

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 12, 2020, BHADRA 28, 1427 BS

Promises are not meant to be broken

When will India honour its commitment to "zero" killing at the border?

WE are deeply saddened and outraged at the death of yet another Bangladeshi national near the Beurjhari border in Baliadangi upazila of Thakurgaon on September 10, allegedly at the hands of the members of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). Locals say that the victim, 30-year-old Shariful Islam, was fishing on the Nagor river when he was shot. The 50th Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) Battalion has also confirmed that a group of four to five Bangladeshi men were fishing on the river when BSF members fired upon them as they entered 50 yards inside the Indian territory. What justification, we ask, is there for use of lethal force against fishermen who may have, accidentally or otherwise, strayed only 50 yards into the border, that too in a river with strong currents, where the demarcations are harder to delineate?

The Indian side has repeatedly pledged not to use lethal force along the 4,053-km-long Indo-Bangladesh border, but it has thus far failed to deliver on its promise of "zero deaths". Since 2000, more than 1,000 Bangladeshis have been killed in border areas, according to rights defenders who described the Indo-Bangla border as "killing fields". Forty-three Bangladeshis were killed last year, while 29 died in the first seven months of this year at the hands of BSF. An overwhelming majority of those killed are poor, unarmed villagers—cattle-rearers and fisherfolk like Shariful.

At the annual border guards' director general-level talks at the BGB Palkhana headquarters from September 13-18, border killings will be a primary focus of discussions, as per BGB officials. It is high time Bangladesh took a "zero" tolerance approach to border killings. BGB should not only ask its counterparts to honour its commitments, but also remind them that such killings are continuing because errant BSF personnel are never held to account for their use of excessive force. Promises have been made and promises have been broken way too many times. Bangladesh must demand a clear answer as to why the Indian side is bent on violating basic principles of human rights, international laws and concrete commitments that it has made to its neighbouring country with whom it officially has friendly relations.

Covid-19 poses risk to progress made in child mortality

Urgent redress is of utmost necessity

SIX critical months into the pandemic, yet it remains far from over. A report recently published warns that while the number of under-five deaths worldwide dropped to its lowest point on record last year—down to 5.2 million from 12.5 million in 1990—Covid-19 could disrupt health services and eliminate decades of hard-won advancements made in preventing child mortality. The outcome of our overwhelmed healthcare system has resulted in denial of adequate healthcare services to pregnant women as well as children, while exacerbating fear and anxieties in expecting mothers. Another report, published in June 23, states that according to Unicef, the lives of about 4.59 lakh children and mothers in South Asian countries are in danger as they are deprived of vital health services due to the coronavirus. It further stated that in the worst-case scenario, Bangladesh alone could see additional deaths of 28,000 children in the next six months due to the disruption of immunisation, nutrition and other vital health services.

Due to resource constraints, our overburdened health facilities are unable to provide the required health checkups, vaccinations, etc. A Unicef survey conducted across 77 countries found that almost 68 percent of countries reported at least some disruptions in health checks for children and immunisation services. In addition, 63 percent of countries reported disruptions in antenatal checkups and 59 percent in post-natal care. Meanwhile, families battling poverty are no longer prioritising prenatal and post-natal care. In May, initial modelling by Johns Hopkins University showed that almost 6,000 additional children could die per day due to disruptions due to Covid-19.

Such statics are worrying, to say the least. If we allow these numbers to climb through the charts, then what good was all the hard work, determination and progress we have made thus far in battling child mortality? The government, in coordination with its development partners, should identify the key challenges in ensuring health checkups, vaccinations, and prenatal and post-natal care to the most vulnerable of communities, and take urgent steps to rectify the gaps. If we fail to address this emergency, then the future of an entire generation may well be lost.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Monitoring of online businesses crucial

Online businesses have grown exponentially in recent years, and even more so during the ongoing pandemic. Many of these businesses are based on social media. Every day, our newsfeed is flooded with some new business page or the other. No doubt these businesses and startups are contributing to our economy, but at the same time, there are some drawbacks.

The lack of proper laws to govern the operation of online businesses has led many people to take advantage of it. Many online businesses are not maintaining the quality of their products. Some are providing duplicate products or delivering purchased items much later than the designated time. Without any proper laws, it will be difficult to take any measures against them, and the consumers will continue to suffer. The authorities must take immediate steps to monitor and govern the online marketplace.

Navila Nawshin, Dhaka



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

THE title alludes to a very famous folk song by Abdul Alim, *Premar Mora Jole Dobe Na*. The song pits true love against so-called flings, suggesting that mere water cannot drown the "body" who is in love. Figuratively speaking, the power of true love is such that water cannot wash away the feelings with the passing of time. The return of a teenage girl who was supposedly raped and killed in Narayanganj made me hum these lines.

By now, the Shitalakhya has earned some reputation for returning dead bodies. The most memorable instance was the seven-murder case where uniformed men took money from a political don to abduct and kill his opponents in 2014. The bodies were dumped in the river, but the river spewed them out exposing corruption in our power structure. Compared to the hype over the sensational case, the one I am referring to is trivial, but it involves issues of police power nonetheless.

