

The Daily Star

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Fast-track services at Dhaka ward offices

Delays in providing birth and other certificates unacceptable

We are worried that the process of obtaining necessary documents from the offices of Dhaka city corporations and wards hasn't improved much despite the administrative restructuring following the political changeover in August. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, residents seeking certificates, registrations, or attestations continue to face delays and disruptions. With December already underway, this is particularly problematic for parents seeking school admission for their children, for which birth certificate is mandatory. Add to that the cumbersome process of birth registration—requiring the submission of parents' birth certificates and NID numbers which, in many cases, are either non-existent or fraught with discrepancies, adding another layer to their distress.

The ward councillor offices usually provide 14 types of services, including certifications and attestations, mosquito control, distribution of TCB products, etc. However, since the blanket removal of ward councillors on September 26, these services have been provided by regional executive officers. The problem is, Dhaka city has 129 wards, divided into 20 regions, which means each officer often has to oversee multiple wards simultaneously, stretching their capacity. For example, the workload of the 75 former ward councillors of Dhaka South City Corporation is now being handled by only 10 officers. Additionally, the lack of clear schedule about their time or place of duty, relocation of some ward offices without proper public notification, officers' lack of familiarity with local residents, and high demand for services are also complicating operations. Moreover, due to the vandalism caused during July-August protests, many ward offices lack necessary equipment, further disrupting their operations.

All these problems have combined to cause confusion and inconvenience for residents, who are having to wait for multiple days or even weeks for basic certificates and attestations that should be available within hours. The ward councillor offices under the two city corporations of Dhaka had never been known for their efficient delivery of services when there was a political government. There were many problems, while corruption allegations abounded. But to see some of these problems persist even now is disheartening, given people's expectations from the interim government. Dhaka residents deserve better and faster services.

Therefore, we urge the authorities to take necessary measures to equip all ward offices properly to meet growing demand. First, problems and inadequacies facing the "ward secretaries" and their offices must be addressed urgently. Moreover, it is essential to restore and upgrade the equipment in ward offices to enable efficient service delivery. The verification process for services like birth and death certificates should also be streamlined so that dependency on manual checks can be reduced. Finally, the city authorities must actively engage with residents to address their grievances promptly.

Take strict action to improve Dhaka's air

Govt must introduce alerts for citizens, punish air polluters

Dhaka's air quality has consistently ranked among the worst in the world for several years. While it remains unhealthy during the dry season, it improves slightly during the monsoon. However, with the onset of winter, the city's air quality has reached "unhealthy," "very unhealthy," and even "hazardous" levels on some days, according to AQAir. On Wednesday, for instance, the concentration of particulate matter or PM2.5—the primary component of air pollution—was 34 percent higher than the World Health Organization's standard, with the city being ranked second worst globally with an AQI of 249. Previously, on December 5 and 9, its air quality was classified as "hazardous," with the AQI exceeding 300.

If pollution remains at "hazardous" levels for at least three hours over three consecutive days, a health emergency is supposed to be declared. However, in Dhaka, we have never seen the authorities declare such an alert. While residents suffered from the extremely polluted air, the authorities were either inactive or misappropriated funds intended for air pollution control projects. This time, however, the environment ministry has urged people to wear masks outdoors and recommended that "sensitive individuals" avoid going outside unless absolutely necessary. But we must ask, is this enough?

For years, reports have repeatedly highlighted the health risks of polluted air, but little has been done. According to a World Bank report, air pollution accounts for about 20 percent of premature deaths in Bangladesh. Another study found that poor air quality is contributing to rising rates of premature births and low birth weight in babies born in Dhaka. Yet another study revealed that the average life expectancy in Bangladesh is being shortened by 6.8 years due to continuous exposure to polluted air. Air pollution has now become the leading cause of death in Bangladesh, surpassing deaths caused by high blood pressure, poor diet, and tobacco use, according to a global study.

While past governments failed to act, we hope the interim government will not make the same mistake. In addition to implementing a regular alert system for the public, as directed by the High Court in February, the government must take decisive action to tackle the known sources of pollution. It is crucial that they urgently enforce environmental guidelines for construction firms and brick kilns and also remove all outdated vehicles from our roads. The time to act is now.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

The Paris Agreement reached

On this day in 2015, a landmark climate change agreement was reached at a UN conference in Paris as 195 countries agreed to limit greenhouse gas emissions; the accord effectively replaced the Kyoto Protocol.



