

National News

**Muzzling journalism for absolute political control:
Journalists and researchers**

**Investigative
Journalism
Award 2020
COVID-19 Response**

The magnitude of internal and external pressure in investigative journalism has increased due to expanded absolute political influence, said speakers at a virtual discussion today.

Therefore, maintaining journalistic ethics and showing courage is more relevant than ever before in investigative journalism's trying times to deal with the pressure, they opined.

They also talked about the roles of journalists and media organisations in ensuring the professional safety of the journalists by maintaining the integrity and practising ethics.

On June 22, 2021, TIB organised the virtual discussion titled 'Challenges of Investigative Journalism during Covid-19 and the way forward', followed by an award ceremony titled 'Investigative Journalism Award 2020: Covid- 19 Response'. TIB Outreach and Communication (O&C) Director Sheikh Manjur-E-Alam moderated the session.

Earlier of the ceremony, TIB O&C Assistant Coordinator Masum Billah presented the keynote paper suggesting ten recommendations, including ensuring free flow of information, revoking the Digital Security Act 2018 and the Official Secrets Act 1923, and making the Press Council more effective.

Speaking at the programme, TIB Executive Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said the National Integrity Strategy of the country has some guidelines on how the mass media will run maintaining integrity; however, it isn't enough to tackle internal and external challenges in journalism.

"If the media organisations practice ethics individually and collectively, it is possible to tackle internal challenges. And in the case of external challenges, the environment of

investigative journalism depends on the political context of the country concerned. Similarly, it is also applicable to our country,” he said.

“The main theme of our political culture is the 'Zero-Sum Game', which means 'must-win or stay in power'! For this, the political opponent has to be defeated or knocked down. And when this is done successfully or with relative success, then a section of civil society and the media remains to identify the government's mistakes and play a supportive role. But a section of the government sees this attempt as animosity,” concluded Dr. Zaman.

Talking about fake news and mainstream media, Dhaka University Professor Dr. Gitiara Nasreen said, “The pandemic has made journalism even more challenging. Other than disease, death and financial difficulties, there has been external pressure as well. Bangladeshi media is also being discussed on international platforms. We should look into why people are more dependent on social media than on mainstream news.”



She also said that the journalists' job is to talk and write, but in the last year, they have seen the rights of journalists compromised all over the world.

Researcher and columnist Professor Afsan Chowdhury said, “Journalists are not trying anything new. There is news only on theft issues, but reporters do not do the structural analysis on corruption in their reports. Rather, they talk about who is involved with the corruption. We are failing to say why corruption is going on.”

Agreeing with Afsan Chowdhury's statement, MRDI Journalism Helping Desk Chief Badruddoza Babu said, “We saw reports on the corruption in Regent Hospital, but no one looked into how it was possible for someone to pull this off. Journalists do not work on the underlying reasons, or they do not get the chance to do so.”

Stressing on practising ethics, Boishakhi TV Planning Consultant and Journalist Julfikar Ali Manik said, “Those who violate the ethics of journalism, violate journalism itself. We cannot collect information by force and purchase information from anybody. We cannot take away anything without informing a person from his/her room, which is a clear violation of the ethics of journalism.”

MRDI Executive Director Hasibur Rahman and Channel 24 Executive Director Talat Mahmud were also present, among others.

Three Journalists received awards:

After the discussion, TIB presented the awards to the winners. National and local level journalists attended the ceremony.

