

Lawfare on the press must stop

Prothom Alo incident exposes deeply upsetting approach to press freedom

We are deeply alarmed by the relentless lawfare (legal warfare) being waged against press freedom and the freedom of speech using various legal instruments. The latest victims of this are a reporter and the editor of *Prothom Alo*, who have been sued under the Digital Security Act (DSA) for “tarnishing the country’s image” using its platforms. The hint, of course, was to the daily’s May 26 publication of a report on the astronomical prices of food using a comment from a day labourer, which has since gone viral. The question is, how does the coverage of poor people’s struggles constitute a crime? This is nothing but an attempt to intimidate journalists and discredit the message so powerfully captured in said comment.

Reportedly, the general secretary of the ruling party called the report “politically motivated”. In all fairness, it is the DSA case that seems politically motivated. The report was done following standard journalistic practices, and *Prothom Alo* was quick to take appropriate action after an apparent inconsistency was pointed out in its social media post. That should have been the end of it. Anyone with the remotest idea of how the news media works would know that the reporter, Samsuzzaman Shams, was innocent of the “crimes” alleged by pro-AL factions. Yet, he was picked up from his house by officers of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). His whereabouts were kept hidden for about 20 hours. And two cases were filed against him before he was finally shown arrested in one and produced before court.

This elaborate charade to harass him reminds us of the legal mumbo jumbo in which another *Prothom Alo* reporter, Rozina Islam, was implicated not long ago. On Thursday afternoon, Shams was denied bail by the court and sent to jail. On Wednesday, a journalist of *Jugantor* was sued under the DSA for reporting on a railway syndicate operating in Chattogram. In mid-March, journalists covering the election of the Supreme Court Bar Association were assaulted by police. The frequency with which journalists are coming under attack, legally or physically, is really alarming.

The DSA, for obvious reasons, has emerged as the most preferred tool of repression of journalists and critical voices, as a review by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) has shown. The judiciary’s role in this regard has also been wanting. We expect the judiciary to stand in favour of journalists especially when they are harassed with trumped-up charges. Unfortunately, just like DSA, the entire legal infrastructure is being instrumentalised today to “chill critical reporting”, undermine press freedom, and encourage a culture of self-censorship. This is no doubt an affront to everything that we stand for as a nation. The question is, how long will the authorities ignore calls to create an environment in which the press can function without any fear of consequences?

Shams doesn’t deserve to be in jail. The *Prothom Alo* editor, Matiur Rahman, doesn’t deserve to have a DSA case filed against him. All such cases do not deserve to be entertained. We hope that the judiciary will stand with the press and take appropriate steps in this regard soon.

A sheer waste of public money

Why were the trauma centres built if they were to be left unused?

It is disappointing to learn about the numerous development projects taken up by the government that ended up *not* serving the public as promised because of lack of necessary research, proper planning, and execution. Although these projects failed to bring desired results, a lot of public money was spent on them. One example of this is the 21 trauma centres that were built in the last 20 years along our highways. According to a recent report by *Prothom Alo*, almost all of these centres remain inoperative as there is neither the manpower nor the equipment required to run them. The question is, why were these centres built then?

Reportedly, among these 21 trauma centres, 16 are currently inoperative, two have only outdoor units, while one is currently being used as the orthopaedic department of a district hospital. These centres were constructed along the highways with the aim to quickly transport and treat the injured in the event of a road crash, so that lives could be saved. But that purpose was defeated by the lack of initiative on the part of our health authorities. After the recent tragic road crash on the Dhaka-Bhanga expressway, we have seen how the injured had to be taken to several upazila health complexes and even to a private hospital near the expressway for treatment. If the nearby trauma centre were functional, the injured could get proper treatment on time. This is really frustrating.

And now, after spending around Tk 140 crore on the construction of these centres, the Director of Health Directorate (Hospitals and Clinics) is telling us that the idea of a trauma centre is not realistic in the context of Bangladesh, and that they are planning to repurpose these unutilised buildings. However, it is not clear why the government can’t put them to proper use by appointing the required manpower – doctors, nurses, pharmacists, technicians, etc. – and handing them proper equipment? Given the extremely high number of road crashes taking place on our highways, these centres can certainly play a great role in treating the injured. We think the government should consider this fact before abandoning these projects.

