The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Govt's fatal apathy towards road safety

Investigate the underlying reasons behind Faridpur crash

In yet another tragic road crash on April 16, at least 14 people died in Faridpur—an incident which would most likely not have occurred had the government prioritised basic road safety measures. The bus in question, as reported by this daily, did not have the necessary permits to run on that route or updated fitness certificates. On the other side of the collision, the pickup van, which was carrying all the individuals who died in the accident, wasn't authorised to carry passengers at all. What's most appalling is how common these violations of crucial road safety measures are in our country, and how apathetic the government remains to the endless loss of lives of its citizens on the road.

The government continues to cave to transport owners' pressures against banning old and high-risk vehicles, to withhold strict enforcement of road safety measures and laws, and against adopting effective laws to hold vehicle owners and operators accountable. Meanwhile, at least 1,477 people were killed and 1,920 were injured in 1,630 crashes between January and March this year. Why is it that the government refuses to adopt most of the fundamental road safety measures? Why is it still easier to bribe law enforcement personnel than to acquire licences and fitness clearance legally? Why is letting people die on roads, without any assurance of safe vehicles, more acceptable to the government than employing effective laws and drives to make transport authorities abide by road safety regulations?

According to a World Bank report in 2020, Bangladesh could halve its road crash fatalities if it invested an estimated extra $7.8 billion over the following decade. Unfortunately, those recommendations have not been implemented, with our roads becoming even deadlier each year. While the government is spending scores more on spectacular megaprojects, road safety remains sidelined.

This cannot be how the roads operate anymore. The case of Faridpur and other crashes over the recent months must be investigated thoroughly, and the real perpetrators—not just the drivers but also those who allowed these vehicles to be on the road without permits or operational fitness—must be put on trial, and a white sheet of the underlying reasons behind road accidents must be produced. The government must put the lives of the citizens of this country at the forefront, not the interest of any vested groups, to make the roads safer.

Hurried mergers may prove unwise

Has the process of planning bank mergers been truly voluntary?

We are concerned by the way in which Bangladesh Bank has decided to proceed with its plan for bank mergers and acquisitions. As we saw in the case of the planned merger of Shariah-based Exim Bank and struggling Padma Bank, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed even before a detailed guideline on mergers and acquisitions was issued, whereas the sequence of events should have been the other way around. And even after the guideline was issued by BB, it is not being followed properly, according to a report by Prothom Alo. According to members of these banks, BB itself has directed which bank should merge with whom. During these meetings, the merger decisions were made in some cases in the presence of representatives of the two banks concerned, and in other cases, with representatives of only one bank. Some bank directors have even said that they had found out information about their own bank mergers from newspaper reports. Therefore, although the central bank has assured that mergers would be voluntary, it seems as if the reality is anything but that.

The World Bank had earlier warned that without careful assessment and prudent implementation of procedures to avoid weakening good banks as they acquire bad ones, rapidly implementing bank mergers may further undermine confidence in the sector. That is exactly what seems to be happening, with some bank employees expressing concern regarding the merger proceedings thus far. Moreover, experts have also mentioned the need to bring about systemic changes in the sector—such as regulators ensuring that habitual defaulters no longer get bank loans—without which bank mergers will not be beneficial. In fact, without such changes, good banks might also end up in difficulty.

Even though bank mergers, if properly carried out, would be beneficial, it seems Bangladesh Bank is proceeding with them too hastily. As a result, not everyone seems to be aware of what is going on, and banks are being made party to the mergers not of their own volition. Under the circumstances, BB needs to take a step back and discuss the matter openly with all stakeholders so that confusion and panic do not seep into the sector, further damaging it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Adopt flexible work hours

Recently Singapore has announced that all employers must have a process in place for workers to formally request flexible work arrangements, which the employers can reject only backed up by reasonable business grounds. This, in my opinion, is a great example to follow, both for safeguarding employees. If there is a balance between working from home and flexible work hours for specific types of jobs, employees can save transportation expenses and time loss on the roads. On the other hand, it will ease traffic congestion—which will decrease carbon emissions and fuel consumption. It will also open new possibilities for remote jobs. Lockdown during Covid-19 was a proof of concept that offices can operate functionally with employees working from home. This should be a learning opportunity for us.

