

Rallies must respect commuters' rights

Dhaka's traffic needs immediate fixing

We are all aware of Dhaka's notorious reputation for its slow traffic and congestion on the roads. Whereas the standard recommendation is that at least 25 percent of space in every big city should be dedicated for roads, in Dhaka it is only nine percent. Even this space is neither well designed, nor properly maintained, much of it occupied by hawkers, illegal parking, uncollected garbage, and temporary food stalls. According to studies by the World Bank and BUET, traffic speed in the capital was 21 kmph in 2007; in 2022, it came down to 4.8 kmph, which is equivalent to the average walking speed. Dhaka is perhaps the only city in the world where vehicular traffic speed is equal to that of walking—while braving open sewage and numerous potholes.

Now we have another factor adding to the city's existing traffic challenges: random mass demonstrations. According to a recent report by *Prothom Alo*, in the 90 days between May 9 and August 6, main roads were blocked by various demonstrations in 36 days. Of the 54 times that roads were blocked, political rallies caused it 26 times, students' demonstrations 13 times, job seekers six times, and others nine times. People who block the roads usually choose the busiest and the most crucial places in the city, such as Shahbagh, Press Club, and Paltan. The idea is that the bigger the traffic mess is, the faster the authorities will react. Public convenience is nobody's headache.

According to the report, traffic congestion already causes a wastage of 82 lakh working hours in Dhaka every day, whose monetised value is Tk 139 crore (as of 2022). Multiply it by 365, and we get an idea of what we lose annually. Add to that the wastage of the ever expensive fuel, air pollution, and the impact on public well-being. Imagine the plight of office goers, factory workers, students, hospital goers, and emergency patients. If blockades due to the demonstrations are added to the mix, one can imagine how the commuters are affected.

This must be addressed promptly. Since we are seeking consensus in so many areas from the political parties, we suggest that all should agree not to block the city roads to hold rallies. Students could be urged to follow suit. The government should announce some designated open spaces for rallies and ban gatherings elsewhere. Also, the authorities should allow rallies only on the weekends. This should be considered a priority in national interest. These actions are fast and least expensive that the authorities can and must take immediately. Otherwise, the quality of life and productivity in Dhaka will continue to get worse. With the election on the horizon, we will see a lot more public gatherings taking place. Only planning ahead and preventive measures can alleviate public suffering due to blocked roads.

Israel's plan for Gaza condemnable

World leaders must come together to protect Palestinians' rights

We strongly condemn Israel's plan to take control of Gaza City, recently approved by its political-security cabinet. On August 8, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office unveiled a strategy aimed at "defeating Hamas" and "concluding the war." Although Netanyahu previously stated that Israel's military would "take control of all of Gaza," the current plan specifically focuses on Gaza City. The proposed plan has sparked widespread criticism both domestically and internationally, with fears that it would escalate the war rather than conclude it. Clearly, if implemented, this will result in further displacement of tens of thousands of Palestinians, who have already suffered tremendous losses.

Netanyahu's plan reportedly outlines five key objectives: disarming Hamas, returning all hostages, demilitarising the Gaza Strip, taking security control of the territory, and establishing an alternative civil administration in the territory. There are speculations as to how this takeover could unfold. There could be a phased takeover of areas in Gaza not yet under military control. Evacuation warnings could be issued to Palestinians in specific areas of Gaza, potentially giving them several weeks before the military moves in. Nearly two million Gazans have faced repeated displacement over the past 22 months, and now they face it again. It is heartbreaking to hear the words of a 52-year-old Palestinian woman quoted by AFP, "They tell us to go south, then back north, and now they want to send us south again. We are human beings, but no one hears us or sees us."

Over the past few months, Israel's severe restrictions on humanitarian aid to Gaza have pushed Palestinians to the brink of starvation, while attacks on aid seekers have turned distribution sites into deadly zones. Since May 27, at least 1,373 Palestinians searching for food and 514 along aid routes have been killed, according to the UN human rights office. Gaza is suffering from a famine, with children most affected.

Such a diabolical plan by Netanyahu's government must be stopped at all costs. We urge the international community to take a firm stand against further escalation in Gaza. Israel must be held accountable for violating international laws and human rights in the strip. While Netanyahu's new plan has drawn global criticism—from China, Turkey, the UK, EU, UN, and Arab nations—condemnation alone is not enough. Bold action is needed to end the war in Gaza and to ensure unrestricted access to humanitarian aid. And Israel must be compelled to comply with the ICJ ruling to end its occupation, realise the two-state solution, and uphold the Palestinians' right to self-determination.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



The Louvre opens

On this day in 1793, the Louvre opened in Paris, and it later became the most visited museum in the world.

