THE METRO RAIL TRAGEDY

What is the cost of a human life in Bangladesh?

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On an ordinary morning in Farmgate, Abul Kalam Azad left his home in Narayanganj and set off for his daily commute to Uttara. He never returned. A bearing pad from a metro rail pillar collapsed and killed him instantly, leaving behind a four-year-old son, a three-year-old daughter and a widow grappling with irreplaceable loss. The government's response? A payment of Tk 5 lakh and an offer of a job to a family member. His brother's response sheds light on the devastating reality: "What will this Tk 5 lakh do? This can never be compensation for a human life."

That question demands an answer, not just from the authorities, but from our collective conscience. What is the cost of a human life in Bangladesh? More critically: who will take responsibility for the mounting death toll from preventable accidents that have become tragically routine?

Let's explore "the preventable accident" part. The bearing pad killing Azad fell from pier 433. Just 13 months earlier, a bearing pad slipped from the same metro line near pier 430—only two piers away from 433. The earlier collapse caused no casualties, yet it should have served as an urgent warning. Instead, it became a prophecy of disaster ignored.

Transport expert Shamsul Hoque of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology told this daily that two such structural failures strongly suggest a compromise in the metro system's construction. He noted that the design followed global standards developed over a century, pointing instead to construction quality and inadequate oversight by Japanese consultants.

However, the cost of Dhaka's metro rail line is not insignificant. In Bangladesh, the per-kilometre cost reportedly ranges between $226.74 million and $253.63 million—five times the cost in India ($40.77 million/km) and higher than Riyadh ($166 million/km) and Dubai ($188 million/km). These astronomical costs raise concerning questions about where the money went and whether corners were cut where they should not have been.

But the metro rail is only one symptom of a broader, systemic disease.

In July, a training aircraft of the Bangladesh Air Force crashed into the Milestone School and College campus in Uttara, killing at least 36 people, most of whom were children. The crash left the question about the rationale for allowing air force training missions so close to residential areas in an overcrowded city unanswered. In the same month, Faria Tasnim Jyoti, a 32-year-old sales manager, fell into an uncovered drain along the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway in Tongi and drowned. There were no warning signs near the hazard.

In Chattogram, at least 14 people died falling into open drains or canals over the past six years, including a six-month-old baby in April and a three-year-old girl in July. A probe committee identified "mismanagement by utility service agencies, gross negligence, and long-standing coordination failures" as causes.

More recently, a devastating fire in a chemical warehouse in Mirpur's Rupnagar claimed at least 17 lives, including children. A fire-service official admitted they only learn about such illegal warehouses "when a fire breaks out"—a damning indictment of regulatory failure.

The carnage extends onto our roads. At least 417 people were killed and 682 injured in 446 road accidents across Bangladesh in September 2025 alone, according to the Road Safety Foundation.

Global standards and Bangladesh's reality

International safety frameworks provide a stark contrast to Bangladesh's approach. India's metro rail projects, despite lower costs, maintain safety records via independent third-party audits and rigorous quality control; for example, the Delhi Metro, operational since 2002, has carried over six billion passengers with an exemplary safety record, enforced by the Commissioner of Metro Rail Safety. Meanwhile, Vietnam reduced road fatalities from around 13,000 in 2007 to approximately 7,000 in 2020 through the strict enforcement of helmet laws and traffic regulations.

By contrast, Bangladesh operates in a regulatory vacuum. The Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) exists largely on paper. The Road Transport Act, 2018, promised stricter penalties, but enforcement remains dismal. The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, mandates safety measures in factories—yet illegal chemical warehouses continue operating in residential areas until they explode into headlines.

Worse still, Bangladesh's lax enforcement measures often allow company owners to continue operating without accountability, whereas in countries like Singapore Workplace Safety and Health Act includes penalties up to 500,000 Singaporean dollars (equivalent to Tk 3.3 crore) and imprisonment of up to two years for companies found negligent for fatalities.

How do we place a value on life?

When Azad's widow, Irene Akhter Priya, said, "Compensation or a job will not suffice," she articulated what compensation studies globally have long established: human life cannot be reduced to a transaction. However, the economic concept of the Value of Statistical Life (VSL)—the value society places on reducing the risk of dying—provides insight into how societies prioritise safety.

