

Not a flag carrier to be proud of

Biman's latest scandal reminder of systemic corruption and mismanagement

It's alarming to see the massive level of corruption in the national flag carrier that continues to be ignored by the authorities, despite its harmful effect on the economy as well as the country's image abroad. The latest scandal to be exposed by this newspaper involves a move by the airline, in February 2022, to recruit a batch of contractual pilots to fly its Boeing 777-300ER aircraft. Biman rushed through the hiring process claiming it needed pilots urgently. But one year on, only five of the 14 pilots have taken to the air, while the rest have been "lost in a quagmire of forged certificates, incompetence and failed licensing exams", leading to a huge amount of money being lost in training and undeserved salaries.

According to our report, Biman's own operation manual mandates that to fly Boeing 777, all first officers must have at least 300 flight hours under their belt in the preceding two years. But none of the recruits met that criterion, suggesting foul play in the hiring process. One cannot help but ask: Why hire unqualified pilots contractually when qualified pilots can be promoted? Why circumvent standard safety procedures when the risk of doing that is so great? That these misgivings were not unfounded became further clear when out of the 14 recruited, only four captains and a first officer passed the tests to fly the plane.

This is, however, only the half of a story that ends as other Biman recruitment scandals did: in attempted cover-ups. Reportedly, Biman has been flouting rule after rule and going to great lengths to protect the pilots who failed tests. There is, for example, the wife of Biman's chief of training who was recruited using forged educational certificates. She then failed to complete a crucial test within the time set, but was given a second chance against the CAAB's own policy. She is not the only one to have forged documents, however. Some of the recruits also had questionable backgrounds and track records but yet found their way in comfortably. Equally worryingly, Biman continued to pay some of them grossly inflated salaries of up to seven figures, all of which would be money wasted if they fail to become fully-fledged pilots of the Boeing 777.

What all this shows is how unaccountable Biman authorities have become, and how corruption and mismanagement continue to plague this vital institution. One may recall the story of another recruitment scam exposed in November, where a top official was found involved in the leaking of question papers for new hires. A few months before that, Biman was also in the news for hiring "controversial" and "underqualified" people as pilots and co-pilots. Not just in recruitments, Biman has had an equally sordid record in almost all aspects of its operations.

This cannot go on indefinitely. As our national flag carrier, Biman must answer for its actions and decisions because those have a direct bearing on the safety of passengers as well as our image as a nation and our future. The higher authorities must establish accountability in this organisation, and break the cycle of corruption, mismanagement and incompetence.

Yet another child tortured to death

Why can't we stop the atrocities committed against child domestic workers?

Words are not enough to express our shock at the brutal murder of a child domestic worker allegedly by her employer. The body of the 10-year-old girl was recovered on February 27 by police from a freezing van in front of a hospital in Moghbazar, Dhaka. Reportedly, there were numerous injury marks on the body, including burn injuries, bruises on her head, scratch marks on her forehead and left ear, a swollen wound on the right cheek, and also severe injuries in her genitals. Police suspect that she was murdered at least two days before the body was recovered. Her employer, who claimed to be the joint editor of a weekly newspaper, allegedly hid the body in her house for a day before hiring a freezing van to keep and bury it secretly.

The details of the cruelty inflicted upon a child before her death would shake anyone. Reportedly, her employer used to torture her frequently, and the girl also told her father about it three months ago. After her father sought to take her back home, her employer demanded money from him, as compensation for things she had apparently "damaged". Her poor father couldn't provide any money, and so couldn't take her home with him either.

The question is, what could make someone torture a child like that? The alleged perpetrator clearly held a superior social position which empowered her to continue to torture the girl without having to face any question from anyone. Also, her offer to the deceased girl's father – of Tk 70,000 and a house in Savar – for not reporting the incident indicates that she wanted to dodge the law, which is outrageous.

