

## Fallout of USAID funding cuts

Govt and NGOs should collaborate to keep key projects alive

Like many countries, Bangladesh was caught off guard by the speed and extent of USAID funding cuts under the Trump administration. Although there is no official data on how many people have lost, or may lose, their jobs due to the freezing of funds, estimates from the development sector suggest that between 30,000 and 40,000 people may be affected. This is deeply concerning, particularly because it will put significant strain on the economy.

According to diplomatic sources, USAID provides Bangladesh with \$300-400 million annually for health, nutrition, agriculture, livelihoods, labour rights, human trafficking prevention, and democratic development. These funds have been instrumental in Bangladesh's progress in areas such as maternal health, climate resilience, and rural development. However, following Donald Trump's inauguration as US president on January 20, his administration swiftly suspended most USAID funding and activities, except for emergency food aid, including assistance for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. This move has not only left thousands of development workers unemployed but also cast severe doubt over the future of various development projects.

Many of these now unfunded projects serve the most vulnerable segments of our society. Whether providing crucial immunisations, essential medicines, affordable birth control, or income-generating opportunities for the poor, their loss will have a far-reaching impact. Some projects also focus on promoting workers' rights or supporting labour related cases. With funding now frozen, many of these labour rights initiatives could be sidelined, leaving workers even more vulnerable to exploitation. In a country like Bangladesh, where a significant portion of the workforce is employed in the informal sector with weak labour protections, this could be devastating.

Many development projects currently facing an existential crisis are similarly essential not only for their beneficiaries but also for society at large. As such, the government must not allow them to collapse. It should instead conduct a thorough evaluation to identify the most critical initiatives and explore ways to sustain them. This could include direct government funding for the high-priority projects, partnerships with international organisations, or securing alternative donor support. NGOs, too, must adapt by assessing their efficiency, optimising operational costs, and exploring sustainable funding sources. Without compromising beneficiary support, they should implement cost-saving measures and seek collaborations with the private sector, philanthropic institutions, and public-private partnerships to reduce dependency on foreign aid.

The USAID funding cuts have posed a serious challenge, but they also underscored the need for a more self-reliant development model. A coordinated approach by the government, NGOs, and the private sector is therefore essential to ensure that crucial programmes continue to serve those who need them most.

## Expedite textbook delivery

NCTB's poor planning is disrupting academic activities

It is deeply disappointing that three months into the new academic year, many school and madrasa students under the national curricula are still without their full set of textbooks, which is severely hampering their studies. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) was supposed to deliver a total of 39.5 crore books to four crore students at the start of the year, but as of the first week of March, over 6.38 crore books remain undelivered. Of them, 6.22 crore are meant for secondary-level students, including those in Ebtedayee madrasas.

As many of us would already know, several factors have impeded the delivery of textbooks this year, including book revisions, the reversion to an older curriculum, the decision to assign printing exclusively to local printers, and delays in tendering, approvals, contracts, etc. However, industry sources told *Prothom Alo* that NCTB's poor planning was a key factor in this setback. In fact, insiders had predicted last year that textbook distribution would not be complete before March, despite NCTB's claims that it would be done by mid-January. Printers had warned of a paper shortage, as much of it is apparently imported from China. Yet, three months later, the same issue persists, with NCTB now blaming printers for failing to secure alternative suppliers and complete the job on time. Why the textbook board did not address this problem earlier—before awarding printing contracts—is a mystery to us.

By now, NCTB's inefficiencies are nothing new. We witnessed a number of hiccups throughout the textbook revision and printing process, with the government body omitting as well as printing wrong information in revised books. Unfortunately, it is students who bear the brunt of these errors and failures, as delays in receiving books directly affect their learning and exam preparation. Under the circumstances, penalising printers, who failed to meet deadlines, is not enough; NCTB officials must also be held accountable. They must explain why a contingency plan was not in place to prevent such delays.

There is also scepticism over NCTB's latest deadline of March 10 for completing textbook distribution, as schools will remain closed throughout Ramadan. We hope this does not become yet another example of NCTB's poor planning. The authorities must ensure that such disruptions do not recur.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Joseph Stalin dies

On this day in 1953, Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin died at age 74 and was succeeded by Georgy Malenkov.

