

We demand an independent probe

Rab’s way of operation needs an overhaul

The untimely and cruel death of a young woman who was in the custody of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) raises a number of questions and concerns. The woman, an employee of a Naogaon union parishad land office, died in the custody of Rab-5 after suffering haemorrhages of the brain. She was picked up at 10am on March 22 when she was on her way to Chandipur Union Land Office, where she worked as an office assistant. However, just 48 hours later, on March 24, she was declared to have died at the Rajshahi Medical College Hospital.

According to Rab, the woman died after suffering a stroke. But her family members said she was in perfect health. So, why would she suffer from a stroke while in Rab’s custody? In fact, why is it that so many people who were apparently in perfect health, according to those who knew them, suffered from fatal health issues while in the custody of our law enforcement agencies? Shouldn’t that be a major concern? According to doctors, the woman in question had an external bruise on her head as well as multiple intracranial bleeds. Rab’s explanation for that was that she had fallen down. So again, we must ask, why do people so frequently fall ill, have accidental injuries, or suffer from fatal health problems suddenly while in Rab’s custody? How is the Rab handling its detainees that such incidents have become so common?

On that same topic, why did the Rab record her case – of syphoning off money from job seekers using a Facebook account, under the Digital Security Act (DSA) – more than 31 hours after she had been picked up and when she was unresponsive in a hospital bed? According to Rab, there were allegations of unusual transactions in her bank account, which it found to be authentic after scrutinising her bank statement. So why is it that the case was not filed earlier? The incident raises serious questions about Rab’s way of conducting its operations, as did another occurrence only a few days ago, on March 17, which had resulted in the death of a 65-year-old man during a shooting incidence; another victim was also shot in the leg. Neither of them, however, had any involvement with the case.

Needless to say, all such unexplained occurrences have resulted in a deep sense of injustice building up among the people – particularly because, in many cases, Rab’s version of the story differs substantially from that provided by witnesses and others. Unfortunately, we never see any independent investigation being conducted to find out the truth and clear the air, despite repeated calls to do so.

We are heartened by the High Court passing an order *suo moto*, wanting to know the details of Rab personnel involved in arresting and interrogating the woman. We would, however, like to plead to the court to launch an investigation into the incident. Given the numerous serious allegations against Rab, as well as the imposition of international sanctions, independent investigation is the only way of restoring the government’s already dwindling credibility when it comes to handling such deaths.

A riverine horror show

Saga of three rivers a reminder of how catastrophically mismanaged our rivers are

Not long ago, a study by the Rivers and Delta Research Centre (RDRC) revealed that 56 rivers across the country are suffering from extreme pollution. It was an alarming if not entirely shocking revelation. But new details of the year-long study, courtesy of a recent report, throw further light on the scale of the damage being wrought, which makes you sit up and take notice. Apparently, key pollutants including microplastics have been found in all the rivers surveyed, meaning that industrial and municipal wastes dumped in rivers near cities and towns are flowing into rivers in far-flung coastal areas. Which, in other words, means that if preventive steps are not taken, the pollution of these rivers will affect all other rivers as well.

Another important revelation is about three rivers which have been identified as the most polluted. These are Labandaha in Gazipur, Haridhowa in Narshingdi, and Sutang in Sylhet. Of them, the Labandaha river, once called “Labalong Sea” because of its size, has now been reduced to a canal through constant pollution and encroachment. Some 250 factories have been found on the banks of this river, and industrial waste generated by them, together with waste from the Sripur municipality, are all dumped in the river, choking it to death. The same thing has happened to Haridhowa, which was once used for fishing and agricultural purposes but is now little more than a dumping ground. The story of Sutang, a cross-border river in Sylhet, is no different; so polluted has its water become that it is no longer distinguishable as a river.

Plastic waste, household waste and industrial waste are all landing, untreated and unopposed, in these rivers and others, robbing them of their life. The question is, why are we allowing this to happen? A more worrying question is, are these rivers damaged irreversibly? Only the other day, the shipping minister warned that Bangladesh will not survive if our rivers stop flowing. Studies like the one by RDRC suggest that we may already be headed in that direction. Our country is a victim of not just negligent handling of its wastes by individuals and institutions but also of a development/urbanisation policy that pays little heed to environmental concerns. Just imagine: industries and EPZs are being constructed near rivers. Tanneries are being relocated near rivers. Urban authorities are using rivers as dumping grounds. How long can Bangladesh survive in such a toxic environment?

Because of unchecked pollution, not only are the ecosystems of rivers being damaged, but the lives and livelihoods of people living near rivers, as well as our agriculture, public health and sources of clean water are also being threatened. Such catastrophic mismanagement can no longer continue. We urge the authorities to take stern actions in this regard.

Why does the EC want to talk with the BNP anyway?

The sudden invitation for dialogue seems to be for lip service



THE STREET VIEW

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When the top leadership of the Awami League and BNP, the two major political parties in Bangladesh, ruled out any possibility of talks ahead of the next parliamentary election, the Election Commission appeared in the scene by inviting the BNP to a dialogue.

