

## Expedite action to resolve Beximco crisis

### Reopen closed factories, settle workers' dues

We are worried about the prolonged uncertainty surrounding the fate of workers from the 16 garment and textile factories of Beximco that suspended operations on December 15, citing a lack of export orders and financial distress. More than a month has passed since then, yet there is no resolution in sight. Tuesday's mass rally by thousands of workers from the Beximco Industrial Park in Gazipur—demanding the reopening of factories and payment of outstanding salaries—underscores their plight and the slow pace of efforts to resolve this crisis.

The 16 factories employed around 42,000 workers and officials in total, with 27,000 workers laid off at the time of closure. On January 14, the labour secretary stated that the government was trying to find employment for affected workers in other factories and attract foreign buyers for the closed ones. However, this is proving to be difficult due to Beximco's liabilities that pose a major hurdle to any acquisition. The group owes banks approximately Tk 50,000 crore in loans, over half of which have turned non-performing, according to data from Bangladesh Bank. Moreover, a state advisory council convened on January 20 to discuss selling the factories to repay these loans but deferred its decision, citing discrepancies in loan and default amounts between the financial statements provided by Beximco's state-appointed administrator and banks.

Naturally, there will be further scrutiny of these statements now, which will further delay the selling and reopening process. It will require time, something that the laid-off workers simply cannot afford as they remain without wages or alternative employment. Beximco's crisis—caused by the fall of the autocratic Awami League government of which its founder Salman F Rahman, now behind bars, was an influential adviser—had nothing to do with these workers, yet they are the ones left to bear the brunt of it. It is heartening that the convener of the state advisory council assured that every worker would receive their due benefits, and Beximco Industrial Park authorities announced on Wednesday that all dues would be paid. But this is not enough. The workers also need their jobs to survive.

We urge the authorities to resolve this crisis with the highest priority. It is understandable that businesses must operate within certain financial realities, but if Beximco cannot sustain operations, alternative arrangements must be made. Whether through restructuring, alternative ownership, or even nationalisation, as demanded by a labour union leader at Wednesday's rally, these factories must be revived—both for the sake of workers and our economy.

## Curb misinformation with robust measures

### The high volume of fake news circulated last year is alarming

The sheer volume of misinformation and fake news that spread in the months following the ouster of the Awami League government on August 5 is truly alarming. While disinformation has long posed a threat to democracy in Bangladesh, its surge in recent months has been particularly notable, exacerbating communal tensions and straining Bangladesh India ties. Fact-checking organisations reportedly debunked 58 percent more content in 2024 compared to the previous year. Dismisslab's annual roundup states that fact-checkers identified and verified over 3,000 unique pieces of false or misleading information that went viral last year, fuelling a wave of chaos in the wake of the political transition.

According to its report, throughout 2024, certain Indian elements and pro-Awami League social media users played a significant role in this. Disinformation related to communal tensions and religious hatred, which had been on the rise since August, escalated further in November and December. False reports regarding attacks on minorities and communal unrest caused panic and division within the country. There was also misinformation about Indian soldiers withdrawing from Bangladesh, as well as fabricated claims by Indian mainstream media alleging that Pakistani troops were patrolling inside Bangladesh.

On November 5, an anti-ISKCON Facebook post led to violent clashes in Chattogram, injuring seven police officers and five army personnel. Later, on November 26, the arrest of Chinmoy Krishna Das on sedition charges triggered a wave of misinformation, including fabricated quotes falsely attributed to him. Fake photocards, appearing to be from mainstream media outlets, further spread confusion. Similarly, misinformation surrounding the three student leaders who took on advisory roles in the interim government was widely circulated on social media.

This barrage of falsehoods has not only fuelled internal discord but also strained our relations with India, with tensions persisting at the borders and repeated incidents occurring this month. However, it is reassuring that a meeting between the BGB and BSF has resulted in an agreement to resolve disputes through dialogue and to counter the spread of rumours.

Misinformation and disinformation pose a serious threat to our democratic journey. Social media platforms, in particular, have become breeding grounds for false narratives and deliberate propaganda. It is, therefore, vital that we remain vigilant against fake news designed to harm national unity at this crucial point in our history. The government must establish a robust mechanism to swiftly debunk fake news, especially content that could endanger national security or public order. The mainstream media also bears a major responsibility in this fight. News organisations must strengthen their fact-checking initiatives and adopt modern verification tools to combat misinformation. Only through collaborative measures can we mitigate the damage caused by disinformation.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### First coronavirus lockdown



On this day in 2020, the first coronavirus lockdown came into force in Wuhan, a city in China, where the virus was first detected in 2019.

