Road Safety in Bangladesh:
Key issues and countermeasures

DR. HASIB MOHAMMED AHSAN points out the principal causes of frequent road accidents and provides guidelines to make our roads safer for commuters and pedestrians.

Overview Of Road Traffic Accidents
Worldwide, the number of people killed in road traffic crashes is estimated to be 1.3 million, with another 50 million injured each year. More than 85 percent of these casualties and 96 percent of total child deaths, occur in low and middle income countries. Road traffic deaths are predicted to increase by 83 percent in low-income and middle-income countries (if no major action is taken) and to decrease by 27 percent in high-income countries over the next 20 years. Sustained declining trends in road fatalities in developed countries have been attributed to concerted efforts in many areas, including effective coordination, community involvement, research on road safety initiatives, the promotion of good road safety practices and improved targeting of resources.
Road traffic accidents have now become a great social concern in Bangladesh and the situation is deteriorating. The annual economic wastage occasioned by traffic accidents is estimated to be in the order of 2 to 3 percent of the GDP. Each year, there are at least 3,000 fatalities and 3,000 grievous and simple injuries from around 3,500 police reported accidents on Bangladesh roads. Other sources estimated the fatalities as high as from 12,000 to 20,000 per year. Thus, the safety problem is very severe by international standards with some 60 to 150 fatalities per 10,000 motor vehicles in Bangladesh compared to around 25, 16, 2 and 1.4 in India, Srilanka, the US and UK respectively.

Motor vehicle ownership has increased steadily in Bangladesh, at present it is about 2 to 10 vehicles per 1,000 persons. However, despite large growth in the number of motor vehicles, the country's transport demand is still predominantly met by non-motorised modes, particularly by walk and rickshaws, and its level of motorisation is still far below compared to the levels of other countries, such as around 12, 25, 426 and 765 motor vehicles per 1,000 persons for India, Srilanka, UK and the USA respectively. Such growths together with other complementary urban hazards have resulted in substantial road traffic safety problems.

**Accident characteristics**

**Accident statistics:** The reported road accident and casualty statistics over the past thirteen (1998-2010) years for Bangladesh have showed significant fluctuations. Such fluctuations usually indicate that the statistics are unreliable (probably masking the actual trends) with accidents increasing by some 12 percent between 1998 and 1999 and then peaking in 2003 (4,114 accidents) after dropping quickly in 2001 (decreased by 26 percent compared to year 2000). In 2010 there were about 2,437 reported accidents with 2,443 fatalities and 1,706 injuries. Information indicates the widespread under-reporting and incomplete collection of specific details (e.g. exact location, road user movement involved).

**Potential years of life lost:** Overseas research has shown that countries lose the most economically active years from road accident victims, approximately 70 percent of the 'years of life' lost due to accidents are 'working years'. It is argued that compared to the other costs of premature death in developing countries, particularly malaria and infectious diseases, deaths from road accidents appear to be increasing. The most vulnerable age group is 21 to 35 years representing the potential economic force group of Bangladesh. The situation is similar for drivers, passengers and pedestrians as well.

**Fatality rate and index:** The fatality rate, i.e. the number of road traffic accident fatalities per 10,000 motor vehicles, for Bangladesh is very high by international standards. The fatality index which is deaths divided by total casualties expressed as a percentage in Bangladesh is also very high, nearly 50 and one of the highest in developing countries. This signifies probably two important characteristics viz. widespread under-reporting of less serious accidents as well as the lower level of emergency medical services available to the accident victims. It is believed that fatality index depends crucially on medical facilities. In Bangladesh with present level of medical services there is little scope to provide prompt and necessary medical attention to injured people, particularly during the initial hours of an accident.
**Predominant collision types:** Accident type analysis showed 'hit pedestrian' as the dominant accident type (45%). Other common accident types are rear-end collision (15%), head-on collision (15%) and overturning (9%). These four accident types account for nearly 84 percent of the total accidents.

