

The Daily Star

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Clarify methods of prosecuting money launderers

ACC, other bodies must collaborate to provide details to the court

WE are extremely disappointed to learn of the failures of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and other government agencies in submitting detailed information about money launderers to the High Court, as directed. Reportedly, an HC bench has been holding hearings on a *suo motu* rule and a writ petition for the prosecution of money launderers for over a year now, but couldn't pass any order in the absence of proper information—names, addresses, their deposits in overseas banks, properties abroad, etc.

According to a 2020 report by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), around USD 3.1 billion, or Tk 26,400 crore, is being illegally remitted from Bangladesh every year, while a Global Financial Integrity (GFI) report listed Bangladesh as one of the top 30 countries in the world in terms of illicit financial flows. Names of Bangladeshi money launderers and corporations were revealed in the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers published in 2016 and 2017, respectively. In 2020, the foreign minister also admitted that government officials were buying luxurious homes abroad. Following these revelations, the HC issued a *suo motu* rule and directed intelligence agencies to take measures to stop money laundering. Sadly, the court's order fell on deaf ears. Since then, the HC has issued several directives to the relevant authorities, including the ACC, but to no avail.

The ACC, however, did submit a "compliance report" to the court last year which contained the names of 43 people, but failed to provide any findings of its own. The question is: Why couldn't they? According to a lawyer of the commission, they sought information about the launderers from the foreign and home ministries as well as the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU), but did not receive any. Again, why is that? Apparently, as per the foreign minister, his ministry is not responsible for finding money launderers. There is only so much a court can do if none of the relevant bodies accept their responsibility.

Clearly, there is a serious lack of coordination among the state agencies concerned when it comes to finding information about the launderers and bringing them to justice. It also indicates that those laundering money abroad are powerful people against whom the agencies do not want to move the needle.

We think, while the ACC must be held accountable for not performing its duty, our intelligence agencies must also be questioned for their inaction regarding the issue. If the ACC, with help of others, could at least give details about the accused launderers, the HC could have issued necessary directives to bring them under the law. Money laundering has become a serious threat to our economy, and it must be prevented by bringing the offenders to justice. To do so, all state agencies concerned must work together.

How honest are we about saving rivers, really?

Govt engaging in filling river areas sends a wrong message

WHEN agencies of the government itself are found to be negligent in protecting rivers, we can't help but wonder if the rivers are really dying—as it is often said—or if they're being killed. Reportedly, the Bangladesh Bridge Authority (BBA) has been filling up a portion of the Turag River for the last one month, for its Dhaka-Ashulia expressway project. Curiously enough, both the BBA and the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) appeared to plead ignorance. While the project's director claimed that their Chinese contractor "mistakenly" filled up the area, the port and transportation director of the BIWTA vaguely said that the BBA would "probably" apply to them for permission. We wonder if this is the standard procedure for such projects: to first fill up part of a river and then seek permission for it, after the damage has already been done.

Many questions arise from this situation: Why did the government only recently set up demarcation pillars along the four Dhaka rivers, when the High Court had passed an order to do so in 2009? Why were nearly half the pillars set up in the wrong places, making the rivers even narrower, and thus defeating the very purpose of restoring them to their original state? Worst of all, why is there such a disconnect between different government agencies when working in the same area? It is strange that the river area in question has been filled up for over a month, according to locals, but the BBA project director only ordered their contractor to stop work on January 23, 2022. Does this mean that those running this project are so out of touch with its progress that they didn't know about this assault on the Turag River?

We hope that this discovery will be a wake-up call for the government and those in charge of restoring and protecting our rivers—not just around Dhaka, but all over Bangladesh. Dumping waste in rivers and grabbing of river land by influential people are also major threats that need to be dealt with urgently. For many, especially in rural areas, our rivers contribute heavily to their livelihoods, while also sustaining biodiversity in a world steadily succumbing to the impacts of climate change. We must not allow for our water bodies to be suffocated for our own misguided notion of "development."

Impropriety, Irregularity and Impunity

Erosion of values and offices of higher education



ON THE SHORES OF (IN)JUSTICE

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CR ABRAR

AFTER seven long days, the 28 protesting students of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) ended their hunger strike, bringing relief to their loved ones and fellow protesters. Unfortunately, there is little indication that the crisis that pervaded the campus for almost a fortnight is about to be over. On the one hand, students stand firm on their demand for the resignation of the vice-chancellor (VC); on the other, the administration remains oblivious to the impasse. While the lack of initiative by the beleaguered VC is understandable, the insensitivity and inaction by the government—more specifically by the education ministry—to engage in a meaningful dialogue to address the students' grievances is unconscionable. Citizens were appalled by the failure of senior functionaries of the state to engage with the students in addressing their

The dismissive and intimidating tactics employed to suppress the SUST students' protests have not only proven futile, but have fuelled their outrage further.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR



concerns, and appealing to them to bring an end to the hunger strike.

The SUST situation has triggered a mixed reaction in various quarters. The SUST VC's inability to handle the discontent of the residents of a female dormitory and take timely action against the errant provost, his reticence to acknowledge, let alone act upon, the genuine grievances of general students of the university, and his alleged granting of permission to law enforcement agencies into the campus, who resorted to brute force to disperse the protesting students, have resulted in solidarity protest marches, rallies and human chains at public universities across Bangladesh—including those in Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi and Barisal. The University Teachers' Network, Bangladesh, a coalition of progressive teachers of various universities, and the Conscientious Citizens' Forum, which organised a long march from Dhaka to Sylhet, endorsed the demand for the SUST VC's resignation. In the print, electronic and social media, commentators, columnists and netizens expressed their disappointment on how the matter was handled, and outrage at the excessive use of force. Even some lawmakers expressed solidarity with the protesters.

