

# The Daily Star

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## If digitalisation doesn't work, what will?

### Govt must make the birth registration process simple and hassle-free

**I**DEALLY, a digital birth registration process should make life simpler. It should be easy to navigate, remove the hassle of having to go to multiple offices for documents, and significantly reduce delivery times. But it appears that in trying to digitalise the birth registration process in Bangladesh, we are also "digitalising" the logistical problems of the erstwhile manual system. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, citizens are being put through unnecessary hassles as they have to go through a slow, lengthy, and often complicated process while trying to obtain this vital document.

The government made the online registration of birth mandatory since January 1 last year, meaning citizens must have this document to access a total of 18 services, including enrolment in educational institutions, registration for Secondary School Certificate exams, applying for passport, driving licence, etc. Besides, children aged 12 and above, who are entitled to Covid-19 vaccine, also require a digital birth certificate. This makes the document as important as one's NID. But the process to obtain it remains as cumbersome as ever. Our correspondent spoke to applicants in Dhaka who complained that they couldn't register their children's births because their own certificates lacked the required digits (17). There are also allegations of deliberate misspelling of names and addresses, which can lead to a complicated and time-consuming correction procedure. Many complained of the unhelpful attitude of city corporation officials, and the resultant intervention of brokers with alleged underhand dealings with the former. There are also system-induced challenges for people without fixed/permanent addresses, forcing them to go from one office to another.

If you're one of the lucky ones, you may have your certificate within a month or so, although the certificate delivery receipt would mention a waiting period of 15 days from the submission of relevant documents. But a whole new ordeal may follow if there are corrections to be made, which is a case for many. Also, a lack of coordination between city corporation officials and the office of the registrar general for birth and death registration—as highlighted by two councillors from Dhaka's two city corporations—can put additional burden on the applicants.

So, what's the point of having a digital birth registration system if it makes the life of applicants difficult, rather than help them? We understand that the birth registration process is still going through a transition, and it may take more time to iron out the problems inherited from the manual system. But addressing systemic loopholes, ensuring coordination and cooperation among all related departments, and building a delivery method based on the once-only principle should be at the top of the government's agenda, if the digitalisation drive is to succeed. Citizens must not suffer while trying to obtain this all-too-important document.

## No respite for Bhabadaha residents

### WDB must use practical methods to address their waterlogging problem

**A**S if years of waterlogging problem in the Bhabadaha region between Jashore and Khulna was not problematic enough, it seems the Bangladesh Water Development Board's (WDB) efforts to solve this issue are also proving impractical, yielding no significant results. A recent report by this daily has narrated how the board is conducting excavation in the Teka and Hari rivers to draw water away from Bhabadaha. But the contractor responsible for the task is reportedly dumping the sediment back into the rivers just a few feet away from the excavation spots. As such, far from solving the problem, the dumping has caused the rivers to narrow down into three canals, while hundreds of thousands of people are still living knee-deep in stagnant water.

Earlier last year, the WDB began pumping out stagnant water from Bhabadaha using 20 pumps, as part of a project for which they had already spent Tk 2.5 crore by August 2021. The current, largely ineffective river excavation project itself will cost a total of Tk 3.18 crore. Meanwhile, the riverbed is becoming more elevated due to the dumping of sediment, and clogging the entire area's drainage system.

We wonder why the WDB hasn't yet adopted the tried and proven method of getting rid of waterlogging: the tidal river management (TRM). This method entails building an embankment around a *beel*, leaving two cut points for water to enter and recede from. When the water recedes during low tide, it takes away the sediment deposited on the riverbed in a process of natural excavation and helps the depth of water bodies remain intact. Until 2013, TRM was used in the area for eight years, during which the level of the river was zero at sea level, while it is now silted and thus raised up by around 2.5 metres.

Though there are some drawbacks to employing TRM, we would urge the relevant authorities to consider this approach. This has been a proven method, one in which the affected population has faith. The people of Bhabadaha region deserve to be permanently rid of their long-drawn-out problem of waterlogging, which has brought only misery in their lives.

