

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Time to issue regular alerts for toxic air

HC directive highlights the urgency of the threat

The High Court's order for the government to introduce an alert system to caution citizens about toxic air highlights the urgency of addressing the ever-deteriorating air quality crisis in Bangladesh. So far, as with other major public health threats, the government's response has been mostly limited to half-cooked solutions and token gestures that delivered little, if any, respite. As a result, over the last few years, our air, especially in Dhaka, has been repeatedly ranked as among the most polluted in the world. Almost every day comes with the news of our capital rivalling global cities in that regard, and of residents suffering and dying because of it.

Introducing an alert system is the least that the government can do after having failed to do anything about this disturbing reality. Such alerts may come in various forms—from cautionary messaging on TV, social media and via mobile SMS to announcements on streets and in crowded neighbourhoods. As for the content of messages, besides describing the severity of the pollution, it should include tips to minimise its impact. People may be advised to stay indoors, limit, change, or postpone outdoor engagements, stay away from local sources of pollution like busy roads or construction sites, wear facemasks, etc. Those who have asthma or other respiratory issues may be advised to take extra precautions. There may also be tips for what should be done in case of health-related emergencies. The government may also consider periodically publishing the names of air pollution hotspots.

There is a lot that the government can do to properly inform citizens so that they can take care of themselves to the extent possible. But this only forms a part of its responsibilities. Its main task, of course, is to ensure that there is little pollution to worry about in the first place. But as we have repeatedly seen, its initiatives with regard to the main causes of pollution—smoke from factories and brick kilns, dust from construction sites, fumes from vehicles, unplanned urbanisation, disappearing open spaces and greenery, etc—have been frustratingly ineffective. Without resolving these issues, public messaging alone will not make a big difference.

We, therefore, urge all relevant departments of the government to take meaningful actions based on the High Court ruling, which also included making a time-bound action plan to address the threat of air pollution. Citizens want results, and the government must deliver that.

Stop extortion of Sylhet traders

Criminals claiming to be BCL members must be apprehended

We are disturbed by repeated reports of extortion of vegetable and fruit trucks in Sylhet city by groups of men identifying themselves as members of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). According to *Prothom Alo*, about Tk 2 crore is being extorted every month from goods-laden trucks at the three entrances to the city, with Tk 2,000-5,000 charged from each vehicle. If traders and transport workers deny payment, they are reportedly beaten up, and their goods looted. The question is, why is this crime being allowed to take place every night?

The answer lies partly with the political identity of the criminals and partly with the complicit silence of those in charge of law enforcement. A *Samakal* report also found that activists of different groups and sub-groups affiliated with Sylhet BCL are involved in extortion and other crimes. Because of the terror they have spread, transport workers say many are too afraid to lodge a case or speak out openly against the extortionists. Some of the traders even alleged that police were involved in the process, as otherwise it would be impossible to carry out such acts every night.

BCL has denied the allegations of any involvement, of course. But can they or the police clarify who these mystery men who have such a free reign in Sylhet are, and why they are claiming membership of the BCL (and not of other affiliates of the ruling party)? The fact is, the high price that traders have to pay to extortionists is also hiking up the prices of winter fruits and vegetables, causing a ripple effect across the country. Even the Sylhet-1 MP, former foreign minister AK Abdul Momen, stated in parliament on Tuesday that criminals in his constituency are regularly extorting money from trucks carrying essential goods and urged the administration to stop it.

It is unacceptable that such a state of affairs has been ignored for months on end. We demand an immediate end to this terrorism. The extortionists as well as their enablers must be identified and brought to book.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Noise pollution by MRT

It is true that the sound produced by the MRT cars is bearable, but only when you are under the train line. If you are anywhere above the line, the sound these cars produce is extremely uncomfortable, and potentially harmful in the long term. As such, hundreds of families living near the MRT line, on floors close to and above the MRT line are forced to endure this excruciating sound all day. With the MRT's eventual full-time operation, including more frequent coaches and longer operating hours, it is unclear how these residents will cope with the increased noise. I urge the authorities to immediately address this issue and ensure that future projects prioritise noise mitigation measures.

