

# The Daily Star

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## We cannot lose our battle against drugs

Recent findings highlight the failure of existing control measures

Given the alarming levels Bangladesh's drug crisis has reached of late, it is high time the authorities and society at large treated it with the urgency it deserves. According to an estimate by the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC), there are now around 8.3 million individuals addicted to drugs, constituting 4.89 percent of the total population. This highlights the ineffectiveness of existing drug control measures that should have done better.

There are some clear patterns that can be observed among drug users in the country. For instance, the survey estimates that 7.76 million of those addicted are men, mostly young, while the most commonly used substances include cannabis (approximately 52 percent), yaba (20 percent), and alcohol (17 percent). By thoroughly analysing these demand-side factors, the authorities should be able to identify and address the social, political, and economic drivers of drug abuse. Unfortunately, the absence of large-scale initiatives in this regard shows how indifferent we have remained despite the risks of a growing drug crisis. The lack of specialised treatment centres for drug addiction has been another pressing concern. For example, the four government-run facilities in the country can accommodate only 199 patients. Although more than 300 private rehabilitation centres are in operation, there is minimal oversight of their activities—and many simply cannot afford private treatment.

On the supply side, reports indicate that large quantities of drugs are flooding the country, both for domestic consumption and transit to third countries. Both trends are deeply damaging for us. A major obstacle to curbing drug supply is the lack of resources available to our security forces, compounded by legal complexities and our geographical location—at the intersection of the Golden Triangle, the Golden Crescent, and the Golden Wedge. That we are losing the battle against drug trafficking is evident from the fact that rarely have we seen any major drug kingpins identified or arrested over the years, although couriers and low-level carriers, often driven by poverty and desperation, continue to be arrested.

The failure to apprehend domestic masterminds behind the drug trade is not only disheartening, it also suggests the deep-rooted connections they enjoy within security agencies, political circles, and other influential sectors—connections that have rendered them virtually untouchable. At the same time, given that the drug trafficking problem in Bangladesh is inextricably linked with transnational crime and criminal syndicates, it cannot be properly addressed without effective collaboration with other countries.

But first, we as a nation must realise that drug addiction is not only destroying lives but also having extremely negative effects—including increased crime, corruption, and health issues—on our society as a whole. Unless we fully recognise the danger and are sincere about preventing it, it will be impossible to address the root causes of this issue and ensure a drug-free, healthy, and happy society. We urge the authorities to take holistic measures to stop drug supply and address the underlying issues propelling its demand.

## Barguna dengue crisis exposes gaps

Authorities must take proper steps to contain its spread

We are concerned about the dengue situation in Barguna which has emerged as the worst hit district in Barishal and perhaps in the country. The situation there has been making headlines for quite some time, and now a survey by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control, and Research (IEDCR)—conducted from June 17 to 19—has shed light on why it has become so severe. As per IEDCR, there has been an alarming level of infestation across the district, with Aedes mosquito larvae detected in 76 percent of rural homes and 31 percent of urban homes. This explains why 60 percent of all cases reported in Barishal this year came from Barguna alone. On Wednesday, the DGHS reported 326 dengue hospitalisations across the country, and 65 of them—or 20 percent—were from this one district.

Experts say this could be because of several factors. In Barguna, due to its potable water crisis, it is common to store rainwater in plastic drums or earthen pots, especially in rural areas. While it is recommended not to preserve water for more than two days, people tend to do it anyway, often mixing new water with old while leaving the containers uncovered or poorly covered. Such clean but stagnant water provides ideal breeding grounds for mosquito larvae. Moreover, cleaning and sanitation drives in Barguna have also slowed since the political changeover in August, according to local activists, who have flagged poor waste management, absence of a proper sewerage system, and public apathy as key contributors to the current outbreak. The presence of a new dengue serotype (serotype-3) has not helped either.

Unfortunately, as in many other districts and upazilas, local hospitals in Barguna lack sufficient beds, testing kits, intensive care units, and skilled manpower needed to deal with the high caseload or critical cases. Such shortages have already forced many patients to seek care in Dhaka, adding pressure on hospitals already overwhelmed by patients from nearby districts like Cumilla and Narayanganj. Health officials and experts have warned that things may worsen if outbreaks spread further into districts that lack doctors and essential equipment.

The IEDCR survey findings should, therefore, serve as a wake-up call for health authorities and local administrations across the country. Barguna needs effective, large-scale mosquito control drives and adequate treatment facilities, as do other known and emerging hotspots at the district level. If the government cannot properly respond to this crisis, things may spiral out of control as monsoon progresses.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Yen made official monetary unit of Japan

On this day in 1871, the yen was adopted as Japan's official monetary unit, when the government suspended the exchange of clan notes, money issued by feudal lords that had circulated since the 16th century.

