

Flood victims need urgent support

Govt must intensify efforts to save lives, reach out to those most at risk

We're worried about the worsening flood situation in the eastern and southeastern regions of Bangladesh where vast swathes of land have been submerged over the last few days, laying bare the vulnerability of even areas previously deemed protected from large-scale flooding. The floods, submerging 357 unions across eight districts as of Thursday afternoon, left more than 4.4 lakh families stranded and a total of three million affected, as per an estimate. Moreover, at least three people died and two went missing on Thursday. These numbers are set to rise should the downpours and swelling of rivers by the onrush of water from India continue. Against this backdrop, the urgency of improved, coordinated response to ensure the safety of flood-hit communities cannot be overstated.

Among the eight districts affected, the situation in Feni, Cumilla, Noakhali, Chattogram, Khagrachari, and Moulvibazar is particularly distressing. The situation in Feni—especially in Chhagalnaiya, Phulgazi, and Parshuram upazilas—has been described as unprecedented, with nearly every house inundated. This has caused a massive humanitarian crisis. The municipal towns are unrecognisable under the deluge. Roads remain impassable, and the call for speedboats and helicopters to expedite rescue efforts has gone largely unanswered. While the interim government is doing the best it can, ongoing aid and rescue efforts have caused frustration among local residents.

In Khagrachari, the situation has been equally troubling. Continuous rain and runoff from the hills have submerged over 100 villages across the nine sub-districts of Khagrachari, making this the worst flood recorded since 1988. In this and other hilly districts of Chattogram, there is the added risk of widespread landslides. Many fear that deadly landslides similar to those in 2017 may occur, with people living on the hillsides or slopes being urged to relocate to safer areas or shelters. The inadequacy of shelters and relief efforts, exacerbated by the difficulty of reaching remote areas, has emerged as another concern in flood-hit areas. Equally troubling has been the disruption in communications and power supply—with several areas entirely disconnected—further isolating the vulnerable populations.

Amid this situation, one development with the potential for a flare-up in Bangladesh-India relations has been the release of waters from an Indian dam likely intensifying flooding in Bangladesh. Although India's ministry of external affairs refuted claims of causing the flooding on our eastern borders, Bangladesh's information adviser has categorically blamed it for opening the dam without any prior warning, depriving Bangladesh of the chance to prepare accordingly. The sheer intensity of flooding in areas like Cumilla and Feni does lend credence to the allegation of dam-barrage opening on India's part. India's water sharing policy has long caused consternations in Bangladesh, and we hope the latest development serves as a clarion call for equitable water-sharing arrangements to be made urgently.

Experts say the situation may improve within two-three days, but until then the dual assaults of heavy rain and onrush of water from India will likely cause further damage. So we urge the government, security forces on duty, and all public representatives including student volunteers to further intensify their efforts to help the affected communities. We must all stand together to ensure that they receive the aid and support they so desperately need. Communications and power supply in the flood-hit areas must also be restored urgently.

Stop extortion in transport sector

Bringing discipline in this vital sector is paramount

It is disturbing to know that soon after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government on August 5, BNP-affiliated transport leaders have emerged on the scene and taken control of major transport organisations across the country. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, the offices of Dhaka Road Transport Owners' Association and Bangladesh Road Transport Owners' Association, from where the transport sector used to be controlled by Awami League leaders, are now under the control of their BNP counterparts. Similarly, BNP men have taken control of almost all other transport organisations, bus terminals, and workers' unions.

Understandably, the main objective behind their push is to get their hands on extortion money. Reportedly, every year, around Tk 2,000 crore is collected by the transport owners' and workers' associations through extortion across the country. While about Tk 70 is collected openly from each bus or truck every day, there are various other fees, including "gate pass" fees or membership fees, that are collected from transport operators as daily, monthly, and sometimes one-time donations. According to a Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) study published in March, politically connected individuals or groups, traffic and highway police, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) officials, transport organisations, and staffers of municipalities or city corporations all get a share of this money, which shows how pervasive this culture of extortion has been.

Unfortunately, the transport sector is just one example where BNP-linked men are taking control of important public sectors. After the fall of Awami League, we have seen how BNP-affiliated people have been trying to assert their control in every other sector, such as the health sector. Recently, we have also seen how groups claiming allegiance to the BNP have been trying to take control of slums and footpaths in the city. This tendency must stop urgently.

Extortion is one of the key reasons for the chaos and lawlessness in the transport sector, so the interim government must find a sustainable solution to this problem. The transport organisations, including powerful owners' and workers' associations, must be represented by honest individuals who can save this sector from the crippling influences of corruption and irregularities, which have led to our roads becoming one of the most dangerous in the world. Reform of state institutions was a major goal of the student-led mass movement; and to attain that goal, politicisation of vital public sectors including transport must stop.

