

Internet must be declared a basic human right



TAIMUR RAHMAN

The recent internet shutdown disrupted lives and livelihoods across all levels of society. For 10 days, mobile internet services, along with popular communication apps and social media channels, were suspended.

The shutdown nearly brought the communications system to a halt, marking an unprecedented event in the country's telecommunications history. This incident has highlighted critical issues surrounding internet access and the laws that enable the authorities take such arbitrary decisions.

In this age of massive digitalisation driven by state-of-the-art technologies and innovations, the world is heavily dependent on internet and all other digital services supported by internet.

Internet has played a crucial role in turning the whole world into a global village, opening up new windows of opportunities for businesses and industries throughout the world.

Given such scenario, one can easily understand the importance of uninterrupted access to internet or connectivity facilities. Going against the tide, Bangladesh kept internet services suspended for quite some days, which has dealt a heavy blow to public life, industries and service sectors.

Antithetical to the Digital and Smart Bangladesh vision of the former government, this sudden blackout had serious fallout effects. Within the first few days of the blackout, the country's economy incurred a loss of around \$1.2 billion, bringing the local economy to a screeching halt.

As per estimates by the ICT and telecommunications ministry, this sector's loss amounts to around Tk 18,000 crore.

However, the biggest loss caused by this abrupt suspension was not something related to economic factors, rather it's a loss of image at the global stage.

This had a very negative impact on the country's image in the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry and was a devastating blow for the freelancers providing support to many global clients as this happened without any prior notice and no one could give any clarity on the internet restoration.

The news of internet blackout ordered with an intent to muzzle the people and

contain all means of communication hit the headlines in almost all major international dailies with global experts calling it a sheer violation of basic human right.

While many may argue about the acceptance of internet as a human right, it is mentionable that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by United Nations (UN), recognises internet access as a basic human right.

Article 19 of the UDHR says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and

the Kerala High Court in 2019 delivered a verdict, declaring the right to access the internet a part of the fundamental right to education and privacy.

Bangladesh is currently at a crossroads as it seeks to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) to sustain its economic growth momentum. The recent internet shutdown sent the wrong signal to everyone, including foreign investors and the telecom operators' parent companies.

They were surprised by the shutdown, especially since internet access is regarded

According to Sections 66 (ka), 97(2) and 97A of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation Act 2001 and Clause 26.03.01 of the Unified licence, telecom operators are obligated to comply with all instructions of the government and law enforcement agencies relating to national security and public safety.

Otherwise, the same shall be considered as a punishable criminal offence for the companies and its officials and may be subject to fine up to Tk 300 crore and/or cancel licence as per sections



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PHOTO: STAR/FILE

expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

This resolution was further ratified through another provision clarifying the idea of "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet" (Section 32) and underscoring the instrumental role played by internet in upholding the essence of these resolutions. Responding to such universal declaration, many countries have already declared access to internet a basic human right.

Back in 2009, France's highest court the Constitutional Council declared that access to the internet will be regarded as a basic human right, abolishing the system of cutting off network access arbitrarily.

Even in the neighbouring country,

as a basic human right in other parts of the world. To regain the confidence of the global business community and local stakeholders, it is crucial to implement measures that prevent the recurrence of such incidents in future.

Many believed that the internet blackout was done by the access network service providers, i.e. mobile network operators and the internet service providers. In reality, there are many stakeholders/licensees in the internet service value chain. The issue is that all these providers are governed by a very strict telecom act and relevant licences provided to them, which give a huge power to the government, law enforcing agencies and the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) to force the licensees to follow orders leaving no room for resistance.

66A and 73 read with 76 of said act.

This kind of arbitrariness granted to the regulators and various agencies through laws deserves an urgent review as this can be used to impose restrictions not only on internet but also for all sorts of services dependent on telecommunications.

While the country is taking great strides in different sectors, we hope that all the stakeholders will play responsible roles in the days ahead and work collectively towards achieving excellence in telecommunications services by bringing in required reforms to catalyse further growth through ensuring transparency, good governance and fundamental human rights in Bangladesh.

