

Why are many migrants dying at sea?

Prevent exploitation by traffickers, create opportunities at home

We are quite disturbed by the tragic deaths of at least 23 Bangladeshi migrants whose bodies washed ashore in northern Libya. Reports indicate that a boat carrying 56 migrants bound for Italy departed from Libya's coast on January 25. On January 28, local authorities recovered seven bodies, and over the next three days, the toll rose to 23. Two critically injured survivors were also rescued and hospitalised. However, some victims remain unidentified, while officials fear the death toll may rise as there is no information about the remaining passengers.

According to the families of some identified victims, the boat passengers were being smuggled from Libya to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. All came from impoverished backgrounds, each paying between Tk 14 lakh and Tk 16 lakh for the perilous journey across the Central Mediterranean route, with a Bangladeshi broker from Cumilla allegedly organising the operation. One of the deceased, Bashir Akand, left behind a one-year-old child; he had been working in Libya for a year before attempting the journey to Europe. Another victim, 19-year-old Titu, took this life-threatening risk after being defrauded by an agent when applying for a work permit, which brings us to the crux of the matter.

While these migrants attempted to enter Europe illegally, each had their own reasons for taking such a desperate gamble. Some had borrowed large sums in search of better opportunities. Others had tried to migrate legally but were defrauded by unscrupulous agents, making them even more desperate. Ultimately, their desperation to leave Bangladesh highlights the severe lack of stable jobs and economic prospects in their home country.

Since 2017, Bangladeshi migrants have consistently ranked among the top nationalities crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe—a route often taken by those fleeing conflict or war and considered one of the most dangerous in the world. This underscores the grim reality driving such migrations. Another major reason so many Bangladeshi fall victim to human traffickers is the failure of so-called "legal" recruitment channels, which often deceive and exploit prospective migrants. With no other options, these individuals are forced to pursue risky, illegal routes in the hope of a better future.

The only way to prevent such tragedies is by creating better opportunities within the country. The government must address this issue as the employment situation appears to be worsening. At the same time, legal migration must be made more affordable, accessible, and efficient. Finally, the authorities must crack down on human smugglers and their agents who exploit innocent people trying to secure a better future for their families.

Save elephants, save biodiversity

Govt must restore forest lands, ensure safe elephant corridors

The deaths of several Asian elephants in the Chattogram region in recent times raise questions about our commitment to wildlife conservation. According to media reports, more than 30 elephants have been found dead in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia and Teknaf upazilas and Chattogram's Anwara, Karnaphuli, and Banskhali upazilas over the past decade. Last year, seven elephant deaths were recorded in Ukhia and Teknaf alone.

Many of these elephants were electrocuted or shot dead, while others succumbed to hunger, malnutrition, and disease due to food shortages. Expanding human settlements, economic zones, and infrastructure built on elephant habitats and migratory routes are disrupting their natural movement, which typically spans 70-80 kilometres daily in search of food and water. In Ukhia and Teknaf, the Rohingya refugee camps as well as the barbed-wire fence built by Myanmar government along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border have blocked five of the eight existing elephant corridors in Cox's Bazar, making at least 15 water bodies inaccessible to the area's 205 elephants.

Similarly, in Anwara and Karnaphuli, establishing the Korean Export Processing Zone (KEPZ) and the China Economic Zone by clearing forests—and without undertaking proper environmental feasibility studies, one may add—has further disrupted the life and habitat of the elephant population. Environmental conservation guidelines were also ignored during the construction of the Dohazari Cox's Bazar railway line, creating additional barriers for these animals. Alarmingly, many of the elephant deaths have occurred in reserved forests and wildlife sanctuaries. What is the purpose of declaring an area a "wildlife sanctuary" if we cannot ensure the safety of the wildlife within it?

There is reason to expect stronger action from the current interim government which claims itself to be pro-environment. In October, the environment adviser helped establish a committee in the KEPZ area to ensure the protection of wild elephants. However, more action is needed across all regions where human-elephant conflicts have been intensifying. The consequences of habitat degradation and destruction extend to humans as well, with 136 people estimated to have been killed by elephants in the last six years.

