

Rising human toll of a sizzling heatwave

At least 10 died of heat stroke in seven days

In a country where ordinary people still suffer disproportionately in both extreme cold and heat, despite its vaunted economic progress which should have minimised such sufferings, it is perhaps a given that there would be deaths galore in proportion to the severe heatwave now underway. Yet it is difficult to accept them as inevitable. Every death feels more like a failure on the part of the state than the outcome of individual immune responses. According to a report, at least 10 people died of heat stroke over the last week, three of them in the 24 hours till Tuesday morning.

The estimate, however, is only from government hospitals. And the DGHS has no data on the days preceding April 22 even though there has been a heatwave every day in this month except on the 9th and 10th. So, the human toll of this unprecedented heatwave—the longest in 76 years—is expected to be much higher. Tuesday ended Bangladesh's warmest month in recorded history, both in terms of heatwave duration and average maximum temperatures. The question is, how much of the suffering that followed is due to the weather? How much of it was avoidable? Probing this topic is crucial to our survival in the coming years in a world fast warming up.

While there are bigger issues contributing to rising temperatures in Bangladesh—such as unplanned urbanisation and rapid depletion of forests, trees and low-lying areas—that need critical policy attention, we should also consider more immediate issues related to our preparation or lack thereof. Topmost among them is the electricity crisis, especially in rural areas. Throughout April, there were long and frequent spells of loadshedding outside Dhaka. There were also few initiatives from city corporations and health authorities, especially in response to frequent heat alerts, to lessen public suffering. Hospitals have struggled to accommodate or serve rising patients suffering from heat-related illnesses. The education authorities, on the other hand, showed poor leadership as they flip-flopped on classroom shutdown/reopening decisions. Resuming classes despite a heat alert on Sunday reportedly caused two school teachers to die of heat stroke and numerous students to fall sick.

All this shows our poor level of preparation which is really unfortunate. This must change going forward. The meteorological department predicts that May will bring some relief from the scorching heat. There might be rain and thunderstorms as soon as May 2, and the heatwave spells would be much shorter, albeit slightly humid. This is good news, but we must remain alert. We urge the authorities to beef up their preparation so that the sufferings of April are not repeated.

US must pay heed to demands of students

It remains key to stopping Israel's atrocious war in Gaza

It is disappointing that more than 900 students have been arrested from a number of universities and colleges in the United States over the past two weeks, because they demanded justice for Palestinians. Protesting against Israel's unjust war in Gaza, these students have been demanding that their universities divest from companies and businesses that have links with Israel in any shape or form. They want their educational institutions—and essentially their country—to be separate from Israel's genocidal campaign against Palestinians, and we stand in solidarity with them.

Since the October 7 Hamas attack in Israel, the latter has been running a ruthless campaign in Gaza that has so far killed more than 34,000 people. Although the US, as usual, stood by Israel, its university students wanted no part in it. They have been holding rallies, sit-ins, hunger strikes and, most recently, encampments on their campuses in protest. Things escalated when, on April 18, police removed a pro-Palestinian encampment on the Columbia University campus, arresting over 100 demonstrators. Instead of getting subdued, the students pushed back, and similar demonstrations spread across the US.

Now university administrations and police are cracking down on protesters, with the accusations of anti-Semitism being thrown around to justify it. We fail to understand how a peaceful demonstration demanding justice for a persecuted population can be labelled anti-Semitic. In fact, what these protesters are being subjected to violates the principles of academic freedom and free speech, as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has pointed out.

The US government should pay heed to the demands of pro-Palestinian protesters. What we have seen so far is an extraordinary display of double standards and flouting of international and humanitarian laws in Gaza, and these students have been trying to bring critical focus on that. The US must re-evaluate its position regarding Israel and take a stance that is moral and in line with international humanitarian laws, not to mention its own stated policy on human rights. Protecting one nation's interests must not be detrimental to another nation's freedom and well-being.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rethink standard workweek

The traditional 8-hour workday and 5-6 day workweek deserves reevaluation. While its inception aimed to improve gruelling work conditions, the job market needs to evolve towards more worker-centric practices. This benefits not just employee well-being, but also productivity. Granting workers more rest days and space for personal development fosters creativity and national economic growth. After all, a well-rested and engaged workforce fosters innovation, which many developed countries have recognised by adopting more flexible work arrangements. It's time we consider the same.

