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Mega corruption in megaprojects

The system that allowed this must be fixed

Despite corruption being prevalent under the previous regime, the extent of it in regards to eight mega projects is shocking. According to a report by a government-formed task force, the costs of these projects—Padma Bridge, Padma Bridge Rail Link, Jamuna Railway Bridge, Dhaka-Mawa Expressway, Bangabandhu Tunnel, Dhaka Metro Rail Line-6, Terminal 3 of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, and BRT Line-3—rose by a staggering 68 percent, or \$7.52 billion, from the initial estimates. Initially, the total estimated cost of these projects was \$11.2 billion, but it eventually surged to \$18.64 billion, primarily due to poor and faulty feasibility studies, corruption, and delays in project initiation.

The task force has also identified several other factors contributing to cost overruns, including delays in land acquisition, a prolonged and corrupt land valuation process, misuse of acquired land, and conflicts with other projects. Consequently, while these mega projects have been completed, their success has come at a hefty price—both in terms of time and resources—leading to substantial resource wastage. The report found that such megaprojects are often formulated through a top-down approach, heavily influenced by political and external factors. Project ideas are typically conceived by ministers, influential politicians, ministries, secretaries, and donors before being presented to the prime minister for approval. Once approved, the project is handed over to the relevant ministry for feasibility studies and proposal preparation, with instructions for swift implementation. However, these projects often do not align with the relevant department's master plan or priorities. Moreover, feasibility studies are frequently treated as a mere formality, with a tendency to exaggerate project benefits and underestimate costs. Land acquisition, which typically begins during the project implementation phase, is also plagued by corruption, inefficiencies, and delays in valuation and compensation assessment.

It has been found that foreign government funded projects often incur high construction costs due to direct procurement methods and non-competitive bidding practices. For instance, India's lines of credit, intended to support Bangladesh's development, come with stringent conditions—one being that 75 percent of project content must be sourced from India. This restriction limits Bangladesh's procurement flexibility, often resulting in inflated costs and compromised quality.

In addition to these megaprojects, the Awami League government undertook numerous other projects during its tenure, many of which underwent frequent revisions, leading to delays and cost escalations. Ultimately, it is the people of Bangladesh who bear the burden of such massive corruption and inefficiency.

Moving forward, ensuring transparency and accountability in all development projects is crucial. The task force committee has made two key recommendations. First, the Planning Commission should have the authority to appraise, approve, coordinate, and oversee all public projects. Second, all four modes of transport should be brought under a single ministry, potentially the transport ministry. The government should seriously consider these proposals and implement systemic reforms to ensure that public projects genuinely serve the public interest.

Why is custodial death continuing?

The govt must end this practice immediately

We are appalled by the death of a 42-year-old man in Cumilla less than 24 hours after his arrest. According to the inquest report of the Kotwali station in Cumilla, the body of Touhidul Islam bore marks of trauma and injuries—and the pictures from the report shows how brutally he was tortured. The hospital director stated that Touhidul's body showed signs of injury. All of these corroborate the family's assertion that he was tortured to death. Joint forces allegedly picked the man up from his house at 2:30 am—police later found his body on the bank of the Gomati River at 11 am. The police had been informed by the joint forces.

We are shocked that security forces continue to torture, kill, and detain arrestees, showing little change in their treatment. Custodial deaths and extrajudicial killings were a hallmark of the last regime, where the police and other forces enjoyed complete impunity for these heinous crimes. Are we to believe that, despite an end to the repressive Awami regime, some members of the security and law enforcement forces still feel the same sense of infallibility that they torture arrestees to death?

The Human Rights Watch's World Report 2025 has stated that there are concerns that security forces in Bangladesh have continued to carry out abuses, including the arbitrary arrests of opposition supporters and journalists and denying them due process and proper access to legal counsel. The chief adviser has denounced any form of custodial torture and extrajudicial killings. He has stated that upholding human rights in all aspects of national life remains a core mission of the administration, which includes some of the country's top rights activists. We welcome his prompt reaction and his statement reiterating the government's commitment to "eliminate human rights violations in police interrogations, crime management, and judicial procedures" by engaging with political parties over the findings of several commissions to reform the criminal justice system.

While reforms are crucial, and so is dialogue with political parties, we feel that the interim government must act now to immediately stop the police and other security forces empowered with magistracy from abusing their power. We have seen that even after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government, there have been other deaths in custody, and the causes have remained a mystery. This only gives more credence to the idea that these deaths were a result of torture.

We hope that the probe into Touhidul's death will be fair, thorough, and swift and that the perpetrators will be given appropriate punishment. Custodial torture and death must stop immediately.

