

A red alert indeed

Militants’ escape from court premises raises fresh security concerns

We are shocked to learn that two militants escaped police custody from the Dhaka court premises on Sunday. Reportedly, four cops were escorting the two death-row convicts, along with ten other militants, to the prison cell when unidentified individuals attacked a constable and snatched the two. Both were members of the banned militant outfit Ansar Al Islam, and convicted in the murder cases of slain publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan and blogger Avijit Roy. Such dangerous criminals being on the loose, amid suspicions of a resurgence in militant activities fuelled by mysterious disappearances of young men in recent months, is indeed concerning.

To call the incident unusual would be an understatement. Although there have been similar militancy-related security breaches in the past – including the escape of three convicts in 2014 after a gang of 10-15 masked men attacked a prison van in Trishal, Mymensingh, and the defiance of some Holey Artisan-linked convicts wearing dubiously collected prayer caps inscribed with IS logo in 2019 – the site of the latest breach, at the heart of the judiciary, and the manner in which it was executed, exploiting lax security, are emblematic of bigger concerns.

It has exposed security loopholes in handling high-risk criminals. Reportedly, about 600-700 defendants are brought at the Dhaka district and metropolitan courts every day, with only 190-200 cops tasked with escorting them. Clearly, the security arrangement is far from adequate, and the conduct of police far from professional. According to court sources, the fugitives were not bound with fetters, and cops were taking them to the prison cell without the judge’s permission. The coy, coordination and potential collusion that characterised their escape are also noteworthy. How did the associates of fugitives get their hands on the key to their handcuffs? How did the fugitives know when to launch the surprise assault on the constable before they were joined, and whisked away, by their associates?

These questions must be investigated by the probe team looking into their escape (and the attempted escapes of other militants). We are told that a case has been filed, and security on court premises has been beefed up. Five cops were also temporarily suspended in this connection. Meanwhile, a red alert has been issued by the home ministry to arrest the fugitives, with the border guards asked to remain vigilant. More will be known about this in the coming days as investigators comb through related materials and evidence. This predictable chain of reactions, however, doesn’t address our concern about the renewed threat of a rise in militant activities.

With the national election a little over a year away, any such threat is indeed disturbing. There are fears that reorganised militant groups could be targeting the election for a showdown, and the recent spate of militancy-related developments could be part of that goal. Regardless of the motive, any hint of militancy deserves to be taken with seriousness. We urge the police and intelligence agencies, which failed to predict Sunday’s escape, to up their game to stay ahead of the militants.

Finally, a loss and damage fund

COP deal was long overdue but major barriers to its execution remain

It is a welcome development that a final agreement has been reached at the just-concluded climate summit (COP27) that will set up a fund to help poor countries struggling with the effects of climate change. Reportedly, the deal has been reached through tense negotiations that continued for 40 hours beyond the deadline, after which the final text was released in a plenary session where it was gavelled through. However, the swift approval of a dedicated “loss and damage” fund left some of the critical points unresolved, which were deferred until the next summit. But we know for sure now that a fund will indeed be set up for the rescue and rebuilding of vulnerable areas stricken by climate disasters – a key demand of developing nations in the last 30 years of climate talks.

The fund for loss and damage, to be used to support the societal and physical infrastructure of nations devastated by catastrophic weather disasters, has been agreed upon by over 200 countries, and it could be established within the next year. Important questions such as how much money would be put in, by whom, and on what basis are yet to be resolved, however. When the UNFCCC was signed in 1992, countries that were classified as “developing” were exempt from any commitment to reduce emissions or offer aid to others. Thus, the EU’s main goal during the negotiations this year was to guarantee that these nations – including China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations – were taken into account as potential contributors.

Delegates have applauded the success in creating the fund as a step towards climate justice, which aims to assist disadvantaged nations in coping with storms, floods, and other calamities caused by carbon emissions from affluent nations. The loss and damage clause has the approval of the US as well. However, according to a statement by the German foreign minister, a number of significant polluters and oil producers have blocked long-overdue actions on mitigation and the phase-out of fossil fuels. After oil-producing nations and high polluters reduced and withdrew crucial agreements on greenhouse emissions and the phase-out of fossil fuels, it is no surprise that COP27 is being seen by many as a failure in terms of the target to reduce carbon dioxide.