For those of you who have glossed over the news, let me put the narrative straight with the benefit of hindsight. On July 4, a 15-year-old girl went missing, and her father lodged a case soon after. The investigating police officer took three individuals with whom the girl was last seen into custody; one of them was a three-wheeler driver and the other two

Custodial torture and death are examples of their abuse of power. These are unlawful. The same goes for extrajudicial killings. Law should follow its own course. Any unnatural course of action is going to have an unnatural reaction.

"My usual election-cycle comment is that we're trying to find enough duct tape to cover the holes in the bucket. This time, we're trying to make the bucket out of duct tape."

— Justin Levitt, a professor at Loyola Law School and voting-rights expert, quoted in *Rolling Stone* magazine.



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

AMERICANS elect their president through a crazy-quilt mosaic of elections conducted by a bewildering variety of local jurisdictions spread out over the entire country, and its wheels may come off come November.

As in everything else in America, money talks. That means if you're affluent, the system usually works fine. If you are poor, tough luck, buddy. Scenes of voters in metropolitan areas waiting long hours to vote are a disgrace. Not coincidentally, a disproportionate number of them are African American.

The system is also antiquated. Presidential elections are held on the first Tuesday after November 1 every four years. Tuesday? Comedian Chris Rock once remarked irreverently: "They don't want you to vote. If they did, we wouldn't vote on a Tuesday. In November. You ever throw a party on a Tuesday? No. Because nobody would come."

Unlike any Western democracy (and many non-Western ones), the US does not have a nationwide election system. Political scientist and elections expert Richard L. Hasen told the Brennan Center for Justice that the US needs a national non-partisan election administration similar to other advanced democracies like Australia, the UK, Canada, and Germany.

Professionals run those elections, voting machines are the same everywhere instead of partisans running elections "in 9,000 different electoral jurisdictions, each making their own rules," he said.

The ugly underbelly of the US election system was exposed to an aghast world during the 2000 presidential elections in

A Corpse of Love Doesn't Sink in Water

were boatmen. On August 9, these three suspects gave confessional statements before the court of the Senior Judicial Magistrate stating that they had raped the teenager and gave her a watery grave in the river. The accused were thrown into the jail.

On Sunday, the family of the missing girl received a phone call from someone called Iqbal Pandit, claiming that the schoolgirl was alive and living with him. The police later detained the girl and

officer who had pocketed the money, processed the suspects for court hearings. He told the court that the schoolgirl had been murdered and her body was dumped into the Shitalakhya River by the suspects. He had the forcibly extracted confessional statements of the accused to back up his narrative.

There is no body as/of evidence, yet there is a rape-and-murder case. The ingenuity of SI Shamim's imagination would have even humbled William

the law—that he is the law incarnate.

There needs to be a healthy discourse to remind the police of their role as civil servants. They need to be reminded of the social mandate under which they are supposed to serve. Society grants law enforcement officials the power over citizens to maintain peace and preserve social order. The police force has been given the freedom to use their judgment to decide which laws to enforce, when and against whom. But as they say, with great power comes great responsibility. The freedom sometimes is so great and wide-ranging that many officers end up abusing this freedom. Political patronisation and the cash nexus bloat the egos of the corrupt cops even further as they feel freer than they really are.

Custodial torture and death are examples of their abuse of power. These are unlawful. The same goes for extrajudicial killings. Law should follow its own course. Any unnatural course of action is going to have an unnatural reaction. One does not have to be a Newton to understand this simple physics. Hence, the reports of the three accused in the Major Sinha murder case being tortured in custody by the investigating authorities do not surprise us. Yet we should not gloat over the misfortune of the officers who are having a taste of their own medicine. To reiterate, custodial torture under no circumstances should be deemed lawful. If the government can ensure that, then the criminal investigation and forensic team will be encouraged to find evidence through creative, intellectual, scientific and lawful methods. The use of primitive brutal force to extract confession should be a thing of the past.

There is one silver lining though. On Wednesday, the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court in Dhaka sentenced three former policemen to lifetime rigorous imprisonment over the death of Ishtiaque Hossain Jonny, who was picked up from a wedding party in Pallabi in 2014. The judgment is the first of its kind under the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act 2013.

This is a refreshing piece of news that underlines legality amid the array of illegal items that flood our daily news stream. Imagine how one death in police custody (rather a tipping point following a flurry of systematic racial abuse cases) has sparked off the "defund the police" diatribe in the US. Can we at least start a dialogue to suggest "reform the police"?

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There needs to be a healthy discourse to remind the police of their role as civil servants.

ILLUSTRATION: PRITHI KHALIQUE

her partner, and came to know that the girl had actually eloped with her then-boyfriend Iqbal with the intention of marrying him.

