The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Collusion fuelling Sada Pathor looting

Govt must act on probe reports implicating agencies, individuals

It is quite disturbing, if not as surprising, to learn how the rampant looting of white stones from Bholaganj's Sada Pathor area has enjoyed broad support from influential quarters. As per a probe committee formed by the Sylhet district administration, some government officials, including members of law enforcement agencies, were involved in or beneficiaries of illegal extraction. A preliminary report by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) was more damning, as it specified the Bureau of Mineral Development (BMD), the Sylhet administration, police, Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB), and 42 individuals with political and business links as being involved, either directly or indirectly.

Among the accused named are Sylhet's divisional commissioner, now-former deputy commissioner, superintendent of police, now-former UNO of Companiganj, etc. Besides administration and law enforcement officials, the names of leaders from across the political spectrum also came up in the ACC report, underscoring how high up the chain of authority this nexus of exploitation goes. While we acknowledge the flurry of interventions, including joint forces drives and administrative reshuffles that followed public outrage over Sada Pathor looting, doubts remain as to how effective these will be in the long run. The "all-party consensus" that seems to prevail over stone extraction—reflecting decades of elite capture and policy failures—cannot be undone by short-term measures alone. And how do you prevent a practice that syndicates have turned into an organised crime with mass participation?

This wide net of beneficiaries highlights just how entrenched the business of stone and sand extraction, not just around Sada Pathor but across Sylhet's tourist spots, has become. It is no longer just a case of a few unscrupulous traders, politicians, or local opportunists exploiting natural resources; rather, it has become a well-oiled system of plunder sustained by collusion among state officials and vested groups. That the very agencies tasked with protecting natural resources and ensuring law and order have been found complicit only shows the extent of this problem.

But now that the matter has come to light again, the authorities must ensure that ongoing efforts and investigations do not lose momentum or get buried under political pressure, as has so often been the case in similar scandals. Accountability must be established at every level, and those responsible, no matter how influential, must face justice. Besides joint drives to recover stolen stones, the district administration has reportedly taken the initiative of restoring them at Sada Pathor. Such efforts must persist as part of a broader strategy to prevent illegal extractions and other harmful activities that our natural commons are routinely subjected to in the country.

Address the crisis of community clinics

Govt must regularise medicine supply, renovate crumbling clinic buildings

It is quite concerning that community clinics, the primary healthcare facilities most accessible to the rural populace, remain plagued by multiple issues. As things stand, many are housed in dilapidated buildings and suffer from a shortage of essential medicines. This is severely disrupting the vital services they provide, including 22 types of free medicine to 4.9 lakh people daily.

According to a report in this daily, 3,136 of the 14,467 community clinics in the country have been identified as high-risk and need immediate replacement, while another 1,944 require urgent repair. The situation worsened after the sectoral programme that funded the medicine supply to community clinics came to an end in June 2024. Following the change in government in August 2024, the new programme proposed by the previous regime was scrapped because of anomalies and coordination failures. Although the interim government has drafted a two-year project to support the clinics through June 2026, the proposal is still awaiting approval. In the meantime, only a limited supply—15,000 boxes of medicine—has been distributed to clinics through a lump-sum allocation, according to officials of the Community Clinic Health Support Trust.

The medicine supply is quite insufficient, with a *Prothom Alo* report pointing out that 180 community clinics in Laxmipur have not been able to provide medicine to patients for the last three months. Similarly, reports from northern Bengal show severe shortages of contraceptives, provided at the community clinics under a separate health sector programme. As a result, poor villagers are being forced to purchase over-the-counter drugs—like pain relievers and cough syrups—from pharmacies, further burdening households already struggling with some of the highest out-of-pocket healthcare costs in the world. This situation is especially alarming amid ongoing public health threats such as dengue, influenza, and chikungunya. The shortage of contraceptives is particularly concerning as the decline in the country's fertility rate has remained stagnant since 2011.

Despite past political exploitations of community clinics, and conflicting stances about their necessity between the local government and health reform commissions, the fact remains: these clinics are indispensable for lakhs of rural people. Therefore, the government must act swiftly to repair unsafe buildings, ensure a consistent supply of medicines and contraceptives, and allocate sufficient manpower and equipment to the clinics. The health of rural citizens must not be compromised while policy decisions regarding the funding of community clinics or their revamping as per the health commission's reform recommendations await approval.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

The Scream stolen

On this day in 2004, Edvard Munch's iconic painting The Scream (1910 version) and Madonna were stolen in broad daylight from the Munch Museum in Oslo, Norway. Both works were recovered two years later with minor damage.