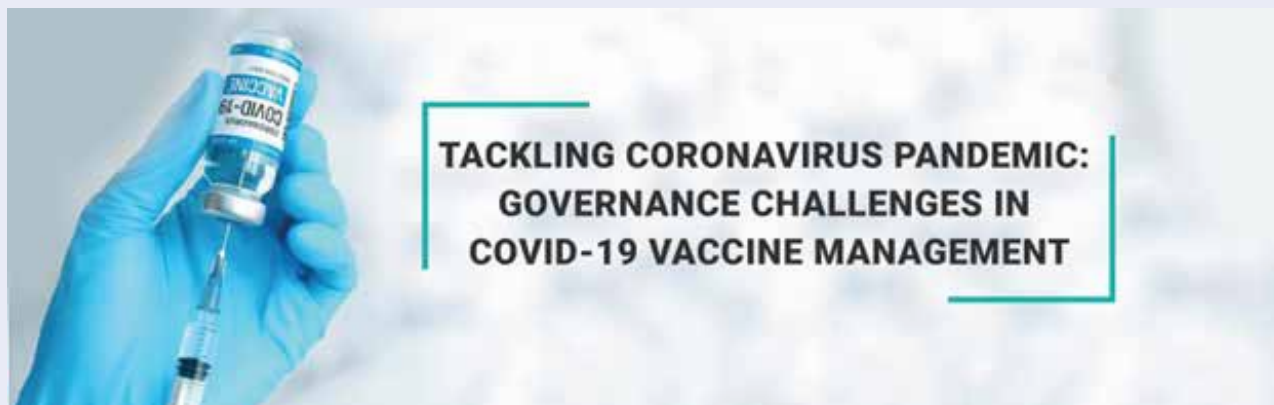
The award was given in three categories, including print, online and electronic media. Under these three categories Abu Ryhan Tanin from Chattagram Pratidin, Saikat Bhowmik from Sarabangla.net, and Mufti Parvez Nadir Reza from Ekattor Television bagged awards. Each of them received a certificate, crest and Tk 1,25,000.



Researcher and columnist Prof Afsan Chowdhury, Boishakhi TV Planning Consultant Journalist Julfikar Ali Manik, Dhaka University Professor Dr Gitiara Nasreen, and MRDI investigative journalism helping desk chief Badruddoza Babu were the panel judges.

This award was exclusively for the COVID-19 response in the year 2020.

Third-party involvement in procurement responsible for vaccine mismanagement; TIB calls for a definite action plan



Analysing the mismanagement in the COVID-19 vaccination programme nationwide, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has recommended that the government prepare a definite action plan that can ensure vaccination of at least 80 per cent of the population within an actual timeframe.

In a virtual press briefing on June 8, 2021, TIB has recommended the above along with other 19 recommendations after releasing the research report titled 'Tackling Corona Virus Pandemic: Governance Challenges in COVID-19 Vaccine Management', where researchers looked into the factors involving the rule of law, response, efficiency and effectiveness, participation and coordination, transparency and accountability.

The third phase of the research on the COVID-19 pandemic analysed the progress, impact and challenges faced in the vaccination programme, started nationwide from February 7, 2021.

The report has pointed out that the involvement of a third party in the vaccine procurement process has forced the government to buy the vaccines at an inflated price of 5 dollars per dose, which is more than double what the European Union member countries paid.

The additional amount paid to the third party, amounting to Taka 231 crore, could have been used to buy 68lakh more vaccine doses. Furthermore, there has been a violation of the law as one of the representatives of the tripartite agreement between Serum Institute, Beximco and the Government of Bangladesh is a ruling party parliamentarian and an advisor to the Prime Minister, which goes against The Representation of the People Order, 1971 [Article 12 (A)] that states anyone having business relations with the government cannot be lawmakers.

Regarding such irregularities, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said in the press meet, "The irregularities and corruption that were seen in the health sector since the start of the Corona infection persists. The government procurement rules have been violated, there is information on how there were illicit dealings in the emergency medical professionals' hiring process and the government had to face loss of crores of Taka as temporary hospitals were built and closed without determining their utility."

In addition, TIB has identified that there is no definite roadmap in terms of vaccine collection and inoculation for the countrymen. The absence of farsighted planning and the lack of buffer doses have also jeopardised the chance of getting second doses for more than 13 lakh people.

On the other hand, a lack of planning in terms of infection control has also been observed. The new strain of the virus had entered the country due to mismanagement in tests and quarantine in the entry points. There has also been a lack of effort in changing people's behaviour regarding health rules and regulations. As a result, there was a 26.6% infection rate and 24.2% death rate in March and April of 2021.



