

## Should we worry about crystal meth?

*Authorities must step up efforts to contain it before it takes off*

ALTHOUGH there is no established market for crystal methamphetamine or meth in Bangladesh yet and so far meth-related arrests and seizures have remained minimal, recent developments suggest a growing trend with the powerful stimulant, popularly known as "ice", increasingly making inroads into the country. The Department of Narcotics Control on Wednesday seized two kilogrammes of crystal meth, estimated to be worth Tk 10 crore, in Teknaf. It was said to be the largest consignment of ice to be seized in Bangladesh. Investigators say that at least two to three consignments of the drug, each weighing around 0.5kg-1.5kg, have arrived every month over the last three years through various airports, mostly from Malaysia. Smugglers are also using land routes, as the latest consignment entered Teknaf border, an established gateway for yaba, via Myanmar from Thailand.

Our assessment of the situation says that if the drug hasn't yet become popular in the country, it is perhaps because of its high price—leading drug syndicates to target users in upscale neighbourhoods—and the fact that Bangladesh, and India, are often used rather as transit routes. That may change if growing use somehow pushes the price down and creates a fertile ground for a profitable market within Bangladesh. This is why the narcotics authorities must remain vigilant at all times so that any tipping point where crystal meth use takes off can be avoided. DNC officials have already collected enough intelligence about the techniques and methods followed by smugglers and local dealers. This knowledge should be translated into a comprehensive action plan, while ongoing efforts such as setting up scanners and dog squads at airports and land and river ports (to detect narcotics entering the country) should be expedited.

Bangladesh is already struggling with its narcotics problem. And the risks of failure in preventing the trade/use of crystal meth, a highly addictive and potentially deadly drug, cannot be overestimated. As well as strengthening existing detection and prevention measures, there should be awareness campaigns to make potential users aware of the dangerous side-effects of this drug. However, since Bangladesh is being used as a transit route, local control measures may fall short of having much impact if we cannot cut off the source. This calls for wider collaboration with the governments of countries affected by the operations of the transnational drug syndicates. We hope the authorities can fight off this burgeoning trend before it reaches worrying proportions.

## Cost overruns and delays cannot be the norm

*Govt must monitor the execution of its projects*

THE recent finding by a probe body of the University Grants Commission (UGC) about the mishandling of projects at Begum Rokeya University of Rangpur (BRUR) is a classic example of how government schemes experience delays in implementation due to anomalies and rules violations by the concerned authorities. The report shows that though the constructions of the Sheikh Hasina Female Student Dormitory and Dr Wazed Research and Training Institute were inaugurated on January 4, 2017 and were supposed to have ended in 2018, less than half of the construction of the two structures has been completed till now. The probe body has also found that the Vice Chancellor (VC) of the university and his close associates have violated both the Public Procurement Act 2006 and Public Procurement Rules 2008. The same thing recently happened in the case of the Kushtia Medical College and Hospital. Eight years after the government had approved the setting up of the institution, the project's implementing agency could not make much progress in completing it. Although the project started in 2012 and was to be done by December 2014, only 34 percent of the work had been finished till December 2019. Meanwhile, the cost of the project has more than doubled during the same period.

Not conducting feasibility studies before embarking on a project, changes in leadership and policy-making bodies during the continuation of the projects, bringing changes in the initial designs of the projects numerous times and also, appointment of companies and individuals personally attached to the head of an organisation are some of the common reasons behind this repetitive story of cost overruns and delays in the execution of government-funded projects. To find a solution to this problem, the government should establish certain rules and regulations that will prohibit the top brass of an institution from affiliating themselves with the economic activities related to a project. Besides, the government should also set up a committee or body that will supervise over all its initiatives centrally, without any interference from the local authorities. Also, holding accountable those responsible for these inefficiencies and delays and punishing those found guilty of graft no matter how influential he/she may be are essential steps to ensure that valuable funds and resources of the government are not wasted and projects are completed within the deadlines.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Where online businesses are going wrong

E-commerce flourished tremendously during lockdown. The growth that the sector witnessed during the peak of the pandemic may not have been possible otherwise maybe for a few years.

Now as things slowly to return to normal, it doesn't not look like all of these ventures are going to survive. And the weakest part about these businesses is the delivery part of their service, which must be fixed.

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# Issues that demand inclusion in the development debate

## THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE reason behind the creation of the concept of Least Developed Countries (LDC) by the UN in the 1960s was to identify a set of nations whose development struggles were not solely based on their own shortcomings, but due to other structural constraints. Therefore, it was decided that the global trading system had to be adjusted in a way that would grant LDC's preferential market access for them to catch-up in terms of development.

