The Tuptup tragedy and the growing cost of regulatory inaction



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The recent fire incident at Tuptup Resto & Resort in Cox's Bazar's Inani area reportedly killed 10 tourists, including six members of an extended family. The building had wooden floors, walls, and staircases, leaving guests on the upper floors little chance of escaping once the flames spread. The establishment also had no fire safety licence, environmental clearance or approval from the Cox's Bazar Development Authority (CoxDA), the deputy commissioner, the local union council, or municipal authorities. The Department of Environment (DoE) had reportedly fined the resort in May, Fire Service officials say they issue notices, while fines can be imposed through mobile courts, although enforcement has remained limited. The DoE can penalise environmental violations but, according to its officials, cannot itself close or demolish the establishments concerned. CoxDA has the authority to demolish unauthorised structures, but says it must follow procedures involving final notices and executive magistrates. These limitations may be real, but they do not end the discussion. If several agencies can identify the same establishment as being dangerous, but none can ensure it stops taking in customers, what purpose does this elaborate regulatory machinery serve? The DoE reportedly imposed about Tk 1.27 crore in fines on 55 hotels, resorts, and restaurants over one year, averaging roughly Tk 2.3 lakh in fines for each. But for some businesses, paying a fine can be cheaper, faster, and simpler than changing anything in their structure to comply with the law.

Under the 2013 master plan, construction within 300 metres of the shoreline inside the municipality and 500 metres outside it is prohibited. CoxDA says it has approved no hotels or resorts along the Cox's Bazar–Teknaf Marine Drive road. The area has also been designated an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) since 1999. According to a Prothom Alo investigation, Cox's Bazar had just over 200 hotels and resorts in 2000, a figure that rose to approximately 500 in 2010 and exceeded 1,000 by 2020. Today, the district has more than 2,000 hotels, resorts, and cottages. How did so many buildings pop up in an area where approval was supposedly unavailable? Owners cannot be excused for breaking the rules, but neither can authorities be excused for watching those violations become an entire industry.



The deadly fire at Tuptup resort has again exposed the authorities' failure to enforce safety regulations in the tourism sector. PHOTO: STAR

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The marketing of these properties as "eco resorts" adds another layer of absurdity. Bamboo and timber may look appealing in promotional photographs, but they do not automatically make accommodation environmentally responsible or safe. Fire Service officials have stressed the importance of open spaces and single-storey units in genuine eco resorts. Instead, multi-storey wooden structures accommodate tourists in locations where firefighting equipment and emergency access may be inadequate. The word "eco" should not become a convenient substitute for compliance with building and fire safety standards.

Unfortunately, Cox's Bazar is not an isolated case. In Bandarban, only 32 resorts reportedly have environmental clearance, while an operator in Mirinja Valley claims none of approximately 89 resorts there has every required approval. In Khagrachhari, only four of 42 residential hotels had renewed fire licences. Sajek Valley has experienced fires in 2017, 2021, and 2023, yet reports suggest none of the estimated 126 resorts there had fire extinguishers as of 2025. Fire engines must travel from towns hours away. Near the Sundarbans, more than 20 resorts have reportedly been built in Khulna and Satkhira amid allegations of land clearance and canal filling. The landscapes differ, as do the regulations. But everywhere, tourism appears to have expanded with little regard for safety and environmental concerns.

There can be a revealing comparison made with Kolkata. After a fire at Shikha Inn in August killed nine people, seven of whom were Bangladeshis visiting for medical treatment, authorities arrested the leaseholder and owner as well as inspecting hundreds of hotels and guest houses. Of 960 establishments inspected, only 41 reportedly met fire safety requirements; the remaining 919 received closure notices. Kolkata's own record is hardly admirable: another hotel fire killed 14 people there in April last year. The crackdown came after the deaths, not before. But government agencies in Cox's Bazar already possessed enough information to act. Police sources suggest only around 120 of the district's more than 500 establishments are fully compliant, while the Fire Service reportedly considers only about 40 to be safe. If these estimates are anywhere near accurate, why were tourists allowed to keep booking rooms without being told the risks?

