

Recurrent road tragedies must stop

High casualties during Eid holidays reflect systemic failure

It is deeply distressing that every occasion of Eid, which is meant to be a time of reunion and celebration with families, continues to be overshadowed by reports of mass casualties on our roads. This year's Eid-ul-Fitr was no exception. According to the Road Safety Foundation, at least 274 people were killed and over 1,500 injured in 342 road crashes across the country between March 16 and 26. Among the deadliest incidents was the one in Rajbari's Daulatdia, where a bus fell into the Padma River while waiting to board a ferry, leaving at least 26 dead and several others missing. In another tragedy, 12 people were killed in Cumilla when a train rammed into a bus at a level crossing. Many crashes during the Eid holidays have shattered families. The recurrence of these tragedies, year after year, is a stark reminder of how fundamentally flawed our transport system is.

Reportedly, both the number of accidents and fatalities have increased this year compared to last year. Despite repeated warnings from experts, it appears that the authorities have learnt little. The same causes—reckless driving, unfit vehicles, poor road management, and weak coordination among relevant authorities—continue to be major factors behind these crashes. Even basic safeguards such as enforcing speed limits or ensuring vehicle fitness tend to break down during the rush of Eid travel. The question is: how much longer will it take the authorities to address the systemic flaws that make our roads so dangerous? When will the long overdue reforms in the transport sector be implemented? And when will the state learn to value the lives that are lost on our roads, railways and waterways due to poor enforcement of the existing laws?

Unfortunately, our transport authorities continue to rely on ad hoc, short-term measures instead of implementing a long-term, comprehensive road safety strategy. As the Road Transport Act, 2018 remains largely unimplemented, holding those responsible for these road mishaps accountable becomes difficult. Transport experts have also pointed out that investigation reports into major accidents are rarely made public, and their recommendations are seldom implemented. This culture of impunity allows negligence to persist. If transport owners, drivers, and even regulatory bodies continue to face no consequences for their failures, little will change in the sector.

To ensure safe roads and prevent further loss of lives, the government must urgently reform the road transport sector. Strict enforcement of traffic laws must go hand in hand with the immediate removal of unfit and expired vehicles from the roads. At the same time, clear and enforceable policies on drivers' working hours and mandatory rest periods are essential. Road engineering flaws must also be identified and corrected to improve overall safety. Increasing highway police capacity is important, particularly during Eid holidays. Above all, better planning and coordination among transport authorities, engineers, law enforcement agencies, and policymakers are essential. Finally, conducting proper investigations into road crashes and taking firm action against those responsible is crucial to ensuring transparency and accountability in the sector.

ICU beds shouldn't be a matter of luck

Make all the existing ICU facilities operational

As citizens of this country, one of our basic rights is to live a life free from harm and have access to timely and adequate medical care when needed. But time and time again, that basic right is stripped away, leaving us vulnerable in precarious situations. One such incident reported by *Prothom Alo* recently occurred at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH) where some 33 children died within 11 days while waiting for admission in the hospital's intensive care unit (ICU). The RMCH ICU in-charge said timely admission to the ICU might have saved some of these lives. These deaths point sharply to a healthcare system that continues to fail its most vulnerable population.

What makes the RMCH crisis particularly inexcusable is that it was not simply a matter of scarcity but a gross failure to utilise the already existing facilities. The RMCH has a 60-bed ICU complex—with 20 paediatric beds and 40 adult beds—but only the 40 adult beds are functional. The hospital authority, in the absence of government support—including equipment and trained personnel—has allocated some 12 adult beds for children under special arrangements. The *Prothom Alo* report also mentions the 200-bed children's hospital constructed in the Lakshmipur area of Rajshahi. Built at the cost of Tk 34 crore, this hospital has 10 dedicated paediatric ICU beds. However, despite construction being completed in 2023, the facility has yet to become operational. Even at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the country's largest government hospital, only a fraction of patients seeking ICU care can be accommodated each day.

This troubling phenomenon, where infrastructure exists but remains unused due to a lack of institutional goodwill and sound operational plan, also leads to a massive waste of the already limited healthcare budget. We frequently hear about new hospital buildings built and then left abandoned all around the country. Meanwhile, nearly 80 percent of our annual health budget is wasted on purchasing equipment that is not needed, which often sits idle and unused.

