

A UN office can make law enforcers accountable

Three-year MoU paves way for UNHRO to open mission in Bangladesh

The interim government's decision to host a mission of the UN Human Rights Office in Bangladesh to promote and protect human rights is a positive step. The decision, one may recall, follows a UN fact-finding mission (OHCHR) investigation conducted not long after the July-August uprising, which documented widespread abuses by state forces under the Awami League regime. Generally, OHCHR country offices are invited by national governments during periods of significant transition, vulnerability, or post-conflict reform.

In Bangladesh, however, its opening with the signing of a three-year MoU between Bangladesh and UN officials has been preceded by protests from certain religious groups. The government has also acknowledged their concerns, particularly about the perceived ideological orientation of UN human rights bodies, and sought to address them through a press statement. In that, it stated that the OHCHR mission will "focus on addressing and preventing serious human rights abuses, such as those perpetrated by the previous government, and ensuring accountability for violations," adding that it will not serve to promote any social agenda that falls outside the country's established legal, social and cultural framework. Bangladesh also retains the sovereign authority to withdraw from the agreement should it "determine that the partnership no longer aligns with national interests," the statement says.

That said, Bangladesh's horrific track record of human rights violations demands that such an international, independent body be set up to act as a watchdog over the government and state machinery in their treatment of citizens. The Sheikh Hasina regime is an example of how a government can abuse its power by using various institutions and agencies to clamp down on citizens whenever it wants to, without facing consequences. Enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, torture, and gender-based violence were some of the persistent human rights abuses of the AL regime. During the July-August crackdown, the state's use of excessive force resulted in over 1,400 deaths.

The OHCHR, following its fact-finding mission, made some important recommendations which its office in Dhaka can help implement. Among other things, it called for independent investigations and prosecutions for killings, torture, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, and gender-based violence. Under the police and security sector reforms, it called for reducing use of lethal force, banning certain types of ammunition, reforming police training, establishing an independent police oversight commission, disbanding RAB, etc. Other recommendations include ending unlawful surveillance of journalists, activists, and political opponents, and holding independent inquiries into surveillance practices.

Going forward, we also hope that the UN rights office can help raise the bar for local watchdogs like the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which currently has no binding or enforcement powers and cannot compel government agencies or law enforcement to take specific actions. The NHRC cannot even independently investigate abuses by police, military, or other agencies. We must acknowledge that the UNHRO's increasing presence of late signals Bangladesh's increasing willingness to be transparent and to remove the culture of impunity that has long become entrenched within state institutions. We must ensure this journey towards protecting rights continues apace.

RAJUK still mired in corruption, bribery

Govt must ensure transparency, accountability in this institution

We are quite disappointed to see that RAJUK continues to fail in delivering its services in a transparent and accountable manner. Over the years, the organisation has earned a bad reputation for subjecting service seekers to various forms of irregularities and unethical practices, including bribery. While city dwellers had hoped that things would improve during the interim government's tenure, old practices have reportedly remained unchanged. From allotment letters and plot transfers to building design approvals and land-use clearances, irregularities persist across the board. While RAJUK is entrusted with the responsibility of restoring Dhaka's liveability, there have been no visible steps taken towards fulfilling that mandate. This state of affairs is unacceptable.

According to a report by *Banik Barta*, service-seekers face the greatest challenge while seeking land use clearance and design approvals. Apparently, getting building designs approved is nearly impossible without paying hefty bribes. Landowners and developers claim it may take anywhere from Tk 5 lakh to upwards of a crore to get a design approved. To address such irregularities, RAJUK had launched the Electronic Construction Permitting System (ECPS) in 2022 but it remains allegedly non-functional, as all processes continue through manual, desk-based dealings. Often, building designs submitted online through RAJUK-approved engineers are rejected without explanation. To learn the reason for rejection, applicants must visit RAJUK office in person, where they end up being compelled to pay bribes. RAJUK's inefficiency and irregularities are also reflected in its new Detailed Area Plan (DAP), which has drawn criticisms from experts.

