The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

BSF must stop killing Bangladeshis

Recurrent border killings a thorn in bilateral relations

We condemn the killing of a Bangladeshi minor by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) along the Kantivita border in the Baliadangi upazila of Thakurgaon. According to local sources, BSF personnel opened fire on a group of individuals early Monday as they attempted to enter India by cutting through a barbed-wire fence. In the shooting, 14-year-old Jayanta Kumar Singh was killed, while two others were injured. Just a week ago, another victim, 16-year-old Swarna Das, was similarly killed by the BSF. These incidents once again underscore India's failure to fulfil its promise to reduce border deaths to zero.

What's at stake here is not just the inalienable right to life of the people illegally crossing borders, many among them poor, unarmed villagers; these border incidents also exacerbate tensions between the two countries. As our foreign adviser has recently said, BSF border killings remain a significant obstacle to maintaining good relations between Bangladesh and India, which is crucial for both countries. While we seek improved relations, these killings continue to pose a major challenge. Even during what India referred to as the golden chapter of our bilateral relations, such incidents occurred regularly. According to Ain O Salish Kendra, between 2009 and 2022, 563 Bangladeshis were killed by BSF. In 2023 alone, 31 Bangladeshis were killed. Clearly, despite how India justifies its actions, very little has been done to bring border deaths down to zero.

The need for using non-lethal weapons at the Bangladesh-India border has been raised many times. On numerous occasions, both sides have committed to using non-lethal weapons to prevent deaths. However, the BSF has still resorted to lethal force repeatedly. We struggle to see how this benefits India. For example, how does the killing of a 14-year-old boy or a 16-year-old girl enhance its border security? These killings are only aggravating the people of Bangladesh, which in turn affects bilateral ties.

We hope the Indian government will take this matter with the seriousness that it deserves. It must recognise that such actions by the BSF do not reflect the behaviour of a friendly neighbour, which is how we have regarded India. Moreover, as a gesture of goodwill, India should honour Bangladesh's request to investigate all border killings, identify those responsible, and hold them accountable. Additionally, we urge the Indian government to take steps to ensure that such killings are brought to an end.

Wider reform key to end plastic menace

Expand the scope of plastic ban, ensure enforcement

We appreciate the environment adviser's directive to ban the use of polythene and polypropylene bags in all superstores across Bangladesh. This, we hope, will be the first of many long-needed measures to rein in plastic pollution in the country. At present, chain superstores offer free bags, made from polypropylene, for customers to pack their groceries, although thin polythene and plastic bags were banned in 2002. According to the latest directive, instead of these bags, superstores will have to make jute or cloth bags available for purchase starting from October 1.

Although the order targets a small portion of commercial plastic usage in the country, smaller steps taken in phases might actually be more effective than issuing blanket bans that lose steam over time, as previously seen. The key here is enforcement, so the administration must ensure compliance from market managers and customers. It also must ensure that low-cost alternatives are easily accessible to wean customers off their dependence on plastics. Previous attempts to encourage jute bag usage have largely failed for supply shortages and lack of proper marketing. That said, the government should also consider schemes to promote research on and commercial production of eco-friendly alternatives like Sonali bags.

At the same time, campaigns can be launched to create awareness about the health and environmental hazards of plastics, encouraging customers and entrepreneurs to adopt the 3Rs—reduce, reuse and recycle—of waste management. Another area that requires awareness is proper disposal of plastics. Plastic litter is not only impacting our ecosystem, polluting waterbodies, or harming aquatic lives; it is also clogging sewers, drains, and canals and thus contributing to waterlogging in urban areas. While we understand that completely phasing out plastics may not be possible, reducing its usage and ensuring proper disposal are certainly doable.

In the long run, we hope that the environment adviser, having long fought for environmental causes herself, will be able to bring some much-needed reforms in the sector. Once the plastic ban in superstores takes effect, the authorities should gradually expand the scope of the ban by targeting various related industries including restaurants and packaging as well as all governmental and non-governmental institutions. They should also clamp down on polythene production and restrict the import of plastic products.

