



TRANSPARENCY
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Social movement against corruption

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World Press Freedom Day 2023 Panel Urges Abolition of Digital Security Act to Safeguard Fundamental Rights

Dhaka, 3 May 2023: A distinguished panel of speakers at a high-level discussion, jointly organized by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), UNESCO Dhaka office, and Article-19, emphasized the imperative need to abolish the Digital Security Act to protect fundamental rights on the 30th anniversary of World Press Freedom Day.

Esteemed attendees included Susan Vize, Officer-in-Charge of UNESCO Dhaka Office; Gwyn Lewis, United Nations Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh; Dr. Kamal Uddin Ahmed, Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission; Dr. Gitiara Nasreen, Professor at the University of Dhaka; Reaz Ahmad, Executive Editor of Dhaka Tribune; Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua; Alexandra Berg von Linde, Swedish Ambassador to Bangladesh; and Anisul Huq, Minister of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs. TIB Executive Director, Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, moderated the discussion.



The speakers expressed grave concerns over media control and the Digital Security Act, highlighting its misuse to stifle journalists and limit civic space. They argued that the complete repeal of the Digital Security Act was the only viable solution to safeguard fundamental rights, as the Act has been disproportionately used against journalists, undermining the principles of press freedom. Bangladesh's 10-step-decline in the World Press Freedom Index in just a year, ranking 163rd out of 180 countries, further emphasized the urgent need for change.



Despite concerns, Law Minister Anisul Huq reiterated the government's stance of not repealing the Act but pledged to introduce necessary amendments by September. Dr. Iftekharuzzaman vehemently disagreed, emphasizing that the Act posed an unacceptable threat to freedom of the press and fundamental rights. He called for a new cyber security law and expressed deep disappointment with Bangladesh's declining media freedom ranking.

During the discussion, Susan Vize recited a written message from UNESCO Director-General Ms. Audrey Azoulay, emphasizing the vital role of press freedom in fostering democracy and upholding human rights. Dr. Gitiara Nasreen highlighted the importance of true media freedom in amplifying marginalized voices and shaping public opinion. Swedish Ambassador Alexandra Berg Von Linde concurred, affirming Sweden's commitment to supporting press freedom in Bangladesh. Reaz Ahmad emphasized that the Digital Security Act was being used to silence dissenting voices, stressing the need for an environment conducive to media operations.



Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua drew attention to instances where the Act infringed upon citizens' rights and called for its repeal. At the conclusion of the discussion, Dr. Iftekharuzzaman reiterated civil society's rejection of any amendments to the Act and demanded its complete repeal. The event underscored the urgent need to protect press freedom and uphold fundamental rights in Bangladesh.

Repeal DSA to ensure freedom of press and security of journalists: TIB

Dhaka, 2 May 2023: Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has strongly urged the government to uphold democratic principles by safeguarding fundamental rights such as freedom of information, expression, and independent thinking, while also ensuring the freedom of the press and the security of journalists. Specifically, the corruption watchdog has called for the repeal of the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA), 2018, which is being arbitrarily abused to suppress the media and protect vested interests.

In a press statement issued on World Press Freedom Day 2023, TIB's Executive Director, Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, emphasized the government's responsibility to create an environment where the media can freely carry out its crucial role as the fourth pillar of the constitution. However, he expressed concern that while the number of mass media outlets has increased significantly, fearless and independent journalism has declined in

proportion. Dr. Iftekharuzzaman pointed out that authorities often tout the number of media platforms as a sign of press freedom, but in reality, powerful vested interests exploit state mechanisms to harass, sue, and attack journalists, thereby stifling media and suppressing freedom of speech. He highlighted Bangladesh's 10-step decline in the World Press Freedom Index 2022, ranking 162nd, which indicates the alarming deterioration of press freedom in the country.

