

Take steps to reopen flood-hit schools

Prolonged learning disruptions are hurting students’ future

Students just can’t seem to catch a break. Over the last few months, there have been one disruption after another across all tiers of education that either put a stop to classroom activities or, worse, put students and teachers in harm’s way. In particular, schools and colleges have been affected by intermittent closures during the weeks-long anti-discrimination movement, assaults and fatalities of students during the movement, subsequent disruptions including often-forced resignations of teachers and administrators, and finally a flood that has left behind a vast trail of destruction in a number of districts, including their educational institutions. This shows how urgent it has become to ensure that students resume their education without further disruptions.

While the extent of damage suffered by schools, madrasas, and colleges in flood-hit areas is yet to be fully determined, one estimate says that 1,206 educational institutions have been damaged, resulting in a loss of over Tk 37 crore. But this is more likely an underestimation given how devastating the flood has been, especially in 11 south-eastern districts. Feni and Noakhali were the hardest hit among them, with more than 90 percent of their combined populations said to be severely affected and about 48 percent of homes destroyed, according to Oxfam Bangladesh.

So, it makes more sense when a Prothom Alo report claims that all 951 pre-tertiary educational institutions in Feni were inundated. This includes 559 primary schools, 351 secondary schools and madrasas, and 41 colleges, with the number of affected students reaching nearly four lakh. The flood has had a similar impact in some other districts including Noakhali and Cumilla. While some of the institutions have started classes after floodwaters receded, most schools and colleges remain more or less shut, their classrooms filled with mud and debris.

In Feni, the district administration has said that more than half of the educational institutions are still in an abandoned state. In addition to educational institutions, the district and upazila education offices were also inundated. Many buildings remain under water, many formerly used as flood shelters. Reportedly, school-college authorities are struggling to clean debris and repair any damage suffered, but the process has been slow, so there is no certainty about when the students can safely return. Their own situation back home also has to improve for them to be able to come to class.

We don’t need to remind anyone of the consequences of prolonged school closures. Each day of missed schooling will exacerbate the learning gap accumulated over the past months, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. So, restoring normalcy in the educational landscape of flood-hit areas should be a priority. The immediate focus should be on accelerating the cleanup and repair efforts. In schools that remain waterlogged, the authorities may think of alternative arrangements using temporary learning spaces, digital tools, or community-based classes to bridge the learning gap. It is likely that many books and learning tools were also destroyed during the flood, so the education authorities must provide necessary help in this regard.

A great gesture of goodwill

UAE pardoning 57 Bangladeshis raises hope of deeper ties

We are quite relieved to learn that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has pardoned the 57 Bangladeshi migrant workers who were sentenced to prison for staging demonstrations in that country. The UAE president granted the amnesty on Tuesday, with our foreign adviser saying that the released workers might get another chance to work in the Gulf country. This is a great show of goodwill on the UAE’s part, which we deeply appreciate. We also congratulate the interim government for this diplomatic win so early in its tenure.

These people, who had migrated to the UAE seeking better opportunities to support their families, staged peaceful demonstrations on July 19, protesting against the Sheikh Hasina government’s crackdown on students who demanded quota reforms in public service recruitment. But as such protests are prohibited in the UAE, they were detained on July 20 and, through an expedited trial on July 21, sentenced to prison for various terms as well as deportation upon serving their sentences. Naturally, the conviction was condemned by human rights advocates at the time. As we also said in this column then, the nature of the punishment was excessive given that the protesters had merely acted on their conscience in a peaceful manner. We also requested the UAE government to consider deportation without imprisonment.

The UAE president’s amnesty comes a week after he spoke with the chief adviser of the interim government in a congratulatory call, during which the latter appealed to him for the release of the 57 Bangladeshi nationals. We appreciate the gesture of respect shown to the interim leader as well as the people of Bangladesh. This certainly bodes well for the Bangladesh-UAE relations. Bangladeshis, who constitute one of the largest communities in the UAE, have long been a part of its journey of growth and development. It also remains one of the top sources of remittance for us. We hope that the recent positive exchanges will further deepen our ties, and open the door for fruitful discussion on resolving some labour rights issues faced by our migrants, including abusive labour conditions under the kafala system and alleged exploitation of construction and domestic workers.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Mother Teresa dies

On this day in 1997, Mother Teresa—who was awarded the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize for her charitable work with the poor, especially in India—died at age 87 in the then Calcutta.



Kallol Mustafa
is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, energy, environment and development economics. He can be reached at kallol_mustafa@yahoo.com.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

After Bangladeshi teenager Felani Khatun was gunned down by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) in January 7, 2011, her mother Jahanara Begum had said in anger and frustration that, no one should lose her child, not even a bird should die at the hands of the BSF on the border. Yet, the killing of people by BSF on the Bangladesh-India border has not stopped.

