

## Set a new benchmark for migrant welfare

Our workers must be protected from abuse and corruption

Since taking over in early August, the interim government has taken a few positive steps to recognise the contributions of migrant workers and address their grievances. However, these isolated attempts fall far short of the comprehensive reforms needed across the labour migration process. As a result, feelings of neglect persist among the workers. This is why news of the record \$24.24 billion in remittance earned up to November 2024 feels less like a triumph for migrants and more like a reminder of how the state continues to view them: as mere economic tools to boost its foreign reserves.

On the occasion of the International Migrants Day, *The Daily Star* talked to a number of migrant workers who expressed frustration over the lack of measures to ensure their welfare. Oneworker said, “They (Bangladesh authorities) don’t care about how we live, our health issues, or whether we are safe. Their only concern is how much money we send.” Even the embassies, he added, “do not respect us; they treat us like slaves.” Such sentiments are rooted in years of systemic corruption, irregularities and mismanagement suffered by migrants. Reports of fraudulent recruitment practices and exorbitant migration costs remain alarmingly common. Once abroad, workers also face abuse, contract violations, and poor living conditions, with little recourse or support from the authorities.

The interim government has a chance to change this narrative and ensure that our workers receive the support they deserve. There are many issues that need to be fixed, from recruitment to reintegration. While the need for increasing remittances—through upskilling workers and deterring the reliance on informal channels such as hundi—is understandable, it is secondary to tackling the exploitative practices that plague the life cycle of migrant workers, directly affecting their wellbeing. The time has come to shift the focus from what migrants can do for the country to what the country can do for them. The formation of a commission to undertake this task, as recommended by experts, is an essential first step in that direction.

One area that needs urgent attention is the costs of migration. It is unacceptable that Bangladesh remains one of the costliest countries for migration, with aspiring workers often paying up to six times the government-stipulated costs due to corrupt practices and intermediaries. Moreover, they are also harassed while getting a passport, completing medical check-ups, etc. Clearly, stricter oversight of recruitment practices is crucial. The plight of workers stranded or mistreated abroad is another pressing concern. From Malaysia to the Gulf states, thousands face exploitative conditions, delayed salaries, and even threats of deportation. The government must enforce stricter monitoring of our recruitment agencies and embassies, and negotiate better protections with destination countries. Additionally, it must ensure proper reintegration for returning migrants who often struggle to rebuild their lives after years abroad.

There is a lot that needs to change, and for that, all relevant departments and agencies must undergo a cultural and operational overhaul. The interim government, and any administration that follows, must understand that we cannot honour our migrant workers without a full recognition of their rights and dignity.

## Inflation is pushing us to the brink

Quick, effective measures needed to curb the menace

A recent study has revealed a rather distressing picture of inflation’s impact on the lives of ordinary people. The study, conducted by the Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID), found that high inflation over the last two years has pushed at least 78 lakh people into poverty, with 38 lakh of them slipping into extreme poverty. A further one crore people are at risk of falling below the poverty line if the current inflationary pressure continues. This does not bode well for a country undergoing a massive political transition, underscoring the need for a comprehensive action plan to bring the situation under control as soon as possible.

Bangladesh has been battling high inflation for more than two years now, a situation caused by external shocks but made more severe and persistent due to delayed and shortsighted decision-making—such as excessive money printing by the previous regime, etc. Overall inflation has remained above nine percent since March 2023. In November this year, inflation hit a staggering 11.38 percent, while food inflation soared to 13.8 percent. The persistently high prices of essentials have been causing financial distress for citizens, a majority of whom have yet to recover from the shock of reduced income caused by the pandemic and other factors, including natural disasters. As a result, many households have been forced to cut back on basic needs such as education and healthcare, and even on daily food intake. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), around 3.77 crore people experienced food insecurity in 2023.

We need prompt, effective measures that can support the poor as well as help curb inflation. For immediate relief, social protection programmes must be beefed up to provide support to those who urgently need it. This should include cash support and/or provision of basic essentials at subsidised rates. For a long-term remedy, the government must take a multipronged approach. Public spending, for example, has to be adjusted to prevent wastage, while government resources should be used more effectively to support social protection programmes as well as to create jobs for those suffering due to reduced income opportunities. Simultaneously, the government must employ measures to complement its ongoing efforts to curb inflation, such as strengthening market management to prevent price manipulation and monitoring supply chains to stop extortion.

The interim administration has a mammoth task ahead. To deliver on its promises, including stabilising the economy, it must make prudent and timely decisions to bring the raging inflation under control. This is also vital for a smooth political transition.

# Reform imperatives of our police



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The police reform of Bangladesh requires an in-depth examination of the police organisation, its mandate, its functional dynamics. It also highlights the need to establish effective structures to oversee police performance and ensure the realisation of the organisational mission. The reform process has to touch all ranks and be all inclusive, calling for a commitment and sense of purpose from the political executive since what is involved is basically a redetermination of the whole governance paradigm.

Every organisation, whether public or private, can perform well only if it is founded on valid organisational principles. In the case of Bangladesh police, these principles were not followed over the years, resulting in a corrupt, inefficient, and highly politicised force. Increasingly, the police were rendered agents of the political executive rather than instruments of a democratic state. The selective application of law against opponents, whether political or personal, at the behest of influential individuals, became the norm rather than the exception. People perceived the police as agents of the party in power, not as members of an organisation publicly maintained to enforce the rule of law.

The key question relevant to the reform is: what kind of organisation will the police of Bangladesh need to meet the law-and-order challenges of the 21st century? As a first step, the responsibility of maintenance of law and order will need to rest unambiguously with the police. The police hierarchy must be made responsible not only for the organisation and the internal administration of the force but also exclusively for all matters connected with maintaining law and order. In short, policing operations should no longer be subjected to general control and direction from outside the police department.

Steps will be required for rendering the police professionally competent, operationally neutral, functionally cohesive, and organisationally responsible for all its actions. This, in turn, will lead to efficient police operations, better decision-making,

improved discipline within the force, and revamped accountability mechanisms. The role, duties, and responsibilities of the police must be orientated to prioritise service function, ensuring that the prevention and detection of crime serve a social purpose. The reform strategy should seek to solicit voluntary support and



FILE PHOTO: AFP

Police try to disperse protesters in Dhaka during the quota reform movement.

cooperation of the people.

The sole purpose of the police is to enforce the laws of the land without fear or favour towards anyone. Therefore, it is crucial to render the police politically neutral. Such neutrality has been achieved in other countries by placing the police under apolitical control, thereby creating a buffer between political expediency and law enforcement. Without such a buffer, influential individuals will never allow the police to perform their mandated duties.

Police accountability is a subject of great contemporary significance. The increasingly sophisticated range of coercive, scientific, and technical apparatus at the command of police requires stricter accountability controls. Bangladesh urgently needs statutory commission institutions like the Independent Police Complaints Authority in Britain or the Public Safety Commission system in Japan. The Independent Police Complaint authority in Britain consists of members of civil society and is

on meeting community expectations.

The first order of business is to enact a new police act to replace the present archaic legislation enacted in 1861. This act is weak across almost all parameters that govern democratic police legislation. It has made it easier for others to abuse and misuse the police organisation. People in positions of power have been able to do so because the act grants the government authority to exercise superintendence over the police without defining the term “superintendence” or prescribing guidelines to ensure legitimate use of power. The act does not establish institutional arrangements to insulate the police from undesirable external control, pressures, and influences. It also fails to recognise the government’s responsibility to establish an efficient and effective police force. Furthermore, it does not require the setting of objectives or performance standards, nor does it establish independent mechanisms to monitor and inspect police performance.

## COP29 outcomes bear consequences for Bangladeshi children

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With the focus on climate finance, COP29 concluded on November 24 in Baku, Azerbaijan, with a \$300 billion annual pledge by developed nations until 2035. The amount will go to support developing nations such as Bangladesh in adapting to the climate emergency. While a step in the right direction, the outcome fell short, piling in comparison to the actual needs. Bangladesh alone requires \$176 billion to implement its climate action plan to meet the Paris Agreement goals—known as the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC). What’s more, COP29 failed to clarify where these funds will come from, and the annual Global Stocktake dialogue—meant to assess the collective progress to inform the next round of NDC—was postponed until June 2025. This delay is especially concerning, given the critical role the NDCs play in driving climate progress when international mitigation negotiations are failing to reach consensus.

