

Is a 1923 law applicable for modern Bangladesh?

Eminent citizens question govt's move to arrest investigative journalist

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Civil society bodies and eminent citizens across the nation issued statements decrying the arrest of Prothom Alo senior correspondent Rozina Islam and demanded her immediate release.

Addressing a webinar by the Committee for the Protection of Fundamental Rights (Moulik Odhikar Shurokha Committee), eminent jurist Dr Shahdeen Malik commented on the use of the Official Secrets Act against Rozina Islam.

"I have only found one judgment under this law, and it was given by the High Court in 1983. This is a clear example that the government is using the criminal code to silence journalists in new ways," he said.

"The biggest trickery of these times is when the government says that law will take its own course and that nobody is above law. I demand that Rozina be given bail soonest," said Dr Malik.

"We should ask for a clear directive from the court regarding whether the Official Secrets Act can be used against a journalist in such a case. We should ask whether a law made in 1923 can be relevant to modern Bangladesh," opined Barrister Sara Hossain at the webinar.

She said that the law is applicable under circumstances where information is being passed to enemies of the state. "Unless, the government thinks that the public is the enemy of the state," she added.

"We also need to question whether the conduct of the government officials can be defined as misconduct – unless the government thinks that it is acceptable to assault someone and throw her onto the floor," said Hossain.

Dr Malik said Rozina Islam was arbitrarily detained for five hours to

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'Free Rozina'

Journos demand withdrawal of case, unconditional release

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Calls for unconditional release of Prothom Alo's investigative reporter Rozina Islam, who was arrested on Monday in a case filed under the Official Secrets Act, 1923, continue to grow louder throughout the country.

Criticising and condemning the arrest, journalists yesterday threatened to continue the protests until Rozina is released.

Journalists from different platforms in the capital held human chains and protest rallies at Jatiya Press Club and Dhaka Reporters' Unity (DRU).

Both factions of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), Dhaka Reporters' Unity (DRU), Bangladesh Secretariat Reporters Forum (BSRF), Bangladesh Nari Sangbadik Kendra (BNSK), and Bangladesh Photo Journalist Association held the programmes.

Alleging that Rozina was trapped and tortured, BSRF president Tapan Biswas demanded her release and exemplary punishment for those involved in torturing her.

"It was a plot against Rozina... I've two questions – police and admin officers took six hours to lodge a complaint. What was the reason behind the six-hour delay? What grave offence did she commit?"

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TEA WORKERS' DAY

100 years of a forgotten tragedy

MINTU DESHWARA and HASAN MEER

These days, Shamnarayan Goor doesn't do much other than sitting on the porch of his hut and watching the day go by, over the hilly terrain of Lungla Tea Garden in Sylhet.

Other than his family members, the 90-year-old retired tea worker of Moulvibazar's Kulaura upazila does not see that many visitors or engage in conversations with others.

However, every year for the last many years, on May 20, he makes an effort to let people – especially the youth – know the history of their people, their struggle and how on this day in 1921 their ancestors, in a desperate attempt, initiated a protest march.

This newspaper met with Shamnarayan on a Saturday afternoon.

As we sat beside him on small stools, and heard him speak in intervals and with difficulty switching between languages, we could tell age has taken its toll on him. But it could not diminish his will to carry on.

These days, Shamnarayan said, very few people remember the 1921 march, when around 30,000 tea workers left their workplaces, protesting against the inhumane working conditions and torture at the hands of British owners.

"Mulluke Cholo" – the call to go back home – reverberated through the hilly terrains of Sylhet, as they started walking towards Meghna ghat in Chandpur on the morning of May 20 in 1921, he added.

"My father was one of them." "They did not know what lay ahead, but they knew it could not be worse than what they were leaving behind. That's why, to them, it was not only a protest march but also a desperate attempt to journey back home to the lands of their origin – Bihar, Odisha and Assam," said Shamnarayan.

