

The government must focus on urgent issues



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It has been almost three months since the interim government took office. During this period, it has taken several notable steps, including the formation of various commissions to begin the reform process of key sectors and suspension of the indemnity law in the energy sector—steps largely viewed as positive. However, there are many other tasks that it should prioritise. It is surprising that to this day, there has been no official list of the deceased and injured from the July uprising. The student-led protests evolved into a broader people's movement, with citizens from all walks of life joining in. Participation of the working class was particularly significant. Many among the victims are from the labour force. Many of the injured are now struggling to carry on their medical treatment. They expected support from the state. More prompt actions should have been taken in this regard.

There seems to be a tendency to overlook the pivotal role of workers during the uprising, as their demands has not received the attention it deserves. For example, after the 18-point agreement among the employers, garment workers and the government, it was clearly stipulated that all outstanding wages would be cleared. But many factories have not fulfilled this commitment; some factories have even shut down without warning. When workers raise their concerns and demand their dues, they are often met with violent responses, such as shootings, which lead to casualties. A 25-year-old female RMG

worker, who had joined the ongoing protest demanding payment of wages pending for several months, was recently shot and died from her injuries later. Even yesterday, two garment workers were shot during a violent clash with law enforcement forces in Dhaka's Mirpur area. It is disheartening to see that while any student-led mobilisation receive a degree of sympathy from the government, workers are met with force when they demand their rights. It is hoped that the government will take adequate steps to address these concerns.

Meanwhile, political complexities seem to have diverted the current administration's focus elsewhere. One such issue involves recent statements made by the president. A clear response to his remarks might have been the publication of Sheikh Hasina's resignation letter. If this is not feasible, then a resolution must be sought through dialogue with political parties. Some state run organisations have also made demands and put forth claims, indicating that internal contradictions may be brewing. Rather than allowing instability to grow from these contradictions, the government should swiftly engage in discussions with political parties and take decisive actions with consensus.

One such swift decision was the recent ban on the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), student wing of the Awami League. This ban was a demand of the anti-discrimination student movement, which called for BCL's dissolution. Often perceived as a militant arm

of the Awami League, BCL gained a reputation for engaging in criminal activities—extortion, tender manipulation, harassment of university students, and even operating torture cells in dormitories. The organisation's presence in many communities became synonymous with oppression, serving the Awami League's interests to maintain power, and this image was deliberately cultivated by the Awami League government.

that the gravity of the allegations may get diminished. This approach raises questions about the credibility of the judicial process.

The decision to ban a political entity could prove to be self-defeating too. Banning a political group does not eliminate its ideology. While the organisation may no longer be legally active, its ideas and activities could continue underground, with the potential for resurgence. For

power, its student wing becomes dominant and oppressive, using the university administration to further its goals. The government uses these student groups to exert control over campuses, as seen with the Awami League's BCL, the BNP's Chhatra Dal, Jamaat's Islami Chhatra Shibir, and the Ershad-era's Chhatra Samaj.

To prevent a return to authoritarianism or fascism, strengthening democratic processes is crucial. This includes fostering democratic dialogue, ensuring transparency and accountability in governance, and upholding the rule of law. When institutions are made functional and accountable, and when exemplary punishment is meted out to offenders, the foundation for authoritarianism weakens. Moreover, increasing public participation in governance can create a resilient barrier against any potential return of undemocratic forces.

If the government ignores the demands of the majority working class population or the calls for justice across various social divides, and relies solely on coercion, it risks paving the way for authoritarianism. Heavy-handed tactics, threats, and coercive laws only contribute to the re-emergence of undemocratic practices. The key aspiration of the uprising was to build a "discrimination-free new Bangladesh," and to achieve this, the focus must shift towards necessary reforms.

