

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

A perplexing decision by central bank

Who will gain from its restrictions on media access?

The recent restrictions placed on journalists' access to the Bangladesh Bank (BB) have evoked understandable criticism from the journalist community as well as from Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). It is quite a perplexing decision coming from a public institution which, by definition, is supposed to serve public interests. The media, too, is morally mandated to serve public interests. This it does by disclosing finance and banking related information, including any irregularities allegedly taking place in the sector. Access into Bangladesh Bank is thus crucial for any journalist covering the sector. We are, therefore, quite alarmed that the BB could take such a restrictive measure.

The central bank has apparently instructed its security management and other departments not to allow journalists to enter its offices. The unprecedented restriction has meant that journalists covering the economy and finance have not been able to properly cover issues related to the economy. This is a disservice to the public but also to the government which needs an honest appraisal of what is happening at BB to make proper and timely interventions. Such reporting is all the more necessary at a time when the financial sector is facing severe challenges, including various irregularities, high inflation, and a dollar crisis that has affected many businesses and consumers.

Thus, journalists covering the economy and financial sector need full and unrestricted access to the Bangladesh Bank in order to get correct and verified information. Bangladesh Bank itself should also want to be accessible so that there is minimal risk of misinformation or rumours being circulated. All this makes its aforementioned decision rather difficult to understand.

The message emanating from such restrictions is not the kind that a democratic government would want to send to the people. It gives off the impression that this is being done to protect the interests of certain powerful quarters that have been playing a major role in the irregularities of the financial sector. We, therefore, urge Bangladesh Bank authorities to remove these restrictions so that journalists can have free access to the central bank as they did before. By exposing anomalies in the financial sector, journalists are upholding the people's right to know and helping the government by providing insights into this crucial sector so that problems are identified and solutions can be developed and applied. Surely this is a win-win system for all parties.

A totally meaningless tragedy

DSCC garbage truck kills minor

We are saddened to learn of the tragedy that befell a 13-year-old in Madinabagh area of the capital after he was run over by a garbage truck of the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) on Thursday night. According to a report, Mahin Ahmed, a Class 7 student, was fatally injured when the vehicle came out of nowhere, and was declared dead shortly afterwards. Apparently, behind the wheel of the truck was not its designated driver but someone hired by him. This doesn't take the blame off the DSCC, but only further highlights the driver management crisis in the transport sector that has been responsible for so many deaths over the years.

The two city corporations of Dhaka—which maintain a large fleet of vehicles for various purposes—should have been an exception rather than an example. They should have been strict about driver recruitment, rotation, and supervision. Unfortunately, the opposite has been the case, with their garbage trucks having reportedly claimed at least 18 lives since 2016. Unfit vehicles, lack of skilled drivers, and reckless driving are some of the reasons cited for the accidents. As an expert has rightly pointed out, the city corporations' management of trucks and drivers should ideally have been an example to follow for others. But when they allow unskilled drivers to control unfit vehicles, what message does it send to the wider transport community? The answer is for everyone to see.

After the latest tragedy, the DSCC mayor has promised strict administrative action. But any corrective strategy must go beyond routine disciplinary measures. After some of the recent crashes, the city corporations formed probe bodies and recruited skilled drivers but these proved to be not enough. An investigation by *The Daily Star* has found that many crashes involving garbage trucks were not probed, and that some of those who were at the wheel got away. The city corporations also failed to properly implement the recommendations of their expert committees. This is precisely why crashes keep occurring. We urge city corporations, not just in Dhaka but across the country, to undertake regular inspections of their vehicles and drivers and prevent all irregularities so that no such tragedies recur.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Combat heat holistically

As the weather becomes hotter annually, there is a surge in the purchase of air conditioners. That ACs are only beneficial to those who use them and ultimately cause the outside weather to get hotter are concrete facts. But the general people don't have any other form of respite from the suffocating heat wave besides buying an AC if they can afford it. So, it is for authorities to ensure that they do everything in their power to cool down the outside temperature in a holistic manner, without causing further harm to nature. This includes planting more trees (not felling them), reviving water bodies, and building shade wherever possible.

Azmam Talukdar
Tongi, Gazipur
<!-- Bodymatter -->

Will anyone take responsibility for the traffic deaths?



