

Sunken ferry raises winter travel concerns

Reduced visibility should not mean reduced preparation

With the country shrouded in freezing fog, there is no denying that visibility has become a safety concern for the transport sector. The past few days saw reports about how flight operations were disrupted, ferry services suspended, and road vehicles derailed or collided because of reduced visibility caused by the dense fog. On Wednesday morning, a utility ferry carrying nine goods-laden trucks and minitrucks sank near the Paturia terminal in Manikganj. Although there have been conflicting claims about its reason—with some officials citing a collision with a bulk carrier while some survivors pointing to water seepage amid a nighttime travel embargo—it is evident that fog played a role during or in the lead up to the incident.

There have been no reported casualties after the capsizing. But that's more due to luck—with the ferry carrying only trucks and no general passengers—than any preventive measure. The fact is, despite fog-related incidents being a common occurrence, every winter comes with renewed fears about travel safety both on waterways and roads. Often water vessels are not fitted with proper fog lights, while their use on roads poses both legal and operational complications. Experts also blame lack of trained crew members, insufficient safety checks, rise in river traffic (including unregistered vessels), and poor regulatory oversight for the rising waterway tragedies. All these just heighten the risk of accidents during winter.

Even during air travel, safety is far from assured. Just how vulnerable to accidents or disruptions it is can be understood from the fact that the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) recently shut down a system meant to protect planes from winter fog right in the middle of winter. Reportedly, the Instrument Landing System—which makes it possible for planes to land in low visibility—has been disabled in a bid to upgrade it. The current system allows landing with a visibility of 800 metres or more, but once upgraded, it will allow landing when visibility is as low as 500 metres. While upgradation is important, the timing is not just illogical but can be dangerous. Just the other day, we saw how an Indian plane made an emergency landing in Dhaka because of low visibility.

We, therefore, urge the authorities to ensure maximum preparation to prevent fog-related incidents. Since low visibility may continue to be an issue for several days more, all relevant departments must be on alert.

Stop relentless attacks on nature

Illegal encroachers keep on devouring forests, rivers

For years, unscrupulous people and entities have been devouring our precious rivers, hills, and forests, but preventive or punitive actions were seldom taken. These crimes have been normalised to an extent that no one bats an eye anymore at the news of such incidents. The latest of them, as reported by this daily, saw rampant tree-felling and excavation of ponds in parts of a reserved forest in Barguna, defying existing regulations and endangering the wildlife and ecosystem.

As a result, a section of the Patharghata mangrove forest, declared "reserved" in 1986, has turned into a pseudo-village with some locals setting up habitats by clearing the forest area. These settlers believe they have a right to the land, because in 1989-90, the then deputy commissioner of Barguna district had allocated 40 acres of land within the forest to 53 landless families. However, according to a Forest Department official, the allocation deal was cancelled when 21 acres of the "promised" land was left unoccupied, and was declared part of the reserved forest. The memo seemingly did not reach the encroachers, who are now stepping up efforts to occupy the remaining area.

But nothing can justify the destruction of such a forest. We fail to grasp how these individuals can so openly defy the law about reserved forests or even attack government officials in their pursuit, as the report mentions. According to local sources, the encroachers have "managed" some forest officials to expand their illegal settlement. If the guardians of forests are compromised like this, how can we prevent such crimes or ensure justice?

In another news of the day, the once 300-metre-wide Hari River in Khulna—through which the water of 27 beels used to flow—has been reduced to a mere canal, thanks to rampant land grabbing and setting up of brick kilns, thus polluting surrounding areas. We have seen reports like this all too frequently over the years, yet no effective measures have been taken to stop such encroachment. This relentless assault on nature must stop. It is high time relevant departments were made accountable for their neglect or indifference in this regard. We must prioritise the wellbeing of our nature for the sake of our own survival.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Stop cutting topsoil

Agriculture is one of our most important sectors. But today we are pushing this sector towards destruction by cutting the fertile topsoil from cropland. Of late, many newspapers reports have shown how this topsoil is being cut to be used in brick kilns. But do those removing the topsoil and/or selling it know that when topsoil is removed from farmland, it loses its fertility and productivity? This practice also destroys the ecological balance of our environment. I urge the government to take legal action against those involved in this business and halt a harmful practice for good.

Anika Taskin
Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur

What's holding us back from diversifying our exports?

Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), discusses the challenges that Bangladesh has to overcome on its journey to becoming a middle-income country, in an exclusive interview with Naimul Alam Alvi of The Daily Star.

Bangladesh is on its way to becoming a middle-income country, and one important element during that journey will be the manufacturing and export-based industries. Where do you think we stand in that regard?

In Bangladesh, there are two contrasting narratives that make up our labour sector and export sector progress: one for the ready-made garment industry and the other for the non-garment sectors.

In the RMG sector, we are making some strides in technological and product growth, diversification, buyer networking, and delivering products at globally competitive prices. We hope this trajectory continues. The working environment also shows some improvement compared to the past, thanks to collaborations with the Accord Alliance and ratifications of International Labour Organization conventions and compliance with minimum age requirements. Workplace harassment ratification is also underway.