**Pedestrians -- the most vulnerable group:** In Bangladesh, with a low level of motorisation, the role of walk mode is quite significant. Indeed walking appears to be a major contributor to sustainable transport strategy. It is the motorists, not pedestrians, who normally receive much attention and a greater share of priority. Pedestrians deserve and need protection in the form of facilities by ensuring their legitimacy, safety and convenience. Pedestrians, being physically unprotected, are thus considered to be the most vulnerable user group and demand a priority consideration in road safety strategies.

Pedestrians accounted for 49 percent of all reported fatalities in the accident database. In urban areas pedestrians represent 62 percent of road accident fatalities. Current statistics revealed a deteriorating situation in metropolitan Dhaka, with pedestrians as a proportion of road crash deaths increasing from 43 percent in 1986-87 to 74 percent in 1998-2010. In urban areas 50 percent pedestrian casualties occur during crossing the road, but in rural areas 52 percent pedestrian casualties occur while walking along the roadside. On the other hand, grievous and simple injuries are the highest for passengers (63%).

**Involvement of children in road accidents:** Road accident statistics of Bangladesh revealed a serious threat to children. The incidence of child involvement in road accident casualties and fatalities are around 16 percent and 20 percent respectively. Of this fatality 78 percent represent as child pedestrians. This involvement of children up to 15 years of age in road accident fatalities in Bangladesh is much higher than those in other developing countries. Worldwide, road traffic injuries are the second leading cause of death for 5 to 14 years of children. It is important to note that compared with industrialised countries, the proportion of fatalities to under 15 years of age in developing countries is approximately two and a half times higher.

**Over-involvement of trucks and buses:** Heavy vehicles (trucks and buses) are major contributors to road traffic accidents accounting for about 58% of vehicular involvement in accidents. Some striking features of heavy vehicles accidents are as follows:

* Involvement in all accidents 71%
* Involvement in fatal accidents 71%
* Involvement in pedestrian accidents 63%
* Involvement in pedestrian fatal accidents 65%
* Involvement in casualties 53%
* Involvement in fatalities 54%
* Involvement in pedestrian casualties 67%
* Involvement in pedestrian fatalities 70%

**Accident Locations:** A large proportion of fatalities occur on rural sections of the main highways. Within urban areas, accident frequency is the highest on main road networks. There is evidence of ‘clustering’ of accidents at a few sites, indicating that the road safety problem may be
partially addressed by site-specific treatment. Frequent accident occurring road locations on highways and hazardous intersections under Dhaka City Corporation are to be found respectively at http://www.buet.ac.bd/ari/downloads/Blackspot%20in%20National%20Highways%20of%20Bangladesh.pdf and http://www.buet.ac.bd/ari/downloads/Hazardous%20Intersections%20of%20DMP.pdf

**Accident contributory factors**

Road traffic crashes result from failures in the interaction of human, vehicle and the road environment - the three elements which produce the road traffic system. The combination of these various elements to produce road crashes means that road safety itself has to be tackled in a multi-functional manner in order to break the chains of events that lead to crashes and the eventual injuries of road users. One useful approach is to consider each traffic injury problem as resulting from an interaction between several discrete factors, occurring over distinct phases in time and space. This can be done by dividing all time into three phases: before the injury event, during the event, and after the event. The physical universe can be divided into three factors: the human being (usually the victim), the vehicle and equipment potentially involved in an injury event, and the environment (which consists of everything else). The approach results into a 3x3 matrix, also referred to as the Haddon's matrix. This provides a useful framework for the crash analysis and prevention program in the way to formulate effective countermeasures.

In Bangladesh pedestrian-vehicle conflicts are clearly the greatest problem with significant involvement of trucks and buses. There is a severe lack of priority and even attention given to vulnerable road user movements, despite this group of road users dominating travel patterns as well as casualty types. Vulnerable road users are much more susceptible to accidents when
vehicle speeds are high and can even suffer fatal injuries in accidents with motor vehicles at moderate speeds.

