

The Daily Star

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Workers deserve more in new Bangladesh

Honour their sacrifices in July uprising through labour reforms

It is no secret that the July mass uprising was made possible by the sacrifices of many individuals, particularly workers and underprivileged communities. Without them putting their bodies in the line of fire, alongside students, this uprising would not have succeeded in bringing down the autocratic Awami League regime. It is, thus, unfortunate to see that their contributions are still not receiving the recognition they deserve. Instead, as speakers pointed out during a discussion organised by *The Daily Star* on the sidelines of a photo exhibition titled “36 Days of July,” these individuals risk being “erased” from the narrative.

The lack of recognition is evident not only in the failure to properly document their contributions but also in the continued disregard for their needs and rights—as evidenced by the plight of the injured seeking treatment and rehabilitation, as well as workers in various sectors. Part of the challenge is that a comprehensive list of those injured or killed has yet to be finalised, even after four months. This is affecting the fund disbursement efforts of the July Shaheed Smriti Foundation, which earlier promised to deliver all the funds by December. While the compensation amount itself has been criticised as inadequate, its prompt disbursement could address some, if not all, of the issues facing the injured. The continued delays and hurdles reported in accessing treatment and medication also need to be resolved.

The fact is, these people, including rickshaw-pullers, garment workers and other marginalised individuals, paid a heavy price for their involvement in the July uprising. Many families lost their primary breadwinners. Many survivors suffered life-altering injuries. Beyond treatment or compensation, what they need is proper rehabilitation to rebuild their lives, in which the government must help. An accurate victim list is also essential to prevent a repeat of the flawed listing of 1971 freedom fighters, which remains a cautionary tale of exploitation.

That said, the most meaningful tribute to these unsung heroes of the uprising would be to build a pro-worker business ecosystem where their rights and dignity are guaranteed. We have an obligation to ensure that these individuals are not only remembered for their sacrifices but also given their due through tangible improvements in their lives. In the past, workers’ demands for fair wages, safe workplaces, and reasonable working hours were frequently dismissed in favour of appeasing powerful industrial groups. Workers have long been treated as disposable—whether it’s the appalling treatment of migrant workers, exploitation of RMG workers or invisibility of sanitation workers. The change promised by the head of the Labour Reform Commission recently makes us hopeful. But it must be backed by structural reforms in labour laws and practices.

Bangladesh finally has an opportunity to address decades of inequities and ensure the dignity and rights of all. The sacrifices of our workers demand nothing less. Let us not fail them.

DAP must enhance Dhaka’s liveability

Govt should not bow to pressure from real estate developers

We are concerned about the newly proposed amendments to the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) 2022-35 of Dhaka by the Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (RAJUK). According to city planners and environmentalists, these amendments prioritise the interests of real estate developers over the city’s liveability, environmental protection, capacity, and civic amenities. In the proposed revisions, RAJUK has only suggested increasing the size and height of buildings, while issues such as protecting flood flow zones, wetlands, and agricultural land have largely been overlooked. Clearly, RAJUK’s proposals serve the interests of real estate businessmen who seem to be primarily interested in the floor area ratio (FAR), increasing which would result in higher profits for them. It is due to their pressure that efforts have been made to revise the DAP twice within two years of finalising it.

Over the past decades, Dhaka has developed without proper city planning. While real estate developers have often constructed buildings without adhering to necessary guidelines, many water bodies have also been filled in by developers as well as government and non-government agencies, leading to various environmental consequences. After the first DAP was formulated in 2010 under the Town Improvement Act of 1953, we saw how the government gave in to developers’ demands, leading to over 200 amendments to the plan. Through these amendments, the filling of wetlands was legalised, among other things.

When the second DAP was developed by RAJUK, we hoped for a change in direction. Sadly, since DAP 2022-35 was passed in August last year, it has also been the subject of debate and criticism. Many leaders of the real estate developers’ organisation, REHAB, as well as city planners believe the new DAP is discriminatory and unclear. One of the reasons cited for it is that the FAR ratio set in the second DAP varies across different areas, benefiting the wealthy while depriving middle- and low-income groups. While this issue must be addressed by the authorities in consultation with all stakeholders, they must also ensure that flood flow zones, wetlands, and agricultural land—all vital for our collective existence—are protected from developers’ encroachment.

