

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Missing firearms pose serious threats

### Joint forces should make every effort to recover them quickly

We are deeply alarmed by the slow progress of the joint operation being carried out by the police and other forces to recover the firearms that were looted during and after the fall of the previous Awami League government. Although a month and a half have passed since the drive began, only 318 arms have been recovered, while 1,748 remain unaccounted for. This is a serious cause for concern because if these missing firearms end up in the wrong hands, they could pose a significant threat to our national security.

After the fall of the AL regime, mobs attacked and vandalised hundreds of police stations and set many facilities on fire, resulting in the deaths of at least 44 officers. During the chaos, 5,829 firearms and 606,742 bullets were looted from police stations across the country. After taking charge, the interim government ordered people to return the weapons and suspended the arms licenses issued to civilians during the AL rule. According to data from Police Headquarters, as of September 3, people submitted 13,349 firearms with suspended licenses, while only 3,763 of the looted firearms were returned or recovered. When the joint drive began on September 4, we hoped that the rest of the firearms would soon be retrieved. Sadly, that did not happen, reportedly due to intelligence gaps within our police forces.

In late July and August, at least 70 militants reportedly escaped from 17 jails across the country, while many previously convicted criminals were also recently released. Moreover, after the fall of the AL, many of its leaders and supporters left the country or went into hiding, many of whom had licensed arms. Therefore, there is a high chance that many of these firearms may now be in the hands of militants or convicted criminals—or may have already been smuggled out of the country. Reportedly, some of these arms were even used by miscreants at the capital's Geneva Camp recently, which makes the situation all the more worrying.

Unaccounted weapons are a major threat to our national security and can deteriorate the law and order situation at any time, as experts believe. Therefore, we urge the police and all other forces to immediately address the intelligence gaps and expedite their operation to recover the missing arms and ammunition. They should engage the public in their efforts through media campaigns and could even offer rewards for information that could lead to recoveries. Additionally, they should create a separate database of legal and looted firearms to gain a clear picture of the situation, and make sure to continuously update it.

## A nine-year-old's brutal rape

### We must do more to protect our children

The brutal rape of a nine-year-old child—who is now fighting for her life in a hospital—has horrified us. The injuries caused by the rapist are indescribable—the child has had to go through surgery to make an opening in her abdomen to pass stool. It is impossible to imagine the physical pain and mental trauma this child is experiencing, and if she survives, it will take months for her to lead a normal life.

On October 12, the girl left her house to visit a puja mandap in the neighbourhood, but when she didn't return home that night, her family began searching for her. The rapist had abducted her and taken her in a CNG-run three-wheeler to an empty floor in a building and raped her. He then put her in a bus to Mohakhali so she could go home. The child managed to reach her house but was profusely bleeding from her injuries. Even after a week, the suspect had not been identified. This crime, and the cruelty involved, is a reminder of how vulnerable our children are, especially girls.

We demand that this case does not unfold like the hundreds of other cases involving minors who have been abused, allowing the perpetrators to escape justice for such heinous crimes. According to Ain o Salish Kendra's statistics, at least 119 children were raped from January to September 2024, with 22 of them under six years old and 48 victims between the ages of seven and 12.

The pathetically low conviction rate for cases of sexual violence gives predators a sense of impunity, further encouraging them. The role of the police is therefore all the more critical. They must promptly take the cases, make sure the victim gets urgent medical attention and is kept safe, and carry out immediate investigations to identify the perpetrator and bring him to book. The court must make sure that the victim is represented by a public prosecutor—as in most cases, the victim is from an impoverished family—and the rapist is convicted.

But how do we stop these horrendous crimes from happening? How can we keep our children and women safe from sexual violence? These are questions that neither previous governments nor society as a whole have prioritised. We need widespread awareness regarding the sexual abuse of children and women and the permanent damage it inflicts on the victims, which ultimately debilitates society.

While the interim government faces many challenges including the task of getting the police force and the courts to function properly, safety of children and women must take priority. We urge the present government to take all steps to ensure the best treatment for the victim including counselling and rehabilitation.

### THIS DAY IN HISTORY



## Muammar Gaddafi is killed

On this day in 2011, Libyan de facto leader Muammar Gaddafi was killed by rebel forces following a revolt that received international military assistance.

# Govt must make itself available to questions from the press



Zia Haider Rahman, a former international human rights lawyer and head of research at Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), is the author of the novel "In the Light of What We Know." His X handle is @ziahaiderahman.

ZIA HAIDER RAHMAN

I am mindful of the risk that criticism even from a friend keen to see the interim government (IG) succeed could be misrepresented by those who would rather the IG failed. Such people will find nothing in the following to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the IG. Rather, the remarks here are offered in the spirit of constructive advice with a view to helping the IG accomplish its goals.

Democratic governments are held accountable by popular elections, parliamentary scrutiny, and the review of independent institutions such as the courts. Beyond such features, one is hard pressed to find any practice of democracy that does not include the rigours of a vibrant, free press.

At the time of writing this, there are only three members of staff in the press office of the chief adviser. The office's woeful under-resourcing alone, rather than failures of staff, could explain its shortcomings.

Instead of acting as a passive conduit for government bulletins, a press office should take the initiative on communications, anticipating needs and acting accordingly. Consider the IG's announcement on

**The press office has several functions for which it must be adequately staffed. Clearly, it must guide senior IG officials on how to field questions. More generally, it must anticipate reactions to its own announcements; it must be fleet of foot; it must enlist any part of the IG necessary to inform a response to news and events; and it must have the weight of the CA behind it to promptly receive whatever input it needs from others in the IG.**

September 17 to grant temporary magistracy powers to the military. Without reasons for such a grant of powers, the announcement naturally raised concerns. The home affairs adviser did subsequently provide further explanation in a speech to new army recruits, but that came two days after news media had reported the story and damage had been done.

