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# Another gag on media, free speech?

Some sections of new BTRC regulation similar to that of DSA

ZYMA ISLAM and PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission has drafted a regulation to clamp down on what it deems the ugly side of social media and streaming services.

However, certain sections of the regulation are almost identical to the Digital Security Act and could be used to gag voices of dissent.

If the regulation is adopted, social media "intermediaries" cannot host or publish, upload any information that threatens the "unity, integrity, defence, security, or sovereignty of Bangladesh, [and its] friendly relations with foreign States".

The draft defines "intermediaries" as any person who on behalf of another "receives, stores or transmits electronic records or provides any service with respect to such records". Intermediaries also cannot disseminate anything that "is against the Liberation War of Bangladesh, the spirit of the Liberation War, the father of the nation, the national anthem, or the national flag" or "threatens the secrecy of the government".

Furthermore, they cannot publish any information that "creates unrest or disorder or deteriorates or advances to deteriorate law and order situation"; or "is offensive, false or threatening and insulting or humiliating to a person".

These are identical or strikingly similar to sections 21, 25, 29, 31 and 32 of the Digital Security Act 2018, which are routinely abused to target journalists and opposition voices.

The DSA sections have received considerable backlash from proponents of freedom of expression, who allege that the law is being weaponised to muzzle dissent.

The draft regulation is applicable to all "publishers of online news/current affairs online content/publishers of online curated content or web-based programs/films/series", said the draft.

"Online curated content" is defined in the draft regulation as "any curated catalogue of audio-visual content other than news and current affairs content ... made available on-demand, including but not limited to subscription, over the internet, or computer networks, and includes films, audiovisual programmes, documentaries, television programmes, serials, podcasts and other such content."

This definition groups together social media handles of media organisations, IPTV and Over The Top media services.

Furthermore, it states that such publishers should have a no-objection certificate from the Ministry of Information and a registration.

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**"The implementation of the draft regulation will cause the same problems being caused by DSA. The concern expressed by the Editor's Council concerning DSA, stands in the case of this draft regulation too."**



A demarcation pillar of the Turag right in the middle of a park near Botanical Garden in the capital's Mirpur area. The park was developed by a resort and entertainment centre, occupying the river's land, and the BIWTA later set up the pillar. The photo was taken a couple of days ago.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

# Amount hiked for projects this FY could make another Padma bridge

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and WASIM BIN HABIB

That project revisions have become a government ailment is well established by now.

But how big a malaise it is has come to the fore this fiscal year: a second Padma bridge could be built with the additional amount allocated to the revised projects so far, raising serious questions about the project implementation procedures of the ministries.

In today's meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council, three projects would be tabled for amendment, to take this fiscal year's tally of project revisions to 31.

If the three projects' revisions get the nod, the additional costs for the 31 projects would come to Tk 29,471 crore.

In contrast, the ambitious Padma bridge, a much-cherished project of the government, cost Tk 30,192 crore.

"A culture of project revision has

## 28 PROJECTS REVISED

- Original cost: Tk 55,077 cr
- Revised cost: Tk 80,513 cr
- Cost hike: Tk 25,436 cr or 47%

**A culture of project revision has become ingrained in our country -- and a vicious circle has been created**

Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow of CPD

become ingrained in our country -- and a vicious circle has been created," said Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

First, a project is passed and then its budget is increased by making delays, he said.

And this inefficiency is ultimately borne by the taxpayers.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed discontent over the issue on several occasions and gave directives on formulating appropriate project plans to check cynical project revisions. But it fell on deaf ears.

Projects keep getting revised and those responsible for the revisions are never held to account.

While the reasons for revisions vary from one project to another, there are some common factors like complexities in land acquisition, lengthy procurement process and absence of proper feasibility studies, according to experts and officials.

It takes at least two years to pass the development project proposal (DPP), according to Rahman.

Due to the time taken to get the projects approved, the estimates

based on which the proposals are prepared become dated, almost always necessitating additional funds.

"So, it's a problem that remains inbuilt," Rahman said.

In many cases, the DPPs are not prepared in a professional way, so many flaws remain in the proposals.

Besides, delays in the bidding process and corruption are the reasons for the cost overruns and time extension, he added.

Some delays also happen in the procurement process mainly due to the import of machinery and lack of specialised manpower, according to planning ministry officials.

Improper feasibility study is one of the major bottlenecks for the timely and smooth implementation of development projects.

Because of it, the project authorities often include several components after taking up a project, which ultimately increases the costs and time, they added.

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# Highest Covid death in 20 weeks

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 38 Covid-19 patients died in the 24 hours till 8:30am yesterday -- the highest single-day death toll since September 19 last year.

On that day, 20 weeks ago, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) reported 43 deaths. At that time, the Delta variant was the most prevalent strain of Covid in the country.

Since January, the spread of the new Omicron variant has marked the third wave of Covid-19.

In the 24-hour period, the DGHS also reported 9,369 new cases. With the latest count, the total number of Covid-19 deaths reached 28,627 and the total confirmed cases numbered 18,70,901.

The positivity rate during the period was 21.07 against 44,471 samples tested countrywide.

Meanwhile, Health

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A man brandishing a gun near a polling centre during a clash between supporters of two chairman candidates in Khagaria union of Chattogram's Satkania. Violence in the seventh phase of the union parishad polls left two people, including a 13-year-old, dead in the upazila yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

# Violence mars 7th phase UP polls too

2, including a seventh-grader, killed in Satkania

STAR REPORT

Thirteen-year-old Tasibul Islam was excited about the UP polls yesterday as his uncle was a member candidate in Nalua union of Chattogram's Satkania upazila.

But the seventh grader was stabbed to death after he found himself in the middle of a clash between supporters of two chairman candidates in the union.

A supporter of a chairman candidate from the ruling Awami League was also killed in the upazila's Bajalia union.

With the two victims, at least 100 people have been killed in violence centring on the staggered union parishad polls, which began in June last year, according to media reports.

As many as 138 unions across the country went to the polls in the seventh phase yesterday.

Clashes between supporters of chairman candidates took place in at least four unions of Satkania, mainly over capturing polling centres and establishing dominance.

Several people were also hurt in the clashes, during which many were seen brandishing arms and carrying bamboo sticks.

Deceased Tasibul was a student of Marfala RMN High School in Nalua union.

After a clash ensued near the Marfala Board Office polling centre over attempts to capture it, he started running towards safety. He, however, fell on the ground hitting a tree, SM Rashidul Haque, superintendent of police in Chattogram, said, quoting witnesses.

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