

# Militant suspects out on bail pose a threat

## We need an effective legal process to prosecute them quickly

WE are alarmed to learn of the number of militant suspects who are currently out on bail, roaming freely amid unsuspecting citizens. According to the Police Headquarters, as many as 4,881 people were arrested for their alleged involvement with different militant outfits since 2005. Of them, 2,456 walked out of jail on bail, 251 of whom went into hiding. Reportedly, many of the suspects reorganised to continue their extremist activities, while a good number of them fled the country. Only a few of them appear before the court during hearings, according to court sources.

According to our report, one such militant is Ariful Karim Chowdhury alias Adnan, who was arrested by police in 2015 over his involvement with banned militant outfit Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami (Huji). After coming out of jail, he got involved with another banned outfit Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). Although Adnan was arrested again in 2019, this is not the case for the majority of the suspects who are on bail. They have been continuing their activities in hiding, according to reports.

The question is: how did so many suspects manage to get bail? One reason cited by officials working on countering extremism is the long time it takes to collect evidence against militant suspects. By the time police collect the evidence, the militants are out on bail already. Lack of public prosecutors experienced in dealing with militant cases is another reason. Moreover, according to the prosecutors, the weak charge sheets given against the suspects are also a barrier to keeping them behind bars.

These suspected militants pose a threat to our security. This needs to be taken seriously by all working to counter extremism and radicalisation, including the Anti Terrorism Unit (ATU). We know that a team of counter-terrorism unit (CTU) was formed in every police unit across Bangladesh in 2017. They should regularly monitor the activities and whereabouts of the militants. In addition, the issue of social reintegration of militant suspects needs to be taken seriously by the authorities concerned. If they are not deradicalised and given a chance to re-engage with society in a positive way, we can't expect them to make an automatic U-turn from their former way of life.

Last but not the least, the legal process for trying militant suspects must also be made more effective by enhancing the capacity of the investigators and improving coordination between the police and the prosecutors at all stages. The cases filed in connection with militancy must be disposed of quickly. Otherwise, all our efforts to contain militancy may fail.

# How do we avoid another launch fire?

## By heeding the recommendations of experts

WE commend the investigation of a civil committee into the MV Abhijan 10 launch fire on December 24, 2021, which found proof of negligence against 12 people: four government officials, four operators, and four owners of the launch. The result of the investigation by Poribesh Bachao Andolon (Poba) comes after another probe by a government-formed committee that also found a number of people—including three officials of the shipping department and the BIWTA—responsible for the fire that claimed 49 lives. Both investigations pointed to the incredible negligence of those responsible for the safety of the launch.

The MV Abhijan 10 caught fire after its faulty engine burst into flames on the Sugandha River in Jhalakathi. But this could have been avoided if everyone involved had just played their part. For example, the launch was operating after a hiatus of three months, so why did the authorities not check its fitness before letting it sail again? It was also found that the dock authorities had replaced the launch's engines with older ones, without any official approval. To top it off, the two launch drivers, who brought it to shore after it had caught fire, reportedly did not anchor it. Instead, they fled and left those on the launch trapped in the fire. Add to this the fact that the launch was carrying double the number of passengers it should have, while the master of the launch failed to stop its journey at the Barishal launch terminal even though the heat at the lower deck could be felt by all.

While such terrible incidents on our rivers may seem sporadic, their number is not negligible. It shows how unfit the vessels operating across the country are, and how irresponsible those in charge can be. We must not forget the MV Mayur accident on June 29, 2020, when 34 people died as the launch hit a small vessel on the Buriganga River. If those responsible for these incidents are left unpunished, and if adequate measures are not taken to avoid their recurrence, we are essentially inviting more of such disasters and tragedies in the future.

Therefore, we urge the government to heed the recommendations listed by the civic probe committee. The fire service must check if a vessel is in order every three months and should provide clearance to a vessel's fire safety system before it can operate, while every passenger vessel must have Ansar members on board for security. Cameras should also be installed at key points so that no one can escape their responsibility to keep passengers safe.

# SUST VC's sexist remark reveals a worrying picture



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UNIVERSITIES are considered to be the highest place for education, learning, research, and innovation. Students attend universities not only to get academic degrees, but also to acquire knowledge and develop a global outlook, which guide them throughout their lives. Seeds of education and values which are planted among students in school grow and mature at university. University education enhances and enriches individuals and societies, and university teachers play the key role in imparting education and shaping the minds of students by instilling the right values which are conducive to economic, political, social and cultural transformation.

It is, thus, incomprehensible that a university teacher—a VC, no less—could make a misogynistic remark such as the one made against the female students of Jahangirnagar University (JU). Instead of handling the demand by female students of Sylhet Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) to improve the situation at their dormitory in a sensitive manner, the VC attempted to undermine the issue by referring to the female students of JU and their movement around the campus at night in a derogatory and deplorable manner. He told the SUST students, “Do you want to be like the JU students whom nobody wants to marry, because they roam around at night?” Really? Who told him? He said that some student leaders told him so. He went on to say that he did not want their (SUST) “good” students to have such a “stain” on them.

