

Unite to protect press freedom

Say journos; DRU protests attacks on Star, Prothom Alo

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Journalist leaders yesterday termed the recent attacks on the offices of The Daily Star and Prothom Alo direct assaults on free and independent journalism, demanding swift justice and exemplary punishment for those responsible.

They made the remarks while participating in a human chain organised by the Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU) on its premises, calling on journalists to remain united so that vested interests cannot attack media workers or press institutions in the future.

Speakers said attacks on the media are not new, noting that previous incidents, including the shutdown of newspapers, went unpunished, which emboldened miscreants to target The Daily Star and Prothom Alo.

The protest was held against the attacks on the offices of The Daily Star and Prothom Alo, the harassment of New Age Editor Nurul Kabir, and what organisers described as a “false

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‘Revise schedule, keep Feb 12 vote date unchanged’

NCP urges EC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The National Citizen Party yesterday urged the Election Commission to rethink the election schedule without changing the polling date, insisting the 13th parliamentary election be held on February 12 as planned.

NCP Chief Coordinator Nasiruddin Patwari and Joint Member Secretary Zahirul Islam Musa briefed journalists after meeting Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin at the Election Building in Agargaon, Dhaka.

Patwari said the EC had announced several dates for nomination submission and withdrawal, and the party requested reconsideration of those. He clarified they did not seek changes to the voting day but asked for flexibility if documents cannot be submitted on specific dates.

He said the judicial process over the killing of Sharif Osman Hadi remains incomplete, the perpetrators stay unidentified, and instability persists. “Given this situation, we told the EC the election scheduled for February 12 must be completed on that date.”

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Journalists form a human chain in front of the Mymensingh Press Club in the city yesterday, protesting the recent mob attacks on the offices of The Daily Star and Prothom Alo.

PHOTO: STAR

Tk 250cr graft in 5 solar plants over land deals

Finds study by Transparency International Bangladesh

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has estimated that around Tk 250 crore was siphoned off through corruption in land acquisition and compensation in five solar power projects.

The projects are Sirajganj 68MW, Teesta 200MW, Mongla 100MW, Lalmonirhat 30MW and Manikganj 35MW solar-based power plants. All of them are currently in operation.

“A section of plant officials, local land registration officials, union and upazila land office staff, local public representatives and politicians, including members of parliament, and middlemen are behind the corruption,” said the findings of a TIB study presented at a press conference at its office yesterday.

The study said although the Teesta 200MW project is completed and operational, many landowners have yet to receive their payments.

“There are allegations that landowners were forced to sell their land at low prices by building a dam around the project area before land purchase. Many landowners were not given the promised compensation.”

Several respondents told the study that landowners were pressured into selling land at extremely low prices, sometimes as little as Tk 1,000 per decimal, while others received inconsistent amounts such as Tk 20,000 per acre.

“It is generally estimated that a solar plant requires approximately three to

The power sector is one of the most corrupt sectors in the country. Corruption, irregularities and wastage are very common here. The study now shows that the renewable energy sector is not an isolated one.

IFTEKHARUZZAMAN
TIB Executive Director

four acres of land per megawatt. But the 200MW plant in Gaibandha acquired around 1,000 acres of land, although its actual requirement is approximately 650 acres,” the study said.

The highest level of corruption was estimated in the Manikganj 35MW project at

Tk 174 crore. The study said land acquisition and site development there were carried out in a highly coercive and irregular manner, causing direct losses to farmers.

“There are allegations that landowners were paid only Tk 1,000-2,000 as compensation. Although project representatives initially promised full and fair compensation, many affected households report that these commitments were not honoured,” it added.

The plant also acquired more land than required, taking around 333 acres despite needing about 141 acres, the study found.

The study said similar irregularities occurred in the other projects, adding that problems were not limited to land acquisition but extended across all stages, from approving renewable energy projects to completing them.

In another six projects, TIB found that at least Tk 2,926 crore had been overestimated compared to actual costs. “Since the determination of per-unit electricity price is related to the overall cost of a project, the irregularities in showing additional costs compared to actual costs are clearly evident,” the study said.

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আন্তর্জাতিক অপরাধ ট্রাইব্যুনাল INTERNATIONAL CRIMES TRIBUNAL

TAYIM'S KILLING

ICT-2 presses charges against 11 former cops

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The International Crimes Tribunal-2 yesterday pressed charges against 11 former police officers over the killing of Imam Hasan Bhuiyan Tayim, a 12th grader, in Dhaka's Jatrabari on July 20 last year.

The three-judge tribunal took the charge into cognisance, issued arrest warrant against the fugitive accused, and ordered relevant authorities to produce the accused, including two already in custody, before the court on January 5 next year.

Chief Prosecutor Tajul Islam, while reading out portions of the formal charge, gave a harrowing account of the incident.

