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

Crossfire must never return

No executive order can make it obligatory for police

The police chief's recent remark about using "crossfire" "if (the) government allows it" is not only alarming but also raises the question of whether any real change has taken place within our disciplined forces since the July uprising. One of the core issues that drove the uprising was extrajudicial killings, which had almost become a norm during the Awami League regime. We spent months forming commissions and drawing up reform proposals so that all the human rights violations that the country saw during the 15-plus years of Sheikh Hasina's tyrannical rule would never occur again. And yet, a little over two years on, the person who heads the force primarily responsible for citizens' protection is using the term "crossfire" most irresponsibly and unconstitutionally. Shouldn't this make us concerned that police are still playing by the old partisan book, whereby they stand ready to carry out any unlawful and unconstitutional act that the party in power may demand?

Since 2004, when the Rapid Action Battalion was created, the term "crossfire" has been used in Bangladesh to mean alleged extrajudicial killing. An analysis published by *The Business Standard*, based on data compiled by Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), shows that 2,957 people were killed in crossfires involving law enforcement agencies between 2004 and September 2026, of which police were involved in 1,371 cases. How, then, could the IGP not know about the gravity of the term? And as a law enforcer, he surely has read our constitution, Articles 31 and 32 of which clearly states a person's right to life and protection under the law. Not even the country's government has the right to take away a person's life without proper judicial process—a point clarified by the Prime Minister's Adviser on Information and Cultural Affairs Zahed Ur Rahman.

What makes the remark more troubling is the police don't have a fully clean book even under the current administration.

What makes the remark more troubling is the police don't have a fully clean book even under the current administration. Per ASK data, 10 custodial deaths occurred in the country between March and September 2026. While not all custodial deaths occur from torture, and data on human rights violations vary across organisations because of differences in their methodologies, unlawful excesses by police or their inaction favouring ruling party activities have made the headlines several times. Moreover, the police chief's comment appears more concerning when it is read in the context of the questionable amendments made to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Act, 2026 and the Enforced Disappearance Prevention and Redress Act, 2026, which stripped the NHRC of its power to probe human rights abuse by members of law enforcement agencies.

We second the opposition's and rights bodies' call for accountability and withdrawal of the remark. The colonial and partisan mindset of our police and other security forces must change. To achieve this, comprehensive reforms, an independent commission, and a modern, updated law governing the ethics and conduct of law enforcement personnel are essential.

Fight against plastic needs us all on board

Chattogram Zoo's plastic-for-entry initiative is encouraging

We welcome the initiative of Chattogram Zoo to offer free entry to visitors under 18 in exchange for 100 grammes of discarded plastic waste. Launched on September 1, the campaign allows children to save the regular Tk 70 entry fee while contributing to a cleaner environment. More than 400 young people have participated so far. According to one student, collecting plastic bottles from neighbourhood alleys and school grounds made him realise how much waste was scattered around the city. Such experiences can help children develop responsible waste disposal habits from an early age and inspire families and communities to keep their surroundings clean.

This is not the first time a local authority has taken a civic approach to tackling plastic waste. In July 2023, Moulvibazar municipality introduced a plastic trading booth where residents could sell used bottles and polythene for Tk 50 per kilogramme. The initiative drew an encouraging response, with residents collecting sacks of plastic waste from streets and bushes. In 2024, the DNCC also launched an initiative to buy discarded items from residents as part of its efforts to tackle dengue.

These examples show how small, practical incentives can turn discarded plastic into a resource while encouraging citizens to take responsibility for their surroundings. However, the real test is whether such initiatives can be sustained beyond the initial enthusiasm. The subsequent discontinuation of Moulvibazar municipality's plastic trading booth highlights this challenge. Chattogram Zoo, however, has taken a necessary step in this regard by signing a one-year memorandum of understanding with Young Power in Social Action (YPSA), which will regularly collect, sort, and recycle the plastic gathered at the zoo. The authorities must ensure that the partnership produces measurable results and that a viable system remains in place in the long term.

However, local collection drives and recycling schemes cannot, on their own, address the enormous threat posed by plastic pollution. Although polythene bags were banned in the country in 2002 and restrictions on other single-use plastics were introduced later, weak enforcement has allowed the problem to persist. The government must therefore enforce existing laws and restrictions more effectively, while encouraging businesses to reduce unnecessary plastic packaging and take greater responsibility for the waste their products generate. Polluters must also be held accountable. Innovative local solutions can help change behaviour, but without consistent enforcement and effective waste management by the government, plastic pollution will continue to threaten our environment.

