

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Make highways safe for passengers

### Spike in robberies on Dhaka-Chattoogram highway raises alarm

We are concerned about the increase in robberies and muggings on the Dhaka-Chattoogram Highway over the last six months or so. According to a report by Prothom Alo citing frequent travellers of this route, there have been more than 100 incidents of robberies and muggings at different spots of the 462 kilometre highway during this period.

Accounts from victims, police officers, and bus and private car drivers suggest that such criminal activities have noticeably gone up, even though the number of robbery cases filed with police stations along the route may not reflect it. Prothom Alo found only 19 related cases filed with three police stations in Narayanganj, one of the districts connecting this important highway. Per these cases, the frequency of mugging and robbery is high in at least 17 spots of the district. Cumilla and Chattogram also have several highly mugging-prone spots. However, victims often don't want to file cases because police cannot generally recover stolen valuables. Instead, many end up being harassed and having to go through trial-related hassles. In most cases, however, police only file a general diary.

In recent times, expatriate Bangladeshis have been frequently targeted by muggers and robbers, who often commit the crime when vehicles slow down or get stuck in one place for too long because of traffic, which is a regular phenomenon in the Narayanganj section of the highway. According to police, people don't want to file cases of highway robberies as they tend to move to a safer place quickly afterwards. Even when they do report and police arrest the perpetrators, the latter manage to get bail and resume their criminal activities.

Our highways are already notorious for the high number of road crashes that occur there. Added to that is the menace of robbery and mugging, not to mention rampant extortion. These crimes don't just affect individuals; cargo vehicles have also come under attack. We, therefore, urge the authorities to take effective measures to make our highways safe. Increasing patrols, raising awareness, and addressing the reasons behind long gridlocks on the highways are some of the measures that can be employed. On the legal front, making reporting of highway crimes easy and ensuring that perpetrators cannot go scot-free after arrests will also help reduce the incidence of mugging and robbery. Transport associations should also cooperate with the authorities to prevent highway criminal gangs. Passengers should be able to travel without the fear of losing their lives and possessions.

## Stop allowing black money in real estate

### NBR permission is destabilising the housing market

It is unfortunate that black money continues to be in circulation using a legal loophole that hasn't been addressed despite criticism over the past five months. It can be recalled that the National Board of Revenue (NBR), on September 2, announced the cancellation of the opportunity to legalise undisclosed (black) money by paying a 15 percent tax on securities, cash, bank deposits, financial schemes, and so on. However, the provision for legalising undisclosed assets through a fixed tax payment on investment in real estate has been retained. Now, according to a report by Bonik Barta, this is being exploited to whiten black money by individuals purchasing properties at inflated prices in Dhaka's elite neighbourhoods.

Analysing some recent developments in Gulshan, the report suggests that the opportunity to convert illegal money into legal assets is driving up prices of flats and plots. While there are other factors likely contributing to high prices in areas such as Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara—including continued demand from affluent buyers, availability of better living opportunities, and better security—black money continues to play a destabilising role. It is well-known that many individuals, particularly those with political and business ties to the ousted Awami League government, accumulated vast sums of illicit wealth and funnelled it into real estate. Even though many of them have been on the run or behind bars since the political turnover in August, this hasn't dampened the housing trend, thanks to the continued allowance for investment of black money in real estate.

Its consequences are not hard to miss. First, this is leading to artificial price hikes in real estate, making homeownership quite difficult for honest, middle-class citizens. Second, it continues to distort market dynamics with some experts claiming that the prices of flats in some areas of Dhaka have even surpassed those of global metropolitan cities like London, Dubai, and New York. Third, it continues to enable a culture of impunity where those with illegitimate wealth can get away without any scrutiny and consequences whatsoever.

This is totally unacceptable. We urge the NBR authorities to immediately extend the freeze on legalisation of black money through real estate investment. Moreover, there must be strict audits on high-value property transactions to identify the sources of funds. Without these measures, real estate will remain a safe haven for illicit wealth, reinforcing inequalities and preventing efforts to overhaul the financial sector. It is not enough to talk about the crimes of the past; we must prevent their recurrence in the future.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Karl Lagerfeld dies

On this day in 2019, German fashion designer and photographer Karl Lagerfeld—the creative power behind the modern revival of Chanel, the legendary French fashion house founded by Coco Chanel in the early 20th century—died in Paris.

