

## Take steps to improve Rohingya security

ARSA chief’s arrest highlights militant threats in camps

The recent arrest of Ataullah Abu Ammar Jununi, commander-in-chief of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), along with 10 others, has once again highlighted the militant threats long plaguing the refugee camps in Bangladesh. On Tuesday, Ataullah and six others were placed on remand while the rest were sent to jail. Earlier, Rab made the arrests after conducting special drives in Narayanganj and Mymensingh. According to case filings cited by Prothom Alo, all the arrestees except one hailed from Myanmar’s Rakhine State, likely arriving in Bangladesh sometime after the mass exodus of Rohingya in 2017. This development is significant given how militant groups like ARSA have terrorised the Rohingya camps for years, engaging in targeted killings, abductions, trafficking, extortion, and such crimes.

Ataullah and his group first gained prominence after they carried out an attack on Myanmar’s border posts in Rakhine in October 2016, resulting in the deaths of several officers. They gained wider notice following their August 25, 2017 attacks on around 30 police and army posts that led to the ruthless military crackdown that drove around 740,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. Since then, ARSA has continued its activities within the refugee settlements. Hundreds of Rohingya are believed to have been killed by ARSA members. The group has also been accused of targeting Rohingya leaders advocating for repatriation, including the 2022 assassination of Mohib Ullah, chairman of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights. ARSA has also been linked to the killing of a DGFI officer near the Tumbru border, showing how militant threats within the camps spilled onto nearby territories, threatening our internal security.

For years, however, the Awami League government refused to acknowledge the activities of Rohingya militant groups. This not only provided cover for their operations but also created an environment of impunity that allowed them to expand their criminal networks. Even though ARSA appeared to have lost ground to its rival Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) since 2023, the relative security vacuum has led to an exponential rise in violence—with murders, abductions, and extortion skyrocketing between 2022 and 2024, according to a recent report by Fortify Rights.

Against this backdrop, the government must take stern action to dismantle these militant groups. While it is true that they may try to exploit the vulnerabilities caused by the recent cuts in US funding for Rohingya refugees—with fewer resources now available for them—there is no alternative to strengthening internal security measures. The government should launch a comprehensive crackdown on all armed groups operating within the camps. Moreover, it must ensure that captured militants face justice, whether through domestic legal proceedings or through international mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court, as the director of Fortify Rights has recommended. While the wait for repatriation prolongs, we cannot sit back and delay action on these threats anymore.

## Don’t sacrifice haors for development

Road construction through Sunamganj haor destroying cropland, harvest

We are alarmed to learn of the impact the ongoing road construction project through the Sanghai Haor in Sunamganj is having on the surrounding cropland and paddy harvest. According to a recent report by Prothom Alo, under a special project of the disaster management and relief ministry, a four-kilometre road is being constructed through the haor by digging up soil from surrounding paddy fields. In doing so, saplings of Boro paddy—the harvest of which is due in Baishakh (April-May)—are being destroyed. This is not only harming the haor and its ecosystem, but also affecting the people whose livelihoods depend on this wetland.

According to the report, this project was of special interest to former Planning Minister MA Mannan, whose home village is supposed to be connected by this road. When the works began last year, farmers protested the destruction of their cropland. After that, Mannan apparently instructed the project contractor to provide financial compensation to the affected farmers. However, not only have the farmers not received any compensation to date, but they have not even been informed about the extent of losses they are set to suffer.

Meanwhile, even though Mannan and his party are no longer in the picture, others with vested interests have taken over to support the project, with soil being excavated from arable land at present. Farmers are naturally frustrated by this state of affairs. One of them said he had already lost one-fourth of the cropland he owned in the area. Another lamented that his livelihood is at risk because the road is being constructed on the cropland. What’s more, such infrastructure will obstruct the natural water flow of the haor, which may lead to large-scale flooding during the monsoon season.