The latest victim is Swarna Das, a 16-year-old school girl, killed by BSF at the Bangladesh-India border in Kulaura upazila of Moulvibazar on September 1. According to *The Daily Star*, Swarna along with her mother, assisted by two local agents, had attempted to cross the Lalarchak border with India. A couple from Chattogram accompanied them. When they approached the Indian border’s barbed wire fence around 9:00pm, BSF personnel opened fire, killing Swarna on the spot, while the Chattogram couple sustained injuries.

Fifteen-year-old Felani Khatun was returning from India to Bangladesh with her father through the Anantapur border in Kurigram 13 years ago, while Swarna Das was going with her mother through the Lalarchak border in Moulvibazar to meet her immigrant brother in Tripura, India.

After Felani’s killing by BSF, her body was hanging on the barbed wire fence for a long time and the image sparked outrage and protests at home and abroad. However, the BSF member who killed Felani was not punished, rather the BSF court acquitted him. The case was then brought to the Supreme Court of India, but it has not been heard yet.

Not just the teenagers Felani or Swarna, the Indian BSF is regularly killing Bangladeshis by shooting or torturing them across the border. Incidents of shootings or killings on the border of two hostile neighbouring countries are not rare. But the case of one country regularly shooting and killing citizens of the other country on their common border, when the countries are officially “friends,” is rare.

According to human rights organisation Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK),

FROM FELANI KHATUN TO SWARNA DAS

When will border killings by BSF end?



FILE PHOTO: **STAR**

Despite India’s claim to be friendly, the country’s behaviour in border management is that of an aggressive and dominating neighbour.

31 Bangladeshis were killed by BSF along the border in 2023, of whom 28 were shot dead. The number of Bangladeshi citizens killed by BSF in 2021 and 2022 were 18 and 23, respectively, and at least 522 Bangladeshis were killed between 2009 and 2020.

Regarding border killings, the BSF gives the excuse of firing in “self-defence” under “compulsion.” In July 2022, the then Director General of India’s Border Security Force (BSF) Pankaj Kumar Singh tried to justify Bangladeshi nationals killed on the border—terming them as “criminals.” He claimed that all those killed were involved in various crimes, including drug trade and cattle smuggling as if BSF can stamp any foreign citizen as a criminal without any trial and then kill the alleged criminal at will.

First, cattle smuggling, like all other commodity smuggling, is a joint venture involving both Indian and Bangladeshi sellers and buyers. The rules of a market economy dictate that any commercial transaction, whether legal or illegal, can only take place if both parties benefit. In this regard, Kirity Roy, secretary of a West Bengal based rights organisation Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM) has rightly said that,

sees these! Nobody stops these because everyone gets his share. The real issue here is corruption, BSF kills when there is a dispute with the distribution of the spoils.”

Secondly, neither the Indian Penal Code nor any international law allows shooting or killing a smuggler at will. Anyone crossing the border illegally can be arrested and prosecuted. India ignores all internationally accepted border control protocols and bilateral border management instruments like the *Joint India Bangladesh Guidelines for border authorities of the two countries, 1975* and the *India-Bangladesh Coordinated Border Management Plan 2011*. For example, to avoid the possibility of “unpleasant incidents,” according to article 8(i) of the 1975 guideline, if nationals of one country ingress the working boundary and enter illegally and commit or attempt to commit an offence, the border security forces would be at liberty to take appropriate action in the exercise of the “right to private defence” *preferably without resorting to fire*. And according to article 8(m), whenever any cattle are alleged to have been lifted across the border, *a report will be lodged with the opposite Post*

The RMG workers’ movement requires stronger demands



Kalpona Akter
is a labour rights activist and president of Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation.

KALPONA AKTER

The current workers’ protests are demanding very basic things. There is nothing revolutionary or new about them that needs attention for the most part. Some of these demands include our wages being paid properly and on time, enforcing managerial changes due to abusive behaviour, stopping suspensions, and implementation of a production bonus. Additionally, female workers, especially during the later phases of pregnancy, shouldn’t be made to do physically heavy work. The practice of deducting wages for being late for three days must be stopped as well. There are also demands for the attendance bonus to be increased to Tk 1,000 from Tk 500. Among the many demands we have seen, one common one is that the mandatory 5 percent salary increase should be raised to 10 percent or more.

However, some demands that should be included are missing. For example, the minimum salary declared last November should be re-evaluated. We didn’t see labourers demanding the lift of restrictions on trade unions or the cessation of harassment. This is because the scale of disregard for the law is so high that the labourers are thinking if some minimum demands are met, things will get better. They will then consider their factory to be running well and go back to work.