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The concept of a public institution eludes our central bank



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In the mid-1980s, military dictator HM Ershad banned BBC's journalistic operations in Bangladesh. In March 2022, the Taliban banned BBC's local language services in Afghanistan. It can thus be theorised that authoritarian rulers simply hate any journalistic investigations because the press is detrimental to their longevity. But for journalists' normal, professional access into a financial institution in Bangladesh to be barred is an untimely absurdity. It raises a question as to whether something is really wrong within Bangladesh Bank (BB) right now, given that the regulator is floundering in the theatrics of mergers and trying to convert rotten apples to fresh oranges by covering up multiple loopholes.

BB has recently restricted the journalists' access for no reason in sight. Of course, BB's policy restlessness in recent months surrounding default loans, the dollar's exchange rates, reserves, remittance, inflation, and mergers have drawn in more criticism than praise from the media. Meanwhile, journalists have been reporting BB's half-baked ideas and erratic steps. They are only doing their job, as they have been for so long. It is their noble duty to report any public or private sector wrongdoings so as to alert the nation. So what's the problem?

The BB governor has attempted to explain the decision as trying to protect some "top secrets" of the central bank. If the so-called top secrets aren't religiously private, he is supposed to share these with the public via the media. People have every right to know such information since the central bank is the regulator of banks which live and thrive on people's money. And the BB is not like police headquarters; it doesn't handle murder cases which may warrant confidentiality. The culprits BB might be dealing with are wilful defaulters who are at the root of plundering the financial sector and thus placing the economy on the cliff's edge. But even these cases shouldn't be kept secret. The BB governor is a custodian of the state's interests, not those of loan defaulters. Being a hundred percent transparent is the first point of his oath.

The culture of central banks addressing journalists has been there since the early 1990s. Economist Alan Blinder, the then vice-chair of the