Typically, the principal contributory factors of accidents are as follows: Mix of traffic with a variety of vehicle characteristics and speeds. Failure to obey mandatory traffic regulations, illegal and inconsiderate driving practices. Pedestrian/vehicle conflicts. Failure to provide and maintain road signs and markings. Failure to enforce traffic law. Lack of education of road users. Poor detailed design of junctions and road sections. Failure to provide way. Lack of lane discipline. Counter-clockwise travel at roundabouts. Non-wearing of motorcycle helmets. Failure to slow down when approaching an intersection.

Road safety countermeasures
It is possible to significantly reduce the number of road accidents and casualties by implementing an effective and coordinated safety policy and actions which require significant improvements in the relevant sectors viz. better enforcement, better roads, enhanced vehicle safety standards, improved and extensive public education and safety related programs. There is a need for identification of accident prevention priorities setting realistic problem specific goals and targets. The problem-specific targets (e.g. reduction of pedestrian deaths from pedestrian walking with traffic) are far more important than macro targets (e.g. fatalities per 10,000 registered motor vehicles).

There is specific need and much scope for road environment improvements aimed at correcting the most common deficiencies through wider application of traffic engineering approaches. It is argued that priorities be placed on the principles like traffic segregation to provide facilities and road space for the most vulnerable users particularly pedestrians and non-motorized vehicles, and to force correct road user behavior (self enforcing measures) via channelization, speed reduction measures, etc. To promote enhanced road safety, there should be programs to implement well-known engineering measures, leading to larger and longer lasting effects at less expense, widely and systematically. Measures that would achieve greater road safety (likely to also improve traffic flow) and would also offer cost-effective results are listed below.

Road and road environment improvement measures
Low Cost Short Term Periodic Measures
* Improvement of shoulder (hard and soft shoulder, vertical drop)
* Removal of visual obstruction (permanent and temporary)
* Access control (major-minor road connections, frequent median opening)
* Road side hazard and parking management (bazaar, vendors, illegal parking)
* Improving bus-bay, passenger shelter and street lighting
* Road surface improvement
* Traffic sign, signal and marking improvement
* Drainage improvement
* Curve improvement (super-elevation, widening)
* Intersection improvement
* Pedestrian facilities improvement (walking along the road side and crossing)
* Speed management
* Long Term Policy and Capital Intensive Measures
* Planning and guidelines
* Land use control
* Exposure control through transport and land-use policies
* Functional hierarchy of the road system
* Safety audit and assessment
* Access control
* Highway surveillance
* Bridge and bridge approach
* Increase provision of road divider
* Provision of service or frontage roads
* Grade separated intersection
* Grade separated pedestrian facilities
* Additional space for future intersection improvement

**Vehicle and traffic operation improvement measures**
Vehicle modification restrictions (shape, size,

* Use of seatbelts and helmets
* Setting and enforcing speed limits
* Standard safety features in vehicles
* Improved visibility of non-motorized vehicles (NMV)
* Strict enforcement and random vehicle inspection (light, brake, tyre)
* Control irresponsible overtaking
* Computer based vehicle fitness checking
* Restriction in carrying rooftop passengers and goods
* Control excessive speeding and overloading
* Control non-standard vehicles on roads
* Application of ITS and central traffic control system
* Promoting public transport system
* Development of adequate modern driver training schools

**Research, Education and Awareness Development Measures**
* Advancing road safety research
* Strengthen accident data reporting and recording system
* Traffic safety education and information for all ages of road users
* Awareness development at different levels
* Mass media campaigns and publicity
* Safety awareness of vehicle owner
* Development of community based road safety program

**Post-Crash Care Measures**
* Ensure help for road accident patients at every stages
* Improve emergency rescue services
* Emergency units capable of dealing road accident patients
* Trauma care centre
* Rehabilitation
Accident Research Institute
The Accident Research Institute (previously known as Accident Research Centre) of BUET with its own efforts collects Accident Report Forms (ARFs) from four metropolitan offices and six ranges of Bangladesh Police regularly and is maintaining a Microcomputer Accident Analysis Package (MAAP) based database which is substantially important for ARI's research, training and national road traffic accident statistics. It is to be noted that while collecting data from police offices ARI provides necessary supports regarding the software and training for accident data recording and reporting to concerned police personnel. ARI is going to publish a 'road safety fact' booklet regarding road traffic accident data at the earliest.

