

Impunity for border killings must end

Justice for Felani and other victims is long overdue

It is unacceptable that even after the passing of 14 years following the gruesome murder of Felani Khatun, justice still remains elusive. This simultaneously reflects Bangladesh authorities' lack of initiative in pursuing justice as well as the Indian authorities' refusal to ensure accountability, both of which have contributed to a culture of impunity enabling such border killings to persist.

On January 7, 2011, 15-year-old Felani was shot dead by a member of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) while attempting to cross the barbed-wire fence near Kurigram and West Bengal's Koch Bihar. As she climbed down a makeshift ladder, her dress became entangled in the fence. While stuck, she was spotted by BSF personnel, and constable Amiya Ghosh shot her. According to Kirty Roy, secretary of a West Bengal-based rights organisation, the BSF could have apprehended Felani without using lethal force and presented her in court for breaking the law. Instead, she was shot and left hanging on the fence for hours, bleeding to death. Even after shooting her, the BSF could have rescued her and provided medical attention, but they chose not to.

Despite this inhumane act, a BSF court acquitted Amiya Ghosh of any wrongdoing, with a subsequent BSF court also upholding the verdict. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court of India, set to hear final arguments in this case on January 8, postponed the hearing for unspecified reasons. Will Felani's family ever get justice? After 14 years, Indian authorities seem to have little interest in this regard. This impunity—and the evident disregard for Bangladeshi lives—has allowed such killings to continue unabated. The most recent casualty is Zahur Ali who, earlier this week, was allegedly beaten to death by BSF members and Indian citizens along the border.

According to *Ain o Salish Kendra* (ASK), 31 Bangladeshis were killed by BSF in 2023, 23 in 2022, and 18 in 2021. Thus, at least 522 deaths of Bangladeshis were recorded between 2009 and 2020. One cannot help but ask: why is the number of casualties so high despite India's repeated promises to reduce them to zero? How should Bangladesh respond to such killings and to India's claim of being a "close friend"? The death toll at the India-Bangladesh border starkly contrasts with the far fewer fatalities along the India-Pakistan border, despite the latter's hostile relationship. When a so-called "friendly" neighbour causes such loss of life, how can this relationship be viewed as genuine friendship?

The interim government must prioritise justice for all Bangladeshi victims of BSF violence, starting with Felani Khatun. It must also demand an immediate end to these killings. If Indian authorities remain uncooperative, Bangladesh should consider taking the issue to international courts and actively raising it on global platforms, as the Jatiya Nagorik Committee recently suggested. It is time for Bangladesh to adopt a firm stance against the BSF's callous treatment of our citizens and India's persistent failure to address this grave issue. Impunity must end, and justice must prevail.

Don't neglect threat of a major earthquake

Raise awareness, ensure strict enforcement of building regulations

We are concerned about the lack of preparedness by relevant government agencies to face a major earthquake in Dhaka, despite warnings that it is one of the riskiest cities in the world. According to the Earthquake Disaster Risk Index, Dhaka tops the list of the 20 most vulnerable cities globally. The occurrence of two recent earthquakes within a week has heightened concerns about whether we are taking this threat seriously. Fortunately, neither the January 3 earthquake originating in Myanmar nor the January 7 one in Tibet (with a magnitude of 7.1) directly affected Dhaka. However, researchers indicate that a major quake could strike the city at any moment. We have no time to remain ill-prepared for this dreadful prospect.

Research highlights that the Indo-Burma subduction zone, encompassing Sylhet and Chattogram, is accumulating strain capable of generating a significant seismic event of up to magnitude 8, which is alarming. Additionally, the Dauki Fault is another highly active seismic zone. Over the past decade, the region has experienced 550 earthquakes of magnitude 4 or higher. Experts warn that these smaller tremors could be precursors to a larger earthquake potentially devastating Dhaka.

Unfortunately, despite experiencing minor tremors over the years, our response has been minimal. Dense urbanisation and poorly enforced building codes naturally put Dhaka at high risk of catastrophic damage in the event of a major earthquake. Its geological location, combined with human and economic factors, exacerbates this vulnerability. According to a recent RAJUK study, an earthquake of 6.9 magnitude, along the Madhupur Faultline near Dhaka, could demolish about 865,000 buildings. If such an event occurs during the day, around 210,000 people could die, with another 229,000 injured. The financial loss would also be immense, estimated at \$25 billion, with an additional \$44 billion required for rebuilding.

