

The Daily Star

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Drop the charges against Rozina Islam

Legal harassment of journalists, human rights defenders must stop

The UN experts have recently called on the government to not "use the judiciary to chill critical reporting" and drop the charges against Rozina Islam, an investigative journalist of the daily *Prothom Alo*, as a case filed against her back in 2021 is still hanging over her head. Rozina was accused of "taking photos of official documents without permission" and charged under the Official Secrets Act, a law enacted by the British colonial administration in 1923, when she went to collect data from the health ministry in May 2021.

Although the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) submitted its final probe report to the court on July 3, 2022, stating that no substantial evidence had been found to support the allegations against Rozina, she is yet to be acquitted in the case. What happened instead was, seven months later, the same court ordered the police to carry out further investigations into the case following a petition by the health ministry in January 2023.

The prolongation of the investigation in the case is worrying. One can assume that it is being done with an aim to further harass the journalist concerned, suppress investigative journalism, and undermine press freedom in the country. The UN experts also raised the same concerns when they noted that "the protracted nature of Rozina Islam's case reflects a dangerous trend in Bangladesh and beyond to bring serious charges, often on unsubstantiated grounds, against journalists and editors and then leave the cases hanging unresolved in the judicial process as a way of threatening, intimidating, harassing, and silencing them."

The questions that must be asked at this point are, should the law, under which Rozina Islam was sued, even exist at this age and be used against journalists? Doesn't it undermine people's right to information, as guaranteed under the Right to Information Act? What Rozina did was unearth corruption, mismanagement and irregularities in our health sector, particularly the irregularities in the procurement of emergency medical supplies during the pandemic. Didn't she do a great service to the nation through her investigative journalism? Shouldn't the government have taken action against the corrupt officials of the health ministry based on her reports, instead of framing her and harassing her for what she did?

And Rozina is not the only one to be framed for doing her job: scores of journalists, editors, human rights defenders, political activists and others were framed under the obnoxious Digital Security Act (DSA) enacted in 2018. According to the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), a total of 109 cases were filed under this draconian law between October 2018 and August 2022, in which 2,889 individuals were accused. Of them, only two percent saw their cases come to a close, with the court handing either a conviction, an acquittal or the dismissal of the case. What happened to the rest? They have been suffering indefinitely through prolonged investigation and trial processes. This must stop.

We call upon the government to drop the charges against Rozina Islam and withdraw all other protracted cases against journalists, editors, political activists and human rights defenders. We join the UN experts in urging them to also review the prosecution policy for journalists, the use of the colonial-era Official Secrets Act, as well as the Digital Security Act.

Will the UNSC ever hold Myanmar accountable?

Repatriation is becoming a distant dream for the Rohingya

We wholeheartedly endorse Law Minister Anisul Huq's call to the UN Security Council (UNSC) to do its part to resolve the protracted Rohingya crisis, instead of being held hostage by political agendas of its member states. Over the last five and a half years, it has failed miserably to take appropriate action against Myanmar's military junta, despite widespread documentation of horrific atrocities carried out against the Rohingya population in their country. Even though there have been some positive developments in the international arena, the UNSC is still a long way from holding the Myanmar government accountable.

In December last year, the UNSC adopted the first-ever resolution on the "situation in Myanmar," demanding "immediate release of all arbitrarily detained prisoners," and an "end to all forms of violence." It was the first such resolution on Myanmar in over five decades, and it is astonishing that it took the 15-member council so long to simply come to a consensus in the face of overwhelming evidence of injustice. While we hope that this resolution will finally speed up the process of ending the Myanmar military regime's escalating repression and violence against civilians, especially in the Rakhine state, the UN must recognise that a lot more needs to be done – and fast – if we are to bring back any semblance of normalcy to the lives of the Rohingya people living in a lingering nightmare within and outside the country.

The situation of the Rohingya population in Bangladesh continues to be dire, particularly for the youth. The dream of repatriation gets more distant as years go by, for both the Rohingya and Bangladesh. With global attention shifting to the Russia-Ukraine war over the past year, we must now confront another rude awakening: a slashing of food aid to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Starting next month, the World Food Programme (WFP) will reportedly reduce the value of its food assistance to USD 10 per person from USD 12, which will no doubt lead to increased food insecurity and malnutrition of an already vulnerable population.

