

Private airlines barely staying afloat

Govt must provide them financial assistance, reduce their tax burdens

WE are really concerned to learn that our private airlines have been struggling with a host of problems, which are not only impeding their growth but also have forced a number of them to completely stop their operations. According to a report by *The Daily Star* on February 5, regulatory malfunction, excessive tariffs, high jet fuel price and undue patronisation given to their main rival, the national flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines, are the major reasons behind this.

According to the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, while 1.3 million people opted for air travel in 2000, the number increased to about 6 million in 2020. While our private airlines could have expanded their operations taking advantage of the high demand for air travel, they could not do so due to a lack of support from the government and other concerned authorities, experts say.

The most important challenge for these airlines is to survive against the state-financed Biman, which has a bonded warehouse facility as well as a hangar at the airport which other airlines don't have. What this means is, when it comes to servicing an aircraft or replacing spare parts, the private airliners fall far behind Biman as they can't keep the spare parts at the airport, leading to a regular disruption of flight schedules. Sometimes, the private airlines have to wait for months to import the spare parts. Moreover, they have to import many of the parts—such as the multiple number of generators used in the aircraft, various types of LCD panels and computer displays used in the cockpit—at a very high price, due to the unreasonable tax they have to pay at the Customs. Some of the parts are taxed between 15 and 150 percent while they should be cleared on zero-tax, according to industry stakeholders. Then there is a 5 percent advance tax (AT) which has been imposed recently on the import of aircraft, engines and spares.

Another major reason why the private airlines are struggling is their due surcharges. According to aviation analysts, it is the piled-up surcharges that forced the GMG Airlines, United Airways and Regent Airways to ground their fleet. The high price of jet fuel is another barrier for them.

Therefore, in order to revive our aviation industry, there needs to be a clear directive from the authorities to stop the arbitrary and whimsical practice of taxation on the private airliners. They also need bonded facilities at the airport to easily service their aircraft and replace the spare parts as needed. Getting permission from the authorities to import the parts should not also take so long. Most importantly, private airlines also need financial assistance from the government, that is until the playing field for them is level.

Save our forests from influential locals

Govt must take firm stance to stop environmental damage

STORIES of cutting hills or ravaging forests and other natural resources by powerful individuals are so frequently published that they do not surprise us anymore. It is well-known that these people often operate with some kind of work order issued by the local administration and, importantly, with the blessings of the local political power. As a result, they remain outside the dragnet of the laws even when they do something horrible.

One such story has now come from Cox's Bazaar with details of how a wildlife sanctuary, surrounding agricultural lands and two canals are being decimated by a syndicate having links with the ruling party. According to the Youth Environment Society (YES), a Cox's Bazar-based environmental organisation, the forestland and croplands belonging to locals were excavated 30 feet deep, turning an estimated 300 acres of arable land and forestland into veritable ponds.

The story says that after damaging two canals by building dams and extracting sand, the syndicate is tearing apart the forest by scooping out sand from it and topsoil from adjacent arable land in Dulahazara union of Chakaria upazila, Cox's Bazar. Reportedly, the canals, both marked as ecologically sensitive, have been leased out to a local influential group. And as expected, they have been making hefty money out of it paying no heed at all to the environmental damage caused.

Once an eye-catching locale with pristine trees, the whole area was a sanctuary for birds and wild animals. The Fasiakhali forest, which serves as a habitat for the critically endangered Asian Elephants, is now at risk because of these activities. The extensive damage done to the entire locality has also been mentioned in a report of the Department of Environment. It found out that about 4,000 square feet of the two canals were damaged as a result of sand and soil extraction by the leaseholders. These people are well-known, just as the official response, especially from the divisional forest officer of Cox's Bazar (north), is predictably lax.

We have noticed a pattern of such irresponsible and inadequate responses from the district officials in case of such acts of destruction of the environment and overstepping legal bounds by the perpetrators. This cannot be the norm. The higher authorities must take a firm stance to save our forests and other natural resources and ensure local officers and administration take appropriate measures.