We urge the government to eliminate corruption and bribery from RAJUK to ensure the smooth delivery of services to citizens. Currently, securing even a single service requires submitting numerous documents, many of which are unnecessary. This burdensome practice also must end. RAJUK should streamline all its services to alleviate public suffering.

In 2020, the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) recommended some critical reforms to curb corruption and promote accountability within the institution. These include amending outdated laws and regulations, transferring RAJUK's housing and real estate functions to a separate authority, dedicating RAJUK solely to planning and development, decentralising its services, and strengthening oversight, among others. We call on the government to seriously consider these recommendations and take decisive steps to transform RAJUK into a transparent, efficient, and citizen-friendly institution.

EDITORIAL

July uprising and the rise of collective power



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The July people's uprising was the result of many years of built-up grievances. Through this movement, the people of Bangladesh expressed their protest using a language shaped by long-standing discontent. We have seen many times before that when people's dissatisfaction reaches a breaking point, they rise up. This was evident during the Language Movement of 1952, which eventually led to the fall of the Muslim League in 1954. In 1969, another mass uprising helped pave the way for the Liberation War in 1971, which ultimately brought down Pakistan's rule. In 1990, a people's movement ended General Ershad's long military dictatorship. In the same way, the mass uprising of 2024 brought down an autocratic regime that had held on to power for over 15 years.

Localised uprisings have also carried deep significance in Bangladesh. For example, the people of Dinajpur rose up after police raped and murdered a teenage girl named Yasmin in 1995. This ignited a new phase in the anti-rape movement in the following years. In 2006, a massive uprising in the northern part of the country forced the cancellation of a destructive multinational open-pit coal mining project in Phulbari. Similarly, a government plan to build an airport by destroying Arial Beel was also halted due to local resistance.

These events show a clear pattern: when people are pushed to the edge—when their voices are ignored, their demands dismissed, their hopes silenced, and their protests crushed—they rise together, sooner or later. This was the same path that led to the 2024 mass uprising.

In fact, the ground for the latest countrywide uprising had been laid over the 15 years of Sheikh Hasina's autocratic rule. During this time, people resisted in different ways at different levels. In 2008, Awami League returned to power with a large majority of public votes. But soon after, it took steps to remain in power permanently without holding credible elections. The constitution was amended, and the caretaker government system was abolished. At the same time, to gain favour with countries like India, China, Russia, the United States, and Japan, the government partnered with their companies on various mega-projects against the people's interests. These steps effectively built a global alliance of plunder and opened the door to



Through the 2024 July uprising, Bangladeshis expressed their protest using a language shaped by long-standing discontent. This photo was taken on August 2, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

widespread corruption, irregularities, and a system where authoritarian rule and looting of wealth went hand in hand.

Since 2014, the government shut down all meaningful avenues for electoral change. Alongside this, democratic rights were increasingly attacked. Surveillance intensified—both online and offline—and repression reached alarming levels, with "crossfire" killings and enforced disappearances becoming commonplace. At the same time, harmful projects and deals that endangered people's lives and the environment continued to be pushed forward.

Naturally, protests and resistance grew in response. The movement demanding elections under a caretaker government saw ups and downs; many political parties were vocal on this issue. There were also significant people's movements to protect natural resources, the environment, and public rights. Among these, the movement to protect the Sundarbans stood out. It brought people from all walks of life in a nationwide campaign that lasted nearly a decade. This movement revealed the government's increasingly authoritarian nature and its dependence on India. It was

measures, all these protests gradually built up the energy that fuelled the 2024 uprising. So, the July uprising cannot be understood solely through the lens of what happened that month or in early August. It is the outcome of various struggles carried out over the past 15 years. This is one key feature of this movement.

The second key feature of the 2024 uprising is that it differed from the ones in 1952, 1969, and 1990. In those earlier uprisings, there were declared political goals, leading organisations, and widely known political leaders.

