

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Bring top criminals under police radar

Proper law enforcement vital for businesses, public safety

We are worried about the continued law-and-order fallout due to the re-emergence of criminal gangs under kingpins who were, until recently, behind bars. Their involvement is partly responsible for the surge in criminal activities such as theft, mugging, robbery, extortion, and abduction. Equally alarmingly, these gangs are also engaging in public clashes to assert dominance, sometimes even in the presence of law enforcers, creating panic among citizens.

On Friday night, for instance, two computer traders were hacked with machetes by a gang of 20 in front of the Multiplan Centre in Elephant Road, Dhaka. Despite the presence of a police outpost and a traffic police box nearby, no intervention was made to rescue the victims. According to a report by this daily, the attack is supposedly linked to a power struggle between two top criminals—Sanjidul Islam alias Emon of Hazaribagh and Imamul Hasan Helal alias Picchi Helal of Mohammadpur. Both were listed as top criminals in 2001 and are among the 43 high-profile criminals who secured bail in various cases after the political changeover on August 5.

As we know, following the uprising, the law enforcement situation in the country became fluid in large part due to the absence of a fully functional police force. However, although over five months have passed since then, police still seem to be struggling to regain their footing, leaving room for criminal activities to thrive. It goes without saying that the resurgence of such crimes not only endangers public safety but also poses a threat to businesses and the economy. A report by this daily has quoted several businesspeople in the capital who allegedly received extortion demands and violent threats from the gangs of top criminals. Some have had to pay extortion fees to multiple groups. Many are not even reporting these threats out of a fear of retaliation.

The country's businesses are already grappling with the fallout of the previous regime's corruption and financial irregularities, which left behind a huge debt for us along with a fragile banking system. The additional menace of criminal gangs is only making things worse, undermining business confidence and creating an untenable environment for economic recovery amidst high inflation and unemployment.

While it may be too late now to question the decisions that granted bail to so many criminals and militants after August 5, it is not too late for the police to act decisively. They must proactively monitor these individuals, keep criminal gangs under strict surveillance, and respond swiftly to any complaints about their activities. Rebuilding confidence in law enforcement is essential for fostering a stable environment where businesses can flourish, economic challenges can be tackled and, overall, citizens can feel safe across the country.

Another case of identity fraud

Investigate Bagmara maternity allowance scam, punish perpetrators

It's alarming to learn that a fraud ring has siphoned off the maternity allowances of nearly 2,500 mothers in Bagmara, Rajshahi. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, the government, under its Mother and Child Support Programme, provides Tk 800 monthly to impoverished pregnant women and mothers of infants. However, in Bagmara, these allowances—disbursed through mobile financial services such as Nagad, Rocket, and bKash—were diverted to unauthorised accounts after the registered mobile numbers of beneficiaries were fraudulently replaced with other numbers. Some of the beneficiaries reported not receiving their allowances for months, only to discover later that their funds had been stolen.

This has naturally caused hardship for the affected mothers who depend on the allowance for essential needs such as nutritious food and infant care. We have earlier heard about beneficiary inclusion problems in this programme as well as instances of new enrolments being stalled or payments being suspended. The new development, however, points to a far serious problem, as it shows how vulnerable such support programmes for underprivileged communities can be to the increasingly ingenious identity fraud using digital platforms. In recent years, we have often come across similar reports on various government allowances being stolen, including by stealing the NID information of victims.

It is reasonable to think that such schemes cannot be pulled off without the involvement of insiders—those directly engaged in the allowance initiatives. In the Bagmara case, the victims have also blamed insider involvement, claiming that only the relevant department has the authority to modify their account information. Moreover, they said the fraud involved temporarily altering their mobile numbers before fund disbursement and reverting them afterward to avoid detection, indicating a coordinated action.

However this fraud has been committed, it is vital that the authorities get to the bottom of it and take necessary actions against those responsible. It is also imperative that they arrange for the return of stolen funds to victims, and critically review the safety protocols of all government support programmes. The goal of such programmes is to uplift the most vulnerable members of our society. Therefore, we must ensure that these are not only well-designed but also resilient against scams and irregularities.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Jasmine Revolution



On this day in 2011, Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali stepped down following mass protests against poverty, unemployment, and political repression; the uprising was known as the Jasmine Revolution.

Education deserves a reform commission



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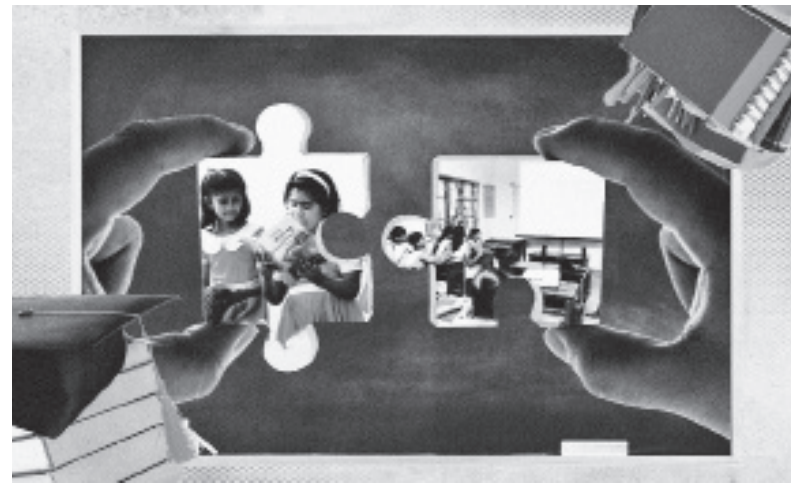
In his first address to the nation on August 25, 2024, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus stated that the misuse of the previous government had crippled the education system and had created anarchy at all levels of education. He declared that comprehensive education reform was a promise of the interim government, that the work on developing a curriculum suited to changing times would commence, and that an urgent task was to restart educational institutions in a creative, safe, and learner friendly environment.

On September 11, Prof Yunus announced the formation of six independent commissions to work on reforms of the constitution, the electoral system, the judiciary, the police, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and public administration. Another set of five commissions was established on October 31 for reforms in health, mass media, workers' rights, local government, and women's rights. It is ironic that the student-led anti-discrimination uprising that precipitated the "state-repair" agenda did not lead to the appointment of an education reform commission.

The students' protest against discriminatory quotas in public service jobs was the spark that ignited a mass uprising against the entrenched and authoritarian oligarchy. It also drew attention to the poor quality of the education system, the lack of nurtured skills and competencies within educational institutions, and the opportunities denied to the majority of young people in a highly unequal system. Prof Yunus's motto of zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero carbon emissions also implied a major rethink of education goals and methods.

So far, during the months of the interim government's tenure, we have seen ad hoc actions and decisions in education, mainly in the nature of firefighting to contain the chaos inherited from the past regime and arising from the turmoil of the protest

movement. An initiative has been undertaken only for primary and non-formal education by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME), which appointed a nine-member "consultative committee" to recommend short-, medium- and long-term measures for improvement and reform in this sub-sector. The committee's work, headed by this writer, is underway, and its report is due by the end of January. While this is a positive step, it is a partial move that leaves major concerns in the education



FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

sector unaddressed. The work on primary education highlights the need for a comprehensive approach and holistic thinking about the education system, calling for political choices at the state level on education reform beyond the remit of MoPME alone.

Public and media discourse overwhelmingly favours the idea of a reform commission for education. However, the interim government has not expressed a definitive position on the matter. Why is there reluctance to set up a commission on education reform? Is it because such a commission may open Pandora's box, unleashing demands, protests, and counter-protests from an array of stakeholders—more than what is

already being encountered? This is a legitimate concern. But will inaction or ad hoc measures stem the discontent and frustrations of students who have long been subjected to misguided policies and decisions that jeopardise their futures? What about the expectations of the nation that this opportunity for change and reform in education should not be lost? The interim government has waded into reform efforts in many difficult, complex, and sensitive spheres; why should education be left out?

Forming a commission, defining its tasks, and deciding its working mechanism in a field as complex and multifaceted as education demands careful consideration. The education sector encompasses major sub-sectors with distinct objectives, pedagogic approaches, beneficiaries, organisational arrangements, and state obligations. For instance, the challenges vary across sub-sectors

individuals knowledgeable about the sub-sectors and those with insight into the holistic nature of education and its transformation are represented in the commission. Its working methods should ensure that each sub-sector receives due consideration.

Discussions and debates within the education community suggest that the following areas deserve special attention as part of the reform agenda:

i) Guiding efforts toward an education sector plan with a medium-term timeframe and a longer-term perspective. Some work was done in this respect with the participation of both education ministries and with support from UNESCO and the Global Partnership for Education in 2020. However, the government failed to follow it up, reflecting a lack of seriousness.

ii) The sector plan would prioritise a time-bound programme and strategy for universal primary and secondary education; market-linked vocational education and training; employment-responsive four-year colleges under the National University; and university expansion rigidly applying quality criteria.

iii) Rethinking teacher and education worker recruitment to attract and retain top talent in teaching.

iv) Creating a responsive, accountable, and decentralised education governance and management system, effectively utilising education resources, and substantially increasing public investment.

v) Helping to articulate the government's position on external assistance areas and priorities aligned with the proposed sector plan and strategies for various subsectors.

The education commission may operate somewhat differently from other reform commissions in two ways. First, since decisions may need to be made regarding ongoing educational activities and institutions that could affect anticipated future reforms, the government could seek the commission's advice on sensitive issues and long-standing grievances. Second, in anticipation of a permanent education commission—a demand of the education community and an unimplemented recommendation of the Education Policy 2010—the reform commission appointed now could engage in public dialogue on the nature, role, and composition of the proposed permanent body and continue to serve until a future political government formally establishes it.