# Disappointing CPI score: What trajectory is Bangladesh on?



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**T**HE Transparency International (TI) released its Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2021 on January 25, 2022. Bangladesh has scored 26 out of 100—the same as in 2020, 2019 and 2018. From the top, Bangladesh is ranked 147th among 180 countries, one step lower than 2020, and 13th from the bottom, one step higher than 2020. The result is disappointing. We have failed to achieve any real progress. More importantly, based on a trend analysis for 2012-2021, Bangladesh has stagnated at the same score of 26, which indicates the lack of success in controlling corruption over the past decade.

Once again, we are second worst in South Asia, above only Afghanistan. We are also the third lowest among 31 countries in the Asia Pacific region, and continue to score well below the global average of 43, an indicator of moderate success in corruption control.

No country has scored 100 percent, implying that corruption exists everywhere. About 130 countries (72 percent) have scored below 50, and 100 countries (55 percent) less than the global average. The 10-year trend analysis shows a mixed picture: the score has increased for 84 countries, decreased for 83, while seven including Bangladesh have stagnated in their respective score.

Denmark, Finland and New Zealand have jointly topped the list, each having scored 88. Other countries leading the list with more than 75 percent score are Norway, Singapore and Sweden (85), Switzerland (84), Netherlands (82), Luxembourg (81), Germany (80), the UK (78), and Hong Kong (76). Notable weak performers are the US (67), Spain (61), Italy (56), China (45), and Russia (29). Russia's score has dropped from 42, while China's score has gone up from 32 to 45. South Sudan is at the very bottom, having scored 11. Other lowest performers are war-torn or "failed states" like Syria, Somalia, Venezuela, Yemen, North Korea, Afghanistan, Libya, Equatorial Guinea, Turkmenistan, DR Congo, and Burundi.

Bhutan continues to be the best South Asian performer, scoring 68 and ranked 25th from the top, followed by India and Maldives scoring 40, Sri Lanka (37), Nepal (33), Pakistan (28) and Afghanistan (16). The trend analysis for 2012-2021 shows Bhutan to have gained five points, India four, Nepal eight, Afghanistan eight, and Pakistan one. Only Sri Lanka has lost three points, while Bangladesh remains stagnated. Data for Maldives were not available.

Bangladesh has overcome the agonies of being the worst performer in 2001-2005. However, we have disappointingly remained in the category of countries where corruption is considered to be acute. Disappointing in particular for the fact that the period for which CPI 2021 data relates to (November 2018 – September 2021) was supposed to be one of zero tolerance against corruption.

At the time of launching the 2018 election manifesto, the prime minister made a zero tolerance pledge against

corruption. After forming the cabinet, she reminded the ministers of the same. Subsequently, delivering a speech to the nation, she stressed upon four aspects of her anti-corruption pledge: those involved in corruption must move away from it and practice integrity; the laws must be strictly enforced; information technology in public services must be expanded; and

bias for the predominant business lobbies, while the interest of the poor and disadvantaged remained peripheral. The institutions mandated to ensure rule of law and accountability have been rendered dysfunctional by politicisation. As a result, the beneficiaries, colluders and promoters of corruption are protected. Accountability is rare except for smaller



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SOURCE: TIB

cooperation of media and general public must be ensured to prevent corruption. In the context of the much-talked-about anti-corruption drive in September 2019, she announced that nobody should be spared, including leaders or workers of her own party. She later reiterated zero corruption in the response and recovery programme undertaken by the government to confront the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hence, it was logical to expect that Bangladesh would perform better. The reality is just the opposite. Belying the prime minister's pledge, corruption has flourished as a section of unscrupulous people, often linked with power, took the pandemic crisis as an opportunity to abuse power and accumulate wealth. At the local level, a section of officials and politically influential people, including public representatives, indulged in various forms of corruption in supply and distribution of relief goods for the victims of the crisis. Even the cash support scheme for the ultra-poor was not spared. The floodgate of corruption got expanded in procurement and supplies involving vendors with alleged political links colluding with a section of officials.

Money laundering captured headlines highlighting reported involvement of the powerful, including public representatives, officials and businesspersons. In addition to money laundering, some public representatives were even involved in human trafficking, including one convicted out of the country, though concrete action within the country against any such instance has been negligible.

A key factor in the non-delivery of zero tolerance pledge is the intrinsic linkage between politics, money and corruption, causing a disconnect of public decisions and actions from common people's interest. The banking sector is an example of state capture, whereby policies and decisions often reflect the interest of loan defaulters and swindlers. The Covid recovery stimulus package represented

fries, whereas the big fish enjoy impunity, thanks to their links with power—real or manipulated.