DAP was formulated to make Dhaka a better place to live, not to serve the interests of any specific group. Therefore, RAJUK must revise it with a focus on public interest, liveability, and environmental sustainability. To achieve this, we need well-planned, sustainable strategies and approaches.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Pearl Harbor attack

On this day in 1941, Japanese bombers launched a surprise aerial attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, precipitating the entry of the United States into World War II.

A new vision for social protection in the face of climate change



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FAZLEY ELAHI MAHMUD

Bangladesh is witnessing a marked increase in the frequency and intensity of climatic events, leading to substantial losses in lives, assets, and livelihoods. A recent report by *The Daily Star* highlighted that the country endured 15 climatic events between May 2023 and September 2024. These included four cyclones, nine floods, several episodes of heavy rainfall, and extreme temperature events like heat waves and cold waves. In response to these escalating challenges, advancing adaptive social protection (ASP) has emerged as an urgent priority, complementing ongoing climate mitigation and adaptation efforts to address the growing impacts of climate change.

ASP enhances the resilience of climate-vulnerable households by strengthening three capacities: preparing for, coping with, and adapting to climatic and other shocks. [i] Its development is driven by several complementary factors: i) the proven success of social protection measures, particularly cash transfers, in reducing poverty and building resilience; ii) the shared objective of resilience-building across social protection, disaster risk management (DRM), and climate adaptation; iii) the increasing use of cash transfers in disaster response over the past two decades; and iv) the potential to leverage social protection mechanisms, such as beneficiary registries and digital payment systems, for rapid cash delivery to disaster-affected individuals.

Despite their complementarities, social protection, DRM and climate adaptation have distinct objectives. Social protection primarily focuses on poverty reduction, with resilience-building as a secondary outcome. However, its reliance on poverty-based indicators for beneficiary selection often excludes climate-vulnerable households who fall outside these criteria. In contrast, DRM prioritises resilience through interventions such as infrastructure development, preparedness, and disaster response. After a shock, DRM aims to restore livelihoods and help communities “bounce back” to their pre-shock state. Climate adaptation takes a broader approach, enabling communities to “bounce forward” by addressing climate vulnerabilities and fostering sustainable development through strategies like improving economic conditions, promoting human

capital, and facilitating migration to safer areas. ASP leverages the complementarities among these approaches while addressing their gaps to establish a comprehensive framework for addressing the impact of climate change.

Since adopting the National Social Protection Strategy (NSSS) in 2015, Bangladesh has established a life cycle-based social protection system that addresses risks faced at different stages of life, including pregnancy, early childhood, school age, disability, and old age. Key programmes under



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

this framework include the Mother and Child Benefit Programme (MCBP), the Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP), the Disability Allowance programme, the Widow Allowance programme, and the Old Age Allowance Programme (OAA). These are complemented by several DRM-related schemes such as Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), the Employment Generation Programme for the Poor (EGPP), Food for Work, Work for Money, Test Relief, and Gratuitous Relief. Both life cycle

universal coverage would ensure that no climate-vulnerable individual is left behind. Given the already high programme coverage, expanding to universal access in climate-vulnerable areas would be both strategic and affordable.

Second, strengthen coping and adaptive capacity through top-up cash (or in-kind) transfers. Top-up cash or in-kind transfers can be provided to beneficiaries of life cycle programmes in anticipation of or following climate shocks, using existing beneficiary lists

revised policies, updated operational guidelines, and formal agreements on financing, collaboration, and coordination mechanisms among relevant ministries and agencies.

While full-scale ASP implementation will take several years, Bangladesh is well-positioned to embark on this transformative journey. By pursuing these pathways, the country can strengthen the resilience of most vulnerable populations, enhance adaptive capacity, and establish itself as a global leader in ASP.

Traffic problem, no problem!



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SAYEED AHMED

My wife’s car has artificial intelligence, which I realised while returning from the BRTA office after renewing its fitness certificate, the annual ritual for every motor vehicle in Bangladesh.

