

## Another disturbing fire incident

When will the authorities enforce building codes and fire safety regulations?

Within 11 days of the Bangabazar fire that burnt to ashes around 3,000 shops, another fire – this time at New Supermarket – has again left hundreds of traders financially crippled just days before Eid, when sales are supposed to be at their peak. The frequent fires in buildings in Dhaka point to the lack of fire safety precautions and violation of building codes that should have been enforced by the concerned authorities. A total lack of awareness regarding fire safety among those who stay in the buildings/markets is also to blame, although ensuring this is too the responsibility of the authorities.

The cause of yesterday's fire is not known yet; traders have speculated that it was because the footbridge near the market was being demolished – ironically, for safety reasons – and the welding might have caused clothes near the end of the stairs to catch fire, which then spread all over the building. It may be mentioned that, according to an official of the DSCC, the corporation had on several occasions told traders not to pile up clothes in front of their stores.

We do not know the real reason for this fire – some have opined that it may even be sabotage – but we cannot continue to be in denial that many buildings in this city are at risk of fire and collapse due to some common reasons. The buildings are either too old or dilapidated, or there are too many shops housed in the building. These ill-maintained structures are always at risk of gas leaks and short circuits from poorly maintained air-conditioning units of so many shops crammed together. How many of them have fire escapes or fire extinguishers? Hardly any. Fire drills or even basic awareness exercises are also nonexistent.

Last year, there were 24,102 fires, according to fire service data. This year, we have already experienced several fires in which lives have perished together with the livelihoods of thousands. The most tragic part is that experts have frequently given recommendations but those have been completely disregarded by the authorities. An obvious one is vigorous monitoring and inspection by the Rajuk as well as enforcement of relevant rules by the city corporations and the fire service. This would involve ensuring fire safety, electrical safety and structural safety before allowing a building owner to rent out shops. Even a peripheral look at most markets like the New Supermarket shows that such inspections have been rare, and none of the precautions have been enforced. When the risks are so high, why this mindboggling apathy?

The fires at Bangabazar and New Supermarket occurred at times when there were no people inside the buildings. But it could very well have happened when these markets are thronging with traders, shop staff and Eid shoppers. Are we going to have to wait till we have a high number of casualties before the authorities finally wake up? For the traders who have lost their shops and millions worth of merchandise, the future is bleak and uncertain. The government must help them get back on their feet.

## FIFA ban deserves close scrutiny

BFF must answer for alleged financial irregularities, organisational failures

We are alarmed to learn that FIFA, world football's governing body, has imposed a two-year sanction on the general secretary of Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF), Abu Nayeem Shohag, on the grounds of his using forged documents to justify payments made with FIFA funds. This has come to light after a lengthy investigation by an ethics committee into allegations of financial irregularities conducted between 2017 and 2020. In this regard, a 51-page description of the charges against him as well as probe results, made available on the FIFA website, is quite telling.

We must admit, all this is very unsettling. Not only does it again bring to light the shambolic state that our football is in presently, but it also paints Bangladesh in a negative light on the global stage. It seems unbelievable that football was once the most popular sport in Bangladesh. But over the last two-three decades, it has gone through a dramatic decline because of a lack of vision, organisational failures, and financial irregularities, with only two regional championship wins (SAFF trophies in 2003 and 2022 for men's and women's teams, respectively) to show for it. Things have taken a nosedive particularly during the 15-year tenure of the incumbent BFF president, the latest example of which came after the withdrawal of the women's team from Paris Olympic qualifiers despite its surprise success last year.

Seen against this backdrop, the FIFA ban, although restricted to one person, has been a long time coming. As with any institution in the public sector of Bangladesh, the BFF is no stranger to allegations of corruption, mismanagement and undue interference in football-related decisions. Although FIFA takes financial irregularities and government interference seriously – one may recall its ban on Bangladesh in early 2002 because of a politically influenced dismissal of the then BFF executive committee – the relevant authorities have frequently failed to address concerns raised by football lovers or establish accountability in their procedures. As a former executive committee member has indicated, what FIFA has uncovered is only the tip of an iceberg of irregularities of various kinds that have been plaguing the BFF for long.

