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Media gag policies for state employees are dangerous

It may lead to misinformation and political spin of data

We are deeply concerned by the continued assault on freedom of expression and free flow of information in the country. In its latest bid to tighten control of information, the administration has imposed restrictions on any kind of media engagement by government officials without prior approval of their department chiefs. According to a report by this daily, the public administration ministry has sent a letter to the secretaries in all ministries to this effect, invoking Section 22 of the Government Servant (Conduct) Rules, 1979. The blanket restriction comes after months of similar measures, if on a smaller scale, by several government and autonomous bodies. For example, on April 16, nurses of all public hospitals were instructed by the Directorate General of Nursing and Midwifery not to speak to the media. A week later, Health Minister Zahid Maleque prohibited health officials from talking to the media.

It's important to take note of the manner in which increasing restrictions are being imposed on the free flow of information. The coronavirus pandemic has, unfortunately, seen old rules being invoked and familiar repressive tools such as the Digital Security Act being used with greater enthusiasm than before, with devastating consequences. Making state officials inaccessible for comments or interviews during a pandemic could mean that you not only get inaccurate, unverified information, but also end up with dangerous claims such as the ones by ministers that the pandemic is "under control" in Bangladesh, which is far from the truth. There is usually a vested interest in centralising communications like this. It enables politicians and policymakers to selectively "spin" data to control public opinion. This form of information control, at a time of dwindling access and resources for journalists in Bangladesh, could also mean a heavy blow to the news industry.

We urge the government to refrain from pursuing this dangerous path. While controlling public messaging through some form of centralised communications may have some utility in normal times, there is no justification for blanket restrictions on media engagement. The implications of such gag policies in the middle of a pandemic can be far-reaching and, therefore, these should be taken off the books. At the same time, we also urge the government to ensure proper flow of information, which is vital to saving lives and establishing accountability, and address people's legitimate grievances instead of stifling them. The responsibility for any chaos that follows from lack of opportunity to speak and lack of access to proper information ultimately lies with the government.

3,256 healthcare facilities operating without registration

Stern action needed against institutions jeopardising people's lives

A recent report published in this daily sheds light on the dreadful reality regarding licence renewal—or its absence thereof—of private hospitals, clinics and diagnostic centres. Following the Regent Hospital scam, private medical facilities were given a month's time to renew their licences by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on July 23. One month on, around 3,500 private medical facilities still did not bother to apply to renew their licences. At present, 3,256 are pending renewal after completing the formalities, 2,674 are waiting for inspection by officials, and 1,736 other facilities have already been inspected.

It is mortifying that two-thirds of the country's over 15,000 private clinics and diagnostic centres had been running without any valid licence since 2018. The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) began "digitalising" the process of the renewal of licences in 2018, but progress was at a snail's pace—with scanty staff responsible for thousands of institutions. However, there can be no excuse for allowing institutions to run illegally, jeopardising the lives and wellbeing of millions of patients.

For far too long, these illegally operating institutions have enjoyed impunity, with authorities turning a blind eye towards their highly questionable and criminal practices. This must end now. It is totally unacceptable that healthcare facilities are allowed to operate without licences as it poses grave risks to those who are seeking treatment in those facilities, especially given the fact that our healthcare system is already in crisis mode. The government must look into the matter with urgency and take stern action against institutions that are not abiding by the rules. At the same time, it must ensure that the inspection process is free of corruption.

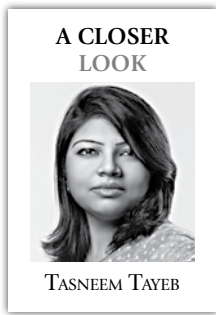
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Justice for Aritry Adhikary

On December 3, 2018, Aritry was found hanging from the ceiling of her home, hours after she and her parents were allegedly insulted by some teachers of Viqarunnisa Noon School and College for using a mobile phone during examinations. The next day, her father filed a case with police, accusing three teachers of provoking Aritry's suicide. Recently, a Dhaka court issued an arrest warrant for the suspended acting principal, along with the accused teacher. Such cases of students being humiliated by teachers is nothing new, and neither are the suicides that tend to result from them, unfortunately. I hope the arrest serves as an example for everyone so we no longer have to lose anyone to such heart-wrenching causes.

Samiya Islam, Nilphamari



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

jails, where constructive counselling is supposed to be provided so that they realise their mistakes and come out of these centres better human beings. The reality of these JDCs, as perhaps one would expect, is pretty different.

