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Unauthorised, low-grade facemasks flooding the market

How can factories produce them without permission?

WE are alarmed at the way unauthorised factories are producing thousands of low-quality face masks and selling them in the wholesale markets. As the number of coronavirus patients is increasing in the country during winter, there is also a growing demand for face masks among people. Taking this as an opportunity, many unscrupulous garment factories are producing substandard products in unhygienic conditions. According to a report by *The Daily Star* on Thursday, many people in Kamrangirchar, Keraniganj, Gazipur, Narayanganj, and Savar are involved in the production of these low-grade, non-woven surgical masks with no idea about the safety guidelines that need to be maintained while working on them.

What is basically happening here is, these people are getting contracts from small local factories which do not provide them with any guidelines on what conditions these masks should be made. The factories supply these masks to the local market from where wholesale buyers purchase them in bulk at cheap rates, without any packaging, and later sell them in the capital and other areas.

Needless to say, these face masks will actually increase the risk of infection as they have not been made maintaining the strict hygiene required for such protective gear. Those wearing them will be doing so with a false sense of security and will be more vulnerable in terms of catching the virus and will also be easily transmitting it to others. According to the authorised mask producers, this unhygienic production has put the sector at risk as high-quality masks made by maintaining health safety measures cannot compete with the cheap, low-quality ones.

What we do not understand is how these factories can produce substandard surgical masks without the authorisation of the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA). Also, why is there such hype among people about wearing surgical medical masks when, for the common people, it is more than enough to wear a three-layer fine cotton mask, which can be used repeatedly?

The government needs to give strict, clear guidelines on the use of masks and other safety measures that should be followed by people at large. As low-quality masks are one of the prime reasons behind the rising number of infections in the country, according to health experts, their use should be stopped. The DGDA should immediately take action against the unauthorised factories taking advantage of the crisis. Also, if the government gives specific guidelines to people to wear cotton masks, instead of surgical masks, these unethical business by garment factories may stop to some extent.

A shameful display of violence in the US

The democratic process must be respected

IT is a sad day indeed when the world has had to watch the US Capitol being stormed by violent Trump supporters, as lawmakers met to certify the Electoral College votes for the country's 2020 presidential elections. In dramatic scenes, the joint session of Congress had to be stopped midway and lawmakers had to be escorted to safety by the police. Reports have emerged of people drawing their guns, and one person at least has reportedly been shot and four people have reportedly died.

The incendiary rhetoric that has been used by the outgoing president and the deep divisions that have been created over the last four years were bound to spill over at some point. And the shocking scenes that were witnessed during the Congress session was a most shameful display of protesters refusing to respect the democratic process.

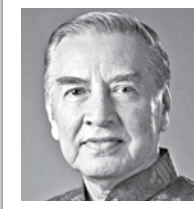
There were clearly some enormous failures by the Capitol Police, as it is difficult to imagine how they could have allowed the protesters to storm the Congress building during an ongoing session, which put the lives of lawmakers and other staff at risk. It also exposed the bias of law enforcers who were clearly indulgent towards the protesters, in stark contrast to the heavy handedness of the federal and national guard agents attempting to crush peaceful protesters of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer. The fact that such violence had taken place in the first place itself is a dark stain on the US and its democracy.

Nevertheless, now that the siege has ended, it is vital for there to be a peaceful and orderly transfer of power. The sitting president must immediately refrain from instigating his supporters from carrying out any further acts of violence and terror. It is tragic that although the courts have dismissed most of the cases filed claiming irregularities in the US elections as having no evidence and most politicians on both sides have agreed that it was a free and fair election, the sitting president continues to spread propaganda to delegitimise it. Wednesday's anarchic situation is a result of that, and has served to deepen the divisions in American society. The crisis the US is currently facing cannot be resolved through violence, but only through peaceful, legal and democratic means.

Fearful public, vengeful police

Reja's death should set alarm bells ringing all over

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

HERE is a story that should alert us all. On December 29, a law student named Rejaul Karim Reja, 30, was having tea with friends at a roadside tea stall around 8 pm near his home in Barisal town.

Police Sub-Inspector Mohiuddin Mahi of Detective Branch (DB) along with two constables, all in plain clothes, picked him up, slapping and hitting him while shouting that he was both a drug user and a peddler. They then took him to the local DB office. There is no report of whether Mahi or any other DB official tested him for drug use. On December 30, he was presented to the court. While in court, his relatives came to see him, when he recounted the horrifying story of brutal beating to them. The court sent him to jail.

