

## World Press Freedom Day

*The free press must function unhindered*

ONE very essential ingredient of any functioning democracy is a free press. And in Bangladesh, where press freedom is gravely restricted and is quickly diminishing according to Reporters Without Borders, strengthening press freedom is becoming even more indispensable for the growth of democracy.

Despite this, we are disturbingly witnessing different laws being manoeuvred into place that is clearly indicative of a constrictive mindset and can greatly endanger press freedoms further. The alleged abuse of sedition laws and of Section 57 of the amended Information Communication Technology Act among others, to curb any form of dissent, not only threatens the freedom of the press, but democracy as a whole, given the intertwining relations between the two and the essential role of the press in a free and democratic society.

Governments and the press in general have always had tense relations given the press's watchdog role in society. In order for the government to be aware of what is happening and how state organs are functioning, however, there is no other tool available to it that is as effective as a free press. Hence, the fact of the matter remains that the role the press plays is of seminal benefit to the government itself.

We hope that the current government and all future ones will understand and come to recognise this. And we urge that the free press in the country be allowed to breathe and function unhindered so that it can perform its duty in safeguarding our democracy.

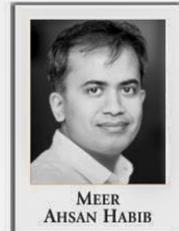
## A desperate act of protest

*Who is responsible for Ali and Ayesha's deaths?*

WE do not have words to console Halima Begum who lost both her eight-year old daughter and her husband who reportedly committed suicide by jumping before a running train near Sreepur Railway Station on April 30. We have stooped so low as a society that a father may not get a hearing from local authorities when his daughter is sexually assaulted. According to Halima Begum, her husband Hazrat Ali informed Goshinga Union Parishad member Abul Hossain about the assault on his child three months ago by a neighbour but the UP member did not take any steps. Are we then to believe that the powerless in society have no rights and they may be trampled upon as and when it pleases the high-and-mighty?

The National Human Rights chief has stated that the police cannot avoid responsibility and a probe committee has been formed by the police to look into the incident. The UP member has reportedly been detained by the police and we urge that a thorough investigation is made on the allegation that the official indeed made no attempt to help a father protect his daughter. Should Halima Begum's allegation be proved true, it is up to law enforcers to investigate and bring to justice the individual who sexually assaulted the child, and the UP member who ignored a father's plea for help. Failure to ensure justice for Halima Begum, her husband and daughter, will seriously undermine the credibility of public representatives who are supposed to ensure security to the people they are supposed to be serving.

# WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY Let the press do its job



MEER  
AHSAN HABIB

As a communication for development professional, I have always had an interest in press freedom and freedom of expression. While surfing the internet recently, I made an amazing discovery:

the Department of Films and Publications (DFP) in its website boasted to have documented the historic March 7 speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This courageous documentation took place during the rule of the Pakistani military regime. This is not just a lone example of upholding press freedom; we all know how journalists risked their lives and played a critically important role and contributed to our independence. The way they operated was similar to present day BBC which was established by a royal charter, and operates under its Agreement with the Secretary of State

*Today, only 13 percent of the world's population enjoy a free press which includes an environment where media can report on political issues without fear or favour, journalists are not subject to any threat and their safety is guaranteed, state intervention is minimal and the press is not oppressed by legal and economic instruments.*



SOURCE: WWW.MEAA.ORG

for Culture, Media and Sport.

As I write this piece, I am taking into consideration many issues which have been best told by my mentor Professor Rehman Sobhan who once said, "Today when I write an article, it takes me one week and five readings of censorship before I am ready to publish it. I have to think of every word I write today as everyone else in independent Bangladesh. But when we were fighting the martial law we could sit on the desk and write in two hours." Today, as we mark World Press Freedom Day, the world press stands at a crucial junction.

According to Freedom of the Press 2017 findings commissioned by Freedom House, 2016 witnessed the decline of global press freedom to its lowest point in 13 years - journalists and media outlets in major democracies received unprecedented threats, and authoritarian states came up with new control mechanisms within and beyond their borders. Countries that witnessed the largest decline in press freedom are Poland, Turkey, Burundi, Hungary, Bolivia, Serbia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Today, only 13 percent of the world's population enjoy a free press which includes an environment where media can report on political issues without fear or favour, journalists are not subject to any threat and their safety is guaranteed, state intervention is

minimal and the press is not oppressed by legal and economic instruments.