Why Bangladesh struggles to attract FDI



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Bangladesh has struggled to attract substantial foreign direct investment (FDI), as reflected in its low FDI as a percentage of GDP compared to regional peers. In 2023, Bangladesh's FDI-to-GDP ratio was only 0.4 percent, while Vietnam's was 4.3 percent. In that year, Vietnam attracted around \$39 billion in FDI, whereas Bangladesh saw only around \$3 billion. The July-September quarter of FY25 showed a 71 percent year-on-year decline in FDI for Bangladesh. It is well known that foreign investment drives economic growth by bringing capital, creating jobs, transferring technology, and enhancing global market access. For Bangladesh, with its large workforce, FDI is essential for industrialisation. Therefore, the decline in FDI threatens Bangladesh's goal of becoming a middle-income country and requires immediate policy reforms.

Several factors contribute to the low inflow of FDI and the recent decline. Reversing the unsatisfactory FDI trend requires bold, forward-thinking policies and decisive action. Policymakers must take a holistic approach to creating a more attractive investment climate.

Firstly, bureaucratic red tape and corruption are significant deterrents to investment in Bangladesh. The country ranks poorly in global business environment indices and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Investors face excessive red tape, an unpredictable and unfriendly tax system, slow decision-making, and policy uncertainty. Lengthy procedures for obtaining permits, land, and utilities, combined with demands for bribes, frustrate both domestic and foreign businesses. The lack of transparency and accountability in

governance further erodes investor trust. To address these issues, bureaucratic reforms are essential. Simplifying procedures, digitising services, and operationalising "one-stop service centres" (which are largely dysfunctional now) can reduce



VISUAL: ANWER SOHEL

delays. Strengthening anti-corruption measures and ensuring accountability will help rebuild trust in the system.

Second, Bangladesh's political landscape, marked by partisan conflict, the dominance of crony capitalists, and policy reversals, adds to investor uncertainty. Additionally, macroeconomic instability—high inflation, currency depreciation, and fiscal deficits—raises concerns about business viability. Investors seek stability, which Bangladesh struggles to guarantee. Establishing consistent policies, ensuring fair competition, and combating corruption are crucial. Strengthening institutions, enforcing contract laws, and maintaining

political stability will foster a conducive environment for long-term investment.

Third, while the country has made some progress in infrastructure development, including mega projects like the Padma Bridge and metro rail, significant gaps remain. Power shortages, inefficient ports, and congested transport networks raise business costs. In contrast, Vietnam's integrated industrial zones offer a seamless experience. Bangladesh must prioritise infrastructure by accelerating key projects and improving maintenance. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) should be used to mobilise resources, but

Fifth, Bangladesh boasts a young and growing workforce, but the quality of human capital remains a challenge. Many investors struggle to find adequately trained workers, particularly in technology-intensive sectors. Without substantial investment in education and vocational training, Bangladesh risks losing out on high-value FDI to competitors with better-equipped labour markets. Bangladesh must revamp its education system, align vocational training with industry needs, and promote STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education to prepare workers for the evolving job market.

Finally, Bangladesh's reliance on the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, which accounts for over 80 percent of exports, makes it vulnerable to external shocks and limits its appeal to diversified investors. While the RMG sector has been a success story, over-dependence on a single industry is risky, especially as global demand fluctuates and competition intensifies from other countries. To attract a broader range of investors, Bangladesh must diversify its economy. Policymakers must create an enabling environment for emerging industries by offering incentives, investing in skills development, and fostering innovation. Special economic zones (SEZs) with world-class facilities and streamlined regulations can serve as hubs for new industries and attract foreign investors.

The low level and decline in foreign investment are not just economic issues but reflections of deeper structural and governance challenges. For Bangladesh to achieve its ambitious development goals, it must confront these challenges head-on. Policymakers must recognise that attracting foreign investment is not just about offering tax breaks or incentives but about creating a stable, transparent, and business-friendly environment.

The time to act is now. The global economic landscape is rapidly evolving, and competition for investment is fiercer than ever. If Bangladesh fails to address the root causes of its waning FDI, it risks falling behind its peers.

Can 'engineering diplomacy' solve Bangladesh-India water issue?



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Bangladesh is still recovering from the devastating August 2024 floods, one of the worst regional floods in its history. Millions were displaced, livelihoods shattered, and diplomatic tensions reignited. Yet, this crisis could be the turning point for regional cooperation.

The science and misinformation of the floods

The floods were driven by intensified monsoon rains, a shifting jet stream, and the Madden-Julian Oscillation funnelling moisture into south-eastern Bangladesh. Districts like Feni and Noakhali, areas not typically prone to severe flooding, experienced record-breaking rainfall and devastating impacts—half a million displaced, over 300,000 hectares of farmland submerged, and schools and roads left in ruins.

