

## Address people’s suffering in flood-hit areas

Flood situation deteriorates in Sylhet and Sunamganj

WE'RE deeply worried about the deteriorating flood situation in the north-eastern region of Bangladesh as water from the upstream and heavy rainfall sent floodwaters surging into many villages and towns. Two districts, Sylhet and Sunamganj, have been particularly affected, with the Surma and Kushiara rivers flowing above danger level for over a week. Reports from the region paint a grim picture: a vast number of roads, houses and croplands inundated, people either trapped in water or taking shelter in the flood centres, poor access to food and other basic necessities, schools closed or converted into shelters, and no electricity in many flood-hit areas. The suffering that all this has caused is hard to describe.

It's an emergency made worse by both natural and manmade causes. Ponds, canals and haors, which once dotted these areas and traditionally served as reservoirs holding the excess water from floods, have all but vanished in recent decades, thanks to mindless development, urbanisation and flawed government policies. Many of the rivers have also been encroached, and consequently dry up during the summer and overflow after above-average rainfall. During a visit on Wednesday, the foreign minister, a lawmaker from the Sylhet-1 constituency, spoke of plans to dredge the rivers to restore their navigability. This is not reassuring, given the experience of previous dredging initiatives that rarely delivered results.

While we hope the authorities will put their heads together to better tackle floods, which are growing in frequency and intensity because of climate change, the immediate challenge is to deliver relief and medicine and restore normal life in the flood-hit areas. We're told that in Sylhet, where about 13 upazilas including the Sadar city were hit, about 150,000 people are living in the dark after several power stations were inundated. About 675 educational institutions were reportedly closed. Meanwhile, although traders have earlier said that there were adequate supplies of food and other essentials in the market, many shops and warehouses remain under water and the supply line disrupted, which may create a food crisis soon. The situation in the remote villages is reported to be particularly dire.

We, therefore, urge the government to take urgent measures to tackle the aftermath of the flood. Expecting that the water will soon recede automatically, as the foreign minister has said, is not enough. What we need is concrete action, starting with ensuring that help reaches the most affected immediately. Relief and medical teams should be sent out to all flood-hit locations and shelters with adequate supplies, and power should be restored as soon as possible. The government should also address the bigger issues affecting the flood situation in the long run.

## Listen to the UN chief’s warning

Govts, private sector and financiers must band together to address climate change

UNITED Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has rightly called for a global coalition to speed up the deployment of battery technology, and urged countries to ease intellectual property restrictions to hasten the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. His call comes in light of a report released by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), which found that four key climate change indicators—greenhouse gas concentrations, sea-level rise, ocean heat and acidification—set new records in 2021. These are some extremely alarming findings. And we concur with the UN secretary-general that the report illustrates “a dismal litany of humanity’s failure to tackle climate disruption.”

According to the WMO, the last seven years were the warmest on record. Given the current trend, it is only a matter of time before even that record gets shattered. This has prompted the UN secretary-general to outline a five-point plan for the world to get back on track for a renewable energy revolution. Among them is a proposal for investment in the renewable energy sector to be tripled to USD 4 trillion per year, and for renewable energy to be treated as a “global public good,” rather than intellectual property to be monetised.

Despite considerable amounts of resources being poured into the shift to renewable energy, solar and wind still account for just eight percent of global electricity generation, while other types of renewables, such as hydropower, bring the total up to 30 percent. In order to increase their share, Guterres called on countries, manufacturers, technology firms and financiers to join forces to fast-track the deployment of batteries, removing red tapes and intellectual property constraints. Since the issue of climate change concerns everyone, there is no reason why advanced countries and companies shouldn't look to involve all stakeholders. In fact, they should be looking forward to sharing these technologies with others so that newer breakthroughs can be made, and the world can adopt them on a larger scale before temperatures rise beyond our control.

While most governments—particularly in developed countries that are most responsible for global carbon emissions—have not lived up to their own promises as per various international agreements, the ongoing effects of climate change continue to show why this issue is among the most important when it comes to the long-term survival of human civilisation. Therefore, the latest warning from the UN chief should not only be taken seriously by governments around the world, but also by the private sector, whose involvement in this project might be just as vital.

# Why are there so many laws against free media?



### THE THIRD VIEW

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WITH the numerous laws that already exist to regulate—or better still, suppress—the media, and the diligence with which new ones are being prepared, one would think that of all the areas that need fixing, our government expects the journalists to be “fixed” first. But why? Why is there never an acceptance that independent media is the lifeblood of democracy, good governance, rule of law and accountability? Why is there no recognition of the fact that countries that advance into the rank of “developing countries” do so not only with higher GDP, but also with higher levels of human rights and all sorts of freedoms? Development cannot be just in economy, it must also be in society. It must be holistic to be meaningful.