This needs an urgent response. We can no longer ignore the woeful state in which our football languishes. At a time when countries are heavily investing in sports because of their potential to improve their image intentionally, our authorities seem to be paying little attention in this regard. We urge the government, particularly the ministry for youth and sports, to follow up on the latest development. They should conduct their own investigations and take stern action against all involved with the allegations raised. The BFF, because of its consistently poor performance over the years, also needs to be overhauled so that it can bring back the glory days of Bangladesh football by reviving the domestic leagues for both men and women and taking football to the ordinary people again.

# Information Commission's key role in ensuring right to information

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Citizens' right to monitor, probe and question the work of their governments is essential for democracy. The use of this right varies among countries which have adopted a Right to Information (RTI) or Freedom of Information (FOI) Act – tools to facilitate the process. The path from government secrecy to openness is long, winding and rocky, even in countries where the right to information is well-entrenched. In a country such as ours – where the law is relatively new – we still have far to go before the right is seen not merely as “window dressing” to bolster our democratic credentials but becomes a true tool to hold our public authorities to account.

The three key parties in this process are citizens, their public authorities and the arbiters of any disputes between the first two. The first have the right to demand information; the second have the responsibility to respond. The third are members of the Information Commission (IC), composed mainly of former bureaucrats. Both the second and third pillars of this tool can be too hesitant in carrying out their duties, uncertain about the extent of government sincerity in opening itself up to public scrutiny.

A survey of 311 IC decisions on complaint cases from June 2022 to March 2023 throws important light on the predilections of the IC in dealing with both sides at complaint hearings, in interpreting and applying the law, and more importantly, in serving as the custodian of its hallowed objectives. All the cases arise from citizens submitting RTI requests and most of them not receiving timely responses from the relevant authority – resulting in the complaint to the IC. As the decisions do not provide a comprehensive picture of the exchanges that take place at the hearings, we also sought the views and experiences of some complainants themselves.

In over 91 percent of all complaints, the applicants claimed not to have received any response to their applications or subsequent appeals. In many of them, the government's Designated Officer (DO) – charged with responding to RTI requests – rushed to respond only after receiving summons from the IC for complaint hearings.

Disappointingly, in approximately 78 percent of cases surveyed, the IC simply directed the DOs to provide the requested information without recording a serious concern for their wanton disregard of the law. This is very



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worrying indeed, given the mandatory nature of the law. In 62 percent of the cases, the IC did ask DOs for the reasons for not responding, but in the remaining cases no such questions appear to have been raised. While in a few cases the IC did ask the DOs to show cause for their absence at earlier hearings, it showed little concern for their disregard of RTI requests. This apparent indifference from the IC will not help curb the general tendency of DOs not to respond. A stricter position by the IC and invocation of sanctions under the law is clearly called for: records show only two such sanctions made in 2019.

This lack of holding DOs to account extends to other areas. Many DOs simply denied having received any information requests at all or claimed that they were new to the job and/or unaware of the law. Except for 2.5 percent of such cases, here too the IC simply directed the DOs to provide the requested information without questioning the veracity of the denials or expressing discontent. If DOs manage to flout the law so easily, user confidence will continue to erode. A serious probe into the matter and the use of sanction provisions would go a long way to stem such unfair practices.

In a sizable number of cases, the decisions also indicate that the IC discharged cases for non-appearance of parties, passed orders in the absence of one party or both, which are against the principle of natural justice, and postponed hearings because of non-appearance of DOs. These too can only have negative impact on citizens who

see their use of the law more as a civic responsibility than as a simple exercise of their rights.

The decisions brought to light another recurring penchant of DOs. They appear to be more inclined towards using the exemption clauses contained in Section 7 of the Act to deny RTI requests than to focus on the more positive provisions of the law to promote transparency and accountability in government work. Sadly, however, they often use them without fully assessing their applicability and explaining the reasons for their invocation. More unfortunately, the IC too often fails to discuss the underlying legal issues at the hearings or to provide reasons for their acceptance of exemption claims by the DOs. As a quasi-judicial body, it is expected to do so. However, providing such legal analysis is a difficult task and requires legal expertise, an area where the government might wish to equip the IC properly.

Some DOs reportedly insist that applicants provide their phone numbers so that they may be called and threatened to come and see them, provide reasons for their request or collect the information from their office when there are no such requirements under the law. The IC should clearly admonish DOs who indulge in such practices.