Both Bangladesh and the Rohingya population find themselves in a precarious situation. The Rohingya need more support – not just food and basic amenities, but education, skills and livelihood opportunities – so that the camps don't turn into hotbeds of crimes and extremism. The government of Bangladesh must be more strategic in its short-, medium- and long-term visions for rehabilitating this population, and engage more meaningfully with its trade partners, particularly Russia, China and India, whose reluctance to act in the Myanmar issue has stalled actions in the UNSC. It is also time for the UN to prove that it can do more than simply pay lip service to peace and human rights, and provide lasting solutions to one of the most pressing crises of recent times.

US, India, and the election in Bangladesh



THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

There has always been a feigned attempt by the diplomatic corps in Dhaka to keep their role (read: meddling) in Bangladesh's politics under wraps. Quite understandably, neither our politicians nor the diplomats feel comfortable discussing such matters openly. But predictably, the foreign diplomats appear to have become more active with the 12th parliamentary election less than a year away.

In recent months, there have been quite a few visits from countries that are deemed to have the potential to wield significant influence on Bangladesh politics, especially around elections. A number of top US officials visited Bangladesh for talks with government officials, civil society members and senior journalists over the last few years. The Indian foreign secretary visited on February 15. The Chinese foreign minister, on his way to Africa, stopped by in Dhaka in January for a brief meeting with his Bangladeshi counterpart at the airport. Usually, newly appointed Chinese foreign ministers begin their stint with a tour of Africa. This time, however, the minister seemed to consider Bangladesh important enough for a brief stopover on his first trip abroad.

This flurry of visits cannot be brushed aside as merely coincidences. They are more of a sign that Bangladesh has gained importance in the region. Interestingly, none of these visits had politics anywhere on the agenda, neither were the talks on politics – not officially, at least. And yet, two comments, made on the same day, appear to be rather intriguing.

Before that, one should perhaps go back a little for context. On November 21, 2021, this daily reported that Ambassador Kelly Keiderling, US deputy assistant secretary of state overseeing south and central Asia, said the Biden administration had decided to take out India from relations with the five other South Asian countries "to deepen US relationships with them." This meant that the US would be seeing



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

Bangladesh from its own lens and not through India's. There is much to speculate about the Indian stance regarding Russia vis-a-vis the US since the invasion of Ukraine and how that lens might vary. The once warm India-US camaraderie has certainly cooled down a bit, but it could turn into a full-blown rift – we can't say yet. This tussle of giants is what Bangladesh must navigate through without getting in their way or getting caught in the crossfire.

The visiting Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra also assured that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had full support of his country. "We have total support for you and your leadership," a PMO spokesperson quoted him as saying to the premier during their meeting at Gono Bhaban on February 15.

It could be a polite and courteous reassurance that India remains an ally, since relations with India have reached a new high over the last decade that the Awami League has been in office. But given the context and the critical

State, said, "I have confidence there can be a free and fair election. The government has said they want to have a free and fair election. We've made no secret of the concerns we have had about the treatment of certain advocates in civil society, particularly in human rights, concerns about previous elections."

On the same day, Derek Chollet, counsellor of the US Department of

State, and then there is China, who presumably also has interests in Bangladesh. Bangladesh would also not want to do anything that even hints at ignoring China. But all that must be done in delicate balance, considering the bigger powers at play.

Bangladesh is geopolitically important now, but the government must be cautious. When the whole

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"The US will continue to voice those concerns in the months to come. But sure, we have confidence and we have heard from the government today their commitment to hold a free and fair election. And we'll hold on to that," he added.

During the meeting with Derek Chollet at Gono Bhaban, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, "The next election will be fair and free. I fought for democracy throughout my life."

Now, there is India which has full confidence in Sheikh Hasina, and then there is the US that wants to see a free and fair election in Bangladesh. It might be flattering that both India and the US want to get Bangladesh

world is facing an economic crisis and the election is closing in, any slip could spell doom for us. There is our economy to think about, especially during these hard times. And Bangladesh relies heavily upon the US as a destination of our exports and a source of our remittance. On the other hand, countries cannot change neighbours and must live with them ever after – preferably in peace, even if not in happy harmony.