However, progress is stagnant in the RMG sector in terms of the socio-economic well-being of workers. Wages, unionisation rights, participation in social dialogue, and even the standard of working conditions remain insufficient. This contradiction undermines our ability to fully leverage the potential of our skilled workforce.

The non-garment sectors lag even further behind. The potentially major export-oriented industries, such as textiles, leather footwear, ceramics, and agro-processing grapple with technical deficiencies, skill gaps, low productivity, market share struggles, child labour issues, abysmal working conditions, weak union representation, and wage non-compliance.

Recent reactions of the government, entrepreneurs, and brand buyers towards US and EU policies and reports reveal a lack of long-term improvement in areas critical for export sustainability—namely social issues, labour rights, and labour-owner relations. This raises concerns about potential crises occurring under international pressure. We must remember that importing countries' scrutiny extends beyond the garment sector, encompassing overall labour rights. Therefore, we have enough reasons to take immediate action to remedy these issues across all sectors.

How do you evaluate the growth of our export-oriented industries? Are we on the right trajectory?

Internally, Bangladesh's garment

export landscape has undergone a subtle shift. While a single product once held the major share, there are five goods now which collectively account for around 75 percent of exports. However, we have yet to become a producer of premium RMG products. Although it's said that garment sectors rarely flourish beyond 30 years, at 40 years and counting, Bangladesh's dependence on its RMG sector continues. This stagnant progress threatens to confine us to a low-end manufacturing niche.

While other sectors are showing some promising signs of emergence, our economic foundation remains heavily reliant on the "three Rs": rice, remittance, and RMG. This concentration impedes both job creation and worker productivity. No alternative sector offers comparable employment opportunities, trapping workers in a low-wage cycle. Overdependence naturally prioritises labour-intensive, low-skilled, and low-paying jobs.

Instead of a graduation from the garment sector, our specialisation has narrowed to cotton-based basics and bulk products, and a plateau of low-value items. Imagine if there were five additional billion-dollar export titans, such as food processing, agro-processing, leather footwear, jute, and textiles. These would foster healthy competition and elevate wage ceilings.

We lack a robust SME sector producing high-value, high-margin products—a crucial element for honing labour skills and propelling us upward. Furthermore, transitioning to such items demands unwavering adherence to ensuring workers' rights, good factory conditions, and addressing environmental concerns. These unaddressed challenges discourage buyers and customers of high value products from coming to Bangladesh.

What are the challenges hindering this transition to high-paying, high-valued industries?

I believe that challenges, to varying degrees, permeate nearly every aspect of our graduation trajectory. While the government deserves credit for setting a long-term vision of attaining high-income status, a critical gap

has emerged between this aspiration and the policies enacted to achieve it. The immense size of the RMG sector, coupled with its considerable political influence, presents a unique challenge.

Any faltering within this sector, whether through unemployment or disruptions in employment, could swiftly translate into substantial political pressure upon the government. Furthermore, the extensive involvement of RMG entrepreneurs in the government's policy-making process has inadvertently restricted the government's flexibility and narrowed its focus, hindering the advancement of other sectors. There persists a hesitation to enact policies that would champion diversification (such as targeted fiscal incentives and, in some instances, the strategic withdrawal of existing support from the RMG sector).

The issue of workers' wages reveals yet another constraint: political will. While logical justifications, capabilities, and needs exist for more frequent and coordinated wage increases, such progress has remained elusive.

RMG-centric policy framework acts as a significant impediment. Kudos to entrepreneurs in non-garment sectors for bootstrapping their way forward despite minimal support. Yet, imagine the potential that can be unlocked with targeted long-term policy support, sector-specific frameworks, and a level playing field. The current situation, with the garment sector absorbing nearly 65 percent of government incentives, stifles growth in other areas. Capital gravitates towards this established sector, leaving others starving for resources.

This persistent lack of alignment between political intention and policy implementation underscores the urgent need for a renewed commitment to the structural reforms necessary to propel Bangladesh forward on its graduation journey.

Similar challenges plague supply chains across industries. Underinvestment in non-garment infrastructure makes it vulnerable to established players. Additionally, the

rise of conglomerates, while offering potential benefits, can suffocate competition and market dynamism. New businesses struggle to enter such an environment, leading to SME stagnation and big businesses being free to produce high-priced, substandard products for consumers. The vicious cycle continues: entry barriers remain high, promising ventures falter, and the export dream remains distant.

Furthermore, entrepreneurs themselves are often reluctant to embrace formal structures, delegation, and transparent governance. This continues to hinder growth.

Building robust corporate frameworks and shedding informal practices are crucial steps. Furthermore, our next generation's potential remains untapped due to the lack of global-standard, industry-oriented training. While they excel in service sectors, manufacturing unfortunately appears a closed door.

