

In Dhaka, fire safety in a shambles

Building code must be enforced

THE fire department's recent report paints a grim picture of fire safety in the capital's public and private establishments. A year-long inspection programme carried out by Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence (BFSCD) found that all but a few establishments—hospitals, shopping malls and educational institutions—it inspected were susceptible to disastrous fire incidents. The organisation inspected a total of 2,612 establishments, of which less than a hundred turned out to have satisfactory fire safety measures.

Such frightening statistics explain why the number of fire incidents more than tripled in the last two decades—from 5,376 in 1996 to 18,105 last year—in Dhaka.

In particular, hospitals are in a very vulnerable situation because, as the BFSCD pointed out, a fire in those hospitals could result in colossal damage since they store highly flammable chemicals and oxygen cylinders, which may cause fire to spread quickly.

According to the fire department's data, unstubbed cigarette butts caused 2,453 fire incidents last year.

And, when it comes to educational institutions, only 18 among 989, which had been inspected, turned out to be safe. It is, therefore, really not an overstatement that “we are sitting on a ticking bomb,” to quote an expert who commented on our story.

We cannot afford to downplay the findings of the fire department. The solution, in part, lies in enforcing the National Building Code in all public and private establishments because the code also explains what fire safety measures one should take. As for accessible roads, there aren't quick solutions as the entire city is highly congested. However, as the BFSCD recommended, the government may set up “satellite fire stations” in more areas of the city—especially in vulnerable areas like Mirpur, Tejgaon and Savar—so that firemen can reach accident areas quickly.

Dangerous level of water contamination

75 million people at risk!

THE World Bank unveiled a report titled “Promising Progress: A Diagnostic of Water Supply, Sanitation, Hygiene, and Poverty in Bangladesh” on October 11. It portrays a dismal picture of water quality in the country. Seventy-five million Bangladeshis (nearly half the population) are drinking contaminated water where there is presence of arsenic and E-coli bacteria, depending on the region. Forty-one percent of water supplied has bacteria at source and 13 percent water contains arsenic. As the report points out, “E-coli bacteria was present in 80 percent of private piped-water taps sampled across the country, a similar rate to water retrieved from ponds.”

Needless to say, the comments are less than salutary and we can only imagine the impact of the contamination on people's health. There are certain things that are beyond our control like climate change which is increasing both the frequency and intensity of natural disasters that play havoc with water and sanitation services. We need to move away from dependence on tube wells to piped water which can be monitored and treated. Nearly 95 percent of the rural populace and 70 percent of urban residents depend on tube wells where it is very difficult to monitor water quality. With continued dependence on groundwater comes the challenge of depleting water tables that may be causing arsenic contamination of water supply.

We need to move to piped water supply which will require a major overhaul of existing piped water networks, especially in urban areas. The problem is that illegal connections and frequent pipe breaks also result in contaminated water when sewerage drain water mixes with piped water supply. It is up to policymakers to prioritise the repair and maintenance of piped water systems if we wish to improve on the nutritional disadvantages of early childhood which are linked to poor water quality and sanitation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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'Leave politics to politicians'

The president of Bangladesh and chancellor of Dhaka University, while addressing the 51st convocation of the university, requested to leave politics to politicians only. He expressed his concern about the fact that anyone in the country—a police officer, a government employee, an army officer, a vice chancellor, a barrister, or a teacher—can join politics after retirement. At present, many businessmen are involved in politics. He suggested that if someone wants to get into politics, he/she should get involved right after his/her graduation.

I think what he has said is quite important. We have a glorious history of student politics. But, at present, the term “student politics” is understood to refer to politics of the student wings of some of our political parties. Clearly, this type of student politics can't produce good political leaders. As a result, businessmen, retired government employees, and retired army and police officers, without the basic knowledge about politics, are joining politics. This practice must stop. And only those who have a good political background should do politics.

Md Mahbubur Rahman Sazid
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August 21 verdict and its implications for BNP

MORE THAN JUST FACTS



NAZMUL AHASAN

Awami League (AL)—into a deadly and violent one. The grenade attack left 24 people dead and hundreds wounded including AL chief Sheikh Hasina, who was clearly the target of the attack.

