

Palestinian children wait to receive food from a soup kitchen funded by the World Food Programme in Deir Al-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Ensure safeguards for journalists in cyber law

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editor of New Age, and General Secretary Dewan Hanif Mahmud, editor of Bonik Barta.

Provisions concerning the removal or blocking of content, arrest, search, seizure, surveillance, and interference with digital data must ensure transparency, a specific legal basis, prompt judicial oversight, and effective remedies, it said.

The organisation also called on the government to make prior court approval mandatory before journalists can be arrested, searched or placed under surveillance over allegations arising from their professional work.

The draft, which has yet to be finalised, should enable effective action against cybercrime while protecting the media's professional independence and the public's right to information.

For allegations directly related to journalists' work, court approval should be required before seizing materials or accessing digital devices and data. Emergency action taken without prior approval must be reviewed or approved by a court within 48 hours. Such cases should be bailable.

News, investigative reports, analysis, and opinion published professionally or in the public interest should not be treated as cybercrimes merely because of their content or critical stance.

Fair criticism, satire, cartoons, parody, consumer complaints, political criticism, and unintentional errors should not be criminalised. Matters involving freedom of expression should not be made non-bailable.

Where the draft conflicts with laws protecting journalists and media outlets, provisions safeguarding press freedom and constitutional rights should prevail.

The organisation sought protection for reporting on corruption, abuse of power, financial irregularities, environmental damage, public health, consumer rights, government spending, and irregularities in public and private institutions.

Criticism of the government, state institutions, officials, public representatives, and policies, as well as political opinions, analysis, and satire, should not constitute cybercrime. Any prosecution must establish the elements of an offence clearly defined in law.

The council opposed vague expressions such as "disparaging the state" and sought precise definitions of statements deemed insulting to the state, threats to national security and harm to friendly relations with foreign countries.

Journalism, research, human rights monitoring, international cooperation, and public-interest disclosures should not be brought under such provisions or made non-bailable.

It called for separate definitions of incorrect information, disinformation, and rumours. Incorrect or incomplete information should not itself be criminalised, and information should not be treated as an element of an offence merely because it is unverified or unsupported.

Terms requiring clear definitions include bullying, defamation, disparagement, sexual harassment, and sextortion.

On removing or blocking news reports, posts, videos, and other digital content, the council sought a specific legal basis, written reasons, and an explanation of why action is necessary.

Except in emergencies, affected individuals or organisations should be allowed to present their views. Every order should be open to appeal before an independent authority or court within a specified period, with judicial review, according to the recommendations.

Emergency content blocking must receive court approval or review within 48 hours, while information on removal and blocking orders should be made public.

The council opposed making online defamation a new or more serious cybercrime, recommending that such complaints be referred to the Bangladesh Press Council under existing procedures.

Mobile courts and executive authorities should not adjudicate complaints involving news publication, expression, defamation or journalistic content. Arrests, fines, content removal, and other punitive measures in such disputes should be subject to judicial oversight.

No media organisation should be shut down, have its registration cancelled or face disproportionate punishment over an individual report or publication, the organisation said, proposing that such matters be referred to the Press Council.

It demanded legal protection for journalists' confidential sources, saying journalists must not be forced to identify them.

For disputes involving reporting, professional conduct, ethics or media responsibilities, it recommended using the Press Council's complaints and inquiry procedures before taking action, where appropriate. Its jurisdiction and effectiveness should be modernised, if necessary, to include relevant digital news outlets alongside newspapers.

The council called for an independent and accountable National Cyber Protection Council to oversee agencies empowered to investigate, arrest, search, seize materials, conduct surveillance or remove content.

It sought safeguards to ensure the independence of Protection Council members, limits on their powers and investigating officers, and accountability for their decisions. The body should include cybersecurity, legal and human rights experts, alongside experienced media professionals and editorial leaders.

Decisions affecting the public interest, policy recommendations, and the exercise of powers should be transparent and made public.

At a discussion on September 28, the government agreed to form two expert committees to review draft amendments amid concerns raised by journalists.

The draft did not adequately distinguish cybersecurity, cybercrime, and journalism in the digital sphere, which could undermine independent reporting and media freedom, the Editors' Council said in its release.

It urged the government to reconsider the draft after consulting stakeholders, saying that a secure digital environment and independent media were not mutually exclusive and both could be strengthened through appropriate laws and safeguards.

Govt to buy 5,830 vehicles for police

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According to Planning Commission proposals, obtained by The Daily Star, the stations have only 1,237 vehicles, 64 percent of which are more than 10 years old, hampering patrols, criminal investigations and emergency response.