Infrastructure alone will not fix Chattogram's mobility problem



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The quality of a city's governance is reflected in how easily its residents can move within its jurisdiction. Chattogram, the commercial capital and second largest economic hub of Bangladesh, feels like an abandoned city because of poor mobility and low safety standards. But it was not always like this. The city's urban infrastructure was once shaped by hills, canals, and arterial corridors. It allowed people to move through the city not systematically but with relative ease and predictability. The comparatively narrow roads were reinforced by the surrounding land use, and organic canals and drainage channels supported flood management. This "arrangement" was not efficient by modern transport standards, but it worked well enough to sustain the city as the country's growing commercial hub.

Today, moving through Chattogram often means sitting in traffic, navigating disconnected roads, and feeling unsafe amid congestion and chaos. That cities will expand is inevitable, but this dysfunctionality only indicates an institutional neglect towards developing an integrated transport system as the city grew.

Over the past decade, Chattogram has witnessed mega infrastructure projects like flyovers, an elevated expressway, highways, and major expansion of the existing roads. While some of them were needed for better connectivity, all of them were built without developing an end-to-end ecosystem to ensure smooth functionality. Flyovers were built with flawed designs, including unsafe curves, and without operational feeder roads. The expressway was built and opened for public use three years ago with all nine of its access ramps inaccessible; only six ramps were recently opened for use while the rest are expected to be accessible in two months. Meanwhile, roads have been expanded without keeping the drainage system in mind.

In all these mega infrastructures, one common aspect has been missing from consideration: public movement. The Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) has undertaken 10 development projects worth more than Tk 14,874 crore, including six transport projects involving road widening, new road connections, an outer ring road extension, and the proposed Oxygen Moar flyover. But what is the city's mobility strategy connecting these individual projects? The Oxygen-Quwaish development project carries a proposed cost of Tk 2,024 crore. The issue of concern here is not whether the intersection needs intervention but whether another flyover or wider roads will resolve the underlying causes of congestion. This also raised an unexamined but important policy question: what problems have flyovers and expressways actually solved in Chattogram?

According to urban transport planning principles, elevated roads can function properly only when they are embedded within an integrated transport system: a clear traffic hierarchy, well-planned access corridors, reliable public transit, and safe pedestrian infrastructure. These preconditions were not all applied while implementing these grade-separated roads. Not only were the designs of these flyovers flawed, but the intersections and roads underneath were not rebuilt keeping both humans and vehicles in mind. No wonder that the traffic congestion did not just trouble the junctions but also all the access and exit points, as well as the surface roads under the flyovers. The elevated expressway followed a similar pattern, prioritising speed over safety, ignoring traffic demand analysis and public transport integration, and enabling the construction of unplanned ramps. The consequences were not surprising: fatal crashes due to high speed on the upside and clogged roads below.

These infrastructures may improve travel time for a limited group of users, but do little to improve the overall mobility. Pedestrians, who are major stakeholders, were excluded from all planning considerations, and footpaths became fragmented, leading to open drains. Also, despite earlier planning recommendations, the movement of freight to and from the Chattogram Port remains a significant challenge for the city's transport network. The port-bound trucks and industrial vehicles share road space with local traffic, resulting in congestion and delays that affect both urban mobility and economic efficiency. In a port city where the majority of daily trips are short, mixed-mode, and human-centred, shouldn't large infrastructure investment be evaluated by how effectively they integrate freight corridors, truck terminals, port access, public transport, and safe pedestrian movement into a coordinated citywide mobility strategy?



The 4-lane, 16 km elevated expressway in Chattogram, partially opened to traffic in 2023, has not delivered its full benefits in three years.

FILE PHOTO: **RAJIB RAIHAN**

The frustrating part is that Chattogram has not lacked transport assessments or planning recommendations. Earlier studies supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), alongside government masterplans, identified weak coordination between agencies, inadequate traffic demand analysis, and the absence of an effective citywide multimodal transport framework. More recently, the CDA's draft Chattogram Metropolitan Master Plan 2025-2050 has proposed an integrated transport system combining modern buses, commuter rail and water buses, alongside improved terminals, traffic signals and parking management. It also recognises that congestion cannot be solved by increasing road capacity alone. But a master plan's value does not lie in what it proposes on paper. Individual investments should be prioritised, designed and implemented in accordance with its wider vision. To fully implement the master plan, the megaprojects and the proposed public transport network, freight management and pedestrian infrastructure must complement each other.

Successful cities around the world have shifted their policies from car-centric expansion to integrated spatial mobility solutions that prioritise public transport, pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, freight efficiency, and traffic demand management. Cities like Copenhagen, Oslo, and Rotterdam have recognised that urban competitiveness depends on how reliably people and goods can move. To correct its course, Chattogram needs a fundamental policy shift from speed and construction to safety, accessibility and coordination. Doing so requires asking difficult questions about past investments and whether the port city needs more mega infrastructure or better administrative policy movement. Until those questions are answered honestly, the city will continue to build without planning, and despite decades of investment, mobility here will continue to suffer.

