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We must defend investigative journalism

High Court's verdict a clarion call to government

In what is perhaps its most powerful endorsement of the freedom of the press in recent times, the High Court on Sunday released the full text of a verdict announced in June last year, in which it touched upon the issue in considerable detail. In the judgment, made in relation to a case about a newspaper's coverage of how the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) had exempted a former engineer of the Public Works Department and his wife charged with corruption, the court was firm, decisive and unambiguous. There cannot be a more authentic voice on this topic than the court, and we are happy that it chose to intervene at a time when the press is facing all sorts of challenges.

The court stated that journalists are part and parcel of a democratic process. "In a modern world, right to information is being treated as one of the preconditions for expression of opinion. Journalists act as helping hands in ensuring rule of law and democracy." As "watchdogs", it said, journalists disperse information not to undermine anyone but to serve the cause of justice. There is, then, no alternative to an "efficient" and "fearless" press that can do this without any impediments put in its way. Referring to Article 39 of the constitution which deals with freedoms of thought, conscience and speech, the court said that these rights are vital for the press, especially investigative journalism.

Investigative journalism is an effective antidote to the corrosive effect of corruption which, the court said, "undermines democracy and the rule of law; leads to violation of human rights; distorts markets; erodes the quality of life; and allows organised crime, terrorism and other threats to human security to flourish." Seeing how pervasive corruption has become in our society, it is important that investigative journalists, and their sources, are protected from harm. In this regard, the court categorically mentions that journalists are constitutionally and legally authorised to expose corruption in public interest, and that they cannot be compelled to disclose their sources.

These observations are not without context, and if contrasted with the present reality, they serve as a clarion call to the state authorities, which often act as if the rights of the press are not inalienable. In recent years, we have seen how journalists were subjected to threats, violence, harassment, lawsuits, and a culture of censorship. Investigative journalists were especially targeted for disclosing critical information. And various barriers were put up so that they cannot access or disclose information. Meanwhile, the Digital Security Act, a law that should never have been passed, has been repeatedly abused to target journalists. Also, overt and covert attempts have been made to make it difficult for media organisations, especially those critical of the government, to function.

Under such circumstances, the High Court reminds the authorities that their job is to protect and promote public interest journalism, not muzzle it, for the sake of the people. We urge the government to take the court judgment with the seriousness it deserves, and act upon its recommendations.

Give Guerrilla Hafiz his due recognition

Repeated failure to recognise his sacrifices is an affront to our history

Freedom fighter Syed Hafizur Rahman, known as "Guerrilla Hafiz" or "Mine Hafiz" because of his gallantry during the 1971 war, laid down his life for our independence. Fifty years have passed since then, yet the country for which he made the ultimate sacrifice has still not recognised him as a martyred freedom fighter. This is a shameful gesture not only towards the sacrifices he made, but also our glorious history as a nation.

According to a report by this daily, Hafiz's family has submitted a total of eight applications to the state requesting that he be officially recognised as a martyred freedom fighter – as his compatriots were. However, time and again, the state failed to pay him this bare minimum respect. This was despite the fact that his family submitted a copy of the Tk 2,000 cheque awarded to the family by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1972, along with a recommendation letter signed by Crack Platoon guerrilla commander Golem Dastagir Gazi. Moreover, many of his fellow freedom fighters have also authenticated the family's claim that Hafiz had not only participated in our struggle for independence, but had shown supreme courage until his very last breath, even in the face of torture by Pakistani forces – including the gouging out of his eyes for not giving away information about his fellow freedom fighters.

Over the last 50 years, successive governments have failed to protect the history of our glorious Liberation War beyond paying lip service or trying to glorify themselves and their roles in the war for political purposes. We have seen how documents from those days have been neglected, how lists of freedom fighters were tampered with, and new lists were made, which were full of errors. Yet, the largest collection of Liberation War documents, "Bangladesher Swadhinota Juddho: Dolil Potro (Volume 10)", details several operations that Hafiz took part in during the war. Why, then, has the government failed to give him his due recognition? What have the various departments entrusted with preserving our history been doing?