The procurement involves two projects: one for 4,829 operational vehicles costing Tk 4,328.9247 crore and another for 1,001 specialised vehicles costing Tk 2,280.1414 crore.

Both projects are scheduled to be placed before the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecnec) for approval at its October 25 meeting, according to a Planning Division notice.

Police officials said the shortage worsened after 1,074 police vehicles were damaged during the July-August 2024 mass uprising, including 455 that were burnt, according to the Police Headquarters database.

On March 30, Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed told parliament that many vehicles had been burnt or rendered unusable during the uprising, disrupting patrols and law enforcement activities. He said the government was taking steps to restore police capacity and replace damaged vehicles.

The proposed purchases, however, aim to address broader operational shortages and strengthen the force's specialised capabilities, beyond replacing damaged vehicles.

The projects, proposed by the home ministry, would be implemented by Bangladesh Police between October 2026 and June 2029, with the entire cost borne by the government.

According to the proposal, each police station generally covers several unions or wards and requires at least four to five pickups or patrol vehicles to cover different areas simultaneously. Densely populated and crime-prone areas may need more.

With only one or two vehicles at many stations, deploying a team for an operation can leave other areas without adequate patrol coverage or immediate police response.

Contacted by The Daily Star, Kamarum Munira, assistant inspector general (media) at Police Headquarters, said the procurement was primarily aimed at addressing the transport shortage and supporting police operations.

She said the force would assess its vehicle requirements in the coming days and submit further requests if needed.

The operational vehicle project aims to improve mobility for regular patrols, anti-crime and anti-narcotics operations, arrests and emergency response. The proposal also highlights the need for additional vehicles during national elections and major events, when police are required to operate simultaneously across the country.

The specialised vehicle project seeks to strengthen riot control, criminal investigations and operations in remote areas.

According to the proposal, riot control vehicles would help police respond to public disorder and emergencies, while all-terrain vehicles would enable officers to operate in areas inaccessible to conventional patrol vehicles.

Mobile command centres would serve as temporary control rooms, allowing police to monitor and coordinate operations using advanced communication systems. Crime scene vans would help investigators collect evidence immediately after incidents, facilitating criminal investigations and the identification of suspects.

The proposals also highlight the need for watercraft to conduct patrols, respond to emergencies and carry out rescue operations in riverine areas.

Besides the 639 administrative police stations, Bangladesh Police operates 24 railway and 73 highway police stations, according to the documents.

The operational vehicle project allocates Tk 15 crore for purchasing vehicle repair equipment and tools. It also proposes driving and mechanical training for 650 personnel handling light vehicles and 300 handling heavy vehicles, alongside separate mechanic training for another 50.

Under the specialised vehicle project, 910 personnel would receive driving and mechanical training, while another 50 would undergo mechanic training.

The Planning Commission's project evaluation committee reviewed both proposals on October 15, recommending that the projects ensure accurate cost estimates, compliance with government procurement regulations and adequate maintenance arrangements after completion.

It also sought detailed information on vehicles currently operational, repairable or beyond use, along with necessary adjustments to the police's approved vehicle establishment.

The commission subsequently recommended both projects for Ecnec approval, saying they would help address the transport shortage, improve police mobility and ensure faster responses to public needs.

Alif's killing an attack on press freedom

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examine whether any political, personal or journalism-related disputes, or previous threats, were linked to the killing.

Regardless of the perpetrators' political identity, social status or influence, they must be brought to justice, the statement said.

Any obstruction to the investigation by any influential quarter or impunity for the perpetrators would seriously undermine journalists' security and public confidence in the rule of law.

The Council also called on the government and law enforcement agencies to take immediate and effective measures to ensure journalists' safety.

"Journalists cannot be silenced from revealing the truth through intimidation, attacks or murder," the organisation said, urging democratic forces, civil society, and all parties concerned to unite in support of journalists' safety and independent journalism.

The statement stressed that justice must be ensured.

On Thursday night, Alif was shot dead by criminals when he was returning home in the Telanjia area of Durgapur upazila.

His wife filed a murder case with Durgapur Police Station, accusing seven to eight unidentified individuals on Friday.

Police arrested suspect Opurba, 22, in Durgapur shortly after midnight on Saturday, our Netrokona correspondent reports.

He was sent to jail after being produced before a court yesterday afternoon.

Police claimed that Opurba was present at the scene when Alif was killed and that he was carrying a bag containing firearms at the time.

Khondokar Shaker Ahmed, officer-in-charge of Durgapur Police Station, said Opurba is a nephew of the prime suspect in the killing.