# Towards a common minimum reform programme



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RASHED AL MAHMUD TITUMIR

The ousting of an oligarchic regime and the subsequent formation of an interim administration have unearthed deep-rooted structural crises in Bangladesh. The challenges are omnipresent, with declined investment, sluggish economic growth, and growing public dissatisfaction. The deposed oligarchy failed to control inflation. This cost-of-living crisis disproportionately impacts working-class and marginalised communities. The manufacturing and service sectors are paralysed by policy uncertainty, while the banking sector struggles with liquidity shortages. Investors are reluctant to commit capital in the absence of long-term policy commitments. The economy is contracting, plunging into recession.

The crisis is more than just economic; it is a reflection of a broken political system. The existing power structure, shaped by elite bargains and institutional distortions, has failed to establish a sustainable, inclusive democratic order.

At the heart of the problem is a flawed political settlement where vested interests dictate governance, rather than an inclusive and institutionalised democratic system. Economic policies benefit a politically connected syndicate, rather than fostering broad-based growth. Regulatory bodies, the judiciary, and financial institutions suffer from political influence that undermines their independence. The lack of genuine democratic competition has created a culture of impunity, where the rulers have ruled without the public mandate.

The interim government has inherited these contradictions. Without a legitimate political mandate, no administration can implement meaningful economic and institutional reforms. Bangladesh must define its governance model to serve the median population, rather than a privileged few. A new social contract—based on equity, democratic accountability, and economic justice—is essential to building public trust and ensuring long-term stability.

A free, fair and credible election is the only path to restoring stability,

building confidence, and enacting real reforms. The urgency of an elected government is not a matter of political preference but also an economic necessity. Without legitimacy, any country risks stagnation, institutional decay, and growing public unrest.

The interim government constituted several reform commissions to address constitutional, electoral, and judicial issues, among others. While the proposals of these reform



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

commissions sound promising, there is an urgency for an immediate consensus by following a max-min principle, i.e. consensus on a common minimum reform programme (CMRP) by a maximum of political parties as a second-best alternative. A prolonged transition—or a rigid stance on “reform first, elections later”—will only deepen the crisis. A CMRP agreed upon by the maximum number of political parties is necessary. The elements of CMRP could be on three key issues: a) peaceful transition of power; b) free, fair and credible elections; and c) representational public order.

Firstly, no political party in

People have spoken against the culture of deinstitutionalisation and political centralisation. The deposed resource-dependent syndicate has eaten away at systems. The collusion between moneyed interests and political rulers have eroded institutions, making the citizen-state relationship a distant ideal. A nation cannot withstand external pressures if it is plagued by power asymmetry and rent-seeking elites who exploit state resources.

A political party, seeking a mandate, must present voters with a clearly articulated new social contract—one that shifts from oligarchic clientelism to a people-centric development. Any uprising, as history suggests, warrants

can provide, and such, in turn, can ensure decent employment for all.

Bangladesh is at a historic turning point. The economic paralysis cannot be solved in isolation from the political crisis. Without democratic legitimacy, no government can restore economic stability or implement necessary reforms. The demand for free and fair elections is not just about political justice—it is an urgent economic necessity too. The country's future depends on democratic governance, where power is derived from the people, not from elite negotiations or external interventions. The time for action is now.

## A gathering of South Asian idiots



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HAMID MIR

I first heard the name Wangchuck in the famous Indian movie *3 Idiots*. Aamir Khan played the character of Wangchuck in the movie. I did not know that Wangchuck is a real character. I was introduced to him last week in Islamabad during the South Asia Climate Symposium organised by Dawn Media Group. This symposium provided a great opportunity for climate experts from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and other countries to find solutions to the climate crisis.

Sonam Wangchuck from Ladakh is an engineer and a climate activist who went on a 16-day hunger strike last year to save the ecology of his hometown. He was invited to the symposium due to his inventions to protect the climate. His inventions also impressed Aamir Khan. One of his inventions is an artificial spring in the shape of an ice *stupa* that stores downstream water to be used in spring when farmers need water. I never thought that I would see Wangchuck in Islamabad.

