

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Save journalists from retaliatory abuse

Ongoing trends of legal harassment, violence must end

It is disheartening that at a time when the nation is supposedly enjoying press freedom and freedom of speech, journalists continue to face violence, intimidation, and legal harassment. The latest figures provided by the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) paint a grim picture, revealing that at least 91 journalists were harassed, assaulted, or intimidated in May. Among the victims, 33 were physically assaulted, seven received threats, and three were arrested. Moreover, 48 journalists were implicated in various cases. While no one is above the law, these cases and arrests seem to mask retaliation and exploitation as legal action, sharing similarities with past instances of journalists being targeted through dubious charges over the July atrocities.

In recent weeks, we have repeatedly commented on this disturbing legal trend. Victims of such dubious and exploitative cases include not just journalists but also individuals from other professions, such as businessmen, lawyers, teachers, and actors. Journalists seem particularly at risk, though. One example reported in mid-May involved 26 journalists, along with others, being implicated in an attempted murder case filed by a pro-BNP lawyer in Chattogram. The relevant case statement seemed quite flawed, with little evidence or corroboration from either police or the accused, many of whom deny the charges or even being present at the scene of the alleged crime. Unfortunately, such cases continue to be filed or acted upon with frightening regularity.

According to an investigative report published by this daily on May 3, at least 266 journalists had been implicated in various criminal cases related to the July uprising as of that time. Such legal assaults not only endanger journalists and undermine press freedom, but also violate the public's constitutional right to access information. Their continuation, we must add, casts a dark shadow over the interim government's commitment to uphold press freedom.

So we again urge the authorities to take all necessary steps to ensure that journalists are protected from retaliatory cases as well as from physical violence and intimidation. The same applies to other victims of rights violations, such as those who have suffered from mob violence, rape and sexual abuse, political violence, and labour exploitation—all of which, according to HRSS data, reached worrying levels in May. These too are serious rights violations that demand urgent redress.

That said, the government alone cannot fix this state of affairs. Political parties, too, must do their part by strictly disciplining their members who engage in violence or inflammatory rhetoric that increases risks for the vulnerable segments of society. The BNP, in particular, must show greater leadership in controlling its errant activists and leaders. This is especially crucial as the country moves towards a long-awaited democratic transition through elections.

Health, education need greater focus

Budget does not reflect government's stated priorities

We are disappointed by the low budgetary allocations and limited attention that the health and education sectors have received in the just-unveiled budget for FY2025-26. In his budget speech, the finance adviser pledged that the government would focus on key areas such as education, healthcare, effective governance, civic amenities, and job opportunities, rather than prioritising physical infrastructure. However, in reality, there is inadequate reflection of these priorities in the budget, particularly with regard to education and health. While Tk 95,644 crore has been proposed for the education sector and Tk 41,908 crore allocated for the health sector, these figures have frustrated educationists and health experts alike.

These two sectors have not only received insufficient allocations, but there is also a palpable lack of strategic planning for the execution of the funds. According to UNESCO recommendations, 4 to 6 percent of GDP, or 15 to 20 percent of a national budget, should be allocated to education. However, only 12.1 percent of the total budget, or just 1.72 percent of GDP, has been allocated to this sector. While the government has proposed some important initiatives—such as steps to raise enrolment in technical education and the launch of a new school feeding programme in 150 upazilas—these are not enough. The education sector requires critical reforms, which remain unaddressed in the budget.

Similarly, the health sector has received only 5.3 percent of the total budget, ranking seventh among all sectors. This is far below the Health Sector Reform Commission's recommendation of 15 percent. While the finance adviser has announced some tax relief on the import of pharmaceutical raw materials and medical equipment—which would help reduce the cost of medicine—he has not clarified how the commission's recommendations will be implemented. Given the dismal implementation rate of the health budget in the outgoing year, special attention is required to ensure proper utilisation of funds in this sector.

We understand that the government is grappling with many challenges. But we hope it will overcome them and proceed with a clear roadmap to bring about the much-needed reforms in these sectors. The finance adviser has rightly pointed out the need to develop human capital, but for that to happen, we must prioritise both the education and health sectors, and also address unemployment, among other pressing issues. The government must take concrete initiatives to harness our demographic dividend for sustainable long-term growth. It should consider the suggestions made by experts and incorporate them into the budget before its finalisation.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Dunkirk evacuation ends

On this day in 1940, during World War II, following a massive rescue effort that included civilian boats, the withdrawal of Allied troops trapped at Dunkirk, France was completed. More than 300,000 soldiers were saved in that mission.