The research demonstrated that the demand for vaccines was not determined or analysed before distributions, which resulted in acute shortages in some areas and oversupply in others. Additionally, as expatriate workers were not brought under the vaccination programme according to demand in due time, workers had to spend an additional 60-70 thousand Taka for quarantine in their destination countries.

Besides, very few people from financially disadvantaged communities have been incorporated into the vaccination programme.

Criticising the vaccination programme, Dr. Zaman added, "The absence of coordination and specific work-plan, mismanagement has been widespread in the vaccination programme. There has been discrimination in terms of area, class, sex and occupation as the vaccination registration and management processes were not user friendly for the underprivileged persons. This is further impacting the nationwide inoculation programme."

Moreover, obstacles for information dissemination persisted throughout the pandemic, and the efforts to control information have been intensified. The research has determined that 247 journalists were either attacked or tortured in 2020, while cases have been filed against 85 journalists under the Digital Security Act.

Dr. Zaman said, "The government was a hundred times more active in covering up information on corruption rather than curbing corruption itself. This is a suicidal stance, and the government must step away from it."

Alongside recommending a definitive roadmap for efficient vaccination, TIB has also suggested allowing local companies to procure vaccines through open competition and has urged the government to take action against irregularities and corruption based on complaints from the citizens.

This research collected qualitative and quantitative data both directly and indirectly from February 7 to May 31, 2021. Researchers interviewed 1,387 people in exit polls conducted in 59 vaccination centres in 43 districts, and data were also collected from 317 organisations classified in the 12 priority sectors.

Manifold corruption crumbling public universities: TIB expresses grave concern

Dhaka, June 01, 2021: Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has expressed grave concern as the punitive measures advised by the University Grants Commission (UGC) have not been implemented despite evidence of rampant corruption against vice-chancellors of multiple public universities.

In a statement today, TIB expressed its concern saying the news of education ministry's unwillingness to follow the recommendations of the UGC indicates corruption and irregularities, and shows the lack of political will, accountability and the culture of impunity in establishing good governance.

TIB believes that such a situation has brought the country's top educational institutions to the brink of collapse, which will have far-reaching negative impact on the country's higher education and the society as a whole.

Expressing dismay over the corruption news against vice-chancellors, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said, "Instead of being the focal point of education, research and knowledge, it seems that the universities have turned into the centre for serving the interests of the political parties due to a section of privileged political sycophants and so-called teachers. In most cases, there are allegations that teachers are being hired for their political identities and affiliations instead of their academic qualifications. These allegations cannot be undermined."

"At the moment it seems that the authorities of the public universities have appointed vice-chancellors and other high officials who work to ensure the implementation of the ruling party's agenda and the protection of vested interests of the party members instead of enabling an atmosphere of higher education," said Dr. Zaman.

Agreeing to a UGC member's comment that reprimanding a single vice-chancellor according to the recommendations of the investigative committee would set a precedent and dispel future vice-chancellors from enabling corruption and irregularities, the TIB Executive Director said, "Due to a lack of accountability and punitive measures, some of the vice-chancellors are setting the outrageous precedent of disingenuous self-indulgence without heeding any kind of rules and regulations. We are learning about different forms of corruption in universities and none seems to be bothered about it. The relevant authorities are not even accountable to anyone. It is very important to overcome this situation."

It is also disappointing that the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has failed to carry out its responsibilities even though corruption allegations against some vice-chancellors' amount to 25 or even 45 complaints.

As the Deputy Minister of Education has talked about taking actions upon proving allegations and forwarding the report of financial corruption to the ACC, TIB expects that the perpetrators will ensure exemplary punishment without succumbing to any external pressure and considering the person's social position and political identity. There is no alternative to political goodwill of the government and the ruling party in this regard, states TIB.

TIB cautiously praise government move to revoke the chance of whitening black money

Demands a specific roadmap to curb corruption

Dhaka, June 3, 2021: Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has cautiously praised the government for not announcing further provisions to whiten black money in the fiscal year 2021-2022.

The organisation has also called on the government not to keep similar provisions in the guise of any other format in the Income Tax Ordinance as it is unconstitutional and discriminatory to honest taxpayers.

