

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Improve public safety as a top priority

### Challenges abound, so the govt must take effective steps

Only yesterday, we criticised the home adviser's overly optimistic portrayal of the law and order situation, and now a report citing statistics on crimes—from government sources, no less—shows how far from "satisfactory" the situation really is. According to police data based on filed cases, incidents of murder, abduction, robbery, burglary, dacoity, and theft have all increased in January 2025, compared to the same month over the last five years. For instance, at least 294 murder cases were recorded in January 2025, up from 231 in the same month last year. Meanwhile, robbery cases rose to 171 in this January, compared to 114 in January 2024, while abduction cases rose to 105 compared to 51 last year.

This trend, fuelling public outrage and security concerns simultaneously, is anything but a sign of a normal situation. On what basis, then, did the home adviser draw his conclusions? Even the much-publicised Operation Devil Hunt, resulting in over 9,000 arrests since February 8, hasn't had the desired effect in restoring order or public confidence. While there is no denying that law enforcement activities have increased significantly of late, experts say that it is the rise in high impact crimes—rather than overall crime rates—that most influences public perceptions of safety.

For instance, the multiple muggings reported in different parts of Dhaka on Sunday night or the robbery and sexual assault incident on a moving bus on February 17 have, understandably, tapped into anger accumulating over several months, resulting in an outburst of calls for the home adviser's resignation. True, social media can sometimes disproportionately highlight certain cases while overlooking others that may be more grievous. But a modern police force cannot be distracted by that. It must stay ahead of evolving crimes and criminals, and take effective, multi-pronged steps that improve both safety and public perceptions surrounding it. We have yet to see that happening.

We must recognise that law enforcement agencies are facing challenges on multiple fronts. Leave aside the alleged machinations of the cohorts of Awami League and other political actors. Beyond murder, mugging, and extortion, we have also seen repeated protests, clashes, and mob violence involving different groups over the last few months. Many incidents of attacks on *mazar* (shrines), *darbar sharif* (Sufi centres), and *Baul akhras* were reported. There has been a spike in rape and sexual violence as well. The release of some top criminals after the mass uprising as well as continued circulation of arms and ammunition looted from police stations have also contributed to the rising crime. According to police sources, of the 758 mugging suspects arrested in Dhaka from January 1 to February 20, some 115 have been released on bail. Add to that the role of rumours and misinformation on social media, which is only making matters worse.

Given this explosive situation, we need visible improvements in law and order, not assurances or boastful claims. For that, it is not enough to simply increase law enforcement activities; those in charge must too be made accountable. Given the alarming crime statistics as well as security risks associated with Ramadan and the election-related activities down the year, the government must treat law enforcement as its number one priority going forward.

## How long will char dwellers be neglected?

### Govt must do more to improve their lives

We are saddened to see the plight of char dwellers who continue to be denied basic necessities. A recent report in this daily has highlighted the dire living conditions in many chars in Kurigram, where people struggle to earn enough for a tolerable life as they constantly battle floods, droughts, and erosion throughout the year. Improving their quality of life is a battle they cannot win on their own, without proper government support.

Kurigram district alone has 450 chars that are home to around 5.5 lakh people. Unfortunately, employment opportunities in these areas remain scarce. While agriculture is their main source of livelihood, farmers often lack the necessary support to sustain their work. They are forced to sell their produce at low rates while paying exorbitant prices for essential goods. Amid this bread-and-butter struggle, sending their children to school is a luxury many cannot afford.

Not just in Kurigram, those living in chars in other districts also suffer immensely, especially during floods, amid inadequate government relief operations. According to a char resident in Kurigram, during floods, they receive only a few kilograms of relief, and in winter, just a blanket—nothing more. Meanwhile, child marriage and malnutrition remain at alarming levels, and healthcare services are virtually nonexistent, with women and girls suffering the most.

Unfortunately, the government's attempts to improve their situation often lack proper planning and sustainability. For instance, six years ago, to rehabilitate 450 families displaced by natural disasters, the government established three cluster villages on chars in Khulna's Koyra upazila. However, as a recent Prothom Alo report revealed, these houses have already been damaged by tidal surges due to their proximity to the riverbank, a development that should have been foreseen.

We, therefore, urge the government to adopt a bottom-up approach to address the struggles of char dwellers and implement well-thought-out measures to improve their living conditions. Creating sustainable employment opportunities and providing necessary agricultural support should be prioritised. Given that chars are highly disaster-prone areas, the government must pay special attention to disaster preparedness and mitigation. It is unacceptable that residents of remote chars still lack access to basic education and healthcare. These issues must be addressed immediately. Since several NGOs are already working in these regions, the government should coordinate with them to design effective and comprehensive interventions.

