

## Why is BIWTA filling up the Turag again?

Officials of the government body must be held accountable

THE latest initiative of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) to build permanent structures in Dhaka's Cabtoli, Amin Bazar, and Diabari areas by filling the Turag River is shocking. In 2005, the BIWTA constructed landing stations in the same areas by filling up the riverbanks for a government water taxi service. Despite pouring a huge amount of money into launching the service, the project was an utter failure as the landing stations remained abandoned since the suspension of the service.

The latest plan to construct large concrete jetties on the banks of Turag River indicates that the BIWTA has learned nothing from its previous failure. As this daily reported on Monday, multiple private and government structures have also been set up bordering the landing stations by illegally filling the river. According to experts, the construction of these illegal structures violates a High Court directive, as one of the landing stations has been constructed around 150 feet inside the river's boundary demarcation pillars, and the BIWTA has kept filling up the riverbank near the landing station. Moreover, large jetties are being constructed near the landing station's south portion, around 100 feet inside the river's boundary demarcation pillar nos. 210, 211 and 212. Similar construction works were being done near other demarcation pillars as well.

We fail to understand why the BIWTA would choose to ignore an express directive of the High Court imposing a ban on the construction of any structure obstructing the natural water flow of a river. Environmentalists have pointed out that such action may encourage others to also encroach upon the river. And they have also asked whether all this was being done for the interest of any vested quarter, and to legitimise other riverbank grabbers. We believe this is a legitimate question.

In this connection, the comments made by the chairman of the National River Conservation Commission are pertinent. At a recent webinar, he admitted that rivers were becoming "victims of greed" of influential and vested quarters. This newspaper has also, time and again, reported on the continuing river encroachment by influential individuals and groups, and the lack of government action to hold them accountable. This trend must change, and the culture of impunity that is fuelling such illegal activities must be eradicated. But how can that be done, we wonder, when the government bodies themselves are guilty of such encroachment?

We call upon the authorities concerned to immediately look into the matter and ask the BIWTA high-ups to explain why they have taken up this initiative, despite the obvious environmental concerns and a High Court order, risking the life of the Turag River. Additionally, we call on the government to immediately halt said construction work and to clear the riverbank of all such obstructing structures—government or private.

## DU's decision to keep 'gono' rooms closed commendable

The authorities must see this through and ensure compliance with health guidelines before reopening

AS the Dhaka University authorities are preparing to reopen its 18 dormitories on a limited scale on October 5, ahead of resuming in-person classes, students who were staying in the 'gono' rooms before the pandemic are naturally worried about whether they will be able to get any regular seats in the dorms. Although students currently pursuing their master's degrees and those who are in honours final year are supposed to return to the dormitories first, students of other academic sessions will be allowed into the dorms gradually. However, how the university authorities will provide seats to these 'gono' room residents as they have decided to end the 'gono' room culture—to maintain the Covid-19 safety guidelines—has become a big question.

Reportedly, the university authorities have decided to vacate seats occupied by former students in the dorms and allot them to the 'gono' room students. To ensure this, they have made a list of the former students who have been staying in the dorms illegally for a long time, and another list of first- and second-year students to whom these seats will be allotted. Although the hall authorities have said that they will ensure the allotment, we don't know how they plan to do it. As far as we know, the university authorities took such initiatives in the past as well, but could not implement them allegedly due to the influence of the ruling party's student wing. And students of 'gono' rooms fear that if the administration cannot prevent the stay of "illegal" former students at the dormitories, they may have to live outside the campus, further spiralling into uncertainty.

Besides, it also remains to be seen how the authorities ensure that only honours final-year and master's students will stay in the dorms at the beginning. In a sign of things (troubles) to come when the university finally reopens, we have already seen the chaos that was created in the university libraries on Sunday, when students entering the libraries after the long closure hardly maintained health guidelines and got into a scuffle with the proctor. The incident raises alarm as to what will happen when the university dorms reopen and the classes resume.

We hope the Dhaka University authorities will remain alert and take all the necessary preparations so that such incidents do not recur. Maintaining health safety guidelines and social distancing should be a priority for the university authorities as they reopen. We hope other universities will learn from DU's experience in phased reopening, and reopen their own doors only after taking proper measures to avoid untoward incidents.



C R ABRAR

TODAY, September 28, is observed globally as World News Day. This is not your usual "industry celebration" day, but one to highlight the importance of the institution of news media and the critical role that journalists play in gathering, presenting and interpreting facts, in unearthing the background of events, in exposing corruption and abuse of power, in holding the state and non-state actors accountable and—through all these processes—in augmenting democracy. It is a day to sensitise the wider society about the challenges that the journalist community faces in performing their duties. At the same time, it is also a day of reiteration of what constitutes ethical journalism, the hallmark of this noble profession. Coincidentally, the day is also marked as the International Day for Universal Access to Information (designated by Unesco).

