



## PEEKING AT THE CITY tales told by Dhaka balconies

JANNATUL BUSHRA

Step out onto any rooftop in Dhaka and take a slow spin. You'll notice that almost every building in this urban jungle has one thing in common: balconies or verandas, whatever you want to call them.

From Banani's sleek glass railings to Old Dhaka's rust-stained iron grills, each balcony here is a stage, a diary, a confessional — and Dhaka's residents perform, scribble, and gossip on them like nobody's watching. Except, well, we are.

Because we Dhakaites are nosy or, in better words, curious with a capital C. Even as I write this, I catch myself peeking outside, not for fresh air (let's be real, this is Dhaka) but for stories. And balconies? They're the perfect theatres for the absurd, the mundane, and the gloriously ridiculous.

You never really know what you'll find on a Dhaka balcony. One could be doubling as a yoga studio, complete with gym instruments abandoned in the corner, now repurposed as climbing frames for the house cat. Another could be the scene of an all-out laundry war, where bed sheets and curtains wrestle over sunlight like gladiators who forgot their swords but somehow remembered the drama.

Some balconies are simply outdoor storage units masquerading as living space. You'll see precarious towers of



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

broken furniture that defy both logic and the laws of physics, or piles of boxes that, judging by the smell, should probably be declared hazardous waste.

Then there are the adventurous households taking "urban farming" too literally, raising chickens in cages, as though testing how far "farm-to-table" can be stretched in Dhaka apartments. Balconies, in short, are where the city's quirks hang out to dry.

And yet, not all balconies scream chaos. Some soothe. Bougainvillea vines curl around grills, little ferns

compete politely for sunlight, papaya trees rise from clay pots with optimism. Fairy lights, wind chimes, and dreamcatchers signal the presence of girls quietly rebelling in aesthetic ways.

But perhaps the most poignant balconies belong to our elderly. For them, these small slabs of concrete are not extras — they're boundaries. The farthest they can go.

Take Sahura Khatun, a 60-something, diabetic. Her doctor insists she walk forty minutes daily.

Walk where, exactly? Dhaka's sidewalks are either occupied by vendors, dug up by construction, or a minefield of open drains. So, she walks on her treadmill, on her sixth-floor balcony, sipping tea between steps and watching traffic as though it were a storm — fascinating to observe, but too dangerous to step into.

Then there's Mohammad Ali, 85. Once a man of the land in Mymensingh, he now rules a kingdom of pigeons from his Jigatola balcony. He reads the newspaper there and surveys the road. "It feels like the traffic can hit me at any time," he says. And so, like many others, his balcony becomes his promenade, his park bench, his lifeline. It's his personal theatre, except everyone is part of the audience, whether they want to be or not.

Balconies, in other words, are where Dhaka resists. This city has long been accused of choosing cars over people. Pavements vanish, green spaces shrink, pollution thickens. And yet, tilt your gaze upward and you'll see something stubbornly human. People carving out space, however small, for plants. For birds. For gossip. For tea with grandchildren.

It is where Dhaka pushes back against being dismissed as one giant traffic jam. Its where human stories leak through the concrete, reminding us that we were never designed to be boxed into these cells.

## Stay vigilant as there'll be bid to foil election

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Leaders of the AB Party, Ganosamhati Andolan, Gono Odhikar Parishad, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Nagarok Oikya Islami Andolon Bangladesh, Jatiya Gono Front, and Islamic outfit Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh attended the meeting.

"The election will be held in the first half of February. We will transfer power to an elected government," Yunus said.

According to the press secretary, Yunus said the election is a test of Bangladesh's ability to stand independently and govern on its own terms.

"We have to make sure that no country can interfere," Yunus said.

With everyone's support, the chief adviser hoped that this would be a landmark election. "This election belongs to all political parties, not to the interim government. We want your all-out support in arranging it,"

Yunus told leaders.

Speaking to reporters, Islami Andolan Bangladesh presidium member Ashraf Ali Akon said the chief adviser raised concerns about the election at the meeting.

