

FREEDOM HOUSE REPORT

Position of Bangladesh improves in 2022

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh witnessed improvement in the state of political rights and civil liberties in 2022 compared to the previous year, according to a report by Freedom House, a US-based independent watchdog.

Highlighting the key developments, the report says the country saw fewer extrajudicial killings during the year, after the US government sanctioned leaders of the Rapid Action Battalion.

With an aggregate score of 40 out of 100, the country, however, still falls in the status of "partly free", reads the report.

The record shows Bangladesh's status had gradually deteriorated since 2017 when the score was 47. The country slipped to 45 in 2018 and 41 in 2019. It scored 39 in three consecutive years from 2020.

Bangladesh scored 15 out of 40 in the political rights category while it scored 25 out of 60 in the civil liberties category.

The new report -- Freedom in the World 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy -- is the 50th edition of Freedom House's annual global assessment of political rights and civil liberties.

It says the ruling Awami League has consolidated political power through sustained harassment of the opposition and those perceived to be allied with it, as well as of critical media and voices in civil society.

It also said that the opposition BNP was able to hold major rallies during the year, though AL supporters and authorities continued to disrupt rallies and clash with participants.

The 50th edition of Freedom in the World also finds that attacks on freedom of expression have been a key driver of democratic erosion.

Freedom in the World is an annual global report on political rights and civil liberties, composed of numerical ratings and descriptive texts for each country and a select group of territories.

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Ukrainian service members from a battalion fire a howitzer M119 at a front line, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, near the city of Bakhmut yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Bakhmut battle pins down Russia's best units

Says Ukraine as fierce fighting continues along the front

REUTERS, Kyiv

Ukraine has decided to fight on in the ruined city of Bakhmut because the battle there is pinning down Russia's best units and degrading them ahead of a planned Ukrainian spring counter-offensive, an aide to President Volodymyr Zelensky said.

The comments, by Mykhailo Podolyak, were the latest signal of a shift by Kyiv this week to continue the defence of the small eastern city, site of the war's bloodiest battle as Moscow tries to secure its first victory in more than half a year.

"Russia has changed tactics," Podolyak said in an interview published by Italy's La Stampa newspaper. "It has converged on Bakhmut with a large part of its trained military personnel, the remnants of its professional army, as well as the private companies."

"We, therefore, have two objectives: to reduce their capable personnel as much as possible, and to fix them in a few key wearisome battles, to disrupt their offensive and concentrate our resources elsewhere, for the spring counter-offensive. So, today Bakhmut is completely effective, even exceeding its key tasks."

Russia has made Bakhmut the main target of a winter offensive involving hundreds of thousands of reservists and mercenaries. It has succeeded in capturing the eastern part of the city and the outskirts to the north and south, but has so far failed to close a ring around Ukrainian defenders there.

Kyiv, which had seemed at the start of March to be planning to withdraw to positions west of the city, announced at the start of this week that its generals had decided to reinforce its troops in Bakhmut

and fight on.

In a morning update, the Ukrainian general staff reported a large number of attacks along the front and said "the enemy is not halting its attacks on Bakhmut".

Kyiv and the West also saw signs of exhaustion in Russia's latest mass salvo of missile strikes on Ukrainian targets.

Russia fired hundreds of millions of dollars worth of missiles across Ukraine on Thursday, including an unprecedented six of its hypersonic kinzhal missiles, touted as a superweapon for which Nato has no answer. It is only believed to possess a few dozen kinzhals.

Britain's ministry of defence said yesterday the reason for the longer lull was probably that Moscow was running out of missiles and now had to wait between barrages for its factories to produce them.

4 killed in road crashes in 3 dists

STAR REPORT

Four people died in road accidents in Gazipur, Thakurgaon, and Patuakhali between yesterday morning and Thursday night.

In Gazipur, a married couple died after the motorbike carrying them was rear-ended by a speeding truck on the Dhaka-Tangail highway in Kaliakair upazila around 11:00am yesterday.

Wahab Akand, 32, and his wife Tamanna Akhter, 28, both garment workers, were headed to their village in Gaibandha's Gobindaganj.

The accident left the couple dead on the spot, said Salna Highway Police OC Atiqur Rahman.

In Thakurgaon, a high school student was killed when a pickup hit him on his way to a coaching centre on a bicycle in the Bhulli Bazar area in Sadar upazila around 7:00am yesterday.

Md Rabbi, 13, son of Motiar Rahman of Baguladangi Pabnapara village, was an eighth-grade student at Boguladangi High School.

In Patuakhali, a retired army sergeant died after he lost control of his motorbike and fell on the road in Dumki upazila.

Abu Zafar Shaheen, 40, was heading to his home in Santoshdi village from Lebukhali when the accident occurred in the Baitul Ruhul Amin Complex area of the Lebukhali-Boga road around 10:30pm on Thursday.