While violence against domestic workers is pretty common in our society, it is rarely reported, and only in a handful of cases are the perpetrators brought under the law. One may ask: what happened to the law that was passed in 2015 specifically for this purpose? Apparently, it exists only on paper. Lack of enforcement of the law is encouraging some affluent individuals to not only employ underage workers at their houses but also to torture them without any fear of consequence. There is also a discrepancy about the minimum age for the employment of a domestic help. While according to the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy, the minimum age for employment is 12, it is 14 years according to the labour law. Such discrepancies further compromise existing legal safeguards, and must be removed to protect our children from harassment. The state must ensure that no children need to work for survival or are exploited by any household or workstation.

In the Moghbazar case, the accused must face justice. Such a heinous crime, and other such crimes that came to the fore in the past, must be investigated and properly responded to.

Let me speak my mind

But with DSA hanging over our heads, can I?



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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ERESH OMAR JAMAL

"When governments fear the people, there is liberty. When people fear the government, there is tyranny."
– Thomas Jefferson

At a memorial meeting marking the second death anniversary of writer Mushtaq Ahmed, speakers said the government had been using the Digital Security Act (DSA) as a weapon to create a culture of fear. Author and social activist Mushtaq Ahmed died in jail on February 25, 2021, after being detained and allegedly tortured for social media posts critical of the government. The police arrested him in May 2020 under the DSA. For nine months – from his arrest to his death – his family was not able to meet him once.

Were it not for the harrowing details shared by cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore with *The Daily Star*, we might never have known how Mushtaq really died, given the state's refusal to take any responsibility for his death in custody or to investigate it.

Mushtaq might have been the worst victim of the draconian law, but he was not the only one. Kishore himself was detained for 10 months under the DSA and tortured before being released in the face of intense protests following Mushtaq's death.

According to data collected by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), in the four years since the law was enacted, a total of 1,109 cases have been filed under the DSA against 2,889 individuals, with only two percent of them seeing their cases come to a close with the court handing either a conviction, an acquittal or the case getting dismissed. Of the accused, only 52 saw their cases coming to a close with the court system. Nine others found relief because their accusers withdrew the cases. The police are still investigating three quarters of a thousand or so cases, and at least 725 of them are from before 2022, meaning there has been a clear violation of the legal time limit given to law enforcers to complete their investigations in these cases.

This is because the law stipulates that an investigation report must be submitted within 60 days. The investigation officer can, if necessary, seek an extension of 15 days from the authorities. But after that, the case should fall under the jurisdiction of the tribunal. Over the last four years, however, in many cases, we have seen the accused still being held in custody

and effectively being punished before trial, even if the investigation report was not given within the stipulated 75 days.

So, what the state is effectively doing is using the process itself as the punishment. On February 22, while calling on the Bangladesh government to drop the charges against investigative journalist Rozina Islam, a panel of UN experts said the protracted nature of her case "reflects a dangerous trend in Bangladesh... 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," thereby acknowledging this reality.

This is nothing new. Plenty of authoritarian governments around the world have used this trick before.

That the DSA is being used for this purpose can be further corroborated by the fact that according to data, politicians and journalists ranked the highest in terms of those accused – although researchers were able to

identify the profession of only around half of those accused – with ruling party affiliates specifically being the largest group of people prosecuting the journalists. In fact, according to Dr Ali Riaz, distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University, "every week a case has been filed by an Awami League activist against more than two persons for

toxic human traits – i.e. hubris.

Only in authoritarian cultures would citizens trust politicians or government officials with the power to declare what the absolute truth is, and then, using the force of law, bar any expression that deviates from it. Therefore, the fact that our society has accepted living under laws such as the DSA, under whatever pretext, is



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

almost four years under one law."

But even if we were to consider that the intention behind enacting the DSA was not to create a culture of fear, but for a benevolent and all-powerful government to allow only truthful statements while identifying and outlawing false claims, the reality is that human nature makes such a reality impossible. For a thousand years prior to Enlightenment, most societies were ruled by all-powerful institutions – monarchies, empires, etc – that claimed to possess absolute truth and so outlawed any views that deviated on the ground that they were "false." Since then, one of the greatest intellectual advancements of human liberation has been the realisation that all human institutions are fallible, that they endorse false claims either due to error or corruption – which is why every individual must retain the right to question and challenge their orthodoxies.

Error is the inevitable condition of even the most well-intentioned humans. Which is why at the heart of every censor resides one of the most

extremely concerning.