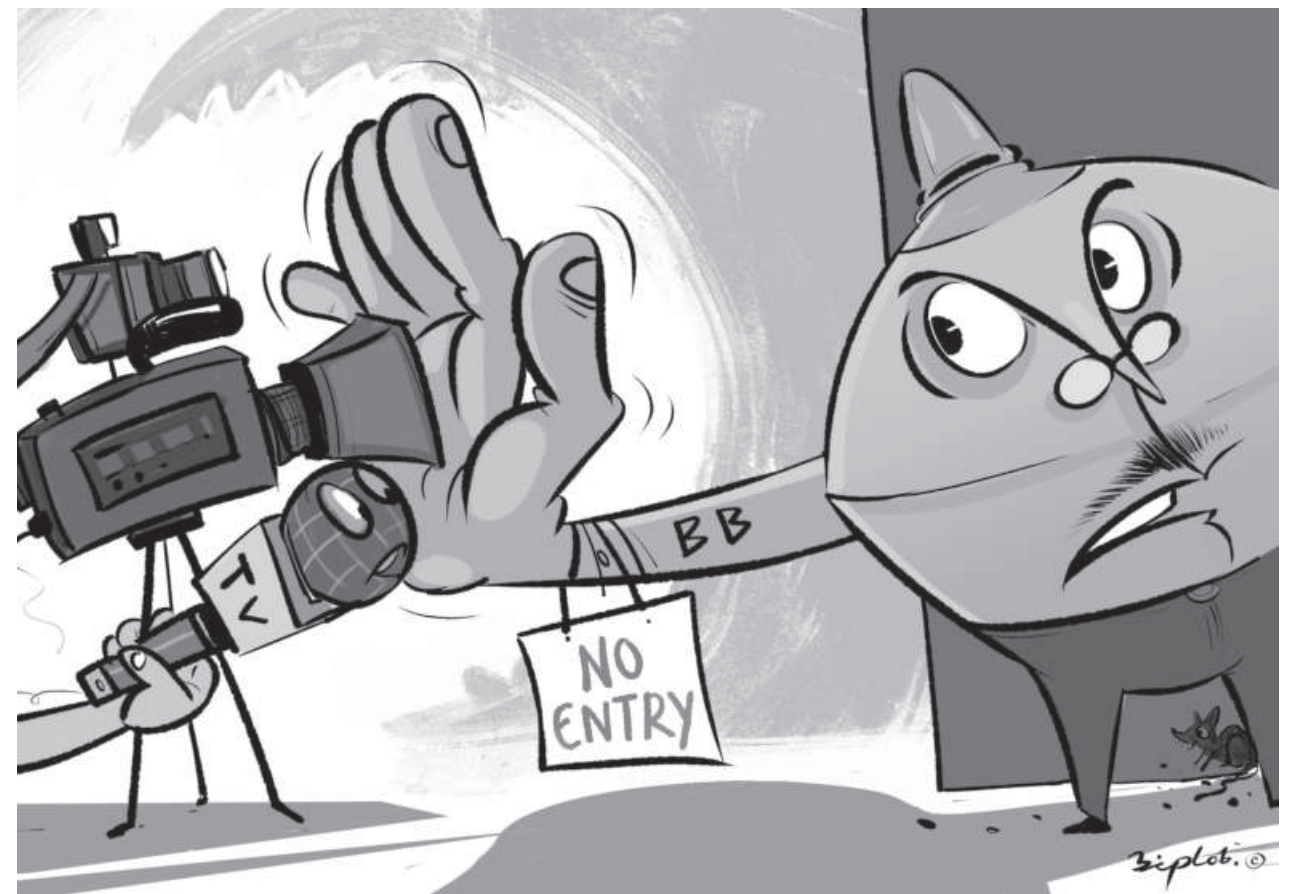


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Federal Reserve System, championed the culture of making central banks more accessible for and accountable to the public. His campaign, "Fed listens," has been a paragon of how a central bank must ensure free flow of information. The journalists help establish communication between policymakers and the public. The current Fed chair Jerome Powell regularly meets with journalists after every policy decision; so does the governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Bailey. The current president of the European Central Bank (ECB), Christine Lagarde, previously the chair and managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), invites the press for question-and-answer sessions quite regularly. The ECB also welcomes public tours to improve the common understanding of how central banks work and what purposes they serve.

The IMF outlines four principles of communication by central banks. It asserts that communication should be clear, candid, and transparent. Second, communication should

reach all segments of the population. Third, communication should take place regularly. Fourth, all economic agents should have equal access to the same information. Ben Bernanke, who chaired the Fed and won the economics Nobel Prize, made it clear that central bank governors are public servants, and it is their responsibility to provide the public with as much

before, because journalists can read the public pulse and communicate with stakeholders efficiently. No other service can replicate the functions which the media carries out for the public. Journalists mustn't be seen as counterparties, nor are they enemies of state interests. BB should rather engage with journalists as well-wishers and counsellors in regards

of their decisions as possible. Former Reserve Bank of India governor Raghuram Rajan faced journalists quite confidently because he understood economics well and didn't fear being dethroned by any tycoon groups. None of those mentioned above resorted to using their spokesmen to justify their stances because the respective governments appointed them knowing that these leaders know how the economy functions and thus can speak for themselves. At any central bank, every information is public information, and hiding anything is equivalent to doing a disservice to the economy.

The economy is facing high inflation and reserve depletion. The banking sector in particular is in its most appalling state, requiring constant checkups like a patient in the ICU. In such a situation, journalists are akin to those devices surrounding the patient which work tirelessly to report BB's financial symptoms to the public.

BB needs extensive interactions with journalists more than ever

to policy steps. Had BB adopted this practice in early 2022 when the prevailing crises began to surface, the governor would have been regarded as a good policymaker by now. But BB's attitude towards journalists has recently been more bureaucratic than accommodative, and that is doing more harm than good.

Restricting journalists in the secretariat should in no way be a good example that is blindly replicated in an institution like BB or the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission. These bodies deal with citizens' savings and investments and citizens have the right to inquire about what the custodians of their assets are doing with them at any point in time. Thus, preventing journalists from discharging their duties is unconstitutional and demeans the noble objectives of the Bangladesh Bank Order, 1972 which was framed under Bangabandhu's guidance after independence. BB must revise its approach to journalism by following global best practices and thus improving its knowledge base.