In addition to this, ARI conducts in-depth investigations on some major accidents on different national highways. ARI organises various training programs based on database analyses, researches and investigations. For example, Heavy Vehicle Drivers' Training Program on Road Safety and Good Driving Practice (1 day Program, approximately 1,000 drivers), Training Program for Police Officers on Accident Event Recording and Reporting (1 day program, approximately 800 police officers) and Driving Instructors' Training Program (2 weeks program, approximately 80 instructors). Recently, ARI with collaboration of Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB) has arranged a five-day professional training program on Traffic Safety. ARI has taken the initiatives to upgrade its training manual for drivers, driving instructors and related professionals to Safe Driving Manual and publish it as early as possible. ARI will continue its endeavors regarding trainings and investigations depending on demand and availability of funds.

Concluding Comments
The Accident Research Centre has identified and documented the striking road accident and injury problem characteristics and outlined strategies for improving road safety. It has recommended some proven and cost-effective measures for their implementation with due urgency in mitigating the problem, thereby achieving enhanced public safety on roads. Importantly it should be noted that improvement of road safety is a multi-disciplinary task and involves many sectors. Road safety can only be tackled effectively if the state takes a leading role and responsibility with due commitment by concerned agencies in the relevant sectors with close collaboration and understanding. Indeed, strengthening the National Road Safety Council (NRSC) under the direct control of the Head of the Government with necessary focus on its member organisations and sub-committees for the evaluation and the monitoring of the working agencies is needed.

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Road safety: held hostage by trade unions

TAWFIQUE ALI exposes the lawlessness that reigns supreme in the transport sector due to the influence exerted by trade unions.

The overall scenario
We are destined to face fatal road accidents and lose dozens of human lives every other day in Bangladesh with the transport sector being a hostage to trade unions and corruption. It will not be an exaggeration to say that it is lawlessness and rampant corruption by private transport owners and affiliated worker unions that virtually rule the country's transport sector. Private owners own the entire sector except a scanty number of BRTC buses and trucks. It is widely reported and believed that Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation (BRTWF) led by the incumbent shipping minister has been a pivotal actor in enforcing anarchy in the transport sector management over the past couple of decades.
The situation has appallingly worsened over time with the frequency of tragedies increasing, claiming more and more innocent lives. We were shocked each time we lost school students, children, parents, workers, top bureaucrats, farmers, filmmakers, artists and journalists in road accidents with the government playing the role of a mere silent spectator, making no tangible efforts to contain the situation except for making hollow promises.

None of the successive governments have ever undertaken the issue of preventing tragic deaths in road accidents as an agenda, as the transport sector has remained a potential source for illegal extortions by the owners' and workers' unions always backed by ruling party elements.

So, who rules the entire sector? Under the auspices of the shipping minister, errant owners, drivers and workers rule the sector. However, BRTA, traffic police and highway police are legally responsible for taking actions against errant drivers and unfit vehicles. To one's utter disappointment, the BRTA has only two mobile courts led by executive magistrates for legal actions against unlicensed driving primarily in Dhaka metropolitan city while the wayward drivers and unfit vehicles in the rest of the country enjoy almost a free rein.

Though there is a lax patrol of the highway police; with inadequate manpower and logistics, it is bribery that ultimately dictates the deal for unfit and unregistered vehicles and unlicensed drivers. In other words, lawlessness never leaves the sector thanks to a constant pressure from a powerful group of owners and workers.