Therefore, the government must take decisive action to mitigate these risks. Immediate steps should include extensive mass awareness campaigns, regular earthquake drills, disaster education for children, volunteer training, and coordination between government and non-governmental agencies for rescue operations. In the long term, it is critical to strictly enforce the National Building Code and demolish the risky buildings. Given Dhaka's increasing vulnerability, we can no longer afford to remain oblivious or inactive.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Mahmoud Abbas elected

On this day in 2005, Mahmoud Abbas, who was a founder of Fatah in the 1950s and served briefly as prime minister of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 2003 under Yasser Arafat, was elected president of the PA.

EDITORIAL

What makes the economy more troubled to progress?



OPEN SKY

Dr Birupaksha Paul
is professor of economics at the
State University of New York at
Cortland in the US. His recent book is
'Sangkakaler Orthoriti.'

BIRUPAKSHA PAUL

If there is any element of truth in the saying, "Morning shows the day," the interim government has failed to show a bright morning in terms of stabilising the economy. The two economic vices— inflation and unemployment—were at the root of the student-led mass uprising in July-August 2024, yet both reign supreme even after five months of the interim government's inception. And there is no certainty that the economic aspects won't deteriorate further, suggesting that the government should now think seriously about holding an inclusive election at its earliest capacity.

That was not the deal when the interim government took office on August 8 last year. Massive corruption and an authoritarian rule masquerading the façade of democracy contributed to the drastic ouster of the Awami League regime. In that backdrop, almost all political parties and the public demanded the sequencing of reforms first before holding an election. As time passed by, many, if not all, influential political parties are demanding the election first before delivering reform in the economy. The question of how far a non-elected government can go for time-consuming reforms within its limited capacity has become the talk of the town in recent days. And that very political landscape has made the economy more troubled than ever before.

The economy is not heading in the right direction because of two things: i) inherited mismanagement from the previous regime; and ii) conflicting priorities and intrinsic bumpiness of the interim government. The government seems to be engaged in unnecessary political debates by indulging untimely sociopolitical issues related to the constitution and history. This is unwarranted, particularly when the priority should be to curb inflation and to reduce unemployment.

Although the Bangladesh Bank governor expects the inflation rate to drop to around seven percent by June this year, the rising price of the US dollar doesn't lend credence to it. The indomitable practice of localised extortions and organised syndication

are sending the prices of necessary commodities beyond the reach of the extreme poor and lower-middle class that occupy a lion's share of the population.

A minimum level of macroeconomic stability will be hard to achieve if the interim government keeps its attention on political confusion, noneconomic diplomacy, racial discontent, and a huge vagueness about its own strategic intent. Simply a market-based exchange rate or interest rate doesn't create macro stability when the rulers have a nebulous roadmap

to follow. Printing Tk 22,500 crore to resuscitate the drowned banks seems necessary at the time, but it will fuel inflation despite the parallel mop-up attempts, which are inadequate.

As the Bangladesh Bank data on LC settlements suggest, imports of consumer goods fell by 13.4 percent during the July-November period of 2024 over its corresponding period of 2023, suggesting a further pressure on inflation due to the supply shortage. At the same time, a decline in imports for capital machinery by 21.9 percent will invariably hurt the country's productive capacity and

growth potential. A decrease in the imports of intermediate goods by 15.4 percent over the same period will dampen industrial production, which already suffers from labour unrest, layoffs, and sporadic closures.

These factors will largely contribute to the weakening of GDP that is expected to see four percent growth this fiscal year, as per the World Bank forecast. Bangladesh heads to an untimely stagflation, which has tormented many economies in the 1970s in the wake of the oil shocks. A Phillips curve, which exhibits a typical trade-off between unemployment and inflation, disappears during stagflation when both stagnancy and inflation force the toiling mass to walk through a tightrope. Stagflation makes the economy nosedive and induces youth frustration to erupt, the primary symptoms of which are looming. The student force seems to remain hugely unsettled in the education sector, damaging the quality of human

may fall again when the central bank switches back to capping the dollar price at Tk 123.

Remittances alone aren't enough to ensure a good growth in foreign exchange reserves. A fall in imports will impede growth in exports. Although forex reserves slightly edged up to around \$21.4 billion on the last day of 2024, its growth will be eroded if foreign direct investments (FDIs) don't pick up. FDIs in FY2024 declined by 8.8 percent, and the trend has even worsened during the interim regime. FDIs in the July-October period of FY2025 saw a collapse by 19.8 percent, suggesting that the foreign capitalists are not considering Bangladesh right now as a hotspot for investment. FDIs don't flow in unless domestic private investment shows an uptick, and here lies a problem with the interim government's capability for creating a credible business environment.