Draft amendment to CSA

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and 64 arrested in 44 cases under the cyber law between March and September, he warned that passing the proposed law without consulting stakeholders would be harmful to the public and the media, and "suicidal" for the government.

Speakers strongly protested Section 29 of the draft, which allows cancelling an entire media outlet's licence for an employee's offence, alongside another provision that empowers investigating officers to indefinitely seize all devices and data centres of a media house based on mere suspicion.

"An entire newspaper cannot be shut down for a correspondent's mistake -- Manabzamin cannot be closed for my crime," said its Chief Editor Matiur Rahman Chowdhury, while opposing a provision that allows mobile courts to try journalists.

Terming mobile court trials for journalists unthinkable in a democratic society, he said: "Please do not tie our hands again -- tying our hands will only harm you."

Criticising the monopoly structure of the proposed "National Cyber Security Council" under Section 12, media committee member Sharifuzzaman Pintu pointed out that the prime minister-led council includes five influential ministers, nine secretaries, five agency chiefs -- including the DGFI and NSI directors general -- the IGP, the Bangladesh Bank governor, and the NBR and BTRC chairmen, while excluding the National Human Rights Commission chairman.

Warning that granting such unchecked power to the executive branch could become a dangerous tool for a future autocratic government, he proposed ensuring at least one-third representation from journalist bodies and human rights activists to maintain a balance of power.

Pintu also criticised section 52 for granting blanket immunity to government officials, a provision absent in previous laws, and section 8 for allowing content blocking without prior court permission.

Discussants also demanded the removal of terms like "defamation", "demeaning" and "bullying" from Section 25, "rumour" and "misinformation" from the newly proposed Section 26A, and the provision for warrantless arrests under Section 46.

At the meeting, Independent Television Chief News Editor Mostafa Ahmed called for a clear legal safeguard for public-interest investigative journalism, while Daily Waadaa Editor Shafiqul Alam proposed activating civil defamation laws with financial penalties instead of criminal punishment, alongside ensuring Meta's accountability.

Secretariat moving

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Sources at the meeting told The Daily Star that the PM wants to bring all ministries and divisions onto a single campus and make the new Secretariat operational before the next parliamentary election.

The Housing and Public Works Ministry presented the proposal to the cabinet. The total cost of the project has yet to be finalised, but the government is expected to finance it.

Once the Secretariat is relocated, the existing buildings may be used to accommodate government offices based in Old Dhaka or operating from rented premises elsewhere in the capital, ministry sources said.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, Cabinet Secretary Nasimul Gani said the new Secretariat would be an aesthetically designed complex built on a 31-acre site at the former Trade Fair grounds in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar.

Under the government's plan, the new Secretariat will have 33.16 lakh square feet of floor space, with 14 twelve-storey buildings, three basement levels and parking facilities for 3,800 cars.

The complex will also include a mosque, two multipurpose halls, a cafeteria, a gymnasium, a passport office and a post office. There will be surface parking for another 200 vehicles, while 30 percent of the site will be reserved for greenery and water bodies.

"A number of underground roads and underpasses will be built to ensure smooth traffic movement around the new Secretariat, while existing roads will be widened to improve traffic flow," Gani said.

Asked whether the relocation decision was justified given the country's current economic situation and public expectations following the mass uprising, he said, "Although the current Secretariat has 18.76 lakh square feet of space, it cannot accommodate 16 ministries. The prime minister wants all ministries and divisions in one place to speed up decision-making."

According to a Cabinet Division press release issued after the meeting, the existing Secretariat has 13 buildings on 17.57 acres of land, eight of which were built before independence.

Buildings 1, 2, 3 and 8 were constructed between 1937 and 1939, while Building 5 was built in 1947, it said.

Citing inadequate usable space in the buildings, the release added, "The shortage of toilets and overcrowding caused by staff numbers exceeding capacity make it impossible to maintain a hygienic working environment."

Yesterday's cabinet meeting also approved a proposal to rename the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, replacing "Mohila" with "Nari" in its Bangla name, the cabinet secretary said.

The cabinet also endorsed Bangladesh's accession to the Rotterdam Convention to strengthen international cooperation on the import, export and management of hazardous chemicals and pesticides.

Gani said the harmful effects of various toxic chemicals and pesticides needed to be assessed in advance.

Joining the convention would help Bangladesh make informed decisions on whether to import such chemicals after assessing their potential hazards, he said.

According to the United Nations Treaty Collection, the Rotterdam Convention currently has 169 parties and 72 signatories.

Ishraque's fate up in the air

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Secretariat yesterday afternoon and instructed him to step down.

However, no official statement had been issued by the time this report was filed at 2:00am today.

