

Curfew and violence slowly bleeding the economy

Resulting damage could have severe long-term impacts

The ongoing nationwide curfew, which may be necessary for security reasons, and internet shutdown are slowly bleeding the economy and causing untold sufferings for businesses and ordinary citizens. The country's biggest exporting sector, the garment sector, has already endured direct losses amounting to around \$48 million due to the production suspension, according to a report in this daily. When the country's exports have been on a decline over the last three years, such a big hit to its largest export sector could prove seriously damaging moving forward.

The violence that happened across the country in recent days, along with the repressive tendencies demonstrated by government agencies, has definitely damaged the image that Bangladesh has painstakingly built in the global arena over the years. This could mean that less business prospects will be available for local businesses with international partners, and other indirect losses that industries will have to incur. Losses due to delays, with buyers either cancelling work orders or shifting them to other countries, is already a concern that garment industry insiders are fearing.

On top of that, the shipment of goods because of unrest and curfew has come to a grinding halt. Reportedly, 6,000 export goods containers are currently stuck at Chattogram Port depots as customs cannot clear export consignments, and shipping agents have lost contact with main line operators without access to the internet. Operational activities at the port have been moving at a snail's pace, and port yards have been choked with containers. Meanwhile, export activities at Inland Container Depots dropped by 80-85 percent due to the unavailability of export cargo from factories.

With vehicles used to carry goods sitting idle for the last few days, the overall losses of the truckers would amount to at least Tk 175 crore per day. And due to the increased transportation risks, the very few vehicles transporting perishable goods such as fresh vegetables and fruits are demanding higher fares as risk premium—in most cases nearly double the normal rent per vehicle. As a result, prices of essential commodities including vegetables and eggs skyrocketed in kitchen markets across the capital and elsewhere. Low-income people and informal workers have been hit the worst by this. According to the Labour Force Survey 2022, more than five crore people (84.9 percent) of the employed population are engaged in the country's informal sector, over one crore of them working in Dhaka. What will happen to these people if the curfew continues? Without any available work, how will these people meet their daily needs, particularly with prices of essentials rising by the hour?

Under the circumstances, the government urgently needs to restore the country's internet connection and lift the curfew, so that all economic activities can resume as per normal.

Ensure accountability

Investigate allegation of abuse

We are disturbed by reports that Nahid Islam, a key organiser of quota reform movement, was allegedly abducted and tortured mentally and physically until he lost consciousness. In comments made to *The Daily Star*, Nahid stated that he was picked up in the early hours of Saturday from a house in Sabujbagh by at least 25 men in plainclothes. Blindfolded and handcuffed, he was then taken to a room where he was interrogated repeatedly about his involvement in the student movement and tortured. His body bore deep bruises sustained in his arm and legs.

Once he regained consciousness, he found himself dumped under a bridge in Purbachal. The inevitable question is: who abducted and tortured him so? Once his family came to know that their son had been picked up, they went to the office of the Detective Branch of police, but they said they have no information about him. Then they went to Khilgaon Police Station to file a GD, but there the police did not take the matter into cognizance. When contacted by this daily, the police have reiterated that they have no information about Nahid having been picked up.

How are we to interpret this incident, at a time when the government wants to accommodate the demands of the protesters? Nahid's family and fellow protesters had earlier alleged that Nahid was picked up as he was against the idea of holding a dialogue with the government prior to the Appellate Division verdict. If we accept, as we would like to, the version given by law enforcers, then isn't the obvious step to find out who the culprits are? The fact that Khilgaon Police Station refused to record the GD of Nahid's parents opens up many uncomfortable questions.

We urge the government to ensure, at the very least, security for the student activists and due process of law during any questioning of student protesters in the future. We have seen in the past how activists and dissenters have been arbitrarily and illegally detained and harassed by various state machineries in the aftermath of previous student movements. If the government is to restore people's confidence in the rule of law, the government must prioritise and protect human rights.

The Supreme Court on Sunday stated that it expects the judicial probe commission, led by a High Court judge, to unearth the reasons behind the deaths of the students. We hope that any excess of state machineries and ruling party will also be investigated.

Move away from blame game and confrontational power politics



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The Appellate Division verdict of July 21 has opened the scope for resolution of the main issue around the demands coming from the quota reform movement. However, its observations associated with the judgment represent at least partial insensitivity to the bigger picture around the constitutional provision of equality and justice for the underprivileged section of society, especially women and Indigenous communities. The women's issue has been totally ignored, while the provision for Indigenous communities have been curtailed. One would hope that the government would exercise its leverage to address these critical issues before long.

Be that as it may, the nation has once again been reminded that student power is invincible, especially when fighting peacefully for a legitimate cause. Like many a time in the past, they have also shown the limits and fault lines of regime power that neglects lessons of history.

The student movement for quota reform, which challenged the prevailing state of discrimination in public service recruitment, cannot be in any manner linked to its violent and devastating turnaround. Though the movement and the violence were isolated from one another in terms of respective objective and means, what facilitated an unholy and unsurprising sync between the two is the country's confrontational zero-sum game of politics. From the beginning, there were clear replays of the ruling authority's usual practice of smelling in the quota reform movement a rot of conspiracy of the political opposition. The latter—as yet another example of its political bankruptcy—in the name of solidarity, took the quota reform movement as an opportunity for political mileage, for their core agenda against their political arch-rival.

Thus, when the student front of the ruling party, inspired by its general secretary, cracked down on protesters with the support and participation of law enforcement agencies, condoned by the partisan administration of most educational institutions, unprecedented violence was unleashed. What initially erupted in the campuses very quickly then spread nearly all over the country.