Journalism as a trade has experienced massive transformation in this age of communication technology, augmented by digitalisation. The centuries-old paper-based news industry now faces a serious challenge from its online counterparts. The local newspaper industry, even in the Global North, faces threats from Facebook, Google, and other sites that "siphon off" the bulk of the revenue. While some in the industry have successfully adapted to the new reality, others have had to pull down the shutters. In addition, social media has emerged as an alternative source of information. Unfortunately, such systemic transformations have not necessarily been accompanied by the growth of responsible and credible journalism practices, promoting, celebrating and facilitating professional excellence. Therefore, the need for gathering, presenting, and interpreting trustworthy news and information has become ever more important. An essential prerequisite to attain such lofty goals is protecting the right of the journalists to perform their tasks freely and without fear.

One may recall that in the long-drawn struggle for democracy during Pakistani days, ethical journalism played a critical role. On the one hand, it challenged and exposed the authoritarian practices of those at the helm of the state; on the other, it conveyed the alternatives (such as that of the theory of two economies) offered by the opposition platforms that helped galvanise the people to rally, and protest, and demand change. Unfortunately, instead of further

facilitating press freedom, successive governments in independent Bangladesh have adopted laws and administrative practices that act as barriers to that aspired principle. Included among the laws are provisions of the Special Powers Act, the Printing Press and Publication Act, the Information and Communication Technology Act, the sedition and defamation clauses of the Code of Criminal Procedure and, no less importantly, the Digital Security Act. Needless to say, these laws, particularly the DSA, have been applied to stem dissent on a number of occasions, and it is the journalist community who disproportionately bore the brunt.

The rampant application of the DSA severely restricts freedom of expression. Stating that 14 of the listed 19 offences under the law are non-bailable, the president of the Editors' Council noted, "Even if the law is not invoked, its sheer existence is enough to destroy journalistic initiatives." This may entail that an accused may have to spend months behind the bars before the trial process even begins. It also takes a toll on his/her reputation and social standing. The law also extends enormous power to the police to conduct searches on the premises of news establishments or seize computers and other equipment on "mere suspicion."

The defamation provision is another legal instrument to intimidate journalists. While in most countries, defamation

pursue their vocation.

There have been occasions where journalists had to endure physical assault, illegal detention, and harassment from the state functionaries for performing their professional tasks. In mid-March 2020, Ariful Islam's reports on the irregularities of Kurigram district administration resulted in 30 to 40 people, including a senior official of civil administration, raiding his house in the



Free press ensures the accountability and transparency of various branches of the government and state institutions in a democracy.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

middle of the night and detaining him. Arif was taken to the DC's office, where he was tortured blindfolded and threatened with an "encounter." He was then sent to jail for a year on charges of "possessing alcohol and marijuana" by an illegal mobile court sanctioned by the deputy commissioner.

The non-state actors also constitute a threat to journalists. On unmetten numbers of occasions, particularly during mass protests such as the road safety or quota movements, along with the protesters, reporters (carrying visible identity documents) were attacked and their equipment and vehicles vandalised by the supporters or members of the affiliated organisations of the ruling establishment, inflicting bodily harm on journalists. There is little evidence that effective actions were taken against the attackers for violating the law.

Likewise, reporters are also subjected to attacks and intimidation for publishing news and posting opinions on social media platforms, triggering displeasure of the powerful quarters. Golam Sarwar's case provides a classic example. This Chattogram-based journalist was involuntarily disappeared last November, and he reappeared after three days. While in illegal custody, Sarwar was

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is treated as a civil offence, under Bangladesh law, it is a criminal offence. The law explicitly stipulates that the plaintiff has to be an aggrieved party, but in practice, defamation cases filed by individuals, who had no *locus standi* to file them, were admitted by the magistrate.

While the state retains a plethora of legal provisions to clamp down on the media if it so decides, thus far there is no law for the protection of the media from arbitrary intrusion and closure, and from arrest or questioning of journalists and the whistleblowers. This works as a great impediment to freedom of the press, and curtails journalists' ability to effectively

## That sinking feeling from Down Under



ANDREW SHENG

"that fellow from Down Under" in what appears to be a senior moment. The fact that the military alliance has upset a lot of people from China, France, and even their own commentators should not have been surprising.

Has Australia, one of the four advanced OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries from the Asia Pacific region (the others being Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand), seriously thought through AUKUS implications on her Asian neighbours?

First, do eight nuclear submarines by 2040 make serious military sense for Australian security? We can understand that a maritime power in the South Pacific with lots of coastal waters to patrol needs a strong navy. But as former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating rightly pointed out, China is a land-based power and, being several thousand kilometres away from Australia, does not pose a military threat to Australia. Assuming that the nuclear submarines will be similar to those planned by the United States, which will acquire 12 of the Columbia-class nuclear submarines for USD 128 billion by 2030 (US Government Accountability Office), Australia may be paying at least USD 85 billion for equipment that may be obsolete by the time they come onstream. Even the US director of national intelligence has admitted that China's GDP (22.8 percent of world GDP) would outclass that of the United States (20.8 percent) by 2040. Twenty years is a long time to improve defences against submarine attacks. Submarines have, at best, deterrent effects under conventional warfare, but their real threat comes from carrying nuclear missiles. But even the potential of carrying such missiles would invite enemy nuclear retaliation.