However, contrary to such rational responses, it is revealing that two important stakeholders of higher education, the university teachers' associations and the vice-chancellors' forum, have not only espoused a very contrasting view, but have belligerently put that view across for public consumption.

In a statement on January 20, the Bangladesh Federation of University Teachers' Association (BFUTA), the apex body of all university teachers' associations in the country, expressed grave concern over "a quarter with vested interest trying to divert the ongoing student protest at SUST and hatching conspiracy." The association called upon the government to investigate if there is any conspiracy involving the SUST protest and take necessary steps to this end. "We are concerned that a quarter is trying to disrupt the existing peaceful situation in all the university campuses in the country

by involving the students as part of its conspiracy to destabilise the country," the statement read. Thus, the BFUTA was convinced that there is a plot to mobilise "the protesting innocent students to turn their protest into an anti-government movement" (*The Daily Star*, January 21, 2022).

Days later, in the same spirit in an appeal to the authorities to resolve the dispute, the Dhaka University Teachers' Association demanded "an investigation into whether there was any incitement behind the police action during the protests at SUST." Their statement noted, "It appears that a third party is trying to manipulate the situation into becoming an anti-government movement" (*The Business Standard*, January 24, 2022). Earlier, the education minister also hinted at possible intervention from outsiders to divert the movement to another way (*The Business Standard*, January 22, 2022).

The lack of empathy for the students in the BFUTA and DUTA statements is startling. There was no mention of the students' justifiable demands pertaining to the quality of food served in the dormitories, poor access to the internet, inefficient administration and the like that triggered the initial discontent. The absence of the spirit of dialogue and accommodation on the

an already charged environment—a role that was expected from this eminent body—such a confrontational stance of AUB reflected its partisan stance on behalf of the administration, and belittled the agency of the students who, defying all odds, were essentially protesting against the wrongs they have been subjected to.

The VCs' threat of *en masse* resignation was particularly revealing. It betrayed their collective anxiety about the unfurling of a domino effect. In other words, the VCs were worried that involuntary resignation of the SUST VC may encourage students of their own institutions to resort to similar protests against them. Perhaps the VCs are well aware of the simmering discontent among students in the public universities. Included among those are unfair allocation of seats and poor quality of food served in dormitories, poor internet services, unaccountability of teachers, delayed publication of results to general administrative inefficiency, the absence of the right to organise, speak and elect their representatives freely, and the high-handedness that the ruling party supporters exercise with impunity.

These failings of the heads of public universities (who are generally appointed on political considerations, rather than

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university administration's part towards the protesting students that escalated the tension was also ignored by the associations. Their silence on the brutal attacks on the protesting students by the student wing of the ruling party was deafening. While the DUTA statement referred to the "attack of the police force," the BFUTA remained completely hushed on this critical factor that strengthened the students' resolve in demanding their VC's resignation. Needless to say, the associations failed to provide a shred of evidence in support of the allegations they made.

The partisan stance of the teachers' associations, though painful, is hardly surprising. Gone are the days when a teacher was "friend, guide and philosopher" of the students whom they mentored. One wonders if those in the leadership of teachers' associations championing "the spirit of the Liberation War" are at all aware of Dr Mohammad Shamsuzzoha, who was shot dead for protecting the students of Rajshahi University against a Pakistan Army unit during the 1969 students' movement. Just before being shot by an army captain at point blank range, Dr Zoha is famously known to have declared, "Before any bullet strikes any student, it will hit me." His death acted as a catalyst of the mass uprising that subsequently toppled General Ayub Khan.

In an unusual development, VCs of 34 public universities in the country expressed solidarity with the controversial SUST VC. In a statement issued after a virtual meeting of the Association of Universities of Bangladesh (AUB), the VCs noted that the chaos created in demanding the removal of the SUST VC "is a conspiracy." "The ongoing protest seems to be a part of a conspiracy to destroy the education system by creating an anarchic situation in SUST as well as in other educational institutes," read the statement. They also termed the demand for resignation as "unethical." Expressing solidarity with SUST VC at a virtual meeting, the association members said they were ready to resign *en masse* if SUST VC was to resign (*Prothom Alo*, January 23, 2022).

Instead of having a calming effect on

their intellectual and administrative abilities) have had a dampening effect on the intellectual firmament of campuses, and contribute to further politicisation of the institutions concerned, undermining their autonomous status.

There is little surprise that such a dispensation works as a breeding ground for corruption. After due investigation, the University Grants Commission (UGC) recommended actions against several VCs for alleged corruption and irregularities over the last few years. Included among the charges listed by the UGC were corruption and nepotism in recruitment of faculty and staff members, discrimination in promoting staff members, non-transparent monetary practices including withdrawal of excess honorarium, irregularities in infrastructure construction, procurement and purchase, unauthorised occupation and use of university property, and unauthorised holding of several administrative posts. It is against this bleak backdrop that the priority of the administration and those of law enforcement agencies becomes starkly pronounced, when five former SUST students (among them two architects and two engineers) were arrested allegedly for funding the ongoing student protests.

The UGC's recommendation failed to generate any action against the delinquent VCs. Irked by the ministry's inaction, the UGC chair feels that "such inaction against the VCs after probes found them guilty are disappointing" and "it gives wrong message and a kind of impunity" to them and others. Elaborating the point, a UGC member notes, "Some have become more reckless in the absence of punishment" (*The Daily Star*, May 18, 2021).

Decades ago, Dr Abdur Rashid, VC of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), reportedly advised the Governor's Office to check scripts of all admission seekers when he was approached to admit one candidate who could not pass the admission test. The Governor's Office backed off. Readers may note that the incident happened during Pakistan's rule, and the universities enjoyed no autonomy then.