Shockingly, 45 percent of the world population live in countries where the media environment is 'Not Free'. Ten such countries and territories are Azerbaijan, Crimea, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Syria, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In democracies like Poland and Hungary, politicians have undermined traditional media outlets, shaped the news by exerting their influence over public broadcasters, and raised the profile of 'friendly' private outlets. In the US, President Donald Trump lambasted some of the top media outlets for overshadowing the success of his first 100 days in office. He has previously disparaged the press, rejecting the news media's role in holding governments to account for their words and actions. In more authoritarian states like Venezuela, Turkey and Ethiopia, both political and social unrest have been used as a pretext to crack down on independent or opposition-oriented outlets. Governments in several countries in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia have extended restrictions by adopting fresh laws and policies, particularly targeting online media.

Over the years we have witnessed some laws being drafted or enacted that media practitioners and free thinkers consider as instruments to limit press freedom and freedom of

expression. Although we have a number of civil society institutions that are directly linked with the press, none have been involved in the true sense in the formulation process of these laws. As a result, these institutions have not been able to serve the mandate for which they were created. For instance, Bangladesh Press Council (BPC) was established in 1979 under the Press Council Act, 1974. The objective was to meet the need for an independent authority for safeguarding the freedom of the press and protecting individuals and institutions from excesses by the media. Due to bureaucratic bottlenecks and age-old practices, the council has never been able to govern the press. Although the Act made BPC a quasi-judicial body with the authority to receive complaints made against newspapers or news agencies it gave no power to cancel the declaration of a newspaper. At present the office of the Additional District Magistrate issues declaration under the Printing Presses and Publication (Registration and Declaration) Act, 1973.

In 2015, the online press was puzzled when all of a sudden the Press Information Department (PID), the role of which had so far been limited to outreach, campaign and issuance of government notifications, asked the online press to apply for registration. As a result of this surprising move, there now exists an overpowering ambiguity regarding who really is in control of the press and who will protect it from various forms of attack and intrusion.

In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we must make sincere efforts to attain target 10 of SDG 16 - dedicated to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, the provision of access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels. This is directly linked with people's right to access information and safety of journalists. There is no other alternative but to protect the fourth pillar of democracy (free media) through effective and independent press institutions.

The writer is a communication for development professional. E-mail: meer.riyadh@gmail.com

## Are the haor floods caused by climate change?



SALEEMUL HUQ

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

THE haor basin in the northeastern part of Bangladesh is currently experiencing severe flash floods, causing considerable hardship to people, and destroying crops and other infrastructure. Some people are asking if this flood can be attributed to human-induced climate change.

Firstly, it is important to distinguish weather events (like rains, cyclones and floods, etc.) from climate. The former happens on a short timescale (several days) while the latter happens in much longer timescales (months and years).

The weather can change from day to day but the climate changes over months to give us different seasons each year. Both weather and climate vary over time in a natural pattern and have done so since the beginning of time. However, in the last few decades we have begun to see a change in the patterns which is possibly due to the fact that since the Industrial Revolution almost two hundred years ago we have been emitting greenhouse gases, mostly carbon dioxide, from burning fossil fuels like coal, petrol and natural gas.

These greenhouse gases trap the sun's heat and raise the temperature of the atmosphere above what it would normally be. Already the global mean temperature has been raised over one degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

This may not seem very much as temperatures can vary by over ten degrees between day and night every day. However, even a few degrees of rise in the global mean temperature can cause considerable adverse impacts around the world.

That is why in the Paris Agreement on climate change all the countries of the world have agreed to keep global mean temperatures below two degrees and if possible below 1.5 degrees.

When it comes to attributing the adverse impacts of climatic and even weather events to human-induced climate change, it is not as simple because not all events or all climatic impacts are equally related to atmospheric temperature increases.

I will give below a description of which climatic events are more easily attributed

to climate change and which are more difficult (starting with the most easily attributable).