No progress without workers' inclusion

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Although Bangladesh places great importance on May Day and officially celebrates it as a national holiday, workers in Bangladesh face significant challenges in organising and forming unions. There are barriers to forming unions, and even when unions are established, they often face difficulties in functioning, especially if the employers are opposed to them.

Out of the six crore workers in Bangladesh, only around one crore have their trade union rights recognised. Compared to other South Asian countries, workers in Bangladesh are paid less, and the country has one of the worst workplace safety records.

Historically, trade unions received support from major political parties until 1990, but once these parties came to power, they didn't prioritise workers' demands and instead used politically affiliated trade unions against the trade union movement. Additionally, during workers' agitations, intervention by departments of labour, industrial police, and security intelligence agencies often occurred, resulting in actions taken against the workers rather than addressing their grievances. This highlights a complex relationship between political interests and labour rights in

Bangladesh.

Compared to trade union rights in other South Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan, Bangladesh faces greater challenges concerning rights, social security, and wages. In these neighbouring nations, trade unions have more robust legal frameworks and bargaining power, resulting in better protection for workers' rights, enhanced social security measures, and comparatively higher wages. However, in Bangladesh, trade union activities are frequently met with obstacles such as legal restrictions, harassment, and violence, thus limiting workers' ability to organise and advocate effectively. As a result, workers in Bangladesh often experience greater vulnerabilities in terms of rights protection, social security benefits, and wages.

Bangladesh is closely monitored by international bodies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), as well as by the European Union and the United States.

The relationship between Bangladesh and the United States Trade Representative (USTR) often revolves around trade agreements, labour rights, and economic policies. The USTR monitors trade practices and negotiates trade deals on behalf of the United States. Bangladesh's

trade relations with the US can be influenced by factors such as labour rights standards, intellectual property protection, and market access. Discussions between Bangladesh and the USTR include issues like improving labour conditions, enforcing trade agreements, and promoting fair trade practices.

The European Union (EU) and trade unions in Bangladesh have various interactions and interests. The EU is a significant trading partner for Bangladesh, importing goods such as textiles and garments. The EU has been involved in initiatives to improve labour standards and human rights in Bangladesh, such as through the Bangladesh Sustainability Compact, which aims to promote responsible business conduct and improve working conditions.

The EU has been actively engaged with the ILO in Dhaka to improve trade union rights and safety in the workplace in Bangladesh. This engagement often involves supporting initiatives aimed at promoting labour rights, improving working conditions, and enhancing workplace safety standards. The EU provides funding and technical assistance to support projects implemented by the ILO in Bangladesh, which focus on areas such as capacity building for trade unions, promoting dialogue between workers and employers, and strengthening labour inspection systems to ensure compliance with international labour standards. Additionally, the EU works closely with the ILO and other stakeholders to address challenges related to labour

rights violations, including efforts to combat forced labour, child labour, and discrimination in the workplace. Overall, this collaboration between the EU and the ILO in Dhaka plays a crucial role in advancing labour rights and improving working conditions for workers in Bangladesh.

As we currently receive GSP facilities from European countries, and those from North America are now suspended, we want to continue receiving these benefits from the European Union. Additionally, we aim for the withdrawal of suspension from North American countries. We seek to improve human rights, trade union rights, and rights to organise workers, and foster healthy, productive industrial relations. It is meaningless to provide GSP facilities for exporting goods to foreign countries if the benefits neither reach the workers and the poor, nor generate employment.

The Bangladeshi government and employers often resist the formation of robust trade unions, fearing potential conflicts with their interests. They attempt to exert control by favouring politically affiliated trade unions. Similarly, other professional organisations find themselves compelled to align with government agendas. This apprehension toward independent civil society bodies reflects the government's deep-seated concerns.

We have to ensure that people are not left behind, that all take part in the benefit of progress and economic development. Without the inclusion of the deprived and marginalised, we cannot say we made progress.