Last Saturday, in a belated observation of the World Press Freedom Day, all the apex bodies of journalists, and those representing the owners and editors, jointly expressed concerns about the state of the free press in Bangladesh, and the challenges before the industry as a whole.

Working journalists highlighted the issue of surveillance which has reached dangerous levels with the acquisition of latest listening and tracking devices by state agencies. Some of our district correspondents suffer a greater degree of surveillance than those in the cities—more direct and crude. They are sometimes told point-blank not to see some people and are called within minutes of their meeting with an opposition politician wanting to know what transpired. Sometimes, sources are called and warned against meeting certain reporters not in the good books of officials.

The occasional leaks in the public domain of personal telephone conversations of people that the authorities want to embarrass, or whose reputation they want to damage, prove the wide net of telephone tapping that goes on. During *Prothom Alo* reporter Rozina Islam’s detention by police, a telephone conversation between one of her female colleagues and the latter’s father became public. It was meant to show Rozina in a bad light, proving that both Rozina and her colleague’s phones were tapped. The question is, how many journalists’ phones are monitored? We assume that many editors’ phones are monitored, too. Is this operation authorised by anyone? If yes, then, by whom? Under what law? By what criteria



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

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are those under surveillance chosen? Or is it left to the whims of the officers concerned? What about privacy? What about the misuse of this practice? Is there any accountability? People in power now enjoy the fruits of this. When things turn around, they become its worst victims. Here is a brief list of laws that directly or indirectly affect journalism: i) The Penal Code 1960 (Section 499—Defamation);

ii) The Code of Criminal Procedure 1898 (sections 99, 108, 144); iii) The Official Secrets Act 1923; iv) The Contempt of Court Act 2013; v) The Printing Press and Publication (Declaration and Registration) Act, 1973; vi) The Press Council Act, 1974; vii) The Newspaper Employees (Condition of Service) Act, 1974; viii) Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006; ix) The Digital Security Act, 2018; x) The (Draft) Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms, 2021; xi) The (Draft) Over The Top (OTT) Content-Based Service Providing and Operation Policy, 2021 (by ICT Division); and xii) The (Draft) Mass Media Employees (Services Conditions) Act 2022.

The defamation law is not only among the most frequently used but also one that is most abused. The law clearly states that only the person defamed can lodge a case, and that not more than one case can be lodged. In practice, literally anybody can lodge such a case claiming that, “I have been defamed because my leader was defamed”, or some such pleas. The tragedy is that the lower courts accept it, and also in more than one instance. Thus, journalists and/or editors are seen attending court hearings in all parts of the country and seeking bail. Thankfully, instances of defamation cases have reduced. However, only the day before yesterday, *Bhorer Kagoj* editor and publisher was subjected to a dubious defamation case.

Much has been written about the Digital Security Act and its devastating impact on the free media. Its harmful

## How is Sri Lanka’s youth dealing with the economic crisis?

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WE’VE been talking to a black screen for over an hour now. Paramie Jayakody, a Colombo-based journalist, is on the other end of the call. We haven’t been able to actually see each other yet, but with the wavering internet connection and frequent power outages she’s been facing, having to keep her video switched off is the least of her concerns.

“People have switched over to only one meal a day because they just can’t afford it,” Paramie says. Not only does this reduce the amount they need to spend on the exorbitantly priced food supplies in Sri Lanka, but it also helps them avoid waking up at odd hours to prepare meals due to the inconsistent power supply. Life revolves around these power cuts, with no escape from the brutal summer heat. Even travelling beyond a radius of three kilometres proves to be taxing, as one either needs to stand in extremely long fuel queues or shell out for the increased public transport fare.

With the economic crisis in Sri Lanka fuelling these deplorable conditions, a widespread protest movement has emerged across the island nation. The target of these protests is the ruling party—particularly President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. From our interactions with Sri Lankans, it appears that they are unwilling to forgive the president and believe any reform will take place only after all the Rajapaksas are stripped of their powers.

