

Worryingly low pass rate in some boards

Is quality of teaching the reason?

WE are not particularly surprised that this year's Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) pass rate has fallen by quite a margin compared to previous years. Such a consequence was expected under a new, revised evaluation method which aims to standardise marking of answer scripts, eliminating the discrepancy in marks given under the old system. The relatively new MCQs (multiple choice questions) have also thrown off some examinees used to the previous question paper format.

This is a good development in our education system as it fairly evaluates a student's performance. But what is shocking is the significantly poor performance of examinees from some boards. Comilla Board in particular, has done very badly with a pass rate of only 49.52 percent with the high failure rate being attributed to failing in one subject – English.

It is crucial to find out the reasons why such a large number of students failed in English and therefore did not pass their HSC exams. Some academicians have pointed to the lack of properly trained teachers of English in many of the institutions under these boards. If that is so then it is the system that is at fault and not the student. So what is the academic future of the almost 51 percent of young people from Comilla who have failed their HSC?

It is disturbing to know that of the examinees who scored GPA 5 around 74 percent are from Dhaka. This points to the huge gap in the quality of education between Dhaka and the rest of the country.

The Education Ministry obviously has a lot of work ahead. One of its major tasks is to find out the underlying causes of the underperformance of students in other districts and vigorously upgrade the quality of education in these areas. Only then will the new evaluation method pay off.

Bangladeshis harassed at KL airport

Genuine travellers should not suffer

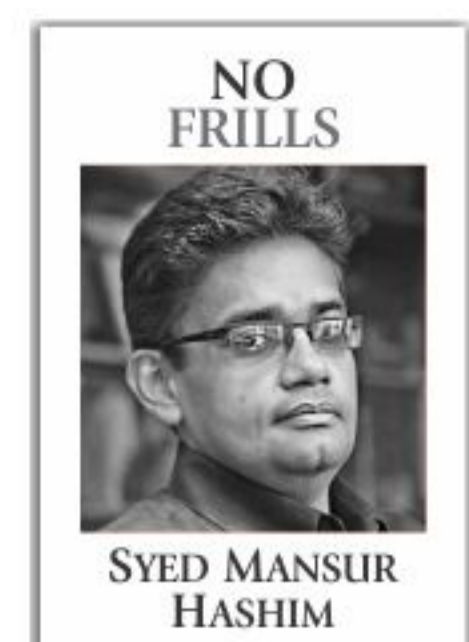
REPORTS of persistent harassment of Bangladeshi nationals at Kuala Lumpur airport are distressing. There is no reason for a person with valid travel documents and visa to be harassed at the airport.

We believe that the visa officials at the Malaysian High Commission in Dhaka should properly check the background of the applicants before issuing visas. If the immigration authorities need to reassess visa status and eligibility of entry of any person after arriving at Kuala Lumpur airport, they should follow the established procedures, not blanket detention without showing any reason. Most worryingly, the detained Bangladeshi nationals are being subjected to ill-treatment and even denied food. These incidents are very incongruous with the longstanding fraternal relations between the two countries.

Bangladesh enjoys robust bilateral relations with Malaysia. A large number of Bangladeshis go to Malaysia every year for various purposes, including study, work, tourism and business, and significantly contribute to the Malaysian economy. Recently, Malaysia launched a drive against illegal immigrants as a result of which many Bangladeshis were detained. It has been reported that many genuine workers and tourists are facing harassment in the process. The incidents of harassment at the airport might have some link with this drive. We are happy to note that the Bangladesh government has already made arrangements with its Malaysian counterpart to solve the issue of illegal Bangladeshi workers.

It is reassuring that Bangladesh has conveyed its position to the Malaysian government and we hope that steps will be taken to stop harassment of genuine Bangladeshi workers and tourists at the earliest.

The curse of yaba persists



NO FRILLS

SYED MANSUR HASHIM

METHAMPHETAMINE, commonly known as "yaba," has over the last decade taken a hold on our society as it went from a trendy, synthetic drug for the elite to mass consumption. Today, yaba hauls by authorities run into millions of tablets a year, but it is a losing battle.

It made its appearance in 2010 and 81,000 tablets were seized that year. In 2016, that number had risen to 29.5 million. Today, two million tablets are consumed daily in Bangladesh and it is pouring in over the Naf River in Myanmar. But is it only Myanmar that is producing it in different colours or do we have a regional problem here?

