

## National News

### **Persons with disabilities illegally charged extra for safety scheme, finds TIB**

Persons with disabilities (PWDs) pay between an additional Tk 1,000 and Tk 3,000 to be enlisted in the government's disability allowance scheme, said a Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) report.



The report said that they also need to pay between Tk 1,000 and Tk 3,000 extra to receive the government's "Suborno card" designated for them.

It added that Tk 1,000 to Tk 1,500 is illegally charged at government hospitals to identify PWDs, and a further Tk 100 to Tk 200 is required for inclusion in the database.

The study also found that the existing action plans for the welfare of PWDs were not inclusive, primarily due to incapacity in the implementation level.

TIB disclosed the report titled "Inclusiveness in Development and Disability: Governance Challenges and Way Forward" during a virtual press conference on 11 February 2021. Conducted between December 2019 and November 2020, the qualitative study aimed to identify the governance challenges that hinder the inclusion of PWDs in the development process.

Speaking at the conference, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said that the policymakers didn't determine the actual number of PWDs. Therefore, their rights and facilities are not properly ensured.

"Lack of regular monitoring, supervision and control over the institutions providing services to persons with disabilities is marred by widespread irregularities and corruption, which is a matter of great concern," Dr. Zaman said.

"Like any other sector, there are instances of collusion and corruption in procurement. Above all, there is a significant deficit in education, health, employment, infrastructure and access to property rights to ensure their fair access, justice and participation. As a result, our development process is not inclusive in most cases for people with disabilities," he added.

Regarding institutional capacity, the study said that the purview of social safety-net is still constrained in the recently adopted 8th Five Year Plan as in the 7th Five Year Plan. There is budget inadequacy to create employment for persons with disabilities and make them educated and skilled. The study also found that the Social Welfare Ministry and other ministries lack coordination in adopting an integrated action plan. In most instances, the city/Upazila Social Services Offices and Disability Service and Help Centers do not discuss activities relating to the identification of PWDs, disability allowance, loan disbursement, etc.

According to the study, doctors in charge and assistants of some government hospitals have been accused of extorting money to certify people as PWDs. Local MPs and a section of the officials and employees at the Secretariat and District Administrations lobby with the Social Services offices to get the "Suborno Card" for their relatives and acquaintances, even if they are not real PWDs.

There are allegations against a section of local government representatives at the union level that collect money illegally for "Suborno Card". There are allegations of political influence as well for disability allowance cards.

The study also found allegations against the National Disability Development Foundation officials-- which provides financial support to NGOs-- of illegally collecting Tk 20,000 to 70,000 to ensure grants. As a result, these NGOs do not implement their promised activities.

Along with 14-points recommendations, TIB recommended separating allocations from the national budget under different ministries regarding disability with an increased Ministry of Social Welfare budget.

Other notable recommendations included the establishment of disability-friendly institutions, roads, bridges, public toilets; separate units for the treatment of PWDs in government hospitals at districts and Upazilas; establishment of specialised schools and services, and help centres for the PWDs at districts and Upazilas; adequate workforce in all PWDs concerned organisations and organising capacity building training.

The study also recommended that internationally recognised method(s) to estimate the actual number of PWDs should be followed.

TIB Research and Policy (R&P) Programme Manager Farhana Rahman presented the research findings on behalf of the research team.

## Building a corruption-free, well-governed Bangladesh to uphold the spirit of 21st February

**Dhaka, February 20, 2021:** The vitality of the spirit of 21st February, the quintessential reminder of Bengali's fight for their language, lies in the ideas of a corruption-free, equitable, secular and democratic country. The 21st February inspires us to fight all inequality, injustice, discrimination and persecution. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has called on to build a corruption-free and well-governed country by holding the spirit of 21st February.

In a statement today, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekhharuzzaman said, "Our glorious Language Movement is as much related to emotions as it is to struggle and rebellion. The spark of 21st February has given Bengalis the courage to fight against injustice and oppression repeatedly, ultimately giving rise to the sun of independence. We are inspired to resist evil with unrelenting strength from this historic event. Alongside being the spirit of resistance against injustice, discrimination and oppression, 21st February should also be the guiding force in the fight against corruption. The reason being that any injustice is against the spirit of 21st February and it must be remembered in the fight against corruption. We must carry on the struggle to break free from all forms of discrimination."

Dr. Zaman recounted that the rebellious spirit of 21st February had ultimately manifested our independence through the Liberation War but the burden of corruption has pulled everything backwards. He added that the promise of a country without oppression, fear, and discrimination in the essence of 21st February has been derailed as destructive and greedy corruption has taken over.

