and build 20 new coaches a year post-independence now can repair a maximum of 450 coaches a year and builds no new coaches at all. Not only that, in 2016, an initiative was taken to build a new railway coach factory in Saidpur at a cost of Tk 753 crore, later revised to Tk 1,460 crore, but it was not implemented. But if the coaches and wagons could be manufactured in the country, the procurement cost would be reduced to half.

BR also did not invest adequately to prevent accidents and make the railway services safer. Train derailment is the most common cause of railway

accidents in the country, and most people die in collisions at unsafe railway crossings. About 82 percent of railway crossings across the country are not protected, as of July 2022. In many places, the train tracks are worn out, due to which trains often get derailed. For example, according to a recent report by the Daily *Samakal*, in a 24 km

stretch of tracks on the Mymensingh-Bhairab route in Ishwarganj upazila, 8,000 clips were found missing on the railway sleepers, 142 nuts are missing on the fishplates, and 16 sleepers are missing and 69 are broken.

The railway authorities are yet to take any initiative to install automatic train protection systems to prevent head-on collisions and automatic fire detection and brake application systems in case of fire, even though trains in Bangladesh have suffered from such incidents causing huge losses of lives and properties. It is noteworthy that the railway service in the neighbouring India is already using an indigenously developed Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system named "Kavach" and a fire detection and brake application (FDBA) system to enhance passenger safety.

Sustainable development of the railway service is not only about building visible infrastructure. Shortage of engines, coaches, wagons and manpower must also be met, along with proper maintenance of the existing infrastructure, tracks, bridges, engines and coaches. Modernisation of railway signalling and safety systems must also be ensured on an urgent basis.

## Balancing faith and commerce during Ramadan



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As Bangladesh recovers from the intensity of its recent elections, the arrival of Ramadan sheds new light on its economic woes. This holy month, historically a time of spiritual meditation and fellowship, today emphasises the complicated dance between consumer demand and market stability in a country attempting to reconcile ancient values with modern economic realities. The vibrant streets of Dhaka, pulsating with the spirit of Ramadan, present a contrasting story. On the one hand, increased consumer spending in the market and retail sectors reflects the month's cultural significance. On the other hand, rising prices for critical necessities cast a pall over the festivities, providing substantial hardship for regular Bangladeshi families.

Consider the small-scale spice dealers in Old Dhaka, who experience increased demand during Ramadan. Last year, a combination of import restrictions and higher tariffs caused an almost 30 percent spike in the price of basic spices. The merchants, torn between retaining consumer loyalty and managing rising expenses,

exemplify the more significant economic issue. In another case, a prominent Dhaka eatery famed for its iftar dishes faced a similar conundrum. The rising cost of ingredients caused them to hike menu prices, resulting in a decrease in repeat consumers. This pattern is repeated throughout industries, from street vendors to substantial retail outlets, all facing comparable issues.

The government's role in this circumstance is critical. Previous patterns in Bangladesh have demonstrated that, without regulatory monitoring, the cost of essential items can increase during Ramadan, putting excessive burden on consumers. However, government intervention in market dynamics is a tricky issue. The solution is not heavy-handed control but deliberate measures that ensure fair pricing without disturbing the fundamental dynamics of the free market. For example, a government-led programme to subsidise crucial ingredients during Ramadan can drastically reduce costs for businesses and consumers. This move would help stabilise prices and uphold the spirit

of Ramadan, which is one of charity and community.

The private sector plays a complementary role. Adopting tactics from nations like Malaysia—where "Ramadan bazaar" discounts are widespread—can serve as a roadmap. Local businesses should create special Ramadan pricing or discounts that reflect the month's spirit while being affordable. Furthermore, large firms could participate in corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, such as funding community iftars, to assist needy individuals. This method not only helps to keep prices stable but also promotes communal unity.

However, some contend that the market should be allowed to self-regulate. They claim that government intervention may cause long-term market distortions. While this stance has merit in many economic contexts, Bangladesh's specific socioeconomic environment, mainly during Ramadan, necessitates a more nuanced approach. There may need to be more than a hands-off policy to handle consumers' urgent challenges during this time.

Looking beyond Ramadan, the methods implemented during this time may have far-reaching consequences for the Bangladesh economy. Effective market management during Ramadan can serve as a model for resolving similar difficulties in the future. It can also improve the general resilience of the economy, particularly in areas such as Ramadan-based essentials/foods and services, which are critical to Bangladesh's economic growth. To

solve these difficulties, I suggest the following: i) Use targeted subsidies or price caps on critical commodities during Ramadan to avoid excessive price increases; ii) Encourage private-public collaborations that offer customers and businesses special discounts or loyalty programmes; iii) Increase market surveillance to ensure price conformity and avoid hoarding or false shortages; and iv) Encourage community-driven activities, such as local food banks or charity drives, to help people most affected by price increases.

Thus, the call to action is clear—a team effort is required. Policymakers, industry leaders, and consumer advocates must collaborate to develop and implement measures that balance market stability and customer welfare. This intentional effort guarantees an equal Ramadan and sets a precedent for managing economic issues during culturally significant seasons. As Bangladesh navigates challenging financial waters, the lessons learned during Ramadan will be critical. They can influence future policy and the entire fabric of the country's economic and cultural landscape. The question now is not whether intervention is required but rather how it may be done most effectively in the best interests of all stakeholders.

Finally, the strategy for addressing economic issues during Ramadan in Bangladesh must be varied and inclusive. Bangladesh can sustain the spirit of Ramadan by combining strategic government policies, good corporate practices, and consumer awareness.