

Ensure justice for Nadim’s murder

The country is becoming increasingly unsafe for journalists

We are horrified by the ruthlessness with which Golam Rabbani Nadim, the Jamalpur district correspondent of Banglanews24.com and Bakshiganj upazila correspondent of Ekattor TV, was beaten to death, allegedly by supporters of a union parishad chairman in Jamalpur’s Bakshiganj upazila. A video clip of the attack, which has been circulated on social media, provides a chilling account of the incident during which men armed with steel bars and rods hit him indiscriminately, and corroborates the statement of another journalist accompanying him at the time. According to Nadim’s family, he was being harassed and threatened by the UP chairman, Mahmudul Alam, prior to the attack; the latter had even filed a case under the Digital Security Act (DSA) for reporting on a press conference in which a woman had claimed that the chairman had married her in secret.

The attack on Nadim took place on the same day that the chairman came to know that the DSA case had been dismissed by the tribunal, which reportedly enraged him. Given the timing and circumstances surrounding the attack, a credible investigation must be made into the involvement of the UP chairman, who is also the general secretary of Jamalpur Sadhurpara union unit of Awami League. The law enforcement agencies must identify and arrest all the perpetrators in the meantime without further delay.

We are alarmed at how unsafe the country has become for journalists who are simply doing their job of holding truth to power. Over the years, there have been increasing instances of attacks, threats, intimidation and even murders of journalists, and it is the correspondents outside of Dhaka who remain most at risk. Unfortunately, in most cases, there is no justice for the violence inflicted upon them, particularly when people in positions of power are involved. The Unesco Observatory of Killed Journalists lists a total of 26 journalists killed in Bangladesh between 2004 and 2022, but notes that only 16.67 percent of the cases it was tracking had thus far been resolved. The high profile murder of journalist couple Sagar and Runi remains unresolved even after 11 years, with submission of the probe report deferred for the 100th time, giving us a disturbing glimpse into the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators in this country.

Meanwhile, the space for investigative journalism and freedom of expression are shrinking at an alarming rate, as evidenced by the growing number of cases filed under the DSA against journalists. Such institutionalisation of intolerance can only add to the growing insecurity faced by news correspondents across the country. We urge the authorities to ensure justice for Nadim’s murder, irrespective of the identity or party affiliation of the perpetrators. No journalist in this country should have to put their life at risk for doing their job.

Why are we failing to save our children? Urgent action needed to curb rising child mortality rate

We are gravely concerned about the unexpected rise in the infant mortality rate in Bangladesh. According to a new government study, deaths of children under five increased to 31 per thousand last year from 28 in 2021, 2020 and 2019. And deaths of children under one increased to 25 per thousand from 22 per thousand. Despite making significant strides over the past decades, this recent increase in child mortality marks a step backwards in achieving our Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of reducing under-five mortality to at least as low as 25 per thousand live births. The health ministry has also set a target to reduce under-five mortality to 20 by 2035. Experts say the latest figures highlight a lingering gap in child healthcare services in the country, which requires urgent attention and action from healthcare officials.

Though reasons behind the rise were not analysed in the latest study, the project director noted that in 2021, pneumonia was the leading cause of infant death, along with jaundice, diarrhoea, malnutrition, acute respiratory infection, and drowning. Experts stated that over 24,000 children in the nation die from pneumonia each year, which can be prevented through an integrated development of the healthcare system. Regarding malnutrition, another recent study in May also showed that 50 percent of children are consuming unhealthy, processed foods. And according to WHO and Unicef, as many as 38 children die every day from drowning, which can be prevented by low-cost solutions such as awareness programmes in local communities.

With such staggering statistics but available solutions, it is now time for policymakers to open their eyes and take a comprehensive approach to address the reported causes of children’s deaths in the nation. We urge the officials to take the latest study seriously and launch the required interventions in child healthcare facilities, which also accounts for the socioeconomic inequity in infant survival. Studies have shown that a household’s income status and the region’s administrative division are potential risk factors of infant deaths. Officials must recraft a more holistic strategy, with community-based facilities and awareness programmes to promote healthier lives for all our children.

