

## Protesters charged with attempted murder

High-handed, disproportionate response by police

PROTESTERS came out in numbers on Friday to demand the reinstatement of the Lady Justice statue at the Supreme Court premises. They gathered near the Raju sculpture on Dhaka University campus and began marching towards the Supreme Court. Later in the day however, in a show of extreme high-handedness and utter lack of respect for the constitutional right of citizens to peaceful assembly, law enforcers filed a case against 140-150 protesters charging them with attempted murder and "carrying lethal weapons". According to onlookers, including reporters of this daily who were present at the scene, protesters were not even seen to be carrying sticks, bricks or stones, let alone lethal arms.

Apart from the fact that it is wholly unclear as to what the "lethal weapons" the police are referring to are, and that only 10-12 people were said to have remained after the police fired tear gas and sprayed water at them, the grounds on which more than 100 protesters have been charged with attempted murder are outrageous. If anything, this seems like an outright attempt to crush a peaceful protest through police action and legal harassment especially when eyewitness accounts and media reports clearly suggest that protesters did not possess lethal weapons.

A charge as serious as attempted murder cannot be arbitrarily handed out in any civilised society. An independent investigation needs to be carried out immediately into the case to find out whether there is any validity to these charges and to exact the details of the disproportionate amount of force used by the police. We must remember that freedom of assembly is one of the most fundamental rights of citizens living in any democracy and any action that prevents citizens from exercising this right freely is unacceptable.

## Take real action against river grabbers

Enough with the excuses!

ADDRESSING a discussion, the National River Commission (NRC) Chairman said that a list of river grabbers is being prepared to bring them to justice. For years now, we have been hearing either this exact same story or some other, but are yet to see any substantive action taken against large scale encroachers. We wonder when the listing of river grabbers will finally end and when exactly it is that any meaningful action be taken against them.

During the time of our Liberation War, Bangladesh's river route was about 24,000 km long. Today, it has astonishingly been reduced by 18,000 km to only 6,000 km. In his address, the NRC Chairman also said that they "will never allow anyone to reduce the length anymore". But what exactly were the authorities doing up until now? Why wait this long to 'decide' not to allow anyone to reduce the length anymore?

Allegations of river grabbing against influential and powerful people have always been there. Newspapers have time and again reported on who is responsible for encroaching on rivers and how. Disappointingly, the authorities have, more often than not, been unwilling to do anything about it. Meanwhile, countless numbers of people whose livelihoods depend on our rivers have been negatively affected.

It is the government's prime duty to save our rivers by taking legal actions against the grabbers. We hope that the authorities, instead of wasting more time, will take meaningful action against grabbers, regardless of their political or other affiliations.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Pollution in Pabna city

Trash cans overflowing with waste can be seen in nearly every lane in Pabna city, which also makes the area smell horrible. It is becoming impossible to live in such an unhygienic environment. It is a humble request to the Mayor of the Pabna Municipal Council to take necessary steps to make our city pollution-free, so that we can become a country-wide example of cleanliness like Rajshahi.

Md. Khalid Mustakim Saad  
By email

### Physical education must be tailored to students' needs

I would like to congratulate the NCTB for their initiative of introducing the "Physical Education, Health and Sports" subject in the SSC education curriculum. However, I would like to point out how it can be made better with a little attention to detail. All the students are currently participating in a uniform physical exercise regime that doesn't take into account the prevailing health status and specific needs of each individual student. This could actually be detrimental to their health. The exercise should be tailored by examining the health status of each student. They could use the logarithmic biophysical modulator.

Our honourable Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid is known for introducing creative questions in the state curriculum, introducing a new grading system and curbing corporal punishments in classrooms. I hope that he will take this matter into consideration as well.

Md. Abdul Hakim  
Nutritionist, Tangail

# Growing malignancy in the banking sector



THE banking sector has been passing through a turbulent period for some time. Given that a sound financial sector is key to sustained economic development, good health of banks is crucial. This is more so when almost 80 percent of financial assets is owned by commercial banks. In FY2017, the financial sector's share in GDP was 3.41 percent, of which the share of the banking sector was 2.91 percent. The sector is struggling to recover from the setbacks of large financial scams in a number of state-owned and private commercial banks unearthed in recent years. Most indicators reveal a poor health and lack of discipline in several banks.

In an effort to attract investment, emphasis has all along been put on lowering bank rates. High lending rate has been attached to high deposit rate. Bangladesh Bank desires that commercial banks should keep their interest rate spread within 5 percent. In recent times, there has been a downward trend of both lending and deposit rates. However, this could not energise the growth of domestic credit that increased only slightly in March 2017 compared to that of the same period last fiscal year. Though growth of credit to the private sector was 16.1 percent in March 2017, close to Bangladesh Bank's target of 16.5 percent, credit to the public sector has been negative (-9.5 percent). Low demand for bank credit by the public sector is due to government's reliance on savings certificates. Lower demand for credit has resulted in high liquidity in the banking system.