The recent grisly murder of three young boys in the Jashore Juvenile Development Centre has brought into limelight the country's struggles with ensuring protection of child offenders in the so-called juvenile correction centres. Naeem Hossain, Parvez Hasan Rabbi and Rasel alias Sujon—three juvenile inmates of the Jashore JDC, along with some other inmates—were tortured by the officials and other inmates of the JDC so brutally that they succumbed to the injuries on the same day. Their mouths were stuffed with towels and hands were pulled out of the iron bars, while they were being beaten with cricket stumps, rods and sticks. The pain was so brutal that these boys were said to have fainted. And when they regained consciousness, they were subjected to a fresh round of beating. And why? According to media reports, apparently one of the boys—Hridoy, who also happens to be a barber—failed to comply with the correction centre's head of security Nur Islam's order to cut his hair, which led to two bouts of scuffles—the second leading to the death of the three juvenile inmates, triggering public wrath.

This, however, is not the first such incident of atrocity committed in a correction facility. Earlier, in 2011, an inmate was brutally murdered at a correction centre. And cases of suicide are not uncommon. In 2013, Monira Begum chose suicide over living at the Gazipur correction centre. Even as recently as 2019, a 15-year-old boy Noor Islam committed suicide in one of the centres. One can only imagine what circumstances lead to such desperate actions by these youths.

The pictures of the three JDC in the country that are now surfacing through media investigations tell us a lot about what happens behind the iron gates of these "correction" facilities.

These centres are no less of a prison than prisons for adults. These overcrowded places—according to media reports, these centres run at overcapacity,

CHILDREN, like adults, can get embroiled in conflicts with the law. When juveniles commit criminal offences, they are placed in Juvenile Development Centres (JDC) rather than

at times accommodating more than 900 inmates in 300 capacity facilities—are neither able to provide the children with adequate food and essentials, nor are they able to ensure satisfactory psychological counselling to address their emotional needs. Worst of all, these centres seem to be run by people who treat these juveniles as criminals and are prone to meting out harsh punishments, as happened on August 13 at the Jashore JDC.

An investigative report published by

are being "corrected" in the development centres? Perhaps the murder of one, or the occasional suicide of lone juveniles, could not generate enough public attention to engage them.

Children, especially the ones in their adolescence, can become derailed for various reasons. Last year, I wrote a column that took a closer look at the causes behind the growing problem of juvenile delinquency. While eliminating reasons that lead children to come into



PHOTO: COLLECTED

a local English daily suggests that these correction centres lack proper counselling teams or even proper doctors. For a long time, these centres were even lacking in instructors for physically or mentally challenged children. Due to lack of care, planning and supervision, neither proper counselling nor physiological training are provided to these children. And who are to be blamed for this? The local "caretakers" or the system that allows the appointment of sadistic, myopic and careless officials for the important task of caring for misguided children?

Given the realities, one might be pardoned for questioning the willingness of the concerned authorities to address the plight of child offenders. Why did it take the murder of three boys for the Ministry of Social Welfare to form a probe body to identify the criminals or even acknowledge the crime? When was the last time the concerned authorities paid visits to these JDCs to see for themselves how the misguided children of this nation

conflict with the law remains a priority for all; for the ones who are already on the wrong side of it, these correctional facilities can play a significant role in giving them a second chance at life.

Child psychologist Tarana Anis says that juvenile development centres are not only meant to help the derailed children and youth understand the mistakes they have made, the crimes they have committed, and enable them to correct their ways through psychological counselling. These centres are also supposed to explore the triggers that led them to commit crimes and address those factors. She said, "Adolescents can become engaged in criminal activities for many reasons, it is the responsibility of the correction facilities to understand case-by-case what pushed them to this path, help them overcome those triggers."

"In fact, if possible, child offenders should be allowed to stay in the comfort of their homes, amidst the love and care of their families. Clinical social workers

We need a paradigm shift to deal with loss and damage from climate change



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

politically sensitive topic—it brings up issues of liability and compensation, which many developed countries regard as taboo topics. Nevertheless, after much concerted effort from the most vulnerable developing countries, there was some success in getting the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) on loss and damage approved at COP19 in Poland in 2013. Under the WIM, an executive committee with a five year work programme was set up, which delivered some excellent technical products, including a task force report on displacement due to climate change (which falls under the WIM).

However, there has not been similar progress on the demand from vulnerable developing countries for innovative finance for loss and damage, beyond insurance. While insurance is definitely a potential way forward, it cannot be the only way to raise funds. Last year at the 25th Conference of Parties (COP25) held in Madrid, the vulnerable developing countries pushed hard for setting up a financial mechanism under the WIM to explore some new and innovative sources of funding loss and damage. This topic was one of the hot issues that took COP25 into two extra days of negotiations, and even then was not resolved to our satisfaction. All we got was to set up a technical arm of the WIM called the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage, but it had no financial arm, which we had demanded. Hence, COP25 was definitely a failed conference from the perspective of the vulnerable developing countries.

Preparations are now under way for COP26, which was originally supposed to have been hosted by the United Kingdom

in November 2020, but has now been postponed to November 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This gives sufficient time for the UK as incoming chair of COP26 to consult widely with all relevant countries as well as civil society, and try to come up with a way forward to avoid the failure that was COP25.