The fate of these trauma centres again exposes the sheer lack of accountability in our health department. If there was any accountability, such projects could not be taken without doing the necessary feasibility study. If there was any accountability, so much public money could not be wasted on projects doomed to failure. This is just one example of how lack of planning and execution has been plaguing many finished government projects. We have seen many such ill-planned projects undertaken by government institutions, including the railway ministry in the last few years alone. Such practices must stop. Those responsible for these projects must be held to account.

How did Sultana Jasmine die?



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The medical certificate issued by Rajshahi Medical College Hospital mentions “irreversible cardiorespiratory failure due to intracerebral haemorrhage” as the cause of death of Sultana Jasmine, a union level land employee in Naogaon, who was picked up by a team of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and interrogated about being involved in an extortion scam. It was while in custody that Sultana allegedly “fell ill.” By the time she was taken to a hospital in Naogaon, her brain was already haemorrhaging. After being taken to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, Sultana died from an apparent stroke while in Rab custody. There was an injury mark on the side of her head.

There are many unexplained gaps in the story. The actual Digital Security Act (DSA) case against Sultana was filed 31 hours after she had been taken into custody. How could Rab pick her up without a case being filed against her?

Reportedly, the owner of the building where Sultana, a divorcee, lived with her son, said the house was being watched by a group of unidentified men. When the owner asked them why they were there, they said they were ‘from the government’ and that he or others ‘ought not to disturb their work.’

According to the plaintiff of the case, Enamul Haque, who is joint secretary at the office of Rajshahi divisional commissioner, it was when he came to Naogaon on official business that he came upon a Rab patrol team and told them how his Facebook account had been hacked and used to extort money with false promises of jobs, and that one of the individuals involved was Sultana Jasmine. Was it because of Haque’s position that he could just get Rab to interrogate Sultana without any case filed against her? What kind of interrogation did Rab members conduct that caused Sultana to have a “stroke” (as stated by the doctors) and fall, injuring her head (also stated by the doctors)? Was the bleeding in her brain due to the stroke or the fall, or both?



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

According to a report by this daily, the owner of the building where Sultana, a divorcee, lived with her son, said the house was being watched by a group of unidentified men. When the owner asked them why they were there, they said they were “from the government” and that he or others “ought not to disturb their work.” We can only guess who these “unidentified” men could be and why they persistently watched the house, even trying to enter it, though prevented by the landlord. Three of these men were present at Sultana’s burial on March 24; so were policemen and Rab officials. The antecedents of this death show that it was not just a spur-of-the-moment decision to pick up Sultana. Why, then, was the case not filed before she was picked up?

Even the High Court has questioned under what authority Rab picked up Sultana, as she wasn’t an accused in a case at the time. The High Court bench asked what happened to her between the time of her detention (11:50 am on March 22) and her being taken to the Naogaon hospital (1:15 pm the same day). Rab’s official statement regarding Sultana is that she fell ill while being taken to the police station. But it was almost an hour and a half before she was taken to the hospital.

According to Rab, after detaining Sultana, some of its members were busy printing documents from her phone at a nearby shop for an hour

and a half. Rab has also stated that it conducted “primary interrogation and evidence gathering in (the) presence of the complainant and witnesses.”

It will be hard to establish whether it was a stroke or a wound due to being hit on the head that led to a perfectly healthy woman to be dead within 48 hours of her being picked up. But the fact remains that she

up. Even if we are to believe that she did have a stroke, it only reaffirms how terrifying it is when Rab or any other law enforcement agency picks up a civilian and takes them away. And what about the head wound that was mentioned, which the latest Rab statement seems to deny? “We did not have any information of injury,” states a high official of Rab. Doesn’t this

contradict the statement of the leader of the medical board that conducted the autopsy a day after her death, that Sultana did have an injury to the head apart from the bleeding in her brain?

As civilians, we know that asking these questions will never bring any satisfactory answers. It may even be dangerous. But Sultana’s death only re-emphasises just how helpless we are at the hands of law enforcement members. Does this mean that, at any time, for any reason, anyone can be picked up from their home, office or from the streets, and whisked away in a microbus with no guarantee whatsoever of whether they will ever return to their loved ones? There are still many individuals languishing in jail, arrested under the notorious DSA that seems to have become a weapon of the powerful to “tame” anyone they consider their enemy.