Bangladesh is now on the cusp of graduating from an LDC to a developing nation. What that essentially means, as explained by Debapriya Bhattacharya, a member of the United Nations Committee for Development Policy (UN-CDP)—which determines the conditions that a country needs to meet to graduate from LDC status—is that the country has acquired "a seal of global approval regarding its development achievements".

During the second triennial review by the UN-CDP between February 22-26, 2021, Bangladesh received the final endorsement to graduate. Its per capita income, which had to be above USD 1,220, stands at over USD 2,000 today. It also managed to satisfy the UN threshold levels for the human asset index and the economic vulnerability index. Thus, in terms of development, there is no denying that Bangladesh has made remarkable progress. But at the same time, the country very unfortunately seems to be regressing in other ways.

The rights to freedom of speech and expression are being routinely violated either directly or indirectly. Space for dissent has been shrinking. Laws like the Digital Security Act, which are largely unpopular with the people, civil society, media, etc. have become popular among politicians and top government officials, who ignore the people's call to scrap such laws and, instead, regularly defend

their repressive use. That itself is a clear indication of how government officials have forgotten the all-important fact that they are just public "servants", who have no legitimacy to act like rulers in a country that is supposed to have a government of the people, by the people, for the people.

The fact that public servants can carry on like this demonstrates another sad reality, which is that despite Bangladesh's progress over the years, it has not managed to develop effective democratic governance institutions, nor managed to establish, in reality, the concept of separation of powers between the different branches of government that are supposed to hold each other accountable. In the absence of effective institutions, no nation can function for a sustained time-period without sliding into despotism, that is one of the great lessons that history teaches us. So, is there any reason for us to believe that we would be an exception to that rule?

What also commonly happens in the absence of effective institutions is that

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corruption becomes widespread—like what we are currently witnessing—and political power gets out of control and becomes overbearing and, eventually, dictates the accrual of economic power. This obviously raises the stakes of coming to power, and competition for office becomes an existential necessity, as all parties are aware of the fact that the winner will take all, and the loser will have no institutional protection and will be at the absolute mercy of the winner—this, too, we have seen happening since the so-called restoration of democracy back in 1991.

Even if the current party in office is filled with benevolent leaders, the lack of effective institutions should terrify us all. After all, is there any guarantee that the next party to assume office will be just as beneficent? Even if the current government does not allow for the DSA to be misused—a law that lawyers and other experts themselves have repeatedly said is vague and can be easily abused—is there any guarantee that future governments will be just as merciful and upright? Finally, why should the people be dependent on

# Faceoff with Facebook: What have the regulators learned?

## MAN AND MACHINE



MOINUL ZABER

LAST week, the world media was flooded with the news of the faceoff between Facebook and the Australian parliament. Australia passed a landmark media law that compels Google and Facebook to pay news publishers and broadcasters for displaying their content. The media companies have long argued that Google and Facebook make money from news and analysis provided by them. According to them, the users mostly go to google to search for relevant news and link them on Facebook when they want to share it with others. The proponents of this law argue that due to this practice, users find the news sites less helpful if no news appears on their Google search results or Facebook feeds. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission after an 18-month long inquiry concluded that there is an imbalance in power between the platforms and the media companies.

However, this is only one side of the story. Folks who believe that the Internet is best left unregulated think that Australia has gone too far. Tim Berners-Lee, credited to be the founder of the World Wide Web (WWW), thinks this idea of making the tech giants pay for displaying news is tantamount to saying that the platforms will have to pay to host a "link". For him, the ability of web users to freely link to other sites is "fundamental to the web". The problem with upholding a pay-for-link regime is that it can distort the market. The big platforms will make deals with their preferred media outlets making lives difficult for the less connected media outlets just because there is "no deal" with them. Already, Google has launched products like "news showcase" and started to make deals with various media outlets. Facebook's first response came as a threat—they first threatened to boycott the Aussie news media, but then after "negotiations", they made a "deal" with the authorities. They have got what they wanted, no one is going to take away their right to make "deals". Now the competition commission in Australia is "expecting" that Google and Facebook will "strike a deal with small publishers".

The connectivity marketplace started as a monopoly. For almost 100 years, late into the 20th century, most of the countries were served by a national or by a government-sanctioned private entity. Things changed as in the USA, the monopoly company AT&T, that once used to boast "One policy, one system, universal service (i.e. one company)",

was broken down into regional "Baby Bells". Soon after, other countries started to open up their marketplaces as well. The rise of mobile telephony changed the marketplace from a "natural monopoly" into an "oligopoly" where several companies rule the marketplace. Conceptually speaking, having healthy competition is the prerequisite to ensure a thriving market that protects both the producers and consumers. Regulatory organisations were set up in almost all the countries to ensure competition in the marketplace and to uphold the resident's right to connectivity. Over time, once access was ensured, regulators started to adopt regulations to ensure the quality of access.

