

## Russia’s aggression must be stopped

### But its security concerns cannot be ignored

THE one thing we have feared since the recent rise in tensions between Nato and Russia over Ukraine has unfortunately happened. Russian President Vladimir Putin declared war in a pre-dawn televised address, after which Moscow mounted an assault by land, sea and air on Ukraine. At the time of writing this editorial on Friday evening, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky reported 137 Ukrainians being killed on the first day of the Russian invasion, while Russian forces captured the former nuclear power plant in Chernobyl and the Hostomel airport in the Kyiv region. Meanwhile, gunfire is ringing through the streets of Kyiv as Russian tanks entered the capital on Friday. The International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor has hinted that his court may investigate the possibility of war crimes within Ukraine. We would like to firstly express our solidarity with the people of Ukraine and, as ever, condemn the war initiated by Russia. What the world is watching unfold—and which is being referred to as the worst since World War II—is an abrupt and unnecessary attack by Russia in the face of only a perceived threat from the West. It is the height of injustice and illogicality that Ukrainian lives should be lost owing to conflicts between Russia and the Nato members.

While President Putin has tried to justify his move by claiming he had no other options left, we cannot help but be doubtful of such a statement. Had all avenues of resolution through dialogue been exhausted? Had the existing dialogue between parties involved, including the West, truly reached a dead end? Even then, is hostile invasion of innocent people truly ever the only option left?

While we condemn Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, we cannot say that the West has no responsibility in bringing the situation to this state. The gradual expansion of Nato, first in 1999 and second in 2008, were swallowed by Russia, who unambiguously asserted that any attempt to incorporate Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance would be the last straw. The West obviously did not take Russia seriously. Just as the US has its own sensitivities about security issues—would it allow anti-Western military alliance to have members close to the US border?—so does Russia, and they cannot be ignored.

Now that the situation has turned into a war, its effects will inevitably spill over to the rest of the world, including Bangladesh, as prices of essentials will rise further and the global supply chain will be dealt a blow. However, the first priority is to save the Ukrainians from the Russian invasion. While we call for an immediate end to hostilities in Ukraine, we also hope that dialogue and negotiations will win. We do not want a war in Europe.

## Why did BCL attack protest on gang rape?

### Doing so puts their motive into question

IF a group of unruly men were to swoop down on students demanding justice for the gang rape of one of their classmates, what would it say about the men in question? At the very least, it would imply that they condone the rape—or worse, that they themselves were directly involved in the very act. We are thus at a loss as to why a group of men allegedly affiliated with Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling party, would attack the protesting students of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University (BSMRSTU) in Gopalganj if they had nothing to do with the rape incident.

According to reports, on Wednesday evening, a group of seven or eight men attacked a BSMRSTU student and her friend, took them to an under-construction building, raped her and tortured her companion. On Thursday morning, several hundred students laid siege to the Gopalganj sadar police station, demanding punishment for the suspects. Students, requesting anonymity, told our correspondent that a group of BCL men had started hurling brickbats at the students at around 5pm. In the ensuing clash between the two groups, at least 30 protesters were injured.

It would be redundant to point out that the gang rape itself, which took place in the town of Gopalganj, is highly disturbing. We are outraged that, despite the ever-climbing statistics—according to Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, at least 1,235 women reported they had been raped, and 179 gang-raped, in 2021—the government has done little to make the cities, towns and the country at large safer for women and girls, beyond cosmetic changes and empty promises. It is now an established fact that a major reason for the escalating violence against women in Bangladesh is the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators. Time and again, we have seen how the administration goes out of their way to protect the perpetrators, especially those who have some form of affiliation with the ruling party, and how the justice system, too, ultimately fails the survivor(s) as a result.

