

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## A welcome extension of benefits to LDCs

### We must use this opportunity to improve our competitiveness

We are relieved to know that the World Trade Organization (WTO) has decided to allow Bangladesh among other Least Developed Countries (LDCs) to enjoy duty-free market access for three more years after graduating to a developing nation category—which, for Bangladesh, will be in 2026. We appreciate the WTO's decision, endorsed by its members at the recent Ministerial Conference in Abu Dhabi, as it is key to maintaining a trajectory of steady growth for the country. Bangladesh has already hugely benefited from this trade benefit. What is crucial now is to make sure that we utilise this opportunity to strengthen our industries in order to make them more competitive and ready to take on the challenges of graduation.

The extension no doubt alleviates a lot of worry of industry leaders and the government as it had been estimated that Bangladesh could lose \$7 billion worth of trade annually after graduation. In recent years, the Covid pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war have wreaked havoc on the economies of LDCs. Bangladesh is grappling with major setbacks including the US dollar crisis, energy crisis, high food inflation, costly import of essentials, etc. The prospect of not having the preferential trade facility that it has enjoyed for so long would have meant a huge blow to our economy.

Bangladesh can now negotiate for trade benefits with the EU, China, India, the UK, South Korea and other countries where it qualifies for the facility. It goes without saying that due to the duty benefit under the LDC category, Bangladesh has been able to considerably expand its international trade. As much as 73 percent of the country's shipment enjoy LDC-linked market access, making it the second-largest apparel supplier in the world after China.

With so much at stake, we must take full advantage of the extension opportunity to install effective regulatory measures and legal structures to make our industries, especially the RMG sector, more efficient. This means upgrading our management skills, protecting labour rights, improving labour skills, and investing in research and development to produce high-quality products. The goal must be to prepare our industries so that they meet international standards to be competitive by 2029. This will require the private sector and government to closely work together. Going forward, they must see the WTO's extension as a chance to strengthen our industries for future prosperity.

## We must put an end to wildlife trafficking

### Protecting our biodiversity, preventing illicit trade vital

It is disheartening to see that Bangladesh is increasingly becoming a transit hotspot for wildlife trafficking as many exotic and endangered species continue to be smuggled into the country from Africa and South America. A report by this paper tracks several such instances of smuggling busted by border guards and law enforcement officials, saying all rescued animals were sent to the Bangabandhu Safari Park in Gazipur but their traffickers or intended final destinations could not be identified. We often hear of live wildlife (or body parts thereof) being smuggled out of Bangladesh. And its growing status as a transnational trafficking route and even a consumer of such species paints a grimmer picture of the challenges in combating such trade networks.

It's not an overstatement to say that Bangladesh still has a fairly rich biodiversity. But such trends amid depleting habitats are putting a huge pressure on our wildlife. A study published in November 2022 identified 13 districts in the country where wild species are sold openly. They are also brought to Dhaka and Chattogram to be trafficked through air and land routes using forged permits and other fraudulent means. Another study, published in December 2022, identified 15 countries that receive live wildlife from Bangladesh, including four countries in the Middle East, four in South Asia, four in Southeast Asia, and three in East Asia. It also said that South Africa, India, Indonesia and Kenya are the four main countries exporting live felids (mammals of cat families) to Bangladesh.

These studies highlight the complex dynamics surrounding the wildlife trade, but also the pressing need for Bangladesh rise to the challenge. Reportedly, ongoing efforts are being undermined by insufficient resources, inadequate manpower, systemic weaknesses, and a lack of awareness among airport officials and border guards, which must be addressed. Given the rising demand for wildlife consumption, not just in Bangladesh but globally, the challenge in preventing illicit trade is understandably huge. But we must match it without increased efforts. We urge the government to prioritise the preservation of our biodiversity and re-commit to preventing wildlife trafficking anyway possible.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Govt negligence behind Baily Road fire?