Examples of "small" avoidable errors are plentiful; their impact cumulatively, however, is far from small. Here is another example. After first supporting the IG's resolve to reform the constitution, BNP leadership was reported to say, on September 22, that reforms should take place only under an elected government. This came after earlier reported claims that the public would not tolerate an IG staying in place for too long. The press office should have grasped the significance of the BNP statement, not least as a test of the traction that calls for elections might enjoy. A press office with initiative would quickly have landed on a readily available response to provide journalists. With the law adviser's help, the office could have drafted something along such lines as: "The IG shares the BNP's concern for democratic endorsement of a constitution. Constitutions, everywhere, are typically approved by constitutional assemblies and ratified by parliaments. The IG respects the need for the people, directly or through elected representatives, to ratify a constitution." Such a response would not have bound the IG and, moreover, it would have sent a cautionary signal to all those who would call for elections prematurely. As a bonus, it would have reframed the BNP's own statement.

Perhaps the press office's shortcomings are most vividly illustrated by the CA's recent interview with Voice of America and the subsequent furore. Though first reported on October 3, the interview



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

itself took place on September 27. Presumably, a press officer was present (and made a separate recording), as should be the case at all media interviews.

After referencing the destruction of Bangabandhu Memorial Museum and the cancellation of the national day of mourning, while further noting that Sheikh Mujib had long been recognised as the father of the nation, the interviewer asked "What's the viewpoint of your IG?"

To say that the CA's answer was regrettable is hardly controversial. In hindsight, I imagine he wishes he had worded things differently. His reply was: "You're talking about the past. Apparently, you don't remember that a mass uprising has since taken place. You're speaking as if it never happened. You need to see what's happening in this new situation. You do not seem to have any questions about how many students have sacrificed their lives, why they sacrificed their lives. First, we must admit that they, the students, said that we have pushed a reset button. The past is gone for sure. Now we will build up in new way. People also want that. And this new way means we must bring reforms."

What gave rise to controversy, specifically, were the words "...we have pushed a reset button. The past is gone for sure." My own view is that the CA did not intend to be understood as promoting revisionist history or Stalinist photographic airbrushing of a persona newly deemed non gratis. But it is unreasonable to expect everyone to read his words as I did: on its face, the text is indeed troubling.

Moreover, the controversial words aside, the rest of the CA's response to the question reflects a lack of having been prepared by his press team. His tone is defensive, bordering on belligerent, which does not look good at all. My attention here is not on what the CA said but on what the press office failed to do both beforehand and afterward. Professor Yunus is not a seasoned politician emerging from the trials of political interviews over long years. He is an academic. His team should have warned him that, although he will be celebrated by leaders gathered in New York for the UN general assembly, he should not expect an easy ride in every press interview. They should have cautioned him that criticising a journalist for the choice of questions leaves the impression of someone defensive and unfamiliar with accountability. Under the old regime, of course, Awami League politicians all but wrote the questions put to them at press conferences. But that is not the case wherever there is a free press—choice of questions is the interviewer's prerogative.

Equally important, the team should have primed the CA on the cardinal rule of political interviews—

do not answer a question, when it is wise not to do so, but instead pivot to your own talking point. And it is never wise to answer a question that has raised your ire and made you feel defensive, in the way the question quite evidently had Professor Yunus. His own closing words indicate what the focus of his answer should have been: "...we must bring reforms."

wondering if some in the IG have failed to grasp a simple fact: they have ceased to be civil society campaigners making demands of the government; in fact, they are the government.

Most of the advisers are drawn from the NGO or academic sectors, where conferences and roundtables are routine. Such roundtables have a virtue in attracting news media for

the purpose of legitimate advocacy work. But governments do not need roundtables to attract attention. Moreover, it should be apparent to anyone who's attended any—and, God forgive me, I have attended too many—roundtables hardly ever yield new insights.

Too much of what we hear about government decision-making is through news reports of roundtables. Even if the government were elected, this would be undemocratic, but it is all the more so given that the IG is not elected, and since such forums are invariably gatherings of the Dhaka elite, who are all too often found at the same dinner parties and weddings.

Governing is about getting things done practically and is not the same as NGO advocacy. Advisers should attend roundtables judiciously, turning instead to press conferences and fielding questions from journalists. Press conferences are the right forum for announcing developments in government policy.

One notes, by the way, that where press conferences are routinely held, with press officers taking questions, news media will put their best journalists on the beat, for the obvious reason that good questions will yield material worth reporting. And this, incidentally, will raise the standard of accountability. Accountability is not to be feared but embraced. It makes each of us better, as well as being better for those to whom we are accountable. Besides, shouldn't we act like the change we want to see? If the IG wants governments to be accountable, it can act now.

Roundtables can go ahead but without advisers, and conveners can make written submissions to the IG, with the benefit of discussions already in hand. Advisers and other government officials must be freed from the terrible time-sink of these roundtables. If I mention Dhaka's horrifying perpetual traffic jam and the hours it takes to travel to and from any venue, it is to underline the fact that time is a precious commodity depleting by the day, and especially precious to an IG with an indeterminate future.

Bangladesh needs a properly resourced and responsive IG press office, one that regards its audience as the nation and not the elite. Making itself routinely answerable to a free press is the pre-eminent means, until elections, by which the government can deliver effective accountability. Without accountability, we will all, in time, inevitably wonder: what the heck is the government actually doing? The cumulative effect of inadequate announcements and infrequent press conferences, where questions are taken, will be the draining of trust and faith, and growing doubt in the IG's capacity to deliver. There is still time to fix all this. But how much time is anyone's guess.