## SPECIAL POWERS ACT, 1974

# Bangladesh's forgotten villain



### MIND THE GAP

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### NOSHIN NAWAL

Bangladesh has a curious love affair with villains—particularly those neatly wrapped up in legal jargon. Mention the Digital Security Act (DSA) or the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT) at your next coffee catch-up, and you'll witness rants more passionate than your melodramatic cousin's Facebook poetry. But casually bring up the Special Powers Act (SPA), 1974, and watch the room go eerily quiet, as though you've referenced an awkward family scandal nobody wishes to recall. It's our quietly menacing dinosaur, a relic still lurking unnoticed in our legal attic—outdated, oppressive, and embarrassingly overdue for retirement.

The Special Powers Act isn't merely another oppressive law—it's the patriarch of Bangladesh's infamous "black laws," a term lovingly reserved for legislation designed primarily to silence anyone who dares to disagree with those in power. Born in the chaotic year of 1974—presumably when human rights were as optional as side dishes at a wedding—it hands the government a chilling ability to detain individuals without bothering with formal charges or pesky courtroom procedures. Initially, the detention is for six months, but here's the diabolical detail: these six-month periods can be renewed indefinitely. Think of it as Bangladesh's own twisted version of Hotel California—you can attempt to check out anytime, but good luck actually leaving.

What's especially alarming is how comfortably the SPA tramples over constitutional protections that are supposed to be sacred. According to Article 33(l) of the Bangladesh Constitution, any arrested individual must be promptly informed of their alleged crime and must have access to legal counsel. Additionally, Article 32 explicitly guarantees protection against arbitrary deprivation of life and liberty. Yet under the SPA, detainees frequently find themselves in a Kafkaesque nightmare—imprisoned indefinitely without knowing their supposed wrongdoing, without lawyers, and without recourse. It casually shreds the principle of habeas corpus, a cornerstone of any legitimate democracy, as if tossing away an unwanted food delivery flyer.

This form of preventive detention cheerfully ignores fundamental due process, casually discarding the rights to a fair trial and presumption of innocence, concepts our constitution claims to uphold. Terms like "prejudicial to national security" or "disturbing

public order" are deliberately vague, conveniently allowing authorities to target virtually anyone—from outspoken journalists and opposition figures to students whose only crime is to exercise their democratic rights.

Ironically, while activists justifiably raise hell over digital censorship via the DSA, the SPA goes quietly unnoticed, merrily detaining people without causing hashtags, tweets, or even the mildest online outrage. Amnesty International and Human Rights Forum Bangladesh have previously pointed to thousands of SPA detentions, citing devastated families,

relatives without answers, recourse, or support. Entire communities are held hostage by fear. Yet, because this abuse happens discreetly rather than dramatically, it fails to attract widespread empathy. Apparently, silent suffering doesn't make great headlines.

At present, Bangladesh finds itself led by an interim government promising significant institutional reform. Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, now overseeing the transition, speaks eloquently about restoring democratic norms and constitutional rights. These reforms have inspired considerable hope. Yet, curiously absent from the discourse is any meaningful effort to address, amend, or—heaven forbid—repeal the SPA. It's as if everyone is busily rearranging furniture in a sinking house while ignoring the colossal, dinosaur-shaped hole in the ceiling.

Over decades, civil society leaders, legal experts, and human rights advocates have tirelessly argued that the SPA's unchecked powers are fundamentally incompatible with democratic ideals. Young Bangladeshis, whose hashtags and social media-driven activism have changed national conversations, are growing increasingly impatient with a law older than their parents, and

embarrassingly overdue for retirement.

However, the interim government now has a historic opportunity—indeed, a moral obligation—to confront this embarrassing and dangerous law. A dedicated, independent commission must urgently review the SPA, offering meaningful, rights-respecting alternatives. Many democracies worldwide manage national security concerns without permanently sacrificing constitutional protections. Judicial oversight, transparency, and accountability are achievable goals; Bangladesh certainly doesn't lack the capability, merely the will.