# How zila parishad can be an effective local govt body



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Established as a local government body in the Indian subcontinent by the British rulers in 1885, zila parishads (district councils) have not functioned as an ideal democratic institution over the last five decades. In post-independence Bangladesh, zila parishads were formed under the Local Government Ordinance, 1976, but elections were not held. Between 1988 and 1990, zila parishads functioned briefly under appointed chairpersons who were mostly MPs from the ruling party, who enjoyed the status of deputy ministers. In the 1990s, zila parishads existed only in name as a local body, with a few officials and staff working without elected representatives.

Since the Zila Parishad Act was passed in 2000, the government, after more than a decade, appointed administrators in 61 districts, except the three hill districts, for the first time in December 2011. In 2016, elections were held in the zila parishads except in the hill districts, followed by the latest elections of the parishads in 2022. Unfortunately, tokenism became the norm in every regime when it came to the question of zila parishads being a stratum of local government, and none of the governments in Bangladesh genuinely considered it as a viable local government institution. According to recent media reports, the Local Government Reform Commission, constituted on November 18, 2024 by the interim government, has recommended forming strong zila parishads through direct voting, instead of the present system of indirect elections. In the first week of February, the Public Administration Reform Commission, in its recommendations, proposed the abolition of zila parishads, but the Local Government Reform Commission suggested the opposite. The latter recommended that zila parishads should take up the primary role of planning, while upazila and union parishads should undertake

implementation of said plans.

The Local Government Reform Commission is yet to submit its full report; it submitted only a summary of its recommendations to the interim government earlier this month. It includes a total of 210 recommendations in 14 areas. The commission recommended a strong local government system for the country and proposed that zila parishads be formed via direct elections, instead of the current practice of elections by



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upazila parishad, union parishad, and municipality members.

As per law, the zila parishad is supposed to undertake wide-ranging functions, such as: developing infrastructure that includes constructing roads, bridges, culverts, and other rural transport networks; providing social services such as building hospitals, dispensaries, schools, and other educational institutions; building health and sanitation facilities, arranging drinking water, and building rest houses; coordinating activities of union parishads within the district; promoting rural employment

and empowerment of women; developing social, educational and religious institutions; and ensuring maintenance of rural bridges, tanks, ghats, wells, canals, and drains.

In order to carry out the above-mentioned functions, the roles of zila parishad chairperson and members, officers and employees are crucial, but at the same time, it is essential to demarcate the roles of the district administration and give enough scope and allocate adequate funding to the local bodies. As per the administrative structure of Bangladesh, the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives oversees the operation of 61 zila parishads. The Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) Affairs, on the other hand, oversees the work of the three hill districts. The capacity of these two ministries also needs to be enhanced, and permanent cells should

approve. It is necessary to allocate sufficient funds to zila parishads so that they can become a viable local government entity and play a significant role in ensuring growth and planned development of their respective areas. There have been no genuine local-level planning efforts in the country except some pilot exercises undertaken in selected districts in the past. If the recommendation of the commission is accepted, a new participatory planning mechanism will be possible in Bangladesh, and together with stronger monitoring, supervision and evaluation roles added to the zila parishads' functions, a qualitative change in project implementation is likely to be possible in the country. This will have a positive effect on the local economy and the well-being of local people.

Despite good intentions of the Local Government Reform Commission to make zila parishads successful as a local government body in the future, there is a need to appreciate certain issues that should be addressed in order to make the body viable. These are: i) lack of experience of the zila parishads to formulate short- and long-term strategic plans, land-use plans, and regional plans; ii) limited experience in project formulation, infrastructure development, and maintenance; iii) poor leadership capacity; iv) lack of manpower; v) limited local resource generation capacity; and vi) lack of cooperative working relationships with the district administration, service delivery organisations, ministries, and the Planning Commission.

In order to introduce direct elections on the basis of universal adult franchise, the existing zila parishad election rules will have to be amended to switch from the existing electoral college system. Since the district has a large area, in order to ensure that all the eligible voters of the district can cast their votes, the area will have to be divided into a number of smaller constituencies or wards based on the number of voters. In order to undertake the proposed functions, a strong support by the government, local government experts, and trainers to the zila parishads will be required. Some bold steps should be taken in the local government area to fulfil people's aspirations generated through the July uprising. A run-of-the-mill reform will not bring any good for the country.

