

## Will air cargo ban be lifted?

### Dhaka airport security now improved

TWO years ago, direct air cargo flights by Biman to the UK was banned (only Biman had direct flights to the UK) as Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal Airport was deemed to be unsafe and declared a "red zone". Other countries like Australia and Germany followed suit and the government appointed a British company to oversee the transformation of the security details at the airport. In the meantime, exporters have paid a heavy price as UK is the hub through which 54 percent of our exports head for the European Union. Exports had to be rerouted through third countries like Dubai, Qatar, Thailand and India adding both cost and shortening lead times considerably.

With the expected arrival of the British foreign minister on February 9 for a two-day visit where discussions on bilateral relations and Rohingya are on the agenda, authorities are hopeful that the ban imposed by British authorities in March, 2016 will be lifted. The loopholes in safety have largely been addressed with the introduction of ETD (explosives trace detection) and other equipment, on top of the British company already appointed to screen outbound air cargo. Needless to say, the cargo ban has also hit the national carrier Biman badly. Before the ban the airline used to carry anywhere between 25-30 tonnes of goods and earn nearly Tk 5 million per-month from transporting air cargo. The RMG sector and vegetable exporters are the most adversely affected groups due to the ban. Given that conditions set by foreign countries have largely been met, it is time for a final review of Hazrat Shahjalal's security set up and take the airport off the "red zone" and lift the ban.

## Grabbing of a minority family's land

### Punish the grabber

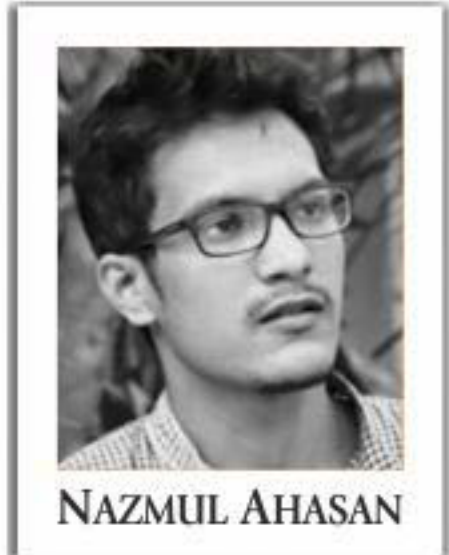
IN yet another shameful act of minority persecution, a man in Lalmonirhat grabbed a piece of land belonging to a local Hindu family. Khagendranath, the owner of the land, said he was even threatened with dire consequence if he ever intends to visit his land in future.

The grabber did not even hesitate to admit that he grabbed the land. While talking to a correspondent of this newspaper, he unashamedly said that the owner had promised to sell the land to him, but since he was declining to do so now, he thought it was only fair to occupy it!

This incident is an indictment of what a minority family is facing in our society. Perhaps, this was not an extraordinary case and we recognise that this could happen to a Muslim family, too. But, the grabber's blatant admission indicates that his conviction was such that he would easily get away with occupying a minority family's land.

We appreciate that the police went to the spot following a complaint filed by the victim. However, we wonder why the illegal occupant wasn't arrested immediately but given 48 hours to vacate the land. He should be arrested, and appropriate legal actions taken against him. We would also urge the local administration to provide the family with security if needed, lest the influential grabber intimidate them.

# The state of our student politics



THE RECENT fiasco at Dhaka University (DU), involving a tussle between Chhatra League (BCL) and the protesters against sexual assault, stems from a grossly wrong-headed and reckless administrative decision. It all began when Dhaka University took over the responsibility of seven major colleges in Dhaka from the National University (NU).

According to multiple media reports, the mutual animosity between a former VC, AAMS Arefin Siddique, and a former Pro-VC of DU, who happens to be the VC of NU, might have motivated the former to push for the change.

In spite of the remarkable progress that the National University had made in crushing its notorious session-jams, the education ministry conceded to Siddique's persistence. In the months since, a prolonged, chaotic and extemporaneous transition process has ensued.

Meanwhile, the former VC of DU had to step down, as the government decided to replace him with Mohammad Akhtaruzzaman, widely seen as supported by the ex-VC's opponents.

While Akhtaruzzaman has so far refrained from openly criticising his predecessor and former boss, the new administration admittedly hinted that it did not have adequate preparation to take on the responsibility of these seven colleges, whose size of students are five times that of Dhaka University.

