

# The Daily Star

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DHAKA SATURDAY DECEMBER 11, 2021, AGRAHAYAN 26, 1428 BS

## Govts worldwide must stop imprisoning journalists

*Attacking the free press is the hallmark of authoritarianism*

IT is disconcerting to note that for the sixth year running, the number of journalists imprisoned worldwide has hit a record high, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). It illustrates an alarming trend of governments around the world cracking down on the free flow of information and on professionals whose duty is to keep the public informed. Without an informed public, there can be no democracy—this has been widely acknowledged by all reformers who helped shape modern democracies. That the governments around the world are upholding this idea less and less illustrates a dangerous turn towards authoritarianism.

According to a report published in this daily on December 10, many Asian countries are leading the way when it comes to imprisoning journalists. Among them are countries like China, Myanmar and Vietnam. Press freedom in Bangladesh has also taken a turn for the worse over the years. Bangladesh, which has always performed poorly in the World Press Freedom Index, slipped another notch to be ranked 152 out of 180 countries in this year's ranking.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, we have seen governments around the world crack down on journalism in the name of protecting people from misinformation. However, as we have repeatedly seen around the globe, the production and distribution of verified information by independent journalists have always been the best antidote to disinformation.

That is why, as recently as October this year, editors of various newspapers in Bangladesh raised concern that free press in Bangladesh was under assault from multiple directions. The lack of institutional protection for journalists, along with the government's refusal to respect the constitutional rights of journalists—and, indeed, all individuals when it comes to free expression—as well as the various international agreements that it is a signatory to, is gravely concerning.

Imprisoning journalists for reporting the news is the hallmark of an authoritarian regime. Yet, we have seen the Digital Security Act (DSA) being used to repeatedly harass journalists in particular. This hostility towards free expression not only threatens independent journalism, but our democracy itself. Hence, we call on our government to reassess many of the laws and mechanisms it has put in place that are stifling freedom of speech and freedom of the press. And on the global front, countries have to start valuing the rights of journalists—and overall of free expression—that their respective constitutions and various international human rights agreements recognise as being eternal, and key to the survival and progress of our civilisation.

## Economic recovery cannot afford inefficiency at ports

*Customs procedures must be made hassle-free*

WE are concerned to learn that the recovery of import-export businesses post Covid-19 lockdowns is being hampered by the slow and expensive pace of work at the Chattogram port. According to Mohammad Ali Khokon, president of the Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA), many shipping lines are reluctant to send their vessels to this port due to delays in unloading goods. With businesses finally starting to get back on their feet, demand has risen all around for container ships, but this has unfortunately caused an abnormal rise in the price per container—from the pre-pandemic fee of USD 600 to a staggering USD 6,000. Because of the delays due to port congestion, businesses are also incurring losses in terms of paying demurrage for overstaying and goods not being attended to at the port.

While there have been encouraging trends regarding trade—such as the 6.36 percent rise of garment exports to non-traditional markets in 2020-21 fiscal year, despite the two waves of the pandemic—the economy is still a long way away from fully recovering (at least to the pre-pandemic levels). So, now more than ever, it is important for the customs authorities to buck up and clear out shipments as speedily and efficiently as possible. In the last fiscal year, the Customs House, Chattogram (CHC) itself recorded a 23.23 percent higher year-on-year revenue growth of Tk 51,577 crore—the highest ever in CHC's history. Though the CHC officials say this increase is owing to them improving surveillance to eliminate false declarations, it is undeniable that the increased demand in the energy, power and construction sectors have contributed to the customs house's success as well. It is crucial for the organisation to now carry this momentum forward and perform even better once the current fiscal year is concluded.

As such, we urge the Chattogram port authorities to conduct the unloading, loading, and shipping of goods with as little delay as possible, so that businesses, big or small, need not pay for hefty overstaying fees on top of the already expensive process of importing and exporting goods using shipping containers. The customs department must also make sure not to hold businesses hostage by not completing procedural tasks on time. Losses due to such delays will eventually affect the whole economy, slow down or even negate our recovery, if issues with customs are not resolved soon.

# From Disgrace to Grace



fallen out of grace to fall on their own swords.

Historically, "falling on one's sword" implies a tradition of accepting responsibility for a calamity. It dates back to 42BC when Brutus, one of the assassins of Julius Caesar, decided not to run away after his defeat at the Battle of Philippi, but to end his own life. Shakespeare made Brutus say, "Hold then my sword and turn away thy face/While I do run upon it" (*Julius Caesar* V.v). By the same token, one can even argue that the recent resignations involve swords of a sharper sort—such is the reputation of the tongue. In both cases, private loose talk exposed in public domain became the source of disgrace. Since one cannot answer the "why" and "how" of the public availability of such private discourse, it is safe to reflect on their observable implications and ramifications.