TALK CHECK

Population-wise, Bangladesh is the eighth largest country in the world with a population of around 175 million. The country may be small in area, but with such a huge population if the government wants to reach the people, it can divide the country up into at least five provinces and create a federal structure.

Brig Gen (retd) M Sakhawat Hussain
adviser to the interim government, in an opinion piece in Prothom Alo on September 8.

Rethinking economic growth

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SYED ABUL BASHER *and* SALIM RASHID

Imagine Bangladesh's banking sector restored to health, RMG contracts renewed, capital flight reversed, and flood damage repaired. Should we then consider our economic challenges resolved? While these are undoubtedly necessary first steps, if we stop there, we risk accepting the current economic path as fundamentally sound. In this column, this is precisely what we contest.

These fixes, while significant, address only the visible symptoms of the country's economic challenges. Our critique goes beyond these immediate concerns to question the very foundations of our economic thinking.

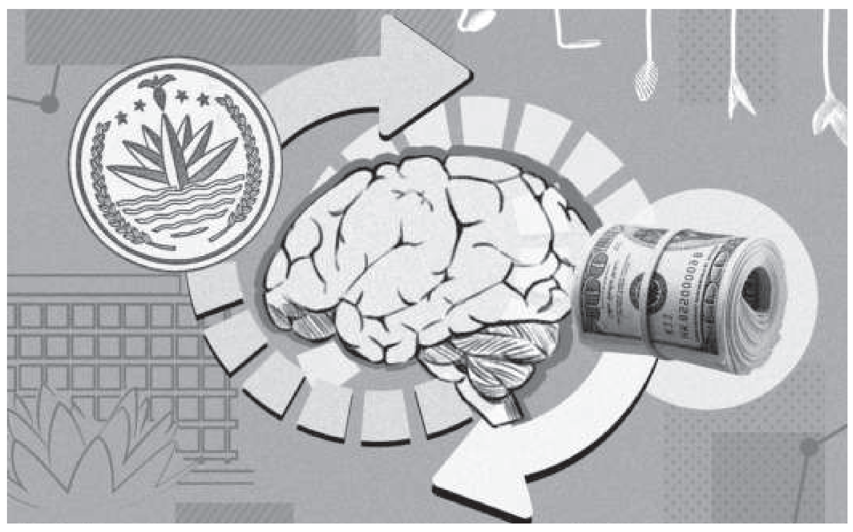
For years, Bangladesh has followed a development mantra centred on high GDP growth, low-wage manufacturing exports, trickle-down economics, and enabling infrastructure. But has this approach delivered on its promises?

Since 2001, Bangladesh has maintained an average annual GDP growth of six percent and is aiming for even higher growth in the future. But does GDP growth necessarily mean prosperity for the average citizen? Imagine a country where GDP grows by 10 percent, but 99 percent of that growth is captured by just one percent of the population. The remaining 99 percent see their incomes stagnate or even decline. This is high GDP growth on paper, but hardship for the majority. In Bangladesh, we've seen a similar, though less extreme, pattern. As GDP has grown, income inequality has also widened. The Gini coefficient, a measure of income disparity, has steadily increased alongside economic growth. This indicates that the benefits of our "economic miracle" are not reaching those who need them most.

Bangladesh has built its export economy on the foundation of low-wage manufacturing workers. However, growth based on cheap labour is neither desirable nor sustainable. This model is unstable because another country with even lower wages can easily undercut Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) industry. Historically, Britain lost its textile manufacturing to cost-competitive Japan, and today, low-cost manufacturers like Bangladesh and Vietnam are displacing China. If this trend continues, Bangladesh will always be caught in a "race to the bottom," constantly at risk of losing industries to cheaper alternatives. In addition to the threat posed by lower wages in other countries, technological advancements and rising protectionism, such as friendshoring and nearshoring, are equally concerning.