The writer is the chief corporate and regulatory affairs officer at Banglalink

Gold hits record high

AFP, New York

Gold hit a record high on Friday as global stock markets gained on reassuring data about the health of the world's biggest economy and likely US interest rate cuts.

Expectations of US interest rate cuts weakened the dollar, while oil prices tumbled as weak Chinese demand expectations offset ongoing tensions in the Middle East, according to traders.

The gold spot price rose to a record high of \$2,509.41 an ounce as investors snapped up the heavy investment in the face of an increasingly likely US interest rate cut in September and heightened geopolitical risks.

"The sharp drop in bond yields amid expectations of rate cuts by the Fed" have pushed gold prices higher, said City Index and FOREX.com analyst Fawad Razaqada.

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All three major Wall Street indices shook off an early slump to close higher Friday, ending a positive week.

"We had very big moves over the past two weeks off the low," Adam Sarhan of 50 Park Investments told AFP. "And now we are only five percent below the all-time high."

"That shows us that there is still a lot of demand for stocks at lower prices," he added.

Weak US jobs data and a Japanese interest rate hike double-whammied stock markets at the beginning of the month, as investors who had financed investments in red-hot US tech shares by borrowing in weak yen faced the prospect of immense losses as the value of the Japanese unit bounded higher.

In Asian trading, the Nikkei 225 jumped 3.6 percent as the yen was lower against the dollar early in the day. London bucked the positive trend in Europe as a strengthening pound weighed on multinationals earning in dollars.

On the corporate front, shares in German chemicals giant Bayer jumped 11.3 percent after a US court victory in the group's long-running fight against claims that its glyphosate-based weedkillers cause cancer.

PRICES OF KEY ESSENTIALS IN DHAKA CITY			
	PRICE (AUG 17, 2024)	% CHANGES FROM A MONTH AGO	% CHANGE FROM A YEAR AGO
Fine rice (kg)	Tk 60-Tk 80	0	4.48 ↑
Coarse rice (kg)	Tk 52-Tk 55	2.88 ↑	9.18 ↑
Loose flour (kg)	Tk 40-Tk 45	0	-16.67 ↓
Lentil (kg)	Tk 105-Tk 110	0	13.16 ↑
Soybean (litre)	Tk 145-Tk 152	-1.00 ↓	-5.71 ↓
Potato (kg)	Tk 50-Tk 55	-13.22 ↓	38.16 ↑
Onion (kg)	Tk 110-Tk 120	0	58.62 ↑
Egg (4 pcs)	Tk 48-Tk 50	2.08 ↑	-9.26 ↓

SOURCE: TCB

China's faltering growth revives cash vouchers talk

REUTERS, Beijing

Another round of bad Chinese economic figures is raising pressure on Beijing to loosen the fiscal spigot further and even dole out shopping vouchers to get growth back towards this year's target of roughly 5 percent.

After a dismal second quarter, the world's second-largest economy lost momentum further in July: new home prices fell at the fastest pace in nine years, industrial output slowed, export and investment growth dipped and unemployment rose.

Other data beat forecasts, but not for positive reasons. Rising inflation was attributed to bad weather rather than stronger domestic demand, a jump in imports reflected frontloaded chip purchases before expected US technology curbs, and a pickup in retail sales was flattered by low comparisons in 2023.

In all, the data paints a worrying picture for policymakers, who look increasingly likely to ramp up stimulus unless they accept slower growth and the prospect of a downward spiral in consumer and business confidence.

"The current economic performance remains behind target, necessitating immediate and significant policy intervention," said Carlos Casanova, Asia senior economist at UBP. This might require the government to widen the budget deficit to 4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) from the planned 3 percent, he said.

One policy adviser, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Beijing may decide in October to bring forward part of next year's bond issuance quota if growth did not show signs of bottoming out in the summer.