**Despite the lack of adequate response from the ruling party, and the increasing contempt they seem to show towards citizens in these desperate situations, the spirit of the Sri Lankan youth still seems to be strong and unwavering.**

As Sahan, a 27-year-old protester from Colombo, elaborates, “Other countries have funded Sri Lanka, and we have internal bonds piling up to be released in emergencies, but they [the Rajpaksas] are living a luxurious lifestyle, built on this and taxpayers’ money.” Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, the president’s brother, has already been forced to step down, but the president himself overcame a no-confidence motion put forth by the opposition.

The appointment of the new prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has been considered a victory by many Sri Lankans. However, according to Paramie, a lot of protesters are also perceiving it as a “way to ignore the people’s primary demand that the president must resign.” The transparency shown by the new prime minister with regard to the economic crisis, the solutions he has offered, such as privatising the Sri Lankan airlines, as well as his international ties have led to him gaining mainstream public support. But his appointment is also viewed by his critics as a mutually beneficial relationship of power and protection, which further adds to the uncertainty.

Due to this uncertainty, many protesters have not surrendered their original demands. The long-drawn-out quest to make the president resign has taken numerous forms. Perhaps the most notable one is *GoGotaGama* (Go Gota Village), a protest site right in the heart of Colombo. The vibrance of the village is evident through the sheer number of participants, estimated by Sahan to be at least 100,000 at any given point in time. Although most small businesses can’t openly support the protests, many of them, such as local bakeries, help out in whatever

effects are becoming clearer on a daily basis, forcing our journalists and editors to practice self-censorship in order to survive. After relentless complaints and many reports by the international media bodies, our foreign minister admitted that “some excesses” could have occurred. More to the point, our law minister said that no journalist will be directly arrested under DSA and that they will be summoned first. We welcomed the proposal, as a first step, and expected that this would be followed by a directive from the home minister to every police station to that effect. To the best of our knowledge, no move has been forthcoming.

At the moment, three draft laws are in the pipeline—one deals with data protection, the second with OTT platforms, and the third with the service conditions of media employees.

The draft law for data protection has many good aspects, but the dangerous part is that law enforcement agencies have been exempted, with the result that they are free to use personal data in any way they want, flouting all the rights to privacy.

The draft law for OTT platforms is designed to put serious restrictions on artistic creativity and freedoms of thought and expression.

The draft law meant to ameliorate the service condition of media workers ends up doing the exact opposite. As for service conditions, it basically repeats what already exists, like the wage board, etc. However, much to our concern, it introduces hitherto non-existent media courts to be set up in every district. They will be added to by media appeals courts at higher levels. The function and purpose of such courts remain totally unclear. We in the media feel—and here the editors, owners and working journalists’ unions are all in unison—that this law is a “medicine more harmful than the ailment”, and will entangle the media into complex and intricate legal battles. There are numerous provisions for enhancing bureaucratic interference in the operation of media houses through obligatory reporting, which is totally contrary to the operation of industries in the private sector.

The time has come for a total change of mindset—instead of always looking at the media as the “enemy” that needs to be controlled, or at least kept under surveillance, it should be seen as an “ally” in the democratic and development journey that Bangladesh is well embarked on.

I want to conclude by quoting Manzurul Ahsan Bulbul, a senior journalist and union leader, who recently said, “Doing journalism in Bangladesh today is like swimming in a pond full of crocodiles”. We may be able to swim around them for a while, but when any one of them will devour us, we don’t know.

way they can. Another iteration of the village, *HoruGoGama* (Thieves Go Village), has been set up directly in front of the parliament.

However, the sheer strength of the protests does not seem to have daunted the government. On May 9, supporters of the ruling party attacked *GoGotaGama*, triggering a wave of violent clashes across the country. Paramie recalled the police doing nothing and simply watching as the mob entered barricaded areas and attacked women and children, forcing men to abandon tents which were then set on fire. Huge parts of the protest site were destroyed, and although the protesters managed to recover a few tents, most of the creative displays were demolished.

But despite the curfew that was imposed, people are rebuilding the village. The site was in complete disarray when Paramie reached it, and she realised a lot of supplies were required, so she got together with a few friends and found many people willing to donate for the cause. It took around half a day for people to just try and understand what was needed at the site, and by the time they left to procure the supplies, others were offering aid, donating resources, and putting up tents. Now, Paramie and her friends regularly visit the protest site, and activities such as poetry readings have slowly gone back to normal.

Authority errs when it underestimates the power of the people and tries to suppress legitimate protests. This is quite evident in Sri Lanka today. Despite the lack of adequate response from the ruling party, and the increasing contempt they seem to show towards citizens in these desperate situations, the spirit of the Sri Lankan youth still seems to be strong and unwavering.