The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

End this cycle of fatal road crashes

Natore crash highlights persistent failures to ensure road safety

The death of at least 12 people in a head-on collision between a bus and a truck on the Pabna-Rajshahi highway in Natore early Tuesday is yet another reminder of how unsafe our roads remain. Twenty others were injured in the crash; many of them are in critical condition. According to survivors, the bus helper was driving recklessly while the driver slept at the back at the time of the crash. Although police have yet to confirm this allegation, it raises serious questions about unauthorised driving, compliance with road safety rules, and the monitoring of long-distance buses.

Among the victims was a 70-year-old onion trader who was travelling to buy seeds for his business. A couple travelling to visit relatives during Durga Puja was also among the victims. The husband died, while his wife remained in critical condition. A bank employee and his daughter were killed, while his wife and 10-year-old son were injured. Such deaths are unacceptable because they could have been prevented by enforcing basic safety rules. How long will it take for the authorities to learn to value passengers' lives and recognise the urgent need to make our roads safe?

According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, at least 1,25,405 people were killed and 1,76,249 injured in 72,736 road crashes across the country between January 2014 and June 2026. The Road Safety Foundation also reported that 7,963 children were killed in road crashes between 2020 and September 2026, including 2,513 who died while travelling to or from educational institutions. These numbers are horrifying and show how road crashes continue to devastate families across the country.

Shouldn't bus operators ensure that only qualified and authorised drivers take the wheel? Shouldn't drivers be given adequate time to rest before and during long journeys? When exhausted drivers or unqualified helpers operate buses, the risk of fatal crashes increases significantly. What are the authorities doing to enforce these basic safety measures?

Reckless driving, dangerous overtaking, driver fatigue, a shortage of skilled drivers, unfit vehicles, and weak enforcement of traffic laws continue to put passengers' lives at risk. In the Natore case, if the allegation that the helper was driving while the driver slept proves to be true, it would reveal a serious breach of safety rules. Shouldn't bus operators ensure that only qualified and authorised drivers take the wheel? Shouldn't drivers be given adequate time to rest before and during long journeys? When exhausted drivers or unqualified helpers operate buses, the risk of fatal crashes increases significantly. What are the authorities doing to enforce these basic safety measures? Most importantly, why is the Road Transport Act, 2018 still not being properly enforced? These are questions we continue to ask while the authorities fail to take effective action.

We urge the government to strictly enforce the Road Transport Act, 2018, strengthen oversight of public transport operators, prevent unqualified people from driving vehicles, and ensure compliance with rules on driving hours and rest periods. Regular inspections are essential to remove unfit vehicles from the roads, while reckless driving and dangerous overtaking must be stopped through effective monitoring and enforcement. Reliable road crash data is also needed to take proper preventive measures. The Natore district administration has formed a committee to investigate the crash. Its findings must be made public, and anyone found responsible should face appropriate legal action.

Forests need more than paper promises

Encroachment in Patuakhali reserved forest exposes gaps in enforcement

Why is it that our forests are so often treated as expendable? On one hand, we are quick to make gestures that look commendable on paper. But we are far less consistent in realising them on the ground. The latest report of such attrition of forestland comes from Patuakhali's Rangabali, where an estimated 200 to 300 trees have been cut down in a reserved forest to make way for watermelon cultivation. Forest officials say an excavator is also being used to build an embankment on the site. The work has continued despite the Forest Department's objections and its filing of two cases and a general diary with police. What is most troubling is that the encroachment may have been given an appearance of being legal.

Last October, the district administration reportedly leased at least 30 acres of reserved forest for two years. However, a Rangabali upazila land office document from last year, signed by a former UNO, appears to have permitted farming for only one season or a year. Those overseeing watermelon cultivation claim they leased it from the administration, while the current UNO denies any involvement. How could land in a reserved forest be leased at all, and why did the Forest Department's objections fail to stop the cultivation work?

There is a tendency in Bangladesh to use nature's resources for immediate gain, and not treat them as living ecosystems whose value exceeds what they can provide. This is made worse by routine disregard for laws, an acute lack of enforcement, and repeated use of political patronage for a senseless desire for profit. In a climate-vulnerable country like Bangladesh, coastal mangroves (which surround the reserved forest in question) shield communities from cyclones and storm surges, and their destruction strips away an effective natural defence.

Local communities should be empowered to be stewards of the forests, not mere beneficiaries. We urge the government to thoroughly investigate the leasing of forest land and ensure accountability for those responsible. Coastal regions are certainly well-suited for watermelon cultivation, but it should never come at the cost of a forest's health. Genuine institutional goodwill, matched by enforcement, can make all the difference.

Why does the JS body take comfort in the law and order situation?



