

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Personal data still in danger

Govt still failing to protect citizens' private information

It is gravely concerning that even after multiple incidents of data leakage from government servers, the authorities are continuing to ignore the crisis of cybersecurity in the country. We are still hearing about data theft, that too by government staff, which is a clear evidence of negligence. The latest incident came to light when police on Tuesday arrested two members of a cybergang that offered "services" such as changing information in the National ID server and locating people by phone triangulation. The gang operated with assistance from unscrupulous staffers at the Election Commission and other government offices.

The ease with which the criminals operated is quite frightening. They were able to avail these services via websites and encrypted messaging apps. This just shows how this group was operating right under the authorities' nose, and points to the possibility of many more gangs currently being active. Surely, authorities know that such crimes have far-reaching consequences. For instance, by manipulating NID information and using fake documents, fraudsters can open bank accounts and get loans, as has been done before. Besides, then authorities should be greatly worried about the fact that a section among them are involved in these crimes. Police said changing personal data on the NID server requires the credential of high-level Election Commission officials, which means the bad apples have climbed the ladder and are now abusing their powers.

In June 2023, TechCrunch revealed that personal information of about 50 lakh Bangladeshi nationals had been leaked from a government website. One would have guessed that the news would serve as a wake-up call. But mere months later, in October, this newspaper reported that personal information of smart NID card holders—5.5 crore people—was available in the messaging app Telegram. And since then, news of cybergangs providing such services have made headlines several times. Clearly, the authorities have not woken up. How many more breaches and leaks will it take?

These incidents imply that the administration, in its quest of digitalisation, does not have the necessary expertise or diligence to ensure data security. It is reluctant to take accountability for its negligence, as in the case of breaches centring NID. But ultimately, the government, which seems to only be concerned about acquiring private information, is responsible for protecting the data of the country's citizens. We urge the authorities to urgently address this issue by apprehending the criminals, weeding out officials and staff involved with such crimes, and bolstering the data security infrastructure in consultation with experts.

Children should feel safe in their schools

Why are so many primary school buildings in Barguna dilapidated?

It is alarming to learn that about 21 percent of government primary schools in Barguna are in dilapidated conditions, putting the lives of children at risk. According to a report, these schools, built between 1994 and 2002, have never gone through any renovations since, adding to the wear and tear of the structures in a region that often experiences extreme weather events such as cyclones and heavy rain. Take Gaurichanna High School for example, whose students are attending classes in a building declared unsafe two years ago. Teachers say they have urged higher authorities to take steps, but none have been taken so far. Requests for renovations may take some time to process because of bureaucratic complications, but a two-year waiting time for the work to even start is unacceptable.

We have seen a similar situation in many other schools across the country. In June last year, the then state minister for primary and mass education told parliament that a total of 6,704 government primary schools were in dilapidated conditions. It means the many thousands of students, teachers and staff members who visit these buildings every day are at risk. Some guardians are, therefore, reluctant to send their children to schools. Forced academic interruptions like this may harm not only children's education, but also their life potential and future trajectory, especially for rural girl children for whom early marriage is a constant threat.

While the government has plans to replace some of the old, rundown buildings—reconstructing them as cyclone shelters in some cases—students and teachers should not have to risk their lives by continuing to attend classes there. There must be an alternative option that is safer, if temporary. Bureaucratic red tape and procedural delays must not come in the way to compromise their safety and security. Also, during the renovation or construction of buildings, fire/building safety and seismic resilience should also be ensured. Children should be able to focus only on their studies, and not worry whether the place where they are supposed to be protected will come crumbling down.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Double standard regarding freedom of speech

Police brutality against protesters is nothing new in the US. During the ongoing student protests at US universities, the way not just the police but the university authorities also handled the protesters raised questions about these educational institutions' claims as the flagbearers of freedom of speech, thought, and academia. Yesterday's article titled "End of academic freedom on US campuses?" was just another reminder of the true stance of the US policymakers on free speech. Several right-wing or autocratic world leaders and politicians have, from time to time, criticised the US's prescription on freedom of speech. Now they will find even more excuses to crush on freedom of speech in their own countries.