It is disgraceful that the last time Hafiz's family made a submission for his recognition, his younger sister was asked to just "pay [a bribe of] Tk 5-10 lakh at the right place" to get a certificate, instead of running around here and there. It goes to show how low we have come as a nation – particularly the state machinery – from those glorious days when people like Hafiz fought to liberate this nation.

We call on the relevant authorities to immediately grant Hafiz proper posthumous recognition, with an official apology for the delay. His family has been through enough trouble; the state, instead of causing them more inconveniences, should reach out to them of its own volition and rectify a grave mistake.

How are LDCs faring during the global food crisis?



MACRO MIRROR

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According to a recent report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the number of hungry people across the world was as high as 828 million in 2021, up by 46 million from 2020 and a whopping 150 million from 2019. The majority of these people live in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), which are net food-importing countries. As a global food crisis looms over us, LDCs are at a higher risk, which needs to be addressed urgently.

LDCs are predominantly agricultural economies, but are also highly dependent on food imports as they cannot meet demand through domestic production. They import several essential food items, and these imports have increased over time – especially cereal. Due to supply chain disruptions during the pandemic, lockdowns, reduced economic activity and travel restrictions impacted not only the production but also international trade of food. The Russia-Ukraine war made the situation worse, especially since LDCs are more dependent on Russia and Ukraine for food imports.

In the wake of the war, several countries have banned export of certain food items to maintain their own stocks, intensifying LDCs' food challenges. Since Russia and Ukraine are major exporters of fertiliser, supply chain disruptions are also affecting agricultural production in LDCs. High fertiliser and fuel prices have made it extremely difficult for farmers to cultivate. The other perennial threat is that of climate change, which has been reducing global agriculture productivity over time. Not only extreme weather events, but volatility of the weather has been impacting agricultural production adversely.

In view of high food prices, LDCs put forward food security and agriculture as their topmost agenda at the 12th World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial meeting (MC12). The Ministerial Decision on World Food Programme (WFP) Food Purchase Exemption from



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Export Prohibitions or Restrictions has been an important outcome on food security at the MC12, which stated that WTO "members shall not impose export prohibitions or restrictions on foodstuffs purchased for non-commercial humanitarian purposes by the World Food Programme."

However, the global food crisis has continued to intensify. In this respect, a few measures are critical.

First, the international trade on food should be continued without any restrictions. It has been a common phenomenon that during a food crisis, food-exporting countries resort to protectionism and impose bans on their food exports. Usually, export restrictions are imposed on staple food and essential items such as rice, wheat, sugar and edible oil. Countries should also refrain from domestic support policies in the agriculture sector that distort production and trade and negatively impact poorer countries. The WTO Food Security Declaration calls for agricultural trade to flow and

asks countries not to impose WTO-inconsistent export restrictions or prohibitions. However, these are not binding rules. Countries also use non-tariff barriers to discourage importing countries. Hence, the work of the multilateral trading system should focus on smooth trade in agricultural products to reduce hunger and avoid famine in net food-importing LDCs.

for higher yields and lower costs of cultivation. This requires making fuel and fertilisers affordable. Investment on innovation and technology are prerequisites for a resilient agriculture sector that can ensure higher food production. Adequate government support is crucial, particularly for small farmers.

Fourth, offering fair prices to farmers

Second, there should be a permanent solution for public food stock-taking programmes. More than 80 developing countries have been trying to secure a permanent solution to the problem of public stock to protect farmers' rights, and to expand food security programmes by giving out more support to farmers. The MC12 declaration states that WTO members recognise the need for adequate food stocks that can contribute to domestic food security and encourages WTO members to release their available surplus on international markets following WTO rules. This was supposed to help the LDCs, who are disproportionately affected by high food prices. However, there is no reflection of such a call in the market.

