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FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Rising AL-BNP confrontation is most disturbing

This cannot bode well for our democracy

The signals coming from the streets are very concerning. Our two biggest political parties might be heading towards greater violence with the focus firmly on tomorrow's events at the moment. While both sides express their determination to not trigger any violence themselves, they seem more than willing to jump into the fray if the "other side" provokes it. And, as we have seen in the past, there will always be an "other side" to blame if it happens.

The tragedy of the situation is that regardless of endless talks about avoiding violence, neither side will make any concession that can ensure it. Leaders of both parties know in their hearts that, without compromise, there is no way to stop violence, and yet no leader will publicly even hint at such a possibility without any clearance from the top. And so far, there has been no hint of that.

We have criticised the ruling party for always trying to hold rallies on the same day as the opposition does, but to no avail. In tomorrow's case, it is going to be as Jubo League, Swechasebak League, and Chhatra League have all shifted their programmes to coincide with that of the BNP. The aim of the ruling party appears to not let BNP be physically present on the streets of the capital without ensuring its own simultaneous presence – the logic being that if BNP is allowed any open play, it will get some advantage from which it cannot be dislodged later. So, prevent it before it happens! It is quite uncertain how far this goal of the ruling party can be implemented with any serious occurrence of violence as BNP will have to be contested every time it plans an event. The ruling party's suspicion has been further fed by BNP's calling for two major demonstrations in such quick succession.

Whatever may be the goal of the two sides, the general public cannot but be worried about how the rising tensions between the two will affect their lives. It can almost be assumed that shopkeepers, rickshaw pullers, daily workers, etc may have to forego at least a day's earnings for tomorrow's events, assuming that there is no violence, police assault, arrest or death.

We express our serious concern about the way political events are unfolding in the country. The constant exchange of invectives, the growing violent tendencies on both sides, and the diminishing chance of a peaceful settlement have created uncertainty about the prospect of a peaceful transition towards the coming polls. More and more, our passage towards the polls appears to be strewn with violence which is turning people away from the most crucial of democratic exercises – casting their vote. This cannot bode well for our democracy.

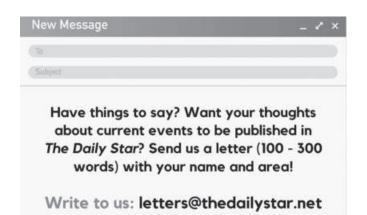# Let no child die from drowning

Death by drowning continues to be a major headache for rural communities

Drowning is perhaps one of the most common but overlooked causes of death in the country. What's bleaker still is the fact that it is mostly children who die from drowning, even though it is preventable. As reported by this daily, an average of 50 people die from drowning every day, 40 of whom are children. Altogether, the number comes up to a staggering total of 19,000 annually. Unfortunately, efforts from the authorities to prevent this menace have been quite disappointing so far.

Take, for example, a project undertaken in May last year by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs which aims to establish coordinated child care centres in 16 districts countrywide. Given that many rural children are left unsupervised while their parents or caregivers go to work, such community-based initiatives can help keep them away from potential drownings. However, the project has seen very little progress so far, with care centres set up only in six districts, each catering to a maximum of 25 children under the age of five.

Another initiative related to this project is the SwimSafe programme. It aims to provide swimming lessons to over 306,000 children aged 6 to 10 across 1,600 venues (100 in each of the 16 districts). However, the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research – which is overseeing the programme – has only been able to run three centres in the Patuakhali and Barguna upazilas, offering their services to around 3,000 children. While this is still a positive development, especially given the alarming child drowning rate in Patuakhali – according to the Patuakhali civil surgeon's office, the death toll is nearly doubling each year – it is far from satisfactory.

In Bangladesh, drowning is the second leading cause of death for children under the age of five, according to Unicef Bangladesh and the World Health Organization. Clearly, existing measures are failing to deliver results. This is quite alarming. We urge the authorities to take a critical look at this state of affairs and ramp up efforts to prevent drownings. Bureaucratic delays, such as late recruitments or plan approvals, as well as other institutional barriers must not hinder the progress of projects that can save children from dying such avoidable deaths. The authorities should also engage community leaders to raise awareness about water safety, especially among low-income families.