The current strategy is undesirable because a low-wage economy is simply another name for a poor population. In the 1970s, Bangladesh may have had no choice, but 50 years later, how can it be considered desirable growth if the majority of people are expected to remain poor and accept low wages? The bottom line is that an economic policy based on low-wage manufacturing traps us in a path of continual economic hardship, rather than providing a ladder to prosperity.

Trickle-down economics suggests that benefits for the wealthy will eventually flow down to everyone else. However, in practice, this approach has led to massive wealth concentration at the top. Take, for instance, the extensive corruption during the last Awami League (AL) government. According to a report by a prominent local newspaper, over the last 15 years of AL's rule, nearly \$150 billion was syphoned out of the country, marking the largest financial outflow in its history.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

This case exemplifies a broader trend: instead of trickling down, wealth flows upwards. The situation in Bangladesh illustrates a key feature of crony capitalism—favouring those who already have wealth over those who work.

The most vulnerable members of society, particularly those at the bottom of the economic ladder, have the greatest need for essential services like education and healthcare. Unfortunately, Bangladesh's public expenditure on these crucial sectors is low—one of the lowest in the world. In FY2024-25, the country allocated only 1.69 percent of its GDP to education and less than one percent to healthcare.

This underinvestment leads to poor quality of education and high out-of-pocket healthcare expenses. A sudden health crisis, such as a dengue outbreak, can push a low-income family into poverty or severe debt. Moreover, the long-term repercussions of inadequate education and health services are significant. These deficiencies deprive individuals of opportunities for meaningful employment and limit their contributions to both personal and societal advancement. It also deprives the economy of the human capital needed to sustain growth beyond the initial thrust from poverty.

The current economic model has failed because it prioritises short-term gains over long-term, inclusive development. It allows a small elite to capture a disproportionate share of economic benefits, neglects critical investments in education and healthcare, and relies on an unsustainable strategy of competition based on low wages.

Ironically, Bangladesh's focus on infrastructure-led growth, intended to stimulate economic development, has exacerbated the problem. While infrastructure is undoubtedly necessary for the country's long-term development, the way projects were selected, financed, managed, and implemented significantly undermined their value. The various megaprojects built over the last 15 years have increased the country's foreign debt burden. Meanwhile, a rising dollar has made imports more expensive, unsettling the middle class and subjecting the poor to rising inflation.

Given these profound shortcomings, we need a fundamental shift in our economic thinking. A new approach must prioritise the dispersion of wealth along with its creation, with policies aimed at reducing inequality and spreading benefits more widely. This means moving away from the failed trickle-down model toward bottom-up economic growth that directly benefits the majority. Central to this approach is increased investment in human capital. Considering Bangladesh's current underinvestment in education and healthcare, a significant increase in public expenditure is necessary.

In the quest for new economic policies for Bangladesh, we need to start by asking some basic but bold questions. As the capital-centric focus on economic development—which has concentrated resources and opportunities in Dhaka—has led us to the current stalemate of uneven growth and urban congestion, is decentralisation of economic activities the way forward? Does our comparative advantage lie only in low-wage manufacturing, or does its potential exist elsewhere? How can real income be doubled every decade? What

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strategies can be employed to achieve this ambitious goal?

Addressing these fundamental questions requires sustained effort and long-term commitment. The logic of decentralisation is rooted in the need to correct the imbalances created by our current economic model. China has lifted 800 million people out of poverty by developing secondary cities, creating regional economic hubs, and investing in infrastructure and human capital outside the capital. This approach not only spreads economic opportunities more evenly, but also harnesses the unique strengths and resources of different regions.

Perhaps Bangladesh's primary comparative advantage is its fertile soil, a gift of nature that cannot be outcompeted by another country. However, this valuable resource is currently underutilised. Instead of maximising its potential, much of the land is devoted to low-yield rice cultivation or lost to the proliferation of residential structures in rural areas and the expansion of commercial real estate. New thinking is needed to increase production through high-yielding rice and high-value agriculture—such as cultivating specialty crops or developing agro-processing industries—on the country's diminishing fertile land. This approach would allow Bangladesh to better leverage its enduring natural comparative advantage.