Asked about his party's demand, he said, "We demanded that the Awami League, Jatiya Party, and the 14-party alliance all be banned."

Ashraf described law and order as "out of control". "If the violence cannot be stopped now, how will it be contained during elections to 300 constituencies?" he asked. He also called for a proportionate representation system.

Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh Joint Secretary General Azizur Rahman said they had demanded that the July Charter include the Shapla Square massacre, as well as the arrest of identified criminals and collaborators of the Awami League government.

Ganosamhati Andolan Chief

Coordinator Zonayed Saki said Yunus had sought advice and cooperation from political parties regarding the upcoming polls. "We have proposed forming a committee with representatives from parties in the Consensus Commission talks to coordinate the electoral environment."

AB Party Chairman Mojibur Rahman Monju highlighted concerns over governance and law enforcement. "The Chittagong University incident revealed a lack of coordination between the government and law enforcement agencies. Unless this is fixed, doubts about the election will persist."

Quoting the chief adviser, Monju added, "He himself said there is no one in his team with experience in conducting a neutral election. We recommended appointing those with such experience, even on a contractual basis. The chief adviser

has said any election is a challenge, and there is no alternative to facing it together."

LDP Secretary General Redwan Ahmed urged that the administration must take measures to remain neutral during the polls.

Meanwhile, Yunus directed the health ministry officials concerned to send Nurul Haque Nur, president of Gono Odhikar Parishad, abroad for better treatment. Nur was injured as security forces beat him up during a clash between supporters of his party and Jatiya Party on Friday night.

The directive was given in the presence of Nur's wife, Maria Akhter, party General Secretary Rashed Khan, and senior joint general secretary Hasan Al Mamun at Jamuna.

Law Adviser Asif Nazrul said a one-member committee led by Justice Ali Reza is being formed to investigate the attack.

a contractual basis.

**RAB ABUSES, SANCTIONS**

During his tenure as Rab DG (April 2020-September 2022), Mamun said the Task Force Interrogation (TFI) cell routinely abducted, tortured, and secretly detained dissenters.

He said directives for enforced disappearances and crossfire killings came from the Prime Minister's Office via defence adviser Tarique Ahmed Siddique.

"I was aware of these abuses but lacked authority to intervene. The US sanctioned me, Rab, and its former DG for these actions."

**GUILT, REMORSE**

In an emotional conclusion, Mamun said his decision to become an approver stemmed from guilt over the mass killings.

"Hearing victims' testimonies and seeing footage of corpses being burnt shook me deeply. If this full account reveals the truth, I may find some peace."

"I served 36 years and a half in the police. There were never any allegations against me. But this massacre happened under my watch. I accept responsibility."

Mamun is scheduled for cross-examination today.

officials. The meeting reconvened inside the cantonment to finalise deployment plans, he said.

As protesters poured into Dhaka on August 5, Mamun learnt that Hasina would resign. He was later airlifted by army helicopter to Dhaka Cantonment with other senior officers, including SB chief Monirul, DMP commissioner Habibur Rahman, DIG Amena Begum, additional DIG Proloy and additional IGP Lutful Kabi.

Mamun's appointment as IGP was revoked on August 8, and he was arrested on September 3.

**2018 BALLOT BOX STUFFING**

Mamun also told the tribunal, "During the 2018 elections, the then IGP Javed Patwary advised Sheikh Hasina to keep 50 percent of the ballot boxes stuffed the night before the polls. Following that advice, the government instructed the local administration, law enforcement agencies, and party leaders and activists to implement the decision..."

He said the force had become politicised since 2014, especially by Gopalganj-based officers, with officers with many prioritising party agendas over regulations. Since there was a tussle between officers over who would succeed him, he was kept on as IGP on

the injured to hospitals, according to a Reuters witness.

Some of those injured have been transferred to hospitals in Kabul and the adjacent province of Nangarhar, said Ehsan. Thousands of children were at risk, the United Nations Children's Fund warned yesterday.

