

Some relief for road crash victims

Compensation package for affected families long overdue

We are happy to learn that the government has finally settled on a compensation package for road crash victims. According to a report in this daily, the family of someone killed in a road crash will be entitled to at least Tk 5 lakh in compensation if they make a claim, while someone who suffers life-altering injuries can claim Tk 3 lakh. We believe this initiative, if properly implemented, will pave the way for safer roads in the country.

It will also bring some relief to the families who have lost their loved ones to road crashes. In many cases, the victims are their families' sole breadwinners, so their sudden death puts added stress on their grieving family members. In case of the survivors, the compensation can be used to pay their medical bills.

However, there is a question to be raised about whether the amount of the compensation fixed is enough considering the heavy loss suffered. How much is a human life worth? We are also concerned about the amount of time the authorities have taken to finalise this compensation package. It took them more than four years to publish the relevant rules under the Road Transport Act 2018, and another eight months to finalise the compensation package as part of it. We cannot help but wonder if the verification and approval processes for compensation claims are going to be equally time-consuming, which will be unfair. We urge the authorities to make the whole process simple, transparent and hassle-free for the affected families. The BRTA also needs to run a nationwide awareness campaign so that people know about the compensation package and how to claim it, when needed.

At the same time, the government must rethink some of its decisions, such as backtracking on a decision to set a limit to the economic life of buses and trucks, to make our roads safer. Experts have been highlighting for years how unfit vehicles, along with reckless driving, is a major reason behind road crashes. We understand that various stakeholders in the transport sector try to influence these decisions, but the government's priority must be the safety and well-being of citizens. Contradictory rules will only hinder our road safety goal. The government must set policies in such a way that no life is lost unnecessarily, and thus no compensation is needed.

Disturbing signs of escalation

The onus is on the ruling party to exercise restraint

The ongoing trend of political violence in the country is really disturbing. In the first two days of this week alone, some 400 individuals have been reportedly injured in clashes between BNP activists and members of the AL and police combined. We express our concern over the never-ending nature of confrontational politics where the nation's streets are turning into battlefields, leaving citizens in a constant state of fear and uncertainty.

The first of the latest series of clashes took place when BNP activists held road marches in Habiganj, Barguna and Narayanganj, demanding the release of party chairperson Khaleda Zia, and law enforcers baton-charged them, resulting in a chase and counter-chase situation. The day after, the district AL unit in Habiganj organised a march, protesting the "terror and anarchy" of the BNP. AL activists reportedly attempted to attack the home of a local BNP leader, which resulted in another showdown. In typical fashion, the former claimed it was BNP that had first attacked their march. Each time an incident like this breaks out, the same blame game plays out, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle.

We have previously criticised the ruling party's attempts to disrupt BNP's street programmes as a violation of its constitutional right to peaceful assembly. Such attempts have been particularly evident after the BNP launched its one-point movement for holding the next parliamentary election under a non-party interim administration. Police's role in resulting clashes has been equally troubling. Just last month, a BNP activist was killed in Lakshmipur during a clash that ensued after police and AL activists reportedly obstructed a BNP procession. It goes without saying that, until the ruling party changes its current approach and exercises restraint, the prospect of a fair and participatory election will remain distant.

Ultimately, if the AL and BNP truly care about the public, they will have to find a way to compromise, and engage in dialogue rather than violence. As the party in power, the AL must lead the way to prevent the history of violent confrontation from repeating itself.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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When will the govt learn?

Around this time every year, hospitals in Dhaka get crowded, packs of saline start disappearing from pharmacy shelves, and desperation to get blood for loved ones puts people in despair. So, why is it that the government still hasn't learnt to take necessary steps to fight the health crisis brought on by dengue?

When there are clear examples set by other countries of what to do to prevent such a situation, why does the administration in our country not follow them? We even have our own experts repeatedly giving warnings ahead of the dengue season, and every year, they fall on deaf ears. Instead of effective actions, all we get are some excuses, or the bare minimum, like fogging, which has proven to be ineffective.

I can only hope that next year, the same events won't repeat, but hope is all I have, because the trend predicts that the people will yet again become helpless in the face of this disease.

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Relabelling the DSA won't protect citizens from cybercrimes



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Last week, British director Daniel Gordon's new documentary *Billion Dollar Heist* was released. The film highlights the seriousness of cybersecurity issues the world faces today. Unfortunately, the subject of Gordon's documentary is our central bank, the Bangladesh Bank, which was almost robbed of around a billion dollars by hackers in one of the worst instances of cybercrime in the world. Reviews published in some of the leading international newspapers, including *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times*, remind us that the 2016 heist remains quite a mystery.

