

A proposal that needs careful appraisal

Any decision on govt job entry age must be part of wider reforms

The recommendation by a government committee to raise the entry age limit for public service jobs to 35 for men and 37 for women marks a major step in addressing a long-standing demand of some jobseekers. If implemented, this could provide relief to aspirants whose educational or career paths have been delayed due to various factors, such as the pandemic, economic downturn, political harassment, backlogs in public-sector recruitment, etc. However, while the proposal serves to address immediate concerns, it may open up new challenges that the government should carefully navigate to ensure that any decision aligns with our broader economic goals.

In Bangladesh, around 90 percent of employment is in the informal sector, while public and formal private sector jobs cover the remaining 10 percent. The growing fascination with public-sector jobs has as much to do with the struggling and largely stagnant private job market as with the security and benefits that come with public jobs, especially since the 2015 pay scale increase. However, the public sector, representing less than 5 percent of total employment, cannot accommodate the large number of jobseekers, leading to frequent demands for removing quota (which has been met) and raising the entry age limit. The last time the age ceiling was raised—from 27 years to 30—was in 1991.

Against this backdrop, the recommendation—which may be placed before the Advisory Council for the final nod—has been welcomed by some so long as it is approached as a “temporary” solution. Their guarded reaction can be attributed to several concerns. First, while it is understandable why a section of jobseekers would want the entry age to be raised, it is unfortunate that such a policy shift should occur under pressure rather than guided by research. Another concern is the potential swelling of the applicant pool, making it even harder to manage the recruitment process efficiently. There is also a concern that the accommodation of older candidates could further exacerbate the youth unemployment problem and discourage entrepreneurial pursuits for extended periods. The likelihood that raising the entry age may lead to a corresponding increase in the retirement age—currently 59—has also raised some concerns.

Given the circumstances, some experts have suggested a time-bound approach—such as raising the age limit for a few rounds of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exams—that would allow the government to evaluate the impact of the change without committing to permanent reforms. This makes sense from a practical point of view, as streamlining all decisions related to recruitment, retirement and pension eligibility requires proper planning and preparation. Those arguing in favour of greater flexibility in the job entry limit, or removing it altogether, in line with the practices of some countries, also have a point. This is a direction that could help an administration aspiring to be meritocratic.

That said, we must recognise that the real problem for us is not the age limit or lack thereof, but the lack of jobs in general. High unemployment and insecurity in the private sector are driving more and more candidates towards government jobs, creating a very unhealthy and unsustainable environment. So, we urge the government to approach this issue as part of wider economic and governance reforms that can fulfil the nation's aspirations for a more dynamic and inclusive job market as well as an efficient, people-oriented civil service.

Ensure schools are safe for all

How can we expect students to learn in an unsafe environment?

It is unacceptable that over 21,500 primary schools across the country continue to operate despite being in severe disrepair, endangering the lives and well-being of thousands of teachers and students. Bangladesh has 107,000 primary educational institutions, including 65,567 government schools. Nearly 11 million students from grades one to five are taught by more than 384,000 teachers in the government schools. Alarmingly, however, around 20 percent of all primary schools nationwide are in dilapidated condition, putting the lives of teachers and students at risk. The situation has worsened due to the recent flash floods that damaged around 2,800 primary schools in 11 districts across the Sylhet and Chattogram divisions, according to the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE).

In addition to those already in severe disrepair, the DPE reports that another 16 percent of schools need repairs, underscoring years of neglect that have led to the current crisis. As of July this year, DPE officials classified 49,656 school buildings as “new, good, and usable,” 18,271 as “old,” 16,998 as “reparable,” 11,613 as “dilapidated,” 5,252 as “risky,” 3,307 as “abandoned,” and 1,348 as “non-useable,” with the remainder under construction. Many government primary schools are 40 to 50 years old, and a significant number of the 26,193 schools nationalised in 2013 are currently in a poor condition, while several hundreds were damaged by floods or cyclones. Despite this, some schools are forced to hold classes in buildings that have been declared abandoned.

Under these circumstances, both students and teachers are being placed in harm's way, while the learning environment is clearly unfavourable. When the fear of structural collapse looms, how can effective teaching and learning take place? The education authorities have initiated “beautification” projects at several government schools in Dhaka, but such efforts must be urgently expanded to other districts.

According to a report, the August floods in the southeastern and northeastern regions caused damage to infrastructure, furniture, books, and documents at 2,799 government primary schools across 11 districts. The government should, therefore, begin repair programmes outside Dhaka, prioritising the schools most affected. Moreover, the government must establish a system to ensure regular maintenance for all government schools and hold private schools accountable for timely repairs. A safe environment for students and teachers is a basic right that must be fulfilled.