From what has been published in the media, yaba is a cheap synthetic drug that requires no natural ingredients. Hence, unlike cannabis or heroin, it can be produced in a laboratory which has made this drug's widespread use so easy. Back in 2012, the drug cartels in Myanmar decided to shift their supply chain of yaba through Bangladesh because the traditional route through Thailand had effectively been checked by the China-Thailand joint programme 'Safe Mekong' which cut off the usual movement of drugs through Thailand. Increasingly, we have found that local production of the drug is taking hold in Bangladesh. In an effort to stem the rise of domestically produced yaba, the government has taken steps to ban the import of cold-medicine component pseudoephedrine, a key ingredient in the making of yaba tablets.

According to narcotics officials, evidence has emerged that labs situated on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, which is largely unpatrolled, are producing yaba tablets in their millions. Pseudoephedrine, the import of which skyrocketed by more than six times to around 20 tonnes from five years ago, was being diverted to the production of the finished product.

It is good to see that local industry is responding but it is too early to comment whether the ban will have its intended effect. With Bangladesh becoming a transit point for this particular chemical for use—not just in Myanmar but in other countries in the region—we will have to wait and see if the ban will have the desired effect because there is the risk of Indian pseudoephedrine being re-routed through Bangladesh to reach factories in Myanmar unless similar steps are taken in that country.

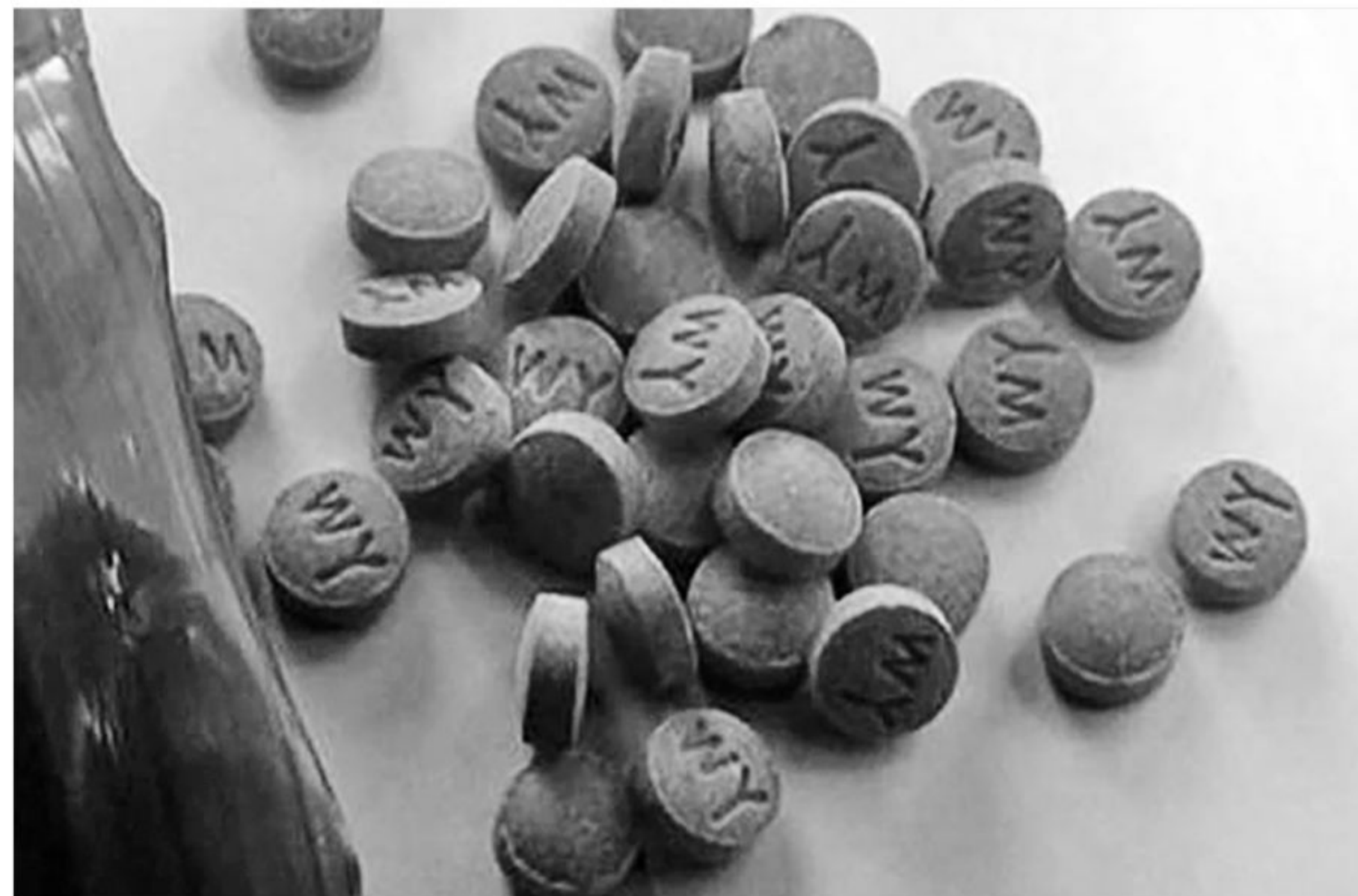
Since 2012, we have seen the rapid proliferation of yaba usage from a trickle to a flood. Bangladesh became a natural choice for smugglers due to the fact that it shares a 4,000km porous border with India. In a recent article titled "Inside Bangladesh's methamphetamine problem" published on July 23 in asia.nikkei.com, Tom Kramer, a Myanmar expert

