

'Zone-based school timings could ease morning traffic nightmare'

Md Hadiuzzaman, a professor at the department of civil engineering of BUET, talks to Khairul Hassan Jahin of The Daily Star about alternative ways to ease traffic congestion during school hours and reduce fuel consumption amid the rollout of austerity measures in response to the energy crisis.

The prime minister recently directed the education ministry to adopt alternative measures to reduce traffic congestion during school hours. In your opinion, what would be the most effective alternatives? One of the main reasons for traffic congestion during school hours is that guardians in private cars drop off and pick up students directly in front of school gates. Since our road capacity is limited, the pressure spills onto the main roads. Therefore, as a first step, such cars should be prevented from reaching school gates directly. The footpaths around schools should be made hawker-free so that students can get off a little further away and walk safely to school.

Secondly, all morning-shift schools start at the same time, creating immense simultaneous pressure on the roads. To reduce this, a zone-based staggered schedule can be introduced. For example, schools in Mohammadpur could start at one time and those in Motijheel at another. If this is staggered by 30 minutes to one hour, the pressure will no longer hit the main roads all at once. At the same time, office schedules also need adjustment. Many guardians drop their children at school, return home, and then go to office, which creates extra trips. If school and office timings are coordinated, guardians can drop their children and go straight to work, reducing one trip on the road.

The third and most important issue, which is not being discussed enough, is coaching centres. Our education system is now heavily coaching dependent. Students often rush to coaching immediately after school, adding more trips and vehicles on the roads. If coaching centres are temporarily closed during the ongoing fuel crisis, traffic will fall and fuel will be saved. To make the prime minister's initiative effective, this issue must be considered alongside school timing.

In recent years, the intensity of heatwaves during summer has become a major cause of suffering for students. If the

current season is considered in the context of changing school schedules, how logical would this change be?

There are a large number of schools in Dhaka city, and among them, most haven't been built in a planned manner. To meet capacity shortages, many run morning and day shifts. A zone-based staggered schedule will certainly reduce road pressure, but heat must factor into such decisions now. When temperatures rise, electricity consumption in schools increases significantly. If the energy crisis is not managed strategically, load-shedding may become inevitable, and conducting classes in classrooms will be very difficult.

I know the education ministry is considering an alternate-day method in light of the energy crisis—one day online, one day offline. But in my opinion, this would be managerially difficult for both students and guardians. Instead, if the crisis becomes severe, educational activities could be moved fully online while examinations remain offline. However, if the government wants to keep schools partially open, then the alternate-day system should be coordinated with office schedules. On days when school is online, offices should also operate online. That would allow guardians to manage both their children and their own work.

Since Covid, educational institutions have been among the first to close during any movement or unrest. As a result, students' learning and socialisation needs have both been affected. So, is changing the schedule the only solution? For example, can changes in school transport systems, through mandatory school buses or carpooling, be effective in offsetting such disruptions or closures?

This is essentially a problem of flawed planning. In Dhaka, most schools were not established in a planned way; they have neither their own buses nor parking facilities, yet approvals were given without proper analysis. At the same time, we have still not created school zones. In developed cities, the concept



Md Hadiuzzaman

of a school catchment area is common—only those living within about one and a half to two kilometres of a school usually attend that school. But in Dhaka, guardians often send children from Motijheel to Uttara in pursuit of reputed schools. That is where the main problem lies.

This also makes the idea of school buses less effective. Because the distances are so long, routes become lengthy. The student living furthest away must board the bus two to three hours before school and returns home late. But if a catchment area is determined, the situation changes. Students remain within a limited zone, it becomes possible to run circular transport services effectively, and many can also walk if footpaths are connected and hawker-free. Then repeated guardian drop-offs and pick-ups would decline, and so would extra trips on the road.

Another benefit is educational quality. If students mainly attend nearby schools, there will be pressure on schools in general to improve their standards. This is a major opportunity for our overall education system.

How exactly would a catchment area policy work? Should we opt for area-based priority over admission tests in schools, and what broader impact would

that have on students and the city?