We fail to comprehend how the authorities, despite such harmful impacts of the project, are still allowing the construction work to continue, especially when farmers and environmentalists have been vocal about its risks. At the least, they should suspend the construction work immediately and reassess the entire project plan. In the changed reality of this new Bangladesh, acting responsibly to protect the delicate ecosystem of a haor and the people who depend on it for their livelihoods should not be difficult. We urge the relevant government offices, especially the Sunamganj district administration, to look into the matter and stop all activities that are harmful to the haor and its people.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Operation Searchlight approved

On this day in 1971, General Abdul Hamid Khan and Lt Gen Tikka Khan at the flagstaff house in Dhaka Cantonment reviewed, amended and approved the hand-written Operation Searchlight, which initiated the Bangladesh genocide on March 25.

# We must create an equitable tax system



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MAMUN RASHID

In Bangladesh, nearly 70 percent of total tax revenue comes from indirect taxes, meaning whether one is a rickshaw puller or a corporate executive, they need to pay the same rate of value-added tax (VAT) on essential goods. Consequently, the less financially privileged contribute a larger share of their income to the state than the wealthy.

For years, the gap between the ultra-rich and the working class has widened, fuelled, in part, by a tax system that rewards wealth accumulation while punishing spending. It is a well-documented fact that countries that rely heavily on indirect taxation tend to have higher income inequality, and Bangladesh is no exception. The reliance on VAT, excise duties, and other consumption-based levies disproportionately affects lower-income groups, keeping them locked in a cycle of financial insecurity. Meanwhile, a significant portion of high-net-worth individuals remain outside the formal tax net, either due to loopholes or sheer administrative inefficiency.

Broadening the tax base is not about extracting more from those who are already struggling; rather, it’s about ensuring that those who can contribute more do so. The informal sector, which comprises nearly 85 percent of Bangladesh’s workforce, remains largely untapped in terms of direct taxation. It is because the system was never designed with them in mind. Small traders, street vendors, and gig workers are often wary of formalising their businesses due to bureaucratic red tape and fears of arbitrary harassment from tax officials. However, there are models in countries like Indonesia and Mexico, where simplified tax regimes for small enterprises have resulted in higher voluntary compliance and increased revenue collection without undue burden. For example, Indonesia introduced a fixed income tax on micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) at a flat rate of 0.5 percent of turnover, significantly reducing compliance burdens while increasing participation. Similarly, Mexico has boosted tax compliance among small enterprises through the Régimen de Incorporación Fiscal (RIF), integrating informal businesses into the tax system with lower rates initially and

simplified filing. This transition, however, cannot happen without modernisation. Tax administration in Bangladesh still largely relies on outdated mechanisms that invite inefficiency and corruption. In an era where digital financial transactions have skyrocketed, it is almost comical that tax filings and compliance checks remain heavily paper-based. The National Board of Revenue (NBR) made attempts to digitise certain processes, but these efforts remain fragmented and inadequate. India’s introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) demonstrated that digitisation, when



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

done correctly, can significantly reduce tax evasion and increase revenue without raising tax rates. Bangladesh needs a similar push; one that is not limited to urban corporations but extends to small businesses, rural entrepreneurs, and even individual professionals. For instance, adopting a flat tax rate or turnover tax could make the process less daunting for small entrepreneurs who may lack the resources to navigate complex tax regulations. Furthermore, fostering partnerships with intermediaries can help bridge the gap between the government and informal workers, promoting awareness of tax obligations while providing essential support. However, the political will to reform tax structures has always been met

while promoting fairness within the tax system. Such changes will improve fiscal health and encourage investment and economic growth, as businesses are less encumbered by a convoluted regulatory framework.

A key factor in ensuring tax compliance is trust. No one would willingly pay taxes if they believe that their money is being misused. In countries where tax revenue is transparently managed, compliance is significantly higher. Improving taxpayer services is crucial to ensuring this trust. One of the primary measures involves simplifying the tax regime to create a more user-friendly environment for taxpayers. A simplified tax structure not only minimises loopholes that companies exploit but also makes it easier for

# Reconstructing society: Lessons from a cybercrime case



Taslima Tinni is a human rights activist.

TASLIMA TINNI

Two months back, I was drawn into a traumatic cybercrime case that highlighted the depth of societal issues we face today. The ordeal began when the family of a young adolescent girl reached out to me to help uncover the identity of someone harassing their daughter through a fake messenger account. Shockingly, the perpetrator had used AI technology to create explicit videos of the girl by superimposing her face onto pornographic footage. They then demanded money, threatening to either share the videos with a wider audience or resort to an even more horrific act: throwing acid at her.

