

## Court's order to sue police for torture commendable

Now it must be ensured that the order is followed through

In a country where custodial torture is all too commonplace but redress for such crimes is equally rare, we commend a Natore court for ordering the district superintendent of police to file a case against five policemen for torturing three men in custody. Senior Judicial Magistrate of Lalpur Cognisance Court Md Muslim Uddin issued the order after the three men provided chilling accounts of torture at Lalpur police station when they were produced before the court. The men stated that they were beaten mercilessly on different occasions, and were told to confess to carjacking a three-wheeler.

One of the accused, Sohag, said in his statement that he was beaten, thrashed on the soles of his feet, kicked in the scrotum, and told to confess unless he wanted to be placed on remand. The leg of a table was repeatedly slammed on the little finger of Salam, another accused, and he was beaten with a steel pipe from waist down. Meanwhile, Shamim, the third accused, was thrashed with a piece of bamboo, his legs tied up, and the soles of his feet repeatedly smacked; the cops allegedly also threatened to rub chilli powder on his private parts if he refused to confess to the magistrate. The descriptions of the torture – and the severe injuries sustained in the process – suggest that the unlawful practice is still ubiquitous in the country, and raises serious concerns about the legality or authenticity of confessions obtained in police custody and during remand. They also provide a glimpse into the barbarity which, in worst cases, lead to deaths in custody.

It is truly distressing that the ratification of the 1984 UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, enactment of the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013, and issuance of clear directives by the High Court about the rights of those interrogated in law enforcement custody have all failed to establish accountability mechanisms for excesses by state actors. Those engaging in such practices are hardly ever brought to book – given that the investigations are usually carried out by the offending agencies themselves – providing wholesale impunity to carry out such grievous human rights violations against the citizens of this country.

Against this backdrop, it is worrying that the SP who has been tasked with filing the case has already claimed that the three accused sustained injuries when they fell as they were attempting to run away from police, and that a case will be filed when an investigation is done. But who exactly will conduct the investigation, and how are we to ensure its neutrality? We urge the court to follow up and conduct a judicial inquiry into the matter, if needed. If law enforcement agencies are unwilling to take action against their errant members, the court must intervene to ensure that justice is served.

## Speed up the food storage project

Ensure accountability for missed deadlines

It is no secret that delays and rising costs of development projects have become commonplace in the country. According to a recent report by this daily, a government project undertaken in 2014, styled "Modern Food Storage Facilities Project," which aimed to build eight silos across districts and also serve 500,000 rural households in 63 upazilas during times of scarcity, has made less than 50 percent progress. Ten years after the project was initiated, none of the silos have been built, while the project cost has been revised upwards by 86 percent, in sheer wastage of taxpayers' money. The situation is completely unacceptable.

It must also be noted that the project aimed to digitalise monitoring of the country's overall food stock, including transportation and market supervision, to reduce inefficiencies – a much-needed action plan. But that, too, has not been accomplished. According to the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED), the reason lies in negligence of the companies contracted to make the software for the digitalisation system, namely Beximco Computers Ltd, Tech Mahindra Ltd of India, and Tech Valley Networks Ltd of Bangladesh. It is beyond our understanding as to how firms contracted public projects can get away with missed deadlines. The authorities must hold these firms accountable and put in place penalties for further impediment due to negligence. The firms must pull through and fulfil the obligations of their contract.

Excuses citing delays in licensing or the dollar crisis cannot justify the financial burden of incompetence any longer. The IMED report on the project discovered loopholes in the feasibility study and mistakes in the design. Steps must be taken to address these anomalies. The stagnant project, which was scheduled for completion by June 2020, is being proposed by the Planning Commission to be completed by 2025, subject to the World Bank's approval. Averting public woes from food shortages is an integral part of governance. Given the current economic state of the country, the food storage project is now more important than ever. We urge the authorities to take the new deadline seriously and speed up implementing the initiative to enhance food security for citizens.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Do something about dengue!

What are the Dhaka city authorities doing to manage the dengue situation? Every day, I am hearing about more and more dengue deaths and cases, which is scary. I live in a neighbourhood where Aedes mosquitoes can breed easily! I urge the city authorities to up their efforts to clean out the mosquito breeding grounds so we can be safe from dengue.

