

Investigate Alal's custodial death

Those responsible must pay for their crime

We are appalled at the news of yet another death in police custody. Like most other custodial deaths, this time, too, the victim died in a hospital on Friday after he was arrested. Police detained 50-year-old Alal Uddin, a caretaker, in connection with a murder at the building where he worked. However, while his family says he was picked up by police on June 6, the latter claim they arrested Alal on June 10. According to Alal's family, he was in good health before being picked up – yet, within four days, he was taken first to an orthopaedic hospital, as ordered by the court, and then moved to a hospital for cardiovascular diseases, where he died soon after. Alal's body also bore marks of injury, as per his family.

By now, we know that there are too many unanswered questions in the version provided by police. We also know the familiar pattern of stories around custodial deaths. Just this March, 38-year-old Sultana Jasmine was declared dead 48 hours after she was arrested by the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) on her way to work. The death certificate said she had died of a severe brain haemorrhage, and media reports stated that she had a head injury.

After the US sanctions on Rab, the number of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances dropped dramatically, according to human rights organisations. But unfortunately, custodial torture and deaths still take place every now and then. The reason? Members of law enforcement agencies hardly ever get punished for these crimes, leading to a sense of impunity among them. Despite laws and High Court directives, prohibiting any kind of torture and with clear guidelines regarding how arrestees should be treated, these barbaric practices continue.

The solution to this is clear. The government must investigate all custodial deaths – not by the force whose members are implicated in the deaths, but by an independent body to ensure the probe is unbiased and transparent. The government must also put a stop to the practice of people being picked up and shown arrested at a later date, as this allows for possible torture of detainees. We hope that the High Court's proactive role in demanding the probe report in Sultana Jasmine's case within 60 days, and asking the officials concerned to show causes as to why they should not take action against the Rab members involved, will be repeated in all other cases of custodial death, including Alal's. Custodial deaths go against our constitution, against international conventions and against democracy. They must end regardless of whether the US imposes sanctions or not.

Why such disinterest in research?

Dhaka University must incentivise research studies

The national rhetoric of prioritising high-quality education seems to be going nowhere. While insufficient research funding has often been cited by academics as a reason for the lacklustre state of higher education in Bangladesh, a recent report by this daily revealed that our eminent Dhaka University has, ironically, failed to fully use even the measly funds. The DU authorities received around Tk 36.22 crore as research allocation in the last four fiscal years, of which Tk 9.59 crore has been left unused. In FY2020-21, nearly two-thirds of this amount was underutilised. The lack of learning incentives and failure to expand our knowledge base are damaging and beyond the pale.

While administrators and some academics point to the lack of interest among faculty members to make use of the grants, which are comparatively small in nature, others say that the process of acquiring the allocated funding for projects is mired with time-consuming red tape and mismanagement. As a result, many opt for NGO or external funds instead. The situation calls for the DU authorities to do some soul-searching and develop a proper scheme to mitigate disinterest among its faculty members. Reportedly, a section of teachers opposed the university's decision last year of mandating PhD degrees to get promoted as associate professors and professors. It is shameful that such an attitude towards education exists in the corridors of our oldest and largest university.

The characteristic of DU as an educational institution has also been waning at the bottom of worldwide rankings, as innovative research studies are required to increase the excellence quotient. Bangladesh suffers from the trap of low learning and increasing cases of "brain drain," and the lack of proper research capacity in our universities is one reason why. Experts have previously called for a paradigm shift to research-based learning in higher education to affirm our ambition towards a knowledge economy. How much longer do we have to rely on foreign scholars because our own university scholars cannot provide the studies needed to understand the nitty-gritty of our own nation? DU must set up a proper state-of-the-art research infrastructure to buttress its reputation.

New Message

To

Subject

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When even judicial exoneration can't keep journalists safe



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His Twitter handle is @ahmedkal

KAMAL AHMED

Another day, another attack on the press in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, this latest attack was brutal and the target was a journalist working far away from Dhaka, the capital, which meant he had little or no protection and institutional support for doing the most difficult job of holding the powerful accountable. The horrific death that Golam Rabbani Nadim met with last week in Jamalpur's Bakshiganj upazila was the result of merciless beating by some musclemen allegedly on the orders of the local union parishad chairman, Mahmudul Alam.

Nadim was attacked the very day that he learnt that a court had exonerated him from defamation charges brought under the most dreaded Digital Security Act (DSA) by Mahmudul Alam for publishing a story about the latter's alleged bigamy. In many conservative societies, bigamy is considered a crime – or at the least moral degradation. UP chairmen are entrusted with the responsibility of issuing character

It seems that assaulting journalists has become quite common in the current environment, and in most cases the culprits either belong to the ruling party or get blessings from its leaders and the administration.

certificates to residents within their jurisdictions as and when they are required. Mahmudul is also the general secretary of Awami League's Sadhurpara union unit in Jamalpur, for which he enjoys political clout over local administration.

Who could have thought that exoneration from the DSA charges would ultimately exonerate Nadim from journalism, a profession he loved and was dedicated to? As most of the mofussil correspondents get very little financial compensation from their employers, they need to top up their income by taking jobs in two or more media houses. Nadim, too, had been working tirelessly for Bangla tabloid the *Daily Manab Zamin*, television channel Ekator TV, and news portal Banglanews24.com.



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

A short clip of CCTV footage showing Nadim being pulled down from his motorbike and accounts given by reliable eyewitnesses make one thing clear: he was killed in an ambush that bears hallmarks of a premeditated murder. In the footage, soon after he falls off his bike, the attackers are directed to drag him out of the CCTV range, as an attacker is heard ordering, "Drag him to the dark and beat him."