As the main effect of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is a rise in the atmospheric temperature globally, it is logical that increases in hot days and even heat waves are the most easily attributable to climate change.

The second most easily attributable impact is global sea level rise, which is due to the thermal expansion of the ocean together with melting of glaciers and ice caps in Greenland and Antarctica. In Bangladesh we are already seeing the impacts of this in our coastal areas where

considered as severe droughts.

In fact, right now the eastern part of Africa is suffering from a very severe drought which is putting tens of millions of people at risk which, if not tackled in time, will almost certainly unleash one of the biggest migrations in decades.

Finally, the most difficult impact to attribute to climate change is floods. This is because the changes in hydrology due to increased atmospheric temperatures vary by region of the globe. Each region needs to be modelled separately as global models are not good enough at these scales.

The regional models for the South

difficulty of attribution of climate change to floods is the fact that there are many different kinds of floods, each with a different level of attribution.

Hence the flash floods happening in the northeast today are different from the main river floods and coastal floods, which are different from ponding in cities like Dhaka and Chittagong after a heavy rainfall.

Thus, as far as the question of whether the current flash floods in the northeast can be attributed to climate change is concerned, it is possible but not with a great deal of certainty.

What is possible to say with a great



Cows swim across a flooded haor area in South Sunamganj looking for dry ground. Losing the only crop of the year due to flash floods, farmers are selling their cattle and valuables and migrating to urban areas to survive.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

people are suffering from salinity intrusion into drinking and irrigation waters.

The third most easily attributable impact is the severity of cyclones (but not necessarily their frequency) as the higher the sea surface temperature during a given cyclone, the more severe is the cyclone.

The next adverse impact that can be attributed to climate change is droughts, especially repeated or prolonged droughts. In the Barind Tract in the northwest of Bangladesh, we have droughts for part of the year but in the global context these are not really

Asian Monsoon region (in which Bangladesh falls) show that the potential impact of climate change is not likely to enhance the overall precipitation over the twelve months of each year, but rather change the pattern of rainfall so that we will have more intense monsoons and longer drier seasons.

Hence, paradoxically even if the overall amount of rainfall during the year does not change much, we will still face more floods in the monsoon season and also longer droughts in the dry season.

A final aspect that compounds the

degree of scientific credibility is that Bangladesh is vulnerable to almost every one of the adverse climatic impacts mentioned above and hence we can expect all of them to become more severe as well as more frequent in future years.

This has enormous implications for all our future national and regional plans. Hence, business-as-usual plans and actions will no longer be good enough.

The writer is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh. E-mail: Saleem.icccd@iub.edu.bd

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### The problem with the VAT rate

A lot of controversy is going on regarding the imposition of 15 percent VAT on all goods and services. In advanced countries, VAT is imposed on producers of goods and services and not on consumers. If there is any sales tax then the consumers are required to pay this. In no country of the world is Value Added Tax as high as 15 percent.

Reza Hussain, Baridhara

### Discourage tobacco consumption

Bangladesh remains one of the world's largest consumers of tobacco, according to reports published by *The Daily Star*. Subsequently, cancer expert Dr. Lim Hong Ling has also said that 80 percent of all lung cancer cases worldwide are related to smoking. In fact, the 69-plus carcinogens in tobacco smoke can cause many types of cancer, as can smokeless tobacco: cancers of the sinus, lips, mouth, throat, oesophagus, larynx, gastric system, colon, pancreas and bone marrow, and cervical, breast and ovarian cancer in women.

As such, tobacco taxes need to be increased in order to deter the youth from its consumption. Tobacco control legislation must also be properly implemented and enforced. The graphic health warnings featured on the bottoms of cigarette packs are not visible enough to have a significant effect on consumers. The industry still targets Bangladeshis - especially children - with misleading advertising, marketing and promotions, while tens of thousands of our fellow citizens suffer terribly from tobacco-related diseases every year. This is unacceptable.

The government has the power to change this. I urge them to use that power and prioritise the health of Bangladeshis above the tobacco industry's profits.

Md. Shafiqul Islam

Bangladesh Country Advisor, Vital Strategies