

NCTB must fast-track delivery of books

Expedite printing, resolve PDF download issues

It is frustrating that weeks into the new academic year, primary and secondary school students are still waiting for their textbooks. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, as of mid-January, only 37 percent (or 15 crore) of the 40.15 crore books required for about 4 crore students have been distributed. Among them, those at primary schools have been more "fortunate", with 75 percent of the required 9.19 crore books delivered. Conversely, only 30 percent of the nearly 31 crore books required for secondary schools (and Ebtedayee madrasas) have reached them. The delivery rates are said to be particularly low in regions like Chattogram, Barishal, and Rangpur, leaving their students disproportionately affected.

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), which is in charge of developing and distributing textbooks for pre-tertiary students, is distributing the books in phases. Even though the authorities initially promised to ensure timely delivery of books, it was never a realistic goal considering the disruptive effects of the July-August political upheaval and the reversion to the 2012 national curriculum—which necessitated additional work including revisions in 441 textbooks. Another challenge this year is that no printing work was outsourced to India to help in the process (from 2009 to 2023, a portion of the books was printed in India). However, it is reasonable to ask why there was no contingency plan to ensure timely printing even though these decisions were made months ago. Why were some printing presses allowed to take on more work than they could handle, allowing the backlog to pile up? And why are some bookstores in Dhaka illegally selling the books at inflated prices when the students should be getting them free at schools?

All this points to the lack of sound planning and execution, as a result of which students are losing valuable learning time. Apart from the academic disruptions caused by the lack of books, students from class 10 are also worried about preparations for their upcoming public exams with only a fraction of the books available. Adding salt to the injury, many students are also reportedly struggling with the download of PDFs from the NCTB website—an alternative to printed books not accessible to all—because of server issues, leaving them with no options.

This state of affairs has to change. The authorities now say that all the textbooks would be distributed within February, but such assurances are not enough. We urge them to step up their efforts to fix all the challenges facing textbook delivery. A thorough investigation is also needed into the inefficiencies and alleged corruption in the printing and distribution process, and those responsible must be held accountable. The government also must prioritise distributing books to regions with abysmal delivery rates as well as students who have public exams in the near future.

Will the ceasefire in Gaza be permanent?

The world must ensure Israel sticks to the deal

After fifteen months of relentless bombardment that has killed nearly 47,000 Palestinians—mostly women and children—the Israeli government has agreed to a ceasefire deal with Hamas, set to begin on Sunday morning. The agreement was brokered primarily by incoming US President Donald Trump (with support from the Biden administration), Egypt, and Qatar. While there is some relief that the horrific bloodshed in Gaza may finally come to an end, serious doubts still remain given the realities on the ground.

It is appalling that even after the ceasefire was announced on Wednesday night, at least 122 Palestinians, including 33 children, have been killed in Israeli attacks. What does this say about the future of the ceasefire deal, or the quality of the "peace" to be brought by it?

During the first and second stages of the deal, Israeli hostages will be released, with priority given to children, the sick, and the elderly, while hundreds of Palestinian women and children held in Israeli prisons will also be freed; humanitarian aid—largely withheld by Israel throughout the war—will also be allowed into Gaza. The third phase likely involves Gaza's reconstruction, supervised by Qatar and the UN, along with a full Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. However, given Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's reliance on far-right coalition partners, there is reason to doubt whether Israel will fully relinquish control. Moreover, allowing Palestinians to return to northern Gaza—now reduced to rubble—feels like a cruel irony. What arrangements are being made to shelter them before their homes are rebuilt?

Israel's history of overwhelming and disproportionate retaliation, along with the unwavering support it received from the US and other Western nations, leaves room for scepticism about whether Palestinians will be treated fairly in this process. Still, as delayed as it is, a ceasefire is something the world—and especially the Palestinian people—desperately needs.

The international community now must extend full support for Gaza's reconstruction and recovery. The war's catastrophic consequences—including thousands of disabled, injured, and traumatised children, women, and men—must be addressed with urgent medical care, psychological support, and financial aid. Palestinians must also have the right to choose their own leadership and be free from Israeli control. Most importantly, the US and other Western nations must ensure that Israel does not renege on its commitments under the deal using any pretext.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

The first BlackBerry is released

On this day in 1999, the first BlackBerry pager, BlackBerry 850, was released. Although BlackBerry devices dominated the market for much of the 2000s, they eventually lost their market share to Apple's iPhone.



EDITORIAL

INTERVIEW WITH YASMIN SOOKA

Digital technology can bring clarity to the July-August atrocities



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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

A 15-minute film has put together video clips of one of the most brutal crackdowns of the July-August uprising by the police. Many of us have seen some of these clips of shootings outside Jatrabari Police Station on August 5 when hundreds of protesters were marching towards the ousted Prime Minister's official residence Gono Bhaban, sure of victory ahead. But to see them together with the narrator giving details of the horrific scenes makes it clear that the police action on August 5, the day Sheikh Hasina fled the country, was a well-orchestrated, cold-blooded massacre that had been given clearance from the very top.

The film, launched on January 14, after months of forensic investigation, by International Truth and Justice Project (ITJP), Tech Global Institute and The Outsider Movie Company, provides valuable evidence that can be used to bring the perpetrators to justice. In an exclusive interview, Yasmin Sooka, a human rights lawyer who has dedicated four decades to human rights and transitional justice and now is executive director of ITJP, shares how detailed forensic investigation is crucial, not only for the process of justice sought by each victim's family but for the overall understanding of the systemic installation and perpetuation of brutal repression by the state.

ITJP, headed by Sooka with its London office run by journalist Frances Harrison, has been documenting human rights violations in Sri Lanka since 2014, focusing on the atrocities committed during the final phases of the Sri Lankan civil war. Sooka also chairs the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, established in 2016 by the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. The commission is mandated to monitor the human rights situation and address accountability for serious crimes in South Sudan.

In early 2024, Sooka's organisation was about to investigate economic crimes and corruption in Bangladesh. But while they were discussing which particular cases to look at, the student protests erupted in July and Sooka and her co-workers immediately directed their focus on documenting the violence unfolding. It was clear that evidence had to be collected in real time to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Collaborating with local researchers, such as British journalist David Bergman and a young team from the Tech Global Institute, Sooka's organisation gathered testimonies

and cellphone footage from victims' families. This evidence was crucial for truth recovery, as many families lacked first-hand knowledge of what had happened to their loved ones.

Sooka emphasises the revolutionary role digital technology plays in modern justice systems. As incriminating as the footage was, her team had to ensure that the evidence would be admissible in court—through proper authentication. This included using advanced methods like geolocation and chronolocation. Collaborating with experts experienced in documenting crimes in Sri Lanka, the team reconstructed events to establish

patterns of state-sponsored violence. "When you look at modern conflicts and the rise of social media you begin to see that this is going to play an important role in evidentiary material before any kind of trial or any kind of tribunal," says Sooka. "The challenge," Sooka explains, "is preserving the chain of custody and ensuring the footage is tamper-proof, especially in an era where AI manipulation is a possibility." These efforts culminated in two documentaries detailing police brutality during the protests, including incidents at Jatrabari Police Station and the killing of Hridoy Ali, a protester.

The documentaries made it quite clear that the violence had been orchestrated and sponsored by the state. Sooka recounted how unarmed protesters faced live ammunition from

police forces acting on orders from the highest levels of government. "This was not panic-driven," she says. "It was deliberate, calculated, and ordered by the highest levels of authority."

The team's goal was not just to document the atrocities but to use the documentaries as part of evidence in the legal process. The team intends to have private screenings with victims' families to provide them with a sense of justice and clarity, as well as public screenings to initiate critical conversations about accountability.

Sooka and her colleagues, including Spanish prosecutor Carlos Castresana Fernández and Swiss investigator Felix Weber, conducted training sessions for prosecutors (including the chief prosecutor) and investigators of Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). These sessions focused on modern methods of proving crimes against humanity. However, says Sooka, ICT faces significant challenges such as resource constraints and limited access to digital technology. She stresses that these challenges must be addressed to

Sooka stresses the importance of national dialogue in shaping Bangladesh's future. "Understanding the past is not about creating a better past but building a foundation for a better future," she said. She emphasises the role of students and civil society in building a Bangladesh free from repression and inequality. While trials can bring perpetrators to justice, Sooka believes they must be complemented by institutional reforms, reparations, and initiatives promoting historical memory. She points to South Africa's approach to reconciliation, emphasising accountability, acknowledgment of violations, and societal healing over mere forgiveness.

Sooka says that there is some confusion regarding the term "truth commission" and many people think that it automatically means "reconciliation" which is not the case.

"We would call this a truth recovery process," she says, "which is aimed at building a new narrative for the country around how it was possible for Bangladesh to have so many years of



PHOTO: NAIMUR RAHMAN

Yasmin Sooka

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ensure the effectiveness of the trials.

Sooka believes that the end goal is for Bangladesh to establish a broader truth recovery process. "Trials address individual accountability," she explains, "but they don't uncover the structural underpinnings that enable systemic violence." Drawing from her experience in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission where she was appointed by President Nelson Mandela in 1995, Sooka advocates for a state commission to investigate how institutional failures allowed for repression, corruption, and inequality. Such a commission could also investigate the role of corporations, media, and political parties in perpetuating injustices. For Bangladesh, this process could create a national narrative acknowledging past abuses and promoting a more equitable future.

repressive governments and how it was possible for this kind of institutionalised state-sponsored violence to happen. A truth commission would also allow you to look at the question of corruption which is another big factor in many of our countries." Sooka believes the fact that the chief adviser has established several major commissions is a step in the process of truth recovery.

For Yasmin Sooka, justice is not just about holding the guilty accountable and punishing them but creating a society where such violations will never occur again. Through her commitment to seeking justice by unravelling the truth and advocating systemic reforms, Sooka gives hope to Bangladesh and many other nations that have had to bear the brunt of decades of state repression.

Why Bangladesh needs a child affairs reform commission



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The student-led July-August uprising that toppled the 15-year regime of the Awami League and installed the interim government on August 8, 2024, was a defining moment for Bangladesh. Led by Nobel Laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus, the administration has committed itself to the ambitious task of "state repair," laying the groundwork by forming 11 independent commissions.

Each commission has been tasked with addressing vital issues such as constitutional revision, judicial reform, electoral processes, public administration, police accountability, anti-corruption, health, mass media, workers' rights, local government, and women's affairs. Yet, amid this comprehensive reform agenda, a glaring omission has surfaced: the lack of a dedicated commission for child affairs.

This oversight is particularly troubling given the vulnerable condition of millions of children in Bangladesh, many of whom were

directly affected by the uprising and continue to suffer systemic neglect. According to a Child Rights Advocacy Coalition of Bangladesh report, at least 121 children were killed by law enforcement and other agencies during the uprising.

The exclusion of child-related concerns from the government's agenda is deeply disheartening. Although a Women's Affairs Reform Commission has been established, it has not incorporated issues affecting children. This exclusion raises pressing questions: why has the plight of children been overlooked? And why can't child affairs be included in the existing Women's Affairs Reform Commission or addressed through a separate entity? Children constitute a significant portion of Bangladesh's population, and their well-being is inextricably linked to the country's future.

Their voices, however, are absent from public discourse, as they lack the ability and platform to advocate for their rights. It is, therefore, the moral

responsibility of the government to champion their cause.

According to the National Child Labour Survey 2022, there are some 35.4 lakh working children aged 5-17 in Bangladesh, with 17.6 lakh not in child labour and 17.8 lakh engaged in child labour, including 10.7 lakh in hazardous child labour. These children are deprived of education, healthcare, and the opportunity to experience a childhood free from exploitation.

A significant proportion of these children are street children, and this number has only risen alarmingly in recent years. A recent UNICEF report estimates that over 34 lakh Bangladeshi children live on streets without parental care, and are exposed to abuse, neglect, and extreme poverty.

These children, who bear the brunt of systemic failures, were among the most affected during the uprising against the previous regime. Many lost their lives or were injured in the violence, yet their sacrifices remain unacknowledged. Despite laws prohibiting child labour, enforcement remains weak, and children as young as six years old can be found working in factories, workshops, and households.

The interim government's reform agenda offers a unique opportunity to address these longstanding issues, but this can only be achieved if children are given the attention they deserve. Establishing a dedicated child affairs reform commission or integrating

child-related concerns into the existing Women's Affairs Reform Commission would be a step in the right direction. Such a commission could focus on critical issues such as eradicating child labour, ensuring birth registration for all children, including those who are orphans, improving access to education, ensuring healthcare for all children, and protecting street children from abuse and exploitation. It could also advocate for policy changes to uphold children's rights and ensure their inclusion in national development strategies.

The argument for prioritising children in the state reform agenda is not merely ethical but also pragmatic. Children represent the future of Bangladesh, and investing in their well-being is essential for the country's progress. Neglecting their needs will only exacerbate existing social and economic disparities, hindering the nation's ability to achieve sustainable development. By addressing the systemic issues that affect children, the interim government can lay the foundation for a more just and equitable society.

It is crucial to recognise that true reform cannot be achieved without addressing the needs of its most vulnerable citizens. Children who lack the means to voice their concerns and demand their rights must not be left behind.