with the international research and advocacy body Transnational Institute is quoted as saying, "rebel groups in Myanmar like the United Wa State Army have been accused of simply shifting from the opium and heroin business to amphetamine manufacturing. The increase in production and use of amphetamine pills has been driven by both demand and supply, as well as profound socio-economic changes in the affected countries, which have moved from rural agricultural based economies to urban, industrial and market-based societies."

A growing middle class in Bangladesh means more money in the hands of people. That social acceptance to this multi-coloured pill is ever-increasing has health practitioners and policymakers worried about the

side effects can cause users to become violent, suffer from paranoia, confusion, anxiety and insomnia. It has been touted as a slimming agent and one that increases energy.

Campaign against drugs is a tricky issue. Law enforcement is just one facet. Beyond media campaigns, treatment and rehabilitation, what we need is an education strategy that takes the message to children in the schooling system. Indeed, school-based programmes, particularly at the secondary school level are where drugs take hold. We have to understand that any such programme will take years to yield positive results. The new emphasis is on building self-esteem and skills in problem-solving and communication. Mere bombardment of information on drugs (as had been the case



The widespread use of yaba in the country has health practitioners and policymakers concerned about the health, criminal and psychological effects.

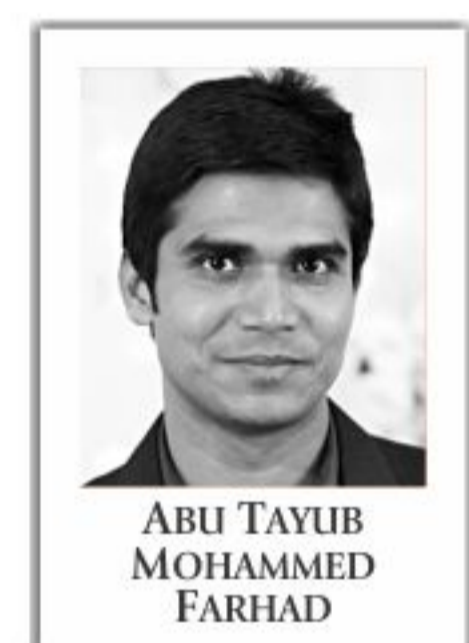
SOURCE: PANGLONG.ORG

health, criminal and psychological implications this "crazy medicine" will have for the country. With yaba usage being touted as a symbol of smartness and the ease with which it can be carried and peddled, the worry is how fast it becomes the staple for the 15–30 age group which makes up a third of Bangladesh's population. With prices ranging from Tk 300 to Tk 1,800 (depending on grade) for a single pill, there is no official data on the exact number of users in the country. An overdose of the brightly coloured pills can result in hyperthermia convulsions and death while

previously) has not worked and the new approach replaces lecturing with student participation. It is all about providing children with coping skills to face situations that can lead to drug abuse; help recognise pressures that influence them to smoke or use drugs; and resist peer pressure. These are the findings of UN International Drug Control Programme from more than two decades ago, and something our policymakers need to look into.

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What goes around comes around



ABU TAYUB MOHAMMED FARHAD

IN November 2006, in an interview with the US-based National Public Radio, the then Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed, speaking about extrajudicial killings, said: "Although technically you may call it extrajudicial—I will not say killing—but extrajudicial deaths. But these are not killings. According to RAB, they say all those who have been killed so far have been killed or dead on encounter or whatever crossfire, whatever you call it—people are happy."

Little did the BNP leader know that he would have to take a different stance

Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh, supports Moudud's claim.

This newspaper has also run a news report referring to the HRW report that says security forces in Bangladesh are accused of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and secret detentions, including that of opposition activists. According to the HRW report published on July 6, 2017: "Human rights organisations and media have documented over 90 people 'disappeared' in 2016, of whom 21 were later found dead. The whereabouts of nine remain unknown at the time of writing. The others, after varying periods of secret detention, were 'released' before being formally arrested."

The global rights watchdog in its report also quoted witnesses and family members of the victims as alleging that Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) or the

intolerance between the two major political parties—Bangladesh Awami League and BNP. But at one point, both the parties act alike, using law enforcement agencies to hunt down political opponents.

