

| CORRUPTION |



PHOTO: NAIMUL KARIM

Officers at the anti-corruption hotline office barely get any break during their shifts.

CALLING IN CORRUPTION

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How much money did you pay him in bribes for the papers?" asks an officer with his headphones on, while scribbling down the main points of the reply on a piece of paper. "BDT 1200... and now he wants more?" he further inquires as he briskly takes a sip of instant coffee from a disposable cup.

There is a similar sense of urgency in the cubicle across. "He has been occupying your land for more than two months now. Is that right?" another officer, slightly older than his neighbour, asks as he lowers his eyebrows and tries hard to understand the situation.

These are scenes from an afternoon shift of the country's anti-corruption hotline office in Segunbagicha. The hotline Number 106, which was launched a month ago to crack down on corrupt activities related to government services, has already witnessed more than two lakh calls.

There are 60 Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) officers, ranging from Deputy Directors to Assistant Directors, who receive calls using five computers in different shifts.

Spend an hour in this office and you realise there is barely any time for them to take a break during these two-hour shifts. When asked how much time they get in between calls, one of the officers smiles and says, "10 to 15 seconds," before diverting his attention to a new caller.

The problem though is that there is not a lot that the ACC can do regarding a majority of the calls that they receive. According to the Director of the project, Zahed Hossain Khan, 84 percent of the calls that they receive do not fall under their purview and they cannot do much to solve those issues.

He explains that the ACC can only accept and work on cases, which fall under the Prevention of Corruption Act (1947), Money Laundering Prevention Act (2012) and Anti-Corruption Act (2004). The first act deals with any kind of corruption related to public servants. Under the other two acts, anyone involved in money laundering or illegal ownership of property can be brought to the book.

"In spite of that, we try to help our callers in every way possible. What we have realised is that many people don't know the basics of many things. For instance, we got calls from people who lost their voter IDs and did not know what to do next. These are small issues, but our officers still tell them to file a GD and explain the process to them," says Zahed.

"And then people often ask us under what law they can file a case against someone, because they know that if they go to consult a lawyer, they will have to pay money regardless.

"On Sunday, we got a call from a patient in the Rampal Health Complex saying that the food they were serving was not up to the mark. This does not fall under our purview, but we still ensured that the ACC called the concerned authority from that region to put pressure on them to fix the issue.

"These are certain services that we provide because we want to help them, but we don't record these," he adds.

Of the two lakh calls, only 16 percent of the cases were deemed workable by the ACC this month. And of the 16 percent, 13.5 percent of the cases lacked enough information for the ACC to make a move or send a team. As a result, they have managed to work on only

2.5 percent of the calls.

One of the success stories of the 106 hotline team deals with a blind man who was cheated by a government employee. The man, in his early 30s, was approached by a clerk and told that he would get a government job if he managed to pay BDT 80,000.

Submitting to the ploy, he and his wife—who is also blind—managed to take loans from various sources and gave the clerk the money. He was supposed to start working after Eid. However, after the holidays, the clerk asked for more money. According to Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya, the spokesperson of the ACC, the clerk said that he needed BDT 50,000 more to seal the deal. That is when the victim decided to call 106.

"After our officers heard his story, they asked him to come to the ACC immediately. We made a plan to trap the clerk. We told the victim to carry on as usual and ask the clerk to come to his house to collect the money on a particular date.

"Our team had the house surrounded and was waiting for the clerk to arrive. He went in, took the money, and came out. That's when we caught him," recalls Pranab. "For cases related to bribes, these kinds of traps are really effective. We have already done 15 of these this year," he adds.

According to Zahed, the ACC is working on setting up five more traps because of information they received through the hotline.

One of them deals with a government employee who will quit his job soon and go on Leave Preparatory to Retirement (LPR). Under this scheme, public servants are entitled to their salaries for 18 months after they leave their job. After that, they get their pensions.

The ACC recently received a call from the government employee who alleged that an officer asked him for BDT 50,000 so that his files could be processed and he could get the money.

"They kept asking him to bring this paper and that paper and made him run around a lot. He had worked in different cities and they made him submit all his salary slips. After he did all of this, the assistant was reporting to told him that he needed to pay BDT 50,000 or else he wouldn't get anything," says Zahed.

ACC officials met the person who complained and told him the plan. However, the elderly man was a bit scared and, understandably, was in two minds. "He is still deciding on what to do. He is scared that if he takes our help, things might get more complicated and he may not get any money at all," explains Zahed.

This is one of the reasons why a number of cases that the ACC receives through the hotline have to be dropped. They do not get enough information and eventually nothing is done.

"The other day someone called from a prestigious English medium school in Dhaka. The caller said that the school had suddenly decided to charge BDT 4,000 more from each student and that they were going to protest.

"We decided to send a team there. We have three teams in Dhaka under the ACC and they are always ready. But after we went, the caller decided not to appear. He didn't want to come out in the open," explains Faruque Ahmed, the manager of the afternoon shift.

"We have to think of these cases in regards to the legal framework and if people are afraid to tell us all the information or come out and talk to us, then we can't do much," he adds.



PHOTO: NAIMUL KARIM

Most of the calls that the ACC receives come from remote areas. People outside cities tend to get cheated more often, according to Zahed.

The recent case of a girl, who came all the way from a remote area in Rangamati to Dhaka to give an interview for a job that never existed, reflects the dire situation.

