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Democracy can't do without a free press

Political leaders tell Editors' Council discussion marking World Press Freedom Day

STAFF CORRESPSONDENT

Political parties have stressed their commitment to ensuring press freedom, recognising it as essential for democracy and good governance, and warning that its absence leads to fascism.

They also emphasised the need for upholding the values of ethical journalism and said the media should not be used for corporate or other vested interests.

The remarks were made at a discussion organised by the Editors' Council to mark the World Press Freedom Day at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday.

In his speech, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said, "We can assure you that we [the BNP] have always been, and will continue to be, in favour of press freedom -- whether we are in government or not."

> **"We have fought before, we are still fighting, and we will continue the fight. We will never support unjust imposition of one's views on others. We will, of course, firmly uphold the right to freedom of opinion."**
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> BNP Secretary General
> **Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir**

He highlighted his party's history of standing against the oppression faced by the media, as well as the "clearly fascist" laws imposed on the media under the previous regime.

"We have fought before, we are still fighting, and we will continue this fight. We will never support unjust imposition of one's views on others. We will, of course, firmly uphold the right to freedom of opinion.

"If we ever get the chance to govern, we will institutionalise press freedom. If we remain in opposition, we will continue our fight to ensure it."

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

With golden bales of harvested paddy hoisted on their shoulders, farmers head homeward, crossing the canal via a slender bamboo bridge that links one side of the haor to the other. The photo was taken recently from Zilkarkandi Haor in Sylhet.

No deal on humanitarian channel yet

Says Khalilur; 'won't engage in any proxy war in Rakhine'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh will not engage in any proxy war, as suggested by a news portal of a neighbouring country, National Security Adviser Khalilur Rahman said yesterday.

The news portal falsely claimed that Bangladesh and the US were preparing for a proxy war in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, he added.

"If we were waging a proxy war on behalf of the US, China would be the first to be affected. Why isn't China protesting? Why is the disinformation campaign coming from elsewhere?"

SEE PAGE 8 COL 4

Journo protection law at review stage

Adviser Mahfuj says govt embarrassed by false cases against journalists

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government is working to introduce a law for the protection of journalists, Information and Broadcasting Adviser Mahfuj Alam has said.

He made the remarks along with several observations while speaking as the chief guest at an event titled "Brave New Bangladesh: Reform Roadmap for Press Freedom" yesterday. The Dhaka office of Unesco, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), and Swedish embassy jointly organised the programme at the TIB office in Dhanmondi.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 4

Some banks hit by capital squeeze

BB data shows a key indicator of financial health stands at just 3.08%, while most banks remain strong

MD MEHEDI HASAN

Bangladesh's banking sector is struggling with a weakened capital base following years of unchecked irregularities during the Awami League's tenure, with a key measure of financial strength falling to a new low.

Fresh data from Bangladesh Bank shows, capital-to-risk-weighted assets ratio (CRAR) across the sector dropped to just 3.08 percent at the end of 2024, below the 10 percent minimum required under the Basel III framework, an international set of reforms. The figure marks a steep decline from 6.86 percent three months earlier and 10.64 percent in June 2023.

While some banks continue to maintain healthy capital buffers, the data reveal a deep divide within the industry. State-owned, Islamic Shariah-based, and specialised banks have seen

SEE PAGE 5 COL 5

IMMINENT RISK OF SEVERE PRODUCTION DISRUPTION IN THE TEXTILE AND RMG SECTOR DUE TO GAS CRISIS: EXPORT DECLINES, MOUNTING FINANCIAL PRESSURE AND GROWING RISKS TO LOAN SERVICING AND WAGE PAYMENTS

A sudden and severe gas supply crisis has gripped Bangladesh's industrial sector with devastating effects on textile mills and ready-made garment (RMG) factories in particular. Over the past two weeks, the situation has steadily deteriorated causing serious concern among manufacturers and exporters. Acute gas shortages have forced many export-oriented and domestic mills to scale down or entirely halt production operations. Due to a shortage of gas, garment factories are unable to carry out their production activities. As a result, in order to meet delivery deadlines under ongoing purchase orders, they are being forced to ship products to international buyers by air at significantly higher costs. This is causing these garment factories to incur substantial financial losses.

The textile and RMG sectors have long struggled with inconsistent gas supply. Despite repeated government assurances of uninterrupted service, gas prices have risen by more than 300% in recent years. At the same time, mill owners had to pay substantial security deposits. These measures have failed to improve supply conditions.

Amid ongoing global tariff conflicts and shifting geopolitical dynamics, many international manufacturing firms are relocating to countries offering more stable production environments. Bangladesh had the potential to attract significant investment from these relocating industries. However, the persistent gas crisis and growing weaknesses in the financial sector will potentially undermine this opportunity.

Despite numerous appeals, letters and formal petitions submitted to the Honorable Chief Adviser of the Interim Government and other relevant authorities following the movements in July–August last year, no effective resolution to the gas crisis has been achieved. Most recently, gas prices were further increased despite strong objections from industry stakeholders. A key factor behind the current crisis appears to be the diversion of gas from industrial use to increase electricity and fertilizer production. Within the TITAS Gas distribution network alone, industrial gas supply has dropped by approximately 100 million cubic feet per day. In addition to that, we believe the system loss is close to 20% primarily, because EVC (Electronic Volume Corrector) meters have not been installed in all textile mills and garment factories. As a result, the actual extent of system loss remains unclear.

Textile and RMG factories affiliated with BTMA, BGMEA, BKMEA and BTTLMEA together account for nearly 85% of Bangladesh's total export earnings. Yet, these vital export-oriented sectors are not being prioritized in gas distribution. As a result, major contributors to the country's foreign exchange reserves are now struggling to maintain regular production.

There has been clear evidence of even zero gas pressure at most of the mills and factories. If this crisis continues, an estimated USD 70 billion in investments across the textile and RMG sectors will be at serious risk. The resulting production losses will reduce exports, negatively affect foreign reserves and undermine recent government initiatives aimed at macroeconomic stabilization. The broader economy will face additional strain deepening financial distress and increasing the likelihood of loan defaults and wage payment disruptions. Industry stakeholders are gravely concerned. Present Gas crisis if not addressed adequately will worsen new job creation and will create uncertainty in salary payments for existing workers.

Despite the severity of the crisis, no concrete action plan or strategic roadmap has been issued by the responsible agencies, including the Ministry of Energy, BERC, Petrobangla or TITAS Gas. Given the urgency, the government must immediately prioritize and guarantee uninterrupted gas supply to the textile and RMG sectors. Critical steps must be taken without delay including halting system losses, disconnecting illegal connections, directing BERC, Petrobangla, TITAS and other supply agencies to suspend profit-maximization practices and eliminating VAT at all levels of gas distribution. A recent photo of the gas meter from a textile mill is shown below:

BTMA | BGMEA | BKMEA Working Today to Shine Tomorrow | EXPORT OR PERISH BTTLMEA

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