

Assaults on free press deeply alarming

Authorities must act decisively to protect press freedom

We're deeply concerned about the ongoing threats to press freedom as epitomised by the spate of attacks, vandalism, hostile mobilisations, and inflammatory rhetoric targeting *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*. This is a rude awakening for those who expected the culture of intimidation and repression against journalists to recede with the ouster of an autocratic regime—which, over 14 years, saw Bangladesh's position plummet 42 notches on the World Press Freedom Index. Instead, threats to the media appear to be intensifying in the current political climate, with coordinated campaigns aiming to stoke hostility against media houses that have long stood as pillars of independent journalism. This raises troubling questions about the future of the press in Bangladesh.

The campaign against *Prothom Alo* has been particularly vociferous since October 25, when a group announced plans to siege its head office in Karwan Bazar but failed to mobilise. Later, starting Thursday, protesters held sit-ins and caused disorder outside the office for several days, prompting law enforcement to intervene. On Monday, two of the paper's regional offices came under attack: masked individuals vandalised its signboard and windows in Bogura, while in Rajshahi, a group attempted to break into its office, destroyed its signboard, and burned copies of *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*. Hostile gatherings against both papers were also reported in Chattogram, Sylhet, Barishal, Chandpur, Munshiganj, and at Savar's Jahangirnagar University. On Friday, a group also demonstrated in front of *The Daily Star*'s head office.

While we welcome and indeed look forward to any constructive criticism of the media—which can be a learning experience for journalists—the current campaign, rooted in neither truth nor reason, offers no such opportunity. No credible grievances or evidence have been presented to justify these attacks and disruptions. Instead, they appear driven by an agenda to discredit independent media and deter it from fulfilling its watchdog role, exploiting the fluid security situation. As the Editors' Council and the Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (Noab) have rightly pointed out, any objections to the news or editorial policy of a newspaper can be expressed constructively, through writing. There are also legal means available to anyone feeling aggrieved. Even peaceful protests are permissible. But intimidation or violence targeting newspapers—and by extension their staff—are not only unacceptable but also a disservice to the democratic aspirations of the July uprising.

We are, however, encouraged by the solidarity shown by various platforms amid ongoing assaults. Government officials, including the information adviser, have also condemned this wave of aggression, vowing to prevent any unlawful activities to silence the media. We hope these assurances will be matched by swift action to create a secure environment for journalists, and that those behind ongoing assaults will be held accountable. The anti-media campaign coincides with the ongoing trend of disruptive activities by various errant groups, highlighting the complex challenges facing the pro-uprising forces. It is, therefore, imperative that civil society, political leaders, and the public stand united in protecting our hard-earned freedoms.

Senseless violence at DMRC by students

Those responsible for the mayhem, looting must face justice

We are shocked by the mindless violence that erupted at the Dr Mahbubur Rahman Mollah College (DMRC) on Monday, as students from Suhrawardy College and Kabi Nazrul College clashed with DMRC students for hours, leaving around 100 injured. Reportedly, hundreds of students from the two colleges, armed with various weapons, stormed DMRC around noon and damaged everything in their path, setting fire to furniture, destroying documents, and looting cash and computers. According to the DMRC principal, the estimated damage to the institution could be around Tk 60-70 crore. Such senseless acts of violence and destruction, especially by students, are completely unacceptable.

In recent days, we have observed a troubling trend of students resorting to violence at the slightest provocation. On November 20, students from Dhaka College and City College clashed in the Science Lab area for no apparent reason. About a week ago, students from Titumir College blocked roads and railways, hurling stones at train commuters and injuring many, in a demand to upgrade their college to university status. And now this violence involving students from three colleges. Reportedly, the unrest began after a DMRC student passed away at Dhaka National Medical College Hospital on November 18. When students from DMRC went to vandalise the hospital alleging medical negligence, students from the other two colleges joined, eventually sparking a clash.