It may seem a mere coincidence that just before the story of Nadim's killing came to my notice, I finished a chat with another journalist, Golam Sarwar, who made headlines for his desperate plea for his life to be spared with repeated hysterical utterances like "Please don't beat me" and "I will not make any news again," as soon as he regained consciousness after rescuers recovered him from beside a canal in Sitakunda, Chattogram. Sarwar, executive editor of local news portal cnewsbd.com, was abducted on October 29, 2020, taken to an unknown location blindfolded, and repeatedly beaten until he was left unconscious on the canal side in Sitakunda three days later.

Though his life was spared, Sarwar's sufferings didn't end. Several attempts were made to run him over in Chattogram, and two defamation cases – one civil claim for compensation and one criminal complaint – were lodged against him.

Bulletin in Barishal's Uzirpur, had been beaten up by a local Jubo League member for reporting on the assault of a madrasa student by him. It seems that assaulting journalists has become quite common in the current environment, and in most cases the culprits either belong to the ruling party or get blessings from its leaders and the administration.

The International Press Institute (IPI) has documented at least 72 press freedom threats or violations in Bangladesh over the past year, which includes both legal and physical attacks against journalists. The IPI says "its monitoring shows that a majority of these incidents and violations were committed by state authorities, which include law enforcement and judicial authorities, precisely the public officials and institutions that are responsible for safeguarding fundamental human rights and the rule of law." There's a common perception that attacking journalists in Bangladesh is not a crime and it doesn't risk any judicial consequence. Families of journalists killed rarely get justice. A glaring example is the investigating agencies' failure to conclude an investigation into the double murder of journalist couple Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi in more than 11 years.

The global impunity index for crimes against journalists, produced by the

press freedom or journalist safety environment has improved." It added that the single notch drop was due to the numbers of unsolved murders in the index period being less than five, which was a requirement for inclusion in the report.

Physical attacks on journalists, random misuse of the DSA, and threats in the form of unofficial advisories to media houses have seriously damaged press freedom in Bangladesh. Despite admission by our ministers of DSA misuse to silence criticism, the government continues to refuse suspension of this much discredited and criticised law as prescribed by the UN human rights chief. The law minister's fresh promise that the DSA would be amended in September, sans two most crucial provisions that the UN experts have flagged for abolition, is being viewed by many, including Western diplomats, as an attempt to keep tighter control on the media for taking propaganda advantage in the run-up to the national election.

The killing of Golam Rabbani Nadim after his exoneration from the DSA clasp and the forced exile of Golam Sarwar ironically show that until and unless democracy is restored in the country, there won't be any accountability and press freedom. Even self-censorship and judicial exoneration may not be enough to ensure physical safety of journalists.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Who will listen to the woes of trainee doctors?

The trainee doctors in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) recently staged an agitation for several days demanding an increase in their monthly allowance, payment of arrears and regular payment of allowance. The matter came to the attention of mainstream media when the BSMMU vice-chancellor was confined by the demonstrators. Non-government trainee doctors are on duty six days a week, working 60-80 hours per week. In return, they get a monthly allowance of Tk 20,000 each. These trainee doctors are not allowed to practise medicine outside of their employment either. The average age of each of these doctors is around 30 to 40 years. They have families to take care of. It is not possible for them to make ends meet with Tk 20,000 of monthly income at a time when commodity prices are rising through the roof.

The non-resident trainee doctors of the 2022-23 session received only three months of allowance in a year, with nine months' allowances still due. They have been demanding an increase of monthly allowance from Tk 20,000 to Tk 50,000 – a demand which is justified. Trainee doctors in neighbouring India get a much higher allowance – between 60,000 and 113,000 rupees, depending on the region. In Bangladesh, Tk 20,000 is fixed for all courses year after year, but



FILE PHOTO: STAR

in India, this allowance is increased every year. In Pakistan, which we know as a "failed state," trainee doctors are paid double compared to us.

The BSMMU trainee doctors chose peaceful ways of protest, including submission of memorandum and forming a human chain. The medical organisations did not come forward to support them. Seeing as it's an election year, heavyweight leaders in the medical sector may have felt it is safer to avoid the issue. The desperate trainee doctors, therefore, appeared before the VC with their demands, but no effective solution came out of it. In fact, when

the agitating doctors pushed their demands, the VC proclaimed that the agitating doctors were "anti-national and Jamaat-Shibir." He also threatened to throw them out of their courses if they went on a strike.

After passing MBBS or BDS and completing internship, after preparing for two or three years, competing with thousands of doctors for a few seats, a few talented doctors on the basis of merit get an opportunity to train at the BSMMU. According to the vice-chancellor's office, there are 3,276 resident trainee doctors and 1,531 non-resident trainee doctors in the

university. The medical profession is one of the most challenging in the world. Is it possible to establish a sustainable model of training when these doctors are under physical, mental and financial stress? Many of these doctors are forced to live far away from the hospital as they cannot afford living anywhere closer – many cannot even afford a balanced diet. Their overall lack of a quality life has an impact on their workplace performance.

As much as Tk 6,558 crore of the allocation for the health sector in the national budget of FY2022-23 was returned to the government as the fund was not utilised. And yet, the trainee doctors did not get paid their allowances on time, let alone get a raise. It is evident that there is a huge flaw in the policy framework.

Let's not forget the role that these doctors played not too long ago. During the worst phases of the pandemic, they stepped up and worked at the front line to save lives. Many sacrificed their lives while doing their job. The authorities should remember that and be more humane towards the private trainee doctors, and accept their demands immediately.

Dr Rakib Al Hasan,
Physician, author, activist, and youth leader