

The price of exposing truth is getting costlier than ever



THE OVERTON WINDOW
 ERESH OMAR JAMAL

TODAY is the fifth anniversary of the UN recognising November 2 as the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. Incidentally, data shows that this year has been one of the deadliest for journalists out of the last five years, if not longer. And those who have attacked journalists have done so with an impunity that remains unmatched in recent history.

According to the International Press Institute, as many as 100 journalists have been killed worldwide since September 2017. Some of these murders were quite sensational and thus gathered large-scale media and public attention, while others, unfortunately, failed to garner as much coverage. But apart from the murder of journalists, there have been many other forms of violence against them throughout the world in the last one year.

In its "Global Impunity Index 2018: Getting Away With Murder", the Committee to Protect Journalists highlighted 14 countries where impunity for crimes against journalists has become "entrenched". While most of these countries have been mired in one form of conflict or another, such as Somalia, Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Afghanistan, etc., what is shocking is that Bangladesh too has managed to get on that list. And not only Bangladesh, but India and Pakistan too are on the list, which perhaps shows the real state of protection afforded to journalists by governments in South Asia in general.

However, the fact that Bangladesh is on the list despite not being a country currently going through a war or a major conflict wouldn't come as a great surprise to those who had witnessed the events that unfolded during the recent student movement for safe roads. During that time, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), as many as 30 journalists "were the targets of deliberate violence" for covering the "wave of student protests in Dhaka." These included direct physical attacks "by pro-

government activists armed with steel bars or sticks," where the worst injuries were sustained by "Associated Press photographer AM Ahad, Palash Shikder of *Dainik Banik* and freelance photographer Rahat Karim." Others assaulted include "Channel-i reporter Samia Rahman, bdnews24.com photographer Mahmud Zaman Ovi, *Dainik Janakantha's* Ibnul Asaf Jawed, a reporter for the US-based Zuma Press known as Rimon, and photojournalism student Enamul Hasan" and many more. Then there was the "vandalising" of journalists' "vehicles and camera" to prevent them from covering the attacks and police passivity in the face of it, as

Even after the information minister had acknowledged the attacks and wrote a letter to the home minister, not a single case of the attacks has, unfortunately, been followed up to our knowledge which, again, shows the sheer scale of impunity that has been given to those responsible for committing violence against journalists.

In fact, one individual who was detained is photojournalist Shahidul Alam who, according to RSF, is a victim himself. He is still languishing in jail after the incident of his arrest, despite calls from hundreds, if not more, of academics from around the world, Nobel laureates, intellectuals and

Julian Assange, remains "arbitrarily detained" as per two UN rulings for seven years without charge. Whose political refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, thanks to the actions of the newly elected Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno, now "looks more and more like solitary confinement"—equivalent to torture—according to the General Counsel at the Human Rights Watch.

Speaking of Wikileaks, this year also saw the violent murder of Malta's most famous investigative journalist, sometimes referred to as Malta's "One-Woman Wikileaks", Daphne Caruana Galizia. We also cannot forget about the murders of Bulgarian journalist Viktoriya Marinova, Slovakian investigative journalist Jan Kuciak—who was covering high-level corruption cases, including alleged links between organised crime and top Slovak politicians—and his girlfriend, Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh, Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi and many others, who simply refused to shut up and let crime and corruption reign freely.

Because similar to what Julian Assange said, they too believed that "One of the best ways to achieve justice is to expose injustice." Which is what they did till the very end, in spite of little support.

And the journalists who are still standing and fighting to expose injustice today, also seem to be doing so with little support and, in fact, amidst increasing criticism and growing condemnation, especially from politicians and members of the government. Perhaps because, as Edward Snowden had said, "Those who have never risked anything want nothing more than to criticise those who risk everything."

The question for everyone else, however, remains that as these people who are exposing injustice are slowly being silenced and removed one by one, who will expose the injustice that is eventually done to you? And, when those "who are risking their everything" to expose injustice themselves are subjected to the greatest of injustices, is your silence all what they truly deserve?

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A group of men equipped with sticks and sharp weapons swoop on Associated Press photojournalist AM Ahad in Dhanmondi after the latter started taking photos of demonstrating students being attacked during the road safety movement.

well as sexual assault on at least one female journalist for "filming a pro-government demonstration."

I happened to be one of the witnesses to these disgraceful events, and a number of journalists working for *The Daily Star*, including one who was "attacked with a stick and then handed over to the police and detained by them" for hours simply for taking photographs, were also the victims of such senseless violence and are still awaiting justice. Since then, despite widespread protests by journalists and activists, the government has failed to take any meaningful steps to bring those responsible for the attacks to account.

authors including the likes of the great Noam Chomsky, calling for his release.

