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

Riyadh owes Dhaka a clear explanation

Bangladesh needs answers about the execution of two nationals in KSA

Four days after Saudi Arabia announced that it had executed two people it identified as Bangladeshi nationals, Bangladesh's consulate in Jeddah still cannot confirm who they were. A note verbale asking for formal confirmation has yet to be answered. Dhaka learnt of the deaths the same way everyone else did: from a statement by the Ministry of Interior of Saudi Arabia carried by the state news agency. Bangladeshi officials say they had no prior knowledge of the case.

The Saudi account was brief. Nazerul Islam Abdul Basir and Siti Akhtar were arrested, investigated and charged. A court found the charges proven and sentenced them to death under ta'zir, the discretionary category of Islamic punishment. The offence was described only as an "immoral act" inside a mosque in Makkah. The sentences were upheld, and a royal order authorised the executions. The Saudi statement does not say when the two were arrested, how long they were held, whether they had lawyers or interpreters, whether they understood the proceedings against them, or even whether their families knew they were on trial, let alone facing death—a basic human right denied.

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Both Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia are parties to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. Article 36 of the convention requires authorities to tell a detained foreigner, without delay, of the right to have their consulate informed, and to notify the consulate if the detainee asks. It also gives consular officers the right to visit, communicate with, and arrange legal representation for their nationals in custody. Article 37 requires the receiving state to inform the relevant consulate without delay when a foreign national dies.

Bangladesh's bond with the kingdom is, first and foremost, one of faith. Besides, Saudi Arabia is also the largest destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers, whose remittances sustain millions of households and prop up the country's foreign reserves. Many of these workers hold low-paid, precarious jobs, speak little Arabic and know little of the kingdom's legal system. That is precisely why the Bangladesh government must at least seek information from the kingdom.

Rights groups have long criticised the use of the death penalty under ta'zir, where the absence of a fixed penalty leaves wide room for judicial discretion. The Arab Charter on Human Rights, 2004, which Saudi Arabia has ratified, obliges states that retain the death penalty to reserve it for the "most serious crimes" and to use it only in exceptional circumstances. Saudi authorities executed at least 356 people in 2025, setting a new record in the country for the highest number of executions in one year since Human Rights Watch began monitoring. Executions of foreign nationals for nonlethal drug crimes drove the surge in executions in 2025.

Dhaka should ask, formally, for the full record: dates of arrest, the charges, the evidence, details of legal representation, whether consular notification was offered, and whether the families were informed. It should seek the return of the bodies or clear information on burial, and support for the families left behind. Riyadh, for its part, owes Dhaka a clear explanation.

Stop this deadly negligence

DSCC must prevent unauthorised driving of its garbage trucks

At a time when reckless driving is claiming so many lives nationwide, people would expect a public institution not to put lives at further risk through its own negligence. But the reality is different. A recent investigation by *Prothom Alo* revealed that at least 22 garbage trucks of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) were being driven by people other than their assigned drivers. Some designated drivers are drawing salaries without driving the vehicles themselves, allowing assistants or outsiders to take the wheel.

At least 18 people have reportedly died in 16 accidents involving DSCC garbage trucks since 2017. Among them were Notre Dame College student Naim Hasan, school student Mahin Ahmed, and laundry shop employee Iqbal Hossain. In all three cases, the vehicles were being driven by someone other than the assigned driver. Following student protests after Naim's death in November 2021, DSCC suspended nine drivers and dismissed a transport supervisor, who was later reinstated. The practice of handing over vehicle keys to others has however continued, while the victims' families are still waiting for justice. The *Prothom Alo* investigation has also raised serious questions about possible fuel theft and the role of those responsible for supervising the transport operation.

While the DSCC has a large fleet of garbage trucks and other equipment, it has a shortage of permanent drivers. But can they allow unauthorised or unqualified people to operate heavy vehicles on roads? Also, the responsibility for the deaths cannot solely fall on the drivers. Officials who fail to supervise them and anyone who facilitate such arrangements must be held accountable. The DSCC administrator has said that instructions have been issued to prevent unlicensed people from driving the vehicles and that disciplinary action will follow if further violations are found.

The city corporation should urgently verify the identities and licences of all drivers and ensure that its garbage trucks are operated only by authorised drivers. It must recruit more drivers to address the shortage and establish an effective oversight mechanism. It should also inspect the roadworthiness of its fleet and strengthen monitoring of fuel allocations and consumption. The allegations of irregularities must be investigated impartially. Other city corporations should also review their vehicle management practices to prevent similar irregularities and deaths. Finally, the families of those killed by DSCC vehicles must get justice.