Prioritise TIN returns, not VAT hikes

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In its bid to mobilise revenue, the government has decided to increase value-added tax (VAT) and supplementary duties on over 100 products and services, including essentials such as liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), soap, detergent, and biscuits. While this measure aims to bridge the widening budget deficit, it disproportionately burdens the middle class and low-income groups already grappling with high inflation and constrained purchasing power. A more equitable and sustainable approach would focus on improving compliance with income tax return submissions rather than relying on regressive tax hikes.

According to the National Board of Revenue (NBR), there were more than 1.02 crore Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN) holders as of April 25, 2024. While this reflects an encouraging expansion in the tax base, the reality is disheartening: 59 percent of these TIN holders did not file tax returns in the financial year 2023-24. Among registered companies, the compliance rate is even worse. Of the 2.88 lakh registered companies, only 8.45 percent filed returns in the same fiscal year. These figures reveal a significant disconnect between the generation of TINs and the actual filing of returns.

This gap stems partly from the ease of obtaining an e-TIN, introduced in 2013 to make tax compliance more accessible. With minimal requirements—such as a national ID for individuals or an incorporation certificate for companies—many

people have acquired TINs out of curiosity or for specific transactions, such as land transfers or trade licenses, without any intention of submitting returns. Additionally, a portion of TIN holders has become inactive or deceased, further skewing the statistics.

Efforts to encourage return submissions, such as mandating proof of submission for availing over 43 services, have yielded limited success. Without stricter enforcement or incentives, the lack of compulsion continues to deter taxpayers from fulfilling their obligations. The NBR's own reports show that nearly 5.28 lakh people who obtained TINs for land transfers and another 3.75 lakh for various one-time purposes do not regularly file returns. Meanwhile, dormant companies and individuals with minimal taxable income remain outside the compliance net.

The historical context sheds light on this issue. Before 1995, taxpayers were identified by General Index Register (GIR) numbers, maintained manually by tax circles. The introduction of TINs marked a shift towards digitisation, but the ease of obtaining an e-TIN since 2013 has inadvertently inflated the number of TINs without corresponding growth in tax compliance.

The recent VAT increases are regressive in nature, disproportionately impacting low- and middle-income families. With inflation at 10.89 percent in December 2024—and food inflation even higher at 12.92 percent—raising

VAT on everyday items like LPG, soap, and biscuits exacerbates the cost-of-living crisis. Economists have voiced concerns that such measures hurt those with fixed incomes far more than the affluent, who can absorb these costs with minimal lifestyle adjustments.

While the government argues that VAT hikes are necessary to meet revenue shortfalls—especially under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—this approach

The government's focus on VAT and supplementary duty hikes is a short-term fix that risks alienating the very population it seeks to serve. Instead, a long-term strategy centred on improving tax compliance and broadening the income tax net would foster economic resilience and social equity.

undermines social equity. Revenue collection efforts should instead target those who can contribute more, such as high-income individuals and large corporations that evade taxes through loopholes or non-compliance.

Rather than resorting to VAT hikes, the government should focus on increasing tax compliance among TIN holders. Several measures could be adopted to bridge the gap between TIN generation and return submissions:

i) Implementing stricter regulations to compel all TIN holders to file returns, regardless of income level, could significantly improve compliance. Simplified filing processes and better

public awareness campaigns would support this transition.

ii) Conducting regular audits to identify and deactivate dormant or irrelevant TINs would provide a clearer picture of active taxpayers and reduce administrative inefficiencies.

iii) Offering tax credits, rebates, or other benefits for timely return submissions could encourage more people and entities to comply.

iv) Strengthening enforcement mechanisms for registered companies, which currently exhibit dismal compliance rates, should be a priority. Penalties for non-compliance, coupled with support for small businesses to navigate the tax system, could address this issue.

v) Expanding digital infrastructure to make filing returns seamless and error-free would reduce barriers to compliance. Transparency in how tax revenues are utilised could also build trust and encourage voluntary compliance.

Revenue mobilisation is essential for addressing the budget deficit and funding public services, but it must be pursued in a way that upholds fairness and minimises economic hardship. Prioritising the enforcement of tax return submissions over VAT hikes aligns with the principles of progressive taxation, ensuring that those with higher incomes contribute their fair share.

The government's focus on VAT and supplementary duty hikes is a short-term fix that risks alienating the very population it seeks to serve. Instead, a long-term strategy centred on improving tax compliance and broadening the income tax net would foster economic resilience and social equity. By addressing the root causes of non-compliance among TIN holders and companies, the government can achieve sustainable revenue growth without overburdening vulnerable groups.