

Persistent rights concerns demand scrutiny

Joint letter by rights groups raises critical questions

The joint appeal by six international human rights organisations to Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus—calling for an end to arbitrary arrests and detentions—deserves a proper response from the interim government. The letter urges immediate action to prevent such arrests and to review and withdraw cases deemed politically motivated or infringing on freedom of expression and other fundamental rights. It is worth recalling that the law adviser has, on multiple occasions, acknowledged that individuals have been falsely implicated in criminal cases, often as a result of political vendetta or personal disputes. He assured us that the government would review these cases and release innocent individuals. However, no significant progress has been made in this screening process, and a substantial number of people, including journalists, continue to languish in prison without due process.

We, therefore, fully endorse the rights groups' observation that the government should uphold press freedom and protect journalists from arbitrary arrests and detention, regardless of their perceived political affiliation. Of particular concern here is the continued detention of journalists on fabricated charges, including murder, amid scant progress in investigations conducted over the year. Charging individuals without credible evidence and repeatedly denying them bail on flimsy grounds undermine the core principle of justice that everyone has a right to be treated as innocent until proven guilty.

The joint letter also emphasises the need to strengthen state institutions to guarantee free and fair elections and to prevent democratic backsliding. It aptly calls for not restricting freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. These propositions are simple yet essential for holding any credible electoral process.

It should be mentioned that these leading rights groups have long supported the people in their struggle against autocracy and in pursuit of a just and democratic society. During the previous autocratic regime, these organisations stood in solidarity with them despite obstructions, including travel bans, surveillance of their partner organisations, and defamation. Some met Professor Yunus at home and abroad, expressed their support for his government's reform initiatives, and encouraged ensuring accountability for abuses committed by state and non-state actors both before and after the August 5 political changeover.

Their joint letter reiterates their support for the accountability process initiated by the interim government and calls on the military to respect the authority of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). It also urges security-sector reforms, including the disbanding of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), the exclusion of military personnel from civilian law enforcement, and the clear limitation of the DGFI's role to military intelligence with defined operational boundaries.

We hope the government will treat these constructive suggestions with the seriousness they warrant and critically assess its human rights performance over the past 14 months. It must also disclose the outcome of its review process and clarify how many innocent individuals, if any, have been released from wrongful detention.

Reduce preventable deaths and injuries

Alarming rate of road crash injuries, deaths needs urgent intervention

It is deeply concerning that road accidents remain one of the leading causes of injury-related deaths across all age groups in the country. According to a recent government survey, the annual number of road crash fatalities is 24,233, meaning that 66 people die from road traffic injuries every day. In addition, more than 30 lakh people suffer non-fatal injuries in such crashes each year, among them 38,028 left permanently disabled. The survey, carried out between May 2023 and February 2024, came up with these findings after analysing data from 4.43 lakh participants. Three other leading causes of mortality include suicide, accounting for 20,505 fatalities annually; followed by drowning, with 18,268 deaths; and falls, with 14,167 deaths. The survey thus highlights the increasing number of injury-related deaths in the country.

These findings come at a time when our transport sector remains in complete disarray. According to an estimate by Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, at least 116,726 people were killed and 165,021 injured in 67,890 road crashes over the last 12 years. While corruption and flawed policies of successive governments are largely to blame for this, the situation has not improved under the interim government either. A large number of unfit vehicles continue to plague our roads. The shortage of skilled drivers, sharp rise in motorcycles, unsupervised operation of battery-run rickshaws and slow-moving vehicles, and poor enforcement of traffic laws also serve as major barriers. Unfortunately, the Road Transport Act 2018 has failed to address the prevailing indiscipline in the sector, as it remains largely unimplemented. Influential transport associations continue to make the rules on our roads. The interim government's failure to enforce its directive to withdraw date-expired vehicles from operation is a case in point. This situation must change.

The increasing number of injury-related deaths also highlights a public health crisis that demands urgent response. Going forward, the government must prioritise injury prevention by implementing the survey's recommendations, such as developing and executing an injury prevention strategy, forming a national committee for necessary interventions, and building capacity for on-site injury prevention. As road crashes remain a major cause of deaths and injuries, it is crucial that all political parties commit to prioritising road safety and modernising public transport systems before the next election to ensure safer roads for all.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Cuban missile crisis

On this day in 1962, President John F. Kennedy alerted Americans to the Cuban missile crisis, declaring a naval blockade to prevent further missile shipments to the island country 145 km off the coast of the US.