This opened the floodgates of mayhem by the subversive forces that have clearly been gaining from strength to strength in the space created for them by the confrontational politics between two major contenders. Needless to say, these subversive forces capitalised not only on the confrontational power game, but also on public discontent over growing economic hardships, governance deficits, and the atmosphere of intimidation and insecurity against free speech and



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FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

freedom of association.

The kind of violence and destruction of public properties can represent nothing but evil designs and acts of such subversive elements. The cost of management failure of a crisis around a very genuine grievance of the young generation for justice, equality and non-discrimination in the public sector job market has already crossed enormous proportions. On top of all are at least 170 lives and countless injuries inflicted upon students, youth, and even children as well as professionals like journalists and police. Not to underestimate the huge loss of public properties, including key state installations and infrastructures.

But the economic cost of the deficit of political acumen in crisis management that catalysed the violent turnaround is going to be unprecedented in terms of disruptions of production, services, and businesses. A ballpark estimate of direct GDP lost is no less than \$1.3 billion daily since July 18, when everything came to a standstill, including the internet being shut down, unprecedented not only in Bangladesh but perhaps anywhere else in the world. Beyond the monetary value, the cost of public suffering and harassment for being deprived of various essential services including utilities, not to speak of the mental stress and agony, is mind-boggling. Whether the continued

destination for foreign investment in the region is anyone's guess. The same can be said about the time needed for our development and foreign trade partners and even the employers of our stranded expatriate workers to regain the eroded confidence.

No less important is the national and international implications of the information and images of human rights violations unleashed by the attackers on the movement as well as the disproportionate use of force by law enforcement agencies, despite the foreign ministry's invitation to follow the ostrich syndrome. Equally disturbing will be the possible impressions of us as a violence-prone society created by the images of destructions by the subversive elements who took advantage of the crisis.

The key lesson of the crisis, therefore, is that intransigence, non-responsiveness, denial of reality or overconfidence of absolute power, and use of disproportionate force do not serve the purpose and can only be counterproductive and self-defeating.

The more the regime power is detached from the people and public interest, the more fragile and vulnerable to governance deficits and political failings it can be. Vulnerabilities are further accentuated by partisan control of state institutions, which may serve only short-term interests at the expense of a greater public good.

or administrative mandate, like the reported abduction and torture of one of the coordinators of the movement, Nahid Islam. To be sure, this is nothing new nor isolated, while such “operations” not only remain unaccountable but also assume their own dynamics outside mainstream governance structure.

It is indispensable to ensure exemplary accountability and justice for the victims of perpetrators of violence against the striking students and others who were victims of abuse by both politically patronised power and the institutionally mandated authority, like the point-blank shooting down of a student in Rangpur. Failure to do so will further erode public trust in the government and the state institutions.

No less important is to identify and bring to justice those responsible for orchestrated violence, targeted attacks and enormous damages caused to public properties, including some key institutions. But as experience has also shown, ensuring accountability of perpetrators alone is not enough, especially leaving the breeding ground open on a daily basis for such militant forces to grow. On top of preventive measures is the imperative of moving away from the politics of blame game and confrontation for power, with a view to putting back public interest and people's participation at the core of political culture.

QUOTA REFORM PROTESTS

Govt failed to handle the situation properly



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The demand that was placed by student protesters could have been fulfilled through discussion. They had only one demand: that the existing quota system in government jobs be reformed to make space for meritocracy. They did not ask for a change in government or chant slogans against the government. But the government handled the issue from an egoistic stance, and made several wrong decisions while tackling the situation. The way they tried to quell the protests by using Chhatra League, the ruling party's student wing, cannot be justified, either legally or morally. The situation came to what it is today because of that.

It is being said that some political parties have infiltrated the protest. This not something new; political parties usually get involved with this kind of movements. It happened

during the protests in Ershad's time and even during the Pakistan period. It is unfortunate that the issue got prolonged and so many lives were lost, which according to various media reports, is about 170. This is too much! This means excessive force has been applied in this situation. The way our law enforcement agencies tackled this situation, using helicopters, is unprecedented. A civil protest should not have been dealt with this way.

Those who died, about half of them, if not all, were students. These were children! Farhan Faiyaz, Abu Sayed—losses like these is even harder to process. Also, why were the key point installations, some of which were attacked and burnt down, not protected by the authorities from the beginning? Even the way the police acted shocked us. I saw law

enforcement agencies with assault rifle in hand! Overall, I think, the government could not handle this situation properly and is still failing to do so. Bringing the military in and imposing a curfew mean that the government had no other options left. A different message is being projected to the whole world because of military deployment and the curfew.

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Regarding the government's narrative that the data centre was burnt down, the question arises: what happened to the back-up for that? Why

are those not working? Crores of taka is being lost every day because of internet shutdown. People are complaining that they cannot transact money or pay their electricity bills because of this. When most businesses are dependent on the internet, I do not think shutting the internet service down across the whole country is worth it. Shutdown is okay for a day or two, but for how long will it continue, especially when the violence did not stop completely despite the internet shutdown? Lives were lost even yesterday (Saturday); about 35 people were killed, according to newspapers. Did the past protests—in 1969, for example—not take place when there was no internet? The internet shutdown is causing a great loss to the economy.

Anyway, all we can hope for is that good sense will prevail all over. The government should now properly heed the rest of the protesters' demands. There is not a single demand that cannot be implemented. I have all the sympathy for the students and their movement, which they had started peacefully but unfortunately a lot of lives were lost and much blood shed on the streets. I pray for the souls of those students who died, and for their families.