

Less than nothing done to improve road safety

THE progressive increase in the number of fatalities on the roads and highways since the enactment of the Road Transport Act on September 19, 2018 suggests that the law has failed to serve its intended purpose, which is to ensure road safety. In the first six months of this year, Bangladesh Police data reported at least 2,589 deaths and 2,308 injuries in 2,880 road crashes across the country. The Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, meanwhile, reported that a total of 20,411 people were killed in thousands of road accidents in 2018-2022. In reality, the number of casualties, according to passengers' rights advocates and researchers, is much higher. In June 2021, the road transport authority reported that there were about 10.13 lakh unlicensed drivers behind the wheels, and around the same time, the number of unfit vehicles was about 5.08 lakh. The number of unlicensed bikers also saw an increase. To prevent accidents from the operation of multispeed vehicles on highways, a ban on three-wheelers is in place, but they regularly ply the highways. The public perception that the law was enacted in 2018 to stifle the road safety movement rather than with the goal of bringing some order to the roads rings true given that the road safety situation has been steadily and radically on the downturn.

In the public transport sector, infrastructural development, such as the construction of four-lane highways or flyovers, will not automatically ensure road safety. In the most recent tragic accident in Jhalakathi in July, the driver on board did not have a licence to drive a heavy vehicle. In the road crash in Madaripur in March, the transport company did not have a route permit. Clearly, the failure to enforce road transport law is responsible. Experts, therefore, urged the government to consider safe traffic management on the recently constructed infrastructure. Immediately after the enactment of the law, in the face of opposition from the transport companies, the government announced a high-ranking committee to amend the law and delayed the enforcement of the law until November 2019. It took another four years to finalise the rule for the full implementation of the law. In addition to the road transport law, there are directives from the Prime Minister's Office and the High Court. In 2018, the prime minister gave directives to ensure drivers' rest every five hours and alternative drivers for long-distance transports, but none were implemented. In reality, gross violations of the law and a lack of implementation of directives remain the norm.

It is time that the government acknowledged its failure in streamlining the sector, stopped making false promises, and ensured road safety for the public. The government must act, considering its constitutional obligation to protect the lives of its citizens. Abandoning the reported bias towards the transport owners and workers associations, it must act with the interest of public safety at heart.

Inordinate delay in probe into casino scams unacceptable

LITTLE progress into the investigations of major money laundering cases filed against casino kingpins and an inordinate delay in the trials of the other cases involving the casino kingpins raise concerns. Since September 2019, law enforcers have raided at least 50 clubs alleged to be involved in casino business and arrested at least 275 people for their alleged involvement in casino business, corruption and money laundering. But most of the cases, which mostly accuse people who are in positions of different associate wings of the ruling party, have remained pending inordinately, while most of the accused have been released on bail and have returned to politics. Such a situation, as jurists and anti-corruption activists say, questions the government's sincerity and commitment to zero tolerance for money laundering, corruption and gambling. The Anti-Corruption Commission, the Criminal Investigation Department, the Rapid Action Battalion and the Detective Branch were tasked with investigating 57 cases filed over casino scams on charges of money laundering, amassing illegal wealth, and possessing drugs and illegal arms and the investigators submitted charge sheets in 52 of the cases. Trials in only three cases have, as the public prosecutor at Dhaka Metropolitan Court said, ended so far.

What is surprising is that investigations into money laundering cases against some influential leaders of the Juba League, the youth wing of the ruling Awami League, have remained stuck. Investigations into the cases against former Juba League leaders, Ismail Hossain Chowdhury Samrat and Khaled Mahmud Bhuiyan, for example, have not seen any progress. Both of them, along with some other accused, have secured bail and are reported to be active in politics. Jurists say that these leaders might now influence the investigations and the trials. Already, it has been reported that many witnesses in a number of under-trial cases do not appear before the court to testify. It is highly likely that the witnesses are under pressure from the accused. The failure on part of the investigating agencies not only ridicules the anti-corruption efforts of the government but also undermines the process of rule of law. What is also problematic about the situation is, as jurists say, when people, even students, are behind bars for months and years for exercising their freedom of speech, a right enshrined in the constitution, prime accused in serious cases such as money laundering and amassing illegal wealth are released on bail as investigating agencies delay in investigations and submitting charge sheets. Moreover, the way these accused have been welcomed back into politics also shows the political bankruptcy of the ruling party.

