

The violence must end

Welcome offer of negotiation is being undermined by continued attacks

Twenty-nine dead, at least, and over 3,000 wounded, in one single day on Thursday. Eleven of those killed were students, a 17-year-old school child among them, and the rest includes a journalist, two rickshaw pullers and a pedestrian. While the identities of all the deceased could not be confirmed, what is apparent from media reports is that most of the victims were hit by shotgun pellets when law enforcers fired indiscriminately. A day later, even without any internet connectivity in the country, reports of violent crackdown on protesters are coming in. As of writing this editorial, at least 66 have been killed in attacks, many of them students. Dhaka as well as many other parts of the country have turned into areas of violence, with gun shots and grenades going off even late into the night.

What can possibly justify any response by the law enforcement that has led to this death toll? What is even more ironic is that while the attacks on protesters continued, the government was making calls for peace and dialogue. Peace and dialogue, as much as we all want it now, are not achieved through shotgun pellets and live bullets.

Who will take responsibility for all the deaths? The protests we have seen were largely peaceful—and the government, too, reacted with great restraint initially—before unprovoked attacks first by armed cadres of the ruling party, and then by law enforcement earlier in the week. What of the right to protest as enshrined in our constitution? It may seem pointless to ask this now, but what's the worst that would have happened had the protesters been allowed to carry out their shutdown programme without any intervention, as we saw in the first weeks of the protest? It may have caused inconvenience to ordinary citizens, and certainly the government, but it would not have led to so many unwarranted deaths. And if the aim on Thursday was to control a crowd from becoming violent, why did they not use non-lethal means to disperse them? Such indiscriminate and disproportionate violence has clearly only further incited an already angry crowd.

There are news reports of the cruel way that many of the students were killed. While we are glad that a police committee has been formed to probe the killing of Abu Sayed, can we expect the same for every death that has taken place? We can only hope that the judicial probe that has been promised to investigate the deaths will look into police excesses and recommend action accordingly.

It may well be that at this point other elements have infiltrated the movement and are carrying out violent activities not endorsed by the students. One of the coordinators of the movement has already disassociated themselves from political elements and destruction of public property. It is imperative that for the credibility of the movement, the students continue their protests peacefully. It is also important to distinguish the quota reform movement from those wanting to take advantage of the situation, but in order to do that, the government must first assuage the protesters. While we welcome the government's move to appeal to the court to keep 80 percent government jobs based on merit, and for the hearing to be held on Sunday, we urge it to follow through with confidence-building measures, first and foremost among which is putting a stop to the violence.

On top of all these, the government has decided to suspend internet connectivity in the country. To what end, we must ask. We have seen time and again how breakdowns in communication breed rumours, insecurity and anxiety. It also makes it impossibly difficult for journalists to do their job and provide a trusted account of what is happening on the ground. Ultimately, it further erodes trust and impedes any path to dialogue. We urge the authorities to restore internet connection across the country immediately.

Ensure proper inmate segregation

Jail overcrowding increases radicalisation risk

We are deeply concerned about the situation in Chattogram Central Jail, where notorious criminals, militants and terrorists are being kept in the same wards as general inmates. According to a report by the daily Samakal, the prison, with a capacity for 2,249 inmates, is currently housing twice as many prisoners. This not only degrades the living conditions for all inmates, but also puts the security of the prison at risk.

The report mentions that there are currently 79 secured cells for dangerous criminals in the prison while the number of such inmates exceeds 700. The recent transfer of imprisoned Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) members from Bandarban has contributed to the increase in the number of such inmates. One building with secured cells is currently being used to keep KNF members only. As a result, the condemned prisoners and dangerous criminals from that building were shifted to a general ward. Inmates of this prison include leaders of JMB, Ansarullah Bangla Team, Huji and other terrorist outfits. Confining them together with general inmates increases the risk of radicalisation of the latter.