Two sides of the same conundrum



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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In a world infested with media gurus, I don’t think any professional job search coach could have suggested what Mukta Sultana did. The young woman, who reached the maximum age limit for applying for a public job last year, appeared on Facebook Live last month and burnt all her academic certificates. The graduate from Eden Women’s College had to work part-time to support not only her studies, but also her family, as she had her breadwinner father early in life.

Mukta moved to Dhaka from Kishoreganj to avert early marriage, as she wanted to be independent. Working alongside her studies affected her academic performance, according to a TV interview that she gave following her certificate burning social media spectacle. Mukta achieved her master’s degree in 2019 and failed to get any job. The entry-level jobs in the private sector would hardly cover her travel and food expenses. She started preparing for government jobs, but the window to get one closed down last year, when she turned 30 years old. Mukta’s interview was watched by our ICT State Minister Zunaid Ahmed Palak, who took the initiative to offer her a job at a digital literacy project.

It is good to see a public official with a heart. The state minister had the option of being angry and coming after Mukta with a punishment under the Digital Security Act (DSA) for trying to “tarnish the government’s image.” He could have instructed the education boards concerned to cancel her degrees altogether. Mukta took a calculated risk in her attempt to draw attention to the ongoing movement by a section of students demanding an extension of the age limit to apply for public service jobs to 35 years. They argue that with 30 as an entry benchmark, many graduates don’t get enough time to prepare and apply after graduation. The delay in result publication and session jams further shrink the job application window. The protesters also demanded an extension of the retirement age limit and a reduction of application fees.



VISUAL: STAR

The fate of the protesters who tried to bring attention to their causes by waylaying Dhaka’s Shabbagh intersection was not as pearly as Mukta’s. They were baton-charged and dispersed by the police. Mukta, in a follow-up interview, sympathised with her comrades and said that she had mentioned their demands to the state minister during her meeting. While I am happy for Mukta, I feel there are many more humane stories out there that need our sympathetic hearing.

I received an email from a reader of my column, who said he had been selected for a job at Rupali Bank almost two years ago. Post his employment, his family arranged for his marriage. But in the last two years, the appointment process has not been completed. His wife’s family is now suspicious of his “claim” of getting a bank job and threatening a divorce. Any sympathetic intervention can probably save the future of this young couple.

Then again, addressing a humane

calculate the retirement benefits of an employer. While the employees feel that by 62, they have already served their offices enough to earn the perks to enjoy the rest of their lives. Conversely, in our country, we see that an employer still has a lot to give to their institutions at the time of their retirement at 60. They lobby for extensions. Some of them use their public offices to avail of various training opportunities to prepare for the post-retirement phase. The generous scholarship given to in-service, mid-career officers to pursue higher degrees abroad is a case in point. I have not come across any impact report on the government’s huge expenses related to these career development initiatives.

Prolonging the stay of an employee in service impedes fresh graduates from joining the workforce. This gives us a perspective of the other side of the conundrum where job-seekers such as Mukta are located. The presence of senior workers in the system creates further complications as they hamper the promotion of officers who are

10,000 a month. If the state minister had not given her the job, she would have been forced to take a job at a garment factory just to survive.

The mismatch between degrees sought and jobs available is another contentious but related issue. While public jobs are given through knowledge-oriented tests, which demand rote learning, private jobs demand people and professional skills. Mukta’s failure to get a job in the private sector can be due to multiple reasons. She is nevertheless a strong, independent woman who just needed an opportunity to prove herself. The state minister has given her one. Indeed, as Thomas Gray puts it, there are “many a gem of purest ray serene” that are found in “the dark unfathom’d caves of ocean” and “full many a flower” that is “born to blush unseen” in the desert. Our sympathies should extend beyond social media spectacles and bring all these job-seekers under a strategic inclusionary project. And we will need more than a state minister to work together to make that happen.

