

## Stop protecting the corrupt

We welcome the High Court's decision to stop safeguarding unethical public officials

**W**e applaud the High Court for declaring illegal Section 41 (1) of the Public Service Act, 2018, a provision that required law enforcers to get prior approval from the government or relevant agencies if they wanted to detain government officials in criminal cases – a provision that should not have been formulated in the first place. The court, in its landmark judgment, observed that providing such protection to a particular section of the population was contradictory to articles 26, 27 and 31 of the constitution. Article 26 says that laws inconsistent with the fundamental rights are to be void, and articles 27 and 31 guarantee equality before the law and the right to protection of the law.

This provision of the law – as had been outlined by legal experts and civil society members when it was first proposed – contradicted the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Act, curtailed the authority of the ACC, and in essence protected corrupt public officials. At a time when rampant corruption across all the sectors in Bangladesh has all but eroded the foundations of our public institutions, we need stricter laws that hold corrupt officials accountable, not provide them with impunity to carry out their illegal activities without so much as a slap on the wrist.

Corruption seems to have become a "way of life" for an overwhelming majority of our public officials, who increasingly use their political affiliation as a licence for abuse of power and pocketing of taxpayers' money. Despite media reports and research studies conducted by reputed national and international institutions, detailing corruption across every sector year after year, we don't see any initiative from the government to so much as investigate the allegations, much less hold the corrupt officials accountable. The ACC, unfortunately, is independent in paper only, with little visible success in catching corrupt officials high up in the command chain. Meanwhile, we see different manoeuvres at play to provide indemnity to public officials for their wrongdoings, which send a dangerous message: Swindle the public all you want, the government will still protect you!

Too many government officials have long forgotten their constitutional obligation to the people of Bangladesh. They have sacrificed all ethics to the altar of their own selfish interests. The government must wake up to the reality that such rampant, ruthless and unrepentant corruption is simply unsustainable in the long run, and that it is eating away at whatever economic and social progress the government has made over the last decade.

We welcome the High Court directive to treat all citizens of the country equally under the law, and hope it sends a strong message to the government to prioritise protection of the public from corrupt public officials – not vice versa.

## Are the Rohingyas doomed to a half life?

Int'l community must put their money where their mouth is

**F**IVE years have passed since the Rohingya influx, when over 100,000 refugees crossed into Bangladesh fleeing a violent military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Despite myriad challenges, Bangladesh has sheltered them since 2017 on humanitarian grounds and provided them with all the basic facilities they need to live in the refugee camps, with the assistance of international donors. Bangladesh signed a repatriation agreement with Myanmar in November 2017, and since then, made two attempts to repatriate the forcibly displaced Rohingyas without any success.

It was obvious from the failed repatriation attempts that the Myanmar authorities were unwilling to take back their citizens against whom they committed a genocide. Although Bangladesh urged the international community to put pressure on Myanmar to create a conducive environment for the Rohingyas' safe and dignified return, we are yet to see any visible development. The facts remain that Rohingyas want to go back to their homeland – provided that they are given citizenship and their safety and security are ensured – and that it is becoming increasingly difficult for Bangladesh to host them.

Although there were enough funds coming in from donor countries in the first three years, funding started to decrease as the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in 2020. And as time passed, global attention moved away from the Rohingya issue to other crises, the latest being the Russia-Ukraine war. But this much is clear: Bangladesh cannot continue to give the Rohingyas proper shelter unless we get enough support from the international community in this regard.

Meanwhile, the situation in and around the camp areas in Cox's Bazar has also deteriorated. Crimes have increased, free movement of the refugees has been curtailed, and education of Rohingya children has been stopped. But if the refugees are deprived of education and livelihood opportunities, how can we expect them to not engage in criminal activities? Realistically, what is a whole generation of frustrated Rohingya youth to do, except languish in the camps, leading a half life, with no foreseeable change in their circumstances?

While the government needs to address these issues to provide the Rohingyas with a better life while they are in Bangladesh, it must also engage in talks with Myanmar authorities so they fulfil all the conditions for the Rohingyas' safe return – such as safety, guarantee of citizenship, freedom of movement, and sending them to their ancestral homes, not to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

Since Myanmar is currently facing pressure because of the verdict of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that it can pursue the Gambia's genocide case, and after the US' declaration of the violence against Rohingyas as genocide, now is the time for the international community to come forward and put further pressure on Myanmar for the Rohingyas' safe and dignified return to their motherland.