Yet, one could look at this grim picture in our own country as being, to some extent, the mirror image of what is currently happening worldwide in an age when an increasing number of governments and intelligence agencies in countries considered to be the freest in the world, consider investigative journalists as the greatest threat to national security above all others, including terrorists, as per their own admissions.

One such country that I am referring to, of course, is the UK—at the heart of which the Editor-in-Chief of Wikileaks,

Increase ICU beds in Chattogram

Availability of service dismal compared to demand

IT should not be lost on anyone that just 12 Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds for the entirety of Noakhali, Feni, Rangamati, Khagrachhari, Bandarban, Cox's Bazar, and Chattogram are nowhere close to being adequate. Yet, as we have recently pointed out in a report, that is exactly the number of ICU beds in public hospitals that is available for patients in the region who need intensive care.

Intensive Care Units are there for patients with severe or life-threatening injuries or illnesses. And at any given moment, the likelihood of finding one of the 12 beds at the Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) empty for someone who needs critical care is marginal at best. Alongside the number of beds, other logistical and manpower support needed also remain severely inadequate. Estimates show that every year, around 2,500 patients in the region need intensive care support.

So for patients in this region, many from low-income backgrounds, the only other option available in emergency cases are private hospitals where the cost of intensive care is very high. The difference in out-of-pocket expenditures between private and public hospitals is in the lakhs, and as one case in our report showed, patients from low-income backgrounds might have to resort to drastic measures such as selling off livestock and land just to afford a private ICU bed.

The availability of this essential service is a matter of life and death. And, for the majority of the population, government hospitals remain the only viable option. The constitution recognises healthcare as a basic right, and as a country committed to fulfilling the SDGs, access to healthcare (more so in emergency cases) is of utmost importance. The inadequacy of the number of beds in comparison to the number of potential patients in the region should have been recognised by the administration already. We urge that the matter is now given serious consideration, and immediate measures are taken to increase the number of beds in the region. If possible, not only should the number be increased, but also distributed among public hospitals in the area.

Bangladesh advances one notch on EDBI

This is not quite good enough

BANGLADESH ranked 176th in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index (EDBI)—an index that measures the performance of some 190 countries in the world. The "Doing Business 2019" report, however, found Bangladesh trailing all other South Asian nations. The index is based on 10 broad pillars and the main areas where we have done better than last year are: getting electricity (six points up), registering property (two points up) and paying taxes (one point up).

Unfortunately, we have done poorly in other areas. For starting a business, our rank in 2018 is 138 (131 in 2017); for dealing with construction permits, our rank is 138 (130 in 2017); for access to credit managed, our rank is 161 (two notches down from 2017); for protecting minority investors, we slid 13 spots from the preceding year to 89; and in trading across borders, we are down three spots to 176. Although we did better than last year with a measly upward movement by one notch (176th in 2019 as opposed to 177th in 2018), the country ranked lowest in South Asia. In fact, war-torn Afghanistan managed to rank at 167, nine spots above Bangladesh. Even Myanmar with all its ethnic tensions outranked us by five points!

Reforms are sorely needed to expedite the various steps involved in the lifecycle of a business and we have consistently been coming up short in some crucial areas. As we have said in the past, if the country is truly serious about attracting FDI, then the cost and time for starting and doing business must be reduced.

Growth, green growth and development

The case of Dhaka city

MIZAN R KHAN

THE dictionary meaning of "growth" is "getting bigger", in size or volume, whereas "development" is improvement in the quality of a system. It can be an individual, a community, or a nation. Growth is termed as a physical change, whereas development is said to be physical as well as socioeconomic or psychological change. Thus, "development" may require growth (physical), or may happen without, depending on the context. For example, growth in basic needs for people add to improvement in quality of life, but growth in mere junk productions does not add to any development. Growth in a developing economy may add to quality

really say that the rapid growth in Dhaka city leads to improvement in quality of life of its citizens? In yearly global Liveability Index Dhaka fares lowest/almost lowest year after year. Based on regular but varied national reflections on Dhaka in this daily, I have to argue this dishevelled, callous growth in Dhaka city is not development by any means. Let me justify my thesis based on a few basic indicators.

First about the open space: The WHO says a minimum of 9 sqm of open space/person is needed as a basic amenity. In many Western cities, there is more than 20 sqm of open space/person. On October 29 this daily carried a beautiful piece on open space. But how

neighbouring rooftops exchanging epistles wrapped over little stones. Now they can shake hands from back windows. It's better now that the government has a guideline about a third of residential plots to be left un-built.