Now, what the ruling party does must be based on the best possible outcomes in terms of national interests, which may not necessarily coincide with short-sighted partisan interests. This is where we must have full confidence in the prime minister's leadership as well. More than foreign diplomats, it is important that we, the electorate, have faith in the prime minister's prudence and courage to decide on the right course. And if not, we, the electorate, should have the means to hold her accountable – by the ballot, if need be.

Does a degree in Bangla have no value?



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMMAD MORTUZA

Is a degree in Bangla useless? What are the factors that contribute to the marginalisation of the academic degree of a language in its own country? Is English a killer language that uses its colonial supremacy to deny Bangla its rightful throne in academia? That, at least, is a common perception. There are many jokes about the stereotypical attributes of a Bangla graduate to confirm the prejudice. Employers tend to associate proficiency in English as an additional skill that gives a job-seeker a certain edge in a job market that is fast becoming privatised and corporatised.

A few months back, this paper ran an op-ed highlighting the strange fetish over useless degrees in Bangladesh that are simply wasting away the time and efforts of our students as well as our national resources. The author, a research student in an Anglophone country, argued that there was no real connection between the knowledge pursued by these degrees and the jobs that are available for them. His argument is based on the need for technologically-skilled personnel for the job market. A degree in Bangla language and literature probably falls short of these requirements in a professional world driven by the much-hyped Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

To prepare graduates for the real world, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has asked universities to adopt an outcome-

based education system that requires a multidisciplinary approach. About 30 percent of the courses need to be from disciplines not pursued for the degree by a student. This means even a Bangla graduate must have some knowledge of other humanities, science, and social science subjects. The approach involves an attempt to bring all degrees under a common frame of assessment and evaluation.

However, one wonders whether these prescriptions, given in English, will be lost in translation or not. All departments of both public and private universities are required to write their programme missions, visions, and objectives in English. I was surprised to learn that even the course objectives for the Bangla course that we offer at the English department need to be in English. The reason is simple: it is for the sake of the donor, not for its intended audience. In the workshop designed to help us with the new curriculum development, we were given a list of keywords and action phrases. I could sense that these documents are going to be lip service as many of us do not have the symbolic and cultural capital to internalise what is at stake. The copy-and-paste method will make us look good on paper, but whether these ideas will be applied need to be seen and tested.

The dilemma was pointed out by Prof Anu Muhammad in a recent article published in this daily. The economist, who is known for his

political activism, regretted that many of our national policies are in English and do not have Bangla versions. This goes on to prove some state-level negligence shown to our mother language, notwithstanding the constitutional obligation of using Bangla everywhere. Our policymakers still prefer to relish the colonial hangover and uphold the supremacy of English as it is touted as the *lingua*

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franca of the world.

I think the answer to the question of Bangla in higher education lies in the problem. Unesco's adoption of February 21 as International Mother Language Day serves as a guideline. While it celebrates the tangible and intangible heritage of *Ekushey*, it also tells us to preserve and disseminate to "encourage linguistic diversity and multicultural education" for "fuller awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and to inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue." This is where Bangla can play a crucial role.

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Speaking at the launching ceremony of the Bangla Department at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), the iconic educator and cultural activist Abdullah Abu Sayeed shared an anecdote involving Rabindranath Tagore and Balraj Sahni, a Punjabi author who used to write in Hindi. Sahni was hesitant to write in his native tongue, saying that not too many people read Punjabi. Tagore told Sahni that Bangla, too, was once considered a pedestrian language. We kept on contributing to it with our writings to enrich it and get more readers for it.

I think we need to invest more in Bangla to make it an integral part of our life. True, the climate of neoliberalism has pushed Bangla into the abyss. But, as the discussants at the launching ceremony pointed out, the potential of Bangla is immense. The filmmaker, musician and public intellectual Chandril Bhattacharya and publisher of Shuvonkar Dey from Kolkata reflected on the shared victimhood of Bangla on the other side of the border. They told the audience about the political economy and cultural hegemony that were impacting the use of Bangla in all spheres.

But the solution came from the president of Bangla Academy, novelist Selina Hossain, and educator Abdullah Abu Sayeed. They told the audience to celebrate the language for the joy of reading its rich literature as well as for liberating one's consciousness before engaging with the world.

Research on Bangla can enrich our culture, while translations of our literature can introduce our heritage to the world. Bangla departments must redefine their objectives to make themselves effective. For that, it does not necessarily need to go to foreign prescriptions. A little soul-searching can do wonders.