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# Don't be fooled by the RPO amendment



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KAMAL AHMED

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibur Awal's comment defending the recent amendment of the Representation of the People Order (RPO) seems to be well-synchronised with the government's narrative. Brushing aside experts' criticisms for losing some of its crucial regulatory powers, the CEC said, "No authority of the Election Commission has been abolished with the amendment; it has been consolidated."

If the CEC's assertion that no authority has been curtailed is true, then one may ask: what warranted them to seek legal authority for cancelling elections of an entire constituency in the event of widespread violation of electoral rules? Experts have merely pointed out that the authority that the Election Commission sought was already there, and they even applied that power in suspending voting of the entire constituency of Gaibandha-5 during its by-polls last year. Following the new amendment, the EC will no longer be able to cancel or suspend voting of an entire constituency, let alone the election process, prior to the polling day, except in the event of a candidate's demise.

CEC Awal now says, "...the government has not revised the RPO. They did as per our proposal. The government has agreed to the amendments sought by the Election Commission to make the latter's position more consolidated and strengthened. It has increased our power." Here is a reminder about what Law Minister Anisul Huq told lawmakers in concluding the parliamentary debate before passing the bill. He, too, said the RPO amendment would not curtail the EC's power, but termed the EC's power to suspend polling in the entirety of a constituency "undemocratic."



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

The law minister's argument was based on the assumption that suspending voting in an entire constituency if violence or irregularities took place in only a few polling centres amounted to taking away the peoples' right to vote. Unfortunately, past experience tells us that due to the nature of our political rivalry, rampant irregularities on election days have become a norm in our country. The CEC's refusal to recognise this change as curtailment of the EC's power is deeply problematic.

His explanation about replacing the word "election" with "polling" as a clerical correction is also quite strange.

To lighten the significance of this alteration, he says, "Clerical correction is just correction," which is legally untenable. In the RPO, there's a legal definition, though scanty, of election – Article 2 (vii) – but "polling" remains undefined. Generally, it is accepted that polling means the activity on the day of the vote, but election denotes the entire process. The RPO defines

I have argued before that setting the rules of the game should follow the ruling the ongoing political dispute between the two main contending parties, as experiences between 1991 and 2009 show that such accords reduce violence and irregularities. Political consensus provided the basis that helped with the enforcement of code of conduct and limited, to some extent, vote-buying and influence of black money. But the EC's rush in revising the RPO meant allowing the ruling party to impose their wish in the codification process. And the result is not only the weakening of the EC's authority, but relaxing of rules such as extending extra facilities to loan defaulters.

The incumbent EC often claims that they have successfully conducted several elections during their tenure of over one year. But it belies the fact that most of those elections were intra-party contests of the ruling Awami League, as their main challenger, the BNP, stayed away from the elections, expressing no confidence in the EC. There have been some woeful examples of the current EC's inability, such as their failure in taking action against a member of parliament belonging to the ruling party for defying their order during the Cumilla city polls last year. When there were empowering rules, the EC failed to enforce them appropriately, but now wilful relinquishment of some authority makes us wonder how they can claim they are prepared to ensure a free and fair parliamentary election.

There's no doubt that the 15th amendment of the constitution and the ruling party's insistence on constitutionalism have left the EC effectively helpless. The arbitrary enactment of the 15th amendment meant not only the abolition of the caretaker government system for holding general elections, it also kept alive the parliament, leaving the EC powerless against privileges claimed by MPs. In a sense, the CEC was right when he said the EC did not dig their own grave, because it's the government which is in charge of the graveyard. But the EC certainly has taken the hope of a free, fair and democratic election one step closer to the grave.

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## WORLD YOUTH SKILLS DAY

# Bangladesh must invest in youth development

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FARAH KABIR and NAZMUL AHSAN

Bangladesh celebrated 50 years of independence in 2021 – a young country with a young population, and aspirations. According to the recent census, the total population of Bangladesh stands at 169.8 million, and 27.96 percent of them are young people, aged between 15 and 29 years. Compared with the 2011 census, the percentage of young people increased from 26 percent to 27 percent. The latest Labour Force Survey (2022) indicates that the youth labour force, aged between 15 and 29 years, stands at 26.82 million, or 36.53 percent of the total labour force, which is 73.41 million.

This data indicates that Bangladesh has an unprecedented upsurge of young people in its demography. However, they have limited scope of participation and access to leadership structures to shape national development agenda. Traditions, hierarchical and patriarchal norms, and practices leave young people, particularly young women, and other marginalised groups aside, limiting their access and opportunities to engage in decision-making structures. Current representation trend in parliament reflects a similar trend where only 0.29 percent of its members are under 30 and 5.71 percent are under 40 years of age.

