

More citizens are exercising their right to information. We must keep it up.

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

THE International Right to Know Day will be commemorated on September 28. By adopting Right to Information (RTI) or Freedom of Information (FOI) laws, governments recognise their citizens' power to demand transparency and accountability about their work. Bangladesh enacted the Right to Information Act in 2009. How did that law fare last year?

It is difficult to provide a clear answer to the question. Research has shown that such a law does better in countries where an active coalition of civil society organisations (CSOs) collaborate in its promotion. Such a coalition has yet to come together in Bangladesh. The CSOs engaged in promoting the law seem more inclined to work on their own, rather than to coordinate their efforts and share their experience and knowledge. As a result, the prospects and challenges of the law remain largely unknown, contributing to a lack of collective efforts to find remedial measures.

The gravity of the situation becomes clearer when one takes into account the fact that in 80 percent of the complaints resolved by the Information Commission of Bangladesh in 2020, the RTI requests had originated from places where NGOs were engaged in promoting the law.

The main reservoir of substantive knowledge about the RTI regime in the country, therefore, is the Information Commission. It receives reports and information related to the operations of the law from public authorities, NGOs and individuals on a regular basis. Unfortunately, most of such knowledge remains inaccessible to the public until the commission discloses it in its annual reports.

However, the Information Commission publishes its decisions on the complaint cases on its website regularly. These cases provide a picture of the type of information citizens seek from public authorities, and the fervour with which they pursue their efforts—also, how the authorities deal with information requests from the citizens, and the proclivities of the commission in dealing with the citizens' complaints. Looking at the 119 decisions taken by the Information



All citizens of a country have the right to seek and receive information held by government and private authorities—except the data concerning national security—with a view to ensuring transparency, accountability, and good governance.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Commission last year, they range from the occasionally encouraging to the often disappointing, with many falling in the middle.

We will, however, begin with a decision that the commission made in 2019. It relates to the transparency and accountability of public work. The Information Commission examined the matter of its own accord, after coming across a disturbing news report.

The report, published in a national daily, claimed that old-age benefit cards, issued under the government's safety net programme for the needy, were being sold for money. The commission served notices on nine public officials of the concerned upazila and union parishads who were directly involved with conducting the programme. The officials were asked to explain their respective roles and address the allegations.

The officials explained the process and their involvement in it, starting from allocation at the administration's highest level to distribution at the lowest level, as well as the challenges they faced in implementation. Based on their explanation,

the Information Commission came up with important recommendations to streamline the process, which ranged from transparency in the selection of recipients to timely delivery of the benefits. The authorities were also required to inform the commission on their implementation.

Applied properly, the directives of the commission can thus have an important bearing on corruption-free and timely implementation of such beneficial programmes of the government.

Another commendable decision by the commission came from a case from Banaripara upazila in Barishal district in 2020. A day labourer asked for some information about a 40-day work programme in the area where he worked, from the designated officer (DO) in the upazila. The DO was also the project implementation officer (PIO) of the programme. The applicant needed the information to submit before a court, which had earlier sent him to jail in a case lodged by a previous PIO who, instead of paying the labourer his dues when he asked for it, had brought criminal charges against

him.

After almost a year and many postponed hearings, the case was finally decided in November 2020. In its decision, the Information Commission not only directed the DO to provide the requested information, but also imposed a fine of Tk 3,000 on his predecessor for her failure to respond to the complainant's request and provide the information he sought in time.

Unfortunately, the Information Commission has not always taken such firm action against other delinquent DOs. In 63 percent of the cases the commission looked into in 2020, it took a lenient view towards the DOs who agreed to provide the requested information only at the complaint hearings. And in nearly 18 percent of the cases, the DOs prepared and brought the information to the hearing only after being summoned. Additionally, in all six cases where complainants had to lodge new complaints due to non-compliance of its earlier directives, the commission failed to penalise the DOs for their wanton disregard of the law.

An added problem is that the public is often uninformed about whether the directives issued by the Information Commission are implemented or not. Not knowing the final outcome can be frustrating for the citizens.