Dr. Iftekharuzzaman squarely blamed the arbitrary misuse of the Digital Security Act for this decline in press freedom in Bangladesh. He mentioned that research demonstrated one out of four cases filed under the Digital Security Act targeted journalists, with most plaintiffs being related to the government or the ruling party. He emphasized that such misuse of the Digital Security Act undermines the constitutional right to freedom of speech and democratic principles. Moreover, he condemned the practice of filing cases against journalists long after abducting them and detaining them for extended periods under non-bailable charges, which constitutes a gross violation of constitutionally recognized fundamental rights. Dr. Iftekharuzzaman called for the immediate repeal of the draconian Digital Security Act on World Press Freedom Day.

TIB also expressed concern that mass media has fallen into the trap of self-censorship due to a climate of fear in their workplaces, as there are no exemplary measures taken against attacks on journalists and the misuse of the Digital Security Act by hidden forces.

On World Press Freedom Day, TIB extended its applause and congratulations to the brave journalists who persistently present facts to citizens and raise public awareness despite facing attacks, legal cases, and even risks to their lives. For media workers to continue playing their vital role in shaping a corruption-free and well-governed country, and to ensure an environment conducive to independent journalism, fair wages, and personal security, TIB called upon the government, media owners, and relevant stakeholders to fulfill their respective responsibilities.

Empowering Journalists through Data Journalism TIB Drives Change in Media Landscape

May 2023 Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), in collaboration with the Department of Mass Communication & Journalism (MCJ) at Rajshahi University, recently hosted its second Workshop on Data Journalism. The workshop shed light on the untapped potential of data journalism as a powerful tool for journalists to uncover corruption, ensure accountability, and address challenges such as state overreach and self-censorship in Bangladesh.

Recognising the underutilisation of data journalism in the country, TIB is actively investing in its introduction and raising awareness. As part of this initiative, TIB has produced a comprehensive handbook in Bangla and partnered with universities to educate journalism students about the transformative impact of data journalism.



This workshop is part of TIB's broader mission to cultivate a data journalism movement in Bangladesh, equipping journalists with the necessary skills to expose irregularities and promote transparency. TIB believes that data journalism represents the most advanced form of investigative reporting, and journalists must practice this approach effectively. The workshop selected around 50 students to participate, aiming to enhance their capacity in data journalism. The students were introduced to the fundamental principles of working with data through interactive sessions that included using Lego blocks. Gradually, they explored various aspects of data journalism, discovering how open data sources can be harnessed effectively.

The students gained insights into the potential of data journalism to uncover discrepancies and anomalies within datasets, empowering them to expose irregularities. Additionally, they received guidance on using popular data analysis and visualisation tools, such as Excel, to elevate their investigative reporting skills.

During the certificate distribution ceremony, Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director of TIB, underscored the transformative impact of data journalism on journalism. He emphasised that data journalism streamlines the work of investigative journalists, facilitating the discovery of hidden truths. Dr. Iftekharuzzaman reiterated TIB's commitment to supporting students through similar workshops. Furthermore, he addressed the challenges faced by objective journalism in Bangladesh, highlighting the need to address the Digital Security Act, which poses a significant obstacle to press freedom.

Expressing gratitude to TIB for organising the workshop, Professor Dr. Mustak Ahmed, Chairperson of the MCJ Department at Rajshahi University, emphasised the university's recognition of data journalism as a crucial step toward shaping the future of journalism. He unveiled plans to collaborate with TIB in introducing a data journalism course into the academic curriculum.

The recently concluded workshop marks the second edition of TIB's Data Journalism

Workshop, following the first workshop held in March 2023 at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Jahangirnagar University. TIB's initiatives aim to inspire a transformative shift in the media landscape by harnessing the power of data journalism and nurturing a new generation of investigative journalists equipped with the skills to drive transparency and accountability in Bangladesh.