The agencies tasked with investigating the cases must, therefore, complete the investigations early and submit the charge sheets. The authorities must also look into whether the accused are exerting any influence on the investigation processes and on the witnesses. Above all, the government must deliver on its commitment to zero tolerance against money laundering and corruption.

Our ministers' adulation of foreign leaders

by Md Mahmudul Hasan

SINCE 2000 I have lived in four foreign countries: the UK, Germany, Malaysia and the USA. I have also travelled to other countries for presenting my research at various academic conferences. I lived in the UK for nearly seven years and have been living in Malaysia since June 2010. During my time in these countries, many of Bangladesh's ministers visited them. I have hardly seen their visits reported in any of the national media outlets of these countries. Visits by our political elites to most other countries perhaps receive a similar level of (in)attention.

The contrast involving visits of foreign leaders to Bangladesh (even if for an hour or two) is stark. Even if a junior minister from powerful countries comes to Bangladesh, the state reception as well as the media frenzy they receive is astonishingly intense.

Does it mean that we as a nation are more hospitable and welcoming than others? The answer is perhaps yes. But is it the only reason why we are at a feverish pace to welcome foreign leaders or cover their visits in the media? Sadly, our hysterical reception of foreign leaders does not necessarily point to our excessive love for them but may simply indicate a manifestation of our self-doubt and our sense of inadequacy.

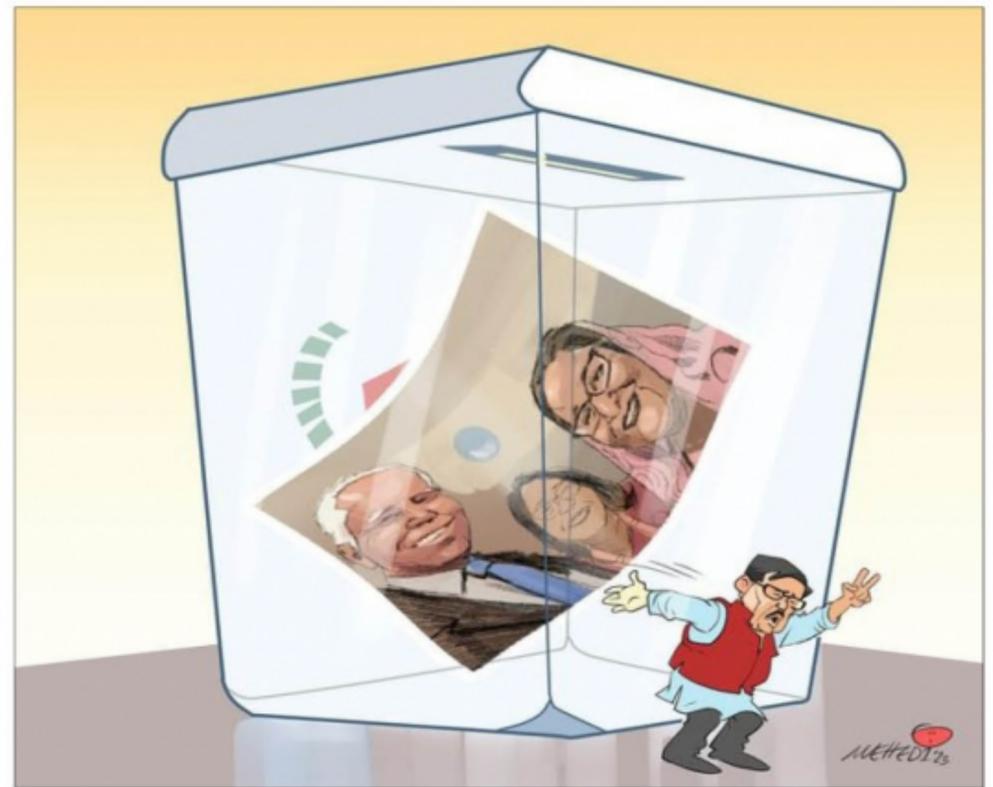
I know that discussing these issues is complex, and these are unlikely to be topics of choice of our political elites. Our idolisation of foreign leaders and the relative inattention with which our ministers are typically greeted in foreign lands have been bothering me for many years. I had kept them locked deep inside me for a long time, but this essay is an expression of my pent-up anguish and frustration.

