



The condition of Karatoa River in Bogura, shrunk into a canal-like state due to rampant encroachment and subsequent pollution, depicts the reality of rivers in Bangladesh.

FILE PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

## Spare our rivers from certain death



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ANU MUHAMMAD

Recently, a minister commented that rivers in Bangladesh were too wide. He went on to say that we don't need such wide rivers, and that we have to narrow them down and recover land from the riverbanks to build resorts and roads and implement other forms of development.

Initially, I thought it was one of those times when our ministers make irresponsible statements. But as it turned out, these were not mere comments.

For years, big projects have been planned around rivers with the aim to improve the rivers' navigability and waterflow by shrinking them. According to the latest media report, the Jamuna River will be narrowed at the estimated cost of more than Tk 1,000 crore, of which more than Tk 800 crore will be provided by the World Bank as a loan.

There are a lot of aspects of this project: there will be studies, visits to foreign countries, workshops, seminars, and construction. A lot of interests are attached to this project, so this is great news for many of the stakeholders involved. This is not the first time this is happening either; there is also another project around the Brahmaputra River, also being funded by the World Bank.

We are currently deprived of water in the Teesta River, and there is no news of progress in signing the Teesta water-sharing deal. As the situation stands right now, there are numerous obstacles being built on the Teesta's upstream in India. In

Many initiatives and discussions could have been undertaken on this issue; there could have been multilateral meetings, if not bilateral, but nothing of the sort has been done. Instead, a megaproject has been planned with China's involvement where the Teesta's banks will be pulled in to make it narrower, the river will be dredged, and resorts will be built on the land that's recovered. There is a craze surrounding resorts all of a sudden – that they need to

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be built so people can visit them and generate tourism. And for that, rivers need to be narrowed down.

There are plans with the Meghna and the Brahmaputra as well. Some of them are in partnership with India, and the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are involved, too. Many Bangladeshi water resource experts are also involved with these. Most importantly, the organisation that is responsible for ensuring waterflow through the rivers in Bangladesh, that is responsible for looking after the health of our rivers and for taking the necessary steps against river erosion – the Bangladesh Water Development Board – is the one undertaking these projects.

Rivers aren't separate from our collective existence; rivers are connected to the existence of Bangladesh itself. If Bangladesh has an important strategic resource, it has to be our water. Our agriculture, livelihood, soil fertility, biodiversity are all dependent on our rivers. And these rivers are now under attack.

These attacks are coming from three directions. The first kind is coming from India with its barrages and river connection projects. The second is Bangladesh's own projects that are being undertaken in the name of development. Some projects are filling up the riverbeds, some are disrupting the waterflow with sluice gates, and some projects are impeding the rivers' free flow of water with construction along the banks. Coal-based projects and other similar undertakings are polluting the rivers as well.

The third kind is coming from powerful individuals in Bangladesh – those who are close to power. They are encroaching on the rivers, turning them into drains by polluting them. If one travelled around Bangladesh today, they'd come upon many bridges across rivers that have no water in them.

In the late 1980s, a Flood Action Plan (FAP) was introduced, in partnership with the World Bank. The plan was to create 4,000km of walls and dams along the Padma, the Meghna, and the Brahmaputra to control the waterflow. It's difficult to understand the level of scientific and intellectual thought that led to this plan. The driving force behind it seemed to have been that the bigger the plans are, the more economic opportunity is created for those involved, such as construction companies, engineers, economists, consultants, experts, firms affiliated with the organisations that provide loans, etc.

The authorities were unable to implement the FAP because there were protests at that time. But they've been doing the same thing under different names since. Right now, the Delta Plan that is being implemented is somewhat similar.

The condition our rivers are in right now is a threat to our existence. The government has a simple way to resolve the river dispute with India. In 1997, an international water convention was held by the United Nations. The convention clearly states what rights are held by the countries upstream and downstream. Bangladesh has not yet ratified this convention – neither has India. It makes sense for India to not ratify it as they are an upstream country, but Bangladesh needs to ratify the convention quickly. After doing that, Bangladesh can bring this issue to the international community. This is an easy way to ensure waterflow of the Teesta, the Meghna, the Jamuna, the Brahmaputra, and all other shared rivers, especially as bilateral discussions with India have not led to an agreement in many years. The fact that the government hasn't ratified the UN convention yet is a big problem.

Looking within the country, development projects have a dangerous aspect as they are destructive to our rivers. These are the projects that will narrow rivers down as they progress. This may increase our GDP, by filling up rivers, building resorts and growing tourism. But when a river's natural course is interfered with, the river will die. Many rivers have already been murdered like this.

Our rivers need to be at the forefront of all economic, political, and social discussions. Those who care even slightly about the rights of Bangladeshi people, the existence of Bangladesh, and the future of our country, must oppose the development projects that are detrimental to our rivers, the aggression towards the rivers and the encroachment of the rivers. On the one hand, we see the High Court ruling that rivers are living entities, and on the other hand, we see repeated attacks on these living entities. Thus, voices should be raised and discussions ought to be had on this issue from all quarters. We must also raise our voice against those experts who are involved in such destructive initiatives and are giving them credibility.

Transcribed and translated by Azmin Azran.

## DSA and the quest for an obliged press



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The use of the Digital Security Act (DSA) to target journalists in Bangladesh is deeply concerning and goes against the principles of free journalism and freedom of expression. A free and independent press is essential for any democratic society, and journalists must be allowed to report on issues of public interest without fear of retaliation or censorship.

