The Daily Star

Lawmakers blinded by power

Who gave them licence to brutalise their constituents?

WE are deeply worried by the activities of some of our lawmakers who have recently made headlines by assaulting and threatening people, including teachers, local public representatives, traders and public officials. In the latest incident on July 16, a ruling party lawmaker from Cumilla allegedly attacked an upazila chairman on the parliament premises. According to media reports, he punched and kicked the chairman during a meeting. On July 7, another lawmaker from Rajshahi beat up a local college principal in front of his fellow college principals. These are just some examples from the recent past. Such stories of power abuse were also occasionally reported over the past few years.

Going through the details of such incidents, we cannot help but be appalled at the unruliness of these MPs who, rather than standing by the people in their hour of need, brutalised them or allowed violence in their presence. Regardless of the circumstances behind their action, such vulgar display of intolerance from persons in authority is totally unacceptable.

We wonder how they would justify the impropriety of their behaviour. What could make them feel so emboldened to behave in such a manner? The first reason that comes to mind is that they feel beholden to no one because of their power. They were blinded by it, having possibly emerged from a culture of thug politics. Otherwise, why would someone assault a respectable person such as a college principal in such a way? Why would an MP hurl abuse or threaten public officials for petty reasons? Why would an MP assault another public representative?

The second, and equally important, reason for their unruliness is that none of them were ever held to account or have had to face any legal consequence for their actions. This has further emboldened them to continue with their objectionable activities.

While, as elected representatives, lawmakers are supposed to look after their constituents, often they end up forgetting their role and use their positions of power to gain personal benefits or assault those who either stand in their way or who they deem disloyal. They forget that their position is not a license to do whatever they want.

We urge the government to investigate all incidents of assaults by lawmakers and take legal action against them. At the same time, the party in power should also take punitive action against leaders/members who have been using its name for their petty gains. We hope the senior leadership of the party would take this issue seriously and do the needful to discipline them, not only for the sake of its image but to preserve democratic values as well.

We can't afford another dead river

Authorities must save Dhaleswari before it's too late

DESPITE having a parliamentary committee to oversee – and a number of laws and agencies to protect – our rivers, it's alarming that precious little is being done to stop the scourge of water pollution or punish those who are violating the laws. We are helplessly watching the slow death of the Dhaleswari River right before our eyes, as state functionaries remain unmoved for unknown reasons. This is a major river of the country and used to have clear water and plenty of fish before the tanneries were shifted to Savar. But with the tannery owners indiscriminately dumping toxic waste in the river, it may soon embrace the fate of Buriganga River, unless preventive action is taken.

Recently, the Department of Environment (DoE), at a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on environment, forest and climate change, highlighted how aquatic life and biodiversity of the river are being destroyed due to unbridled pollution caused by the Savar Tannery Industrial Estate. Worryingly, while the minimum level of oxygen at Dhaleshwari should remain 200mg/per litre, its current oxygen level is said to be two to three times less than the permissible limit. This speaks volumes about the state of the river at the moment, and why it should be saved before it is too late.

Reportedly, besides the oxygen level, the amount of metal chromium in Dhaleshwari River has also gone much higher than the permissible level, which is contributing to the extinction of different types of sweet water fish and a wide range of biodiversity. The question is: where is the Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) that was supposed to prevent this? It is utterly puzzling that with the sad plight of Buriganga available for everyone to see and learn from, the relevant authorities still allowed the tanneries to start operation at Savar before installing the CETP. Environment experts, activists and the media were quite vocal about it right from day one, but it all fell on deaf ears.

The tannery sector generates huge foreign currency, and therefore it was expected that the authorities would give full attention to removing the bottlenecks existing therein. But it is beyond our comprehension that they come up with the same excuses every time questions are asked of the state of the CETP, paying no attention to the negative impact that the industry is having on the environment and public health. Therefore, to save the Dhaleshwari River and avoid another major environmental disaster, everything that needs to be done must be done without delay.

DIGITAL BANGLADESH
One step forward, two steps back?

OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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IN a technological backwater like Bangladesh, a full digital transformation with all of its administrative procedures moved online – and all citizens enjoying unrestricted access to its benefits – is perhaps too much to expect. But it's a dream that has shown tremendous resilience. "Digital Bangladesh" continues to be a central plank of the ruling Awami League, despite the failure of its techno-utopian Vision 2021, which had brought it to power in 2008. Citizens, too, are warming up to the idea of an increasingly networked life.