Each and every government in Bangladesh has used law enforcement agencies to deal with their political opponents, branding the latter as "criminals". Therefore, even if a government is replaced by another, the state-sponsored "executions" using law-enforcement agencies remain in play.

It's worth mentioning that, before the last BNP-led government's tenure expired, then opposition leader Sheikh Hasina, critical of RAB for extrajudicial killings in violation of human rights and the rule of law, in 2006 said: "Many people think if Awami League comes to power again, it will abolish RAB. But we

were shown arrested later (*The Daily Star*, July 1, 2017). Meanwhile, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, like his predecessors, brushed aside the allegations brought against the law enforcement agencies in the recent HRW report, and termed it "fabricated" and "motivated".

Is what Kamal said something new? Since the introduction of anti-crime drive "Operation Clean Heart" in October 2002, no government ministers have taken the blame. They have either justified the actions or trashed the allegations outright.

It is really shocking to see that the opposition, which raised its voice against the extrajudicial executions, applies the same technique after coming to power. The BNP, which created RAB and used it as a death squad, now loudly calls for holding the RAB officials accountable for their actions. On the other hand, the AL, which was critical of its activities while in opposition and promised "zero tolerance" for extrajudicial killings after it came to power in 2009, refuses to acknowledge that some security forces are violating human rights.

From the above discussion, a point can strongly be made that the practice of extrajudicial executions is a politically-motivated decision. We have hardly seen any strong public statements from the subsequent governments to stop this practice, encouraging the law enforcement agencies to feel they are invincible. This carefree attitude can even turn dangerous. In this regard, researchers Edy Kaufman and Patricia Weiss Fagen (1981) observe that when any government heavily relies on police, military, and security forces for silencing dissenting voices, those security forces are likely to "act independently of government control." The Narayanganj-seven murders or the shooting of Limon are some of the best examples, but they are an exception, too, as the guilty officials were handed down punishment. But in all these years, we have rarely seen any government move to try law enforcement officials for violating human rights.

Once a staunch supporter of extrajudicial executions, Moudud is now worried as the method is being used by the AL-led government against his own party men. Doesn't the AL think that, in case of a democratic change of power, the same technique will be used against the AL men? The sooner the AL realises this, the better. What goes around comes around.

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SOURCE: DOC-RESEARCH.ORG

someday and denounce extrajudicial activities, including killings, torture, and enforced disappearances, at the hands of law enforcement officials!

Very recently, Moudud made another comment at a discussion on "enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killing, and abduction," in contrast to his 2006 comment.

He alleged that 118 people were killed extrajudicially and 84 became victims of forced disappearance in the last 10 months (*The Daily Star*, July 16). He, however, did not mention the source of the information. But a recent report by the Human Rights Watch (HRW), titled *We Don't Have Him: Secret Detentions and*

detective branch of police were behind the disappearances.

So what Moudud alleged is not wrong as extrajudicial activities do exist in the country now. At the same time, records of different human rights organisations indicate that this practice has been going on since the creation of RAB in 2004 by Moudud's party-led government (the then BNP government) following the success of an anti-crime operation named "Operation Clean Heart" in 2002.

Over the last 10 years, nothing has changed in terms of extrajudicial executions. Bangladesh has a predominant culture of political

will not do so. Rather, RAB will be given a special assignment to capture corrupt people" (*The Daily Star*, March 17, 2006).

Awami League is in power now, but there is apparently no sign of improvement. Between January and June this year, as many as 68 people have been killed in "crossfire" during encounter with law enforcement agencies, says human rights organisation Ain o Salish Kendra. In addition, plainclothes men identifying themselves as security officials picked up 44 people during this period. Seven of them have returned, two bullet-hit bodies were recovered, and three others

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Chittagong city is drowning

Life has come to a standstill for the people of Chittagong. We are passing our days in unbearable sufferings as the city drowns. This is mainly a result of the inefficiency and negligence of those who are in charge, but who alas seem to be least bothered about keeping the city in a good condition. Drains and canals have become clogged due to garbage and unauthorised construction work. The roads have become narrow with land-grabbers taking over the space on either side. It cannot go on like this. The authorities must do whatever is necessary to salvage this horrible situation immediately.

 Nur Jahan
 Chittagong

Less bureaucracy in public service procedures

The civil servants of the country celebrated the National Public Service Day on July 23, 2017, with the aspiration of improving public service management. However, we are troubled to learn from news reports that, in the upcoming DC's conference, mid-level bureaucrats will submit 300 proposals and appeal for more empowerment and more area to conduct mobile courts. This might lead to an authoritative-colonial public service system.

As a member of the civil service, we need to be proactive in providing time-bound quality service and should avoid complicated streamlined bureaucracy.

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