At *The Daily Star's* 32nd anniversary programme, human rights activist Hameeda Hossain said, "We can see from Bangladesh's struggle for independence how important it was to have freedom of thought, freedom of expression and for people to discuss their various diverse views and opinions." The fact that, five decades after liberation, these are no longer our core collective values is very dangerous.

At the same event, writer and activist Noorjahan Bose said that, if necessary, she was willing to live in a "hut or go hungry," but she must have the right to freely express herself. She even said that she was willing to sacrifice her life for it. That is the kind of attitude we must have towards our core moral values; we must not be willing to compromise on them, no matter the cost. Only collective efforts by individuals who see the world like that can get us out of the current oppressive environment we are in, where the space for free speech, free expression and free thought is rapidly disappearing.

Making Khulna a green and fair climate city



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

I have just returned from a visit to the Khulna region, both Khulna city and the Sundarbans. With the Padma Bridge cutting down the journey between Dhaka and Khulna to just a few hours means that the Khulna region is already seeing development at a much faster rate than before. This has both positive and potentially negative results – if we don't take care to avoid making mistakes during the development.

We can develop Khulna city into a green and fair climate city going forward.

The first aspect I want to discuss is the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world. The Sundarbans is a Unesco World Heritage site as well as a Ramsar wetlands site, which Bangladesh has the responsibility to conserve not just for its own well-being, but on behalf of humanity. During my visit, I participated in a roundtable discussion with key stakeholders from the Forest Department, Department of Fisheries,

Department of Environment (DoE), and the divisional commissioner's office, where we discussed how to improve the conservation of both the terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity, as well as support the communities living around the forest.

The first lesson we shared was the impressive progress that Bangladesh has made in improving biodiversity conservation, which is shown by the relatively frequent sighting of Bengal tigers in recent times. There has also been significant advancement in setting up conservation committees at grassroots level who are supporting the Forest Department in preventing poaching and illegal tree felling in exchange for some benefits. There are also efforts to develop sustainable and responsible tourism in place of the free-for-all approach that seems to be happening with irresponsible tourism. The bottom line is that while good progress has indeed been achieved, there is still much that needs to be done to ensure that the

benefits are not lost.

The key elements that need to be further developed and improved are supporting the local conservation groups to motivate them, while imposing restrictions on irresponsible tourists who cause pollution and disturb the wildlife in the forest as well as its peripheral area, which is a designated Environmentally Critical Area (ECA).

The good news is that we know what needs to be done. If we can collectively do this, we can make the southwestern part of Bangladesh one of the world's foremost places to implement nature-based solutions (NbS).

The second aspect of the Khulna region that is relevant to climate change is its extreme vulnerability to salinity intrusion in the low-lying coastal districts, which are already causing displacement of the local people. This is in fact an instance of loss and damage from human-induced climate change, which we need to address as we invest in making Khulna city both a green and a fair climate city, particularly for the climate migrants who are rapidly filling up the slums in Khulna city.

This will require us to develop the city through what is called Just Urban Transition (JUT), which is a relatively new concept of ensuring both a green and a socially just urban development pathway. In Khulna's case, it must be ensured that the upcoming

investments in the city infrastructure are more people-centric and not just infrastructure-oriented. Again, the good news is that we know what needs to be done – we just have to make sure we do it.

The final aspect is the potential for adaptation to climate change in the entire southwestern part of the country, with a particular emphasis on promoting Locally Led Adaptation (LLA). In fact, the second meeting I attended during my trip was to launch the Khulna Divisional Platform on LLA, which is part of the National Platform on LLA where all the stakeholders working on different aspects of LLA will come together to share their knowledge, experience and activities. This is being launched at the divisional level first this year, with the national platform due to be launched next year in Dhaka. This will bring both the government and non-governmental stakeholders together to ensure a truly whole-of-society approach to building resilience to tackle climate change impacts in Khulna and the surrounding areas.

In conclusion, the southwestern part of Bangladesh, with Khulna city at its core and the Sundarbans nearby, has the potential to become a global centre of green and just development if all the actors play their parts, and if we implement the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) plan that has been prepared for the region.