Nearly three years after the heist, our government enacted the Digital Security Act, 2018, promising it to be "an Act to make provisions for ensuring digital security and identification, prevention, suppression and trial of offences committed through digital device and for matters ancillary thereto." But instead, from its beginning, it has been another tool for suppressing free speech and political dissent in the country. According to Law Minister Anisul Huq, as of January 31 this year, more than 7,000 cases have been lodged under this law since its enactment. This means that, on average, 4.5 cases are filed under the DSA each day. The number of people sued and arrested has not been released by the government, but could be speculated to be three to four times the number of cases. This clearly indicates that the DSA has been weaponised to intimidate and harass dissenters.

In more recent years, there have been quite a few instances of serious security breaches that one would have thought could not happen following the lessons learnt from the Bangladesh Bank heist. The latest in this series of shocking failures was a 38 hour shutdown of our NID server and trouble with a few other critical networks following threats from hackers, allegedly from outside Bangladesh. Before this, there was a breach into more than 50 million Bangladeshis' personal information, which remained unnoticed by the local authorities until a South African cybersecurity expert, Viktor Markopoulos, went public with the information (following weeks of waiting) to draw the attention of the authorities responsible for keeping the data secure.

After nearly five years of resisting the demand for scrapping the DSA, both from within the country and from international development partners and rights groups, the government

has now decided to replace the law. Unfortunately, the publication of its replacement, named the Cyber Security Act (CSA), is already another disappointment.

The most contentious provisions of the DSA – which have been viewed as a harsh deterrent to free speech – Articles 21 and 28, have been retained practically unaltered, save for a nominal reduction of sentences. Provisions related to the authority for removal of content, search and seizure of devices, and arrest of suspects without warrants given to law enforcement agencies also remain unchanged. Rights groups have been alleging that such abuses have inflicted great suffering on thousands of activists and innocent citizens, not to mention they caused the death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed under custody.

Despite the reduction of sentences and allowing of bails on a few of the offences which were previously non-bailable, experts have pointed out that the unchanged vagueness and the wider scope of the Act's application will likely be the most worrying aspects of the proposed CSA. They have argued that the retention of about nine articles from the DSA will continue to impede independent journalism and freedom of expression and opinion. Changing the name of the law and the implementing agency perhaps symbolises all that is proposed by the government: a simple relabelling of a

tool of suppression.

Ministers have said innumerable times that the DSA is not very different from that of most other countries. Some of them even questioned whether digital regulations in Western countries were actually less repressive. In an interview on May 2, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told US broadcaster Voice of America's Bangla service that the digital security law does not exist only in Bangladesh, but in all other countries of the world. Furthermore, the PM said that her government was looking into the contents included in the digital laws of other countries, such as the US, the UK, and in European countries. She also added that if it is discovered that there are punishments in the laws of these other countries which are tougher, then those sections in our law, too, will be reformed.

The draft CSA does not hint, however, that the government has examined relevant laws in either the US or the UK. Firstly, under the First Amendment of the US constitution, its citizens enjoy almost unfettered freedom of expression and opinion, be it online or offline. The United Kingdom, prior to January 1, 2021, was a member of the European Union and hence still follows EU principles and legislations in regulating cyberspace, especially in relation to the protection of citizens' rights. There are a number of national legislations in the EU regarding digital security, but all of them are aligned with the Convention on Cybercrime adopted in 2001 (otherwise known as the Budapest Convention) which has been ratified by 68 countries. Currently, negotiations are in progress to improve it further and make it a global charter. The Budapest Convention states that signatories be: "Mindful of the need to ensure a proper balance between the interests of law enforcement and respect for fundamental human rights

as enshrined in the 1950 Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the 1966 United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other applicable international human rights treaties, which reaffirm the right of everyone to hold opinions without interference, as well as the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, and the rights concerning the respect for privacy."

Notably, in the digital security laws of other countries, the independence of law enforcement agencies (including police) is such that they can be guided by the law, not the whims of politicians. These countries also have powerful watchdogs which work free from government interference. With fast-changing technology, lawmakers are under pressure to update their legislations more frequently and, as a result, the EU enacted a new Digital Services Act (DSA) last year to make companies more transparent and accountable in relation to protecting citizens' rights (not the political ideology of a party or of the politicians in power). A similar legislation, the Online Safety Bill, is currently being considered by the UK parliament.