This is exactly why Asean (Association

of Southeast Asian Nations) countries like Malaysia and Indonesia showed serious concern that the AUKUS deal may become a catalyst to the nuclear arms race. If that is the case, Australia would lose her status as a haven for nuclear-free living, something that New Zealand cares seriously about, which is why she distanced herself from the deal.

Second, which businessman would spend nearly the same amount of money that he earns to point a gun at his best customer? China imported USD 100 billion in 2020 from Australia, with the latter earning a trade and service surplus of USD 55.5 billion. Then to spend USD 85 billion (with likely huge overruns based on

Australian military intelligence is an oxymoron when they recently ordered 70-tonne US Abrams tanks that are too heavy to carry by train or across the Northern Territory bridges by road to defend the Northern Australian coast.

Her Asian neighbours would be much happier if Australia took the lead in the Asia-Pacific region on climate change, rather than spending on arms. Amongst the rich countries, Australia has the highest per capita emission rate, similar to the US. But out of 200 countries, Australia ranks fifth or sixth among the biggest global emitters, so her voice on fulfilling the requirements of the Paris Agreement matters. Unfortunately, given the huge



US President Joe Biden, in the East Room of the White House, is joined virtually by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to introduce AUKUS partnership on September 15, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS

past experience) on defence against your top trading customer defies business logic.

Third, the Anglosphere military alliance created a split with Europe, already sore after Brexit and Kabul. France is not only the first foreign ally of the United States (helping in the US Independence War against Britain), but also has serious Indo-Pacific interests, with 93 percent of her maritime economic exclusivity zone—10.2 million sq-km, the second largest in the world—located there.

Fourth, you have to ask whether the

asked to surrender his freedom to pursue his chosen vocation in exchange for "freedom" from harassment and torture. He claims that a politically influential family in Chattogram filed two defamation cases against him. In one instance, Tk 100 crore compensation was sought. So far, he failed to secure any redress from the law enforcement authorities.

The prevailing adverse regulatory framework, coupled with arbitrary administrative practices and high-handedness of the politically and financially powerful connected with the corridors of power, have created an environment of self-censorship. This has led to a situation in which it is not only the veracity of facts that concerns news editors and chief reporters, but also if the facts being dealt with are "DSA proof."

Over time, journalism has also been adversely affected by changes in the pattern of the ownership of media houses due to corporatisation, which are increasingly guided by overtly pecuniary, business, and other interests. Gone are the days when there was little meddling of owners with contents of the news and opinions expressed, and the editors enjoyed full discretion in running affairs of the media. However, over time, there has been gradual erosion in the authority of professional editors as the corporate houses increasingly began to interfere on such matters. Instead of letting the media perform its professed goal of serving the nation by disseminating credible facts and information, news outlets have become a handy tool for corporate houses to pursue their business and political interests, often resorting to publishing or running fake news to malign their business and other rivals. Such "predatory corporate control" has increasingly become stark in the Bangladeshi context, eroding the ethical foundation of media in general.

In this age of the "tsunami" of news portals that are built around "unedited, unverified, unsourced news and deliberate promotion of alternative facts," this aberration of the mainstream media is worrisome. Such a development not only dampens ethical journalism, but it also does a disservice to the people and weakens democracy. As the nation marches forward in the economic terrain, the need for accountability and transparency of various branches of the government and state institutions has become all the more important. Therefore, the onus lies on the state and other stakeholders to ensure that freedom of expression and ethical journalism can flourish—as real news, truth, objectivity, balance, and fairness do indeed matter.

C R Abrar is an academic, and a member of Nagorik, a platform of human rights and rule of law.

that by 2030, their lands could become uninhabitable due to rising seas, water salination, reef destruction, and more natural disasters.

The latest World Bank model suggests that the global decline in biodiversity and collapse in ecosystem services such as wild pollination, food from marine fisheries, and timber from native forests could result in a decline in global GDP worth USD 2.7 trillion by 2030. The injustice is that the poorest countries—including those in Asia Pacific—will bear most of such ecosystem and GDP losses. In particular, many indigenous people whose livelihood depends on nature will bear the brunt of these losses.

Why are we not surprised that, on September 13, 2007, when the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by 144 member countries, the four votes against it were from the Anglosphere countries of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States? In all four rich countries, the record of treatment of the indigenous people have been shameful, such as the unmarked graves of indigenous school children in forced assimilation schools in Canada. According to Human Rights Watch, Aboriginal and Torres Islander people comprise 29 percent of the Australian adult prison population, but just three percent of the total population. In the United States, states with large native populations have incarceration rates for American Indians up to seven times that of whites.

The AUKUS military alliance essentially signals to the world that money spent on real war is preferred to money spent on social justice at home and concerns for the people and the planet. Who really profits from the nuclear submarine contract? Look no further than the exclusive submarine suppliers such as General Dynamics (US) and British Aerospace (UK).

The AUKUS deal essentially confirms that Australia opts to sink or swim with their rich Anglosphere few, rather than the global many.

Who said the world was fair?

Andrew Sheng is adjunct professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing and University of Malaya. He was formerly the chairman of the Securities and Futures Commission, Hong Kong.

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