

Will transport extortion ever end?

Probe finds BNP-linked people involved in extortion in Dhaka's transport stands

We are alarmed by the findings of a government probe on extortion in Dhaka's transport terminals and stands. The investigation, conducted by an intelligence agency after the ouster of the Awami League government, found the involvement of influential figures including some linked to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in this exploitative practice. Not only is this unacceptable, but the fact that even the fall of an autocratic regime through a violent mass uprising could do nothing to reverse this trend in the transport sector is deeply concerning.

According to the probe report, a staggering Tk 2.21 crore is extorted daily from 53 transport terminals and stands in the capital city. Over a month, this amounts to Tk 66.3 crore to even Tk 80 crore. The system established by Awami League leaders and allies during the party's 15-and-a-half-year rule has simply been taken over by leaders and activists of BNP and its affiliated organisations. Of the daily extortion earnings, Tk 1.17 crore is collected under the name of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners' Association, currently headed by Saiful Islam, convener of BNP's Cumilla (north) unit. All this money is reportedly being extorted as "fees" for city corporations, terminal authorities, "expenditure" of counters and terminals, and payments for workers, linemen, cleaners, and security guards, the intelligence agency has found. Long and medium-haul buses, trucks, pickups, covered vans, microbuses, private cars, human hauliers, CNG-run autorickshaws, and evenrickshaws are being charged these "fees."

It is no secret that extortion has plagued our transport sector for decades. Its extent and sphere of influence can be understood from a study—unveiled by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in March last year—that revealed that private buses and minibuses pay at least Tk 1,059 crore in illegal tolls and bribes every year. Unfortunately, following the Awami League government's fall, we saw how BNP-affiliated transport leaders took over the sector, seemingly to get their hands on the extortion money, thus perpetuating this unscrupulous practice.

This status quo must be broken. As Bangladesh moves forward with key reform initiatives to establish discipline and accountability in various sectors, the transport sector cannot be left to rot under this age-old cycle of extortion and corruption. The BNP leadership must take into cognisance the allegations against its leaders and take punitive action, as it did against more than 1,000 members and 12 committees when allegations of rent seeking and illegal occupation were proven. The government should also consider the probe report's recommendation: privatising bus terminals and stands, allowing them to officially charge fees, and using that revenue to run these establishments. Whatever the solution, it must be implemented immediately to rid the sector of this illegal practice.

Govt must prioritise farmers' needs

Ensure adequate storage facilities for potatoes, reduce transportation costs

It is concerning that potato growers in the northern districts are struggling to find space in cold storages for their produce. According to a report, there are 101 cold storage facilities in the Rangpur division with a total capacity of 1.1 million tonnes—which is insufficient given the high demand for space. This shortage has caused severe congestion outside the facilities, particularly in Dinajpur and Syedpur. Hundreds of potato-laden trucks remain stranded on highways for days, causing traffic disruptions and driving up transportation costs. Farmers in the region have also alleged that cold storage operators are favouring traders over them, which is unfortunate.

Reportedly, more farmers have cultivated potatoes this year, encouraged by last year's high prices. However, they now fear incurring losses instead of making profits. Sensing the crisis, transporters have also almost doubled their rates—from Tk 35 to Tk 65 per sack of potatoes—mostly because trucks carrying potatoes have to wait for a prolonged period outside storage facilities. The cold storage charge also remains high, as the government has imposed a fee cap of Tk 6.75 per kilogramme of produce. Many farmers allege that while they wait for days, traders' trucks are granted entry at night. Storage operators, however, have attributed the delay to overwhelming demand for space. Due to this unfavourable situation, farmers are already facing financial losses. Worse still, the market price of potatoes has fallen below Tk 20 per kg.

Under the circumstances, we urge the government to ensure adequate storage facilities for potato farmers. The capacity of both government and private cold storages should be increased to accommodate the high volume of produce, and storage authorities must maintain the government-mandated storage ratio of 60:40 for farmers and traders. While local authorities have deployed police and Ansar-VDP personnel to manage the chaos outside storage facilities, more government oversight is needed to ensure farmers get proper access. Additionally, the storage charge per kg should be reduced to Tk 5 from the current Tk 6.75, as farmers have demanded. Our potato farmers—already burdened by high production costs and falling incomes—should not suffer further losses due to storage shortages and mismanagement.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Japan hit by earthquake, tsunami

On this day in 2011, an earthquake struck off the northeastern coast of Honshu, Japan, causing widespread damage in the country and triggering a devastating tsunami that instigated a major nuclear accident.

The ongoing struggle for women's safety

MACRO MIRROR

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In Bangladesh, this year's International Women's Day saw protests and marches by people from all walks of life across the country, demanding the safety of women and girls. The day arrived at a time when an eight-year-old girl was raped in Magura and a female student of Dhaka University was verbally harassed by a bookbinder of the university library. Protesters called for stricter measures to punish the perpetrators without delay.

