

Prioritise addressing unemployment

True state of labour market worse than expected

Given that the previous regime's strategy for remaining in power relied on falsified narratives, it is unsurprising that it used outdated definitions to downplay the unemployment rate in Bangladesh. According to a report in this daily, the former government relied on international definitions and standards that are over four decades old to measure labour data in the country, presenting an overly optimistic picture of low unemployment and an improved labour market.

This, quite frankly, was evident. For instance, the final report of the Labour Force Survey 2022—prepared using the outdated 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) standards from 1982—stated that unemployment in Bangladesh stood at 3.5 percent, or 2.58 crore people are unemployed. However, based on the latest 19th version of ICLS from 2013, the unemployment rate is 5.9 percent. Similarly, youth unemployment, calculated using the updated method, is 17.7 percent, significantly higher than the inaccurately reported eight percent.

According to the government-commissioned white paper on the economy, the unemployment rate among educated youth has increased 2.5 times since 2010. Previous reports have highlighted how the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) in Bangladesh is alarmingly high—likely with even those figures being understated. Despite these warning signs, which clearly indicated that we were squandering the energy and potential of our young population, the previous regime consistently dismissed such concerns through manipulative tactics and misrepresentation of facts.

This is a habit we must urgently abandon. Relying on outdated standards distorts the true picture of labour and employment conditions, impacting several key indicators, including the labour force participation rate, employment rate, unemployment rate, youth unemployment, youth NEETs, and informal employment. In today's age, if we fail to base our decisions on accurate and reliable data—as other countries do—we risk falling behind rapidly and continuing to implement misguided policies.

Policymakers and others must base their decisions on accurate data. Bangladesh has already fallen behind in taking advantage of its demographic dividend. And the social and economic costs of having such a large number of unemployed people—particularly among the youth—will be immense. Therefore, it's high time the government took extraordinary measures to reduce the country's unemployment rate. At the same time, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) must urgently adopt the updated standards for measuring labour data. While the BBS has stated that it needs time to implement the new method, the government should seek international expertise if necessary to expedite the process. Given the extent of falsehoods propagated by the previous regime regarding our economy, the nation is currently operating under a significant veil of misinformation. The sooner the truth comes to light, the quicker the existing problems can be identified and resolved.

July victims need mental health support

The injured have suffered severe psychological trauma

We are deeply concerned about the psychological well-being of those injured during the July-August uprising, as a survey has found that 75 percent of them are suffering from some form of mental health issues. The survey, conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health and Hospital, revealed that more than 27.3 percent of the injured—who are receiving treatment at the National Institute of Ophthalmology—are suffering from severe depression. Additionally, 54.5 percent are facing mild to very severe levels of anxiety, while 58.2 percent are exhibiting symptoms of stress or mental pressure. Although the survey was based on a small sample size, it provides valuable insights into how the injured are coping with their lives four months after the uprising.

Unfortunately, while we focus on their physical treatment, the issue of their mental well-being seems to be getting overlooked. Just imagine the psychological trauma faced by those who were once independent and living normal lives like us four months ago, only to find themselves permanently dependent on others after losing their eyesight and/or limbs. What kind of life awaits them? According to professionals at the National Institute of Mental Health and Hospital, almost all of those injured during the uprising or their relatives—those who have come to receive treatment at the institute—are suffering from bipolar disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The events surrounding the movement have significantly impacted their mental health, which is deeply concerning.

We, therefore, urge the government to provide proper psychological assistance—such as counselling and therapy—to the injured. Since the majority of them are students and workers, it will be difficult for them to resume their education or work even after their treatment is complete. Thus, the government must develop a comprehensive rehabilitation plan for them. Reportedly, many of the injured have still not received proper treatment or the promised compensation of Tk 1 lakh from the July Smriti Foundation. Therefore, there is a need to expedite the disbursement of these funds.

We must never forget that it is through their sacrifices that the nation saw the end of a 15-year autocratic rule. They are the heroes of our nation, and the government must treat them as such by supporting them in every way possible. Alleviating the mental and physical trauma they are enduring is the least we can do for them.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Saddam Hussein captured

On this day in 2003, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was captured by US forces during the Iraq War. Three years later, he was found guilty of crimes against humanity and was executed.

Assad's ouster and the ever-changing world

Do we have the expertise to tackle the crises and exploit the opportunities?