Next, about roads and footpaths. Again in a civic city, planners say about 20 percent of space should be left for roads including footpaths and thoroughfares. How much do we have in Dhaka? Barely six percent, with very little footpaths in a city where 60 percent of people walk. Whatever narrow tiny footpaths we have, they are under the control of either policemen or of student leaders, and poor vendors eke out their livelihood at their behest.

Third, about air quality or noise pollution. The Department of Environment often measures these indicators, which show a really alarming picture. Air quality in the densest parts of the city is over 100 times worse than the WHO's prescribed standard. The result is that millions have asthma, whereas when we were young we barely saw anyone suffering from asthma in Dhaka. It is the same when it comes to noise pollution. The high dB level is deafening for children, young and old alike, though the High Court banned hydraulic horns. In our no land zoning culture, educational institutions or hospitals are no different than shopping plazas or industrial units.

What about the ponds, canals and rivers in and around Dhaka city? This newspaper carried quite a number of reports on disappearing ponds and canals within core areas of Dhaka. But thanks to developers and powerful encroachers,

almost all are gone. Again, Dhaka is bounded by four rivers and historically, cities have been established along river banks, for easy communications, amenities and trading. What a mess we have made of ours! We now depend overwhelmingly on ground water, which is fast depleting because of overexploitation. In all these four rivers, you cannot find a single drop of clean water, not to talk of its chemical parameters. Because of extinction of ponds particularly in old Dhaka, some citizens still take baths in the stinky pitch-black waters of the Buriganga, once the lifeline of Dhaka city.

Next about housing. Real estate value in Dhaka city is one of the highest in the world, comparable to Tokyo, London or New York. What pride we have, with income barely reaching USD 1,600 per capita. About 40 percent of the city's population live in slums which lack basic amenities. In the recent crusade against drug peddlers, police have caught most of the criminals from the city's slums. The government does not yet have a firm housing policy for those who build for us. Vested interests are keen on catering to the needs of only the rich, not the poor.

Finally, we are being told to follow the Pudong model, leaving behind this mess of Dhaka West, to move East, as a frontier land left open—but actually it's a sprawling floodplain! Huge investments, both national and international, with profuse advice wait in the wings. Can we do it without restraining our greedy developers, or without making the RAJUK accountable? Or, without questioning our culture of impunity of powerful interests? What about the citizens of Dhaka West? Should they be left in a perpetual moribund state?

These are a few reflections of mine on a few aspects that touch our lives at the core, but our policymakers tend to worship any kind of growth, without reflecting on its development features. So, instead of marching to the East too fast, first we should think of how we can decentralise our Dhaka-centric country and bring in basic amenities with a little order to Dhaka city and its satellites. This will provide vital lessons for building the East. Perhaps we should let investments be put on hold for a moment and have a collective reflection for both fronts.

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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

of life, but not much in a rich developed economy. So, there is a de-growth movement to maintain environmental sustainability.

Also the terms "green growth" or "sustainable growth" are used often by policymakers, which actually is an oxymoron: a contradiction in terms. Growth in a finite system, like in a limited, bounded space as in a country or in global ecological system, cannot continue ad infinitum. However, green growth sounds better in terms of maintaining a balance with nature. In this sense sustainable development appears to be the right concept, as an ideal, though difficult to operationalise. Looking through these conceptualisations, can we

much of it is there in Dhaka city? Numbers may vary, but here are a few: about 0.052 sqm/person (DAP, 2009), which is several orders of magnitude lower than the minimum standard. An ideal city is regarded where there is about 20 percent forest cover, but we have about seven percent under vegetation of sorts, about one percent as public parks. Actually, any open space is viewed as kind of an "eye sore" by our builders, so something has to be built. The result is the concrete slum that we have. Our cars down with just an hour of torrential rain in parts of Dhaka.

In my class, I joke with students that movies of the 1960s showed Romeo and Juliet as sharp shooters in the

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The great deterioration of student politics

Gone are the days when student politics was admirable—when the prevailing atmosphere in all educational institutions were praiseworthy. Back in those days, Student's League and Students Union were the only two wings that made up the political community in universities.

They were not beholden to any political party. And would raise their slogans based on how different issues affected the nation, as students were conscious and concerned about the wellbeing of their fellow citizens. Nowadays, ideologies of each and every political party dominates political discussions in almost every university campus. And most discussions are really just about defaming rival groups and talking up their own party through whatever claims necessary—whether they be true or false.

Protests often lead to gunshots being fired, crackers or hand made bombs being exploded, etc. often injuring other students. This is followed up by university authorities being forced to close down their institutions which hamper regular educational activities.

Student politics has become demoralising; and this kind of politicisation is forcing students to increasingly get involved in criminal activities which is leading to their human values to deteriorate.

Mahmudul Hasan, By email