

## Govt must improve road crash data

Reliable official data key to preventing crashes on our roads

Despite fatal road accidents becoming a regular phenomenon in the country, it is disturbing to see how casually this is being treated, with government agencies themselves having no uniform road crash data. Until January, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) used police data on road crashes, but then it started publishing its own. And according to its data, 636 people were killed and 752 others were injured in 630 road accidents in January and February. But this does not match with police data, which says that 542 people were killed and 420 others were injured in 557 road crashes during the same period.

Aside from contradicting each other, these numbers are also much lower than that provided by independent organisations, which puts a question mark on the former's initiatives. Lack of reliable official data could derail the government's plan to implement the National Road Safety Strategic Action Plan 2021-2024 to reduce 20 to 25 percent of casualties by 2024, and to halve the casualty number by 2030. But what number will that be? Besides road safety campaigners, different international organisations have also raised questions about the veracity of our accident data.

The World Bank, for example, which already approved a loan for a Tk 4,988.14 crore project on road safety – under which a road accident database will be developed, among other targets – said that the “poor quality and unreliable data on crashes, deaths, and injuries impede proper road safety management.” One may recall that, according to a World Health Organization's report published in 2018, at least 24,954 people were killed in road crashes in the country in 2016. According to the police, however, only 2,463 people were killed in 2016. The huge discrepancy between these figures shows how confusing policy-making can be in the absence of reliable data.

The reason given by the BRTA chairman for the difference between BRTA and police data is that the latter is based on the cases filed over accidents, but many injured died in hospitals later. Since the BRTA also includes hospital data, its number may be higher. But how will it explain the discrepancy between the numbers of accidents recorded? Either way, the data has to be accurate, which requires developing a uniform system of documentation. In the absence of that, it will be more difficult for the authorities to take proper measures to reduce road crashes.

It doesn't boost confidence when the authorities, far from seeing the error of their ways, criticise road safety campaigners for publishing “fabricated” reports on crashes, as the Road Transport and Highways Division secretary did early this year. Using the classic diversion tactic to cover up their own failure, he said such reports were “tarnishing the image” of the country. But what about the fact that responsible agencies have repeatedly failed to prevent loss of life due to road accidents? Why is it that the same government agencies that criticise data provided by safety campaigners are themselves failing to prepare accurate data? The government must hold them accountable for their failures so they can show better results.

## Law alone cannot stop food hoarding

But it's a vital first step, and needs to be implemented regularly

It is heartening to know that the cabinet on Monday finally approved the draft of an act to tackle hoarding of food, among other illegal practices, which has been often responsible for destabilising the market. According to the proposed law, if a person stores more than the amount of food fixed by the government, or breaches any government instruction regarding stocking, it will be considered a criminal offence. The punishment for that will be life imprisonment or a maximum of 14 years' rigorous imprisonment as well as fines. Other crimes related to the production, storage, transfer, transportation, supply, distribution and marketing of food grains such as paddy, rice, wheat, flour and corn have also been brought under the purview of the law, and the punishment for those will vary depending on the magnitude of the crimes.

The development comes a year after the bill was approved in principle by the cabinet on April 19, 2022. We are told that it has been drafted by combining the Food (Special Court) Act-1956 and the Food Grains Supply (Prevention of Prejudicial Activity) Ordinance-1979. Admirably, the government has resisted the urge to introduce capital punishment for hoarding food, which was in the initial draft. This is important because capital punishment, while being something that we cannot condone from an ethical point of view, has also been known to be more of a distraction than a deterrent. In any case, there is already a provision of death penalty for hoarding food in the controversial Special Powers Act, 1974. In case of hoarding, as in case of any other crime, even the strictest punishment doesn't work if the law is not implemented properly.

This is where the challenge will be going forward: enforcement of the bill, when it is passed into law. We have often seen how mobile court drives have been conducted against hoarders, and fines slapped on them, but to little effect eventually. These drives are conducted so sparingly that any effect fizzles out before those could be meaningful. Also, lack of coordination among different government agencies – one of the main reasons why joint public-sector interventions have such poor track records – often gets in the way of those efforts. As well as ensuring regular drives and monitoring in every stage of food supplies, the influence exercised by powerful syndicates and market manipulators also needs to be checked for any law to be effective.

The food sector is going through a critical phase at the moment, with concerns about high prices of production and consumption taking centre stage in national discussion. Although the influence of external factors like the Russia-Ukraine war cannot be denied, poor policy and pre-existing governance issues have also been responsible for the present crisis in the market. We, therefore, urge the government to ensure that the proposed law doesn't meet the same fate as so many other ineffective laws in Bangladesh because of its failure to enforce it properly and evenly.