The march, however, did not go as planned for those workers, brought to this part of the Bengal with a promise of a better life, which remained a far cry.

When they reached Meghna ghat, the then Assamese police opened fire on the protesters. Many of the workers were killed, and their bodies were thrown into the river.

The rest fled, while some eventually got caught and were subjected to torture.

"My father was among the ones who escaped and eventually re-joined work at the gardens, as they had nowhere else to go," said Shamnarayan.

Today marks the 100th year of that march to home that led to the massacre of tea workers.

A century has gone by but their



STAR FILE PHOTO

plight has not changed much. Today, they can barely live by the wage they earn, and their families cram into small quarters.

Furthermore, these indigenous workers – paid Tk 120 a day along with other benefits such as housing, ration and treatment – and their family members are on the verge of losing their language and cultural identity.

According to the statistical handbook on Bangladesh tea industry, published in June last year, there are 166 tea gardens in the country with a total of 1,40,164 registered and casual workers.

The government has yet to recognise "Tea Workers Day" at the national level and take effective steps to preserve different spoken languages as well as distinct cultural practices of different communities spread out in the tea gardens of Sylhet division, according to Bangladesh Tea Workers' Union.

The use of their mother tongues is also diminishing day by day, as Bhojpuri or Bangla are the two most commonly used languages among all communities in the region, said Sujit Baraik, a resident of Khan tea garden.

Besides, local schools do not have any curriculum in their mother tongues.

"Our children lost interest in learning their mother tongue Sadri, because Bangla is the common language of everyone outside their homes," said Baraik, also vice president of Sylhet Cha Jonogosthi Chhatra O Jubo Kalyan Parishad.

"They know many words but cannot use them properly," he added.

Moulvibazar's Rajhat union chairman Bijoy Banarjee echoed him.

According to the International Mother Language Institute, Bangladesh now has 40 small ethnic groups with

their own languages. Researchers have identified 14 of these languages as endangered. Among those, quite a few are spoken by workers at the tea gardens, he added.

Mesbah Kamal, professor of history department at Dhaka University, earlier said the indigenous tea workers living in poverty are losing their culture and heritage.

Their cultural identity is now under threat due to socio-economic circumstances, he added.

Raju Nunia, a student of microbiology at Jahangirnagar University, said even though education is a human right, tea workers and their children, who play an important role in the country's economy, are mostly deprived of that right.

Nunia, also general secretary of University Tea Students' Association, said due to extreme poverty, children of the tea workers somehow reach the primary level, but majority of them drop out due to financial constraints.

Gita Rani Kanu, president of the Bangladesh Tea Workers' Women's Forum, said women workers of the tea gardens are deprived of education, health and equality.

"The authorities concerned need to pay attention to female tea workers so that their healthcare, education and work environment can improve. Also, harassment and discrimination against them must stop," she added.

Prof AFM Zakaria of anthropology department at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology said, "Their [tea workers] is a history of identity loss, deprivation, marginalisation and non-recognition. The government will have to come forward and protect the small indigenous communities and their culture."

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By-polls to four constituencies in July, EC decides

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission will hold by-elections to the four parliamentary constituencies in July.

It decided to hold by-polls to the Laxmipur-2, Sylhet-3, Dhaka-14 and Cumilla-5 constituencies amid Covid-19 for constitutional obligations, said EC secretary Humayun Kabir Khandaker yesterday.

He was speaking to reporters after attending a meeting at EC office in Dhaka. Dates of by-polls will be announced after a meeting on May 24, he said.

On March 3, the EC announced the schedule of by-polls to Laxmipur-2 constituency, polls to 371 UPs and 11 municipalities, slating the election date for April 11. On April 1, the commission postponed the elections due to the Covid-19 situation.

On February 22, parliament secretariat issued a gazette notification announcing that Laxmipur-2 fell vacant because of Mohammad Shahid Islam, also known as Kazi Papul's moral turpitude.