The High Court has shown its integrity by raising the pertinent questions against Rab’s arbitrary acts. A Supreme Court lawyer has filed a public interest litigation, seeking the court’s directive to form a high-power committee to probe Sultana’s death. We can only hope that the court’s proactive intervention will bring to light what really happened to Sultana Jasmine, and if there has been any breach of her human rights, legal action will be taken against the officials involved.

A window of opportunity to phase out fossil fuels

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SABER HOSSAIN CHOWDHURY and ED MARKEY

Next week, the UN’s top experts on climate science will release a landmark report on climate change. Already, we are clear on what it will portend: a warming world, an unsure future, and a more severe climate chaos than we are already experiencing across the globe. We’re not yet on track to save ourselves from this dire destiny, which will require us to keep the world from warming more than 1.5 degrees Celsius – the threshold beyond which climate change will trigger the most devastating consequences.

That news will be no surprise for the people we represent: millions of Bangladeshis and US Americans already hit by floods, droughts, and other extreme weather events made worse by climate change.

But there’s a sliver of hope. The latest science says that it’s still narrowly possible to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, but only if we agree to phase out fossil fuels starting right now.

It’s the latest and direst warning that we need to drastically reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. The International Energy Agency

has already said that new oil and gas development needs to stop immediately. The reason is glaringly obvious: burning of coal, oil and gas has been the source of 80 percent of carbon dioxide emissions since the industrial revolution. It drives up the Earth’s temperature and creates a spiralling crisis of extreme weather, rising sea levels, disease, biodiversity loss, water stress and poverty.

The fossil fuel industry continues to put profits first, so we need leaders who will put the people first. That includes having leaders at international financial institutions like the World Bank, who will firmly commit to addressing climate change and to better supporting vulnerable nations – not double down on fossil fuel investments – as well as electing leaders in nations across the globe who will commit to working in concert to address this planetary crisis that knows no borders.

We need strong climate leadership in every hall of power, including in the boardrooms of multilateral development banks. Since the Paris Agreement was signed, the World Bank has continued to invest billions in fossil fuel projects. It has fallen behind on its already meagre climate commitments, which are less ambitious than the baseline targets set by other development banks. International financial institutions have a responsibility to meet the moment by ending fossil fuel funding and stepping up on climate aid to

vulnerable nations.

On the national level, we need heads of state to pick up the pace on talks to end fossil fuels and follow the example of those who are leading the way. Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and the European Parliament have endorsed the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. Colombia says it will ban new

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oil and gas exploration. Costa Rica and Denmark created the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance, a growing cluster of countries driving forward the managed phaseout of oil and gas production.

That list needs to grow. And we need leaders who will uphold the promise made at last year’s COP27 to frontline nations by contributing meaningfully to an international Loss and Damage fund. The science is clear: developed nations like the United States are more responsible for emissions, and yet the nations most affected, like Bangladesh, are forced to foot the bill for the devastation wrought on their shores. We cannot continue to allow

wealthy countries to externalise the damage of their pollution spree.

Fossil fuels are a global addiction, and it will take a global effort to shake them.

As we work simultaneously on domestic efforts – from Bangladesh’s visionary Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan to the United States’ Inflation Reduction Act – we must commit as a global community to phase out fossil fuels. International cooperation, commitments, and treaties work because they provide accountability and set deadlines. A global commitment to phase out fossil fuels would inject urgency and decisiveness into a debate where we have no more time left to lose. It’s why we’re two of hundreds of parliamentarians from across the world who have joined the Parliamentarians Call for a Fossil Fuel Free Future, urging stronger international collaboration to end fossil fuels.

This year, a political opportunity to make that possible is on the horizon. The first Global Stocktake – a convention held by the United Nations to measure the progress of countries and other shareholders in meeting the goals established in the Paris Agreement – is our chance to get a reality check, hit the political reset button and put the world on a path to avoiding the most devastating consequences of climate change.

It’s time to end the cause of this carnage and seize the moment to phase out fossil fuels for good.