Therefore, in the final analysis, the achievements of this year’s conference have been minuscule compared to its potential and promise. Countries that joined the conference should have come to a definitive decision on curbing carbon emissions, and finalised the outline of the loss and damage fund. Instead of that, broad and general agreements were made that fall short of the expectations of communities hit by the climate catastrophe. We, therefore, urge the international community to ensure that the fund is set up properly within the next year, and strict guidelines are passed in terms of carbon emissions.

Our fiscal space is narrowing fast

What does the government plan to do about it?



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At the moment, Bangladesh is facing a number of challenges in maintaining macroeconomic stability, with the taka depreciating against the US dollar due to increased import bills, coupled with declining export earnings and remittance inflows. This is made worse by the global economy at large going through a recessionary (or stagflationary) period, with a fall in economic growth and a surge in prices in many large economies.

Both global and local macro-challenges can have a number of serious implications for the general citizens of Bangladesh.

First, the economic contraction of our trading partners can have negative implications for export earnings, which can affect the process of industrialisation and employment generation. The energy crisis is only adding to this and negatively impacting industrial production. Austerity measures taken by the government to contain inflation (and to curtail import payments) could also affect employability prospects. In the short- to medium-term, all of these factors could reduce household income and expenditure.

Secondly, the falling value of the taka is not only putting pressure on our foreign exchange reserves, but also adding to our import bills. With our import basket containing many essential food items, the appreciated dollar value is triggering further inflation. And it goes without saying how the government raising the price of fuel by a significant margin (to balance losses they had incurred previously due to high subsidies) has affected the livelihoods of the average Bangladeshi.

While there could be a fall in global energy prices due to the global recession, the ongoing war in Europe has added a lot of uncertainty into the mix. Besides, if our export and remittance earnings continue to fall, it will put further pressure on the value of the taka, making fuel even costlier to purchase.

In general, there are at least two



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ways in which increased energy prices are affecting our daily lives: through an increase in the direct cost of transportation and communication, and through an increase in the price of essentials due to higher transportation costs.

Continuing subsidies and reducing indirect taxes to contain the prices of fuel and essentials could shrink our already narrow fiscal space, leading the government to curtail expenses in health, education and social safety net programmes. Any reduction in the safety net expenditure in particular can hit lower income groups hard, especially against the backdrop of rising prices of essentials.

Without a proper support system, higher inflation can, on one hand, push already vulnerable members of the population below the poverty line, and on the other hand affect the quantity and quality of people’s food intake. In the latter case, lower

can even compel some families to discontinue children’s education. In this case, while any child could end up joining the labour force, girl children might be forced into marriages. The social costs of inflation can therefore be far reaching.

The government now must decide on whether they will move towards a market-based exchange rate system to restore macroeconomic stability. If we do not manage to stabilise the exchange rate, we could be faced with a more depreciated value of the taka, and that can trigger inflation further.

The government might also need to adjust import duties and value added taxes – at least in the short term. It is now essential to cut down on unnecessary expenses, especially operating expenses, and to carefully consider and select which development projects to work on while strictly

the relevant authorities are already taking austerity measures, which can constrain employment generation and affect households’ income. It is therefore crucial to provide support mechanisms to workers through adjustment of wages, subsidised food items, and more. It is also crucial to expand the government’s safety net programmes to safeguard economically vulnerable members of the country’s population. In addition to expanding coverage, raising per capita allowances is a need of the moment.

In order to eliminate the “unexplained” aspect of inflation – which is often caused by manipulation of, and inefficiency and disruption in, the supply chain – greater emphasis needs to be put on effective market monitoring.

