



Garbage on the window sill of the environment appeal court.

PHOTO: NILIMA JAHAN

No comfort at court

NILIMA JAHAN



Overflowing garbage bins in the corridors are a nuisance for the lawyers who work there year-round as well as passers-through.

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The High Court issued a rule on June 23 on why it will not send out instructions to set up air-conditioning in all district courts of the country and asked the secretaries of law, power, finance ministries and the public works department to respond within four weeks. The rule came after advocate Moksed Ali filed a public interest litigation (PIL) on April 11 this year, regarding the absence of air conditioners in district courtrooms. Lawyers, judges, and people who have to appear at court suffer from unbearable heat in courtrooms in the summer.

Lawyers of district courts claim that authorities pay little heed to the numerous problems they regularly face in their workplace. For example, a few days ago, the public prosecutor of Gazipur judge court, Alhaj Haris Uddin Ahmed, lost consciousness due to extreme heat in the courtroom. "It's too hot these days, and we demand air conditioning in the courtrooms so we can work comfortably," he says.

Advocate Haris's demand is legitimate; many courtrooms can only seat 20 people (including lawyers) whereas at least 200 people show up. Only five or so electric fans is not enough to cool stuffed courtrooms. "One-third of these fans don't even work, but the concerned authorities take no initiatives to fix these. But why should that be, when the courts earn over 10 crores per month?" says advocate Chaitanya Halder, from Dhaka judge court. At the judge court, only the metropolitan sessions judge court and the chief judicial magistrate court are air-conditioned.

"Most of the courts also don't have any generators. Sometimes, when the electricity goes off, trial processes are hampered. The judges might use small fans, but it is very difficult for the lawyers and other people in the room to tolerate such heat," says another lawyer, of Gazipur judge court, on condition of anonymity.

Seating crises are particularly common in district courtrooms outside Dhaka.

"There aren't enough seats both in the courtrooms and the common room—the courtrooms only seat around 15 and those stools too are in poor condition," says advocate Abdul Jabbar Masum, from Brahmanbaria judge court.

Lawyers of the lower courts have also long been demanding a change in their dress code. The tradition of a black coat, gown, tie and collar band is a colonial one, handed down from the British period. While such an elaborate outfit may make sense for the British weather, in Bangladesh, where it is hot for most of the year, advocates call for this outfit to be changed and for the dress code be set in accordance with our weather. "It's difficult to wear these gowns on hot days, especially when we are running back and forth from our chambers to the courtrooms," says advocate Noorjahan Kabir of Dhaka judge court.

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