

Curb corruption in prison services

CAG audit report on Dhaka Central Jail demands proper response

We appreciate the efforts of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in unearthing large-scale financial irregularities in Dhaka Central Jail during 2019-20 fiscal year. According to *The Daily Star's* report on this issue, the CAG audit team has found 14 counts of irregularities in the amount of Tk 37.5 crore. These include giving prisoners substandard and insufficient food, overbilling, violating procurement rules, not depositing canteen revenue to the exchequer, etc.

We are well aware of the deplorable state of our prisons, as this has been reported many times before. Among the common challenges inmates face are unhygienic living conditions, overcrowding, torture by staff and other inmates, and a highly organised system of corruption that extends to extorting money for services that the jail should provide anyway. All this paints a grim picture of the plight of prisoners. The audit report only reinforces the reality of the subhuman conditions under which they are kept in jail.

It is especially shocking that auditors found putrid, low-quality rice in the Central Jail's silos. The jail authorities spent Tk 9.11 crore for rice that proved to be unfit for consumption. Not only were the meals of poor quality, even the portions of fish and meat served were less than the minimum required. There were no fruits either. The quality of food in general is so poor that many inmates are forced to pay to get food from outside. Earlier reports in this paper have also found that some prison staff extract a hefty sum of money from prisoners' families in exchange for basic facilities such as proper bedding, water for bathing and even access to toilet. We shudder to think what prisoners who cannot pay these "fees" must go through.

The CAG audit makes it clear that those members of the jail administration responsible for procurement and distribution of food enjoy impunity which allows them to continue to engage in irregularities. The audit is of only one fiscal year, however. It is essential that audit reports from previous and current years are revealed.

We urge the prison authorities and the higher-ups at the home ministry to critically examine not just how jail funds are being spent but also the overall conditions of our jails. They must identify those engaged in corrupt practices and punish them under the law. Prisoners are required to serve their jail time according to their convictions. But no one should be treated with such cruelty and neglect. It violates the basic principles of human dignity that every person is entitled to. The parliament, which has been presented with the audit report, must respond properly to put a stop to this.

Roads churning out dead bodies

Govt must take effective measures to make our roads safe

We are quite frustrated at the lack of efforts from government agencies to prevent the avalanche of road crashes. According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, which compiled the figures of July, 576 people were killed and 1,055 injured in 505 road crashes last month. Reports by other road safety organisations are likely to follow, as they usually do, but there may not be much change in the numbers. These reports, unfortunately, never seem to be taken seriously by those in charge, who for years promised reforms to make our roads safe but never really delivered. Instead, they are often found to be taking decisions in favour of the powerful transport associations and owners who are mostly responsible for today's grim scenario.

For instance, the government has recently put on hold an order that set a limit to the economic life of buses and trucks, which, according to transport experts, is essential to ensure road safety – since old and unfit vehicles are a major reason behind road crashes. What could be the reason behind staying such a directive? Even one day without road limits is one day too many in our present context. Currently, there are over 74,000 registered buses, trucks and other commercial vehicles (as of April) that are past their economic lifespan, according to the limit set by the government in May this year. Just imagine the amount of damage that these and other soon-to-be-expired vehicles can do to us, including by polluting the air and contributing to road crashes.

Previously, we have seen how the authorities suspended the implementation of several sections of the Road Transport Act-2018 for months following a strike by transport associations in late 2019, and how they prepared a draft later to amend the act, reducing fines under 11 sections and punishment under four sections. All this is proof of the unchecked power and undue concessions that transport associations continue to enjoy while the authorities turn a blind eye to the woeful state of our road safety situation. This must change.

We urge the government to prioritise road safety over the demand of the transport associations. Experts have already identified the areas where work needs to be done. Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, for example, has particularly highlighted several factors – such as the increasing number of motorcycles, plying of slow-moving vehicles on highways, violation of traffic rules, faulty construction work on highways, dangerous overtaking, etc. – which must be addressed. Additionally, the importance of taking all unfit vehicles – and all unskilled/unlicensed drivers – out of our roads cannot be stressed enough. The authorities must take these steps for the sake of citizens.

Can BNP really put up a good fight?



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One cannot help but note the strange twist of fate in which the BNP finds itself in almost the same position as Awami League did in 1996. Back then, Awami League had demanded that BNP resign and hand over power to a caretaker government to oversee elections. BNP refused and doggedly went ahead with the elections. Awami League mounted a crippling street campaign and BNP relented and agreed to amend the Constitution to allow a caretaker government before it stepped down after just 12 days in office. BNP's half-hearted assembly at Dhaka's entry points on July 29, 2023 – the day after a huge rally in front of its central office – was slightly reminiscent of Awami League's campaign of laying siege on the capital, grounding life to a halt, in 1996. Even a section of the bureaucrats was openly coopted through the *Janatar Mancha*, which was probably the beginning of systematic politicisation of the bureaucracy.

Elections were held under the caretaker government in 1996, 2001 and 2008; in 2011, Awami League cancelled that provision through another constitutional amendment, and now keeps repeating that the election will be held according to the constitution. The suggestion that BNP's demand is unconstitutional conveniently ignores that, in statecraft, political legitimacy always triumphs over constitutional legitimacy. But political legitimacy does not emerge by itself. It must be convincingly illustrated from different social and political spheres. It must be demonstrated from the streets, visibly and volubly.