Two executions and the limits of diplomatic friendship



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■ **KHAN KHALID ADNAN**

A friendship between two states means little if one discovers through the news media that the other has executed its citizens. On October 14, Saudi Arabia executed two people it identified as Bangladeshi nationals for an "immoral act" inside a mosque in Makkah. Bangladesh's Consulate General in Jeddah has confirmed that it received no advance notification. The question here is not simply whether diplomatic courtesy was neglected. It is whether safeguards that could have mattered while the two were alive were ever available.

The publicly reported Saudi statement leaves the precise offence undisclosed. It describes a discretionary death sentence under ta'zir, subsequently approved for implementation. That account does not permit a reliable assessment of the evidence or the offence's gravity. Neither does invoking the sanctity of the place explain why death was justified. The official account also omits basic details about the proceedings: when the two were arrested, how long they remained in custody, whether they had legal representation and whether their families were informed. Without these details, it is impossible to assess whether the defendants had a meaningful opportunity to challenge the charges and sentences.

Saudi Arabia ratified the Arab Charter on Human Rights in 2009. Article 6 of the charter restricts capital punishment to the 'most serious crimes' and recognises the right to seek pardon or commutation. Article 16 protects access to counsel, interpreters, adequate defence preparation and appeal. Were these protections effective in practice? A statement announcing final approval cannot answer that question. These are commitments Saudi Arabia itself accepted, not standards Bangladesh would be inventing after the event.

According to a report published by *The Daily Star* on October 17, Bangladesh was still awaiting a formal Saudi response to its note verbale seeking confirmation of the executions and verification of the individuals' identities and nationality. These uncertainties require investigation, not speculation. But a government identifying the executed as foreigners should be able to explain how their consular rights were protected.

Saudi Arabia has jurisdiction over offences committed within its territory, but this does not make its treatment of defendants exclusively a domestic matter. Sovereignty includes obligations voluntarily accepted through treaties. Bangladesh need not claim a veto over Saudi judgments to insist that those obligations be respected. Both countries are parties to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. Article 36 of the convention requires authorities to inform detained foreigners of their consular rights without delay. If a detainee requests it, the relevant consulate must also be notified without delay. Consular officers are entitled to visit and communicate with their nationals in detention and arrange for legal representation, unless the detainee expressly opposes such assistance. The obligation to explain these rights does not depend on the detainee already knowing enough to ask.



ILLUSTRATION: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

Legal precision matters here. Article 36 does not expressly impose an unconditional requirement to notify the foreign government before every execution. Article 37(a), however, separately requires consular notification of a foreign national's death when the authorities have the relevant information. The immediate questions, therefore, are whether the two were informed of their consular rights, whether they requested consular assistance, whether access was obstructed, and whether notification followed the deaths. The absence of advance notice alone does not answer all these questions.

These are not administrative technicalities. In the case Avena and Other Mexican Nationals, the International Court of Justice required the United States to provide effective review and reconsideration of convictions and sentences, taking account of consular violations and possible prejudice. Its reasoning demonstrates why consular protection belongs within the administration of justice, not outside it as diplomatic decoration. Execution without an effective opportunity for such review forecloses the possibility of correcting a conviction during the defendant's lifetime.

The proportionality question is equally serious. Saudi Arabia ratified the Arab Charter on Human Rights in 2009. Article 6 of the charter restricts capital punishment to the 'most serious crimes' and recognises the right to seek pardon or commutation. Article 16 protects access to counsel, interpreters, adequate defence preparation and appeal. Were these protections effective in practice? A statement announcing final approval cannot answer that question. These are commitments Saudi Arabia itself accepted, not standards Bangladesh would be inventing after the event.

The UN Human Rights Committee interprets "most serious crimes" as crimes of extreme gravity involving intentional killing (General Comment 36, p. 8, paragraph 35). Saudi Arabia is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the committee was interpreting, so that interpretation cannot simply be presented as its treaty obligation. It remains an important benchmark, while the Arab Charter supplies an independent legal restraint. Nothing in the published account of Saudi Arabia identifies an intentional killing, so the authorities should explain how the offence in question satisfied the exceptional threshold for taking two lives.

Advance warning also has an international foundation beyond consular law. Human Rights Council resolution 30/5 calls for adequate advance information about executions for prisoners, their families, and legal representatives (p. 3, paragraph 4). This is not a binding treaty requirement to notify another government. It is, however, a clear standard against leaving those most affected to discover an execution afterwards. Whether these families received such information must be established.

Bangladesh should also examine its own consistency. Both Dhaka and Riyadh voted against that resolution in 2015. A vote against the whole text does not establish opposition to every safeguard it contains. Nevertheless, protections for people facing execution should not become important only when our own nationals need them.