**Nexus between trade unions and political quarters**

With the changeover of political power each time, ruling party men take over the extortion cartel assuming the tag of 'owners' and 'workers' unions. The sector insiders estimate that different unions collect at least Tk 2 crore illegally from the transport operators everyday in Dhaka metropolitan area alone. Though it happens in broad daylight, the transaction has no records.

The incumbent shipping minister Shahjahan Khan, who is executive president of BRTWF, made a shocking demand to the parliamentary sub-committee on transport sector in mid February this year that extortion in the sector be made a legal practice. On top of placing a 17-point demand, he also demanded that a totally new committee be formed to facilitate implementation of his demands. The new committee, he suggested, should include himself and Jatiya Party leader Moshiur Rahman Ranga, executive president of Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Samity (BSPS). He however had made his most insensitive as well as callous remark last year in the face of public outcry following the tragic deaths of filmmaker Tareque Masud and journalist Mishuk Munier along with their driver and two other crews, he had said that BRTA should issue driving license only if a driver could identify a cow or a goat on the road.

The parliamentary sub-committee chaired by M Israfil Alam, after an October meeting last year, told reporters that a minister-led transport labour organisation was running an extortion-regime in the sector. It collects at least Tk 51 crore a year in the name of raising funds for workers' welfare. The committee's findings were only a tip of the iceberg. Rampant toll collection is another basic reason for hikes in passenger transport fare and commodity price hikes sometimes 200 percent higher than usual, Israfil added.
According to the parliamentary committee findings, more than 23 lakh workers work for over 5 lakh buses, having 7,490 workers' unions and 412 bus owners' associations. In August last year, thousands of transport workers took to the streets and blocked Dhaka-Mawa highway placing heavy buses across the roads at Gabtoli, as a magistrate punished seven errant drivers. Three of the drivers holding fake licence and the rest with no licence, were arrested and handed over to police. Enraged by the action, the agitating transport workers and owners halted traffic movement in the area for over three hours and confined the magistrate forcing him to bring down the punishment to a token fine of Tk 5 each.

This incident clearly points to the lawlessness prevalent in the sector. Even if a government official intends to enforce law by putting lawbreakers in the dock, politically-backed trade unions thwart the move. It also explains why not a single driver responsible for a road crash has been punished yet. A culture of impunity thus has taken roots in the entire sector.

**Irregularities in issuing licence**

The BRTA has so far issued over 1.5 lakh driving licenses for heavy vehicles like buses and trucks directly in the face of pressure from the transport workers' federation since 1997. Last year, Shajahan Khan reportedly requested BRTA to issue about 25,000 driving licence in the same fashion without any prior test, to people listed by his federation. As per licensing rules, one is required to have a six-year driving experience to obtain a heavy vehicle license but the above mentioned licences were issued without meeting the procedural requirement.

The High Court several months back called for all the records on how those licenses were issued and ordered BRTA to stall the renewal process of those until further order. The BRTA has so far issued a total of over 11 lakh genuine driving licences including 2.5 lakh for heavy vehicles. The total includes around one lakh smartcard machine-readable licence introduced last November.

**Ineffective road safety council**

The National Road Safety Council, which is headed by the communications minister and has representatives of 24 government agencies, is supposed to prevent road mishaps. It has sat four times during the incumbent government's tenure though it is supposed to meet every three months. The council, formed in 1995, has virtually remained ineffective. However, the council has been successful in expediting formation of highway police and an accident research institute at BUET.

The council is an inter-ministerial body with representations of home ministry, traffic police, transport sector, experts, eminent activists with the mandate to make decisions and policies on preventing road fatalities. Deputy Commissioner at district level and UNO at Upazila level lead the road safety council. Communications Minister Obaidul Quader expressed frustration over implementation of the council's decisions taken years ago, while presiding over the council's 21st meeting on June 17. The council's decisions included putting an end to plying of unfit vehicles.
and issuance of fake driving licence, renewal of licence regularly, creating a road maintenance fund, enhancing the capacity of road safety unit and stopping robberies on highways.

