

Overhaul the life insurance industry

Those responsible for corrupting the sector must be punished

The widespread financial irregularities and mismanagement plaguing our life insurance firms, which have put the entire industry at risk, are alarming. According to data from the Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority (IDRA), 31 out of 36 life insurers are yet to settle about 11 lakh policyholders' claims worth Tk 3,643 crore—with clients remaining uncertain as to when they will get their money back.

Officials and experts say that poor investment decisions, high agent commissions, excessive management costs, and unhealthy competition are to blame for this. The situation has particularly worsened in recent years, with IDRA data showing that the claim settlement rate among life insurers dropped from 85 percent in 2020 to 72 percent in 2023. Moreover, of the 31 insurance companies with unsettled claims, nine have the worst settlement rates. For example, Fareast Islami Life recorded Tk 2,577 crore in claims but paid just Tk 32 crore. Similarly, Padma Islami Life paid only Tk 4 crore against Tk 226 crore in claims, Progressive Life Insurance settled Tk 6 crore of Tk 174 crore in claims, Sunflower Life Insurance settled Tk 2 crore of Tk 141 crore, and BAIRA Life Insurance paid Tk 2 crore of Tk 67 crore in claims.

According to the Insurance Act of 2010, claims must be settled within 90 days of submitting all required documentation after a policy matures. However, the fact that policyholders are struggling to get their money back for much longer is entirely unacceptable. Additionally, the amount and types of irregularities that are to blame for this are staggering. Yet, regulators reportedly never took any major steps against these companies due to political reasons and legal limitations. That political constraints limited regulators' ability to do their jobs seems to have become a common excuse now across industries. As a result, however, it is the ordinary people that are now struggling. But should the concerned authorities be let off the hook for their failure to perform their duties and protect citizens? And what about those who were directly responsible for the corruption in this sector? It is incumbent upon the government to identify those who are directly responsible for such irregularities and mismanagement and hold them accountable.

Moreover, the government needs to develop a comprehensive strategy to ensure that clients recover their money from these companies. This should include taking legal action against directors involved in financial irregularities and confiscating their assets. The government should also consider monetising the fixed assets of corrupt companies to settle claims.

Clearly, mismanagement in the sector has led to a significant loss of credibility. Therefore, the government should involve experts and other stakeholders to fully reform the sector and ensure that regulators are empowered to effectively oversee it in the future.

US support for Israel's genocide must stop

Israel's offensive in Gaza has killed mostly women and children

Though we are witnessing the catastrophic impact of the Israeli offensive in Gaza live, the fact that 70 percent of the dead are women and children, as stated by the UN Human Rights Office, continues to shock and horrify us. Overall, 44 percent of the victims were children—the youngest was a one-day-old boy, and the oldest was a 97-year-old woman. This also goes to show that despite many countries condemning Israel's genocidal campaign, the mindless violence on civilian populations continues unabated.

Following his office's latest report, United Nations human rights chief Volker Turk has censured Israel's "wanton disregard" for the "rules of war," which are aimed at limiting and preventing human suffering during conflicts. He has urged Israel to comply with its international obligations. The report warns that the attack on civilians could amount to "crimes against humanity." In fact, Israel's siege of northern Gaza, its decision to sever ties with the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) should be labelled as such because it effectively starves people by cutting off essential food and medical aid to Gaza.

Israel's military has deliberately targeted densely populated areas, sparing neither women, children, nor even babies. This demonstrates an attempt to ethnically cleanse Gaza, which constitutes genocide. How can Israel justify killing such a staggering number of women and children in the name of "self-defence"? Meanwhile, an independent Famine Review Committee (FRC) has warned of famine in northern Gaza. The FRC has urged those directly involved in the conflict (Israel), as well as those who can influence them, to take immediate action within days to stop or alleviate this catastrophic situation. The US has warned of restrictions on military aid to Israel if it does not "improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza."

Though this is too little too late, and comes after over 43,500 people have been killed in Gaza during the 13 months of war (according to Palestinian health authorities), if the US actually follows through on its warning, there may be some hope. It is up to the US to force Israel to stop its genocidal war, agree to a ceasefire, and enter into negotiations for a two-state solution. For this to happen, the first step would be for the US to refrain from sending any more military aid to Israel.

The question is, does it have the moral courage to do so? Since the Biden administration does not have to worry about elections anymore, this could be its chance to show that it does. Donald Trump, the next president of the US, has said that he will end all wars but that he will continue to support Israel. We hope in the interest of humanity and to honour international law, the Trump administration will change this stance and aim for a ceasefire.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

China joins WTO

On this day in 2001, after 15 years of negotiations, China's membership in the World Trade Organization was approved, and the following day Taiwan's membership was approved.