Was the attack conspired and orchestrated by the then party in power, BNP, as held by its opponents? That was up to a court to determine. And after a 14-year-long investigation, which was stained from the onset, a court in a verdict delivered on October 10 did just that. It sentenced Tarique Rahman, the *de facto* BNP leader exiled in Britain, to life in absentia for his role in the attack.

In no way can the BNP downplay its role in the aftermath of the attack. It used the entire state machinery to make a total mockery of the investigation process. This one single act of duplicity should be enough to indict the then administration in the entire affair.

For a party struggling to mount a challenge to the AL's decade-long rule, this verdict could prove to be a severe blow—especially when it's trying to unify parties belonging to different aisles of the political spectrum, which already are uncomfortable over the party's ties with Jamaat-e-Islami.

True, the BNP still has legal avenues to clear, or at least soften, the sentence awarded to Tarique Rahman, but its current strategy is to wait out this government. Sanaullah Mia, one of his lawyers, told reporters that Tarique would appeal to the higher court once he came back to the country.

While Law Minister Anisul Huq said that he would have to appear before the court within 60 days after the verdict was given in order to appeal against it, BNP leader Moudud Ahmed disputed the claim, saying he could invoke the “condonation of delay” clause to appeal beyond the prescribed period of 60 days.

The state prosecutors are in no hurry either. Syed Rezaur Rahman, the principal prosecutor, reacted positively to the outcome. “However,” he said, “whether or not to appeal for Tarique Rahman's death sentence would be decided after consultation.” Such deliberation hints at renewed efforts to pressurise the British government to hand him over to Bangladesh authorities.



AL leaders and activists just moments before the attack on August 21, 2004.

PHOTO: STAR

In his reaction to the verdict, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam said, “International law doesn't allow [a country] to provide shelter to a convicted criminal. Since Tarique Rahman has been sentenced to life, it wouldn't be difficult to extradite him.” He, however, acknowledged that a death penalty would complicate the process.

Both parties had long prepared themselves as to how to respond to the case's possible outcome. Yet, while it would still be premature to write the epitaph of the Zia dynasty—which ruled the country for multiple terms—the judgment certainly is a major setback for the BNP's efforts to recoup its strength. This gives more scope to the ruling party to try to discredit those who try to join hands with BNP.

And, for people like Dr Kamal Hossain, who has advocated for the rule of law throughout his entire life, it would be more difficult to defend their decisions to associate with BNP. In fact, attacks from ruling party leaders already put Dr Hossain, who once headed an investigation committee into the attack, on the back foot, forcing him to clarify that his National Unity Process had no contacts with Tarique and that the unity process was all about the people, not a certain individual.

While the verdict's political fallout may be felt profoundly, there's an important takeaway for public servants—especially those serving in the security forces. Apart from political leaders like Tarique, Lutfozzaman Babar, Abdus Salam Pinto and others, a whole bunch of former high-profile senior security officials—including then chiefs of intelligence agencies and police—were given harsh punishments. If anything, this judgment should serve as a wakeup call for unscrupulous public servants willing to go to great lengths to serve their political masters beyond legal limits. This is a judgment they should remind themselves of when their instincts are inclined towards what is clearly unethical and criminal.

In his observation, Shahed Nuruddin, the tribunal judge who pronounced the verdict, said, “In a democratic state, there have to be efforts to strengthen democracy by applying liberal policy towards the opposition.” It is a recommendation that the current party in power, which was the victim of this heinous act, should pay heed to when dealing with its political opponents.

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Is it a crime to question the accuracy of official data?

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in his 2018 SDG progress report, while reporting major achievements in some areas, also emphasised in no uncertain terms the need for reliable data. “Without evidence of where we stand now we cannot confidently chart our path forward in realising the Sustainable Development Goals...” (The) report also reflects on the challenges faced in the collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of reliable, timely, accessible and sufficiently disaggregated data, and calls for better evidence-based policymaking.” Unfortunately, often governments do not like it when evidence comes to light showing that official data is inaccurate or totally false. People in power also do not want the public to question the veracity of the “success stories” or news flashes touting “rapid economic growth” achieved under its watch. And while in most instances it is the authoritarian states such as China and North Korea who attempt to silence the “fact-checkers,” we are now witnessing more and more open and democratic regimes using strong-arm tactics to bring any “data sceptics” to book.

