

No democracy, rule of law sans press freedom

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point, even if we all strongly believe that a case is false, and many people, often uninvolved, are implicated."

Nazrul urged journalists to contribute to legal reforms. "You all can sit with the best legal minds in Bangladesh in a roundtable discussion and suggest what we should do, I promise that we will act accordingly."

Reflecting on the broader culture of repression, the adviser said, "For 15 years, a culture of filing false cases has taken root. During this time, we collectively failed to protest. We really couldn't. I always say that when anarchy begins in a country, it breeds more anarchy. The backlash of misrule lasts for years."

He said the government had already taken some steps. "We have already repealed all cases under the Digital Security Act. We have made the necessary changes. If you want me to raise my voice every week, I will. There will be no mercy for those who file false cases."

"Those who file false cases, at some level, carry on Sheikh Hasina's legacy. Sheikh Hasina used to file false cases. We removed her. Now, some people are internalising her bad practices. I question and condemn them."

He added, "Our police have been strictly instructed not to arrest anyone without substantial proof. But radical change cannot happen overnight. We may hope for it, but implementing it is difficult. We truly feel sorrow in many cases. Imagine someone suffering because of a false case. It's deeply painful."

"We in the government are all embarrassed by the harassment caused by false and abusive cases. But we are constantly trying. I urge everyone to suggest necessary legal amendments or steps. We will try to implement them," he said.

"If a case reaches a stage where the law ministry has a role to play, we will fulfil our responsibility," he added.

Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam said, "We can't really

say we've reached a strong position in journalism. Circulation fluctuates. We are creating many narratives and making progress in several areas. But somehow, the lives of journalists remain precarious."

He stressed the real-life consequences faced by journalists. "In the past, many journalists have had to die for dissent. When we talk about freedom of speech, the truth is—we haven't been able to secure that space properly. Despite the government's good intentions, some people are

police work can be extremely slow."

"Our interim government truly wishes to institutionalise freedom of speech. That's why, right at the beginning, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus invited editors and said, Everyone, open your hearts and speak freely."

"Beyond freedom of speech, a journalist deserves dignity. That dignity must be recognised by everyone, and their salaries should be paid properly."

Bangladesh Press Council



Guests and NOAB members at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh at a city hotel yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

trying to hijack those efforts. From the beginning, we've been clear that we don't want to shut down any newspaper or TV station."

About the cases against journalists, Shafiqul said, "Some people even file murder cases against journalists. And in such cases, our legal framework is so inadequate that I often find myself unable to help them in a meaningful way. Investigations are ongoing, but

Chairman Justice AKM Abdul Hakim said he would do everything necessary for the betterment of journalists.

NOAB President AK Azad said they were celebrating the milestone at a time when journalism in the country was at a critical crossroads.

"Over the past two decades, NOAB has remained firmly committed to defending press freedom, protecting journalists' rights, and improving

their quality of life, always in line with the law of the land, and committed to developing the journalism ecosystem."

He highlighted how the previous government suppressed the media in various ways and failed to provide incentives even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Today, our industry faces additional threats—declining circulation, reduced revenues, and rising production costs due to inflation. Print journalism is under

structural conflicts. Out of 45 industrial sectors in the country, 43 fall under the labour ministry, while only the newspaper industry is under the information ministry. This discrepancy has led to continued legal conflict, currently pending in the High Court."

Azad urged the government to repeal all repressive laws enacted during authoritarian regimes.

"We call for the full repeal of repressive laws and any new legislation that may stifle free expression."

Mahfuz Anam, founding president of NOAB, reflected on the media's difficult journey. "We have not been able to truly establish independent journalism in Bangladesh. That's because we have failed to make any government understand that criticism is acceptable. Independent journalism is the government's best friend, not its enemy. But they always prefer praise. The moment there is criticism, their attitude changes, and we are marked as enemies."

He added that the trend of filing false and abusive cases is weakening journalists and eroding public trust.

"When officials say, 'There's nothing to be done,' even when the law is misused, it emboldens others to keep filing such cases. It's killing journalists' spirit, morale, and image. If punitive action is taken even just two or three such incidents, this harmful trend will begin to stop."

"For those of us in the media, our true commitment is to the country. Our loyalty is to the people. Loyalty should be to our independence—not to promote the interests of any particular group. Independent media cannot serve factional interests," he said.

The event was chaired by NOAB Senior Vice President ASM Shahidullah Khan Badal and moderated by NOAB member Dewan Hanif Mahmud. Political leaders, businesspersons, and diplomats were among the attendees.

The event began with a solo performance by singer Warda Ashraf.

