



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

INTERNATIONAL DAY TO END IMPUNITY FOR CRIMES AGAINST JOURNALISTS

# Why must journalists put their lives on the line?



Shoaib Ahmed Sayam is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

SHOAIB AHMED SAYAM

When Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Rumi were murdered, I was an oblivious 16-year-old. Politics, the state machinery, censorship, free speech—none of these issues occupied space in my mind. I only vaguely remember the incident making headlines for a good couple of days, and how the then home minister had vowed to catch the killers in 48 hours. Then, one day, it stopped being the talk of the town, and I carried on with my life.

Those 48 hours eventually turned into thousands of days, hundreds of weeks, and 11 years. I'm now 28 years old and, through a strange turn of events, a journalist. Now, my mind is full of all the injustices in the world, all the machinations of states, all the rights that are infringed upon. And I face a grim reality: journalists, who fight for people's rights, seldom enjoy justice themselves.

According to Unesco, one journalist has been killed every four days over the past decade around the world, with several slain in front of their family members, including their children. The prospect of getting justice is slim, as nine out of 10 killings go unpunished. While death is the ultimate price to pay for this job, journalists also face all kinds of abuses, such as physical and mental torture, harassment of family members, threats to life, and trumped-up charges.

Bangladesh has a hostile environment for journalists, according to the International Press Institute. Out of 180 countries, Reporters Without Borders ranked Bangladesh 163rd in its 2023 Press Freedom Index. This shouldn't be surprising, given the deluge of reports coming out every few days of journalists getting beaten up in clashes, being picked up and put behind bars, or even hacked to death. According to Ain o Salish Kendra, as many as 216 journalists were tortured and harassed, and one killed, in the first nine months of this year.

Such crimes against journalists do not happen in a vacuum. Our

government, regardless of the party in power, has always been hostile towards journalists. Historically, this country has suffered from an absence of accountability and transparency, and it is the journalists' job to hold those in power accountable. Herein lies a conflict immemorial. So, the government has devised ways to thwart journalistic efforts: through legal instruments, law enforcers and, when needed, the student wings of political parties.

The authorities may tout the Cyber Security Act (CSA), Digital Security Act (DSA), ICT Act, and Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation Act—all enacted in the run-up to one national election or the other—as laws to ensure regulation and security, but we have all seen how they are really used. Journalists, more so than opposition politicians, have been the main victims of the DSA (now replaced with the CSA), with more than 330 cases filed against them since the law was introduced in 2018. Journalists were usually charged under the non-bailable sections of the act, which led to the accused rotting in custody and, in many instances, facing abuse. Although in the CSA some sections are now bailable and punishment has been reduced in a few cases, experts have given their consensus: it is just as oppressive as the DSA.

No level of concerns—from regular citizens to local experts, from rights organisations to even the UN—has been able to convince the government to repeal such draconian laws. It always has its stock of responses ready to counter these concerns: "External entities should not interfere in our internal matters," or "We have to protect the country's image," or "Journalists must not spread misinformation and propaganda."

While the laws themselves are frightening, what's even more alarming is the lightning speed in which some of these cases are registered and the way people are detained arbitrarily, and in some cases even "disappeared." Look at what the Savar correspondent of

Prothom Alo, Samsuzzaman Shams, had to face in March. Law enforcers in plainclothes essentially abducted Shams from his home before dawn, with no warrant, and without telling him or his family what was happening or where he was being taken. Shams was kept confined for 30 hours and was then shown arrested under the DSA. Even those accused of heinous crimes don't deserve to be treated in such an inhumane manner.

Aside from these more "sophisticated" forms of suppression, there's always the primitive: physical violence. And the student wings of political parties have a staggering track record of "delivering lessons." Last month, BCL activists reportedly left Mosharraf Shah, a *Prothom Alo* correspondent, bloody and bruised for reporting on clashes between two of its factions. A month before that, BCL activists in Patuakhali attacked a journalist for publishing a report allegedly against the unit's president. I believe there's at least one event of the like each month.

Just like the government, I am also concerned about the image of our country. Looking at all these incidents, I wonder: how have they affected our image?

Working at my safe and comfortable office desk, I sometimes wonder about the reporters who are paid pennies for putting their lives on the line. Why did Golam Rabbani Nadim take the risk of publishing reports against a UP chairman? There's little to no monetary reward for doing so; only a sense of justice prevailing. Far from being rewarded, Nadim had to pay a price with his life. Has justice prevailed?

It's a miracle how five years in journalism hasn't beaten all the optimism out of me. Surely, the never-ending deadline extensions to submit the probe report of Sagar-Rumi case, the latest being the 104th extension, should make anyone feel dejected. And if even that doesn't do it, the arbitrary detentions at the dead of night must make one feel hopeless.

And yet, despite the fact that with each keystroke, I think of whether the next phrase will land me in trouble, I'm still in this profession. Meeting so many journalists all this time, those spending whole days in the field, those in constant search for corruption, those risking their safety and well-being, I've come to a conclusion: journalists don't want to be heroes or martyrs, they just want a better world. And we don't deserve to be tortured, maimed, and killed for that.

# Will our RMG workers get an acceptable living wage?



Taslima Akhter is president of the Bangladesh Garment Sramik Samhati and a photographer. She can be reached at taslima\_74@yahoo.com.