For instance, the US Environmental Protection Agency uses a VSL of approximately $10 million, and many other countries follow a similar approach. These figures influence infrastructure investment, safety regulations, and corporate liability frameworks. In Bangladesh, contingent-valuation and benefit-transfer studies put the VSL in the range of $15,000 to $250,000, depending on income levels and risk preferences. Yet in practice, compensation awards for preventable deaths in Bangladesh rarely approach even the lower end of these estimates.

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

However, the loss of a life does have broader economic consequences. The World Bank estimates that the costs related to traffic crashes can be as high as 5.1 percent of the GDP annually. The Asian Development Bank and other regional analyses estimate that infrastructure deficits can cost economies roughly 3-4 percent of GDP. Recent studies report that human and organisational failures are implicated in a large share of structural failures, as high as 60-90 percent, and improved oversight, inspection, and quality control can reduce failure risk substantially. Therefore, the economics of prevention are clear—what is lacking is the political will.

Who bears responsibility?

The Road Transport and Bridges Ministry has formed a six-member committee to investigate whether the metro accident arose from "technical fault or sabotage." This framing itself is telling—it equates sabotage with negligence, deflecting from systemic accountability. The Dhaka Mass Transit Company Limited (DMTCL) managing director, Faruk Ahmed, speculated about "jerking of the line caused by train movement" and acknowledged that "there might be a construction issue or a design flaw," but deferred conclusions until the investigation is complete.

Sadly, this is a familiar script: form a committee, promise a report in two weeks, announce compensation and then wait for public attention to fade. Rarely do such investigations lead to meaningful accountability. No executives are charged. No licences revoked. No systemic reforms implemented.

The interim government has inherited infrastructure built on what many call "Sheikh Hasina's loot-fest"—megaprojects plagued by inflated costs and suspected corruption. DMTCL is now examining why metro costs are so high, but retrospective analysis comes too late for Azad. Unless accompanied by comprehensive safety audits and accountability measures, the analysis may come too late for future victims.

City corporations carry similar failings. Despite so many deaths in Chattogram from open drains, basic safety measures, such as covering drains, installing barriers, posting warning signs, remain undone. The failure to cover drains or post warnings directly led to Faria's death in Gazipur. Yet, no officials have been held accountable. Acronyms of coordination and committees mask the lack of action. Although Azad's wife has filed an unnatural death case, whether it will lead to justice and meaningful accountability remains a question.

What must be done?

Bangladesh needs a fundamental overhaul of its safety and accountability framework, focusing on clear and enforceable measures, starting with conducting independent safety audits of all critical infrastructure, especially major projects completed in recent years. Second, criminal liability for institutional negligence must be established so that organisations and leadership are held accountable when failures cause death. Third, we must create an independent safety oversight body with enforcement powers, insulated from political interference. This body should conduct inspections, mandate corrective actions, and have the authority to shut down non-compliant operations.

Moreover, ensuring transparency in project costs and construction oversight by publishing detailed audits, investigation reports, and safety compliance data is also crucial. The government must provide meaningful compensation that reflects the true economic and social cost of preventable deaths. A payment of Tk 5 lakh for a breadwinner's life is an insult layered upon a tragedy.

We can either continue treating safety as an afterthought—compensating victims with token payments while systemic rot persists—or we can demand the accountability every citizen deserves. The right to cross a street, ride public transport, work in a factory, or walk near a drain without risking death should not be a privilege.

The question "What is the cost of a human life in Bangladesh?" must not have a finite answer. A life is priceless. But our actions suggest we have assigned it a bargain-basement value, paid in compensation checks that insult more than console. Until those responsible for these deaths—through negligence, corruption, or wilful disregard—face consequences proportionate to their failures, the deaths will continue. Justice delayed is justice denied; justice absent is complicity in murder.

The Nobel gap: Reclaiming the Muslim legacy of knowledge

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Winning a Nobel Prize is universally regarded as the highest recognition of human intellect—the pinnacle of creative and scientific achievement. Since its establishment in 1901, the Nobel Foundation has awarded 633 prizes to 1,026 individuals and organisations for advancing the frontiers of knowledge, promoting peace, and enhancing human welfare. Yet, among Muslims, only five have ever received this honour for sciences, while eight have been awarded for peace and three for literature.

This disparity does not arise from exclusion, but mainly from a civilisation's retreat from its own legacy of inquiry. The Muslim world, once known for scientific curiosity and philosophical brilliance, has over time lost its enthusiasm for discovery. The same ideals that once illuminated fields of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and chemistry with near-spiritual dedication to knowledge have, in many areas, faded into reverence without research, belief without exploration. For the decline of intellectual discipline and neglecting the very spirit of ilm (knowledge) that once defined the Muslim world, there is no one to blame but the civilisation itself. The story of Muslim absence from the Nobel list is not a tale of oppression or bias; it is a chronicle of diminished pursuit of passion unrenewed and potentials unfulfilled.

