

The Daily Star

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A sinkhole of corruption

TIB study reveals massive corruption in RHD projects

It is more or less common knowledge that there was widespread corruption in the transport sector during Awami League's 15 year rule. A recent study by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has now uncovered the extent of the irregularities that took place in development projects undertaken by the Roads and Highways Department (RHD), and its nothing short of staggering. According to the study, corruption in these projects caused a loss of Tk 29,230 to Tk 50,835 crore, or 23 to 40 percent of total project costs. This is not the full picture, but it does show how a deeply entrenched system of corruption resulted not just in inflated budgets, but also substandard infrastructure, with no one held accountable for it.

While the TIB primarily focused on domestically funded projects, its researchers estimate that corruption levels were almost similar in both foreign- and locally-funded projects. Firms reportedly paid a significant percentage of the total work order value as bribes to secure contracts, with further payments made during inspections and construction phases. And everyone involved—ranging from concerned ministers, local MPs and politicians to top officials, project directors, and those overseeing tender evaluation, procurement, inspection, etc.—got a cut. It is no wonder that initial budgets were often revised up to satisfy their greed, while the contractors got away with using inferior materials and disregarding project specifications, requiring repairs or fresh construction that would repeat this corrupt cycle.

This tripartite collusion among politicians, officials, and contractors—which frequently extended to other powerful stakeholders in the transport sector—was institutionalised over the years, forcing citizens to pay for extremely expensive projects that brought little benefits. Fast and safe mobility remains an elusive dream despite billions spent to achieve these goals. This has been once again highlighted by the Road Safety Foundation that recently disclosed that 426 people were killed in road crashes in September alone. Road safety is intrinsically related to road infrastructure. Ill-executed projects and poor road conditions, combined with the neglect of critical safety measures such as traffic enforcement, are responsible for frequent clashes and congestions.

The challenge for the new Bangladesh is to address these dual crises—corruption in transport sector and resultant suffering and casualties—with equal importance. We think the non-political, interim government is uniquely suited to break this cycle. The TIB has offered its help to identify those involved in road development corruption, which the government should accept. Going forward, there should be greater transparency and accountability in development projects to ensure public funds benefit the public. Additionally, a comprehensive approach to road safety—focusing on stricter enforcement of rules, better infrastructure, and better regulation of transport owners and workers—is essential to prevent further loss of lives.

A tale of courage and compassion

We salute the two doctors for their efforts during the uprising

During the July-August uprising, the compassion, integrity, and dedication of two doctors—Dr Worthy Jukhrif and Dr Hritisha Aktar Mitheen—stood out in their commitment to humanity and their profession. On July 18, Dhanmondi 27 became one of the flashpoints when violent clashes erupted between pro-reform demonstrators and police, who were backed by activists from the then-ruling party. Many injured demonstrators were too afraid to seek medical help as the government cracked down on protesters, even stationing police in front of hospitals to intimidate anyone seeking treatment. Some hospitals were overwhelmed with patients, while others refused to provide care.

Amid this difficult situation, Dr Worthy and Dr Mitheen not only opened their doors to the wounded but also converted the garage of their building on Satmasjid Road into a makeshift clinic. With the support of other residents who contributed supplies, the two doctors treated over 100 injured individuals. Despite their own trauma and shock from the events unfolding around them, they set up two beds in the garage and provided critical care, including removing pellets, dressing deep wounds, and offering counselling to the injured, thus transforming their garage into a sanctuary for those with nowhere else to turn.

The doctors recently recounted some of the horrific injuries they treated, explaining that, as a result of their efforts, on July 19, police targeted their building with tear gas shells. Additionally, men in civilian clothes questioned the building's guards, inquiring about the residents and why they were treating protesters. They even issued threats of severe consequences if anyone stepped outside. Despite these and other forms of harassment and surveillance, Dr Worthy and Dr Mitheen stood their ground for the sake of humanity, embodying the highest ideals of the medical profession and demonstrating profound compassion for their fellow countrymen.

Dr Worthy and Dr Mitheen have demonstrated just how noble the medical profession can be—something that many other doctors and carers did during the uprising. We salute them for their selfless efforts. We also urge the interim government to properly recognise the services of all such people who contributed through their acts of kindness and commitment to the nation during the mass uprising, so their example may inspire future generations.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Congress approves Iraq invasion

On this day in 2002, the US Congress passed a bill granting US President George W Bush the broad authority to use force against Iraq.



All genuine culprits of the past regime must be punished, but for the crimes that they did commit.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

The indiscriminate arrests and murder charges

The interim government needs to be more legally compliant



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

A core criticism of the former government of Sheikh Hasina was the blatant misuse of law to imprison, harass and intimidate political opponents, critics, and members of the independent media. Activities by a section of political opportunists and vested groups may give rise to a perception that we are witnessing a revival of the same. The term "collaborators of the fascist regime" is the catch all phrase that is serving as a dangerous, sweeping, undemocratic and law-abusing framework for actions against political rivals, personal enemies, and a section of the media.

As a fellow traveller in the profession, I will start with what is being done to journalists. Recent, not latest, statistics show that cases have been filed against at least 129 journalists in Dhaka, Chattogram, Bogura and Rajshahi. Twelve cases on murder, attempted murder, rioting and unlawful assembly charges have been filed against 60 journalists in Dhaka, two cases on attempted murder and abduction charges against 33 journalists in Chattogram, eight cases on murder charges against 22 journalists in Bogura, and three cases on vandalism, extortion and assault charges against 14 journalists in Rajshahi.

