

THE YEAR THAT WAS

22 events that defined 2018 and which have or will have far-reaching consequences for the country.

Farmers Bank loan scam

Large-scale corruption and irregularities in the privately-owned Farmers Bank have been exposed over the last year, after it was unable to pay back over Tk 852 crore in deposits to its clients. In March, Bangladesh Bank unearthed further scams involving loans of up to Tk 500 crore which were granted to firms violating banking norms and procedures, and most of which later defaulted.

The central bank had first detected scams (involving Tk 400 crore worth of loans) by the Farmers Bank in December 2017. It held former chairman Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir (also ruling party MP and former home minister) and ex-chairman of its executive committee Mahabubul Haque Chisty as the prime responsible. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which has been investigating the scam since 2017, placed Chisty and his family members, and other top bank officials on a travel embargo. In April, Chisty was also arrested in a Tk 160 crore money laundering case; he was denied bail in June.

Farmers Bank itself is also failing to recover loans of up to thousands of crores; 58 percent of its total loans were in default, as of September. The government attempted a bailout, with four state-owned banks and an investment company buying a majority of its shares, which came under much criticism for the use of public funds in bailing out a private bank.



Rape of Marma sisters

On January 22, two teenage sisters of a Marma family were allegedly raped and sexually assaulted by security forces in Orachhari village in Rangamati's Bilaichari Upazila. The sisters were hospitalised a day later, where they were held under strict surveillance for more than three weeks, despite repeated requests from the sisters that they be released in the custody of Chakma Circle Chief Raja Devasish Roy. They insisted that their parents were being controlled by the powers-that-be.

A writ petition was subsequently filed by prominent rights activists asking that the sisters be released under own custody. But while this writ was pending, a second bench issued a verdict on Feb 13 saying the daughters should be placed under their parents' custody following another petition by their father.

Two days later, the Marma sisters were forcibly removed from the hospital by masked people who also attacked Chakma Rani Yan Yan and her companions. Later, it was found that the sisters had been taken to the house of a former union parishad chairman in Rangamati. The NHRC formed a three-member probe committee, nearly a month after the incident, but declared that they did not find any evidence that indicated rape, or that the Chakma Rani had been assaulted.

Bangladesh gets 4G but downgrades to 2G from time to time

Bangladesh entered the fourth-generation mobile internet era in February 2018, with Grameenphone, Robi, and Banglalink racing to provide a 4G network to users eager for the fastest possible data speed, around 7-10Mbps. However, less than a year into its launch, it has already been suspended at least thrice by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC)—for over 36 hours before and after election day, for several days during the student protests demanding road safety, and for an hour before one SSC examination.

