

Surge in child patients needs quick response

Raising awareness among parents is also crucial

It's alarming to see reports about thousands of patients—mostly children suffering from diarrhoea, pneumonia, and cold-related illnesses—being admitted to hospitals across the country every day. In the first four days of January alone, 139 children with pneumonia and 155 with diarrhoea were treated at Dhaka Shishu Hospital and Institute. This is just one example from Dhaka. Hospitals in other districts are also overwhelmed by the influx of diarrhoea patients as winter intensifies. At the icddr,b, an average of 675 children were admitted daily in 2024; this number has risen to 914 in the last 18 days. Among them, 60 percent of the children affected by diarrhoea were infected with rotavirus, which typically peaks in winter. Its vaccine is not yet part of the national immunisation programme in Bangladesh.

While the vulnerability of under-five children to cold-related viral diseases is well documented, it is disheartening that many parents across the country remain unaware of the risks. Children are often brought to hospitals only when symptoms worsen due to improper disease management. Many mothers, for example, lack the knowledge of preparing and administering oral rehydration solution (ORS) correctly. On December 30, a nine-month-old baby was admitted to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital with diarrhoea after being given improperly prepared saline, resulting in high sodium levels in his body that led to kidney failure. Such incidents are unacceptable, especially considering Bangladesh's prior success in managing and raising awareness about diarrhoea.

A recent icddr,b study of 350 mothers revealed that 88 percent lacked correct knowledge about ORS, while 72 percent used incorrect methods to administer it to their children. This underscores the urgent need for public awareness campaigns. Furthermore, the state of accommodation and treatment facilities in hospitals is alarming. In many hospitals, children with diarrhoea are treated on the floor due to a lack of beds, and parents are forced to stand for hours holding saline bags because of a lack of stands. Complaints about medicine shortages are also common. These challenges demand immediate action.

We urge the authorities to ensure that public hospitals are adequately equipped to handle the growing number of diarrhoea and pneumonia cases. Raising awareness about proper diarrhoea treatment and ORS preparation at home is also essential. Considering the significant number of rotavirus infections, the government should strengthen nationwide vaccination programmes, and diagnostic facilities for rotavirus must also be made available at all district-level hospitals to expedite treatment.

Given the likely role of poor air quality in the rising pneumonia cases, especially in Dhaka, the government must also take urgent steps to improve air quality during winter. A holistic approach from our health authorities is crucial to address these interlinked issues effectively.

Govt must focus on creating jobs

Latest BBS data shows a bleak state of unemployment

Rising unemployment remains a cause for grave concern in Bangladesh, as highlighted once again by the latest data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). According to the BBS, the unemployment rate rose to 4.49 percent in July-September 2024, up from 4.07 percent the previous year. This means the number of unemployed individuals increased by 1.7 lakh in a year, totalling 26.6 lakh. Among them, 17.9 lakh are men and 8.7 lakh women. The data has been compiled using the latest methodology, giving us a more accurate picture of the situation.

This rise in unemployment has been attributed to economic and political instability, particularly during the July-August uprising, which disrupted industrial activities and caused a significant decline in both labour supply and demand, alongside security concerns, especially for women. However, while this data is more precise, experts believe it still doesn't fully represent the real scenario. In fact, one expert estimates that if the assessment were more accurate, the unemployment rate could be closer to 10 percent.

Indeed, we have known for a while that unemployment is worse than what the official data suggests. A major contributor to this crisis has been the stagnation in job creation. It is deeply frustrating that the economic growth experienced over the past decade under the Awami League regime was not geared towards creating employment. For example, while the manufacturing sector grew by 9.1 percent per year on average between 2016 and 2022, jobs in the sector paradoxically decreased by 9.6 percent. What is the point of such growth if it fails to generate employment? Another key factor is the continued lack of private sector investment, driven by political uncertainty and a still shaky law and order situation.

This growing crisis must be addressed promptly with well-planned, effective solutions. Authorities must first properly assess the situation to gather the most accurate unemployment data, which is critical for effective policymaking. Special attention must be given to understanding why women are falling behind in economic activities. The interim government should also take focused steps to restore investor confidence and encourage private sector investment. Upskilling our youth is also essential, as many are struggling to meet the demands of today's job market.

We urge the government to take these issues seriously and explore all options for creating equitable job opportunities for both men and women, so that we can get the wheels of our economy moving again.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Gunmen attack Charlie Hebdo

On this day in 2015, two gunmen connected to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a Yemen-based militant group, stormed the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo and killed 12 people in retribution for the satirical magazine's portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad. The attackers were later killed by police.