Our bilateral relationship makes these questions harder to evade. Bangladesh sent more than 750,000 workers to Saudi Arabia in 2025. Pilgrimage sustains another substantial connection between the two countries. These ties should strengthen expectations of reliable consular cooperation. This is not to suggest that Bangladesh's nationals deserve special treatment because of their religious connection or because their labour benefits Saudi Arabia, which would make it sound like a reward or entitlement. But nothing justifies the withholding of established rights or safeguards either.

Dhaka, therefore, should seek verified identities, judgments, dates of arrest and detention, and records of access to legal representation and interpretation. It should explain its findings to the families and disclose any institutional failures without compromising private information. Its own mission's conduct also requires review, without assuming negligence where officials genuinely lacked notice. Where violations are established, Bangladesh should pursue accountability and appropriate reparation.

For future cases, Bangladesh should negotiate a protocol requiring timely consular notification, subject to the detainee's wishes, and advance execution notice, backed by funded legal assistance and systematic monitoring of capital cases. Pending that, it should seek stays in other capital cases where access and defence safeguards remain unverified.

A diplomatic protest after an execution cannot restore the opportunity to contest a charge, challenge a sentence, or say goodbye. The measure of a bilateral relationship is not how warmly the governments describe each other, but whether their cooperation protects people before protection becomes impossible.

Social media witch-hunts must not replace dialogue or due process



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■ **SARA HOSSAIN**

Recently, Tasneem Siraj Mahboob, an associate professor in Dhaka University's Department of English, was relieved of her teaching duties following a complaint that she had made inappropriate remarks to a female student about her clothing.

Since I am not familiar with Dhaka University's rules and regulations governing such departmental actions, I would refrain from commenting on that. However, what I find particularly concerning about the ongoing situation is how quickly the issue has escalated and, in particular, the role social media has played in this process. While the suspension is in place, the accused is being subjected to extreme vilification on social media. It effectively amounts to a social media trial, forcing her to defend herself publicly.

A university should be a place where views are exchanged and ideas are debated through civil discourse. So, while there can be room for difference around the opinions she expressed—which, first of all, must be determined through a fair and impartial investigation—her opinions can't be predetermined through a toxic social media campaign. Besides, these issues could be resolved through discussion on campus rather than through the kind of witch hunt that we can see going on.

This is not the first time we've seen this sort of incident and social media trial happen. In the past, under the Awami League government, we saw women being threatened and vilified for having their heads covered. Now we are seeing the opposite situation where women are being attacked and identified in particular ways and tagged for not having their heads covered or for making comments about head covering.

Actually, we have an important judgment of our High Court, which says that it's the right of every woman to choose what she wears; it is part of her freedom of expression protected by our constitution and protected by human rights law. That case was decided in April 2010, in the context of a school principal who was accused by an upazila education officer of not covering her head. In that context, the High Court said that whether she covers her head or not is a matter of choice. Equally, today if a woman does choose to cover her head, that is a matter of choice.

I would, however, go a bit further and say that if you're in a public space—for example, in an educational context or work context—there may be situations where you need to uncover your face in order for someone else to communicate more clearly with you. Those are things we can discuss and debate, but they're not issues around which any person should be vilified to the extent that Professor Tasneem is, and it is certainly not an issue around which she should be prevented from carrying out her work.

With regard to the current rhetoric around Islamophobia in Bangladesh, which resurfaced following the DU incident, I find it quite problematic. We are an overwhelmingly Muslim-majority country, and I don't think Muslims face significant difficulties in expressing their views or practising their faith. Islamophobia has a different meaning in contexts where Muslims are a minority and may find themselves subjected to discrimination because of their faith, dress or manner of expression. It is more difficult to understand how the concept applies in Bangladesh.

It is also problematic to speak about Islamophobia without putting it in a context of discrimination based on other grounds. For instance, we speak about Islamophobia, but most of us aren't really concerned about discrimination based on other religions, or discrimination against people of other religions. Similarly, most do not seem to be concerned about discrimination based on gender or sexuality or political opinion or nationality. Being concerned about discrimination is extremely valid, and we should be concerned about all forms of discrimination. However, selectively picking out one area of perceived discrimination is somewhat problematic.

It is one thing to discriminate against people because they're expressing their faith in their dress or their speech or their conduct. It's another thing to say phobia exists against an entire religion. It is because we don't talk about Christianity-based discrimination or Hinduism-based discrimination. That is not to say that discrimination against Muslims is not possible, but it is less likely in a Muslim-majority context, especially at a policy level.

Our goal as conscious citizens—55 years on from the liberation of Bangladesh, and over two years on from the July uprising—should be to strengthen and entrench protection against discrimination of all forms, especially against vulnerable groups, so that we can build a more equal and just society.

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