In this article, we have emphasised two key points. First, returning to the previous economic model will inevitably bring back the same economic challenges the country currently faces. Second, in exploring a new path for growth, focusing on agro-based development may offer a more sustainable and equitable solution. This approach is inherently decentralised, promotes a more dispersed distribution of economic activities, and leverages Bangladesh's natural comparative advantage in agriculture.

To retain buyers, stop the infighting

RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

Bangladesh has been through an extremely challenging situation recently, especially with the change of leadership brought forth by a student-led mass movement. As a business community, we should now be looking forward to the coming months with a sense of optimism. For the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, this is a crucial period as apparel manufacturers look to complete autumn and winter orders.

Therefore, it is frustrating to see that pockets of unrest continue, leading to closures of garment factories, which are already under tremendous pressure of completing their work orders. This is taking place at a time when the nation is facing numerous economic challenges. When foreign exchange reserves are a big concern, creating trouble in the garment sector will deal a heavy blow to the economy and the country as a whole.

The recent labour unrest in garment factories of Dhaka's Ashulia and Gazipur has been attributed to a power struggle between local thugs with differing political allegiances. Some ringleaders are allegedly attempting to assert dominance after the regime change and their rivalry has intensified the unrest.

According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the protests began at the Dhaka EPZ gate, where demonstrators demanded jobs. The unrest spread to nearby factories, although initial impacts were minimal.

On August 31, workers from a major exporter began vandalising factories, according to industry insiders, workers, and law enforcement reports. They forced other factory owners to close their factories and urged workers to join the protests. Violence erupted as owners and workers resisted the shutdown, resulting in more vandalism. Some unrest has persisted since then, with some factory closures. Garment manufacturers have held separate meetings with government officials and law enforcement agencies since then.

Industry insiders believe the police should ensure factory security, but some officers were involved in violent crackdowns during the student uprising, which may have left them feeling hesitant to confront workers. Although the Bangladesh Army has been deployed nationwide, it is more challenging for them to manage the situation without sufficient police support.

So, what now? My personal perception is that global apparel buyers have faith in the Yunus-led government, and orders continue to be placed. However, it is frustrating to see that a vested group is attempting to further destabilise the garment sector.

Moreover, these ongoing tensions between political factions in Bangladesh pose a significant threat to Bangladesh's reputation, especially at a time when it must present a unified and stable front to retain the trust of international fashion buyers.

The RMG sector, which accounts for over 80 percent of Bangladesh's export earnings, is the backbone of the nation's economy. Any instability in this industry directly impacts not only the livelihoods of millions of workers but also the broader economic prospects of the country. For global fashion brands, who rely on consistency, reliability, and timely delivery from suppliers, such infighting sends the wrong message.

Political unrest, labour strikes, and factory closures signal an unpredictable business environment. International buyers, operating in a highly competitive market with tight deadlines, cannot afford disruptions in their supply chains.

This does not bode well for Bangladesh, especially when other nations such as Vietnam, India, and Cambodia, are emerging as competitors in the global garment industry. These countries present themselves as stable, reliable alternatives, further exacerbating Bangladesh's challenges in maintaining its market share. Infighting within the RMG sector weakens the industry's competitive edge by diverting attention away from productivity and innovation and toward internal strife. The situation is particularly concerning given the country's dependence on international buyers, many of whom have voiced their support for ethical and sustainable sourcing practices.

To maintain its position as a global leader in the garment industry, Bangladesh must prioritise unity and stability. The government, industry leaders, and political factions must work together to create an environment conducive to business, signalling to the world that Bangladesh is a trustworthy and dependable partner. If the country fails to present a unified voice, it risks losing the confidence of global buyers, leading to devastating economic consequences for millions of workers and the nation as a whole.

In the past few weeks, buyers, NGOs, and rights groups have urged fashion brands to stand by Bangladesh amid its change of leadership. But we must repay this loyalty by providing a stable and reliable business environment. Major customers are supportive of our efforts but there is only so much they will tolerate before saying: enough.

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