We have repeatedly warned about this issue, calling on the need for rehabilitation and deradicalisation of militants in prison. There have been reports of instances when militant prisoners took advantage of the gaps in surveillance in overcrowded prisons to create new outfits and recruit new members. This compromises the security of a prison and also threatens the future peace and stability of the nation. Besides the militancy threat, keeping notorious criminals with general inmates endangers the latter's lives. The recent killing of one prisoner by another at Chattogram Central Jail is evidence of that danger.

Overcrowding in prison also dehumanises inmates by stripping them of their basic rights such as a proper space to sleep. The objective of imprisonment should not only be punishment; the focus should be on rehabilitation. While the expansion of Chattogram Central Jail is crucial in the short run, planning modern detention centres with proper surveillance systems and facilities to ensure inmates' basic rights, and preparing them, on a case-by-case basis, for social reintegration should be the ultimate goal.

QUESTION LEAKS, QUOTA DEBACLE AND KLEPTOCRACY

When a quick buck reigns supreme



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The leak of question papers, revealed by a TV channel, of a railway recruitment examination under the Public Service Commission (PSC) has brought to the fore the problem of unfairness in public examinations of all kinds—be it selection of candidates for a job, admission to higher education institutions, or student performance at various levels of education. According to media reports, a syndicate comprising, among others, PSC employees and senior officials has been active for over two decades and has orchestrated at least 30 question paper leaks for government recruitment tests, including those for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exams, over the last 12 years. The PSC had to cancel the 24th BCS preliminary test in 2003 due to allegations of leaked question papers. During the 33rd BCS written test in 2013, there were media reports about alleged question paper leaks and those question papers allegedly getting sold for Tk 5 lakh per set.

Complaints about question leaks, buying and selling of question papers, and bribery for primary school teacher recruitment and secondary school teachers' certification written examinations and oral interviews have been reported periodically. Over the years, there have also been reports of question leaks during Junior School Certificate (JSC), Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams, as well as for university entrance and medical college entrance tests.

The lack of integrity of recruitment examinations disclosed again at this time is particularly egregious when students all over the country are protesting against the existing system of various quotas in government service recruitment, including a high 30 percent reserved for the descendants of 1971 freedom fighters. Freedom fighters themselves or even their children are no longer of age to



VISUAL: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

enter a government job 53 years after the Liberation War. But then the demand for recruitment by merit instead of through quotas becomes futile if the recruitment exams are not fair or not honestly conducted.

Technical solutions are available for stemming question leaks, which require using digital technology that allows preparing multiple sets of questions and their random distribution to examinees at the last moment so they do not know which set of questions one may get at the test ("Plugging question leaks: A technical solution," The Daily Star, February 17, 2018). These solutions have been applied partially in the secondary and higher secondary board examinations; as a result, there have been less complaints about these examinations in recent years. No technical solution, however, can be fool-proof against totally dishonest and greedy people who will go to any length to make a

quick buck in a social environment that breeds and tolerates such actions.

Technical means of plugging leaks should be more widely used in both academic and non-academic examinations. At the same time, political conditions have to be created for the technical means to be applied effectively and for violations of rules to be quickly and severely penalised.

those holding opposing views.

The narrative of corruption at high levels in major institutions of the state at mind-boggling proportions coming out recently, by coincidence or not, adds to the build-up of a mood of dystopia among citizens, including students concerned about their future.

Declaration of assets and income required by public representation rules submitted by candidates for parliamentary and local government elections have revealed staggering percentage of growth of their wealth counted in multipliers of hundreds and thousands. However, the Election Commission (EC), the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and the National Board of Revenue (NBR) have not considered it necessary to ask any question and no candidate has been barred from election on this ground.

One is also reminded of the deplorable state of the country's financial and banking system that has become the instrument for looting peoples' money through loan defaulting and money laundering by a privileged group. Or the much-hyped mega infrastructure projects which are the costliest by world standards and pass on a heavy burden of loan repayment to future generations. In public perception, kleptocracy is the order of the day.