# 'Those responsible for custodial torture, death are rarely punished'

Nur Khan Liton, a human rights activist, discusses his experience of dealing with cases of custodial torture and deaths in an exclusive interview with Monorom Polok of The Daily Star.

**Can you describe an instance from your experience where someone became a victim of torture or died in police custody?**

We can talk about the case of Rubel. Rubel was a private university student who was arrested by the police, tortured, and murdered in custody. Police had tried to frame him with drugs, and during the torture, he died. This was clearly a case of custodial murder. When the incident became public, we started working on it.

Our methods of working at that time were different from how human rights activists work now. Nowadays, it's more organisation-centric or agency-centric. At that time, a few organisations used to coordinate and work together. We had strong coordination among ourselves. After Rubel's death, we saw his body, then tried to contact his family. They lived in Dhaka's Malibagh area, and his brother was quite cooperative in this regard.

Later, the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) provided legal assistance and a case was filed, with cooperation from Ain O Salish Kendra, Sommito Samajik Andolon, and members of the bereaved family. When we were all convinced that Rubel had died due to custodial torture, we demanded a judicial commission. A one-member commission was formed, with Justice Habibur Rahman. Many of us, as human rights activists, gave testimonies and presented statements to the commission. The report that came out of it was one of the most detailed in recent times. It included actionable directives, which were later taken up by the High Court. We were deeply involved in the process.

This is one example. Another is our involvement in the case of Limon, the boy who lost his leg after being shot by the Rab. We worked on that case as well. This work was not done individually. All of it was done in an organised way, through the collaboration of multiple groups. That is how we were able to push these cases to a stage where justice became possible. And in Limon's case, we did see some progress towards justice. The case is still pending, awaiting its final ruling. There are many such cases.

**In any of these cases, were there obstacles to taking legal action against the police?**

Yes, we are working on many such incidents. For instance, we also worked on the case of Jonny, a Bihari youth

from Mirpur. BLAST filed a case, and a judgment was given, which created an opportunity for justice, although the case has probably not been resolved yet.

In these types of cases, there are always various kinds of obstacles created by the police. We've had to overcome them using different strategies. Sometimes, the obstacles are direct. Other times, pressure is applied on the victim's family. Many families, unable to bear that pressure, end up making compromises—they give in silently.

**Can you recall any legal, procedural or institutional changes that might offer redress in these cases?**

We've been talking about these issues for a long time. The necessary areas of change have already been identified. There are certain weaknesses in the law. One key issue is the lack of a witness protection system. The issue of witness security needs to be addressed.

Also, when allegations are made against law enforcement agencies, there should be a proper system for investigating them. We have made

knowledge about what could be done in such a situation. Today, people know what human rights are and what to do if someone is tortured in police custody. Now, human rights organisations step forward with help in such situations. But 20-30 years ago, or even just 15 years back, this wasn't the case. If you look at the 15-plus years of the previous regime in particular, you'll see that there has been disorder in every institution—from the judiciary to the police. All institutions were placed in a kind of partisan servitude. In that situation, getting justice was impossible.

In the few cases where justice was achieved, it required tremendous effort. But in Bangladesh, it is simply not possible to put in that level of effort in every single case. There are only a handful of human rights organisations, and the number of such incidents is overwhelming.

**Often, victims of custodial torture do not have the mental strength or practical means to file a case themselves. In such situations, is public interest litigation (PIL) the most appropriate route?**

Look, filing a PIL can result in a court issuing a ruling or drawing attention to the issue. It can bring matters to the public spotlight and attract the attention of the state. That's a valuable outcome. But the actual work of proving a specific incident and ensuring justice for that individual often remains unaddressed.

So yes, PILs have their role: to create awareness and bring light to these issues. But we must also remember that, whatever legal route we take, there must be a supportive environment in place.

Imagine this: someone is brought before the court after being tortured in custody. Their wounds are fresh, still bleeding. Yet, the magistrate doesn't even look. The judge doesn't even look. How will justice be possible in that setting?

And then, when the victim is presented to record a statement, where they are supposed to tell the truth, often the magistrate refuses to record it, and the person is sent back into police custody instead. This kind of tactics and wrongdoings must stop. To prevent this, democracy must be institutionalised. Transparency and accountability must be ensured in every sector. Without that, no reform or litigation—PIL or otherwise—will be enough.



Nur Khan Liton

PHOTO: COLLECTED

In some cases, it becomes impossible to produce witnesses. Even if there are witnesses, they cannot be presented before the court for many reasons. First, no witness security exists in our country where witnesses can safely appear and testify in court. Second, the law enforcement official that is accused of torture is able to threaten the witness and victim in many ways. Sometimes the investigation report is flawed, sometimes there are major inconsistencies in the post-mortem report. All these issues weaken the case and prevent it from getting a proper conclusion.

