

MY DHAKA



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DHAKA AFTER DARK

The lives that keep the city alive

REHNUMA SHAHREEN

Have we ever stopped to wonder when the ATM machines refill themselves? Or who stocks the shelves of our favourite stores before we walk in the morning? Who guards our streets while the rest of the city sleeps? And who, beneath the weight of more than 22 million people, carries the night on their shoulders so that the day can run without pause?

Night-time Dhaka is nothing like its daytime self. The congested roads, the honking horns, the endless arguments between cars and rickshaws all vanish after sunset. The city, so restless in daylight, finally exhales. For most, the night means rest. But for a few, it is when life begins.

At a small roadside hotel near Dhaka Medical College, a man named Lokman has been serving tea and meals late into the night for years. He prefers it this way. "The rush of customers is manageable, so I can work with a peaceful mind," he said.

But not all night-time work brings comfort. For Fazlur Bari, who has guarded ATMs for almost a decade, the silence brings unease. "I like the environment but I don't like working at night. My job is already lonely. At night, it becomes lonelier. I provide security for others, but I worry about my own."

Beyond the workers are the unseen lives that stir only at night: street dogs patrolling like unofficial guards, homeless people laying claim to small patches of pavement, and trucks unloading supplies that keep the city running the next day. Night-time is when Dhaka's invisible economy breathes freely -- the stocking of goods, the movement of money, the flow of

labour that make daytime life appear seamless.

For some, the city at night feels entirely different. Jubayer Mahmud Khan, who works nights for a foreign company, said, "I go to the office in the evening

and spend most of my hours inside. But when I return home around four in the morning, I see a new Dhaka. The chilly air, the empty roads, the people sleeping on the sidewalks -- I notice them then. It feels like the city shows me a side it doesn't reveal otherwise."

For others, the night carries both convenience and danger. Sauvik Debnath, who works in cash management, enjoys the traffic-free

streets but worries about safety. "Public transport is rare, so I spend extra on bikes or rickshaws. That's when the risk grows. Once, I was attacked while returning from work. They took my wallet and phone. So, you see, the night is peaceful, but also dangerous."

Some, however, thrive in it. A rickshaw puller explained why he prefers the night shift. "Even though I get fewer passengers, I can drive easily and more efficiently because the roads are empty. The rides are enjoyable, and for me, night-time is actually more profitable."

Perhaps this is the true nature of Dhaka after dark: a city stripped of its façade. Most will never know this version except in fleeting glimpses -- on a late drive home, crossing a road before dawn, or gazing out of a window when sleep won't come. But for those who live and work in it, night-time Dhaka is not an intermission. It is their shift, their solitude, their risk, their discovery. It is, in its own way, another city altogether.



Only 5% road crash victims

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They were compensated from a fund generated through the annual fees paid by vehicle owners. The fund stood at Tk 225 crore as of November last year.

According to different non-government organisations, the number of road crash victims is much higher than the government count because many accidents are not reported.

Contacted, BRTA Chairman Abu Momtaz Saad Uddin Ahmed, also the chairman of the trustee board, said the board in its last meeting on August 12 decided to extend the application deadline to two months.

"Necessary documents have already been conveyed to the Road Transport and Highways Division for approval," he told The Daily Star on August 25.

REASONS BEHIND POOR NUMBER

Following the enactment of the Road Transport Act 2018, the government formed a trustee board led by the BRTA chairman.

In December 2022, the government approved the rules of the Road Transport Act, allowing the compensation process to begin in January the following year.

According to the rules, the family of a victim killed in a road crash is entitled to Tk 5 lakh in compensation.

Those who lose a limb or suffer other life-altering injuries receive Tk 3 lakh each, while victims expected to recover and return to normal life are given Tk 1 lakh each.

An individual seeking compensation must fill out a form and submit it to the trustee board

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chairman within a month of the road crash.

In case of death, the victim's family members are required to submit the deceased's NID card or birth certificate (in the case of a child), an attested copy of the death certificate, a succession certificate, a power of attorney signed by the heirs on a Tk 300 stamp paper, a declaration on stamp paper by the legal guardian (for minor heirs), and other supporting documents where applicable.