EDITORIAL

Floods in the north matter too



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This year, severe flash floods have affected people in Mymensingh, Netrakona and Sherpur districts, killing at least 10 people in the last seven days. However, the extent of government and private support in terms of rescue and relief operations has not been as prominent as it was during the August flood that occurred in the southeastern region. The flood in Rangpur, Kurigram and Lalmonirhat districts in the Teesta basin earlier in September also saw a similar sort of passivity.

It is undeniable that the flood in the southeastern region in August was unprecedented, and the way people from all walks of life extended their support was unique and rare. After Sheikh Hasina's ouster, the entire nation felt a great wave of unity. Dhaka University's Teacher and Student Centre (TSC) premises turned into a relief repository. Thousands of volunteers from all over the country, even from the northern districts, went to Feni, Noakhali and Cumilla to rescue flood-affected people. Government and private employees, military personnel, civilians, various religious institutions, and even school and college teachers contributed one day's salary to the government's relief fund. The government also launched rescue and relief operations and opened the Chief Adviser's Relief Fund immediately.

People in the northern districts, where floods occur several times every year, were watching the reports on the abovementioned incidents on the mainstream news media as well as social media. Watching these, they probably wondered why they too were not getting support to this extent when there is a flood in the northern region. Many people on social media also raised this question: is the flood in the north not worthy of empathy? Do floods not cause the same level of misery to the residents of the northern region?

Before addressing these questions, let us analyse why so many people from all over the country responded to the August flood and why the government was so proactive.

First of all, the severe flooding in



The flooding in Mymensingh, Netrakona and Sherpur in October was severe too, but received less attention from people and the government compared to the August flood in the southeastern region. FILE PHOTO: SAHIDUL ISLAM NIRAB

Feni-Cumilla was one of the worst floods in the history of Bangladesh. The floodwater rose to the level of a two-storey building in many places—something people could not foresee. As a result, many were left trapped. They posted audio and video footage of their woes on social media and pleaded to be rescued.

Another factor about the southeastern region that made a difference is the literacy rate, which is much higher than that in the northern region. Financially, people in the south are far better off compared to the north. In every family from the southern districts, one of two members live abroad and send money earned in foreign currency. They have good communication with Dhaka. They could quickly broadcast the dangerous situation they were facing on social media and draw the attention of the news media, government, and general people.

On the other hand, floods in the north occur several times a year. Sometimes it is severe, sometimes not so much. Mainly people living in the Teesta, Brahmaputra and Jamuna river

basins are affected by floods, which destroy houses, livestock, fish and also croplands. Over the years, thousands of people have lost their homes to river erosion. There have been instances where river erosion forced a 70-year-old person in the northern region to relocate their home 30-40 times through their lifetime.

People in the river basins of the

transport. As a result, government and private relief materials are often distributed in the chars located near the river banks, where it is easier to take good photographs of relief distribution for media coverage.

In 2017 and 2019, there were severe floods in the northern districts. However, according to a 2019 report by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), the cash and rice the district administration distributed as relief among the flood-affected people were inadequate.

Not just floods, thousands of people in the north also lose their homes to river erosion and become destitute every year, getting nothing from the government for rehabilitation. In the past, only one bundle of tin was given to each erosion-affected family, that too if they got chosen and were very close to the local ruling party leaders/activists.

It is a known fact that there is a development disparity between the northern and southern parts of the country. During the 15 long years of Awami League regime, most megaprojects have been implemented in the southern region. While places in the south including Dhaka are becoming uninhabitable due to over and unplanned development, the lack of development initiatives in the north is driving the northerners to flock to the big cities in the south, including the capital, to get work. What can be a greater example of discrimination than this?

This discrimination cannot be allowed to continue for generations. If the people in the north living in river-erosion and flood-prone areas are asked what help they need, they will not ask for relief. They want embankments and the lives of their rivers back so that flooding does not upend their lives every year, and the interim government should understand it.

The discriminations between the north and the south have now come to the fore. The people of northern districts—the victims of years of discrimination—have woken up and raised their voices. The interim government, which emerged from an anti-discrimination movement, should listen to them.

The pattern of natural disasters has changed because of climate change. The government should revise its climate change policies and prioritise permanent solutions not just for the south, but for the north, too. Proper river dredging can free lakhs of people in the northern region from floods, river erosion, and the clutches of destitution.