WASA chairman removed for flagging irregularities; TIB says concerning practice of 'Shooting the Messenger'

Dhaka, 23 May 2023: Expressing concerns, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has said the removal of the Dhaka WASA Board Chairman for filing complaints against corrupt practices is a troubling attempt of shielding perpetrators. TIB has said that this goes against the legal obligations to protect whistleblowers from abuse of power and corruption. This also undermines the government's declaration of 'zero tolerance against corruption' from the highest levels of government, thinks the corruption watchdog.

At a press statement, TIB has strongly urged the government to take the complaints by the ousted chairman seriously to conduct a fair and transparent investigation into the serious allegations against the accused.

Cautioning not to take the incident naively, TIB Executive Director, Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said the tenure of the newly dismissed chairman of WASA had ended in October last year, but no new chairman was appointed for a long time. However, a new chairman was appointed just five days after the board chairman had filed a written complaint to the ministry against WASA's Managing Director. Even if the incident is termed as a 'coincidence' by the Secretary of the Local Government Division, the removal of the complainant under such circumstances establishes the doctrine the WASA MD has the last word in everything, and he will expel anyone to protect his own interests.

"With such actions, the authorities gave the message that identity and position give an individual the license of lawlessness, and the arbitrary power to practice 'shooting the messenger' whenever there are whistleblowers trying to report corruption or abuse of power," said Dr. Iftekharuzzaman.

Dr. Iftekharuzzaman further mentioned that the allegations made by the ousted chairman saying that Dhaka WASA has become a sanctuary of arbitrary abuse of power, irregularities, and corruption were also reflected in TIB's research report Dhaka WASA: Governance Challenges and Way forward published in 2019. Moreover, media reports have also corroborated such allegations of corruption and court orders of investigations have also seen no progress. He said that the entire incident is a glaring example of disregard for institutional responsibility and accountability. The latest incident is another disappointing example of authorities shielding irregularities and corruption, said Dr. Iftekharuzzaman. Urging the govt. to stick to the declaration of zero tolerance against corruption from the highest level of the government, TIB calls for a fair investigation of all the allegations brought by the outgoing Chairman and others, over the years, against WASA managing

director and all other associates to ensure accountability.

Notably, TIB had issued another press release on 19 May 2023 following the WASA Board Chairman's complaints saying that such allegations of corruption and irregularities can no longer be ignored as the accusations were made from an insider. The board chairman was ousted from his position just 5 days after that.

Public hearing at Cumilla Medical College Hospital

Hospital authority to increase transparency and accountability in health services

Dhaka, 25 April 2023: In order to increase transparency and accountability in healthcare and quality of services, Cumilla Medical College Hospital and the Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), Cumilla, organized a public hearing on 24 May 2023 with the participation of service recipients of the hospital.

Deputy Director of the hospital Dr. Sajeda Khatun delivered the welcome speech while Dilnashin Mohsen, joint convener of the sub-committee of CCC, Cumilla moderated the programme. CCC member Alhaj Shah Md. Alamgir Khan shared the goal and objectives of the public hearing.

Participating in the public hearing, service recipients suggested to increase the supply of medicine, demanded safe food and water and to increase the number of seats, toilets and staff members. Civil society members demanded policies to determine reasonable fare for private ambulances and proper management of hospital trolleys. They also argued to start e-ticketing system to stop harassment in the hospital.



Dr. Mohammad Azizur Rahman Siddiqui, director of the hospital, gave immediate instructions for ensuring adequate medicine and safe drinking water. He made commitments to consider the issues of e-ticketing system and proper management of

trolleys. The director sought cooperation of all including the CCC in formulating policies to determine reasonable fares for private ambulances. He assured the continuation of improvement of the quality of health services through the cooperation of CCC, Cumilla.

CCC Vice President Professor Nikhil Chandra Roy said that CCC will surely cooperate in all kinds of positive activities. Among others, Assistant Director of the hospital Dr. Nishat Sultana, CCC member Prof. Vijay Krishna Roy, Selina Akhter, doctors, nurse and administrative officers of the hospital and members of Youth Engagement & Support (YES) and Active Citizens Group (ACG) were present at the event.

