The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Persistent violence must be reined in

Brutal attacks in Mymensingh, Lakshmipur continue trend of violence

We are deeply alarmed by the terrifying speed with which law and order is fraying, and we unequivocally condemn the authorities' failure to halt this slide. This lawlessness was again on full display in two atrocities committed less than 48 hours apart—one in Mymensingh, the other in Lakshmipur—united by their sheer, uninhibited brutality.

On Thursday night, outside a knitwear factory in Bhaluka, a small industrial town in Mymensingh, a mob bayed for the blood of Dipu Chandra Das, a 27-year-old employee falsely accused of "hurting religious sentiments." Inside, factory staff feared for the safety of their building. Their decision was morally repugnant as the worker was forcibly ejected from the premises to "protect the factory." The mob promptly beat him to death, hung his body from a tree on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway, and set it on fire. The horror of the lynching is compounded by its baselessness. The Rapid Action Battalion later confirmed there was no evidence—digital or otherwise—against the worker. It now appears he was murdered over a rumour. But the guilt extends beyond the mob. The decision by factory management to hand a worker over to a violent crowd is grotesque. It suggests that factory managers have become complicit in the barbarism outside their gates.

This ghastly spectacle is not an isolated incident but part of the prevailing anarchy in the country. On Saturday in Lakshmipur, the target was a politician. Belal Hossain, a local leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, was asleep when unidentified assailants locked his family's doors from the outside and set their home ablaze. Belal narrowly survived, but his seven-year-old daughter, trapped in the inferno, did not. Two other daughters are now in a burn unit, severely injured and fighting for their lives. There is nothing that can excuse such depravity. Locking a family inside a burning home is an act of barbarism that transcends any claim of political rivalry.

Taken together, these atrocities paint a terrifying picture for the interim government as it prepares for a national election in less than two months. It must be careful as violence has been evolving and changing colour. In Lakshmipur, it appears to be a political vendetta executed with extreme cruelty. In Mymensingh, it was the weaponisation of religious sentiment, where an accusation alone has become a death sentence.

This lawlessness must be met with unyielding resolve. The prompt arrest of seven suspects in the Mymensingh case is a start, but it is reactive. The government must make it unequivocally clear that neither mobs nor arsonists will find sanctuary in the chaos of transition. It is the state's paramount duty to ensure that citizens are protected from such brutalities and intimidation. Bangladesh stands at a perilous juncture. The authorities must arrest this slide into lawlessness and ensure that the rule of law is not supplanted by the rule of the mob. The culture of impunity must be crushed.

Better regulation of hate content a must

Meta, state institutions all must do their part

There is no denying the role played by social media in spreading misinformation and hate content in Bangladesh. While this has been more or less the pattern since the 2024 uprising, recent weeks have sharply highlighted the dangers of the unchecked circulation of such content, with open calls for violence preceding vicious attacks on The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, Chhayanaut and others. Against this backdrop, we support the call of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) and the National Cyber Security Agency for Meta, which owns Facebook, to take urgent, responsible action to prevent its misuse.

The BTRC's letter rightly situates the problem within Bangladesh's fragile political transition, with the law enforcement agencies struggling, and often failing, to uphold the rule of law. In such a context, the unchecked spread of incendiary content online has emerged as a big obstacle. The speed with which online incitement sometimes translated into physical attacks, including vandalism and arson, has been terrifying. When social media posts precede and seemingly facilitate such acts, platforms can no longer hide behind claims of neutrality or abstract commitments to "freedom of expression."

In this connection, we note BTRC's concerns about delays in removing or blocking incendiary content. "The amount of time being taken by Meta to take action... is creating an opportunity for further incitement and mobilisation of violence through those accounts," it said. In moments of volatility, time is critical. Even a few hours of inaction can allow harmful content to spread and mobilise groups. Meta's lack of a local office here further compounds the problem, creating a gap between reported content and meaningful intervention. For a platform with such deep penetration and influence in the country, this absence is increasingly indefensible.

At the same time, content removal is only one part of the solution. Equally important is strengthening Bangla-language moderation, investing in local expertise, and applying community standards with sensitivity to prevailing sociopolitical realities, as blanket algorithms designed elsewhere cannot adequately grasp local triggers, historical grievances, or the coded language often used to incite violence. That said, responsibility does not lie with Meta alone. Our state institutions and political camps must also do their part.

First, they must avoid selective outrage. Condemning online incitement while tacitly tolerating or exploiting it when convenient only deepens cynicism. Any engagement with social media platforms must also be transparent, rights-respecting, and free from the temptation to use "security" as a pretext for suppressing dissent or critical journalism. We must remember that the integrity of the ongoing political/electoral process, the safety of vulnerable groups, and the survival of an independent media ecosystem are all intertwined with the digital space. We must all be very careful.

Budget increases alone cannot fix public healthcare

Dr Syed Abdul Hamid
is professor of health economics at Dhaka University, convener of Wellbeing First Initiative Bangladesh (WFIB), and chief adviser of Universal Research Care Ltd.

SYED ABDUL HAMID

Government allocation for Bangladesh's health sector has long been inadequate, compounded by weak implementation mechanisms. As a result, our out-of-pocket (OOP) payments for healthcare continue to rise, and access to quality services is becoming increasingly difficult for millions of citizens.

According to the Bangladesh National Health Accounts (1997-2020), nearly 69 percent of total health expenditure comes directly from individuals' OOP payments, one of the highest rates in South Asia. The WHO warns that OOP spending above 30-35 percent poses serious financial risk; Bangladesh's rate is more than double this threshold. In contrast, the government contributes only 22-23 percent of total health spending.

Public health allocation has remained at around five percent of the national budget, reaching just 5.3 percent in FY 2025-26. As a share of GDP, public spending stands at only 0.74 percent, far below the WHO-recommended five percent. Even when public and private health expenditures are combined, the figure is merely 2.34 percent of GDP. Beyond low allocation, implementation inefficiency remains severe as poor planning, weak project execution, and the trend of unspent funds persist. Consequently, poor and lower-middle-income families face growing financial hardship and often avoid necessary care. Ineffective public hospitals—plagued by management failures, staff shortages, inadequate infrastructure, weak supply chains, and medicine shortages—often force patients towards costly private care.

Addressing these systemic weaknesses requires urgent, coordinated, and structural reform. However, restoring a health system long burdened by mismanagement, complexity, and inefficiency first requires answering three fundamental questions: whether citizens are empowered to seek public healthcare services, whether public service providers are adequately motivated and incentivised to deliver services, and whether there is sufficient political will and attractiveness towards investment in the health sector.

Unfortunately, under the current reality, the answer to none of these questions is satisfactory. This failure is closely linked to three critical unknowns: patients remain unaware of the value of the services they receive; providers lack a clear understanding of the value of the care they deliver; and the government does not adequately know the monetary value, or returns, of its spending in the health sector. Addressing these questions and unknowns necessitates a policy framework capable of delivering positive change across all three areas.

First, consider how the public can be empowered to access public healthcare. Citizens are not adequately empowered due to insufficient priority given to health in personal and family life, the absence of health awareness and practical health education in educational institutions, and weak enforcement of the rule of law. As a result, many people do not know when, where, or what kind of healthcare to seek, nor are they fully aware of their rights as consumers of the health system. A lack of confidence in making health-related decisions is also evident.

To ensure access in this context, the public needs an entitlement-based system that effectively empowers them to receive necessary healthcare. Such a system could be operationalised through the introduction of a health card that legally assures citizens' access to healthcare. Each family could be provided with a ceiling-based family health card with a defined annual limit on healthcare utilisation. The card would specify the monetary value of healthcare that a family is entitled to receive annually through public institutions. This would encourage people to return to government hospitals and foster a clearer understanding of the services to which they are entitled. GPO Box: 3257

If a specific service is unavailable in a public institution, it could be provided through selected private facilities via strategic purchasing while maintaining priority on delivery through the public system. In parallel, the ecosystem of public health facilities must be strengthened and made fully prepared for effective service delivery.

At the same time, beyond ensuring regular salaries and benefits, a performance-based incentive system must be introduced for service providers. Complexities surrounding promotion, transfer, and posting should also be reduced so that healthcare workers feel sufficiently motivated to serve the public interest. Turkey offers a relevant example. Under its Health Transformation Programme, the country introduced a performance-based remuneration system for public healthcare providers, offering bonuses based on staff efficiency and effort. In addition, the government provides location-based incentives of up to 40 percent of salary for those working in regions with low socio-economic development, helping to ensure more equitable deployment of health workers. This integrated incentive package has improved service quality, motivated staff, and enhanced retention, particularly in remote areas.

This leads to the question of how interest in health-sector investment can be strengthened in Bangladesh. Valuing healthcare services is crucial to creating attraction towards such investment. To achieve this, the value of each healthcare service must be determined based on its diagnostic group. Doing so would allow patients to understand the value of the benefits they receive, thereby increasing trust, respect, and loyalty towards public hospital providers. At the same time, service providers and hospital authorities would gain clarity on the value of the services they deliver, enabling them to identify strengths and weaknesses, develop improvement plans, and foster healthy competition within the hospital system to accelerate quality improvement.

The ceiling-based family health card is central to this transformation. When services are accessed through this card, the government can clearly assess the value created for patients. If the value of the service is found to be two to ten times higher than government expenditure, the political importance of investing in healthcare will become evident. If, however, the value is lower than the expenditure, the source of inefficiency can be identified and addressed promptly.

Advancing the health sector primarily requires coordination among three elements: empowered citizens, motivated service providers, and politically valued investment. If this is prioritised and the above conditions are met, the public health system can certainly be revitalised.

FILE VISUAL: **STAR**

They want our silence, but we will not give it to them

Nazifa Raidah
is a journalist, researcher and development practitioner.

NAZIFA RAIDAH

From late Thursday night through the early hours of Friday, December 19, my colleagues at The Daily Star were trapped on the roof of their burning workplace, unsure if they would survive. Journalism is not a vocation that pays, nor does it sustain our lives fully, but we do it anyway because we find immense value in keeping readers informed and voicing the truth against autocrats, censorship, and potentially a threat to our lives. Yet, last night, the same premise set The Daily Star and Prothom Alo offices ablaze.

Mobs have no regard for the truth; they only care about a skewed sense of justice. They care about their unification under the banner of violence because it makes them feel like they are doing something. Mobs have not only bent the will of the interim government, but they are surely pushing journalists towards self-censorship—something the now-repealed Digital Security Act, 2018, had once accomplished.

The question "Who does this violence benefit?" does not occur to the perpetrators. But I'll add a layer to this and still ask—Who does a post-truth society benefit?", one where public opinion is shaped more by swaying emotions than objective facts. The answer is simple—it benefits extremism, populist leaders, and it benefits Bangladesh's personal favourite word of the year—fascism. It is because emotional narratives (fear, anger, belonging) are greater mobilisers than rationality and facts—the more politically polarised a society is, the easier they are to control. Which is why, since August 5, 2024, any and every criticism against the establishment or radicalised figures is viewed as anti-establishment.

We are now living in a post-truth society where discrediting experts, science, and traditional media has created a vacuum filled by partisan sources and conspiracy theories, making populations easier to sway. People retreat into "truth" bubbles within their communities, resisting outside facts—a phenomenon amplified by social media. What they fail to notice is that the Awami League government used these same tactics to subdue us. Populist figures are now using the violence we witness today as a tool. The AL government normalised violence against the public to such an extent that succumbing to revenge politics now seems like a justifiable course of action for many. The AL government promoted a political identity which centres around the belief that if you criticise our ways, you are the enemy. Besides, the Awami League also bears a large part of the blame for the role allegedly played by it in inciting or perhaps committing some of the recent violence. Sadly, the AL era mindset persists, and my words, along with those of many other journalists, continue to receive the "enemy" label. But we are stubborn; in the face of fear, our voices grow louder.

Our constitution mandates the protection of journalists, which the interim government's home ministry has failed to provide. Despite the instigators discussing this violence for days prior, the interim government's home ministry failed to reinforce tight security measures around media houses and important cultural institutions. With elections announced and the government's willingness to hand over power to the democratically elected, the government's muted response to stop mob violence appears puzzling. Identifying the perpetrators should not be difficult, since mobs mostly make sure to show off their actions on social media. Otherwise, in the absence of strict legal action, mob violence will continue.

Seeing the pictures of harmoniums being thrown to the ground with such determined rage and passion at Chhayanaut, and seeing archives and dreams burn at *The Daily Star* and the daily *Prothom Alo* offices, made me feel hollow. I couldn't help but wonder where this rage is coming from. How can an average individual with a family at home suddenly resort to such violence? It may be due to record-low employment rates, inability to afford necessities, years of pent-up frustration and radicalisation, or simply because they are being paid or incentivised in other ways to instigate this. Whatever the case, the enemy they've chosen, the very institutions they are trying to harm now, are the ones that stood by them when the Awami League tried to subdue their right to freedom of speech. The journalists of these two media outlets have done so over the 15 and a half years of AL rule, though their phones were tapped and their existence threatened with the possibility of enforced disappearance.

That's is why even after a harrowing night, these people have cleared the ash and rubble from their desks and returned to work. The sky fell on journalists in the wee hours of Friday. I hope they continue to use it as a blanket.