I have not seen any precedent in developed countries for admission tests at the school level. The main principle there is simple: if someone lives within the catchment area and wants to admit their child to that school, the school gives them priority. Education is a fundamental right, so there should be no discrimination based on financial ability. If only affluent children study in good schools while low-income children are pushed into weaker institutions, deep inequality is created.

If the zone or catchment area plan is implemented, many problems will be solved at once. If the school is within two kilometres, students can walk and vehicle dependence will fall. School-based traffic congestion will decrease, fuel will be saved, and each school will have to focus more on improving quality in light of the evolving social needs. But I do not agree with admission tests. Merit is not properly verified in this way; there is already a system of national examinations for that purpose.

Since we are talking about managing school hours and traffic, let's focus on the metro rail, particularly the concern that it has failed to sufficiently attract private car owners. Why is that?

This is an important issue. Our research shows that the main purpose of building the metro was to shift private car users off the roads. Private cars occupy about 60 percent of road space, but carry only six percent of passengers. The original idea was that if a section of private car passengers moved to the metro, the roads below would become less congested, making way for a more disciplined public transport system. But in reality, the opposite has happened: about 60 percent of daily metro passengers have been found to have travelled by bus previously, while only around five percent came from private cars.

The reason is a fundamental flaw in planning. The metro has been seen only as a fast transport mode, whereas in developed

countries it is used as an urban planning tool. They improve roads below, build proper footpaths, and develop buses as feeder services before or alongside metro systems. The metro acts as a backbone. But we did not think sufficiently about the connection system to stations. Private car users enjoy door-to-door service, and to be attracted to the metro, they need an easy and comfortable path to the station. If there were effective footpath networks within 500 metres to one kilometre of metro stations, many more people would walk.

That planning failure is costing us. Before building more metro lines, investment should be made in public transport and footpath management on the roads below. Compared to metro projects, this requires far less investment, but the impact can be much greater.

Coming back to the energy crisis, what else do you think the government should do going forward?

The government is repeatedly saying there is no fuel shortage—that oil exists in depots, distribution systems, filling stations. But it must clearly explain where the crisis actually lies, because people are standing in long queues, not getting oil, and many stations are closed. In this situation, some are even storing thousands of litres.

To prevent confusion and hoarding, the government must send a strict message and strengthen monitoring. If the fuel card system is properly implemented, it will be possible to reduce excess purchases and black marketing. Those whose livelihoods depend on fuel, especially ride-sharing drivers, are suffering the most.

At the same time, alongside changing schooling schedules and methods, it is necessary to introduce online-offline systems in offices to reduce trips on the road. In the long term, the plans we already have for public transport development must be implemented seriously so that small fuel-dependent vehicles can gradually be removed from the roads.

EU's changing apparel market and Bangladesh's export challenges



RMG NOTES
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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

Bangladesh's garment industry has faced some serious challenges of late. In the first eight months of FY2025-26, the country's ready-made garment exports fell 3.73 percent year on year to \$25.79 billion, against \$26.79 billion in the same period of the previous fiscal year. In the EU—Bangladesh's biggest apparel market—garment exports slipped 1.03 percent to \$7.83 billion in the July-November period, down from \$7.92 billion in the same period of FY25, with the bloc accounting for over 48 percent of total RMG shipments in that period.

There are several obvious explanations for the slowdown. These include weak consumer demand in Europe, higher living costs, a cautious buying environment and, of course, geopolitical disruptions. Bangladesh's own exporters and trade bodies have been making these points for months. But I believe there is another possibility worth examining—especially for suppliers serving mainstream fashion retail—and it is that part of the market has been shifting away from traditional wholesale import channels and towards direct-to-consumer cross-border e-commerce flows led by companies such as Shein and Temu. In

other words, the global apparel trade may be increasingly influenced by a growing "parcel economy." EU policymakers themselves now describe the surge in low-value e-commerce consignments as large enough to distort competition. The European Parliament said 5.8 billion low-value items valued under 150 euro entered the EU in 2025. It said that growth is linked to the rise of Chinese online retailers such as Shein and Temu, as 91 percent of those shipments came from China in 2024.

