

# A curious case of 'extortion'



MORE THAN JUST FACTS  
 NAZMUL AHASAN

## Cases based on falsities

### A worrying trend

THE absurdity of accusing a bedridden 82-year-old, just out of the hospital, of taking part in an assembly of individuals at a playground to carry out "subversive activities" would seem fictional if it weren't actually a true happening reported by this paper. The police have accused him of being one of the "miscreants" from the BNP who had gathered at a meeting at a playground in Wari. Along with this ailing octogenarian, a ward-level BNP leader has been accused of taking part in the same meeting although he has travel and immigration documents that say that he was abroad when the incident allegedly took place.

It is indeed disturbing that an 82-year-old, falsely accused of planning to carry out subversive activities, would be forced to go to court in a wheelchair to obtain bail.

The incident is certainly very worrying. For one thing it indicates how easily false cases can be filed especially when the plaintiff is from a law enforcement agency. In fact we have seen in the recent past how individuals belonging to opposition parties have been randomly picked and slammed with cases. A Bengali daily has reported a deceased BNP leader being accused of vandalism and blasting cocktails 28 months after his death!

Are we to believe that this will be the trend in the near future—at least till election day—with individuals being sued and taken to court without even crosschecking whether they were present at the scene in the first place? Can the police just randomly file cases against people without preliminary investigation?

It is strange also that some locals who live or work near the busy playground—where this assembly was alleged to have taken place—have said that they had no knowledge that such a meeting took place.

We are concerned that such instances of abuse of power will be on the rise unless the government makes a concerted effort to ensure that law enforcers cannot get away with filing false cases. The offenders here are those who have wrongly accused individuals and they are the ones who should be held accountable for their actions.

## Collapse of banks' corporate governance

### Sharp increase in NPLs

NONPERFORMING loans (NPLs) jumped by Tk 15,037 crore in the last six months alone bringing the total amount to Tk 89,340 crore in June of this year. This shows just how little control Bangladesh Bank (BB) actually exercises over state-owned banks and their management. The fear of banking experts is that this trend will grow further in the coming quarters because loan defaulters have been allowed to repeatedly reschedule their loans.

What we are witnessing today is a culture of giving out loans in breach of rules and regulations to parties that do not meet minimum standards that every bank should be following to ascertain their credit worthiness. The experience of the last one decade has taught us that established banking practices have been ignored wilfully by the management and the boards have gotten increasingly involved to give out loans worth thousands of crores of taka to dubious parties.

As per Bangladesh Bank data, the six state-owned banks' NPL amount stood at Tk 42,850 crore, which is nearly 50 percent of all NPLs, and this amount has increased by 14.8 percent in the last six months. Because the government has failed to bring to account those responsible for the several large-scale scams that have rocked the foundations of the banking sector, it has only encouraged others to default too. That the central bank remains powerless to remove a director of a state bank (many of whom are politically appointed) has basically negated BB's regulatory role. Unless the central bank is given sweeping powers to take to task corrupt officials in state-owned banks, we cannot expect any qualitative change in banking practices that allow for such loan defaults.

THE way Mozammel Hoque, a road safety campaigner, was arrested was hardly normal. A complaint was filed with the police by "a transport labour leader" accusing him of demanding extortion.

Understandably, such cases are common in Bangladesh, and many of them false, targeting journalists and human rights defenders.

Unless directed otherwise, the police normally do not treat these cases as a priority. But in Mozammel's case, the police was so "prompt" that they raided his house at 3am—an ungodly hour—to detain him as if he's a dangerous criminal.

Fellow road safety campaigners have told reporters that the police officers who arrested Mozammel admitted to acting upon pressure from high-ups. It's very strange that the so-called high-ups would pressurise local police to arrest an accused in a single case when, according to the police's own data, nearly 20,000 cases were filed in July alone.

And then, the media uncovered explosive information that called into question the entire case. The accuser, Mohammad Dulal, was revealed to be a lineman at a local bus stop living hand-to-mouth, not a "labour leader" and certainly not a man from whom Tk 2,00,000 could be demanded as extortion, as alleged in the complaint.

Dulal can't even read or write. He told reporters that he had signed a statement (the court statement) as asked by local transport leaders without knowing its contents and that he didn't even know who Mozammel was.

While Dulal seemed to have changed his story later, the powers that be understand that the premise of the case has collapsed and that it wouldn't suffice to keep him behind bars for long enough. Maybe that is why the police have appealed to a court to show Mozammel arrested in a separate case filed in February under the Special Powers Act and Explosive Substances Act.