Recently a group of scammers under the banner 'Community Clinic Limited' put out job advertisements online. They were looking for SSC and HSC graduates.

"When the girl first saw the advertisement, she thought it could be trusted because Community Clinics fall under the purview of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. These health clinics are opened in rural areas to bring medical facilities to people's doorsteps," explains Zahed.

"But what she did not see was the limited word at the end and applied for it," he adds.

Working for such a clinic would have allowed her to earn a decent income in her own hometown and it seemed like a good option. After the interview in Dhaka, she was told that she would have to pay BDT 10,000 to get the job since there was plenty of competition. She paid the money, gave the scammers her ID and a number of other details at their office.

However, a day later, the scammers wanted more money and that is when she called the hotline.

"I initially thought that the case was related to a government official who actually wanted a bribe, so we thought of planning a trap. But we later realised that

the case was different and we informed the police," says Zahed.

By the time the police reached the office of the scammers, it had been evacuated and the criminals were nowhere to be found.

The 106 hotline team has realised a lot of things in the last one month. They have learnt that people are willing to use the number for a wide array of complaints, whether or not it falls under the purview of the ACC. As one officer from the team humorously put it: "We are one step away from listening to their personal problems."

"The other day, we received a call from a girl from a remote area because she was feeling sad and needed someone to talk to," says Zahed. "What can we do about that? We asked the girl to talk to her parents or consult someone she was close to," he adds.

Jokes aside, they have also learnt that people actually trust the officials to solve their problems, going by the two lakh-plus calls in the last one month.

Critics say that there is corruption at so many levels of the government that hotlines like these will not really make much of a difference.

Zahed, Pranab and all the other members of the hotline team are well aware of that fact, but they also know that the small steps they are taking to curb corruption can eventually grow into a bigger force one day.

Follow Naimul Karim @naimonthefield

| OPINION |

Having a flat nose and small eyes has always been a problem in Bangladesh, but now there is fresh cause for concern for the adivasi people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. As Myanmar broils with trouble, Buddhists in Bangladesh are being used as scapegoats.

Here are a few acts of violence that took place recently in the community. I have personally talked to all of the victims or their close ones and am narrating their experiences.

A female university student in Dhaka who belongs to the Marma community was recently chased by local (Bangali) boys who allegedly charged at her with these words: "Why are the Rohingyas here in Bangladesh?"

One Chakma female university student had to get down from a local bus in Dhaka in the middle of the road before she reached her destination because she was bullied for her "Burmese-looking" face. In a school in Chittagong, when a science teacher was giving detention to a Buddhist sixth grader, she allegedly told the child: "It is because of you Buddhists that the Rohingyas are here. Why don't you share their pain as well?" In this case, the sixth grader did not even fully understand what religious and communal conflict is but was facing harassment from a teacher.

In another incident, an adivasi female driver in Chittagong went to a private hospital in Chittagong to collect her medical reports and was harassed by two Bangalis. Her attackers stipulated that adivasi people like her should be sent back to Myanmar, because "they are not from Bangladesh"—or so the men inaccurately claimed. Similarly, a Chittagong University student was lambasted as "being from Myanmar" by high school kids on the road.

Why would having a different religion or culture get a citizen of a nation cast out from his or her own country?

The culture of bullying adivasi or indigenous people in Bangladesh is nothing new. We are accustomed to the fact that we will face it our entire life. In the cities of Chittagong or Dhaka the most common word used to tease an indigenous person is "Chakma", even though they may belong to any of the ethnic group living in Bangladesh.

Recently, however, that word has been replaced by terms such as "Burmैया", as a result of the violence brewing in Myanmar.

The incredulous idea behind such bullying is that indigenous people in Bangladesh are somehow responsible for the situation at Rakhine state and are thus worthy targets of verbal or physical abuse. What makes this situation even more bizarre is the fact that many indigenous groups practice Hindu or Christian faith.

But our "Otherness", apparently, lies in our faces. Adivasis are targeted for their facial structure, which is different from that of Bangalis. Our faces are the most conspicuous thing about us—the thing we cannot change and the thing that makes us vulnerable in public places. As a result, we people from indigenous and Buddhist communities

# "BURMAIYA" A NEW TERM TO OTHER THE ADIVASI PEOPLE OF CHT

UKHENGCHING MARMA

who are residing away from our homes are living in constant fear of being subjected to verbal abuse, intimidation or physical attacks.

There have been anecdotal reports that many indigenous people who were working in factories and garments have left their jobs and are headed back to their homes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts because they think the environment is not friendly or safe for them to move around freely. Some indigenous students who are studying in different areas of Dhaka and Chittagong have expressed fear over attending classes. Many are being advised to go out in groups for protection from any sort of possible violence. We are afraid of getting assaulted or bullied anytime and anywhere when we step out of our residences, simply because we look different.

Sure there have been no casualties in the recent spate of discrimination—but why does blood need to be shed for our fears to be justified? The fact that we indigenous people are going through psychological abuse in our daily lives is concerning. If we claim that Bangladesh is secular and non-communal, why are we afraid to move freely, to attend our workplaces and educational institutions?

The irony of the matter is that these harassers are fighting communal violence with more hatred, discriminating against people of their own land in an effort to show solidarity against discrimination elsewhere.

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