Even the criminal investigation following the Tuptup fire has raised questions. According to a report, the resort's website identifies Tanvir Sultan Mia and Niaz Morshed as its owners, yet only the former was named in the police case, alongside several employees. Ukhiya police say they initially knew of only one owner and may include additional names as the investigation progresses. Legal experts have also questioned whether the charges, including causing death by negligence under Section 304A of the Penal Code, adequately reflect the circumstances. Whether more serious charges are legally justified will depend on evidence of the individuals' knowledge, conduct, and responsibility. But the immediate question is about why identifying the people responsible for running an establishment that had received repeated official warnings should prove so difficult even after a fatal fire. The investigation must establish who knew what, who made the decisions, and who continued collecting revenue while safety concerns remained unresolved.

This negligence threatens the country's tourism industry, which heavily relies on domestic tourists. Bangladesh received 5,85,145 foreign tourists last year, down by 7.6 percent from 2024, and international coverage of another fatal resort fire will do little for the country's image, dubbed as "the world's least touristy country" by The Telegraph in 2018. But the more immediate concern is a family travelling from Dhaka or other parts of the country for a short holiday. How is that family supposed to know whether its chosen resort has working extinguishers, usable exits, or even the permission to operate? Most guests cannot inspect a building's regulatory history before making a reservation. They assume someone responsible has already done so. For guests at Tuptup, that assumption proved fatal.

The district administration should coordinate the agencies concerned and establish a legally sound process for promptly closing establishments that pose immediate danger. A public register showing hotels' approval and fire safety status would allow visitors to make informed choices. Multi-storey timber accommodation should not receive overnight guests without verified escape routes. The government must also establish why the warnings and demolition notices against Tuptup went unenforced, and whether officials neglected their duties. Holding owners accountable is essential, but stopping there would leave the wider system of negligence intact.

After every tragedy, we hear promises of inspections, mobile court interventions, and tougher enforcement. Then the headlines fade, and families make their bookings. For Tuptup, the paperwork was apparently plentiful, but what was missing was action. Unless the authorities can explain why they allowed a known hazard to remain in business, another round of notices will offer little reassurance to the people sleeping behind the next set of wooden stairs.

NATIONAL ROAD SAFETY DAY

Our road safety problem is not a lack of laws, but a lack of enforcement



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■ MONOROM POLOK

Commuting or travelling is an integral part of our lives. Yet in Bangladesh today, this basic action carries a risk to life, and the risk often increases depending on one's economic status. Though we observe National Road Safety Day every year, our record of reducing the risk on our roads has been poor. The head-on collision between a bus and a truck on the Pabna-Natore highway, which claimed 12 lives just two days ago, is yet another tragic testament to the persistent toll of road fatalities in our country. It seems we have somehow reached a point where every time we step out of our houses, we risk getting injured, or at the extreme, losing our lives.

Last year alone, 7,359 people died in road crashes, according to the Road Safety Foundation (RSF), and 16,476 others were injured. However, it must be noted that road crash data in Bangladesh varies considerably across different organisations and platforms. For example, Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity reported 9,111 road crash-related deaths for 2025, while the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) recorded 5,490. Moreover, the international standard of counting deaths within 30 days of a crash is not practised in Bangladesh, which means the real toll is likely higher.

Apart from fatalities, the number of injured is also likely to be much higher than reported because many choose not to report minor accidents. However, even minor accidents can lead to loss of income, trauma and high medical costs. In a country where about one in five people lives in poverty (the World Bank estimated the national poverty rate at 22.5 percent in 2026), the number of people who are one accident away from falling into debt or extreme poverty is also high.



PHOTO: STAR

A head-on collision between a bus and a truck on the Pabna-Natore highway claimed 12 lives on October 20.