It is disheartening to see such divisions and petty conflicts when, over three months ago, students played a significant role in the fall of an autocratic regime through their united efforts. Why can't they stand united now at this crucial moment of nation rebuilding? It defies logic that the death of a fellow student would lead to violence among students themselves, rather than a unified, peaceful protest against any perceived medical negligence. Some, including the DMRC principal, believe that outside forces may be instigating such violence to create unrest in the country. While the possibility of external instigation cannot be dismissed, nothing justifies the violence and vandalism carried out by the students.

As citizens of this country, students must abide by its laws. The government and college authorities must ensure that this message is clear to them. The government's strong stance against these actions is commendable, but words alone are not enough. We urge the authorities to take swift legal action against those involved in the attacks, vandalism, and looting, after conducting a thorough investigation. Incidents like these cannot be taken lightly.

Dhaka, a Gotham caught in the crossfire of conspiracies



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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Around 100 people were injured when students of Government Suhrawardy College and Kabi Nazrul Government College launched an attack on the Mahbubur Rahman Mollah College in Dhaka's Jatrabari on November 25.

battery-operated rickshaw drivers and the violent clashes among students across Dhaka don't appear to be isolated events—they seem like pieces of a broader conspiracy, a strategy to hold the city hostage to fear and uncertainty.

Adding to the storm are whispers of meddling by intelligence agencies from neighbouring countries. These covert operatives, with their vested interest in destabilising Bangladesh, have allegedly penetrated protests and fanned the flames of discord. Their tactics are subtle yet effective—exploiting existing divisions, amplifying religious tensions, and quietly manipulating the public discourse. Dhaka becomes a chessboard, its citizens pawns in a game organised beyond their understanding.

Consider the clashes at Newmarket between Dhaka College and City College students. What began as a petty quarrel escalated into a

battlefield, with lives disrupted and property destroyed. Or the protests by Titumir College students, whose so-called demands for university status devolved into roadblocks and rail disruptions. These incidents are not anomalies—they are symptoms of a city caught in a manufactured storm, where every grievance is magnified, every conflict exploited.

enforcement, appears overwhelmed. Their assurances of action ring hollow as unrest continues to spread. Meanwhile, the interim government's pleas for dialogue and order are drowned out by the cacophony of chaos.

"The night is darkest just before the dawn," Harvey Dent declares in *The Dark Knight*. For Dhaka, this darkness feels unending. But it also presents a choice: to surrender to the manufactured chaos or to rise above it. The responsibility lies not with mythical heroes but with the people themselves.

Citizens must confront the forces exploiting their grievances, whether they are rogue journalists twisting narratives, political influencers inciting division, or foreign agencies interfering in their sovereignty. Responsibility cannot be abdicated to leaders or institutions; it must be claimed by individuals refusing to be manipulated.

In *Batman Begins*, Bruce Wayne reminds us, "It's not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me." Dhaka's residents must ask themselves what defines them in this critical moment. Will they continue to be pawns in a sinister game, or will they demand accountability—from their leaders, their media, and themselves?

The AL now finds itself accused of conspiring to undermine the very nation it helped liberate. Its alliances with rogue actors and foreign entities betray desperation to reclaim power at any cost. But as Alfred, Bruce Wayne's loyal butler, observes, "Some men aren't looking for anything logical..." They just want to watch the world burn."

Dhaka is no stranger to struggle, but this moment demands more than endurance. It requires vigilance, integrity, and unity. The city may feel like Gotham today, but it need not share its fate. There is no Batman to save Dhaka, no billionaire vigilante to fight its battles. What it has, instead, are millions of ordinary heroes—people who can choose to reject chaos, to question the narratives fed to them, and to demand better from those in power.

As Batman himself says in *The Dark Knight Rises*, "A hero can be anyone." In Dhaka's darkest hour, heroism lies not in capes or masks but in the courage to see through the conspiracy, to resist manipulation, and to rebuild trust in each other. Only then can the city rise, not as a pawn in someone else's game, but as a beacon of resilience and hope.

