

# Enact and enforce right to information law

## Speakers tell workshop

### STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Legal experts, media leaders and academics yesterday called for the promulgation of a 'Right to Information Bill' to improve access to state information, but warned it would be ineffective unless there is political and administrative will to enforce the law.

Speaking on the first day of a two-day World Bank Institute-sponsored workshop on 'Media and the information environment in Bangladesh,' they lamented that although there is a thriving media in the country, journalists gather information through informal channels and are sometimes forced to gather it illegally.

They also said that the existing legal structure is 'extreme unfriendliness' towards the media, as the government ministers and officials are bound not to divulge information.

World Bank Country Director Xian Zhu inaugurated the workshop at Hotel Sonargaon in the city. The Daily Star, Channel i and Mass-Line Media Centre are the partners of the workshop.

Legal experts Tanjib Alam and Asif Nazrul of law department, Dhaka University, claimed that the 'restrictive laws' perpetuating the lack of access to information are usually accentuated while the more enabling 'supportive laws' in the system are overlooked.

Speaking in two separate sessions on the legal framework of right to information law, Tanjib cited more than 10 existing provisions, which ensure that the people would gain access to certain types of information. He also mentioned two

other rules that restrict information to different levels of the government.

He said freedom of the press is enshrined in Article 39 of the constitution.

Section A of the Article 39 ensures freedom of speech and expression while Section B ensures freedom of the press.

Currently, both these provisions are suspended under the state of emergency, he added.

But, he said, hardly any of the provisions are applied because of very weak enforcement of the laws and most public servants incorrectly cite the Official Secrets Act, 1923 to withhold information, as the Act only legally applies to information regarding the national security.

"No amount of laws can help change the culture (of withholding information) unless enforcement of the law is ensured," he added.

Laura Neuman of the US-based Carter Centre said restrictive laws such as the Official Secrets Act are capable of having a chilling effect on public servants as it puts them at risk of criminal punishment.

These laws need to be removed so that state officials are not provided the tools to continue a culture where the media and the public are deprived of information, she added.

Tanjib added that this culture and other restrictive laws prevent the media from accessing crucial public information, thereby preventing participatory democracy.

He argued that a Right to Information Bill, which has already been drafted in consultation with the stakeholders, must be put into force to ensure deliberative democracy.

He also said that there should

## Wasa inspector caught while taking bribe

### STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An inspector of Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) was caught red-handed by Army personnel while taking bribe at Fakirapul Wasa Office in the city yesterday.

Motijheel police said members of Paltan Army Camp arrested Lutfur Rahman around 11:30pm while receiving Tk 2000 as bribe from one Moshirul Rahman.

Lutfur asked Moshirul to pay him Tk 2000 when the latter went to see the former at his office to discuss about his bills.

Moshirul informed the incident to Paltan Army Camp who instructed him to pay Tk 2000 to Lutfur and made copies of the notes that Moshirul would use to pay him.

When Lutfur was taking the bribe, army personnel entered the office and caught him red-handed.

## CTG LANDSLIDES China, Japan, Myanmar, Latvia shocked

### UNB, Dhaka

China, Japan, Myanmar and Latvia have expressed shock at the loss of life and property caused by catastrophic rain and landslides in Chittagong.

Foreign ministers of China and Japan have sent letters to Foreign Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury expressing their sympathies to the victims of the natural calamity.

In his message, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi expressed deep sympathy and sincere condolences to the victims and the bereaved families. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso, expressing sorrow, also hoped that the "situation will be brought under control" soon.

Similar messages were received by the foreign adviser from Foreign Minister U Nyan Win of Myanmar and Acting Foreign Minister Aigars Stokbergs of Latvia.

"All of them are our friends and we deeply appreciate their expression of sympathy which flows out of their deep feelings for us," said Iftekhar while speaking to the media.

## Seminar on interoperability

### Bss, Dhaka

Microsoft Bangladesh yesterday organised a seminar on interoperability, first of its kind in the country.

The seminar was organised by public sector group of Microsoft Bangladesh to enhance the expertise of the local officials, says a press release.

The overview of interoperability challenges in Bangladesh was highlighted by a senior official from Bangladesh Computer Council.

The key presentations were delivered by Oliver Bell, regional technology officer, Stephen Mutsoski and Jeff Paine, regional government engagement programme manager of Microsoft Asia Pacific.

