

Proactive efforts needed to deal with evolving cybercrimes

New techniques making cyberspace increasingly dangerous for the users

We are alarmed at the way cybercrimes are rising and evolving in the country, making the cyberspace increasingly risky for its users. Reportedly, criminals are using advanced technologies, new platforms and novel techniques to extort and harass people in the cyberspace. As the patterns of crimes have evolved, so have the criminals. Although many criminal groups were arrested by our law enforcers in the recent past, we wonder whether their efforts are enough or evolving equally to deal with the wide range of crimes taking place in our cyberspace.

According to officials working at the Cyber Police Centre of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), while they used to receive around 1,500 cybercrime complaints every month on an average in the past, the number has now risen to 2,500. And the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) has estimated that an average of 169 cyber crime cases were filed every month in 2020 – under four different acts – and the figure rose to 194 in 2021. These figures, however, do not reflect the actual depth or range of the crimes being committed, including cyber stalking, profile hacking, cyber bullying, dating scams, information theft, cyber terrorism, etc. It is because the victims often lodge complaints only as a last resort.

Reportedly, hackers are using different “voice changing software” to turn male voices into female ones, which they use to find their targets on various messaging apps. Criminals were also found using alert notifications from banks to extort people. A group of criminals have reportedly hacked bKash accounts using a loophole in the iPhone’s operating system. Every time new arrests are made, we get to know about the novel techniques used by criminal groups. Even foreign nationals were found to be involved in such crimes. We are particularly worried about the fact that different terrorist outfits are using the cyberspace for encrypted communication, motivating and recruiting new members, providing training, collecting funds and also for claiming terrorist attacks, as found by the CTTC. We definitely need increased monitoring here.

While we acknowledge the efforts our law enforcers have made so far to arrest the criminals in cyberspace, we think they do need to be proactive to stay ahead of them and to deal with the ever-evolving threats of cybercrimes. Rather than acting *after* receiving complaints, they must remain alert all the time to prevent such crimes using sophisticated technologies. Besides, internet and mobile phone users must understand the gravity of the situation and take precaution accordingly. Meanwhile, banks and other financial institutions should also install advanced technologies to protect their systems from being hacked.

UGC luxury trip defies PM’s call for austerity

Public authorities should lead by example, not dilute the message

We’re surprised to learn of a two-day luxury trip being organised by the University Grants Commission (UGC) at a time when the government is undertaking austerity measures to reduce public spending. A number of government offices and banks have already cancelled foreign trips following a May 12 circular and amid repeated insistence on exercising austerity by the prime minister. It was necessitated by the economic pain caused by Covid-19 since 2020 and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war that has led to escalation of prices globally. But it seems the message was lost on the UGC, which has organised a Tk 15 lakh trip to Cox’s Bazar for vice-chancellors and registrars of all 50 public universities and 25 high officials of the UGC itself.

The reason cited by the UGC is “to sign annual performance agreements with the public universities to ensure good governance, transparency, accountability, excellence and proper utilisation of resources as well as improve their institutional capacity”. We cannot help but ask: How does a luxury trip sit with the purposes of accountability and proper utilisation of resources? Couldn’t the agreements be signed at the UGC’s office at Agargaon, like it was done in the last two years?

We are told that the UGC held similar meetings before the pandemic. In 2017 and 2018, the events were held in Bogura and Cumilla, and it cost Tk 30 lakh each time. The following year, the meeting was held in Bandarban, costing the UGC Tk 25 lakh. But the agenda for such meetings doesn’t justify the expenses incurred. Had the UGC organised it at its own office, it would have spared the government unnecessary spending and even the embarrassment of seeing its austerity drive overlooked by one of its own offices. At a time when we’re struggling to fund vital services like social safety net programmes and subsidies in various sectors, such wastage of public money is unacceptable.

The drive for reductions in public spending should not be limited to only trips, however. Huge amounts of money are wasted in various ways including corruption and mismanagement in the public institutions – autonomous, government and semi-government agencies under different ministries as well as state-owned banks and financial institutions. We have seen how public projects have dragged on year after year, leading to frequent cost overruns. Therefore, we urge public authorities in every sector to lead by example and establish control on all sources of unnecessary expenses.