Elon Musk is a vigilante superhero. That’s terrible news for everyone



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One of the most common tropes in the comic book universes of Marvel, DC Comics, Image and what have you is that of the billionaire superhero. And in 2022, we have a new entry to that list – a very real parody of a comic book billionaire superhero named Elon.

In the fertile imaginations of comic book writers, there exists a very valid cause for why superheroes are needed – in Gotham, Batman is a necessity as a counter to the corrupt, inept justice system. Even when Batman dons his Bruce Wayne persona to interact with “normal” people, his wealth and status put him beyond reproach and allows him to do extraordinary things – like buying up an entire hotel where the manager was rude to someone wearing tattered clothes. It fuels our capitalist revenge fantasies as we imagine using a fraction of our near-inexhaustible wealth to teach the lesson of a lifetime to someone who has dared slight us.

To say Elon Musk isn’t prone to the same vengeful fantasies would be wrong. Filthy rich or not, he’s still human. Prophetic overlord of SpaceX, Tesla, The Boring Company and now Twitter, Elon is from an industry that is dominated by an adherence to the cult of personality.

It matters little that the man taking credit for electrifying the world’s roads

and building the rockets that will ultimately whisk us away to safety once we’re done killing this planet has very little engineering excellence to back up his claims to prophethood. To date, he has a total of 18 patents, out of which nine are inactive/obsolete and the remaining nine are mainly related to autonomous vehicles, charging ports and location based searches. SpaceX and Tesla, Elon’s most successful ventures to date, are valuable purely because of speculation – based on where investors think the world is heading and which companies they see to be leading the charge.

So, when Elon Musk undertakes an aggressive takeover of Twitter and brands it as him “saving” the platform and upholding free speech, one has to ask: what actually makes him qualified for the role?

Given the disastrous results of the USD 8 for a “verified” blue tick stunt that he spearheaded, the answer to Elon’s qualifications seems to be clear. Parody accounts that paid the paltry sum for a verified blue tick caused billions of dollars of damages to publicly traded behemoths like CocaCola, Lockheed Martin and Eli Lilly, with scathing “confessional” style Tweets levelled against some of the worst offenders of climate,

war profiteering and healthcare. Advertisers pulled away from the volatile mess and hotbed of memes that Twitter was quickly devolving into, yet Elon’s ego made sure to put a positive spin to his house burning down by marvelling at the number of people who showed up to watch it go down in flames.

For technology to truly reshape the world in a meaningful, impactful way, we must move away from false idolatry and worshipping the cult of personality. Placing our collective faith in one person’s ability to manage his ego in delivering salvation might just cause everything to crash and burn faster.

The saddest part of Elon’s Twitter saga may have come when he claimed the social media platform’s performance suffers in many countries due to the excessive number of batched Remote Procedure Calls (RPCs) used by the feed to load content, only to be told to his face in a tweeted response by some senior engineers that Twitter does not use RPC protocols at all, instead favouring GraphQL. It’s equally funny and sad that tech guru Elon

doesn’t know the tech stack of the company he’s trying to “save,” but the fun runs out when a bit of light digging reveals that Elon immediately fired the engineer(s) who had responded to him. Let’s not even go into the hypocritical nature of Elon and how retaliatory firing of employees for speaking their minds simply goes against the “free speech” mandate he wants to be championing.

For anyone even remotely familiar with the global tech industry, it should be clear that Elon Musk would not be qualified to hold a junior business analyst role at a tech company in Bangladesh on his own merits. That his South African apartheid profiteering family and his emerald mine-backed family fortune essentially allowed him to buy his way into the world of technology, and that he’s held on and risen up by swindling and dealing, needs to be made clear to the whole world.

For technology to truly reshape the world in a meaningful, impactful way, we must move away from false idolatry and worshipping the cult of personality. Technological advancements have the possibility to bring net good to society and may hold the tools to ensure the continued survival of humans as a species, but it is absolutely vital that we look to community building and ensuring our institutions are functional and accountable, instead of replacing them with so-called individual superheroes. Placing our collective faith in one person’s ability to manage his ego in delivering salvation might just cause everything to crash and burn faster.