On the demand side, too, there are both encouraging and discouraging developments. The most encouraging development is that RTI requests are increasingly becoming more focused on matters of transparency and accountability in public work and less on personal needs. The requests that were made recently were quite diverse: allocation of funds to healthcare centres during the Covid-19 pandemic and their utilisation; rules for the use of government vehicles by public servants, along with the records of monthly expenses on their operation and maintenance; government directives stopping the distribution of medicine at community clinics; number of stalls allotted to publication houses during Ekushey Book Fair and the income generated from it; copy of the work order and justification for filling a river in order to construct a stadium; resource allocation for mosques, temples, churches,

Eidgahs, cremation grounds, etc—to name a few.

Citizens are clearly getting savvy with the fundamental potential of the RTI law to promote transparency and accountability in public work. This is very encouraging and calls for the Information Commission and civil society groups to bear this in mind, and collaborate with each other to sustain progress. It is, after all, the crux of the law.

At the same time, there are many examples of discouraging practices by RTI users that are likely to impact the system negatively. In several cases, we found applicants seeking information on important issues of public interest, with a significant bearing on the way public authorities go about their work, but abandoning their efforts midway. In some cases, the main reason seemed to be the large costs involved in getting the information. Then why ask for such information? This is unfortunate and calls for the civil society groups to look into it, and come up with appropriate guidance.

Another important data emerging from the decisions revealed that in nearly 18 percent of the cases, the Information Commission dismissed complaints due to the absence of one or both the parties at the hearings, on presumption that the complainants were not interested to pursue the matter. The reasons for such absence can and should be investigated for remedial measures.

We hope that the current state of RTI in Bangladesh, as depicted above, will provide food for thought and discussion as we observe the International Right to Know Day this year. In conclusion, we would like to make a plea to all concerned to ensure that a law like the RTI Act, with its immense possibilities to promote better governance, does not remain underutilised, and that its potentials are fully explored. As the basic objective of the law is to empower the citizens, the civil society must bear the main responsibility in this regard. We must work together and confront the challenges collectively. It should be a good resolution for this year's Right to Know Day.

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How the US' War on Terror played out on its social divide

A glimpse at the winners and losers within the country

Where have all the flowers gone?
The girls have picked them every one.
Oh, When will you ever learn?
Oh, When will you ever learn?
....
Young men
They're all in uniform.
Soldiers
They've gone to graveyards every one.
Graveyards
They're covered with flowers every one.

—“Where Have All the Flowers Gone”
Song written by Peter Seeger



ON June 23, 2010, a rocket-propelled grenade shattered the skull of US Army Private First Class Russell Madden in Afghanistan, where he was fighting his country's war against terror. He came from a poor Kentucky neighbourhood, his son was born with cystic fibrosis, and he had no insurance. He had gone to the army only to pay for his son's medical expenses. His mother, wife, and son have since been bearing the burden of the US's Global War on Terror. With this sad story, the University of California Professor David Vine starts his book “The United States of War.”

But for some, the same war has been immensely beneficial.

While Madden's wife and mother were

grieving, the US defence contractors saw their profits soaring. Boeing, Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics—the top five—saw their share prices increase tenfold in 20 years, since President George W Bush launched the War on Terror in September 2001. It is almost twice the average gain of the Standard and Poor's 500 (S&P 500) Index Fund during the same period. The unprecedented war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya has played out quite well to fill up the coffers of the world's most influential corporates. A symbiotic relationship between these corporates and the government policymakers has instigated wars in far-flung countries to make such profiteering possible. Let's look into some instances to elaborate on this point.

Major General (ret'd) Mike Boera had once been the US Air Force's director of programmes and requirements; he developed programmes and business plans for weapon systems. After retirement, he joined Raytheon as the executive of intelligence, information, and services. Within a year, the company received approximately USD 2.9 billion in air force contracts. Incidents such as this are aplenty, as a 2018 study by the Project on Government Oversight (POGO)—an independent watchdog—elaborates. Termed “the revolving door,” such moves from the Pentagon to the corporates benefit the wider defence industry.

US-based global defence and aerospace contractor BAE Systems, Inc had Gerard “Jerry” DeMuro as its CEO from 2014 to 2020. DeMuro had previously worked as an

acquisition official at the US Department of Defense (DOD) for almost a decade. Before joining BAE, DeMuro had served two other defence contractors: GTE Government Systems and General Dynamics. President Barack Obama recruited an industry lobbyist as his first deputy secretary of defence—an example of the reverse-revolving door.