While many of us keep trying in our small way to safeguard and promote the honour and prestige of our country, I have noticed with horror that our ministers drag all of us into the pit of ignominy and lack of self-confidence and self-respect.

I know talking about these issues may not take us anywhere, but my mind is torn by resentment for the tendency of our rulers to fawn on leaders of other countries. Perhaps, they act slavishly towards leaders of powerful nations mainly out of desperation to gain legitimacy and an inflated image in the eyes of people.

But the questions are: Why do those in power in Bangladesh need recognition from foreign leaders — either in the form of visits or gestures like photo opportunities? Isn't it the people of Bangladesh from whom our rulers should seek legitimacy and recognition? My blunt answer to these questions is that, when ruling elites are disconnected from the people or are not democratically elected, they look for other sources of approval at our expense.

This has other implications. Since our leaders are not in need



of our appreciation or even our votes to remain in power, they seek acceptability from external stakeholders. For the same reason, they look after the interest of their foreign benefactors and treat the citizens like colonial subjects only to impoverish them. They treat our country like their private property from which they derive dividends and amass fortunes only to siphon them off to foreign destinations.

Foreign dependency of our rulers harms us all and sundry, irrespective of our political hue and affiliation. It robs us of our dignity and compromises our identity as citizens of the world.

As a Bangladeshi, I feel ashamed to have seen how a photo opportunity of one of our political leaders with the president of another country has been fetishized into a political propaganda. It has been appropriated to tell us that we have reached new heights of achievement in global politics. The public display of such makeshift honour is nothing but a botched attempt to deceive us. This is not the right way for our leaders to gain importance and influence in the domestic or international arena. Once there is social justice, democracy and rule of law in our country, we will be prosperous and will not need to beg recognition from foreign powers.

Let me be more direct and unreserved in my remarks.

Which other countries in the world will regard a photo opportunity of their leaders with the US president as a mark of distinction? Did the US president consider it a privilege that he shared a photo with our prime minister?

What is more worrying is that, considering the media coverage of the photo opportunity in question, such publicity stunt seems to have proven effective in fooling a section of the population. If people really believe that our prime minister's photo opportunity with a certain foreign leader has lent our country more weight among the nations in the world, there is a genuine cause for concern. It will show a very low level of their maturity and a very high degree of their gullibility, none of which augurs well for our country. Unfortunately, such naivety and ignorance of the people are used by political leaders to deceive and exploit them.

Soon after the photo-flash excitation, France's president visited our country. Again, that was also depicted as an increase in our country's influence on the global stage. I am not an expert in international relations. Nor do I know the granular details of diplomatic exchanges between Bangladesh and France. But I can't comprehend how the French

president's business trip to Dhaka to sell products of his country can be a victory for us. The truth of the matter is that, France's president would have gone to any place on earth — with the exception of a grave — if he had known that he would be able to sell 10 Airbus aircrafts at such a highly exorbitant and profitable price.

France's president was smart in the sense that, in a short trip of a few hours, he struck an extremely lucrative business deal for his country. Now compare that with innumerable foreign trips that our ministers have been making over the years. Have they been able to bring any comparable benefits to our country through all those trips that cost our country huge sums of money?

Our ministers are smart at deceiving us. But they are slavish to, and outsmarted and outmanoeuvred by, foreign leaders. If they respected us as citizens and helped protect our rights, both they and we would have a dignified existence in this world. Until they realise this truth, we may keep suffering inside our country and losing our prestige and resources to foreign powers.

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Exploring the impact of AI on our lives

by Rokhsana Wazed

ARTIFICIAL intelligence has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping various facets of our daily existence. Its influence is pervasive, spanning industries such as healthcare, education, entertainment, and transportation.

AI has made remarkable contributions to the field of healthcare, fundamentally altering its landscape. AI-driven diagnostic tools possess the ability to swiftly and accurately analyse vast volumes of medical data. This capacity has led to early disease detection, enabling timely intervention and the development of personalised treatment plans. As a result, lives are saved, and healthcare systems are relieved of the financial strain associated with late-stage interventions.

In the realm of education, AI is revolutionising the learning experience. Intelligent tutoring systems, fuelled by AI, adapt to the unique needs and learning styles of individual students. This adaptability ensures that education is more accessible and effective than ever before. Furthermore, AI-powered content recommendations cater to individual preferences, enriching the overall learning journey and fostering a lifelong pursuit of knowledge.

AI's impact extends beyond healthcare and education; it has permeated the workplace as well. AI-powered automation streamlines operations by handling repetitive tasks efficiently and accurately. Additionally, AI aids in enhancing decision-making processes across diverse industries. While this surge in efficiency and productivity is commendable, it has raised concerns about the potential displacement of human workers and the necessity for reskilling and upskilling the workforce.

AI's influence reaches into the realms of entertainment and transpor-



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ation. AI-driven recommendation algorithms curate our content consumption, ensuring that we engage with content tailored to our individual tastes and preferences. Furthermore, the promise of autonomous vehicles holds the potential to make transportation safer and more efficient, ultimately reducing accidents and traffic congestion on our roads.

Despite the manifold advantages that AI offers, its pervasive presence has prompted significant ethical considerations. These concerns encompass privacy issues, biases in AI algorithms, and the potential for job displacement. Striking a harmonious balance between technological progress and ethical responsibility remains a critical challenge that must be addressed to ensure a future where AI genuinely enhances the human experience.

One of the foremost ethical con-

siderations in the age of AI is the erosion of privacy. AI systems collect and analyse vast amounts of personal data, raising questions about the safeguarding of individuals' sensitive information. Whether it involves tracking online behaviour for targeted advertising or using facial recognition technology for public surveillance, there is a growing need to establish robust regulations to protect personal privacy.

Another ethical concern revolves around bias in AI algorithms. AI systems learn from historical data, and if this data contains biases, AI can perpetuate and exacerbate those biases. This has far-reaching implications in areas such as hiring, lending and criminal justice, where AI-driven decisions can unintentionally discriminate against certain groups. Addressing bias in AI algorithms is imperative to ensure fairness and equality.

The widespread adoption of AI has the potential to disrupt the job market. While AI automates many tasks, concerns exist regarding the displacement of human workers across industries, including manufacturing and customer services. However, it is essential to recognise that AI can also create new job opportunities in fields related to AI development, maintenance and oversight. Preparing the workforce for this shift through education and training is essential.

As AI continues to advance, the ethical challenges it presents require careful consideration and regulation. Striking a balance between technological progress and ethical responsibility is paramount. Collaboration between governments, businesses and tech leaders is essential to establish guidelines, standards and frameworks that ensure AI serves the best interests of humanity while upholding individual rights and societal values.

The impact of AI on our lives is profound and undeniable. From revolutionising healthcare and education to enhancing workplace efficiency and transforming entertainment and transportation, AI offers a myriad of benefits. However, the ethical concerns it raises, including privacy issues, algorithmic bias and job displacement, demand our attention. In navigating the AI revolution, it is incumbent upon us to remain vigilant in protecting individual rights and promoting fairness. Only through responsible development, ethical deployment and thoughtful regulation can we ensure that AI genuinely enhances the human experience and contributes to a future where the advantages of AI are harnessed for the betterment of society as a whole.

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