

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Voter intimidation cannot go unpunished EC must take action against AL candidates, activists making threats

As we move closer to the election, threats of all kinds—breaking the hands and legs of opposition supporters, cutting non-voters or dissenting voters off from the social safety net benefits, etc.—are reportedly being issued, causing panic among ordinary people. This is further proof that the current situation is in no way conducive for a fair election, with the BNP and other likeminded parties having already opted out of the race. The arrogance being displayed by those affiliated with the ruling party, as demonstrated by their comments and activities on the campaign trail, only lends credence to the accusation that Bangladesh has become a one-party state where ruling party men may consider themselves to be above the law.

Since the electoral campaign began, the media has reported at least 15 instances of threats being issued against opposition supporters as well as the general public. According to the electoral code of conduct, it is a crime for any political party, candidate or anyone on their behalf to make provocative or threatening remarks. Yet, till now, a number of ruling party leaders and others have publicly made such threats, clearly violating the code. In one video doing the rounds on social media, a Faridpur union chairman said if individuals getting social welfare benefits do not go to the polling centres to vote, his parishad will do its best to ensure they no longer receive such benefits. In another video clip, Ramesh Chandra Sen, a member of Awami League's advisory council and also an MP, is also seen making the same threats, going so far as to say that their polling centre committee members, including the president and general secretary, will be present on election day to note down whether they (beneficiaries) attended.

These are just a few examples. The message thus being sent out is clear: people must vote, preferably for Awami League nominees, or face severe consequences. Supporting the opposition will also bring similar wrath, and so will non-participation in the election. So, we have arrived at a point where not only are people not getting to vote for whoever they want, but they cannot even *not* cast their votes. This is totally unacceptable. Can the Election Commission, having failed to get the main opposition to participate in the election, at least do the bare minimum of its job of ensuring peace and safety by properly enforcing the code?

## Save Sutia river from rampant pollution

### Authorities must set up dumping ground in Trishal

Over the last 10 years, the banks of Sutia river in Mymensingh's Trishal upazila turned into a garbage dump right in front of the authorities. Yet, they didn't feel the need to address this crisis, which just shows how little the administration cares about protecting rivers despite Bangladesh's many commitments in this regard. As per a report by this daily, piles of household waste are dumped beside the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway, near Naudhar area, every day. The garbage ultimately lands on the adjacent riverbank and remains there for years. And during monsoon, the waste washes into Sutia, contributing to the pollution of the entire network of local rivers. Thus, the negligence of local authorities is causing serious health risks for residents and those who depend on the water bodies.

Since its establishment in 1998, Trishal municipality has failed to ensure a designated waste dumping ground for its 40,000 residents. Usually, when the authorities are confronted with issues relating to garbage dumping, they blame residents for their lack of awareness. But there is no scope for such excuses here. The councillor himself has acknowledged that municipality workers have been dumping around 10 tonnes of garbage every day on the riverbank, in the absence of a fixed spot. This is just one of the countless examples of our rivers falling victim to pollution and encroachment over the years. Reportedly, around 90 percent of Bangladesh's 220 small and large rivers are suffering from such offences, with more than 43 rivers having dried up between 2000 and 2020.

One may recall that the High Court in 2019 granted rivers the legal status of "living entities," bestowing them with rights as "legal persons." But what good are such initiatives if the government cannot even ensure basic services like proper disposal of waste which leads to not just environmental harm but also the choking of rivers? The problem of the lack of designated dumping grounds is not limited to Trishal alone. Therefore, the authorities must undertake measures that address all such causes of pollution to protect our rivers.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Protect us from toxic air pollution

Yesterday, Dhaka once again topped the list of cities with the worst air quality. This "silent killer" claims millions of lives globally, and for Dhaka's residents, every breath is a battle against toxic smog; every breath pushes us closer to pneumonia, asthma, bronchitis, and other severe respiratory diseases. While monsoon brings us some relief from the clouds of dust, the dry air of winter exacerbates the situation to great lengths. Rampant construction in all areas makes sure that this health crisis accompanies us at all times, and brick kilns, especially the illegal ones, are also to blame. When we know the factors responsible for this crisis, why aren't we doing anything? Despite years of suffering and experts' warnings, authorities have failed to control Dhaka's air pollution. While many initiatives have been taken, they are clearly not enough. We are concerned for our health and urge the authorities to take immediate action.