What the RMCH crisis ultimately exposes is an unacceptable failure in governance, fuelled by negligence and a culture of lack of accountability. This cannot be improved without combined efforts from the policymakers, healthcare professionals, and general citizens. Only with greater transparency in government spending, optimal use of the existing resources, and a firm commitment to ensuring that every medical case receives proper and timely treatment can we ensure that lives are no longer needlessly lost.

The surcharge of Eid-time tragedies

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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In Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, a character with supposed authority intensifies the absurdity by quantifying emotion. Pozzo philosophises, "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh." The inseparability and cyclical nature of joy and sorrow is found in the folkloric wisdom that we learnt at school, "The more the laughter, the more the tears—so said Ram Shonna." We are taught to accept the fact that joy is never permanent, and happiness carries within it the seed of its fading.

Call me a pessimist, but reports of accident-related deaths that marred our Eid celebrations have a sobering effect. As if nature had its own mechanism to warn us against joy and force us to recognise a type of emotional symmetry that posits laughter and tears not as polar opposites but as necessary neighbours, like yin and yang.

It was almost surreal to see a bus plunging into the Padma River from the pontoon attached to a ferry boat at Daulatdia ghat in Rajbari. A ferry hit the pontoon, causing the bus to lose control and roll over straight into the river with passengers inside. As of Thursday night, 26 bodies have been recovered, with some passengers escaping through the windows and locals pulling them ashore. The absurdity is further solidified when you get to hear that the driver was allegedly having tea at a nearby stall and the helper was behind the steering wheel. Whatever the situation might have been, we are dealing with deaths caused by callousness. The passengers did not follow the protocol of getting off the bus before boarding the ferry. The guardrail was not sturdy enough to prevent such accidents. The pontoons and the ferry were aligned in a dangerous curve. The constant river erosion doesn't allow the administration to prepare a proper dockyard, which exacerbates the risk of accidents.

My newsfeed is filled with anecdotal references to some of the deceased. Colleagues from my previous workplace are showering praise on a



FILE PHOTO: KHALID BIN NAZRUL

At least 12 people were killed on a bus that was hit by a train on a level crossing in Cumilla on March 22, 2026.

former debater and campus livewire, Raihan, who was among the victims. I have friends who had family members in that ill-fated bus. I cannot just brush away the incident as a distant accident. It could have been any one of us.

Every year, during Eid holidays, lives are claimed by road crashes. The Daulatdia ferry ghat accident will be a footnote in this year's road crash report, just like the report of a bus ramming into a train on March 22 at a level crossing in Cumilla's Paduar Bazar. Twelve passengers died with at least 15-20 injured in that incident. Add to that the crash in Burichang when a bus rear-ended a private car, killing all four members of a family as well as the driver.

There is no short supply of accident news during Eid holidays. You cannot blame the authority because they have done their part by issuing multiple directives. Yet, we continue to have tragic incidents like the one in Burichang. During such times, we often find ourselves lamenting

our fate. The pull of compulsory homecoming over the Eid holidays imposes a heavy surcharge on the people. Eid-time mobility is affected by bad roads, poor driving, high pressure on the highways, lack of monitoring, and the absence of enforceable working-hour rules for long distance drivers, resulting in a heavy toll on passengers, pedestrians,

must return to the city to serve others. The amount of joy associated with Eid is in complete alignment with the amount of sorrow that Eid-time deaths entail. Eid is a social obligation. We celebrate to remember, to return to our group, our clan, and our families. The Eid journey is part of a ritual that involves visiting our roots and renewing our bonds. When

and families who face the harsh reality of risky journeys while yearning to be near their loved ones during the holiday season.

Behind each number of casualties, there is a human face. Imagine the trauma of the eight-year-old who was pushed out of the window as the bus was plummeting into the deep water of Padma; he will always blame himself for not being able to help his mother in her final moments. Should he consider his life a gift from his mother? Like many of us, should he simply blame "reckless drivers" and move on? What about fatigue, long hours, and a lack of defined limits for drivers? Whose profit-mongering allowed these drivers to be reckless? Why didn't the guards at the ferry terminal insist on the offboarding of passengers? Once we start asking these questions, we plunge into a void of moral choices. A system designed to compete with rivals and maximise profits for its owners compromises the drivers' agency. The passenger is but a commodity. But the "workers"

this celebration becomes a dangerous duty, we need to go beyond asking, "Why are our roads unsafe?" and start asking, "Why do we accept unsafe roads as normal at the very moment we claim to value family most?"