At 10:34pm, state broadcaster Bangladesh Television ran a news ticker reading: "Prime Minister orders Ishraque to resign from the cabinet."

The ticker was removed shortly afterwards.

At 11:22pm, BTV aired another ticker quoting Ishraque as saying the reports that he had been instructed to resign were "completely false".

Government and Prime Minister's Office officials said discussions had been underway since yesterday afternoon over whether Ishraque should step down.

The controversy has embarrassed the government and raised concerns at the highest levels about ministerial conduct.

Tarique also reportedly reprimanded Ishraque yesterday afternoon for brandishing a firearm, instructing him to apologise publicly and refrain from doing so again.

Asked about the government's position on Ishraque's conduct, Cabinet Secretary Nasimul Ghani told reporters after a cabinet meeting around 7:15pm, "I have no comment on this matter. There was no discussion in this regard."

Pressed on whether the government had taken note of the incident or launched an inquiry, he said, "I will make no further comment on this."

In a Facebook post around 12:35am today, Ishraque said any instruction from the prime minister to a cabinet member, whether to resign or on any other matter, "is conventionally binding and becomes effective immediately upon issuance".

He added, "Therefore, there is no need to verify such information through any third, fourth, or more distant intermediary.

"If any such decision is taken concerning the Liberation War Affairs ministry or myself, the nation will be informed in detail through a press conference at the earliest possible opportunity once the decision takes effect, Insha'Allah."

Earlier, contacted by The Daily Star around 11:00pm, Ishraque dismissed reports that he had been asked to resign, calling them "rumours".

At 10:30pm, his press officer Mahfuz Kabir issued a statement dismissing reports in the media and on social media that Ishraque had resigned or been asked to resign as "completely false, baseless, fabricated, and motivated".

"The truth is that the state minister continues to discharge his official and political responsibilities with dedication and distinction. No directive has been issued from the highest levels of the government asking him to resign, and there is no question of his resignation.

"At the same time, we call upon those who have published or broadcast these misleading reports to immediately withdraw them and present the correct facts. Otherwise, appropriate legal action will be taken against those responsible for spreading false information."

PRIME MINISTER UNHAPPY

Three government sources familiar with the matter said Tarique expressed strong dissatisfaction when he met Ishraque at the Secretariat around 2:00pm yesterday, questioning why the state minister had personally participated in the operation while carrying a firearm.

A government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, "His actions have embarrassed the government... If the government does not take strong action over the incident, it will create a negative impression among the people. That's why he has been asked to apologise publicly."

Ishraque's actions have also caused unease among BNP ministers, lawmakers and rank-and-file party members.

Five MPs and two ministers, requesting anonymity, said they supported anti-drug drives but objected to a state minister personally carrying out such an operation while armed. They said the incident had exposed the government to criticism.

Some lawmakers also feared the videos could damage the government's image among foreign diplomats.

The controversy erupted on Saturday when videos posted on Ishraque's verified Facebook page showed him stepping out of a vehicle with a pistol and directing his associates to apprehend several people near the Dayaganj Ghuntighar railway crossing, close to Gandaria Railway Station.

Two others accompanying the state minister were also seen carrying firearms. At one point, a member of his entourage threatened to shoot, while one of his bodyguards kicked a young man as the group attempted to detain several people.

The footage went viral, raising questions about the legality of a state minister personally conducting such an operation and displaying a firearm in public.

Under the home ministry's Firearms Licence Issuance, Renewal and Use Policy 2025, licence holders may carry or use firearms for self-defence but are prohibited from displaying them in a manner that causes fear or annoyance to others.

Meanwhile, Ishraque accused several media outlets in a Facebook post of exaggerating the incident.

He said the operation, carried out with assistance from Gandaria police, dismantled four to five makeshift drug dens and led to the detention of six suspected drug traders.

Suspected heroin, foreign liquor, drug paraphernalia, sharp weapons, cash and mobile phones were also seized, he added.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police has also launched an investigation into the incident.

Detective Branch Chief Shafiqul Islam told reporters around noon yesterday that the deputy commissioner of Wari Division had been assigned to investigate and submit a report.

Opposition Jamaat-e-Islami condemned the incident, describing the display of a firearm as an attempt to establish a "reign of terror".

In a statement yesterday, the party said Ishraque's conduct was unlawful, could embolden criminals and amounted to a breach of his oath of office. It called for action against those responsible.

Under Article 58 of the constitution, a minister other than the prime minister vacates office upon submitting a resignation to the prime minister for forwarding to the president.

The prime minister may also request a minister to resign at any time. If the minister fails to comply, the prime minister may advise the president to terminate the appointment.