The seminar was inaugurated by Feroz Mahmud, country manager.

Tarique Mosadique Barkatullah, senior systems analyst, Bangladesh Computer Council, provided an overview of the interoperability challenges in Bangladesh e-governance initiatives, and updated about the efforts of Bangladesh towards a national e-governance interoperability framework that is currently going on and its future plans.

Oliver Bell said, "Interoperability is an increasingly important topic of discussion among customers of technology products. Heeding calls by customers, technology vendors are now devoting significant resources to identifying and solving real world customer interoperability issues, he added.

Bell said Microsoft is deploying all of these tools, designing products so that they are interoperable with other products out of the box, without need for extensive consulting services, collaborating with others in the community to jointly solve interoperability challenges, broadening the ways we provide access to our technologies so that others can create interoperable solutions, and participating in efforts to develop standards that create common solutions to interoperability challenges."

Speaking as chief guest Planning Secretary Jafar Ahmed Chowdhury said the project would help ensuring better inter-departmental connectivity in the ministry.

He hoped that the training of the government officials would also increase their efficiency.

He however said e-governance



Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) and Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) begins eviction of illegal canal occupiers on the bank of Chakta canal in Chittagong yesterday. (Story on Page 16)

PHOTO: FOCUS BANGLA

## Establish e-governance for easy access to govt info

### Speakers tell workshop

### STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a workshop yesterday called for establishing e-governance to ensure people's easy access to information about the services of different government agencies.

They also stressed the need for training of government officials and setting up of infrastructure for information and communication technology (ICT) in government offices.

The awareness creating workshop was organised jointly by United Nations Development Programme and Ministry of Planning at LGED auditorium in the city.

The workshop was organised as part of the project titled 'Assistance to support for strengthening information and communication technology (ASICT) for strengthening different divisions of planning ministry through ICT.'

Speaking as chief guest Planning Secretary Jafar Ahmed Chowdhury said the project would help ensuring better inter-departmental connectivity in the ministry.

He hoped that the training of the government officials would also increase their efficiency.

He however said e-governance

cannot be established over night, it should be done in phases.

Once an office gets the facility of ICT, people would get better services from it, he added.

The secretary said the government plans to expand the information technology network to chief adviser's office as well as in the secretariat.

"The three-year project, started in July 2006, aims at strengthening infrastructure in different wings of planning ministry and training up of officials working there," said National Project Director of ASICT Miah Abdulla Mamun.

Commenting on the progress of the project he said they have almost completed recruitment of people and procurement of equipment.

In the coming days, they would start setting up of infrastructure and training up of officials, he added.

While presenting his paper Anir Chowdhury, e-governance policy adviser of UNDP, said e-governance does not only ensure speedy disposal of tasks, it minimises cost and ensures accountability at different levels.

It is not enough that different offices are well equipped with high-tech ICT facilities, it is equally important that people can avail themselves of the benefits from the

offices, he added.

Anir said the government officials' commitment to serve people is also equally important for establishing good governance.

## EXTORTION CASE Former lawmaker Shaheen sued

### UNB, Mymensingh

An extortion case was filed against former lawmaker and ex-vice president of Bangladesh Cricket Board Shah Nurul Kabir Shaheen and seven others.

Abdul Halim, headmaster of Ishwarganj Uchakhila High School, filed the case with the local magistrate's court.

Halim alleged that Kabir and his associates demanded Tk 4 lakh from him to make him principal as the school was upgraded to a college.

"I gave Kabir Tk 1 lakh on October 25 in 2005 and I was suspended as I failed to give him rest of the money within a given time," Halim said in his case statement.

Today is the second death anniversary of ATM Mozammel Haque, deputy director of Ansar-VDP, says a press release.

Mozammel Haque, a freedom fighter, was also awarded Independence Day Award.

To mark his death anniversary, Qurankwani and doa mahfil will be held at his village home at Singair in Manikganj on June 22.

Afia Khatun

Today is the second death anniversary of Afia Khatun, mother of Prof M o s t a f a Kamal, principal of Dhaka Public College, says a press release.

On the occasion, Qurankwani and doa mahfil will be held at her village home at Purnamati in Burichang, Comilla.

Relatives, friends and admirers are requested to attend the programme.