"NOAB is not against journalists' welfare. The problem lies in

95% pvt facilities running without valid licences

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clearance certificate was recently made mandatory for renewal. Previously, healthcare facilities could submit proof that they had applied for clearance, and that was deemed sufficient.

"Obtaining a clearance certificate takes a considerable amount of time," the official said seeking anonymity.

A divisional director pointed out that the DGHS lacks dedicated manpower to inspect the huge number of healthcare facilities, often resulting in a backlog of applications.

Another DGHS official, on the condition of anonymity, said that previously, vehicles and fuel needed for inspections of healthcare facilities were funded under a special arrangement.

"But that arrangement is no longer in place, which is hampering the process."

Several health officials said that many service providers often take advantage of the authorities' failure to inspect the facilities timely due to manpower shortage. They simply submit applications without the necessary or up-to-date documents and continue operations.

Service providers are now demanding that the government ease regulations to let them renew licences every two years, they added.

Contacted, Abu Hussain Md Moinul Ahsan, director (hospitals) at the DGHS, said, "Many applications

are pending because the hospitals or diagnostic centres concerned have failed to submit up-to-date documents."

The designated committees are gradually inspecting healthcare facilities, he said, expressing hope that the number of licence renewals will increase significantly by the end of this fiscal year.

ABM Haroon, acting president of Bangladesh Private Hospital, Clinic and Diagnostic Owners Association, claimed that 90 percent of the hospitals and diagnostic centres have submitted applications for licence renewal.

"But renewal is getting delayed as the DGHS lacks necessary manpower for inspection of facilities," he told The Daily Star on April 29.

"Besides, it takes a long time to obtain environmental and narcotics clearance, which further slows down the renewal process."

He said they requested the government to allow them to renew licences biennially, citing the ongoing manpower crisis at the DGHS.

Responding to a query, he said that a medical facility running without a renewed licence risks closure for non-compliance. However, the authorities take such action only in cases of serious irregularities.

Prof MA Faiz, former director general of the DGHS, said the number of health facilities has increased

significantly over the years but the health authority's capacity to monitor their quality of service has not improved much.

"Those who are running hospitals or diagnostic centres also have responsibility here ... No facility should be operating without an updated licence."

Once a licence is renewed, it becomes possible to verify whether a hospital or diagnostic centre has the required manpower, equipment, and other essential components in place, he noted.

People pay for services, but they often have no idea about the actual condition of a medical facility. That's why inspection and licence renewal are necessary, he added.

Contacted, Prof Sayedur Rahman, special assistant to the chief adviser for the health ministry, said, "The shortage of manpower and resources needs to be addressed, and the system should be developed accordingly."

"It may not be possible to increase manpower and resources immediately. We are aware of the reality and will try to resolve the issues," he told this correspondent on April 29.

Asked about the service providers' demand for biennial licence renewal, he said, "This involves procedural and legal issues. There will be discussions before a decision is made in this regard."

rule.

Hasina, her defence adviser Maj Gen (retd) Tarique Ahmed Siddique, ex-IGP Benazir Ahmed, forcibly retired Maj Gen Ziaul Ahsan, and eight others have been accused in the case.

The third case has been filed over "mass killings" during a Hefajat-e Islam protest at Motijheel's Shapla Chattar on May 5, 2013, against Hasina and four others—former home minister Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, ex-inspector general of police Hassan Mahmood Khandker, then DMP commissioner Benazir Ahmed, and Imran H Sarker, spokesperson for Gonojagor Mancha, a platform that demanded the highest penalty for war criminals.

The ICT has already issued arrest warrants in those cases against Hasina who has been in India since her government fell on August 5 last year.

The National Central Bureau (NCB) of Bangladesh Police has already submitted a request to Interpol seeking a "red notice" against 12 people, including Hasina.

Hasina will begin with filing of the "formal charge", he said.

He added that the formal charge against senior police officials over the killings of six people in the capital's Chankharpool during the July uprising would be pressed this week.

On April 22, the ICT fixed May 25 for the prosecutors to press charges against former DMP commissioner Habibur Rahman and seven other police personnel over the killings on August 5 last year.

According to the prosecution, 22 cases are currently pending with the ICT, and 339 complaints have already been filed with the ICT investigation agency over the July atrocities.

Of the cases, three cases have been lodged against Hasina.

One case has named Hasina and former IGP Chowdhury Abdulla Al Mamun as responsible for their command decisions related to crimes against humanity during the July uprising.

Another case involves allegations of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings during the 15 and a half years of Awami League

rule.

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reckless conduct has brought the two nuclear-armed states closer to a major conflict," Shafiqat Ali Khan told a briefing in Islamabad.