A group of armed policemen had forced open a tea shop in Jatrabari's Kajla area around 12:00pm on the day, where several protesters -- Tayim, Md Rahat Hossain, Shahriar Azad -- and shopkeeper Liton, were hiding.

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CHANKHARPUL KILLINGS

ICT-1 to deliver verdict Jan 20

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The International Crimes Tribunal-1 yesterday set January 20 for delivering its judgment in a crimes against humanity case filed over the killing of six people at Chankharpul during the July uprising.

The three-member tribunal, led by Justice Golam Mortuza Mozumder, fixed the date after hearing arguments from both the prosecution and the defence.

This will be the second judgment delivered by the tribunal, following its first verdict in a case against the ousted prime minister and her two top aides.

Eight police personnel, including former Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner Habibur Rahman, are accused in the case.

The others are Sudip Kumar Chakraborty, former DMP joint commissioner; Sha Alam Mohammad Akhtarul Islam, former additional deputy commissioner; Mohammad Imrul, former assistant commissioner of the Ramna Zone; Arshad Hossain, former inspector (operations) of Shahbagh Police Station; and constables Sujon, Imaz Hossain and Nasirul Islam.

Arshad, Sujon, Imaz and Nasirul are currently in jail, while the others are absconding.

In another development, the tribunal framed charges against four accused, including two former Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) officers, in another crimes against humanity case over the killing of 28 people in Rampura during the student-led protests on July 18 and 19 last year.

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Govt passes stricter tobacco

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the consumption of tobacco products in public places alongside smoking.

The incorporation of nicotine pouch as tobacco product comes after the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority in April approved the Bangladeshi arm of global tobacco company Philip Morris to set up a factory in Narayanganj to produce nicotine pouches, triggering widespread criticism and protest from anti-tobacco campaigners.

The new law bans the production, import, sale and use of electronic nicotine delivery systems like e-cigarettes and vaping, as well as banning the sale of tobacco products within a 100-metre radius of educational institutions, hospitals, playgrounds and children's parks.

It also increased the fine for smoking in public places from Tk 300 to Tk 2,000 and repealed the provision that allowed “smoking zones”, meaning there will no longer be such zones in public places or transport.

All kinds of advertisements, including those on the internet, for tobacco products have been banned.

Prominent anti-tobacco campaigner Sohel Reza Choudhury welcomed the approval of the ordinance, saying it would contribute to public health.

He urged that the law be enforced strictly.

Replying to a question, Sohel, who is also the head of epidemiology and research at the National Heart Foundation Hospital

and Research Institute, said it would have been better if their proposals had not been omitted and went on to express hope that the government would consider them in the future.

Last year, an estimated 3.71 crore people of 15 years old or above consumed various tobacco products in Bangladesh, while 1.97 crore people smoked, according to a World Health Organisation report published in October.

The Smoking and Tobacco Products Usage (Control) Act was enacted in 2005 to curb tobacco use in Bangladesh, with a ban on smoking in public places as one of its key features.

The law was strengthened in 2013 through amendments but anti-tobacco campaigners have been calling for further amendments to make the law more stringent and to close loopholes that tobacco companies exploit to promote tobacco use.

An amendment proposal for the act was placed before the then-cabinet in October 2023 but was sent back for further review.

Another proposal was submitted to the incumbent advisory council in November last year, but it was not approved.

Instead, a committee led by Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed was formed to review it further.

Shafiqul Alam, the chief adviser's press secretary, while announcing the decision on November 7 last year, said: “On one hand, tobacco use has many adverse health effects. On the other, the cigarette

industry contributes significantly to revenue. So, a decision has been taken to revisit the law, considering all these perspectives.”

PROVISIONS EXCLUDED

The committee held three meetings with the last meeting held on December 4, where six decisions were taken and the draft ordinance was modified accordingly, according to health ministry officials.

The meeting decided to omit the draft provisions of banning the sale of tobacco products through hawking; the sale of such product without registration; a ban on flavored tobacco products and a prohibition on the sale of loose or unpackaged tobacco products.

The draft ordinance had proposed printing pictorial health warnings covering 90 percent of the surface area on all packaging, wrappers, cartons, bags and containers -- up from the current 50 percent. But the meeting decided to make it 75 percent.

Besides, the meeting also decided to incorporate nicotine pouches under the definition of tobacco products, the ministry sources said.

The omission proposals came from the National Board of Revenue and the finance ministry as the measures could reduce revenue generation and thus the opposition from the health ministry was ignored, said an official of the health ministry seeking anonymity.

Health Secretary Saidur Rahman could not be reached for comment.

‘No more internet blackouts’

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uploaded on the telecom ministry's website.

The original proposals aimed for a multi-agency structure to oversee the central interception platform, involving one representative nominated by the president, one by the prime minister and one by the speaker of parliament, along with a retired judge from the High Court Division and a retired district and sessions judge.