But the transformation achieved so far has been quite chaotic. Take the example of the digitalisation drive, meant to replace the analogue government work culture by putting all public services online. Before the drive, interacting with responsible agencies was a Sisyphean nightmare: You had to slog through a mess of paperwork and countless offices, not to mention the corruption and mismanagement that became synonymous with the "system." Digitalisation is supposed to make life easier by bringing bureaucracy at the fingertips of service-seekers. So, how has been their experience?

Two recent reports published by The Daily Star show mixed results: while many services have been digitalised and had some positive changes, their cumulative effects have been anything but satisfactory, thanks to website and connectivity issues as well as disruptive practices inherited from the analogue time.

The first report, based on a review by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED), leaves room for hope. It says that 161 services out of the 244 provided under six ministries/divisions – that is, about 66 percent of their services – have been digitalised, and it helped save both time and money for ordinary people. Of them, according to the survey, 92 percent saved money, 96 percent saved time, and 70 percent were relieved of the hassles of the pre-digital era. Among the ministries they sought service from are education, land, and health and family welfare.

The land ministry, once dreaded for its labyrinthine system, saw noticeable progress. The government reportedly

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digitalised 10 services under five departments of the ministry. These include e-mutation, mutated ledger, payment of land development tax, collection of e-leaflets, etc. Since July 1, 2019, when the door to e-mutation was opened, land mutation can be obtained in seven days. Earlier, it would take at least 28 days. So far, more than 30 million people reportedly paid land development tax online, without spending additional money. Half of the people surveyed by the IMED said their sufferings reduced because of the digitalisation of these services.

This is only half the picture, however. We come to know of the other half from another review done by the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU). The CPTU, after evaluating the performance of digital services provided by 26 ministries/divisions, concluded that people were not getting the maximum benefit from the 761 government services digitalised so far, mostly because of user-unfriendly sites, bad servers and poor internet speed. Additionally, a number of those services exist in name only.

Although the surveyed beneficiaries generally expressed optimism about the digitalisation drive, many admitted facing problems while trying to obtain services such as e-dockets, land mutation, e-passport, machine readable passport, loan service, e-trade licence, etc. Either the websites through which services can be requested are not updated, or certain services are no longer operational because of a lack of skilled manpower, or user interfaces are too complicated, or servers are down frequently. Add to that the pre-existing challenges such as poor planning, irregularities and corruption, allowed through manual processes involving officials and middlemen, which makes things further problematic.

The picture that emerges from these contrasting findings is of a multi-year, multimillion-dollar drive not being allowed to reach its full potential. No one expects Bangladesh to have the digital infrastructure that advanced countries do. But corruption and inefficiency, either of the system in place or the people running it, are challenges that a good infrastructure alone can't fix. If digitalisation hasn't turned out to be the huge boon that it was supposed to be, it's because of these persistent problems.

Unfortunately, our e-office and e-government frameworks still seem to be in a nascent state. There is no clear guideline for digital transformation, no central monitoring authority for all digital services, and no centralised data storage to streamline all the information – NID, TIN, passport, birth, land, vehicle or other registration records, for example – passing through the system. Proper utilisation and sharing of data are as important as proper digitisation of it. But ours is an island of misfit agencies, each with their unique digital architecture, with little interoperability among them. You hear ministers talk about digitalising all 2,800 of public services, but rarely do they acknowledge the governance issues that can cripple their chances of success.

Can the government go fully paperless anytime soon? Perhaps that's the wrong question now. The more important question is how we are preparing for that. Besides setting up more digital centres and putting more public services online, the government should also focus on fixing the loopholes of the existing system. Asking the right questions is vital. For example, what percentage of citizens are requesting services online? How many of them are doing it without the help of intermediaries? What percentage of citizens are being alienated by the digitalisation process, and why? How to ensure their inclusion? How future-proof are the services offered? How to make them easier to obtain? How to reduce manual interventions? Last but not least: how to stop the digitalisation of corruption and inefficiencies?

There is a lot that remains to be done, and reformed. Strengthening our broadband networks, improving the internet penetration rate, and closing the digital divide are key priorities. But the government should urgently fix the problems plaguing its digitalisation drive. The future rests on its success to do so.