EDITORIAL

LOOKING BACK AT THE JULY UPRISING

How law was manoeuvred for human rights violations



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The mass uprising in July-August 2024 primarily evolved to reform the unjust and discriminatory quota system in public employment, which later turned into a nation-awakening anti-discrimination movement. The march for equality and zero discrimination, led by students and joined by masses from all walks of society, was unlawfully attacked and suppressed by law enforcers of the then government. The massive and violent crackdown led to serious human rights violations, including crimes against humanity and mass killings. As the UN fact-finding report estimates, the unlawful use of lethal weapons by law enforcers and unjustified shoot-on-sight order killed as many as 1,400 people, including many children, and injured thousands.

During the movement, thousands of student protesters were arbitrarily and unlawfully detained and tortured, violating the right to liberty of the person and due process guaranteed under the constitution and international human rights laws. Apart from mass killing and arbitrary detentions, the imposition of internet shutdowns violated civil and political rights, including the right to freedom of expression, information, and peaceful assembly. In all cases of human rights violations, either the law was used to justify the cause in the name of "national security," "use of force as self-defence," and "public interest," or it played a complicit role in weaponising state mechanisms for oppression, harassment, and torture.

The July uprising also exposed how law has been deeply manoeuvred as a tool to commit human rights violations. The past government promulgated some draconian and repressive laws that helped sustain the regime at the cost of recurring human rights violations. The Digital Security Act (DSA), which was a footprint of an earlier repressive provision of Section 57 of the ICT Act, enabled digital authoritarianism in Bangladesh, leading to numerous arrests of rights activists, journalists, human rights defenders, students, and even ordinary citizens. A study by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) found that under the DSA, 7,001 cases were filed against 21,867 individuals between October 8, 2018 and January 31, 2023.

This repressive law was designed in such a way that its misuse was not required—the very use of the law enabled harassment, intimidation, and torture, silencing dissent.

The overly broad and vague provisions in the digital laws have provided unchecked power to the law

aggressively used during the past regime to curtail freedom of expression and criminalise any sort of criticism. The colonial penal laws, the Contempt of Courts Act, and the DSA that criminalised defamation were extensively applied. Filing a series of cases for a single alleged defamation against media outlets, journalists, editors, and activists was common in the past regime. The Code of Criminal Procedure requires that only an aggrieved person can file a defamation case, but this provision was routinely violated in defamation cases. In most cases, members of the ruling party filed defamation cases as aggrieved persons when anyone criticised their political leader.

The complicit role of law in human

been done yet.

The enabling role of law in facilitating human rights violations was also perpetuated by the widespread failure in enforcing laws. Poor law enforcement helps promote a culture of impunity for the abusers, where law becomes a tool of oppression rather than protection. Laws are made to protect human rights and ensure justice; however, when laws are drafted with vague provisions, poorly and selectively applied, or deliberately used to justify arbitrary detention, undermining fundamental freedoms and aiding discriminatory practices, then the legal system may turn into an enabler for human rights violations. This becomes fatal in a country that suffers from a fragile rule of law, limited judicial independence,



The July uprising exposed how law has been used as a tool to commit human rights violations, empowering law enforcement agencies to suppress dissenters and protesters with impunity. This photo was taken in Purana Paltan, Dhaka on July 19, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

and democratic deficit.

The July uprising enabled a renewed opportunity to embark on transformative and systemic legal reforms necessary for a re-visioned Bangladesh. The ongoing reform agenda, though it sounds transformative in words, remains elusive in reality. The collective voices and aspirations of the masses to challenge the entrenched power structures, as manifested in the July uprising, by redefining the social contract between the state and its people, are not adequately articulated in the reform agenda. The people's uprising gave us a rare opportunity to re-examine the foundational principles of governance, justice, and accountability, and reimagine our legal and political landscape that serves the people, not the powerful. This opportunity should not be wasted.

enforcement authorities, allowing them to weaponise the law by detaining individuals on mere suspicion without a warrant. This provision was indiscriminately used during the uprising. The legally empowered, unfettered authorities of state agencies were extensively used to block content and data from digital spheres and social media, violating due process as per human rights standards.

The intended outcome of the digital laws was a culture of fear, intimidation, and self-censorship. These laws, in their crafting and application, prioritised political agendas over safeguarding digital rights. While human rights in the digital spheres are constantly evolving, repressive digital laws have helped expand authoritarian rule by criminalising free speech, increasing surveillance, and silencing detractors. Defamation laws were also

rights violations was armoured by institutional inability and weakness. For example, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) was legally barred from directly investigating human rights violations committed by the security forces. This legal bar, coupled with its lack of independence influenced by political imperatives, made this watchdog body a toothless and ineffective institution.