Some safeguards have been introduced into the surveillance mechanism, which were absent in the previous law, said Abu Nazam M Tanveer Hossain, a telecom policy expert.

“However, the quasi-judicial body mentioned here includes positions that are an integral part of the government and may not ensure independent assessment,” he added.

While the controversial National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre will be abolished, a Centre for Information Support will be established under the home ministry. The centre will be able to carry out interceptions only upon requests from authorised agencies or pursuant to orders from the court and the council.

Lawful interception can be carried out for the purposes of national security, maintenance of law and order, emergency life-saving needs, judicial or investigative requirements and cross-border matters.

Such interception will be conducted only by agencies specified in law and strictly within their respective jurisdictions, Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, special assistant to the chief adviser with executive power over the ministry of posts,

telecommunication and ICT, told The Daily Star.

Breaking away from the framework of the controversial 2010 amendment, the independence and accountability of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) have been ensured, with a clearer balance established between the powers and functions of the ministry and the regulator, said the telecom ministry in a statement.

Previously, the ministry approved all licence issuance. Under the new arrangement, the ministry will approve only a limited number of nationally significant licences based on independent studies, while the authority to issue all other licences has been restored to the BTRC.

Important national licences refer to the licences of telecom operators, tower companies, fibre optic network providers and satellite and submarine cable companies, enabling the government to issue the most critical licences in the sector.

In addition, an accountability committee has been formed under the chairmanship of the president of the parliamentary standing committee on posts and telecommunications.

The time required for licence application to final decision has been reduced. High and recurring penalties prescribed under the earlier law have also been lowered, a move expected to make the telecom sector more investment-friendly.

The BTRC will now be required to hold public hearings every four months, publish follow-up actions on its website, and enforce

provisions to prevent conflicts of interest.

The use of SIM and device registration data to surveil or harass citizens without due cause has been made a punishable offence.

The regulator should regain the full autonomy granted under the original 2001 Act, which was formulated through consultations with globally renowned bodies, said BTRC Chairman Md Emdad ul Bari.

He warned that certain new provisions introduced in the name of accountability would undermine the BTRC's independence and obstruct its smooth and effective functioning.

Ataur Rahman

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of the Special Powers Act, 1974, issued a 90-day detention order against Ataur.

Upon receipt of the order and with the DMP's help, Tongi East Police Station arrested him and sent him to jail, the release added.

Abdullah Al Mamun, senior jail superintendent of Kashimpur High Security Central Jail, told this newspaper that Ataur has been kept at Kashimpur Central Jail-1.

Ataur's followers claimed on social media that he was travelling in a bus heading for Bhairab from Narsingdi on Tuesday night, which was halted for his detention.

His social media profile identifies him as the founder of the Prisoners' Rights Movement and Ameer of Azadi Andolon Bangladesh. He has also been seen taking a leading role in mobilising protests under the banner of “Tawhidi Janata” on several occasions.

National unity key

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between pledges and outcomes, he added.

Debapriya said while public focus has shifted to the election, fundamental questions about acceptable participation and turnout remain unanswered.

He also cautioned that unless election expenditure is strictly controlled, post-election corruption would be unavoidable as winning candidates seek to recoup campaign costs from public resources.

“Public security has emerged as another priority for the government. There is public anxiety regarding what will happen in vulnerable areas once short-term security deployments are withdrawn.”

He said a vast amount of firearms was looted on August 5, 2024, and claimed that a large quantity of weapons entered from India. Therefore, the government must focus on arms recovery with the assistance of the army, Debapriya added.

Kazi Maruful Islam, professor of Dhaka University's development studies department, said the country is exhibiting signs of a transition trap, where institutions are reconfigured in form but not in substance.

Warning of a growing religion-centric authoritarianism, he said holding a credible election is essential to restoring a democratic environment.

Presenting the keynote paper, Shujan Secretary Badiul Alam Majumdar, who led the Electoral Reform Commission, said

Bangladesh's democratic crisis over the past decade stemmed largely from the collapse of the electoral system. He criticised changes to the legal framework governing party nominations, saying that the original proposal requiring nominations from grassroots panels elected through secret ballots had been diluted.

Abdul Alim, a member of the reform commission, said, “Ahead of the election, our immediate duty is to ensure the security of candidates and voters, compel everyone to abide by the code of conduct, and disseminate the information provided in the affidavits to the voters.”

Chairing the session, Justice MA Matin, vice-president of Shujan, said that sustained public vigilance is essential to ensure accountability.

Commission member Jasmin Tuli, Dhaka University Prof Mohammad Jasim Uddin, and North South University Prof Waresul Karim, among others, also spoke at the event.

One suspect

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assistant commissioner of DMP.

Based on Himon's information, police recovered a foreign-made pistol and three rounds of ammunition from Adabor.

“Himon is an active member of the Jubo League in Adabor. We believe his interrogation will lead us to whereabouts of Alamgir and others,” Abdullah said.