

How far does the gold syndicate's reach go?

Involvement of law enforcers, public officials must be investigated

The unexplained death of Jhenaidah MP Anwarul Azim Anar has brought some shocking truths to light, including details of a brazen gold smuggling operation in his constituency. According to a recent investigation by this daily, Anar had invented a "token" system that would allow carriers transporting illegal gold a free pass from law enforcement. In return, the latter would get a "handsome" cut. This daily interviewed a carrier who said there are dozens like him who pick up consignments from various districts and deliver them to the border, where other operatives smuggle them out to India. The border smugglers earn between Tk 1 lakh and Tk 2 lakh per consignment, while carriers receive a fixed monthly salary.

According to local sources, gold smuggling has been taking place through this border area over the last four to five decades. Azim has reportedly been involved in the gold trade since he was a student in 1986, assuming a leading role for the last 10 years. The three-time MP stood accused in 21 cases between 2000 and 2008, including murder, extortion, and smuggling of arms, explosives, drugs and gold (which subsequently got dismissed during the AL regime). We cannot help but wonder how a man of his "notoriety" could hold such an important position, and whether the ruling party was truly unaware of the scale of his involvement in criminal networks.

The slain MP may have been one of the kingpins of this smuggling syndicate, but the question still remains: who else is involved in the trade, and how deep does the involvement run? Most importantly, can we expect an independent investigation into the syndicate now, or will the kingpins continue to orchestrate the show from behind the curtains, with the same impunity they have enjoyed till now?

The government should be as worried as we are about the nexus among criminals, law enforcement and political leaders, and the possibility of complicity of more people within its own ranks in sustaining such criminal networks. In order to regain public trust as well as for its own sake, the government must initiate a thorough and credible investigation into the smuggling syndicate, beginning with identifying all those within the law enforcement and administration who have been actively aiding and abetting the process. Exemplary action must be taken against them, no matter their designation. Anar's murder and subsequent investigations have caused great damage to the country's reputation, and the government must respond with urgency and full transparency.

When childhood is devoid of play

Govt must address children's lack of playtime, dwindling playgrounds

As open spaces keep turning into high-rises in this fast-paced world, our little ones are being deprived of their most basic right: the chance to play to their hearts' content. A recent report, based on opinions of those aged 3-18 years, reveals that one out of three children does not have enough time to play, one out of five has no safe playing space, and one in three children with disabilities has no playmates. This is truly a depressing statistic and does not bode well for the future generation. While this is the global scenario, the Bangladesh government must think about how it has contributed to this crisis, as dwindling playgrounds and rising educational pressure, among other issues, are greatly depriving our children of the chance to play.

Against the backdrop of the first-ever International Day of Play, observed on June 11, we must address the difficult issues facing our children. Notably, school, coaching classes and homework are snatching away the precious time to play, and we must ask: must these youngsters be burdened with so much studying at this age? We acknowledge that education is a tool to escape poverty and climb the socioeconomic ladder, but play is also of utmost importance. According to experts, it is essential to develop intelligence, language and social skills, empathy, and creativity, while ensuring physical well-being. Unfortunately, due to our cut-throat society, parents often forget about these benefits.

In the last 22 years, the number of playgrounds in Dhaka has come down from 150 to only 24. So, even if they have the time, where exactly will our children go to play? According to the report, 97 percent of the children surveyed said play is important, 57 percent said they made friends while playing, and 45 percent got to bond with their caregivers during playtime. Only by taking their thoughts seriously can we work towards their welfare, but clearly we don't. As a result, they have been condemned to spend hours in front of digital screens for daily entertainment, which pose serious health risks. This has to change. The authorities, first and foremost, must ensure adequate playgrounds and a well-structured education system, so our little ones can play freely under the open sky.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Magna Carta sealed by King John

Magna Carta—a charter of English liberties that occupies a unique place in the popular imagination as a symbol and a battle cry against oppression—was sealed on this day in 1215, under the threat of a civil war, by King John.

Biman's frustrating legacy of misadventures



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

In the country's aviation landscape, Biman Bangladesh Airlines and controversy have now become synonymous. From rampant corruption in every layer of its activities to gross misgovernance permeating all levels of decision-making—with ample evidence presented in various investigative reports—Biman is fully submerged in a stinky cesspool of controversies of various forms, scales and scopes.

Biman's recent decision to proceed with procuring Airbus aircraft, with the a reconstituted evaluation committee turning projected losses into projected profits based on illogical assumptions, has added more flesh to the body of accusations against the national flag carrier over mismanaged deals.

One would remember the 2014 lease of two EgyptAir aircraft for five years, which Biman could only put into use initially for one year, due to engine defects. Not only did it have to take separate engines on lease for Tk 177 crore, it also had to count staggering losses due to keeping them sitting idle. Between 2014 and 2019, Biman had to bear a loss of Tk 1,200 crore, with the expenditure of Tk 3,529 crore surpassing the Tk 2,329 crore revenue that the two aircraft had earned.

It seems Biman is about to make another loss-making venture by procuring the Airbus aeroplanes, as the projected profits are based on unrealistic assumptions, as stated earlier. First of all, to show a 20 percent jump in revenue, the 92 percent passenger cabin factor that Biman projected for these aircraft is inflated. On an average, the passenger load factor or passenger cabin factor of an aircraft is usually around 70 percent, depending on various factors, such as expenditure. Last year, the global passenger load factor was 81 percent.

The second fallacy in Biman's logic for profit is the route suggestion. While the national carrier says that the Airbus aircraft would be profitable in two routes only—the Dhaka-New York route, three times a week, with a stopover in Istanbul; and the Dhaka-Jeddah route with daily flights—Biman has apparently lost sight of the

fact that it is not authorised by the US Federal Aviation Authority to fly in the NY route due to the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh's operational irregularities identified in 2006.

