

A shocking tale of brutality

Russel's alleged death in torture cell serves as a wake-up call

Unchecked political power has long been the bane of modern Bangladesh as it spread its tentacles in every sector of society. From corruption to crimes to the erosion of public institutions, its influence has been far-reaching and deeply destabilising. The brutal murder of Saiful Islam Russel in a so-called torture cell in Dhaka's South Keraniganj area cannot be seen in isolation from this influence as it emboldens political elements to act with impunity, regardless of the cost.

Our report on the murder carries shocking details provided by Russel's family, who have been living in fear even since videos of the incident went viral, forcing police to take action. Russel allegedly died after hours of excruciating torture by the now-sacked Swachhshabak League leader Aftab Uddin Rabbi and his cronies. As per his wife, on January 10, after learning that he was being held in Rabbi's "torture cell slash office," she went there to find him severely beaten and covered in blood. She pleaded with Rabbi to take her husband to hospital, but he demanded Tk 20 lakh first. Her phone was then confiscated so that she could not seek help. Later, an unconscious Russel was carried home in a gunny sack, and a doctor called in by his torturers declared him dead.

According to locals, Rabbi, whose father and uncle are both Awami League leaders, built a criminal network and is particularly known for extorting traders and torturing anyone who refuse to obey him. Unsurprisingly, his influence extended to local police officers, some of whom frequented his office. Against this backdrop, can his party—which sacked him after the torture footage came out but refused to accept responsibility for his actions—really absolve itself considering that he drew strength from his political link-ups? Over the years, we have had countless reports on political thugs committing all sorts of crimes and even running torture cells, and only when something blows up in their face do their parties spring into action, but only to save their reputation.

That's not accountability—it's PR crisis management 101. And it's not enough. The political leadership must address why individuals like Rabbi feel emboldened to commit such crimes and often get away without punishment. The relevant authorities also must ensure that Russel's murderers are properly investigated and brought to justice, and that his family is given necessary protection. The harrowing murder has shocked the entire nation. The authorities must take action to prevent a repeat of such crimes.

Leave Anwara Park alone

DNCC is right to stand against efforts to commercialise it

It is refreshing to see a city authority take a hard stance against another government agency to protect a park from being turned into a commercial space. According to a report, the Dhaka metro rail authorities intend to construct a shopping complex or station plaza on the land of Anwara Park in Farmgate. But the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) has intervened on time, with the mayor making it clear that the space must be returned to the public as a park. We commend the DNCC for its commitment to preserving what little open space is left in the city.

Located in one of the busiest areas in Dhaka, Anwara Park used to provide breathing space to visitors and local residents, especially children. However, since the end of 2018, the metro rail authorities have been occupying it for storing construction materials and other purposes. Even though the construction of the rail line through Farmgate has long been over, they are still occupying it. On top of that, they decided to use it for commercial purposes despite previously promising to return it as it was.

We wonder why they are going back on their word. Surely they can see how a congested area like Farmgate, made more congested by the rail service, is in dire need of some open space? What's more, repurposing the park violates the Playground, Open Space, Park and Natural Water Reservoir Conservation Act, 2000. Why, then, do they want to use this particular space for a shopping mall?

That this is even a matter of debate is astounding to us. When the capital city is routinely getting flagged for having the worst air in the world, we need every bit of breathing space we can manage to counter the effects of pollution. We urge the metro rail authorities to abandon their preposterous plan and fully cooperate with the DNCC to restore Anwara Park to its former self. We also urge all government agencies to prioritise conservation of natural resources when undertaking any infrastructural development project.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Noise pollution in Cox's Bazar

I am writing this letter to draw the authorities' attention to the honking horns and high volume sound devices used in the main city of Cox's Bazar. The level of noise in the tourist spots is so severe that normally people need to shout to communicate with each other. I live in Cox's Bazar and I hardly notice awareness of noise pollution among the locals and tourists. Cox's Bazar International University, a private university located in Cox's Bazar, took the initiative to raise awareness about the harmful effects of noise pollution. A few days ago, the students along with the teachers and staff of that university gathered at Kolatoli Circle, one of the noisy places in the beach city, with placards and distributed leaflets among the motorists asking them not to blow horns unnecessarily. What gives us hope is that the initiative was taken by university students. I respectfully ask the relevant authorities to take measures to free Cox's Bazar of noise pollution.