How food prices can be stabilised



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In December 2023, the price of onions exceeded Tk 100 per kg in the retail market. News outlets widely reported that syndicates were allegedly manipulating the market by creating artificial shortages to drive up prices. However, just one year later, during the same period, the price fell below Tk 50 per kg. Some of the producers are incurring heavy losses due to the low price of onion. This raises a fundamental question: if these syndicates of suppliers are so powerful, why are they allowing prices to drop this time?

While the syndicate narrative is often compelling and easily resonates with the public, it does not hold up under scrutiny. In 2023, India, a major supplier of onions to Bangladesh, imposed an export ban due to weather-related disruptions that significantly reduced its domestic supply. This led to a sharp spike in the onion price in Bangladesh. In contrast, last year, Indian exports flowed freely, and local production in Bangladesh also remained stable. Consequently, the market experienced a glut, driving prices down.

It is simply market forces of supply and demand at work.

However, while there may be no syndicate at play in the onion market, the extreme price fluctuations severely impact both producers and consumers. This leads to a pressing question: how can prices be stabilised amid the shifting dynamics of domestic and international factors?

The conventional market-based approach to food price stabilisation assumes that all participating countries operate in a cooperative equilibrium. This presupposes a seamless exchange system where surplus-producing nations export their excess to deficit countries and vice versa during times of scarcity. For example, when a country experiences high domestic food prices, it is assumed that another country with lower prices will readily step in to supply the needed goods.

However, such cooperation is not binding, and no guarantees exist that this mechanism will function as envisioned. In practice, countries often prioritise their own food security over international cooperation, relying on trade policies tailored to their

domestic needs. A case in point is India's ban on non-basmati rice export during the 2007-2008 food crisis. This policy effectively shielded India from skyrocketing global rice prices, which rose by 160 percent between June 2007 and June 2008. Meanwhile, India's domestic rice prices increased by only eight percent, contributing significantly to then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's re-election in 2009.

This example highlights a divergence from the long standing



Onion prices skyrocketed in 2023 but came down last year, indicating market forces rather than syndicates at play.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

recommendations of academics and policy analysts since the 1980s, who have argued against direct market interventions. Instead, they advocate for social safety nets and market-based risk management tools to help populations cope with price volatility. Yet, the 2007-2008 food crisis revealed that countries with interventionist policies, such as China and India, performed better in maintaining price stability than those adhering strictly to market-based approaches. This raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the dominant economic paradigm in addressing food crises.

Bangladesh provides another illustrative case, particularly in its onion market. The country heavily

relies on India to meet its onion demand. However, whenever adverse weather events or other disruptions affect India's onion production, the Indian government often restricts exports to stabilise its own market. This leaves Bangladesh vulnerable to sharp price hikes, underscoring the risks of over-reliance on external markets for price stabilisation.

An alternative could be competitive storage driven by private incentives. Prices can be stabilised if domestic onion producers can store onions during periods of low prices—such as during harvest surpluses—and sell them during lean seasons. Yet, cooperation challenges persist even at the domestic level. Publicly managed storages often compete with private storages, leading to distrust and inefficiencies. Policymakers frequently intervene in private storage activities, either by releasing publicly held stocks or through imports, undermining private investors' confidence in

the profitability of their ventures. The lack of coordination creates confusion in the storage market. Private entrepreneurs hesitate to invest in storage facilities, fearing that government actions during times of scarcity will render their investments unprofitable or even lead to losses. Consequently, the storage market remains underdeveloped, exacerbating price volatility during crises.

A coordinated approach to storage management can address these issues. Governments must strike a balance between regulating public storage and encouraging private investment. Clear, predictable policies that foster collaboration between public and private sectors are crucial to building a resilient storage system capable of

stabilising food prices.

It is also worth examining the global dynamics of food trade. Export bans are often criticised for exacerbating global shortages. However, they reflect a pragmatic response to domestic pressures. Establishing international agreements that allow for conditional export restrictions can ensure that domestic needs are met without severely disrupting global markets.

Additionally, regional trade agreements and alliances can provide more reliable frameworks for cooperation. For example, South Asian nations could collaborate to establish shared food reserves or harmonised policies for essential commodities. Such initiatives can reduce dependency on global markets and provide a safety net during crises.

However, addressing food price volatility requires a broader perspective that considers the unique circumstances of each country. For instance, Bangladesh's reliance on India for onion imports is a structural vulnerability that demands a long-term strategy. Diversifying import sources, investing in domestic production, and developing robust supply chain infrastructure are all critical steps towards achieving greater self-reliance. Encouraging technological innovations in storage, such as climate-controlled facilities and improved preservation techniques, could further enhance the capacity to manage food stocks effectively.

In addition, the government should ensure that essential commodities remain within reach for low-income households during crises. This may involve direct subsidies, rationing systems or targeted cash transfers. Furthermore, educating farmers, traders, and consumers about the benefits of coordinated storage, transparent pricing mechanisms, and fair-trade practices can foster trust and cooperation. The government should also involve private sector actors in policy discussions to align incentives and create a shared vision for food security.