Without a paradigm shift in our political culture to put public interest first, replacing the practice of treating political affiliation as a licence for abuse of power, corruption cannot be controlled. Politics and political positions must be insulated from the influence of money and criminality. Depoliticisation of institutions is critical to ensuring rule of law. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) must be able to effectively criminalise corruption, irrespective of social, political and financial status. To promote public participation against corruption, the space must be expanded for openness, reporting and discourse on corruption, and the exercise of constitutionally guaranteed rights, including freedoms of opinion and dissent.

The theme of CPI 2021 is "Corruption, Human Rights and Democracy." Corruption contributes to an unsafe climate for human rights and its defenders. The Transparency International estimates that out of 331 cases of murder of human rights defenders globally in 2020, 98 percent occurred in 23 countries with high levels of corruption, and at least 20 such cases targeted anti-corruption activists.

Restricting freedoms of opinion and dissent is a strategic weapon to protect corruption and weaken the scope of societal checks on it. Unabated corruption reduces the state's capacity to ensure accountability, enhances impunity, and makes corruption a way of life.

Corruption leads to democratic decline and dysfunctionality of institutions. It increases injustice and abuse of human rights, which in turn leads to further corruption, causing a vicious cycle. Given the state of violation of human rights in Bangladesh, deficits of the rule of law in general and abuse of the Digital Security Act (DSA) in particular, whether we are on the same trajectory or not is anyone's guess.

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# Developed countries can't get out of paying for climate impacts



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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**O**N the last official day of the 26th UN climate conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland last year, over 150 countries representing more than five billion people put forward a proposal for the creation of the Glasgow Facility on Financing Loss and Damage to combat human-induced climate change as part of the final Glasgow Climate Pact. However, the text was later downgraded, at the insistence of the US and a few other developed countries, to a Glasgow Dialogue on finance for loss and damage. The vulnerable countries were extremely disheartened by this downgrade from action to mere talk, but had no choice other than to accept it.

This does not mean that the efforts to create the facility for finance for loss and damage will be abandoned, and the dialogue can still be turned into action.

Firstly, the Glasgow dialogue on finance for loss and damage envisages two entire years of dialogue before a decision can be made. This was clearly an attempt by the

developed countries to postpone action for several years, and is precisely what Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg accused world leaders of doing when she described the COP26 as more "blah, blah, blah."

This is also not the first dialogue that has been held under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), as there was another one called the Suva Dialogue on finance for loss and damage several years ago, with practically no outcomes.

The main reason that the developed countries, especially the US, are so opposed to offering finance for loss and damage is their fear of admitting liability, and hence facing claims for compensation. In fact, the very phrase "liability and compensation," which are taboo words as far as the US is concerned.

However, now that the impacts of climate change are a reality, its resulting losses and damage are trickling in, too. And the victims, whether in developed or developing countries, are already paying the price. The question is: Who will support the victims in dealing with loss and damage once it is widespread?

After the floods in Germany in 2021 killed nearly 200 and caused billions of euros of damage, Chancellor Angela Merkel recognised the floods as having been exacerbated by human-induced climate change, and offered hundreds of millions of euros as compensation for those affected. Similarly, when hurricane

Ida hit New Jersey, US President Joe Biden acknowledged the climate impacts and offered citizens compensation.

These acts by Merkel and Biden to help victims of the climate crisis in their respective countries were perfectly legitimate acts. However, when developing countries asked for similar financial assistance during COP26, they refused to give up even a single dime. Instead, they merely offered to continue to talk for two more years.

So, as the UK and Alok Sharma will retain the presidency of the COP until they hand it over to Egypt in November this year in Sharm El Sheikh, they need to arrange with the UNFCCC Secretariat to hold the Glasgow Dialogue on Finance with the aim of transforming it into a finance facility at COP27, if they wish to retain any credibility.

A final issue to take into consideration is the challenge made by the first minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, who kick-started the Loss and Damage Fund outside the UNFCCC with a contribution of two million pounds from Scotland. She also challenged other leaders to match her funds and has already collected around 10 million pounds from the Province of Wallonia in Belgium, as well as from several foundations.

Thus, funding for loss and damage is already underway, and the challenge is for leaders of developed countries in the UNFCCC to rise to the occasion, instead of kicking the can down the road again.

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