Similarly, TIB has expressed concerns over the absence of a definite roadmap for ensuring accountability and curbing corruption in the healthcare sector despite massive allocations for tackling COVID-19 crisis.

In a press statement issued today, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said, "The government may have come to a realisation (regarding black money) as it has not announced the provision to legalise black money in the upcoming budget although it was included in the ongoing fiscal year ignoring strong objections and protests from all quarters."

"We want to believe that respecting the prime minister's commitment towards 'Zero tolerance Policy against Corruption', this illegal provision will not be kept using the legal loophole of income tax ordinance or being pressurised from vested quarters," he added.

Appealing for a public welfare-oriented budget, Dr. Zaman further said, "Even though the proposed budget for fiscal year 2021-2022 has allocated Taka 33,000 crore for healthcare, it is still inadequate than required. According to the latest data from the WHO, while the government's spending on medical services in the country is 26 per cent, a patient spends 74 per cent, which is a shame for Bangladesh as a signatory to the UN Universal Declaration of Health."

Expressing concern, he said that the allocated funds might not be rightly used due to the existing corruption. Besides, lack of a definite roadmap in the budget to overcome this crisis is disappointing.

Despite appreciating the government's move to allocate a separate Taka 10,000 crore for fighting the corona pandemic and the significant investments in vaccination, Dr. Zaman said, "Allocating money is not enough to tackle corona pandemic. It has to be ensured that spending in this sector is done in a transparent manner and in no way the rampant corruption in healthcare can take any advantage. It is also expected that the government would facilitate a transparent procurement process and emphasise the people's interest."

He has also said that the tax rebate for 10 years is a timely decision as it'll increase the scope of hospital services outside the city and ensure quality health care in rural communities.

Expressing concern over the 60 percent allocation of the budget for non-development

sectors, Dr. Zaman said, “It was expected that the government would reduce unnecessary expenditure and allocate a realistic amount for emergency services considering the reality of the coronavirus pandemic.

“However, the public administration sector got the fourth highest allocation of the entire budget (7.6%), and if we add the defence expenditure here, then it crosses 14 percent,” he said, adding that despite the yearly increase in allocation to public administration, it lacks an effective strategy to ensure its efficiency, transparency, and accountability.

Also, having no announcement to ensure transparency in the procurement process of the defense sector shows disregard for good governance, he said while strongly demanding the government to ensure transparency, accountability and strict integrity in realizing the budget, especially in public procurement and expenditure.

Finance minister shifts from his earlier decision over whitening black money; TIB shocked and disappointed

TIB’s earlier “cautious praise” goes down the drain

Dhaka, June 05, 2021: The temporary sigh of relief from honest taxpayers that came as the finance minister had announced to repeal the unconstitutional provision to whiten black money in the upcoming budget has instantly turned into concerns in a matter of a day due to the remarks of the minister at the post-budget press conference.

In this regard, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has expressed its disappointments and resentments as the minister has issued statements like “We’ll decide after observing for one month”.

TIB has also hoped that the finance minister would step away from this reckless decision and convey a strong message to corrupt individuals by denouncing this unconstitutional, discriminatory and corruption-friendly provision starting from June 30, 2021.

Mentioning that TIB had thought that the government had learned from its mistakes and therefore, had cautiously praised the government, the organisation’s Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said, “We want to believe that the budget is a comprehensive financial charter reflecting the unified narrative of the Finance Minister, Finance Ministry and other top policymakers. But the minister’s scepticism and U-turn from his decision over ‘unannounced income’ just after a day of presenting the budget to the parliament is shocking.”

“Even more disappointing is the fact that the minister had talked about disallowing the opportunity to whiten black money for the sake of justice and fairness in the upcoming budget but is he stepping away from the position due to external pressure? or to protect vested interests? He could not clarify this,” he opined.

Dr. Zaman said, “There was this attempt from the beginning to hyperbolically present the

fact that a record Taka 14,000 crore has been legalized in the first 10 months of the ongoing fiscal year and it is a matter of concern that the minister is trying to portray this as a shield to favour this unjust provision, which is not expected at all."