The use of DSA to suppress critical reporting is particularly troubling as it can be interpreted broadly and lead to the criminalisation of legitimate journalism. This not only stifles press freedom, but also undermines the ability of citizens to access accurate and timely information, which is essential to hold governments and other powerful actors accountable.

The recent case filed against Prothom Alo Editor Matiur Rahman and the arrest of its reporter Samsuzzaman Shams are examples of the harassment and intimidation that is being used to curb bold journalism by the newspaper. The case must be withdrawn, as with all cases filed against journalists under the DSA.

The law minister has talked about amending the DSA to prevent its misuse, and also promised that the law won't be used arbitrarily against journalists. However, cases are still being filed against journalists under this law, which is a clear threat to the freedom of press. Samsuzzaman was sent to jail after his bail petition was rejected initially (he was granted bail in one of the cases against him on April 3). Filing cases under the DSA one after another is a significant blow to the country's newspaper industry and freedom of expression.

There have been worrying incidents of violence and intimidation against journalists reported recently, such as attacks on reporters covering the Supreme Court elections, an assault on the brother of a journalist of Al-Jazeera, an attack on a photojournalist of Dhaka Tribune. These events demonstrate a concerning trend that poses a threat to the safety of journalists. It is essential to denounce such acts of violence and ensure that journalists are protected when carrying out their critical work.

Arrests of and criminal proceedings against journalists in any country warrant particular scrutiny and attention. The authorities should investigate each of these instances promptly and impartially if they truly believe in the rule of law, democracy, and freedom of the press.

It is unacceptable that Samsuzzaman Shams was missing for 30 hours after being taken into custody and before being presented in court. The law stipulates that a person who is lawfully detained must be produced before a court within

24 hours; the law enforcement agency that detained Shams clearly failed to adhere to this requirement. Moreover, it is concerning that the case for which the reporter was brought to court was filed more than 20 hours after he was initially apprehended.

These actions raise serious questions about the treatment of detainees and adherence to legal protocols, and it is imperative that they are investigated thoroughly to ensure that such violations don't occur again in the future.

If any media outlet publishes a report that goes against the ethics of journalism, aggrieved parties should address their concerns through the Bangladesh Press Council. The direct arrest of a reporter under non-bailable sections of the DSA without regard for the Press Council demonstrates the government's intention to exert control over the media and punish those who express criticism or dissent.

It is pertinent to mention that the Bangladesh Press Council is a statutory body established under the Bangladesh Press Council Act, 1974, with the mandate to promote and maintain freedom of the press, improve journalistic standards, and adjudicate complaints against newspapers and news agencies.

Sadly, the council is largely seen as being ineffective in addressing cases of media censorship, harassment, and violence against journalists. Many journalists and media organisations have criticised the council's slow and bureaucratic procedures, as well as its perceived bias towards government interests.

The self-styled ineffectiveness of the Press Council has created a regulatory void in the media landscape, leaving journalists and media outlets vulnerable. This has led to a chilling effect on the media, with journalists increasingly facing intimidation and harassment, and media outlets self-censoring to avoid government reprisals. Strengthening the Press Council and ensuring its independence from government influence is essential to creating a more conducive environment for free and independent journalism in Bangladesh.

As the 12th parliamentary election in Bangladesh is less than a year away, it is crucial for the government to uphold journalistic pluralism and independence. Failure to do so will undermine the democratic legitimacy of the election.

The arrest of Samsuzzaman Shams and the case filed against Matiur Rahman reflect a broader pattern of media crackdowns in Bangladesh. The arrest of Shams also violates his constitutional right to safety as a citizen and sets a negative example of media control and punishment.

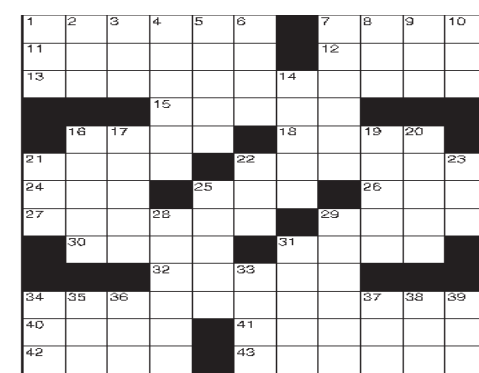
The increasing use of the DSA against journalists is concerning. The cases filed against journalists under the DSA must be withdrawn, and repressive laws like the DSA act must be abolished to uphold the freedom of mass media and expression.

Bangladesh successfully qualifies the definition of "Hybrid Regime." The last remaining resistance is the "Partly Free" press. Does the state want an obliged one?



### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Full and new, for two
  - 7 Sketch
  - 11 Tie down
  - 12 Part to play
  - 13 Hard to control
  - 15 Camera setting
  - 16 On the house
  - 18 Sunset setting
  - 21 Multi-colored
  - 22 Piece that moves diagonally
  - 24 Sty resident
  - 25 Manx or Siamese
  - 26 Mine matter
  - 27 Preplexed
  - 29 Sign of disuse
  - 30 Guinness
  - 31 Dorothy's dog
  - 32 Violinist's need
  - 34 Like some
  - 17 Majestic
  - 19 Holler
  - 20 Statue subject
  - 21 Letter after upsilon
  - 22 Chips buy
  - 23 Parrot or puppy
  - 25 Winter quaff
  - 28 Weasel's kin
  - 29 Nancy's hubby
  - 31 Cover words
  - 33 Wound reminder
  - 34 Ewe's mate
  - 35 Inventor Whitney
  - 36 Great weight
  - 37 Life story, for short
  - 38 Director Spike
  - 39 Curvy letter



### FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

P	A	P	A	S		S	C	A	R	F		
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