Moreover, setting up an Airbus fleet would require Biman to create a completely separate and new supply chain, and logistics arrangement with trained manpower, as the current one caters to a predominantly Boeing fleet. This would involve crores in additional costs.



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

It has been suggested that this is more of a diplomatic move by the Bangladesh government, which is trying to move away from its dependence on US-made aircraft. Airbus is European-made: France, Germany, the UK and Spain are all involved in its manufacturing value chain, with the final parts assembled in Toulouse, France.

Whatever the reason may be, Biman cannot and should not be used for any other purpose other than ensuring its healthy and sustainable growth and creating a competitive edge for

books to hide the losses. According to the same report, the liabilities were not shown on the past five years' financial statements, which also did not include a significant amount that Biman owes to Padma Oil Company in interest due to delayed payments. These were revealed in audit reports, and is unfortunately not a new phenomenon for Biman. Such findings have even been discussed in parliament, without making any meaningful impact on Biman or its operations. It continues to go wayward.

That Biman is a highly corrupt

processes. Most importantly, Biman should be brought under a clearly defined governance framework with updated code of conduct, policies, and SOPs to ensure good governance practices. And the authorities must ensure that these policies, SOPs and code of conduct are implemented and applied to the dot.

This all depends on the intent and political will of the authorities. Do they have the willingness to introduce meaningful changes to how Biman operates, to transform it into a growing, profitable venture?

RTI kept alive mainly by rural, semi-urban citizens

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

There is conflicting feedback from our readers on the operation of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in the country. Some believe that in the existing political climate, there is little scope for the success of a law that seeks to empower citizens to probe into the government's inner workings. Others consider that by building incremental gains achieved through developing a close working relationship between government officials and citizens based on low-level RTI interventions, a culture of openness can be cultivated where deeper probes may be possible.

As a result, the upper echelons of society with a better understanding of how the government works have largely avoided the law. In contrast, those at the grassroots level with little knowledge about the intricacies of governance have used the RTI law to ensure that the government fulfils its responsibilities to the people.

Today, we bring to light several real-life instances that vividly illustrate the positive outcomes and growing influence of the RTI Act at the grassroots level. These success stories demonstrate how citizens, often with NGO support, have effectively used the RTI mechanism to address issues and bring about significant change.

In Nilphamari Sadar upazila, women patients who required ultrasonogram tests often had to get them done at

private clinics despite the high cost. Those who could not afford them depended on the free services at the upazila hospital. However, they found the place unsafe, with no privacy during the process and no female nurse to perform it. One of the male nurses was insensitive and made the patients feel unsafe. Frustrated, two members of an RTI group in the area, Anupha Begum and Shahida Begum of Bahalipara village, took matters into their own hands. They submitted two separate RTI requests in March 2024 to the officer-in-charge of Nilphamari General Hospital, seeking information on measures taken by the authority for the safety and privacy of the patients at the upazila hospital during the ultrasonogram process. They also asked for the names of doctors, nurses, and technicians who were supposed to run the service. Within a month, the hospital authority responded, stating that safety and privacy measures had been introduced at the upazila hospital. A positive outcome like this served as loud publicity for the power of the RTI Act and the role of citizens in bringing about change.

In the same upazila of Nilphamari, some members of the local RTI group in Ramnagar Union felt that despite repeated government assurances, the services provided by the local community clinic were poor. The

medicine it provided for free included only paracetamol, antacids and the like; the more expensive medication had to be bought from the market. So, some of the members submitted individual RTI requests to the upazila health office, asking for a list of services provided at the Ramnagar Community Clinic as well as a list of medicines supplied free of cost to the public by government hospitals and clinics. Shortly, replies came listing 59 free medical services and 42 types of medicines distributed by the institutions in a given period. The disclosures caused a stir in the community as many listed services existed in name only. Armed with the information, the group decided to mobilise the local population, ensuring that they knew what to demand from the authorities concerned.

In Dinajpur Sadar upazila, a local RTI group was surprised to find that the counter to deposit money in savings accounts, pension schemes or fixed deposits was kept open only from 10am to 10:10am in the city's main post office. No transaction was accepted after that period, and the number of persons served was limited to 10 only. It caused great hardship to the people, particularly those who were illiterate. So a member of the group, Astarul Alam, decided to submit an RTI request to the postmaster of Dinajpur asking for a copy of the official decision on the deposit counter's hours of operation, and the list of transactions performed by the said counter from April 24 to May 6 this year. Upon learning about the RTI request, the head of the post office directorate in the region directed the

postmaster to provide the requested information urgently, copying his mail to other important postal officials in the district for their knowledge and necessary action. In his response to the applicant, the postmaster informed that all post office activities remained open from 9am to 4pm, including deposits, and provided the number of people served within the period specified by the applicant.

These examples illustrate the point we have made in these columns time and again: it is mainly through the efforts of ordinary citizens that the RTI Act has been kept alive and kicking across Bangladesh. Their efforts are not just about demanding better services and transparency, but also about expanding the scope of democracy in the country. Though not always met with friendly responses, their actions are a powerful testament to the strength and resilience of democracy. They also help with the proper implementation of many government programmes for the needy and underprivileged.

However, while they smoothen the path, it will be the responsibility of the more knowledgeable members of the civil society to take the law to greater heights, so that more sensitive governance issues can be brought into the purview of citizens' inquiry. This collective effort of the citizens is a true embodiment of the power of democracy, making them feel the significance of their role in the governance of their country.

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