

We were complicit by our silence

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them. Where was our sense of duty then? We betrayed our role as the voice of the people.”

He argued that extremism was not confined to political or religious factions – it had infiltrated the intellectual elite class as well.

“Some of us, the so-called liberals, became silent collaborators of the regime’s agenda. We were complicit by our silence, by choosing not to speak out.”

This idea of complicity through silence was echoed by Afsana Begum, director of Jatiya Grantha Kendra. “Writers are the mirrors of society. We owe it to our future generations to write the truth, to record what is happening in real time, and to create a platform for debate, discussion, and understanding.”

For her, the role of writers is clear: they are the voice of their people, and that voice must never be stifled – neither by external forces nor by



Writers and poets attend a discussion titled “Abhuththan Poroborti Lekhoker Daay”, a part of the “36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts” exhibition and storytelling week at The Daily Star Centre in the capital yesterday. PHOTO: STAR

internal self-censorship.

“We must not censor ourselves,” Begum insisted, “Especially in times of crisis. If our writing doesn’t

provoke, challenge, and spur debate, then we have failed in our duty as writers.”

Lyricist Shahidullah Farazee

paid tribute to the martyrs of the July Uprising, noting the courage shown by even the youngest of protesters.

Clock ticking for 26,000 migrants

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While e-passport delivery has been smooth due to a digital process, approximately 26,096 MRP applications remain stuck due to a shortage of MRP booklets, leaving applicants like Khorshed in a precarious situation.

Amid the worsening crisis, the Department of Immigration and Passports (DIP) on October 28 requested the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur to charge additional fees to MRP applicants to provide e-passports instead, citing a critical shortage of MRP booklets.

IRREGULARITIES

On September 22 last year, the high commission signed a deal with outsourcing company Expert Service Kuala Lumpur (ESKL) for e-passport processing and visa services, upon approval from the home and foreign ministry.

Mia Mohammad Keyamuddin, councillor (passport and visa) at the high commission, signed the deal with ESKL with a service charge of 32 ringgits for each application.

Although ESKL has government permission to provide both MRP and e-passport services, the high commission’s passport wing signed the deal for e-passport and visa processing so that the wing can handle MRP processing.

Pranab Kuman Bhattacharjee, councillor (political) at the high commission, sent a show-cause notice to Manzil Hossain, an office assistant at the passport wing, on September 26 over his involvement in irregularities.

The notice asked Manzil to explain an audio conversation in which he was heard saying, “Many people are involved with embassy and passport work in Malaysia. Their earning fully depends on this work, as they have no other means of income.”

At one point in the conversation, the notice read, Manzil was heard saying, “If the high commissioner gives any order, I have access to make a counter to the high commissioner. He knows everything about my connections with up to three ministers ... Bahauddin Nasim, Asaduzzaman Kamal They are like family, relatives.”

Pranab sent another show-cause notice to the passport wing’s councillor Keyamuddin on October 23.

An internal task force had found irregularities in MRP applications, including unsigned applications and identical signatures across multiple

applications.

The notice asked why Keyamuddin approved such applications by violating the rules.

This newspaper obtained copies of the notices.

A senior official at the high commission, who wished not to be named, told The Daily Star: “We have received replies to the notices. We are now analysing their claims. If the allegations are found to be true, administrative action will be taken.”

Keyamuddin did not take phone calls or reply to messages for comments.

Bangladesh High Commissioner to Malaysia Shameem Ahsan did not answer queries from The Daily Star about pending MRP applications, steps to address the issue, and allegations of mismanagement and irregularities against officials.

RUNNING OUT OF TIME

In Malaysia, expatriates unable to renew their visas due to passport delays or financial constraints can obtain up to eight special monthly passes at 200 ringgits each.

They must either return home or face the risk of staying without valid documents if the visa is not renewed in this period.

Uzzal Hossain, a Bangladeshi expatriate in Malaysia, submitted his passport renewal application on May 15, with a promised delivery date of October 25. By November, he had yet to receive it.

“I’ve already taken six special passes against my visa. If I can’t renew my visa within two months, my life will be stuck,” Uzzal said over the phone.

Amid the crisis, High Commissioner Shameem sent a letter to the senior secretary of the home ministry on November 18, highlighting documentation issues faced by expatriates applying for e-passports.

To prevent mass job losses in the country, he recommended allowing an alternative process for issuing MRPs to those with information mismatches, and spelling issues of names in their national identity cards or other documents.

The letter also noted that the high commission and ESKL were charging additional fees to renew and upgrade MRPs to e-passports of those who have necessary documents as per the directives.

He said the problems need to be solved quickly since the issue is creating grievances among expatriates. Otherwise, the situation may spiral out of control and will

pose “security risk” to the high commission and ESKL officials, reads the letter, of which a copy this newspaper obtained.

