

Post-flood support quite inadequate

Affected people need comprehensive assistance to rebuild lives

We are disappointed by the news of the lack of adequate support for those affected in recent floods, particularly in Noakhali and Feni. Reportedly, many people in these districts continue to live in uncertainty, with most of those who lost their homes yet to receive government assistance for rebuilding. According to data from the DC offices, over 90 percent of the population in Feni and Noakhali was impacted by the August floods last year. A study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) estimated the damage caused by the floods at approximately Tk 14,421.46 crore. Among the affected regions, Noakhali bore 29.07 percent of the total damage, followed by Cumilla at 23.51 percent, Feni at 18.61 percent, and Chattogram at 11.63 percent. Without a comprehensive post-flood rehabilitation plan and increased budget allocation for relief, the suffering of these communities will only deepen.

In Noakhali alone, some 1,28,300 houses were damaged, incurring losses of Tk 309.60 crore. In Feni, on the other hand, some 8,659 families lost their homes; among them, 1,798 houses were completely destroyed, while 6,941 were partially damaged. Despite these staggering figures, the government's rebuilding initiatives fall woefully short. Reports suggest that only 90 houses are being built in Noakhali and 110 in Feni under government programmes. While various national and international organisations have provided cash assistance, the scale of support is nowhere near sufficient to meet the overwhelming need.

As a result, many villagers are resorting to borrowing money from neighbours, NGOs, and banks to rebuild their homes. Many farmers, facing the dual loss of homes and crops, have been forced to abandon farming and take up day labour due to the lack of financial support for post-flood cultivation. Those attempting to re-cultivate their land are also struggling with the costs, with no government aid to ease their burden. Similarly, small business owners were also hit hard. Burdened by loans taken for rebuilding, farming or restarting businesses, flood victims are unsure how they will repay their debts.

We, therefore, urge the government to strengthen its post-flood assistance and rehabilitation efforts. It must provide financial aid to all who lost their homes, crops, and businesses due to the floods. Given their importance in ensuring the nation's food security, special attention should be given to farmers so that they can resume cultivation. The floods not only destroyed crops but also left farmlands covered in sand and saline water, rendering them infertile. Providing farmers with salinity-tolerant seeds suited to current conditions is thus imperative. The authorities must ensure that their support and intervention match the devastation wrought by the floods, and only then can all the affected communities rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

This cannot be the price of progress

Environmental damage from unplanned development, encroachment must stop

The filling of a large swathe of a wetland in Khulna city's Khalishpur area to make way for a housing project is totally unacceptable. Such actions not only harm biodiversity but also exacerbate the risk of flooding in the area. A photo published on the front page of this daily on January 14 clearly shows how the wetland has been overtaken by unauthorised construction projects that lack approval from the Khulna Development Authority (KDA). Unplanned development of this kind is a major driver of shrinking agricultural lands and wetlands in the country, with devastating long-term consequences.

But we cannot blame private developers alone. The KDA—responsible for overseeing development including by assessing environmental impacts of any housing project and enforcing legal measures against unauthorised construction—has also failed to act against their violations. The government must investigate why the KDA has not taken action against the developers flouting the law and harming the environment.

We have recently come across another case of environmental degradation that is also quite troubling. It involves the 11-kilometre-long Bhola canal, once a vital waterway for trade and irrigation, which is now in distress due to unchecked encroachment and pollution. The canal has lost its flow over the past six years, and as a result, local businesses are struggling. Traders are reportedly incurring additional costs in transportation due to the loss of its navigability, while the time required for transporting goods has also increased drastically. Furthermore, with the canal's water levels being reduced to just two feet, about 2,000 hectares of farmland in the Sadar upazila have been left without adequate irrigation, jeopardising livelihoods in the region.

Given the gravity of all such degradations, we cannot afford to ignore the environmental and social costs of unplanned development and waterbody encroachment. The interim government must launch a thorough investigation into why public agencies tasked with environmental and development oversight are failing in their responsibilities. It is also imperative to adopt a broader, more sustainable approach to development that accounts for the long-term consequences of neglecting environmental concerns. We urge the government to demonstrate greater commitment to preserving our natural resources.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Wikipedia launched



On this day in 2001, Wikipedia, a free internet-based encyclopaedia that operates under an open-source management style, was launched. It was founded by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger.

It's time our youth used their right to information

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

More than five months after the interim government took office in Bangladesh, our youth who spearheaded this change appear to have not yet discovered the country's Right to Information (RTI) Act, the only instrument available to citizens to probe the work of government offices. Yet, this is a readily available tool for them to create the changes in governance that they wish to see.

NGOs and activists still promoting the RTI law, however, tell us there have been recent indications of interest among youths in exercising the law. For this budding interest to turn into action, more of them must come forward, and the vacant information commissioner posts must be filled. Here are some examples to help our youth understand the importance of the RTI law.

The first example, dating back to 2010, relates to one of the earliest RTI requests in the country. It was submitted by the Bangladesh Environmental Law Association (BELA), of which Syeda Rizwana Hasan, an adviser to the interim

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government, was the executive director. Information was sought from Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (RAJUK), the city development authority, on the construction of a high-rise building on Hatirjheel Lake in Dhaka, known as the BGMEA Tower. When RAJUK failed to respond to the original request and a subsequent appeal, a complaint was lodged with the Information Commission. The latter ordered the release of the information, which RAJUK refused to entertain. This led to the issuing of a legal notice to the authority's chairperson, who finally released the



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

requested information to BELA.

