

Time to fix our building vulnerability

Violation of building codes, lack of awareness causing fires and explosions

Three accidents in less than three weeks have once again highlighted how vulnerable Dhaka's buildings are to fires, explosions and such disasters. First, there was the fire in Gulshan, which killed two individuals. Then, there was a blast near the Science Lab intersection which killed three. And then came the explosion in Gulistan which killed at least 22. Their locations – one in a posh area, one in a commercial area, and the latest in a crowded area in Old Dhaka – suggest that when it comes to building accidents, no neighbourhood is safe enough. The risk seems to lurk everywhere in this megacity thanks to unplanned urbanisation, blatant violation of building and fire safety regulations, as well as lack of inspection and awareness.

This has been a proven recipe for disaster, and by the look of things, it has been getting worse. As per data from the fire service, there were 19,642 fires in 2018. The number rose to 24,102 last year. If the trend holds, and if the relevant authorities continue to refuse to learn and take preventive actions, it is only a matter of time before tragedy strikes again.

Ours is a city "strewn with ticking time bombs", as the headline of a report by this daily memorably put it. And why not? Given how callously building and fire safety regulations are treated, questions can be asked about the electrical and structural safety of most buildings. Some of the commonly cited reasons for recent fires/explosions include electric short circuit, accumulation of gas in a confined space, poorly maintained air conditioning units, etc. The Gulistan blast has also been blamed on accumulated gas through concealed or disconnected gas lines. There is also the possibility of biogas accumulating in the septic tank or a leaky sewer pipe turning part of the building into a gas chamber, which was somehow ignited. Whatever the reason, it is obvious that it had to do with poor maintenance of the building.

The question is, how many buildings are there with similar conditions? How will residents understand if there is a risk of gas accumulation and of explosion? Lack of awareness is an issue, of course, but as an expert recently noted, Titas may have stopped adding the distinctive foul-smelling mercaptan to natural gas making it difficult to detect a leakage. Most buildings in Dhaka also suffer from poor ventilation. Unfortunately, the safety of buildings – including gas connections, electric lines, sewer pipelines, septic tanks, elevators, etc. – is rarely inspected, while fire drills are quite unheard of, making it almost natural for tragedies to occur.

This must be stopped. We urge the relevant authorities, including Wasa, Desa, Rajuk, fire service and the city corporations, to acknowledge the gravity of the danger that residents of this overcrowded city face. As experts have suggested, the government should immediately introduce a practice of providing occupancy certificates after yearly inspection of all buildings. We need a thorough inspection of all residential and commercial buildings, and all measures must be taken to improve their safety. We must also punish those responsible for the frequent building tragedies.

DSA must be amended without delay

We support the call of UN rights chief in this regard

It bears repeating that the Digital Security Act (DSA) is nothing but a tool of repression as it is being used to muzzle freedom of speech and press freedom. This has been proven time and again in the last four years or so. The way it has been used particularly to target and harass journalists, editors, political activists and human rights defenders is unacceptable in any democracy. Unfortunately, despite activists frequently raising concerns over its abuse and demanding its abolishment, the government seems to be not only turning a deaf ear to the demand but is, in a way, advocating its abuse. The law minister's recent comment – that the law is required in the present context – is an example of this.

Against this backdrop, we appreciate the call of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk to amend the DSA. He has also raised concerns at the "increasing incidents of political violence, coupled with arbitrary arrests of political activists, and ongoing harassment of human rights defenders and media personnel in the build-up to the elections." We think these are all valid concerns, and should be addressed with the same urgency that the abuse of DSA deserves.

By now, there is ample evidence that the law has been abused to harass people unnecessarily, with the majority of cases filed under it hanging unresolved for long. According to the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), at least 1,109 cases were filed between October 2018 and August 2022 – in which a total of 2,889 individuals were accused. What happened to these cases? The CGS study has found that only two percent of the accused saw their cases come to a close, with the court handing either a conviction, an acquittal or the dismissal of the case. And the rest have been suffering through prolonged investigation and trial processes.

The CGS also found that, of all the cases filed under this draconian law, 60 percent were filed over Facebook activities, which is hardly surprising. And the fact that a total of 140 cases were filed for allegedly defaming the prime minister alone further reveals the absurdity of the law.

Moreover, the cases filed under this law are not being handled as per the law. Reportedly, at least 725 of all the cases that police are now investigating are from before 2022. Although the law gives a 60-day time limit to submit an investigation report – with an extension of 15 days, if sought by an investigation officer – this is rarely followed. This is a clear violation of rules governing the investigation process.