With the advent of the WWW and the Internet, new technologies started to inundate the marketplace. This prompted a change in the way

gotten even more difficult.

The rise of platforms such as social networks has created the next most difficult regulatory challenge. It has become difficult to regulate the status quo with the age-old SMP (significant market power) regulations. The network owner may not be generating a lot of money as the various over the top (OTT) applications such as Facebook may have become the dominant reason behind the use of the network. In many countries, with zero rating deals with the network providers, the social media platforms are helping the service providers to attract new customers. Apparently, we may see that a particular carrier is getting more customers, not due to the network's better service delivery but because of the free access to the platform. Now the question is, whom or how should the regulators regulate? Or should they even regulate?



A woman shoots a video of the sign at the entrance of the Facebook main campus in Menlo Park, California, US.

PHOTO: AFP

the regulatory regimes handled the marketplaces. In many cases, the age-old telecommunications rules and regulations seemed obsolete. Mobile telephony, different data services, voice over IP (VoIP), etc., disrupted the peace of the slow-changing regulatory regimes. Regulations that were directed to the network owners now needed to be updated as service givers were no longer the network owners. People started to call using "WhatsApp" or other services which are not governed by the mobile phone operators or the Internet service providers (ISP). Who should be held responsible for the abusive use of the call—the network operator, or the service giver? This is a challenge that most regulators do not want to face. But things have

To us, it seems like Australia tried to force Facebook and Google but failed as the giants threatened to leave. Australia had to revise the law to Facebook's liking. Regulators around the world are being bullied and threatened as they make decisions against the big techs. On the other hand, this shows how we are misunderstanding the platforms and how our decisions concerning one platform may disrupt the whole web. Simply making someone pay for "linking" might mean that sometime soon, everybody will start charging everybody or make deals. People may move from the world wide web to the dark web where things are still free!

Access to the communication tools have become a right of the residents that

the charity of any government to begin with? The purpose of a constitution and of a parliamentary form of government is to ensure that even the most incompetent and immoral government cannot do harm to the nation and its people. But for that we need independent and effective governance institutions, that will safeguard the constitutional rights of its citizens, especially from the overreaches of the government itself.

This brings us to the absence of democratic ideals in government and in society in general. There is a reason why great minds and moral individuals throughout history have studied and promoted ideas on statecraft, that continues to be discussed all around the world today. There is a reason why they shared similar ideals on how a peaceful and prosperous state should function—at least at the core of it. Unfortunately, these ideals are inadequately understood, promoted and even valued in our nation today. But without these guiding principles being at the centre around which our nation functions, can we truly claim to have "developed" a nation full of independent individuals, who share a common belief in the rule of law and are guaranteed justice?

Most certainly not. And hence, even though Bangladesh has moved forward in terms of development—and in other spheres such as economic growth—there are a number of areas where it has yet to develop to the extent that is necessary for this development to be meaningful, or even sustainable. Today, as Bangladesh graduates from an LDC, the (external) structural constraints that once held it back can no longer be used as an excuse for us to justify our failures as we move forward. That is why, it is now more important than ever for these issues to be brought into our development debates. And for us to try and develop these basic frameworks that are necessary for any successful and sustainable nation, that we have so far ignored.

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*The connectivity marketplace started as a monopoly. For almost 100 years, late into the 20th century, most of the countries were served by a national or by a government-sanctioned private entity.*

the governments must ensure. In today's world, these tools are not only helping us to "keep in touch", but they also are now our "information source", "lifestyle guide", "transportation provider", "entertainment engine", what not! Imagine a day without your cellular phone—I doubt many would like to take up the challenge! The platforms are ruling our lives whether we like it or not. We must make them accountable. However, before making any decisions we must be clear about the consequences.

It is therefore time to ponder and to hold conversations to shape the decisions. We need to make sure that the fundamentals of the web are not compromised. We also need to make sure that the big techs or big media do not crush the small and new entrepreneurs and media. For a country like Bangladesh, there are temptations for following Australia's path. India is already making new rules for Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. However, making rules and regulations before scrutinising the technologies and economics of these platforms may result in failure. Disruptive technologies will make things ever more difficult. To tackle it we need to be prepared. Our regulators need to learn, concentrate on capacity building, and take a light-touch approach while keeping a vigilant eye on the way these platforms and communications networks are playing in the marketplace. Before we engage in policy skirmishes, we need to build a strong fortress. Our regulators should start the process now.

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