We have repeatedly called upon the government to ensure that it ends the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators, and to take stern action against the members of the ruling party who are implicated in such cases. It must investigate whether the BCL members were, in fact, involved in the attack on the protesting students, and if so, what possible justification the BCL members would have to do so, if not to protect the perpetrators. We understand that police have picked up three youths for questioning—two of whom were cleaners and whose colleagues staged a demonstration in the town claiming their innocence and demanding their release. We implore the authorities to conduct a fair investigation to find the real culprits.

# Save us from the brunt of price hikes



### BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THERE was a time, not long ago, when Bangla news editors would use the phrase “like the price of water” to connote the low cost of an item. Even last year, raw cowhide during the Qurbani Eid was sold for the lowly “price of water.” Aggrieved dairy producers are often heard of throwing away their products in protest of the parity found between milk and water. With the Dhaka Wasa increasing the water tariff 14 times over the last 13 years, the newspersons would have to look for a new analogy. How about using “like the price of a citizen—by extension, a human being,” then?

I wish water was the only pricey commodity. Gas, electricity, fuel and food items are all on a price enhancement frenzy. The cost of living has gone up, and the worth of life has come down. People die for trivial and avoidable reasons. They receive mercy packages in some news-making accident cases. The price tag is as low as the cost of a funeral.

According to a news report, a typical middle-class resident of Dhaka needs more than Tk 50,000 a month to meet the basic needs of a family of four. The sad reality is that the majority of Dhaka residents don’t make that amount on their own. To afford a berth in the concrete jungle that we call home, Dhaka residents must either live on household income, where they have partners or other members of their families share the expenses, or they must take up a second job or adopt spurious means simply to survive. The system is draining out our essential human attributes. I don’t have facts and figures to support my suspicion. But the dire state of the Bangladeshi middle class, which is struggling as living costs outpace their income, is a fact beyond suspicion.

The lines at the backs of the Open Market Sale (OMS) trucks snake through the city to hiss at the crisis. Although intended for the poor and low-income groups, the trucks selling products with controlled prices are now frequented by people from middle-income groups. They wait for hours to get everyday items such



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

as rice, flour, lentils, edible oil, and onions. The long queues for food items are symptomatic of inflation. It is probably indicative of the class of “new poor” atrophied by the unemployment and financial losses caused by Covid-19. I came across a meme recently that showed an oversized man with a hefty kitchen bag, from which fish and poultry items were poking out,

historically the costs of essentials rise to unfair levels due to a boost in demand. During the month of abstinence, we will manage to overindulge, allowing the businessmen to engage in “price gouging.” We will hear about government intervention, but with no effect. Middle-man will remain middle-man, extortionists will behave to prove their mettle. And the prices will soar higher to dehumanise the middle-class consumers.

For sustainable growth, the motto of leaving no one behind is often chanted. But more and more, we are witnessing a forked growth in which the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting even poorer.

The policymakers must acknowledge the elephant in their AC room. For quick relief, bank deposits and lending rates need to be adjusted to control commodity prices. More incentives should be given not only to the production side of the agriculture sector, but its distribution side, too. We need the stringiest action against the syndicates who create artificial crises in the market. Import duties on fundamental goods need to be reduced. The government is already targeting the corporate sector for heftier taxes. Instead of creating fear, the number of taxpayers should be

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increased. If the long queue before the truck sale is any sign, there should be more government-regulated mega shops.

More importantly, we must not lose focus on population control and unemployment issues. And corruption, the core of all evil, needs to be checked. I left this issue for last because it is corruption that creates a vicious cycle of supply and demand. Most people are corrupt because they cannot make their ends meet. Imagine a city where 98 percent (according to a report) struggle to manage their everyday lives with their official income, and then imagine the consequences of discomfort. The answer is blowing in the wind.