Amaya Haseeb
Dhaka

IMF prescription to raise energy prices is anti-people, illogical



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The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has just completed their recent mission in Bangladesh, during which they held various meetings and discussed the terms and conditions of the \$4.7 billion loan, which they are set to give out in instalments. We have seen a set of preconditions emerging out of those discussions. Typically, there are two types of IMF conditions—and I say this from my observations and long-term research on IMF activities in developing countries. The first set of conditions relates to much-needed reforms to improve any economy, such as financial sector reform, tax-GDP ratio, ensuring accountability and transparency, etc. Then there is a second set of conditions, whose main objective is more privatisation and commercialisation. For the public, this means increased gas, electricity and transport prices, more taxes, and so on.

We have to treat these two conditions separately. If we do, we will notice that the IMF is not so serious about the first set of conditions—which are the bare minimum needed for an economy to function. They may talk about these much-needed reforms, but these are not their main agenda. Their priority is to institute the second set of reforms. The IMF has already given out loans to Bangladesh 10 times before, but has there been any improvement in the financial sector? In fact, there has been an alarming degradation of the sector—Bangladesh has now become an example of how a financial sector can become a place of unprecedented and unapologetic looting. But since the 1990s, the IMF and World Bank have brought about many reforms in public banks. The space and scope for private banks have been increased. They have done these in the name of reform in the financial sector, but we have not seen any overall improvement.

It has been the same in the case of corruption in private and public sectors. In the name of increasing the tax-GDP ratio, they have imposed various taxes on the people, but those in whose hands wealth has

been centralised have not been brought under the tax regime. It is now universally acknowledged that inequality has increased exponentially in Bangladesh. It is because a large amount of wealth has accumulated in the hands of a few people within a very short amount of time, thanks to large-scale looting in the finance or energy sector, occupation and destruction of our rivers and forests, and different construction projects undertaken at the highest costs. But those who have benefited from this corruption are not being taxed, even though it is because of them that the country's GDP has increased. So while there is a need to increase the tax-GDP ratio, the burden is ultimately falling upon the ordinary people. New taxes are being imposed on them at different times of the year, even though such decisions are supposed to be made as per the national budget.

The IMF's position is clearly to protect corporate interests and against public interest. If they were

concerned with public interest, they would have asked why subsidies are so high, instead of asking to reduce them in the energy sector. Why are subsidies so high? Even though our installed capacity is more than our current need, the government has given one private power plant after another permission to set up, and now are paying them an absurd

amount of money to simply sit idle—as much as 81 percent of the subsidies in the energy sector is spent paying capacity charges. Another reason is that, instead of investing time and money in gas exploration, our government has opted for expensive LNG imports. So now we are having to spend Tk 30,000-40,000 crore in importing LNG to get what we could have gotten by spending Tk 400 crore in gas exploration. As a result, subsidies are increasing in the gas sector.

Similarly, instead of investing in renewables, they are setting up import-based coal power plants. Nuclear power plant is being built with huge loans. If the reasons due to which subsidies are so high remain unaddressed, the process of withdrawing subsidies would only mean that instead of solving the energy crisis, the burden of increased energy costs will fall on the general public. Simply put, in order to expand the businesses of some private groups

development position. Unfortunately, that is what the IMF consistently does. It is not truly invested in institutional reforms. They gave out loans to Sri Lanka many times, yet it fell into a crisis. Pakistan has taken out loans 22 times, but we all know the state of its economy. So it is important to question the conditions, frameworks and prescriptions recommended by the IMF and World Bank, and hold them accountable. It is time to ask what the results are of the various projects and prescriptions of these organisations. The ruling class in Bangladesh are certainly to blame for the chaotic situation in the railway, education, health and energy sectors, but I also hold the IMF and World Bank responsible for enabling them. It is time we asked whose interests are being served ultimately by the various projects and prescriptions of these international institutions.

As told to Sushmita S Preetha of The Daily Star.