Both the students of these seven colleges and Dhaka University opposed and protested the move, albeit for different reasons. The students of the seven colleges saw their education get plunged into an unending chaos, while academic operations in the other colleges around the country were running smoothly. The students of the 2014-15 session of these colleges, for example, are yet to get their results, although they had taken their exam a year ago.

They often took to the streets to express their frustration. In one such protest rally in July last year, Siddique Rahman, a student of Titumir College, lost his vision when police threw a tear-gas canister. Instead of addressing the outcry over the brutality, the police filed a case against an unspecified number of student protesters. The withdrawal of this case has been included in the students' list of demands, which no one cares to meet.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN/RASHED SHUMON

Demonstrating students of the seven DU-affiliated colleges demand the publishing of their final examination results.

On the other hand, Dhaka University students protested the move as they believe that the affiliation would further strain their already overburdened, understaffed and overstretched university. They were also concerned over what they saw as a growing assimilation of the students of these colleges into their university. For example, the fact that the admission process of new students of these seven colleges—32,000 in total—was carried out on DU's campus unsettled its own students.

And the Chhatra League cashed in on this. As detailed in a report by this newspaper on January 30, the leaders of DU units of BCL initially supported and encouraged the students who had arranged a protest rally on January 11, demanding the affiliation process be cancelled. However, the university authorities dodged the protesters and talked directly to BCL leaders, whom they believed were pulling the strings, and asked them to douse the flames. Accordingly, the BCL leaders tried to persuade the protesters to call off their demonstration by saying that the VC would resolve the issue.

Unconvinced, the students decided to continue their protests and staged a sit-in five days later in front of the VC's office—this time without any backing from BCL. Around half an hour later, after having been summoned by the VC,

a few hundred BCL activists, led by its top leaders, appeared at the spot and asked the protesters to stop their demonstration. As the two parties engaged in a scuffle, BCL activists hurled abuses at the female demonstrators and had even sexually assaulted them. In the end, the demonstration was foiled, and the university authorities lodged a case against the protesters.

That is when the nature of the movement abruptly changed, with left-leaning organisations aligning themselves with the demonstrators. On January 23, the protesters again gathered in front of the VC's office with four new demands, including the resignation of the proctor, punishment of BCL activists who had assaulted the female protesters, and the withdrawal of the case lodged against the students. The left-leaning organisations brought a change in the initial demand of the protesters. Instead of demanding an outright cancellation of affiliation, they called on the DU authorities to "resolve" the ongoing crisis. That was a sensible change, on their part.

As the protesters broke into the VC's office and confined him, hundreds of BCL activists came to his "rescue", reportedly, at his request.

Everyone knows the rest of the story. Protesters were outnumbered and

forced to retreat. The following day, a bunch of front-page photos in this newspaper showed how female protesters were assaulted by the BCL's female activists.

For many on social media, the incident brought back memories of the infamous Shamsunnahar Hall tragedy in 2002, when activists of the then-ruling party affiliated Chhatra Dal and police stormed the hall and assaulted female protesters.

The entire episode showed how a petty internal strife among some influential teachers had a far-reaching consequence for tens of thousands of students. Interestingly, DU units of BCL thought that the demands raised by the general students were legitimate and, thus, supported them, but when the high-ups signalled their opposition, BCL could not maintain a shred of its integrity or independence. So, what's the point of having a student organisation that cannot determine its own position?

The whole saga is a reminder of the degraded and sorrowful state that our student politics is in today and of student political organisations whose position only overlaps that of their respective parent organisation, not that of students.

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Nazmul Ahasan is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

### PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

## Social media's junkies and dealers



BUT we didn't take Andreessen seriously; we thought it was only a metaphor. Now we face the challenge of extracting the world from the jaws of Internet platform monopolies.

I used to be a technology optimist. During a 35-year career investing in the best and brightest of Silicon Valley, I was lucky enough to be part of the personal computer, mobile communications, Internet, and social networking industries. Among the highlights of my career were early investments in Google and Amazon, and being a mentor to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg from 2006 to 2010.

Each new wave of technology increased productivity and access to knowledge. Each new platform was easier to use and more convenient. Technology powered globalisation and economic growth. For decades, it made the world a better place. We assumed it always would.