For children in Bangladesh, the most exposed in the world to climate and environmental hazards, these

outcomes signal a dire “code red” for both their present and their future. Every year, extreme weather events—floods, heatwaves, and cyclones—continue to offer no respite. This year has been particularly unprecedented and devastating. During monsoon season, the worst floods in 34 years swept through the homes, schools, and villages of over 20 lakh children in eastern Bangladesh. These tragedies came on the heels of earlier disasters, including June floods in northern Bangladesh and Cyclone Remal in May—the three combined emergencies affected over 1.8 crore people, including 70 lakh children. Flooding, along with increasingly severe storms, has a direct impact on children: it increases stunting; drives pre-term pregnancy complications; and results in increased maternal and newborn mortality. This is not just a science reality. It is killing women and children, and this alone should be the justification for action.

Meanwhile, children are growing up in an increasingly unhealthy environment that is taking a heavy toll on their health and development.

Emissions are a driving factor for the climate crisis, but also a damaging factor for children’s health. In 2021 alone, air pollution was responsible for over 235,000 deaths in Bangladesh. Higher temperatures is another harmful outcome of the climate crisis. Heatwaves, which are becoming more frequent and intense, reached record-breaking temperatures of 43 degrees Celsius in April and May. These extreme temperatures forced nationwide school closures and worsened the learning loss, especially for most vulnerable children, who have no access to digital means of education.

But this crisis is not just about rising temperatures or polluted air and water—it is about injustice. Children in Bangladesh are paying the highest price for a crisis they did not cause. Developed countries are responsible for the bulk of global emissions, yet it is countries on “ground zero” like Bangladesh that face the worst consequences.

These disparities become even more glaring as the 2030 deadline looms just five years away. While countries largely postured and avoided the urgency of the 1.5 degrees Celsius target and Sustainable Development Goal 13 for Climate Action at COP29, children in Bangladesh cannot afford to wait another year. Stronger actions are desperately needed to protect their rights, lives, and futures. Climate finance must be accessible, transparent, and sufficient. We need infrastructure—schools, hospitals, and water systems—that

The goal should be to establish a police force subject to the rule of law rather than the whims of the party in power. The police should intervene in the lives of citizens only under limited and controlled circumstances and must be held publicly accountable.

Historically, policing in Bangladesh has largely been a one-sided affair, with communities having little to no say in local policing plans and strategies that affect them most. The idea that “police are the people, and people are the police” has not taken root in the region. Unfortunately, the Police Act of 1861 was silent on the issue of community consultation. Instead, it focused on the responsibility of communities to ensure order, with the entire community facing collective punishment if any member stepped out of line.

An inefficient and outdated administrative legacy is undermining reforms supported by numerous national and international expert missions. For too long, the basic functioning of the police has remained unchanged. What is needed is to make improving the quality of law enforcement a permanent and integral part of the national agenda.

An enlightened and determined political leadership, high levels of public support, and a motivated and well-led public sector are critical for change. Equally, if not more importantly, a civil society that demands and supports higher standards of police performance is essential for reform.

The core issue today is not what the police does, but why it does what it does. It is time to make the police work for the people.

Over the last few decades, public opinion leaders have responded to the growing policing crisis with traditional approaches. They have blamed the police officers, protested against abuses of authority and corruption, and levelled criticism at the police without showing the necessary will or support to change its design.

The police reform debate seems to be attracting a wider and more serious audience. These issues are receiving focused and sustained attention in the media. If the goal is to make quality policing a way of life, then we need to begin by restructuring the existing police framework. The police constable must be transformed into a responsible official providing essential services to the community. The existing police setup must be replaced with a system that strives to be customer-friendly. There must be a shared sense of mission and clearly understood organisational goals, as well as citizens’ inclusion in police decision-making processes.