

IO report on ASI Emadul simply doesn't add up

Can the police be trusted to carry out an impartial investigation?

We are horrified, though not altogether surprised, that a police investigation has cleared ASI Emadul Haque – who ran over and killed two people while driving a seized bus in the capital's Gulistan in December 2021 – of any wrongdoing. The investigation officer, in his final report submitted to a Dhaka court on September 24, stated that there was no evidence that Emadul was driving recklessly, and that he had actually driven the vehicle in “good faith” to ensure the smooth flow of traffic. The police would have us believe that the incident happened as a result of a faulty engine and brakes.

The IO further claims that the ASI had taken control of the bus when its driver fled the scene after causing an accident. However, two dozen witnesses had confirmed to *The Daily Star* at the time that the ASI had forced the driver out of an empty bus before driving it himself, after which he swerved violently, ploughed through a crowd, and killed two people, injuring two others, in addition to damaging vehicles and the guard rail of a footpath. Even if we accept the IO's narrative, that there was something wrong with the bus, there is still no justification for the ASI taking over the vehicle, particularly as the incident was not even under the jurisdiction of his police station in Paltan, and given that he had not informed the concerned DMP Wari division before doing so. And even if the bus *had* been abandoned by the bus driver (which, as we know from eyewitness accounts, is false), why did Emadul not have it towed, as is the standard practice, but instead drive it without checking whether it was safe to do so in the first place, given that it had already caused an accident?

No matter how the police try to spin it, the facts simply don't add up. If the ASI really did take control of the bus in “good faith,” it may clear him of murder. But can he still not be charged for causing death by negligence under Section 304A, given that he had not followed due process and had taken unnecessary and unjustified risks in driving the bus?

What is truly alarming in this particular case is the clear bias that the police have shown in conducting the investigation, highlighting the illogic of tasking the same law enforcement to investigate allegations of crimes by one of its members. We have seen time and time again how cases of torture and extrajudicial killings have fallen through the cracks because the investigations were not conducted by an independent body. Under the circumstances, we urge the court to intervene in the matter, assign another law enforcement agency, and ensure that an impartial investigation is carried out. This is the least we can do to ensure justice for Shukur Mahmud and Raisul Kabir Tusher, who were killed that fateful day in 2021.

Mental health is a public health issue

Concerted efforts needed to address the gap in services

Across Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of citizens silently suffer from serious mental health illnesses without treatment or diagnosis. Last year, a total of 582 students in the country died by suicide, according to a study by Aachol Foundation. When reports of such tragic cases come about, our first response as a society is to offer sympathy and scour through details of individual lives to find some reasoning behind the incidents. But the cause of such tragedies lies in the fact that mental health is still largely misunderstood as a personal issue, with a lingering social stigma in seeking help. As we observe World Mental Health Day on October 10 every year, we must recognise that the mental health crisis in the nation isn't just about the unhappiness of individuals. It's about our society, economy, and the gruelling shortcomings of our medical establishment.

In the government budget for FY 2022-23, mental healthcare was mentioned as part of an “In addition...” bit, with a plan to expand Pabna Mental Hospital to international standards. Yet, the specialised facility remains alarmingly inadequate, being unchanged for decades and having only 500 beds. According to a recent report by this daily, the Pabna hospital has been failing to offer proper services due to a lack of manpower and equipment. Only 14 doctors are working, while 17 posts have long been vacant! The abysmal state of the most reliable mental health hospital in the nation only shows that those who suffer from chronic mental health issues are victims of a healthcare system that is simply not designed to meet their needs.

Last year, the country undertook its first ever National Mental Health Policy to decrease suicide rates through prevention and awareness programmes. However, the Bangladesh Psychiatrists Association has highlighted how the policy does not recognise the significance of mental health. We urge the health ministry to overhaul the Pabna Mental Hospital and start treating mental health with the same priority as any other physical illness. A rigorous plan must be developed to allocate adequate human and financial resources for district hospitals and upazila health complexes, as well as training for community health workers, to respond to mental health emergencies. Furthermore, to address the prevalence of mental health issues among the youth, educational institutions should accommodate psychological health counselling. As citizens battle with persistent socioeconomic issues in the nation today – such as increasing income inequality and unemployment – it has never been more urgent to take mental health seriously.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Make foot over-bridges safer

As night falls in Dhaka, foot over-bridges turn into gathering spots for miscreants. Many on social media have recently reported being robbed or otherwise threatened on these bridges. As such, strict patrolling of these bridges is essential. Law enforcers should collaborate with community groups to address the issue comprehensively. These vital urban structures must serve their intended function, instead of becoming hotspots of criminal activity.