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How we are missing out on higher remittances

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her X handle is @tasneem_tayeb.

TASNEEM TAYEB

Migrant workers from Bangladesh are disadvantaged in many ways compared to their counterparts from other countries. To cite one disadvantage: as per a February report by The Business Standard, an aspiring Bangladeshi migrant worker bound for Malaysia pays between $4,000 and $4,500 for employment in the manufacturing or construction industries. But for the same opportunities, Indonesian workers pay between $340 and $742. This is despite the Bangladesh government setting a maximum Tk 78,990 (less than $1,000) migration cost for workers travelling to Malaysia. The cost of migration is equally exorbitant for Bangladeshi workers travelling to other countries in search of livelihood. In fact, a 2020 International Organization for Migration (IOM) report suggested that the migration cost of Bangladeshi workers is considered one of the highest in the world.

VISUAL: NAZIFA RAIDAH

Bangladesh has always eyed the less skilled market with its lower barrier to entry, entertaining demand from traditional markets needing low-paid unskilled, less skilled workers. But we must understand that in a fast-changing landscape, where quality of work is becoming increasingly important for employers

This is attributed mostly to the corruption in the system that has enabled syndicates to be formed among recruitment agencies, in addition to ineffective migration diplomacy, and limited efforts from the concerned authorities to ensure the wellbeing and rights of the migrant workers.

While the remittances sent by the migrant workers are valued highly, we have not taken effective measures over the years to map international market demand for skilled labour and accordingly upskill aspiring migrant workers, which would have translated into higher remittance for us.

Even at a time when our volatile forex reserve remains a major economic concern and despite the growth in the number of migrant workers—around 1.3 million workers migrated abroad in 2023, a 15 percent increase from 1.13 million in 2022, thanks to Saudi and Malaysian markets opening up—we have not been able to tap the full potential of the expanding job market abroad, both in terms of revenue volume and skilled worker migration.

The remittance inflow in 2023 remained stagnant at the $21 billion mark, despite more workers migrating abroad. In 2022, remittance inflow was $21.28 billion and in 2021 it stood at $21.74 billion. Given the 15 percent year-on-year increase in worker migration in 2023, the mere 2.54 percent year-on-year increase in remittance in 2023 is a telling tale of wasted opportunities and the inability of formal banking channels to woo customers.

A study of government data by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) revealed that of the workers who migrated in 2022, a staggering 78.64 percent were less skilled. In 2021, it stood at 75.24 percent. While there was some improvement in 2023, with an increased number of skilled and semi-skilled worker migration, less skilled workers still made up more than half of the entire pie, at 50.28 percent, according to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET).

This is mostly due to our lack of demand mapping, planning, and political will to tap into the skilled labour market. Bangladesh has always eyed the less skilled market with its lower barrier to entry, entertaining demand from traditional markets needing low-paid unskilled, less skilled workers. But we must understand that in a fast-changing landscape, where quality of work is becoming increasingly important for employers, new avenues are opening up for the skilled workforce. So, being content with pushing more unskilled workers into the global labour market is no longer an option.

Our Asian peers are quickly upskilling their workforce to capture the new markets and their workers are earning higher wages, while in Bangladesh, we are patting ourselves on the back for sending about 1.3 million workers abroad, without a plan on how to tap into the new markets and enable our workers to find better-paying jobs, in turn us getting higher remittance.

We must study the global labour market patterns to identify new destinations for Bangladeshi workers, and the skill sets required to make sure our workers succeed there. Better coordination, cooperation, and oversight among the government and private sector actors are critical to improving the living conditions of our workforce abroad and driving forex earnings.

However, for this to happen, we would need to overhaul our overseas employment system which is lethargic by nature and mired in corruption. There is no way that notorious syndicates are given free reign to do as they wish—exploiting unsuspecting and powerless migrant workers—without the system benefitting from their illegal gains.

The transformative push in the labour migration landscape of our country would also mean that the Bangladeshi missions abroad would have to make efforts to identify potential industries for foreign worker recruitment in the countries where they are located and the skills that would be required to fill those requirements. The concerned officials would have to engage in robust migration diplomacy to negotiate good deals for our workers—both in terms of wages and living conditions.

It is true that in Bangladesh we lack adequate technical training centres and polytechnic institutes. So the focus should be on building additional capabilities while fully utilising the existing facilities.

