

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## One PK down, how many more to go?

### We must rectify the system that protects money launderers

In a landmark judgment, a Dhaka court has finally sentenced PK Halder to 22 years in jail for money laundering and the possession of illegal wealth. In a country where money launderers are essentially given free rein to do as they please, we welcome the verdict against a man who has swindled at least Tk 3,500 crore out of the country over a decade – and left four non-banking financial institutions (NBFI) in ruins in the process. We also wholeheartedly agree with the observation of the court that money launderers are the enemies of the country and the nation. The question, however, remains: why are we doing so little to name, shame and take action against them? As we draw the curtains on the crimes of one man, we must ask, how many more PK Halders are out there looting state institutions and funnelling money through various nefarious means right under the noses of our regulators?

There can be no denying that PK Halder – despite his cunning and ingenuity in amassing such huge amounts of wealth illegally – was not an exception. An estimated \$12-15 billion is smuggled out of the country every year, according to Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). Meanwhile, the Global Financial Integrity (GFI), a Washington DC based think tank that focuses on illicit financial flows, suggests that the amount of money lost annually to deliberate trade misinvoicing could exceed \$14 billion by 2030. Over the past decade, despite numerous promises and policy changes, there has been a glaring lack of substantial progress in curbing money laundering. Lists of defaulters have failed to materialise, investigations have been stalled, and wings of investigators have been clipped. In fact, money launderers with political ties have been protected and pampered by the powers that be, time and time again. In the process, the integrity of our financial system has been severely compromised.

The consequences of unchecked money laundering are not merely financial. It erodes public trust in institutions, and the wealth syphoned off through money laundering could otherwise have been invested in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and other areas that would benefit our society as a whole. In essence, as the court has highlighted in its verdict, it is a betrayal of the people and the nation.

Effective anti-money-laundering measures require a concerted effort from all stakeholders – government agencies, law enforcement, financial institutions, and the judiciary. It is imperative that our government takes immediate and decisive action to rectify the situation. This includes strengthening regulatory frameworks, enhancing inter-agency cooperation, and ensuring that justice is swift and severe for those involved in money laundering.

The sentencing of PK Halder is a step in the right direction. But we must now begin the more difficult task of identifying and addressing the regulatory failures, inefficiencies and collusions that facilitated such huge sums of money to leave the country undetected in the first place. It should serve as a catalyst for comprehensive reform and a renewed commitment to eradicating money laundering from our society.

## Judiciary must be above politicisation

### We need concrete actions, not mere acknowledgements

Chief Justice Obaidul Hassan has recently said that the judiciary and the courts of the country should be above any manner of politicisation. Speaking at an event on Sunday, he also said that, during his tenure, he is going to work on making the judiciary corruption-free, modernising the system, and making it accessible to the general public. There can be no denying the importance of a free and impartial judicial system in upholding people's right to justice in a democratic system.

His predecessor, former Chief Justice Hasan Foez Siddique, had also stressed how the courts have to be kept at a safe distance from political ideologies and rifts, adding that independence of the judiciary is essential for establishing participatory democracy, the rule of law, and the rights of the weaker sections of society. Sadly, our legal system has long been afflicted with a number of ailments, including systemic flaws, legal loopholes and the corrupt interplay of money and power. As we have seen time and again, our courts are not immune to such influences, which impede the pursuit of justice.

While we feel hopeful by Chief Justice Obaidul Hassan's assertion that a judicial administration should be independent, transparent and congruent with the idea of social justice, we look forward to seeing some meaningful actions following his remarks. After all, words are only good on paper – no change will come unless effective measures are put in place to stamp out corrupt and partisan elements from our judicial system. To this end, mechanisms to ensure judicial accountability must be strengthened so that everyone involved with the justice system – ranging from investigating officers to prosecutors to even judges – is transparent and impartial in performing their duties. Our judiciary should be equipped to withstand any and all influence, no matter where it is coming from, and treat every citizen equally under the law of the land. The state, too, must work to this end, help uphold the constitution and ensure that the judiciary faces no disruption and interference from the executive branch. The judiciary must strive to become a beacon of hope for those who seek justice, especially the ordinary people.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Caution needed to manage RNPP

We are now known as the 33rd nation to use nuclear fuel to meet our energy demands. However, the world has seen nuclear disasters in countries much more developed and better equipped than Bangladesh. Although the technology has improved significantly, reducing the risk of such explosions on nuclear sites, I hope we will be fully prepared to prevent any accidents.