Repealing or radically reforming the SPA wouldn't merely be symbolic—it would signify a profound and lasting shift in the state-citizen relationship.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

It would finally honour constitutional promises made under Articles 32 and 33(l), bringing Bangladesh closer to genuine democracy.

So, next time you sit with friends, passionately dissecting the latest digital outrage over overpriced cappuccinos, perhaps spare a thought (and a hashtag) for this quietly terrifying villain. The Special Powers Act has lurked in our shadows since 1974—far too long, and far too damaging, to continue going unnoticed.

It's high time Bangladesh finally confronted this sinister dinosaur. Let's consign it where it belongs: safely in history's junkyard, alongside outdated rotary phones, embarrassingly wide bell-bottom pants, and every other idea best left firmly in the past.

## Is smoking the problem, or that women are doing it?



### Naziba Basher

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### NAZIBA BASHER

A leisurely chat over a cup of tea and a quick smoke hardly has an ominous ring or suggest any associated danger—other than the consumption of tobacco and sugar, of course. Yet, that is exactly what turned out to be a nightmare for two people at a tea stall in Dhaka's Lalmatia area on Saturday. The only reason was that they were women.

An elderly man took offence and remarked that women should not be allowed to smoke there, at which the two women were duly offended. An altercation ensued with slurs quickly turning into slaps. In an appalling turn of events, the persecutor, a man well into his 60s, managed to incite a mob, calling the women "whores" for smoking in public. The mob pounced on the women. They were abused, harassed and assaulted. They were injured and parts of their clothes were ripped off. All because they smoked in public. Taken away into police custody, the two were then told not to file a complaint.

When asked about the matter later, Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury duly noted that smoking in public is an offence—whether the laws against public smoking applied in this case could be a matter of debate—and that people should refrain from this habit. He also remarked that there had been a spat between the women and the old man, and that one of the women had apparently splashed tea on the man, thus triggering the whole incident.

However, the home adviser did not, for once, note the criminal nature of what the men had done to those women.

The Penal Code, 1860 in Bangladesh criminalises sexual assault against women, criminal force with intent to discolour, and attempt of wrongful confinement of women (sections 354, 355 and 375), all of which apply to the mob and the elderly villain in question—all of them men, by the way, and perhaps many smokers among them too.

It is not about the consumption of tobacco (chewing zarda, for instance) but the act of smoking by women that is generally associated with Westernised rebelliousness, that almost automatically lends itself to "bad character." Women who smoke are frequently labelled as "wayward," implying they lack traditional values. Not for men, though. For them it might be seen as an added layer of appeal—a show of masculinity, even.

This double standard is deeply rooted in subcontinental gender norms, cultural expectations, and moral policing, which dictate that women should embody ideals of modesty, virtue, and domesticity.

In a justified show of outrage, people protested, many women among them. On Monday, protesters under the banner of "Bangladesh Against Rape and Oppression" staged a demonstration protesting what happened in Lalmatia, burning an effigy of the home adviser and demanding his resignation. They argued that while smoking in public may be subject to legal restrictions, it does not justify physical assault. They also criticised the adviser for failing to acknowledge the criminal actions perpetrated by the attackers against the two women in Lalmatia.

This is not at all about encouraging women—or men—to smoke. Smoking is harmful for both men and women. It increases the risk of lung cancer, other forms of cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), chronic bronchitis, and emphysema, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, strokes, hormonal imbalances, and fertility issues for BOTH male and female smokers. No, it is about the male chauvinistic mindset that sets unreasonable standards for one gender and not the other. The same mindset spills into other spheres of public life—participation in sports, attire or even the nature of employment—with equal toxicity.

What happened in Lalmatia and our home adviser's response that followed had nothing to do with smoking. They only proved themselves as two more specimens confirming the stereotype which is easily threatened. It is quite simply discrimination. The same turn of events would have been quite beyond the question if it were two men.

It was never about smoking. It is just that women were doing it, and perhaps seen to be invading what is deemed to be men's territory. Feminist movements, urban youth cultures, and changing attitudes are slowly pushing back against these outdated norms, but incidents like the one in Lalmatia show that there is still a long way to go. But we will continue to raise our voice against injustice and gender-based violence.

With or without a cigarette between the fingers.

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