Thanks to an agent, we went there at 8am and were finished by 2pm. I felt relieved because it was two weeks overdue. What happened next could be any Hollywood sci-fi movie sequence. As we hit the expressway, the engine growled, and the car pounced, weaving through the traffic, frequently changing lanes to overtake them. “Rubel, why are you driving so fast? Slow down, for God’s sake!” I yelled at my driver. He looked puzzled, glanced at the speedometer nervously while trying to manage the steering wheel, and mumbled, “It’s speeding up all by itself. I haven’t done anything!” Baffled, I frantically tried to comprehend our bizarre situation. After a few minutes of racking my brain, it occurred to me like an epiphany: the newly obtained fitness document! The car, looking quite innocent and rather dumb, sensed its presence, felt “fit as a fiddle,” and sprinted at the first opportunity. Somehow, we managed to steer it home safely.

Rubel stepped out, staggered towards a water tap, and put his head

under flowing water in full view of grinning onlookers, both baffled and bemused. I calmed my nerves with a double-shot espresso. We had to confine the culprit in a double-locked garage until its excitement waned.

I revisited the fitness-checking process to satisfy my curiosity. The inspector scanned the barcode on the windshield with a hand-held device, signed a few papers, and was off. That’s it! The car got a clean bill of health for another year. Nobody opened the engine hood or checked the emission. Not even a glance at the tyres or the lights. Now I know how the 40-something buses and trucks get their fitness certification and run with more vigour every year. Don’t let their rickety and rusted bodies, black exhaust, peeling paint, and absence of lights fool you. They are all certified fit and road-worthy. I feel savvy as I sit inside the air-conditioned car and watch people boarding or getting off running buses in the middle of busy intersections, covering their mouths with Covid-era masks. Who will tell them there is no need for masks because all vehicles are fit, and the emissions are perfectly healthy?

But why are those people crossing the road through such heavy traffic

when a perfect foot overbridge is nearby? Some escort uniformed children, hold babies, or carry heavy bags. A grown-up was recently photographed crawling through a narrow hole in a road divider on the ever-busy Aricha Road. Isn’t that illegal and dangerous? I kept pondering as the car started moving again. Suddenly, my whole body jerked briefly as if struck by lightning. Rubel looked at me quizzically. The purpose of the foot overbridge was not what I thought! They were for shopkeepers and beggars to set up businesses, people without homes to sleep at night, and perhaps drug peddlers. How mistaken I was!

The train of thought kept going as I stopped at another congestion. Pedestrians don’t need footpaths; they can use any part of the road. Footpaths are for hawkers and fish sellers (who will also process it for you right there), motorbike users and, astonishingly, relieving oneself.

Dhaka’s roads have many unique aspects that no other city can match. You can drive in any direction—there is no right or wrong. You turn on your hazard lights (or flash headlights), honk, and keep driving in whichever direction and at whatever speed you want. Other drivers will give way with reverence. Learn from the rickshaw drivers. They take the shortest path to the destination, like crossing a farmland diagonally, stopping and greeting people at will along the way. Some roads have signs saying, “It is forbidden to drive in the wrong direction.” But how would others know which direction is right for me? My direction is always the right one! And

who are you to tell me which direction I should travel?

I gradually came to realise that Dhaka has no traffic problems. Shake your head in disagreement all you want, but I will tell you why it is so. Nothing is stuck forever; slowly and grindingly, things move along, though often it takes hours. People get to work every day. Children go to schools. Stay-at-home parents carry on with their daily chores. Late into the night and early mornings, trucks, pickups and rickshaw vans carry fresh produce to the markets. Shoppers complain about the rising prices but still buy things. Days roll into weeks, weeks into months, then into years, and so on for decades, while life gets more arduous. Where is the problem, then? It lies among those who habitually complain about everything from their air-conditioned cars, homes and offices.

May I also propose another unique offering Dhaka could make to the world? A motor rally from Sadarghat to the Gazipur intersection and back in full traffic. It would start at 4pm on a Thursday. The Paris-Dakar rally would look like a toddler’s game. Imagine the enormous tourism development opportunity it would bring.

So, dear residents of Dhaka, stop complaining and continue with your daily endurance in this city of ever-increasing traffic congestion. And dear experts and policymakers, find out why rural workers migrate to cities in droves. Decode the economy of people’s travel demands and the unending supply of rickshaws. And, finally, step out of your air-conditioned SUVs to use public transport. That’s the minimum you could do.