

## Cyber ordinance a threat to freedom

### Scope for return of repressive practices must be prevented

We support the Transparency International Bangladesh's call to revise the recently approved draft of the Cyber Protection Ordinance by properly incorporating feedback from all key stakeholders. Rushing through the approval of such an important legal instrument without inclusive consultations is as problematic as some of its provisions. The TIB is the latest to join the growing chorus of experts taking aim at the ordinance that they say still retains some of the controversial provisions and terminologies of its predecessors—the Cyber Security Act (CSA) and the Digital Security Act (DSA). This calls for a renewed examination of the ordinance so that there is no scope for past transgressions to be repeated.

The TIB, which earlier criticised the short three-day window for public review before the draft's approval, has detailed its objections at a recent event. It pointed out that the ordinance largely preserves the regulatory and surveillance mechanisms of the CSA and DSA, posing potential threats to freedom of expression, media independence, and citizens' rights to dissent and organise. Among the contentious provisions is one that criminalises content that are “insulting”, “harassing”, and “defamatory”, which it says could be weaponised to stifle legitimate criticism. Another provision criminalises “hurting” religious values and sentiments without defining these terms or incorporating safeguards for equality, non-communalism, and non-discrimination. Additionally, the ordinance grants “broad and unchecked powers” to a government figurehead to block online content.

These are all serious objections that need to be thoroughly checked. Over the last few days, several experts, including two columnists of this daily, have highlighted similar issues. While the removal of eight controversial sections of the CSA and the withdrawal of ongoing cases under it are positive developments, one columnist provided a detailed analysis showing how the shadow of the previous oppressive laws still hangs over the draft, risking a continuation of repressive practices. For example, Section 43 of DSA (Section 42 of CSA), which empowered police to search, seize and arrest without a warrant, has reappeared as Section 35 of the ordinance. Another columnist explained how criminalising “hurting” religious sentiments—using vague and broad terms—shrinks the scope for constructive discussions and risks deepening religious divisions.

In post-uprising Bangladesh, we need cyber legislation that effectively checks authoritarian tendencies, not perpetuate them under a new guise. While protections against the abuse of free speech are expected, unnecessarily criminalising speech undermines democracy. To address these concerns as well as the many overlapping, inherently contradictory issues lumped together under this ordinance, the TIB has proposed splitting it into three separate laws addressing computer-related crimes, cybersecurity, and online safety. This could be a viable approach, but the government must first prioritise proper consultation with key stakeholders, including rights defenders and journalists, before proceeding any further.

## Union health centres need adequate staff

### Rural healthcare facilities must not be neglected

We are concerned about the state of union-level health and family welfare centres across the Habiganj district. According to a report, many of these centres are operating with just one or two staff members, far below the government-mandated minimum of 10 personnel per centre. For instance, the Health and Family Welfare Centre in Chaumuhani union of Madhabpur upazila is struggling with a significant manpower shortage, serving approximately 40,000 residents with just one family welfare inspector. Sadly, not just in Habiganj, but the shortage of medical staff is a persistent issue in rural healthcare facilities across Bangladesh.

Over the years, this daily has repeatedly highlighted the challenges facing rural health centres, including upazila health complexes and union-level facilities. These centres, which offer free medical services, are frequently undermined by shortages of doctors, nurses, technicians, and medicines. In Habiganj, the health centres play a vital role in promoting normal childbirth, an essential alternative to the rising number of C-sections at private clinics. In 2022, these centres performed 8,737 normal deliveries, increasing slightly to 8,816 in 2023. However, only 2,161 deliveries have been recorded last year, which highlights the deteriorating staffing situation. Roksana Akhter, the lone family welfare inspector at the Chaumuhani centre, points out that even having one additional staff member could significantly improve patient care, especially for women seeking childbirth services.