Seeing telltale signs of brutal assault, the jail superintendent, Prashanta Kumar Banik, brought in a doctor who sent him straight to the jail hospital, recording in the forwarding note that there were injury marks on his ankles. After more than 36 hours, at 9 pm on January 1, according to Banik, Reja started "bleeding from his leg" and was sent to Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH)—where he was kept for more than 24 hours and later pronounced dead after midnight, at 12:05 am on January 3 to be precise. The director of the hospital, Bakir Hossain, said Reja died of excessive bleeding through his rectum and urinary tract.

On the evening of January 1, his wife, who was in Jashore when the incident occurred, rushed to his hospital bed at SBMCH and saw him losing blood through his rectum and urinary tract. He told his wife how he was mercilessly beaten with metal pipe and kicked repeatedly in the stomach, and that he had been bleeding for many hours and also feared for his life. He died subsequently.

Reja's father Yunus Munshi said his son was in good health at the time of his arrest. He said jail authorities had called him at 9 pm on Friday, January 1, and

informed him that Reja was bleeding after he fell in the bathroom and was admitted in SBMCA. "We went to the hospital and found injuries on his legs, chest and neck... He was losing blood with stool and urine... Police tortured and killed my son," he said. His neighbour Sujon told this paper that he saw injury marks all over Reja's body.

While police have constituted a three-member inquiry committee to investigate the case—headed by a

neighbourhood and among people he mixed with, and no one said anything about Reja being a drug peddler or even a user. There is a police record of his arrest for drug use in 2017. But nothing since then.

Many questions arise from the above story. Why did SI Mohiuddin Mahi suddenly pick him up? After all, there was no complaint against him. Why were Mahi and his two assistants in plain clothes? How can one distinguish

treatment was rendered to him?

Would it be wrong to conclude that Reja's death was first caused by police torture and later by medical neglect? The truth is unlikely to emerge through an investigation involving police officials conducted by their own colleagues.

We want to pose some serious questions to our leaders, the lawmakers, and also those running the police about the present state of police accountability. We know police operate under clear guidelines. But how are officers who turn criminals controlled? There is, mostly in name, some mechanism of ensuring disciplinary action against errant police officials. Does that really work? Recently, under the present IGP, measures were being taken against police found to be using drugs. A very good initiative. But what actions did the police take in cases of custodial deaths? The police force is the only body empowered by the law to kill, but under strict guidelines and only to protect the public. Nowadays, however, police are found to be killing for their own interest. Police officer Pradeep's premeditated murder of retired army major Sinha is a case in point. The latest one is Reja's. Will proper investigation be done and the rogue SI be punished? What about the senior officials who seem to care very little about justice and more about protecting their errant colleagues?

With the enactment of Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013, it was hoped that such incidents would stop. In fact, in September when, for the first time, three former policemen of Pallabi Thana were found to be guilty in a court verdict, it was hoped that it would send a stern signal for the police force to bring in internal reforms. That hope remains elusive.

I would like to conclude by reproducing the oath of office that every police official takes on being appointed:

On my honour, I will never betray my badge, my integrity, my character or the public trust. I will always have the courage to hold myself and others accountable for our actions. I will always uphold my country, constitution and Bangladesh Police.

How ironic.

Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*.



Rejaul Karim Reja.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

deputy commissioner of the Barishal Metropolitan Police—another officer of the same rank (rank is very important in institutions such as these), DB Deputy Commissioner Manzur Hossain, claimed that Reja was a drug dealer and fell ill due to drug-related complications and died as a result, and that police did not torture him. This conclusion has come before any post-mortem on the body, and before the inquiry committee had a chance to deliberate. We can easily imagine what chance there is of unearthing the actual truth.

Our heart goes out to the family of Reja who showed all signs of being tortured leading to his untimely and unfortunate death. Reja could have been a drug user but even then it is no justification for torture, let alone death. Correspondents of this paper asked around his

between common criminals and the police if the latter are not in uniform? Aren't there clear police guidelines that prohibit officers from arresting anybody while not in uniform? A Supreme Court directive mandates that relatives should be informed within 12 hours of a person being arrested from any place other than home. Was this followed in Reja's case?

Questions also arise as to why Reja was bleeding through his rectum and urinary tract. What could have led to that? Can drug addiction—and there is no evidence that he was on drugs since 2017—lead to such bleeding? How thorough was his examination at the jail hospital? What was the diagnosis and treatment? Was an X-ray taken at any stage (which should have revealed his state of internal bleeding)? At the SBMCA, which is a far bigger and better equipped hospital, what

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Will open-door recruitment improve university education?

The Academic Experience Project is a faculty-student collaborative work aimed to glean insights about the experiences of tertiary-level students. Each Friday, The Daily Star publishes an op-ed highlighting its findings. This is the tenth article of the series.