Our skewed legal system



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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THIS is an issue that has consumed my mind and compels me to pen my views on it every now and then. While I offer no apology for delving once again into a heavily flogged subject – I believe one cannot write enough on the matter – I nonetheless offer my apology in advance for repetitions of specific examples that might have occurred in my previous articles regarding our legal system and, linked to it, the rule of law.

A well-known legal mind is said to have remarked that “the worst part of judicial system is, instead of fighting against injustice, people are fighting for justice”. PS Jagadish Kumar’s inimitable words are fairly representative of the situation in most of the South Asian countries, certainly of ours, where justice remains a chimera for people without means. Means include – political clout, power, money, and even close and remote proximity to power. Matters can be hastened or delayed depending on who is the victim and who is the accused. Every passing day, my view that the law is being applied selectively grows stronger. Forgive me if I appear to be speaking out of turn, but let me back up my claim with a few glaring examples.

It has been 10 years since the journalist couple Sagar and Runi was murdered in the most gruesome manner. It remains the most sensational and longest unsolved murder. More than 80 dates had been fixed for hearing of the case, but the rule issued by the court in February 2012, answerable within two weeks, has not been answered in 10 years. All that the agencies have been able to find out after the DNA testing is that the murder might have been carried out by two men. Did it require all these years to reveal the sex of the killers?

One may ask why the police, after it had announced on February 26, 2012 that they were “almost certain” about the motive of the killing, later retracted when the case was reassigned by the HC to the Rapid Action Battalion saying that they were not able to pinpoint the motive despite their best efforts. The comment of the High Court is extremely relevant and hits at the malaise of the legal system. The HC made no secret of its disappointment when it observed, “If any police is killed, you get



▲ VISUAL: STAR

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the clue. Then why you don’t get it when a journalist or a lawyer is killed?” Are we to believe that the police had discovered something which would not only embarrass but also implicate powerful people in high places? Did the two, known for their talent for investigative journalism, come by incriminating information so damaging that they had to be silenced for good, because they could

The Taqi murder case is another blot in our justice system. Would one be remiss in asking why after the Rab claimed eight years ago to have cracked the case, and assured that, “the chargesheet would be given any time,” no charge sheet has been given yet. Needless to say, here again is involved, as revealed in the media, a scion of a political family linked to power. The unfortunate relatives and the little

not be bought? Take another example where equality before the law has been trampled and the adage that some are more equal than others has triumphed. The Sitakunda container depot fire exposed everything wrong with the system. It was a glaring example of violations of rules, regulations and procedures. It was a disaster waiting to happen since the depot started operating, flouting local and international guidelines, and now the related agencies are pointing fingers at one another for its non-compliance. While this is one aspect of the case, the other aspect is that the owner of the depot has not been indicted in the case while eight of his staff have been. Compare this with, for example, the fire at the FR Tower in Banani in March 2019 which killed 26 people. The police were quick to arrest, and rightly so, two owners for negligence and violations of a national building code that resulted in casualties, and the two could end up facing charges of culpable homicide. This begs the question: Why has the owner of the container terminal been given a different dispensation than the owner of the FR Tower? Is it because he happens to be somebody from the ruling party?

boy Sagar and Runi left behind, who is a young man now, are not only asking for answers but seeking justice too, and so are the parents of Taqi. It seems that William Gaddis had a country like ours in mind when he uttered, “Justice? – You get justice in the next world; in this world you have the law.” One hopes that these people would not have to wait for the next world to get justice. There should be no doubt that any attempt deliberately engineered to see the cases fall through, and I am not for a moment suggesting that this is being done, will make those involved in doing so complicit in the crime.

I am tempted to reproduce what I wrote in conclusion of a piece on the same subject four years ago to the month. It goes as follows, “This is a phenomenon that is not regime specific, but one that has vandalised morality and made the system of justice a farce. And unless there is a collective expression of indignation we will quickly approach, as described by Aristotle, to the level that human beings can degenerate to. He says, ‘At best, man is the noblest of animals, separated from law and justice he is the worst.’” It is a thoroughly reprehensible prospect.

Do we need stricter tobacco control?



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QAZI KHOLIQUZZAMAN AHMAD

BANGLADESH’S fight against tobacco has come a long way since the country signed the World Health Organization’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2004. Between 2009 and 2017, the prevalence of tobacco use fell from 43.3 percent to 35.3 percent. This was a result of years of legislative and fiscal measures and cooperation between relevant government bodies and other anti-tobacco stakeholders. However, comparing the progress made by other South Asian neighbours (i.e., 28.6 percent of tobacco use prevalence in India as per GATS 2016 and 19.1 percent in Pakistan as per GATS 2014), Bangladesh’s achievement is discouraging.