To address this crisis, the government's approach to the primary healthcare sector must change. It must urgently recruit adequate medical personnel for rural healthcare facilities. Equally important is ensuring that doctors posted in remote areas remain at their stations, which requires addressing the lack of basic facilities and incentives in these regions. Poor governance, which has allowed such dysfunction to persist, must also be tackled to improve service delivery for rural populations.

The challenges in rural healthcare are part of the broader malaise afflicting the health sector, which has long been plagued by corruption and irregularities. A complete overhaul of the whole sector is thus overdue. It is encouraging that the government has established a health reform commission to address various systemic issues. We hope the commission delivers a sustainable reform roadmap to bring accountability and efficiency to the health sector, ensuring that rural healthcare facilities receive the attention and resources they deserve.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Granada reclaimed by Spain

On this day in 1492, Granada, home of the Alhambra palace and the seat and final stronghold of the Moorish kingdom in Spain, was surrendered to the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand II and Isabella I, ending the Reconquest.

# What should be our strategic priorities in 2025?



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As Bangladesh steps into a new year and looks forward to confronting ongoing economic and political challenges, the need for objectively assessing the country's current economic realities cannot be overstated. The economy is experiencing several complex challenges that require a cohesive and strategic approach. Key priorities for the upcoming national budget, to be placed in June, must also be outlined while underscoring the importance of a broader reform agenda.

The source of the economic hurdles lies in the unrelenting inflationary pressure that does not seem to recede. The Bangladesh Bank has resorted to hiking interest rates on many occasions over the past two years, with little effect on containing inflation. As a result, the country has been a major failure, whereas many neighbouring countries have successfully controlled inflationary pressure. While the past regime faced allegations of either inaction or improper action in combating inflation, the present interim government has also not been able to show any success so far. The failure emanates from the lack of coordination among monetary policy, fiscal policy, and domestic market management. By now, policymakers must understand that without a synchronised approach, these measures remain fragmented and ineffective. For the interim government, containing inflation and providing solace to low-income people must be the top priority.

Exports and remittance inflows have provided some respite, with recent performances showing promise. This has led to a marginal improvement in the foreign exchange reserve position. However, the key to sustaining this momentum is addressing the macroeconomic instability, labour unrest, and tensions that have bedevilled many factories. Furthermore, private investments remained stagnant in the context of high and rising interest rates and an unfriendly business environment, with an unstable law and order situation. That has had a strangulating effect on job creation and industrial growth.

The forex market is another area of concern. While the Bangladesh Bank is signalling a shift towards a more market-driven exchange rate policy, careful timing and implementation are necessary to avoid exacerbating import costs and inflationary pressures. The transition should be well complemented with a properly communicated strategy in which businesses and consumers are duly prepared for it.

However, the absence of strong and resolute economic management from the interim government has not



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

helped much in addressing the major economic challenges. The apparent lack of coordination in major economic issues raises concerns about the mechanism for making and implementing policies. It is high time for the interim government to show seriousness in addressing the challenges through comprehensive and effective interventions.

The White Paper Committee's recent report, submitted on December 1, sheds light on systemic corruption, illicit money transfers, cronyism, and rent-seeking activities

priorities. A confrontational political climate risks diverting attention from critical issues, including the persistent inflation that continues eroding ordinary citizens' purchasing power.

With these challenges in mind, policymakers must take actions that offer immediate economic relief and facilitate broader reform measures. They include coordinated efforts to contain inflation, to cushion the effects of inflation on the most vulnerable groups through expanded social safety nets, and to address

disagreements, if not carefully managed, risk overshadowing or derailing efforts to address structural economic challenges that are essential for ensuring stability and growth.

It is, therefore, incumbent upon the interim government to stay focused on economic reforms with the same intensity as opening up dialogue and consensus-building on general institutional reforms. All these competing priorities require clear leadership, effective communication, and a commitment to incremental progress.

# The hidden cost of New Year's celebrations



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As the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve, the sky lights up with a dazzling display of colours, each firework going off to mark the passing of another year. The spectacle is undeniably mesmerising—a universal symbol of hope and celebration. But amid the cacophony of cheers, have we paused to consider who might not be so thrilled about our celebratory detonations?