# Is deferment of LDC graduation a viable option?



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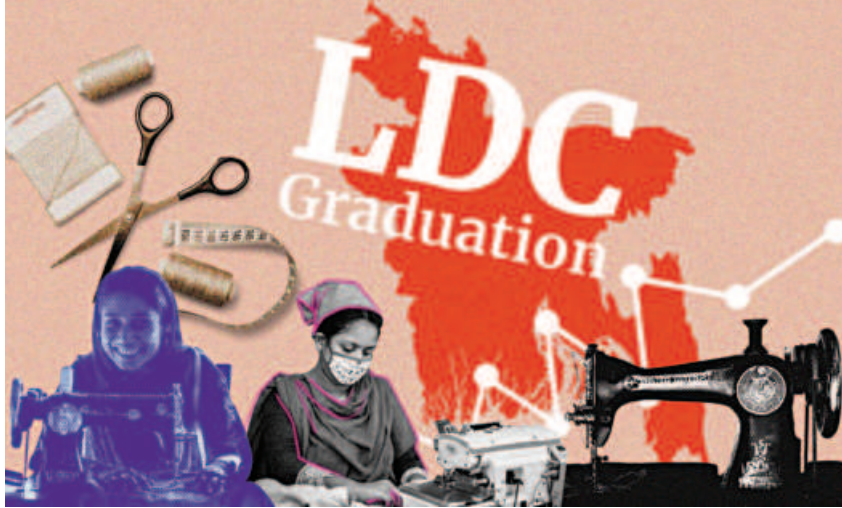
As may be recalled, Bangladesh is set to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category on November 24, 2026. However, some stakeholders in the country argue for a deferment of this graduation for an unspecified period. An objective analysis of the issue and an assessment of the veracity of these divergent views hold practical significance in shaping Bangladesh's stance in this context.

Some clarity in this regard is necessary. While specific criteria exist for including a developing country in the LDC group, it is ultimately up to the concerned country to decide whether it wants to be categorised as such. On the contrary, graduation from the group is contingent upon the LDC meeting the graduation thresholds and fulfilling the graduation procedures. In this sense, inclusion in the LDC group is “voluntary,” while graduation is somewhat “mandatory.”

To reinforce this point, in 2006, Zimbabwe rejected the UN Committee for Development Policy's (CDP) determination to categorise it as an LDC, stating that it “refuses to be downgraded as an LDC.” On the other hand, as noted above, there is a defined procedure for an LDC's graduation. An LDC must meet the criteria for

its graduation would take effect on November 24, 2026 (alongside Nepal and Lao PDR).

It is worth noting that the graduation of LDCs has been deferred in the past, even when eligibility for graduation was met. For instance, the graduation of several Pacific Island LDCs (e.g., Small Island Developing States such as Vanuatu and Kiribati) was deferred multiple times due to their vulnerability to environmental challenges. These countries were



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

eligible for graduation primarily based on the “income-only” criteria. Similarly, Nepal, which first met the graduation criteria in 2015 (three years before Bangladesh), will graduate simultaneously with Bangladesh, as it was not recommended for graduation in 2018 due to the 2017 earthquake.

Understandably, the call for Bangladesh's graduation deferment is being led by the export-oriented RMG sector, which accounts for about 85 percent of the country's total exports. The implications of the loss of preferences for this sector and the country are significant. Since tariffs on apparel items in major markets range from 10-15 percent, the adverse impact of preference erosion on RMG competitiveness will undoubtedly be considerable. Deferment of graduation would allow Bangladesh to continue enjoying various “Special and Differential” treatment provisions in the World Trade Organization (WTO), specifically targeted at LDCs.

Indeed, among the LDCs, Bangladesh has benefited the most from preferential treatment due to its relatively higher supply-side capacities compared to most other LDCs. Not surprisingly, the country also stands

without considering deferment, while Bhutan graduated in December 2023 without seeking a deferral. Should Bangladesh choose deferment, it will be the only South Asian country, aside from war-ravaged Afghanistan, to remain an LDC beyond 2026. Is this a position Bangladesh would find acceptable?

In this context, Bangladesh's best course of action would be to prepare for smooth and sustainable graduation from the LDC group. Bangladesh has already developed a “Smooth Graduation Strategy,” with concrete recommendations from seven sub-committees, awaiting approval by the National Committee on Graduation. According to the most recent triennial review by the CDP (February 2024), Bangladesh's eligibility for graduation has been reaffirmed, and as noted in the white paper committee report, “there is hardly any plausible reason, as of now, for Bangladesh to request a deferment of the exit date from the group.” However, the white paper also highlights concerns about the coordinated implementation of the strategy, including challenges related to institutional and policy leadership.