On the third day of tit for tat exchanges, the Indian army said it "repulsed" waves of Pakistani attacks using drones and other munitions overnight, and gave a "befitting reply".

India also accused Pakistani forces on Thursday of targeting three military stations—two in Kashmir and one in the neighbouring state of Punjab.

Pakistan Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said the Indian army statement was "baseless and misleading", and that Pakistan had not undertaken any "offensive actions" targeting areas within Indian Kashmir or beyond the country's border.

Despite the denial, Indian officials said a new wave of drone attacks targeted Indian Kashmir yesterday evening, including the city of Jammu.

The source said "drones have been sighted in Jammu, Samba" in Indian administered Kashmir and in Pathankot in the neighbouring state of Punjab, adding: "They are being engaged".

Indian run Kashmir's Chief Minister Omar Abdullah said on X: "Intermittent sounds of blasts, probably heavy artillery, can now be heard from where I am" in Jammu, adding that there was a blackout in the city.

AFP journalists on the ground reported heavy artillery shelling in the Indian village of Poonch near the border.

Earlier, India accused Pakistan of endangering civilian lives by keeping its airspace open during drone and missile attacks on multiple Indian cities, allegedly using commercial flights as a shield against counter-strikes.

At a special briefing, an Indian military spokesperson said Pakistan launched 300-400 Turkish drones on the nights of May 7-8, targeting Indian cities.

Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri said those hit civilian infrastructure and some military sites, calling Pakistan's denial of involvement "an example of their duplicity."

Meanwhile, Pakistan's foreign ministry spokesman yesterday said that India's "jingoism and war hysteria" should be a source of serious concern for the world.

It is most unfortunate that India's

reckless conduct has brought the two nuclear-armed states closer to a major conflict," Shafiqat Ali Khan told a briefing in Islamabad.

Later, Pakistan's military spokesman said it would not "de-escalate" with India.

"We will not de-escalate -- with the damages India did on our side, they should take a hit," Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry told media at a briefing.

"So far, we have been protecting ourselves, but they will get an answer in our own timing."

In Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, officials said heavy shelling from across the border killed five civilians, including an infant, and injured 29 in the early hours of yesterday.

"In response, the Pakistan Army carried out a strong counterattack, targeting three Indian posts," police official Adeel Khan told AFP from Kotli district, where four of the deaths occurred.

Pakistani military sources, meanwhile, said that forces had shot down 77 Indian drones in the last two days, claiming they were Israeli-made.

In Indian-administered Kashmir, a police official said one woman was killed and three people were wounded by heavy overnight shelling in Uri, some 100 kilometres from the state capital Srinagar.

"Several houses caught fire and were damaged in the shelling," the official said.

Sirens blared for more than two hours yesterday in India's border city of Amritsar, which houses the Golden Temple revered by Sikhs, and residents were asked to remain indoors.

Militants have stepped up operations in Kashmir since 2019, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government revoked its limited autonomy and took the state under direct rule from New Delhi.

Yesterday, schools were closed on both sides of the Pakistan and Indian border in Kashmir and Punjab, affecting tens of millions of children.

India has also closed 24 airports, but according to local media, the suspension on civilian flights may be lifted today.

The conflict has caused major disruption to international aviation, with airlines having to cancel flights or use longer routes that don't overly the

Indian-Pakistan frontier.

The Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket tournament was suspended for a week yesterday, the Indian cricket board announced, a day after a fixture was abandoned in Dharamsala, less than 200 kilometres from Jammu, where explosions had been reported.

The Pakistan Super League, meanwhile, was moved to the United Arab Emirates after an Indian drone struck Rawalpindi stadium on Thursday.

India's Directorate General of Shipping also directed all ports, terminals and shipyards to increase security, amid "growing concerns regarding potential threats".

India and Pakistan have downgraded diplomatic ties and slapped a slew of measures against each other since the Pahalgam attack on April 22. India also suspended the critical Indus Waters Treaty between the two countries.

Pakistan yesterday said it responded to letters sent by India on the treaty's suspension, asserting that the treaty is still in force.

World powers from the US to China have urged the two countries to calm tensions.

American Vice President JD Vance has called for de-escalation, underlining that Washington was "not going to get involved in the middle of a war that's fundamentally none of our business".

"We want this thing to de-escalate as quickly as possible. We can't control these countries, though," he said in an interview on Fox News show "The Story with Martha MacCallum."

Meanwhile, the Chinese embassies in India and Pakistan advised citizens to remain indoors to closely monitor the situation and enhance safety precautions. It also advised its citizens against travelling to these countries.

Several countries have offered to mediate, and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met his Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in New Delhi on Thursday, days after visiting Pakistan.

The Saudi minister of state