Suspicious about the sudden invitation, the BNP rejected it outright, calling it “meaningless.” Although the EC roadmap, announced late last year, did not say anything about talks with the political parties, it did mention that gaining their trust was a major challenge. But it did not spell out how that trust would be earned.

The EC invitation to BNP came at a time when Awami League and BNP leaders were both meeting with diplomats about the next election. It was widely reported that Western diplomats emphasised holding a free and fair election. To add to the context, the US Department of State has published its annual flagship human rights report where it was mentioned for the first time that the 2018 election was neither free nor fair. Charles Whiteley, the European Union ambassador to Bangladesh, said the EU would not send observers to the next election if it is not participatory. Now, if the international observers don’t come, the election’s credibility as well as the EC’s role will remain under question.

It could be said that the election authorities only acted responsibly when they invited the main opposition, seeing as the issue of a participatory election is under discussion right now. On the surface, at least, the EC has demonstrated their willingness to hold an inclusive, free and fair election. But one ought to ask what the EC is looking to achieve through these talks. Other than the commission gaining some mileage by showing their attempts, and the political parties playing to the gallery, there is not much that these talks would gain. In that respect, talks with the EC would be rather infructuous.

The invitation letter to the BNP also clarifies some things. While the Election Commission is fully aware of BNP’s position regarding

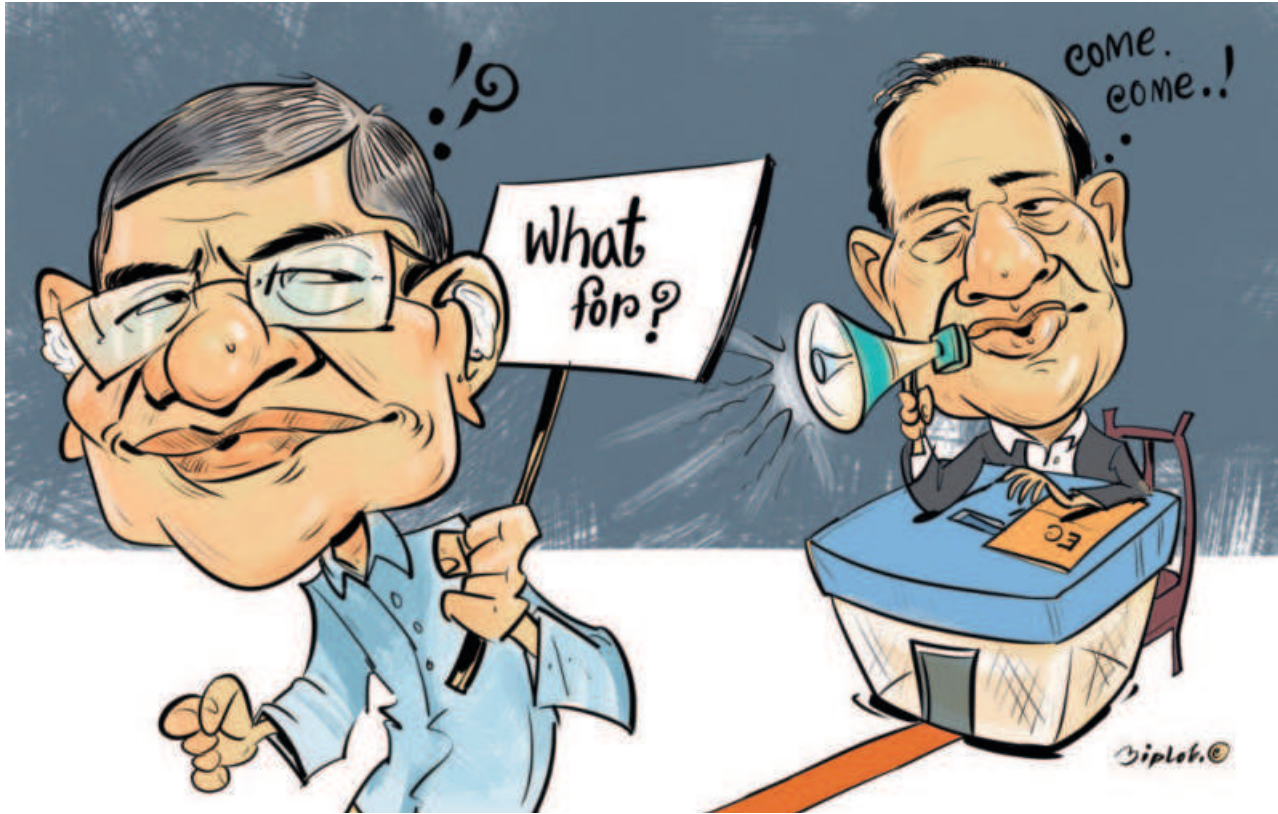


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

an election-time government, there is no comment related to that in the letter. To make any progress with the election, the stumbling blocks must be dealt with, and the commission must have a specific agenda for the talks – for instance, whether to use electronic voting machines (EVMs) or not. The invitation letter does not carry any such details. Then why hold these talks?