**What should be done to salvage the sector**
The government must first deal heavy-handedly with the extortionists to break the nexus of corrupt cartels and thus salvage the transport sector from anarchy and lawlessness. It requires honest political commitment. Citizens' movement could make it a public issue and an agenda during general election. The contending political parties may be pressed for making election pledge on the issue.

The designated functionaries, the regulatory body BRTA and police must be purged of raging corruption. The safety issue must be addressed with recommendations from relevant experts at the designing and planning stages of the roads and highways. Authorities must stop the practice of calling them only after a tragedy occurs. A public sector that crucially determines people's daily life and economy cannot be run by mere private business operators and owners.

The government has to be accountable to people for each avoidable death in road accident. Therefore, it must ensure an effective national road safety council with the authority to act against any agency working with it. The council should not remain toothless.

Strengthening BRTA with manpower and logistics, simplifying fees deposit system and modernising licensing process and also modernising traffic and highway police are vitally conducive to proper licencing and curbing corruption.

Finally, there is no alternative to well-trained, educated drivers. So, producing adequate number of qualified drivers is also important. Raising public awareness with massive publicity particularly in electronic media and incorporation of lessons in the curriculum are equally vital.

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**Immersed in corruption**

**M ABUL KALAM AZAD** argues that the communications ministry has to be divested of widespread corruption in order to improve the conditions of dilapidated highways and check unfit vehicles from plying the roads.

Two months ago, some young contractors of ruling Awami League went to Communications Minister Obaidul Quader with a different type of complaint: They could not access a website of roads and highways department and thus was failing to bid for a tender. They told the minister that a group of contractors in connivance with some officials of the department denied their access to grab the tender of repairing a road.
An angry minister called the concerned officer and shouted at him for the malpractice. He asked him to open the website for all. The website was opened accordingly but only for a few minutes. This incident was enough to prove how the digital tender initiative of the government has been made farcical and how tenders are being manipulated by contractors and officials of the roads and highways department, which is the largest division of the communications ministry. The ruling Awami League introduced digital tendering system in a bid to check rampant tender manipulation and corruption, and protect misappropriation of fund allocated for various development activities.

The recent shootout at the department was nothing but a continuation of long-running practice of grabbing projects and making money. A large group equipped with firearms attacked their opponents in a bid to oust their rival group and establish authority at the department. The Communications Ministry is one of the most graft-ridden ministries. It deals with as many as 22,000 kilometres of roads and highways across the country. In addition, there are hundreds of bridges and culverts under its jurisdiction. Every year, it spends thousands of crores in repairing the roads and bridges. New projects like upgrading Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Mymensingh highways, construction of metro rail, elevated expressway and a couple of flyovers in the capital also involve millions of taka.

Although a huge amount of money is spent every year to improve the communications sector, the country's roads, highways and bridges are left in a bad state. The reason is simple: the major part
of the allocated fund for the sector is gobbled up systematically. A senior official of the communications ministry has told this correspondent that less than half of the allocated money of any tasks or projects can be utilised, which is the main reason behind the poor condition of many roads, highways and bridges. He further revealed that keeping 10 percent of the fund for the concerned officers of the roads and highways department and the project director has been a ritual but initially one has to spend another 10 percent to manage the project through manipulation. Then he cannot carry out the project without paying local politicians or influential parties. And lastly, the contractor has to make profit out of his work.

A contractor of roads and highways department admitted to this correspondent that 30 to 40 percent of the fund can be utilised in the end, which has become a common practice and that none can maintain the standard of work if he has to pay bribes at various steps. The racket of contractors, politicians and the officials has become so strong that a new system has been developed wherein dubious projects are created. Every year, dozens of small projects are created, which only remain on papers and a section of engineers and contractors pocket a large amount of these funds.