# EDITORIAL

## Suicide prevention must embrace nuances and complexities



### BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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**E**VERY act of suicide carves a vacuum in which those left behind struggle to find meaning to this seemingly irrational action of ending one's life. The pointer of the blame goes in many directions. Those who are close to the victim engage in remorseful self-reflection to identify their share in the tragic event, or blame others to find comfort through a defence mechanism.

The legal provision to prove that someone is responsible for someone else's suicide can be tricky. The court needs to know if the defendant's action or inaction is the direct cause of the death. Did that person know, or should have known, that the dead individual had a suicidal tendency? What other factors could have instigated the suicide? What is the time gap between the act of suicide and the wrongful death action?

In Bangladesh, any news of suicide inevitably involves police arrests of some family members. Quizzing people close to the deceased to discern suspicious activities surrounding the death is a part of the police protocol. Unfortunately, I have seen how police use these unusual death cases for extortion and out-of-court settlements.

The media hype over suicide often prompts law enforcement agencies to engage in visible actions, ignoring the complicated nuances of suicide. Indeed, the family of a person that was forcefully or wrongfully led to suicide deserves justice or compensation. My concern, however, involves the broad-brush portrayal of suicide.

In June, a young man set himself on fire in front of the Press Club in protest of business fraud. He invested Tk 1.26 crore in a company believing that he would be made a partner. But after repeated attempts to get his share or his money back, he made a public statement by ending his life. The fraudsters are now being tried. This deliberate act of death is the ultimate resort of a desperate man who harmed himself to implicate the perpetrators. It is up to the court to decide whether the top bosses of the cosmetics company (in which the victim invested) are guilty of manslaughter or legally responsible for the death.

According to a survey report published earlier this year, as many as 101 students of different universities in



There seems to be a complete lack of understanding and empathy in our society when it comes to suicide, except for the desire to be sensational.

VISUAL: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Bangladesh died by suicide in 2021 against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. The figure, included in the survey that was conducted by a social organisation named Anchal Foundation, is strikingly higher than the pre-pandemic period. In 2017, 19 public and private university students died by suicide; in 2018, the toll stood at 11. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, 79 university students died by suicide. No data is available for 2019. Now, whom do we blame for these deaths for failing to provide psychosocial support to a frustrated generation? The list of causes cited by the report merits our attention: 24.75 percent of these students died by suicide over relationship issues, 19.8 percent due to family problems, 15.84 percent to end mental distress, 10.89 percent due to study-related issues, 4.95 percent due to financial issues, 1.98 percent of students died by suicide after becoming addicted to drugs, and 21.78 percent due to various other reasons.

The question is: How many intervention programmes have been undertaken to address this serious issue? As a top university administrator, I know of the two fully fledged programmes we ran to offer hotline services to our students during

some of our students confess to their teachers about the parental pressure they feel at home, when contacted, the parents tend to be in denial to protect their wards from the supposed stigmatisation. Dealing with these cases made me realise that many of these deaths can be prevented, provided the involved parties learn to know and deal with the symptoms.

The parents who know that their children have a mental health condition must report it to the school authorities. If the students are on anti-depressants, that, too, needs to be reported as some of these drugs are allegedly responsible for inculcating suicidal thoughts in patients. Then again, the confidentiality of such reports should lie with designated counselling sections or professionals.

Each educational institute must have psychosocial counselling services or other peer support groups to address this issue. Without a proper channel to ventilate innermost anxiety, fear, frustrations, impulses, and desires, any individual with a mental health issue is prone to commit self-harm. Otherwise, we will simply associate the action with the immediate trigger or hearsay.

department of the education ministry, is completed. Do we know if the student was further humiliated at home for her exam performance?

The issue is greater than one death. It involves sensitivity to process the information, report the event, and judge the before and the after of the event. There seems to be a complete lack of understanding and empathy, except for the desire to be sensational. The circulation of the video footage of the suicidal jump captured by a nearby vendor is a case in point.

In 2017, Netflix streamed a controversial series titled *13 Reasons Why*, in which a dead narrator shares her side of the story in a series of tapes to explain her decision. Each episode points to a particular reason (usually a person). While the series is blamed for glorifying suicide, it does warn us against oversimplifying suicide. It is a complex issue that requires professional interventions. We need institutionalised therapeutic interventions to save lives, and stand by those who need support for their mental health condition. Our post-facto *aha's* and *uhu's* mean little to those who have decided to end their lives.

