

APPEAL TO THE ‘NEW GENERATION LEADERS’

You have crushed fascism, now strengthen

DEMOCRACY AND PRESS

FREEDOM

MAHFUZ ANAM

We are proud to launch our photo exhibition today, titled “36 DAYS OF JULY – SALUTING THE BRAVEHEARTS”, to pay our special tribute to the students and the people who have freed us from the shackles of fascism. We salute Abu Sayed and Mugdho and all others who gave their lives to end oppression. We express our solidarity with all those who have been blinded, left visually impaired, bullet hit, physically disabled and mentally traumatised, and all those who have lost their family members, friends and loved ones.

The exhibition, being held at The Daily Star Centre till December 7, depicts how The Daily Star covered the student-people revolution, the editorial positions we took, and the articles and photos we published. The exhibition will show how our reporters, and especially the photographers, risked their lives to tell our readers and the world the stories of the sacrifice, courage and valour of our students and freedom-loving people. We are proud to say that throughout the movement we devoted our full energy and talent to reporting authentically about the brutality meted out to the ordinary people.

The exhibition will show how we reported on the events of the “36 Days of July” with sincerity, devotion and professionalism. As each day passed, we went deeper into the stories, found how cruel and heartless the regime had become, and exposed its brutalities.

Our students, with the support of the people, have vanquished fascism. They have opened new doors for freedom, for democracy, for rights and for possibilities before the people. They have opened our eyes, our hearts and our minds to new realities and potentials. The new Bangladesh is committed to truth and courage and to the freedom of expression and independence of media. It is our hope and belief that the new generation will successfully build democracy, set up a rights-based society where discriminations, injustices and abuse of power will no longer exist. It may sound a bit too idealistic but

together we pledge to strive for it.

All sections of society are united in efforts to realise that goal. But regrettably there are groups within the new reality who are trying to destroy what the student-led mass uprising has achieved. We echo the concern of the government, of the student leaders and of the political parties about the disruptions, chaos and divisions that are being created. These groups are trying to impose their will on others and moving towards extreme positions to create fault lines and thereby dampen the spirit of the uprising. By spreading hatred and false narratives, they are trying to instigate violence, and by doing so, they are creating the very opposite force to what the student-people revolution needs at the moment. These groups are clouding the future prospects of the new Bangladesh.

The recent attacks and intimidation targeting The Daily Star and Prothom Alo, we think, are a part of that destabilising process. Its supremely false narrative, ideological thrust, extremist tendencies, assertions without proof, and intent to demonise two of the most respected newspapers in the country can only harm the unity and enthusiasm created by the students’ revolution and further impede our march forward.

In the new Bangladesh, let us express our thoughts, debate our divergent views and enunciate our respective philosophical, ideological and fact-based personal opinions so that we can create a more knowledge-based society. This is what we in The Daily Star have worked for and what our journalism is all about.

At this very moment, some criticism is being hurled at us for what they falsely claim is our partisanship. We welcome them and really want to listen to and learn from them. We must remember that criticisms when based on facts, proper analysis and correct interpretations serve both to improve journalism and enlighten the nation. We are open and eager to learn from our flaws to serve the readers better. Any other variety misleads the public, misinforms the audience, creates divisions within society and leads to hatred and violence.

To pick a story here or an editorial there and focus only on a few lines out of context does not serve the cause of constructive criticism or knowledge-generating debates.

A narrative is being spread that we worked to support Sheikh Hasina’s rule. Here is what The Daily Star and its editor-publisher suffered during the last 15 years.

This paper’s editor voluntarily stated on a TV programme in 2016 that

during the 1/11 changeover in 2007, this paper had published a few stories supplied by DGEI without independently verifying them. We published 11, while almost all other newspapers published far more, one even went up to 29.

The comments, made in good faith, were weaponised to malign the newspaper and its editor-publisher. Within minutes of transmission of this programme, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, the former prime minister’s son, gave a Facebook status – much like what is being done now – saying, “The publication of false news reports by Mahfuz Anam, the editor of The Daily Star, led to the arrest of

SALUTING THE
BRAVEHEARTS

36

days of
JULY

my mother, and she had to spend 11 months in jail. I want justice, I want to see Mahfuz Anam arrested and tried for sedition.”

