

The Daily Star

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Press freedom is in peril

With it, the people’s right to know and our democracy

For a country whose destiny till now has largely been shaped for the better by dissenting voices – oftentimes coming from within the more courageous sections of the independent press – it is extremely disheartening to have to come to terms with the decrepit state of press freedom today. According to Reporters Without Borders, Bangladesh ranked 162nd in the World Press Freedom Index last year – the lowest among all South Asian countries except for Myanmar – out of 180 countries. And if that wasn’t terrifying enough, the rapidly worsening trajectory of Bangladesh’s positioning in the rankings over the past years – 121 in 2019, 152 in 2021, followed by 162 in 2022 – should have caused a massive national outcry, followed by serious retrospection to find out how exactly we’ve gotten here. But unfortunately, what we have seen over the last year is the complete opposite of that.

There has been a lot of hostility displayed over the past year, particularly by government officials and ruling party affiliates, against the press. But that, perhaps, should not come as a big surprise, as it is the duty of the press to challenge power and to hold it to account – which naturally causes the powerful to push back. What has been shocking, however, is how openly that has been done and the tactics and pretences that have been used to shut down critical voices. What is further worrying is the complete lack of accountability for those who have broken the law – such as attacking or even murdering journalists – to prevent media workers from doing their jobs of informing the public.

As journalists, human rights defenders and even the general public have repeatedly pointed out, the Digital Security Act (DSA) has created an environment that is the antithesis of one which allows press freedom and free expression to exist, let alone flourish. The main and most glaring problem with it is that it has been framed in such a way that “allows” for the law to be abused. And since its enactment, that is exactly what has happened, with data from the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) showing there have been at least 355 cases filed against journalists using the law and, almost half of all cases being filed by people affiliated with a political party or government officials. In spite of all that, more laws seem to be in the offing to allegedly “regulate” the press – or rather, in our case, force it to remain passive and silent in the face of exploitation and lawbreaking by the powerful.

The prevailing situation clearly does not allow the press to function freely. Yet, the biggest danger of that is that it impedes upon the people’s right to information and knowledge. When people are forcibly kept in the dark, democracy cannot exist. It is from this dangerous quagmire that we need to dig ourselves out of.

Robbing the poor of social safety net benefits

Government must check corruption, update database of beneficiaries

A recent survey conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has found that non-eligible people are eating away around Tk 1,500 crore every year from the government’s social safety net programme meant for the elderly and widows. Moreover, the programme has not covered an estimated 33 lakh old people and 25 lakh widows who are eligible for the support. Such a situation is not only unfortunate but also totally unacceptable at a time when inflation and the increasing cost of living are pushing poor people further into poverty, with the elderly people, widows and the marginalised communities being the worst-affected. The question is, why after so many years of the introduction of the social safety net programmes in the country has the government failed to create an accurate and updated database? Equally importantly, why are government officials in charge of disbursing these funds allowed to engage in rampant corruption?

Reportedly, this social safety net programme provides a monthly allowance of Tk 500 each to around 57 lakh elderly people and 25 lakh widows. However, among these beneficiaries, around 30 percent of the elderly and 33 percent of the widows are no longer eligible for the allowance. Meanwhile, around 12 percent people are getting multiple allowances from such schemes. We assume that this is not only true for this particular scheme; the rest of the safety net programmes may also be suffering from similar issues.

For instance, another CPD study in four northern districts of Bangladesh – Gaibandha, Kurigram, Nilphamari and Rangpur – during the first stage of the Covid-19 pandemic found that nearly two-thirds of households that received allowances under five leading social safety net programmes were not eligible to receive them.

Clearly, such irregularities and inefficiencies could take place because of a lack of proper database of the beneficiaries. The government has been telling us for a long time that they would use the National Household Database (NHD) to select the beneficiaries of all these schemes, once it is developed. We would like to ask: what has happened to this NHD, which is expected to serve as a poverty registry in the country? Why has it still not been developed although the deadline has expired?

It is common knowledge that local government officials include ineligible people in the list of beneficiaries in exchange for bribes. Moreover, even eligible candidates have to pay bribes to get the allowances. According to the CPD survey, elderly people had to pay between Tk 500 and Tk 6,000 in bribes to get their dues.

We urge the government to urgently address the inefficiencies and corruption plaguing social safety net programmes. Stern action must be taken against these corrupt officials who are supposed to serve the poor, not rob them of their entitlements. It is the government’s responsibility to ensure that support reaches the most vulnerable sections of society in the worst cost of living crisis in over a decade.



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

Titas doesn’t have the budget to fix all gas leaks – so it ignores them

Dr Ijaz Hossain is former dean of the Faculty of Engineering at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet). In an interview with Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star, he talks about the hazardous state of Dhaka’s gas distribution system and how that is putting people’s lives at major risk.

On April 24, people from different parts of Dhaka started to panic fearing there had been a gas leak. How vulnerable is our gas distribution system to such leaks and how much danger is it putting people in?