Third, LDCs themselves have to prepare to tackle the situation. They must enhance their domestic capacity to produce more and develop robust agricultural systems and infrastructures. This is essential

through better market access must be ensured. The prices should cover their production costs and include an attractive profit margin so that they are encouraged to produce more. Very often, farmers stop cultivating if they do not find it economically sensible. During a good harvest, they are often forced to sell their crops to middlemen at a low price. Therefore, governments in the LDCs should also come forward to procure crops and produce from farmers at fair prices. They should also build storage facilities to store the produce for a longer period during a crisis.

Finally, for the long-term sustainability of the agriculture sector, large investments are required to face the challenges of climate change. Given that the LDCs are extremely vulnerable to climate change despite not causing it, those who are, i.e. the developed countries, should provide enhanced funds and technology to the LDCs.

Lead poisoning: The next big threat for Bangladesh



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MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh is grappling with one of the largest cases of lead poisoning in history, with millions of children being exposed to it every day. In Bangladesh alone, it is documented that more than 35 million children have blood lead levels that are quite a bit above the safe range. According to the Institute of Health Metrics Evaluation (IHME), Bangladesh now has the world's fourth highest rate of death due to lead exposure.

Globally, one in three children – more than 800 million children in total – has elevated blood lead levels (BLL). A recent study in Dhaka suggests that 80 percent of urban children have more than five micrograms per decilitre (µg/dl) of lead in their blood, which is above the WHO recommended value. Another countrywide study suggested that 34 percent of children have more than 5µg/dl blood lead. This persisting high BLL among children needs special attention from government and non-government institutions.

There are additional sources and pathways of lead poisoning in lower-income countries compared to higher-income countries. For example, despite having an insufficient capacity in maintaining protective regulations and infrastructure, the use of lead in industry still persists in Bangladesh and other lower-income countries. At the industrial level, used lead acid battery (ULAB) recycling is a common source of hazardous emissions in semi-urban



Used lead-acid battery recycling sites, a big source of lead poisoning in Bangladesh, primarily employ child labourers.

FILE PHOTO: RAJIB RAHMAN

and rural Bangladesh. Until now, the toxic site identification programme (TSIP) identified more than 360 ULAB recycling sites, and the World Bank identified 1,100-plus such sites, bringing roughly a million people at risk. When abandoned, defunct ULAB recycling sites still pose a hazard to the surrounding communities – and can sometimes spread even further. ULAB recycling is also extraordinarily dangerous for workers, including child labourers who comprise about a quarter of the ULAB workforce.

Bangladesh is compliant with the WHO and has banned lead paint.

However, enforcement remains limited – 30 percent of paints sold in the country exceed the threshold standard, and almost all of them contain very high lead concentrations (10,000 ppm). There is an ongoing movement to mobilise support for stronger controls and enforcement against the use of lead paint.

Lately, the adulteration of spices – particularly turmeric – has caused

lead chromate to mitigate turmeric adulteration. Screening of turmeric for lead is also urgently needed to identify and stop this practice. This should be done in alignment with generating more awareness among turmeric producers about the dangers of this practice and empowering consumers with more oversight of how the turmeric they buy is processed.

Furthermore, lead may also be found in various day-to-day products, such as local cosmetics, traditional herbal medicines, toys, aluminium cookware, and jewellery. Although lead content in these products is anecdotally documented in the recent 2022 countrywide fact-finding explorations, limited evidence is available about the extent of lead contamination or the relative contribution to the national burden of lead poisoning.

There are diverse sources of lead poisoning in Bangladesh, and the relative burden caused by different exposure channels remains poorly understood. Lead exposure is not only more common in lower-income countries, but the adverse effects may also be more severe due to nutritional and environmental factors. Poor nutritional status, especially calcium and iron deficiencies, increases lead absorption and metabolism.

A variety of interventions are recommended based on the 2022 findings, including improved nutrition, correction of iron deficiency, community and family education, chemical chelation of products, and attempts to remove lead sources from children's environments. Adding blood lead levels in national surveillance would help monitoring, evaluation and research to inform policy and its implementation. We need continued investment in the reduction of lead exposure and government-level policy implementation nationwide.