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What if Khaleda Zia's health takes a fatal turn?



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The press conference held on October 9, 2023 by the medical board responsible for Khaleda Zia's treatment at Evercare Hospital is deeply concerning. During the conference, doctors conveyed that the health of the BNP chairperson is in an extremely critical condition, and that they have exhausted all available treatment options within Bangladesh. Additionally, doctors emphasised the inadequacy of the treatment she has been receiving locally.

The medical team has consistently recommended that Khaleda Zia be allowed to seek immediate, advanced medical care abroad. Her family has made multiple appeals to the government, seeking permission for her to travel abroad for better treatment. However, the government's response has been marked by a combination of vindictiveness, double standards, and political immaturity.

In the most recent instance, when Khaleda's health deteriorated, her brother Shamim Iskander applied to the home ministry urgently requesting her permanent release and approval for overseas medical treatment.

Regrettably, the law minister stipulated that Khaleda Zia, even in her critical condition, must return to jail before any consideration, which includes the necessity for her to appeal once more. Furthermore, on September 30, PM Sheikh Hasina introduced a new condition, requiring Khaleda to appear in court as part of the process. Subsequently, on October 1, the government rejected the plea from Khaleda's family, citing legal grounds. Things took a more distasteful turn when the prime minister remarked two days later about Khaleda's age and the possible future consequences.

Legal experts have already affirmed that whatever legal obstacles exist can easily be overcome. Their argument is that Khaleda Zia was granted temporary release via an executive order under Section 401(l) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and, similarly, she can be allowed to travel abroad through an executive order. All that is required is the government's willingness to act. This, unfortunately, seems to be missing.

To better understand the legal context, let's review Section 401(l) of the CrPC, which states: “When



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Is there no precedent of releasing convicted individuals and granting them permission to travel abroad?

any person has been sentenced to punishment for an offence, the Government may at any time without conditions or upon any conditions which the person sentenced accepts, suspend the execution of his sentence or remit the whole or any part of the punishment to which he has been sentenced.”

The entire ordeal surrounding the denial of Khaleda Zia's request to travel abroad has been plagued with questions from the very beginning. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government temporarily released Khaleda Zia from incarceration on March 25, 2020, via an executive order, with conditions that restricted her to her Gulshan residence and prohibited her from leaving the country. It's important to note that Khaleda Zia was already seriously ill at that time, and her release was granted due to her deteriorating health.

Moreover, it may be rare, but is there no precedent of releasing convicted individuals and granting them permission to travel abroad?

Indeed, one notable example is the case of ruling party MP Haji Selim,

who faced a corruption conviction but was allowed to seek medical treatment abroad.

To understand the government's double standards, it's essential to delve deeper into Haji Selim's case. Despite being convicted by the court in 2008, he didn't end up in jail until 2022. And shortly thereafter, he was released on bail. In stark contrast, Khaleda Zia was

agree to participate in the upcoming parliamentary election under the current government in exchange for her being allowed to receive treatment abroad.

While one can certainly criticise Khaleda Zia for her mistakes during her nearly four-decades-long political career, it's also undeniable that she has made significant contributions

to the betterment of the people of Bangladesh. It is a matter of hope that the doctors believe time has not run out yet. The unanimous decision of the medical board is to proceed with the TIPS procedure and arrange for a liver transplant at an advanced multidisciplinary centre abroad. The way the AL-led government has been handling Khaleda Zia's treatment issue lacks political courtesy and reeks of vengeance. This sets a perilous precedent for the future of Bangladeshi politics. We mustn't forget how the attempted assassination of Sheikh Hasina on August 21, 2004 vitiated the political culture of Bangladesh, leaving behind a legacy of deep-seated animosity that endures to this day. If the government's obstinacy leads to a fatal outcome for Khaleda, it will only further degrade Bangladesh's politics and pose even greater challenges for the incumbents to navigate the consequent crisis. The government should seize this opportunity and promptly arrange for Khaleda's treatment abroad, as recommended by the medical board.

Another pertinent example is that of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal leader ASM Abdur Rab, who was permitted to seek medical treatment in then West Germany while serving a prison sentence imposed by a martial law court.