Their aims and messages were clearly communicated to the public. But in 2024, there were no central or familiar leaders guiding the movement. The Students Against Discrimination (SAD) began the movement for parity in access to jobs, but it turned into an anti-government uprising after the authorities unleashed atrocities on the students. The rage that had been building for years—against economic exploitation, plunder, oppression, and torture—reached a new level. When the government responded with indiscriminate killings, people from all walks of life joined in: workers, students, teachers, journalists, writers, artists, activists from different political camps. At that stage, people did not

no formal manifesto, but a vision for a humane Bangladesh became clearer through the protests. One of the most powerful forms of expression came in the form of graffiti. These writings and illustrations on walls reflected the calls to end class injustice, ethnic oppression, gender inequality, and religious discrimination. The idea of a discrimination-free Bangladesh, shared mostly by young people, began to take shape through this uprising.

Those who uphold discriminatory ideologies—who seek to widen class divides, reinforce gender inequality, impose religious divisions, or promote ethnic discrimination—stand against the spirit of this movement. The July uprising was born out of people's desire to end these forms of oppression and discrimination. Therefore, its most important task is to build the ideology, politics, and people's power needed to establish a Bangladesh free from inequality and repression. The institutions and ideological support needed to realise that vision must now be strengthened.

This is the challenge of our time. On the first anniversary of the July mass uprising, it is our responsibility to deepen and expand all cultural, political, and social efforts toward that goal.

Students who didn't pass SSC exams deserve a way forward



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This year, nearly six lakh students failed the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination in Bangladesh. That number alone should spark a national conversation, not just about the shortcomings of our education system, but also about how we treat those who fall through its cracks. For a country striving for progress, keeping such a large portion of our youth idle for an entire year is not only wasteful, it is self-defeating.

Among these failed students, many have only fallen short in one or two subjects. Yet the system gives them no option but to sit out the entire year, retake their failed subjects the following year, and then wait again to resume regular education. In the process, they lose not just time, but confidence, social standing, and, in some cases, even the motivation to continue. A year of forced inactivity

often results in psychological stress, exposure to negative influences, and, at times, involvement in crime. Many become victims of social bullying and

family pressure. What should have been a temporary academic setback too often spirals into a permanent life detour.

But this year-long academic purgatory is not merely a personal loss for students; it is also an economic loss for the entire country. If these six lakh students had the opportunity to

complete their education without delay and enter the labour force a year earlier, the economy would benefit significantly. Consider this: if each of these six lakh students were to earn even a modest monthly income of Tk 10,000 upon joining the workforce, then by graduating a year earlier, their combined contribution to the economy would be around Tk 7,200 crore in a year. That's Tk 72 billion in GDP loss, simply because we let six lakh young people sit idle instead of studying.

There is a simple fix to this

We should consider reforming our entire high school education structure to a semester-based system spanning classes 9 through 12. Instead of the current model, where students are assessed in a single high-stakes examination after years of study, we could adopt a modular approach.

problem. We can easily allow students who have failed in one or two subjects to begin college studies on a conditional basis. They would enrol in college, begin attending regular classes, and simultaneously prepare to retake the failed SSC subjects the following year. If they pass, they move forward with their batchmates. No

year lost, no future derailed.

Even better, we should consider reforming our entire high school education structure to a semester-based system spanning classes 9 through 12. Instead of the current model, where students are assessed in a single high-stakes examination after years of study, we could adopt a modular approach. Students would complete courses in blocks, with opportunities to retake failed subjects in subsequent semesters without losing an entire year. Such a system already exists in many developed countries and allows for flexibility, second chances, and more personalised academic paths.

This is not a radical overhaul; it is a rational, humane, and economically sound proposal. We are not talking about lowering standards. We are talking about updating an outdated system to reflect the realities of our society and the potential of our youth. When six lakh students fail at once, it is the system, not just the students, that has failed. And that system needs to adapt.

Bangladesh cannot afford to waste a year of six lakh young lives. The cost is too high—socially, economically, and morally. Let's give these students a second chance, and in doing so, give our nation a better future.