CONTACT TERMINATED

High commission sources said ESKL has been providing day-long services with 45 desks to around 800 people daily, while the high commission does not have such facilities or manpower.

Now the high commission is looking for an alternative since the contract with ESKL has been terminated.

Contacted, High Commissioner Shameem shared the termination document, stating, “I have nothing to add except this (document).”

The document, issued on December 3, revealed that the agreement, signed on September 22, 2023, would be terminated after three months’ notice, effective March 2, 2025.

ESKL Managing Director Gias Ahamad said the six-year agreement included a probationary clause for the first year and was extendable to another five years based on performance.

He claimed there was no mismanagement on their side. “But our contract was terminated without any justification.”

“Middlemen, who used to embezzle 300-500 ringgits from expats for passport renewal, opposed our operation from the beginning.”

None from the high commission, however, agreed to talk about the issues on record.

A high official at the high commission requesting anonymity told this newspaper that they were working, and hopeful to find out a solution soon.

Shah Mohammad Tanvir Monsur, director general of the foreign ministry’s consular and welfare wing, refused to talk about the issue. “The high commission in Kuala Lumpur will take necessary steps in this regard,” he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The Daily Star contacted Md Firoz Sarker, additional secretary (security and immigration wing) at the Security Services Division of the home ministry who was recently transferred as Khulna divisional commissioner, for comments regarding the MRP crisis and delivery delays.

“We have some problems regarding our LC (Letter of Credit) to import foil papers for MRP,” he said.

“We have already addressed the problems and the crisis will be solved at the earliest possible time.”

‘We may see an elected govt next year’

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when Bangladesh might achieve a developed country status.

The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) organised a four-day annual conference at Lakeshore Hotel in Gulshan. The conference’s theme is “equality, opportunity, freedom, and dignity: restructuring institutions for equitable and sustainable development”.

“We are still not thinking about the low-income trap. We have not yet considered how we would achieve the position that the Philippines and Thailand have achieved, let alone Malaysia,” the adviser said.

He recalled Vietnam’s per capita income in the 1990s, claiming it was like that of Bangladesh at the time.

The adviser added that Vietnam’s per capita income is now 40 to 50 times more than Bangladesh. The country is now availing \$20 billion in foreign direct investment every year, while Bangladesh gets \$1-2 billion.

“While their entire economy is export-oriented, we only have one or two sectors like that,” said Prof Mahmud.

“Currently, they have 30 to 40 free trade agreements (FTA), including with the European Union,” he said.

Recently, Vietnam has signed a strategic partnership with the US on particular technology transfer. They also trade with The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries.

“Our economy has to be more competitive as a prerequisite condition for that.

“If you don’t become competitive, you can ask for a one-sided concession rather than any bilateral or multilateral move where there is an issue of give and take,” he said.

Prof Mahmud also expressed concern about the quality of human capital as it would be difficult to move on creative destruction. “Our industries must be more competitive for the economic development of the

country.”

“Competitive does not mean only cheap labour and poor technology. Technological innovation and human resource development are needed where education will play a role.”

He explained that in East Asia, 30 percent students pursue higher education, while about 70 percent go for vocational education.

“In our country, only 20 percent students pursue vocational education. Around 80 percent posts of teachers are vacant.”

On the other hand, the country is building infrastructure for universities in every district for general education, the adviser said.

“From this perspective, how will we go for the creative destruction? It is not possible for us [interim government]. I have enough doubt whether any political government can do it.”

BIDS Director General Binayak Sen delivered the opening remarks during the inaugural session.

Diplomats pay tribute to July bravehearts

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photographs, along with testimonies of its journalists who put their lives on the line to bring stories of indomitable courage to their readers.

Launched on November 30, “36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts”, an exhibition of news reports and photographs, is dedicated to the martyrs and those injured during the mass uprising in July and August. The exhibition will continue till December 14.

At the special invitation of the daily, the distinguished guests started arriving at The Daily Star Centre at around 3:00pm to join the special viewing programme.

The programme commenced with the documentary film “Droher July: Shongbade, Shongrame (July of Rebellion: In News, In Battle)”.

After the inauguration, the visitors explored the exhibition, moving through the photographs and news coverage on the ground floor and first floor of the building and appreciated the newspaper’s coverage during the movement.

The exhibition highlights The Daily Star’s coverage of this historic uprising, including editorials and commentaries, along with articles and features.

A dedicated corner was set up for guests to reflect on, and the diplomats shared their thoughts regarding the exhibition and the uprising in the visitors’ book.

After visiting the exhibition, Michael Miller, ambassador and head of delegation of the European Union, in his reaction told this newspaper that he was grateful to The Daily Star leadership for the invitation. He commended the photographs at the exhibition as “striking, tragic and impressive”. “The European Union is here to identify how it can support the interim government at this moment of political transition in your country,” he added.

