

A new threat to citizens' privacy

New system of phone surveillance raises alarm ahead of the election

With the election mere months away, we are alarmed by the revelation that a new system of phone surveillance that provides precise information about the locations of mobile phone users may soon be added to the government's arsenal of surveillance weapons. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, the system, called Integrated Lawful Interception System (ILIS), can be operational as early as November, enabling law enforcement and intelligence agencies to get six months' worth of geo-location data from phones. It is said to be an improvement over the current system that can track the general whereabouts of a person but not their exact location; the new system offers more accurate, mass-level tracking capabilities using artificial intelligence.

This is, we must say, alarming for a number of reasons. First, the cloak of legality – note its name and also existing legislation surrounding interception for criminal investigation purposes – makes such systems vulnerable to abuse by government agencies and political actors, if history is any indication. The legal argument for tracking location using phones, not just one's calls/conversations, is also quite tenuous. Second, such technology are typically meant for tracking individuals associated with criminal activities, not for mass surveillance of the public, which is what the government may do with the opposition parties intensifying their one-point movement for its resignation. Third, the costs of installing the ILIS will apparently have to be borne by mobile network operators, which will eventually fall on the customers.

If that is the case, we must ask, what are we paying for, really? It goes without saying that the implications of such breaches of privacy are profound. As a columnist of this daily asked when the home minister first announced the acquisition of the ILIS early this year: "How can breaching citizens' privacy be lawful?" The government claims it wants to thwart "anti-state" and "anti-government" conspiracies using such surveillance tools – of which it already has plenty. But since when is being anti-government a crime?

The modern era has seen the misuse of such technology by governments worldwide. But it's crucial to strike a balance between ensuring security and respecting individual privacy and democratic principles, especially with the general election approaching. The clarity of purpose is as important as sticking to the purpose – and that, for the government, must not be silencing dissent and weakening opposition parties. We urge the government to ensure transparency and accountability in its use of any surveillance mechanism.

An alarming picture of nursing colleges

Govt must ensure they abide by the rules always

We are concerned at the way private nursing colleges are mushrooming in the capital without following the rules set by the government. According to a report, there are around 50 such colleges in four areas of Dhaka alone – Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Dhanmondi and Moghbazar. Most of them do not have the necessary infrastructure such as academic buildings, hostels for students, required number of teachers, or adequate learning materials. While, as per rules, a college should have its own hospital (consisting of 100 beds) or at least an arrangement with a hospital where its students can practice, only a handful of colleges currently have such facilities. For instance, out of 10 nursing institutions in Mirpur, only two have their own hospitals. Moreover, often their student evaluation systems are also problematic.

The question is: why did the Bangladesh Nursing and Midwifery Council (BNMC) register these colleges without ensuring the capability expected of them? How are they still operational when they cannot even meet the basic needs of students and are failing to abide by the relevant law passed in 2015? Clearly, most of them are being run purely for commercial purposes. There are allegations that some BNMC officials have been giving approval to substandard institutions in exchange for money. Reportedly, there is also a syndicate working behind this.

Over the past two decades, nursing degrees have become quite popular in Bangladesh because of the increasing job opportunities for nurses in many private hospitals and clinics. Students are enrolling in these colleges with high hopes, but they seldom get the learning environment essential for becoming a good nurse. That is why, 80 percent of the students failed in the recently held nursing licensing examination, mandatory for all nursing and midwifery degree holders to enter their professional life.

We, therefore, urge the government to take action against the nursing institutions operating without proper facilities. If needed, the authorities should consider cancelling their registration. Only institutions that meet all necessary requirements to enroll and properly educate students should be allowed to run their activities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stay hydrated during commutes

The traffic situation in the capital is worsening by the day. People have to sit in traffic for hours no matter which time of day it is. As frustrating as this is, it also causes many to feel exhausted. Therefore, it is crucial for commuters to not only carry water bottles and dry food, but also for city authorities to set up more "water ATM booths" around the city. The horrendous traffic robs us of our time, but it need not take our health, too.

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Talking is the only way out

THE STREET VIEW

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Any person would readily name the same two things if asked what the most pressing issues are right now in Bangladesh. The economic crisis comes first. But the second, and more perennial problem we are faced with, is the political deadlock between the two arch-rivals. In a way, such a deadlock is nothing new – it is the oldest theme in Bangladesh's nascent multiparty democratic politics. Over the span of 30 years or so, the script has remained so consistent as to have now become largely predictable.

Understandably, this rivalry becomes most intense ahead of the ultimate political showdown: the national election. The only means to resolve this impasse appears to be a dialogue between the political quarters. At any rate, this is the preferred avenue to a peaceful and constructive resolution for the civil society, foreign friends, and for the general people. But while the parties have sat down together on several occasions in the past, the outcome has always been a net-zero in terms of coming to an agreement or understanding.

The issue of a dialogue has once again come to the fore as the US pre-election assessment mission presented its five recommendations, stating that moderating rhetoric and engaging in open and substantive dialogue on key election issues, protecting freedom of expression, and ensuring an open civic space where dissent is respected can lead to credible, inclusive, participatory, and non-violent elections.

But soon after, the initiative for holding talks saw its fate pretty much sealed as the ruling Awami League's general secretary (who is also the party's spokesperson) Obaidul Quader said that dialogue may be considered only if the BNP withdraws its conditions, which include the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, dissolution of parliament, resignation of the Election Commission, and holding polls under



a non-party caretaker government.