How apprehension of AL's comeback is affecting the govt



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It seems that the apprehension of Awami League's return is haunting the interim government, occasionally affecting its activities and decision-making. The fear of a "return of AL" or a "counter-revolution" is not unfounded. Dictator Sheikh Hasina fled the country in the face of a mass uprising, but the oppressive system she built over the last 15 years has yet to be dismantled. The interim government has formed various commissions for reform, but it may take time and effort to see much tangible results. So, the government must remain vigilant regarding the activities of powerful individuals, institutions, and organisations associated with the past regime. But it should not confuse the manoeuvring of power brokers with the movements of the mass people.

It is natural that after the end of a long undemocratic regime, various sections of society will raise long-suppressed demands. The apprehension about infiltration of these movements by allies of the previous regime is not unreasonable. In this context, how should these movements be addressed?

The democratic approach to understanding which demands are reasonable, which are unreasonable, which are part of a conspiracy, and which stem from real issues is to engage in dialogue with the activists and stakeholders. However, we observe that when any group raises its demands, rather than initiating dialogue, efforts are made to immediately label the activists as enemies of the government and as part of the AL's comeback conspiracy. This approach is reminiscent of how every movement was framed as a BNP-Jamaat conspiracy during Hasina's regime.

Not only the newly emerged movements, but even those that originated during the Hasina regime are now being labelled as AL conspiracies. An example of this is the movement of workers and officials from the Palli Bidyut Samity (PBS). The 80 PBS organisations are responsible for supplying electricity to rural areas, and they are centrally regulated by the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (REB)—a statutory body under the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources.

Since January this year, PBS workers have been protesting, demanding an end to REB's dual administration, the elimination of discrimination and oppression, the integration of REB and PBS, the implementation of a unified service code, and the regularisation of irregular or contractual employees. PBS workers complain that REB is exploiting the PBSs in the name of regulation. REB buys low-quality equipment, which PBSs are forced to use to maintain the distribution system. If anyone protests, they are transferred, reprimanded, or punished. Additionally, REB charges



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PBSs 3 percent interest on the cash fund provided by the government to manage PBSs activities. This interest is deducted from the cross-subsidy that profitable PBSs provide to those that are loss-making. As a result, the loss-making PBSs become weaker without receiving the necessary subsidy, while REB increases its savings by depositing the interest in the bank.

To end this discrimination, PBS officials and employees organised a 15-day strike in May and July under Hasina's regime. At that time, the government and REB labelled their movement as a conspiracy against the AL regime. For example, an official letter from REB dated May 7, 2024, stated: "Basically, this movement is part of a conspiracy by anti-government and anti-development

groups to obstruct the unprecedented development activities undertaken by the current government in the power sector."

Interestingly, after the fall of the Hasina regime, when PBS activists again raised their longstanding demands, they were labelled as co-conspirators of the AL. Rather than engaging in discussions and negotiations with the activists, REB dismissed 20 PBS officials on October 17, which led to protests and power outages across the country. After that, 8 PBS activists were arrested and remanded under a sedition case filed by REB, accusing them of obstructing power operations with the support of ministers, MPs, and influential figures from the previous AL government.

The PBS activists must have some miraculous powers—apparently, they were anti-Hasina during her regime and became pro-Hasina overnight after her downfall!

The interim government has shown a similar attitude towards the garment

minimum wage across all factories, settlement of outstanding payments, raising of attendance bonuses, night shift bonuses, tiffin allowances, etc.

After failing to deal with their movement using law enforcers, the interim government and the owners finally accepted the workers' 18-point demand on September 24 through a tripartite agreement. Since then, the situation in the garment sector has largely calmed, which proves that the workers did not take to the streets to demand their rights because of any conspiracy or provocation.

The problem arose because, as per the 18-point tripartite agreement, all dues were to be paid by October 10. But it was observed that some garment factory owners did not pay the dues by the deadline, which led the workers to take to the streets once again. Instead of forcing the owners to fulfil their promises, the interim government cracked down on the protesting workers using LEAs.

In this context, on October 23, LEAs opened fire on workers of the Generation Next Fashions Ltd, who were protesting the non-payment of their salaries for months. Champa Khatun, a 25-year-old garment worker, died of gunshot wounds on October 27. The amount owed to the workers by Generation Next Fashions Ltd, owned by Hasina's close business family, was Tk 21.66 crore only. Notably, Bangladeshi businessman Javed Oppenhaffen, whose family owns the Generation Next Fashions Ltd, organised one of the most expensive wedding ceremonies in Paris last year, spending a million dollars.

Earlier, Kawsar Ahmed Khan (26), a sewing machine operator at Mango Tex factory, was shot dead by LEAs on September 30 while workers were protesting to implement their 18-point demand—which was accepted in the tripartite agreement. More recently, on October 31, two teenage workers—Jhuma Akhter (15) and Al Amin Hossain (17)—were shot by law enforcers while workers from Creative Designers protested the sudden closure of their factories. All of these tragic incidents are the result of viewing people's movements through the lens of "conspiracy" and the alienation of government officials from the crisis faced by the people.