Unicef said it was sending medicines, warm clothing, tents and tarpaulins for shelter, and hygiene items such as soap, detergent, towels, sanitary pads, and water buckets.

Taliban soldiers were deployed in the area, providing help and security. The disaster has further stretched the war-torn nation's Taliban administration, already grappling with a sharp drop in foreign aid and deportations of hundreds of thousands of Afghans by neighbouring countries.

Rescue teams and authorities are

proposal came from the DGFI. I opposed it but later agreed following the home minister's order," Mamun told the tribunal.

He added that the responsibility was assigned to DB chief Harun or Rashid, who, along with the DGFI, picked up the coordinators and kept them in DB custody. Their family members were also brought in and the detained leaders were forced to announce the withdrawal of the movement in televised statements.

"DB chief Harun played a leading role in this," Mamun said, adding that the home minister used to call him "Jinni" because of his efficiency in executing any government order.

**COORDINATION, SUPPRESSION**

On August 4, 2024, a Security Coordination Committee meeting at the Gono Bhaban, attended by 27 top officials, including military and intelligence chiefs, planned to block the "March to Dhaka" scheduled for the next day.

Mamun said the police and army were instructed to coordinate operations, with DMP forces deployed at city entry points.

Later that night, a second meeting was held at the Gono Bhaban with Hasina, Sheikh Rehana, and senior security

delivery of aid," the World Health Organization said, adding that over 12,000 people had been affected by the quake.

So far, Britain has allocated 1 million pounds (\$1.35 million) to support the efforts of UN and the International Red Cross in delivering critical healthcare and emergency supplies, reports Reuters.

India delivered 1,000 tents and was moving 15 tonnes of food supplies to Kunar, with more relief materials to be sent yesterday.

Other nations such as China, the United Arab Emirates, the European Union, Pakistan and Iran have pledged help but aid is yet to arrive.

Yesterday, a line of ambulances was on the damaged mountain road trying to reach Kunar villages, as helicopters flew in, bringing aid supplies and taking

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Rescue operations were carried out in four badly hit villages in Kunar on Monday and efforts will now be focused on reaching more remote mountain areas, said Ehsanullah Ehsan, the provincial head of disaster management.

"We cannot accurately predict how many bodies might still be trapped under the rubble," said Ehsan. "Our effort is to complete these operations as soon as possible and to begin distributing aid to the affected families."

Access for vehicles along narrow mountain roads was the main obstacle, said Ehsan, adding machinery was being brought in to clear roads of debris.

"Damaged roads, ongoing aftershocks, and remote locations of many villages severely impede the

VIOLENCE AROUND CU

## Banned BCL men among 1,095 sued

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chittagong University authorities yesterday lodged a case accusing 1,095 people, including activists of the banned Chhatra League, over a clash between students and villagers, which left at least 240 injured on August 31.

Abdur Rahim, Deputy Registrar (security) of the CU, filed the case with the Hathazari Police Station naming 95 accused, said Abu Mohammed Kawsar Hossain, officer-in-charge (OC) of the police station.

Apart from that, the CU security department lodged a general diary (GD) with the police station in connection with looting sharp weapons, which were seized from different halls after August 5 last year, from its security lockers during the violence.

Apart from them, 800-1,000 unidentified people were also accused, the OC said.

He said, "The university administration lodged case of attempted murder ... Police registered the case and have started an investigation. However, no one has been arrested in this connection so far."

The OC declined to disclose the political affiliation of the accused, but campus and police sources said names of local Jubo League and BCL leaders and activists were mentioned in the FIR.

CU Gate No 1 area's Jubo League leader Md Hanif, 40, and his three brothers — Iqbal, Rezaul, and Sarwar — who are also affiliated with BCL and AL, were named in the FIR, they said.

Hanif and his brothers used to control the broadband internet business in the university area until October last year.

Another FIR accused, Suman Mamun, is a former BCL leader of CU, said campus sources.

At least 240 people were injured during two rounds of clashes between villagers and the students. The violence was sparked by an alleged assault on a female student Saturday night and flared on Sunday.