# In times of crisis, journalists must double down on facts



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

Badiuzzaman Bay  
is assistant editor at  
The Daily Star.

BADIUZZAMAN BAY

Since this issue has rumbled on longer than most issues in Bangladesh are allowed to, with new players butting in every other day, let's revisit some facts to put things back into perspective.

Fact 1: A report by *Prothom Alo* correspondent Samsuzzaman Shams on the poor people's struggle to cope with high food prices was published online on March 26. Fact 2: A social media card based on the report caused a stir after an apparent photo quote mismatch was detected in it, which as a reporter he had nothing to do with. Fact 3: Plain-clothes CID officers picked him up at the dead of night for that which he had nothing to do with. Fact 4: He was charged under the Digital Security Act (DSA) for that which he had nothing to do with. Fact 5: He was hauled before a court, denied bail, and thrown into jail – all for that which he had nothing to do with.

These are all facts, and incontrovertibly so. Everything else about this story is just a reaction to events as they unfolded. You can question the authenticity of the quotes used in the report. You can take issue with the timing of the publication. But it will all be insinuations unsupported by facts, unless otherwise vindicated by a competent authority – the Press Council, for example – which is yet to happen. The truth, therefore, remains that a journalist was harassed and punished for no offence recognised by law.

What offence did he commit then? Why are some people still fixated on that minor, insignificant mismatch, when far more serious concerns have been left unaddressed? Why do they keep throwing shade at the supposed failure of one media organisation, while ignoring the very obvious failure of several state organisations to uphold vital human rights?

On Monday, in her sharpest criticism yet of *Prothom Alo*, and as the latest to weigh in on this issue, the prime minister called the paper “the enemy of Awami League, the enemy of democracy, and the enemy of the people of the country.” While addressing a special session of parliament, she questioned the motive behind the report, “To hand Tk 10 to a small child, to make him tell a lie, to get some words from the child's mouth... what were the words? [We] want the independence



VISUAL: STAR

of [having] rice, meat and fish.” This line of argument appears to support a theory misattributing said words to the child, although the report itself was crystal clear about whom those words belonged to: an adult day labourer.

Unfortunately, it is this theory, first peddled by a section of the media, that is now being used to endanger the more critical section of it. Soon after the prime minister's speech, a group of people tried to breach security at the *Prothom Alo* head office in Dhaka, threatened security guards, shouted slogans against its editor, and wrote “boycott” on its reception wall.

Monday's events capped off two weeks of what, in hindsight, appears to be a coordinated smear campaign in which the same message reverberated off the walls of party echo chambers. It started as a seemingly well-meaning critique of journalistic responsibility, but soon turned into a dizzying drumbeat of *Prothom Alo*-bashing before, finally, culminating with a call for a ban on the newspaper. From top Awami League leaders to loyal university teachers, cultural figures and media personalities – everyone jumped on the bandwagon.

This is where Fact No. 6 enters. For the detractors, Shams is nothing but

rights-shaming. Give the media some freedom, but make it feel guilty about it. Make it blame itself when those rights are compromised. It serves them when journalists are divided.

The enduring appeal of the DSA – which became evident once again when the law minister outright rejected calls by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to immediately suspend the law – is because it gives a legal cover to any violation of those rights. The Awami League intelligentsia, which needs to keep up the appearance of being pro-journalists, will tell you that being anti-*Prothom Alo* is not necessarily being pro-DSA. But right now, both are the same.

In a country that ranks at the bottom of the eight countries in South Asia on the global press freedom index, having slid from the 146th position in 2018 – when the DSA was unleashed – to 162nd in 2022, journalists require unconditional support and legal protection regardless of any journalistic transgression, true or imagined. There is no sugar-coating the lawfare (legal warfare) being waged against them, the extent of which has been revealed in a study by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS).

According to the study, since 2018, every week has been a DSA week. Every week for four years, a case has been filed by a ruling party activist against more than two persons, with journalists and rival politicians forming the majority of those accused. Even before the Shams saga could come to an end, there have been a number of cases filed against journalists. As I commented in a previous column, “It has been like a political bonfire on which critics and rivals could be roasted, without a bitter aftertaste.”

Can journalists still afford to remain divided on the question of their rights? Often, as in the case of *Prothom Alo*, the crime that victims are accused of is not whether something was done right, but whether what was done right was done with the right motive. It's a slippery slope that can take anything, and anyone, downhill. And it's shocking how easily the whole legal infrastructure can be exploited to punish a journalist if enough “reactions” and interpretations can be manufactured.