Employment also remains the biggest concern. Close to 2.2 million young people enter the job market every year. According to the LFS in 2016-17, youth unemployment rate was more than double and stood at 10.6 percent, compared to the national average rate of 4.2 percent. A closer review indicates that there is a correlation between the higher level of education and higher rate of unemployment in Bangladesh. About

29.8 percent youth with secondary education, 13.4 percent with tertiary education and only four percent with no education remain unemployed. In addition, the share of NEET youth (not in education, employment or training) within the total youth population is 29.8 percent.

This exhibits a huge mismatch between the education system and the job market. Moreover, the substandard vocational and technical training courses have negligible impact on employment generation and access to the job market, in the opinion of experts. The rising number of training spaces and courses over the last few years is not effective either.

When it comes to women's participation, a smaller number of women enrol in vocational and technical education. For example, data from the World Bank (2018) reveals that only 27 percent of secondary students join the vocational stream. Fourteen percent of polytechnic students were women in 2016. As a result, an excessive number of women, particularly young women (92 percent, according to a2i 2022), are opting or being forced to engage in the informal sector economy, which comes with low productivity and often an indecent work environment. About 89.2 percent of youth workers (91.6 percent of whom are young women) experienced lack of decent working conditions, particularly during the pandemic. Eighty percent of the young respondents reported that they had experienced an income reduction during the pandemic.

The pandemic negatively impacted young people's education, particularly those from marginalised communities. Although the education system was transformed into an online

system, in a survey conducted by the Citizen Platform for SDGs Bangladesh, 64 percent of the respondents were not involved in any online education or training programmes. This can be attributed to poor connectivity, shortage of smart devices, excessive costs, and a lack of interactive content. Moreover, schoolteachers were not fully equipped and trained to conduct online classes.

The enormous digital divide that young people continue to experience due to societal gender roles and disparities between urban and rural areas remains a major concern. Thirty-five percent of rural residents have internet access, compared to around 55 percent of urban residents. Of those who use the internet, 81 percent are between the ages of 16 and 24.

Online safety is also increasingly becoming a concern. According to a survey by ActionAid Bangladesh, 63.51 percent of women, between the ages of 15 and 35, experienced various forms of online violence on different digital platforms, such as being sent hateful and insulting sexual remarks, sexually explicit images on social media inboxes, sharing of private photos on social media without permission, and threats of sexual assault.

There is underinvestment in young people as reflected in the national budget, posing a significant threat to youth development that would enable the country to make the transition to a "smart" nation. The investment for quality education, skills development, livelihood and employment, sexual and reproductive health and rights, social protection concerns, etc are the most pressing issues. For example, funding for the Ministry of Youth and Sports was significantly cut in the 2023-24 budget.

Young people in Bangladesh frequently express concern about not having adequate information and access to government institutions and service providers. The deprivation is more severe among the youth from different excluded and impacted groups, such as the Dalits, ethnic

minorities, Indigenous communities, and young people with disabilities.

To address the challenges and harness the power of youth in Bangladesh, in addition to the government initiatives, various non-governmental organisations including ActionAid Bangladesh have been developing the leadership capacity of youth, particularly young women, from the grassroots to encourage them to take on leadership positions in various decision-making bodies. The participation of grassroots youth is facilitated through these interventions in various social development initiatives, campaigns for climate justice, and advocacy for innovative actions. Young people are provided support to practise agroecology and climate-resilient sustainable agriculture, along with the tools they need to speak up about the climate vulnerabilities of marginalised communities and to demand action from national and international decision-makers. To address the digital divide, marginalised youth are also equipped with digital literacy and skills, so that they can leverage online platforms for learning, networking, advocacy, and campaigning.

Climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of our time, affecting ecosystems, economies, and human well-being. As greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, the world is experiencing a range of adverse effects, including extreme weather events, sea-level rise, and the loss of biodiversity. These impacts often result in what is referred to as loss and damage. The youth in Bangladesh are the most vulnerable in this reality.

More initiatives and substantial investment is critical to empower youth to be the real change agents for the country. All stakeholders need to come together to help them step up and lead to realise the SDGs by 2030, Paris Agreement, and the just transition particularly in the areas of social justice, gender justice, and climate justice.