

The Daily Star

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What gives BCL the right to attack anyone?

DU mayhem puts it at odds with PM's directive

IT is inevitable that every time Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) does something reprehensible, which it has been with alarming regularity, it would reflect poorly on the ruling party too. That hardly seems to bother the student organisation, however. On Tuesday morning, men allied with BCL swooped on rival members of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) at the Central Shaheed Minar area of Dhaka University as the latter tried to enter the campus to hold a pre-scheduled press briefing. The resulting scuffles, which stretched into several adjacent locations and over several hours intermittently, injured about 30 JCD activists, including a few female students.

The manner in which BCL men carried out the attacks—unprovoked and armed with sticks, iron rods and machetes—is disturbing, with video clips showing footage of female students being mercilessly beaten up. Perhaps equally alarming is how little effect the prime minister—who on May 7 reportedly asked party leaders to allow opposition parties to hold public meetings and processions without hindrance—had had on BCL, which decided to do the exact opposite. Three days ago, BCL men also beat up JCD leaders in the TSC area, leaving three wounded. Last Monday, they again attacked JCD activists on the Rajshahi University campus. This is not just an act of insubordination; it shows how out-of-control BCL has become that it can ignore a direct order from the party chief herself.

With the next general election fast approaching us, this may have grave consequences going forward. The continued intolerance shown by BCL, and other affiliated organisations of the ruling party, threatens the ever-shrinking space for the opposition and is inconducive to establishing a healthy electoral environment. If this is a sign of things to come, we cannot help but worry about the future of democracy in the country. There are other concerns, too: what gives BCL the right to attack anyone, not just rival student groups? The BCL leadership, after Tuesday's attacks, fell back on old, hackneyed arguments about "protecting general students and preserving DU's academic environment" as a justification for their actions. Even if that were the case, they had no legal or moral authority for said actions. On the contrary, the culture of fear that they have created may further disrupt academic activities in our public universities.

We urge the DU administration and the police to investigate the attacks by BCL and take necessary actions. The police, especially, must take stricter action in the face of a law-and-order situation. Equally importantly, the ruling party must rein in the unruly elements of BCL for the sake of democracy. It must protect the rights of opposition parties and student groups to hold peaceful meetings and processions without hindrance.

Foreign study tour for a retiring secretary?

Authorities must answer for such wastage of public money

WE are surprised to learn that a senior secretary of the Local Government Division (LGD) returned home from a foreign "study tour" only a day before his retirement from civil service. This, obviously, raises the question: what benefit will the citizens obtain from the knowledge, if any, acquired by him during this trip? According to a report in this daily, all the expenses of his 10-day trip to the Netherlands and Spain were borne from the funds of three government projects.

The trip must have cost the country's exchequer huge sums of foreign currency amidst the ongoing strain on Bangladesh's foreign exchange regime, so we struggle to find any justification for the study tour of an official who was already on the verge of retirement. After the news broke out, some commentators have rightly called it "a parting gift". But in public records, this will definitely remain as a blatant wastage of public money. This is also quite unethical, according to a former cabinet secretary, who said that such study tours are meant for young officers who can apply the knowledge gained in nation-building projects—and surely not for a retiring bureaucrat who has no time to use that knowledge.

The officer in question, however, tried to justify his action by saying that the experience he had gathered can be of use in sectors like the WASA and LGED if they choose to use it. This sounds dubious. Also, how can someone become an expert on any subject after a 10-day study tour? Our report further states that the tour money came from the funds of three projects, namely Dhaka's Food System (DFS) Project, Emergency Multi-Sector Rohingya Crisis Response Project (EMCRP) and City Governance Project, but the high-level delegation had hardly anything to do with the stated purpose and apparent scope of the tour. This raises questions about the lack of transparency and accountability in the use of project funds that are intended to serve the public interest.

We strongly feel that such wastage of public money by government officials transcends all ethical bounds, and it must stop. In this connection, we appreciate the recent ban on unnecessary foreign tours imposed by the government and hope that it will entertain no exceptions. The government must be careful about how it uses the hard-earned money of the citizens to ensure its optimal benefits.