"The notion of zero tolerance against corruption touted by the top level of the government has been proved to be farce as some unimportant corrupt perpetrators were punished while no stern action was taken against the big fishes. The proof is right there as Bangladesh has held the same position in the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for the past decade, which is also second to last in South Asia," said Dr Zaman, adding that a strong stance against corruption would be in line with the spirit of 21st February.

The TIB Executive Director also commented that it is a matter of concern that there is a 'denial syndrome' in the government and bureaucracy as any allegation of corruption and irregularities are either denied or simply portrayed as conspiracies against the government. He said that this is compromising the state and political mandate against corruption and contributing to the creation of a corruption-friendly environment.

"It is expected that the government would step away from this stance and display the courage to accept the truth to take legal action against questionable activities, which in turn would establish controversy-free government organisations that are accountable and transparent' in a meaningful democracy. At the same time, there has to be a strong position against corruption in line with the spirit of 21st February by overcoming the unethical practice of providing additional privileges to powerful individuals by putting aside political differences and not surrendering to fear or subjugation. Or else the sacrifices of our language martyrs and freedom fighters would go in vain."

## **TIB calls on government to courageously tolerate criticism by cancelling the Digital Security Act**

Dhaka, February 27, 2021: Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has expressed anger over the death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed while being incarcerated and has strongly demanded the removal of the suppressive Digital Security Act. The anti-corruption organisation asked who is responsible for the death of a defiant and freethinking writer like Mushtaq. Mushtaq's death proves that the government does not have the honest courage to face any criticism. TIB has commented that every division and personnel involved in this tragic event must be held accountable if the government respects its responsibility over democracy and the constitution.

The TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman has said that the disgraceful precedent of misusing and misinterpreting the clause 'propaganda to tarnish the image of the state and the government' in the Digital Security Act has been set by arbitrarily accusing, jailing and suppressing writers like Mushtaq and many others.

"Many got bail in similar cases but Mushtaq did not get it even after six applications, that raised questions. The bigger problem is that the government is considering the custodial death of a person for allegedly tarnishing the image of the government like any other normal incident. Even though there has been an investigation to find the cause of death, it is unimaginable to expect a reply to the question if the Digital Security Act is being abused by law enforcement agencies or any individuals. It is now important to ensure accountability in light of such a tragic incident. How could the government deny that the abuse of the Digital Security Act is the reason for Mushtaq's death?"

Media reports say that 457 people have been accused in 197 cases filed under the Digital Security Act in the year 2020, which includes 75 news media professionals accused in 41 cases. Most of the plaintiffs in these cases are either from law enforcement agencies or the ruling party. "I would not be an overstatement to say that the Digital Security Act is being implemented only to suppress different opinions and criticism. It is absurd to claim that freedom of speech and opinion exists in the country while such a law persists. We demand the cancellation of this Act immediately."

Dr. Zaman further said that criticism-based accountability is the precondition for public welfare centric development and democratic progress. Critics are not enemies, rather they can be well-wishers and catalysts for positive achievements. He reiterated that criticising the government is the right of every citizen and the right to their opinions cannot be deemed criminal offences in any civilised society.

"Moreover, the state and the government are two different entities and there is no way, the two can be considered one. When a person practices freedom of speech by criticising corruption, injustice and immorality of the government, that can in no way be deemed a conspiracy against the state. Critics want to see the betterment of the country and its people by promoting an accountability-based state system. The government lacks the honest courage to face this truth and their willingness to do so has also disappeared. The death of Mushtaq Ahmed is the burning example of that."

## **CCC News**

### **Sharing Meeting with Chakaria Land Authority**

The Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC) organised a sharing meeting with Chakaria Upazila Land Office on 16 February 2021 with the Upazila Land Authority with a view to improve the quality of land services. Assistant Commissioner (Land) and acting Upazila Nirbahi Officer of Chakaria, Tanvir Hossain chaired the meeting.



CCC placed a number of recommendations to improve the quality of land service in Chakaria by ensuring transparency and accountability included – introduction of one-stop service, taking alternative measures to keep the help desk in the Upazila and Union Land Office operational during office hours, taking alternative measures to continue providing services to the recipients in the absence of the respective Officer, organising quarterly exchange meetings among the service recipients and local leaders, promoting various steps of Land Office against corruption and irregularities in the Land Office's Facebook page and creating opportunities for service recipients to apply online at a nominal price at the land office.

Assistant Commissioner (Land) and Upazila Nirbahi Officer (Acting) Tanvir Hossain said, “As a result of various steps of the government to improve the quality of land services, access to services has become much easier and people's confidence has increased. There will be more dynamism in land services when ongoing processes will be introduced.”

Among others, President of CCC, Chakaria Bulbul Jannat Shahin, CCC Member and Convener of CCC's land Sub-Committee Principal Farid Uddin Chowdhury, CCC member and Journalist M. R. Mahmud and Zia Uddin took part in the meeting.

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