I actually went to this climate symposium to meet two old friends. My friends Nirupama Subramanian from India and Mahfuz Anam from Bangladesh are journalists with keen interest in climate issues. Nirupama spent many years in Islamabad as a correspondent of *The Hindu* newspaper. She made a

lot of friends here. Now she works in Chennai. Her own city is facing threats due to climate change. Some World Bank experts were telling us during the symposium that rising sea levels are becoming a threat for the existence of Karachi, Badin, Tattha, Mumbai, Chennai, Kochin, Kolkata, Chattogram, and the whole of Maldives. Some experts discussed the issue of smog, and some were worried about the melting of glaciers due to increasing temperatures. I was happy to see my old friends at this event, but we were also worried about the warnings by many international climate experts.

During one session of this symposium, Sonam Wangchuck was sitting on stage with Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's coordinator on climate change, Romina Khurshid Alam. He praised Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's initiatives on climate change. I was listening to his speech while sitting in the audience. Nirupama whispered in my ear that he is Wangchuck from Ladakh. I immediately asked if he was Wangchuck from *3 Idiots*. Nirupama smiled and said yes. Then she told me about his hunger strike. Wangchuck always challenged government policies in India, but he was defending the PM in Pakistan. The life line of Pakistan, the Indus River, originates from his native land,

and he was suggesting a joint strategy to address the problem of global warming. He highlighted the idea of creating artificial glaciers. He said, “That is what we do in Ladakh.”

There was a session in this symposium about the role of media and climate change. Zafar Abbas, the editor of *Dawn* newspaper, moderated the session. Mahfuz Anam, Nirupama Subramanian, another Indian journalist Soumashree Sarkar, and Nepali journalist Kanak Mani Dixit agreed that the media must give priority to environmental issues and come up with some bold climate journalism to save South Asia. I noticed that despite tensions between the governments of India and Pakistan, and Bangladesh and India, some “idiot” journalists from these three countries were ready to work together to save the climate of their region. Nirupama had been issued a visa for Pakistan just one day before the conference. She flew from Chennai to Delhi and collected her passport. A very wise Pakistani visa officer did not allow her to cross the Pakistan-India border by foot. She flew to Dubai and took a flight to Pakistan. Only an idiot like her can take this pain for the sake of climate.

I remember that a few years ago, when Mahfuz was facing more than 80 sedition and defamation cases filed on the orders of Sheikh Hasina, I condemned her government. After a few days, I received her message through a diplomat: Mahfuz Anam is an idiot and I should not interfere in the internal matters of Bangladesh just to save an idiot. I responded: “Tell Hasina that I am also an idiot like Mahfuz Anam and he is more important for me than a civilian dictator.” I was happy to see my idiot friend in Islamabad again after many

years. During his visit, at a dinner hosted by Jazz, he took interest in the conversation of young Pakistani journalists Absa Komal, Shehbaz Rana, and Nadir Gurmani. He looked happy to know that, like him, these young idiots are not ready to surrender their freedom to any power.

Some World Bank and UNICEF officials told me that PM Shehbaz Sharif gave his word to come to the inauguration of this symposium, but when he learnt that Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Ali Amin Gandapur was also invited, he refused to come. Gandapur belongs to the party led by Imran Khan. Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal represented the PM at the symposium. It is unfortunate that climate change needs a consensus in South Asia but Indian and Pakistani governments are not ready to sit together. Then again, Pakistani politicians are also not ready to sit with each other.

Valerie Hickey, World Bank's global director for climate change, stunned the audience by revealing that the world needs \$1 billion per day to combat the threat of drought, but we don't have enough money. Pakistan needs at least \$40 billion annually until 2050 to save Karachi, Badin and Thatta from rising sea waters. Can a Pakistani government afford internal and external fights in this situation? It seems that only idiots understand the gravity of the situation. We need cooperation but our rulers are more interested in confrontation. It's a good thing that idiots from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have started a dialogue. We need idiots like Wangchuck and Mahfuz Anam who can force the rulers to give more attention to save air and water, not their chairs.