These issues vary case by case. If we go through them individually, we can clearly see which obstacles were present in which case, what kind of weaknesses existed, and in which ones we succeeded or fell short—and why. So, broadly speaking, in cases of torture, death, or even serious injury in custody, those responsible are rarely punished.

recommendations in this regard as well. In cases of custodial death, for example, we have said that post-mortems should be recorded, meaning they should be conducted under active CCTV surveillance, with the footage preserved. We have made these recommendations at various times.

However, the most important issue is this: without a functioning democratic system in the country, there is no hope for justice in cases like these. Without institutionalising democracy and ensuring that the judiciary can work independently, justice will not be delivered. If they are ensured, justice in custodial torture or death cases will not be difficult to achieve.

**We know that you have personally been a victim of police harassment. Did you try to take any legal action or seek compensation?**

No, I never tried to file a case or take legal action. Back then, there was no institutional support or even

# Bangladesh's search for a balanced national identity



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Bangladesh stands at a pivotal moment in its political and ideological evolution. With the ousting of Sheikh Hasina's government and the appointment of an interim administration, the country now witnesses a debate over its national identity. At the heart of this discourse is the Constitution Reform Commission's proposal to replace secularism with pluralism. This shift has sparked confusion and contention among political factions and civil society.

Since independence, Bangladesh has grappled with the role of religion in governance. The founding principles of the state included secularism, a concept that was meant to ensure religious neutrality and prevent the dominance of any single faith in public affairs. However, secularism was often perceived as an imposed ideology rather than an organic evolution of Bangladesh's socio-political fabric.

Over the decades, successive governments have oscillated between reinforcing secularism and accommodating religious sentiments. The Awami League, under Hasina, reinstated secularism

in the constitution while maintaining Islam as the state religion—a paradox that reflected the country's complex religious landscape. Critics have long contended that secularism, as practised in Bangladesh, has failed to foster true inclusivity, often alienating religious communities rather than integrating them into a cohesive national identity.

The interim government's proposal to replace secularism with pluralism is an attempt to redefine Bangladesh's approach to religious coexistence. In theory, pluralism acknowledges the presence of multiple faiths and promotes their harmonious existence within the state framework. However, the term itself has led to divergent interpretations. One Islamist party leader said that they "view pluralism as a gateway to multi-religionism," fearing that it may dilute the country's Islamic heritage or create unnecessary divisions among religious groups.

The Constitution Reform Commission's intended meaning of pluralism appears to be the recognition of all faiths within the country, ensuring that no single religion dominates the national narrative. While this approach seeks

to foster inclusivity, its ambiguity has led to concerns about its practical implementation. Without a clear framework, pluralism risks becoming another contested term, much like secularism before it.

Given the confusion surrounding pluralism, Bangladesh's policymakers must consider alternative terminologies that better capture the spirit of religious coexistence. Two potential replacements—"interfaith harmony" and "religious empathy"—offer more precise frameworks for fostering unity.

Interfaith harmony emphasises active engagement between religious communities, encouraging dialogue and mutual respect. This approach has been successfully implemented in various multicultural societies, where religious groups collaborate on social and cultural initiatives without compromising their distinct identities.

Religious empathy focuses on understanding and respecting different faiths without necessarily integrating them into a singular national ideology. By promoting empathy, the government can ensure that religious minorities feel acknowledged and valued, while maintaining the cultural and historical significance of Islam in Bangladesh.

Both alternatives provide a more structured approach to religious coexistence, avoiding the vagueness associated with pluralism. They also mirror Bangladesh's historical ethos, which has long been shaped by a mix of Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic influences.

The debate over secularism, pluralism, and alternative frameworks is not merely a philosophical exercise—it has tangible political consequences. Bangladesh's political parties are deeply divided on the issue, with some advocating for pluralism, while others push for a more religion-inclusive model. The BNP—the country's largest political party at present—faces the challenge of navigating these ideological shifts while maintaining its broad appeal.

The interim government's decision on this will set a precedent for future administrations. If pluralism is adopted without a clear definition, it may lead to further polarisation. Conversely, a well-articulated approach, through interfaith harmony or religious empathy, could pave the way for a more stable and inclusive Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's constitutional debate is more than a legal amendment. It reflects the country's evolving identity. At this crossroads, the nation must carefully consider the implications of its choices. Whether through pluralism, interfaith harmony, or religious empathy, the ultimate goal should be to foster a society where all faiths coexist peacefully, without undermining the country's historical and cultural foundations.

The coming months will be crucial. The government must engage with scholars, religious leaders, and civil society to ensure that constitutional changes reflect the will of the people. In doing so, Bangladesh can move beyond ideological confusion and towards a more cohesive and inclusive future.