

Hold to account those behind airport fire

Probe report shows how negligence, rule violations caused it

An official probe into the devastating October 18 fire at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport's import cargo complex has found that unsafe storage practices and a lack of fire protection systems were responsible for the blaze. Improper storage of products such as laptops and mobile phones containing lithium-ion batteries, classified as "dangerous goods," has also been cited as a major cause. The airport, moreover, did not have the necessary demolition equipment to tear down the walls of the courier building's corrugated tin structure, where the fire is thought to have started. It was only when the Fire Service arrived with bulldozers that the source of the fire could be reached. There were also no fire hydrants near the complex, forcing firefighters to fetch water from distant points.

The investigation by Biman Bangladesh Airlines, the ground handler of the cargo complex, also found that the International Air Express Association of Bangladesh (IAEAB), which had previously subleased the area from the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), exposed the area to severe fire risk by constructing a tin-shed courier facility inside, in violation of the rules. CAAB's negligence, therefore, must be held to account. Despite a letter from Biman in January 2024 warning that the cargo complex was half the required size, leading to delays in customs clearance and cargo build-up, nothing was done.

The probe report further found that the fire spread over piles of uncleared cargo blocking the roads, making it difficult for fire trucks to pass through. Biman is required to list uncleared cargo after 21 days and hand it over to customs for auction—none of which was done on time, leading to the pile-up. In January this year, a committee had recommended that all "dangerous goods" cargo should be relocated to an unused barracks on the north side of the airport complex. This, obviously, was not followed through. The level of mismanagement and negligence evident in this scenario is quite shocking. Just think: in 2011, Biman had notified the airport's then director that the cargo village and complex lacked a permanent fire suppression system, warning that delays could destroy goods worth thousands of crores. And it finally did.

CAAB must acknowledge and address the serious gaps in the airport's fire safety measures. As recommended by the investigators, lease agreements for the cargo complex must clearly define each cargo stakeholder's responsibilities regarding fire safety. Automatic fire detection and fire suppression systems must be installed across all warehouses, cargo sheds, and service buildings. Goods classified as "dangerous" must be stored separately in areas far away from regular cargo. Most of all, CAAB, Biman and all relevant entities handling cargo must work in coordination—and with extreme efficiency—when it comes to maintaining safety protocols.

Investigate the drug cases seriously

Procedural errors, absence of witnesses remain major legal barriers

It is quite concerning that 59 percent of drug-related cases in Bangladesh cannot be proven in court. The daily Prothom Alo analysed the verdicts of 500 drug cases resolved across 26 districts, including Dhaka, between January 2021 and June 2025, and found that in 296 cases all the accused were acquitted, while convictions were made in only 204 cases. The review also revealed that investigations in such cases rarely went beyond the primarily arrested individuals. No new information was uncovered beyond initial reports, and charge sheets contained no details about any patrons, protectors, or financiers, leaving main offenders beyond law enforcement's reach. This is deeply alarming.

In short, the Prothom Alo investigation has found 16 major shortcomings preventing drug-related crimes from being proven in court. These include faulty FIRs, weak investigations, lack of witnesses, inaccurate seizure lists, contradictory statements by law enforcement officers, questionable chemical test reports, failure of the complainant or investigating officer to testify, other procedural errors, and negligence by both investigators and the prosecution.

In 237 of the 296 acquitted drug cases, the absence or unreliability of neutral witnesses was a key reason, while flaws in searches, FIRs, and investigations contributed to 48 more acquittals. Investigating officers failed to testify in 126 cases, complainants in 79, and in 66 cases, neither appeared in court. The problems are further highlighted in a research report by the Department of Criminology and Police Science at Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University that found that in five drug-related cases in Sylhet, a single police informant was repeatedly used as a witness, merely signing seizure documents when called. Moreover, chemical testing, crucial for verifying the substance and determining punishments, was mishandled in 23 cases, leading to full acquittals. These patterns reveal systemic negligence and malpractice in investigations and prosecutions.

In 2020, both the Police Headquarters and the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) issued directives instructing officers to identify full drug networks and trace money flows in drug seizure cases. However, an analysis of 20 DMP case reports by Prothom Alo found that these directives were not followed. Investigators only charged the carriers, without uncovering the sources, destinations, or wider networks involved.

Clearly, the current police/legal approach to dealing with drug cases is deeply flawed, focusing only on low-level offenders and ignoring the main networks. If the success of law enforcement operations is measured by the quantity of drugs seized and the number of cases filed, rather than the effectiveness of targeting the entire drug trafficking network, nothing will change. Only through rigorous, well-supervised investigations, active prosecution, and a strong governmental commitment to enforce the law can we hope to stop the spread of drugs and bring the kingpins of the trade to justice.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

China's World Trade Organisation membership approved
On this day in 2001, after 15 years of negotiations, China's membership in World Trade Organisation was approved.

EDITORIAL

Is the July charter drive losing its way?

WINKERS AWEIGH!