How Western nations can help Bangladesh reclaim stolen assets



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On August 5, Sheikh Hasina, who ruled Bangladesh for 20 years in total, resigned and fled the country after a student-led mass uprising that emerged out of protests over the controversial government job quota system. During her tenure, the achievements that the country enjoyed have been overshadowed by her increasingly authoritarian governance, characterised by rampant corruption, nepotism, and staggering capital flight.

Several reports from credible national and international sources have revealed how many ministers, high-ranking officials, law enforcement leaders, and politically-connected businessmen syphoned off vast amounts of money. According to a report by Boni Barta, an estimated \$150 billion, equivalent to around Tk 17.6 lakh crore, was illegally transferred abroad during Hasina's tenure. This staggering figure is drawn from findings by US-based think tank Global Financial Integrity (GFI). Much of this illicit capital flowed via inflated government project costs and fraudulent loans from banks.

The stolen funds were funnelled into foreign bank accounts or used to purchase real estate in countries like the UK, Canada, Singapore, Malaysia, the UAE, and the US. One striking example is former Land Minister Saifuzzaman Chowdhury, who amassed a property

empire valued at approximately \$675 million across the UK, US, Dubai, Malaysia, and Singapore. This vast scale of corruption that characterised Hasina's government.

What is equally striking is the role that Western and other wealthy nations have played—knowingly or unknowingly—in enabling Bangladesh's political elite to stash their ill-gotten gains. For years, these countries have attracted investments from corrupt individuals, often turning a blind eye to the origins of their wealth. The financial systems in these nations provide anonymity and confidentiality. Through the use of shell companies, trusts and offshore accounts, corrupt individuals are able to obscure their identities and move vast sums to these countries with little scrutiny.

Moreover, many financial institutions in these countries fail to conduct due diligence, particularly when dealing with wealthy clients from developing nations. Profits are often prioritised over compliance, allowing dubious transactions to proceed unchecked. This negligence perpetuates global corruption as stolen wealth flows freely into Western economies with minimal oversight.

The complicity of these financial systems highlights a broader issue of accountability. While countries like Bangladesh are frequently criticised

for weak governance and corruption, financial institutions in the West play a significant role in facilitating the laundering of illicit funds. By providing safe havens for stolen wealth, these nations not only undermine justice but also deprive developing countries of much-needed resources. These countries must recognise their responsibility in this fight and take meaningful steps to prevent their financial systems from being used as tools for money laundering and illicit wealth accumulation. In doing so, they can help countries like Bangladesh reclaim stolen resources, invest in their future, and improve the well-being of their citizens.

Bangladesh was already facing a series of economic challenges before Sheikh Hasina's departure, including high inflation, slowing remittance and export earnings, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and high external debt burden. At the end of 2023, the external debt stood at \$100.6 billion. According to the Economic Relations Division (ERD), in FY24, foreign loan repayments, including interest and principal amount, was approximately \$3.36 billion. This repayment burden is expected to rise to \$5.38 billion by 2027. The mounting external debt is placing enormous pressure on the country's already stressed forex reserves.

Given the economic crisis, recovering stolen assets must be a top priority. The international community can play a vital role in these efforts. Cooperation in tracking down and repatriating illicit funds will be critical in helping Bangladesh rebuild and regain control of its economic future.

While stolen asset recovery is undoubtedly complex, it is both feasible and necessary. There are several international laws and

conventions that can be used to facilitate the recovery of laundered funds. The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) set global standards for anti-money laundering policies and asset recovery efforts. Additionally, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the World Bank's Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR) support international efforts to recover stolen assets. However, these frameworks rely heavily on the cooperation of international financial institutions, Western governments, and global anti-corruption watchdogs.

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has initiated efforts to recover Bangladesh's stolen wealth by seeking cooperation from Switzerland and technical assistance from the World Bank. With his global influence and strong ties to Western leaders, Yunus is well-positioned to lead the mission to reclaim the billions syphoned off during the Hasina regime.

Recovering these assets would have a transformative impact on Bangladesh's socioeconomic landscape. Billions could be reinvested into critical sectors such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social welfare. Moreover, successful asset recovery would not only provide financial relief but also help restore public confidence in government institutions. Holding corrupt individuals accountable would strengthen the rule of law, promote a culture of integrity and transparency, and build greater trust in the country's leadership. While Bangladesh's path to economic recovery is challenging, with Prof Yunus at the helm, backed by his international network and leadership, the recovery of stolen wealth seems within reach.