TASLIMA AKHTER

Over the past year, we have been demanding that Tk 25,000 be the monthly minimum wage for ready-made garment (RMG) workers. Some organisations have demanded Tk 23,000. So, when the owners proposed Tk 10,400 as the minimum wage, we were shocked. This means that not only are they unwilling to increase the wage, but they are in fact trying to lower the wage. If we take into account the current rate of inflation and the yearly increment that the workers are supposed to get, the minimum salary of a worker should be more than Tk 10,400. And considering the market prices of daily essentials,

logical demand. We all know that police cannot shoot at anyone without the instruction of the higher authorities. Why should the workers have to die for demanding a fair wage?

Under the circumstances, we hoped that the owners would at least propose a new wage in the meeting of the wage board that was held yesterday. But instead of doing that, they asked for more time. This exposes the way in which they view and treat the workers. When workers across the country are agitated because they can barely survive on the salary they are getting, the owners are looking

after the Russia-Ukraine war broke out, when other sectors incurred losses, the growth of our RMG sector was steady. Currently, it brings in around 84 percent of the country's total foreign exchange earnings. Do the workers, who are the driving force behind this success, deserve such miserable lives?

We, from the Mojuri Briddhitey Garment Sramik Andolon, are reviewing the prices set by the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB). We have found that if 1-1.5 people earn in a four-member family, they need to earn at least Tk 40,000 to meet their minimum requirements. Other research, carried out using scientific methods, have also found that a family of four will need at least Tk 25,000 to even barely survive. We have raised these issues with the members of the wage board hoping that they would consider these while declaring or proposing the new minimum wage. But sadly,



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

## What options do the RMG workers have besides demanding for a better wage for their survival?

it is impossible for RMG workers to survive on such a meagre amount. Naturally, this proposed wage has infuriated the workers; they have been demonstrating across the country rejecting this amount proposed by RMG factory owners and demanding at least Tk 23,000.

The reaction of the owners to the workers' legitimate demand, however, has been totally unacceptable. They are not only ignoring the workers' plight but are also attacking the protesters with the help of police and local goons. But the government and the owners are now saying that the workers are involved in vandalism and are creating chaos. We feel it is not right to accuse the workers in this way, because it was the owners and the wage board who were supposed to finish their task within six months and declare the minimum wage for the RMG workers. But they failed to do so on time. And it is due to their delay that the workers are in such a situation now. We have seen in Mirpur how the cadres/goons—*lathiyal bahini* and *helmet bahini*—of the ruling party attacked the peaceful protesters. The death of RMG workers Imran and Rasel Hawlader during the protests have only infuriated the workers more. They are still pushing for their

to spin conspiracies. Should they not be meeting the workers' demands instead, so that the latter can survive during this period of high inflation? We are totally disappointed that no good outcome came out of yesterday's meeting. This has further enraged the RMG workers. Meanwhile, those of us who are vocal about the workers' rights are also being threatened. Do we have any other option, though, but to express our concerns and protest, given the situation?

What options do our workers have besides demanding for a better wage for their survival? Currently, the price of a kilogram of onions is higher than the price of a kilogram of guavas. The prices of all other essential items, including rice, lentils, flour and eggs, have increased abnormally over the past five years—some of them by 100 percent while others by as much as 120 percent. At present, workers cannot even afford to buy eggs—the cheapest source of protein—for their families. In the past, when I went to the areas where RMG workers lived, I saw them buying small fish or broiler chicken at least on Fridays. Now, they seem to only buy leafy greens because that is all they can afford to eat. During the Covid-19 pandemic and

they did not take this research into consideration.

Given that the RMG workers cannot even afford to buy food to survive, how will they pay for their treatment? If a worker is infected with dengue now, will she or he be able to buy green coconuts or eggs or even pay for her/his treatment? And how will they pay for their children's education with this meagre pay?

So, I would like to ask the owners: what do you want? Do you want the workers to go hungry or go without treatment or even get shot if they speak up voicing their needs?

We think the demand that the workers have raised—for a minimum salary of Tk 23,000-25,000—is very logical and acceptable. But since the owners' proposal was unbelievably low, it has created a feeling of uncertainty and rage among the workers. Even the deaths of two workers have not been able to stir the owners. We would like to ask the owners and the wage board to declare a new minimum wage as demanded by the workers. The faster they can do that, the sooner our workers will be able to go back to a normal life.

**As told to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star.**

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 TV viewing spot

5 Penn, for one

11 Compared with

12 Different

13 Overly suave

14 Cherished

15 Career campaigner

16 Yank's ally

17 Fuming

19 Jack Sprat's no-no

22 Deed holder

24 Chapel topper

26 Book unit

27 Baseball's Rodriguez

28 Pandora's box held them

30 Dropped-tomato sound

31 Cub's home

32 Hawaiian island

34 Matching

35 Arrest

38 Sizzling strip of meat

41 Water, to Juan

42 Floors

43 Mayor's domain

44 Casual eateries

45 Son of Seth

DOWN

1 Halt

2 River from Pittsburgh

3 Joining the formation

4 One or more

5 Milk buy

6 Boxers, perhaps

7 Scads

8 Cassis cocktail

9 – out a living

10 Stop symbol

16 Butter unit

18 Lively folk dance

19 Substituting

20 Vicinity

21 Phone message

22 Commentary piece

23 Surfer's ride

25 One of a bear trio

29 Rink patron

30 Take to court

33 Run up

34 Shoebox number

36 Lot buy

37 Inlets

38 Passing craze

39 French friend

40 Painter Vermeer

41 Poker card

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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