FY2026 BUDGET

A missed opportunity for structural reform



Dr Selim Raihan is professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka and executive director at the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). He can be reached at selim.raihan@econdu.ac.bd.

SELIM RAIHAN

The proposed budget for 2025-26 fiscal year is at an opportune moment in Bangladesh's economic and political economy. Inflation is in the higher range, job creation is sluggish, investment confidence is declining, and the overall macroeconomic situation remains shaky. Given these realities, the finance adviser's address was commendable in terms of tone and content, marked by openness and realism rarely seen in budget announcements in Bangladesh.

But acknowledgement, though necessary, is not sufficient. Even as the speech acknowledges facts on the ground and expresses a willingness to address entrenched problems, the budget itself does not deliver the meaningful structural reforms the country desperately needs right now.

Even more respectful in tone, the FY2026 budget largely maintains the structural status quo. It once again reiterates the pattern of previous years in which institutional lethargy, lack of reform ambition, and bureaucratic inefficiency are the characteristics. For instance, there is no evident reform agenda for the tax system; however, in spite of ongoing issues of low

Even the most well-prepared budgets cannot work if there is no strong institutional capacity. Alas, the implementation arm of the Bangladeshi state continues to be weighed down by established weaknesses.

revenue mobilisation, tax evasion, and overly complex and discretionary tax administration, the system continues to be plagued with problems. Likewise, public expenditure inefficiencies, government procurement delays, and weak implementation capacity remain unremedied.

More importantly, there is no mention of such critical accountability tools as outcome-based budgeting, performance audit, or project implementation audit, even when

these are central to institutional credibility and implementation building.

One of the major turning points in public discourse last year was the student-led mass movement that demanded a focus on equity and decent employment. The finance adviser's speech did reference these demands, but the budgetary response is at best fragmented and at worst inadequate.



VISUAL: SUSHMITA S PREETHA

Allocations for education, health, and social protection show no structural shift. Given the chronic underfunding in these sectors, modest increases fail to address growing needs. Furthermore, there is no visible commitment to invest in human resources for health and education, introduce modern skill-building initiatives, or leverage data systems for transparent delivery and accountability.

In terms of job creation, the budget makes reference to supporting SMEs, tech-based sectors, and manufacturing. However, these efforts are not supported by coherent sectoral strategies or legal and regulatory reforms that can truly enable business growth and attract private investment.

Meanwhile, the approach to investment promotion in the proposed budget is cautious and incremental. While there are tax incentives and sector-specific announcements,

to be weighed down by established weaknesses. Planning and budget coordination are ad hoc. Line ministries are not capable of implementation. Project timelines slip, and funds go unspent or are squandered.

The FY2026 budget does not provide any planned solution to this capacity shortfall. It does not provide an agenda for institutional reforms—neither in new systems of accountability, upgrading human capital in ministries, nor procedures of inter-agency coordination. Without these reforms, the dangers of underspending, leakage, and misallocation exist.

The broader political context further complicates the budget's prospects. The interim nature of the government, the unresolved tensions following the national election, and heightened international scrutiny place the current regime in a fragile

position. In such a setting, there is a tendency to prioritise political stability and management over economic restructuring.

This brings forth an important political question: how sincerely will the current interim government prioritise resolving economic issues? Or will its primary focus remain on political management amid the post-election uncertainty and deadlock among major political parties? The political unrest, controversies surrounding the election, and reactions from the international community have all placed the government under pressure. If, under this pressure, the government sidelines economic priorities in favour of political manoeuvring, the prospects for economic stability will be jeopardised.

For Bangladesh to move beyond budgetary continuity and embrace transformation, four strategic pillars must be prioritised:

i) Employment generation: Targeted investment in labour-intensive sectors, alongside comprehensive skill development for youth in emerging industries such as digital services and green energy.

ii) Reducing inequality: Significant resource reallocation towards quality education, rural healthcare, and cash transfer programmes, particularly those addressing vulnerable populations.

iii) Improving the investment climate: A bold agenda for tax simplification, contract enforcement, policy predictability, and digital infrastructure is critical to reinvigorate investor confidence.

iv) Institutional strengthening: Integrate performance-based budgeting, expand e-governance in public procurement and monitoring, and reform project execution systems to enhance accountability and efficiency.

The FY2026 budget may be remembered for its honest rhetoric, but unless backed by real political will and institutional reform, it will remain a lost opportunity. Bangladesh cannot afford to treat the budget as an annual arithmetic ritual. Instead, it must become a vehicle for structural transformation, inclusive growth, and long-term stability.

If the next political government found that this non-political interim government had introduced a truly different kind of budget, it would be facing significant pressure to carry forward a new policy direction. This raises an important question: did the interim government miss a crucial opportunity to set a bold example in budget-making?