These crimes not only gravely violate personal dignity but frighteningly misuse emerging technology. With the support of law enforcement, journalists, development workers, lawyers, and activists, I joined the family in their pursuit of justice. Together, we embarked on a relentless 15-day journey to identify the perpetrator. When the truth finally came to light, I was stunned to discover that the person responsible was a 15-year-old girl and that she had targeted multiple

girls with the same malicious actions. I was shaken to my core, not just because of the unexpected identity of the perpetrator, but because of the deeper implications it holds for our society.

As I reflect on this experience, I find myself deeply questioning the foundational structures of our society, the role of families, the effectiveness of the educational system, and the values implanted in children. These questions weigh heavily on my heart, leaving me grappling with the unsettling reality of the societal trajectory. What makes this even more alarming is that the girl’s parents are both teachers—individuals entrusted with shaping the minds and values of countless children in our society. It highlights the shortcomings of our social institutions, and the need for increased empathy, respect, and understanding of the consequences of our actions.

Family is essential for teaching empathy, discipline, and morals. Rigid control can promote negative views and criminal behaviour, further warping children’s moral compass, while neglectful circumstances can

cause them to seek authority or recognition. In the context of this case, one could wonder: what unmet emotional needs or lack of guidance led the perpetrator to such an act? Families need to be more aware of the emotional and psychological needs of their children, teaching them the importance of respect, self-awareness, and ethical behaviour.

The educational system often prioritises academic achievement over emotional and social development, neglecting digital literacy, ethics, and interpersonal skills. To create emotionally intelligent citizens, schools should focus on empathy and responsibility. They should help students evolve to create a meticulous understanding of the impact of their actions on others.

The rise of social media has influenced young minds, leading to a culture of validation and attention-seeking. It’s crucial to create safe spaces for young people to express themselves without resorting to harmful or unethical means.

Why a person might find such criminal acts tempting requires delving into the psychosocial factors at play. Adolescents are naturally curious and impressionable. When combined with easy access to advanced technology, curiosity can lead to dangerous experimentation. The perpetrator in this case likely did not fully understand the harm and long-term consequences of her actions. For some individuals, committing such acts provides a sense of control or power. Insecure

firms to comply with tax regulations. Additionally, implementing a rules-based regime with minimal ministerial discretion can enhance transparency and consistency in tax administration, hence reducing opportunities for profit shifting and tax avoidance schemes.

Furthermore, investing in technology is crucial because leveraging advancements in data analytics can improve the government’s ability to monitor compliance effectively. This could include automating filing processes and providing online platforms where taxpayers can easily access information and submit their taxes. Clear communication about the purpose of taxes, along with how they contribute to national development, can foster a sense of civic responsibility and encourage greater voluntary compliance from corporations.

Moreover, promoting a culture of accountability within tax administration is vital. Training tax officials to engage positively with taxpayers and address grievances promptly can significantly reduce harassment issues. Participatory budgeting models, where communities have a say in how local tax revenues are spent, have worked wonders in places like Porto Alegre, Brazil, where citizens directly influence municipal spending, and Quezon City, Philippines, where participatory processes improved local tax collection and service delivery. If Bangladesh wants its citizens to comply voluntarily, it needs to foster trust by demonstrating that tax money is being used effectively, whether through improved healthcare, better infrastructure, or more accessible education.

Loopholes and exemptions further complicate matters. Large corporations often exploit tax holidays, incentives, and strategic accounting to minimise their contributions. While some incentives are necessary to attract investment, the excessive use of tax breaks means that multinational corporations contribute far less to Bangladesh’s economy than they should.

For too long, discussions on tax reform in Bangladesh have been trapped in theoretical debates and political grandstanding. Without immediate action, we risk deepening economic divides and stalling our progress towards becoming a middle-income country. This is not just about revenue but about fairness, sustainability, and ensuring that the economic burdens of the future do not continue to fall on those who can least afford them. If we want a Bangladesh that thrives, then it is time to stop treating taxation as a mere administrative function and start seeing it for what it truly is: the foundation of an equitable society.