

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Resolve the CNG auto-rickshaw debacle

### BRTA's retreat from a poorly planned and enforced decision raises questions

By now, this has become a pattern: a long-festering grievance comes to the fore (whether or not there is an immediate trigger), protesters in large groups block streets, public sufferings mount, and the authorities then cave under pressure—retreating from a decision or reform initiative or acquiescing to protesters' demands. We have seen this cycle recur across various sectors over the last six months. The helplessness of the interim government in the face of such pressure tactics was once again on display when the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) withdrew its decision to take legal action against the drivers of CNG-run auto-rickshaws disregarding government-set metered fares, after the latter blocked key city streets and even besieged BRTA headquarters on Sunday.

In this particular instance, however, what worsened an already poor optics of governance is how hasty the decision was in the first place. According to a report, the BRTA attempted to enforce a fare system for CNG-run auto-rickshaws that was set nine years ago, without any review or consultation whatsoever. The CNG sector has long been fraught with various issues including fare disputes, conflicts between owners and drivers, and illegal operations. According to our report, the last fare revision was in 2015—which also set a Tk 900 daily deposit payable to owners—but neither drivers nor owners adhered to these rates, each blaming the other for overcharging. A 2022 attempt to revise fares and deposits also failed due to disagreements between them. Following the political shift in August, conflicting demands, and policy responses emerged, leading to the current debacle.

The question is, why would BRTA even try to enforce an outdated system instead of revising fares and deposits in consultation with the stakeholders? Drivers argue that owners currently charge between Tk 1,200 and Tk 1,600—far above the government-set deposit rate—while prices of essentials have also risen significantly, forcing them to overcharge passengers. Owners also cite inflation and rising gas prices as reasons for ignoring the fixed deposit rate. While it is absolutely unacceptable that passengers remain at the mercy of drivers, and by extension, the owners, the lack of enforcement—or rather, enforceable decisions—on the part of the government is also to blame. This whole episode only trivialises its decision-making process and enforcement capacity as well as the welfare of passengers, who are having to pay for its failures.

The fact is, overcharging passengers beyond metered fares and overcharging drivers beyond fixed deposit rates are both punishable under the Road Transport Act 2018. There can be no going around this legal obligation. However, the time has come to revise these rates in a manner that reflects present economic realities as well as passenger expectations—something the BRTA must do without delay. Resolving this issue judiciously is essential not only to establish discipline in this sector but also to prevent future disruptions.

## Crack down on illegal brick kilns

### We must gradually move towards better alternatives

The news of unchecked expansion of illegal brick kilns across nine upazilas of Pabna district once again highlights the authorities' persistent failure to address this issue. According to a report by this daily, more than 150 illegal brick kilns are operating in the district, many of which burn wood instead of coal, exacerbating pollution levels in the region.

A recent investigation by the Department of Environment (DoE) identified 92 kilns in four upazilas using wood in 120-foot chimneys—39 in Pabna Sadar, 46 in Ishwardi, six in Faridpur, and one in Santhia. Among them, 13 have even set up illegal sawmills to ensure a steady supply of timber. Despite clear prohibitions against using wood as fuel under brick manufacturing regulations, most kilns continue to source large amounts of illegally logged timber without permission from the forest department, according to Pabna's district forest office.

While the assistant director of the DoE in Pabna has stated that a report has been sent to the higher authorities in this regard, no significant action appears to have been taken. Meanwhile, the district administration claims to be conducting mobile court drives, but these efforts have been woefully insufficient, as evidenced by the sheer number of illegal brick kilns still in operation and their persistent environmental degradation. According to the district administration, there were 165 registered brick kilns as of 2020, but only 24 have renewed their licenses. What about the rest? How have they managed to operate illegally without consequences?

This is not an isolated issue. Last month, this newspaper reported that 984 kilns in Rangpur division were operating in violation of regulations. Prior to that, similar concerns were raised about Brahmanbaria, too. All of this points to the urgent need for the government to intensify its efforts to shut down illegal operations. Throughout this winter, Dhaka has consistently ranked among the most polluted cities in the world, and unregulated brick kilns are a major contributor to this sorry state of affairs—not just in the capital, but across the country.

That said, permanently eliminating such kilns requires viable alternatives. Fortunately, solutions already exist, including thermal blocks, compressed stabilised earth blocks, and sand-cement hollow blocks. The government, in collaboration with the stakeholders, must develop a clear, enforceable strategy to transition away from traditional brick kilns towards these more environmentally friendly alternatives. Otherwise, this menace will continue to persist at the cost of our environment and public health.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Clyde Tombaugh discovers Pluto

On this day in 1930, Clyde W. Tombaugh, a 24-year-old American with no formal training in astronomy, discovered the dwarf planet Pluto using a 13-inch (33 cm) telescope at Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona.

# The grand choreography of blood



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H.M. NAZMUL ALAM

The July-August uprising of Bangladesh, as history will remember it, was not merely a movement—it was a symphony of repression, meticulously orchestrated by none other than the then prime minister and home minister.

On July 18, a core committee meeting convenes. The setting? A conference room where history would be rewritten with the ink of innocent blood. Picture it—a gathering of the highest-ranking officials of security agencies, intelligence officers, and political henchmen, all waiting for the orders. The home minister, a man whose name will forever be whispered with dread, looks around and declares, "More lethal force!" A nod from the prime minister seals the fate of thousands. A moment worthy of *Game of Thrones*, if only the Red Wedding were stretched over weeks, spilling far more blood.

Imagine the scene: A soldier loads his rifle, a commander nods approvingly, an intelligence officer drafts a list of "targets." The stage is set. The cast is ready. And the audience? Unwilling, unarmed, and unprepared for the brutal show that would unfold.