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No two regime-toppling events are similar, yet there are some uncanny resemblances between the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad and Sheikh Hasina. Both seemed invincible but fell like a house of cards, clung to power for long yet disappeared within days, claimed popularity yet had little knowledge of how unpopular they had become. Both felt they stood on sturdy daises, but they were moth-eaten ones to the core. Both convinced themselves that they controlled the narrative yet were unaware that nobody trusted them. Both felt they were irreplaceable figures of history, but were replaced within days of their defeat without their people batting an eye. Both believed that ruling their people was their God-given right, hence they didn't need to take their people's mandate. So brutal, atrocious and heartless were their reigns that both had to flee and seek asylum abroad. They had no place in their countries, which they both thought they owned.

The Syrian revolution is the latest piece in the ever-changing world that Bangladesh will have to deal with as it forges ahead. The big question is: do we have the requisite expertise for it?

Foreign policy is among the least discussed subjects in Bangladesh. It is always shrouded in the mist of bureaucratic maze. In the 33 years of my experience with this daily, I cannot recall a single instance where foreign policy was discussed by the government in any public forum. Our parliament failed itself and the voters by never bringing it up in the House. Discussions by private think tanks or newspapers could go only so far.

None of the reform commissions is on foreign policy. This is indicative of our own sense of priority—or the lack of it. If not a commission, we could at least have officially brought some of our former foreign secretaries, senior bureaucrats, former ambassadors, academicians and security experts together to discuss how to navigate through the ever-changing geopolitical reality.

Take our relationship with India. One look at the map will tell you how vital, complex, multifaceted and intricate our geolocation is, and

the high-quality multidisciplinary expertise we need to get the best deal for ourselves. I have often wondered why we don't have specialised institutes to study our foreign relations, especially with our big neighbour. Do we really know what our only other neighbour is all about? The Rohingya issue should have driven home the point that we need geopolitics to solve it a long time ago.

Every university of repute should have courses that could produce specialists on these issues. The rise of



FILE VISUAL: STAR

the Arakan Army, which now controls our border with Myanmar, has suddenly brought home a new reality. Do we have the expertise to handle it, or even understand it?

In my long years as the editor of *The Daily Star*, I realised that when we talk about relations with India, we most often think of New Delhi and Kolkata and at best Mumbai. We have very little idea of South India where India's IT hub is located, and from where our startups and IT entrepreneurs could have learnt. How do we forge a new, win-win, non-hegemonistic and mutually beneficial and respectful relationship with India? The answer is clearly knowledge, competence and belief in ourselves. While we have the latter, we need significant work on the first two. We need coolheaded experts to sit together, do all the calculations, make the facts public, and make

a stable and mutually beneficial relationship that benefits us both. Any one-sided agreement is bound to fail.

The just concluded trip by the Indian foreign secretary, we ardently hope, will mark some progress in our relationship that has shown some disturbing signs lately. Honestly, we have been totally outraged and deeply disappointed at the depiction of Bangladesh by the Indian media.

Take the case of the repercussions of the Syrian regime change. What was Russia's role in the sudden collapse of its long term ally—Assad—to maintain whom Putin invested hundreds of billions? The common wisdom is, the Ukraine war drained too much resources from Russia. He needed to make a choice about allocating additional resources, and he chose Ukraine. So what will be Russia's new strategy? Will it abandon Syria?



FILE VISUAL: STAR

What is the story of Iran? It did extend all its support to Assad and for a while felt comfortable being on the winning side. The destruction of Hamas in Gaza and subsequent diminishing of Hezbollah in Lebanon—both being integral parts of the forces that helped Assad stay in power—created the opening for the rebels to make their breakthrough. The impact on Iran is still not clear, but it definitely stands weakened.

Israel's bombing of Syrian military assets—480 airstrikes in 48 hours—is the clearest indication of how this war-mongering country is taking advantage of the situation. It has been more than a year since it started carrying out the most cruel and destructive bombing and killing of the Gazans.

Then it invaded Lebanon and killed thousands of ordinary citizens in the

name of destroying Hezbollah. Israeli soldiers were spotted way into the Syrian territories around the Golan Heights, which President Donald Trump allowed Israel to annex during his first term. Israel is indiscriminately attacking some of its neighbours with complete impunity—without the UN Security Council condemning it for such a blatant violation of international law.

What its policy will be vis-à-vis Iran is the big question. When a country's foray inside other countries goes unchallenged, in fact encouraged, how far it will take its aggression remains unclear. History has very dangerous lessons in this regard.

Türkiye has definitely emerged as a more active player with its president now holding more cards than before.

Relations with the US under President Trump will be quite a challenge for Bangladesh. The former prime minister's offensive and unexplained comments on the US has left a bad taste in the mouth of the State Department officials. Trump's message on X before the election clearly shows the nature of our future challenge.

