

## Police legacy of lethal force has to change

### Militarisation of police cannot be accepted under any pretext

It is encouraging to learn that the police may cease using lethal weapons and lead pellets for crowd control. We fully support this drive as there is no justification for the police to use lethal force against ordinary citizens. Such actions, however, were rampant during the tenure of the ousted Awami League regime. During the July uprising, excessive use of lethal weapons by police and other security agencies resulted in approximately 1,500 deaths while leaving nearly 20,000 injured. It is incomprehensible that those entrusted with the duty to protect the public could commit such violence against them.

In light of these events, it is imperative that our security agencies, including police, undergo reforms to prevent such atrocities from ever occurring again. Reportedly, the Police Headquarters has already formed a committee to recommend non-lethal methods for controlling crowds and unlawful assemblies. Discussions are also underway about banning the use of long-barrel firearms. In extreme cases of necessity, it is expected that police will rely on small arms, in accordance with practices in developed countries and aligned with UN guidelines, to which Bangladesh is a signatory.

Following the successful July uprising, *The Daily Star* analysed the injury patterns of 204 individuals who had died as of August 1. Nearly 95 percent of these victims were killed by bullets, including live rounds and shotgun pellets. Of these, 113 were shot in the head, chest, stomach, or abdomen—clearly indicating an intent to kill. Additionally, an analysis by the Lawyers for Energy, Environment and Development (LEED) revealed that lethal weapons such as 7.62mm semi-automatic rifles, submachine guns, BD08 assault rifles, Taurus 9mm revolvers, and Type 54 pistols were used during attacks on protesters.

As highlighted in a report by this daily, the militarisation of the police under the previous regime began in 2012-2013. In an October 2014 meeting, a decision was made to procure lethal firearms, including 7.62mm rifles. From that point onward, the regime increasingly pressured the police to use such deadly weapons to suppress dissent. Procurement records available on the Bangladesh Police website show that 7.62 sniper rifles and 7.62mm bullets have been in use for years, with their acquisition often coinciding with the farcical elections held under the regime, the latest being the January 2024 general elections.

Former Home Affairs Adviser M Sakhawat Hossain has rightly questioned the rationale for giving such “military-grade” weapons to the police. The answer is clear—they were introduced to enable the fascist regime to maintain power by silencing dissent and oppressing citizens. Therefore, comprehensive reforms in our security agencies, particularly the police, are critical. These reforms must also include establishing thorough, independent mechanisms to investigate errant police officers and hold them accountable.

## Stop illegal brick kilns in Brahmanbaria

### Why are they still in operation even after regime change?

We are frustrated by the lack of satisfactory progress in removing illegal brick kilns in the country, despite repeated assurances from the authorities. These unauthorised operations, especially along riverbanks and wetlands, continue to inflict damage on the environment, public health, and rural livelihoods. Most of the kilns were set up by local influentials leveraging their political connections, so the fall of the Awami League regime on August 5 had raised hope that they would be swiftly shut down. This has not happened, at least not to the extent expected.

Brahmanbaria is one of the districts where illegal brick kilns have mushroomed over the years, often encroaching on agricultural lands and even extending into wetland areas. Currently, there are 56 such units in the district. The problem, as per a report by *Prothom Alo*, is particularly acute in Sarail upazila, where a number of illegal kilns were set up along the banks of Titas River. Unfortunately, regime change hasn't had much effect on their operations or expansions. One example is the illegal Jisan brick kiln, set up by a former Awami League lawmaker occupying six acres of farmland near the Sarail-Nasirnagar-Lakhai regional highway. Despite having no valid documents, including environmental clearance or the permit for brick burning, it continues to operate even though its owner is now in jail in connection with a murder case. Reportedly, it has already erased a nearby canal.

Similar operations also continue unchecked, ravaging topsoil and burning bricks with impunity. Even open toilets have been set up along the river by kiln labourers. One doesn't need to be an expert to understand the cumulative effects of such activities. In addition to the various health hazards posed to local residents, these operations harm biodiversity, cause soil degradation, and lead to a decline in agricultural productivity. Yet, beyond imposing occasional fines on kiln operators, the authorities have taken no decisive action to stop them.