"Yet it is not being taken into consideration how the government is actually losing massive revenues due to this. It would not be an exaggeration to think that it is a ploy to institutionalize the culture of defaulters in the tax system by disregarding the taxpayers who earn in an honest and legitimate way," he continued.

He also said that if no question arises over the black money whitening provision, then it questions the govt's commitment towards 'Zero Tolerance against Corruption' and aids in creating corruption-friendly atmosphere.

"It is the demand of the time that the legal loopholes that facilitate whitening black money by masking them as 'unannounced income' in the income tax ordinance be repealed. It is not unknown to the authorities that there is a very fine line between unannounced income and black money," he said, hoping that the government will step away from the policy of appeasing corrupt individuals by underhanded strategies and concentrate on supporting honest taxpayers.

"TIB yet again calls on the government to repeal the opportunity to legalize black money by overcoming all hesitation and pressure from vested quarters. The sooner the government learns from its mistakes, the sooner the desired good governance in finance will be accelerated," concluded Dr. Zaman.

Blatant use of muscle power in public procurement

The anti-graft watchdog outraged; demands immediate accountability measures

Dhaka, June 13, 2021: Brandishing arms in broad daylight inside the Pabna public works office by the ruling party activists is the ultimate manifestation of muscle power in public procurement and construction works, said Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) today at a press conference.

Terming the incident "shameless", the anti-graft watchdog expressed grave concerns and outrage over the matter.

TIB also called the incident another blaring example of the culture of muscle power use, threat and influence in the government procurement and construction works that have been continuing for long.

In a statement to the media, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said, "The competitive tender system that was introduced in the government procurement, construction and different organisational activities for more transparency has been ineffective for a very long time due to illegal use of power, intimidation and forcible occupation by ruling party activists and vested quarters. But the authorities concerned have always denied this, with a few minor exceptions, and in some cases have been

providing protection (to the vested quarters).”

“The Pabna incident is just another visible example of the appalling culture of muscle power use in the government tender process. Everyone involved in this act has to be brought to justice with exemplary punishment immediately alongside ensuring an open and competitive tender system,” added Dr. Zaman.

Though the firearms were claimed to be registered in the news, Dr. Zaman said, “Even if the firearms are legally registered, brandishing the firearms publicly in an important government office to create panic can’t be legally accepted. It would not be an overstatement to call it an act of terror. Though a week has passed since such a terror incident, unconcerned assurances from the police like ‘violations of the Arms Act will be investigated’ have shocked us. We are not even sure if police actions will be just limited to such assurances.”

“It was naturally expected that police and local administration would investigate the matter and take adequate measures immediately after the incident. We demand that the authority and law enforcers take quick and effective actions alongside answering these legal questions to stop such incidents. If the arms brandishing perpetrators are released due to their connections to the ruling party, then such terror activities would soon take over the country,” he added.

Referring to a research report titled ‘Governance in Public Procurement: Effectiveness of E-GP in Bangladesh’ published on September 16, 2020, Dr. Zaman said, “The E-GP portal was introduced by the Central Procurement Committee back in 2011 to stop corruption and the use of muscle power in public tender and procurement processes. It had made the procurement process easier but political influence, collusion, and syndicates are still playing a central role in order to get work orders, and the culture of obtaining work orders by threats or illegal influence is still persistent. The brandishing of arms and exercising muscle power in Pabna is the proof of that.

“If the government fails to take punitive measures immediately, then the government’s commitment to curb corruption and establishing good governance will be proved to be a verbal deception, and all positive initiatives will be impacted,” he continued.

Mentioning TIB’s another study that showed how corruption in procurement-related issues incurred a loss of 8.5 to 27 per cent of the procurement budget, the TIB Executive Director said, “One of the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 12.7) is to promote sustainable public procurement in accordance with national policies and priorities. According to the United Nation’s Anti-Corruption Convention, every member state has to implement a transparent, competitive and objectively run public procurement system to curb corruption. But incidents like in Pabna give the opposite message to Bangladesh’s commitment to achieving these goals.”