In total, 14 students are undergoing treatment in three hospitals in the port city. Of them, two students are in the ICU.

## Simpler rules key to smooth transition from LDC

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much-needed capital inflows.

They emphasised that political stability, predictable energy supplies, and an improved law-and-order situation are prerequisites for sustained growth. Consultation with the private sector, they said, must be genuine, not tokenistic.

Participants also highlighted the vulnerabilities of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which provide the bulk of employment and underpin larger corporations. Without targeted support, SMEs risk being disproportionately exposed to post-graduation pressures.

Zaved Akhtar, president of the Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), said Bangladesh must simplify business processes, improve NBR operations, and ensure a regulatory environment that supports both exports and domestic production. "If SMEs don't survive, corporates will not survive," he warned.

Ahsan Khan Chowdhury, chairman and CEO of PRAN-RFL Group, lamented the "difficult" business climate. Because of this, Bangladesh's annual export is one-tenth of Vietnam's target of \$450 billion, he said.

"Every application hovers from table to table and gets stuck for small reasons," he said.

Till we make business simple, Bangladesh will not be a competitive place to manufacture or attract foreign investment, Chowdhury said.

He also said government people don't want to listen to the private sector. "When the private sector talks, they always believe that it is for a vested interest."

"We create more jobs than the government sector. So, Sir, start listening,"

Chowdhury blamed poor port, customs, and transport systems for the country's low competitiveness.

Syed S Kaiser Kabir, managing director of Renata PLC, called LDC graduation "a highly risky decision" given the Covid-19 fallout, last year's July uprising, economic mismanagement, high inflation, and currency depreciation. "Bangladesh is not yet ready. Preparations could be made later when the situation stabilises. Many countries have deferred the process; we could too," he said.

Showkat Aziz Russell, president of the Bangladesh Textile Mills Association, said he doesn't think there is a good business environment in place for surviving after the LDC graduation

He also cited discriminatory port charges. "Demurrage for cotton is 400 percent, whereas it is zero for yarn. Are we patronising imports?" he asked.

"If our policy is such that the government wants to help import, then there is no point establishing

factories in the country that contribute to job creation," he added.

DataSoft Systems President M Manjur Mahmud urged the government to respect local firms, allocate them a fair share of IT contracts, and stop excessive interference.

He said the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority is trying to bring investors from "everywhere else". "What about me? I'm an investor," he said.

Mahmud criticised delays in land registration and excessive compliance. "It takes two years to register land in a company's name. Once you start your business, suddenly the environment department comes, suddenly NBR asks for five files. You get bombarded with systems and processes," he said.

Yasir Azman, CEO of Grameenphone, warned that taxes are higher for the telecom industry compared to other countries, but unpredictable tax policies undermine confidence. "We will bring investment but we need policy sustainability," he said. "If the government takes this opportunity to fix things, it will help businesses."

Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, noted that while the government has recently begun some fiscal adjustments, such as subsidy reforms and tariff adjustments, collective preparation from the private sector is lacking.

He advised shifting fiscal incentives from export stage to production phase, citing India's example of support for establishments, machinery, and energy instead of direct export incentives.

"Entrepreneurs should clearly communicate their needs, and the government must respond to ensure the competitiveness of the private sector after graduation," he said.

He also said a centralised digital platform should be created where all government agencies can access the required documents directly, without forcing businesses to submit them repeatedly.

Abbar Hossain Sayem, president of the Bangladesh Apparel Youth Leaders Alliance, said most new businesses fail within five years. The major obstacles they face include financing, contract enforcement, and complex taxation. He called for simplified regulations, digital one-stop services, and targeted investment in skills and high-potential sectors.

Riad Mahmud, managing director of Shoenerverse Footwear, warned that without timely policy support, many firms will collapse, leading to job losses and capital erosion.

He also flagged security concerns that restrict women's participation in sales and revenue collection. "The security issue must be addressed immediately if we want women to play a bigger role," he said.