



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHON

Who watches the watchmen?



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ZARIF FAIAZ

On June 27, it took a foreigner to point out that millions of Bangladeshi citizens' personal information was left exposed on the internet due to a security leak on the website of the Office of the Registrar General, Birth & Death Registration (BDRIS). At least 50 million citizens' personal data – including full names, birth dates, addresses, parents' and grandparents' names, phone numbers, and more – were affected by the security breach.

Viktor Markopoulos, the cybersecurity expert who spotted the leak, tried to contact the Bangladeshi government's e-Government Computer Incident Response Team (BGD e-GOV CIRT) repeatedly but no one responded. It was only after the news was widely circulated in the local media that CIRT acknowledged the breach and took steps to take down the exposed data.

A somewhat similar issue happened when Bangladesh Krishi Bank was hit with ransomware. On July 11, this newspaper reported that the notorious ransomware group ALPHV, also known as BlackCat, hacked into Bangladesh Krishi Bank and stole over 170GB of sensitive personal information, including employees' names, passport and NID information. ALPHV claimed in their blog that they offered the Bangladesh Krishi Bank authorities a window to negotiate, but no one responded or "was bothered."

It is one thing to become a direct victim of cyberattacks. But when weak cyber infrastructures leave your data exposed, and when you fail to even acknowledge or spot an attack, let alone fight it, they go on to highlight the extent of carelessness the government shows when handling the citizens' personal, sensitive information.

As citizens, we entrust the government with our personal information based on the belief and goodwill that the government will keep it safe and not misuse it – nor let it be misused – in any way. But recent events showcase the government's utter failure in safeguarding citizens' personal and sensitive data that may easily end up in the wrong hands. Even the meek responses to the cyberattacks showcase how the government

authorities fail to even comprehend the dangers of these security breaches.

That brings us to the burning question: what happens when our data is out there for the world to grab? For starters, your leaked personal data exposes you to the growing dangers of internet fraud and scams. It becomes easy for you to become a victim of identity theft. A hacker – or anyone, actually – can easily steal your entire identity, engage in a scam or fraud under your name, and get away with it. With your sensitive personal information available on a mere Google search, hackers may even gain access to your bank accounts, social media handles, emails, and more.

Hackers often sell your data to other hackers who may have a separate agenda or motivation. These agendas are almost never personal. International groups may gain access to your data – either by hacking directly or buying off of other hackers – and engage in full-scale cyber wars with rival groups or countries. Your data, in those cases, becomes collateral.

ALPHV, for example, declared on July 7 that if Bangladesh Krishi Bank

did not meet the ransom demand, they would start extracting funds from the bank. The group even issued a warning to all stakeholders and investors to pull their funds from the bank within seven days of declaring the warning.

These events can cause serious financial loss and can be extremely difficult to fight back against for all sorts of legal issues. In a country like Bangladesh, where frauds and scams like these are not well defined in terms of legal proceedings, recovering your identity or funds can prove to be even more grueling.

Surely, our safeguards must know about these dangers. The question, then, arises: why did they fail to protect our data? How did even the first responders of cyber threats miss out on these security breaches?

Consider BGD e-GOV CIRT, for example. Its website says, "Bangladesh Government's e-Government Computer Incident Response Team (BGD e-GOV CIRT), serving as the National CIRT of Bangladesh (N-CERT) with responsibilities including but

not limited to receiving, reviewing, and responding to computer security incidents and activities in the territory of Bangladesh as well as keeping close collaboration with international partners to secure the cyberspace of Bangladesh." Clearly, CIRT is responsible for preventing these attacks, or at least spotting these security breaches and responding to them. And yet, when a reporter of this newspaper first contacted CIRT about the BDRIS leak, CIRT's project director claimed they were not aware of any such attacks.

However, somewhat in CIRT's defence, it did issue a notice on June 27, advising the government, military, and financial institutions to stay alert and implement essential security measures to safeguard against possible cyberattacks. CIRT mentioned that several sectors including banks and critical information infrastructures were at high risk of being targeted by cyberattacks.

The police, too, fail to protect our data. In fact, in at least three of these cases, the police themselves were the victim. On March 15, a group named New World Hacktivists released 84 police log in credentials. Among these, 40 credentials belonged to officers-in-charge of various police stations located in Dhaka. On March 17, a hacker group called the Indian Cyber Force leaked information of about 270,000 Bangladeshi citizens from the Cox's Bazar police's server. The Khulna Metropolitan Police were also attacked by Indian hackers on March 28.

The cases go on. Biman Bangladesh airlines, the national flag carrier, was recently attacked by ransomware, although Biman authorities insist that "no data has been stolen."

The Bangladesh Railway website was also a victim of a DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attack in recent times, but reportedly no data was stolen.

Bangladesh Army, Bangladesh Air Force – all have fallen victim to cyberattacks in one form or another in recent times.

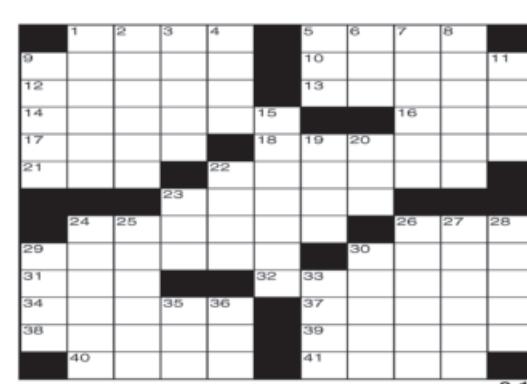
Our government, just like any government around the world, routinely collects sensitive personal data from the citizens for various national purposes. Citizens also willingly give these data to the government, often for essential services, in the goodwill and confidence that the government will not mishandle them. It's a promise, a trusted bond bound by a social contract.