## Why would anyone commit fraud to study at DU?



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**S**AZED ul-Kabir's crime is a peculiar one. Despite failing to get into the University of Dhaka (DU) through the admission tests in 2018, he studied and attended classes, for over three years, at the Department of Political Science. Three days ago, he was finally apprehended.

As a final year student of DU myself, this story made a bit of an impression on me. I've been here for almost five years now (thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic), and much of that time has been spent in frustration and disappointment caused by a variety of shortcomings on my university's part.

My friends and I spend hours every week complaining about all the ways our undergraduate experience could have been better – hours that we can afford to waste due to the alarmingly common occurrence of cancelled classes. We discuss and debate the backdated nature of our curriculum, lament the lack of an open credit system, express our bewilderment at the fact that many departments don't accommodate undergraduate-level research. There are no on-campus employment opportunities (at least none with a good pay), no on-campus restaurants that serve healthy, affordable food, the buses meant for students are barely fit for the road – the list goes on and on. There are many who regret their decision to get admitted at this supposed "Oxford of the East," a title that causes more laughter than

reverence these days.

Yet, for Sazed ul-Kabir, not going to DU was an option he wasn't willing to entertain.

This brings me to an observation, or rather a reminder, of what DU means to many in our country, and what it meant to me when I was a doe-eyed high school graduate. The esteem and the renown that attracted me towards Shahbagh only evaporated once I got there. But for those who don't have my privilege, the allure never goes away.

Does that mean DU deserves this level of prestige, this adoration among young students? The answer to this question is debated every day.

Every time an international ranking places DU far back in the queue, every time dirty politics takes precedence over the pursuit of knowledge by either students or teachers, every time research is plagiarised on this campus, DU's status is debated.

The obsession with DU that people like Sazed ul-Kabir harbour is not an argument against the criticism this university faces. I think this is a good moment to take a step back and really look at DU as a whole, and at its abundance of problems. First of all, why is it that many students who don't get the chance to study at DU think of it as a huge setback in life, whereas many who get the chance think the same as well? And secondly, how can a modern university be so terribly administered

that a person can attend its classes for over three years without being a student?

The answer to the second question is known to every student who goes to DU. Many of the analogue mechanisms that have been in use since the inception of this university have never been replaced with modern alternatives. Until the pandemic, students still had to physically go to their departments, then to their residential halls, and then to the registrar's building to enrol themselves for their academic year. The first two parts of this process had to be repeated before every semester final. Even after the pandemic started, the online services took months to be deployed. And now, every time the system faces a non-standard case, students have to appear physically at the university to get their work done.

According to students of the Department of Political Science, Sazed ul-Kabir took advantage of one such backdated administrative practice. The sheets that were provided by the university's registrar's office at the start of every semester included the names of all the students who got admitted in 2018-19 session, including students who had left the university since.

Sazed impersonated one such student, who had left before becoming familiar with any of their classmates. The fact that this former student's information was still held and circulated by the university's (badly maintained) database is alarming by itself, but it also made it easy for Sazed to claim his roll number.

It should be noted that Sazed did not change his name for this purpose, nor did he employ any sophisticated methods to dupe the authorities. He simply showed up regularly for three years, used a roll number that was available, and got away with it.

The University of Dhaka has a lot of

soul-searching to do, given what has been going on for years now and what has happened recently. It's a university running on the fumes of reputation, being chased by embarrassment day after day. For a university that is struggling as much as it is, students who are this desperate to get an education there should have been a blessing. No one knows why Sazed wanted to go to DU so badly, but it's regrettable that when he failed the admission test in 2018, his willingness did not influence the evaluation process. Students trying to get admitted to DU don't have to submit essays, or a statement of purpose to make their case. Maybe if that had been the case, Sazed's fate would have been different.

In September 2019, *Prothom Alo* reported that 34 students had been admitted to an evening master's programme under DU's Faculty of Business Studies without an admission test. These were hastily made admissions, processed right after the schedule for Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu) election was announced. Eight of these 34 students ended up getting elected to various posts in that election, and they were all members of Bangladesh Chhatra League.

Other than being emblematic of systemic mismanagement, the reason for bringing up this old incident is to remind everyone of the price DU places on its studentship, and the fact that this price is heavily skewed depending on different circumstances.

What Sazed ul-Kabir did is clearly fraudulent, and I'm sure he will be subjected to a full quota of wrath from the authorities involved. But what Sazed ul-Kabir did is also important in opening the eyes of those concerned for DU, and the direction that our country's "premier" educational institute has taken over the years.