

Now read this article written by Michael Hobbes titled  
**"Welcome to the Traffic Capital of the World"**

I am in a tiny steel cage attached to a motorcycle, stuttering through traffic in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In the last ten minutes, we have moved forward maybe three feet, inch by inch, the driver wrenching the wheel left and right, wriggling deeper into the wedge between a delivery truck and a rickshaw in front of us.

Up ahead, the traffic is jammed so close together that pedestrians are climbing over pickup trucks and through empty rickshaws to cross the street. Two rows to my left is an ambulance, blue light spinning uselessly. This is what the streets here look like from seven o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night. If you're rich, you experience it from the back seat of a car. If you're poor, you're in a rickshaw, breathing in the exhaust.



I'm sitting in the back of a CNG, a three-wheeled motorcycle shaped like a slice of pie and covered with scrap metal. I'm here working on a human rights project, but whenever I ask people in Dhaka what they think international organizations should really be working on, they tell me about the traffic.

Alleviating traffic congestion is one of the major development challenges of our time. Half the world's population already lives in cities, and the United Nations (UN) estimates that

the proportion will rise to nearly 70 percent by 2050. Dhaka, the world's densest and fastest growing city, is a case study in how this problem got so bad and why it's so difficult to solve.

Dhaka's infrastructure doesn't match the scale of its population. Just 7 percent of the city is covered by roads, compared with around 25 percent of Paris and Vienna. Dhaka also suffers from the absence of a planned road network. There are 650 major intersections, but only 60 traffic lights, many of which don't work. That means the police force isn't enforcing driving or parking rules; they're in the intersections, directing traffic.

The cost of Dhaka's traffic congestion is estimated at \$3.8 billion a year, and that's just the delays and air pollution, not the less-tangible losses in quality of life. Paradoxically, the poor infrastructure is one of the reasons why the city is growing so fast. Without roads or trains to whisk them to the suburbs, Dhaka residents have no choice but to crowd into the middle, set up slums between high-rises, and walk to work.

Then there are the users of the roads. Besides pedestrians, the narrow lanes are shared by bicycles, rickshaws, scooters, motorcycles, CNGs, buses, and cars. All these modes take up a different amount of space and have different top speeds. Most people you talk to in Bangladesh blame the traffic jams on the rickshaws. There are too many of them, they say, and they drive so slowly that they trap the cars,

buses, and CNGs behind them. The government is under pressure to designate some lanes as car-only, to build wider roads and overpasses, to take the slow traffic out from in front of the fast.

And this brings us to the third reason why the traffic problem is so difficult to solve. All of these fixes sound easy and obvious, but they come at a cost. One and a half million people drive rickshaws for a living, plus another few hundred thousand own and repair them. Government efforts to get people out of rickshaws and into buses and trains are going to attract huge opposition.

Even increasing bus capacity is more complicated than it sounds. A 2009 World Bank analysis found 60 separate bus companies in Dhaka. Since the bus companies compete with one another, the drivers have every incentive to drive aggressively and take more passengers than the buses can hold. What's more, the public transport isn't all that public. Many of the bus companies are owned or linked to political parties or powerful trade unions. Government efforts to unify or regularize the system would amount to a hostile takeover of all of these small companies.

The obvious solution is to separate the rickshaws from the cars, from the CNGs, give each of them lanes and lights according to their top speed, and, crucially, make car drivers pay the cost of taking up more space on the roads. But that, politically speaking, is unrealistic. Car owners are a small part of the population, but they are the most influential. Every year, Dhaka adds an extra 37,000 cars to its already overcrowded roads.

Think about all this from a Bangladeshi politician's point of view. Any attempt to solve the traffic mess means annoying the poor, the middle class, and the rich all at once.

Thanks to the donors, In 2012, the government announced a \$2.75 billion plan to build a metro rail system and a \$45 million bus rapid-transit line from the airport. For residents of Dhaka, it will come as a relief.

Whenever I asked my Bangladeshi colleagues how long it would take to get somewhere, they always gave two answers: "Without traffic, maybe fifteen minutes. But with traffic? Who knows?"