

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

A tragic death on JU campus

Authorities must take strict action to ensure students' safety

We are deeply disturbed by the tragic death of a first-year student of Jahangirnagar University who was fatally injured after being struck by a battery-powered rickshaw on Tuesday evening. The passing of someone so young—that too in a place where they are supposed to be safe—is a stark reminder of the vulnerabilities that persist within our university grounds. According to a report, the victim, Afsana Karim (Rachi), was near the new Arts Building when the incident occurred. Despite being rushed to the university medical centre and later to a hospital in Savar, she succumbed to her injuries. Agitated students have since blamed the lack of adequate medical care and authorities' failure to regulate vehicle operations on campus for what they are calling a "structural killing."

The sprawling JU campus is no stranger to traffic collisions as it often attracts crowds driving cars and motorcycles from outside. The battery-powered rickshaw, commonly known as auto-rickshaw, has been a particular concern thanks to its rickety structure and unsustainably high speeds posing safety risks to both passengers and pedestrians. In 2022, after another student was injured in a similar incident, students called for a ban on these vehicles but their demand did not materialise. Instead, the authorities attempted to regulate their use. Currently, there are 310 licensed auto-rickshaws. Drivers have to pay a combined fee of Tk 4,000 for registration and outfitting. However, unlicensed auto-rickshaws often enter the campus which, combined with the lack of proper training and accountability for drivers, contribute to accidents.

In the wake of the latest tragedy, JU students staged protests including a daylong blockade at all university gates on Wednesday. Their key demands include justice for the death of Afsana Karim, installing adequate street lighting and speed bumps, functional CCTV cameras across the campus, improving emergency services at the medical centre, banning all unregistered vehicles, ensuring proper training and registration for drivers, etc. The authorities have already suspended four officials for negligence. While we hope they will do everything necessary to ensure a safer campus and restore confidence among students, the High Court's directive on Tuesday—banning battery-run rickshaws on Dhaka's streets within three days—has added a layer of complexity that deserves judicious intervention.

It cannot be denied that the public sentiment is currently largely against such vehicles, with collisions being reported in many other places as well. But an outright ban, without offering viable alternatives for the drivers, risks pushing marginalised workers into deeper economic distress. A gradual phasing out, combined with opportunities for alternative employment, could help address this challenge more equitably. However, at JU, situated on the outskirts of the city, it is more urgent now to enforce strict regulations on their operations and meet other demands of the students. No student should have to be at risk on their own campus.

Protect Kuakata reserve forest

News of sand extraction for govt project is alarming

The callousness being displayed by local authorities towards the degradation of the Kuakata reserve forest is alarming. According to a report by this daily, a contractor involved in a road construction project of the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) in Patuakhali is extracting sand from the forest, putting it at severe risk. This is happening right under the nose of the authorities, yet no action has been reportedly taken against it.

The Patuakhali LGED office is constructing the road on both sides of the Kuakata Zero Point to improve tourist mobility. In the first phase of the Tk 22.27 crore project, the contractor—a local firm called Younus and Brothers—is filling the project area with sand to pave half of the road. According to a sub-contractor, the sand should have been purchased from the market, but instead, it is being extracted from the forest. He, however, claimed this was being done "as per the rules." But what rules could permit the extraction of resources from a protected area? Or is the contractor just doing it to cut costs?

The Kuakata forest is protected for a reason: extracting sand from there would have detrimental effects on its fragile ecosystem. Already, a number of trees are dying due to large ditches created by the sand lifting. But it's not just the forest that is in danger. If sand lifting continues, the nearby flood control dyke—which protects the area from storm surges—could also be damaged. Are the authorities not aware of these consequences? Locals say they have complained about this to the authorities, but to no avail.

This is, of course, not an isolated case of governmental indifference towards environmental destruction. Last month, this daily reported how the Chattogram district administration had allowed a contractor to lift sand from the Ramgarh-Sitakunda reserve forest for a road widening project. Another report in August revealed how the authorities in Jashore's Chowgacha upazila turned a blind eye as local influentials lifted sand from the Marjad Bawar area, endangering nearby croplands, river protection dams, and so on.

This practice has to stop. The government must take swift action to stop extraction of sand and other natural resources anywhere it is reported. It is encouraging to learn that the Road and Highways Department has made environmental impact assessment (EIA) mandatory for all its projects. But this requirement must be extended to all kinds of construction projects. There must be no compromise when it comes to protecting our environment.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Robert Mugabe resigns

On this day in 2017, after some 37 years as leader of Zimbabwe—first as prime minister and later as president—Robert Mugabe resigned from office as the parliament began impeachment proceedings against him.

