

## Spare students from admission test chaos

### Withdrawal of multiple universities from cluster system raises concerns

We are concerned by the renewed prospect of hassles for students seeking tertiary education following the withdrawal of a number of public universities from the cluster admission test system. The reported withdrawal of at least 10 universities—including all three under the engineering cluster and seven others under the general, science and technology (GST) cluster—means that admission seekers will have to sit for those exams separately, forcing them back into an expensive and stressful process. This will require them to again prepare for different types of exams, travel long distances across the country, and incur significant expenses for applications and accommodations. After a year marked by frequent academic disruptions, they didn't deserve this added uncertainty so close to their big moment.

The cluster system was meant to address these difficulties by consolidating entrance exams, allowing students to apply to multiple universities with a single test. Currently, there are 55 public universities in the country. Considering the sufferings involved with independent tests, the cluster system was introduced in 2019 for agricultural universities—who have adhered to it consistently—and for universities under the GST and engineering clusters in 2020. However, major general and engineering universities have been resisting the attempt to consolidate their admission process. Following the recent withdrawals, there is now no university left under the engineering cluster, while only 17 remain under the GST cluster.

This is despite multiple meetings held between the University Grants Commission (UGC) and university vice-chancellors, as well as letters from the education ministry urging that exams be held under the cluster system. Universities opting out have cited poor planning, delayed result publication, and inefficient admission procedures as reasons. Some believe that the cluster system does not adequately reflect their academic standards. While these concerns are not entirely unfounded, abandoning the system without pursuing reform in it is a disservice to students. A well-designed cluster admission system is certainly achievable, as evidenced by the long-established unified medical admission test.

We, therefore, urge the education ministry to take more decisive action to convince the dissenting universities that they cannot arbitrarily abandon a system designed to benefit students. We understand that the revenue generated from independent tests is significant, and some universities may be reluctant to relinquish this financial advantage. If this is a factor in their decisions, it is imperative for the regulatory authorities to ensure that students' needs are prioritised. If the universities are concerned about maintaining academic standards, they should work to refine and improve the cluster framework, rather than discarding it entirely.

## Take action to restore investor confidence

### Govt, political parties must work together to boost FDI

The declining trend of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Bangladesh in recent years is quite concerning, especially amid high inflation, rising unemployment, and increasing financial liabilities. According to central bank data, Bangladesh received 71 percent less FDI during the first quarter of FY2025 compared to the same period in the previous fiscal year. Moreover, 55 percent of the FDI consisted of intercompany loans and reinvestments, not new investments that can create jobs and drive business activity.

Experts cited political instability, economic uncertainty, bureaucratic inefficiencies, inconsistent policies, high inflation, currency volatility, and inter-agency misalignment as key reasons behind the decline in FDI. Even low labour costs have failed to attract foreign investors, as a combination of these factors—along with rising corruption and nepotism in more than 15 years of Awami League's rule—ultimately pushed up the cost of doing business in Bangladesh. The situation turned worse last year amid month-long protests and the Awami League's violently oppressive actions to suppress the uprising, which halted production, disrupted the supply chain, and negatively impacted foreign trade. The deterioration of law and order after August 5 further compounded the issue.

It took months for the situation to stabilise, but even now, occasional protests by various groups continue to disrupt businesses. With a non-political government in power, and tasked with initiating reforms and conducting fair elections, new and long-term projects are also not currently on the table. These factors have not helped local and foreign investors regain their confidence, and as a result, they remain in a "wait and see" mode, which is hindering economic recovery.

Currently, FDI constitutes only 0.5 percent of our GDP. To stimulate economic activities and drive growth, this share must increase. Simply having foreign investor-friendly policies on paper is not enough. The government should take concrete steps to review existing policies, identify inconsistencies, and make necessary adjustments. A focus should be placed on developing robust promotional campaigns for domestic industries and initiating bilateral discussions that encourage investment. However, the most urgent issue to be addressed is the volatile law and order situation. Foreign investors seek not only low labour costs, but also a safe environment for doing business and a stable political regime for long-term investments. The interim government, together with political parties and other stakeholders, must recognise this and take decisive action to restore stability and attract FDI.

#### THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### End of Vietnam War



On this day in 1973, the Paris Peace Accords ending the Vietnam War was signed, providing for an exchange of prisoners and for the unilateral withdrawal of US forces from South Vietnam.