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# Forced voting to fool the world?



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Bangladesh has had two elections since the system of a non-partisan caretaker government overseeing elections was abolished. One was boycotted by most of the parties except the allies of the ruling Awami League, and the other was participated in by all the registered and unregistered parties. In reality, neither could be termed participatory, as voters were practically disenfranchised on both occasions. As we approach the third consecutive election to be held under the AL administration—which has so far been a restaging of 2014, due to the boycott by opposition parties—one question that worries everyone is: how will the world react?

It is clear why Awami League is so desperate to make January 7, 2024 look like a genuine competition, without any real competitors. Allowing aspirants of ruling party tickets to run as independents against ruling party nominees has already resulted in numerous bloody, internecine conflicts. Discontent among the ruling party's allies, too, makes the future of its Grand Alliance shaky. But apparently, none of these potential risks matter anymore.

Costly decisions by the party and the alliance to make elections appear competitive is one thing, but coercing voters in order to increase their presence at the polling booths is another. Disturbing reports of vulnerable people, who rely on social security benefits, being warned that staying home on election day would result in their allowances being cut off are quite shocking. One may ignore such threats if they're coming from AL's union-level leaders (though they play a crucial role in preparing beneficiaries' list and verifying them), but hearing this threat from a member of the ruling party's advisory council and a party candidate indicates that it's part of party policy. There has been no official statement so far from AL leadership distancing itself from the statement made by former water resources minister Ramesh Chandra Sen.

Nobody is denying the fact that the Awami League government has expanded the social security net quite significantly over the last 15 years. According to the official statistics of the finance ministry, the number of beneficiaries in the 2022-23 fiscal year stood at 128.5 lakh. But even more intriguing is the fact that coercing women is much easier than men, as the government pays primary and secondary students' stipends to their mothers, and their number is even



CARTOON: BIPOLOB CHAKRABORTY

higher than that of beneficiaries of social security allowances.

Though reports of political nepotism and corruption by party functionaries at the grassroots level are not uncommon, these state benefits are citizens' rightful entitlement and not subject to their political beliefs or affiliations. But using these social security programmes as a tool to force people to go to the voting centres is unprecedented, unethical, and deplorable. If the government wanted to make voting mandatory as part of its commitment to democracy and to strengthen democratic institutions, it could have legislated necessary laws. But this is not the path that it has taken, despite its overwhelming majority in parliament during the past three terms.

In another development, police have now stepped in for the mission to increase voter presence by asking ward councillors of Dhaka's city corporations to encourage residents of their respective areas to go to polling centres. One may ask, has it ever been a norm for the police to be entrusted by the Election Commission, or by any other authority, to put so much effort into increasing voter participation?

Clearly, this is an instance of partisan behaviour by a state institution that is required to be neutral under the law. Such a partisan role to counter the opposition's boycott campaign will in fact unnerve voters even more. And all these coercive measures are being taken for an event where voters in most constituencies will have no choice but to elect someone

and participatory elections in 2024," who will bet on an endorsement of this government's re-election? Could the opposition parties' participation in the 2018 election have restored the European MPs' confidence in our ability to hold a credible election? Unfortunately, the European Commission's then foreign policy chief Vice-President Federica

from Awami League, irrespective of whichever symbol they vote for.

Can this restaging of the 2014 election (with better camouflage) fool the world? A lot has been discussed and speculated about the US, especially due to its threat of a visa ban. But what about the Europeans? Let's revisit the post-2014 election situation. On January 16 of that year, 11 days after the one-sided election took place, the European Parliament in a resolution, among other things, said that it "Sincerely regrets that the parliament and political parties did not manage to agree on an inclusive mechanism for elections, and urgently calls on the government and opposition to put the best interests of Bangladesh first, and to find a compromise which would give a chance to the Bangladeshi people to express their democratic will in a representative and credible way; considers that all options should be considered, including an early election if all legitimate political parties are willing to stand and offer voters a choice."

Given the European Parliament's latest resolution on Bangladesh (adopted on September 14, 2023) calling on the government "to guarantee the conditions for free, fair

Mogherini's statement in parliament was a depressing one. Responding to a question on June 14, 2019, she said, "The EU's cooperation with Bangladesh emphasises democracy, human rights, development, trade relations, and labour rights. The EU closely monitors the political situation in Bangladesh, including the last parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, violence marred the election day, and significant obstacles to a level playing field remained in place throughout the process. The EU has been pressing national authorities in Bangladesh to ensure a proper examination of alleged irregularities."