The case was originally filed against 40-45 "unnamed" people—a normal (mal)practice by the police to use the case in the future—who allegedly held a

meeting to carry out subversive activities to create anarchy in the country and hurled petrol bombs on vehicles. Now the police claim that Mozammel was one of those "unnamed" persons, which is ludicrous given Mozammel's proven track record as a road safety campaigner.

Mozammel's organisation, Jatri Kalyan Samity, a passenger welfare platform, has become a familiar name of late. Almost all newspapers and news outlets quote the organisation's

eventually cracked down upon brutally, but the issue of road safety gained traction. That is why the Samity's innocent statistics suddenly seem to have become "incendiary" information.

The Samity has published regular compilation reports after Eid vacations, when the number of accidents shoots up, as millions of people from Dhaka and other big cities rush to make it home to celebrate Eid with their families. During Eid-ul-Fitr holidays in June, a total of

government's claims that it took serious steps to improve road safety.

What's more, several top ruling party leaders lashed out at the Samity. In particular, the party's secretary and Road Transport and Bridges minister did not only attack the organisation but also its secretary general, Mozammel, personally while trashing the report. Such a response was absurd given the fact that the organisation does not prepare its report based on firsthand information.



Road safety campaigner Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury is seen here at a roundtable discussion organised by Jatri Kalyan Samity at Jatiya Press Club in Dhaka on April 21, 2018.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

periodical compilation of road accidents in their reports. It's one of the most basic forms of research: flipping through newspaper reports and compiling the number of accidents and casualties. And the numbers are often staggering. According to the Samity, in the last three and a half years, more than 25,000 people were killed in road accidents across the country with thousands others injured, many crippled for life.

Such horrendous statistics didn't raise the alarm until recently when hundreds of schoolchildren took to the streets in Dhaka striving to bring some discipline to the city's roads. These youngsters had a legitimate reason: two of their fellow students had been run over and killed by a speeding bus. Protesters were

335 accidents took place around the country in which 405 people were killed and few more than a thousand injured, according to the Samity.

This time during Eid-ul-Azha, in August, amidst the wake of the student protests for road safety, things were not as "normal" as they were before, however. The Samity was allegedly asked by a government agency to not publish its report of Eid accidents as it would "tarnish the image of the government" ahead of the national election scheduled for the last week of December, as reported by Prothom Alo.

The Samity published its report, nonetheless, defying pressure, which found that the number of accidents increased by 13.5 percent compared to during Eid-ul-Fitr, in contrast to the

Instead, it solely depends on secondary sources such as newspapers.

The timing of the arrest was intriguing, too. Just days before a draft transport act—which earned criticism from road safety activists and organisations, including the Samity, for failing to live up to expectations—was placed in the parliament. Whereas Mozammel and his organisation's work could be beneficial for the government, his arrest shows the government has adopted a technique of silencing critics. The entire episode is mind-boggling, showing just how far the authorities can go to suppress a dissenting voice that was bringing out some unpleasant facts.

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# US-India relations reach 'unprecedented heights'

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

SOON after the signing of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) with her American counterpart James Mattis in New Delhi on September 6, Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman termed the deal as elevating bilateral ties to "unprecedented heights."

She is absolutely right. For the agreement pushed India into a never-before-seen strategic embrace of the US because it will allow exchange of the communications through systems mounted on the weapons systems of the two countries' militaries. The agreement came after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, India's Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and US Secretary of Defence James Mattis came together in what represented the highest level of political engagement between India and the US.

The COMCASA undoubtedly marked the most aggressive push towards elevating the Indo-US strategic

to sign were finalised during the reign of the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In August 2016, the two countries signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) which allows the military of the US to support defence operations out of India. And now comes the COMCASA that opens up sensitive military communications between the two countries, pushing the boundaries of strategic cooperation. The third agreement on which talks are yet to begin is the Basic Exchange and Cooperation for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA).

The signing of the COMCASA and the LEMOA has seen India come a long way since shedding the baggage of history of a prolonged anti-US mindset during the Cold War period when New Delhi was tied to Moscow in terms of cooperation agreement and source of military hardware and nuclear power. India's overwhelming dependence on Russia remains by and large intact today. In fact, India is looking to wrap up a deal to buy air defence system from Russia at a cost of

Gulf country braving the looming American sanctions which are set to kick in on November 4. Modi has time and again described Russia as a "time-tested friend" of India. Besides, he also reached out to China by meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping a number of times in the last four years.