POLLUTION IN BANGLADESH

The invisible tango with death



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

MORE than 215,000 people in Bangladesh succumbed to pollution in 2019. The ever lurking, at times invisible, killer—air pollution—alone claimed about 175,000 lives. Water pollution was responsible for 30,000 deaths, while soil contamination, lead pollution, occupational hazard-related pollution factors, including exposure to harmful chemicals and substances at work, made up for the rest of the death pie. This was revealed in a recent report titled "Pollution and Health: A Progress Update," by the medical journal *The Lancet*.

While these numbers are new, the scenario is not. This dark underbelly of the growing, flourishing nation is known to all of us. Day in and day out, we breathe, we drink, we eat, we touch death like it is nobody's business. In fact, for us it is business as usual. Unfortunately, for our lawmakers and the government, this daily brush of the common people with death has also become an acceptable norm, which is why, despite publication of multiple reports flagging this morose reality and the concerns raised by various quarters, little to no action has been taken to rectify this.

As late as March this year, it was revealed in a report by US-based organisations Health Effects Institute (HEI) and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) that, on an average, almost three years of a person's life expectancy is cut by air pollution in Bangladesh. And Bangladesh often unfortunately finds itself at the top of the list of the most air-polluted countries in the world, based on the AQI score. According to IQAir, Bangladesh was the most air-polluted country in the world in 2021 with an average AQI of 161.

Despite these, the brick kilns keep operating at full throttle, non-compliant factories keep emitting harmful gases and discharging toxic wastes in rivers and water bodies, unfit vehicles keep polluting the air, and biomass burning, fossil fuel combustion, and dust from the various ongoing development works keep choking the life out of us.

Similarly, water pollution has exposed us to various health complications, including diarrhoea and cholera outbreaks, among other diseases. Over the years, we have allowed industries to discharge their chemical and factory wastes into our rivers without a worry, which has made the waters of our rivers so toxic and polluted that they have now become hotbeds for various diseases, including harmful skin diseases and cancer. A dip in the Buriganga, and one would emerge carrying

a host of germs and bacteria, resulting in immediate reactions.

While water sources have been compromised, the lack of an efficient water purification and distribution system by Wasa has exposed the population, especially in the big cities, to a wide variety of diseases, including Hepatitis A and Hepatitis E. The recent cholera outbreak in Dhaka is a manifestation of the greater

according to reports, organic matter presence in soil in Bangladesh is less than two percent, which ideally should be five percent, resulting in significantly declining soil health and fertility. Moreover, use of topsoil in brick kilns—a report by Anadolu Agency suggests that 800,000 tonnes of topsoil are consumed every day to feed brick kilns—is also taking a toll on soil health and reducing the volume of



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

problem of health risks associated with water contamination. E. coli and Salmonella, among others, are some of the most commonly found bacteria in the water supplied by Dhaka Wasa. And despite reports and proof, the situation has not changed in decades.

Similarly, overuse of pesticide and insecticide in farming, along with exposure to chemical waste, has made the soil and its produce harmful for the human body. Lead, chromium, cadmium, among other heavy metals, are widely found in the fresh produce and other food items, which are consumed by the people on a daily basis. A study by Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and two public universities, as reported by Anadolu Agency, revealed the presence of cobalt in soil that is 38 times higher than the tolerable standard, and chromium that is 112 times higher than the acceptable levels. The study also found the presence of 11 heavy metals. This heavy metal contamination in the food chain has dangerously exposed us to various health risks, including long-term digestive tract problems and kidney issues.

Moreover, the use and misuse of soil has also taken away its healthy organic balance:

cultivable land. With food consumption increasing and cultivable land decreasing in size, we seem to be stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The authorities do not seem to take any interest whatsoever in addressing these issues. While Mother Nature sustains mankind, we should not take her for granted, and push her into a corner where she is left with no other choice but to turn on us for survival.

The government and policymakers should very seriously look into these environmental concerns and work towards finding both immediate and long-term solutions. For us, the approach should be that of a spirit and marathon combined in a package. The polluters should be dealt with an iron fist and penalised and punished accordingly.