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■ **KAMAL AHMED**

Amid the prevailing doom and gloom over the worsening cost-of-living crisis, the administration has offered news that could be encouraging. According to a press release on the fifth meeting of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Home Affairs, held on October 15, official statistics "indicated a notable improvement" in the country's law-and-order situation. The press release has also added that committee members "expressed satisfaction" with the reported improvement.

Isn't it a wonderful relief to know, from these statements, that we are now better protected against the threat of random crime? The situation has apparently improved to such an extent that our elected representatives are satisfied. Could it mean that anyone can now venture out onto the streets without having to worry about being mugged, or that no one would turn up at our homes or offices demanding money in the name of donations or protection? Should parents rest assured that gang members will not put drugs into their children's hands, or that no one would dare to sexually harass or assault their daughters?

Alas, less than 48 hours after the committee meeting, Ishraque Hossain, a now-former junior minister regarded by many within BNP as a rising star, led an anti-drug "operation" in his constituency while openly brandishing a firearm. Ishraque, whose conduct has often attracted controversy in the past, later sought to explain his activities. He said that residents of the area had repeatedly complained about local drug trade, adding: "I have held meetings with the police at least 30 to 40 times. They give different explanations each time, saying they lack manpower and vehicles." But his justification for taking the law into his own hands raises an uncomfortable question: whose version of the law-and-order reality should we believe—the parliamentary standing committee or a prominent ruling party politician?

Ishraque undoubtedly has questions to answer about how he conducted himself that day. Nevertheless, some of his observations cannot be dismissed. The police have yet to recover fully from the violent aftermath of the 2024 uprising and remain inadequately equipped to confront drug dealers, some of whom do not hesitate to shoot at officers from a distance. If the police are indeed struggling with manpower, transport, and operational capacity, that is a serious concern. But how can the administration then claim that law and order has improved significantly when those responsible for enforcing the law are themselves struggling to maintain control?

Moreover, figures presented at the standing committee meeting, according to several newspapers, offer little ground for complacency. Between January and September this year, the Department of Narcotics Control reportedly conducted 82,626 anti-drug operations, filing 25,021 cases against 26,270 accused persons. Drug-related cases rose by approximately 37 percent compared with the corresponding period in 2025. These are staggering numbers. They mean that anti-drug enforcement officers conducted an average of more than 300 operations every day over the nine-month period. For parents worried about their children's exposure to drugs, such statistics are anything but reassuring; they are more likely to send their blood pressure soaring.



VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Some other crime figures presented at the meeting are equally troubling. Reported rape cases rose sharply in 2026, with a total of 5,381 cases recorded between January and September—an increase of approximately 31 percent over the same period last year, which translates into an average of nearly 20 cases every day. Third-quarter figures, covering July to September, showed an even steeper increase of 55.4 percent, suggesting a further deterioration. Meanwhile, cases involving burglary and forced entry, theft and illegal firearms have also increased.

The home ministry's statistics did show improvements in some categories, notably murder, robbery, kidnapping, mob violence, and attacks on police. But these figures must be treated with caution. Complaints that police stations refuse or fail to register cases of burglary and robbery are common. Did the ministry's murder count include those 379 bodies that were recovered by the river police between January and August? If crimes go unrecorded, official statistics may paint a more reassuring picture than the reality experienced by victims.

Recent crackdowns on juvenile gangs in several districts have exposed another longstanding problem. Many of these gangs are involved in petty crimes, including phone snatching, harassment of girls, burglary, drug peddling, etc. The tragic killing of Oprotim, the 13-year-old son of a university teacher in Cumilla, in September, brought the growing problem of juvenile criminality into sharp focus.

The media have also extensively reported grave crimes committed by organised gangs, including kidnapping, extortion, and murder linked to territorial control and rivalries. The impact of these groups on local communities is amply evident in places like Jungle Salimpur in Sitakunda and Khulna city. A joint-forces operation reportedly restored a degree of normalcy in Jungle Salimpur. Khulna, however, continues to struggle with the influence of rival gangs, with police officers being advised against going out alone after dark.

During my recent visits there, local journalists told me that gang members sometimes notify the police in advance of their planned activities and even occasionally announce them through Facebook. Such warnings can effectively signal that law enforcement personnel should keep away from designated areas for a specified period. If these accounts are accurate, they point to a deeply troubling reality: criminal gangs are not merely committing offences but are also asserting their ability to dictate where and when the police can operate.

Police reluctance to enter crime hotspots is not confined to these two districts. It appears to be part of a broader pattern in which their lack of vehicles, equipment and operational capacity leaves the force more inclined to respond after crimes occur than to prevent them or confront perpetrators in the act. This could also help explain why the police appear more successful in apprehending, for example, alleged members of the banned Awami League than in dealing with vigilante groups that organise mob violence and take the law into their own hands. Police inaction or reluctance to respond to allegations of extortion and land grabbing involving members of the ruling party has also become a recurring concern.