The information revealed that the BGMEA Tower was built on government land without respecting the conditions attached to the permission provided by RAJUK. A case was filed with the High Court, where the information was used as evidence of the tower's illegal construction. The court ordered its demolition for violating several laws. This building, a stark reminder of corruption at high levels and the need for public vigilance, was ultimately brought down.

Second, in 2011, an NGO worker named Asad was monitoring the implementation of minimum wage rules for workers in the shrimp processing industry. He asked the Department of Labour in Khulna for information on the number and names of shrimp processing plants in the region that had implemented the minimum wage. Following several hearings, he obtained an order from the Information Commission directing the labour department to provide complete and accurate information. This revealed that not all plants followed the rules, and many workers were denied the minimum wage. Since then, the situation has changed, and workers reportedly receive full entitlements.

The third case is related to the illegal occupation of public property. In 2014, Arup Roy asked the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) for

that the land belonged to the BWDB and was under illegal occupation. The commission ordered the BWDB to take necessary measures to evict unlawful occupants.

Another 2014 case, widely reported in the press, centred around the efforts of an NGO named Udayankur Seba Sangstha (USS) in Nilphamari district. The NGO enables communities to carry out collective self-help efforts. In a monthly group meeting, participants learnt that some members had received Tk 1,000 each from the local branch of Sonali Bank. These were apparently "beggar loans," approved under a bank scheme without requiring repayment. The recipients were, however, made to sign a form, one of whom discovered that the inscribed amount was Tk 27,000. Upon further enquiry, participants learnt that Sonali Bank had indeed launched a programme called "Swanirbhor (self-reliant) Bangladesh" to provide loans, between Tk 5,000 and Tk 30,000, to indigent people for income generation activities.

The group realised they were victims of a scam and would be required to repay the large loans they had inadvertently signed for. However, being aware of the RTI Act, each victim made an RTI application to the concerned branch of the bank. They soon received responses showing that each of them owed between Tk 10,000 and Tk 30,000 to the bank. The noise

In our last example, one Nowshad Hossain from the Boideshir Haat area in Chirirbandar upazila, Dinajpur, was unhappy about the continuous sand excavation in the Atrai River, on which Boideshir Haat is located. It damaged the beauty of the area and caused environmental hazards. As the excavation was conducted by a private enterprise, which took a lease for the purpose from the district administration, Nowshad sent an RTI request to the deputy commissioner's office in August 2022 asking for measures the authorities had considered to stop the damage being caused to the area and the surrounding riverbanks. Not receiving a response, he appealed to the divisional commissioner's office. The divisional commissioner promptly responded, saying that the excavator's permit was being cancelled.

Many such examples could be cited to demonstrate that, despite its scant use, the RTI Act is indeed a formidable tool for citizens to monitor the work of our public officials and ensure their transparency and accountability to the people. Imagine the impact on the country if many more of us undertook the responsibility and utilised the opportunity provided through the RTI Act for similar purposes. Such efforts alone may go a long way towards meeting many demands for reform aired in the country since the overthrow of the previous regime.

Jagannath University students' demands are reasonable



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Jagannath University (JnU) is the second largest public university in Dhaka in terms of student population. Over 17,000 students are currently enrolled across 38 departments and two institutions of JnU. Located in Old Dhaka, the university serves as a vibrant cultural and political hub. I joined this esteemed educational institution in 2016, and since then, I have witnessed the various challenges its students face.

At the beginning of this semester, I had a striking realisation during a class on business and economic reporting with fourth-year students. The class begins at 12:45pm. As part of my routine, I walk around the room to interact with students before starting the lecture. To my surprise, I noticed that most of them appeared tired, sleepy, overly exhausted, and some even looked hungry. They were clearly not in the right state of mind for learning. When I inquired about the reasons behind their condition, I uncovered some harsh realities.

To attend their classes, most JnU students begin their journey to campus at as early as 6am, with some starting even earlier. Morning classes typically begin at 8:30am. After attending two or three classes, a fourth consecutive

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session becomes an overwhelming challenge. Their day ends with a 3:30pm bus ride home, with some students travelling long distances, such as from Cumilla. This gruelling routine continues for at least four days a week, leaving students physically and mentally drained. It is no wonder they

are desperately demanding access to proper accommodation facilities.

On Sunday, I saw an ambulance carrying one of the students who had fallen ill during a hunger strike around 12:30pm on the JnU campus. As a teacher, I felt deeply ashamed that a student had to jeopardise their health and life simply to demand safe and accessible housing. Their demands include transferring the second campus project to the army, providing temporary accommodation, and offering housing allowances. Are these demands unreasonable? Not at all. In fact, these are fundamental rights, and it is disgraceful that students are forced to

trust the army because of its reputation for professionalism, discipline, and the ability to complete projects efficiently.

On Monday, my department held two important academic meetings. Students were also supposed to participate in an inter-department volleyball competition. However, instead of engaging in these academic and extracurricular activities, they continued their hunger strike. Suspending even one day of academic and co-curricular activities at a public university is a significant and irreparable loss. We need our students back in class as soon as possible, but this cannot happen until their demands are addressed with urgency.

If anyone doubts the struggles of JnU students, I invite them to visit the campus on any weekday. The JnU campus in Old Dhaka is one of the most crowded academic spaces in the country. Female students have access to a single residential hall, but male students lack even that. The university has no playground, our century-old canteen is in disrepair, and there is no common room for male students. These are just a few of the many issues plaguing the institution. A higher education institution cannot function effectively under these circumstances.

I humbly urge the authorities to take immediate action to complete the second campus. Our students are suffering, and their pleas for this essential facility cannot be ignored any longer.