Facts, once the prerogative of the media, used to be sacred. Now, they are just fodder in an increasingly hostile war of narratives. This is why journalists must support and protect each other. This is why Shams and all other victims of the DSA need to be brought back at the centre stage of discussion, because individual stories matter as much as collective narratives. Each of those accused and punished under the DSA represent not just their respective organisation, but also the wider journalist community as well as the people they give voice to.

# The fundamental issues plaguing our higher education

Md Kawsar Uddin  
is associate professor at the Department  
of English and Modern Languages of the  
International University of Business Agriculture  
and Technology (IUBAT).

MD KAWSAR UDDIN

In recent years, most public and private universities in Bangladesh have been facing blistering criticism for producing unskilled graduates, accentuating grade inflation, and aggravating graduate unemployment. While public universities have regularly been in the news for political unrest, private universities have been under the spotlight for their poor education quality. Overall, our higher education sector seems to be headed in the wrong direction – for many reasons.

First, our curricula for honours and master's heavily rely on Western knowledge. A closer analysis reveals that our education system is either a mimicry of Western education or a tool for developing awareness among our students of scientific inventions and discoveries in the West. Our teachers and students follow Western scholars in every field of knowledge like science and technology, business, agriculture, sociology, psychology, philosophy, arts, and literature. Western knowledge and innovations are certainly the most advanced in the contemporary world. But while learning from western systems can be a positive, mimicking them debases the dignity of local knowledge and the significance of contextual approaches.

No nation can grow without cultivating contextual knowledge, research, and innovations. Our graduates find it difficult to relate their hard-earned knowledge to our context. And our education system fails to train them to solve problems in the context of our business, culture, and society. So, they either find themselves misfits or want to settle in Western countries.

Second, our universities have been promoting educational inflation. Consequently, our employers have been demanding credentialism. In this scenario, the young generation is caught in a maze of higher education in which they are compelled to pursue overqualification. They spend their money, time, and energy on degrees that they hardly get opportunities to use in practical life. A survey done by the Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies (BIDS) found that 66 percent of National University graduates are unemployed. Though 21 percent managed to get jobs, they were underpaid. Only three percent became entrepreneurs. The rest of them were still pursuing post-graduation.

Third, there is a gap between graduates' skills and employers' requirements. Though millions of graduates are searching for suitable jobs, employers claim a shortage of skilled employees. And there seems to be no efficient entity to address this gap. Similarly, policymakers at universities usually show more interest in building infrastructures than in addressing skill gaps and investing in faculty development, research, and innovation. So, the

purpose of higher education remains ignored, and graduates fail to contribute effectively to our national economy.

Fourth, our universities are well known for producing innumerable graduates in certain popular fields like computer science and business administration. But we do not have any proper study on how many engineers, scientists, and business graduates will be essential in the upcoming years. In addition, our curricula are designed to focus heavily on theoretical and abstract elements, concentrating less on practical application. Students thus end up completing higher studies either in the nonessential fields or with irrelevant skills.

Fifth, we have a lack of research universities, research funds, and an overall lack of appreciation for researchers. Most of our universities offer course-based honours and master's programmes. These course-based programmes require students to complete only courses and sit for semester-end exams without a thesis or any research work. Though course-based programmes may sound promising for employability, they practically become devalued in actual jobs as most programmes are designed around theories and not based on practical aspects.

Regarding research funding, our universities fail to provide necessary funds and lack collaborations with potential fund providers. So, they neither offer research opportunities nor facilitate job-specific skills learning.

Worst of all, our researchers and scientists do not receive due respect

and appreciation from academic institutions and policymakers. Many Bangladeshi researchers and scholars perform outstandingly during their stay in developed countries, but they hardly get opportunities or respect here. In Bangladesh, government employees seem to be more appreciated and receive more opportunities than researchers, philosophers, and scholars.

The biggest asset of our country is its human assets. The number of students getting admission to universities is increasing impressively every year. But the country's policies seem to prioritise short-term success in business and remittance. We produced thousands of unskilled labourers abroad but are failing to strengthen our backbone through effective higher education, research, and innovation.

Universities must promote research and innovations. They should prioritise researchers, innovators, and scholars over administrators. They must collaborate with relevant industries for research funds and, at the same time, provide job-specific skills and contextual knowledge to students through internships and externships. They should also consider teaching generic skills that are useful for jobs through induction training and short courses. Our universities must generate knowledge that applies to our context, and our graduates must contribute to our society, culture, and economy. They should neither have to find themselves as misfits here nor seek an opportunity to settle in developed countries.