

## Protect journalists, uphold press freedom

Tuhin's killers, Anwar's attackers must be brought to justice

We condemn the killing of journalist Asaduzzaman Tuhin by miscreants in Gazipur on August 7, and echo the concern expressed by the Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (NOAB) regarding the safety of journalists and media freedom in the country. Tuhin, a staff reporter of the Mymensingh-based daily *Pratidiner Kagoj*, was fatally attacked at a busy intersection of the city in full public view. This occurred just a day after another reporter, Anwar Hossain of *Bangladesher Alo*, was brutally attacked in Sahapara, Gazipur.

In both cases, the journalists were on duty. Tuhin was recording footage of several armed men chasing two individuals, while Anwar was investigating allegations of extortion from auto-rickshaw drivers. These incidents reflect the increasingly unsafe working conditions for journalists, particularly those operating outside Dhaka. Journalists are being targeted not only by criminal groups and extortionists but also by political activists and, at times, even law enforcement. Just last month, the Committee to Protect Journalists (Asia) in a tweet urged the government to investigate the assault on a DBC news reporter allegedly by security forces during a protest in Khagrachhari on July 17.

Attacks on journalists are not limited to physical harm. According to a recent Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) report, from August 2024 to July 2025, as many as 496 journalists were harassed, 266 were implicated in murder cases related to the July uprising, and three were killed while on duty. During the same period, eight newspaper editors and 11 news chiefs from private TV channels were dismissed, and at least 150 journalists were terminated. Besides, the TIB report and speakers at a recent seminar highlighted the issue of "mob" to coerce, threaten and put pressure on media houses to change the narrative of news reports if they don't favour certain quarters. NOAB, too, cited the alarming case of a mob attempting to evict the owner of *Janakantha*, which involved a politically connected individual.

Following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's autocratic regime, expectations were high for a freer, less politically influenced media. While there is no longer overt government intervention, hostility towards the media persists among other quarters. The interim government has yet to take visible steps to ensure press freedom. Controversial issues such as press accreditation procedures, the stalled implementation of the Information Commission, and lack of progress in reforming the Right to Information Act raise concerns about its commitment to fostering a free media environment. Most worrying is the government's failure to improve law and order. Why is the police still inactive while crimes occur in broad daylight? With elections just six months away, the government must act decisively to ensure that journalists can work without fear. We urge the authorities to swiftly bring Tuhin's killers and Anwar's attackers to justice and demand stronger police vigilance. No one can feel safe in a society where criminals roam free, brandishing weapons and attacking people in public.

## Save our children from lead poisoning

Eliminate all sources of emission

We are alarmed to learn about the high levels of lead found in children living in Dhaka. A joint study by the icddr,b and Stanford University on 500 slum children aged two to four years in the city has found that around 98 percent of them have concerning levels of this toxic heavy metal in their blood. While proximity to industrial sites is the main driver of high blood lead levels (BLLs), other sources include indoor second-hand smoke, high levels of dust containing lead, and exposure to household items containing lead, such as cosmetics, cookware, and paint, according to the study.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), lead exposure can seriously harm a child's growth and development, causing damage to the brain and nervous system, learning and behavioural issues, hearing and speech problems, lower IQ, and decreased attention levels, among other conditions. The CDC considers BLLs above 3.5 micrograms per decilitre to be concerning, especially for young children, while according to WHO, there are no safe BLLs.

The above-mentioned study found much higher BLLs in the surveyed children than the tolerable levels. It also observed that children in Dhaka South have higher BLLs than those in the north, mostly because there are more lead-polluting industries in the southern part of the city. Children living within one kilometre of battery manufacturing, recycling or other lead-related industries were found to have 43 percent higher BLLs than those living more than five kilometres away. These findings are alarming and call for urgent action from the relevant authorities, including the two city corporations. The question is, are the authorities doing anything to curb this serious public health threat?

With an estimated 36 lakh children already affected and countless more at risk, we can no longer afford to ignore this problem. The government, therefore, must develop a comprehensive plan to eliminate all sources of lead exposure, including air pollution, from Dhaka as well as the rest of the country. It must ensure that no children are employed in factories where lead exposure is high. Raising public awareness about the issue is also necessary. All these measures are crucial to safeguard the future of our children, to make sure they grow up healthy, empowered to contribute meaningfully to the nation's progress. The time to act is now.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Michael Brown shot

On this day in 2014, the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black American teenager, by Darren Wilson, a White police officer, resulted in days of civil unrest and protests in the city of Ferguson in Missouri, US, spurring the Black Lives Matter movement, which was born a year earlier.



### BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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### SHAMSAD MORTUZA

When Dhaka University's admission test results came out in March, we were shocked to learn that only six percent of examinees had qualified for the science unit. Out of 120,488 students, only 7,437 candidates passed against the 1,896 seats. For the country's premier university, many of us saw it as a sign of competitiveness. By the time admissions were completed, classes resumed, and internal migrations took place, the university identified that 505 of its 6,135 seats had remained vacant. The crisis is severe among some of the science faculties, such as applied chemistry, electrical and electronic engineering, leather technology, and physics, as well as in language courses like Urdu, Pali, and Sanskrit.

There are at least two aspects of this problem. First, the schooling system, serving as a feeder channel for our tertiary system, is in a state of disarray. Second, our students are not interested in some of the disciplines for various reasons that merit close examination. Years of systemic neglect, misplaced priorities, and populist grade inflation have plagued our education system, leading to devastating consequences. Not surprisingly, the World Bank's Human Capital Index has reported that a student completing 12 years of schooling in Bangladesh achieves the equivalent of just 6.3 learning-adjusted years, which is comparable to a Grade 7 international benchmark. The diagnostic report aligns with both the admission test results and the SSC results, which saw the lowest pass rate in 16 years.

Our education system has stunted the cognitive development of our youth at a time when the country is supposed to cash in on its demographic dividends. Their readiness for higher education is questionable. The state-funded public system has the luxury of operating institutions with many

# The cracks in our education system

vacant seats. Meanwhile, many unsuccessful students transition to the private education system, which offers a range of pre-university courses designed to address the learning gaps experienced by some of these students. In the process, we enter another dimension of the problem: knowledge is available to those who can afford it. Even an enemy would agree that the



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main cause of our education debacle is the lack of investment. With an allocation worth less than two percent of GDP for education, our school system has failed to attract qualified teachers. Underpaid teachers in schools and other educational institutions are forced to work part-time due to financial challenges. This scenario has allowed coaching centres, private tutoring, and question-paper-leaking syndicates to emerge as shadow systems. Students now study for exams at proxy institutes, learn some guessing patterns on the internet or from mentors, memorise notes, and reproduce them at exams. The fun of learning, the curiosity to

in Bangla was recorded at 26 percent (2011), 25 percent (2013), and declined to 23 percent (2015), then to just 10 percent (2017). In maths, it was 30 percent in 2011, 25 percent in 2013, and 10 percent in 2015, before a slight rebound to 16 percent in 2017. The NSA data reveals a foundational weakness that contradicts figures like the 84 percent school completion rate and the number of GPAs celebrated with drumbeats and exchange of sweets.

The admission test fiasco, along with the World Bank's assessment, reveals to us the dangers posed by years of grade inflation and data doctoring. Our obsession with pass

rates, GPA scores, and enrolment targets was weaponised by successive governments to claim success, appease anxious parents, and hide structural weaknesses. Teachers are pressured to ensure pass rates or given impossible deadlines to check thousands of scripts. This year's SSC review, prompted by a sharp fall in the pass percentage, suggests that even the government must rethink its assessment procedures.

The bluff of GPA 5 has been called. It will take time for students and parents who have gotten used to the badge of academic excellence promised by the numbers to acknowledge the learning deficiency. The controversial "auto-pass" policy, which mitigated learning loss during the pandemic, is already reaping its consequences. Policymakers were unaware that the practice of mass promotion instead of exams conveyed a problematic message: performance is negotiable rather than earned. This ethos continued even after the July mass uprising when the empowered students felt entitled to demand similar report cards.

This culture of resistance, however, is not entirely the students' doing. We are a nation that failed to create a system that teaches failure and reflection as essential life lessons for personal growth. We have failed to dissociate the education system from personal interests or donors' desires and craft a curriculum that emphasises critical thinking. While the policy documents will present all the buzzwords of competence-based creative learning, once you come to the actual textbook contents, you will notice a deliberate dumbing down. Those who wrote the books will tell you that they had to keep the low-skilled teachers in mind while developing the material. Otherwise there will be serious backlash. Why are we surprised that our students cannot be benchmarked against their international peers?

The outcome that bothers us is our doing. Instead of building resilience, we have bred fragility. Instead of teaching critical thinking, we have taught strategic complaining. The system that once demanded academic discipline has become hostage to political entitlement.

## 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF SINGAPORE'S INDEPENDENCE

# A renewed commitment to Bangladesh's future



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### MITCHEL LEE

August 9, 2025 marks a historical milestone for Singapore. We celebrate our 60th year of independence this year. Singapore has come a long way since our early years of nationhood. When independence was thrust upon us, our GDP per capita was around \$516. We were no longer part of a common market with Malaysia and no longer to play a role as the administrative, commercial and military hub of the British Empire in Southeast Asia. Dr Albert Winsemius, a Dutch economist who led the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) mission to provide advice on industrialisation, painted a bleak but not entirely hopeless picture for us back then. Singapore faced high unemployment, poor housing, low education, and the list went on.