After the tragic fire in Baily Road on February 29th, the authorities have detained owners of companies and cafes operating in the building. It is crucial to investigate their alleged failure to comply with fire safety regulations, as they may be held accountable for the deaths of more than forty innocent individuals. However, shouldn't authorities responsible for monitoring building safety regulations share accountability for this tragedy as well? We, the citizens, pay our taxes to maintain offices that ensure our amenities operate according to proper safety measures. This building was not hidden; it was one of the busiest in the city. So why aren't the officials who did not do their jobs right behind custody, or under any official trial?

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## REFLECTIONS ON A NATION AT 53

# Everything's going to be alright... right?



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Try as we may not to be a Debbie Downer in our March reflections, I do not believe it serves anyone to turn away from the news of the day for the sake of celebration, or ignore the realities we live in to prop up a happy narrative of prosperity, development, and the quality of life.

As I write this, the nation is reeling from the effects of a devastating fire that broke out in a major building on Bailey Road in the capital, a road known as one of the city's hotspots for dining and entertainment. In total, 46 lives have been claimed by the fire, most of them young people who should have had the whole world ahead of them. At least one three-year-old child perished. Imagine being burnt or suffocated to death on what was supposed to be a happy night out in town. Imagine being blindsided with the news that your child or your sibling is dead—gone forever—not in a war where life is known to be on the knife-edge, but in this very average urban spot full of restaurants in the capital city of a country supposedly marching towards development.

After finding our footing from the initial shock, grief, and anger, we ask the pertinent questions: why did this happen? Who was responsible for this? And then our rage is compounded by the knowledge that all of this was preventable. Fire safety was not up to code, the building was poorly and thoughtlessly constructed, enforcement from the authorities was lacking and, as always, once the fire started, the fire services were only able to accomplish too little, too late. At the root of all this misery is bad governance. With officials looking the other way, and bribes smoothing over just about any issue, Dhaka has become a city of death, and we always seem to be living in perpetual anxiety about the next fire. This is not the first time I am finding myself writing about deadly fires, either, and I'm fairly sure it won't be the last.

Now, you tell me, how does one enjoy the fruits of development when peace of mind is gone for good? When the anguished cries of the lost souls just won't stop, and the demand for accountability goes ignored day after day, year after year, while newspapers (which are little more than PR agents for the government) bring out glossy supplements that tell us, against the evidence of our own eyes and scorched flesh, that everything is fine, that everything is alright, that everything is going to be alright?

March is the month of independence for Bangladesh. It was on March 26, 1971 that Bangladesh declared its independence from Pakistan. A brutal, bloody nine-month war followed and, in December 1971, Bangladesh achieved victory. Every schoolchild