The first thing we need to accept and understand is that these leaks are there. It is pointless to deny or hide it. So, if these leaks are there, why did people smell the odorant mixed with the gas on April 24, and not on other days? Titas itself has answered that question. Normally, we have a gas shortage problem, which leads to low gas pressure in different parts of Dhaka, and sometimes people also complain that they are not getting any gas. Since all industries closed down during Eid, gas consumption went down drastically, leading to higher-than-usual gas pressure.

Before natural gas enters any city, it has to pass through a facility called city gate station (CGS). On the upstream side of CGS, you have very high pressure from gas fields. Its function is to lower the pressure before supplying gas to the city – you can’t give 1,000 PSI of gas to the city. Because gas pressure from gas fields is

due to the low pressure, we cannot detect it as, after dispersion in the surrounding air, the amount of gas that leaks out is not detectable by our nose.

Anecdotaly, we know that Titas’ lines have many leaks. This incident just outright proved it. But we had proof before, too. For example, we have all seen gas coming out of these lines at high pressure in flood-affected areas. And, several years back, there was a study done under the carbon credit programme “Clean Development Mechanism (CDM)” – because this is a greenhouse gas which is being emitted – of many risers (and pipes) at consumers’ premises which found that a large proportion of those had leaks.

The number of leaks in Dhaka city is staggering – pointing to the fact that the pipelines are old or were constructed poorly. So, gas is leaking continuously. If this leaked gas collects in a pocket or an enclosed space – and its concentration goes above five percent – there could be an explosion. And I believe that the recent explosions we have seen around Dhaka city occurred from that. It’s not always that gas can build up to that point in an enclosed place. And even if it did, it’s possible that, fortunately, there was no source of ignition to cause an explosion. But we now have proof showing that these leaks are serious and dangerous.

Is there a way to have a system in place that could detect leaks before people are put in harm’s way?

It is one thing when gas leaks into someone’s kitchen because they might have meters, detectors, etc showing that it’s leaking. But what about the pipeline? There are definitely ways to detect leaks there, and Titas knows when the pipeline is leaking. But they don’t have the budget needed to fix them all – so they ignore it.

There are many technologies for detecting leaks. Imagine a line has two meters at two ends. If there are no leaks, there won’t be any loss when gas is flowing – whatever passes through one meter must pass through the

other one. Pressurising a line by closing all outlets and observing pressure can detect leaks. These are simple standard methods of detecting a gas leak.

Where should the push for this investment come from? While this may be monetarily costly, what about the cost in terms of the lives we’ve paid with by ignoring this issue?

We have already experienced a few big explosions. For example, the one at the Narayanganj mosque and also at Moghbazar. But we could witness even bigger ones. As per some sources, many other recent explosions (although the government has not confirmed this) also happened from leaks. So, all leaks in gas pipelines need to be plugged urgently.

Also, these leaks are emitting methane, which is 24 times worse than carbon dioxide in terms of global warming.

So, while the government is up in arms about climate change, it is ignoring this emission.

In our country, an adequate maintenance budget is rarely provided. Public sector utilities are more interested in new projects. When you create a budget, you need to set aside resources for the maintenance of old and new projects – as well as provide funds for the protection of workers and the general public. One needs to invest in protecting these pipelines so that they last for 30 years and also provide money to replace the pipes once their useful life (as specified by manufacturers) is over – even if the pipes still look okay and have no leaks, just to be safe.

Through the April 24 incident, we came very close to some major accidents – and luckily people promptly complained and Titas managed to take corrective actions on time. However, there was some negligence here as well. At the CGS, if they had detected the high pressure upstream (because of factories and industries being closed) resulting in high pressure downstream, this would not have happened – and it should never have happened. So,

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the authorities, including the energy minister, need to sit down and find urgent solutions.

So, what we see happening are all outside of the domain of good practices when it comes to safety.

Can the lack of sufficient investment for maintenance and everything you mentioned be described as part of a governance failure?

Yes, absolutely. It is also the attitude that is the problem. The authorities responsible for different projects are not putting enough emphasis on safety – both that of people and of the environment. We are literally seeing crashes, explosions, and fires every day, many of which result from disregarding safety guidelines. Why? Because infrastructures are not well-maintained and, in some cases, not properly constructed.

How do we change this mindset? In many countries, had such deaths from explosions occurred, we would see criminal cases being filed, perhaps being followed by prosecution. Could such accountability improve things?

Our judicial system needs to take proactive steps in this regard and hold people responsible. There needs to be adequate budgetary allocation for safety. This propensity of wanting to build new infrastructure, while ignoring the upkeep of the systems we already have in place, is a damaging one. Until things break down – taking lives with it – we rarely take any actions to replace the asset. So, what does that illustrate? That these lives are dispensable? This should never be acceptable.

So, yes. We have to hold people, organisations, and even the government accountable or criminally liable. But for that, all the courts have to operate with a mindset that people’s lives must always take precedence over and above everything else.