As an activist, what I feel is that the

insurmountable exploitation that the labourers have tolerated for the last 16 years or even more required much stronger demands if it were an organised movement. But the movement now is spontaneous, and it is unclear where it is beginning and where it is ending.

Regarding the issue of men not being employed in garment factories, this is a new demand and by itself, it is not surprising. However, what is surprising is the demand for equal rights for men and women. I see this as both positive and negative. The positive is that the men are not only talking about their own rights but are also demanding women’s rights alongside theirs. The negative is that in the labour market, women are lagging quite far behind. If we say that 50 percent of men must be employed in the garment sector as well, then where will women labourers go? This demand is by male labourers who don’t have jobs and are on the streets.

Something worth mentioning is that those who were connected with the previous government and involved in the business of collecting leftover fabric and other materials at a low price from the factories are now being replaced. The trade-off was that for the discounted price on these materials, they would “tackle” the labourers of the factories—essentially acting as goons. This is a multi-crore taka business, which is now being taken over by the

BNP overnight. We are seeing this in a lot of the industrial belts. In the protests, they are using the labourers for their own benefit.

Another aspect that is problematic for the labourers is that while they were oppressed primarily by the factory owners, the unions they used to go to for resolving their issues were also run and controlled by the owners. If workers got laid off, the compensation

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they should receive was determined at BGMEA by some so-called labour leaders who were actually working for the owners. In cases of terminations, they would use Article 20 and give a low amount in compensation just to be able to say they gave it.

This needs to change. Why would an organisation like BGMEA, which is run by the owners, be given the power of arbitration, making the labour court and Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) ineffective? If these two organisations

Commander to whom the details, such as the tracks of the cattle and the criminals involved etc. will be handed over. The border Post Commander concerned will acknowledge receipt of the report and then inform the nearest police station in his own country, who will make all efforts to recover the cattle and apprehend the criminals.

Does the BSF follow this simple procedure to prevent smuggling while avoiding “unpleasant incidents?” Evidence suggests otherwise. According to an investigation report by Human Rights Watch titled, “‘Trigger Happy’: Excessive Use of Force by Indian Troops at the Bangladesh Border,” all the victims of BSF killings were either unarmed or armed with only sickles, sticks, and knives, which suggest that in shooting victims, the BSF are likely to have used excessive force. In several cases, the victims were shot in the back, suggesting that they were running away. In others, injuries indicate the person was shot at close range, with witnesses often alleging that the person was tortured and killed in BSF custody. None of the cases investigated by Human Rights Watch showed that BSF had recovered lethal weapons or explosives that could pose an imminent threat of death or serious injury that might justify killings in self-defence.

Thirdly, even BSF’s excuses for self-defence are not acceptable. How could unarmed teenage girls like Felani or Swarna be a threat to the armed BSF? And there are many such examples.

Despite India’s claim to be friendly, the country’s behaviour in border management is that of an aggressive and dominating neighbour. Interestingly, the Indian BSF does not behave the same way on the borders with hostile neighbours like China or Pakistan. There may be a state of war, isolated shootings and killings on those borders, but one-sided border killings like the ones on the Bangladesh-India border are absent there.

No attempt was made by the past government to take a firm stand against the regular killings of Bangladeshi citizens by the Indian BSF on the border, to demand fair trial and investigation of every incident, to call the Indian ambassador and demand accountability, and to turn the matter into a bilateral and international issue.

We expect the situation to change in the interim government’s tenure, which should send a strong message to India, protesting BSF’s killing of teenager Swarna Das and demanding justice.

can be empowered, then the grievances of the labourers would have a formal place to go. Additionally, the labourers will also be able to build faith in the legal system and have respect for it.

When do labourers or people go to the streets to protest? When they don’t have a place to voice their concerns. The trade unions were supposed to be the channel for the workers. But these very trade unions have suppressed the voice of the labourers whenever they tried to bring something up. Whether through beating them up, putting them in jail, or blacklisting them, every method has been used. This needs to be stopped and trust should be rebuilt. The workers should be able to choose their own true leaders. Otherwise, there will always be protests every other day, and no permanent solution can be reached.

One source of fear is that as we are currently going through political instability, some other group shouldn’t be able to take advantage of this situation. The garment sector is important for our labourers and our economy internationally. The workers also have to understand that if we want to keep our international orders, we have to keep production ongoing. Otherwise, some other country will grab this opportunity. The buyers are not here to do charity. If the trend of delayed shipments continues due to protests and instability, then the buyers will move to a different country. This will harm our labourers a lot more than the owners. The owners could potentially go to a different country and try doing business from there. But our large labour force cannot do that. So, the labourers also have to keep that in mind and have dialogue and voice their concerns in a manner that production doesn’t come to a complete halt and disrupt future livelihoods.