The media's role in Bangladesh 2.0



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The July-August 2024 uprising marked a historic turning point for Bangladesh. It was more than just a series of protests—it was a collective demand for a future built on accountability and transparency. Across cities and towns, the youth spearheaded this call for change. Their courage and determination resonated with millions, inspiring a vision of "Bangladesh 2.0," a new era that prioritises good governance, public interest, and systemic reform. A key expectation of this transformation was for the media to step up as a pillar of democracy.

Yet, as the movement's fervour begins to fade, troubling patterns suggest that the media's longstanding flaws remain largely unaddressed. While faces in positions of power have changed, the structures and practices that define Bangladesh's media landscape have shown remarkable resistance to change. For decades, the country's media has functioned less as a watchdog for democracy and more as a guard dog, protecting the interests of its owners rather than serving the people.

In Bangladesh, businessmen-politicians have dominated media ownership for years, turning some television channels and newspapers into tools of influence. These media houses, rather than pursuing independent journalism, have been used to shield their owners from tax scrutiny, evade customs regulations, and manoeuvre through bureaucratic hurdles. This entrenched dynamic has eroded the boundary between journalism and propaganda, leading to a loss of public trust in the media.

During the uprising, these media dynamics were laid bare for all to see. As students and citizens demanded justice on the streets, risking their lives, much of the media shied away from supporting them. Instead, some editors aligned themselves with the toppled regime, exposing where their true loyalties lay. Even when the regime fell, these outlets hesitated to question authority or challenge the narratives propagated by those in power. This reluctance underscores how deeply entrenched self-censorship and fear have become in Bangladesh's media ecosystem.

With the fall of the regime came a fleeting hope that the media would

embrace its role as a cornerstone of democracy. The expectation was clear: a free press that would amplify the voices of the people, hold power to account and operate without fear or favour. However, the early signs of this so-called "Bangladesh 2.0" have been disheartening.

The chief adviser, for instance, is yet to engage in an open press conference—a crucial forum for accountability and transparency. Instead, he has opted for carefully



PHOTO: ANWAR SOHEL

curated interviews with senior editors who refrained from posing hard questions, opting instead to glorify his leadership. This pattern reflects a continuation of the old norms, where deference to authority outweighs the public's right to know.

Moreover, the harassment of journalists and media workers affiliated with the previous regime is a stark reminder of how vulnerable the press remains. Many reporters and television workers have been arrested and accused of crimes ranging from murder to corruption. While it is undeniable that some individuals supported the fallen regime in unethical ways, the arbitrary nature of these arrests raises serious concerns.

The filing of dubious cases against journalists undermines the rule of law and fosters a culture of fear. Justice cannot be served through vengeance. Even those who were complicit in the regime's wrongdoing deserve due process, not hasty, politically

motivated accusations. When the legal system is weaponised to settle scores, it erodes trust in institutions and perpetuates a cycle of lawlessness.

Journalists already operate under immense pressure, facing job insecurity, political harassment, and limited protections. The abrupt criminalisation of media workers not only stifles dissent but also sends a chilling message to others in the profession: stay silent or risk retaliation. For a country striving to rebuild its democracy, this culture of fear is antithetical to progress. If "Bangladesh 2.0" is to succeed, justice must be pursued with fairness, transparency, and accountability—not as a tool for silencing dissent.

Beyond the immediate challenges of political interference and legal harassment, Bangladesh's media faces deeper structural problems. Most media organisations operate on

a journalist. This lack of professional accreditation and training has further eroded public trust in the media.

Reforming Bangladesh's media sector requires a multi-pronged approach. First and foremost, journalists and editors must reclaim their commitment to truth and public service. This will demand extraordinary courage, particularly in a political environment where questioning authority often invites retaliation.

However, courage alone is not enough. Structural reforms are essential to support fearless journalism. Media organisations must explore sustainable business models, such as subscription-based services or reader-funded journalism, to reduce their reliance on politically motivated advertisers. Policymakers, meanwhile, must enact legal protections for journalists, ensuring that they can report without fear of harassment or job loss.

An independent regulatory body for journalism is also imperative. Such an institution could establish accreditation standards, offer professional development programmes, and enforce ethical guidelines. By holding media practitioners accountable for their conduct, it could help restore public confidence in the press.

Despite the challenges, there are reasons for cautious optimism. The repeal of the Digital Security Act, a law that stifled free speech, is a step in the right direction. However, repealing harmful legislation is only the beginning. The true test lies in fostering a culture that values press freedom.