Adil Ilahi
Cox's Bazar

For whom the bell tolls?



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REHMAN SOBHAN

It was saddening to observe, on the first day of the New Year, 2024, a day which should have projected promise for the year ahead, that Bangladesh's sole Nobel laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus, a globally recognised and universally respected person, was sentenced to six months' imprisonment by a labour court. Yunus has by now attained a stature both at home and abroad to enable him to emerge unsullied from such a smear on his reputation. Some senior establishment figures have rather unconvincingly sought to delink the regime from this case, attributing it as a purely legal matter inspired by the Department of Labour—a small, obscure institution of the state.

Countless cases of labour rights violation are regularly taking place within an unjust society, and thousands of such cases remain pending in the labour courts as the case files there move at a snail's pace, judgments are few and far between, and jail sentences are rare to none. Few will be persuaded, given its traditional practices, that a functionary of the labour department would suo moto initiate a case—which may have global ramifications—and pursue it at an unprecedented pace wherein a sentence could be passed in record time.

Such a highly publicised judgment has already exposed our legal system and governance practices to public scrutiny. The 160 or so Nobel laureates and globally distinguished personalities who have already commented on the "judicial harassment" of Prof Yunus would be particularly concerned. Many of these personalities may now be inclined to apply their high-calibre minds to more closely scrutinise the particulars of the judgment by a labour court in Bangladesh so they can draw their own conclusions about the intrinsic merits of the case.

Whilst the Yunus judgment may be exposed to global scrutiny, it also demands that we in Bangladesh engage in some introspection as to the circumstances which culminated in exposing a person, who has invested the best part of his professional life in improving the lives of and empowering poor women in Bangladesh, to the prospect of imprisonment. This court case is not the first such instance wherein Yunus has been exposed to various forms of persecution. He is exposed to an ongoing campaign of denigration and slander from both official sources and their intellectual fellow travellers. No rationale, backed by evidence, has been provided to explain



The case of Professor Yunus is symptomatic of the erosion in the credibility of our institutions.

PHOTO: REUTERS

the logic, need or relevance of this adversarial relationship against such an individual.

When a nation has the good fortune of having a person of Yunus' stature in its midst, it may be expected that a leadership committed to the service of the country would attempt to reach out to him and all such people to invest their capabilities in supporting the government's nation-building mission. I am not aware of any single effort by our leadership to hold a dialogue with Yunus to sort out these imagined, or even real, differences. Nor has any effort been invested by our leaders in exploring how he could be deployed to serve as a resource for the nation or as an emissary to world leaders, who normally remain far beyond the reach of our ministers and diplomats.

Reflecting on this case, my most serious concern relates to its wider ramifications in regard to the state of governance and the future of democracy in Bangladesh. One-sided abuse of the law to oppress political opponents has been in practice over the years and dates back to predecessor regimes, whether from the cantonment or from the political domain. Over the years, the weaponisation of the legal system has become an element in the wider assault on our institutions of democracy and governance. Not just our legal system, but our administrative institutions, our law enforcement agencies, our constitutional bodies

such as the parliament, the Election Commission (EC), the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), our central bank, and our National Board of Revenue (NBR) have all been used for partisan purposes—to the point that they have lost their capacity to function as rules-based pillars of governance. Each of these institutions has been politicised to serve the party in power, by persecuting opposition political

itself, now exclusively dominated by the ruling party, has retreated from its responsibility as an institution of accountability over the executive. Its lack of urgency in addressing some of the burning concerns of the people remains conspicuous. Representation in our elective bodies, at all levels, is now monopolised by self-declared and prospective businessmen, many of whom prefer to use their office—

divorced from the application of any conflict-of-interest rules—to pursue their business interests, thereby weakening the functioning of the competitive process.

Without the protection of the rule of law, business advancement—whether domestic or foreign—becomes a matter of political identity, having the right connections, and the deployment of material incentives. Our low inflow of foreign direct investment, compared to other Asian countries, originates in the concern of prospective investors over the arbitrary working of our institutions.

Without the support of rules-based institutions, civil society remains endangered, living out its life at the mercy of official institutions which hold its financial lifeline in their hands. There is no objective criteria to determine the fortunes of a civil society organisation which will depend on its equation with the powers that be and on its relations with the relevant officials.