How do we change the paradigm from mainly being a blame game to finding pragmatic solutions? A number of factors have made it very clear that climatic events are being significantly enhanced due to the increase of over one Degree Centigrade in the global atmospheric temperature as a result of human induced climate change,

damage—namely that it is not just a matter for poor developing countries but for all countries, including the richest ones. Hence, it is now a global problem that will affect all countries, and every government will have to come up with solutions to protect their own populations.

The third additional factor is the global Covid-19 pandemic, which has clearly shown what the deadly consequences will be for national leaders who ignore the scientists and refuse to take timely actions. We are seeing, in real time, the enormous losses in human lives in countries where their leaders



Coastal areas in Patuakhali inundated during cyclone Amphan.

STAR FILE PHOTO

which means a discussion on loss and damage can no longer be postponed.

In 2020, the scientific community already made a major breakthrough by scientifically and credibly attributing the enhancement of the severity of different climatic events around the world. This includes super cyclone Amphan as well as the current floods, the present, severe fires in California and even the hurricanes Laura and Marco, which are currently in the Gulf of Mexico and likely to hit Texas.

This brings out the second new situation regarding the impacts that are attributable to human induced climate change and the associated loss and

have ignored warnings from scientists and epidemiologists. Climate change scientists have been giving similar warnings, which unfortunately have been largely ignored so far, but now need to be taken more seriously if we wish to minimise the extent of global loss and damage going forward.

So the main paradigm shift that has occurred in 2020 is that the problem of addressing loss and damage is no longer a problem of the future, but rather a current and global problem that affects all countries. Hence, there is an urgent need to come up with solutions using a new paradigm of global solidarity, rather than

can be engaged to provide them with psychological counselling and emotional support to help them rise above the challenges. Regular psychological monitoring combined with healthy physiological training can play an important role in enabling these children move forward in life, while living with their families. The idea is to allow these children to leave their past behind and move forward in life, not the other way round."

With regard to the individuals appointed in various roles in the JDCs, Tarana said, "Dealing with disturbed children can be an overwhelming task, even for child psychologists. The people who are being appointed in these important roles should have in-depth understanding about child psychology; or at least these individuals should be given regular training and counselling in handling traumatised children."

The responsibility for disturbed juveniles should not be left in the hands of sadistic individuals who take pleasure in inflicting pain on helpless children. These development centres have been established to correct the ways and world views of child offenders by providing them with psychological training, and integrate them into mainstream social and economic activities by providing them with skills development training, rather than breeding violence-hardened criminals, as the three JDCs in the country are currently doing.

While the concerned authorities are investigating the specific case at Jashore JDC, the higher authorities must now take a serious look into how these incidents of mismanagement and cruelty were allowed to continue for so long. Bangladesh, as one of the earliest signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), is expected to be a model for many other countries to follow.

The country and its administration must do all it can to uphold the rights of its children. Offender or not, every children has the right to protection and care and under no circumstances should these be compromised. The culprits, not only in Jashore JDC, but in the form of a system that looks the other way, should be brought to justice for the gruesome murder of the three boys—for subjecting their wards to pain, trauma and cruelty.

Let's not forget, by allowing a situation where a child needs to be put in a JDC, we have already failed them as a society. The failure to ensure their basic safety at these JDCs is worse by many orders of magnitude.

For these delinquent youths, we have JDCs. What do we have for a delinquent society?

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that of a blame game.

The final aspect of the issue of loss and damage, which makes it more urgent than before, is the clear emerging attribution of displacement due to climate change, leading to the creation of climate change refugees—more popularly called climate migrants. This problem is now clearly attributable to human induced climate change and will become an even bigger political problem unless it is tackled early.

This is where the collaboration of the UK as the incoming chair of COP26 with Bangladesh—representing nearly 50 of the most vulnerable developing countries as chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF)—can be a useful vehicle to bring together developed and developing countries and find ways towards more pragmatic solutions in funding loss and damage beyond insurance.

At the same time, Bangladesh has the opportunity to offer a potential solution to set up its own national mechanism through implementation of the two year pilot project on loss and damage, which was announced by the government at COP24 in Katowice, Poland in 2019. This project needs to be fast tracked by the relevant ministries and taken forward as a two year public private partnership project to explore, in very practical ways, how Bangladesh can set up its own national mechanism on loss and damage.

This would also be another opportunity for Bangladesh to share its experience in real time with other vulnerable countries in the CVF for South-South knowledge sharing on how to tackle this increasingly important hazard to our people and countries.

The negative impacts of human induced climate change are now visible every single day in different parts of the world. There is no longer any valid reason to drag our feet and delay the ways to find solutions for all countries in the spirit of mutual solidarity. This is an opportunity for the UK and Bangladesh to lead the world in finding acceptable solutions at COP26 next year. This opportunity should not be missed.

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