This is a game that is almost intrinsic to Awami League's DNA. The party has campaigned on the streets since before Bangladesh's independence, with the six-point movement and the non-cooperation movement leading up to the 1971 Liberation War, to name just a couple. When it comes to waging a popular campaign on the streets, Awami League is a veteran and a master of the game. In contrast, BNP is a novice and does not have the organisational wisdom or the cunning such a movement would require. The two times it won an election convincingly were when it did not have to fight for a conducive environment to



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FILE PHOTO: STAR

begin with. It was already there in 1991, since all the parties had agreed to have a caretaker government, and in 2001, thanks to the 13th amendment, BNP did not have to worry about levelling the playing field before the elections.

After its landslide victory in 2008, Awami League conveniently removed the caretaker government provision from the Constitution through another amendment and ensured that the party would remain at the helm during elections. BNP's bid to boycott the next election in 2014 and thereafter destabilise the country through a vicious and bloody campaign of fire bombs on public transport did not work. In fact, it backfired, resulting in hundreds of deaths, thousands of injuries, and a frustrated electorate. BNP's lacklustre participation in the 2018 election was doomed, given Awami League's robust groundwork. In fact, the elections were so well engineered – with Awami League winning 302 seats and BNP just seven – that it became a matter of embarrassment even for the AL hawks.

on the ballot. BNP's failure to whip up frenzied popular support that would lend credence to its demand for political legitimacy, as opposed to Awami League's apparent pledge for constitutional legitimacy, is not that surprising, either. The party was born under the protection of the government and founded by a military strongman who was himself the president – rather similar to Ershad's Jatiya Party. It did not go through the test of fire as did Awami League, and has not shown the mettle for a taxing campaign. From its inception, BNP has been an amalgamation of anti-Awami League elements, without a distinct ideology. To make matters worse, the party appears to be held hostage by a presumptive crown prince who believes his only deserving ransom is a premiership of Bangladesh while he wiles away his time in London.

Since 2008, as Awami League systematically decimated BNP into a ghostly shadow of the formidable party it had appeared to be after the 2001 elections, BNP has not really spoken

to lose it soon after. And without a concrete set of pledges that speaks to the heart of the people, BNP's one-point campaign to get the ruling regime to resign will keep falling on its face, or stumble on at best.

Along the way, Awami League will do its best to get BNP off balance and off its track. Its numerous fronts, like the Jubo League and the Chhatra League, will be deployed as distractions. There will be counter programmes and snares. Then there will be the league of sycophantic civil servants who will dine them, and leak pictures of luncheons to the press. There will also be viral social media posts. All of it derail BNP's campaign, and it would be foolish to expect an open field. BNP will have to claw its way in. It has to be ready to take all of it in stride and be nimble, too. On the streets, the ruling party is a far more evolved political organism than the opposition. But, as it appears, BNP finds itself utterly out of depth against Awami League's guile and savvy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Environmental protection laws need stricter enforcement

The Global Liveability Index 2023, published by Economist Intelligence Unit, listed Dhaka as the seventh least liveable city in the world. According to the Climate Risk Index (CRI) 2021, by German NGO Germanwatch, Bangladesh ranks seventh among countries most affected by extreme weather events in 2000-2019. And, according to the World Bank, air pollution caused 78,145-88,229 deaths in Bangladesh in 2019. The vast majority of these deaths were caused by exposure to PM2.5, which are tiny particles that can penetrate deep into the lungs and cause respiratory problems.

It is safe to say that Bangladesh is one of the most polluted countries in the world, with an average annual concentration of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) of 83.3 micrograms per cubic metre (µg/m³). The safe level of PM2.5 concentration is 5 µg/m³, according to the World Health Organization. Bangladesh has a rapidly growing number of vehicles, which contribute to air pollution in major cities like Dhaka and Chattogram. To add to this, large-scale industrial projects have been

undertaken in environmentally vulnerable locations. Under the Paris Agreement, as part of its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions, Bangladesh has agreed to decrease greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by five percent unconditionally and by a further 10 percent subject to financing from the international community.

Bangladesh has a number of environmental laws in place, but enforcement is often weak. The most important aspect of these laws is utilising various provisions of the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act (BECA) 1995. It provides a comprehensive framework for environmental protection and establishes the Department of Environment (DoE) as the lead agency for environmental protection, giving it the power to regulate pollution, enforce environmental standards, and grant environmental clearances.

Meanwhile, the Environment Court Act, 2000 establishes specialised environment courts to deal with environmental offences and violations, meant to ensure speedy and effective resolution of

environmental disputes.

The Forest Act, 1927 regulates the conservation, management, and utilisation of forests in Bangladesh, addressing issues such as deforestation, illegal logging, and forest encroachment.

Bangladesh's Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012 aims to protect and conserve wildlife species in Bangladesh, including endangered species, by prohibiting hunting, trading, and trafficking of wildlife.

For the protection, conservation, and management of water resources in the country, Bangladesh Water Act, 2013 focuses on covering issues such as water pollution, river basin management, and water allocation.

Despite these laws and regulations, environmental degradation continues to be a major problem. This is due in part to weak enforcement of environmental laws. There are a number of challenges to implementing environmental laws in Bangladesh such as a lack of political will, corruption, weak enforcement, public apathy, and lack of data. Transparency International Bangladesh

(TIB), in its recent research, highlighted several deficiencies in environmental legislation, and the DoE's failure to effectively execute existing laws, regulations, and supplementary laws. In 2019, the World Bank estimated that air pollution cost Bangladesh up to 4.4 percent of its GDP. A recent report by the WB concluded that 20 percent of deaths in the country occur due to air pollution.

To sustain the existence of human life, the environment must be saved. In order to overcome these challenges, the government needs to take more steps such as demonstrating a political will to protect the environment, strengthening enforcement of existing environmental laws, raising public awareness, and collecting data on pollution and climate vulnerability in different regions of the country.

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