US stocks ended higher on Friday to record their biggest weekly percentage gains of the year as worries of an economic downturn eased.

"Otherwise, the economy will look ugly, and 5 percent would be out of the question," the adviser said, without detailing where that stimulus would go.

China made similar moves last October, when it raised the deficit to 3.8 percent of GDP from 3 percent and separately frontloaded part of the 2024 local government debt quotas to invest in flood-prevention and other infrastructure. What might change from last year is how the extra money would be spent.

The usual playbook of infrastructure spending is bringing dwindling returns after decades of investment in bridges, roads and rail. Meanwhile, China's preferred driver

of growth, advanced manufacturing, is fanning trade tensions and concerns over industrial overcapacity and factory gate deflation.

"The Chinese economy, given its size, cannot run on manufacturing and exports alone," Societe Generale analysts wrote in a note on the latest data. "To hit the 5 percent growth target - if that's still the target - policymakers need to step up support for domestic demand."

As consumers tighten their wallets, Chinese e-commerce giants have had to resort to heavy discounting and promotions to attract shoppers, squeezing margins across the retail sector.

Alibaba Group Holding missed market expectations for revenue on Thursday, as the company's domestic e-commerce sales came under pressure from cautious spending.



Women shop for clothes at a shopping mall in Beijing on August 7. The current economic performance of China remains behind target, necessitating immediate and significant policy intervention, said an economist. PHOTO: AFP

Oil falls 2% to end volatile week

REUTERS, New York

Oil prices settled down nearly 2 percent on Friday, little changed on the week with Brent crude below \$80 a barrel, as investors tempered expectations of demand growth from top oil importer China.

Brent crude futures fell \$1.36, or 1.7 percent, to settle at \$79.68 per barrel. US West Texas Intermediate crude futures declined by \$1.51, or 1.9 percent, to \$76.65.

Last week, Brent crude ended at \$79.66 a barrel and WTI closed at \$76.84.

On Thursday, data from China showed its economy lost momentum in July, with new home prices falling at the fastest pace in nine years, industrial output slowing and unemployment rising.

That has stoked worries among traders about a slump in demand from the top oil importer, where refineries sharply cut crude processing rates last month on tepid fuel demand.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries on Monday cut

its forecast for this year's oil demand growth, citing softness in China. The Paris-based International Energy Agency also cited weak demand in China when it slashed its 2025 forecasts on Tuesday.

"It has been a volatile week in oil markets: on one hand you had fears of supply disruptions from a wider Middle East war, but on the other, slowing growth in China forced revisions of demand forecasts," said Andrew Lipow, president of energy consultancy Lipow Oil Associates.

Oil futures rallied at the start of the week as traders braced for retaliation by Iran against Israel over the slaying of a Hamas leader in Tehran last month. But some of that risk was priced out because Iran has not struck yet, analysts at Commerzbank Research wrote on Friday.

"At least so far, supply disruptions have been more theoretical than actual," said Brett Friedman, contributor for market data provider OptionMetrics. "That allows the market to focus on the demand side," Friedman said.

Where are we heading?

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Since 1990, Bangladesh has gone through several rounds of agreements and cheating in its political process. The nation is currently facing a few tough questions. Having toppled autocracy, will we get to see a new era of morally grounded social norms and political accountability? Or will we revert to regular elections while shorting trust and cooperation? More corruption, hollow talk on policies, and law of rulers will damage public goods provision, elude inclusion, and fester social anger.

We all want a mechanism for controlling the authority and the power of the state to get the good things and prevent the bad. We want

checks and balances. We want to devise and live a constitution that makes ambition counteract ambition. We cannot have that without a durably mobilised society that participates in politics, protests when necessary, and votes the government out of power when it wishes.

I see no alternative to learning by doing politics differently with Gen Z navigating the way. The rest of society must both follow and oversee with intelligence and forbearance. All concerned must remember while democracy is no charity, it does begin at home.

The writer is a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office