As banks are in the process of implementing BASEL III, a global regulatory guideline to fulfil capital adequacy requirement, effort has to be expedited to maintain such requirements. Though the overall risk weighted capital adequacy ratio in the banking sector is slightly higher than the minimum requirement of 10 percent,

this is mainly due to private commercial banks and foreign banks. State owned banks (SCBs) and development financial institutions are lagging behind, indicating their vulnerability.

Despite various initiatives taken by the central bank, the amount of non-performing loan has piled up. Non-performing loans (NPL) in the banking sector has had a general pattern during the last few years, which shows that towards December each year, the NPL

improve their balance sheet. In recent years, certain amount has been earmarked in the national budget to make for the losses of the SCBs. In the budget of FY2017, the government had allocated a recapitalisation fund equivalent to Tk. 2,000 crore in order to meet the capital shortage of banks created by loan defaults. But the default loan situation of the SCBs has not improved. Such recapitalisation of funds were not much help, since they could

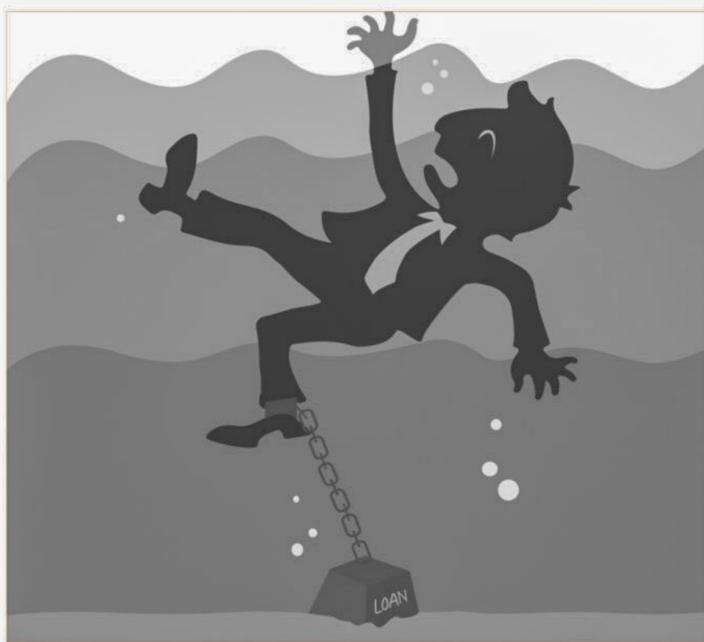
example, during 2009 -2016 the actual amount of recapitalisation fund for SCBs was Tk. 11,705 crore. If this amount is added to the health budget, the actual budget expenditure for health in FY2016 would have increased to 0.84 percent of GDP from the current 0.73 percent.

Recent amendments to the provisions of the Bank Company Act proved to be another setback. This approves increasing the tenure of directors of a private bank from the existing six years to nine years, and allows four members from a single family to be directors in a private bank. In view of the fact that dominance of family members often means that there is resistance to adopting corporate regulations, the Banking Companies Act was amended in 2013 to curb such activities. This amendment had allowed banks to have a maximum of 20 members on the Board, of whom three directors must be independent. This allowed a maximum of two family members to be directors in a private bank. This most recent amendment is regressive in nature, since it will take a step back from the previous changes made to the Act. This law will mean that family ownership will have greater control in banks with the possibility of erosion of corporate governance.

The other issues include the recent developments in the Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd. Following allegations of being involved in terrorist financing and funding political violence, new management is in charge of the bank. Amidst major changes in the management of the bank, the concentration of shares has shifted towards a single owner-borrower. In the interest of common depositors and borrowers, and in order to improve its governance, an orderly transition is urgently required.

If the current trend of mammoth NPL, inefficient management and lack of governance continues, the banking sector can cripple a flourishing economy instead of contributing towards its advancement. Time is ripe now to take bold and effective measures.

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SOURCE: EMRIC.COM

comes down, but starts to rise afterwards. This is probably due to banks' effort to clean up their balance sheets at the end of the year. Though Bangladesh Bank adopted a flexible loan-rescheduling policy in December 2013, it did not bring the positive outcome as intended. Increased NPL and lower credit to the domestic sector have hit the profitability of banks.

The government has been providing generous support to SCBs in order to

only improve the balance sheet of the ailing banks, but not the overall loan default situation.

In a resource constraint country, the opportunity cost of such a large amount is high. This resource could otherwise be utilised for the social sector where budget allocation falls short of the requirement. If the recapitalisation fund was used for education and health sectors, it would improve the share of these sectors' budget in GDP. For

# The foreign input and the ugly outcome



OUR officers are (in)famous for making foreign trips as part of any government project. Executives of some private enterprises are also keen to enjoy such privileges

during development works until good sense prevails that the business house is paying for the 'sojourn' through their nose. Now this nose bit (pun not intended) goes back to the 9th century Ireland, where a nose tax was imposed to punish offending and negligent taxpayers by having their noses slit. (Ouch!) During my recent visit to the Emerald Isle or while covering Bangladesh's 1999 cricket World Cup match, I do not remember coming across anyone thus mutilated. I reckon plastic surgery would be a profitable profession in lands with such austere measures.