Finally, upskilling both current and future workforces is imperative. Our graduates, both domestic and foreign, often lack a competitive edge. We often resort to imported workers or officers for high-skilled positions. But relying solely on imported talent is unsustainable. Investing in our people and building a pipeline of skilled workers is the cornerstone of achieving sustainable economic progress.

What do you recommend for improving this situation?

Our goal is to achieve economic diversification, reducing dependence on only a few sectors and fostering a multi-centric model with diverse employment opportunities for all genders and skill levels. However, within the current political framework, I observe shortcomings in operationalising and implementing such initiatives. Associations often lack a driving role, and opportunities for worker growth are limited. These factors hinder our progress towards achieving the desired growth targets.

Moving forward, the Bangladesh government should prioritise the development and implementation of sector-specific policy frameworks. These frameworks should be meticulously implemented, regularly reviewed, and equipped with clear targets for effective operationalisation. Through coordinated efforts of stakeholders across various sectors—entrepreneurs, workers, middlemen, government representatives, private sector players, buyers, and development partners—we can move towards a long-term, sector-based development plan.



Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem

In the eyes of the world, Israel has lost



His Excellency Yousef SY Ramadan is the Palestinian Ambassador to Bangladesh.

YUSEF SY RAMADAN

Bangladesh's recent announcement to join South Africa in the lawsuit against Israel for committing genocide has added fuel to the judicial war against Israel. This courageous decision comes at a time when South Africa needs international support, especially after Germany's decision to stand by Israel and defend it in the upcoming litigation. It is true that more than 80 countries declared their support for South Africa by publishing statements, but none translated their words into actions besides Bangladesh. Bangladesh's decision to file a declaration of intervention has a distinctive characteristic, reflecting a principled position: we mean what we say. It is not lost on us that it is one country that has been ravaged by colonialism, racism, and apartheid and another which fought for its independence who are fighting against injustice in Palestine.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently condemned South Africa's genocide case against

Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, saying, "Today we saw an upside-down world. Israel is accused of genocide while it's fighting against genocide." Netanyahu could not comprehend that The Hague would unveil the oppression perpetuated by him and his apartheid state, that he would not have a chance to play the victim by citing the Holocaust, and that the Palestinians would display Israel's oppression in technicolour for the world to see. The case by South Africa accused Israel of violating the 1948 Genocide Convention, which was enacted in the wake of mass murder of Jews in the Holocaust. Netanyahu couldn't fathom that the world would finally see how Israel has victimised Palestinians, and how the same people whose ancestors were victims of extermination have now become perpetrators of the same inhumanity.

Israel itself did not think when it ratified the Genocide Convention in 1948 that it would ever stand in front

of the podium at The Hague, accused of the very act of genocide—the annihilation of the people that it has forcefully displaced and fragmented into countless refugee camps. Israel did not imagine that the false Zionist narrative could so easily fall apart in The Hague, like a fragile house of cards, and that the incessant talk about the debunked kidnapping and beheading of babies would sound like a broken record, or that the rumination of the Holocaust would become the empty talking point of a genocidal regime.

For over 100 continuous days, Israel has ruthlessly murdered Palestinians in Gaza. Every sentence to justify its acts has involved the all-too-common fabrication: " Hamas uses civilians as human shields" and " Hamas stole humanitarian aid that led to the suffering of the people of Gaza." According to Israel, South Africa failed to pinpoint the singular value of genocide which, in Israel's point of view, is the rampant burning of a population at one go, and not the killing hundreds of civilians on a daily basis for months that Israel has been doing. Extermination, Israel seems to believe, is a singular act of aggression carried out on a certain day. We all know that the October 7 Hamas attacks don't constitute "genocide," but Israel carpet-bombing the whole of Gaza, attacking Palestinians in the West Bank and elsewhere, does.

In Israel's response, it is clear that it doesn't believe the ICJ has the

right to consider a lawsuit against it, or that South Africa has the right to prosecute it. Opening for Israel, Tal Becker stated that South Africa was "asking the UN court to substitute the lens of an armed conflict between a state and a lawless terrorist organisation." Underlying Israel's rebuttal is the concern of ensuring that the ICJ does not issue provisional measures to prevent it from furthering its acts of genocide in Gaza, either fully or partially towards the persecuted Palestinians, 24,000 of whom have been killed so far.

The truth is that Israel's presence in the dock, under the title of a "genocide lawsuit," terrified the oppressive government, dwarfed its ability, distracted and weakened it, distorted its image, and discredited its guise of purity as "the most moral army." And most importantly, the case signifies the removal of the Zionist narrative that they are historically oppressed. Beyond legal terms, this case refuses to allow Israel to use history in defending the present injustice it is committing. It shows Israel that no amount of historical victimhood can justify the blood on its hands. Whatever the verdict of the ICJ, and no matter how much Israel continues to deny the facts with backing from the US, the UK and Germany, Israel has lost in the eyes of Palestinians and in the eyes of the people of the world. That is what these past 100 and more days have shown.