The government, therefore, must take urgent, visible measures to prevent deforestation, restore forest lands, implement reforestation initiatives, and ensure that the natural routes for elephant movement are never violated under any circumstances. Anti-nature infrastructure development projects undertaken by the Awami League government should also be critically reviewed. We must find a way to coexist with other species without endangering their survival.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Punic Wars ended

On this day in 146 BCE, the Third Punic War, the last of three between Rome and Carthage, came to an end, culminating in the final destruction of Carthage, the enslavement of its people, and Roman hegemony over the Mediterranean.

EDITORIAL

AWAMI LEAGUE PROTESTS

A comeback or a cry for relevance?



THE STREET VIEW

Mohammad Al-Masum Molla
is a journalist at The Daily Star.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The Awami League, once the most dominant political force in Bangladesh, now finds itself in an unfamiliar and precarious situation. Its leadership has fractured following its disgraced fall from power on August 5, 2024 in the face of the student-led mass uprising. The party is now attempting to find its footing again through a month-long protest programme. This raises a critical question: is the Awami League truly interested in working its way to democracy, or is it merely struggling to survive?

Awami League's current predicament is largely of its own making. The party, which once led the country's liberation struggle and positioned itself as a beacon of democracy, gradually turned into an authoritarian entity. Over the past decade, allegations of election manipulation, political repression and corruption eroded its credibility. The parliamentary elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024 were all marred by accusations of vote-rigging. Only a few months after the 2024 election, a mass uprising—which grew from a protest by students against the reinstatement of the quota system in government service—forced Sheikh Hasina's government out of power. This ouster was not just a shift in governance, it was a clear rejection by the people of the party's undemocratic practices and governance failures.

However, the party appears to have learnt little from its downfall. Its leaflet recently distributed to justify its protest movement offers little evidence of introspection or reform. The rhetoric remains unchanged, reflecting an outdated political mindset that fails to address the new realities in Bangladesh. There is a conspicuous absence of acknowledgement of the public grievances that led to its downfall, including the deaths of protesters during the July-August uprising. Instead of expressing condolences or seeking justice for those who lost their lives, the party remains focused on reclaiming power without addressing



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

its past transgressions.

The hypocrisy in Awami League's protests is evident. The very tactics it now condemns—mass arrests, suppression of dissent, and human rights abuses—were once cornerstones of its own governance strategy. When it was in power, Awami League showed little tolerance for opposition protests, often employing law enforcement agencies to suppress them. Now, finding itself on the receiving end of a similar treatment, it suddenly seeks to champion democratic rights. This selective outrage raises suspicions about the party's true intentions.

Meanwhile, the interim government led by Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has taken a firm stance, refusing to allow Awami League to hold demonstrations unless it takes responsibility for the human rights violations committed under its rule. The government insists that the party must first seek public forgiveness

alleged human rights violations under the interim government. Even if some of these issues were valid, the party's selective outrage diminishes its credibility. It must recognise that its own governance was rife with economic mismanagement, suppression of free speech, and political violence.

The party's continued denial of public sentiment only worsens its predicament. Rather than acknowledging the people's movement as a legitimate expression of frustration, it continues to frame it as a conspiracy. This deep-seated tendency to dismiss opposition as foreign or domestic sabotage was one of the key reasons it became so isolated from the people of the country. The fact that the Awami League has not shifted from this stance suggests either a deliberate refusal to change or a complete failure to grasp the current reality. If this trend persists,

it once alienated. Without these fundamental changes, its current movement risks being seen as nothing more than a desperate attempt to gain some relevance.

The responsibility of addressing Awami League's misdeeds does not solely rest on the interim government. The political opposition must also rise to the occasion by mobilising public support through democratic means, rather than relying on government crackdowns to sideline Awami League. True political change in Bangladesh will come not through suppression, but through the people's mandate.

Ultimately, Awami League's protests reflect a party grappling with its own political survival rather than a genuine struggle for democracy. Unless it undergoes a sincere transformation, it will remain trapped in a cycle of political irrelevance, unable to reclaim the trust of the Bangladeshi people.

DUCSU election will usher in student unity



Monira Sharmin
is former general secretary, Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall Union, DUCSU 2019. She is currently working as the joint convenor and office secretary of Jatiya Nogorik Committee. She can be reached at monirasharmin15@gmail.com.