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

STUDENT PROTESTS IN THE US

Reclaiming the flames of human rights



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PSYMHE WADUD

I argued a few months back that the genocidal killings of innocent civilians, particularly of children in Gaza, within the context of the Israel-Palestine war, appear not as just another passing of a period but as an episode potentially signalling the impending doom of an objectively trustworthy international human rights law scheme, particularly with five states at the helm as permanent members of the UN Security Council. Four months later, it seems a tad hopeful, particularly with students and staff in the US universities vehemently protesting the US policies that staunch support Israel, and thereby indirectly provide an impetus to the Israeli genocide.

Anti-establishment protests are generally handled with high-handed tactics by those in authoritative positions, essentially because establishment nourishes and sustains those who form part of the authority. And there has been no exception in the present context.

The protesters, with "an understanding of both worlds," stand firmly between the elite decision-makers at the top and the trampled-on Palestinians at the bottom. The protesters thus create an appropriate

intermediate space to vernacularise the language of human rights, peace, and justice, upon providing for a corrective to the language of dominance, oppression, and hegemony. True that those in power are biased, that power today is defined by imbalance, and that the sham of balance is rigged, but above and beyond such top-down injustices and unfairness lies the unbending power of the people.

Indeed, the very ideas of fundamental freedom, dignity, and human rights are discursively embedded into multiple sites. Mass movements only show the site where the said ideas find flesh and blood. The protesting students chant "boycott apartheid Israel," thereby denouncing the racist policies that Israel propagates and the US sides with. They ask the university authorities to "divest from Israel," thereby warranting divergence from the deep-seated policies of extending unsighted support to Israel. Thus, the protesters unmask the aberrant intricacies and depraved symbols constructing the premise for the genocide now unfolding. However, the question is: how far can these protesters take us?

In January, the International

Court of Justice issued six provisional measures, ordering Israel to "take all measures within its power to prevent genocidal acts, including preventing and punishing incitement to genocide, ensuring aid and services reach Palestinians under siege in Gaza, and preserving evidence of crimes committed in Gaza." Israel, to date, continues to violate the said ruling by the world court. Moreover, the US abstained from voting in favour of the UN Security Council Resolution# 2728 on March 25 for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, thereby not explicitly siding with the latest attempt to assuage the enormous humanitarian crisis there. Reportedly, the International Criminal Court (ICC) is considering issuing arrest warrants for Israeli top military and political figures for the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity. However, the fact that neither Israel nor the US recognise the authority of ICC is yet another despairing reality within the international politico-legal spectrum.

Against this backdrop, perhaps it will be irrationally optimistic to imagine a system overhaul through the protests, because nothing short of such an overhaul can bring in true amends to the devastations caused. Indeed, the protests may not bring in ready-made solutions to the present crisis, precisely because racism is but an institutionalised reality in the now prevailing hegemonic chauvinistic world order. Nonetheless, the protests are a downstream constraint on the illegitimate use of force and exertion of power. Within the illusion of sovereign equality imagining all states standing on an equal footing, the protests of

people of various races, religions, sexes, genders and sexualities bring in fresh air of human equality.

In order to reclaim the transformative terrain and flames of human rights, we need to approach human rights from hitherto excluded locations and from the perspectives of hitherto excluded subjects. The task of so approaching is not quite straightforward. The task ought to involve challenging authorities, re-reading the status quos, and contesting the taken-for-granted assumptions. Through such an elaborate process only, "human rights can be remade in the vernacular" for the fringe-dwellers and the marginalised. Indeed, the protesters are an embodiment of both the excluded locations (which for them is the state of Palestine) and the excluded perspectives lying on the fringes of the international human rights paradigm.

The history of mass movements or student protests is not new in the United States. US campuses have witnessed protests during the Vietnam War, and more recently in support of Black Lives Matter movement and against the overturning of *Roe v Wade* (resisting the rollback of women's reproductive rights). All these movements were anti-establishment and rights-based. Such protests give us both purpose and meaning, through and in the face of adversities. Therefore, at the least, the protests tell us that it perhaps is premature to say that the end of human rights, or international law for that matter, is near. Indeed, the discourse on human rights is all the more relevant now.