The Election Commission may claim that their goal is to ensure an inclusive 12th parliamentary election. But simply saying that is not enough, given the previous EC’s complete failure to hold a credible election in 2018, and then even admitting that publicly.

The incumbent EC could claim that they are different from their predecessors. But then, one could ask what this commission has done to earn the trust of all political parties. The commission’s activities so far

that the EC would not be able to hold a free, fair and participatory general election.

The lack of trust for the Election Commission deepened when it went ahead with the decision to use EVMs in the upcoming general election, ignoring the objection of many political parties, including the BNP. That decision, while embracing modernity and change, was aligned with the desire of the ruling party.

Undoubtedly, rejecting the dialogue would be a setback for the BNP as it would garner criticism from the ruling party. The EC would be able to say that they tried, but could not bring BNP to the table. BNP leaders would have to remain busy for a few days parrying all the criticism. The party may even face questions from the international community.

The BNP should have taken time to deliberate over their decision before rejecting the EC invitation. Now

Terminal 3 alone can’t turn Dhaka into an ‘aviation hub’



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Recently some images have been circulating of the under-construction third terminal of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka, which shows what we can expect the interior of the terminal to look like. Most netizens and experts were vastly impressed.

Many believe that the third terminal megaproject will be a game changer for the country’s aviation sector. At a recent conference, the prime minister herself expressed her wish to turn Bangladesh into an aviation hub. On the other hand, Biman Bangladesh has reportedly been in discussion with Airbus to purchase new aircraft, admittedly a step in the right direction because only a shiny new terminal will not be enough to transform Bangladesh’s aviation sector. Biman, our national flag carrier, must grow, expand, and possibly revamp itself to complement the whole project.

The question remains as to whether Bangladesh can truly be an aviation hub in the region when there are already big players such as Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Delhi. The

third terminal project does include auxiliary projects such as high-speed taxiways and a large cargo village. But frankly speaking, there are several highly important elements that are still missing. It is quite surprising and disappointing that no one yet has pointed out these missing elements in the megaproject – all of which are so crucial!

The first and most important of these is the need for a new ATC (Air Traffic Control) tower. HSIA currently lacks not only a proper ATC tower, but also the right equipment and technology to control air traffic. A new airport would practically be useless without modern navigation and communication systems. So, one can’t fathom why a new ATC tower and radar system have not been included as part of this megaproject. Radio communication between Dhaka’s air traffic controllers and pilots is easily listenable online and one can hear how unclear the communication seems to be due to the airport’s old and outdated equipment. One could be forgiven for wondering how foreign

airlines still fly into the HSIA.

Secondly, there has always been a debate over whether a second parallel runway would be feasible. Every major airport around the world has at least two operational runways. Therefore, it is only fitting that HSIA should also have another runway not only as backup but also to handle increasing passenger and aircraft movement, as the taxiways and the sole current runway get busier. However, the lack of space for a second runway might be an issue here. The authorities have allowed illegal constructions and settlements around the airport’s perimeter to such a degree that a significant threat is posed to flight safety while landing or taking off from Dhaka. This is an issue that needs urgent attention from relevant authorities. Once the safety concerns are duly addressed, a second runway would still be possible, with certain adjustments.

Then there is the matter of ground handling and the quality of airport services. As a major gateway to Bangladesh, the HSIA reflects the image of our country. No matter how shiny an airport is, if the passenger experience is still sub-par, our aviation sector can never progress forward. Incompetency, mismanagement, and corruption have plagued passenger experiences and ground handling services for too long at the Dhaka airport. Many are still worried that, despite a new terminal, these unpleasantly familiar scenarios will remain.

Internationally reputable ground

Handling agencies such as Dnata, Swissport, and Celebi have previously offered to invest in Dhaka’s ground handling. But these offers were unfortunately denied due to Biman’s monopoly. And we have all witnessed and experienced what good this has done.

But no more. New changes are necessary for the benefit of all and it is time for a more competent entity to take over the day-to-day operation of the HSIA once the third terminal is fully operational.

Finally, branding is a vital tool to market almost anything these days. All major airports across the world have their own logo and branding, but none of the airports in Bangladesh practice any form of branding. This must not be overlooked. After the completion of the third terminal, the HSIA will need to brand itself with at least an appealing logo. And the red neon signs displaying the name of the airport on top of the present terminals just won’t do. No other internationally renowned airport has such signs displayed on the facade of the landside terminals given that everyone knows where an airport is located and what it could look like. Bangladesh cannot become an aviation hub overnight, but the completion of the third terminal (along with the additional projects to transform the HSIA into a 21st century airport) could be the first step in that direction. And for that, this roadmap, with all the elements of a modern functioning airport, will be necessary for the Dhaka airport.