Our progress in human rights inspires cautious optimism



Tamanna Hoq Riti is coordinator of Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) mechanism project at the Media & International Advocacy unit of Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK).

TAMANNA HOQ RITI

One year has passed since Bangladesh's human rights record was reviewed under the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR), an important and widely acceptable mechanism designed to promote and protect human rights globally. On November 13, 2023, a total of 110 UN member states presented Bangladesh with 301 recommendations to improve human rights practices and establish the state's accountability. Following this, on March 25, 2024, Bangladesh expressed support for 211 of these recommendations, while noting 90 others.

The country's political landscape has undergone a profound shift recently, bringing renewed hope and presenting a crucial opportunity to implement meaningful reforms that could improve the human rights situation. While significant challenges remain, the anti-discrimination movement, along with the interim government's positive actions in recent months have raised expectations for a more just and accountable society.

The previous government faced widespread accusations of human rights violations, including restrictions on free expression, arbitrary detentions, and enforced disappearances by the United Nations Human Rights mechanism including the UPR. In contrast, the interim government has signalled a strong commitment to upholding human rights, ensuring accountability for past abuses, and implementing reforms to prevent further violations.

One of the most notable steps taken by the interim government has been the ratification of the Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, a move that had been recommended in each of the past four UPR cycles. The prior administration had rejected the recommendation, arguing that there was no legal framework for addressing "enforced disappearances" in Bangladesh and that reforms were needed before adopting the convention. The new government's decision to ratify the convention marks a significant departure from past policies and indicates a willingness to address this pressing human rights concern. The government should now prioritise aligning its domestic legal framework with the provisions of the convention and establish a clear legal

definition of enforced disappearances under national law in line with the convention.

Another key development is the establishment of an independent inquiry commission by the interim government to investigate allegations of human rights violations committed by law enforcement agencies (LEAs). The former government had consistently rejected calls for an independent body to probe accusations of police and military misconduct, citing existing training programmes and penalties for misconduct as sufficient safeguards. In contrast, the new inquiry commission, led by a former justice, has already



The country's political landscape has undergone a profound shift recently, bringing renewed hope of implementing meaningful reforms to improve the human rights situation.

FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

begun its work and has reportedly uncovered evidence of enforced disappearances, demonstrating a more proactive approach to addressing human rights abuses.

The former government had also resisted calls to amend the controversial Cyber Security Act (CSA), despite widespread criticism from civil society, journalists, and international bodies. The CSA was seen as a tool to curtail freedom of expression, particularly targeting the press and online activists. The new government, however, has moved forward with plans to repeal the CSA. In a recent development, the advisory council gave provisional approval to a draft ordinance to repeal the CSA, signalling a shift toward

greater freedom of expression in the digital realm.

Such initiatives give hope that the government will take progressive initiatives to implement other UPR recommendations whether they were supported or noted by the former government. Thus, the government should continue taking concrete steps to protect journalists, media workers, dissidents, human rights defenders and civil society, political and cultural activists from harassment, arbitrary detention, mob attack or violence. This includes ensuring that media outlets are free to operate without government interference, journalists have the freedom to report on sensitive issues, and human rights defenders, political and cultural activists have the space to raise voices without fear of reprisals. Additionally, it is expected the government will urgently take measures to safeguard citizens' rights to access justice, ensure equality before the law regardless of their differences, and protect them from all forms of

lack of independence, primarily due to the restrictive framework set out in the National Human Rights Commission Act 2009. Despite previous efforts to reform the Act, little progress has been made. However, there is now an expectation that the interim government will prioritise reforming the NHRC Act 2009, enabling it to address human rights violations more effectively and independently. Additionally, with the recent resignation of the NHRC Chair and other members, there are expectations that the government will ensure a transparent, open, and participatory process for selecting new members of the commission.

Looking ahead, the government has an opportunity to create a more structured and transparent process for implementing its human rights obligations. One potential avenue is the development of a comprehensive action plan that integrates recommendations from various UN human rights mechanisms, including the UPR, and sets out clear timelines for their implementation. This plan could

torture, humiliation, or ill-treatment. In line with the goals of the anti-discrimination movement, which sought to build an inclusive society for all citizens, the government must also prioritise the implementation of recommendations to ensure the rights of indigenous, religious, and other minority and marginalised groups.