It is high time the government came out of its complacency mindset and transformed the overseas employment sector to make the most of the new opportunities opening up for Bangladesh. While demand for unskilled and less skilled workers will sustain in the traditional markets for some more years, if we do not compete for the new markets in need of a semi-skilled and skilled workforce, our Asian peers will win them over, leaving us little room to manoeuvre.

Do we have the vision and political will to accelerate change and make the most of the opportunities that are about to unfold?

A pathway to prosperity through basic freedoms

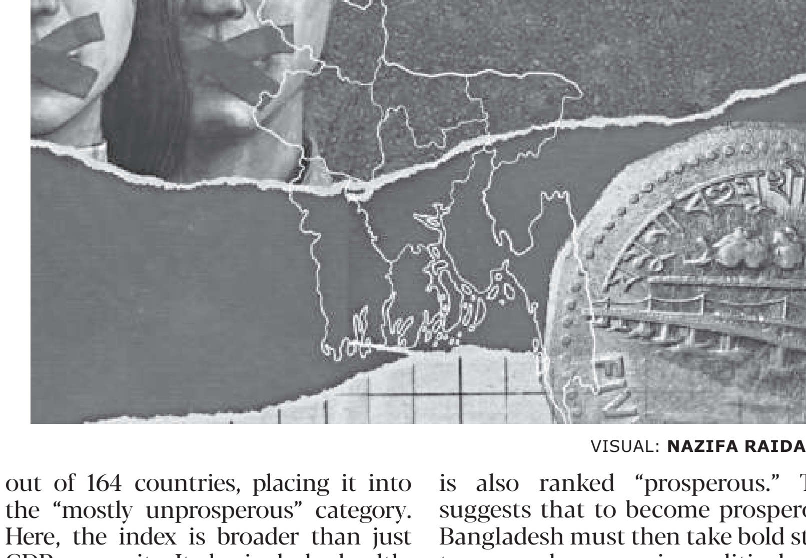
His Excellency Peter Haas is ambassador of the United States to Bangladesh.

PETER HAAS

The perennial debate persists: Does prosperity foster greater freedoms, or is it the other way around?

The Atlantic Council's ground-breaking research into the linkage between freedom and prosperity offers a compelling case for the latter. Freedom isn't merely a byproduct of prosperity; it's the very engine that propels it.

Their report on Bangladesh, being released today, provides some sobering insights. Let me start with the Atlantic Council's Freedom Index, which ranks Bangladesh 141st out of 164 countries, placing it in the "mostly unfree" category. Perhaps more troubling, since 2000, Bangladesh has fallen 25 places. Atlantic Council's index is different from other indexes; it is not just about elections. Instead, it measures economic, political, and legal freedoms. In fact, Bangladesh ranks higher on political freedoms than it does on economic and legal freedoms.



VISUAL: NAZIFA RAIDAH

Out of the 164 countries the Atlantic Council has looked at, not a single country ranked "mostly unfree" is also ranked "prosperous." This suggests that to become prosperous, Bangladesh must then take bold steps to expand economic, political, and legal freedoms for its people.

Bangladesh fares better on the Prosperity Index, where it ranks 99th out of 164 countries, placing it into the "mostly unprosperous" category. Here, the index is broader than just GDP per capita. It also includes health, inequality, environment, minority rights, and education.

To be certain, this snapshot masks the huge development successes Bangladesh has achieved since Independence. But it also highlights the enormous challenge ahead in moving from being a "mostly unprosperous" least developed country today to a middle-income country in 2026 to a developed country by 2041, as forecast in the government's Vision 2041 plan.

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This isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. Every nation faces unique challenges on its path to freedom and prosperity. The United States, a friend and development partner to Bangladesh for over 50 years, acknowledges its shortcomings in this area. Every country grapples with issues like corruption, and securing economic and political rights. The key lies not in avoiding problems, but in actively acknowledging and tackling them.

The United States remains firmly committed to supporting both freedom and prosperity in Bangladesh. We will continue exploring ways to assist Bangladesh in achieving its Vision 2041 goals. We strongly believe that by unlocking its full potential through increased freedoms, Bangladesh can become the next Asian Tiger—a Royal Bengal Tiger, of course!

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