In case of an injury, the victim must submit a copy of NID card or birth certificate (in the case of a child), treatment-related documents and proof.

Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury, secretary general of Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, said that one month is not enough to manage all the required documents.

"Many people lose interest in filing applications because of the complex process," he told The Daily Star last week.

Many people are not even aware of the government scheme. Some families also refuse to conduct post-mortems on relatives killed in road crashes, making them ineligible for compensation, Mozammel noted.

"The process must be simplified, and there should be dedicated manpower to deal with the compensation claims. Otherwise, most people will continue to be deprived of the benefit."

Besides, the investigation process is lengthy, and in the absence of dedicated manpower, disposal of applications takes a long time.

Replies to a question on submission of so many documents within a month, he said, "We will work to simplify the process so that people can easily get compensation."

On teacher student relations, he said students must also have the right to evaluate teachers. "Teachers can evaluate students, but students have no mechanism to do that. That must change."

Meghmaller said he wants a campus where every student enjoys equal rights.

"We resisted before, we are resisting now, and we will resist in the future. No matter who wins the election, students will see me speaking for resistance and justice."

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Meghmaller pledges to end disparity

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saw people being dehumanised, mob rule and moral policing spreading. Indigenous people, women, and minorities have been further marginalised," he said.

He said his panel is based on inclusivity.

"Our panel is inclusive -- 40 percent of our candidates are female. Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and those who work for animal rights are also there. We want a university and a country where everyone's participation is recognised."

If elected, Meghmaller said his top priority will be reforming the Duchs constitution.

"Housing and transport problems cannot be solved without reform. Some propose public private partnerships, but that will only privatise and raise costs. We will use the university's budget instead. I will

Mozammel pointed out.

According to the rules, the trustee board chairman is supposed to form a probe committee within 10 days of receiving an application, and the committee has to submit a report within a month.

But in most cases, the deadline is not maintained, he added.

ABRTA official echoed Mozammel's remarks.

"The verification of documents takes a long time, which delays the disposal of applications," said the official, seeking anonymity.

However, another BRTA official said that as part of efforts to speed up the process, the agency's district offices started receiving applications from crash victims or their families from October last year.

"An auto rickshaw hit my bike in Dhammconi last month, leaving me with a fractured left hand. I had to spend a lot on surgery and medicines and could not attend work. Had I known about the compensation, I would have applied for it," said Nurul Alam, a private job holder.

Earlier, applications could be submitted only to the BRTA headquarters in Dhaka.

The BRTA chairman Momtaz said, "We intentionally make no delay. The law stipulates that we must verify all documents, and it takes time."

Talking to this correspondent on August 24, Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan, adviser to road transport and bridges ministry, said they are working to make people aware of the government scheme.

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"I will also fight to remove the gap in facilities for male and female students,

and ensure equal rights for ethnic and religious minorities."

On the election environment, he said, "The positive side is voters' engagement -- they are asking and discussing manifestos."

However, he raised concerns about the shortage of polling centres. "We fear voter suppression. There are not enough polling centres. If students cannot vote, even after waiting for hours, that will be unacceptable. Moreover, the election is being held during the exam season. We have raised this issue many times, but the administration has done nothing."

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Meghmaller vowed to continue the struggle for a better DU and a better country.

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Citing India, he said religious polarisation has damaged the social

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"This isn't just about constitutional tweaks. It's about where parties get their money, who they are accountable to, and how power is organised."

Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain also said the political culture has to change. "The intention cannot simply be about going to power, but about building the country, institutions, education, and opportunities for the young."

He said the young generation, which brought about change in July 2024, will not allow politics to return to the conditions of 1974 or 1991.

"They may not succeed right away because politics is still in the hands of our generation, who are clinging to it. But they will not be there for long," he said.

"The young will make mistakes. They will gain experience, maybe the

fabric and undermined economic potential. "India has become a cautionary example. We must tell the world: for heaven's sake, do not allow religion and sectarianism to polarise and divide."

Prof Maszlee bin Malik, chairman of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies, warned that when 10.6 percent of the youth are unemployed and civil society is sidelined, the country risks trading short-term calm for long-term fragility.