The office-bearers were asked to step down once their recorded conversations with objectionable remarks were leaked. They did not resign out of any moral impulsion. One tried to play the "conspiracy" and "put out of context" cards, while the other got ready to phase out to succumb to the political compulsion. They did not assert any high moral ground that the Roman practice of self-immolation would have implied, as they did not own up to their actions. The endorsement of their resignation letters simply shows that these two individuals have burnt their boats, and there is no turning back as they have failed to control their tongues. It was a bit too late by the time they learnt that a little modesty averts disgrace. They were sacrificed to save the parties from public opprobrium, and their inglorious exits were timed and presented in such a way that their political adversaries did not get any opportunity to crow triumph or showcase the government as weak.

Instead, their demitting of office is being used as a tool to inculcate a sense of fear among the potential transgressors. There was a time when voluntary resignations were used to laundry-wash away tainted reputations. But we live in a different time, where everyone is vying for attention, and there are too many "cool" people to fill in the empty space vacated by the mighty hot air. It is unlikely for these zeroes to become heroes all over again. By showing the door to two public officials in the face of charges

transgressors—the ones who violated a legal, moral and ethical code. They are all guilty in the eyes of the law.

They took the life of one man because he articulated his frustration. As a conscientious citizen, Abrar Fahad urged for the upholding of national interest above everything else. The expressed sentiment was interpreted as something that went against the party line. He was rounded up, periodically beaten. Under the influence of alcohol, perhaps. Abrar

respect for women even while working under female leadership. He was not thinking of the discretion required by the position sponsored by the taxpayers. The violent act of the engineering students showed that they were simply acting as automatons to pursue hazing instructed by a party senior, without listening to their inner voices of reason. They were actually not thinking of their parents who sent them to become educated and better human beings. They were not thinking of the taxpayers who were facilitating their studies. The fallen public officials and the cursed students remind us of knowing our place in the grand scheme of things.

Frankly, I could not process the judgment against the 25 meritorious students-turned-criminals; just like I could not process the death of Abrar two years ago. As an educator, father, and a responsible citizen, I feel we have collectively failed our students. Our indifference has allowed the hidden monsters to thrive and prowl. Sometimes, they are posing as intriguing land grabbers, perverted predators, or violent Frankensteins.

I don't want to dampen the spirit of our golden jubilee Victory Day with such pessimism. I was reading the story of a young girl from Brahmanbaria named Shova, whose mother works as a domestic aide. Shova lost her father when she was in her mother's womb. Her mother was at the mercy of her brother for some time. The mother and the daughter were thrown out of the house in the middle of rain one night once the mother sold some eggs from the chicken coop to buy a dress for her daughter. She was thrown out of a household as the employer refused to feed two mouths for the work of one. That little girl got scholarships, tutored others for a monthly salary of Tk 100 to eventually pass her school and intermediate exams. She has finally found a place at Buet.

My eyes are welling up as I write her story. I am sure those 25 students have all been special with their own stories. Right now, they are nothing but news items. They join the list of viral stories. But to pay respect to our freedom fighters, we must find *shova* (grace) in whatever we do. We need to leave all our disgraces behind to move forward to embrace the radiance of the golden Bengal that was pursued by Bangabandhu, the father of the nation.

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is the pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).



When one is operating under the illusion of invincibility, it becomes all too easy to forget how precarious one's position of power can become.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

of impropriety and conflict of interest, the government has actually gained political capital.

These timely departures came at a time when a mood of impunity was growing. These punishments can be used as a stern signal for those who constantly fail to control their tongues. A similar exemplary punishment is evident in the landmark judgment in which 25 students of the country's premier technical university were sentenced for the murder of one of their fellow students. Twenty students were given the death penalty, and the remaining five life imprisonment. In essence, both are capital punishments as life without parole is nothing but an extended death sentence.

Social media is rife with mixed responses as the punishment of so many bright, young students is unprecedented. On the other hand, they were all party to a crime that resulted in the death of an equally bright young man. The punishment has been given to

was killed on October 7, 2019. Who do we blame? The 25 men who had been identified as the shadowy figures captured in the night vision of Buet's CCTV footage? The system that allowed people to act more Catholic than the Pope? What does one get out of such excess?

I was reading an article by the youngest daughter of Bangabandhu. After the death of his mother, it was one of the would-be murderers and perpetrators of the August 15 carnage who cried the most. The public show of ideals does not mean anything unless you internalise the spirit of freedom and humanity. The candid remarks of the former Gazipur mayor showed that, deep down, he never respected the ideology of Bangabandhu which he was publicly parading. He was not thinking of the reputation of the party and the love of his constituents that gave him his public stature and personal fame.

The obscene remarks of the disgraced state minister showed that he had no

## To save our planet, we need to stop living unsustainably



kill most of mankind and irrevocably damage our planet. And we have very little time to either phase this self-destructive behaviour out, or else trigger a self-perpetuating cycle of climate change resulting in death, destitution, starvation, forced migration and unimaginable disasters for most of life on Earth.