That promise has not been kept. And when our sentinels betray us, whom do we turn to?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	30 Japanese sport	11 Title paper
1 Hindu hero	31 Fitting	15 Needed fixing,
5 Whole range	32 Dropped down	as a faucet
9 Thoroughly disgusted	34 Binge	19 Rowing needs
10 Swift	37 Unmanned plane	20 GI-entertaining grp.
12 Molecule's makeup	38 Story-telling Dr.	22 Ring event
13 Nonsense	39 Touches down	23 African graser
14 Rewarded good service	40 Like an abyss	24 Muscular-looking, in slang
16 Gorilla, for one	41 Peepers	25 False
17 Crumb carriers		26 Tony winner
18 Defeated soundly		27 Patti
21 – Vegas	1 Where images focus	27 Changes, in a way
22 Partial	2 Makes one's own	28 Methods
23 Join the big leagues	3 Childhood ailment	29 Physics
24 Preceding periods	4 Church area	30 Aerosol output
26 On the – (fleeing)	5 Museum focus	33 Not busy
29 Tiny	6 Road gunk	35 Language
	7 Heroin, for one	36 Sixth sense, briefly
	8 Moved speedily	
	9 Lethal	
DOWN		
1 Where images focus		
2 Makes one's own		
3 Childhood ailment		
4 Church area		
5 Museum focus		
6 Road gunk		
7 Heroin, for one		
8 Moved speedily		
9 Lethal		

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TUESDAY'S ANSWERS



A brutal colonial legacy that fuels the fires sweeping across France



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VIJAY PRASHAD

On July 1, a large crowd gathered inside and around the Ibn Badis Mosque in Nanterre, France, where a 17-year-old boy, Nahel M, was mourned and then later buried. Nahel M, of Algerian and Tunisian heritage, was shot dead by a police officer during a traffic stop. It was clear that the police officer had not acted in self-defence, but had shot the young man in cold blood. A wave of outrage swept through the country, with protests and riots breaking out across France. French President Emmanuel Macron sent out security forces to stem the protests, which inflamed the protesters whose anger at the police is at high levels already. The police's antipathy was confirmed by the language of the police unions (Alliance Police Nationale and UNSA), who called the protesters "vermin" and "savage hordes" and said that "it's no longer enough to call for calm; it must be imposed." This is an act of war by the French police against the French population who come from France's former colonies.

The reticence of France to allow its own universal pretensions (*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* – the phrase from the revolution that was the centre of the 1958 Constitution of the Third Republic) to be heard in the colonies ran from 1804 in Haiti to the wars against national liberation by the French from Algeria to Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s. So ugly is that history that French students are not taught it in an unvarnished manner. If a French student is asked how many Algerians died due to the brutality of the French regime during

population of Haiti rose up in a major rebellion in 1791, France – bubbling with its own revolution of 1789 – nonetheless denied the Haitians of their freedom and fought till 1804 to deprive Haiti of its independence. Even after Haiti defeated the French planters, the French state – with the full backing of the United States – forced the Haitian government in 1825 to pay an enormous indemnity of 150 million French francs, which Haiti only paid off in 1947 to Citibank (which bought the debt after 1888).

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People attend a march in tribute to Nahel, a 17-year-old teenager killed by a French police officer during a traffic stop, in Nanterre, Paris, France, June 29, 2023.

PHOTO: REUTERS

President Macron

called the killing of Nahel M "inexplicable," but this is hardly a credible response. Racism against people of Arab and African descent in France has become almost banal – something that takes place and no longer raises an eyebrow. When France's Ministry of the Interior released the numbers of racist attacks and killings from 2021, the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) said the situation was "alarming." Sophie Elizéon, chief of the inter-ministerial delegation for the fight against racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-LGBT hate (DILCRAH), said, "What is being reported from the ground is the exacerbation of unabashed [behaviour]."

The killing of Nahel M, in this context, was absolutely explicable – it was the result of a general social toxicity towards minorities and one that is given expression through the police force. No wonder the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said, "This is a moment for the country to seriously address the deep issues of racism and discrimination in law enforcement."

Deep issues of colonialism

France never really came to terms with its colonial heritage or its colonial mindset. French colonisers went to the Americas in the 16th century, and a hundred years later set up a number of plantations in the Caribbean that operated a slave-based economy. At the heart of the French colonial enterprise was the island of Hispaniola, half of which is today's Haiti, and from where the French Empire derived an enormous volume of its considerable wealth. France's attitude to its colonies and to their urge for freedom is encapsulated in the story of Haiti. When the Afro-descendent

small amount of money

compared to

the scale of the problem,

but by

not meeting it, it has created a crisis

of trust in the developing countries."

Macron and World Bank President Ajay Banga gave speeches that sounded as if they could have been given over a decade ago. Same language, same tired promises. "Hope and optimism," said Banga, to an audience that was not feeling hopeful or optimistic. At least Macron put some tangible suggestions on the table, such as a global tax on shipping, on aviation, and on the wealthy to raise \$5 billion for a loss and damage fund. It is unlikely that the corporate sector, which has influence in the International Maritime Organization (who will see about the shipping taxes), will allow increased taxation in this sector.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres pointed his finger at the residue of the colonial mindset and the neo-colonial structure when it comes to financing. The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) are available to ameliorate the negative impact of the permanent debt crisis and to bring much-needed emergency finances to poorer countries. But even here, Guterres said, the European Union – with a total population of 447 million people – received \$160 billion in SDRs, while the continent of Africa – with a total population of 1.2 billion people – received only \$34 billion in SDRs. "A European citizen received on average almost 13 times more than an African citizen," Guterres pointed out. "All this was done according to the rules. But let's face it: these rules have become profoundly immoral." He could have been speaking about the French police code.

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