Our only counterbalancing factor is the respect that Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus enjoys in the US, being one of the very few recipients in US history of the two highest civilian medals: the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2010. Both were bipartisan honours.

It is this uncertain world that Bangladesh's foreign policy will have to navigate. The first and the most important thing we have to understand is that whatever emotion and feelings that may drive us in domestic affairs, when dealing with foreign policy, we need pragmatism. There is, of course, our own idealism and world view, but the only way forward is being a realist. While flexing muscle can be an option for the big powers, for us, making our case logically, factually and convincingly and gathering global opinion to back it is the only answer.

The new Bangladesh must persuasively tell its story to the world. It must be able to convince others that we want to build a free, just, inclusive, tolerant, equal and democratic society internally, and a peaceful and just international order globally. For that, words and speeches are not sufficient. We need performance that produces powerful facts, and for that we need all-round expertise.

Why are our roads still death traps?



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Every month, Bangladesh witnesses a tragic procession of lives lost and irreparably altered due to road crashes. According to the latest report from the Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, in October alone, 475 people were killed and 815 injured in 452 crashes across the country. These statistics are alarming, but they barely scratch the surface of a systemic issue that has plagued Bangladesh for decades.

Road safety in Bangladesh is undermined by several interconnected issues, including unlicensed drivers, unfit vehicles, and inadequate enforcement of traffic laws. Over 10 lakh registered vehicles in the country are driven by unlicensed drivers because of a lack of institutional arrangement for proper training. Most drivers transition from helpers to drivers under the guidance of senior drivers, without formal certification.

In addition, more than five lakh registered vehicles lack fitness clearance, yet they continue to ply the roads unchecked. While significant investments have been made in road infrastructure, the capacity of the regulatory authorities like the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) remains woefully inadequate. According to Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), the

BRTA is one of the most corrupt institutions in the country, with widespread bribery facilitating the operation of unfit vehicles and unqualified drivers.

The situation is exacerbated by reckless driving, which often stems from the daily contract system for bus drivers. Under this system, drivers are incentivised to maximise passenger numbers, leading to dangerous competition and accidents. Similarly, the absence of separate lanes for slow-moving vehicles such as easy bikes and battery-powered rickshaws on highways contributes significantly to road crashes.

The popularity of motorcycles, driven by an inadequate public transport system and favourable government policies for production and sales, adds another layer of complexity. While motorcycles account for a significant number of road crashes, the enforcement of safety measures, such as use of helmets, remains lax. A report by the World Health Organization (WHO) highlights that proper helmet use can reduce the risk of death in a crash by six times. Yet, such measures are poorly implemented in Bangladesh, contributing to the country's high motorcycle-related fatality rate.

The term “structural killings” better describes the situation in Bangladesh—a failure of governance and systemic neglect that allows dangerous practices to persist. The vested interests of vehicle owners, transport associations, and regulatory bodies have created a tangled web of corruption and mismanagement that perpetuates this cycle of death. From 2014 to September 2024,

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there were 60,980 road accidents in the country, resulting in 105,338 deaths and 149,847 injuries. Despite a historic student-led movement in 2018 demanding safer roads, little has changed. The promises made by the authorities remain unfulfilled, and the death toll continues to rise.

The impact of road crashes extends far beyond the immediate loss of

life. Families are left to grapple with emotional trauma, financial burdens, and the loss of breadwinners. Injured individuals often face long-term disabilities, resulting in reduced productivity and increased healthcare costs. The ripple effects of these tragedies are felt across society, undermining the nation's progress and prosperity. Addressing road safety in Bangladesh requires a multifaceted approach. These include enhancing BRTA's capacity to ensure strict enforcement of licensing and vehicle fitness requirements, as well as making the processes transparent, and taking anti-corruption measures to restore public trust.

Also, institutional arrangements for comprehensive driver training should be established, with mandatory certification for all drivers by replacing informal training practices with standardised, government-regulated programmes. Separate lanes for slow-moving vehicles on highways should be prioritised, along with pedestrian-friendly infrastructure including proper signage, lighting, and routine road maintenance. Campaigns can be run to educate citizens about traffic rules and the importance of safety measures, such as helmet and seat belts use. Traffic management systems should be modernised through technology, such as surveillance cameras and automated fines for violations to deter reckless driving. Owners of buses and other commercial vehicles must be held accountable for the actions of their drivers. The daily contract system should be abolished in favour of fair and regulated employment terms. Lastly, the interim government must place road safety high on its reform agenda.