A large number of those killed and injured in the July uprising came from working-class and low-income families. Therefore, the interim government, which came to power through this mass uprising, has a special responsibility to end the ongoing economic discrimination and oppression faced by the working majority. Failing to fulfil this duty would only betray the spirit of the uprising.

workers' movement. After Hasina's fall, garment workers—who had been exploited and oppressed during her rule and were actively involved in the mass uprising—took to the streets to demand an end to their long-standing deprivation. They may have expected that with the country now free from Hasina's dictatorship they could freely raise their demands. Alas! Their movement was also labelled as a conspiracy incited by AL associates and foreign agents. Garment owners and the government tried to suppress it like the previous regime using law enforcement agencies (LEA).

But the demands of the workers were centered on specific rights, which could not be considered unreasonable. Key demands included the implementation of the existing

Why police transformation is critical for Bangladesh

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The Bangladesh police force's role in the July-August uprising was undeniable. Hundreds of people lost their lives, many due to the heavy-handed tactics of law enforcement, intensifying public outrage and distrust. This is not new. For years, the police force has been seen as an arm of political repression rather than a protector of the public. Allegations of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary arrests have steadily eroded public trust. The police, tasked with serving and protecting, have too often been perceived as upholding a narrow political agenda at the expense of human rights and justice.

The unrest during the uprising also claimed the lives of police officers, a tragic reminder of the deep rift between law enforcement and the people they are sworn to protect. These fatalities reveal that police officers themselves are often trapped in a cycle of violence and mistrust, operating in a high-pressure environment with insufficient resources, inadequate training, and excessive working hours—factors that have a detrimental impact on the overall effectiveness and morale of the force, as highlighted

in the 11-point demand presented by police personnel in August 2024.

As a positive first step, the Police Reform Commission has been formed recently, but this alone isn't enough. The path forward demands lasting, transformative change that penetrates deeply into the core of police culture, behaviour, structure, and laws. The outdated colonial-era Police Act, 1861, which prioritises control rather than service, needs to change. In 2007 and again in 2013, the UN supported the drafting of a new Police Ordinance under a police reform project, which promoted citizen-centred policing, emphasised public accountability, and included the creation of an independent police commission and a formal complaints mechanism for reporting abuse. Yet despite its promise, the draft ordinance and the 2013 review of the act had stalled at the political level.

A new legal framework on policing could provide a strong foundation for transforming Bangladesh's police force into a professional, accountable, and efficient service. This will build sustainable systems that prevent abuses, protect vulnerable citizens, and

foster a relationship of trust between the police and the communities they serve. The goal of police reform in Bangladesh must be to establish a people-centred force, responsive to the diverse security needs of society. The police must be seen as protectors of public safety and human rights. The reform requires a systemic approach and the Anti-Corruption Reform Commission, and the Judiciary Reform Commission will be instrumental in shaping the police force.

Reform should result in a force that serves all people equally, regardless of political affiliation, gender, ethnicity, or social status. Professionalism, integrity, and impartiality must guide every action, ensuring that the police safeguard all citizens, particularly those most vulnerable to abuses. Human rights must be embedded in the very fabric of police operations—preventing not only extrajudicial killings or arbitrary detentions but also ensuring that every interaction between police and the public is rooted in respect for human dignity and the rule of law.

The police must also be held to the highest standards of conduct, and abuses should be met with swift and impartial justice. Establishing independent oversight bodies is essential to ensure transparency and genuine accountability. Bangladesh is not alone in its struggle to reform its police. Police were reformed in many countries, including Nigeria, Pakistan, Iraq, and Kenya. In these

countries, public demand has been vital in calling for independent oversight mechanisms to hold police accountable and ensure that reports of misconduct are investigated without interference.

Reforms have focused on making the police more responsive to the public's needs, particularly regarding issues such as gender-based violence, and protecting the most vulnerable, especially women and children. Community policing has proven to be an essential method for rebuilding trust. The Police Reform Programme of 2006-2016 offers valuable lessons. Besides improving the force's training and professionalism, it highlighted the deep-rooted political challenges that hinder sustainable reform. A key takeaway from this experience is that sustained political will and genuine public participation are essential to ensuring lasting change.

Public engagement must be central to the reform process, not an afterthought. In a country like Bangladesh, where youth-led activism has made it clear that the status quo is no longer acceptable, young people's voices must shape the future of law enforcement. Nationwide dialogues with students, women, marginalised communities, and victims of police misconduct will ensure an inclusive reform process that reflects the aspirations of all Bangladeshis.

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