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His X handle is @ahmedkhal

KAMAL AHMED

The Eid festivities in April marked a grim milestone with a record number of road traffic accidents and casualties. According to the Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, between April 4 and 18, there were at least 407 fatalities and 1,398 injuries from 399 road accidents. This represents an alarming increase, with crashes and deaths up by nearly 25 percent compared to last year. Even more concerning is that injuries have more than doubled, as reported by the same passenger rights group. The government, however, reported figures which were considerably lower—with an average of 19 deaths and 17 accidents per day, still higher than in previous years.

Recently, *Prothom Alo* reported that over six lakh vehicles across the country are operating without fitness certificates, making it illegal for them to be on the roads. Citing the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), the report indicated that out of approximately 60 lakh vehicles in the country, around 44 lakh motorcycles are exempt from fitness certificates.

Although building new roads and bridges improves traffic flow and is necessary, we need to accept the fact that faulty vehicles and lack of enforcement of traffic discipline somewhat cancel out the benefit of improved infrastructure.

However, of the remaining 16 lakh vehicles, about 6,18,000 lack fitness certificates.

Before the Eid vacation this year, media outlets published numerous images of unfit commercial vehicles, predominantly buses. When asked about the issue, it drew criticism from our Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader, who sarcastically quipped back, "Should I paint the vehicles?" On March 20, responding to a reporter's question, he defended the government's inaction, suggesting that journalists would criticise any action taken against



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

these vehicles due to a lack of public transport alternatives.

While the road transport minister may have expected some appreciation for his candour in acknowledging the government's inability and inaction against the operation of unfit vehicles and the impunity of their owners, it doesn't absolve the government of its responsibility. It underscores the reality that those who flout the rules dominate our roads, with the government's explanations serving as justification.

There seems to be an affinity for outdated and dilapidated vehicles in our country. Consider the cars used for driving lessons in Dhaka; many of them appear destined for scrapyards, yet instructors equip them with extra brakes for training novice drivers. Perhaps the driving schools are pragmatic, anticipating that most trainees will eventually end up driving such unfit vehicles.

Another curious detail when it comes to driving lessons is the lack of special training for heavy duty or goods vehicles. How many commercial transport drivers, for either passenger carrying buses or goods transporting trucks, get institutional training? Most of them start their career as helpers or a driving assistant and scale up

the BRTA chairman Nur Mohammad Mazumder said drivers bear the main responsibility for passengers' safety. He also said, "Road accidents happen due to many reasons like illegal roadside shops and markets. Local representatives, administrations and the Roads and Highways Department cannot avoid responsibility."

On the contrary, Osman Ali, general secretary of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation said, blaming only drivers will not fix the road accident problem. He then added that, "Out of 105 reasons for accidents, only four relate to transport workers—speeding, risky overtaking, overloading and recklessness."

It has barely been a month since Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) found in a survey that private bus companies spend Tk 1,059 crore annually in bribes. The survey said that recipients of such bribes include officials of BRTA, traffic and highway police, representatives of municipalities and city corporations, political leaders, transport owners, and workers' organisations.

Improving road safety is not only a national agenda, but also an international commitment. The United Nations, as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has set a

target to reduce road accidents by half by 2030. Earlier, the target date was 2020, but they were forced to revise it due to slow response from member countries. However, the current approach doesn't inspire much confidence in achieving this goal.

Although building new roads and bridges improves traffic flow and is necessary, we need to accept

the fact that faulty vehicles and lack of enforcement of traffic discipline somewhat cancel out the benefit of improved infrastructure. Most countries have shifted to vehicles equipped with latest technologies such as navigational assistance, parking aid, auto locking systems which prevents vehicles' movement until doors are locked, and automated alert systems for malfunctioning parts or passengers ignoring rules like not wearing seatbelts. The government could start by restricting imports of vehicles lacking these features and phasing out old vehicles within a year or two.

European cities, including London, have successfully phased out old vehicles to improve air quality and reduce emissions. Some have implemented congestion charges and speed limits, resulting in significant reductions in traffic accidents.

While Dhaka and other Bangladeshi cities may not be directly comparable to European cities, there are valuable lessons to be learned, particularly in transport management. Accountability, especially among political leaders, has unfortunately been lacking for over a decade. It's high time we address these issues and prioritise road safety for the wellbeing of all citizens.

Say their names to save their lives



Noora Shamsi Bahar is a senior lecturer at the Department of English and Modern Languages, North South University, and a published researcher and translator.