Locals rescued him and took him to the Combined Medical Hospital at the Sheikh Hasina Cantonment, where doctors declared him dead.

[Our district correspondents contributed to this report]

Launch passenger goes missing after falling into river

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

A passenger went missing after falling into the Tetulia river from a launch on the Dhaka-Charmontaj route in Patuakhali last morning.

Saiful Islam, 25, son of Halim Biswas, is from Charmontaj village of Rangabali upazila in the district.

Saiful who was on the back deck fell into the river around 5:00am at Dashmina launch ghat when the launch was docking.

Dashmina Police Station OC Mehedi Hasan said, "Police went to the spot after receiving information. Fire service has also been informed. Relatives of the missing Saiful and locals are also searching the river by boat. But so far, there is no trace of him."

Israeli settler kills suspected attacker in West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

A settler killed an alleged assailant in the occupied West Bank yesterday after a gunman wounded three people in Tel Aviv, in a surge of Israeli-Palestinian violence that shows no sign of abating.

Tensions remained high a day after Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin had, on a visit to Israel, called for de-escalation ahead of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan in March and the Jewish holiday of Passover in April.

But within hours of his appeal a member of the armed wing of the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas opened fire outside a Tel Aviv cafe, wounding three men in their 30s before being shot dead by police.

Bangladesh Business Summit

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The summit will highlight the success stories that have set the foundation for Bangladesh's sustainable growth.

Ministers from seven countries including the United Kingdom (UK), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), China, Bhutan, and the United Arab Emirates, chief executives of 12 multinational companies, and more than 200 foreign investors and business leaders from 17 countries are expected to attend the event.

The summit will help enhance Bangladesh's economic capacity, create new investment opportunities, and promote business expansion, said FBCCI President Md Jashim Uddin in the statement.

Policymakers and business leaders will discuss various issues with regard to investment and accelerate further growth of Bangladesh's economy which registered 6 per cent growth in the last two decades.

There will be three plenary sessions on strategic issues -- investment opportunities, long-term finance and digital economy -- at the business summit.

Businesses and policymakers will also discuss apparel and textile, energy security, infrastructure, consumer goods, hi-tech and automobile, circular economy and pharmaceuticals and health care.

There will be a plenary session on women's participation and tourism and the blue economy at the summit, according to the FBCCI.

Risky yet in use

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"We have met the current and previous mayors several times and told them that we want a new building. But we have yet to get any response."

Contacted, Selim Reza, chief executive officer at the DNCC, said, "We are looking for a place to relocate the Rayer Bazar market. The current building will be demolished. These shop owners will get shops in the new building. We cannot instantly demolish such a market because the shop owners will have nowhere to go."

Of the kitchen markets identified as risky, nine are under the DNCC and 10 under Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC).

DSCC Spokesperson Abu Naser said, "We have started renovating three of the risky markets. We will soon start working on the rest."

DSCC Chief Property Officer Russell Sabrin said the corporation was in the process of auctioning off some of the buildings. "Once it's

done, they will be demolished."

DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam said the four kitchen markets in Karwan Bazar will be demolished in phases and replaced by new buildings.

The current buildings are in such a poor state that only the bare rods remain at places on the first floor. Steel pipes have been placed by shopkeepers so that the roofs don't cave in.

SITUATION AT DSCC

Between March 9, 2020, and March 22, 2022, the local and technical committees of the DSCC declared a total of 46 buildings, including 10 markets, as risky.

At Nawab Yusuf Market in Babubazar, the roofs of the seven two-storey buildings have partially fallen off while the railings of some of the staircases are gone.

The DSCC's danger sign was not seen in any of these buildings during a recent visit. Many fear that they may collapse and cause loss of lives.

There are 730 shops at the market

where thousands of people go every day.

Mohammad Ali, general secretary of Nawab Yusuf Market Business Association, said, "We were not informed that this market was labelled risky. We were not given letters. The city corporation is issuing new trade licences and collecting rents."

Adil Mohammed Khan, a professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Jahangirnagar University, said, "Once the city corporation labels a building as risky, it should be evacuated and demolished immediately to avert the risk of the loss of many lives."

Asked, Mayor Atiqul Islam said, "We warned the shopkeepers several times. We don't collect rent from them. The corporation doesn't get any revenue from those markets."

He added that there are legal barriers to demolishing some of the risky market buildings.

"I cannot avoid the responsibility as a mayor," he admitted.

3 designs seized, only 1 had approval

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adding that that plan had no provision for a basement.

The first layout plan for a two-storey building without a basement was made in 1959. It shows Rezaur's mother Rizia Rahman as the owner.

After Rezaur's death, his three sons, two daughters and wife became the owners. Detectives on Thursday arrested Rezaur's two sons, Wahidur Rahman, 46, and Matiur Rahman, 36.