Back then, calls to investigate election irregularities also came from the United Kingdom, the United States, and from a few other countries. But none of these calls were heeded. Understandably, strong support from two Asian neighbours, India and China, bolstered Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina so much that she was able to avert pressures from the West and others. But can the same happen for a third time? It all depends on whether Western democracies are willing to conduct business as usual despite their concerns being ignored.

## Why has combatting dengue become a Herculean task?



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Dengue might be one of the most discussed topics of the year, on which piles of articles have been written. But only a few of them have made substantial contributions towards identifying the proper ways and means of combatting the dengue outbreak. Most have unilaterally lambasted city corporations' role in controlling the dengue menace without any cogent reasons.

Broadly speaking, city corporations provide most public services to city dwellers. That's why, when facing any discomfort relating to civic amenities, citizens rush to the city corporation offices for solutions. But just like the coronavirus, preventing dengue does not depend solely upon the activities of city authorities. The Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), for instance, has no shortage of chemicals or pesticides for killing Aedes mosquito larvae. Moreover, all other services of the two Dhaka city corporations have improved a lot over the years. So what keeps the city corporations of the capital from achieving success in combatting dengue menace? As a

field-level official of the DSCC, I would like to discuss the major reasons behind why the prevention of dengue has become a difficult task for city authorities this year.

The DSCC, in its anti dengue drive this year, has applied four recognised Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)—environmental control, biological control, chemical control, and social awareness—from the onset of the breeding season of the Aedes mosquito. The DSCC has also conducted special drives to destroy the habitats of Aedes mosquitoes. But when doing so, the main obstacle that the authorities faced was people's own lack of awareness and nonchalance, as well as inaction, towards the outbreak. Any conscientious citizen would have noticed this year that city corporation staff members regularly sprayed chemicals in and around public places and canals. But they have little or no access to residential units. Immediately after identifying this obstacle, the DSCC put utmost emphasis on creating awareness among city dwellers. Some seriously dengue-

infected areas were declared red zones by the DSCC in order to motivate people to remove the stagnant water gathered in their homes. During the few days before conducting such a drive, vigorous campaigning was done using a microphone or loudspeaker. Leaflets outlining dengue prevention techniques were also distributed among residents of specific localities. Also, on Fridays during *jummah*, the *imam* were requested to deliver short speeches on dengue prevention.

Besides stagnant water, waste has been another hurdle against conducting mosquito-killing drives. For example, rainwater gathered on garbage creates a congenial atmosphere for mosquito breeding.

Meanwhile, large construction companies were found to be grossly violating the health and safety rules by keeping stagnant water in basements for prolonged periods. As a result, the ground floors of almost all under-construction buildings were found to be abuzz with Aedes mosquito larvae throughout the rainy season. Old government quarters were another big source of Aedes larvae. Residents of PWD Colony buildings, for example, complained against officials concerned for failing to keep their drainage system clean.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned steps, the question remains: what else could the two city corporations of Dhaka city have done? The only government organisation that conducts surveys on area-wise density of Aedes mosquito larvae and

gives suggestions to the DSCC and DNCC is the Directorate General of Health Services. Every year, the DGHS carries out advanced surveys before monsoon, when Aedes mosquitoes begin to lay eggs. However, this year, the DGHS delayed conveying the survey results to the city corporations, causing them to wait to determine their respective modus operandi in combatting dengue.

Ultimately, we can only keep the Aedes aegypti mosquito population under control, but it is unlikely to exterminate them altogether. The Aedes mosquito can fly vertically up to 400 metres and lay eggs in both visible and invisible places. An Aedes mosquito egg can survive up to eight months without water, after which it can fertilise and grow even on a teaspoon of water anywhere. This is why mass awareness and precautionary measures are key to saving ourselves from the deadly dengue.

Entomologists should conduct more intensive research every year on the Aedes mosquito's adaptation process in new environments. Given the pervasive attacking nature of the female Aedes mosquito, we can also consider gathering knowledge from Singapore's experience of engineering a special species of male mosquitoes which can neutralise harmful female mosquitoes through cross-breeding. Lastly, with Dhaka being one of the most populous cities in the world, its dwellers shouldn't evade the responsibility of cleaning their own homes or buildings at regular intervals.