Given the above, we must be the country with the highest number of murder suspects masquerading as journalists in the whole world. What an image! What diligent use of the law! What respect shown for the freedom of the media! So far, only four have been arrested, but all the others live in fear of being arrested or harassed. They are not going to their workplace or are able to work as journalists. They are in hiding or living as if they are under "house arrest." Why? What is their crime?

I will be the first to admit that my profession, to which I have devoted 52 years (starting in March 1972), has suffered terribly due to its suicidal politicisation ever since the birth of Bangladesh, but most severely during the Sheikh Hasina regime—in terms of ethics, values and objectivity. A section of the journalists became political activists of the worst kind under the guise of journalism. This sycophancy, blatant partisanship and crude attack on those who tried to speak objectively made ethical journalism extremely difficult, although some did stand their ground. There was immense corruption which was patronised by the ruling party, and a section

of journalists made a mountain of money using their proximity to power. The former prime minister herself admitted during a press briefing that her peon, whom she had let go but had not punished, was worth Tk 400 crore, and that he used a helicopter to visit his village home. One can easily imagine what journalists close to power did and the wealth they may have gathered, and consequently the public hatred they accumulated.

Our plea is, charge them for what they did: corruption, bribery, abuse of power, using the PMO press office for personal gains, pressurising the bureaucracy to do their bidding, etc. But do not charge them with murder without any proof. Our own investigation has found no evidence of it. So why is it happening?

Like every other profession—doctors, lawyers, etc—ours is

The bigger picture looks worse. Between August 6 and September 25, at least 1,474 cases were filed involving 92,486 citizens, most accused of murder along with some other crimes. A total of 1,174 cases have been filed against 390 former ministers, MPs, advisers to the PM, mayors, and Awami League leaders. So far, 59 high profile individuals have been arrested. During the same period, as many as 779 people were also arrested. But in the first week of October, the arrests reached a peak of 7,018 (related to July-August violence and other crimes), amounting to more than 7,500 cases. As shown below, the rate of arrests is likely to rise.

This newspaper did in-depth reports on some specific cases to show how the legal process is being misused and politicised. According to our report published on October 7, two cases were filed over the killing of two men—Sakib Hasan, 22, and Jahangir Alam, 50—in Jatrabari, Dhaka during the student-led mass uprising. The text of the First Information Reports (FIRs) related to these killings is identical, with only the names and addresses of the victims being different. The complainant is Abu Bakar, 55, who claims to belong to Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal, a BNP offshoot; he filed both the

filed a murder case with Uttara East Police Station against 221 people, of whom 210 were residents of Rangpur, the hometown of the deceased and his cousin. The accused were mostly local Awami League leaders.

The Daily Star has found five other cases related to killings that took place in Dhaka, and the accused—in hundreds—are all from the home districts of the deceased as well as political activists of Awami League.

On July 20, Muhammad Habib, 45, was killed when the police and AL men opened fire on him. His wife, Ayesha, a mother of four, filed a case on August 28 accusing 57 people, of whom 50 were from Chandina, Cumilla. When contacted, Ayesha said, "I just signed the complaint. I had no idea who were being accused... I just want justice for my husband." Anwar Hossain Aynal, from Bakshiganj, Jamalpur, filed a murder case for the death of his brother Fazlul Karim on August 5. There are 39 accused, of whom 24 are from his hometown.

The weak factual basis of these cases, each having 20 to 200 accused on average—in many cases, most of the accused are from the localities where political opponents are planning a comeback—indicates potential political or personal motives. This is happening in spite of the wishes of the victims' families. In many instances, they are either being pressured or being told that if they do as they are told, the victims will get justice.

According to our report published on October 10, the Police Headquarters gave special instructions to SPs and metropolitan commissioners earlier this month to increase vigilance and arrest those responsible for violence in July-August. "We have been instructed to increase arrests and take legal action against ward-level AL leaders and activists," said an inspector of Khulna Range Police. Another official, requesting anonymity, said, "The instruction includes arresting people every day, including the supporters and leaders of the AL and its affiliate bodies."

The vague and all-encompassing order mentioned above is a certain recipe for abuse of the law. This will soon turn—if it hasn't already—into a source of extortion, bribery and harassment of ordinary people. The very same thing that police did during the Hasina regime.

We repeat with emphasis that all genuine culprits of the past regime must be punished. But not a single innocent person should be harassed. Human rights, rule of law and justice are the pillars of the July-August uprising. Please don't create a condition where their violations become inevitable. Prof Yunus's reputation as an upholder of human rights is as strong and well-deserved as his reputation for being "the banker of the poor." His interim government should not, even remotely, be accused of violating human rights.

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also divided between pro-Awami League and pro-BNP factions. Each group unabashedly enjoyed the fruits of their proximity to power when their respective parties were in office. Hasina's 15 continuous years in government gave the pro-AL journalists a sense of impunity and never-ending privilege, hence corruption thoroughly permeated in them.

So what is happening now is that the "other side," which was totally marginalised and oppressed during the AL rule, is having their day in the sun. Every non-AL journalist is now the epitome of good journalism and their opponents the worst that the world ever saw! So charge them with murder! (This is something that neither side has ever done to the other before.)

We repeat what we have said earlier: charge them for what they are guilty of, and do not make a farce of the law by this reckless and unsubstantiated use of murder charges. This is dragging the reputation of the interim government down, both internally and globally, as it goes against the personal reputation of Prof Muhammad Yunus as the uncompromising defender of human rights and rule of law.