One may wonder why the government is so adamant in preventing the mortally ill Khaleda from seeking medical treatment abroad. The answer may be that Khaleda Zia reportedly instructed her party members not to

Bangladesh's tragic project implementation record



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It shook Bangladesh to the core when, on August 15 last year, a tragic – bizarre and avoidable – construction accident killed five, including two children, at the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Project site on the capital's busy Airport Road. An under-capacity crane – with an ill-trained operator at the wheels – carrying a viaduct segment toppled over, and the massive concrete block dropped on top of a passenger vehicle. A probe committee quickly pointed fingers at the contractor, their unlicensed crane operator, and the project's security. But what led to this unfortunate incident? Who was responsible for ensuring that only equipment of adequate capacity would be deployed? That operators are licensed, certified, trained, and experienced? Moreover, why is this project still lingering for 11 years, when the original plan was only for four? And why has its cost more than doubled?

Bangladesh has deservedly earned global respect for the successful implementation of the Padma Bridge. But, at the same time, there are numerous projects which are suffering chronic delays and cost escalations, jeopardising its odyssey to becoming a developed nation.

The Daily Star reported on October

3 that thirteen railway projects are facing up to a 260 percent cost overrun, taking up to 9.5 years longer to finish than originally planned. On July 13, the paper pointed out that the Modern Food Storage Facilities Project, commencing in 2014 to build eight silos, has seen only 50 percent progress. The silos are still non-existent, though the cost has gone up by 86 percent. Last year, a parliamentary committee expressed deep resentment over repeated deadline extensions and cost increases in almost all local government projects. The World Bank's Bangladesh Country Partnership Framework for FY2023-27 highlighted chronic project implementation delays, a complex maze of project approval processes, and an overall lack of capabilities in related disciplines. Between 2016 and 2021, Bangladesh's average project implementation period was more than seven years, an abysmal performance by any standard.

For a nation that is steadily moving towards gaining middle-income status and aspires to become a developed country by 2041, all these pose a serious risk of getting into what economists call a middle-income trap. Many nations which fell into it

faced dead-ends and failed to make the transition from resource-driven growth with low-cost labour to being driven by higher-value production. To avoid being in such a situation, Bangladesh must move up the Global Value Chain (GVC) by improving its project implementation capacity.

Bangladesh has already become a development miracle as it transformed itself from a “basket case” to one of the world's fastest-growing economies within five decades since its independence. Its economy has grown steadily, racking up an average annual GDP growth of 6.4 percent between 2016 and 2021. With a GDP per capita of around \$2,800 in 2022, Bangladesh is on track to become an upper-middle-income country (with a GDP per capita of at least \$4,000) by 2031. Proving its resilience, the country has coped well during natural disasters, such as major floods (in 1988, 1998, 2004, and 2007), storm surges (Sidr in 2007 and Aila in 2009), and has absorbed global shocks such as the 2007-2009 worldwide financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, according to a report by Boston Consulting Group.

But, according to a report by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, unless Bangladesh shifts from a low-cost, labour-based economy to one with higher technical and management skills, there is a real risk of us falling into a middle-income trap. To sustain the momentum after transitioning to middle-income status, Bangladesh must switch to technology- and productivity-driven competitiveness. For this, better project management and implementation skills would be essential.

This means the country must offer adequate learning and training opportunities to young professionals, particularly in engineering. Bangladesh has no shortage of knowledgeable practitioners and academics. Yet, their experience, knowledge, and wisdom are not being utilised for the betterment of aspiring project managers. Currently, most Bangladeshi universities teach project management from a theoretical perspective. This is because few textbooks or reference materials focus on the practical aspects of project management and implementation in the local context. The available books, written by professionals or researchers in other countries, do not address issues characteristic of the Bangladesh situation, thus seeming mostly theoretical to local students.

Bangladesh must fill in this critical gap if it wants to develop project managers who can deliver projects effectively and efficiently, without time and cost overruns. Those studying project management should not have to suffer from a lack of source materials that offer insight into real-life scenarios, the big picture of different thematic sectors, and the complexities of the project implementation cycle in Bangladesh.

All projects should be implemented with Padma Bridge-like precision or better. This project, although a point of pride, also faced delays and cost overruns. Luckily, those were managed professionally and by following internationally accepted standards and procedures. There is no reason why Bangladesh can't do the same for every major government project.