If the government is passionate about reforms, why did it deliver the contract of ground-handling of



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

the third terminal of Dhaka airport to a branded inefficient company, Biman, whose stories of corruption are rampant? Why would it keep the Financial Institutions Division (FID), which made default loans worse? Why would it jump into non-productive expenses for buying weapons from China and Pakistan right now? This decision can wait for an elected government. There are other priorities which the interim government has not only failed to address, but it has also confused the economy, which is facing terrible headwinds, with its poor managerial leadership.

Now is the time to act on Rohingya crisis



Jubaida Auhana Faruque
is pursuing master's in public and
international affairs at the University of
Pittsburgh in the US.

JUBAIDA AUHANA FARUQUE

Despite hosting over a million Rohingyas for seven years, Bangladesh lacks a policy measure to manage and regulate these Myanmar nationals on its soil. With Myanmar descending into a civil war, the number of Rohingya refugees is increasing, adding to an already overwhelming crisis. According to a policy brief by the European Union, there are several agreements between Bangladesh and relevant parties to protect the rights of Rohingyas. However, the absence of national policy frameworks complicates managing their identification, movement, and protection, creating uncertainty for displaced populations and host communities.

Though several security issues are coming to the forefront with the recent change in government in Bangladesh, the Rohingyas have received little attention so far. Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus called for the expedited resettlement of Rohingya refugees to third countries, but no country or international organisations have shown much interest in proceeding with that. Under such circumstances, it's expected that the Rohingya will remain in the country a bit longer.

Bangladesh has earned a chance at a new start, which should include addressing the significant number

of people accommodated by one of its most important tourist cities. Due to the lack of an asylum policy, the government has little control over the movement and regulations of the refugees. The Rohingya people have been leaving camps to take up jobs in the host community without permits, replacing local labour and straining the economy. A local resident told *Prothom Alo*, "You need to pay a local labourer Tk 600 daily, but a Rohingya does the same job for Tk 200-300. Naturally, they get hired first." Though UNHCR assists with registration and identification, and security forces oversee their movement, the absence of a robust policy hampers effective coordination due to unclear guidelines. Adding to the economic strain are security concerns, with reports of Rohingyas getting involved in criminal activities.

A Rohingya leader told *Reuters*, "A series of murders of Rohingya men, including some leaders, at the camps have sparked fear and concern about militant groups gaining power and local authorities failing to curb increasing violence." These issues not only jeopardise the safety of host communities but also stigmatise the displaced population, making it harder to foster coexistence.

With Dr Yunus, a Nobel Peace laureate, leading the government,

a durable solution is expected to come to the discussion table. However, in last year's August, the foreign affairs ministry adviser declared that Bangladesh couldn't accept one more Rohingya, while Dr Yunus reaffirmed support without suggesting actionable policies. These mixed signals underscore that a clear asylum policy is essential to managing

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the crisis effectively and strengthening Bangladesh's role in addressing forced displacement globally.

Since Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it doesn't identify the Rohingyas as "refugees" and prefers to label them as Forcefully Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs). While this designation may avoid legal obligations tied to the convention, it does little to resolve the realities of hosting these people indefinitely.

In this case, the government can form a reform commission to develop policies for all foreign nationals seeking

or receiving asylum. The commission, headed by a refugee and migration specialist, should create a white paper to suggest the rights and restrictions for asylum seekers and receivers to the government and stakeholders. This must include ensuring their safety and access to essential services while specifying restrictions on movement. It needs to determine the form and extent of retribution upon breaking domestic laws. Instead of modeling the policy on any other country's example, it should be tailored to Bangladesh's recent political transition. It should reflect the shift from an authoritarian government that neglected the crisis to a more accountable leadership based on change demanded by the public.

The policy should also be adaptable to future needs. Most importantly, it should advocate for and create pathways towards durable solutions. This policy framework should demonstrate that Bangladesh is temporarily hosting the Rohingyas and providing all kinds of accommodation and protection; nonetheless, there needs to be a long-term solution.

While repatriation might not be an immediate solution, ways to push for resettlement should be mentioned. Countries must increase their commitments to resettle Rohingyas and provide support for managing the crisis. Besides, if there are scopes for local integration, that should also be discussed.

Bangladesh has an opportunity to lead by example, showing that even non-signatories to the Refugee Convention can uphold the principles of humanity and responsibility. The current government must seize this moment to turn the rhetoric of support into actionable reforms.