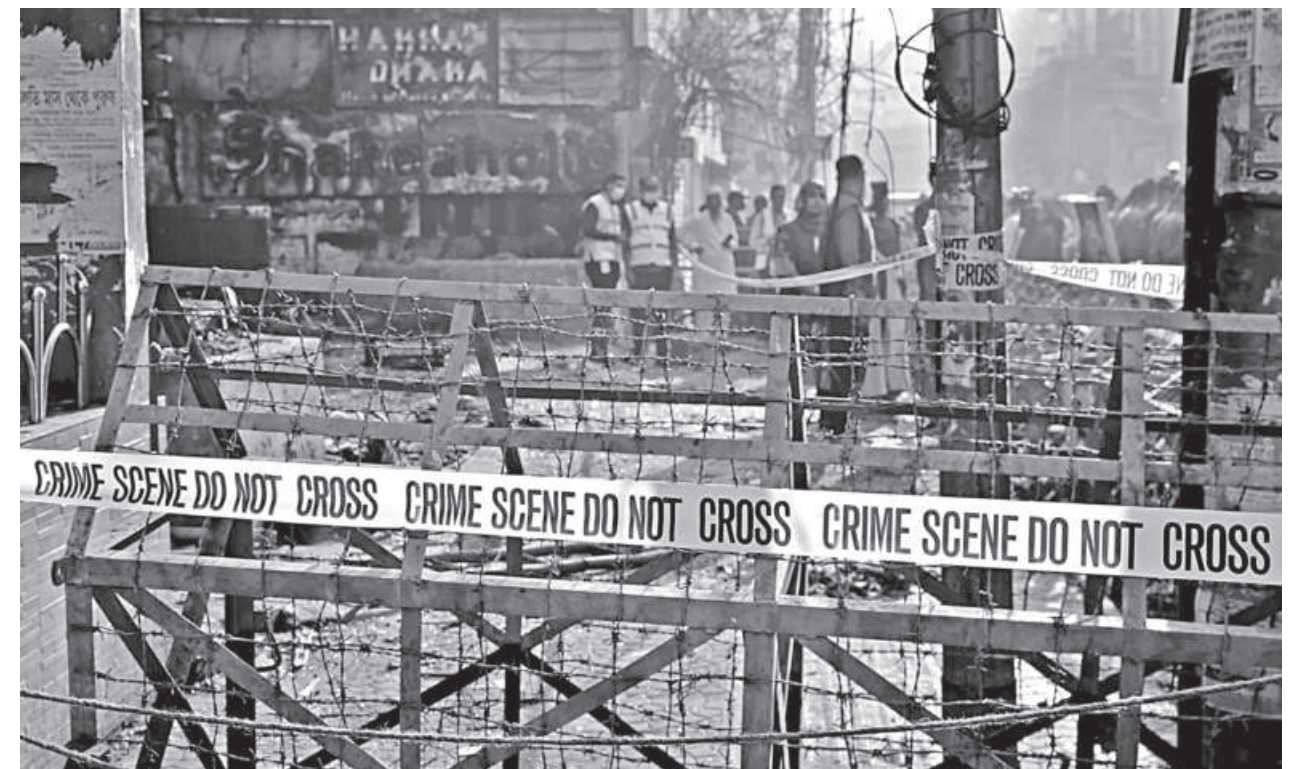


PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

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knows this history, and consequently, every schoolchild is bombarded with a narrative of nation-building. Every discussion, every point of contention comes back, over and over again, to the idea of patriotism—or its ethically complicated cousin, nationalism. Furthermore, all roads go back to the Liberation War, and with a certain fixation on the mythography of the past, we forget to properly take care of the present or plan for the future.

What really is independence, anyway? It is a country's ability to take care of itself, treat its citizens with foresight and wisdom, and operate the machinery of government in a way that shows that it is capable of serving and protecting its people. When a young adult becomes "independent" and moves out of their parents' home, it is a marker of maturity, capability; an assertion that the child is now capable of keeping themselves safe and has no need for adult supervision. Is Bangladesh an adult? Bangladesh is now 53 years old. In the lifetime of a human being, that would be considered peak middle age. But the lifespan of nations is much longer (though not infinite, even while it may sometimes appear so). A 53-year-old nation is an infant among nations, and there is a long way for Bangladesh to go. In order to do that though, our house needs to be in order and our priorities need to be reevaluated. A botched infancy does not bode well for

in a bout of whataboutism ("Why make such a fuss about our fire safety when deadly fires have broken out in the UK as well?"), but these are just ways for politicians to blow a lot of smoke and avoid addressing the real issues. The fact that bad things happen in other countries is no excuse to turn a blind eye when they happen here. The fact that high levels of corruption and negligence exist among public officials elsewhere, say, in more developed nations of Southeast Asia or East Asia, is no excuse to dismiss the same here. The fact that Western democracies are imperfect machines with plenty on their conscience does not mean we should not strive for true democracy and accountability here in Bangladesh.

Recently, I was at a panel discussion in Dhaka with a number of high-profile speakers present. One of the panellists, a well-known academic, launched into a blustering rant against the fear-mongering of newspapers, arguing that the media overhyped how bad everything is here in Bangladesh. At one point, he confidently claimed Dhaka was actually "safer" than a couple of top US cities. He also made the jaw-dropping claim that democracy aided, rather than curbed, the rise of fundamentalism, and that the important thing a regime needed to do in order to develop a country was to "stay in power." Most of the room, composed of educated, sensible people, were gasping in disbelief at such naked

fear-mongering from the newspapers, it is the lived reality of its residents—except for the extremely privileged at the top. Our air is toxic, our roads and highways are death traps, and our fire regulations are the worst in the world. We do not need newspaper reports on the AQI to tell us it is hazardous to breathe in this city—we can feel it ourselves. Wide-scale tragedies resulting from fires breaking out have been normalised to the point where a major building burning down feels like a minor incident—so jaded are we with the brutality. I myself, in my days as an opinion editor, have been forced to write countless editorials about these fires. The words flow as if from muscle memory; I have had so much practice addressing tragedies. Chawkbazar, Banani, Mirpur, Bailey Road, they keep on happening, innocent lives taken away in the most horrific manner. And what do the authorities do? Dodge accountability and play blame games. Nothing gets fixed.