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How BCL became an untouchable entity at JU



Anu Muhammad is former professor of economics at Jahangirnagar University.

ANU MUHAMMAD

Recently, we learnt of a rape incident that took place at Jahangirnagar University. We also learnt that most of those involved in the incident were influential leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League's (BCL) JU wing. Unfortunately, this is neither new nor surprising. If we take a closer look at the perpetrators' identities, we'll see that they are closely related to many other offences and misdoings. This is the result of countless unethical actions that went unaccounted for, all under the banner of the organisation that is BCL.

How did this come to be?

After the liberation of Bangladesh, every party that came to power had a student front upon which they relied to exert pressure on others, especially in university campuses. However, over the past decade, this has taken a new Leviathan form. This is due to the fact that over the last 15 years, or the last 10 (starting from the so-called election in 2014), the ruling party has been in power without any accountability or true opposition. Not having any need to protect their image in the public eye has led to all their affiliated organisations to spiral out of control, who are operating with the idea that they can do as they please. This is why this ruling party's student wing's crimes have increased a lot during this period.

If we look at BCL's activities in JU, we will see that their main activity is creating a torturous environment in the student residential halls. They have their own allocated rooms in these halls, and they summon any student they want and harass them—sometimes from daylight till deep into the night. When students first arrive at the university in their first year, what they need is an affectionate reception from their seniors. Instead, what they're dealt is insurmountable mental and physical harassment from BCL. This harassment is so severe that it leads many students to not being able to continue their studies at all. Firstly, they have to put up with the fact that they are assigned to the gono rooms, which hinders their ability to properly attend classes and study. On top of that, some students encounter such physical torture that it becomes impossible for them to imagine going back to the campus.

Then there's the extortion of money from the shops and businesses that are located within the campus and even nearby. The BCL members eat at the restaurants and dorm cafeterias for free and also extort money in the organisation's name. This results in the fall of the quality of the food and of other products, and also causes an increase in prices for regular students.



Outraged students and teachers stage a sit-in protest at Jahangirnagar University on February 4, 2024, after news broke out about BCL members being involved in the rape of a woman on the campus the night before.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Additionally, BCL charges a commission for every construction project that is undertaken within the JU campus. If they're not given what they demand, they will hinder the construction process. This also affects the quality of the projects while simultaneously raising the costs. In the midst of this, the government has allocated large sums of money for construction work at universities. This has resulted in unplanned and often unnecessary constructions on the JU campus, often destroying its beauty or hindering its utility. The beneficiaries of this are the contractors and the BCL activists in JU who get commissions from this.

How come they are able to conduct themselves this way when there is an administration and teachers at the university? This is because the administration either plays no role or actually assists them in the process. We see in the administration some so-called teachers who work as their accomplices. Even the money collected through extortion and the commissions received from construction and other projects are sometimes distributed among some teachers.

Recruitment of workers, employees, or officers in the university has become a business as well. BCL members and university administration officials work together and share the money

government itself. So when they see the government is not reining in BCL members, they don't want to get in their way either.

It's truly a mutually beneficial relationship, with BCL protecting the administration as and when needed. For instance, in 2019, students and teachers unitedly staged a protest against a dangerous construction project in JU, demanding that it be done in a manner that does not hamper the life, nature, and environment of the university campus. At one stage, teachers and students were protesting in front of the VC office. During that, the VC had BCL to attack the protesters. Even teachers were physically harmed by the BCL members. The VC called it a "mass apprising," praising the BCL students.

This leads to the question: who serves whom? All the wrongdoings of that VC, who was accused of severe corruption, went unaddressed. The attacks by BCL also went unaddressed by the government. It didn't even take any measures to investigate the incident. Instead, those who filed a complaint were threatened. So this union between the government, the administrative board of JU and BCL is at the core of the trouble for everyone else.

To this day, this trend remains the same: the same extortion, threats, torture of students, and utter disregard for rules and ethics. Incentivized by the will to recover the money they paid

for the positions they were awarded, and to climb up the ladder within the organisation, the student activists of BCL lose their identity of being students entirely. They become devoid of human emotions. It's quite unfortunate considering these are all meritorious students who passed the admission test competing with thousands of others. The reason they become comfortable

with the idea of criminal activities is because they are provided protection by the government and the university administration, who are fuelled by the need for a pseudo-army that will assist them with keeping their power and silencing dissenting voices.