We can philosophise the Eid casualties as a seasonal fate. But there are pragmatic steps that can make Eid joy constant. This will require ferry terminals with adequate barriers, level crossings with efficient safety devices, drivers following labour rights and safety policies, and unfit vehicles being removed from service. Above all, the process will require action plans based on the investigation reports. We need to learn from every accident and stop burying the investigation reports along with the deceased.

As for the victims, the winds raged last night with their monsoon moods, and I listened to a favourite song of mine by Sting, "On and on, the rain will fall/ Like tears from a star, like tears from a star/ On and on, the rain will say, /How fragile we are, how fragile we are."

Bangladesh needs a national heat action plan

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In the history of global climate, Bangladesh's vulnerability has been noted in facing risks from floods, cyclones, and rising sea levels. However, in recent years, a new factor has emerged in the vulnerability trajectory: heatwaves. This became particularly evident when the country experienced 24 days of heatwaves in April 2024, surpassing the previous record of 23 days set in 2019. The temperature in Jashore was recorded at 43.8 degrees Celsius, the highest in 52 years. Heat is our fastest-growing concern, yet it remains the most under-addressed national emergency.

This can be viewed as a systematic climatic shift. According to the World Bank report titled "An Unsustainable Life: The Impact of Heat on Health and the Economy of Bangladesh," temperature has risen by 1.1 degrees Celsius since 1980. However, the feeling of temperature, which is the true measure of human suffering, rose by 4.5 degrees Celsius, making the streets of Dhaka feel like open furnaces. With the urban heat island (UHI) effect, the capital's heat index is 65 percent higher than the national average.

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meteorological. But they have deep economic and personal impact as well. In 2024 alone, Bangladesh lost 25 crore workdays to heat-related illnesses, bleeding \$1.78 billion out of our GDP. For the rickshaw-puller in Dhaka, the farmer in Rajshahi or the garment worker in Gazipur, staying indoors is not merely an option but a choice between heatstroke and hunger.

The most alarming consequences are the hidden tolls on people's health. The rate of respiratory and waterborne diseases has doubled in recent summers. Beyond that, a new horizon has emerged: mental health crises. Studies reported that struggling with depression during extreme heat periods is increasing among all age groups. Moreover, women are particularly more vulnerable. They are 77 percent more likely to face heat exhaustion as most of the kitchens are poorly ventilated, trapping the burners' heat as well as the sun's fury.

Despite this, the country lacks a comprehensive national heat action plan (NHAP). When the mercury rises, the bare minimum is decided: to shut down the classrooms. There is also a lack of a proper plan for how academic activities will continue during this time. Meanwhile, hospitals struggle

to manage heatstroke season without dedicated cooling wards.

A NHAP is not a luxury; it is a survival strategy. These components should be incorporated into the design to yield better results: i) there should be a localised early warning system which will enable real-time heat alerts (before 48 hours) that reach the most vulnerable people via mobile phones

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and community radio; ii) we must implement Geographic Information System (GIS)-based vulnerability mapping to identify heat hotspots and at-risk populations, allowing authorities to prioritise water tanker distribution; iii) urban redesigning is

another issue which may take time, yet some measures like building cooling sheds, restoration of urban water bodies, and the expansion of rapid growing green canopies in the most heat-experienced zones could be implemented initially; iv) one of the most import issues during this event is labour protection. Legally mandated heat breaks, hydration stations for outdoor workers, and social safety nets to cover lost income could be acted upon immediately; v) mandatory cool roof regulations for all new factories, high-rises and even for residential buildings should be in the respective authorities' guidelines; vi) for behavioural change, communication on hydration, symptoms, and cooling is necessary. Ads in local dialects in channels and posters in marketplaces and mosques could be circulated; and vii) specialised training is needed for healthcare providers to treat heat-related trauma and mental health issues. Besides, dedicated cooling wards for heat-related patients are also a crying need.

The escalating heatwave crisis in Bangladesh is an undeniable national emergency that demands immediate state action. Ad-hoc measures are no longer sufficient. A comprehensive NHAP is needed to protect vulnerable populations, redesign urban landscapes, and prepare the healthcare system. The country has successfully mastered the resilience needed to survive floods and cyclones. It must now direct that same urgency and planning towards surviving the heat. The mercury continues to rise, and the window for effective action is rapidly closing.