What one must do to get climate finance

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THE Green Climate Fund (GCF), though the youngest financial mechanism under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), is one of the largest multilateral climate funds. However, only 19 percent of direct entities receive this funding, since only accredited entities are eligible to apply for it due to very high transparency and fiduciary standards set by the GCF governing board. This is the case for all large climate funds. Thus starts a dilemma, as the entities best at acquiring these funds are often not the ones best at implementing the project activities at the grassroots level.

Local organisations are always the first to respond in case of an emergency due to both their proximity and understanding of the local population. Development projects are cyclic, and so are the involvement of international actors, but local organisations constantly serve the communities. This is why they are trusted and taken seriously by people. This, along with their localised knowledge and colloquial communication methods, enables them to help the inhabitants of climate-vulnerable regions in the most effective manner.

However, only a small portion of the funds designated for climate actions comes their way, which is not enough for them to deliver up to their potential. Funding from global sources and bilateral agencies are disseminated in a trickle-down approach. After covering overhead costs at various levels, a bare minimum amount is left for achieving the desired goals at the ground level. Due to the funding situation, these organisations also face a huge challenge of recruiting and retaining human resources as they can't compete with the salaries and benefits offered by international NGOs.

Why can't or don't the donors fund these local organisations directly? One of the main reasons they give is that local organisations often don't have the capacity to comply with their requirements and spend money effectively. Multilateral and bilateral organisations also prefer to channel the funds through a few trusted partners, since this method involves fewer risks and is better compliant with their own rules. It's also difficult for such organisations to channel funds directly to local NGOs because of their strict anti-money laundering rules, and the local organisations often don't have the capacity to ensure the level of transparency and accountability that such donors require.

Local organisations also often lack the technical skills that can appropriately express the value for money for their work. Therefore, their proposals for funding often fall short in competitive biddings. However, they, too, can work on building their institutional capacity and compete for global funding. In order to stand out, these local organisations need to address three aspects of institutional capacity-building.

First comes profile-building, for which proper documentation of all the projects an organisation is involved with must be preserved. The documentation should be done from a knowledge management perspective, including internal and external evaluations to track the impact of the projects. It helps greatly to track their progress and archive all the achievements so that they can be presented to the donors at any given point. Publishing good newspaper articles and in peer-reviewed journals is another excellent way of getting into the spotlight. Professionalism is the key – following the working style of international NGOs could help with building trust with donor organisations. Furthermore, these organisations can also give the impression of being more professional and trustworthy when they have and follow proper environmental and social safeguards. So preparing these frameworks and adhering to them are highly recommended. Preparing a five-year strategy and action plan could also be very valuable for local organisations. Additionally, concept notes can be prepared on various topics related to climate change adaptation, such as water security and sanitation, agriculture, aquaculture, nature-based solutions, migration and urban livelihood, and skills development.

Building a global and national network is

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the second essential aspect of institutional capacity-building. The more people know about an organisation and its achievement, the more inclined they will be to fund its projects. Getting to know the government stakeholders and identifying champions within it is key towards building national presence. Additionally, it is important to build a network with bilateral and multilateral agencies. Proactively engaging with and offering to present projects and ideas to different stakeholders help in increasing visibility of an organisation's work. Attending relevant national and international conferences is a good starting point when it comes to building networks and increasing visibility.

Lastly, when it comes to accessing funds, it is extremely important to stay updated on who the potential donors are, and which funds are available for Bangladesh. Keeping lists of other relevant stakeholders is just as important. Staying updated with political changes in large donor countries is mandatory too. Note that funding flow towards different sectors by bilateral donors often vary according to the agendas of the political parties in power. In fact, climate-related funding is politically sensitive. Local organisations can also boost their chances of accessing funds by becoming part of a consortium.

Development discourse dictates where the funding is targeted; with the current global focus on climate change, there will be funds available for addressing over time. In recent times, even the donors have started to recognise the effectiveness of local organisations and are focusing on "localisation" in the humanitarian sector. Major bilateral donors have made it a requirement for international NGOs and other agencies to partner up with local NGOs and provide them with 25 percent of the project funding. Furthermore, international organisations are also working on capacity-building of their local partners. This concept could potentially be adopted in combating climate change in Bangladesh.

Therefore, these grassroots organisations need to keep working on building their institutional capacity by focusing on the three aspects to get access to climate funding.