In a world where most democracies reform their cyber laws to provide better protection for their citizens' freedom of expression and right to privacy, Bangladesh is moving in the opposite direction and instead criminalising dissent and critical views. As a result, the state is increasingly infringing upon citizens' privacy. Relabelling the DSA as CSA is not the answer to making the law compliant with human rights standards. Our authorities must draw lessons from democracies.



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Globalisation for a secure future

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For having one of the world's fastest-growing economies over the last two decades, the World Bank stated that Bangladesh has an "inspiring story of growth and development." Globalisation has played a key role in the country's rapid economic progress. Yet, current data indicates the country remains among the least globalised. Expanding and diversifying Bangladesh's international flows could help fuel the next stage of its economic development.

The DHL Global Connectedness Index, developed by our research team at the New York University Stern School of Business, measures countries' levels of globalisation based on the size and geography of their international trade, capital, information, and population flows. The index shows that Bangladesh has strengthened its economic ties with the rest of the world over the past two decades, but that it still has a large untapped potential to grow its international activity. Bangladesh currently ranks 147th out of 171 countries in the index, but its level of economic development, size, and

proximity to foreign markets (how close it is to other major economies) imply that it could rank closer to 100.

Trade has been the largest driver of Bangladesh's rise in global connectedness over the last 20 years, fuelled by the growth of its export-oriented ready-made garments (RMG) industry. However, the country's exports as a percentage of its GDP peaked in 2012 at 20 percent and fell all the way to 10 percent by 2020, before rebounding to 13 percent in 2022. Cross-country comparisons imply that Bangladesh has especially large potential to grow its international trade. Among 171 countries, it ranks only 167th on the depth of its participation in international trade.

While trade is only one aspect of globalisation, three challenges suggest a primary focus on trade in globalisation strategy for Bangladesh. First, the country's limited export diversification, with RMG accounting for more than 80 percent of exports, elevates its sensitivity to industry-specific risks and suggests untapped opportunities in other areas. Second, limited geographic diversification also poses risks, which in the case of Bangladesh are elevated by the fact that the country straddles a geopolitical divide: 80 percent of exports go to Europe and North America, while China is the largest source of imports (26 percent of the total), some of which are used as inputs for the country's exports. Third, Bangladesh's expected "graduation" from the UN's list of least developed

countries (LDC) in 2026, while an accomplishment to celebrate, implies the loss of preferential access to export markets, especially in Europe.

These challenges are even clearer when considered relative to Vietnam, Bangladesh's closest rival in the RMG industry. Vietnam exports a much broader variety of products, and its exports are diversified across Asia, Europe, and North America. Moreover, while Bangladesh faces the threat of losing preferential market access, Vietnam has secured its access to European markets via the European Union-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement.

The most direct path to securing and expanding access to export markets is for Bangladesh to enter into new trade agreements. The country has agreements with countries producing only 37 percent of world GDP (compared to 93 percent for Vietnam). However, negotiating trade agreements is only one of several steps Bangladesh can take. A more far-reaching strategy would be to deepen the nation's participation in global value chains (GVCs). GVCs split production up across countries, enabling them to specialise in the specific production steps for which they are most competitive.

A recent joint report by the Asian Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank highlighted that Bangladesh's participation rates in GVCs are significantly below the global average, pinpointing substantial scope for growth. The share of its

trade that involves participation in GVCs was roughly 25 percent in 2021, compared to a worldwide average of 46 percent.

Growing global connectedness beyond trade could also help expand Bangladesh's participation in GVCs and accelerate its economic growth. Foreign direct investment can help boost exports and build capabilities to compete in new industries. Digital information flows also support trade growth, with e-commerce serving as a powerful driver for exports. And population flows, such as migration, can expand trade by building up interpersonal networks between countries and support economic development via the remittances that emigrants send back home.

All four categories of flows can be supported by both domestic and international policy choices. Domestic policy matters because it is the attractiveness of a country's domestic business environment that draws the interest of foreign companies and investors. International policies, in areas such as tariffs and trade facilitation, investment regulations, and visa requirements, complement domestic policies, affecting how much of a country's international potential is realised.

Bangladesh is among the 10 countries worldwide with the largest gap between its current globalisation and the level predicted. Closing this gap could contribute powerfully to the country's future economic development.