Our consultation with users from the field also yielded a number of other critical issues which deserve IC's attention. In the era of online meetings, many claimed that when they sought to present their arguments, their microphones were muted. On some

occasions they were cut off due to faulty internet connections. Others claimed to have faced harsh, irrelevant and intimidating questions. The virtual process also made checking and verifying documents physically difficult. And many claimed their submissions were often not reflected in the decisions. As the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have subsided now, the continuing use of virtual hearings calls for re-examination.

The law foresees the IC to be its “guardian angel” and has empowered it to be a strong and objective arbiter, with regard both to information-seekers and information providers. It is incumbent on the IC to play its role boldly and effectively, bearing in mind that the foremost objective of the law is to empower citizens to promote good governance. This will happen only if the IC is able to pave the way for unencumbered and unhindered use of the law by citizens while, at the same time, safeguarding the legitimate interests of the government to maintain secrecy in clearly demarcated areas of governance. Such a balance must be premised upon a clear recognition of the basic tilt of the law in favour of transparency and accountability.

We hope that the Information Commission will take the above conclusions into account in assessing its own work. We recognise the enormity of the task of moving a nation from an age-old culture of secrecy to one of openness and accountability. The progress of RTI in Bangladesh is slow, but it is moving on. Our efforts are aimed at nudging it along the long rocky road.

## The need for a new US foreign policy



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US foreign policy is based on an inherent contradiction and fatal flaw. The aim of US foreign policy is a US-dominated world, in which the US writes the global trade and financial rules, controls advanced technologies, maintains militarily supremacy, and dominates all potential competitors. Unless US foreign policy is changed to recognise the need for a multipolar world, it will lead to more wars, and possibly World War III.

The inherent contradiction in US foreign policy is that it conflicts with the UN Charter, which commits the US (and all other UN member states) to a global system based on UN institutions in which no single country dominates. The fatal flaw is that the US has just 4 percent of the world population, and lacks the economic, financial, military, and technological capacities, much less the ethical and legal claims, to dominate the other 96 percent.

At the end of World War II, the US was far ahead in economic, technological, and military power to the rest of the world. This is no longer the case, as many countries have built their economies and technological capacities.

President Emmanuel Macron recently spoke the truth when he said that the European Union, though an ally of the US, does not want to be a vassal of the US. He was widely attacked in the US and Europe for uttering this



President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden meet at the G20 Summit on November 14, 2022.

PHOTO: AFP

statement because many mediocre politicians in Europe depend on US political support to stay in power.

In 2015, US Ambassador Robert Blackwill, an important US foreign policy strategist, described US grand strategy with exceptional clarity. He wrote, “Since its founding, the United States has consistently pursued a grand strategy focused on acquiring and maintaining preeminent power over various rivals, first on the North American continent, then in the Western hemisphere, and finally

globally,” and argued that “preserving US primacy in the global system ought to remain the central objective of US grand strategy in the twenty-first century.”

To sustain US primacy vis-à-vis China, Blackwill laid out a game plan that President Joe Biden is following. Among other measures, Blackwill called on the US to create “new

and New Zealand support the United States' aggressive approach. I do not. I view the US approach to China as contrary to the UN Charter and peace.

China has the right to prosperity and national security, free from US provocations around its borders. China's remarkable economic accomplishments since the late 1970s are wonderful for both China and the world.

During the long century from 1839 to 1949, China was driven into extreme poverty in a period marked by European and Japanese invasions of China and Chinese civil wars. Britain invaded in 1839 to force China to buy Britain's addictive opium. Other powers piled on during the following century. China has finally recovered from that disastrous period, and in the process, ended poverty of around 1 billion people!

China's new prosperity can be both peaceful and productive for the world. China's successful technologies – ranging from vital cures for malaria to low-cost solar power and efficient 5G networks – can be a boon for the world. China will only be a threat to the extent that the US makes China into an enemy. US hostility to China, which mixes the arrogant US aim of dominance with long-standing anti-Chinese racism dating back to the 19th century, is creating that enemy.

The dangers of US foreign policy extend beyond China. The US goal to expand Nato to Ukraine and Georgia, thereby surrounding Russia in the Black Sea, helped stoke the Ukraine War. Countless nations see the danger of this approach. Major nations from Brazil to India and beyond aim for a multipolar world. All UN member states should recommit to the UN Charter and oppose claims of dominance by any nation.