# Will the home adviser go big or go home?

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As soon as the sun sets and evening descends down upon the city, the residents of Shekhertek Road No. 6 in Dhaka's Mohammadpur area ramp up measures to secure their homes. The streets become almost deserted as pedestrians rush to get away from open roads. An eerie feeling of impending danger lurks in the air. For the residents of Shekhertek Road No. 6, this has become the norm after a series of incidents of mugging, snatching and robbery—at least one in broad daylight—in the surrounding areas have left them scarred.

This is not the picture of that one particular road alone; it reflects the current atmosphere of fear in Dhaka. Post-August 5, muggers, robbers, and criminals run rampant in the city as

only one dies, but the rest remain," the police officer was heard saying to the then Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan.

After the previous regime's fall, three days passed without any law enforcement on the streets. People took it upon themselves to stay up all night and guard their neighbourhoods against robbers and thieves. There

country, particularly in Dhaka city. A report by this daily highlights that in September 2024, as many as 148 murder cases were filed in the city, rising from 119 in August. Thirty-three cases of mugging were reported—at least one in broad daylight—rising from 14 in August.

The situation did not improve drastically in the following



This collage shows screengrabs from CCTV footage showing robbery and mugging in Mohammadpur, Dhaka in recent times.

were also community efforts to guard minority religious places and public property against vandalism. The metropolitan area breathed a sigh of relief when the interim government led by Prof Muhammad Yunus took office with the promise of sweeping reforms. Even then, for a good few weeks, police stations were empty as police themselves suffered significant damage following the regime's fall since protesters retaliated against indiscriminate killings.

We hoped that, despite everything, a new political reality would emerge with these winds of change. We hoped that we were truly about to get a new Bangladesh—the much heralded Bangladesh 2.0. A rebranded Bangladesh where law enforcement agencies will not be our enemies, but our friends and guardian angels. We even saw students greeting police officers with flowers when they resumed their duties on the streets. Five and a half months on, we are beginning to realise that this hope of a new political fantasy might just turn out to be a fantasy.

Since Lt Gen (retd) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury took office as the home affairs adviser, succeeding Brig Gen (retd) M Sakhawat Hossain who held the office for only a few days, he has effectively failed to curb the skyrocketing crime rates across the

months of October, November or December; despite joint operations by law enforcement agencies, the atmosphere of fear and danger and the general feeling of unsafety in the roads still reign in the city. From mob violence to petty crimes, only the privileged class can truly claim that they or their friends and family have not become victims of crime in recent times. Social media is flooded with rising complaints by women that they are scared to go out after dark, mainly due to the increase in the number of harassers on the streets.

Attacks on minorities and the destruction of shrines are other examples of ineffectiveness of our law enforcement agencies and their custodian, the home ministry. There are countless footage of people attacking these shrines; why are law enforcement agencies unable to identify the perpetrators and take action? What happened to the Students of Sovereignty members who attacked Indigenous students with cricket stumps on January 15? We know two were arrested and were paraded in front of the media, but the others remain at large. There's the allegation that several key perpetrators of the July massacre—the ministers, police officers—were able to flee the country. How can the law enforcement infrastructure of the

country let them slip through?

We must ask: why are the law enforcement agencies simply not working? On the one hand, criminals are clearly not afraid of repercussions; and on the other, citizens have no confidence in the custodians of their security. Why is the home ministry failing to control its forces?

The interim government can argue that the crime rates have not shockingly gone up compared to last year, and that the law enforcement agencies, still reeling from the blow of the uprising where they faced the brunt, are struggling to find their foothold back. It can argue that the intelligence network is broken and the red tape of the old bureaucracy is holding them back. It can argue a lot and that all may be true, but what's also true is that we expected better—perhaps a rather unrealistic high expectation. But the interim government failed to even reach the minimum bar when it came to restoring law and order across the country. At least, we expected a sincere acknowledgement of the ground situation and a solid game plan from our home affairs adviser. Instead of doing any of that, he has given vague statements whenever questioned. Repeatedly, the adviser has remarked that "law and order has improved," but people hardly feel so.

Clearly, there remains more to be done. What we want is a clear acknowledgement of shortcomings, and a strongman approach in handling a critical institution like the home ministry. The job is to restore public faith in these institutions, and we haven't seen enough steps yet from the government.

In a new Bangladesh after the mayhem of July-August 2024, reinforcing law and order should have been one of the first priorities of the interim government to restore public faith in our broken institutions. With each passing day, people's confidence will keep deteriorating unless they see actionable outputs. The first step will be to restore law and order, and we are all looking at the home adviser.