This started the legal harassment and triggered greater oppression by Sheikh Hasina’s government. Sixteen cases of sedition were filed against the editor, each of which carried sentences up to life term or death. Sixty-eight cases of defamation with damage claim of more than taka several thousand crores were also filed. The role played by some TV channels and the talk shows they hosted were more like a tribute to Goebbels of Nazi Germany than any exercise in fair journalism.

A ban was imposed on advertisements from 50 major international and national advertisers, causing a 40 percent drop in revenue. Others followed suit without being told, lest they be perceived as helping the paper Sheikh Hasina despised. We were saved by small advertisers who called us to say, “I know my business will not increase by placing ads in your paper but I am doing it so that The Daily Star survives, because the country needs an independent newspaper”.

A ban was also imposed on us covering the former PM’s events and press conferences. The PMO and AL offices were off limits to us.

The editor was maligned directly by the former PM herself on several occasions on the floor of parliament, at AL functions and press conferences as an “enemy of Awami League, of Bangladesh, of democracy”.

Along with Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus, the current chief adviser, the editor was falsely accused many times by the ex-PM of lobbying with US State Department and the World Bank president to suspend World Bank’s loan to construct the Padma Bridge. During and after the inauguration of the bridge, Sheikh Hasina revived her old accusations and demonised, all over again, the paper and its editor.

In 2016, many Awami League ministers and leaders publicly “walked out” of The Daily Star’s 25th anniversary programme, because Prof Yunus was present there as the chief guest. They accused this paper and its editor of trying to “resurrect” an “enemy of Bangladesh”, and also trying to “launch” the Nobel laureate into the public sphere again.

The vilification continued till the last day of the past regime because we never surrendered our watchdog role and strove to hold power to account. Here we must point out that journalism in a free environment and “under fascism” are fundamentally different and must be judged differently. Living under constant fear of being picked up, threatened, accused, legally harassed, jailed or forcibly disappeared imposed a sort of self-censorship on us that journalists in a free environment cannot even imagine, inadvertently softening coverage. We did not succumb to all that but had to navigate extremely carefully which created its own burden.

In spite of the legal, physical and financial “punishment”, here is what The Daily Star stood for during 15 years of Sheikh Hasina’s rule.

We always supported democracy and free and fair election. We strongly opposed the abolition of the caretaker government system and wrote editorials and post-editorials criticising the move. On 2nd July 2011, after the abolition of the caretaker government system, we wrote – may be the only paper doing so – an editorial titled “It’s a mistake”. We opposed the 15th amendment and various provisions incorporated in it. When BNP decided to boycott the 2014 election, we urged the government to postpone the polls to allow more dialogue to have BNP and Jamaat participate.

We strongly criticised the election of

2014, editorially stating that it was “All for an empty victory” and that an election that produces 153 uncontested MPs of a house of 300 members cannot but be a sham. We again criticised the ruling party for the absence of a level playing field in 2018. The 2024 election was totally one-sided and not one that can be accepted as an expression of public will. We questioned the role of the Election Commission in all three elections. We never gave any element of credibility to these controversial and clearly questionable elections.

We always condemned custodial deaths, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and all forms of torture. Our editorials and post-editorials always opposed such actions. We demanded judicial inquiries and criticised the impunity enjoyed by Rab and “encounter deaths” that were associated with its activities.

The Daily Star relentlessly wrote against all repressive laws. When the Digital Security Act was passed, our editorials condemned it outright. Every time a journalist or a citizen was arrested, we never failed to protest. This newspaper took active part in organising the protests by the Sampadak Parishad and conducted constant campaigns for press freedom.

Throughout the 15 years of Sheikh Hasina’s repressive rule, The Daily Star was a target of misinformation, false accusations, intimidation, and partisan talks shows that tried to mislead the public with false narratives.

We suffered all the above because we never compromised on ethical and objective journalism. We held power to account and played our watchdog role despite intimidation.

After 15 years of defamation, harassment and intimidation, The Daily Star is being harassed again. This time we are being tagged as enablers of Hasina government, a claim that does not have even an iota of substance. We are confident that this false narrative, like the past ones, shall also be demolished by truth, and this paper will remain trusted and respected by readers and patrons.

We plan to work with students, people and political parties who are committed to press freedom, freedom of expression and a discrimination-free society. This is the Sonar Bangla that was the dream of all the martyrs of our Liberation War and the 2024 uprising. As we “Salute the Bravehearts”, we want to pledge The Daily Star’s unwavering support for democracy, greater freedoms, social justice, social harmony, rights and justice for all communities and making it a country based on rule of law rather than that of a person or a family.