Among the rare exceptions stand a few luminous names. Dr Abdus Salam, the Pakistani physicist, became the first Muslim Nobel laureate in 1979 for co-developing the electroweak unification theory that revolutionised particle physics. In 2006, Dr Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh and his Grameen Bank received the Nobel Peace Prize for microcredit—a social innovation that empowered millions of poor women and redefined development economics. Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl who defied Taliban bullets, was awarded the 2014 Peace Prize at just seventeen, becoming the youngest laureate in history and the voice of every silenced girl denied education.

In 2015, the Nobel Committee honoured a Muslim scientist in chemistry: Aziz Sancar, a Turkish-American biochemist, for mapping the intricate mechanisms of DNA repair. A decade later, in 2025, Omar Yaghi stood on the Stockholm stage, sharing the Nobel Prize in Chemistry with Susumu Kitagawa and Richard Robson for pioneering the field of reticular chemistry—the art of weaving molecules into porous, functional materials.

That makes only five Muslim laureates for science. The disparity here is glaring—not of intellect but of environment. The West has built a culture that rewards inquiry; much of the Muslim world has built systems that fear it. From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, Muslim scholars translated Greek texts, invented algorithms, measured the stars, and laid the groundwork for modern algebra, optics, and medicine. Knowledge was then seen as a divine pursuit—"Seek knowledge even unto China" was more than a proverb; it was policy. Baghdad's House of Wisdom rivalled any modern research institute, and scholars from Córdoba to Samarkand made discovery a sacred duty.

The Muslim world needs more than laureates; it needs laboratories that breathe curiosity, classrooms that encourage debate, and governments willing to fund science as vigorously as they fund theological undertakings. Research and scientific exploration are about survival in a fast-changing world. When a society invests in science, it invests in sovereignty—intellectual, economic, and moral. The Nobel Prize is not the measure of a civilisation's worth, but a reflection of its direction.

That light dimmed when theology eclipsed philosophy and dogma displaced doubt. The collapse of intellectual pluralism—the marginalisation of thinkers such as Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina—marked the beginning of the decline. Colonial intrusion later deepened the decay, leaving many Muslim nations politically independent yet intellectually dependent. Many of the brightest minds emigrated for oxygen to laboratories in Cambridge, MIT, or Berkeley, where freedom of thought replaced fear of offence. The story repeats itself: most Muslim Nobel laureates built their careers in Western universities. Their success does not indict their belief; it indicts the systems that could not sustain their curiosity at home.

Science thrives on scepticism, not obedience. Yet in many Muslim societies, questioning authority is mistaken for defiance, and conformity masquerades as virtue. Critical thinking is largely absent from classrooms that prize rote memorisation over reasoning. Research budgets are meagre, peer review perfunctory, and political patronage suffocates merit. A young physicist in Cairo or Karachi spends more time chasing visas than experiments. Without autonomy, institutions become ornamental, not generative.

Islam equated ilm with spiritual duty. The Qur'an's first revealed word to Prophet Muhammad was Iqra (Read)—emphasising the primacy of knowledge in Islam. The tragedy is not that Muslims have stopped reading, but that too many have stopped asking why. The revival of intellectual vibrancy requires reclaiming that original mandate: to explore, to reason, to verify. Science and faith were never meant to be rivals; one explains creation, the other its meaning. When belief becomes afraid of the microscope, both religion and reason suffer.

Omar Yaghi's Nobel in 2025 is more than a personal triumph; it is a reminder that intellectual exile need not mean extinction. His journey—from a Palestinian refugee family to the world's most cited chemist—exemplifies what happens when intellect meets opportunity. His discoveries in green chemistry could help solve some of the world's most pressing challenges: clean water, breathable air, and sustainable energy. The irony is that while his innovations can hydrate deserts, many of the Muslim world's universities remain intellectual deserts—barren of inquiry, barren of dissent.

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The task before Muslims is to reclaim that civilisational zeal by restoring freedom to think, courage to question, and dignity to fail in pursuit of truth. The next Nobel will not arrive by miracle; it will emerge from classrooms unafraid of curiosity, from universities liberated from biased politics, and from children taught that wonder is not heresy.