Ultimately, addressing food price volatility demands a multi-pronged approach that transcends the limitations of conventional market-based solutions. By integrating public and private efforts, leveraging regional cooperation, and adopting socially inclusive policies, countries can build resilient food systems capable of withstanding future crises. For nations like Bangladesh, the journey towards stability begins with recognising that market dynamics alone cannot ensure food security. Pragmatic, coordinated actions are needed to safeguard the livelihoods and well-being of millions.

Why are young professionals leaving Bangladesh?



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If you ask any multinational, regional, or large local corporate CEOs what keeps them awake at night, the most common reply is likely to be—employee retention. Be it Standard Chartered, Citibank, or PwC, many potential CEO candidates have been lost to first world countries, and this exodus continues. They were mostly from reputed business schools or engineering universities. Their exit interviews revealed almost a common thread of answers.

Bangladesh has been witnessing a concerning exodus of young professionals, a trend referred to as “brain drain.” Talented individuals across diverse sectors are leaving the country in search of better opportunities abroad, raising questions about the underlying causes and potential solutions to stem this outflow. While migration for career or education is not unusual, the scale at which young professionals are leaving has sparked debate about the nation's ability to retain its brightest minds.

One of the most significant reasons for this migration is the pursuit of higher education. Many young Bangladeshis dream of accessing world-class educational opportunities unavailable at home. For example, programmes in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology remain largely

underdeveloped in Bangladesh. In contrast, countries like Canada, the US, and Australia offer not only top-tier universities but also opportunities to gain hands-on experiences.

Analysts highlight that the gaps between education and the job market in Bangladesh are significant. Without competitive programmes and international-standard training, it is only natural that students will seek education elsewhere.

For those who stay in Bangladesh after completing their education, the challenges of career progression often become a driving factor for migration. The absence of multinational giants like Apple, Google, Facebook, or even Amazon creates a vacuum of high-quality jobs that could nurture local talent. Instead, young professionals look to the US, Singapore, and other countries where such opportunities abound.

Moreover, local firms often fail to provide competitive salaries, clear paths for career advancement, employee share option, or, at the very least, a performance-based remuneration structure, making the prospect of staying far less appealing.

Another issue is the lack of strong, visionary leadership to guide young professionals towards opportunities within the country. Many of them feel that the leaders in their industries fail

to offer mentorship or demonstrate how success is achievable at home. We, the leaders, are increasingly failing to foster an encouraging organisational culture or provide guidance about the career path. This lack of direction exacerbates their inclination to leave.

Bangladesh's urban centres, particularly Dhaka, present numerous challenges that diminish the quality of life. Severe traffic congestion, poor air quality, and inadequate public facilities, such as healthcare and transportation, make day-to-day life difficult. For young professionals who have seen a better standard of living abroad, the decision to leave becomes easier for them. Many of them—planning to expand their families after one or two years of marriage—want to leave the country for the protection and betterment of their future generation.

Safety concerns, both political and personal, also play a significant role. Many young professionals view first-world countries as havens of stability where they can live without fear of unrest or uncertainty. Recent instances of civil unrest and political tensions in Bangladesh have only reinforced these perceptions.

The economic downturn and the rapid devaluation of our national currency have further fuelled the exodus. Many professionals find that their earnings at home hold little value compared to what they could earn abroad.

Bangladesh also struggles with extreme inequality, where merit often takes a back seat to connections and privilege. The lack of transparency and fairness in hiring practices frustrates many talented individuals, driving them to seek environments where opportunities are more accessible and merit-based.

Though extremely tough, reversing this brain drain will require coordinated efforts from both the public and private sectors. Key solutions must include improving education and career opportunities, investing in infrastructure, strengthening leadership and mentorship, and creating a merit-based system, among other solutions.

Expanding higher education programmes to match global standards and attracting multinationals to set up offices in Bangladesh could create opportunities for both students and professionals. Addressing traffic, pollution, and public health concerns would improve the quality of life and make urban centres more liveable. Additionally, industry leaders must mentor young professionals and demonstrate the possibility of achieving success in Bangladesh. Ensuring transparency in hiring and career progression would also build confidence in the local job market.

Many development partners suggest Bangladesh must work on creating a vibrant ecosystem combining quality education, career opportunities, and better quality of life. Without these elements, the exodus of talent will continue unabated.

The migration of young professionals is a symptom of deeper systemic issues that Bangladesh must address. While the pursuit of better opportunities abroad is understandable, creating a nurturing environment at home could ensure that the nation's brightest minds contribute to its progress rather than leaving it behind. It's time for Bangladesh to rise to the challenge and build a future that its youth can believe in.