

Where's the justice for murdered journalists?

Authorities must do more to end the culture of impunity surrounding crimes against journalists

YESTERDAY, as we marked the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, the International Press Institute, in a statement, drew attention to the fact that the global conviction rate for violent crimes against journalists is abysmally low—in at least nine out of 10 cases, the killers go unpunished. This is all too true in the case of Bangladesh.

According to a report by this daily, in the last two and a half decades, cases filed over the murders of at least 13 journalists have been characterised by never-ending probes, their investigations failing to navigate the messy judicial system, and traceless culprits, all with the same end result: a lack of justice, and impunity for the killers. Since 1992, at least 23 journalists have been killed in Bangladesh, and verdicts have been delivered in only a few of the cases.

In the ones that are still in limbo, it seems that only the families of the deceased are concerned with justice being served. Some of these journalists were murdered over a decade ago, yet their cases have not even reached the courtrooms yet. The aggrieved family members have spoken to the media about investigators failing to submit probe reports, or failing to conduct investigations at all. These cases have dragged on for so long, stuck in the legal quagmire of our justice system, that in one case, even the prosecuting lawyer had no idea of its status. In some instances, the cases have simply been thrown out of court, or the accused have been acquitted. Even in the few where verdicts have been reached, it has taken more than a decade to do so.

This culture of impunity and lethargic attitude towards dispensing justice is a serious threat to the ability of journalists to do their jobs without fear of serious (even fatal) repercussions. If forces with vested interests are able to silence independent journalism with violence, and face almost no consequences for doing so, what does it say about the state of press freedom in a country? Given that journalists in Bangladesh are already operating in increasingly policed spaces, with the threat of the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) hanging over their heads, such a state of affairs only adds to the environment of fear that they are currently working in.

We demand that the journalists who have been murdered in Bangladesh receive justice without any further delay, and we urge the government to create a safe and enabling environment for media workers in the country. If impunity for committing crimes against journalists is allowed to continue, it will only accelerate such attacks and undermine the future of independent and critical journalism. Ultimately, this is not only an attack on press freedom, but on democracy itself.

Illegal arms trade must be dealt with urgently

What are these heavy weapons being used for, and by whom?

WE are deeply concerned by the influx of illegal firearms and ammunition through our borders, as it poses a serious threat to our national security on varying levels. In the most recent instance, as reported by this daily, officials of the DMP's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit arrested four individuals with five firearms and 301 rounds of bullets, including bullets for an AK-47 rifle, from Dhaka's Jatrabari area. One of these four arrested is Md Hossain, a legal arms dealer who used his licence to smuggle in illegal arms and ammunition from neighbouring India and Myanmar, and sold them to criminal groups in Dhaka, Chattogram and Cox's Bazar.

But Hossain did not operate alone—he had a syndicate of smugglers assisting him to collect unused licences, acquire weapons using them, and resell them to criminal groups after removing their barcodes. The fact that he did so while himself being a legal arms trader is alarming, to say the least. Is the country's mechanism for legal firearm ownership not strong enough to have prevented this from happening? Hossain has reportedly been imprisoned before for the same. Why was he not monitored by our law enforcers, given his apparent notoriety as an illegal arms dealer?

Not only could such illegal trade of weapons benefit small-time criminals, but the rise of more deadly criminal gangs in Cox's Bazar's Rohingya camps and elsewhere might also be a cause for concern in this regard. Six people were killed in a madrasa in one of the camps on October 22 when at least 50 individuals stormed in with sharp weapons, and even firearms. Be it the Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army (ARSA), as locals suspect, or some other malicious group—it is worth investigating if they are benefiting from such illegal import of high-powered weapons.

We hope the police will not only be diligent about going after those dealers and buyers who have been identified, but will also use this momentum to crack down on the illegal arms trade happening along our borders for so long. Their suspicion that criminal groups are trying to acquire heavier firearms such as AK-47s must be looked into with utmost seriousness, if any future national calamities are to be avoided.

We also urge the authorities to identify loopholes in the legal ownership mechanism for firearms, so that others like Hossain cannot take wrongful advantage of their licences. Most importantly, the government must strengthen our border security and clamp down on all avenues that allow such easy illegal trading of firearms and ammunition.

Where to draw the line between free speech and hate speech?