Madrasa abuse reports demand a reckoning, not just moral outrage



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The recent allegations of sexual abuse involving children in some madrasas demand going beyond the public outrage we have been witnessing. They demand a reckoning with the moral architecture of our society. According to The Daily Star's report on October 25, 2026, six madrasas in Savar, Gazipur, Kushtia, and Pabna were implicated in allegations of rape, attempted rape, and sexual abuse between October 8 and October 23—just 16 days. The alleged victims included boys and girls as young as seven, several of whom were reportedly threatened into silence. The incidents prompted outrage that turned into public protests, assaults on accused teachers, and even, in some cases, vandalism and arson. Behind these disturbing reports and the following outrage lies an unsettling question: what happens to a society when institutions, not just the madrasas in question, entrusted with moral formation fail to safeguard the vulnerable?

The problem cannot be reduced to individual depravity. It must also be examined through the social mechanisms that enable abuse, which can include deference to authority, collective silence, reputational anxiety, and the normalisation of preventable suffering.

In the 1963 book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, Hannah Arendt examined the relationship between wrongdoing, bureaucratic conformity, and the failure of independent moral judgement. Her concept of the "banality of evil" emerged from a specific historical context and should not be simplistically equated with sexual violence. Nevertheless, her work invites an important question about how does harm persist when individuals and institutions relinquish their responsibility to think and act ethically? When protecting an institution's reputation becomes more urgent than protecting a child, morality is subordinated to institutional self-preservation.

The predicament in Bangladesh is aggravated by a culture of accommodation. Repeated exposure to injustice can produce habituation rather than resistance. Society learns to endure what it should refuse to tolerate. Families may fear stigma, children may be intimidated into silence, and allegations may be handled through informal settlements rather than lawful procedures. There are also concerns about intimidation, local settlements, and barriers to accountability—all of which are made worse by a legal system that fails to protect the victims. Such practices transform silence from an individual response to fear into a mechanism of collective complicity.

Another troubling tendency emerges when public outrage erupts: the expectation that the law alone must resolve what society itself has helped conceal. Proper investigation and accountability are indispensable, but this cannot substitute for everyday moral responsibility. Reporting abuse, listening to children, challenging relevant powerful individuals, and refusing to participate in cover-ups are civic obligations. Similarly, mob violence can't constitute justice; it undermines due process and may jeopardise the very accountability it purports to demand.

This crisis also exposes a fundamental distinction between religious instruction and ethical education. While religions can provide important moral guidance, religious literacy, ritual observance, and doctrinal proficiency do not automatically cultivate empathy, respect for bodily autonomy, or an understanding of consent. In his 1968 book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire challenges educational models that privilege passive reception over critical consciousness. His broader insight is pertinent: education that discourages questioning authority risks producing compliance without moral discernment. Children must learn not merely what to believe, but how to recognise harm, question coercion, and seek protection without shame.

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None of these warrants stigmatising madrasas or religious communities collectively. Abuse can occur in any institutional setting and religious identity neither establishes guilt nor guarantees virtue. So, the response must prioritise universal child safeguarding, independent oversight, confidential reporting mechanisms, appropriate staff screening, and prompt, impartial investigations.

In 2009, the High Court issued guidelines requiring educational institutions and workplaces to establish complaint committees to investigate allegations of sexual harassment and take appropriate action. Subsequent court proceedings have continued to raise concerns about the implementation of these directives. More recently, in September 2026, a legal notice called for dedicated child sexual abuse prevention mechanisms across madrasas, alongside stronger oversight of child protection systems. The challenge here is to ensure that protective mechanisms operate effectively and that children in every educational setting can report abuse safely.

Ultimately, the gravest moral failure is not simply that abuse occurs; it is that warning signs can be ignored, disclosures suppressed, and preventable harm allowed to continue. A society's ethical maturity is measured not by the sanctity it attributes to its institutions, but by the safety it guarantees to those with the least power. It must ask whether its moral conviction still possesses the courage to confront authority, disrupt complacency, and defend a child when doing so becomes socially inconvenient. Until that courage becomes a collective norm, outrage will remain episodic, accountability uncertain, and the language of morality tragically disconnected from its practice.

The Daily Star Reg. No. DA 781 | **EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam** Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net | **Registered & Head Offices:** The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222 | **Newsroom:** Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net | **Advertisement:** 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257 | **Subscription:** 01711623906 | thedailystar.net bangla.thedailystar.net/