Government agencies and bodies that are responsible for safeguarding the environment must now roll up their sleeves and get down to work, because given the situation we are in, mammoth efforts will be needed to reverse the damage that we have done so far. Human lives matter, the environment matters, and we must act now to save both.

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Imran Khan's march to chaos



Zahid Hussain is a Pakistani journalist and author.

ZAHID HUSSAIN

PAKISTAN seems to be heading towards political confrontation following the government's decision to ban the PTI march in Islamabad. Crackdowns on the opposition leaders and the sealing of the capital have created a highly volatile situation. The government already seems to be panicking.

Imran Khan had earlier this week called upon his supporters to storm the Pakistan capital. He is demanding the immediate dissolution of the National Assembly and the announcement of an election date. He plans to gather more than a million people to bring down what he describes as an "imported government" installed through a "foreign conspiracy."

Whether or not Khan succeeds in his objective, the situation is becoming increasingly untenable for the present dispensation. The government's actions could set fire to a combustible situation. That's exactly what the former prime minister wants. He has already announced he will defy the government's ban. The impending confrontation could cause the entire political edifice to collapse, raising the possibility of extraconstitutional intervention.

Curiously, Imran Khan has warned the security establishment to stay neutral in the political fray, marking a complete turnaround from his criticism of the military leadership's decision not to rescue his government. He has, however, urged the families of military personnel and former servicemen to join the march. It is evident that he actually wants the

security establishment to be on his side, rather than stay neutral in the political power struggle. The campaign against the military leadership by PTI supporters seems to be a part of the effort to bring the institution under pressure. It's an extremely dangerous game that could have serious implications for the unity of the institution.

Pakistani politics has been on a roller coaster forever. But what's happening now on the country's political stage is bizarre. Just a few months ago, before his ouster from office, Imran Khan's popularity graph seemed to have plummeted to a new low. Bad governance, the rising cost of living, and erratic decision-making had eroded his support base. The creeping demoralisation in party ranks had triggered defections. The hybrid project had fallen apart and an epitaph was being prepared.

But within days of the vote of no-confidence move, the situation changed dramatically. The party rose like a phoenix from the ashes. Khan's narrative of a "foreign conspiracy," however false, hit a chord with large sections of the population that held deep-rooted anti-American sentiments. His demagoguery weaponised nationalist emotions.

It is, however, not the only factor contributing to the exponential rise in Imran Khan's political fortunes, as is evident by his massive public rallies. His narrative of "imported rule" that, according to him, has marked the return to power of a "tainted and tried" leadership, has proven to be extremely effective in rallying support, particularly among the urban middle classes and the youth.

It has been more than six weeks since the installation of the new government, but nothing has been done to stop the financial haemorrhaging caused by subsidies. While talks with the IMF are on, the finance minister has reiterated that the government would not remove

the subsidies on petroleum prices. The latest development has increased political uncertainty and is bound to have an adverse effect on negotiations with the IMF and diminish the possibility of getting a bailout from friendly countries.

It seems that the coalition government has decided to preside over a possible economic meltdown rather than going to the hustings. Its decision not to dissolve the Assembly also seems to have been driven by Imran Khan's policy of confrontation. Fearful of taking any unpopular action on its own, the Sharif government is now looking towards the security establishment to help it salvage the situation.

There has been some talk about involving the National Security Committee in taking hard decisions on the issue of subsidies. The suggestion to seek the military's support has further exposed the government's incapacity in dealing with the crisis. A redundant parliament has worsened the government's predicament, raising questions about its sustainability.

It appears Pakistan may be moving towards a new hybrid arrangement with a weak administration seeking the military's support in propping it up. The latest development could put the military leadership, which is already under attack by the PTI supporters, in a serious quandary. Imran Khan's warning seems to be directed at the security establishment. While once he himself had been propped up by the establishment, the former prime minister is now on the warpath against his former patrons. This situation has raised the possibility of the military getting mixed more deeply in the political power game. It is perhaps the most serious crisis the country has faced in recent times.

This is the abridged version of an article published in Dawn, an ANN partner of The Daily Star, on May 25, 2022.