A CLOSER LOOK

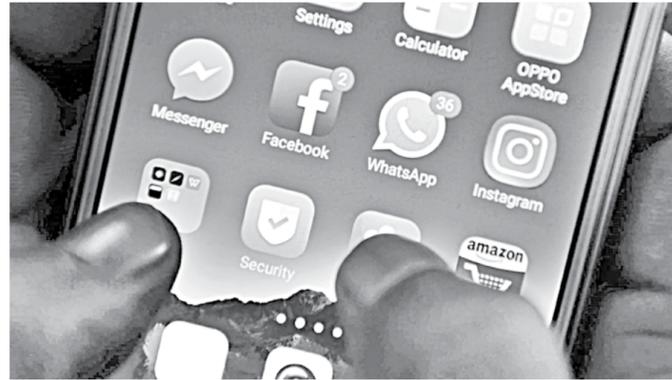
TASNEEM TAYEB

ON a cold winter day in February 2020, BJP leader and turncoat politician Kapil Mishra tweeted a video, asking his followers to "prevent another Shaheen Bagh," referring to the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 demonstrations that were being held in Shaheen Bagh of Delhi since December 15, 2019. Prior to this, Mishra threatened the protesters during a rally near Jaffrabad metro station, saying that he would take matters into his own hands if the police failed to disperse them. What followed was one of the bloodiest chapters of modern-day Indian politics: the 2020 Delhi riots, which led to the

in violence globally—often communal and political—incited by vested quarters through social media. Even in Bangladesh, during the recent Durga Puja celebrations—one of the biggest religious festivals in the country—communal violence erupted after vested quarters posted false, staged, misleading and provocative content on social media. The attacks continued for days, spanning the length and breadth of the country.

The initial incident took place in Cumilla, where a man made a Facebook live post, accusing the Hindu community of desecrating the Quran at a puja mandap. Early on the morning of October 13, police received a call from Ekram Hossain regarding the alleged defamation of the Quran. After police arrived at the spot—Nanua Dighir Par puja mandap—around 7:30am, a man named Foyez Ahmed started making a Facebook live video, showing the OC, Anwarul Azim, and urging people to rise

While the government needs to create an ecosystem that promotes healthy usage of social media, the platforms themselves must focus on greater vigilance with regard to what messages are being circulated on their sites.



The proper use of social media not only requires responsible regulation on the government's part, but responsible usage on the people's part as well. PHOTO: AFP

killing of more than 40 people, mostly Muslims.

Earlier in January this year, Twitter and Facebook had to ban the account of Donald Trump after his provocative social media posts further fuelled the attack on the US Capitol, which initially started as a result of Trump's instigating speech towards his predominantly white supremacist followers after losing the US presidential election to Joe Biden. In a statement, Twitter said, "After assessing the language in these Tweets against our Glorification of Violence policy, we have determined that these Tweets are in violation of the Glorification of Violence Policy and the user @realDonaldTrump should be immediately permanently suspended from the service."

Twitter also banned the accounts of former Trump associates Sidney Powell and Michael Flynn for promoting far-right conspiracy theories.

In recent days, we have seen a surge

up against the defamatory act.

The video started gaining traction with increased views and shares, and by 8am there was a throng of people at the spot. By 9am, there were even more people. They all sought revenge. The police and local administration could not do much to contain the swelling crowd. What followed was a brutal onslaught on the Hindu community.

While the government now needs to take a hard look at the context of the attacks, the factors that enabled it, and the reasons why the government and its intelligence agencies failed to take preventive measures, or even why the curative actions took so long to quell the violence, it also needs to look at how social media is being misused by vested quarters to stoke communal violence in the country.

An investigative report published by *The Daily Star* on October 22 revealed that, as of the publication of the report,

over 300 provocative videos were available on various YouTube channels—most of them uploaded within hours of the October 13 attacks. And all of these videos feature highly loaded and divisive messages. They are filled with hate speech, aimed at instigating the viewers—by appealing to their religious sentiments—to act against the Hindu community. Facebook was also found to be filled with inflammatory content against the minority community.

While the government should not resort to an overall internet blackout or indiscriminate banning of social media platforms, it needs to work on formulating a comprehensive social media policy that can tackle their unchecked misuse, while ensuring people's fundamental right to freedom of speech at the same time.

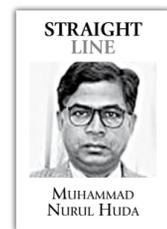
The government currently has the Digital Security Act (DSA) in place, but the DSA or similar draconian laws cannot be a solution to this problem. These are highly controversial laws that verge on the suppression of freedom of speech, and more than helping curb the ever-spilling infodemic, these laws are rather used selectively and to serve the interests of powerful quarters.

What we need right now is a holistic policy and an environment that takes into account fact-checking, social media platform verification and authentication, and social media usage literacy and etiquettes, among other mechanisms, to counter the spread of disinformation, fake news and loaded content.