How to read the Sinha murder verdict



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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FOR the government, the timing of the Sinha murder verdict on January 31 couldn't have been worse, with increasing global scrutiny following a US sanction on RAB over allegations of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings. Yet, soon after the verdict, which handed death sentences to two police officers, a top leader of the ruling Awami League said, "It proves that the Sheikh Hasina government believes in the rule of law." He said so despite the verdict having blown up the entire story arc built by state officials around instances of extrajudicial killing, or any mislabelling thereof (shootout, crossfire, gunfire).

That's politics 101—you control the narrative regardless of what happens. You stick to it until it becomes the "truth", and you use that "truth" as a crutch in the face of any future allegation. So, before the Sinha verdict too gets sucked into this political vortex, it's important that we take control of the narrative and critically examine why this verdict is significant, but also why its place in history may not be as assured as many think.

What's in the verdict? Besides sentencing Teknaf's suspended OC Pradeep Kumar Das and inspector Liaquat Ali to death for the "pure and simple murder" of Sinha Rashed Khan, the court also sentenced six others—including three cops—to life while acquitting seven other police personnel. Frankly, a death sentence is not something that we can ethically stand behind. But at least we now have the comfort of knowing these people are being held to account for a murder planned in cold blood.

Importantly, the verdict also marks a couple of firsts: it is the first time any law enforcement officers in the country have been brought to book for staging a shootout. It is also the first judicial acknowledgment of how a shootout/crossfire story is cooked up. Through its minute-by-minute description of the July 31, 2020 event, the court has essentially taken the lid off all the variations of this story produced over the years. In short, what all of them have in common is how the law enforcers encounter a "threat" from a "criminal" or his associates, and how they are "forced" to respond (read: fatally shoot) in self-defence. By exposing this farce, the verdict has shown that all shootout/crossfire incidents are basically premeditated.

However, being a first may be a source of comfort, but not necessarily a badge of honour. Pradeep and Co. did something



REPRESENTATIONAL PHOTO: STAR

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meeting. Could Sinha's murder, or that of all other victims, be avoided if he had been stopped sooner? Should we be happy that Sinha got justice, or sad that others before him did not?

This is not merely a rhetorical question. Sinha's murder may have been "pure and simple", but for a broader context, we need to de-simplify the circumstances under which the case progressed, gaining unprecedented momentum as it was transferred to the Cox's Bazar court. Our memory of a muted standoff between the police and military establishments over the retired major's murder is still fresh. What chance does a victim without such powerful backing have of getting justice in a similarly speedy manner?

Unfortunately, a victim's family can rarely file a case, according to Nur Khan Liton, secretary general of Ain o Salish Kendra. Police do not want to record such cases. Even when they do, it is hastily binned or somehow falls through. For example, Sinha's may have been the first case to get a guilty verdict but it wasn't the first to go on trial. In that first trial in 2010, the lower court in Kushtia ruled in favour of the cops, even though the victim's family insisted that the former had picked him up before "staging" the shootout.

So while we are glad that a guilty verdict has been finally reached, and so fast, we doubt this will be the norm going forward. So far, there has been no official apology issued from the home ministry. We have heard of no internal

investigations or judicial inquiries into the other shootout cases that Pradeep and Co. were a part of. No political demand for eliminating the culture of extrajudicial executions. No official censure of lawmakers who previously supported this culture, even in parliament. No scrutinising the modus operandi of security agencies. And no outcry over why

this is the first verdict, and not the 100th or the 500th, hypothetically speaking.

It's as if the Sinha case was an embarrassment, and the sooner it goes away, the better.

For the government, however, this particular embarrassment may last longer than expected. While there has been a dip in the number of extrajudicial executions of late, it is unlikely to help its image with the widespread condemnation after the US sanctions on RAB. The verdict, far from being an affirmation of the rule of law, will instead be used as a reference point to further validate claims of state violence and torture. As image-conscious as this government may be, it doesn't seem to understand that the solution is really not to ignore or cover up crimes and failures—because nothing stays hidden for long in this age—but to own up to them and show sincere action to ensure they never happen again.