THE climate crisis facing us today is the combination of endless needs, wants, indecisions, arguments, and the lack of acceptance rising out of selfishness. We are addicted to processes that will eventually

to go by, COP26 was never likely to "rewrite our story."

Walking down the streets of Glasgow to reach the conference centre, there seemed to be two COPs going on simultaneously—one inside and one outside. Outside, there were demonstrations and pleas for understanding, solidarity, equity, climate justice and action to keep the planet liveable. There were cries for those with power to exercise a sense of responsibility preceding self-interest and self-protection. Inside were two weeks of "intense negotiations." But negotiations on what? On whether today's development is more important than the future of this planet? On whether we need to phase out, or if phasing down will do for now? Because if we phase out, then what will happen to the 3.6 million Indians who are directly

in alternate sectors, and develop alternate technologies. Divestment from fossil fuels needs to be accompanied by investment in green technologies.

At the same time, climate-impacted economies need funds to adapt to climatic changes that are already at play, and which will continue even if we stop emitting greenhouse gases (GHGs) right away. Developing countries estimated that their need for climate financing would total about USD 1.3 trillion per year until 2030. This was left out of the Glasgow Climate Pact. Developed countries committed only to coughing up USD 100 billion more quickly, noting "with deep regret" that they had failed to give it by 2020, as previously promised.

Developed countries have refused to take responsibility for loss and damage that they have caused through their

agreed to the need for finance, technology transfer and capacity-building to support adaptation. They agreed to protect nature and biodiversity, and they managed to get non-CO2 emissions such as methane into the conversation.

However, the bottom line is that countries have not planned for significant emission cuts in the next 10 years, despite net zero pledges and acceptance of the science. The Climate Action Tracker shows that if all the COP26 commitments are met, we're still headed for a global temperature rise of 2.4 degrees Celsius, which will be catastrophic (instead of 2.8 degrees Celsius without the pact, which would have been apocalyptic).

Of course, having this conference itself is a success. In fact, given COP's history of ineffective decisions and broken promises, every concession we win is a plus point. But when the stakes are high as saving humankind, anything short of that is a failure.

We asked Dr Atiq Rahman, who was instrumental in forming Bangladesh's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), whether developed countries are taking responsibility for their share of the damage caused by global warming. "No, absolutely not," he said. "Are rich people in Bangladesh taking responsibility for poor people here?"

Developed countries and corporations will not easily change their ways and pour all their money into solving future problems—especially when the status quo benefits them greatly. Lobbyists will make vast amounts of money trying to ensure that lucrative corporations don't lose business. In the same vein, political leaders will try not to lose popular support in their constituencies.

And so, the negotiations turn to the nitty-gritty details about who wins, who loses, who gets to keep their profits, and who gets to develop and how much. Today's development programmes, political agenda, the weighing of power and money against the cost of survival of life on this planet—this was not the intended agenda; but it feels like these considerations have shaped the outcome.

Real change requires real sacrifices. The same goes for you and I. Are we prepared to stop using plastics tomorrow, limit internet use, stop overconsumption? Are we prepared to forego our comforts today for a brighter tomorrow? We are addicted to unsustainable behaviour. To stop will hurt.

But if we change, we can still have our beautiful world. A world which will provide generously for our needs, see more equity not only among human beings, but also in sharing our planet with all those beings who inhabit it.

Runa Khan is the founder and executive director of Friendship, a social purpose organisation.



While leaders wrangled over the wording on their commitments at COP26, protesters outside decried what they saw as a lack of sincere action.

PHOTO: COURTESY

The year 2020 ended with the postponement of the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) due to Covid-19. One more year passed in which nations were not held accountable and gave no results to help abate the climate crisis.

When COP26 eventually happened this year, David Attenborough called it an opportunity to "turn this tragedy into a triumph."

"We are the greatest problem solvers to have ever existed on Earth," he pointed out. "We know how to stop the number rising and put it in reverse."

Opportunity is there. But if the track record of the past 25 COPs was anything

or indirectly employed in coal mining or power sectors? India currently gets at least 70 percent of its energy from non-renewables. Where will this energy come from? India's energy requirement is projected to grow more than any other nation in the world.

Then there are manufacturing processes like steel and cement still dependent on the use of coal—alternate technologies are yet to be developed. India's steel and cement production is set to triple by 2050.

This kind of growth is seen by economists as necessary for progress. If large, developing countries stop using coal, they will need enormous funds to ensure that their economies can adapt, create jobs

emissions thus far, which impact mostly small island nations and developing countries like Bangladesh. Rich countries don't want to take liability for this—capitulation now could be a basis to hold them liable for years to come.

There are a few small victories in the pact. Despite US opposition, references to the rapidly depleting carbon budget stayed in. There is acknowledgement of how woefully inadequate the contribution of developed countries to climate funding is, and calls for urgent scale-up. Developed countries agreed to double their pay-outs. The conversation on loss and damage was given space, but there are no commitments on this subject. They