The media's role in this new era cannot be overstated. It must serve as a pillar of democracy, a guardian of the public interest, and a watchdog that holds power to account. This transformation will not happen overnight. It will require a collective commitment from journalists, media owners, policymakers, and civil society. This uprising envisioned a media landscape that amplifies the voices of the people, challenges authority and resists the pull of partisan agendas. Achieving this vision will demand courage, integrity, and systemic reform.

Change is never easy, and progress is rarely linear. But if the movement taught us anything, it's that the people of Bangladesh are ready to demand better. It is now up to the media to meet this moment, proving itself as a force for truth and accountability in this new chapter of the nation's history. The journey to "Bangladesh 2.0" has only just begun, and the media has a vital role to play in shaping its future.

Choking on Dhaka's signature smog



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If you've been in Dhaka lately, congratulations—you're essentially chain-smoking without lifting a single cigarette to your lips. Yes, folks, our city's air quality has reached such hazardous levels that stepping outside is now equivalent to puffing on 22 cigarettes a day. This makes Dhaka the only place where non-smokers can get lung cancer while saving on lighter fluid, fighting the cost of living one Sunlite lighter at a time.

In light of these alarming developments, the environment ministry has swooped in with groundbreaking advice: "Wear masks" and "stay indoors unless absolutely necessary." A heartfelt thanks for that nugget of wisdom, but isn't this like putting a Band-Aid on a bullet wound? I mean, we're not exactly breathing air anymore; it's more of a gritty, sandpaper-like cocktail with top notes of carbon monoxide and nitrogen dioxide. The kind of drink even a drunk factory chimney would reject. But maybe staying indoors might aid the deadly traffic congestion if not our nasal congestion?

To point out the obvious irony of the situation here. Just a few years ago, masks were an accessory forced on us by a pandemic. We hated them. Now, thanks to our government's stellar environmental policies (read: none), masks are back, this time to save us from turning our lungs into charcoal

briquettes. I wonder what's next? Oxygen tanks as the new trend-bags? "Winter 2024 must-have: portable air purifiers. Available in matte black and Gulshan gold."

Moreover, the ministry's suggestion to "sensitive individuals" during these escalated circumstances is to avoid going out altogether! Define sensitive. Do they mean people with asthma, young children, or anyone who likes their lungs functioning? Or does it include those of us who can't handle

their boss's micro-management but still must trudge to work through this invisible soup of death?

One would think Dhaka's air would clear up after the rains. Nope. We're so committed to pollution that not even nature can wash away our sins. Construction dust, unregulated factories, and traffic fumes combine



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

to create an air quality cocktail that would knock out a power plant. Forget smoking zones; we need breathing zones—designated areas where you can inhale without fear of developing emphysema by lunchtime.

But what truly baffles me is how casually we're all taking this. In any other part of the world, an Air Quality Index of 392 would spark mass panic. Here? It's just another Wednesday. People are jogging in parks, aunties are haggling over vegetables, and

politicians are busy pointing fingers instead of planting trees. It's like living in a dystopian film where the characters are blissfully unaware that the apocalypse is well underway.

Meanwhile, those trying to quit smoking might as well give up their nicotine patches. Why go cold turkey when you can get your daily fix just by breathing? Dhaka's air isn't unhealthy—it's efficient. One deep inhale, and you've got a pack of Marlboro Reds in your system without the pesky expense.

Of course, there's always someone trying to see the silver lining—or in this case, the grey smog. "But it's winter! The weather is so wonderful!" Yes, wonderful enough for the haze to settle like a toxic blanket, smothering every attempt at optimism. Try sipping tea on your balcony while pretending you're in a Jane Austen novel when your chest feels like it's auditioning for a respiratory clinic's version of Lux Superstar.

And let's not forget the *global index shame*. Dhaka consistently ranks among the most polluted cities in the world. We're number one, but not for anything we want to brag about. This isn't the Cricket World Cup, folks—it's a health crisis. Yet, here we are, at least some Dhakaites, more concerned about how to navigate the tri-state (Gulshan-Baridhara-Banani) traffic crisis than how to navigate the air that's trying to kill us.

What's the solution, you ask? Oh, it's simple—move to Mars, because fixing this mess would require actual commitment to reducing emissions, regulating construction, planting trees, and, you know, caring about the people breathing in this city. Radical ideas, I know. Until then, invest in good masks, or get a lifetime air purifier subscription for clean lungs—if such a thing even exists.