The mystery of Nord Stream blast



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Anyone with a remote interest in international affairs couldn’t miss the September 26, 2022 explosions that blew up sections of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 (NS 1 and NS 2) undersea pipelines carrying gas from Russia to Germany. Both NS 1 and NS 2 run under the Baltic Sea through international waters. Three explosions occurred within the Swedish Exclusive Economic Zone while a fourth was within the Danish Zone. Both prime ministers took this as an incident of sabotage. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen went as far as warning that attacks on “European energy infrastructure” were “unacceptable.” The Kremlin also didn’t rule out sabotage as the cause of the explosion.

Notwithstanding his promise on February 7, 2022 – at a joint news conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the White House – to “bring an end” to the pipeline, US President Joe Biden wasted no time in terming the incident as “a deliberate act of sabotage,” adding that American divers would find out what had happened.

On October 14, the German Federal Police released the first photos of the sites taken with underwater drones and reported that only an explosion could explain the extent of the damage. It blew four sections of the pipelines up, two on each, the report added. Initially, Sweden, Denmark and Germany agreed to investigate the case jointly, but that plan fell apart for unknown reasons.

Several European officials blamed Russia, and so did Ukraine and Poland, for the attack. The matter remained a mystery while new theories kept emerging.

On February 8 this year, American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who had revealed the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War and won the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for it, published on his Substack page the details of how the US Navy’s deep-sea divers carried out

published an investigative documentary pointing to the suspicious movement of Russian ships at the explosion site that could perform similar underwater operations.

On June 6, *The Washington Post* reported that the CIA, with information from a European intelligence agency, had briefed President Biden about Ukraine’s plans for the attacks at least three months before the incident. Two days later, President Volodymyr Zelensky denied any involvement, quoted by a German newspaper as saying, “We know nothing about it, 100 percent.”

While the information war and the blame game continue, a brief look at some relevant facts might be worthwhile.

Both the NS 1 (operational since 2011) and NS 2 (completed in 2021 and was expected to become operational in 2022) was going to increase German

Washington would like to see.

There is another crucial fact: Yamal, a large gas field in Siberia that started shipping LNG in 2017. Availability of such a sizable reserve of Russian LNG became a threat to the US shale gas revolution. The success of Yamal LNG led to Gydan LNG development on the Gydan Peninsula in northern Siberia with a capacity of 20 million tonnes per year at a competitive price. With it, Russia’s LNG export capacity could reach 140 million tonnes per year by 2035, potentially killing all competition from the US suppliers. Now with the Nord Stream pipelines out of operation, at least temporarily, and Europe deeply divided on economic cooperation with Russia, the threat from Siberian gas has been thwarted.

The German public and the media have always been critical of American meddling in their internal affairs. Its foreign minister in 2021 spoke for many when he bluntly stated, “Nord Stream 2 is none of US business.” But as Russia invaded Ukraine, that scenario has changed into one where American meddling is almost unavoidable, if not welcome.

For Europe, the Nord Stream incident symbolises a point of no return as it has killed any possibility of closer cooperation with Russia, while the rest of the world is trying to absorb the shock from increasing oil prices.

The nature of the information war is also noteworthy. Hersh’s story elaborating the US Navy’s involvement hardly got any mention in the mainstream media. However, the Nordic documentary that found a Russian ship’s suspicious movement received wide coverage. Meanwhile, increasing energy prices have pushed 141 million people into extreme poverty globally, reported CNN citing a report by the journal *Nature Energy*.

Does anyone care?

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the attack. The White House quickly denied it, terming it “utterly false.” Many others were also critical of Hersh’s claims, but he stood by his story.

On March 8, German media reported, citing investigators’ findings, that five individuals carried out the attack with a yacht hired by a Ukrainian-owned company in Poland. Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, rejected the account, saying “only state level” actors could accomplish such a complex operation.

On May 3, Nordic public broadcasters

dependence on Russian energy supply and strengthen Russian-German relations. That could have been a catalyst for further expansion of trade and cultural exchanges leading to a new security architecture, potentially making NATO’s security umbrella increasingly irrelevant. Naturally, the US was against such close cooperation between Europe’s leading economy and Russia and slapped a series of sanctions against companies taking part in these construction works. A strong Europe is the last thing