Why victims must lead the truth commission

Barrister Tajriyaan Akram Hussain is an associate at Mahibub & Company and an advocate at the District and Sessions Judge Court in Dhaka.

Dr Muhammad Asadullah is an associate professor in the Department of Justice Studies at the University of Regina in Canada.

Nousheen Sharmila Ritu is executive director of UK based think tank Bangladesh 2.0 Initiative.

Md. Harun Or Rashid is an adjunct professor and PhD candidate at the Kent State University.

TAJRIYAAN AKRAM HUSSAIN, MUHAMMAD ASADULLAH, NOUSHEEN SHARMILA RITU, and MD. HARUN-OR RASHID

The recent declaration by Law Advisor Dr Asif Nazrul to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Bangladesh marks a significant step in Bangladesh's journey towards justice and healing for victims of July massacre and the preceding authoritarian regime. The proposed commission, a long-overdue initiative, appears to be a promising attempt at confronting the dark legacy of political repression, state violence and enforced disappearances in Bangladesh.

However, for the commission to be successful, it must be grounded in an inclusive, holistic and sustainable framework. Three urgent recommendations are offered here that can shape the formation of the proposed commission into

a successful tool for healing. First, the framework of the commission including its role and responsibilities must go through broad consultations to ensure inputs from experts, victims, and marginalised sections of the society. Second, it must be inclusive, especially of victims including those who are not from Dhaka, and start with a national dialogue with all stakeholders beyond Dhaka or divisional centres. Third, it must also include experts in post-conflict justice who specialise in the field. Also, the commission's mandate and modus operandi must be clearly set before deciding the composition of the body.

This transitional justice effort also needs a contextualised framework rooted within the unique sociopolitical realities and psychosocial complexities of Bangladesh and its people. Instead of importing Western case study models, Bangladesh needs to develop its own transitional justice model based on its local political, sociocultural and spiritual norms and values. For instance, truth-telling as developed in South Africa were based on Christian values of catharsis and forgiveness that might be incompatible with the psychosocial conditions of a Muslim majoritarian country like Bangladesh. Hence, Bangladesh needs to develop a decolonial transitional justice model that addresses past harms and fosters healing, tolerance and harmony in the context of its present sociopolitical maladies.

Furthermore, the proposed formation of a TRC presumes that

victims are ready to reconcile with perpetrators who, till date, have shown neither remorse nor acknowledgment of their crimes. In fact, many individuals affiliated with the Awami League continue to exhibit wilful arrogance by denying wrongdoing, justifying abuses, and gaslighting survivors. In such a context, "healing" is a far more appropriate focus than reconciliation. The term "Truth and Healing Commission (THC)" thus more accurately reflects the needs of victims. Reconciliation may become an eventual outcome of the process but it certainly cannot begin until perpetrators take full responsibility for their actions—something that has yet to happen. Until now, no high-level Awami League official has issued a public apology. There has been no attempt to acknowledge harm, no evidence of reflection, and certainly no expression of remorse.

Consequently, the government must commence an inclusive national dialogue and consensus building with all stakeholders involved at the outset, before setting up the commission. Besides politicians, law practitioners, and civil society bodies, the commission needs to include victims such as families of the disappeared, survivors of political detention and repression as active stakeholders. Victims and their families deserve more than a token gesture, they need a meaningful platform where their stories are heard, their pain acknowledged, and their needs addressed. Without their active participation, any commission risks being seen as a top-down, Eurocentric

initiative lacking authenticity and grassroots moral authority. It will just be an attempt to check a political box rather than building a real foundation for justice, accountability and healing.

Including Bangladeshi academic experts, particularly those specialising in post-conflict transitions and reconciliation processes, can ensure that the THC addresses not only symptoms of violence but its deep-rooted causes as well. In Bangladesh, where history is routinely politicised and distorted, having a strong evidence-based framework for truth and healing is essential to ensure credibility. Without involvement of experts specialised in this field, the commission risks becoming an echo chamber of political convenience rather than a mechanism of meaningful accountability.

A politically motivated commission, which is not properly designed to meet the needs of the victims, would entrench impunity, insult victims, and embolden future perpetrators. Furthermore, the establishment of the THC and its relevant laws must not be implemented hurriedly.

The commission should be led by an inter-ministerial process as transitional justice goes beyond criminal accountability. A truly victim-centred, trauma-informed, decolonial truth and healing commission could be a watershed in our political history. Done wrong, it will be yet another historic missed opportunity; another hollow promise made in the name of justice. And Bangladeshi citizens have had too many hollow promises already.