Unravelling the insecurity in our IT infrastructure

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Bangladesh's digital infrastructure and cybersecurity are facing significant challenges, leading to concerns about its safety and vulnerability. As the country approaches a crucial parliamentary election, there has been a worrisome increase in data leaks and cyberattacks. A recent incident involved a suspected leak of personal data belonging to 50 million citizens from the Office of the Registrar General, Birth and Death Registration (BDRIS). This breach exposed sensitive information such as National ID numbers, names, addresses, dates of birth and parents' details, making it easy for malicious actors to create counterfeit NIDs. This poses a serious risk of influencing the electoral system, with the potential for misuse of this data by either the ruling party or other local as well as foreign entities. As a result, urgent measures are required to address the prevailing vulnerabilities and safeguard the integrity of Bangladesh's digital arena.

Viktor Markopoulos, a researcher at Bitcrack Cyber Security, an international cybersecurity solution provider based in South Africa, discovered that the BDRIS website was unprotected and had leaked various personal details of numerous citizens. Despite contacting the Bangladesh e-Government Computer Incident Response Team (BGD e-GOV CIRT), Markopoulos received no response.

Interestingly, on the official website of BGD e-GOV CIRT, prominent figures such as the prime minister herself, the IT adviser to the prime minister, the state minister of information technology and the BTRC Chairman are all displayed as the team in charge, complete with their pictures. However, attempts by US-based online newspaper TechCrunch to seek information regarding the leak from the government's press office, the Bangladesh embassy in Washington DC, and the Bangladesh consulate in New York City remained unanswered.

This incident has exposed significant vulnerabilities in the digital security of Bangladesh government. The lack of effective cybersecurity measures and poor management practices have alarmingly intensified data leaks and cyberattacks on both citizens and government databases in the country.

According to Markopoulos' statement to TechCrunch, the leaked information surfaced automatically during a Google search without any intentional effort to seek it. Specifically, it emerged as the second result when searching for an SQL error, indicating a vulnerability in the website's programming language used for database queries. With this personal data now accessible through web applications, there is a heightened potential for unauthorised access, modifications, or deletions of birth registration records. Consequently, the accuracy and transparency of the data are in question, amplifying concerns regarding its misuse and potential implications for the individuals affected.

Inadequate IT infrastructure and vulnerable digital security persist as pressing issues in the country. Recently, there have been instances of "Distributed Denial-of-Service" (DDoS) attacks, where poor security measures have allowed servers to be flooded with excessive internet traffic, resulting in the disruption of connected online services and sites. Several prominent institutions have also fallen victim to cyberattacks. The Bangladesh Krishi Bank's servers are currently under attack by ransomware, and in March, hackers demanded $5 million in ransom from Biman Bangladesh Airlines while holding 100GB of data hostage. On March 15, a group called New World Hacktivists leaked 84 police login credentials. Just two days later, another hacking group called the Indian Cyber Force leaked information of about 270,000 Bangladeshi citizens from the Cox's Bazar police's server. A couple of years ago, taxpayers' information was also compromised in a separate incident. Last but not least is the unprecedented Bangladesh Bank reserve theft in 2016, on which a Hollywood documentary titled *Billion Dollar Heist* has been made, due to come out next month.

On July 12, vulnerabilities were identified in the Election Commission's NID webserver, Posts and Telecommunications Division, and the telecommunications regulator BTRC website, as they lacked adequate SSL security. Moreover, many government sites, including the one-stop site for government services, utilise certifications from non-approved authorities, deviating from root certificate issuing authorities. Entry into these sites from secured computers raises security concerns. These issues underscore the critical need for comprehensive and robust measures to strengthen the country's digital security infrastructure and safeguard against potential threats.

According to Victor Markopoulos and TechCrunch's findings, critical security measures such as the firewall and VPN on the database frontend and backend are not functioning properly, a matter that is deemed completely unacceptable. Although the NID server was claimed to pose no security risk after the incident, numerous other institutions in the country perform e-KYC processes that involve handling personal confidential information. Consequently, sensitive data such as birth registration records, driving licences, passports, land sales, bank account openings, mobile SIM purchases and registrations, etc remains vulnerable.

ILLUSTRATION: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

Moreover, the architecture of key components such as the application, front database, back NID database, architecture bus, and API communication flow is exposed in the Bangladesh National Digital Architecture site, which is entirely unacceptable given the sensitive and confidential nature of the information involved.