Today, Singapore's GDP per capita is among the highest in the world. Our educational institutions are ranked among the best, and we rank among the top 10 countries in quality-of-life surveys. Our 60th birthday celebration is a day to celebrate these accomplishments, but more importantly, to also remember what it took to get to where we are today, a vibrant and thriving global city-state confident in its future.

A key to our success has been nurturing a set of national values that have stood the test of time. Meritocracy, adherence to the rule of law, and a zero tolerance for corruption have all become components of our DNA. Singapore ranks as the third

least corrupt country in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Singapore also consistently ranks high in the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index in areas like regulatory enforcement. Singapore also ranks the highest among Southeast Asian countries in the Global Social Mobility Index by the World Economic Forum, performing well in areas such as health, education and access to technology and employment opportunities.

Another key to our success is the quality of our civil service and public institutions. Singapore ranks third globally in the 2022 Chandler Good Government Index, scoring well in areas such as policy effectiveness and institutional trust. We were also rated No. 1 in the 2024 Blavatnik Index of Public Administration, scoring high marks in leadership, public service delivery, public policy and integrity. Singaporeans and foreign residents and visitors alike have come to expect a competent, efficient and non-corrupt bureaucracy that works.

This is also reflected in our world-class public infrastructure, such as Singapore Changi Airport, our public transportation system and public hospitals. Changi Airport, for instance, is consistently ranked the world's best airport by World Airline Awards. Singapore's mass rapid transit (MRT) public transport system has also received international recognition for its inclusive architecture for elderly and disabled commuters. The MRT

won an International Association of Public Transport award for operational excellence for its AI-powered system, which monitors train service disruptions in real time, leading to significant improvements in reliability. Our public healthcare system has also been lauded for its good public health outcomes. Singaporeans enjoy a long life expectancy of 84 years and low infant and maternal mortality rates. Singapore General Hospital and National University Hospital are listed among the world's best.

Singapore's outward-looking, proactive and principled foreign policy posture has also been integral to our success. External trade has always been our lifeblood. Today, trade is three times the size of our GDP. We, therefore, consistently champion a stable, rules-based multilateral trading system. A more robust rules-based trading system creates more economic opportunities for Singaporeans and our companies. Singapore has built a strong network of bilateral, regional, and multilateral frameworks to promote trade. We have implemented 28 free trade agreements (FTAs) so far. We are also complementing this with innovative partnership agreements that foster rules and norms for new forms of trade, such as in the digital economy.

This brings me to my final point regarding our bilateral relations with Bangladesh. As Singapore turns 60, I am pleased to note that Singapore and Bangladesh have been long-standing friends since the establishment of bilateral relations in February 1972. While we have had long-standing people-to-people links, best encapsulated by the many Bangladeshis who live and work in Singapore, our relationship has since evolved into a multifaceted one which includes areas such as trade and investment, energy, health, infrastructure development, port management, and capacity-building.

Singapore's 60th anniversary coincides with a significant moment in Bangladesh's history. Bangladesh's interim government is busy undertaking the crucial task of restoring democracy, peace and prosperity following the events of July and August 2024. Singapore is committed to supporting the government's efforts in priority areas through capacity-building. More than 2,100 Bangladeshi civil servants have benefited from our capacity-building programmes over the years, and we welcome more to these programmes.

Singapore's economic relations with Bangladesh are significant and growing. Singapore is Bangladesh's ninth-largest trading partner in 2024. The annual trade in goods volume between our countries was around \$3.3 billion last year. Singapore has also been an investment partner of Bangladesh, with cumulative investments of about \$1.4 billion. One major investment is Sembcorp's 420MW gas-fired power plant in Sirajganj. We expect our economic ties to deepen even further when Singapore port operator PSA is eventually granted the go-ahead to develop Chattogram's Bay Terminal, a game-changer which will make Bangladesh a transport hub in the Bay of Bengal.

As Bangladesh undertakes economic reforms, including diversifying its range of economic products and services, Singapore will continue to walk this journey with Bangladesh. This is why Singapore agreed to pursue an FTA with Bangladesh, which both sides seek to conclude in time for Bangladesh's graduation from the LDC status in 2026.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Bangladeshis for their strong friendship and cooperation during our 53 years of diplomatic relations. Looking ahead, we will continue to work closely with our Bangladeshi friends to expand ties into new areas to take our countries to greater heights.