## DHAKA TODAY Bilia budget review meeting

Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (Bilia) organises a budget review meeting titled 'Budget 2007-2008: Development and strategic thinking in Bangladesh'. Venue: Bilia auditorium, 15/1 Iqbal Road. Time: 3:30pm.

## Seminar

Bangladesh University organises a seminar titled 'Position and potentials of Bangladesh in the globalisation of information technology'. Venue: University auditorium, 15/1 Iqbal Road. Time: 10:30am.

## FBCCI Budget review meeting

Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) organises a review meeting on the budget of 2007-08 fiscal year. Venue: Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre. Time: 9:30am.

be an independent commission to set objective criteria to determine which information are to be kept secret.

Neuman said the objectives of creating an environment for access to information include improving accountability of the government and increasing transparency and public participation in national and local decision-making process.

Nurul Kabir, editor of The New Age, said that journalists in Bangladesh obtain information through informal and social channels, but have no legal basis to do so.

"We want to do it legally," he said, adding that this is required so that people of all strata can participate in decision-making to strengthen democracy.

During a lunch presentation, Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said informed opinion on public policy is an integral part of development.

He said economic growth cannot be achieved without good governance, and good governance cannot be practised without accountability which can be ensured by a vigorous and independent media.

Joint Editor of the Prothom Alo Abdul Qaiyum also gave a lunch presentation while President of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Mir Nasir Hossain, Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh and Programme Director, Governance Studies Centre of Brac University, Manzoor Hasan presented papers.

He also said that there should

be an independent commission to set objective criteria to determine which information are to be kept secret.

Neuman said the objectives of creating an environment for access to information include improving accountability of the government and increasing transparency and public participation in national and local decision-making process.

During a lunch presentation, Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said informed opinion on public policy is an integral part of development.

He said economic growth cannot be achieved without good governance, and good governance cannot be practised without accountability which can be ensured by a vigorous and independent media.

Joint Editor of the Prothom Alo Abdul Qaiyum also gave a lunch presentation while President of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Mir Nasir Hossain, Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh and Programme Director, Governance Studies Centre of Brac University, Manzoor Hasan presented papers.

He also said that there should

be an independent commission to set objective criteria to determine which information are to be kept secret.

Neuman said the objectives of creating an environment for access to information include improving accountability of the government and increasing transparency and public participation in national and local decision-making process.

During a lunch presentation, Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said informed opinion on public policy is an integral part of development.

He said economic growth cannot be achieved without good governance, and good governance cannot be practised without accountability which can be ensured by a vigorous and independent media.

Joint Editor of the Prothom Alo Abdul Qaiyum also gave a lunch presentation while President of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Mir Nasir Hossain, Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh and Programme Director, Governance Studies Centre of Brac University, Manzoor Hasan presented papers.

He also said that there should

be an independent commission to set objective criteria to determine which information are to be kept secret.

Neuman said the objectives of creating an environment for access to information include improving accountability of the government and increasing transparency and public participation in national and local decision-making process.

During a lunch presentation, Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said informed opinion on public policy is an integral part of development.

He said economic growth cannot be achieved without good governance, and good governance cannot be practised without accountability which can be ensured by a vigorous and independent media.

Joint Editor of the Prothom Alo Abdul Qaiyum also gave a lunch presentation while President of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Mir Nasir Hossain, Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh and Programme Director, Governance Studies Centre of Brac University, Manzoor Hasan presented papers.

He also said that there should

be an independent commission to set objective criteria to determine which information are to be kept secret.

Neuman said the objectives of creating an environment for access to information include improving accountability of the government and increasing transparency and public participation in national and local decision-making process.

During a lunch presentation, Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said informed opinion on public policy is an integral part of development.

He said economic growth cannot be achieved without good governance, and good governance cannot be practised without accountability which can be ensured by a vigorous and independent media.

Joint Editor of the Prothom Alo Abdul Qaiyum also gave a lunch presentation while President of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Mir Nasir Hossain, Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh and Programme Director, Governance Studies Centre of Brac University, Manzoor Hasan presented papers.

He also said that there should

be an independent commission to set objective criteria to determine which information are to be kept secret.

Neuman said the objectives of creating an environment for access to information include improving accountability of the government and increasing transparency and public participation in national and local decision-making process.

During a lunch presentation, Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said informed opinion on public policy is an integral part of development.