I don't know whether it was their conscience that made them come out of hiding, but the return of the couple saved three individuals from being wrongfully accused. The "suspects" in the abduction case—the three-wheeler driver and the boatmen—could not have known what the girl, "the body in love", was up to. One boatman, Khalil, has already been released. He has told the media that he is illiterate, and that police made him sign a document and threatened him with "cross-fire" if he tried to overturn his confessional statement in front of the judge. Meanwhile, his wife managed a hefty amount by their standard to meet the demands of the police. The said officer is now trying to return the bribe, now that the girl has returned.

According to media reports, Sub-Inspector Shamim, the investigating

Shakespeare, the author of *"Romeo and Juliet"*, featuring the eponymous eloped teen lovers. Dhaka Tribune reports, "The events of this case have raised concerns about police's methods of investigation and obtaining confessions, of committing a crime, even from innocents."

Clearly, the power exercised by a bad cop in a district town demonstrates how "capillary" power operates even on the fringe of the social body and manifests itself in everyday social practices. Simply put, power resides not only at the heart of the state or economy; it runs through the veins of the social body. But when these veins get infected with the pus of power, we see blisters erupting through the social skins. They appear like cankerous blisters and boils such as SI Shamim, or SI Liaqat and OC Pradip who have been arrested in connection with the Major Sinha murder case. The infection deteriorates when some police officers begin to uphold the poisonous thought that the role of a police officer is more than being an enforcer of

What kind of a rinky-dink democracy is this?

US election observers fear November debacle

Florida. Republican candidate George W. Bush and Democratic candidate Al Gore were separated by such a thin margin that the lead turned on how election officials chose to count questionable ballots. A bemused public was introduced to the esoteric pleasures of "hanging chads" and "pregnant chads," total bedlam ensued, and ultimately the US Supreme Court stopped the count and handed Bush the victory.

Take a more recent example. In the 2018 gubernatorial elections in Georgia. Gov. Brian Kemp narrowly beat Democratic candidate Stacey Abrams. Now take a wild guess at who was in charge of that election. It was the very same Brian Kemp.

As secretary of state, Kemp was in

were eligible all along," according to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Here we are, conducting an exercise every four years to elect the most powerful man in the world.

Free, clean elections are the cornerstone of legitimacy. Yet there is no central authority, no permanently employed technocrats and officials. Come election day, it's amateur hour. "Most US poll workers are elderly volunteers—the Center for Public Integrity found... that more than half in the last presidential election were 61 or older," Garrett M. Graff reported in *Politico*.

They are ill-suited to handle the technological challenges. After the 2000 Florida debacle, many states moved to paperless systems. However, after Russian

being a.k.a. Donald Trump.

Coronavirus has turned American elections upside down. Officials face a logistics nightmare as elderly volunteer poll workers look likely to desert *en masse*. Huge swathes of voters are wary about voting in person. Many states are shifting to vote by mail. However, shifting to vote by mail has a steep learning curve.

Politico's Garrett M. Graff offers a grim summation of the upcoming elections: "Taken together, experts are anticipating an election in which it's harder to vote, harder to count the votes, less clear who's won, and more unpredictable than any election Americans have lived through. And that's if everything goes smoothly."

Straddling all of this is the biggest loose cannon of all, the president of these United States. Trump's latest pet peeve is vote-by-mail, which he claims—with no evidence as usual—is open to fraud.

"When it comes to voting rights in our pandemic election year, President Donald Trump has a habit of saying the quiet part out loud," *Rolling Stone* magazine said in a tongue-in-cheek report. Trump has spoken openly of gutting funding for the US Postal Service.

A scary scenario that is especially likely come Election Day is similar to what happened in the 2018 elections, when candidates led on election day but ultimately lost as mailed votes were counted.

Elections analyst Ronald Brownstein tweeted a finding from a Marquette Law poll: "Among those who say they will vote by mail, 81 percent support Biden, 14 percent Trump. Among those who will vote on election day, 67 percent support Trump, 26 percent Biden."

Trump could lead on Election Day, but as mailed votes are counted over the week, the tide could turn.

Will Trump follow the finest traditions of American democracy and concede with grace, humility and dignity like Democratic candidate John Kerry, Republican candidates Mitt Romney or John McCain did?

I'm not holding my breath.

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An iconic photo of the 2000 Florida election debacle where a bemused public was introduced to the esoteric pleasures of "hanging chads" and "pregnant chads".

COURTESY: AUTHOR

charge of ensuring free and fair elections where he himself was running for governor. This is the sort of Kafkaesque situation that would make even a banana republic despot blush.

It should come as no surprise that allegations of shenanigans flew thick and fast. In July 2017, Kemp's office purged 560,000 voters from the voting list in the largest single removal of voters in US history. "More than 87,000... voters have re-registered... indicating that they

attacks in the 2016 elections, elections authorities are bringing back systems with a paper trail.

According to a *Politico* survey, 14 states are upgrading systems following the 2016 election. "Millions of voters and poll workers will face new machines come Election Day," Graff reported.

It gets scarier. There are new twin perils. One is natural—the coronavirus. The other, perhaps even more dangerous, is man-made, the man in consideration