Violence and discrimination against women are not new in Bangladesh. In recent times, many women have faced scrutiny and moral policing regarding their clothing choices. So, the sense of insecurity among women has escalated significantly. This insecurity is compounded by the rise of mob justice, virtual harassment, and public shaming, which have instilled widespread fear among the population—both women and men. The weak law and order situation has emboldened perpetrators, leading to a surge in gender-based violence (GBV) and all forms of harassment. These incidents undermine the spirit of the July uprising, which called for establishing a discrimination-free society.

The situation has been further aggravated by insensitive comments by a government adviser regarding women smoking in public places, reflecting a lack of understanding of gender issues. While the interim government has formed a Women's Affairs Reform Commission, demonstrating a commitment to gender equality, its lack of substantial action on moral policing and GBV is deeply frustrating.

Indeed, despite economic progress over the last five decades since our independence, GBV has not decreased. Like in many other countries, violence against women seems to be pervasive and unstoppable in our country. Women of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds are victims of violence—both in rural and urban areas. It manifests in multiple forms, including physical, sexual, and verbal abuse.

Women face violence from their own family members within their homes, with domestic violence being a common reality. After marriage, many women continue to experience abuse at the hands of their husbands and in-laws. The above-mentioned rape victim was violated by her sister's father-in-law, who should have played the role of a guardian.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Lack of accountability emboldens not only politically connected offenders but also ordinary criminals who believe they can act without consequences.

The problem extends beyond the domestic sphere—educational institutions often fail to provide a safe learning environment. Female students are subjected to verbal and physical harassment by male classmates, teachers, and other officials. Similarly, workplaces are not always safe for women, as they frequently encounter harassment and exploitation from supervisors and male colleagues. Public spaces, including public transport and open areas, pose further risks, where incidents of sexual harassment, assault, and even rape are alarmingly common.

The root cause of gender-based violence lies in deeply entrenched power imbalances between men and women. Though still lower than that

must instil values of gender equality and respect from an early age. Beyond formal education, mass media and community programmes can challenge harmful gender norms by promoting positive representations of women. Families, too, have a fundamental responsibility in shaping children's perceptions of gender roles. Parents need to foster an environment where boys and girls are treated equally and where boys are taught to respect women as equals rather than as subordinates.

Political factors play a decisive role in shaping social behaviour and ensuring accountability for crimes against women. In Bangladesh, the culture of impunity is a significant driver of violence. When perpetrators of rape, harassment, or violence are

shielded by political connections, it sends a message that such crimes will not be punished. Many criminals take refuge under the protection of political parties, escaping legal consequences. In turn, law enforcement agencies are often unable to act without approval from higher political authorities.

In the face of strong protests from citizens, the rapist in the above case has been arrested, and the government has promised to complete the trial quickly by changing some legal provisions. However, such actions are not visible in the case of other perpetrators who have committed similar crimes, as they are wealthy and politically connected.

Despite having several laws and policies to address these crimes, their implementation remains a significant challenge. In fact, the man who harassed the university student was released after his arrest, allegedly due to pressure from a certain group. The helplessness of the state in the face of such pressures is astounding!

The legal framework requires robust enforcement. But the justice system often fails to deliver due to corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and political influence. Our experience indicates that ensuring justice is not an automatic process. It requires a systemic shift in attitudes and governance structures that uphold the rule of law.

Unfortunately, this lack of accountability emboldens not only politically connected offenders but also ordinary criminals who believe they can act without consequences. Ending this cycle requires strong political will and judicial independence to ensure that laws are enforced impartially and that perpetrators, regardless of their status, are brought to justice.

Another important issue is that, despite numerous policies and legal frameworks aimed at combating violence against women, its widespread persistence indicates that legal instruments alone are insufficient. A holistic approach is necessary.

Violence against women and girls is not just a women's issue—it is a societal crisis that hinders national progress. Achieving a violence-free society requires a comprehensive and sustained effort from all sectors, including the government, civil society, youth, and all individuals.

Unless decisive action is taken, the achievements of Bangladeshi women over the past five decades will be at risk. A safer, more inclusive Bangladesh is not only possible but imperative for the nation's development.

Beijing's tactical silence over Trump's global gambits



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Not surprisingly, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, a seasoned diplomat, opted for parables to characterise Donald Trump's foreign policy. Addressing an audience at the Munich Security Conference, he remarked, "No matter which way the wind blows—north, south, east, or west—we will remain calm and unshakable." This, however, should not be mistaken for passive detachment. Beijing is not merely an observer of Trump's seismic shifts in global affairs. Rather, it is fastidiously recalibrating its strategy.