An air of uncertainty and despair engulfs young people. The cloud of dystopia thickens as public perception connects the dotted line between pervasive corruption, greed, inefficiency and ineptitude on the one hand, and lack of accountability and a culture of impunity created by a crony oligarchy of the political class, civil and law-enforcing bureaucracy and a greedily selfish business class working in collusion on the other.

Technical solutions including digital technology should be applied systematically to limit the chances of abusing the public examinations. A rational response to students' grievances about the quotas must be found by political decision-makers. But, above all, the political leadership must recognise the dystopia that submerges young people. The playbook for holding on to power need to change for the good of the regime and the nation.

Road safety and a nation's betrayal of its youth



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As I write this, the weight of a recent tragedy bears heavily on my heart. Just months ago, I received a call that shattered my world: my brother-in-law, vibrant and full of life, had been killed in a road accident. The image of his disfigured face, the knowledge that he suffered for those final 10 minutes on the Bekutia Bridge, haunts me still. What was meant to be a symbol of progress—the eighth Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge—instead became the site of unspeakable loss for two families.

This personal anguish is far from unique. In the wake of yet another devastating report on road accidents in Bangladesh, we are forced to confront an uncomfortable truth: our nation has failed its young people. The statistics released by the Road Safety Foundation are not just alarming; they are a damning indictment of our collective inaction and apathy. Since 2019, a staggering 5,619 students have lost their lives on our roads. Let that number sink in. These aren't mere statistics; they represent crushed dreams, devastated families, and a generation's potential cut tragically short.

The breakdown of these deaths is equally chilling: around 2,783 (49.52 percent) were either bikers or their passengers, at least 2,641 (47 percent) were children aged 5-17, around 1,534 (27.30 percent) were pedestrians



PHOTO: **STAR**

killed by hit-and-run drivers, and 833 students died crossing train tracks in just five and a half years. Each of these numbers represents a life needlessly lost, a family forever altered.

I'm transported back to 2018, to the days of the Road Safety Movement. As an undergraduate, I stood alongside my peers, demanding change. The memory of being chased by armed "helmet gangs" still sends a chill down my spine. I can still taste the acrid sting of tear gas, and see the bruised and bloodied faces of friends and seniors. My younger sister, trapped with classmates in a violent confrontation in Dhanmondi, narrowly escaped

harm. Those days left an indelible mark, a trauma that feels as fresh today as it did then.

We thought we had sparked real change. The deaths of Dia Khanam Mim and Abdul Karim Rajib galvanised the nation. We saw a new Road Transport Act, 17 directives from the Prime Minister's Office, and even a high-powered task force led by the

government touts ring hollow when our youth are being mowed down at such an alarming rate. Besides, the regular occurrence of such accidents is inching closer to desensitising us, our hearts turning blunt to these tragedies. We cannot allow this to be our new normal.

The Road Safety Foundation's recommendations offer a starting point: launch comprehensive road safety campaigns in every educational institution; crack down on unsafe vehicles and reckless driving; and address the seven major causes they have identified, including faulty infrastructure and lack of knowledge about safe road use. But we need more than recommendations. We need action. We need enforcement. We need a fundamental shift in how we approach road safety as a society.

To readers who have lost loved ones to road accidents: I see you. I grieve with you. Your pain is not forgotten, and your loss will not be in vain if we can demand better from those in power, while also trying to be a part of the change we wish to see.

Ensuring the safety of the citizens should be non-negotiable. Road safety isn't just about statistics or policy. It's about the fundamental right of every person to travel without fear and to return home safely to their loved ones. It's about building a society where a simple commute doesn't carry the risk of becoming another heartbreaking headline.

We owe it to those we have lost, to those who still bear the physical and emotional scars of past movements, and to future generations to demand better. How long can the government move forward while holding onto empty promises and half measures? We need visible, meaningful action; our lives, and the lives of our loved ones, depend on it.