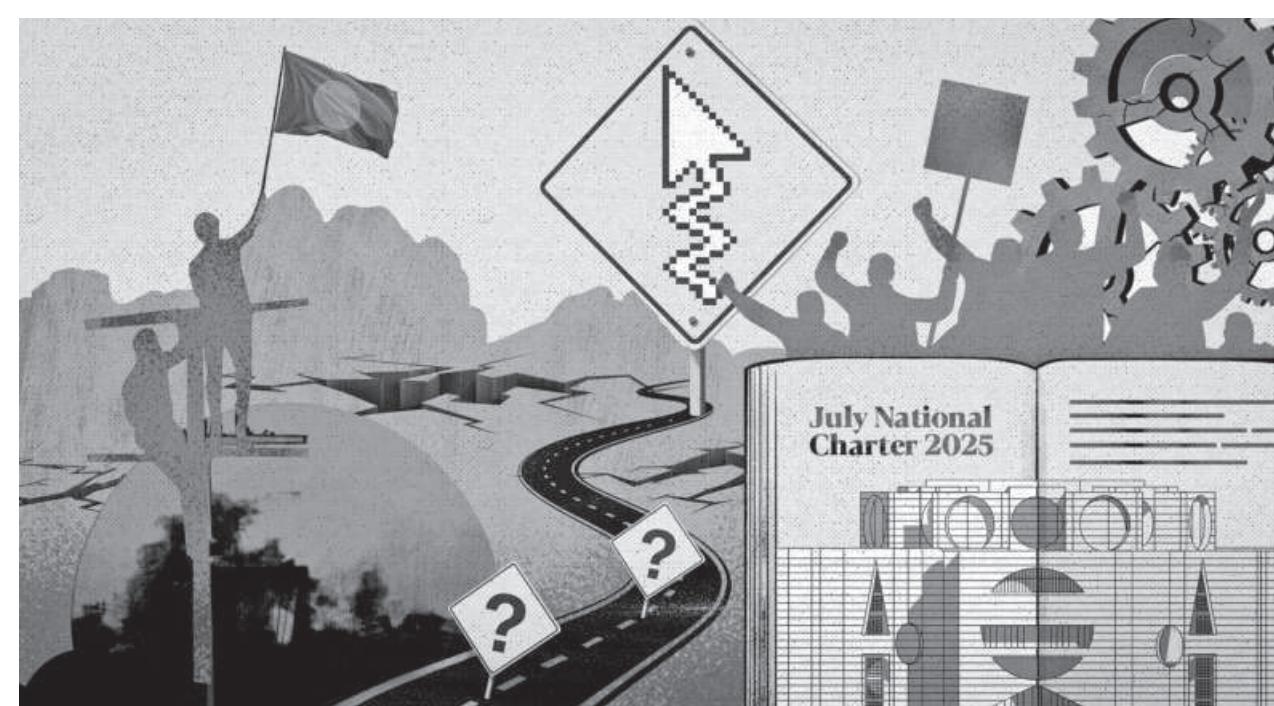
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TANIM AHMED

It is customary for a pilot to plot a plane's flight path long before it takes off. In fact, this is essential for the sake of ensuring safety, efficiency, and airspace coordination. Only then can it be determined if the aeroplane has veered off course, or whether something has gone wrong. Through this exercise, the pilot also knows when and how the plane is supposed to land before it takes off. This advance planning—charting the full course of an operation or undertaking—has obvious benefits. Yet this is precisely what seems absent from the interim government's attempt to arrive at a consensus on the implementation of the July National Charter.

The government's latest gambit (or more of a stopgap measure)—urging the political parties to sit among themselves and reach a consensus, preferably within a week—has not worked. That suggestive one-week deadline expires today with no headway. The message from the BNP is quite clear: the party will not respond to an invitation from Jamaat-e-Islami for talks. It insists that the call has to come from the government. This stance indicates that the largest political player in present-day Bangladesh was not quite aligned with the idea of parties discussing issues among themselves. If anything, Salauddin Ahmed, the BNP policymaker who has been representing the party in the negotiations held by the National Consensus Commission, said his party would rather have the government stand in as referee, and that it would be open to discussions initiated by the chief adviser. Salauddin also dismissed the deadline, saying the government was in no position to put pressure on the parties.

In other words, when Law Adviser Asif Nazrul announced last week that the government expected the parties to sit among themselves and arrive at a consensus within a week, he and the council of advisers had probably not plotted the flight path, and likely not



for the first time. On Sunday, however, following Salauddin's remarks, he dismissed them as a negotiating tactic to put pressure on political opponents.

That the interim government did not clearly think through the initiative to secure a political consensus on the July charter has been evident since the day of its signing, when, to the surprise of many, the National Citizen Party (NCP)—natural heir to the July uprising—refused to sign the charter. Being the most visible and notable stakeholder of that uprising, the NCP's refusal was quite telling. They said that there was no concrete plan or mechanism to make the charter's proposals binding upon the next government, which was their main point of contention.

The seven-day deadline move, which came amid a raging dispute between the two political camps led by BNP and Jamaat, also smacks of an attempt to pass the buck. The government clearly did not want to be seen as the one "holding the pillow". That attempt has now been dashed, with the BNP snubbing Jamaat's invitation to talk.

In the meantime, Jamaat has threatened street protests demanding the referendum be held before the election, as well as proportional representation in both houses of parliament and an implementation order for the July charter. Some of its

single question covering dozens of constitutional reforms that many parties had disagreed with during the months-long discussion at the commission. This likely puts months of hard work at risk if, by any chance, the question mark over the referendum continues to loom.

More notably, however, the law adviser's announcement had come

demands are understandable; some are quite unreasonable and rather disruptive. On the other hand, given the BNP's notes of dissent on some key elements of the July charter, Jamaat is clearly not ready to leave it up to the former's discretion when (or if) they form the next government.

Clearly, at this point, there is a need for a strong voice of a referee, one that

prevails over the bickering sides and calms the nerves. Jamaat needs to be dissuaded from its street campaign, BNP from its stance against diluting the reforms, and the NCP from its fixation on a binding instrument signed by the chief adviser (and not the president). That strong voice has to come from the interim government, which is something it has pointedly shirked. In fact, it has changed its stance almost every time it has been faced with such resistance.

With the one-week deadline now over, the government has yet to point to a new direction in the protracted drama over the July charter implementation. So, to return to our initial analogy, the aircraft is still flying, but the pilot has yet to chart a flight path. For us citizens, there is still no indication of when or where the aircraft will touch down. What may be even more worrying is that the pilot does not seem to be too bothered by it.

Do Jahanara's allegations really surprise us?

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NAZIBA BASHER

When former Bangladesh women's cricket team captain Jahanara Alam came forward with explosive allegations of sexual harassment against team selector and manager Manjurul Islam, and late Towhid Mahmud, former in-charge of the Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB's) women's department, the larger question was not who did what, but rather: was anyone shocked that this could happen to sportswomen in Bangladesh at all?

Across our streets, homes, workplaces, and schools, we have long lived with the fact that sexual harassment is rampant. Women silently endure, suppress, and fear the cost of speaking out.

So, when women step into a male-dominated arena like sports, where officials, selectors and administrators are overwhelmingly men, the odds are stacked against them. Jahanara's revelation is not an outlier; it may be the predictable outcome of a system built on male privilege, unchecked power and a culture of silence.

The pacer alleges that during the 2022 Women's World Cup, she endured indecent proposals and inappropriate physical contact. She says she raised the issue in a letter to BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury that very year—and nothing meaningful happened. The question of why we are hearing this story only now should alarm us. It is sad, yet predictable,

The investigation must not merely be a perfunctory internal exercise. If it is handled this time as business as usual—closed doors, quiet deals, no accountability—future sportswomen will say: "I'm not staying, I'm not risking it." This is why an independent, external investigation becomes essential.

When a female athlete alleges harassment at the hands of those who



FILE PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'Jahanara's revelation is not an outlier; it may be the predictable outcome of a system built on male privilege, unchecked power and a culture of silence.'

that female players feel compelled to suppress their voices, fearing their careers, livelihoods, and even their places on the team can be in jeopardy.

It is within the reach of BCB to act. The board has formed a committee to investigate the allegations and given it 15 working days to report its findings. But given the board's past and present reputation for being complicit in or slow to act on serious complaints, the trust deficit looms large.

evaluate her, select her, reward her, the usual chain of command cannot remain the only mechanism for justice.

As sports commentator and former cricketer Tamim Iqbal has said, this needs a probe "with no one from the BCB involved."

This is not about punishing one person or doing minimal damage control; it is about preserving the integrity of women's sport in Bangladesh. Why should we care? Because this is not just Jahanara's

problem; it is the next generation's problem.

If girls see the national team as a place where talent, grit and ambition can be crushed by misconduct and silence, they might never step in, and we will lose future sportswomen. We will lose the equity that sport could symbolise in a society striving for gender justice.

To avoid that outcome, we must insist on four things: one, full transparency in the inquiry process—specifically, who is on the committee, how evidence is gathered, and how victims are protected. Two, protection and support for those who spoke out—they should not be isolated, punished, or sidelined. Three, systemic reforms in the BCB and sporting bodies: mandatory safe sport policy, an independent ombudsman, regular training, and reporting mechanisms are necessary. Four, government oversight—because when self-regulation fails, as it so often does, this becomes a public interest matter.

The question is not merely whether someone will pay for past wrongdoing. The question is whether we allow a culture in which female athletes enter hostile terrain, are asked to perform while vulnerable, and disbelieved when they speak.

If the answer is silence, then yes, we knew this would happen, and we did nothing. And if we do nothing, we lose more than one athlete; we lose trust, we lose ambition, we degrade sport into yet another arena of male dominance.

Maybe we are shocked by the name, the sport, the profile. But not by the pattern. And therein lies our collective failure. This moment must become a turning point. Sport in Bangladesh deserves better, women athletes deserve better, and we owe it to the next generation to make sure this is the end of an era, not a continuation.