In the days that followed, the streets became rivers of blood. 1,400 dead. Tens of thousands maimed. The government, ever so magnanimous, claimed only 826 casualties as if the dead needed their existence to be validated by a government ledger. Children were not spared, for what is a political massacre without its share of shattered innocence? The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) report details the gruesome reality—kids, mere children, gunned down with precision, their bodies discarded like chess pieces in a game played by hands too cowardly to admit their crimes.

The historical parallels are staggering. If history were to hold a conference, the ghosts of Nanjing (1937) and the victims of the Amritsar massacre (1919) would find familiar company in Bangladesh's martyrs. And yet, in the grand halls of denial, the former state minister for information, Mohammad Ali Arafat,

scoffs at the UN report. "A biased fabrication!" he proclaims as if words could scrub the blood off the streets.

Ever watched *Narcos*? The way the drug cartels operated—extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, brutal torture—all with the wink of an approving state? Turns out, one does not need a drug empire to run a similar operation. Just a government willing to trade morality for power.



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The OHCHR report painstakingly details the institutionalised human rights abuses: abductions, torture, and disappearances. The intelligence agencies—DGFI, NSI, NTMC, DB, SB, CTC—became the real-life boogymen. A dystopian *Stranger Things*, but here, the monsters weren't hiding in the Upside Down. They wore uniforms, carried badges, and answered directly to their overlords.

One cannot help but be astounded at the crooked efficiency of the previous regime. The opposition crushed, the bodies disposed of, the perpetrators shielded behind the

perfect contrast to the monsters who preceded him. But history remains sceptical. The trials of former ministers and MPs have begun. Eighty are already behind bars, yet the stench of injustice still lingers in the air. One must wonder: will these trials serve justice or merely provide the illusion of it?

Meanwhile, the former ruling party cries foul, their voices hoarse with the desperation of the dethroned. "This report is a lie!" they scream, the echoes of their denials drowned by the very evidence they cannot erase. The world watches, some with outrage, some with indifference. But the dead? The

ground, one thing remains certain—some wounds never heal, and some blood never washes away. The question is, will the future be written in justice or in more blood?

History books will one day recount the July-August massacre, though perhaps not with the gravity it deserves. The blood of the innocent will dry, and their cries will fade, but their stories must remain. For in every tale of oppression, there lies a warning: power unchecked is power unending.

For now, let us weep, let us rage, and let us remember. Because forgetting would be the greatest crime of all.

# Key governance reforms needed for a fairer Bangladesh



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MARTIN RAISER

Bangladesh has gone through several political transitions since its independence in 1971. Caretaker or interim governments in the past have often delivered important institutional reforms. The present team under Professor Mohammad Yunus is no exception. But to meet the expectations of Bangladeshis during this short window, a focused reform agenda is required.

Bangladesh has come far in the past 53 years, but its economic engines were starting to sputter in the aftermath of Covid and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Recent data revisions suggest growth was considerably lower than previously estimated, while substantial capital flight weakened the financial sector's health. Add to this the continuous loss in international reserves during the 2022-24 period and persistently high inflation, and the economy by mid-2024 was not in the best of health.

With the move to a crawling peg exchange rate, the tightening of monetary policy, the alignment of prudential standards with international norms, the launch of an asset quality review, and the appointment of independent boards for several of the troubled banks, the Bangladesh Bank has already taken important

steps to regain macroeconomic and financial stability. These should now be completed with the introduction of a robust bank resolution framework that gives the central bank the tools necessary to intervene in failing banks, enforce capital requirements, and, importantly, protect depositors.

While stabilising the economy is a priority, the roots of Bangladesh's recent turmoil lie in a crisis of governance. The interim government is pursuing a programme that can be described as one of full transparency and wide consultation to help put in place the rules and institutions needed to secure a fairer Bangladesh for the next generation. In the economic sphere, three priorities stand out:

First, today, the government loses a massive seven percent of GDP annually (about 3.5 lakh crore taka) from tax breaks awarded in non-transparent and arbitrary ways. While some tax incentives are justified, they should only be granted after a due process. Bangladesh does not have such a process and unsurprisingly has one of the highest rates of tax exemptions in the world. Transferring the authority to approve tax policy from the National Bureau of Revenues to the parliament, as is the case in almost all other

countries globally, and separating tax policy from tax administration, are foundational reforms to ensure everyone pays their fair share.

The governance of public finances can also be strengthened by disclosing the winners and ownership of government contracts and granting independence to the Office of Comptroller and Auditor General.

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In the area of social assistance, the creation of a dynamic, unified social registry to better target welfare programmes is a positive step in the direction of greater transparency.

Second, lax regulation of banks allowed connected groups to secure loans that greatly increased the risks to banks. The Bangladesh Bank should require all banks to check and disclose their ultimate owners and borrowers and the links between them to manage risks.

In parallel, with the help of the international community, Bangladesh is working to recover some of the assets it believes were illicitly transferred out of the country. With a properly regulated banking system, the foundation would be laid for attracting additional investment into the sector, reducing the large stock of non-performing loans and rebooting private sector credit for growth and job creation.

Third, digital and data revolution offers great opportunities to strengthen public sector governance and service delivery. Reforms to bolster the quality and independence of the statistics system are under preparation. These could be complemented with the creation of a digital public infrastructure to make the public administration more transparent, user-friendly and efficient, following the example of other developing countries from Brazil to Estonia and Indonesia to India. Bangladesh—the country with the second largest population of digital gig workers—should not be far behind. A modern data protection framework, creating an interoperable digital payment system for mobile financial transactions, the creation of a unified digital ID system, and a consent-based data sharing framework could be priorities, as recommended by the task force on re-strategising the economy.

In strengthening the governance of public finances, the financial system and the administration of data and statistics, the interim government would leave a strong economic legacy on which all future elected governments could build.