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Madhupur, Tangail

# Soft openings, hard politics



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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BADIUZZAMAN BAY

As the political landscape heats up in anticipation of the general election, the ruling Awami League seems to be pulling out all the stops. One outcome of this strategy is: a term mostly used by businesses to slowly roll out products or services is now part of our politics, or more specifically, electoral politics.

Meet soft openings.

On October 7, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina soft-launched the third terminal of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka. Reportedly, about 90 percent work of the extension has been completed, with it slated to be fully operational at the end of next year after the completion of systems integration and calibration. Although some services are already available, and more will be before it opens, the terminal is still a year or so away from being passenger-ready. So why has the inauguration been brought forward?

You could say this is how soft or partial openings work. Corporations, by testing a new offering with a select group of customers, use the opportunity to improve their product and assess possible responses to a hard launch on a larger scale. But the actual reason in this case, according to a *Prothom Alo* report published last week, is the approach of the general election.

Besides the third terminal, the Awami League government has a host of other mega projects – either nearly complete or nearly ready for a phased roll-out – lined up for launches during October. The objective is more celebration than inauguration. First among them was the official handover of the first batch of uranium to the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant on October 5, which marked a historic moment for Bangladesh as it became the 33rd nation in the world to be using nuclear fuel. The plant itself, it should be noted, is still some distance away from being in a position to supply energy to the national grid.

In the coming days, we are about to see the inauguration/celebration of the commencement of train services on the Dhaka-Bhanga rail route via Padma Bridge (October 10), extension of the Dhaka metro rail from Agargaon to Motijheel (October 29), and opening of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel under the Karnaphuli



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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

river in Chattogram (October 28). Some 140 bridges and 12 overpasses will also be launched simultaneously on October 22. The Chattogram-Cox's Bazar railway route is another possible entrant in this list.

These inaugural ceremonies seem strategically timed to precede the potential announcement of the election schedule in the first week of November, after which any launch of development projects would be considered a violation of the electoral code of conduct. Clearly, Awami League wants to use the vibe generated by these launches to soft-launch its own election bid. The hope is that these impressive projects, covering various sectors including energy, transportation, and infrastructure, will create a sense of accomplishment and optimism among party loyalists and undecided voters, if there are any. The ruling party also intends to position BNP's ongoing movement for the government's resignation as a sign of its failure and lack of moral

justification, juxtaposing this with its own developmental successes, thereby trying to shift the narrative.

At the soft launch of the third terminal, the PM seemed more than willing to share her government's achievements as well as an ambitious vision to build the next international aviation hub in Bangladesh. It was almost as if she was reading from

battle will be fought and won eventually, with both parties locking horns on the streets and sizing each other up, BNP with its newfound determination and a growing and increasingly emboldened supporter base and Awami League with its bottomless arsenal of legal and administrative tools. At a recent press conference, the prime minister blasted those casting doubt on the present

their next election manifesto. Expect to hear similar gloating and pledging in the other events as well. There is little doubt that the ruling party's achievements in infrastructure and development will once again be the key flank of its re-election bid.

This is, however, unlikely to deter BNP which is apprehensive, perhaps not without reason, of any talk of development from its rival as it sees it as a ruse to deflect attention from the more critical issues of concern, such as the ever-shrinking space for democratic practices in Bangladesh, disenfranchisement, astronomical prices of commodities, etc. It is especially concerned about the government's suppression of its protests and harassment of party activists. By all indications, BNP may intensify its one-point street movement in October, making it a critical month for the opposition as well.

Meet hard politics.  
If past trends hold, this is where the

electoral system – surprisingly to some who had expected a more conciliatory tone amid all the pressure from Bangladesh's Western allies for a free and fair election. There was no hint of any dialogue on the issue of election-time government either.