At this point in our history, with as much baggage as we carry, shallow fixes won't do. Our 53-year-old nation needs to reach into its soul and change—really change for the better and not just on paper or in cooked-up development narratives—if it wishes to make good on the promises made during our independence. But like any addict on the first day of recovery, we must first acknowledge and admit that we indeed have a problem.

# A leap day of unforgettable sorrow



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The news of yet another fire incident leaves me grappling with a sense of numbness. Each new report blurs into the next, forming a grim tapestry of destruction that I've become all too familiar with. Despite my efforts to remain objective, each story chips away at my empathy, leaving me feeling hollow. I have written about fire incidents before, chronicling the devastation, the loss, and the grief of those affected, as well as suggested a possible response. However, with each retelling, the words lose their potency, and the emotions they once evoked become duller. It's a disconcerting sensation, to say the least, to confront a tragedy and find myself struggling to summon the same level of impassioned response.

Before February 29, social media was flooded with resolutions for the leap year—even at the very moment when a

fire erupted in a commercial building on the capital's Bailey Road, due to which 46 people have died and over 20 remain critically burned. Despite three alerts to the building's owner, the Fire Service and Civil Defense say that the building was not equipped with any fire safety measures. The gas cylinders in the restaurant kitchens on multiple floors contributed to the fire's rapid spread. Smoke in the staircase prevented people from exiting the building, which had no fire evacuation system installed and where the only stairway was blocked by stacks of gas cylinders.

According to FSCD headquarters, in 2023 alone, 27,624 fire incidents claimed 102 lives in Bangladesh. The irony is that nobody has faced penalties or culpability for the catastrophic fires over the decades, be it the Nimtoli fire in Old Dhaka, the Tazreen Fashion

fire in Ashulia, the Tampaco Foils Packaging Factory fire in Tongi, the Churihatta fire in Chawkbazar, the FR Tower fire in Banani, or the Prime Plastic factory fire in Keraniganj.

Every time a fire incident takes place, we acknowledge the disregard for fire safety and building codes as a prime driver. Yet, who regulates and oversees the enforcement of these codes and measures? There is no specific authority in place to keep an eye on these irregularities and prosecute those who break the law. Following a fire, the relevant authorities kick off to blame one another.

A multimodal strategy addressing community education and readiness, as well as regulatory and enforcement concerns, is needed to reduce fire incidents. Regulatory organisations should intensify their oversight and implementation of building codes. A dedicated authority needs to be formed, comprising responsible stakeholders from the city corporations, Rajuk, Fire Service, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief representatives, architects, and other relevant non-governmental agencies. This body's job will be to check buildings on a regular basis to make sure safety regulations are being followed and to

act quickly in punishing infractions. Collaboration among stakeholders such as government agencies, non-government organisations, political leaders, and private sector entities can help develop and implement fire safety initiatives properly.

Ensuring the rapid removal of chemicals and combustible materials from all residential areas across the country, including Dhaka, is indispensable. The real heroes in times of crises, the firefighters who save lives, need the opportunities to make them more robust. The fire department must have enough manpower, gear, and training to handle fire situations efficiently. This could entail building additional fire stations, shortening response times, and making investments in cutting-edge firefighting equipment.

When tragedies occur not as accidents but as a result of negligent actions, and when there's a blatant lack of law enforcement and monitoring, we are not talking about accidents, but structural murders. It's a term that encapsulates the grim reality of what's happening: lives being cut short due to deliberate negligence and systemic failures. Writing about these incidents feels like bearing witness to an ongoing injustice that I can no longer stomach.