Another area where the government should focus is the strengthening of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). In the latest UPR, several recommendations were made to bolster the NHRC, with an emphasis on ensuring its independence and effectiveness in line with the Paris Principles. The NHRC has long been criticised for its limited mandate and

be accompanied by a monitoring mechanism to track progress and an inter-ministerial coordination body that includes representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs) and the NHRC to ensure input and accountability.

Such a mechanism will expedite the fulfilment of the government's human rights obligations and reinforce the process of ensuring accountability for human rights within the government. It would also provide a platform for continued dialogue with the UN and other international stakeholders, ensuring that Bangladesh remains on track to meet its human rights commitments and strengthen the rule of law.

Bangladesh's credit system needs to change



Adib Babul is director at National Group Bangladesh.

ADIB BABUL

Bangladesh is recognised for its economic progress and GDP growth. However, despite our "over protectionist" policies on Credit Information Bureau (CIB) for individuals and businesses, we remain a country plagued by high levels of bank defaults, corruption, and inequality. We are well aware of the magnitude of defaulted loans and distressed debt, often disguised through window dressing to the central bank. But today, I pose the critical question: how did we get here?

This article is not a lesson in economics, but it is evident that Bangladesh's banking sector is broken—and has been for quite some time. Access to credit has been largely restricted to those with political clout, while entrepreneurs with a moral compass are left stranded on the sidelines. Middle-class consumers, too, face significant hurdles, unable to secure basic home or auto loans due to burdensome bureaucracy.

In Bangladesh, compliance is highly subjective. An applicant might have all the required documents yet still be denied a credit line because the

bank deems them "not satisfactory." Meanwhile, crony companies and infamous individuals continue to bypass these barriers effortlessly. To address this, we must ensure a proper separation of political influence from bank boardrooms. This means excluding MPs, ministers, and their family members—children, spouses, siblings—who have historically shaped the political-banking nexus in this country.

The central bank must recognise that the existing CIB laws are outdated and ineffective. Urgent policy reforms are needed. The current system incentivises companies and individuals to focus solely on their balance sheets, sanctioning more loans to service previous debts. This creates a vicious cycle, where borrowers aim to become "too big to fail," effectively holding banks hostage and evading accountability for financial malpractice.

So, what's so wrong with the CIB laws that got us here?

Well, the current law essentially depicts that if the historical list of ventures is financially solvent, then that

entity is eligible for more loans. But it gets complex when one of the entity's ventures fails. So, what happens when things hit the fan for any one of those? Can we call it quits on that venture and continue with the profitable ones? Absolutely not.

All of the business groups in Bangladesh have experienced this. The existing central bank laws essentially force entrepreneurs with more profitable, financially healthy companies to keep their other ailing entities afloat, ultimately jeopardising the once thriving ventures into bankruptcy. What do businessmen do to avoid that dreaded crisis? To avoid this, many businesspeople resort to over-leveraging, refinancing, restructuring, or consolidating debts, ultimately leading to a financial avalanche.

How can this be avoided? Well, we cannot essentially avoid financial crises. However, we can control the rate of defaults by taking strict fiscal policy measures. We can make sure that a snowball remains a snowball and that it does not take the shape of an avalanche.

If only the central bank would allow the separation of the limited companies from the other entities of the same sponsor, then we could have avoided economic disasters of this magnitude. The United States, for instance, has Chapter 11 bankruptcy provisions for a reason. It is definitely better to cut back on a losing horse earlier on versus to wager all that you have and by doubling down even further by borrowing more money in order to resuscitate the losing

horse, in this case the failing company.

Even publicly listed companies are not immune to these laws, which hold sponsors accountable for their failed private ventures. This means public shareholders, who often hold the majority stake, also suffer the consequences of the sponsors' missteps. This legal framework has stifled our stock market, yet we continue to question why it is failing.

Critics in favour of the existing laws might argue that "given how strict the laws are we still have so many defaults, imagine how many more would default if we adopted this 'lax' approach?" In response, I would say that the bankers would have to do their real work in conducting their due diligence and prevent their boards from approving loan sanctions on projects for suspicious or saturated industries and directly communicate with the central bank, if their board fails to acknowledge red flags. The failure to do so is why we are here today. Bangladesh Bank needs to wake up and realise that it's better to deal with smaller defaults on a yearly basis rather than the default of a financial juggernaut that may jeopardise the economy.

Bangladesh Bank needs to make serious amendments to the existing archaic CIB laws that stifle the spirit of entrepreneurship. These laws have fostered a post-apocalyptic capitalist system in our country. It may feel like it's too late now, but just like the resilient people of Bangladesh, we should not give up now and march forward for a better tomorrow.