In the visitors’ book, he wrote, “Extremely impressive! No one can leave without a deep sense of tragedy mixed with hope and more.”

Palestinian Ambassador Yousef SY Ramadan also thanked The Daily Star and said the newspaper has always contributed to everything positive for the people of Bangladesh – something he has witnessed for the last 10 years.

State sponsored dis-equalising factors

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“If one adds up all the recapitalisation... and also adds up the implications of written-off loans, this will give one an idea of how resources were transferred and who were the beneficiaries.

“Similarly, if you deconstruct your budget and you take into account both subsidies, tax forgiveness, and various tax concessions... you will find a significant transfer of resources.”

The problems can be solved if the government intervenes and redistributes resources to the deprived, he said at the event at a hotel in Gulshan.

Regarding the spread of inequality, Prof Sobhan said there were high profits in politics and getting elected as an MP.

As a result, 70 to 75 percent of the MPs were businessmen. The elected representatives ran businesses using their political power, he said.

As crony capitalism became embedded in the political system, the political elites became “Zamindars”

“Children, students died to protect our freedom. How could we, as writers, stand by and not write for them? How could we be silent when they gave their lives for a cause we should have been leading?”

“It’s better to die in the front lines than live with the shame of having done nothing.”

Farazee’s call for a clear framework of action was mirrored by others at the discussion, including Sayeed Ferdous, vice chancellor of Bangladesh Open University.

While acknowledging the atrocities of the past, Ferdous urged a focus on the future, advocating for a rigorous self-examination among intellectuals. “It’s easy to write against visible enemies, but what about the hypocrisy within ourselves? We’ve become so fearful, so compromised by our own greed and cowardice, that we lost our voices. We need to confront this internal duality -- the part of us

that conforms to power rather than speaking truth to it.”

Litterateur Ahmad Mostafa Kamal reflected on the power of the people during the aftermath of the regime’s fall.

In the days following the Sheikh Hasina government’s ouster, the country was left without formal law and order over than three days.

Kamal pointed out, “There was no chaos. The people protected each other. This shows that we, as citizens, are capable of safeguarding our nation. We must never allow fascism to take root here again.”

Educationist Wakil Ahmed, who presided over the event, concluded the discussion by stressing the importance of writers in the mass uprising. “The success of this revolution lies in the narrative we write for the future.”

The discussion was conducted by Emran Mahfuz, sub-editor of The Daily Star Bangla.

[Bangladeshi] people.”

Fasih Ullah Khan, press counsellor of the Pakistan High Commission, wrote, “Very impressive. Saw some rare pictures.”

Debapriya Bhattacharya, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, also visited the exhibition yesterday.

Such “extraordinary” exhibitions need to be held around the country so that all the people can have a glimpse of the history in this momentous occasion.

“I think it brings back history into life, and it’s a testimony of the bravery of this country,” he said.

The sacrifices young people have made to bring back democracy and open up a new way to the progress of the country have to be carried forward.

“But what is more important that the promise made through the sacrifices has to be kept alive. We will have to bring back all those memories in order to inspire our generation in building our future Bangladesh,” Bhattacharya said.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said the newspaper organised the exhibition as part of the efforts to remember and pay tribute to the fearless souls who sacrificed their lives during the “36 days of July”.

Among the guests were French Ambassador Marie Masdupuy; Spanish Ambassador Gabriel Maria Sistiaga Ochoa de Chinchetru; UAE Ambassador Abdullah Ali Al Hamoudi; Libyan Ambassador Mahmud MM Sallabi; Swedish Ambassador Nicolas Weeks; Danish Ambassador Christian Brix Møller; Dutch Ambassador Andre Carstens; Nepalese Ambassador Ghanshyam Bhandari; Italian Ambassador Antonio Alessandro; acting high commissioner of Australia Nardia Simpson; and Moroccan Embassy’s Deputy Head of Mission Majid Halem.

Besides Alberto Giovanetti, head of economic, political and communication affairs at the Swiss Embassy; Towheed Feroze, EU Embassy media and information adviser; Gokul VK, first secretary of the Indian High Commission; and Mohamed El Emam, country manager of Qatar Airways, also attended the event.

white paper, they were termed crony capitalists and oligarchs.

The economy has transformed from agricultural to manufacturing, while the apparel sector played a significant role. During the transformation, many sectors that were protected by the government are now competitive.

In the meantime, the country did remarkably well in poverty reduction.

Prof Sobhan said some of the problems embedded in the social and political system are the politicisation of administration, erosion of judicial independence, and weaponization of law enforcement.

He proposed that small producers associated with the agro-processing sector be given opportunities to be shareholders of the agro-processing enterprises.

He also recommended associating garment factory workers with opportunities of equity participation so that they become stakeholders and share the value addition process even without nationalisation.