Donor agencies, including the World Bank, are refusing to finance any project or work with the department’s officials, thanks to their involvement in corruption. In 2009, the WB withdrew itself from a project under which the Dhaka-Mymensingh, Sylhet-Sunamganj and Comilla-Brahmanbaria roads were supposed to be repaired. The three highways are now in their worst conditions. The Dhaka-Mymensingh upgrading project has been allegedly stalled due to irregularities in selecting firms. The finance ministry is also reluctant to release fund for the roads and highways department fearing misappropriation.

Donors now have serious reservation to work with the department, as many of its self-proclaimed corrupt officials are holding many top positions. Immediate past Chief Engineer Shahab Uddin was one of them. He was among 44 officers of roads and highways department who confessed to their corruption before the now-defunct Truth and Accountability Commission (Tac) and got clemency by depositing a portion of their ill-gotten money during the last caretaker regime. Many of them later got promotions, and have now resumed their works through corruption and irregularities. Many have pointed fingers at the former communications minister for the promotion. Although Shahab Uddin stepped down in the face of media reports against his misappropriation of fund, corrupt practices continue to haunt the RHD.

Bridges Division is equally an important division of the communications ministry as it is responsible for construction of bridges, flyovers, expressways, but its failure to construct the long-cherished Padma multi-purpose Bridge has posed a big question. Donors cancelled their promised $2.35 billion last September accusing former Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain, his family company and some others of corruption. Fate of the 6.12 kilometre-bridge which will connect the country's southeast districts with the capital is now in doubt.

Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC), the two organs of the communications ministry are pronged with widespread irregularities and corruptions. From getting driving license to fitness certificates, one has to pay at every step. One of the major reasons of frequent road accidents in the country is issuance of
fake driving license by BRTA. Checking fitness of vehicles is nothing but eyewash. Plying of large number of unfit vehicles in Dhaka and elsewhere is the proof of that.

Irregularities of BRTC are, however, little noticed. This organ of the communications ministry purchases buses, trucks and spare parts for the vehicles. It is widely alleged that all type of purchases here is manipulated so that influential BRTC officials can make money. Many got commission when buses or trucks were imported. Buying low-price parts with high rate is also rampant in BRTC, which is a major reason of vehicles going out of order soon.

A failed Ministry
If any ministry stands out for its poor performance, then communications ministry is at the top on the chart. Over the last three and half years, it planned a plethora of ambitious projects, none of which has come through. Metro Rail, elevated expressway, Padma Bridge, upgrading Dhaka-Chittagong highway are all pointers to what was planned and what actually happened.

When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appointed Syed Abul Hossain as communications minister, many questioned his ability to do the job on the ground of his being more of a businessman than a politician. Their fears came true when the communications ministry emerged as a failed ministry of the Awami League-led grand alliance government. The communications ministry under Syed Abul Hossain undertook 167 projects at an estimated cost of Tk 60,000 crore but demonstrated abysmal performance in implementing the projects. The ministry's negligence left half the country's 21,000km roads and highways in appalling conditions. A few of the projects
did indeed kick off, but their progress has been frustrating. At the same time, major projects like Metro Rail and the elevated expressway are yet to get underway and in all probability their implementation seems a distant reality.

Experts believe that the poor performance of the communications ministry means that the country's communications system will deteriorate further, which in turn will greatly hamper the transportation of people and goods and disrupt development activities. The biggest failure of the communications ministry has been in repairing and maintaining roads and highways, which placed the government in an embarrassing situation ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr last September. Road communications on some major routes nearly collapsed. The then communications minister came under heavy criticism from inside and outside the ruling party over his perceived lapses in leadership.

Against this backdrop, the government had little choice but to remove Syed Abul Hossain from the communications ministry and separate the railway sector to form the railway ministry. Newly appointed communications minister Obaidul Quader said he would focus on short-term measures and try to implement some of the projects before the expiry of this government's tenure. People are watching how he holds onto his promises.

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