## DSA took away Mushtaq



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WRITER Mushtaq Ahmed paid the ultimate price for his freedom of expression, and it’s a matter of shame for us all that it happened in the year of the Golden Jubilee of Bangladesh’s independence. Ironically, the law that was applied against Mushtaq to accuse him of harming the image of the country for criticising the current state of affairs, the Digital Security Act (DSA), has itself earned global notoriety. Even in the most cautious diplomatic condemnation of the DSA, UN Human Rights High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet termed it an “ill-defined” piece of legislation “used to punish criticism of the government.” According to the European Union (EU), “some of its provisions risk going beyond the stated purpose of fighting digital crime.”

The defenders of human rights, however, were not so polite in expressing their outrage. Amnesty International said, “The Digital Security Act criminalises many forms of freedom of expression, and imposes heavy fines and prison sentences for (the) legitimate forms of dissent.” Another rights group, dedicated wholly to the issue of the freedom of expression, ARTICLE 19, observed in an analysis of the DSA that its “several provisions are in breach of international human rights law.” The Human Rights Watch (HRW) termed it “draconian” and called for scrapping it altogether.

Following widespread criticism, the government now accepts that “there have been some abuses of the DSA.” Admitting such misapplication of the dreaded act, the law minister told us that the police had been instructed not to arrest journalists

under this law, until an investigation was completed and a charge sheet finalised. How problematic the ministerial discretion has been in applying the law has already become clear, as a number of reports suggest the contrary. On February 18, 2022, police in Satkhira arrested Jahurul Haque, a local reporter, for his Facebook status that allegedly defamed a police officer. Another journalist, Azhar Mahmood, was sent to prison earlier this month in the northern district of Rangpur in a DSA case. According to Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), a national monitoring group of human rights violations, as many as 1,134 cases were lodged last year against journalists and alleged government critics under the DSA, which was manifold higher than the previous years.

The so-called misapplication of the DSA by law enforcement agencies and activists of the ruling party is only one part of the potential hazard of the law. The other part lies with the justice system, where subjects of persecution by the executive branch of the government face almost wholesale denial of their rights to bail. There are several judicial precedents in the subcontinent on the rights of bail, which say this right could not be denied without exceptional guilt and risks, and criticising the government or exercising the right of the citizens to free expression is not a crime. But our trial courts and magistracies refrain from using their judicial discretion on affording bails to those against whom there are no criminal records and whose only offence is criticising or satirising people in power or their acts.

Mushtaq, however, was even more unlucky that he was denied bail by the higher court, too, which issued a *rule nisi* upon the government, and he died before the expiry of the time given for the government’s response.

A year has passed since Mushtaq died under the custody of the state, but many questions remain unanswered. Neither the government, nor the National

Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has investigated the allegations of foul play surrounding his case. One of his co-accused, cartoonist Ahmed Kishore, had alleged abduction, torture and being kept incommunicado in some mysterious detention centres for a few days before they were shown arrested, which could easily be classified as Enforced Disappearances. And the alleged perpetrators were members of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab). The investigation by the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI), ordered by the trial court, which ruled out any such illegal act, is hardly a credible one as it lacked independence. Similarly, there was no independent investigation into the circumstances of Mushtaq’s death, while the official post-mortem report was rejected by most observers as not credible.

Mushtaq was not a political activist and did not belong to any political party. He was a writer and a brave entrepreneur. Like millions of other people on social media, he had simply expressed his views—obviously critical of the government—on various issues and exchanged views with his friends in groups; yet, he became a victim of gross injustice.

Research by Prof Ali Riaz on behalf of the think tank Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) shows that a large number of people implicated in criminal cases under the DSA are activists of the ruling party itself, subjected to harassment by their rivals within the party. Due to the rigid non-bailable provisions of the law and the flexibility of allowing anyone to lodge a complaint without being affected directly or indirectly, the DSA has become a weapon of choice for both the law enforcement agencies and the powerful people.

If we want to avoid any more tragedies like Mushtaq’s death in state custody, we need the DSA to be repealed at the earliest. Wasting time in the name of consultation with foreign experts to amend a discredited law serves no good purpose.

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