This has to change. We urge the government to crack down on all illegal kilns and ensure that their operations do not resume under any pretext. Given the massive damage already done to our environment by them, however, it is no longer enough to merely enforce regulations in the authorised brick kilns. We must find sustainable alternatives to traditional bricks and brick-manufacturing methods so that the demand for development can be met in an environmentally friendly way.

#### THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Fidel Castro dies at 90



On this day in 2016, Cuban political leader Fidel Castro, who transformed his country into the first communist state in the Western Hemisphere and became a symbol of communist revolution in Latin America, died at age 90.

# Why is the banking sector crisis so deep-rooted?



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The crisis that Bangladesh's banking sector is facing now is not simply a bundle of problems exclusive to banking, monetary, financial, accounting or managerial aspects. The sector is a victim of political extortion and rent-seeking cultures. The irregularities of the other five institutions of the past regime are mainly attributable to what the banking sector faces now. These institutions include: i) the finance ministry; ii) capital market; iii) parliament and bank-related lawmakers; iv) top-level bank borrowers and bank directors; and finally v) the financial judiciary.

The moral hazards such as taking big-ticket loans and not paying them back were not confined to the banking sector alone. This culture of extracting people's money has been an integral component of big companies, ardently endorsed by corrupt politicians in power. Thus, the crisis in the banking sector is deep-rooted. The amount of defaulted loans as a share of total outstanding loans reached 12.56 percent in June 2024 from 8.96 percent in June 2022. At the end of September, the amount of defaulted loans escalated to almost Tk 2.85 lakh crore, which is 16.93 percent of the total outstanding loans. In December 2023, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated the non-performing loan (NPL) share to be 25 percent of outstanding loans.

The turbulent July-September quarter saw an unprecedented increase of nearly Tk 74,000 crore in defaulted loans, vindicating that the sector is really in a crisis no matter if the government downplays it or not. The crisis was man-made since the default culture was largely wilful, indulged by the past regime for the monetary benefits of the corrupted politicians and laundering tycoons who received blanket endorsement for all their wrongdoings.

The share of defaulted loans rose from nine percent to 13 percent within the last two years when GDP growth was around six percent on average, suggesting that the default culture was largely wilful. Alarming, the default ratio that was shown in data is the tip of the iceberg, because the definition of default was perversely loosened by the past finance minister in 2019-2024 and the two central bank governors during the same period to revitalise the energy of the bank looters. That made the crisis worse.

The defaulters were allowed to adjust even as low as five percent of

the defaulted loans to get rid of the “stigma” of default. The past Awami League regime allowed multiple loose definitions to let some notorious tycoons participate in the national election and make faulty laws in their favour. There is another way to see that the default culture was wilful and evidently not a macroeconomy-wide issue. The high variation in the NPL ratios based on various ownerships



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unveils the story of how the state-owned banks were subject to a higher degree of looting, while private or foreign banks were able to maintain much lower NPL ratios.

A Bangladesh Bank report shows that at the end of June 2021, the NPL ratios were 3.9 percent and 5.4 percent in foreign banks and private banks, respectively, while the number was as high as 20.6 percent in state-owned banks. The numbers are much higher than what we see here since these ratios were calculated under the loose definitions of default. One thing is clear: the looting was religiously state-sponsored and passionately orchestrated by the

laundered out of the country over the 15-plus years of Awami League regime; only one Chattogram family is alleged to have laundered \$10 billion alone. He also said Tk 4 lakh crore is now the de facto defaulted loans that form 25 percent of the total advances. And Tk 2 lakh crore has gone to only a handful of families. This group of mafias plundered Bangladesh's banking sector to dump it into an incurable crisis. Much to people's frustration, some of them became members of parliament and even ministers, while some were made ministerial-level advisers to the former prime minister. The parliament turned into

financial gangsters not only eroded the future of the banking sector, but also made the wound too difficult to recover. Since the crisis in the banking industry is not simply its intrinsic problem, we need to correct those five institutions or related laws before we can expect a healthy recovery of the sector. Reforms must address these areas before energising the sector to move ahead swimmingly.