Beneath the glow of fireworks, we rarely pause to consider the impact on the most vulnerable among us. For young children, the loud sounds of firecrackers cause not excitement but distress. The sharp, jarring explosions disrupt sleep, trigger fear, and leave many inconsolable. Paediatric studies have long highlighted the detrimental effects of sleep disturbances and heightened anxiety on children. Yet, during New Year's Eve celebration, this knowledge often takes a backseat, overshadowed by the pursuit of spectacle.

For the elderly, the experience is equally harrowing. Sudden, high-decibel sounds act can potentially trigger pre-existing health conditions. Those with cardiovascular issues face heightened risks of heart attacks or elevated blood pressure, while those with hearing aids may find the noise unbearably amplified. The

psychological toll cannot be ignored either. The barrage of firecrackers is more than an inconvenience; it comes off as an assault on their peace and well-being.

Animals are silent victims of our inconsiderate celebrations. Domesticated pets, accustomed to quieter environments, react with panic. Dogs hide under furniture, trembling with fear, while cats flee to secluded corners, driven by instincts to escape perceived danger. Birds, disoriented by the noise and flashing lights, abandon their roosts, sometimes unable to return. Stray animals, already burdened with a life of neglect, are left completely exposed. Their frantic attempts to flee often result in accidents or permanent displacement, a cruel side-effect of our celebrations.

Noise pollution, though less visible, is no less damaging. The World Health Organization (WHO) has long classified noise as a significant health hazard, linking prolonged exposure to stress, sleep disorders, and cardiovascular disease. Firecrackers push decibel levels far beyond safe thresholds, affecting not only humans but also the natural environment. Individuals with PTSD are especially vulnerable, as the explosions can trigger severe flashbacks—a grim irony

when the noise meant to symbolise joy becomes a source of torment.

Then there's the environmental cost. Firecrackers release toxic chemicals into the air. Cities often wake up to a blanket of smog on New Year's Day, a grim reminder of the previous night's excesses. This pollution exacerbates respiratory conditions such as asthma and bronchitis. For those already

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struggling with health issues, the added pollution is a direct threat. But hey, what is a little more smog when you are having fun, right? After all, nothing says “new beginnings” like ushering in the year with a fresh layer of particulate matter.

Defenders of this annual ritual argue that fireworks are a harmless tradition. But harmless for whom? Perhaps for those who can afford to have insulated homes to muffle the chaos outside. For everyone else—children, the elderly, animals, and the environmentally conscious—it is less harmless tradition and more universal nuisance. The notion of harmlessness is often a privilege enjoyed by those unaffected by the consequences.

This year, a writ petition sought measures to curb disruptive activities on New Year's Eve. In response, the High Court issued directives to mitigate the chaos, instructing the police to prevent gatherings on rooftops, open spaces and parks, and banning the use of firecrackers. However, as the night unfolded, it became evident that these directives struggled to translate into practice.

The persistence of such practices despite legal and moral opposition raises troubling questions about our priorities. Perhaps the issue is not the lack of laws but our unwillingness to embrace their necessity? Rules can be imposed, but without a cultural buy-in, they remain mere suggestions, easily ignored. True celebration lies not in how loudly we proclaim our joy but in how inclusively we share it. The stray dog did not ask to spend New Year's Eve trembling in fear, nor did your neighbour's cat volunteer for a panic attack every time a firecracker went off.

As a business student, I offer a satirical proposition. Why not replace fireworks with pre-recorded cheering? Or better yet, distribute noise-cancelling headphones as party favours? Silent fireworks, which offer the same visual spectacle without the auditory assault, are another innovative alternative. Imagine celebrating without terrorising every living being within a 10-kilometre radius. Fun, right?

It's high time we realised that joy need not come at the expense of others' peace. A society that prides itself on empathy and progress must find ways to celebrate without causing a living nightmare for those unable to voice their distress.