There is simply no reason anymore for the law to exist. Therefore, we demand that the government repeals this law urgently, or at least amend it in a manner reflective of the concerns of the activists.

Rewarding thuggery, punishing talent

The worrisome state of our once glorious student activism



THE THIRD VIEW

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Many factors that impact us as a country are not in our control – the climate crisis, pandemics, geopolitics, globalisation, energy crisis, international terms of trade, the Ukraine war, etc. But some are, like enabling our students to be among the best learners, if not in the world, then at least in the region. So when we fail to do that, and knowingly continue to do the very opposite of it, we are forced to ask: are we not destroying the future of our students and, in the process, jeopardising that of our country?

I am fully aware of our history of student activism and am a personal witness to the tremendous importance and benefits that it brought to us. I believe that students must have a role to question what they see and protest whenever they see injustice, oppression, corruption, abuse of power, etc. They must have the right to demand change if a situation calls for it.

But we must also ask: what has become of the student activism that we were once so proud of? Do issues like justice, democracy, freedom, and rights of others hold any meaning for our present day students? How conscious are they of the complexity of modern life and its challenges? How aware are they of the existential threat that humanity faces today – namely climate change? Do they know that their beloved motherland is at the forefront of that crisis and is likely to be one of its worst victims? Do they think that attacking opponents to sort out differences is the only way to go? Do they attach any value to having dialogues with those with whom they disagree? Why is violence their first choice? What values, ideals, dreams are they receiving from their education? What is the role of educational institutions in genuinely guiding these young lives to prepare better for the future?

The above questions and many more forced themselves upon me as I read our own recent reports on the clashes between the students of Dhaka College, Dhaka City College, and Ideal College. All three colleges are among the better ones in the city, with creditable academic track records. Of them, Dhaka College is the oldest, most prestigious and successful – till recent times. City College excels in commerce subjects, with Ideal College holding its own at a satisfactory level. All three are located in the upper middle class areas



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

around New Market, Green Road, and Dhanmondi. If these students are the products of our near-best colleges, one must worry about what's happening in the rest.

What are we actually teaching them? And of what we teach, how much are they really learning? Are we preparing them to be suitable citizens of the 21st century? Do we really understand what being "citizens of the 21st century" implies? We know that it will be an artificial intelligence (AI)-driven society. Will we be able to take advantage of its enormous potential, or will our students go out in anger and break those machines as AI will inevitably start taking away our jobs?

The good students who are still coming out of these colleges and from others are doing so absolutely on their own, and not because of the institutions they study in.

When we passed our matric examination from St Gregory's High School in 1965, all my friends who did outstandingly well went to Dhaka College, and those of us who belonged to the second tier went to Notre Dame College. As the protest against Gen Ayub Khan's rule and resentment against West Pakistan's domination gained momentum, and especially after Bangabandhu launched his six-point programme in 1966, our friends

in Dhaka College started joining the protests and many of them enrolled in one or the other of the most prominent student organisations of the time – both groups of the left-oriented East Pakistan Student Union (EPSU) and the student wing of Awami League, the East Pakistan Students' League. That was Dhaka College. Student politics in our time was

making activities, with gangsterism and activities that are generally deemed as anti-social. Conversely, stories of students participating in social causes, in fighting for human rights, democracy, and justice in general are getting rarer.

With some variations, this is the picture of student activities in almost all colleges and universities throughout

the most serious schooling in social awareness, political consciousness building, and familiarisation with bigger issues like people's struggles for economic, political, and cultural rights and learning to link them with global issues like imperialist domination and the impact of colonialism. This led us to life-changing self-awareness that made us better human beings. Simply put, student politics made us enlightened citizens of the country and, in many ways, of the world. (We chanted endless slogans for the release of Nelson Mandela and the fall of the Apartheid regime, and in support of Palestine, Viet Nam, Angola and Mozambique).

It's not that there weren't fights between students of different colleges or between groups within each institution during our time. They, however, never defined the totality of student activities as they mostly do now.

Just about a year ago, on April 18, 2022, a deadly clash erupted between the Dhaka College students and the traders and shopkeepers of the New Market area. The clash lasted for two days until on the 19th, two persons – Nahid Mia and Mursalin – totally unconnected with the incidents, were killed. The reason was extortion.

Today, it is almost expected that students will indulge in violence, that they will be involved with money-

the country. The only brilliant exceptions were the school students demanding road safety measures in 2018 and private university students protesting against VAT on tuition fees in 2015. Instead of encouraging them to get more involved with social causes, they were brutally suppressed. Some are still facing police cases.