Then came 2016, when the Internet revealed two dark sides. One is related to individual users. Smartphones with LTE mobile infrastructure created the first content-delivery platform that was available every waking moment, transforming the technology industry and the lives of two billion users. With little or no regulatory supervision in most of the world, companies like Facebook, Google, Amazon, Alibaba, and Tencent used techniques common in propaganda and casino gambling, such as constant notifications and variable rewards, to foster psychological addiction.

The other dark side is geopolitical. In the United States, Western Europe, and Asia, Internet platforms, especially Facebook, enable the powerful to inflict harm on the powerless in politics, foreign policy, and commerce. Elections across Europe and in the US have repeatedly demonstrated that automated social

networks can be exploited to undermine democracy.

The Brexit referendum and the US presidential election in 2016 also revealed that Facebook provides significant relative advantages to negative messages over positive ones. Authoritarian governments can use Facebook to promote public support for repressive policies, as may be occurring now in Myanmar, Cambodia, the Philippines, and elsewhere. In some cases, Facebook actually provides support to such governments, as it does to all large clients.

I am confident that the founders of Facebook, Google, and other major

unprecedented precision.

But then came the smartphone, which transformed all media and effectively put Facebook, Google, and a handful of others in control of the information flow to users. The filters that give users "what they want" had the effect of polarising populations and eroding the legitimacy of fundamental democratic institutions (most notably, the free press). And the automation that made Internet platforms so profitable left them vulnerable to manipulation by malign actors everywhere—and not just authoritarian governments hostile to democracy.

As Andreessen warned us, these



PHOTO: DADO RUVIC/REUTERS

The challenges posed by Internet platform monopolies require new approaches beyond antitrust enforcement.

Internet platforms did not intend to cause harm when they adopted their business models. They were young entrepreneurs, hungry for success. They spent years building huge audiences by reorganising the online world around a set of applications that were more personalised, convenient, and easier to use than their predecessors. And they made no attempt to monetise their efforts until long after users were hooked. The advertising business models they chose were leveraged by personalisation, which enabled advertisers to target their messages with

companies, with their global ambition and reach, are eating the world economy. In the process, they are adopting versions of Facebook's corporate philosophy—"move fast and break things"—without regard for the impact on people, institutions, and democracy. A large minority of citizens in the developed world inhabits filter bubbles created by these platforms—digital false realities in which existing beliefs become more rigid and extreme.

In the US, approximately one-third of the adult population has become impervious to new ideas, including

demonstrable facts. Such people are easy to manipulate, a concept that former Google design ethicist Tristan Harris calls "brain hacking."

Western democracies are unprepared to deal with this threat. The US has no effective regulatory framework for Internet platforms, and lacks the political will to create one. The European Union has both a regulatory framework and the necessary political will, but neither is adequate to the challenge. The EU's recent judgment against Google—a record USD 2.7 billion fine for anti-competitive behaviour—was well conceived, but undersized. Google appealed, and its investors shrugged. It may be a good start, but it was clearly insufficient.

We are at a critical juncture. Awareness of the risks posed by Internet platforms is growing from a small base, but the convenience of the products and psychological addiction to them are such that it may take a generation to effect change from the user side, as it did with anti-smoking campaigns. Recognition of the corrosive effect of platform monopolies on competition and innovation is greater in Europe than in the US, but no one has found an effective regulatory strategy. Awareness that the platforms can be manipulated to undermine democracy is also growing, but Western governments have yet to devise a defence against it.

The challenges posed by Internet platform monopolies require new approaches beyond antitrust enforcement. We must recognise and address these challenges as a threat to public health. One possibility is to treat social media in a manner analogous to tobacco and alcohol, combining education and regulation.

With the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, the threat from Internet platform monopolies should be a top concern for attendees. For the sake of restoring balance to our lives and hope to our politics, it is time to disrupt the disrupters.

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Roger McNamee is a co-founder of Elevation Partners and an early investor in Facebook, Google, and Amazon.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### No post-office in Paribagh-Hatirpool area

A large number of inhabitants in the Paribagh-Hatirpool area have no means of accessing government postal services as there are no post-offices in their near vicinity. The postal service run by the government is still highly trusted by a majority of people compared to a number of private courier services. Aside from regular postal services, public post-offices also offer the benefit of providing postal saving deposits.

This is why people in large numbers still prefer using the government postal service over private courier services. As there is much demand for it, I hope that the authorities will establish a post-office in or around the Hatirpool area as soon as possible.

Sirajul Islam, Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR