

## A show of force is not enough to curb crime

Joint operation must be part of a broader strategy to restore order

Given the turbulent events of the past week—marked by renewed anti-fascist protests, disruptions, and unanticipated pushback at times—the Operation Devil Hunt, launched nationwide on Saturday night, can be seen as mostly a step in the right direction. We say “mostly” because of its limited operational scope and overreliance on a law enforcement approach to an issue that extends far beyond policing. While announcing the drive, the home ministry stated that law enforcement forces would target “saboteurs who attacked students, individuals with warrants, and troublemakers” to curb mob violence and restore law and order. The decision follows an attack at the residence of former Awami League minister AKM Mozammel Haque in Gazipur, where a false alarm of robbery led to 15 people, including student leaders of the July uprising, being assaulted.

After launching the drive, joint forces arrested 40 people overnight in Gazipur, all allegedly linked to the ousted Awami League regime. It can be recalled that the joint forces, comprising the army, police, RAB, BGB, Coast Guard, and Ansar, have been active nationwide since September 4 to recover looted firearms and maintain law and order. Later, the government granted magistracy power to army officers so that they can intervene more decisively. That security issues have still persisted—as evidenced by the events on Wednesday and Thursday that led to the demolition of Mujib's Dhanmondi 32 residence, along with attacks, vandalism, and arson targeting Awami League-linked houses and establishments in 35 districts, and eventually to attacks on students—raises questions about how effective the latest operation will be, even within its stated goal of combating the remnants of Awami fascism.

The fact is, the security situation is too fluid at the moment to pin responsibility on any single entity. While some of the events of the past week can be traced to Awami League or Sheikh Hasina, some factions within the anti-fascist movement also bear responsibility for escalating tensions. The polarisation festering within different factions of the movement as well as rising extremism risk undermining the very ideals that fuelled the July uprising. The resulting chaos—readily exploited by criminal elements—cannot be neutralised by force alone. As an analysis of law and order under the interim government shows, criminals perceive the current environment as favourable for carrying out illicit activities, with a still weak and demoralised police force struggling to contain them.

Therefore, for Operation Devil Hunt to be effective, it cannot be just another show of force—it must be part of a broader strategy involving political parties and other stakeholders to restore order and stability in the country. That means targeting not only remnants of Awami League's fascist apparatus but also those who are exploiting the current instability for personal or political gains. The authorities must also use the operation to tackle rising crime including mugging, extortion, and other public safety threats. They must send a strong message that no one involved in jeopardising public safety and law and order will be spared.

## Ensure rights of women prisoners

Address overcrowding in country's lone specialised women's prison

A report by *Banik Barta* paints a grim picture of the environment inside Kashimpur Central Jail's women's section, the country's lone specialised prison for female inmates. Originally intended as a modern facility, the prison now faces severe overcrowding and substandard living conditions. According to the Department of Prisons, it has a capacity of 200 inmates but currently houses 450—more than twice its intended limit. This is posing serious health and security risks to the prisoners.

According to an inmate who was recently released from the prison, five to six prisoners are crammed into spaces meant for two. As a result, many inmates suffer from contagious diseases, including skin infections and fungal and bacterial outbreaks, due to prolonged exposure to unhygienic conditions. The sanitation system is subpar, and despite an approved position for a doctor at the prison, no physician is available to provide necessary medical care. This is unacceptable, demanding immediate action.

Reportedly, the overcrowding problem extends beyond Kashimpur. The total capacity of women's cells in district prisons across the country is 1,929, but they currently hold 2,981 women prisoners. When Kashimpur becomes too overcrowded, prisoners are temporarily transferred to these district jails—only to be brought back when space allows. This cycle of displacement raises the question: should this happen in a modern prison system?

Overcrowding has been a longstanding issue in Bangladesh's prisons leading to deplorable living conditions and security risks. The trend of mixing hardened criminals with general inmates also increases the risk of violence and exploitation. Besides, there are many kinds of irregularities that often take place in the prisons, as a Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) audit report found in 2023. We need a modern prison system that upholds basic human rights for inmates, focusing more on their rehabilitation rather than punishment.

A partial solution already exists for women prisoners: Dhaka Central Jail in Keraniganj has a modern facility for women prisoners, including a separate building for adolescent inmates, dedicated wards for the mentally ill, and a daycare centre for inmates with children. But this facility reportedly remains unused. Why hasn't it been inaugurated? If properly opened and operated, it could significantly reduce pressure on Kashimpur and improve living conditions for female prisoners. We urge the government to take this issue seriously and take all necessary steps to improve the living conditions of our prisoners.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Galileo flew past Venus

On this day in 1990, the spacecraft Galileo flew past Venus on its way to Jupiter. It became the first spacecraft to orbit an outer planet.

# EDITORIAL

## Not at the cost of Mukti Juddho, no way

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The December 2024 edition of Chhatria Shibir's mouthpiece, the monthly *Chhatria Sangbad* (meaning student news) was themed after the mass uprising that loosely translates to “the bloody chapter of victory” (*bijoy er roktakto oddhyay*). One article in that magazine, discussing the downfall of tyrants through the ages (*juge juge shoira char o tader korun porinoti*), states at one point, “Some Muslims participated in the Liberation War without fully comprehending the consequences. It was their failure and lack of foresight. May the Almighty forgive them.”

Chhatria Shibir, which is the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, has expressed its regrets and withdrew the article and recalled the magazine. It is not available online or offline anymore. The fundamentalist students' organisation went on to say in a note of apology that the article had been published “inadvertently” and further that the views expressed in the article were the writer's own.

The explanation and apology might have been acceptable if it were any other organisation. But Shibir, and its parent organisation Jamaat, had violently and actively opposed the 1971 Liberation War. Shibir used to be called Islami Chhatri Sangha in 1971 and resurfaced in 1977 under this current name. Jamaat and its student wing are held responsible for a large number of atrocities committed by the notorious vigilante militia groups like Razakar, Al Badr and Al Shams, which consisted of members and activists of Jamaat and its student wing.

Neither Jamaat, nor its student wing has ever come clean regarding its role in 1971. Still deeply revered within the party, several Jamaat leaders have been tried, convicted and executed for their crimes against humanity. But the party and its student wing have never come forward to apologise for their role or admit to the atrocities their predecessors had committed out of their supposed conviction for a united Pakistan. Instead, both the party and its student wing continue to attempt to justify and vindicate their roles during the Liberation War.

And sometimes, they test the waters to see how far they can go in public. This recent publication was one such instance.

The implicit suggestion of Shibir's response to the widespread criticism of the article is that the editorial board of the magazine had not vetted each article carefully before they were approved. This is not at all expected from an outfit as disciplined as Shibir. The insincere apology, because it does not own up to its misdeed (which is befitting its historical trend), only came about once the lines went viral on social media and Jamaat's student cadres realised they were fast losing



ARTWORK: ZAINUL ABEDIN

support among the public. Almost as if they were dangling their feet to test the waters and pulled out sensing that the time was not yet ripe.

Just like in 1971, the article in question conflates religion with the inspiration for freedom. In fact, the writer is apologetic for even having waged war and begs forgiveness of the Almighty.

It is also important to take note of other omens. Take the Constitution Reform Commission's proposal for instance. It proposes the following two paragraphs in the preamble, “We,

the people of Bangladesh have, in a historically persistent struggle for the emancipation of the masses of this land, achieved independence through a people's war (*jonojuddho*) and built a united resistance against autocratic and fascist rule.”

“We pledge, most respectfully remembering the supreme sacrifice of all martyrs, that the great ideals of equality, human dignity, and social justice that united the people of Bangladesh in the War of Independence in 1971 and the ideals of democracy and equity that united them against the fascist rule in 2024 shall be established in the state and society.”

The existing preamble had enshrined the Liberation War as a sacrosanct basis of the new republic born on March 26. The first graph reads, “We, the people of Bangladesh, having proclaimed our independence on the 26th day of March, 1971

credit. But certainly not by belittling the Liberation War. And yet, there has been very little criticism amid the post uprising dispensation where Jamaat and Shibir, having usurped significant sway, appear to influence much of the narrative post August 5.

The Liberation War is a unique event in Bangladesh's history. It will never happen again. Attempts to equate it with any other movements or campaigns reflect either a lack of wisdom or a deliberate effort to distort history. Unlike any political movement, the Liberation War was a struggle for existence, identity, and sovereignty. It was a full-scale war against a well-trained military machine. It was a national resistance against systematic genocide, oppression—in which Jamaat and its student collaborated with the perpetrators. Comparing it to any democratic movement insults its glory and undermines the sacrifices of millions who fought and perished for an independent Bangladesh.

Mass uprisings and popular campaigns, however significant, cannot be placed on the same pedestal as the Liberation War. Democratic struggles implicitly predicate the existence of an established nation-state. The 1971 War was about the very birth of that state. Any comparison trivialises that War and plays into the hands of those who seek to rewrite (read distort) history and change the narrative for their gain.

We have heard many more such phrases that liken 2024 with 1971 in the last several months. This new Bangladesh had to be rebuilt from scratch, everyone said. Proclamation of revolution was mentioned in the beginning. The Mujibist constitution had to be done away with and in a bid to rid it of Mujibism, the proposed draft of the constitution now trivialises the 1971 War.

The rhetoric of a new beginning in the post August 5 dispensation often carried an unspoken suggestion, a fleeting allusion that it is all “as opposed to 1971.” There is almost an instinctive feeling that there is an ever so subtle attempt to not just rewrite history, but delete it. A second liberation it can very well be, but that does not make it equal to the first one, when the country was born.

Attempts to equate the Liberation War with other political movements, or belittle it, can no longer be shrugged off as adolescent aberration or dismissed as youthful ignorance. They are not.

## Tea garden workers warrant the same support as other industry labourers

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In the tapestry of Bangladesh's socio-economic landscape, tea gardens and industrial parks stand as silent pillars that uphold the lives of millions, weaving together tradition and modernity. A morning that begins with a cup of tea mirrors the soul of every Bangladeshi heart. Alongside, the sprawling Beximco Industrial Park symbolises industrial ambition and global competitiveness. Yet, these two worlds converge in the shared plight of labourers whose sweat fuels our economy. As we savour the warmth of tea or don garments stitched with care, do we pause to acknowledge the unseen hands shaping these moments? This is not just a narrative of labour; it is the story of Bangladesh where every worker's life is intricately woven into the fabric of national progress.

While the media's spotlight shines on the recent turmoil surrounding Beximco Industrial Park, the plight of tea garden workers of the tea estates owned and operated by National Tea Company remains woefully underreported. These crises reveal deeper structural and political issues that threaten the livelihoods of thousands and ultimately, the economic resilience of Bangladesh.

The closure of the National Tea Company due to political instability

exemplifies the precarious position of marginalised workers. The sudden shutdown of Madhabpur Tea Estate in Moulvibazar has left families stranded without income or alternative employment opportunities. Sanu, a worker at the estate, paints a grim picture of this reality. With five family members, including a sick mother, he struggles to provide even the most basic meals, resorting to *muri* (puffed rice) and *cha pata bhorta* (mashed tea leaves) for sustenance. Occasionally, a tourist's tip is all that stands between his family and hunger. This tragic narrative is emblematic of countless others, yet it garners little attention because tea workers lack the platforms or influence to amplify their voices.

Meanwhile the crisis at Beximco Industrial Park dominates the headlines, as workers demand their rightful wages and reinstatement. While both cases highlight the vulnerability of workers, they also expose an unequal distribution of concern and urgency. The media's focus on high-profile industrial hubs often eclipses the struggles of those in remote areas, perpetuating a cycle of neglect for sectors like the tea industry.

Both situations underscore the need for immediate and comprehensive

government intervention. The current approach of relocating displaced workers to other factories or gardens is short-sighted and counterproductive. Such measures ignore the broader implications: abandoned infrastructure, loss of industry-specific expertise, and a diminishing industrial base. The parallels with the

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decline of Bangladesh's sugar and jute mills are stark and cautionary. These once thriving industries now stand as relics of mismanagement and neglect, offering lessons that must not be ignored.

Bangladesh's status as a growing economy demands prudent and proactive policies to safeguard its industries. Political instability and labour exploitation cannot become recurring narratives. The government must prioritise the reopening and stabilisation of the tea estates under

the National Tea Company and Beximco Industrial Park. This involves ensuring fair wages, addressing worker grievances, and fostering an environment conducive to sustainable operations.

For tea workers, the solution lies in comprehensive industry reform. The systemic exploitation that keeps wages at starvation levels must end. The government, alongside industry stakeholders, should implement wage standardisation, social security measures, and skill development programmes. For larger industrial hubs like Beximco, the focus should be on transparent conflict resolution mechanisms, timely payment of dues, and robust labour policies that prevent future disruptions.

It is time for Bangladesh to heed the silent cries of its labour force and walk resolutely towards reform and equity. The stories of Madhabpur's tea workers and Beximco's factory labourers are not isolated, and they remind us of the delicate balance between progress and humanity. Their struggles are a clarion call for a nation striving to achieve middle-income status while ensuring that nobody is left behind. Let us not allow these crises to become forgotten tragedies; instead, let them fuel a collective resolve to create a future where every sip of tea and every stitch of cloth represents not just an industry but the dignity of those who make it possible. Advocacy groups, unions, and policymakers must work together to amplify the voices of the voiceless, ensuring that every worker, regardless of their location or industry, is afforded dignity and justice.