In a country like Bangladesh where people with limited literacy on safe internet usage have easy access to the internet, the users need to be adequately educated so that they can use social media platforms in a responsible manner.

The government should also scrutinise the social media accounts and

It's time to look into the well-being of the policemen



STRAIGHT LINE

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

MORE than not, the word "police" in our parlance gets adverse attention—and for understandable reasons. For policing, an admittedly thankless occupation in the subcontinent, at least, the bouquets are few while the brickbats are aplenty. Most police personnel have reconciled with the reality—perhaps grudgingly—that the sweet taste of appreciation is indeed rarer than the bitterness of the complaint. It is not uncommon to see our police personnel be constantly vulnerable to criticism for the manner in which they choose to exercise their discretion. Police are subject to both ridicule for not exercising discretion, and condemnation for making discretionary judgement—they are damned either way.

In such an environment, the recognition of the stress that police members have to endure, by the cerebral media—for instance, a report published in this daily on October 26—as well as the psychosocial impact of such stress should be welcome news. This is because there is hardly anyone who will take up their cause. Some may sympathise with them, but the sad reality is that publicly espousing a policeman's cause would be something that no activist could take on—even for a friend. In my experience, some policemen, while confronting a law and order situation, have often wondered that if self-expression in this country means destroying public property and causing physical injury to others, then who are they to step in? Law enforcers, in such a scenario, feel a deep sense of shame and can hardly be assuaged by the self-justification of a stressful profession.

We need to understand the reasons behind public apathy towards police. This deficit may have stemmed from the inherent inability of the policemen to

project themselves as who they are, and the dominant public perception is that our policemen have little intelligence and even less resources. As a result, there is little public appreciation for the kind of pressure our police force faces now. With conspicuous consumption, fanaticism and militancy emerging as new threats, the pressure on the law enforcement authorities has increased manifold.

An average policeman, particularly in a metropolis, has a range of duties:



Without a sound mental health and efficient stress management at their disposal, our policemen cannot perform their duty as we expect them to. FILE PHOTO: STAR

attending courts, mitigating marital strife, controlling mobs, chasing criminals, conducting rescue operations, providing VIP security, and tracking down absconding people, to name a few. An average working day for a policeman stretches between 12 and 16 hours, leaving little time for family, friends or recreation. An emerging exhibitionist culture, fuelled by the desire for the quick buck from the *nouveau riche*, has further complicated the status syndrome.

Many policemen are of the opinion that the public expect them to be fully devoted to work, and that the public has the right to set high standards—though the reality of life around us does not

justify such expectations. The question that remains unasked is whether the public needs to meet the police halfway in expressing appreciation when deserved. Since that is not the case, and as the police fail to meet public expectations, the public takes the law into its own hands and wreaks its vengeance on uniformed heads as well as public properties with deplorable callousness. The stress in such a situation is not something to be brushed aside.

platforms that are spreading harmful and divisive content, understand if these are premeditated and synchronised, identify the actors behind them, and take appropriate action to neutralise them. The accounts that have intentionally inflamed violence in the past should also be banned, and the perpetrators should be held accountable for their deeds.

The social media platforms also need to be much more proactive in screening the content that they allow to circulate on their sites. Facebook has recently come under fire after internal documents and reports revealed that the company failed to curb divisive, hate-filled content directed at the Muslim community in India. And the build-up of such content, it has been reported, might have played a role in inflaming the 2020 Delhi riots.

With regard to these allegations, in a statement to the Associated Press, Facebook said the platform had "invested significantly in technology to find hate speech in various languages, including Hindi and Bengali," which, in 2021, reduced "the amount of hate speech that people see by half." However, more needs to be done to ensure that provocative content are screened, flagged and removed on time, along with close monitoring of groups and platforms that have a tendency to promote fake information and disinformation.

Similarly, people in general need to be more aware of the facts and be responsible in consuming, engaging with and sharing such content on social media. Rather than blindly believing every bit of information that is out there on social media, people should check for content validated by the news media.

And the government should encourage and promote press freedom in order to be able to tackle the problem of disinformation. Unless there is a free flow of credible information from the press, the risk of people resorting to social media to quench their thirst for news and information will remain. Stringent government regulation on social media platforms, which can at times infringe on people's right to free speech, is a highly undesirable scenario, and everyone, including the social media users, must do their part to avoid such a situation.

While the government needs to create an ecosystem that promotes healthy usage of social media, the platforms themselves must focus on greater vigilance with regard to what messages are being circulated on their sites. And people should look to the news media as a source of information, rather than dubious social media content. To ensure productive social media engagement, the responsibility falls on all of us, on what we choose to consume, and on where we draw the line.

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