# When will the revolution reach Bangladesh's hills?



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For the first time in over a decade, human rights defenders can meet freely in Dhaka without fear of arrest, surveillance, harassment or worse. After the student-led mass uprising that ousted the repressive Sheikh Hasina government in August, many Bangladeshis can hope for a democratic and rights-respecting future.

However, there is still one place where human rights monitors cannot travel or work freely in Bangladesh: the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The region, which borders India and Myanmar in southeastern Bangladesh, is home to just under a million Indigenous people. Over the last five decades, the policies of the Bangladesh government aimed at controlling the region have displaced many members of the Indigenous population, not

giving them their due rights to their land and identity.

The policies in the region under the interim government have remained nearly identical to those under Sheikh Hasina. The interim government continues to restrict access by requiring foreigners to inform the home ministry prior to any visit. Any international human rights monitors must be accompanied by a guide, vetted by the ministry, making it essentially impossible for activists and human rights victims to speak freely about the human rights abuses they face.

With the population cut off from international monitors and with local activists under heavy government surveillance, abuses in the region are rarely investigated or prosecuted. It is disappointing that even as

Bangladesh plans to usher in a wave of reforms to restore rights and ensure accountability for the indiscriminate use of force, arbitrary arrests, disappearances, and unaccounted-for killings, an Indigenous activist told me that those “winds of change have yet to come to the CHT.”

Michael Chakma, an Indigenous rights activist, was among those forcibly disappeared by the Sheikh Hasina government. He was unlawfully detained in April 2019, and even as security forces and government officials denied his arrest, he was tortured and interrogated in custody.

He was among the handful of detainees who emerged alive from a secret detention centre in August after the Hasina government folded. But the military remains heavily deployed in the CHT region with credible reports of abuse of civilians.

In the late 1970s, the government instituted a “population transfer programme,” offering cash and in-kind incentives to members of the country's majority Bangalee community to move to the CHT area. In 1977, the military moved into the region in response to the rise of local armed groups opposed to the “settlers.”

In 1997, the government signed a peace accord to end the violence

These concerns must be addressed with urgency and within a time-bound framework.

To this end, Bangladesh should focus on necessary reforms and structural transformations to ensure smooth and sustainable graduation. Trade policies, incentives, and import duties should be scrutinised to ensure compliance with global obligations associated with graduation. The country must transition from preference-based competitiveness to one based on skills and productivity. Adequate measures should be taken to ensure compliance with Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) obligations, the Trade Facilitation Agreement, and other WTO-mandated agreements applicable to non-LDC developing countries. Compliance with International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and protocols must also be ensured and enforced. Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) should be negotiated, and “offensive” and “defensive” strategies should be designed appropriately in view of this. In the absence of membership in such trading partnerships and groupings, Bangladesh may find itself in a situation where it will need to export on a non-preferential basis, while its competitors, such as India, Pakistan, Vietnam, China and Cambodia, will enjoy preferential access to many markets (thanks to bilateral and regional free trade agreements and CEPAs to which these countries are members).

The global trading landscape is evolving rapidly, with an increased emphasis on greening trade, enhanced compliance requirements, and stricter environmental, gender and labour standards. Many of these requirements are being demanded not only by governments but also by brands, buyers, advocacy groups, and consumers.

Bangladesh's priorities must focus on domestic preparations and the implementation of its smooth graduation strategy. Reforms and structural changes must be implemented, the capacity to access regional and global markets from a position of strength must be enhanced, compliance with the newly emerging global trading regime must be ensured, and triangulation of transport, investment and trade connectivity must be established.

The discussion on deferring Bangladesh's LDC graduation should not divert attention from undertaking the urgent tasks required to address the challenges of smooth graduation and ensure its sustainability. Gaining a few additional years (if at all) must not serve as an excuse to avoid taking the necessary steps. Bangladesh's policy measures and implementation efforts must be aligned with the new and upcoming phase of its journey as a non-LDC developing country.

and officially recognise the distinct ethnicity and relative autonomy of the tribes and Indigenous people of the CHT region. Yet, nearly 30 years later, the accord is yet to be fully implemented. And violence continues to this day.

Civil society activists have called for the full implementation of the 1997 accord, with only 25 of its 72 provisions addressed. One of them was to set up a commission to ensure “a discrimination-free society establishing rights of the national minorities.”

Yet, that discrimination seems entrenched. Throughout Dhaka, the streets are covered in protest art, illustrating the student activists' dedication and their visions for Bangladesh's future. In the CHT region, too, activists painted in solidarity, but theirs was removed. “The revolution is for everyone in Bangladesh, except for those in the CHT,” one activist told me.

Activists have called for a Bangladesh 2.0, where rights are respected, security forces serve the public, and authorities—including the military—are held to account. Freedom and justice in the CHT region should serve as a test for whether these aspirations are a reality.