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM

Bridging evidence gaps to end gender-based violence



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As the world observes the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (GBV), the spotlight falls on tackling violence against women and children. Despite its profound impact efforts still remain underfunded and under-researched. Thus, it is crucial to push for stronger policies to combat gender-based violence. With that goal, over 1,500 participants from 111 countries gathered at the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) Forum in Cape Town, South Africa in October to share strategies and close knowledge gaps on the issue, some of which are presented here.

Globally, one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, and every day, 137 women are killed by a family member. The far-reaching effects of violence against women and children extend beyond immediate harm, profoundly affecting their health, well-being, and long-term opportunities. These impacts can ripple across generations, perpetuating cycles of trauma and inequality. Economically, the costs are staggering—gender-based violence is estimated to cause a global loss of \$1.5 trillion annually—comparable to the economies of Indonesia, Australia

and Spain. Yet, global development assistance allocates less than 0.2 percent to GBV prevention, and an even smaller fraction is directed toward research and evaluation.

This mismatch between the scale of the problem and the resources dedicated to addressing it highlights the need for stronger evidence-based interventions.

The evidence base faces several critical gaps in GBV research. Comprehensive national prevalence data is lacking, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where the burden of violence is often highest. In many cases, research remains narrowly focused on specific populations, leaving many population groups—including children with disabilities, youth, and Indigenous children—underrepresented in the research.

Additionally, humanitarian settings pose unique challenges. The heightened risks of violence in situations of displacement, instability, and militarised environments are well-documented, yet research in these contexts often focuses on immediate responses rather than long-term solutions. Emerging issues

such as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), artificial intelligence (AI) and the intersection of climate change and GBV also remain underexplored.

Discussions at the forum emphasised survivor-centred programme design. Programmes that are guided by the experiences and needs of—both adult and child survivors—such as by asking them to define what recovery means—are more likely to be impactful and meaningful.

Ways to extend services to more survivors and victims were also shared. In Brazil and Uganda, for example, online platforms are used to improve access to services for survivors. Community-led programmes, such as those in Uganda and Colombia, demonstrate the power of grassroots activism to fill gaps left by strained public services. The forum also spotlighted initiatives like Rwanda's Indashyikirwa programme, which uses community activism to reduce intimate partner violence (IPV).

National policies may also serve as powerful levers for the reduction of gender-based violence. Evidence from Turkey and Peru shows how policy shifts, such as extending compulsory education, can significantly reduce violence by challenging harmful societal norms. Cash transfer and economic empowerment programmes, such as those implemented in Bangladesh, were also highlighted as powerful levers for reducing family and IPV. To ensure programmes can be scaled sustainably, partnerships with governments and capacity building for service providers are critical.

A comprehensive approach is needed to build and use evidence. This includes addressing fragmentation in the field, promoting collaboration, and investing in capacity strengthening for researchers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Initiatives like the development of shared research agendas, play a critical role in identifying evidence gaps and guiding funding priorities.

Another key takeaway from the forum was the need to "decolonise" research by supporting local researchers from affected communities to lead studies. This approach helps ensure the findings are both practical and culturally relevant. The SVRI Research Grant, though modest in size, is one of the few funding mechanisms prioritising locally-led research in LMICs. Long-term funding and collaborative partnerships between funders and grantees were highlighted as critical for scaling interventions and effectively addressing research gaps. The SVRI has co-created guidelines promoting long-term funding and equitable funder-grantee relationships to reduce barriers and support impactful, context-specific research.

The RESPECT framework provides a valuable guide for designing and implementing interventions that transform harmful norms, strengthen relationship skills, and create safer, more equitable societies. As the world reflects on these 16 days, the message is clear: collaboration, investment, and survivor-centred solutions are essential to breaking cycles of violence and building safer, more equitable societies.