Calling upon the government, Dr. Zaman said, “Therefore, without waiting for the complaints from the concerned authority and abandoning the culture of denial (of such cases), ensure exemplary punitive measures by being proactive and following evidence

from the news published in the media. It has to be ensured that no one ever dares to conduct such terrorist activities by taking advantage of political organisations”

CCC News

Dialogue with Divisional Health Authority Held

The Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), Mymensingh organized a virtual dialogue with the Divisional Health Authority on 26 June 2021 titled 'Initiatives of Health Department: Challenges and Actions to Tackle the Corona Situation'. Presiding over the dialogue Mymensingh Divisional Director (Health) Dr. Md. Shah Alam shared the initiatives taken at every stage of the health department to address the Coronavirus situation. Concerted efforts are needed to overcome this situation. He pledged to continue all kinds of cooperation from the health department to address this situation.

Ms. Ferhana Ferdous, Director-Civic Engagement, TIB, also spoke on the occasion. She expressed her gratitude to all the staff of the health department, including doctors and nurses, for their cooperation and responsibility in dealing with the coronavirus situation. Dr. Md. Nazrul Islam, Civil Surgeon of Mymensingh, Dr. K M Shafiquzzaman, Deputy Civil Surgeon of Jamalpur, Dr. Shahjahan Kabir, Health and Family Planning Officer of Mymensingh Sadar Upazila, Dr. Jannatul Ferdous, Health and Family Planning Officer of Muktagachhar Upazila, Dr. Redaur Rahman Khan, representative of Health Department of Mymensingh City Corporation and Md. Atikur Rahman, Coordinator of TIB also spoke in the dialogue.

The dialogue concluded with set of recommendations that included creating a free flow of information, coordination among health service providers, and formulating specific action plans on how to reach a larger population in a timely manner; initiating the registration process for everyone in various ways including eliminating all technical problems; ensuring supply of vaccines by assessing the area-wise demand; establishing labs to create Coronavirus testing opportunities in all districts, and so on.

President of CCC, Mymensingh Mir Ghulam Mustafa thanked everyone. The event was moderated by Vice-President of CCC Subarna Polly Drong.

Primary Education during Coronavirus Pandemic

A virtual sharing meeting titled 'Progress, Limitations and Necessary Measures in Primary Education during Coronavirus Pandemic' was held on 26 June 2021. Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), Lalmonirhat organized the meeting while CCC President Dr. Md. Qasim Ali presided over the meeting. District Primary Education Officer Md. Golam Nabi was present as guest.

The discussants pointed out that primary schools are the key to education. But due to the long-term shut-down of primary schools during the Coronavirus pandemic, the government of Bangladesh has taken various initiatives to keep the students focused in their studies, which has not been very successful. Class lectures are being broadcast on

public television channel, radio and community radio, but majority of students fail to watch these programmes because of the unavailability of satellite connections in most of the rural households.

At the same time, as the majority of the parents do not have smart phone sets, the access to virtual classes remained limited to a small number of students. Moreover, many parents have smart phones but do not use the internet. On the other hand, many of the students using their parents' smart phones get addicted to cartoons, games and other misdemeanors, the discussants added.

Speakers at the meeting opined that parents can play a greater role than teachers in increasing the students' concentration in their studies. Parents need to keep their children engaged in their studies for a certain period of time. The takeaway of this pandemic is that digital media will play a big role in the days to come.

Assistant District Primary Education Officer Md. Nazrul Islam and Md. Hasan Atiqur Rahman, Upazila Education Officer (Sadar) Md. Anwarul Islam, TIB's Cluster Coordinator Kamal Krishno Saha, teachers, parents, CCC, YES and YES Friends members were present in the meeting. The meeting was moderated by Md. Morshed Alam, Area Coordinator, TIB, CCC-Lalmonirhat.

Editor: Sheikh Manjur-E-Alam

Sub-Editor: Mohammad Tauhidul Islam, Xavier Sku, Kazi Mahdi Amin, Mathews Chiran

Design: Samsuddoha Safayat



Write us: Transparency International Bangladesh

✉ advocacy@ti-bangladesh.org 🌐 www.ti-bangladesh.org 📱 [TIBangladesh](https://www.facebook.com/TIBangladesh)