Strengthen the chief adviser's hands

Some actions are having contrary effects

THE THIRD VIEW

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Honestly, we had all lost hope about democracy, rule of law, good governance, accountability of public institutions, corporate governance, integrity in the leadership, free media, etc in Bangladesh. The only way forward was sycophancy and corruption. Options were "lick or fill," meaning either lick their feet or fill their pocket.

Students and citizens together have totally and unbelievably changed the scenario. They have forcibly opened all the doors that were firmly shut but for the lackeys. Suddenly, we are able to breathe again and dream again. But dreams are just as beautiful as they are fragile. Events are taking place that are likely to make the fulfilment of our dreams more difficult than they ought to be. There are occurrences that are unnecessarily raising questions about the interim government and creating doubts about its efficacy. These are happening both within the system and outside.

We start with the police. If any state institution contributed to bringing down the old regime, it was police. They were used by the then ruling Awami League as its own extension, but they later became a Frankenstein and implemented their own agenda. As the saying goes, "Old habits die hard," so now that the police are operating under the new regime, they are doing so in the very same way that they did before: abuse the law in implementing it.

Two journalists, former employees of Ekattor TV—not the best example of objective journalism—were picked up at the airport, handed over to the Detective Branch (DB) of police, and later charged with murder and placed on remand for four days. What law did they break? A murder charge? Their names were not in the original FIR, but were included later under the category of "unknown" miscreants (a most dangerous practice and one that should be scrapped immediately. Police can always add new names as investigation reveals). Even if they were big supporters of the discredited regime, they did not break any established law. The way to handle

them is to criticise their journalism and expose their partisanship, but they cannot be jailed without specific charges of breaking the law.

Vandalising media establishments, TV stations—the latest incident occurring at the East West Media Group—deserve our condemnation. The policies of these establishments may have been unethical, one-sided and devoted to serving the fallen government, but their voices still cannot be forcibly shut. However



The East West Media Group's office in Bashundhara Residential Area, Dhaka was attacked on August 19, 2024.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

blatant and unethical their journalism may have been, they cannot be subjected to physical attacks, arrests and intimidation.

These actions are creating fear among journalists, raising the question as to whether we are returning to the old ways with the victims changing—instead of pro-BNP journalists, the victims are now the pro-Awami League journalists. We must not repeat past mistakes.

Then there was the incident at the court premises where former AL minister Dipu Moni was not protected by the police sufficiently to prevent pro-BNP lawyers from assaulting her. Police cannot avoid responsibility for this failure. But also, these partisan lawyers broke their own professional ethics and denigrated the court and their own profession.

We find it very worrying, the way murder charges are being slapped on former ministers, AL leaders, MPs, former judges, scholars, lawyers and, as mentioned above, on journalists without any proof. The approach seems to be "charge first, prove later." Too many murder cases are piling up against the former PM, which is already giving it an air of witch hunt. The more cases pile up, the less will be its credibility. A few well-founded cases that are supported by strong evidence is good enough to hold the former PM to account. But the way it is happening is already raising questions. What we are seeing is that cases are being filed with courts against the former prime minister, some AL leaders, some judges, lawyers, scholars—persons like Muntassir Mamoon, Shahriar Kabir, former Justice Enayetur Rahim, politicians Hasanul Huq Inu, and Rashed Khan Menon (who was

corruption, banking fraud. Each time such murder cases are being filed, the legal process is coming under question.

Our law adviser has written volumes criticising such laws and practices. We expect him to remove such misuse of laws and ensure more credibility for the whole process.

Then there are other types of events that are increasing our worry about mob rule and people taking up law in their own hands. We really need to think about some of the incidents that have happened recently: i) forcibly entering the Secretariat and compelling the cancellation of remaining HSC exams; ii) forcing the interim government to grant promotions in bureaucracy and various government bodies; iii) forcing the removal of teachers from various posts in different campuses; iv) forcing the interim government to change appointments and dictating choices; and v) political parties competing to occupy critical posts in this transition period.

All the facts mentioned above are of great embarrassment to the interim government, and they are, however moderately, eroding public confidence. Part of what's happening can be accepted as unavoidable. When a powerful and long-standing government suddenly falls, there is a power vacuum, and both those with genuine grievances and the opportunists who try to take advantage of the power shift create situations like the ones mentioned above. Every day, there are demonstrations in front of the Chief Adviser's Office with endless demands, which are mostly self-serving rather than of national interest.