Professionalism is to be valued if a country has to progress standing on a pedestal built on its history and culture, language and climate. Whereas the important learning trips should be undertaken by technically-sound professional people involved in a project, it is not unusual for the consultant to be left behind. Haa? The teams are more often than not overcrowded by bureaucrats who may not be able to make an iota of contribution towards the project, except the habitual *hamki-dhamki*.

For the admin officers, steered by an all-powerful project director ominously addressed as PD, the visits abroad during the feasibility study stage and before all purchases of equipment are more like rewards earned by their rank and position. The costs of the study (?) trip/s, the most important (!) component of a viability report, are built into the project budget. It is made to appear that expenses are being met by the consultant, but in reality the government is paying the bills plus the consultant's profit through reimbursement. It's like I will pay you to buy my birthday gift. Some people do that.

In one such trip to a global industrial power, for a surreptitious scheme revolving around the "beautification" of an important road in Dhaka city, the touring team comprised of every

profession but architects, landscape architects, urban designers, town planners, sculptors, painters, and historians worthy of their respective professions. The Bangladesh delegation, sponsored by a trade concern, (yes they were very much concerned about their trade) was being looked after well by a Chinese supplier of street furniture, pots and plants, equal to the task of commercial transaction.

Overwhelmed by the courtesy of the vendor, represented by some very dignified ladies, our non-technical PD, his wife's avatar looming large over his head, managed to stammer at one point, 'Bon sai', meaning he wanted the ladies to be his sisters. Innocent enough.

The sales ladies, eager to further beef

"Oh my God, you know many-many Bengali girls' names," blurted PD mohodoy. The landscape architect waved his arms in disgust, rolled his eyes in bewilderment, and walked away, an embodiment of dejected failure.

All the while, the PD's new-found bons were gleefully giggling, at the possibility of a big contract.

"You have Facebook?" asked the PD to one of the girls, now uncomfortably writing a voucher under his breath.

"Sorry, no understand fesbuk tree," said she, "I shall have to call our landscape architect."

That, in short, is the speculative tale of how the roadside opposite the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport became bedecked with bonsai trees. Ugly, yes.



PHOTO: STAR

up the Chinese economy, exclaimed in a chorus, "Bon sai? Bon sai?"

Our *godo-godo karmokarta* (beguiled officer) was ecstatic, "Yes, yessss".

"How many?" the ladies crooned in chorus.

"Many, many" drooled our man of the hour. Avatar now a bit hazy.

"But they are all Chinese-looking," the foreign landscape manager tried to explain, "and will not be at all suitable for Bangla-desh".

"Our people very fond of foreign, many-many people from everywhere living in our beautiful country", clarified the idiot.

"Yes, of course! But it is beautiful because of your Parul, Chandan, Neem, Shimul, Mahua, Aparajita. ..."

Portraying Bangladesh, no. Condemned by professionals, yes. Aesthetic, no. Was national interest washed in the waters of the Yangtze? Yes. Expensive, very!

Some of our minds are in a constant state of bonsai. So many Bangla words defining 'inferiority' come to mind. Why else should some government as well as private orgs still consider recruiting foreigners for projects that can easily be handled by Bangladeshis?

Bangladeshis are now constructing, metaphorically speaking, it seems one floyver per month. And yet, once upon a time we were shown the 'high court' when the first one was erected at Mohakhali. Its commissioning was delayed for months because the bidshi constructor was purportedly importing

STUs (shock transmission units), an earthquake damage inhibitor, whose design philosophy has since been substituted by the now preferred method of structural isolation. Since the Kuril Interchange project was entrusted on local expertise, led by a famous Bangladeshi, our home-grown engineers and constructors are flying over with confidence.

Sceptics will finger-point safety lapses, albeit a couple, at Bahaddarhat ("13 dead at Chittagong", November 24, 2012) and Malibagh (one dead at Dhaka, 13 March 2017). But, that has everything to do with our generally slack safety comportment and disregard towards any regime, and little with the ability of our professionals.

The situation was no different when a private university, despite having the option of employing a local consultant through a design competition, did a north to south, and swayed from east to west to opt for an Indian consortium that had apparently met the technical specifications to a greater degree. To be fair to the university, the decision was of a jury comprising of several Bangladeshis. Since then, many university campuses and buildings in this country have been designed by indigenous architects.

The government-managed Inter Continental/Sheraton/Ruposhi Bangla saga is equally painful. It is an important part of our glorious Muktijuddho.

Designed by Architect William B. Tabler, the hotel was an illustrious landmark of the city until its renovation was assigned to a mediocre foreign consultant. More than forty years since its opening in 1966, on the pretext of expanding parking and central facilities, the perpetrators reduced an 'architectural piece' to a mere 'building'. It was executed by people who have no knowledge of architecture, no respect for history, no mastery over juxtaposing new form with the old. A second attempt is now going on to mend the cracked vessel, but by a Singaporean company!!!!

A nation has to have faith in its own people, which is why we are a nation. China grew to become China with the help of the Chinese. With patriotism in place, one day we too shall export full-grown *Krishnachura* trees to Beijing to adorn the gardens of the Bangladesh embassy.

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