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Air at two Dhaka slums 5 times thicker than usual

Plan International reveals findings of Buet, ICCCAD study

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Air density at two of Dhaka's most marginalised low-income slums is four to five times higher than the permissible limit in Bangladesh for a 24-hour period.

As a result, residents suffer from air pollution-induced diseases like laryngeal problems, asthma and bronchial illnesses.

A study report published yesterday titled "Urban Localised Pollution in the Context of Climate Change" revealed this information at a virtual launching event.

According to the report, the major sources of indoor air pollution in both marginalised areas are earthen stoves for cooking and using biomass as fuel. Women are the most severely affected by air pollution, as they are exposed to smoke for long stretches of time during cooking.

The study was carried out in two large slums of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) – Citypolli slum in Dholpur and Dhaka Match Colony in Shyampur. It focused on four issues – water supply, sanitation, indoor air pollution, and solid waste management.

These low-income settlements are surrounded by different air polluting industries like steel mills, plastic factory, melamine factory, brick kiln, etc.

The research was conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 under Featuring Green Earth Project, jointly implemented by Plan International Bangladesh, Bangladesh Youth Environmental Initiative (BYEI) and Population Services and Training Center (PSTC).

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If someone comes across this scene for the first time, they'll have trouble believing that this is actually a part of Buriganga river and not a waste disposal area. On top of nearby factories dumping all kinds of wastes, many negligent residents throw their household items that are not needed anymore into the river. This photo was taken yesterday from near the Babubazar Bridge in Sadarghat area.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

2,355 yaba pills recovered from Dhaka airport

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Some 2,355 yaba pills were recovered from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport yesterday.

An aviation security scanner identified a yaba-like object while scanning a cargo bag of post office around 7:20am, Group Captain AHM Touhid-ul-Ahsan, executive director of the airport, told the media.

Later, two squadron leaders and an ASP rushed to the spot and seized the pills.

The parcel was scheduled to go to Riyadh, said Touhid.

Four employees of Post Office were arrested for alleged involvement in the incident.

The yaba and arrestees were handed over to a representative of the Narcotics Control Department, said the HSA executive director.

DSCC working to ease waterlogging: Taposh

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh said DSCC is hoping to reduce waterlogging problems during the upcoming rainy season.

The DSCC mayor made the comment at a press conference held at Nagar Bhaban yesterday, marking one year of himself and city corporation councillors in office.

"We have cleaned 10 lakh tonnes of waste from two box-culverts and four canals. This has improved water flow of the canals. I believe we will manage to give the city's people a great relief from waterlogging during the coming rainy season," Taposh said.

The government, amid severe criticism over the city's waterlogging, had handed over the drainage system with 26 canals and 385 km main drainage lines to the city corporations from Dhaka WASA on November 26, 2020.

DSCC officials said among the 26 canals in the capital, 11 are under DSCC and the rest are under Dhaka North City Corporation jurisdiction.

The mayor added that the city corporation has started cleaning works of the canals, some which are blocked up to 80 percent with various kinds of waste.

"We hope that by June 20, DSCC will be able to complete cleaning 715km of canals," Taposh said.

While talking to the media, he also outlined some other initiatives. He reiterated his stand against corruption, recounting his firing of a number of DSCC staff, including engineers and revenue official, and conducting a drive against illegal shops.

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\$4m South Korean aid for Rohingyas

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The Republic of Korea has announced \$4 million in assistance for Rohingyas and host community.

The contribution will be used for humanitarian activities being run by UN agencies and international organisations under the 2021 Joint Response Plan (JRP) for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, the said South Korean embassy in Dhaka yesterday.

Supporting the host community, addressing gender-based violence, supporting children and girls, and responding to emergencies and disaster relief are among the priority areas for Korea in its support for the Rohingya refugees and the host community.

Korea, through Koica, has implemented humanitarian projects to support Rohingyas and host communities.

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