In 1998, there was a huge anti-rape movement at JU. Following that movement, the first policy against sexual harassment was created in the university. It is still in effect, which is why teachers and students united in protest on February 4, and because of that the university decided to take some action against the accused in the rape case. The police have also mobilised against the accused. But if the protest or movement cannot keep up its momentum, it is possible that the university administration and the government will rehabilitate these accused.

All around the country, we hear of rape and other forms of sexual violence taking place. And in most cases, the perpetrators go unpunished. The only cases which make any difference are those wherein there are instant protests demanding justice. So it is important that in schools, colleges, factories, and workplaces, everywhere that sees such atrocious crimes take place, we mobilise instantly and protest no matter how small a number we are, if we want any justice at all.

As told to Monorom Polok of The Daily Star.

How will Bangladesh keep on sheltering the Rohingya?

Nazifa Nawar is a researcher and columnist.

NAZIFA NAWAR

Every year, the ill-fated Rohingya refugees in Bangladeshi camps have to wait for the new Joint Response Plan (JRP) through which their annual allocation of funding is raised. The 2024 JRP seeks \$872.7 million to support one million Rohingya refugees and 300,000 vulnerable host communities living in Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas.

In the last JRP, the annual funding requirement was \$875.9 million, of which 50 percent remained unmet (as of February 8, 2024). Due to fund shortages, the World Food Programme (WFP), in June last year, cut its monthly food rations for the Rohingya refugees from \$10 to \$8 per person.

Moreover, the World Bank (WB) and Asian Development Bank (ADB) are progressively tightening their financial support, creating a significant challenge for Bangladesh. The country now finds itself in a desperate

situation. The diminishing funds allocated for the Rohingya crisis are placing an immense financial burden on Bangladesh, forcing the country to resort to borrowing for the refugees' well-being.

In a groundbreaking move in December, Bangladesh sought a \$1 billion loan from the WB and ADB—a financial package consisting of \$535 million in loans and \$465 million in

grants. On January 23, WB Country Director Abdoulaye Seck expressed interest in disbursing an additional \$700 million in the form of both a grant and soft loan to Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud. This funding is earmarked to support crucial socioeconomic development initiatives for both the Rohingya population and the adversely

affected host communities.

In an immediate reaction, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) stated that relying on foreign loans is not a just, prudent, or enduring strategy to address the Rohingya crisis. The statement conveyed profound apprehension at the government's apparent choice and asked it to engage in negotiations with the WB and ADB to obtain a grant instead. Furthermore, it called upon the international community to ensure a just and equitable distribution of the responsibilities associated with this crisis driven by persecution.

In light of the insufficient grants in the Joint Response Plan to comprehensively address the Rohingya crisis, a dual strategy can be adopted: maximising humanitarian aid collection and focusing concerted efforts on the repatriation process. This approach aims not only to alleviate the immediate financial strain but also to ensure a sustainable and effective resolution to the crisis.

In 2023, Bangladesh planned to repatriate an initial group of 1,140

Rohingya refugees to Myanmar under the Pilot Repatriation Project by the end of the year. However, the escalation of conflict in Myanmar caused that plan to stall; thus, the repatriation process is still in limbo.

Meanwhile, conditions in the Rohingya camps are steadily deteriorating. Criminal activities, including killings, drug peddling and extortion, have become commonplace. The pervasive frustration and lack of employment opportunities make the Rohingya population increasingly susceptible to unlawful activities. Plus, the absence of proper education, recreational facilities, and a conducive environment has led some children to become involved in various juvenile offences. If repatriation efforts fail, Bangladesh not only faces financial constraints but also the looming threat of a security lapse for the nation.

The situation in Rakhine state is tense, with ongoing conflicts between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw offering no clear solution. Sustaining the livelihoods of more than 1.2 million Rohingya poses a monumental challenge for Bangladesh.