Reducing the price of essential goods and ensuring they remain within reach of ordinary people is very important at the moment. Scraping anti-people agreements in sectors like energy is essential for laying the groundwork for this new vision of Bangladesh. This should not simply be about replacing one version of BCL with another. A true transformation means breaking away from the trends that have been synonymous with oppression.

As told to Monorom Polok.



FILE PHOTO: STAR

One of the issues in Bangladesh that needs urgent solution is the prices of daily essentials.

While the BCL members who engaged in criminal activities should undoubtedly face justice, it is also crucial to hold accountable those in the previous regime who empowered the BCL for their own benefit. However, the current process of prosecuting individuals associated with the previous regime lacks transparency. Cases are being filed where the main culprits are not being precisely identified, leading to the possibility that the actual wrongdoers may escape justice, or

example, during Sheikh Hasina's tenure, Jamaat-e-Islami was not officially banned but faced similar restrictions in practice. But its ideology persisted, and today it has re-emerged even stronger. Thus, simply banning an organisation does not eradicate its influence; instead, it obscures its true nature and may even create sympathy among the public.

Politics in our public universities has also shown that whichever party comes to

Addressing mental health challenges in the modern workplace



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In today's rapidly evolving workplace, mental health has become a critical pillar of employee well-being, yet it remains an oft-overlooked aspect of organisational culture. A 2022 survey of nearly 15,000 employees across 15 countries found that one in four employees experience burnout at work, underscoring the urgent need for addressing mental health in the workplace. The Covid pandemic has intensified these challenges, unveiling widespread issues like anxiety and depression that adversely affect productivity and job satisfaction. Untreated mental health conditions cost the global economy over \$1 trillion annually, highlighting the need for proactive measures. Organisations must recognise that fostering a culture of mental well-being not only benefits employees, but also paves the way for a more engaged and productive workforce.

Despite the clear benefits, the stigma surrounding mental health often deters employees from seeking help, leaving many to navigate their struggles in silence. Fear of judgement can prevent candid discussions, exacerbating feelings of isolation, especially in hybrid work environments where face-to-face interaction is limited. Job insecurity and escalating demands further contribute to heightened stress levels. A 2019 national poll by the American Psychiatric Association, in fact, found that one in three workers fear job loss if they share their mental health issues at work. Acknowledging these challenges is the first step towards creating a supportive environment that values mental health.

To actively support mental well-being, organisations can adopt proactive strategies such as cultivating a culture that encourages open dialogue around mental health. Companies like Google have successfully integrated mental health discussions into their workplace culture, promoting honest conversations that dismantle stigma. Initiatives such as regular mental health check-ins, training for management to recognise signs of distress, and accessible wellness programmes can significantly improve workplace dynamics. Moreover, regular feedback from employees can ensure that initiatives are responsive to their needs. Sustained commitment from leadership is crucial to maintaining these efforts



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

and fostering an inclusive environment that values mental health.

Offering flexibility in work arrangements is another vital strategy. Studies show that employees experience reduced stress levels when given the option to work remotely, largely due to improved work-life balance. For instance, Gallup's studies reveal that remote workers report higher job satisfaction and lower burnout levels. Options such as remote work, hybrid models, and flexible hours empower employees to manage their personal and professional responsibilities more effectively. However, it is crucial to address potential downsides, such as feelings of isolation and the risk of overworking, which can undermine the benefits of flexibility. Organisations can counter these issues by fostering strong communication channels, utilising project management tools to clarify expectations, and conducting regular check-ins to gauge employee well-being. Establishing clear boundaries around work hours is essential to ensure that flexibility supports overall health and productivity, positioning it as a core element of an organisation's long-term strategy for

employee engagement.