Public hearing on land services

Authority asks citizens to use hotline number for getting advice on land related services

Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), Nalitabari, of Sherpur district and Nalitabari Upazila Land Office jointly organized a public hearing on land services on 27 May 2023 at the Upazila Land Office. On the occasion of the National Land Service Week-2023, the public hearing was organized with a theme of Smart Land Service to increase public awareness about land services. Sadrul Ahsan, president of CCC, Nalitabari, presided over the public hearing.



Appearing in the public hearing, one Ms. Salma Parveen said, "I am a helpless poor person and I used to live in my husband's land. We have been evicted now." In view of the said complaint, Nalitabari Assistant Commissioner (Land) immediately scrutinized the documents with the woman and instructed the concerned Union Sub-Assistant Officer to take necessary measures. Ms. Iffat Jahan Tuli, Assistant Commissioner (Land), gave an instruction to take appropriate measures to free the land from grabbers.

During the orientation of the event, the Assistant Commissioner (Land) shared the services provided by the Upazila Land Office and promoted the multifaceted services introduced by the government. She said that Nalitabari Land Office is working diligently to provide all services related to land without harassment. Currently, e-mutation is being done very easily within 28 days. People can now pay land fees through online at home and can apply for waiver.

The AC (Land) asked citizens to use the hotline number for getting advice on various land related services with free of cost. She also said that the current government has brought land services under the smart digital service. She thanked CCC and TIB for organizing this kind of public friendly programme.

CCC president Sadrul Ahsan Masum said to strengthen transparency and accountability in land services the administration should make all services harassment-free, people-friendly and corruption-free. At least 70 service recipients of the land office attended the event along with the locally elected representatives, teachers, students, journalists, development activists, CCC, YES & ACG members.

Everyone should play the proper role to ensure quality education services

Safe playgrounds, sports facilities, wash blocks, safe drinking water, adequate classrooms and co-curricular activities beside the textbooks are crucial to ensure quality education. A government primary school should have these but Sufia Government Primary School of Madaripur Sadar upazila is running with only three congested classrooms in a small building. The authorities should pay attention to such schools.



Speakers said these in an advocacy meeting on ensuring quality education services organized by the CCC, Madaripur on 31 May 2023. Mr. Shajahan Khan, Member of Parliament and President of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of

Liberation War, was present as the chief guest in the meeting held at his residence in Madaripur. In his speech, Mr. Shajahan Khan called upon everyone to play the proper role in ensuring quality education services and promised maximum cooperation on his part. President of CCC, Madaripur, Yakub Khan Shishir presided over the meeting.

Among others, president and members of the School Management Committee (SMC), Head Teacher and other teachers, locally elected representatives, CCC members, and coordinators & members of the Active Citizen Group (ACG) operated under the CCC participated in the discussion. The meeting emphasized to address the problems immediately.

CCC Jamalpur organize training on PACTApp for ACG members

Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), Jamalpur organized a training on PACTApp (a tailor-made social audit App by TIB to conduct community monitoring) for the members of the Active Citizens Groups (ACGs) on 15 May 2023 at its office. Members of the newly formed ACGs on education and health sectors attended the event. Ajoy Kumar Pal, president of CCC, Jamalpur, inaugurated the programme and delivered the welcome speech.



CCC president said, training on PACTApp will take the anti-corruption social movement one step further. He expressed hope that the programme will enrich participants' knowledge about community monitoring and app-based anti-corruption social movement.

Area Coordinator of CCC, Jamalpur Md. Arif Hossain conducted the training sessions with the help of trained Youth Engagement & Support (YES) members. A detailed discussion on the use of PACTApp was held in the training which ended with a practical demonstration. During the sessions, participants were given hands-on training; and they discussed about community monitoring in detail.

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