A strong legislation consistent with the goal sets the stage for bolder and more effective measures. This is particularly true for tobacco control. The obligation of safeguarding public health is one of the key foundations of Bangladesh’s state policies, according to Article 18(I) of Bangladesh’s Constitution. “The right to life” is protected under Article 32 of the Constitution. Bangladesh government is also a signatory to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and has enacted tobacco control legislation in accordance with the Convention. Target 3A under 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for implementation of the FCTC. Bangladesh’s 8th Five-Year Plan (FYP) also emphasises this requirement.

Bangladesh’s current goals of implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, achieving higher middle-income country status by 2031 and moving towards becoming a developed nation by 2041 are also in conflict with the massive toll, in terms of injuries to health and consequent deaths that tobacco inflicts on people. A study shows that in FY 2017-18, the economic burden due to tobacco use in Bangladesh (medical expense and loss of productivity) stood at Tk 30,560 crore, which is much higher than the revenue earned from the



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tobacco sector which was Tk 22,810 crore. Tobacco claims around 161,000 deaths in Bangladesh a year. It has been ranked as the fourth major contributing factor behind premature deaths in the country. The findings of the 2009 and 2017 Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) identified areas regarding which legislative attention regarding tobacco

control is lacking. While the Smoking and Tobacco Products (Usage) Control Act 2005 and subsequent amendment of 2013 in Bangladesh banned advertisement and promotion of tobacco products, tobacco companies have adopted clever tactics to take advantage of the loopholes and grey areas of the law. According to GATS 2017, almost 54 percent of the population have seen advertisements of cigarettes or *bidis*, while nearly 21 percent have seen some advertisement of *jarda* or *gul* (chewing tobacco). The proportion of people who saw advertisements of *bidis* rose by 22.5 percent between 2009 and 2017. In case of smokeless tobacco products, the increase was 47.9 percent. It should be kept in mind that these cheap tobacco products are mostly consumed by the low-income people and the women who are most susceptible to influence as a result of advertisements.

Elimination of the existing legal provision for Designated Smoking Areas (DSAs) or “Smoking Zones” in public places and public transportation can go a long way towards ensuring the realisation of much higher benefits accruable from Tobacco Control Laws. A “smoking zone” in the middle of an otherwise smoke-free area does not protect people from second-

hand smoke. As a result, such a provision is incompatible with public health perspectives and acts as an obstruction on the way to smoke-free living. According to the 2017 GATS, 42 percent of all people who work in a covered place are regularly exposed to passive smoking. While using public transportation, about 25 million persons globally are exposed to second-hand smoke. A total of 67 countries, including Thailand, Nepal, Turkey, and the United Kingdom have already enacted full smoke-free legislation, which includes the total abolition of designated smoking zones.

Bangladesh’s tobacco control efforts are hampered by the unpackaged sale of *bidi*, cigarettes, and smokeless tobacco products (*jarda* and *gul*). Such sales make tobacco products more available and affordable for such groups as adolescents, youth and low-income people. Furthermore, when tobacco products are purchased loose rather than in packs, the Graphic Health Warning (GHW) on the packs is rendered useless. Article 11 of the FCTC also advises nations to prohibit the sale of single sticks or small packs of *bidis* and cigarettes, which has already been implemented by a total of 118 countries around the world. There is a growing need to address new threats on the horizon as manifested in the growing popularity of emerging tobacco products (ETPs).

The Covid-19 crisis should have called for stronger tobacco control measures. Unfortunately, the opposite has happened in Bangladesh, as suggested by the evidence reflected in the 2021 Bangladesh Tobacco Industry Interference Index.

Experience in recent years shows how the tobacco industry uses its so-called corporate social responsibilities (CSR) as a pretext to create strong liaison with influential government bodies, which, in turn, influence policymaking and implementation. A society where certain policymaking circles are subject to influence by the tobacco industry cannot but be rather weak regarding the adoption of strong tobacco control measures. It is, therefore, essential that tobacco control law is amended to ban the tobacco industry’s CSR activities. An amendment of Bangladesh’s tobacco control law must reflect the realities of post-pandemic new normal and what we have learnt during the pandemic.