CHRONICLES

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Numbers

There is a staggering number of prisoners held in different jails across the country now. From a newspaper editor to the Secretary General of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), as of last week, the government has in total kept 81,305 citizens in confinement. The prisons, which have a capacity crowd of around 41,000, might have to grudgingly welcome more inmates, as Dr Hasan Mahmud, a senior government minister, has said that more BNP leaders will be arrested if necessary. When it comes to the BNP, the government is apparently following a zero-tolerance policy. The prisons are full, yet the police, it seems, have been told to follow a blanket arrest policy. Two BNP spokespersons have so far been arrested, Shamsuzzaman, the latest, might be arrested as well. The last few days he is staying in the party office, and during this week's shutdown he did not even get down to the street to brief journalists.

The government's arrest on sight policy has also given birth to small little business enterprises in the remote parts of the country. According to a newspaper report, the money is mostly made by local policemen who arrest and free suspects--hundreds of unknown people stand accused of vandalism--in lieu of cash. There are villages where the law enforcers were manhandled when the latter tried to do some brisk business. There are also instances where perpetrators of violence are given a clean chit or are allowed to abscond for as meagre an amount as a few hundred taka. If you are not poor, it might look like a win-win solution. Actually, it is not.