How do you juxtapose this uncompromising approach with the apparent positivity surrounding the soft openings? Any show of confidence on the part of the government seems to belie deep-seated tensions about how effective those grand events and gestures will really be in swaying voters or ensuring its continued grip on power. Regardless of what happens in the coming months, however, Awami League appears set on pursuing a mix of soft and hard approaches while BNP, in the absence of alternatives, is left to pursue hard approaches only.

It is a high-stakes political showdown that will ultimately be decided at the ballot box, if a fair and participatory election can indeed be held.

## COMMUNITY HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

# Our unsung health heroes



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In the remote corners of Bangladesh, where access to healthcare is a distant dream for many, there are unsung heroes quietly making a difference. These are the Community Health Care Providers (CHCPs), individuals who dedicate themselves to providing essential healthcare services, often facing immense challenges.

For a bit of a background: in 1978, Bangladesh committed to achieving "Health for All" by 2000 through Primary Health Care, as per The Declaration of Alma-Ata. However, by 1996, it became clear that the efforts to achieve these goals were falling short due to limited access to primary healthcare services in rural areas and insufficient community engagement. To address these challenges, the government initiated a bold plan in 1996, establishing Community Clinic (CC) to bring healthcare to approximately 6,000 rural citizens. And CHCPs are the lifeline of these community clinics.

The selection of CHCPs is a rigorous government-led process, involving written exams at government colleges and viva assessments at the Civil Surgeon's office. This guarantees that only qualified and dedicated individuals are chosen for this vital role. They undergo three months of basic training provided by the

government, which equips them with the skills and knowledge necessary to provide essential healthcare services to their communities. But CHCPs are not just healthcare providers; they are community members themselves, deeply invested in the wellbeing of their neighbours. They work tirelessly to provide a range of essential healthcare services to their communities, including primary healthcare, antenatal care, postnatal care, adolescent counselling, Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI) sessions, referral of serious patients, registration of new couples, maintaining health records of children under the age of five, and providing family planning counselling.

CHCPs serving in the challenging landscapes of Bangladesh must also grapple with a unique set of obstacles. Those we interviewed operate in hard-to-reach areas, often in wards or unions that are not easily accessible. The rugged terrain, characterised by hills, rivers, and/or dense forests, presents formidable challenges to healthcare access. As one CHCP aptly put it, "During monsoon, reaching some villages becomes nearly impossible. But we can't let that deter us; people depend on us for their healthcare needs."

In these remote areas, local residents

often approach CHCPs, requesting specific medicines regardless of medical necessity. "Local people come to us, mention the name of a medicine, and ask us to provide it, whether they need that type of medicine or not. If we do not provide it, they blame us," shared one CHCP. Refusing these requests can lead to blame falling on the CHCPs, adding an emotional burden to their already challenging roles.

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Furthermore, CHCPs are often compelled to take on tasks beyond their training. Despite lacking vaccination training, they are tasked with EPI coverage. This responsibility forces them to make difficult choices, such as temporarily closing the CC or calling in additional staff to manage both roles

simultaneously. In flood-prone regions with inadequate road infrastructure, a CC may be forced to shut down for up to six months. Floodwater renders the roads impassable, preventing CHCPs from reaching the CC and community members from accessing essential healthcare services. Infrastructure, particularly the rudimentary road network, also becomes treacherous during the monsoon season. "Addressing road, electricity, and infrastructure issues will help me serve 30-40 patients daily," stated another CHCP, underscoring the importance of overcoming these hurdles to improve healthcare accessibility.

In the hill tracts, CCs lack basic facilities such as toilets and tube wells, leaving both service providers and receivers struggling. Safety concerns loom large as well, with no nearby localities, leaving CHCPs vulnerable.

Financial struggles are another harsh aspect of life for many CHCPs, making it challenging to meet their own needs, let alone provide continuous healthcare services.

Community engagement faces hurdles, with CC committee meetings often seeing low attendance unless there's compensation or food provided. "Our community group is good, but the problem is that people do not want to come to the meetings," one CHCP observed. This sentiment reflects the challenge of community engagement in these remote areas.

Still, in the words of one CHCP, "We face hardships, but we keep going because we know our communities depend on us." Their service in the face of adversity is a testament to their strength and the criticality of the role they play in delivering healthcare to the farthest reaches of Bangladesh.