Notably, even though more than eight months have passed since the resignation of the NHRC's chairman and members in November last year, a new commission has yet to be formed. The interim government had the opportunity to remove the legal barriers facing the NHRC, enhance its institutional capacity, and establish a strong and effective commission through a transparent, politically neutral process. However, that has not

Netanyahu and taking over Gaza



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To say that Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has lost the plot is to assume he ever had one. With a dearth of ideas as to how to come up with a "final solution" to the Palestinian problem, he has received a majority approval from his cabinet colleagues to take over Gaza City. It took a late night meeting with the security cabinet lasting some 10 hours.

A statement released on the morning of August 8 from his office mentioned a five-point plan intended to defeat Hamas and conclude the war. None of this is an improved version of what has come before: the intended disarming of Hamas, the return of all hostages, demilitarising the Gaza Strip, assuming security control of the territory, and creating "an alternative civil administration that is neither Hamas nor the Palestinian Authority."

There is also not much difference here from recent proposals made by French President Emmanuel Macron, UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, with one fundamental difference: the Israelis want no current Palestinian representative authority to govern the people they so loathe. What all the proposals share is a core belief that the Palestinians are reduced to a subordinate status, forever policed and monitored by watchful authorities.

Their representatives are to be vetted by the Israelis and any number of international partners. Genuine sovereignty can go away.

The Israeli military has announced that it "will prepare to take control of Gaza City while providing humanitarian aid to the civilian population outside the combat zones." Little change, then, given the current model of aid distribution that features daily massacres of the desperate and the starving overseen by trigger-itchy personnel from both the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the obscenely named Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF). The OHCHR, the UN human rights office, claims that at least 1,373 Palestinians seeking food have been killed since May 27, at least 859 of them in proximity of the GHF's distribution points. Another 514 have perished along the routes traversed by food convoys.

UN human rights chief Volker Türk has done his best to reiterate a certain ghastly obviousness in the plan. The military takeover "runs contrary to the ruling of the International Court of Justice that Israel bring its occupation to an end as soon as possible, to the realisation of the agreed two-state solution, and to the right of Palestinians to self-determination." The takeover would entail further

escalation, resulting in "more massive displacement, more killing, more unbearable suffering, senseless destruction, and atrocity crimes."

The IDF's chief of staff, Lt Gen Eyal Zamir, is not a fan of the plan, and concerned that it would do more to imperil the surviving Israeli hostages held in Gaza. *The New York Times* reports that the country's military leadership would prefer a fresh ceasefire, with the IDF suffering from the effects of attrition from the conflict. The head of Israel's National Security Council, Tzachi Hanegbi, is in furious agreement: such an operation would further endanger the surviving Israeli hostages. Mossad Director David Barnea also adds his name to the list of sceptics.

Israeli opposition leader Yair Lapid did not shy away from excoriating the cabinet decision, something he called "a disaster" that would breed further disasters. The far-right figures of Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich had "dragged" Netanyahu into a strategy that would lead to the death of the hostages and Israeli troops while costing billions to the Israeli taxpayers.

An announcement from Hamas proved suitably contemptuous of the latest Netanyahu gambit. "We warn the criminal occupation that this criminal adventure will cost it dearly. It will not be a walk in the park. Our people and their resistance are resilient to defeat or surrender, and Netanyahu's plans, ambitions, and delusions will fail miserably." The group also thought it fitting to name the United States as "fully responsible for the occupation's crimes, due to its political cover and direct military support for its aggression."

In a turn-up for the books for those opposing Netanyahu's blood-soaked

adventurism, some of Israel's closest allies are going beyond muttering criticism. Modest as it is, Germany has announced that weapons exports to Israel for use in the strip has been suspended "until further notice." (Between 2020 and 2024, Germany accounted for a third of Israel's arms imports.) A statement from German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, while acknowledging the usual proviso that Israel had "the right to defend itself against Hamas terrorism," expressed concern that "even tougher military action" by the Israeli army in the Gaza Strip "undermined prospects for releasing the hostages and pursuing negotiations for a ceasefire." Merz further warned that Israel "not take any further steps toward annexing the West Bank."

For his part, Starmer called Israel's "offensive to further escalate its offensive in Gaza [...] wrong, and we urge it to reconsider immediately. This action will do nothing to bring an end to this conflict or to help secure the release of the hostages. It will only bring more bloodshed."

Türk, if somewhat hollowly, demands an end to the war in Gaza with a rosy vision: an arrangement where Israelis and Palestinians are "allowed to live side by side in peace." Admirable as this aspiration is, optimistic in its transcendence, it misunderstands the currency of hate and vengeance currently traded in Netanyahu's cabinet and swathes of the Israeli populace. This is not a matter of side by side, but above and below, living in a state of permanent conflict, suppression and suspicion.

This article first appeared on Countercurrents.org on August 9, 2025.