The unique challenges faced by women in the workplace warrant special attention. Many women juggle caregiving responsibilities alongside their professional roles, with research indicating they are 1.5 times more likely than men to manage household tasks, contributing to heightened stress. Factors such as gender bias—

encourage employees to utilise these services, while designated mental health days offer essential time for recharging. Moreover, gathering employee feedback can help tailor these resources to meet specific needs, fostering a culture that values mental health. Such initiatives support individual well-being and promote long-term organisational health by reducing burnout and

evidenced by the persistent global gender pay gap of 16 percent—and limited advancement opportunities exacerbate these pressures. Companies can make a significant difference by implementing comprehensive policies that promote work-life balance, including paid parental leave, accessible childcare, flexible work arrangements, and mental health days. Such measures enhance mental health, increase job satisfaction, and improve retention rates. Additionally, establishing mentorship programmes and support networks can empower women at all career stages, fostering an environment where they mentally and professionally thrive.

Access to mental health resources is another critical component of a healthy work environment. Offering a comprehensive range of benefits from in-person counselling and employee assistance programmes to digital tools and stress management workshops can measurably impact employee well-being. Research indicates that organisations prioritising mental health often see a return on investment of \$4 for every \$1 spent. Flexible options such as virtual counselling and peer support groups

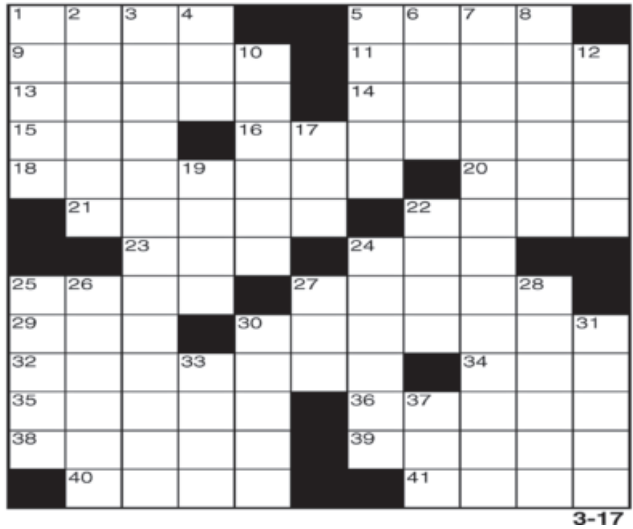
turnover, as evidenced by success stories from companies like Microsoft, which have seen significant improvements in productivity after investing in mental health programmes.

Organisations can safeguard their bottom line by investing in mental health initiatives while supporting employee well-being. Organisations with comprehensive mental health programmes often report improved employee morale and creativity. On the other hand, inaction concerning this issue may lead to increased healthcare expenditures, decreased productivity, and potential legal liabilities.

It's time for businesses to act decisively, transforming mental health from an afterthought into a core aspect of workplace culture. This requires commitment from all levels within organisations, as collaboration is key to fostering a supportive atmosphere. Investing in workers' mental health also contributes to societal well-being by reducing healthcare costs and enhancing community resilience. Together, we can envision a future where mental health is prioritised, creating thriving workplaces and prosperous societies.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Narrow
5 Recipe instruction
9 Ready for bed
11 Insertion sign
13 Justice Samuel
14 Take for — (trick)
15 Ethane, e.g.
16 Yoga studio greeting
18 Swimming groups
20 Egg layer
21 Extra
22 Order to Spot
23 Hosp. areas
24 Be litigious
25 "Darn it!"
27 Capital on the Nile
29 Nest egg acct.
30 Fit
32 It doesn't call for drawing
34 "Give — rest!"
35 Downloadable read
36 Bothered
38 Flower girl, often
39 T choice
- DOWN**
1 Some deer
2 Fragrant flowers
3 Spuds
4 Ran into
5 Cons
6 Scarlett's home
7 Some show dogs
8 Drink made from rooibos
10 Generous folks
12 Minute
17 Bar choice
19 Crew members
22 Diamonds, e.g.
24 Casual shoe
25 Mature
26 Mideast region
27 Soup buy
28 Power problem
30 Confiscates
31 Crew members
33 Pawn
37 Letter after sigma



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