Against this backdrop, the parliamentary standing committee's satisfaction with the law-and-order situation seems detached from the realities experienced by ordinary citizens. Rising rape and drug-related cases, the growing influence of juvenile and organised gangs, allegations of selective policing, and the apparent inability of law enforcement agencies to confront certain criminal groups all pose real threats to people's safety and security.

Some crime indicators may have indeed improved. But a fundamental question is whether citizens actually feel safer, whether they can rely on the police when threatened, and whether the law is enforced impartially against the powerful as well as the powerless. For those who have experienced extortion, robbery, harassment or violence—or who fear that their loved ones may become victims of crime—the difference between official statistics and everyday reality is profound. The ministry's reassuring assessment means little to them.

Climate resilience must not come at the cost of women's debt



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■ **SHAHRINA AKHTAR**

Rehana lives in a char in Kurigram. When the Brahmaputra flooded last year, it took her vegetable plot, two goats, and the plinth of her house. No relief came that could replace them. So she did what millions of women across rural Bangladesh do after a disaster: she took a loan from one NGO to raise her homestead, a second to buy seed and, when the weekly installments became impossible, a third to repay the first two. When the next flood comes, she will still be paying for the last one.

Rehana's story is not uncommon. Bangladesh is often praised as a global leader in adaptation, and in many ways it deserves the praise. But a large part of that resilience is being paid for by the poorest households, mostly by women, and mostly through debt.

The scale of household spending is startling. A 2019 study by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) estimated that rural households in Bangladesh spend nearly $2 billion a year of their own money preparing for and recovering from climate-related disasters. That is far more than the government or international donors spend on them. Where does this money come from? Partly from savings and remittances, partly from selling livestock and jewellery, and increasingly from borrowing.

Bangladesh's microfinance sector serves more than 32 million borrowers, around 90 percent of whom are women. Microcredit was designed to help women start small businesses. In climate-exposed regions, it now works as an informal disaster insurance and adaptation fund, at commercial interest rates.

NGOs prefer female borrowers because they repay reliably, attend weekly meetings, and respond to group pressure. Women are also increasingly the backbone of farming. As men migrate to cities and abroad, about three-quarters of employed women now work in agriculture, according to the 2022 Labour Force Survey. Yet only 13 percent of women in land-owning rural households hold agricultural land, alone or jointly. Without collateral, they are largely shut out of formal bank credit, leaving NGO and informal loans as their only options.

Under repayment stress, women also eat less, sell off their jewellery, take on extra wage work, or pull daughters out of school. Research in coastal Bangladesh also links climate stress with child marriage.

Globally, climate finance is discussed in billions of dollars. In the village, it comes down to weekly instalments of a few hundred taka. IIED estimates that less than 10 percent of finance from international climate funds is directed to the local level. Our domestic financial system has not filled this gap either.

Agricultural insurance remains largely limited to pilots. Bangladesh Bank's green finance policies have helped industries, but little reaches smallholder women. The microcredit regulator caps interest rates but does not track the over-indebtedness that follows repeated disasters. Bangladesh should make a move from microcredit to climate justice. Measuring what households spend on adaptation and recovery would strengthen Bangladesh's hand in negotiations for international adaptation and loss-and-damage funds.

The government should prioritise creating climate-resilient finance products for women. Low-interest adaptation loans, emergency savings, and bundled weather index insurance, with payouts triggered by rainfall or flood levels, should reach women before they are forced to borrow.

Debt management following disasters should be restructured too. When a flood or cyclone is officially declared, a moratorium on instalments, with rescheduling and interest relief, should be automatic for affected borrowers, not left to the goodwill of individual NGOs.

The government should also prioritise creating climate-resilient finance products for women. Low-interest adaptation loans, emergency savings, and bundled weather index insurance, with payouts triggered by rainfall or flood levels, should reach women before they are forced to borrow. International funds should be channelled directly to communities. A share of climate finance should flow through locally led mechanisms, such as community adaptation funds managed with women's groups, union parishads and local NGOs.

Joint land titling for women and acceptance of alternative collateral by banks would open formal agricultural credit to the women who now farm much of the country's land. Universities, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, and the Microcredit Regulatory Authority should also jointly track climate-related borrowing and over-indebtedness by gender and region.

Bangladesh's resilience is often celebrated as a national achievement. But when it depends on poor women borrowing at higher interests to repair damage they did nothing to cause, it is not justice. The question for policymakers is simple: who should pay for adaptation? Today, in rural Bangladesh, the answer is Rehana. And to change this, climate finance (both national and international) must reach her before her next instalment, not after the next flood.

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