Political parties must support the election drive

THE THIRD VIEW

Mahfuz Anam
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MAHFUZ ANAM

We cannot say it vociferously enough that to regain a semblance of global and regional support and strengthen our confidence about our future, holding elections is a must-do. Prof Muhammad Yunus is the best and perhaps only person able to head the interim government, but his government is still an interim one. We must replace it with an elected one, which will come to power through a free and fair expression of public will.

When we hear about the numerous conditions that are being placed by various political parties, we cannot help but wonder whether we really understand the true importance of a national election. We seem to think of it more as an event rather than a process through which people exercise their right to select the leadership that will govern us. We cannot forget for a moment that the polls belong to the people, not to any political party. None of them has any right to declare that elections cannot be held unless this or that demand is met. They have no right to deprive the voters of their fundamental right to exercise their franchise. It is the most basic of rights and every citizen is entitled to it the moment he/she is born. Vote is the symbol of a citizen's political existence.

The introduction of the caretaker government system to oversee elections served us well. Under the caretaker government system, we had four elections—1991, June 1996, 2001, and 2008—which lived up to acceptable standards. Though the losing parties always complained about the outcome, they functionally accepted the results and joined the governance process.

However, through a constant process of walkouts, followed by long-term boycotts and even resignations, both the Awami League and BNP stymied the growth of parliament as the House of the People. The frequent absence of the opposition in parliament gave the ruling party the opportunity to make it an extension of the executive branch. Yes, the ruling party must be held responsible for preventing the parliament from playing its due role, but the opposition must also share the blame for debilitating the House by failing to make use of it to ensure accountability and transparency.

One of Sheikh Hasina's biggest crimes was manipulating elections and engineering their outcomes. She not only produced fraudulent results but also destroyed democracy, made the institution of people's representatives questionable, and cast doubt on the election, which is the most authentic process through which we can understand people's minds.

Through that one action, repeated three times, the previous regime turned parliament into a rubber stamp body and MPs into pliant clerks who, with some honourable exceptions, carried out the boss's wishes in exchange for various benefits, including usurping development funds. The parliament, instead of being the watchdog over the executive, became the latter's lapdog, abdicating all its supervisory and monitoring role.

It needs to be mentioned here that an agreement has already been reached among all the parties, including the BNP (with a note of dissent, of course), for setting up a bicameral legislature with an Upper House. BNP wants the seats of the Upper House to reflect those in the Lower House, while the rest want it under the proportional representation (PR) system.

If we believe in democracy, which all our political parties claim to do, then we must work together to hold the coming election and make it credible for our people to celebrate and the world to honour.

BNP has been consistently seeking the election as early as possible. Some, if not all, feel that the party's insistence for an early election is based neither on their love for democracy nor a desire to implement people's right to vote, but to cash in on the opportunity that the present situation provides. It is based on the fact that, given the peculiar circumstances, it is most likely to get the majority votes in the polls. So the earlier the election, the better it is for them. The fear is that the longer it stays on the sidelines, the more its reputation will be eroded as a section of their rank and file has already started indulging in practices that dragged the previous ruling party through the mud.

The newest political party, National Citizen Party (NCP), feels that the later the election is held, the better the party's chances are to gain people's support. So while it has accepted the election timeline, it wants to see the implementation of the July Charter—produced by the National Consensus Commission—before the polls, and which should have precedence over the constitution or any law. This demand raises fear of unconstitutional behaviour that will set a dangerous precedent. Therefore, we see merit in the question raised by BNP leader Salahuddin Ahmed, "Can an agreement among political parties be considered as a 'supra constitutional document'?"

VISUAL: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

Jamaat-e-Islami also supports the election timeline, but it has presented a new demand that is complicated and challenging, and one that our people are completely unfamiliar with.

While agreeing to having the election in February 2026, Jamaat is demanding that the election for both the lower and upper houses be conducted through the PR process. In the past, whatever percentage of the overall votes that Jamaat got, they did not get as many seats under the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. Under the PR system, they expect to get more seats. Hence, the demand.

However, a major shortcoming of the PR system is that people don't get to vote for their chosen candidates, but for their parties. Hence, a direct link between a candidate and a voter is not there, which deprives the voter from choosing a specific candidate on the basis of their merit, honesty, capabilities, and human qualities. In our country, people generally prefer to vote for candidates that they know and can hold accountable. An MP's link with his/her constituency is vital, and that is what motivates people to vote.