## Street crime is a product of desperation, poverty, inequality



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Mugging has long been a concern in Dhaka, particularly after dark. However, in recent times, they have been striking in broad daylight, too, armed with machetes, knives, and other weapons. Their targets include shops, pedestrians, rickshaw passengers, and commuters stuck in traffic. Those who resist often suffer serious injuries or even death. This alarming trend has created a climate of fear and insecurity among the residents of the city, raising urgent concerns about public safety and the effectiveness of law enforcement.

On February 8, the government launched a special initiative called Operation Devil Hunt, a joint force operation aimed at curbing unrest and ensuring public safety nationwide. While commendable, such initiatives should prompt deeper reflection on the root causes of street crime. Why do people commit these crimes? What underlying factors drive individuals towards criminal activity? Understanding these issues is crucial for formulating long-term solutions that effectively prevent and address street crimes.

In recent years, a growing body of research has examined the links between economic factors and crimes. Crime is rooted in concrete social and economic conditions—deprivation, joblessness, discrimination, poverty, and social marginalisation. Street crime is often an inevitable by-product

of inequality and injustice within the existing social and economic system. At its core, crime is a product of desperation born from a system that consigns millions to poverty, forces them to live in deteriorating environments, and leaves them with little hope for a better future.

Criminal behaviour thrives when a nation fails to provide for the well-being of its citizens. According to the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2023, the country's population stands at 17.15 crore, with 39.88 percent of youth (aged 15-24 years) neither studying nor working. Approximately 20 percent of the population still lives below the poverty line, with limited access to essential services. However, many experts argue that the actual poverty rate is much higher. Research also shows that income inequality is widening, with the wealthiest 10 percent controlling 40 percent of national income, while the bottom 50 percent holding just 9.05 percent.

Additionally, rising inflation has worsened the struggles of low-income earners in Bangladesh. The prices of daily essentials have consistently increased, in contrast to the global trend of declining prices. A recent World Bank report highlights that 71 percent of families have been affected by rising food prices, meaning nearly 2.91 crore households face food insecurity. In such circumstances, the most vulnerable often turn to

petty crimes like mugging, theft, and drug dealing as survival tactics. Social scientists argue that when survival is at stake, criminal activities may seem like opportunities rather than risky, and crime becomes normalised rather than seen as a deviant act.

I believe two other factors are also fuelling the crisis of rising street crimes in Bangladesh. First, the role of politicians in criminal networks significantly exacerbates street-level crimes. Many politicians are known to control or patronise extortion networks, drug trafficking rings, and youth gangs. Reports suggest that some politicians directly benefit from extortion schemes, with businesses often forced to pay "protection money" to individuals affiliated with political parties. Law enforcement agencies frequently turn a blind eye to such activities, further emboldening these criminal enterprises. This involvement enables politicians to consolidate power at the grassroots level, using criminal groups to intimidate opponents and manipulate elections.

Second, high-profile corruption cases have recently exposed how ministers, top officials, law enforcement leaders, and politically connected businessmen have accumulated billions of dollars through fraudulent means, including bank loan scams. During the 15-plus years of Sheikh Hasina's regime, an estimated Tk 1.61 lakh crore to Tk 2.80 lakh crore was lost to corruption from the development projects under the Annual Development Programme (ADP). This money, obtained through political extortion, bribery, and inflated budgets, was often laundered abroad or reinvested domestically in untraceable sectors, such as real estate.

The unchecked criminality of the upper class has profound psychological effects on society. When politicians and businessmen amass wealth

through fraud, theft, and extortion without consequences, it erodes public trust in honest work. Seeing such impunity, marginalised individuals may feel justified in turning to petty crimes, believing that the system rewards corruption over integrity. The issue is further compounded by an ineffective and, at times, complicit law enforcement system. Many police officers are underpaid or politically pressured, becoming susceptible to corruption. Media reports indicate that police officials often take bribes to ignore criminal activities or, in some cases, actively facilitate crimes.

The rising street crimes in Bangladesh reflect a society in crisis—one where poverty, inequality, unemployment, and corruption intersect to create a toxic environment. Tackling this issue requires more than just stricter policing; it demands a comprehensive approach that addresses the root social and economic causes driving individuals towards crime. Expanding employment opportunities is crucial. Education and vocational training programmes should be prioritised, particularly in marginalised communities. At the same time, the government must take decisive action to hold corrupt politicians, high-profile government officials, and businesspeople accountable. Without justice at the top, it will be impossible to build a society where ordinary citizens feel compelled to follow the law.

Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. If the current trajectory of unchecked corruption and rising street crime continues, the country risks plunging deeper into social unrest. However, with meaningful reforms, there is still hope for a future where economic justice prevails and street crime is no longer a desperate response to systemic failure.