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CYBER PROTECTION ORDINANCE Draft fails to shake off ghosts of the past

ZYMA ISLAM and MAHMUDUL HASAN

The newly approved draft Cyber Protection Ordinance retains many of the clauses of its predecessors that drew flak from across the world for stifling freedom of expression.

The ordinance, approved by the interim government's advisory council on December 24, replaces the Cyber Security Act (CSA), and its more draconian precursor, the Digital Security Act (DSA).

The DSA had gained notoriety for having been used as a tool by the Awami League government to muzzle dissent and journalists by arresting and incarcerating them.

The DSA's watered-down version, the CSA, kept clauses that criminalised free speech and just removed stringent and non-bailable jail terms.

Much like its antecedents, the newly drafted ordinance limits free speech online and disregards the right to freedom of expression as a universal right.

The draft penalises "hurting religious sentiment" with a jail term of two years and a fine of Tk 10 lakh. Both CSA and DSA had this provision.

The Daily Star obtained data from Centre for Governance Studies' DSA Tracker and found that 44 percent of the cases filed under the DSA for "hurting religious sentiment" were against the religious minorities, particularly the Hindus.

Last year, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression Irene Khan wrote to the then Awami League government, criticising this clause.

"International human rights law protects individuals from intolerance, violence and discriminations based on their religion or



PHOTO: STAR/FIRE SERVICE

Smoke billows out of a building of the Secretariat as firefighters battle the fires that broke out early yesterday. Security personnel stand guard outside. Inset, firefighters inside the building.



FIRE AT SECRETARIAT

Documents of 5 ministries, divisions burned

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Documents of at least five ministries and divisions have been burned as fires ravaged part of Building-7 of the Secretariat for almost 10 hours.

The fires were seen around 1:52am in two parts of the nine-storey building within the highly secured Secretariat complex.

Around 2:15am, a firefighter setting up hose pipes was run over and killed by a truck on Abdul Gani Road, which had not been closed to traffic then.

As officials are trying to determine the cause of fires, many have expressed suspicion that it was an act of sabotage.

In the morning, Adviser Asif Mahmud wrote on Facebook, "We were working on uncovering the embezzlement and corruption that happened in the past at the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Cooperatives. Evidence of a misappropriation of several thousand crore taka had been found. The extent of damage caused by the fire is not

known. Those involved in this conspiracy to undermine our efforts will not be spared."

Asif told reporters in the evening that documents of those financial irregularities had been burned, adding that those records could still be found at the administration offices in the districts.

Documents at the ministries of local government, labour, and sports and the divisions of telecommunications and highways were fully or partially damaged, he said at the Foreign Service Academy.

THE FIRES

Seven firefighters from the Secretariat Fire Station were the first responders.

"We reached the spot after being informed... and found the scissor gate of the building locked. We cut the padlock and rushed to the fifth floor where the fire was burning. There, we saw another locked scissor gate. We cut that padlock too and saw the fires burning at three places.

"We started spraying water on the west side of the building as that fire was larger. Later, other

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The risk of such clauses being misused or abused remains. It is very important for the political settlement to be such that the implementation of the law happens based on civility and human rights.

FAIZ AHMAD TAIYEB

policy adviser of the Information Communication Technology Division

belief, but it does not allow restriction of criticism of religious belief or sentiment," she wrote.

A clause criminalising defamation, which was heavily used for incarcerating journalists and politicians, has been removed in the draft and replaced with a "cyber-bullying" clause.

The section states that it is a criminal offence to use any website or any electronic medium to insult, harass, blackmail or humiliate a person. The offence carries jail terms of up to two years and a fine of Tk 10 lakh. Use of slurs and offensive words is deemed a violation under this section.

It states that the content that defames someone or causes mental trauma would be under the purview of this law.

The data from Centre for Governance Studies shows that of the over 5,000 accused under the DSA, nearly half were prosecuted for social media posts deemed critical of the government, officeholders, or elected representatives.

One in three accused under the DSA and one in four sued under the CSA were journalists, the data shows.

Saimum Reza Talukder, a prosecutor at the International Crimes Tribunal who specialises in digital rights and cyber laws, said, "The vague wording of 'cyberbullying' and the broad scope of the definition might also be abused in future, because the notion of defamation is also there. Therefore, this needs to be elaborated.

"... Journalistic freedom might be hampered or affected in this draft."

He added, "I understand the importance of curbing hate speech or

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Firefighter Nayan, a family's only hope, gone too soon

KONGKON KARMAKER

Sohanur Zaman Nayan's father, Akhtaruzzaman, a 60-year-old farmer from Chhoran Atkunia village in Rangpur's Mithapukur upazila, had pinned all his dreams on his only son.

Nayan's job as a firefighter brought a world of expectations for his family, who have long been suffering from poverty and the trauma of losing their home to river erosion.

Just as Nayan's career had begun bringing a sense of security to his family, tragedy struck. The 24-year-old was killed after a truck hit him when he and his colleagues were working to douse the fire at the Secretariat early yesterday.

Nayan has one elder sister, who is married off. Despite their limited means, his parents, Akhtaruzzaman and Nargis Akter, 53, ensured he completed higher secondary education.

In 2022, he secured a job as a firefighter with Fire Service and Civil Defence -- a turning point for the family.

Numb with grief, Akhtaruzzaman said, "A father carrying his son's body on his shoulders is the heaviest burden in life. I had so many dreams for him, but they are all gone now. His untimely death has plunged my family back into hardship."

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Manmohan Singh no more

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Manmohan Singh, the former Indian prime minister whose economic reforms made his country a global powerhouse, has passed away in New Delhi last night.

He was 92.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi confirmed Singh's death, posting on X that India "mourns the loss of one of its most distinguished leaders".

Singh was taken to a hospital in New Delhi after he lost consciousness at his home yesterday evening, but could not be resuscitated and was pronounced dead at 9:51pm local time, according

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Farmers harvesting matured cucumbers, locally known as kheera, from a farm in Barishal Sadar's Bukhainagar area. The seeds of these cucumbers were sown in the month of Agrahayan, and it took around a month for them to be fully grown. The farmers usually sell them to local village markets at Tk 20-30 per kilogram. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

PURBACHAL PLOTS ACC to probe Hasina, family

ACC sues Nasrul, family over Tk 3,222cr shady transactions, Tk 64.23cr illegal assets

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Anti-Corruption Commission has started investigation into the allegations of abuse of power to obtain plots of land against ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina and her close family members.

Aktar Hossain, director general (prevention) of the ACC, yesterday confirmed this development to journalists at the ACC headquarters in the capital.

He said, "The ACC has decided to look into allegations of irregularities in the allocation of plots in Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakkha's Purbachal New Town project in the names of six members of Hasina's family."

According to the ACC documents, Hasina, in collaboration with Rajuk senior officials, had six plots of land allotted to herself, her son Sajeeb Wazed Joy, daughter Saima Wazed Putul, younger sister Sheikh Rehana, her son Radwan Mujib Siddiq Bobby, and her daughter Azmina Siddiq.

The six plots, each measuring 10 kathas, are in the diplomatic zone of sector-27 in the Purbachal New Town project.

This is the fourth probe by the ACC against Hasina, after her fall on August 5. For the first time, Saima, Rehana, the son Radwan, and her daughter Azmina are

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