A day later, BNP came back at Quader, with the party's Secretary-General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir questioning whether the government was constitutionally legitimate, suggesting that it was in power illegally by dint of the 15th amendment: "You [AL] have to prove it. I am saying you're not constitutionally legitimate."

We know only too well that when dialogue fails, confrontation becomes inevitable. And, once again, we are faced with the possibility of political violence leading up to the national election. Although the BNP has been waging protests peacefully for more than a year to press home its demand for an election under a non-partisan government, there have been warnings of tougher and more vigorous demonstrations following Durga Puja.

Obviously, our political parties are more focused on their own issues than on issues of people's interest: peace and stability. But they must realise that the country has not faced such a multifaceted crisis in the recent past – certainly not before any election since 1991, which was when we began our journey towards being a modern

practices. It further vindicates the BNP's claim that the government is trying to hold lopsided polls by driving the opposition away from the election scene, even though AL leaders have been saying that there will be a free and fair election. The arrests of opposition leaders and the thousands of lawsuits being filed



COLLAGE: TEENI AND TUNI

democracy.

There are alarming economic conditions, the Russia-Ukraine war, sanctions against Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies, visa restrictions on individuals obstructing the course of democracy, an emerging global world order, and myriad conflicting geopolitical interests that must be balanced, straddled, side-stepped, and negotiated like puddles and ditches – all this while as we hurtle towards a national election.

Unfortunately, we see political division widening at a time when national unity is of utmost importance in order for us to overcome these crises.

On that note, the arrest of Shahiduddin Chowdhury Anne, while the US election assessment team was visiting Bangladesh, will no doubt send unfavourable signals and be considered a barrier to democratic

against them will surely help solidify the BNP's claim.

Against this backdrop, parties must be able to feel the pulse of the public and come forward with an attitude of accommodation towards their opponents. They must have compromise in mind. And there is no doubt that, in this regard, the ruling party's responsibility far outweighs that of the opposition. Similarly, the opposition must also come to the table with the sincere intent to strike an equitable deal. But whatever the settlement or compact or reluctant understanding, it will have to be reached through dialogue.

In an uncertain situation, the best and only choice is to talk. And if the parties fail to have constructive talks, the country will have to embrace uncertainty and chaos – neither of which we want.

Closing the sustainable energy gaps in Asia and the Pacific

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This year, we pass the halfway mark on our journey towards implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and on the signing of the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Asian and Pacific countries have seen mixed progress on both. One of the most pressing challenges is the transition to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all, as encapsulated by SDG 7. Without a significant acceleration of efforts, achieving SDG 7 and its targets for energy access, renewable energy, and energy efficiency will elude our region. Given the significance of Asia and the Pacific in terms of global energy supply and consumption, actions taken here will set the tone for the global trajectory of progress on SDG 7 and the fight against climate change.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific will place these issues at centre-stage during this week's Asian and Pacific Energy Forum. This meeting will provide a platform for the region's energy ministers to plan a regional agenda for a sustainable energy transition.

Looming large among these issues is the lack of access to electricity and clean cooking fuels for hundreds of millions of people. This deprivation has far-reaching consequences, and is a harsh reminder that, while the region has made significant strides in economic development, not everyone has enjoyed the fruits of progress. Lack of access to electricity hinders



It is crucial for us to move away from fossil fuels and towards sustainable resources and technologies for energy.

PHOTO: REUTERS

healthcare, education and economic opportunities. Moreover, the reliance on traditional cooking fuels such as fuelwood contributes to respiratory diseases that disproportionately affect women and children. Energy poverty exacerbates existing inequalities, trapping communities in a cycle of deprivation.

To bridge the energy gap and promote climate-friendly sustainable development, increasing renewable energy and energy efficiency are imperative. The transition to renewables opens avenues for economic growth and job creation.

to the UN secretary-general's Global Roadmap for Accelerated SDG Action, annual investments in access to electricity must increase by \$35 billion and by \$25 billion for clean cooking by 2025. A tripling of renewable energy and energy efficiency investment is needed by 2030. Scaling up finance at this rate requires a large infusion of private finance to bolster insufficient public sources, alongside a shifting of national budgets away from fossil fuels. Carbon pricing mechanisms can incentivise businesses to transition towards cleaner energy solutions. Innovative business models and

financial instruments can attract international finance. But for these to be successful, governments must provide predictable and enabling policy environments.

To ensure the stability of the energy transition over the long term, governments must keep an eye on over-the-horizon risks. Key among these is ensuring adequate, stable, and predictable supplies of critical raw materials needed to construct the millions of solar panels, wind turbines and batteries of the future. Our region holds immense potential for critical raw materials production, making it a key player in the global energy transition. However, regional collaboration is needed alongside responsible mining and extraction practices that minimise environmental damage and social disruptions. Moreover, investing in recycling of critical raw materials can reduce our consumption of finite resources.

While transitioning to clean energy is a moral and environmental imperative, a just transition should ensure that no one is left behind as countries move away from fossil fuels and towards sustainable resources and technologies. This includes reskilling and reemployment opportunities for workers in declining industries, as well as community support to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of the energy transition.

Achieving SDG 7 requires a multifaceted approach. This is not a challenge that any one country or sector can solve in isolation; it demands collaboration, innovation, and shared responsibility. As we reflect on our progress at this halfway point, it is timely for countries across Asia and the Pacific to recommit to a regional vision where all citizens have access to clean and modern energy and the full potential of renewables and energy efficiency are realised. The momentum behind these changes is growing and the opportunity to close these gaps must be seized.