TAHMINA ISLAM and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE higher education sector in Bangladesh has seen rapid growth in recent years with 154 universities now in its list. Yet, only two institutions have made it to the top 200 in the recent QS Asia University Rankings. In the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, the results are more dismal. At the same time, countries in the neighbourhood have seen the inclusion of new universities with a clear rise in rankings. Of course, the overall quality of higher education in Bangladesh comes into question.

The problems with the quality of higher education in Bangladesh are manifold: lack of proper infrastructure and technology, lack of funding, lack of new and innovative programmes, gap between what is taught and what is practiced in the real world, lack of research, and most importantly, lack of good quality faculty.

Students realise they have little to no say in the selection of faculty, the workings and priorities of their universities, as well as their policies and decision-making criteria to ensure the quality of education they seek for themselves. However, they also recognise that quality faculty members who have the interests of students at heart can be transformative in helping them prepare for the future.

There have been allegations of faculty members in public universities not being recruited and promoted on the basis of their merit, but on the basis of

their political inclination. Also, public universities seem to recruit faculty who are valedictorians and alumni of their own institution. In world-renowned universities, recruitment of their own graduates is seen as inbreeding that offers little opportunity to widen the knowledge net. Thus, they recruit faculty from "other" universities with the expectation that they will add new dimensions to the knowledge pool to enrich students.

In contradistinction, when it comes to our public universities, there seems to be little consideration for applicants who apply from outside, even if they are specialised in their fields through research and publications. The situation is no better in the private universities; many of them are inclined to get the job done

engagement styles of faculty applicants should also be critically evaluated by the university administration, faculty peers, and even the students since they are the end users of this service. Periodic, regular, and stringent appraisals of the faculty members need to be conducted where everyone from the university administration to the students can provide feedback. It is also crucial that such feedback is used to help develop the teachers, while creating a wholesome teaching environment wherein faculty members cannot take their positions for granted, an unfortunate practice in many public universities.

Regular training for all faculty members, irrespective of their seniority and positions, are an absolute necessity.



'Quality faculty members who have the interests of students at heart can be transformative in helping them prepare for the future.'

PHOTO: COLLECTED

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with part-time teachers to keep their costs down. Hiring international faculty with attendant costs seems to be an absolute no-no. It may be noted that universities in Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia and Hong Kong, for example, all rose to prominence by keeping their doors open to foreign faculty who can bring with them a whole set of new learning-teaching experiences.

Importantly, students participating in the Academic Experience Project felt that teachers ought to be recruited based on their qualifications, with priority given to individuals with higher degrees, publications, continuing research, and solid experience—not based on their networks and political connections. Teaching and classroom

This will keep them in touch with modern andragogy (the science of how adults learn). What can't be emphasised enough is the importance of research and publications in the making of a quality faculty member who is not only a disseminator but also a creator of knowledge. Universities should emphasise the importance of research and publications in the world's ranked and indexed journals since it showcases their expertise in their respective fields—a vital quality of an educator. It is important to emphasise that the reputation of a university is determined and enhanced to a large extent by faculty contribution to both the quality and quantity of knowledge they generate. Bangladesh is in a unique position to

take advantage of the diaspora scholars who are interested in returning to Bangladesh with solid experience and credentials. Many of them are routinely turned down, which extinguishes their desire to give back to the nation. Bangladeshi scholars living abroad can be invited for a few semesters to share their expertise and knowledge. The University Grants Commission (UGC) should also encourage the universities to invite foreign professors on a contractual basis to teach graduate courses, especially where they do not have senior academic staff. A quota may be created for the universities to be filled by those with academic experience in recognised universities overseas.

Retired civil servants and other professionals who are experts in their fields can be similarly engaged as *professors of practice* to leverage their expertise and gain practical insights about industry, civil administration, etc. Collaboration with top-ranked universities abroad (the Singapore model) and faculty exchange programmes will also go a long way in improving the quality of education in the higher educational institutions in Bangladesh.

World-class universities can be built quickly as evidenced by The University of Peking, which is 24th in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings of 2020. The National University of Singapore (NUS), POSTECH university in South Korea, and many others have also attained global recognition within a short span of time.

All it needs is the right vision and the willingness to establish a few flagship universities as a starting point with a mix of local and qualified foreign faculty. As reputational capital improves, faculty motivation is likely to resurge in our universities to play the knowledge game at a higher level of engagement and intensity with peer institutions. As a result, not only will the nation gain from it, students too will go on to become global citizens and fill the ranks of competent employees engaged in building enterprise and pathways to Bangladesh's middle-income status.

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