"Elite capture erodes trust. Political alienation fuels unrest. Hence, Bangladesh must rebuild its democratic infrastructure not with rhetoric but with decisive action," he said.

He recommended credible electoral reforms, including digital voter verification and independent election monitoring, and proposed a permanent

governance requires four things: it must deliver on people's aspirations, be accountable, respond quickly to crises and it must provide stability so the people of all ethnicities and faiths can go about their work.

He said South Asia may need to go back to history and see what worked and what didn't, and borrow ideas wisely for today. "Asking the right questions is the first step. By working together as South Asians, we can eventually find the answers."

Indian foreign policy expert Sreeradha Datta, professor of international affairs at OP Jindal Global University, also emphasised cooperation among South Asian nations.

She said Bangladesh and India need to have honest and frank conversation with focus on specific issues concerning their national interests, moving beyond



Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain speaking at the inaugural session of the Bengal Delta Conference 2025 at a city hotel yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

hard way, but they will gain it, and we will see changes."

Siddharth Varadarajan, founder-editor of The Wire and member of the Indian Council of World Affairs, stressed the need for empowerment, accountability, resilient institutions and a more equitable framework that ensures institutions are not hijacked or undermined.

He warned that economic inequality, rooted in concentrated wealth, breeds dysfunctional politics that overwhelm even strong institutions.

Siddharth also urged vigilance against the use of religion in politics. "I have seen countries destroy themselves because of politicians pursuing exclusivist agendas. Yugoslavia, once home to many languages and religions, was destroyed when chauvinist politicians played one group against another."

He urged that economic inequality, rooted in concentrated wealth, breeds dysfunctional politics that overwhelm even strong institutions.

The July uprising has given this perspective a special significance, he said. "People have made the ultimate sacrifices, paving the way for a new episode, even a new epoch for our country."

Dr Dipak Gyawali of the Nepal Academy of Science and Technology argued that democracy -- the imported Westminster model -- itself needs rethinking in South Asia. "The question is: are we talking about democracy, or good governance?"

According to Gyawali, good historical baggage.

It was important to keep the Liberation War as a base to the present times and look at the lessons of history -- that is to trust each other, because "trust deficit" is "a double-edged sword and works both ways," she said.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said political parties -- the practitioners of democracy -- use democracy to go to power, but the moment they win an election, they start subverting democracy. "That, unfortunately, is the history of Bangladesh," he said.

On the current realities, he warned, "No matter how good a democratic structure you bring, if the practitioners of democracy don't believe in democracy, it will fail."

Urging the youth, he said, "You may have the energy, the spirit, and the dream, but you do not have the experience. It is in the combination of energy, spirit, and experience that our future lies."

BNP leader stabbed to death in Pirojpur

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pirojpur

A BNP leader was stabbed to death allegedly by a rival in Pirojpur's Bhandaria upazila yesterday.

The deceased Rezaul Karim Jhantu, 50, was the general secretary of Bhitabaria union ward 8 unit of BNP, said police.

Md Jahangir Hossain, officer-in-charge of Bhandaria Police Station, said Rezaul was attacked around 10:30am near Manju Market in the area by his neighbour Mohammad Rubel, 35, over previous ememy.

Witnesses said Rubel stabbed Rezaul in the chest with a sharp weapon during an altercation. Rezaul fell into a roadside ditch, and Rubel continued stabbing him, leaving him critically injured.

Locals rushed him to Bhandaria Upazila Health Complex where the on-duty doctor declared him dead.

Police and locals said Rezaul and Rubel had a long-standing feud.

Rubel has been on the run since the incident, the OC said. "Drives are underway to arrest him," he added.

RISING CONFLICTS

Red Cross sees surge in missing people

REUTERS, Geneva

The number of people reported missing to the Red Cross has risen by about 70 percent in five years, driven by rising conflicts and mass migration, the Geneva-based organisation said yesterday, calling for a recommitment to the rules of war.

"..The surging number of missing persons provides a stark reminder that conflict parties and those who support them are failing to protect people during war," said Pierre Krahenbuhl, Director General of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Some 284,400 were reported missing by the end of last year, up from 16