Why is the PR system practised so rarely in the world? Why do most countries prefer the direct election of a candidate chosen by the voters? No country in the world, except Germany and Israel, have the PR system. Nepal, after more than five years of negotiations, has adopted a hybrid system of electing the Lower House of 275 MPs, 60 percent of whom (165 MPs) are elected directly through the FPTP system; the rest (110 MPs) are elected through the PR system. People's preference globally is clear—for the FPTP system as against the PR system. Jamaat must keep this in mind and not impose a system that our people have no experience of, just out of party interest.

NCP, which has yet to test public trust in them, aligns itself with the PR demand, again thinking that they are likely to get a few more seats that way, putting party interest above that of the nation.

If we believe in democracy, which all our political parties claim to do, then we must work together to hold the coming election and make it credible for our people to celebrate and the world to honour.

Our capacity to complicate matters, especially the political ones, seem to be inexhaustible, even when we know that doing so may affect the process of restoration of democracy by postponing elections. We have seen this happen many times, yet we fail to learn. The election in February 2026 is among the most important challenges that we are going to face, and once completed, it may hopefully pave the way not only for restoring economic and sociopolitical stability but also the implementation of much-needed reform initiatives. Our political parties can either create situations that will impede the election process, or they can adopt a collaborative attitude that will expedite our march towards it. We must not forget that our democratic journey has faltered many times in the past. After 54 years of independence, we cannot further delay or distort our democratic path forward.

Architectural peacekeeping for violent campuses

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MARUF AHMED

I have long believed that space is not merely a backdrop to human action but an active participant in shaping it. In Bangladesh, campus violence is usually discussed in terms of political factions, administrative failures, or law enforcement. Rarely do we look at the built environment itself. But walls, gates, corridors, and open grounds are not passive; they are drawn and arranged in ways that either provoke or pacify confrontation. The recurrent eruptions of violence in our public universities have convinced me that the architecture of these campuses is not innocent.

Walking through Dhaka College, with its singular entries, tight corridors, and controlled circulation, I feel the constant undercurrent of control. Chokepoints force bodies into close quarters where encounters are inevitable and often confrontational. The architecture becomes a holding environment for hostility. By contrast, the Fine Arts Institute of Dhaka University (Charukola) offers porous boundaries, shaded courts, and visual transparency. Muzharul Islam's design allows for drifting, lingering, and quiet withdrawal. Even in tense moments, the openness offers people the dignity of choice—whether to join, observe, or leave. One is the architecture of command; the other, of consent.

Fine Arts Institute of Dhaka University offers porous boundaries, shaded courts, and visual transparency. FILE PHOTO: **PRINON MOSTAFA FAHAD**

Our patterns of campus violence thrive in spatial bottlenecks—the single gate where rival groups must pass, the narrow stairwell that compresses bodies, the bare quadrangle where everyone stands face-to-face under a glare. Such places are not neutral; they are accelerants. We can reverse this by thinking of architecture as a form of peacekeeping—not to "design away" conflict, but to create conditions where disagreement can de-escalate.

Architectural peacekeeping begins with multiple permeable thresholds. No campus should have only one way in and out; single gates become territorial flashpoints. Multiple entries with visual openness allow movement to disperse naturally and make it harder for any group to monopolise access. Next, we need genuinely neutral shared commons—shaded, furnished, and publicly visible spaces where students from different groups can occupy the same ground without confrontation. Long, narrow, single-exit passages of corridors make ambush easy, while branching paths, widened passages, and open bays break the grip of territorial control. Visibility is also critical, but it must be without intimidation. Transparency in facades, open courts, and subtle elevation changes can ensure safety through presence rather than through the cold glare of surveillance. Finally, campuses need holding environments—spaces that contain emotional intensity without amplifying it, such as shaded courtyards, verandas, and gardens that invite movement and conversation instead of standoffs.

These ideas are not expensive or technically difficult. They require, instead, the political will to see architecture as part of governance. Without this, we produce an "architecture of inevitability," in which daily movement patterns make confrontation predictable. A single narrow gate compresses life into a geometry of collision; no neutral space means every space is contested. By designing for porosity, multiplicity, and neutrality, we create an "architecture of possibility"—not a guarantee of peace, but the space for it to occur.

Better design will not end campus violence, but it can change its temperature. We cannot continue to place our young people into pressure vessels and then act shocked when they explode. Our universities deserve more than post-riot repairs; they deserve spaces designed to absorb disagreement and hold it without harm. If architecture is a teacher, we must ask what lessons our campuses are giving: the habit of openness, or the reflex of siege? Charukola shows that a campus can be both an institution and a living commons; Dhaka College warns what happens when enclosure of space becomes enclosure of the mind. In that contrast lies the blueprint for peacekeeping—and the urgent need to redraw our lines.

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