Such remarks about university students and also women in general are not uncommon in our society. Even after several decades of women's leadership at the highest level of the country during its 50-year journey, the mindset of many people—men and women both—has hardly changed. A section of society, including its educated class, still tries to blame the victim when any abusive incident happens. In doing so, they justify abusive male behaviour towards women. I don't see any difference between them and the SUST VC, who is not only supposed to hold progressive values, but also contribute towards developing a progressive society where men and



▲ **Outraged by their VC's ways of handling the situation, SUST students are now observing hunger strike and holding symbolic funeral processions, demanding the VC's removal.**

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

insulted the female students, but also the teachers who are in charge of educating students and maintaining a congenial environment on the JU campus. He has also insulted the parents and guardians of the JU female students. As such, he must apologise for his indecent and inappropriate remark.

The second issue is the SUST VC's style of crisis management, which is dependent on the ruling party's student wing and the law enforcement agencies. The ongoing crisis at SUST, which could have been easily avoided, has once again brought to the fore the issue of VC selection. The culture of rewarding people who are loyal to the ruling party has engulfed almost all sectors—including the universities which are supposed to be the lively centres of independent and liberal thoughts.

A university VC used to be a highly regarded position once upon a time. Sadly, it seems nowadays that there is a deliberate attempt to appoint teachers with poor educational and professional accomplishments but with strong political connections. Their academic background, experience and administrative capabilities are not counted for the position. In the SUST VC's case, social media has been flooded with

on student political leaders. Student politics is supposed to solve students' problems, not to make administrative decisions. But in many cases, there is a nexus between such student leaders and university VCs. They engage in financial and other irregularities together. Political backing saves them even after corruption is proven. Such moral degradation among the VCs and the deterioration of the dignity of the position discourages qualified teachers to run for the position.

There are student unions in developed countries as well. Like many, I have experienced first-hand at two top universities in the UK and the US how student unions function, and how they enhance student welfare by engaging with the university administration. Even with so much freedom, students cannot think of misbehaving with teachers. Indeed, the strong institutional foundation of these universities, which is based on the principles of quality, integrity and independence, keep those unions functioning smoothly. Because they diligently uphold such core values, educational institutions in the advanced and many developing countries have not only been surviving, but thriving for long.

## INTERNATIONAL DAY OF EDUCATION

# Are we doing enough to recover learning loss?



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JANNATUL MAWA

THE main motto of this year's Education Day is transforming education radically to reflect the changes occurring right now. It also advocates equity and democratic participation. As we approach the third year of the pandemic, the importance of addressing the concerns of unrest, inequality and exclusion in education is higher than ever before. Undoubtedly, inequality and exclusion are among the hardest challenges the education sector has been facing since the beginning of the pandemic, and it is clear that technology on its own is not a solution, but a component of inequality itself. The question is, can we bring necessary reforms to minimise the inequality, or are we just leaving the students to their fates?

In Bangladesh, schools remained closed due to the pandemic for more than 500 consecutive days, the longest in the world (and now, we've entered another episode of closure which, one hopes, will not last long). The effect of this closure is nothing less than a pandemic itself, as it has thrown around 35 million children out of school or any kind of learning system. During this long period, a substantial number of children had either minimal to no contact with the educators, did not have access to any classroom teaching-learning process, or were forced to drop out for various socio-economic reasons. Because of the loss of a whole school

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year, students have been promoted to the next grades without having achieved their grade-level competencies. Achieving grade-level competencies and learning outcomes has been a challenge for them despite a promising rate of school enrolment. For example, according to the National Student Assessment 2017, 62 percent of grade 3 students and 76 percent of grade 5 students did not achieve their grade-level competencies in mathematics. The statistics for other grades and subjects are more or less the same. Then, the complete absence of in-person learning for a long time certainly made the situation worse. Even with the students who have been able to continue their studies during school closure, it is hard to be hopeful because of the massive learning gap created in this period, despite various efforts of distance learning.

Ideally, minimising or recovering this learning loss should have been the main objective. But the method adopted after reopening of schools in September 2021—with fewer classes for early grades, shorter syllabi and fewer subjects for tests—means that instead of addressing the loss, the learning time has actually been shortened for the students who are not attending any public exams. Hence, the situation is getting worse every day.

This massive learning gap is one of the many disastrous effects of the pandemic. When the whole country was under strict lockdown, online and TV classes seemed to be the only plausible solution. However, in a country like Bangladesh, the reality of poor access to technology should not have escaped the notice of our policymakers as a large number of students come from poor socio-economic backgrounds. It was obvious that the majority of them would completely fall out of the Covid-19 response and recovery system.

According to UNICEF, 91 percent of students from low-income or rural families have had no access to the internet. This group is certainly amongst the most vulnerable, who are at the risk of dropping out for countless other secondary effects of the pandemic. The government data itself shows that 79 percent of students were not interested in the classes broadcast on TV. The Ministry of Education tried to address the gap with assignments as part of an assessment process. How students dropping out of the learning system can be assessed is a question that no one seems to know the answer to.

We should have realised by now that any response or recovery plan will remain in papers if such overly generalised, one-system-fits-all approaches are taken. Minimising the digital divide and recovering learning loss are two very big challenges that require immediate and equity-focused action plans. Going forward, if distance or blended learning remains the only available option, it must be more inclusive. And that cannot be possible without national-level planning based on expert advice, proper financing, and empowered teachers. Once equity in terms of access to formal education is ensured, recovering learning loss should be on the top of our priority list—not promotion to the higher grades.

Salman Khan, the founder of Khan Academy, the well-known online learning platform used by millions of students globally, aptly put that if technology is not used properly, we might see an “education catastrophe”. The scenario on the ground confirms that fear. If we keep more than half of the students outside of a proper learning system, and the rest learns less than half of what they were supposed to learn, our collective future will be damaged beyond repair.