Among all the collisions, motorcycle crashes account for the highest number of fatalities—40 percent as per RSF data. The second group most affected by road crashes is pedestrians, who account for 34 percent of all fatalities. In September alone, 106 of the 423 people killed in road crashes were pedestrians, per RSF. That motorcycles claim the largest share of road fatalities is not surprising, given they offer no protection against other vehicles on fast-paced roads and are considered accident-prone worldwide, especially in low-and-middle income countries, where they dominate the roads.

However, the pedestrian death toll should ring an alarm bell, because these people were not even in a vehicle. They were simply walking along or crossing the roads. This means our vehicles are not only unsafe for the people riding in them but also pose serious risks for those travelling on foot. And this risk disproportionately affects the poor, who are more likely to walk because they often cannot afford transport costs. It further widens inequality, as the poor, when injured in a road crash, may struggle to afford medical treatment or cope with lost income.

Yet, discussions on reducing crashes often revolve around legal reforms, although Bangladesh has enough traffic laws. Notably, several key sections of the Road Transport Act, 2018 were watered down after pressure from transport associations. However, several improvements have been made in the newly drafted Road Safety Act, 2026. So, it is not a lack of laws that stands as a barrier to improving the conditions on our roads; the problem rather lies in enforcement.

That proper enforcement can lead to a change in drivers' habits is evident from a recent change in Dhaka's roads. Since May 7, AI-powered cameras installed at several intersections in Dhaka have been scanning number plates and filing cases automatically against vehicles that run red lights, cross stop lines, or block lanes. It is the first fully automated traffic enforcement system in Bangladesh. By the end of June, around 1,500 cases had been filed through cameras at 19 intersections. We had traffic signals before, but many did not follow the rules. Even when traffic police were stationed at every signal, they had to force cars to stop by directing them manually. Often, they had to physically walk across the road to stop the traffic.

What has changed now at the intersections with AI-powered cameras is that people realised they must pay the price for breaking the law. Since the ticket is automatic, it is no longer easy to contest the violation, no matter how small or big. This shows that if the likelihood of actually being punished is high and hard to avoid, crimes do come down. This should be our focus.

In fact, one of the main reasons behind road crashes—speeding—can also be brought under control using cameras and AI. This has already been partially implemented on the Dhaka Elevated Expressway, where an automated speed-enforcement pilot has been running. More recently, AI cameras and an auto-fine system were launched on August 18 along about 250 kilometres of the Dhaka-Chattogram highway. In the first 24 hours, 449 cases were filed, with speeding as the most common violation. It is time to bring this to the rest of our roads. Budget concerns can be addressed by placing cameras first at crash hotspots identified by RSF, such as Jatrabari, Demra, Mohammadpur, Kuril, and Airport Road in Dhaka.

Additionally, ineffective regulation of vehicles that allows unsafe vehicles to operate freely on the roads, endangering everyone's lives, must be addressed. RSF lists faulty or unfit vehicles and unskilled drivers among the major causes of crashes, and recommends restructuring the National Road Safety Council and bringing the BRTA, the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) and the Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA) under its supervision. Others propose an autonomous Road Safety Authority that is not beholden to transport unions.

There is also a need to make our roads more inclusive. For example, footpaths and footbridges are sometimes built without thinking of groups, such as children, the elderly, and people with physical impairments. RSF has also pointed out that encroached footpaths and a shortage of usable footbridges also contribute to road crashes in Dhaka. Encroached footpaths and non-inclusive footbridges push vulnerable groups onto busy streets. Besides, footpaths should be wide enough for persons with disabilities to use. My grandfather, who could move freely indoors, did not find it easy to go outdoors without anyone's assistance due to heavy traffic around our house.

To work, to learn, to see the people we love, we have to go out and use roads. A country cannot ask its people to stop using roads. What it can do is make sure they reach their destinations safely. We do not lack laws; neither do we lack the tools to enforce them. What we need is the will to enforce the rules every time and for everyone, to regulate the vehicles we allow on the road, and to build streets that make space for children, the elderly, the poor, and persons with disabilities. This National Road Safety Day, the question is not whether we know what must be done. It is whether those actions are taken so that a trip out of the house no longer carries the risk of not returning.