After the Sinha verdict, we are being told to be hopeful, to look ahead. But we cannot do so without also looking back. The verdict is a painful reminder that countless other victims—victims without powerful backing or those whose moment of tragedy wasn't immortalised in a viral photo or video clip—didn't get justice. Torture or staged executions by state officials reached a point that the identity of victims no longer mattered. Can we move ahead without critically questioning this failure of "the rule of law" or doing something about it?

Can we all play nice, please?



CHINTTO SINCE 1995

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WITH the third round of Covid surge, educational institutions in Bangladesh are once again subjected to an extended shutdown. The purpose, we are told, is to prevent the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant. This act of concern coming from the health ministry, the primary vanguard of our well-being, could be rather puzzling, judging by their recent vaccination campaign for the same schoolchildren.

Before delving any further, let me shine some light on our tradition of discordant work practice in the public sector, especially when it comes to inter-ministerial collaboration.

You might have seen the following episode in person or on TV, read in the papers or online, or *nidenpokke* heard of it: The roads and highways department lays the finishing asphalt to make a public road usable. Everyone is happy. But a week later, the happier person is the contractor of Titas Gas, who has received a work order to dig the same road to put in pipes. We need gas, man.

But wait! An even happier person waits for his cue with even larger pipes. The Dhaka Wasa has issued a separate work order. This contractor is polite enough to move in only after the gas guy has completed his work with a not-so-finished coat on the road. Therefore, there will be more digging. And finishing. Over time, the *nogorbashi* are finished.

The anecdote above had to be dug up

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because of an unfortunate occurrence related to schoolchildren, where once again there were contradictory approaches to a common cause by two different ministries.

The education ministry spent months to plan, studied the ever-changing circumstances, learnt from other countries, trained teachers and officers, and then laid out a procedure to finally reopen schools and colleges after a long closure. Our children were protected.

During more than a year of closure, however, classes and exams had been conducted online and on television to keep the wheel of education running. The ministry was appreciably cautious about exposing students to the deadly virus. As the infection rate dropped to a somewhat tolerable level, students were allowed into classrooms physically—that, too, for two to three days per week. For the rest of the week, learning continued online.

By government order, campuses and buildings were thoroughly cleaned. At the school gates, students' body temperature was checked and their outstretched hands were sprayed with sanitiser. Mask wearing was, of course, mandatory. Inside the classrooms, they sat at alternate desks. Safe distance and Covid protocol were mostly maintained.

It was amazing how teachers managed their students—some of them eight- to nine-year-olds—administering such a demanding task with efficiency. It was obvious that training and communication were employed methodically under the aegis of the education ministry to let everyone involved know what was expected of them. Astoundingly, this happened in tandem all across the country.

Then came the students' vaccination. In early January, the government made the jabs mandatory for those who were attending classes in person. A welcome

move, no doubt, and somewhat of a thrill for students aged above 12 years. But the good news ends here, because the health ministry officials and medical professionals could not ensure precautionary measures.

There was wide-scale shoving and pushing, no one was caring about wearing masks, and shouting and exchange of red eyes were the order of the day. All of those gross delinquencies were committed by the parents of the children. Some children were understandably frightened.

What the education ministry developed and delivered after months of preparation was destroyed at one sweep by the health ministry and the medical practitioners involved—especially those who planned the school vaccination programme. The mindset of the innocent children, built over two years through massive campaigns on TV and radio, and through learning at home and school, went out the window. "Wash your hands, don't touch your face, wear a mask, avoid crowded places"—all this became a joke to them. Hopefully, the children know better.

Instead of saving lives, the school vaccination programme could prove to be a super spreader. Under the circumstances, perhaps the school students are better off without vaccines in such crowded situations. The health ministry should really try harder to get their act right.

My advice? Next time, don't allow parents or guardians into the vaccination premises. You will see the children behaving their best in the presence of their teachers. Let each school arrange vaccination of their respective students in their own premises. Medical professionals can visit the schools at appointed hours to administer the jabs.

Let's save lives together by learning from each other.