Many private military and security contractors (PMSC) have also greatly benefited from the wars. The collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991 and the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993—where 18 American rangers were killed—made sending troops to

updated February 22, 2021). The Blackwater (later renamed Academi) incident sheds some light on the PMSCs' influence on the US government. In 2007, four of its employees killed 17 Iraqi civilians at Nisour Square in Baghdad. All four were found guilty by a federal district court. However, President Donald Trump pardoned them in December 2020, just before leaving office.

Then there are the oil giants. While the Iraq war was not necessarily only about oil, the oil industry played a crucial role. On April 15, 2013, CNN ran a story titled “Why the war in Iraq was fought for Big Oil,” elaborating

it to say the total cost was USD 8 trillion. Had it not been for the war, how could it have benefited the US public? The National Priorities Project, a federal budget research organisation, provides an idea. As a rough estimate, USD 5 trillion could have paid for 18 years of healthcare for the 13 million poor US children, two years of their schooling, four-year public college scholarships for 28 million students, 20 years of healthcare for one million military veterans, and four million clean energy jobs—all at the same time. All of these were foregone to satisfy the big corporates' insatiable hunger for profit.

The nature of today's war is such that there is no definite end, nor are there any clear victors or vanquished. It has been amply demonstrated in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere. While the war rages on, men and women such as Russell Madden and their families lose. Russell was just one of more than 7,000 who died in all these inconclusive wars. Then there are 1.7 million veterans who had reported disability due to wartime deployments until 2018.

It's pretty tempting to say that the US has failed to achieve its mission in Afghanistan. But what was the mission's objective? Whose mission was it? Have all in the US lost? If not, who has won? Perhaps we can be sure about only one thing: the withdrawal from Afghanistan marks the end of one chapter of the extended global war. And a new one has already begun.

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distant places difficult to justify to the voting public. The use of contractors provided a way to avoid public scrutiny and congressional oversight. The war efforts eventually became so contractor-dependent that in 2020, the PMSCs deployed 27,388 personnel compared to only around 5,900 troops in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan (“Congressional Report: Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2020,”

on how the big oil companies profited from the Iraq war. During the rule of Saddam Hossain, Iraq's domestic oil industry was under government control and closed to Western oil companies. After his fall, oil giants such as ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP, Shell, and Haliburton secured most of the industry.

Brown University estimates the enormous cost of the War on Terror under its “Cost of War” project. Many columnists have quoted

QUOTABLE
Quote

SHABANA AZMI
(September 18, 1950)
Indian actress

In times of crisis the artist must rise to the challenge and try to make sense from the chaos.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Ludicrous
5 Lineup
11 Luxembourg coin
12 Musical range
13 Muffin choice
14 Made a point
15 Become intertwined
17 Billiards needs
18 Breaks
22 Had yearnings
24 Satchel part
25 Me, to Michel
26 Imitating
27 Fence supports
30 “The Fifer” painter
32 Real bargain

33 Pendulum path
34 “Don’t panic!”
38 Fix
41 Ocean motion
42 Come into view
43 Goddess with cow horns
44 Beats
45 Small change

DOWN
1 Owned amount
2 Mystique
3 Fast-food restaurant, often
4 Taste bud setting
5 Valentine flower
6 Happens
7 “Cut that out!”
8 Road gunk

9 Genesis name
10 Roulette bet
16 Went first
19 French writer Sagan
20 Account
21 Petty fight
22 Band boosters
23 Eccentric fellow
28 They accept bets
29 Big hammer
30 Travel aid
31 Very cold
35 Peepers
36 Norse god
37 For fear that
38 Gym unit
39 Outback runner
40 Crooner Torme

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	L	E	F		G	R	U	M	P	S
L	A	N	A		E	A	S	E	U	P
O	V	E	N		T	W	E	N	T	Y
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D	E	N	T	A	L		C	A	S	E
S	T	E	E	R	S		T	R	O	T

BEETLE BAILEY
BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT