

## We can’t afford silence with so much at stake

### Govt must be firm as mobs torch newsrooms

To govern in a crisis is to act decisively. But on Thursday night and early Friday, as mob violence struck the country’s two leading newspapers, the interim administration initially chose something else entirely: a terrifying, paralysis-inducing silence. Vandalism and arson attacks on the offices of *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* were not merely acts of destruction. They were orchestrated assaults on the intellectual infrastructure of Bangladesh. As attackers laid siege to the newsrooms, trapping terrified employees inside while fire service vehicles were forcibly held back, the state machinery stood down. Law enforcement agencies were largely spectators; the administration remained mute. For a government that rose from the ashes of an uprising promising a restoration of democratic values, this abdication of duty is morally repugnant.

The details, as recounted by journalists, civil society leaders and politicians in Dhaka on Monday, are chilling. When *The Daily Star* was attacked, pleas for help dissolved into smoke. As one editor put it, the struggle has morphed from a fight for freedom of expression into a primal fight for the right to live.

This lawlessness is symptomatic of a broader malaise. Since the fall of the previous regime, a dangerous form of “mobocracy” has rushed in to fill the power vacuum. Groups inciting chaos under the banner of “justice”—often co-opting the slogans of the very student movement that brought this government to power—are operating with impunity. They have also targeted cultural institutions such as Chhayanaut, seeking to dismantle our pluralistic identity. When the state fails to contain violence, it invites anarchy. By refusing to restrain these actors, the interim government is signalling that the streets belong to violent groups.

The government’s defenders may argue that the transition is messy, or that the police force is still demoralised. Such explanations are not acceptable in the face of a serious crisis. As one economist has observed, an unelected interim government relies entirely on moral legitimacy to rule. That capital is finite—and it has been burned away by indecision.

The dangers of this inaction are existential. If the press is silenced by arson, democracy itself is severely compromised. The executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh has rightly identified this moment as the entry of “mob rule” into the state structure. A government that tacitly relies on—or is afraid to confront—street violence is not merely weak; it is dysfunctional. With a national election less than two months away, the interim government must now assert the rule of law. It must identify and punish the perpetrators, regardless of whose political slogans they chant, and secure the institutions that make a republic function. Above all, it must end its “mysterious silence,” as political leaders have described it.

The 2024 uprising was meant to establish rights, not replace authoritative tyranny with the tyranny of the mob. Leaders across business, law, politics and journalism have drawn a line in the sand and are calling for united resistance. If the government continues to watch from the sidelines while the country’s institutions burn or hurt, it will have abandoned its duty entirely, leaving lawlessness to define the nation’s future.

## Israel must let medical supplies enter Gaza

### Gazans denied aid, life-saving treatment even under ceasefire

As Israel continues to violate the ceasefire and block urgent humanitarian aid to the war-ravaged Palestinian territory, Gaza has been suffering from an acute medicine shortage, which is making it difficult to provide diagnostic and treatment services to its people. According to Gaza’s ministry of health, more than 52 percent of essential medicines are now completely out of stock in Gaza, alongside 71 percent of basic medical consumables and nearly 60 percent of laboratory and blood bank supplies. Emergency departments are running dangerously low on intravenous fluids, antibiotics, and painkillers—the bare minimum required to treat the wounded and critically ill. The situation is deeply alarming.

During Israel’s more than two-year-long genocidal war, almost all of Gaza’s hospitals and healthcare facilities have come under attack, resulting in damage to at least 125 health facilities, including 34 hospitals. Health authorities are now struggling to save lives, as Israel is not allowing the most essential medical supplies to enter the enclave. Meanwhile, Israeli authorities have breached the ceasefire at least 875 times since it came into effect on October 10, according to Gaza’s Government Media Office. These violations include ongoing Israeli air and artillery strikes, the illegal destruction of Palestinian homes and other civilian structures, and at least 265 incidents of Israeli troops shooting Palestinian civilians. Since the ceasefire took effect, at least 411 Palestinians have been killed and 1,112 others injured in attacks across Gaza. Clearly, for Palestinians, neither safety nor access to life-saving treatment or aid has materialised under the ceasefire.

Israel’s refusal to allow tents, blankets, and other supplies into Gaza is directly threatening Palestinian lives. Winter storms have compounded the crisis, as hundreds of thousands of displaced families face increased risks of illness while hospitals lack the means to respond. Reportedly, since the ceasefire began, only 17,819 aid trucks have been allowed into Gaza, out of the 43,800 that were meant to enter. This translates to an average of only 244 trucks per day, far below the 600 daily deliveries Israel had committed to permit under the ceasefire deal.

Under international law, Israel, as the occupying power, is obligated to ensure Palestinians’ access to medical care. Blocking or severely restricting medical supplies while continuing military operations constitute a grave violation of this responsibility. A ceasefire that does not guarantee unhindered humanitarian and medical access is a ceasefire in name only. We, therefore, urge the UN and the international community to take a strong stance against Israel’s restrictions on humanitarian aid. They must act decisively to stop ceasefire violations and ensure immediate and sustained flow of medicines and medical supplies into Gaza.

# The ‘strange fruit’ of Bhaluka and a republic in retreat



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On the night of December 18, 2025, a young man was beaten to death, tied to a tree, and set ablaze by a mob in Bhaluka, Mymensingh. The victim, Dipu Chandra Das, was a garment worker. The mob’s accusation, as relayed by Rapid Action Battalion later, was that he had insulted religious sentiments. The smoke that rose that night was not just from that unceremonious pyre; it was the smoke of our shared social contract slowly burning to ashes.

This image compels a haunting melody to mind: Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” her elegy for the lynched and hung Black bodies of the American South. Today, this could be easily associated with what happened in Bhaluka, its horror lying not only in the unspeakable cruelty but also in its stark, public visibility. It was a spectacle. Traffic slowed. Phones recorded. This was not a crime hidden in the shadows but a performance staged for a community’s eyes, meant to sear a new reality into our collective senses.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière gives us a lens to see this horror for what it truly is: an aesthetic coup. He argues that politics is fundamentally a battle over the “distribution of the sensible”—the system that determines what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, who has a part in the communal story, and who is rendered a silent ghost. The existing social order, what Rancière calls the “police order,” maintains this distribution through implicit rules and conventions. The killing in Bhaluka was a violent, audacious act of redrawing that rulebook. The mob decided, in that moment, what was permissible to see (a burning body as just punishment), what was permissible to say (an accusation of blasphemy as a death sentence), who belonged (the mob), and who could be erased (a minority youth).

This violence did not erupt in a vacuum. It was the bitter, logical endpoint of a pattern we have witnessed and documented with growing dread. Just months ago, on September 5 in Rajbari, another mob exhumed the body of a controversial spiritual leader and set it ablaze on a national highway. That, too, was a public spectacle, a ritual of domination. Before that, the chainsaws came at

down for a centuries-old banyan tree in Madaripur, around whose trunk people of different religions tied threads of hope. It was felled by a mob declaring it a “corruption,” an act of cultural ecocide performed for the camera.



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Each of these acts—the burning of a “heretic’s” corpse, the assassination of a syncretic tree, the killing of a minority youth—follows the same chilling script. First, an accusation is made declaring a person, a practice, or a place to be outside the bounds of a rigid orthodoxy. Then, the mob gathers, often agitated through the digital echo chambers of social media, where rumour metastasises into righteous fury. Finally, the violent performance: a destruction meant to be seen, filmed, and shared, to instil fear and demonstrate who truly holds power in the public square.

On the very night Dipu Das was killed, a similar script was being enacted in the heart of Dhaka. Hundreds of people audaciously stormed the offices of *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*. They vandalised and set the buildings on fire, trapping journalists inside the English newspaper’s building, who were

the streets of Dhaka, that monopoly has been surrendered. The official “police order” has fled the scene, apparently replaced by the mob’s violent logic. The state’s response—a condemnation on social media—is a masterpiece of impotence. It tries to manage the aftermath, having abandoned the decisive moment. When the guardians of order are reduced to spectators, the very concept of the state collapses. We are left in a state of exception where life is reduced to bare life, vulnerable to violence without recourse.

So, we must ask: who benefits from this unravelling? The immediate perpetrators are but foot soldiers. The true beneficiaries are the forces of division, those who thrive in the epistemic murk where fact and fanaticism blur. A society terrified, fractured, and silent is a society that can be easily managed, its historical memory of syncretism erased, its

through preemptive and decisive action, that it will dismantle mobs, arrest ringleaders, and protect the vulnerable. It means defending our journalists, our artists, our eccentrics, and our minorities not as special interests, but as vital organs of the body politic.

The opposite of this burning is not passive peace. It is the active, courageous defence of a shared world. It is the replanting of the banyan, the mourning of every desecrated grave, the insistence that the name Dipu Chandra Das be remembered not as a target but as a citizen whose death broke our collective heart and must now mend our collective resolve. The mob’s fire sought to illuminate its own power. Our task is to harness that light to see clearly the abyss we stand before, and to step back, together, to create a future where the only fruit our trees bear is that of shared shade and shelter.

# Why electric buses won’t fix Dhaka’s transport system



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In his budget speech for the fiscal year 2025-26, Finance Adviser Dr Salehuddin Ahmed announced a plan to introduce 400 electric buses into Dhaka’s public transport network to make the system “sustainable, safer, and environmentally friendly.” While the optics of modernising our public transport fleet are appealing, as a transport policy analyst, I must argue that this intervention is fundamentally misplaced. Introducing electric buses into Dhaka’s current transport ecosystem is an attempt to solve a software crisis with new hardware.

Before we celebrate the arrival of electric vehicles, we must examine what is already on our roads. Dhaka is a city where unfit buses without tail lights or side mirrors operate freely, and thousands of drivers hold fake licences. These smoke-belching vehicles are not on the road by accident; they are there because of a systemic failure to enforce fitness standards.

The reason lies in the governance breakdown at the heart of our transport sector. The Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), the

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law, these expensive new buses will simply join the chaos by design that defines our streets.

Bangladesh’s policymakers have a long-standing tendency to prioritise projects with high visibility over those that deliver usability. Buying 400 buses makes for a good headline. The harder, less visible work, such as strengthening enforcement, ensuring accountability, and pursuing structural reform, is

introducing new buses on the same fragmented routes will produce the same tragic outcomes.

Before launching such an expensive, yet isolated and poorly sequenced project, attention must return to the fundamentals. Enforcement capacity comes first. At present, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) is responsible for managing traffic but lacks a functional line of accountability or coordination with other relevant agencies, while the BRTA issues licences but has no authority to enforce laws on the ground. A unified approach is essential, one in which agencies do not operate in silos.

Equally important is a clear chain of accountability. A national task force should be empowered to oversee the entire transport ecosystem, ensuring that when the system fails, specific institutions are held responsible.

Finally, corruption must be addressed head-on. As long as fitness certificates can be purchased and syndicates can shape policy, no amount of modern technology will make our roads safer.

Dhaka’s transport crisis is not rooted in a lack of vehicles or technology; it is a crisis of order. Introducing electric buses at this stage is akin to applying a fresh coat of paint to a structurally unsound building. We do not yet need more buses with advanced technology. We need the rule of law. Until the governance crisis is resolved, 400 electric buses will amount to little more than a silent addition to a very loud failure.