Prof Yunus's government is here only because of the love and respect he enjoys from the people, and especially from the students who spearheaded the latest uprising. They toppled the Sheikh Hasina government and opened up a whole world of possibilities. It's these possibilities that we must all work to try to bring to fruition. We are standing at the doorstep of a new Bangladesh. But we are also standing on very slippery grounds. It is slippery because we are a divided lot at the moment with the cronies of the old regime, power-hungry opportunists, and vested groups—especially those who looted the state coffers and our banks—waiting for a chance to subvert the interim government. This along with many of the advisers lacking experience in the governance process make the slippery grounds even more so.

As Prof Yunus said, let us not take a wrong step and miss the opportunity. In some cases, we seem to be doing so.

To protect free speech, get rid of oppressive laws

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The Cyber Security Act (CSA), 2023 is widely accepted as a draconian spin-off of the Digital Security Act (DSA), 2018. Hastily passed a few months before the Parliamentary Election of 2024, the CSA carries the same repressive watermarks of the DSA, which was also passed just before an election. The purpose of this law is widely recognised as suppressing the free press and freedom of speech. As a nation in transition, Bangladesh must repeal the CSA to safeguard the rights of its citizens.

All but the most loyal supporters of the Awami League would agree that during its reign, Bangladesh suffered a massive decline in freedom of speech. The World Press Freedom Index ranked Bangladesh 165th out of 180 countries in the 2024 report, placing it at the bottom among South Asian nations, only above Afghanistan. While many factors contributed to this decline, one of the main suppression tools was the CSA and its predecessor.

National and international media, activists, and legal experts strongly opposed non-bailable offenses which existed in the DSA. Unfortunately, the same spirit continued in the CSA, as any offence booked under sections 17,

19, 27 and 33 of the act were declared to be non-bailable.

Section 4 of this act restricted the possibility of anyone criticising the government, even outside of Bangladesh. Unilateral power is given to the Director General of National Cyber Security Agency in section 4, to remove or block any content with the assistance of BTRC.

Section 21 outlines a five-year jail term and/or a Tk one crore fine for any statement, conspiracy, or negative criticism against the Liberation War, the father of the nation, the national anthem, and the national flag, allowing law enforcement to package any form of criticism against the government as anti-state or anti-government and prosecute ruthlessly. Section 25 further doubles down on so-called conspiracies to spread propaganda and falsehoods that affect the image and reputation of the country. The wording of this clause was purposefully kept vague to allow arbitrary interpretation.

Section 42 grants police absolute authority to search bodies, places, confiscate, and arrest without showing any cause or warrant. The former ruling government has been

heavily criticised for using this clause as a major fear tactic. Many journalists have refrained from saying or writing anything against the government out of fear of police harassment and brutality.

The extent to which the CSA strangled rights and voices is astonishing and disproportionate. When the law of the land allows accused individuals to get bail for serious offenses, such as loan default, cheque fraud, and land grabbing, how can authorities detain someone without bail for something as harmless as a Facebook post? This law intentionally targets journalists, netizens, and ordinary citizens, tarnishing freedom of speech, expression, and investigative journalism. No authority, either private or public, should be allowed such unchecked power to search, detain, or punish people.

Although the previous regime is gone, the law remains in force, and many of its victims are still behind bars. Between October 2018 and September 2023, 4,520 people were charged in 1,436 cases. The Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) traced identities of the accusers in 859 cases and found that the former ruling party activists filed 263 of them, suing 887 people.

Victims who have been unjustly detained, tried, and convicted should be immediately released. Independent judicial investigation should be conducted and personnel who were involved in framing innocent citizens must face the law.

The CSA must be repealed, and

the interim government must form an impartial committee consisting of legal experts, journalists, cyber security experts, and activists to draft a new act. The new act should only focus on cybercrimes such as fraud, theft, hacking, or any action that compromises national cyber security. Any online activities of anti-state or anti-national nature can always be addressed under penal code and other existing laws. Speech, online activism, and all forms of journalistic and creative expression must be excluded from the scope of the future cyber law.

For the first time in many years, there is an environment where publishing an article or a Facebook status doesn't make us feel scared. Online news portals are posting materials and incriminating evidence that were practically impossible just a few weeks ago. Television and print media have also come out of their shells, deviating from their once established party lines. These are steps in the right direction, but the fruits of freedom should not appear circumstantial in the long term; they should be structural.

Years of faulty laws have strangled citizens' voices, to an extent that self-censorship has become our second skin. The youth of the country have obviously spoken, and leveraging on that, the existing legal system should be modified so that the common Bangladeshi can speak freely, too. We must dispel the oppressive legal instruments of the past and enact better laws, so that future governments cannot senselessly prosecute its own citizens, much like the last one did.