MONIRA SHARMIN

The night of July 16, 2024 will always be etched in the collective memory of thousands of people. That night, Dhaka University's residential female halls chased away Sheikh Hasina's goons of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). When the student people movement won and the Awami League government fell on August 5, 2024, the adrenaline rush and resolve of the night of July 16 reverberated. Discussions about the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) election gained new significance in the wake of these historic circumstances. DUCSU has served as a forum for student representation and political participation for many years, but its absence has led to a void. Many student organisations endorse the call for DUCSU election, but this demand is not without disagreements. The last DUCSU election took place in 2019, shrouded by accusations of vote-rigging, anomalies, and dominance by BCL. While the elected student leaders, including then Vice-President (VP) Nurul Haque Nur, experienced administrative and political hardships in carrying out their duties, several student organisations, notably the leftist organisations and Jatiyatabdali Chhatra Dal, rejected the results. The Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, initially hailed for its progressive stance and role in mobilising students during the

uprising, has seen its image tainted in the aftermath. Their credibility as a force in student politics has been called into question due to accusations of opportunism, internal strife, and dubious partnerships. Among the other student political organisations, Islami Chhatra Shibir is facing renewed criticism regarding its stance on the 1971 Liberation War, a long-standing controversy that has hindered its legitimacy in mainstream student politics. There is controversy surrounding Chhatra Dal, BNP's student wing, as well, especially in the aftermath of the mass uprising. The general students, many of whom are disenchanted with the condition of student politics at Dhaka University, is becoming increasingly frustrated as a result of such conflicts. While student organisations prepare to assert their influence, they have yet to overcome internal controversies and external scrutiny, further complicating the landscape.

The tensions intensify as the call for DUCSU election gains momentum. The university administration's hesitation to take strong action has further fuelled the flames. Some organisations support an autonomous and fully representative DUCSU, while others appear more concerned in concentrating power and widening already existing divisions on campus. The values of representation, diversity, and true student leadership ought

to be crucial for DUCSU's agenda. Though noble in goal, ideological purity frequently shapes this vision and can occasionally alienate those with different viewpoints. On campus, student organisations are still sharply split along organisational, political, and ideological lines, which makes it challenging to bring them together for substantial transformation. Historically, this split has made it easier for the authorities to stifle student demands and postpone important reforms by weakening collective bargaining strength.

The Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall Union's victory over BCL in 2019 showed that students react favourably to reputable, non-partisan leadership that is based on actions that care for their rights. This implies that student governance should represent the whole student body. It is also crucial to assemble a group of student leaders who are credible across ideological divides, make sure that the selection of candidates is transparent, and uphold a common goal that goes beyond immediate electoral triumph. A proportional representation system in which DUCSU seats are distributed according to each student organisation's vote share is also another option. This model can promote collaboration across ideological differences and stop any single group from controlling all the power. Another alternative is the establishment of issue-based committees. This strategy enables targeted and outcome-oriented action without requiring total consensus on every issue.

In the United States, student union elections are generally conducted annually and candidates often address campus-specific issues like tuition fees, diversity, and student services. Depending on their sociopolitical surroundings and the design of their

educational institutions, student unions use various election models all over the world. Proportional representation is used in student unions in many European nations, including the UK. To guarantee representation for all important groups, seats are allocated according to the percentage of votes each party or panel receives. The positive aspect of this is that it promotes cooperation and fairly represents a variety of groups. The intricacy of the vote-counting procedure and the possible challenge of establishing a majority are the drawbacks of this process. In order to maintain inclusivity, certain South African universities permit various groups to alternate in positions of leadership. In DUCSU, a rotating leadership model could be explored, where key positions are shared among different organisations on a time-bound basis. Such an arrangement could foster mutual respect and understanding while ensuring that no single group dominates the decision-making process.

Student organisations need to place the common good before their past grievances in order to realise this vision. Mutual respect, open dialogue, and an allegiance to common values are necessary in this regard. Leaders need to focus on creating a collaborative culture rather than reverting to the divisive strategies of the past. Equally important is the role of the university administration in facilitating a fair and transparent electoral process. Ensuring a level playing field is essential in rebuilding trust.

As the battle lines are drawn, the stakes grow higher. The coming months could prove pivotal in shaping the future of student governance at Dhaka University.