For Bangladesh, the EU is not just another market, it is the main market. The European Commission says total EU-Bangladesh goods trade reached 22.2 billion euro in 2024 and that almost 94 percent of EU imports from Bangladesh were textiles. It also notes that Bangladesh remains the largest beneficiary of the bloc's Everything but Arms arrangement—providing duty-free, quota-free access to the EU single market for all products except arms and ammunition from Least Developed Countries (LDCs). So, any structural change in the way Europeans buy low-cost clothing matters directly for Bangladesh's export machine.

The problem for traditional trade analysis is that the direct-to-consumer parcel boom does not show up neatly alongside the conventional bulk import model on which many sourcing economies depend. Even where goods are recorded for customs and VAT, the flow is highly fragmented, often entering as millions of small consignments rather than containerised wholesale orders to established retailers. Eurostat's own quality reporting says that extra-EU trade statistics can exclude transactions below national statistical thresholds, which can be as high as 1,000 euro or 1,000kg in some member states. That does not mean all low-value e-commerce trade disappears from the data. But it does mean analysts should be cautious about assuming that traditional apparel import datasets capture the full competitive pressure now coming from the parcel economy in a comparable way.

For Bangladesh's garment sector, the commercial effect could be significant even if the statistical picture is far from perfect. If EU consumers are spending more for ultra-fast, cross-border direct shipments, then traditional retailers may order less from their established sourcing bases or buy later and in smaller quantities. That would show up as pressure on Bangladesh's export receipts without necessarily appearing in import datasets most commonly used by industry observers. It would also help explain why suppliers can feel the market weakening even when some official trade readings appear mixed or lagged. This is especially relevant in value fashion—where speed, price, and variety influence consumer decisions.

The good news for our exporters and European customers is that Brussels has now moved decisively to curb at least part of that distortion. In February 2026, the Council of the European Union gave final approval to new customs duty rules for small parcels entering the EU. The measure abolishes the threshold-based customs duty relief for consignments valued under 150 euro. Until the wider EU customs data hub is operational in 2028, member states will apply an interim flat-rate customs duty of three euro on each item category in a small parcel sent directly to consumers, from 1 July 2026 to 1 July 2028. Once the new system is fully in place, normal customs tariffs will apply instead. Under the new proposal, online platforms are also set to become responsible for customs duties, product compliance, and paperwork on goods sold into the EU. Distance sellers and platforms shipping directly to EU consumers will be treated as the Importer of Record (IOR)—responsible for ensuring imported goods comply with all local laws, customs regulations, and documentation requirements in the destination country—shifting legal responsibility away from consumers and onto the seller or platform. They will be required to ensure that duties are paid and that goods comply with EU regulations. Operators that repeatedly fail to comply could face fines of one to six percent of the value of goods imported into the EU over the previous 12 months. The EU will also create a new EU Customs Authority in French city Lille and a central data hub, though the deal still needs final formal approval. While this will not end the small-parcel model

and nor is it aimed specifically at fashion, EU institutions are being unusually explicit about the rationale. The council said the current duty-free treatment of such parcels leads to unfair competition for EU sellers. The European Commission has made the same point, saying the removal of the threshold is intended to level the playing field between direct imports of individual parcels and traditional retail imports of goods in bulk. For Bangladesh, that should be read as a positive.

Bangladesh's garment industry has built its position around scale, compliance, established buyer relationships, and the ability to supply large programmes into mainstream retail. If Europe becomes less permissive towards lightly taxed or duty-sheltered parcel flows, some competitive pressure should shift back towards more conventional sourcing and import models. That would not solve our other challenges, from productivity and lead times to margin pressure and post-LDC trade planning. But it could remove part of the policy asymmetry that has favoured direct cross-border sellers. There is also a wider point for brands and retailers buying from Bangladesh. A more level customs framework in Europe is not just about protecting EU sellers. It is also about restoring fairer competition across supply chains. Suppliers investing in compliance, traceability, worker protections, and long-term manufacturing capacity have struggled to compete with business models built around millions of low-value parcels moving through a lighter-touch border regime. Brussels now appears to accept that this imbalance has gone too far.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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