NATIONAL ROAD SAFETY DAY

‘Road deaths cannot be reduced without BRTA reform’

Dr Md Shamsul Hoque, professor of civil engineering at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), talks to Monorom Polok of The Daily Star about the role of systemic failures and corruption behind the alarming rate of traffic fatalities in Bangladesh, and the critical structural reforms required to curb it.

Why do we have so many deaths and injuries from road crashes in Bangladesh every year and how can these be reduced?

Motorcycles and buses are responsible for the majority of road fatalities in Bangladesh and these casualties cannot be reduced unless the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) is reformed. For example, route permits are issued by passenger and cargo transport committees at regional and metropolitan levels. However, non-technical persons, including police, labour leaders, transport owners and general bureaucrats often dominate these committees. Since public transport is a specialised branch of transportation, it must be run by people who understand the system. If we keep allowing unqualified people to make these decisions, chaos will continue. A majority of accidents occur because buses race each other for passengers, and in recent years, this chaos has grown to a dangerous level.

Another major problem is the boom of motorcycles—a two-wheeled vehicle with an inherently high level of risk. Often, the riders are mostly young and thrill-seeking. They enjoy speed and tend to ignore the law. On the other hand, large buses, while competing for passengers, cannot even notice these small vehicles, which leads to accidents.

The unregulated route permits given to buses and the reckless behaviour of motorcycle riders together contribute to the indiscipline on our roads. The latter is difficult to control, but if the government wants, the former can be addressed. By introducing a professional system of bus route management, like the one in Hatisrheel, a non-competing, organised environment can be created. That requires planning, not necessarily heavy spending.

At present, the system is rooted in ignorance and unethical practices. If we do not change this, we can never sustainably reduce the risk of accidents. Random accidents may still occur, but what we are facing now is a man-made hazard that keeps increasing day by day.

How does the rapid rise of battery-run rickshaws and other small vehicles fit into this picture?

Yes, battery-run vehicles, such as easy bikes, are part of the problem, apart from buses and motorcycles. Although they are fewer in numbers compared to motorcycles, they are still a major source of road disorder. Most easy bike drivers do not know basic road rules. Besides, these unstable three-

wheeled vehicles move at high speed, often driven by untrained people, creating risk both for themselves and others. Until recently, their numbers were under control, but they increased drastically last year.

What's more problematic is some police and special forces members are now directly involved in the transport business, according to various media reports. When law enforcers become transport owners themselves, indiscipline becomes impossible to



Dr Md Shamsul Hoque

control. For example, many CNG-run autorickshaws, owned by police officials, do not follow metre rules. Thus, others follow their example. This same theory applies to buses that run illegally. When the enforcers of the law are themselves part of the system's corruption, how will order be maintained?

BRTA is a totally incompetent organisation. It does not know how to regulate. The situation on our roads reflects BRTA's poor performance. Other countries can maintain discipline on their roads because their regulatory bodies are professional, accountable, and competent. In our country, those who have taken charge of the transport system lack capacity, professionalism, and accountability.

Let me give an example. Who allowed motorcycle numbers to multiply like this? BRTA did. They even reduced the registration fee by 40 to 50 percent, encouraging people to buy more motorcycles, even though a two-wheeler is 30 times riskier than a car. The result is that motorcycle registration is now higher than that of four-wheelers. This reflects BRTA's complete lack of professionalism and policy understanding.

naturally serves the interests of those groups.

Today, bus owners and transport leaders are present on every committee—whether it is the National Road Safety Council, the committee that issues route permits, or accident investigation panels. The result is that the so-called “regulatory authority” has turned into a clique. When those who are supposed to be regulated become the regulators themselves, no government can fix the system unless it tackles this issue.

Many countries have done the opposite. Look at Dubai's Road and Transport Authority, for instance. They have separate professional units for public transport, signalling, and vehicle fitness. The government does not directly provide these services because it cannot keep pace with increasing demand. Instead, they outsource fitness checks and training to specialised private centres, while the government acts purely as a regulator.

What lessons can Bangladesh take from the other countries where road fatalities are low?

First, the entire value chain of vehicle maintenance and safety must

be regulated. In many countries, workshops and service centres are licensed and can be held liable for faulty repairs if a vehicle involved in a crash is found to have defective components. The government's role is more supervisory; it does not issue fitness certificates itself.

In Bangladesh, BRTA tries to do everything with very limited staff and a few outlets across the country. This creates long delays, which open the door for corruption. The solution is to adopt a partnership model where private centres carry out the technical checks and BRTA acts as a regulator.

The government should be slim, not bulky. It should focus on regulation, policy, enforcement, and oversight, while letting the private sector handle services. However, those in the BRTA who enjoy the benefits of the current system will resist such reforms as they profit from the organisation's inefficiency.

If we truly want to escape this vicious cycle, we must implement structural reforms in BRTA, and ensure independent road crash investigations. In many countries, road crashes are investigated by independent bodies that examine every possible factor—the road design, maintenance, enforcement, vehicle fitness, and driver behaviour. Responsibility is shared, not dumped on the driver alone.

In Bangladesh, when an accident occurs, BRTA, the police, and Roads and Highways officials form a committee. But these are the very institutions that share the blame. So, even if they investigate a road crash a hundred times, they will end up blaming the driver. As long as this approach continues, the road crash issue will not be solved; it will only grow more complicated over time.

Finally, if you could give one clear message on National Road Safety Day, what would it be?

My message is simple: without structural reform of the BRTA, we cannot reduce road deaths. We have been independent for 54 years, yet we have not implemented any lasting structural change in the transport sector.

BRTA must become a truly professional regulatory authority, not a service provider. Until then, accidents will continue to rise, and every campaign raising road safety awareness or symptom-oriented treatment, such as improving roads, training drivers, or giving radar guns to the police, will only be a temporary patch on a deep-rooted disease.

New data regulations warrant urgent rethinking



Fahim Ahmed
is the CEO of Pathao.

FAHIM AHMED

We are at a critical crossroads in our digital journey in Bangladesh. The Personal Data Protection Ordinance, 2025, and the National Data Governance Ordinance, 2025, ostensibly designed to safeguard privacy and data security, instead risk constraining the country's digital economy with outdated, restrictive and counterproductive regulations. Far from fostering innovation and trust, these ordinances threaten to isolate Bangladesh from the global digital ecosystem, deter investment and ultimately harm the welfare and interests of citizens.

At the heart of the problem lies the ordinances' aggressive data localisation mandates. By de facto mandating companies to store multiple categories of personal data within our borders or risk non-compliance penalties, these laws impose a costly and technically impractical burden on global service providers, including social media

and content platforms such as Meta (Facebook, Instagram), Google (YouTube) and others. The result would be that companies may be forced to duplicate infrastructure, driving up operational costs and degrading service quality for the users.

Worse still, a strict data localisation requirement can fragment and weaken cybersecurity defences, reduce the resilience of operations, make data more vulnerable to local and foreign threats by creating centralised targets and undermine privacy protections by concentrating data in a single jurisdiction, thereby increasing surveillance and censorship risks.

Countries that have embraced such localisation have seen digital markets shrink, innovation stall, and foreign investment dry up. We are faced with the risk of large, global service providers suspending services in Bangladesh, where social media platforms provide the backbone for

our local digital commerce sector, which generates \$1.5 billion (based on e-commerce logistics providers' transaction volume) in annual transactions and supports at least two lakh young entrepreneurs.

Equally troubling is the ordinances' sweeping extraterritorial reach. By asserting jurisdiction over companies worldwide, the laws create a legal minefield of conflicting obligations. This legal uncertainty raises compliance risks, discouraging cross-border partnerships and digital trade. In an era where harmonised, predictable data protection frameworks are the global norm, Bangladesh's approach is a regressive outlier that threatens to erect trade barriers rather than facilitate commerce.

The punitive enforcement regime compounds these risks. With fines reaching up to five percent of turnover and criminal penalties including imprisonment, the laws cast a long shadow over innovation. Ambiguous definitions and unchecked government access to private data further exacerbate the threat, undermining business confidence and due process. This is not a regulation that nurtures a vibrant digital economy; it is a recipe for stymying innovation and our economic development.

Even well-intentioned provisions

aimed at youth safety fall short. Blanket bans on behavioural tracking and targeted advertising ignore the nuanced realities of protecting children online. Responsible use of behavioural data can enable age-appropriate experiences and direct vulnerable youth to critical safety resources. Denying these tools outright risks exposing young users to age-inappropriate and culturally irrelevant content, as well as missed opportunities for protection.

The stakes could not be higher. In their current form, these ordinances will isolate Bangladesh from the global digital economy, deter investment and most importantly, harm local businesses and users alike. There is a real and present danger that global platforms will cease services in Bangladesh, cutting off access to vital digital tools and opportunities.

Bangladesh needs to urgently rethink these ordinances. The country requires data protection frameworks that balance privacy with innovation, align with international standards and enable cross-border digital trade. Only through inclusive stakeholder engagement and a commitment to interoperable, forward-looking regulation can Bangladesh secure a prosperous digital future. The current ordinances are not the answer. They are a straitjacket that Bangladesh cannot afford to enforce.