As Washington unsettles transatlantic relations, China's approach is neither reactionary nor resigned but calculated; a quiet yet assertive force adapting to the evolving geopolitical landscape with precision and foresight. Beijing's perspective is apparent—a new global order is rapidly taking shape, one that may soon establish a G2 framework, effectively side-lining the Western-dominated G7. The G20 might persist as a supplementary platform, but the real power struggle will centre on Washington and Beijing.

Two key elements define Trump's global impact. First, his controversial demands—ranging from musings over acquiring Greenland to negotiations with Moscow on Ukraine—underscore Washington's bid to consolidate control over the Western Hemisphere. Second, his aggressive tariff wars signal an economic realignment. China, fully aware of Trump's transactional approach, is consciously preparing for

a prolonged contest over global trade and influence. Instead of reacting impulsively, Beijing is redesigning its strategy, reinforcing its economic defences, and expanding its geopolitical reach. The world is witnessing a fundamental power shift, one where China is a formidable contender, shaping the future of international politics.

Beijing appears cautiously optimistic about the second Trump administration, seeing it as more economically pragmatic than its predecessor. The presence of business elites with deep ties to China fosters the belief that Washington's approach may be more measured this time. Amid this recalibration, China seems receptive to the shifts emanating from the White House, interpreting them as adjustments rather than outright confrontation. Unlike Europe—where alarm over Trump's policies runs high—Beijing does not yet perceive his administration as actively stoking hostilities.

Meanwhile, US Vice President JD Vance delivered a speech that sent shockwaves through European circles, evoking parallels to Vladimir Putin's 2007 Munich address, which marked Russia's definitive break from the West. Vance's rhetoric signalled a new challenge, one that underscores Washington's shifting priorities and the fracturing transatlantic consensus.

While Europe braces for turbulence, China is playing the long game—strategically adapting to a world order

where US-China relations are defined less by ideological struggle and more by calculated economic manoeuvring.

The Trump-Putin dialogue on Ukraine has cast doubt over the post-WWII transatlantic security framework, triggering European anxieties about America's retreat from its role as guarantor of continental stability. Vance's dual critique—targeting Europe's handling of extremist political forces and signalling Washington's unpredictable policy shifts—has injected strategic dissonance into NATO's cohesion.

This destabilising dynamic has spurred Macron to convene an urgent Paris summit, seeking a unified European counter to Washington's Ukraine stance. Three implications emerge: i) US unilateralism under Trump risks eroding trust in its security commitments, reviving existential questions about NATO's relevance; ii) Europe's internal political fragility—amplified by rising far-right movements—leaves it vulnerable to Washington's transactional diplomacy; and iii) the crisis underscores a paradigm shift: America's strategic priorities now diverge sharply from Europe's, mirroring Cold War-era fissures but without the Soviet-era ideological clarity.

Unlike NATO's unified posture against Moscow in the 20th century, today's fragmented response exposes a geopolitical vacuum—one that Beijing and Moscow could exploit. The Macron-led initiative, while reactive, highlights Europe's precarious position: reliant on US military muscle yet compelled to hedge against its capricious leadership. This recalibration, however, lacks the structural heft to redefine Euro-Atlantic power equations unilaterally.

From a Chinese vantage point, Trump's broader agenda presents opportunities. When queried about reducing China's dependence on Russian oil and gas, Foreign Minister

Wang dismissed the notion, asserting that no other nation could meet Beijing's demands. Though China's involvement in Ukraine's peace talks may be minimal, it has compelling reasons to remain engaged. Beijing envisions its expansion in the Middle East, propelled by ceasefire discussions over Gaza. This allows China to bolster its historic support for Arab and Palestinian causes.

Reconstruction needs across the region offer avenues for Chinese infrastructure prowess, potentially in Ukraine, should Beijing sustain its involvement. In this context, China stands to manage the evolving global landscape, asserting its influence while seizing strategic opportunities. This nuanced approach underscores Beijing's aspiration to shape the international order, much like the fabled lords of old.

With transatlantic tensions simmering, the prospect of Europe aligning with the US on trade barriers against China remains uncertain. The American strategy to curb Chinese technology, particularly electric vehicles, hinges on Europe fortifying its own defences. Observers eyeing a potential G2 world view Trump's approach as steering the US away from a head-on clash with a rising China while simultaneously disrupting nearly eight decades of US-European unity.

For China, this scenario is advantageous. It not only bolsters Beijing's global standing but grants it greater influence on critical issues like the Ukraine conflict and Middle Eastern turmoil. Europe, although unsettled, finds itself as the third pillar in this geopolitical triad. Undoubtedly, the Washington-Beijing relationship has entered a new phase, paralleled by the fraying transatlantic partnership. As the global landscape shifts, these dynamics will shape the future of international relations and the balance of power.