But alongside the rising waters came a surge of misinformation. Social media was rife with accusations that India had released water from upstream dams to worsen the floods in Bangladesh—a narrative fuelled by decades of mistrust over water sharing. While these claims were scientifically questionable, they complicated mitigation efforts and strained relationship between the two neighbours.

Addressing natural calamities requires more than just technical fixes—it demands an understanding of the social and political narratives that shape perceptions and responses. This is where engineering diplomacy can play a transformative role.

Engineering diplomacy: A bridge between science and society

Engineering diplomacy offers a pathway forward. It synthesises

scientific facts ("numbers") with cultural and political contexts ("narratives") to create solutions that are technically defensible, societally acceptable, ethically responsible, and politically feasible. Rather than framing the floods merely as a natural disaster or a political weapon, engineering diplomacy would encourage both nations to explore shared interests. Bangladesh's vulnerability to extreme weather and India's role as an upstream actor are not mutually exclusive—they are intertwined challenges that demand shared solutions. By moving from positions ("India must release more water") to interests ("how do we ensure equitable water availability?"), engineering diplomacy fosters trust and pragmatic problem-solving.

What Bangladesh and India can do together

The 2024 floods underscore the shared stakes for both nations. India, too, faced devastating floods in upstream regions like Tripura and Bihar highlighting how interconnected the challenges are. Recognising this shared vulnerability, Bangladesh and India can take specific steps towards resilience and cooperation:

Initiate a "devising seminar" for shared resilience

The two countries can convene multi-stakeholder workshops with representation from four critical communities from Bangladesh and India—knowledge, political, resource, and affected—which can create a platform for collaborative problem-solving. This informal yet structured dialogue can focus on key areas like real-time data sharing, joint flood forecasting systems, and

equitable water-sharing protocols for transboundary rivers such as the Feni and Gomati. I have discussed details of a devising seminar in an earlier piece for the Himalayan rivers. We need informed conversations to hammer out the details required to act and move forward on how to develop and share transboundary resources for an equitable and sustainable future. Complexity of transboundary issues demands learning from other river basins like the Nile, Jordan, and Danube—and adapting to local situations.

Strengthen public perceptions against misinformation

Debunking misinformation and conspiracy theories during a disaster usually does not work. Countering misinformation isn't just about presenting facts—it's about addressing the fears and mistrust that fuel these narratives. Within the context of current Bangladesh-India relations, these narratives are not surprising.

Collaborative projects that are responsive to the underlying interests—not positions—of both parties may be an effective way to ease these tensions, lessen misinformation virality during future floods, and make practical progress on flood resiliency challenges. For example, statements that simultaneously acknowledge that Bangladesh has legitimate fears of water control by India while being clear that the evidence in this particular case does not suggest India's political interference could go far to debunk conspiracy-inspired narratives. As a proactive measure, both nations can launch joint public communication campaigns now to start developing trust in the information they share. By aligning messaging with scientific findings and cultural sensitivities, these campaigns can build trust and reduce the likelihood of misinformation inflaming tensions when the next flood hits the region.

Reactivate collaborative institutions

The Joint River Commission between India and Bangladesh offers a formal venue for cooperation but has been largely inactive. Reactivating its

subcommittees, particularly the Indo-Bangladesh Experts on Flood Forecasting and Warning Systems, could reinvigorate bilateral efforts. This subcommittee has not met since 2004.

Demonstrate collaboration through pilot projects

Pilot initiatives such as joint construction of flood-resilient embankments or shared water-storage facilities for the Feni and Gomati rivers can demonstrate the benefits of collaboration. In addition, establishing a shared platform for real-time data exchange on rainfall and river flows to improve flood forecasting accuracy and initiating joint training programmes for disaster response teams to equip them with advanced tools and techniques for flood mitigation can serve as examples of tangible steps forward. These projects will turn shared challenges into opportunities for cooperation.

Expand collaboration beyond water

Collaboration doesn't have to stop at rivers. To develop actionable strategies, a different approach that goes beyond water and includes a package of mutually beneficial options is needed. For example, joint solar parks and renewable energy projects can reduce energy insecurity on both sides. The inclusion of Sundarbans—as perhaps the only transboundary ecosystem that has a World Heritage site and Ramsar site on both sides of the boundary—within the upcoming 2026 Ganges Water Treaty negotiations can serve as an example of how to operationalise engineering diplomacy processes and tools for effective transboundary water cooperation. We need to look for opportunities to engage affected groups in value-creating exercises before final decisions are made. This will encourage issue and option linkages and increase opportunities for meaningful negotiations. Seeking broader consensus (total unanimity is not essential) and relying on professional neutral facilitators is likely to help formulate nearly self-enforcing and easier to get compliance agreements.