*The writing draws heavily from the keynote speech at the BDI International Conference on Bangladesh held at the University of California, Berkeley on November 8-9, 2024.*

# Real change requires real youth leadership



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As the world's youth take to the stage at COP29, many more than before, we wonder, are we amplifying youth voices with genuine intent, or are we succumbing to “youthwashing,” where young people are included merely for appearances without meaningful opportunities to lead and impact decisions? Too often their presence is symbolic, fleeting, and mostly powerless.

We can no longer afford this superficial inclusion. The youth voice is vital. They are the inheritors of this legacy, and so they must be present with the strength and freedom to act and lead. We need empowered youth—not just to be seen, but to meaningfully shape outcomes.

Tokenism at events like COP29 risks reducing youth engagement to mere visibility. This approach not only disrespects their talents and intelligence but also fails to harness their full potential. Organisations must critically reflect on their motives and commitment to empowering youth.

Today, there are 1.8 billion young people globally—our largest generation—and they stand on the

precipice of an uncertain future. We know that in 2019 alone, 24 million people were displaced by climate-induced disasters, with an estimated 140 million projected by 2050. We cannot treat or use young people as props in a global spectacle, instead of vital allies in this existential fight.

We speak of global targets and yet ignore the transformative power of youth when effectively engaged. Youth-led change is not new; it is essential, and it is immediate. Look at the strength of today's youths in the July uprising.

Real youth representation must rise above mere gestures. It means giving young leaders the ability to engage on the critical topics of our time, giving them needed tools—climate finance, adaptation strategies, and the policies that determine the survival of nations.

Often, the youth are made to stand without adequate preparation. To stand in these dialogues without preparation is to set them up to fail, to lose the trust of decision makers and diminish their true courage.

Youth leadership from the margins happen and is a reality we see daily: friendship impacts girls and boys from

the remote chars of Bangladesh, to defy incredible odds, to raise their voices on international platforms. Two such girls represented Bangladesh at the European Youth Parliament, sharing stories of resilience and innovation for their communities. Friendship's Interconnectivity School Project is another groundbreaking initiative that links students from the isolated chars to the globe. Through digital technology, these students engage with peers worldwide, fostering knowledge exchange and global awareness.

Additionally, our flood volunteer programme empowers young volunteers to represent grassroots disaster response efforts at the 16th International Community-Based Adaptation (CBA16) conference. An individual's story represented, exemplifies how locally trained youth leaders can drive change and advocate for solutions at a global level. These efforts showcase what is possible when youth are empowered with training, mentorship, and platforms to shine.

Empowering youth across diverse fields and technologies must be beyond events and programmes. True empowerment lies in equipping youth with technological skills and multidisciplinary expertise. Young leaders must be trained not only in climate negotiations but also in proposing practical solutions like green technologies, solar energy, and disaster response.

Teaching the next generation to install and maintain solar panels not only creates local resilience but also fosters sustainable economic

opportunities. Similarly, skills in climate disaster response, such as flood management and adaptation techniques, empower young people to lead in their own communities. These skillsets must be diverse—spanning policy, finance, engineering, and ecosystem restoration—because the climate crisis demands comprehensive, integrated responses. Empowered youth are those who can drive both local solutions and global policy, bridging the gaps between innovation and implementation.

There is no power in mere tokenism. Representation without power is worse than absence; it is a hollow gesture, and at this point in the climate crisis, hollow gestures are dangerous. At COP29, we must see beyond the presence of young people on panels or in photo ops. Instead, we must demand capable, prepared youth advocates. While the increased presence of youth is promising, it must be accompanied by comprehensive preparation and meaningful engagement in addressing real-world challenges. Incorporating youth voices meaningfully requires mechanisms for accountability and mutual learning. Decision-makers must evaluate the impact of youth contributions and provide actionable feedback. This ensures that their voices not only resonate but lead to measurable outcomes. Youth engagement must come with the skills to negotiate climate finance, ecosystem-based adaptation, and emissions reduction.

This is my hope for our coming conferences and for our world of tomorrow.