But the signing of the COMCASA has given an unprecedented pro-US tilt to India's foreign policy. The US, for its part, ensnared India into the COMCASA by designating the latter as a major defence partner in 2016.

However, it may not be easy for India to overcome the past hangover of suspicion. It has been argued by some that the COMCASA is a measure of India's readiness for transactional diplomacy the US is so adept at. But where is the transaction? For instance, international experts like Brahma Chellaney are asking what India has got in return for the COMCASA. And he has a reason to do so because the US is yet to accede to India's request for waiving sanctions for purchasing the air defence system from Russia or continuing to source Iranian crude. And there still hasn't been any resolution of the tariff dispute on the imposition of US import duty on steel and aluminium from India.

Another strategic affairs analyst Bharat Karnad pointed out in a newspaper article how past American actions have not generated much confidence about the conduct of its strategic ties with India. He said that in 1982 the US had tipped off Pakistan about a possible joint India-Israel mission against Pakistani nuclear weapons; in 1998 the US disclosed to China the content of a note from Vajpayee to then American President Bill Clinton justifying India's nuclear test in response to the Chinese threat; and in 2008 Washington failed to alert India about the deadly attacks in Mumbai in November that year by terrorists from Pakistan.

Indian media is full of reports that the US has sought to address the concerns in India over how secure the information-sharing between the two militaries under the COMCASA will be. There is acknowledgement in India that the COMCASA will expose Indian military's communication data to the US. The question is: how iron-clad are the assurances given by the US in response to India's concerns? If Indian media reports are anything to go by, either side can abrogate the COMCASA by giving six months' notice in advance. But the question remains: what happens to information already gleaned before abrogation? In fact, such a possibility may work against the termination of the COMCASA. It also remains to be seen how Russia reacts to the COMCASA. Will it impinge on procurement of weapons from Russia?

India reportedly opted for the COMCASA keeping primarily China in mind so that it can help track movement of Chinese military along the unsettled border in the Himalayas (the Doklam standoff last year was seen as a trigger for the COMCASA) and keep a tab on Beijing's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean. To sum it up, the COMCASA has pushed the envelope of India's foreign policy further than ever before.

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India's Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presents a bouquet to US Secretary of Defence James Mattis on his arrival in Delhi on September 5, 2018 to attend India's first ever '2+2 Dialogue' between the two nations.

PHOTO: PTI

partnership. History shows the US has always found it easier to forge close defence and strategic ties with right-wing governments in Third World countries and India is no exception. It was Atal Bihari Vajpayee as prime minister who had termed the US as a "natural ally" of India almost two decades ago. His decision to test nuclear devices in May 1998 paved the way for negotiations on the Indo-US civil nuclear deal during the BJP government's tenure. It was taken forward by the Congress Party government headed by Manmohan Singh, who is known for his centre-of-the-right tilt in Congress and the agreement signed in 2008.

It is not a coincidence that two of the three foundational military agreements the US wanted India

USD 6 billion notwithstanding the threat of American sanctions on import of arms from that country under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

In the last four years, the Modi government had for the most part given the impression of pursuing a policy of multi-polarity in international politics, which many consider as a reincarnation of the policy of non-alignment seen during the Cold War years, through its decision to purchase air defence system from Russia, its move to enlist the support of a Russian entity for the Indian Navy's submarine project, going ahead with the construction of the strategic key port of Chabahar in southern Iran, and import of crude oil from the Persian

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**  
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**Mismanagement in the financial sector**

The financial sector is one of the most important parts of any economy. But our banking sector is unfortunately one of the worst managed sectors in the country. Defaulted loans in the sector have been constantly on the rise because of poor regulatory practices, corruption, political interference, etc.

According to one daily newspaper, as of June this year, the amount of non-performing loans stood at Tk 955 billion which is 10.78 percent of all total outstanding loans in the sector. If written off loans are added in, the amount would actually go up to Tk 1,252 billion.

This constant rise in non-performing loans has literally crippled the banking sector of our country. The public's trust in the banking sector has already greatly eroded.

In the meantime, the sector has suffered from liquidity crisis. And to address this, the government has eased many regulations which some say may end up deteriorating the situation even further. It is time for the government to listen to financial experts. Such mismanagement of the sector cannot be allowed to continue.

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