The July uprising ushered in a new hope of a new Bangladesh where we expect accountability from our government bodies—accountability that was missing for 15 and a half years. We will continue to ask for accountability because the price we have paid for it is too high. If the home affairs adviser and his office cannot embody this culture of transparency and accountability even in five and a half months, maybe it's time to rethink this appointment.

## Utilising AI in Bangladesh's RMG sector



#### RMG NOTES

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Artificial intelligence (AI) offers immense potential to transform Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector, enabling enhanced productivity, improved quality, and sustainable practices, while simultaneously addressing inefficiencies, streamlining processes, and increasing competitiveness. AI-powered systems can revolutionise the production process by enabling real-time monitoring and optimising factory operations. Machines equipped with AI can predict potential failures in equipment, cutting costly downtime and ensuring uninterrupted production. Additionally, AI-driven robotics can assist in repetitive tasks such as fabric-cutting, stitching, and packaging, reducing the time and cost associated with human labour. Human errors will also be minimised leading to the overall improvement of product quality.

Besides, AI technologies, such as image recognition systems, can inspect RMG products with precision, detecting flaws in stitching, colour or patterns. By ensuring that only high quality products reach international buyers, these systems can help safeguard Bangladesh's reputation as a reliable supplier. This technological edge can play a pivotal role in retaining the existing customer base and

attracting new ones in an increasingly quality-conscious market.

AI-powered analytics can also provide real-time insights into supply chain dynamics, allowing manufacturers to predict disruptions and make data-driven decisions. For instance, if a delay in raw material shipments is anticipated, AI tools can recommend alternative suppliers, ensuring that production schedules remain intact. By forecasting demand more accurately, manufacturers can also avoid overproduction and manage inventory efficiently, reducing waste and aligning with just-in-time manufacturing principles.

Furthermore, AI can contribute to sustainable practices by optimising resource usage, such as calculating fabric layouts to minimise waste or monitoring energy and water consumption in factories. These measures will reduce environmental impact and also appeal to global buyers, who are increasingly seeking eco-friendly products.

In addition to streamlining operations, AI has the potential to transform customer engagement. By analysing consumer behaviour, AI tools can identify trends and preferences, enabling manufacturers to design products tailored to market demands. AI-powered online platforms can enhance the shopping

experience, offering personalised recommendations and improving customer satisfaction. These innovations can help Bangladeshi manufacturers establish stronger connections with international buyers and boost sales.

Worker safety and productivity are other areas where AI could bring about meaningful change. AI-driven sensors can monitor factory conditions, detecting hazards such as gas leaks or structural vulnerabilities and ensuring swift action to prevent accidents. Wearable AI devices can track worker health and performance, providing data to improve workplace safety and efficiency, as well as protecting workers and creating a more productive and motivated workforce.

Using AI technologies, manufacturers can make Bangladeshi garment products more competitive in global markets and attract foreign investment, as international brands increasingly prioritise partnerships with technologically advanced suppliers. However, the road to AI integration is not without challenges. One of the most significant concerns is the potential for job displacement, particularly among low-skilled workers who form the backbone of the industry. Automation of repetitive tasks could lead to reduced demand for manual labour, raising fears about unemployment in a sector that provides livelihoods to millions. Addressing this issue requires a proactive approach, including the implementation of reskilling programmes to prepare workers for technology-driven roles. By equipping the workforce with new skills, the industry can create opportunities for employment in areas such as data analysis,

programming, and machine maintenance.

Another challenge is the high cost of adopting AI technologies, which includes expenses for equipment, software, and training. For smaller manufacturers, these upfront investments may seem prohibitive. Government support in the form of subsidies, tax breaks, and low-interest loans could play a crucial role in making AI adoption more accessible. Policymakers must also establish a regulatory framework to encourage research and development in AI applications tailored to the needs of the RMG sector. However, while using AI technologies, manufacturers must ensure that robust safeguards are in place to protect sensitive information, both within their operations and in customer interactions. Building trust in the technology is essential for its widespread adoption.

Resistance to change is another hurdle that must be overcome. Many stakeholders in the RMG sector may be unfamiliar with AI or sceptical of its benefits. Demonstrating the tangible advantages of AI through pilot projects and success stories can help build confidence and encourage broader adoption.

The path forward requires a collaborative effort between the government, industry stakeholders, and technology providers. Policymakers must create an enabling environment through supportive policies and incentives, while manufacturers need to invest in upskilling their workforce and exploring partnerships with technology firms. A phased approach to AI integration, starting with pilot projects and gradual scale-up, can help mitigate risks and ensure a smooth transition.