This aversion to any form of challenges to official statistics has been met with state-orchestrated sanctions in almost every country in one form or another. Sometimes the truth-seeker is killed or kidnapped, at other times they are muzzled by the threat of punishment and banishment.

The most recent and blatant example of governmental overreach to tighten its grip on dissemination of information is now unfolding in the African nation of Tanzania. Its parliament passed an amendment to the Statistics Act of 2015 on September 10, giving the government broad authority to set standards for independent data collection, and making it a criminal offence to publicly question official government statistics. One amendment states: “A person shall not disseminate or otherwise communicate to the public any statistical information which is intended to invalidate, distort, or discredit official statistics.” The amendments also require people and institutions to seek the approval of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) prior to communicating

their research findings to the public.

Opposition members in parliament in Tanzania are resisting these new amendments stating that they could target institutions and scholars releasing data that isn't in favour of the government. Independent scholars and academics also argue that the new laws will curtail both the collection of crucial data and the ability to fact-check and hold official sources accountable.

What propelled the apparently democratically elected leader of Tanzania, in power since 2015, to resort to such draconian measures to suppress truth-seekers? The *Wall Street Journal* in a report titled “Tanzania's President Got Off to a Strong Start, Then Turned into a Strongman” sounded an alarm. It said that President John Magufuli “nicknamed ‘the Bulldozer’ is cracking



PHOTO: AFP

The World Bank said it was deeply concerned about new Tanzanian legislation which would punish anyone who questions official statistics. The amendments to the 2015 Statistics Act are yet to be approved by President John Magufuli (pictured above).

down on opponents and spooking foreign investors, shifting one of Africa's more stable democracies onto an authoritarian path.”

Many of his policy measures also indicate a lack of respect for women and ignorance of the facts of economic conditions in Tanzania. A few days ago, Mr Magufuli urged women to stop taking birth control pills, saying the country needs more people. Unfortunately, his reasoning is contradicted by two key facts on poverty and family size in Tanzania. It has a population of around 53 million people, with 49 percent of them living on less than USD 2 a day. On average, a woman in Tanzania has more than five children, one of the highest rates in the world.

Tanzania undertook this perilous journey to ban any form of fact-checking

to choke off the skepticism voiced by the media regarding the official economic and developmental statistics published by the state-run bureau NBS. In 2017, the World Bank cut its forecast for Tanzania's full-year GDP growth in November to 6.6 percent versus the government's revised growth target of 7.0 percent.

Data quality in Tanzania is poor. Many news sources have in the past pointed out that evidence-based research—that could inform how national policies are formulated in African countries—is lacking. Fortunately, in Tanzania, like many other countries, independent actors fill this gap by providing data—for example, on flood-prone areas to avoid disasters or by documenting citizens' needs, something that isn't captured in official

impacts on the generation and use of official and non-official statistics, which are a vital foundation for the country's development.”

The international agency further commented that the law is “out of line with international standards such as the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the African Charter on Statistics.”

Since I singled out China in my opener, I would be remiss if I don't also mention that leaders of that country, which now has the world's second largest economy, have not only in the past frowned upon any fact-based reporting on politics, civil society and sensitive historical events, but has also increasingly been striving to keep negative news about the economy under wraps.

Recently, stories surfaced that China has in the past been cooking data on GDP and investment growth. On September 28 this year, the *New York Times* reported that the government sent a directive to journalists in China in early October identifying six economic topics that would be “managed” by the government. The list of topics includes: (i) Worse-than-expected data that could show the economy is slowing; (ii) Local government debt risks; (iii) The impact of the trade war with the United States; (iv) Signs of declining consumer confidence; (v) The risks of stagflation, or rising prices coupled with slowing economic growth; and (vi) “Hot-button issues to show the difficulties of people's lives.”

The role of independent or “third-party” sources of accurate and reliable data on GDP, market conditions in a country, and the economic wellbeing of the masses is critical. An economy that has no independent source of data can be compared to an aircraft flying without its airspeed sensors. The analogy was drawn by Aidan Eyakuze, the executive director of Twaweza, a not-for-profit research organisation in Tanzania, in his critique of the government's actions. He drew a parallel to an Air France jetliner that crashed in 2009 because the aircraft's airspeed sensors failed. “Without the air speed reading, the computer systems failed and the pilots, flying literally data blind, were unable to regain control of the aircraft,” he wrote on Oxfamblogs.org.

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