

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

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 Iftekharuzzaman and Programme Director, Governance Studies Centre of Brac University, Manzoor Hasan presented papers.

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 Moshir Rahman.

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

Moshir informed the incident to Paltan Army Camp who instructed him to pay Tk 2000 to Lutfur and made copies of the notes that Moshir 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 Stokenbergs 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 Mutkoski and Jeff Paine, regional government engagement programme manager of Microsoft Asia Pacific.

The seminar was inaugurated by Feroz Mahmud, country manager.

Tarique Mosaddique 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."

Unveiling the cover of the book, Prof Nazrul said the book contains many scientific information and analysis which will be helpful for all.

The government and the NGOs concerned will take GK's efforts into consideration for achieving the MDG on maternal mortality, he hoped.

Prof Abul Qasem Chowdhury, vice-chancellor of Gono Bishwabidyalay and Dr Abbas Bhuiyan of ICDDR,B also spoke.

Dilruba to take over as Zonta Int'l director on June 22

Dilruba Ahmed will take office as director of Zonta International on June 22, says a press release.

She will serve as the director from June 22, 2007 to June 30, 2009.

She is the first Bangladeshi and third Asian to be elected to serve as director of Zonta International that represents 69 regions and countries of the world.

Apart from her role as board director, she will serve as Zonta International president's representative and board liaison for 128 clubs in Finland, Estonia and the USA.

She recently served as governor of Zonta District 25 comprising of Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. She is a member of Zonta Club Chittagong and was its charter president in 1991.



PHOTO: FOCUS BANGLA

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

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 Abdullah 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

Cricketer 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.

GRAFT CASE AGAINST ERSHAD

Statement of PW recorded

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday recorded statement of a prosecution witness in connection with a graft case filed against former president and Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad.

Judge Malik Abdullah Al Amin of the Special Court for Dhaka Division recorded statement of SD Khan, former chief engineer of Bangladesh Television (BTV) and fixed July 10 for next hearing.

According to a case, filed with Tejgaon Police Station in 1992, Ershad, while in power, allegedly directed the authorities concerned to purchase ENG (electronic news-gathering) equipment worth about Tk 2.93 crore to be used by him and his wife though all broadcasting facilities were available in his secretariat.

Another case

The same court yesterday adjourned the proceedings of another graft case until July 10 following a time petition by the prosecution lawyers.

The proceeding of the case was stayed for a long time due to a High Court order though charges were framed on July 7, 1992.

Ershad and AKM Mosharaf Hossain, former chairman of Bangladesh Shilpa Bank, abusing power and through corruption, directed the authorities concerned to remit Tk 35 lakh loan taken by M/S Three Star Poultry Farm Limited on September 4, 1979.

Later, a graft case was filed with Motijheel Police Station against Ershad, Mosharraf, Managing Director Jahangir Kabir, Directors Firoz Kabir and Borhan Uddin and Jahangir's wife Nurunnahar Shelly.

Of them, Jahangir and his wife Shelly are still at large while others are now on bail.

The investigation officer pressed charges against Ershad and five others on November 6, 1991.

Ershad along with party leaders and activists were present at the court during the hearing.

President visits ailing DU teacher

UNB, Dhaka

President Iajuddin Ahmed and his wife Dr Anwara Begum visited ailing Dhaka University teacher Prof Dr AKM Mohsin at United Hospital in Gulshan yesterday.

The president stayed beside the retired Professor of the History Department for some time and inquired about his treatment.

Dr Mohsin, having cardiac complications, was admitted to United Hospital for treatment.

Death anniversary



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 P u b l i c 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.

Govt to import rice, wheat to increase stock

BSS, Dhaka

Adviser for Food and Disaster Management Tapan Chowdhury said yesterday the country has now adequate stock of foodgrains.

To increase the stock, the government will import 2.5 lakh tons of rice and 1.38 lakh tons of wheat, he said after a meeting of food monitoring committee at the finance ministry here.

Finance Adviser AB Mirza Azizul Islam, Local Government Adviser Mohammad Anwarul Iqbal and Cabinet Secretary Ali Imam Majumder also attended the meeting.

One held with Tk 50 lakh drugs at ZIA

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The joint forces arrested a person along with contraband drugs worth around Tk 50 lakh at Zia International Airport in the city yesterday morning.

Joint forces arrested Imran Hossain who was carrying three luggage and two handbags containing illegal drugs. They also recovered a passport from his possession.

Customs sources said an Emirates Airlines flight, carrying the three luggage and two handbags, reached the airport from Dubai in the morning after making a stopover at Karachi.

Police sources said the luggage

came from Karachi.

Imran came to the airport to collect the luggage but when he was leaving the airport, joint forces intercepted him under suspicion and searched the luggage only to find the contraband drugs.

Imran told the police that a person at the airport asked him to take the luggage out of the airport.

When police asked Imran how he managed to get inside the airport, he said that he had a passport with him which he used to enter the airport.

Police have been trying to identify the real owner of the luggage.