The author has personally gathered insights from departmental app managers, which reveal that many of the government's departmental apps, such as those for birth registration, the National Board of Revenue (NBR), passport department, as well as "scheme apps" like e-KYC for banking and telecom, are outdated and not regularly updated. Moreover, sufficient funds are not allocated for the necessary upgrades, leading to the usage of outdated software versions plagued with critical security threats. This neglect of firmware updates and software upgrades has resulted in numerous security breaches and leaks. Firewalls between "Local DB" and "Central DB" and VPN connections of applications suffer from outdated and weak security measures. The front database and central database are accessed by making "API calls" by exploiting coding leaks in the app server and web server. Such subpar IT management practices within a country are indeed deeply disappointing from a security standpoint.

This vulnerability can be attributed to a lack of awareness and negligence, as well as the absence of regular evaluation of website security systems. The absence of a clear cybersecurity policy and a perception of cybersecurity as an additional cost further contribute to the weak state of affairs. Government websites are often developed inexpensively and haphazardly, with novices handling the site application instead of skilled programmers, resulting in easily exploitable vulnerabilities susceptible to hacking.

Moreover, a recurring pattern of duplicating existing sites to create new ones, often relying on open-source tools like WordPress, leads to a lack of robust security measures. Regular maintenance and multiple layers of security are not prioritised, and e-audits are rarely conducted. The absence of a comprehensive and universally enforced cybersecurity policy compounds the issue.

This overall lack of cybersecurity awareness among government institutions in Bangladesh makes them susceptible to cyberattacks and technical weaknesses. The repercussions of data breaches can be substantial, resulting in financial and social security losses. When data falls into the hands of hackers, it can be exploited for illegal activities, including unauthorised financial transactions, illegal banking, usage on Dark Web, SIM registration fraud, OTP message theft, mobile payment fraud, e-ticket fraud, SMS-based service fraud, virtual electronic identity creation, fake bookings, e-governance and e-*nothi* fraud, and money laundering, posing significant threats to security and privacy. The inadequate and risky management of the IT sector reflects poorly on a government with a digital reputation.

The endearing simplicity of Bangladeshi brand names

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As I was scrolling through my Facebook feed recently, one particular post caught my eye. It was about someone's recent visit to Bangladesh. Apparently, what fascinated them the most was the delightful simplicity of brand names in the country, and how these brands embraced their Bangla roots with names that were refreshingly straightforward.

Take Dorjibari as an example. Established in 2003, Dorjibari has become one of the go-to clothing stores for Bangladeshis, especially among men. I must admit, the simplicity of the name represents the elegance and style that this brand exudes. Then there's Khut, a brand that is all about recycled fashion and turning rejected clothes into art. The owners of Khut were so inspired by the exquisite hand-stitched patterns on discarded garments that they named their brand after this idea. The philosophy behind the name is poetic: acknowledging that perfection is overrated and that beauty can be found in the flaws. I have to hand it to them; it's a clever play on words and a reminder that imperfection can be pretty cool.

And then we have the mobile financial service brand, Nagad. It offers a secure and dynamic digital service for most of one's money-related needs. The brilliance of the name lies in its simplicity. Nagad means "cash" in Bangla. Again, we see a brand that didn't beat around the bush, but called its service what it is.

When it comes to grocery delivery services, Chaldal is somewhat of a kingpin. They can bring almost every household item you could need right to your doorstep. And the service is named after *chal* (rice) and *dal* (lentils), which are staples of the Bangladeshi diet. They certainly knew the way to the hearts and stomachs of their customer base.

Online marketplaces such as Bikroy.com also follow this trend of simplistic branding. Bikroy literally means "sell" in Bangla. The way they did not resort to any jargon or make it complicated is certainly admirable. And how can we forget our national flag carrier, Biman? Biman, of course, means "aircraft" in Bangla. Again, talk about keeping it straightforward!

Last but not least is OBHAI, a ride-sharing app that links cabs, bikes, and auto-rickshaws to commuters. The name itself is endearing, as the latter part of it means "brother" in Bangla. It's like having a trusted sibling by your side, ready to whisk you away to your destination. "*Pouchhe debo*," their tagline says, which translates to "Will get you there."

These brand names not only show respect for Bangla, a language for which Bangalees fought hard, but they also demonstrate the country's rich cultural heritage and the importance of embracing simplicity. Sometimes, keeping it simple and relatable is the way to go.