NOORA SHAMSI BAHAR

"When you hung nooses around our youth's necks, you should've known one day someone was going to stand up"

—Toomaj Salehi
While the global media is busy focusing on how the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is waging a proxy war against Israel, there's very little coverage on the war the IRI is waging against its own people. There's been some hue and cry about Mahsa Amini's murder at the hands of the notorious morality police in September 2022, which sparked nation-wide protests carried out by men and women alike, against a regime that, besides its multitude of corruptions, has established a gender-apartheid state since its inception in 1979. However, as a member of the Iranian diaspora, I feel it necessary to write about the latest injustices within the land of my roots.

While the world's attention is focused on the political tensions between Israel, Iran, and their allies, the IRI has used this opportunity as a cover to unleash a new wave of brutal crackdowns on Iranian women. Despite the lack of freedom of the press, citizen journalism has been eye-opening because it is through videos and photos leaked by the people, that we get to see how women

refusing to wear the hijab are beaten, assaulted, and dragged into white vans by the morality police. Bodily bruises are the least of their problems; many are raped, and some are killed. Even minors are not spared. Iranian schoolgirls have been poisoned, and teenagers like Armita Gerawand (17), Sarina Esmacilzadeh (16), and Nika Shakarami (16) have been found dead.

Sara Hossain, a barrister at the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and chair of the Independent International Fact Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, led an investigation along with her team and spoke at the UN General Assembly in March 2024 against the brutalities of the regime. The mission's findings showed that "disproportionate force" was used against peaceful protestors, killing at least 551. These protestors were "viciously beaten and arrested while dancing, chanting, writing slogans, or simply honking car horns in peaceful acts of solidarity." Moreover, prisoners were "subjected to sexual and gender-based violence," "gang rape, rape with an object, beatings, floggings, and electric shocks." And worst of all, "children were subjected to extrajudicial killings, torture and rape, and held in detention along with adults."

Ironically, however, it is the men who are given the official death penalty through sham trials in kangaroo courts, the latest victim of which is 33-year-old dissident rapper, Toomaj Salehi, whose lyrics voice his outcry against oppression, injustices, and deprivation of liberties faced by Iranians under the now-45-year-old regime. Imagine if Tupac Shakur, a politically conscious activist and rapper, whose music is noted for addressing racism, police brutality, and marginalisation of African-Americans, was sentenced to death for his lyrics. Or imagine Bangladeshi rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam being handed out the death penalty for voicing his protest against colonialism, tyranny, and inequality. Toomaj Salehi is the Tupac or the Nazrul of Iran, and the beloved voice of Iranians. But he is now on state-sanctioned death row.

Toomaj was first arrested on October 31, 2022, after he publicly supported the Zan, Zendegi, Azadi (Woman, Life, Freedom) movement. After many months of solitary confinement as well as physical and psychological torture, he received a brief release on bail on November 18, 2023. On November 27, 2023, he shared a video revealing that he refused to admit to false charges despite the employment of intimidation tactics and in spite of various forms of torture and ill-treatment used to get a forced confession out of him. This gutsy video had severe repercussions. Three days later, Toomaj was violently abducted and imprisoned once again. He was charged with "moharebeh" (waging war against God) and "spreading corruption on earth," and sentenced to death by the Islamic Revolutionary Court. If this sentence goes through,

"the world's bravest rapper", as he has been called by various international news outlets, will be lynched from a crane, for exercising his right to freedom of expression.

So what can we, as Bangladeshis, do for Toomaj or others like him? We need to say their names to save their lives. This has worked in the past. For example, in 2020, when three young Iranian men were handed out the capital punishment for protesting against high gas prices, a wave of online protests took place, with over 10 million retweeting the hashtag #StopExecutionsInIran, which resulted in the suspension of those executions. Now, more than ever, we need to mobilise to save the life of Toomaj Salehi, an innocent victim of a regime that, according to the BBC, is the world's second-most prolific executioner, and according to Amnesty International, executed 853 people in 2023 alone. Let us not underestimate the power of hashtag activism—an influential tool for raising awareness and promoting social and political change. All we need to do is use the following hashtags on social media: #FreeToomaj #ToomajSalehi #StopExecutionsInIran

Let Toomaj Salehi's words strike a chord in our hearts, a chord that will spur action, no matter how small: "If you've seen people's pain/ but you've turned a blind eye/ witnessed the oppression of the innocent/ and just walked by/ you're an accomplice to the oppressor/ you, too, are a criminal" (from his song *Soorakh Moosh*, meaning "Rat Hole").

May we not be apolitical at the hour of need; may we not be indifferent in the face of injustice.