After arresting the Rahman brothers, officers said Rajuk in 1992 approved Rezaur's plan for a 10-storey building. DC Mashhur yesterday said Rezaur's two sons gave that information.

Contacted, Tonmoy Das, member (development and control) of Rajuk, said officials were still looking for any document on the building.

"We found a registry book which only shows an application for approval for a design...", he said.

The detectives informed Rajuk about the seizure of three designs. "We engaged a team and hope to find the documents soon."

CASE FILED OVER NEGLIGENCE

In a case filed on Thursday night, police said the owner and other users were using the basement and ground floor illegally to make money. Taking advantage of the greed and nonchalance of some officers and employees of the authorities concerned, the owner did the

unapproved construction work and got the licence and gas, electricity and sewer connections.

It has been primarily proven that what the building owner did were crimes that ended up costing so many lives and causing damage to properties, read the complaint filed by Sub-inspector Palash Saha with Bangshal Police Station.

According to primary findings, the building was not built as per the building code, it added.

Construction material was stored and sold in the illegally constructed basement.

"The greedy building owner and others were using the illegal basement... and the ground floor without solving the gas leakage issues," it said.

Mujibur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Bangshal Police Station, said the case was filed without naming anyone.

WHAT WAS IN THE BASEMENT?

It was rented by Bangladesh Sanitary. The owner of the shop enclosed the entire 1,800-square-foot space with glass, leaving no opening for air to pass. Two large ACs installed there have not been serviced since 2010, police said earlier.

Abdul Motaleb Mintu, the owner of the shop, was also arrested on Thursday.

Before Bangladesh Sanitary rented the basement, it was used as the kitchen of a restaurant on the

Biden, EU chief meet on trade tensions

AFP, Washington

President Joe Biden and top EU official Ursula von der Leyen met yesterday to defuse a transatlantic trade dispute over subsidies for the green economy, as well as cooperation on confronting Russia.

The European Union Commission president has worked closely with Biden in forging an unprecedented response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine over the last year.

European capitals joined Washington in a united front on sanctions against Moscow and supplying weapons and aid to Ukraine. EU countries also surprised many by moving quickly to break the bloc's dependency on energy supplies from Russia.

However, tensions are swirling in Europe over the Biden administration's landmark Inflation

Reduction Act (IRA), a government spending spree championing US manufacturing in climate-friendly technologies.

Amid EU alarm that the subsidies will shut out European manufacturers and hurt the energy and auto sectors, the European bloc is working on its own sets of subsidies, such as the Green Deal Industrial Plan, to promote the emerging sector.

A senior US official told reporters that Biden and von der Leyen want to make sure that the two programs complement each other.

The leaders will express "an articulation of a shared approach and a shared set of goals," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"That isn't going to happen if our incentives and their incentives are misaligned and compete with one another in a zero sum way."

Govt agencies must be held

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recent incidents within a span of weeks.

The latest one, an explosion in a seven-storey building on North South Road at Siddikibazar on March 7, claimed the lives of at least 22 people.

Iqbal Habib, an architect and urban activist, said the 54 government agencies must be held responsible.

"It should start with Rajuk and the related approval or licensing authorities. But most of these bureaucratic organisations are strong and influential, and they never hold each other responsible. That's one of the most important reasons why we can't address the problem."

He said innocent people are paying a heavy price due to a nexus between a section of corrupt officials of different agencies and law-violating establishment owners.

"After every incident, it is said that awareness is the key and that people must be aware of safety. But for me, this is said to cover up the failure of the agencies," Habib said.

Between 2020 and 2022, there were 13,726 fires in industrial and commercial establishments. The number includes cases of fires caused by boiler explosions or gas leaks.

At least 256 people died in those incidents, and of them 13 were firefighters killed in industrial fires. The fires also caused losses worth at least Tk 291 crore.

Town planner Khondker Neaz Rahman, who was the deputy team leader of the Rajuk's newly approved Detailed Area Plan, said Rajuk must be held responsible primarily, and then comes the city corporations, fire department and other related government agencies.

"During the DAP survey, we found that 94 percent houses in the Rajuk area were built without an approved plan. As the houses don't have plans from Rajuk, those cannot have utility connections from Wasa, Titas and Desco. So, the problem starts with Rajuk," he said.

The 21 lakh houses include five lakh buildings. Many of those houses were built even before the Rajuk was founded.

Anisur Rahman Miah, chairman of Rajuk, said the probe committees will identify who are responsible for fire and blasts.

He said that Rajuk is not giving clearance to any building without proper architectural designs and documents.

Anisur said zone-based committees have been formed by Rajuk recently to identify risky buildings, and they have been asked to submit reports within 15 days.

"After getting the reports, we will take decisions on those risky buildings. If needed, structures will be knocked down," he added.