As a participant and a direct beneficiary of the student movements of the past, I cannot but raise the question: why are we throwing our college and university students into this abyss of moral and ethical degradation? Will the future of our student community be sacrificed at the altar of criminal activities and partisan politics? As long as a student is willing to add to the muscle power of one's party, then whatever else he does as a student is acceptable – should that be our position?

And all this when we stand at the doorstep of the most profound changes that humanity ever faced – negatively the climate crisis and positively the AI revolution, especially in the fields of physics, chemistry and biology.

There cannot be a more tragic example of our future going astray. And we are solely responsible for it. There is no "conspiracy" here, only our inexplicable and thoroughly incomprehensible indifference to our future.

A shameless attack on Iran's schoolgirls



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Since November 30, 2022, hundreds of schoolgirls in a number of cities in multiple provinces across Iran have been hospitalised due to inhaling poisonous gas, assumed to be organophosphates (insecticides), that has left them with respiratory problems, nausea, dizziness, muscle weakness, altered sensorium, and fatigue. Short video clips show these teen and pre-teen girls sprawled on school grounds or lying in hospital beds, gasping for air, and screaming, "I can't breathe." Videos of frenzied parents trying to break into schools have emerged, including a father trying to climb over a school gate in a desperate attempt to save his daughter. There is even a video clip of general people trying to physically remove a parked car from the street with their bare hands to allow an ambulance to pass through so it can reach a school where one such chemical attack took place.

The BBC published an article titled "Are Iranian schoolgirls being poisoned by toxic gas?" which itself

is problematic, given that the news agency seems to be questioning the poisonings, and within this article, Simon Wessely, a British psychiatrist who is NOT in Iran, did NOT interview any of the victims, is NOT in touch with the parents of these poisoned schoolgirls, and is surely culturally removed from the current "Woman, Life, Freedom" revolution in Iran, was considered to be a credible expert to comment on the situation. He had the audacity to call this phenomenon a result of "mass hysteria." Later on, due to the backlash received, the BBC amended the article and changed it to "mass sociogenic illness," which is equally tactless and offensive.

What this British man did in essence was to gaslight Iranian women by dismissing their biological symptoms as being psychological and, in the process, intentionally or not, he spread dangerous pro-regime propaganda to Western news consumers. Likewise, in *Psychology Today*, a similar opinion was stated – that this is a case of "mass psychogenic illness." This article has

been taken off the website, thanks to the efforts of Iranians who are actively working on preventing the spread of misinformation on the school poisonings.

This is clearly an act of biological terrorism aimed at schoolgirls who have been actively taking part in anti-regime protests in the ongoing "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi" revolution. Besides being a revenge mechanism, it is also an intimidation tactic employed to ensure that parents stop sending their daughters to school. How convenient is it that the CCTV cameras in the school premises are switched off or out of order when these chemical attacks take place! How questionable is it that the concerned mothers of these poisoned girls are barred from entering the school premises and are in fact dragged away by the hair and violently attacked? Why is it that the school administrators are trapping students inside classrooms by shutting the doors and windows and ensuring maximum exposure to the toxic gas? How is it that we are not hearing about the teachers and staff in the schools suffering from the same symptoms?

The education minister has promised to conduct an open investigation, but what's the point? It's like saying the Taliban will conduct an open investigation to look into the violation of women's rights in Afghanistan. Speaking of the Taliban, it's not surprising that they employed the exact same tactic in Afghan girls' schools.

A simple Google search can perhaps take the reader to the Al Jazeera article titled "Afghan schoolgirls 'poisoned by Taliban'" published in May 2012. Given the pattern, it is not absurd to conclude that neither of these regimes wants their girls to be educated, because clearly educated women are the ones who can lead revolutions to bring down any power that aims to trample upon their rights.

If the regime in Iran is not guilty of deliberately poisoning the girls, how is it that they haven't done anything about it yet? One must bear in mind that this is a regime that uses advanced facial recognition technology to identify women who do not wear the hijab in public spaces, so it will be foolish to think that it doesn't have the kind of intelligence or technology to solve a recurring crime. Over three months have passed since the first chemical attack on school girls in the province of Qom – and yet, nothing?

As an Iranian woman living in Bangladesh, I weep for girls and women in Iran on International Women's Day this year. There's nothing for me to celebrate when Iranian women's bodies are being used as jihad grounds to establish Islamofascist ideology. I strongly urge fellow Bangladeshis to be the voice of the oppressed Iranian women because, as Afro-American poet Audre Lorde once said, "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own."