In such a de-institutionalised universe, the assault on the rights of a person of the global stature like Dr Muhammad Yunus means that anyone—the political opposition, cronies, CSOs, and outspoken individuals—remains an endangered species. In such circumstances, we should be aware that when the bell tolls for someone such as Professor Yunus, it may one day also toll for any of us.

Blue economy for Bangladesh's sustainable development



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SYED ERSHAD AHMED

In 2012, Bangladesh and Myanmar resolved their maritime boundary disputes at an international tribunal. The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea awarded Bangladesh a 12-mile territorial sea around St Martin's Island, overruling Myanmar's argument that it should be divided in half. On the other hand, following decades of disputes and failed negotiations, the maritime boundary between Bangladesh and India was finally established when the Permanent Court of Arbitration delivered its award on July 7, 2014. Following both legal battles, Bangladesh emerged victorious, securing rights to a substantial maritime area in the Bay of Bengal.

These triumphs ultimately present the country with exciting prospects for bolstering economic growth, improving livelihoods, and generating employment through sustainable use of oceanic resources, all while maintaining the well-being of the ecosystem. This area of development is commonly known as the blue economy.

Our nation's sovereignty now extends up to 354 nautical miles

from the Chattogram seaport, encompassing oceanic resources and mainland infrastructure. Ownership of this maritime region is a significant honour, and we must invest in it to achieve its full potential. The concept of a blue economy perceives oceans and seas as "development spaces," where conservation, sustainable utilisation of living resources, mineral and oil extraction, bio-prospecting, sustainable energy production, and marine transport can be combined through spatial planning. After settling maritime boundary disagreements with Myanmar and India, Bangladesh declared its intention to utilise ocean resources for future economic growth. It formulated extensive plans for using ocean space, established explicit objectives for sustainable development, and enacted essential policy support. But tangible steps are yet to be taken, though we have adequate human resources, infrastructure-building capabilities, experts, entrepreneurs, and the strength to maintain safety and security.

Bangladesh's blue economy needs immediate policy support to utilise and conserve marine resources

effectively. The Bay of Bengal handles a large majority of Bangladesh's imports and exports, while coastal regions in Bangladesh are inhabited by around 30 million people.

According to a 2018 World Bank report, the ocean economy contributes \$6.2 billion or three percent of GDP to Bangladesh. This economy comprises tourism and recreation, marine fisheries and aquaculture, transport, and offshore oil and gas extraction. The report recommended a coordinated planning process and long-term strategy for Bangladesh to transition to a blue economy. It also emphasised the need to remove bottlenecks and constraints in resource exploitation. To maximise opportunities from the vast seabed and surface area, officials, experts, and privately funded surveys must identify ocean economy industries. Measuring the economic value of natural capital and considering geographic proximity to the ocean in the long term is essential.

Bangladesh has the potential to benefit from its sea resources, such as sea fish, fish oil, and other marine aquatic products. The private sector in Bangladesh can support sustainable coastal tourism and finance the introduction of various kinds of water sports, cruises, etc for recreational activities and to boost tourism. Artificial islands in the sea, near the coasts, could also be a great draw for tourism.

To maximise benefits from the sea, Bangladesh must take necessary pragmatic steps, backed by well-calibrated policy support defined

jointly by close collaboration between public and private sectors to achieve a common goal of development and prosperity. The blue economy can eradicate poverty and is one of the essential tools available for the country to achieve sustainable development goals. This type of economy develops the ocean economy sustainably as its primary products are mining, ocean renewable energy, sea salt production, marine trade, shipping and transport, marine tourism, marine education and research, maritime surveillance, marine spatial planning, and many others.

The Bay of Bengal boasts enormous potential for renewable energy production through wind, tidal biomass, thermal conversion, and salinity gradients. To achieve a sustainable blue economy in Bangladesh, economic actors must establish an integrated business model that aligns with national and global developments. Investing in the ocean economy sectors and building capacity are crucial steps towards realising this potential. However, ensuring maritime security, preserving marine environments, conserving marine resources, and preventing marine pollution, piracy, trafficking and macro-terrorism are equally important. Luckily, modern combating systems have improved security. With extensive research, expert recruitment, investment and policy support, Bangladesh can leverage its existing marine science and biology institutions to achieve sustainable development goals and boost its economy.